Okurimono (贈り物) - The Gift

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/10870818.

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<td>Haikyuu - Freeform, Teenage Life, sport, Growing Up, Feelings, doubts, Angst, Confusion, Unresolved Sexual Tension, Love, Unrequited Love, Karasuno, Inarizaki, Nekoma, aoba johsai, Kitagawa Daichi, national volleyball team, Itachiyama Academy, Dating, Young Love, College, University, Students, the flow, Psychology, neurology, Asperger Syndrome, Obon, Japanese Mythology &amp; Folklore, Kissing, Public Display of Affection, Age of Consent, Original Character(s), Best Friends, Senpai-Kouhai Relationship, Kyoto, Tokyo (City), Tale of Genji - Freeform, Japanese Culture, First Dates, Masturbation, Wet Dream, Coming Out, Friendship, Friendzone, LGBT Culture in Japan, Volleyball, Games, Scheming</td>
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<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-05-10 Completed: 2017-10-21 Chapters: 22/22 Words: 123481</td>
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Summary

Talent may come for free.
But is freedom a choice for those born with talent?

A multi-chapter development in flashback & forward episodes in the haikyuu saga universe.

My take on the fascinating complexity of one of the best ensemble cast in manga I have ever come across.

The timeline was written a bit trickily because I like the concept that destiny doesn't proceed linearly, plus it's an help for my way to write, which heavily follows inspirations but which is always also very structured in the plotlines from the start (it's tricky in itself, that inspiration of mine!). All the time set ups are anyway related to Haruichi Furudate's canon notions as well as the real Japanese calendar scheduling. I adore Japan so I put Country related bits in the story as much as I could :)

Please notice that if you like to follow the correctly timed sequence of the chapters you have to follow this order:
1... 3... 4... 7... 10... 11... 2... 5... 16... 14... 9... 13... 6... 12... 8... 15... 17... 18... 20... 21... 19... 22

I thank you all my affectionate readers and... THREE more installments are coming in the series now!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Hey, I am the truth
Hey, I am the wisdom of the fallen; I'm the youth
Hey, I am the greatest; hey, this is the proof
Hey, I work hard, pray hard, pay dues, hey
I transform with pressure; I'm hands-on with effort
I fell twice before; my bounce back was special
Letdowns will get you, and the critics will test you
But the strong will survive; another scar may bless you, ah

Don't give up (no no); I won't give up (no no)
Don't give up, no no no (nah)
Don't give up; I won't give up
Don't give up, no no no

I'm free to be the greatest, I'm alive
I'm free to be the greatest here tonight, the greatest
The greatest, the greatest alive
(Don't give up, don't give up, don't give up, no no no)
The greatest, the greatest alive
(Don't give up, don't give up, don't give up, no no no)

All the loud cheers overpowering her requests were suddenly stopped by a single hand gesture coming theatrically slow from one of the main players downright the court. So silent and expecting the place had become that her latest one got uncharacteristic resonance from their stand, a wave of feminine tone gaining substance in sound, exploding from her heart-shaped lips to the ear of the dolly looking girl next to her:

"Who's that one playing setter?"

Alisa didn't even notice due to everyone becoming silent her words could be well heard rows above and under her - and for way less elaborated shouting at the start of the game drama had unfold - because finally she would get an answer, an achievement she had been denied already twice by the competitive atmosphere in the playing arena:

"Do you really need to ask that? Like... even a neophyte as you are must have been schooled about major names in this tournament?"

Yamamoto Akane couldn't forgive lack of knowledge in volleyball. 13 year old, enthusiast to the core, she could memorize any bit of information given to her at speed light:

"That would be Miya Atsumu. Inarizaki ace setter."

Akane Yamamoto. 13 year old with the cutesy of her age all written across her expressive lovely mug, she couldn't ever avoid the perking roller coaster of a young teen heart, either:
"Isn't he fab? Sure we shouldn't reach this far, he's prolly gonna be our adversary soon, but he truly has this rockstar aura about himself innit? Ah, he is SO dreamy..."

Alisa turned an inquisitive face towards her partner in cheer, as cluelessly as possible. Her beautiful features enlightened through an even wider than usual look, making her European heritage reflected clearly into her fully blown heterochromatic irises, thin fair brows arching up, and head tilting on the side gracefully:

"I didn't ask about Miya actually. Who's the other setter, the orange clad one? He looks like a commanding prince so far on the court. I do think that my brother talked about him sometimes but he mostly talks about the little middle blocker of Karasuno so I never really registered anything in my mind of any other of their members..."

She almost gulped to slow down her wording, as people who tend to choke on their explaining when said explaining seems to unveil too big of a chunk of their inmost parts do:

"... but now, now that I'm seeing him before my very own yes I..."

All her usually girly and bubbly gesturing came at disposal and she opened arms in front of her chest looking at her almost bewildered friend, trying to convey her amazement rather physically:

"... I can't even explain! I can't look anywhere else!"

And she couldn't, indeed.

Every motion in play the younger athlete was performing, she was following with sharp intent till any of his actions would become slower in her mind, elapsing the effect by reverberate cherishing; like by divine intervention she could make possible in her moment of gesture appreciation what dozens of opponents had dreamt about for quite a long time, facing him and his impossible quick: to slow down his rhythm and reasoning during plays, to get a chance to read them.

"Well..." reprised her team partner, before getting silenced and pushed gently aside by their captain who happened to have heard all their words up to that moment, making Akane's likely tentative answer a clear statement of his own instead:

"... sure Kageyama Tobio is something special to see playing. But rather than a prince on a court you'd better raise the bar and start calling him like many do who love and practice the sport..."

"Kuroo senpai you've arrived finally! Glad to see you! We thought you would stay stretching after our win, so we came down here to check this game and... well also to secure... your guys' seats on the stands, if you happened to be willing to catch this game at all..."

Akane had stars in her eyes looking up to the tall guy next to her, a black mop of unruly hair spiking asymmetrically up and down a well defined face, eyes perpetually clutching onto reality before them with the intention of judging it after careful analysis, but trying to sell that hard-as-hell work as careless prank:

"No need to say more: it's good to check other teams... it's part of a team helpers job Akane. There are never too many eyes to memorize frames of other schools' schemes."

And from his height towering the little girl, he put a hand on her softly coiffed head, making her the happiest soul in the arena for the time the hand rested there.

Nekoma team was starting to take a few of the seats around their zone, tired after a winning game, but mostly curious to follow what was bound to happen on the court below their eyes in the
Waiting for the play to start back again after a failing pinch serve got Inarizaki coach calling time out, Kuroo Tetsurou was ready to go on talking to Alisa (who was keeping her eyes locked to his, expecting from him that he would complete his previous discourse), but ultimately he went out to stretch and grab by the shoulder his team setter who was seemingly eager to follow the game on court:

"Kenma, what a surprise! You do really find Hinata that captivating to move yourself to watch an entire game from the stands?"

The blonde bleached guy answered in a low monotone voice, without minding the grab, but without detaching eyes from the court either:

"It's not an entire game... they're at least past half of it."

Kenma's words were like whispers but Kuroo could read the faintest of sounds he would say:

"And I want to see their quick again and again."

"No biggie." Smirked Kuroo, and it was a sort of code between the two because somehow the ephoric setter felt the urge to detail better his reasons to watch:

"It's something I want to train my eyes with, to understand how they can do this."

Kuroo's face grew fonder of his friend's unusual curiosity, and replacing the smirk with a comprehensive glance he quipped:

"If that's even possible tho."

Mouths got shut, faces toward the game reprising, and Alisa thought that this was one of the longest talks she ever heard Kenma share; she liked the boy a lot, much like her brother, and every tiny bit of proactive effort she would recognize him display was definitely going to warm her heart, fondly.

If she could pet Kenma like a cat, she would.

"Alisa san don't worry " Yaku shouted from a few rows above, overpowered by rhythmic cheers newly coming from both sides of the arena: "Lev is right after me... he took longer in stretching being him... so long?! "

His beloved brother's guardian, always up to the task, and regularly let down by something unexpected Lev would do without second guessing the consequences:

"Yaku kun, you're so very kind to him. He owes you and your patience so much."

Yaku briefly cut his breath out. To be on the receiving end of Haiba Alisa's grateful spectrum was making him a jolting mess of happy feelings. Geez wasn't she the most beautiful creature ever created?

Alisa smiled towards Yaku, still unable to deal with her existence like a man and not a teen would, then she refocused on Nekoma's captain, longing for the missing part of his speech:

"So how should I refer to him in everyone's book?"

Kuroo took a second to readjust to that conversation, as it was slipping from his memory what they were talking exactly about, while it was adamantly clear Alisa didn't mind anything else that had
been said till that point beside it, eyes sparkling more than ever as she let out a further "mnh?"

"King. You should call him that. King of the upper court. Kageyama Tobio."

Tobio. Kageyama.

"Tobio..."

What a beautifully sounding combination of letters, she thought.
I don't want to disappoint you
I'm not here to anoint you
I would lick your feet
but is that the sickest move?
I wear my own crown and sadness and sorrow
and who'd have thought tomorrow could be so strange?
my loss, and here we go again

I'll take you over, there
I'll take you over, there
aluminum, tastes like fear
adrenaline, it pulls us near
I'll take you over
it tastes like fear, there
I'll take you over

look up, what do you see?
all of you and all of me
florescent and starry
some of them, they surprise

I can't look it in the eyes
seconal, Spanish fly, absinthe, kerosene
cherry-flavored neck and collar
I can smell the sorrow on your breath
the sweat, the victory and sorrow
the smell of fear, I got it

I'll take you over, there
I'll take you over, there
aluminum, tastes like fear
adrenaline, it pulls us near
I'll take you over
it tastes like fear, there
I'll take you over

pulls us near
tastes like fear...

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tobio-kun,
I am sorry for my reaction earlier this week. You were being so honest with me but I didn't realize
that mere fact was indeed an evidence of consideration you had for me.
I have been the silly one.
Once again.
And once again I am so sorry...
This which happened that day... it pains me so, so much.
Once more it seems I am the younger one; I keep acting like you are the wiser, and I am the inexperienced, out-of-reach one wounded by naivety and doubts.
Fact is... I truly am.
What I feel makes me a novelty to myself, and there is no age helping, trust me on this.
You can't be helped by age when you've got no past experience on a similar matter affecting you in your past.
Because now I know.
I know for sure two things.
That I've never been in love before.
And that I am in love with you now.
I hope you have not thrown this away... please please don't until it ends.
I will never be able to say this all to your face after that day... unless you want me to (and I know you don't).
Truth is I shouldn't chase you the way I have done... the way I know I would try again to do... if I weren't sure as I am now you would feel hurt by it and not because you care, but exactly because you don't.
I am losing my mind over this, but it's not your fault, please understand that I do understand this.
I do.
Fully.
My mind does.
But just because of this... it's like my heart has fallen even deeper into you.
Oh, what for?
I would escape you if I could, because you would like it better than this... but how can I force my heart to do what it can't afford to even depict in proposition?
You've been so honest with me...
So let me be the same, please.
Allow me my choice, as you've rightfully allowed yourself your own: let me love you.
From afar.
From where you won't ever again feel the disturbance out of.
Let me bless your sight, let me celebrate your existence, your path, your will.
It's my choice, until it will be it.
Let it be.
Let it be.
Please let me be.

With all my love

Alisa"

Chapter End Notes

In a while the timeline of the story will get easier to follow. I promise :)
Another Summer Haze

Chapter Summary

She's gotta a ticket to ride... but HE don't care.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

"Chikara senpai... how long before they arrive then?"
" Hinata said they should come in ten, fifteen minutes at worst... and they better, or else..."

Yachi shivered coldly at the perspective. Four months had passed with Ennoshita in charge of Daichi Sawamura's former role as a captain and everybody could feel in their bones he was born to be a commander. No one had doubted the choice when it had to be made; but no one had expected such a steady rise to the task.

"What did exactly happen?"

"Apparently his bike broke down on a wronged part of the concrete at the end of the hillside he daily passes by. He says he's not injured but let's check when he's here about that..."

"But then how come Kageyama found and rescued him? Doesn't he live on a total different side of the hill?"

Ennoshita mumbled. True that.

"He was passing by in a car...Saw Hinata, and called us up."

"Isn't all of his family out of Miyagi for Summer? Or they had stayed to bring him here today?"

Silence.
The state of Kageyama family arrangements was as mysterious as Atlantis downfall.

"So Kageyama was a passenger on a car. But whose... car?"

Yachi was trying to guess. But after one year and half there was still so much completely unknown to them about Kageyama life settings that nobody had clues regarding who could have been driving him to the school at six in the morning.

"Maybe some relative. What is important anyway is that they were there to rescue Hinata."

The rumbling sound of a powerful car engine was growing louder:

"Here they come?"

The team bus packed to leave, and the two remaining outside it facing the school entrance in expectation.

"Guess so... who else could come at 6 in the morning on a July Sunday..."
A pink Toyota SUV made its entrance from the side gate of Karasuno High School park. Yachi and Ennoshita looking at it with opposite reactions; the former in love with the color shade and disliking the big size of the ride, the latter almost disgusted by the chromatic boldness but rather captivated by the car overall stance.

"Yachi, please, bring the emergency case here..."

She made her move towards the bus, where the case was stored, but stopped halfway when the car driver stepped out from it.

"What... the..." 
"Sorry, it took longer than planned... my fault, I am not very aware of your surroundings over here!"

Yachi Hitoka was suddenly feeling lighter in her head. But she was not about to faint. She was about to scream. Standing there, a tall beauty with hair like light and silk, a sight of grace who was then moving straight to them waving cheers, her frilly dress beautifully draped to embrace her curves like rose petals opening to sun rays.

"Excuse me... aren't you..."

"Haiba Alisa! You are to meet with my brother's team today if I am not mistaken, captain..."

"Ennoshita. Ennoshita Chikara."

And then she smiled, and Yachi Hitoka felt a warmth in her chest she hadn't since Shimizu had left her manager duties along her. She was still there, one foot on the ground, one already on the bus but didn't move further because she wanted to see more, oblivious to the fact she had yet to bring the emergency case after her captain's request.

"Yachi please bring the case down..."

"There is no need for medication, Ennoshita San!"

That voice. Sounding like violins playing. That voice was even colored. Yachi thought that voice could even have a perfume of its own.

"Excuse me?" Ennoshita seemed frustrated by the interruption, although his impeccable manners could not give it away.

"I took care of everything before. I am a trained nurse. Hinata is totally fine."

Alisa seemed well assured in her words, and the small tension Ennoshita was building up disappeared at the open smile the girl kept showing off. Her eyes were caressed by the long eyelashes two different tones of shade and catching this Yachi's' face grew some darker pink layer; then from the car came the two remaining passengers out in the open, breaking all of her daydreaming.

"Captain Ennoshita! I am very sorry to be causing this delay!"

A small thundering sunshine jumped directly in front of his captain, a handful of red fluffy hair swinging down like flashes of golden fire as he bent to show remorse and contrition for his actions causing the team trouble.

"Hinata... are you ok?"
The concern of his tone was met with Hinata's brightest smile after the bowing down. His face was so open to read, there was no doubt he was fine.

"Definitely!!! I have been checked from top to bottom and beside some bruises I am as perfect as ever!"

"The only perfect thing about you is your stupidity."

"Shut up you! Why are you so mean?"

Ennoshita avoided to intervene. It would be pointless anyway he thought with an inner laugh; for the sudden squabbling between his most noticeable teammates was a thing of preciousness to witness, and often pretty entertaining as well. It was their way to show mutual care. And albeit it was most of the times a series of banalities and repetitive half-assed insults, their strange vocal code translated always into a wonderful chemistry between the two. So beneficial both to one another as players as well, he was always saying to himself, as growing individuals.

"Yeah, I am so mean it's only thanx to me you have not lost the bus gathering, right?"

Hinata looked down for a brief moment, then shoot his pulsating gaze back at Kageyama, who had come nearby in the meantime, with his broading shoulders over towering him mercilessly, the perennial frown just a little bit less intense than usual:

"I already thanked you. What do you want more?"

Kageyama sighed. He wanted to say I want you to take a better care of yourself and stop ride like a fool down that hill but all he managed to muster was:

"Nothing! You dumbass!"

And then he proceeded to put his bag with the rest under the bus and storm inside it.

Hinata was ready to follow suit but a glance by Ennoshita froze him in place.
A quick understanding and he profoundly bowed at Alisa:

"Thank you so much. I hope to see you again at the training camp then. It is something I look forward to. Thank you again, Haiba-San!"

Alisa smiled. Then she greeted Karasuno's captain and made her way back to her car.
"See you soon at the camp then. I'll come by in a couple of days I think."

And as she had come, she went away with another wheels screeching.

"I am really curious now..." Ennoshita was moving to where Kageyama and Hinata used to take seats in the bus "how come you were in that car now..."

But Kageyama was asleep. Both of them were.

"Damn... what ...? How can somebody switch off this instantly on a bus...ehi!"

Feeling a small hand jerking his arm, he turned to see Yachi telling him silently to wait.

"Everyone's asleep, Ennoshita-San" she whispered "and the trip to Tokyo takes a while. Let's savor some rest and save the questions for a later time?"
Chikara nodded, and moved away from his teammates, who were sleeping cutely onto one another as they had zero cares in the world.

"They bicker only when awake, after all"

And chuckling a little to himself, taking his own seat he fell asleep as well.

When the bus arrived at Nekoma High School facility, coach Ukai and Takeda Ittetsu were already there, waiting for them alongside the new head coach of the hosting team, Naoi Manabu. Ukai was chatting animatedly with him, patting him on his back, with the other trying to retain some composure to front his newly upgraded role in a way that wouldn't displease former coach Nekomata. From their seats, Hinata and Kageyama had woken up not a long before, and were looking off the bus to figure out the new space.

"We finally get to train here, after all... it was long due."

Hinata nodded. No sounds. What would have felt like after that game between them? What would have been the new dynamics?

They were such different teams now: the third years who had made unforgettable their match at Nationals months before gone on both ends; new faces nurtured not so in the back (at least concerning their squad, because there were those two kids who really had numbers in them, although roughly shaping up, and sure as hell Nekoma must have gotten some new blood as well), pushing for getting in the limelight; and then there would have been...

"Oi... are you in?"

"Yes... yes I am..."

Kageyama scoffed a bit, unsatisfied.

"You were like... spacing out?"

"I was thinking about Kenma."

That was it then. Ok.

"About what he said to you at the end of our last game?"

Another silent nodding. This silenced version of Hinata was giving Kageyama the chills. Both of them flew back to that court, that glorious day when the Battle Of The Trash Heap finally had taken its stage at Nationals. Their rivalry spreading all over; old coach Ukai sitting behind their bench, enraptured and proud of his nephew and of them all; the bruises; the screaming; the cruel roller coaster of points taken and points left... the indescribable shock of their victory, so hard, so stunning. All their strategies: suddenly fruitful in a way they could have never hoped they would experience. All of their individualities, so impressively synchronized play after play. Their willpower, so overflowing, so immaculately bright. And their level of trust, all of them twelve that day, simply unbroken no matter how patiently and fittingly Nekoma players had tried their everything to disrupt it.

"We deserved to win. We crumbled their perfect defense as a perfectly offensive team. You, and Tanaka and Tsukishima did wonders..."

Hinata turned face to him:
"Well... you actually enabled us?"

Kageyama deflected the praise, as usual:

"I did what I was supposed to. My point is that we deserved to win. What Kozume San felt and said to you after... I think it is just the biggest testament of this truth."

Hinata put his sight back on the street out of the windowsill. Everyone had already gone out of the bus.

"I wanted so bad for him to taste a feeling so big he would get out of his own comfort to grasp it... but I never wanted to make him cry, or suffer..."

Of course he didn't. Kageyama knew that in Hinata Shouyou not a single ounce of malice or deviousness could inhabit. His heart could only spread positivity and he was the one most touched by the effects of his sunny personality. He was grateful deep down himself to have acknowledged it, even though nobody had head on he was feeling any of that.

"Don't think he did."

"You don't think he suffered?"

"To experience that pain... to experience the bite of defeat... that blankness both you and I did already... that is not suffering. That is progressing. Athletes thrive only because of that. Nobody can be immune of losing."

Kageyama had it again. That look into his eyes which was the perfect embodiment of the concept of ambition. No road's worth to walk in which never gets uneasy.

"And by the way, he still playing and is now their captain right? So stop being a dumbass and a drama queen and show him again how you've gotten even better in these months. That's your way to tell him you took charge of what he said to you that day."

And shoving him to push both out of the bus, they reached all their team on the courtyard of Nekoma gymnasium.

Another training camp.
Another chance to grow their skill up.
Life couldn't be kinder to a volleyball lover, the raven haired guy thought inhaling the thick wet air of Tokyo summertime.
He was eager to face the tall ace of Nekoma again, the lanky devil who had impressed him so much in their National fight. Sure they had lost two fantastic players in Kuroo and Yaku but the way Haiba Lev had shown he could progress in small time lapses could well made up for it.
He knew he had grown even taller. She had told him. And his hands were shaking to play against him another round of spat shots.

"Ehi Tsukishima..."

Kageyama addressed him while getting to their lodge after the mutual greetings between the teams.

"What's good Your Highness?"

A snort. But not serious.

"Want to join me later for a run?"
"Guess that's the only way to get assured you won't get lost..."

"Is that a yes?"

The taller one looked prideful and amused. Always so difficult, Kageyama thought.

"Guess so."

Nothing else needed to be said.
Yes, this training camp was shaping up good already.

Chapter End Notes

After the brief Antifact and the epistolary break in which we cover the extremes of
several months spam, things start to get going in regular length chapters. I would like to
update the many chapters I plan every week / ten days. Thank you for stopping by if
you will, and enjoy :)
"How long this ride?"

Kei Tsukishima asked while tying his shoelaces firmly.

"Oh let's make 20?"

"20 KILOMETERS you mean? No fucking way. Forget it King!"


"Could you stop with that? Why are you so fond of calling me a way that irks me?"

They were alone in front of Nekoma High School side entrance; two tall guys, both clad in dark jerseys despite the heat, far from nullified from the hour getting late. One taller than the other, but reversely one just way broader.

"I love to rile you up. It endlessly satisfy me. It's sad how it is slowly becoming ineffective though. I hate this new zen phase of yours."

"Zen phase my ass. I just got used to the evil ways of yours. And decided it wasn't worthy my time to lose steam after it."

"Oh... and isn't it so very royalist of you to dismiss this uncaring way any unworthy subject's distress?"

Tsukishima and his talent with words and reasoning. He could never touch him there. He stood light years ahead of him on that stage no matter the help Sugawara was providing in his newly focused college school prepping.

But looking daintily aside, to fill his nostrils with the foreign air around, Kageyama could be taken indeed for a royal breed. There was something about his face when his deepest thoughts seemed to take all of himself away which was elegant and distant and very pleasing to the eye. There had been a time when all this could be washed away like a lazy tide a beautiful shell and get lost in the deep water, and that would happen any time he had tried to voice that mind of his in coherent words, but in that regard things seemed to have gotten better, too:

"Please stop this. The way you try to subside me through wordly labyrinth gives me headache. Shall we go?"

*Subsiding through wordly labyrinth. Damn King. When did he become so fluent and... chosy with lessical options? He could seem intelligent for a while...*

Tsukishima had been discouraged quite often in trying to corner his setter logically in the previous month, after their unlucky loss in the final of the InterHigh Preliminaires facing Datekou (Noyassan's ankle injury too big of a defeat to overcome for a team with all new balance to countermeasure, and
the new members too distraught after the victorious semifinal against Seijou). Not for lack of trials though: it was more and more clear to him that his own wit wasn't a definite prerogative of just himself. He could merely word it better:

"I won't run a meter over 15 kilometers tho."

"As soon as we start going..."

And Kageyama picked up his pace, careful to not push his comrade too fast at first. They had started doing their running routines during the Nationals at the start of the year. In the beginning Tsukishima would just chaperone Hinata and him on a bike; but after a while, with the not declared intention to get stronger himself, he had started to join in regularly with them. By the start of their second year he would even suggest new chances to run together, and insisting to involve Yamaguchi often.

The night was falling when they came back to the training camp lodge, and they moved to the baths to take a shower.

"I heard this morning I lost a chance to piss you off..."

Kageyama protruded his head over the separation each shower had in between, at once lost and intrigued:

"How come? What are you blabbing about?"

"I heard you rescued our favorite tangerine while being carrying an inappropriate relation with the enemy..."

Okay. That was a low blow.
Nevermind. His face shows no sign he got this at all...

"Enemy? What the hell does this mean..."

Oh, my... isn't this guy irritatingly clueless...

"Weren't you in a car with Haiba Lev's sister?"

Kageyama cut the shower off. His naked body dripping clean, a towel over his head, and still no visible sign of comprehension from the look on his face:

"She was kindly driving me from my uncle's to our school. So?"

Kei took his towel and made a move out of the shower as well.

"Teach me your ways, King. I'd like to have such a senior being my driver at early hours..."


"She is a student in my uncle's interclass program at Todai. I was with him at a family residence yesterday in Sendai, and she and some of her classmates had a bunch of works to perfect and deliver to him there."

Kageyama threw the drenched towel from his head to the laundry basket in the far corner of the showers room, his hair gaining back its usual motility to shield his forehead, and eyes semi closed to carry on the conversation in the most detached way possible: "It isn't the first time we met there. It is quite a regularity for my uncle to host his college students for these inter classes at his places. Alisa
obviously knew I was about to come to her brother's school and just offered herself to bring me at the bus gathering, allowing my uncle some free space today."

_Ah, King. What a long, well constructed, informative speech. You didn't even flinch a bit. You really think this is not strange at all, don't you?_

"So let me rephrase it: are you acquainted with that beauty, and it doesn't minimally affect you?"

"I wouldn't call this acquaintance..."

"Didn't she come expressively to meet you after we won against Inarizaki at the Nationals?"

"That was the first time we met... so..."

_Still obtuse I see..._

"So?"

"So I can't see how she could be willing to just meet me that day. She just came down to cheer the team?"

_What a colossal cretin..._

"Oh, Yeah, sure... so willing to cheer the team she only spoke to you, glued by your side..."

The frown of Kageyama's face clearly signified that he was struggling to recall anything that could have been considered such as somebody "glueing" to him that day. The only things that mattered for him then where strictly game related, and to be fairly honest all those conversations they had post game felt like nothing eventful for him:

"Glued? She was talking near because of the loud noise, otherwise it would have been impossible to understand any word?!?"

_Uuuuuuurghhh._

Tsukishima was becoming reckless. Time to go to bed he thought, their talk was going nowhere interesting anyway, before his reactions could build too high a tower to be falling from.

"There there... whatever Kageyama. I'm done here, I'm gonna go sleeping see you tomorrow!"

And with no backside salute he went off straight from the bath to his futon.

_That creepy apathetic fucker. How can he not realize the basics of social hookups?_

A good twenty minutes after Tsukishima had left him alone, Kageyama went to bed as well. As soon as he lied down, his phone lighted up. A text message.

"Tobio-kun, are you in Tokyo?"

He curled into himself under the light covers to dim the luminosity of the phone screen, into which he typed back:

"Yes, we have arrived today."

Another bling, and a new stream of kanji (he had gotten really better at reading them... thank you Koushi San he said to himself, pleased at his improved quickness in dealing with dialing replies up):
"Same here! Any chance we meet before we all head back home?"

Even in the darkness, you could have seen his eyes sparkle up:

"I'd like to. Where are you at?"

A series of silly emojis covered the screen. Gosh was this person five or...

"Like you don't know... we are at Itachiyama training camp, you dummy... I told you two weeks ago!"

Atsumu was right. He did remember then. He had sent him the text when they realized they wouldn’t have squared off that soon for the revenge at the summer Inter High, due to Karasuno’s loss against Datekou.

_Tobio kun why did you lose? What about my revenge? What about YOUR revenge? Oh crap... I don’t want to wait months to kick your ass... but we could meet at my school special camp during the Summer Holidays? We'll be in Tokyo, hosted by The Great Purple Gremlins... won't you be around town too?_

Kageyama still had to question himself for being highly fascinated by the way Miya Atsumu would carry himself. Nonchalantly annoying for many, in his eyes he was so funnily unfiltered even his arrogance wasn’t all that bad. And by the way, he could play so well that one or two slightly handful things about his behavior could be forgiven, at least in his book:

"If I can arrange a meeting I will definitely enjoy to catch you Miya San."

"Great. But in no way I'll stand Sakusa tagging along. Beware!"

Kageyama froze a bit before choosing his words to reply:

"I would never disturb Sakusa San with such requests..."

"Good. Before he brainwashes you with his luring tactics. Or get you into the whole germophobe shit hell..."

"You shouldn't speak this way of Sakusa San, Miya San..."

" I bet you think he's a crazy weirdo too..."

If Kageyama could have created an emoji for full blown horror he would have, and with that along would have replied:

"Absolutely not. Never. Who do you think I am?"

_You are a magical creature, Tobio-Kun. That's why I want so badly to see you again..._

"You wouldn't think of him any of that because you're kind of a freak as well! Like... you are a terribly awkward social disaster, Tobio Kun. That's why you need to learn more from me, both in and out of a court!"

Kageyama was undecided on how to answer that. He would have loved to learn everything Miya Atsumu could teach him in volleyball. His social capability however... that he could have lived well without. Too flamboyant and aggressive. Waaaay too up registered for his likes. But he was still looking forward to spend more time with him. And also with his brother, why not. And if eventually the great Sakusa Kyoomi would maybe agree and join them in whatever they were about to do
then... no matter Atsumu's denials... he would have certainly considered that day one of the best of his life.

"I'd totally love to learn more from you about the game. Never made a secret out of it."

"Of course Tobio kun. Your taste in the game has always been excellent after all."

No answer. Just an ok emoji.

"You really aren't smooth at basking in praise, are you Tobio kun?"

"Praise too believed can make people weak."

*Coming off so deep and serious at midnight... oh, sweet, sweet Tobio... such an open heart to cage and possess. Everything about him is as farther as possible from deceit and manipulation. And I love it. It's so different from what I'm used to... his purity... I want to understand how one can be this pure.*

"True that! So... it's late and we have to cut this short, but I will do my best to let you come here for a couple of hours... catch you tomorrow ok?"

"Ok. Goodnight Miya San."

A new stream of sleepy emojis followed in place of a more detailed reply.

The lodges at Nekoma all shut down silently. A bunch of teens eager to show their prowess in the incoming days. A couple of them sleeping soundly, too soundly for being teens. The tickling feeling of youth exploding making their days, each one of them, a magnificent discovery. A journey to a full and fruitful adulthood.

On a total different side of the town, in a different suited lodge, another bunch of teens, not all yet sleeping. Not all yet silent.

Frantically replaying situations in his hyperactive imagination, Miya Atsumu couldn't stay laying down in his bed. His senses all sharpened up, and pieces of memories mixing up with a number of desirable perspectives. The tickling feeling of a different kind of youth requirement pulsating to make him wish for a magnificent discovery. His own journey to his own adulthood could provide some side surprises, and he wasn't the type to back down at anything he could deem as interesting. So he fell asleep holding the phone, after having kept it open on a picture taken the day he had experienced the most painful and shattering defeat of his life, as well as the most exciting and surprising connection he had ever perceived.

A picture of a disheveled winner unable to be any less than graceful to those he had just beat to the ground: the eyes of pure joy he fell for glistening for a thin veil of teardrops, but still those of a King, looking at him with gratefulness for a battle he thought fair, beautiful, and enriching. Those eyes which were seeing him as valuable, and mattering, and unique. Those eyes which could see him. Only him. Exactly him.

Tobio had been the first he felt was considering him what he always felt he was himself. Atsumu. Not a Miya half entity. Just Atsumu. Individually.

Funny, considering he was keeping calling him just 'Miya San' mostly. But he knew. He knew. He felt so much accepted in Tobio's eyes he wanted to test how much he could have put up with him without breaking.
Goodnight my favorite mistake. The only one I'd be calling myself lucky to keep repeating. Indefinitely.

When the morning came, Atsumu had to be woken up by his twin Osamu, because his phone failed to propel the wake up ringtone from its speaker:

"Tsumu wake the heck up!"

"Oh... Samu... what time is...it?"

"Time to lift your ass and run... why didn't you set the alarm?"

"I swear I..."

But in his hand still, his phone was dead shut. Zero battery left. When in the afternoon he had recharged it, the screen reflected the picture of Tobio Kageyama shaking his hand after having defeated him in the Spring National.

"Ehi, Tsumu... your phone's charged."

"Mnhh?"

Osamu unplugged it and with a sensitive look adviced his brother:

"Don't be an ass with him. Got it?"

And he launched the iPhone back in his twin's hand:

"Ass? Me? Never!"

Osamu scrolled a bit, fairly resigned that doom was looming ahead by the expression of un-guilty bliss the guy in front of him was offering to his eyes:

"More always, you mind twitching wizard. Still... please leave him alone. He's... I guess... a good guy. He doesn't deserve whatever you're planning for him."

"Fufu... I am not planning a thing. I swear."

And with incredible fastness, Atsumu was already out of Osamu's sight, typing a number on the phone, and disappearing down the students reading main room of Itachiyama Institute.
Fated Bonds (Mountain Day Time)

Chapter Summary

Beyond the horizon of the place we lived when we were young
In a world of magnets and miracles
Our thoughts strayed constantly and without boundary
The ringing of the division bell had begun.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had taken the slow route to his house, and he was starting to regret his stop at Sakanoshita vending machine with Hinata and Tanaka for the last popsicle post training. He knew the rest of the evening wouldn't be free for him but he had been easily convinced by his vice captain that half an hour sooner or later to drown in homeworks would have been no big deal to adjust to. And after all he had come to enjoy those little chances of bonding his team was always ready to offer him.

As aloof and hard to socialize with as he was still appearing to the majority of people, he could feel he was nowhere as much as a hopeless case anymore. Baby steps can still take people far.

He loved all of those he had taken the first year of high school. He was loving all those he was taking in the second. Baby steps, sure. But steady ones at least.

Back at home he found the usual boxes in the kitchen, the usual notes magnetically stuck on the fridge, the usual messages in the voicemail.

But when he went in his room, he found something pretty unexpected, and at the sight he couldn't avoid nor a little jump of surprise, and neither a trace of smile appearing on his face.

Placed carefully in the middle of his bed, a round package patched up in paper with not so impressive skill; under it an envelope, with a beautiful calligraphy reading to Tobio-chan and under the writing a little alien head sticker with big translucent eyes.

Leaving on the floor his gym bag, he sat expectantly on the mattress, in between staying contemplating and resolving himself into action: then opening the envelope and extracting a piece of paper he mumbled softly what was written on it:

"I kept my word, see how good a senpai you got? It is a bit rough on the edges but it means they really used it. This shall make up for all the birthday presents you never got from me. If I think of this, actually now you probably owe me. But let's make it even ok? Enjoy it. Tooru."

Kageyama opened the package in ecstasy and when his hands were over the content, he shivered.

"The National team ball... the one they won with... he really gave it to me?"

Astonished and delighted, trying some little tossing with the precious new toy, he wouldn't stop smiling in his room.
"I can't believe... he really did!"

And with every new tentative toss, he would recall a piece of this new, absurdly left-turned reality where he and Oikawa Tooru were actually trying to get along.

Go figure.

And they weren't a falling avalanche at it: somehow they were really starting to get used to each other.

After the impromptu meeting at his family outdoor reception, (not long after the former Aoba Johsai student had graduated) which at first had left the both of them speechless and tout court shocked to be found by the other in what was supposed to be a safe environment, he had noticed a number of changes in Oikawa.

They had met thrice more since then, and every single time Kageyama had gotten less awkwardly accustomed around him. He thought it had to do with the fact Oikawa seemed to be less bothered by his presence, in general.

He pictured vividly the recent Obon Festival in Tokyo, the month before, where they met and where he had won the bet which had transmuted into the ball currently in his room: and the feeling that yes, Oikawa Tooru was definitely nicely disposed toward him those days didn't seem a stretch at all.

And no, not just because of that ball right there.
He wouldn't try to mock him; he wouldn't leave him in place going the opposite direction anytime he would try and approach him.
He would have a polite conversation, and at times you could call those even pleasant ones.
Who knows, maybe this new Oikawa would even teach him how to serve.
He had gotten so much better since the Spring National, but Kageyama was sure Oikawa had too, so that the gap in skill between them even though it might have been lessened, surely had yet to be erased.

"To have him being a pupil of my uncle... what miracle did it make?"

In his room, finally seating at his desk and taking a sip of milkshake while diligently executing the tests Sugawara had sent to him the week before, he was keeping smiling a bit.

"How much something can change in a matter of months..." he said to himself.

And he would have tried to say 'someone' instead but a part of him was keeping hope that what had always put them two on opposing fences was not a matter of personality but rather a case of dull misconceptions.

The fact was that - still - for him to start thinking about his never too complacent senpai would take up ton of energy, and a whole lot of time. He had none at the moment so he forced himself back on his books before the trail of suppositions could ruin his hour devoted to English Grammar.

"I may see him soon again anyway. There's no point in thinking stuff, when you might just live them and go."

In a pretty naked room, at the same time, Oikawa too had thoughts on his former kouhai after the surprising discovery he was related to his mentor.

"They look a bit alike... But who could've guessed little clueless Tobio had a Nobel Prize team member in his primary bloodlines?"

That's just another talent heritage they have... He dragged himself to the thought, but then he shook
his head, his shortened hair still dancing elegantly over his perfectly shaped eyebrows and just concluded it had been quite nice to realize he had a link in Tobio to connect himself with somebody he could obtain so much for his professional future from.

He looked at the amount of books he had started to amass in the small apartment he would have occupied the following three years while attending Todai University.

It was Mountain Day.

In Miyagi it would have been better than in sweaty Tokyo he thought. Not that many had actually idea what this new holiday was... but if the Government had decided for a new free day, sure why not enjoy it and relax?

He didn't have a group to hang (and lead) with yet; that was a minus for sure, but there was no estimation of loneliness in his foreseeable future, because if there was one thing he was good at (one of the most noticeable among the many, many good things he was good at) to attract people with his charisma would be it.

Sure, for a while he would be nostalgic about his first home; but he was glad to be in the capital. He couldn't wait to start the new chapter of his life. To learn about science not only to dream about space and adventures, but to become eventually able to save lives. And to get better, more and more, at decoding his.

Then he would soon start club activities too. No, he wouldn't give up on volleyball no matter how harsh his chosen academics would get. Volleyball was still his first love. A burning bright kind of love.

Sparse on the floor there were seven or so Volleyball Monthly Magazines. Habits hard to dismiss. Picking the latest one up, he began to casually swipe the pages around, until his attention caught a couple of pictures he couldn't avoid to relate to.

"Who knows what they are up to now? They are all seated teams for the Spring preliminaries, so I guess it's just training and the likes until... October playoffs..."

His mind flew easily to a year before. With bittersweet taste, he recalled what would have stayed with him forever. The complete trust of his teammates. The sense of omnipotence he seldom had felt serving his aces. The laughing for a game lost at a PSP play waiting for everybody to free the locker room, the hours spent strategizing every small detail to make their style of play beautiful. Beautiful and perfect. Beautiful and perfect and domineering. Like the way true champions only can hope to approach the game.

And yes: they were champions that year. Even if they had lost, they were still all champions. He was. And...

Iwa-chan.

Sure he was a champion too. Heart of Fire. The best friend a man could ask for.

Oh, Hajime... days without him were way dullest, weren't they?

But to evolve, to be able to truly discover who they might be, the umbilical chord which was their standing rock mutually had to be cut. Not forever, because a friendship like theirs was falling in brotherly kind of bonds and those are links nothing can affect or make fade out; but the sense of void they sure were feeling suddenly every now and again at their distant new stays was a push for the both of them to re-arrange their lives focusing essentially on their own wishes; their own projects; their own personalities. In a few years, when probably reunited somehow after their University life, they would be certainly starting pest each other like years apart had been nothing but a blink of an eye.

And this projected future was all the comfort Oikawa Tooru was needing to be assured of being safe.
Moving to the kitchen fires to boil some water for a tea, He couldn't stop the rush of memories and images his fondly thoughts were forming like distinguishable ghosts in front of the teapot he was preparing.

Like little sparkles of visionary shapes, those images of kids becoming teens and young willful men were appearing before his conscious sight; and an intoxicatingly precious sense of warmth made him aware he had led a fortunate life till that day.

He had a very special, and supported and cared for existence so far.

That was a given... but yeah, he truly had a blast of a life. And it was his very specific intention to keep it that way from then and onwards.

It wasn't long before he had discovered all of his reasons to be happy. But since he had, it had been like living in technicolor.

'Yes', he claimed unheard in his space, sipping tea and eating a piece of milk bread. 'My days in Miyagi have been a bliss. All of them. All of the highs... and also all of the lows. And I will extend the bliss here, and now. One more day. One more time. And on, and on... and on. I am here to be special. Nothing's gonna stop me. Ever.'

He went to his iPhone and started to type something; then he changed his mind and didn't send anything, opting for an Instagram post of his to-be-set new digs with the caption "nothing so bad that a setter can't fix ".

He kept toying with the phone, but eventually gave up and sent a blunt message reading "Good luck for the rest of the season. Don't be too full of yourself now. Your team has changed and so have others, and it's all incognito from now on. You know already how bad is to fall from high horses."

After a bunch of minutes, in which he weighted down if his message receiver were accustomed to the concept of 'incognito' he got a reply: "I keep working every day to be the best I can possibly be. We are still strong. And without you facing us, there are many teams I am wary of, but nothing I fear."

"This damn brat. Always so shockingly sincere..."

Rather unexpectedly the former Aoba Johsai ace setter had agreed quickly at exchanging mobile phone numbers with Kageyama and since their first re-meet they had settled for a few sms per week. Granted they were completely volleyball related ones but with Tobio no one could have hoped differently.

So it was odd when Oikawa got a late evening text from his underclassman a few days before he was ready to enroll at his University with a serious question involving how to reject somebody gently.

At first he thought he had mistaken the sender's number; when it appeared he did not, instinctively he called him straight to get the business done at a faster pace.

Bad idea.
On the other side of the call, Kageyama sounded all but revealing.

"Tobio-chan, is this a prank?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well... this whole rejecting thing... is it true or are you just fantasizing?"

A small grunting couldn't be hidden by the phone and Oikawa felt indelicate, but also extremely
curious. So that he surprised Kageyama with his subsequent reaction, telling him simply:

"I'm going to come home tomorrow; my parents want to greet me before my enrollment at University, and there is no better chance than Obon isn't it? Tokyo one is a joke compared to our own. If you spare some time and want to meet, you can tell me more about this. I'll stay for a few days."

It took a long frame for Kageyama to answer, but Oikawa never thought he wasn't going to. He could hear his even breath and it was making him even more curious. The Tobio he used to know would have kinda panicked a bit at his sudden request. This Tobio instead... he was just calmly breathing. He was just taking his time.

"Thank you. Yes. I have time to meet. Just text me when and where and I'll be there. I don't wanna you to neglect your family, tho. But I would use your opinion on this greatly."

"Done deal. Details up when I'll be there then. Have a good night, Tobio chan."

"You too, Oikawa San."

Two days later, Karasuno Volleyball team was up in practice despite the Obon festivities. The incoming training matches were making all the players standing on their toes and there was no shortage of good focus in any of them.
The target was to win. Every single game.
Practice or regular, the aim was just the same for all of the guys, and this kind of engagement was the best premise for a good run in the remain of the season.
Coach Ukai had given specific instruction to each player to strengthen every individuality singularly; at the same time he had decided to create mini groups of three players to develop unique strategies of ball connection; and their six on six matches would be for half of the sets a complete randomization of roles.
Then there was the extra dose of self-imposed exercise each regular and reserve would agree on performing for the sake of ameliorating themselves. That was the part Ukai and Takeda were the proudest about.

"Kageyama! Are you staying to try some new stuff today too? New tournaments are around the corner and everyone will be there to knock us down a peg! This time Datekou won't catch us off guard... we are all in shape. We have this new formation and whoooooaah! They won't see how hard we coming will they?"

Hinata and his endless thirst for the victorious quests. His face illuminated by agonism would brighten the darkest night he thought. He loved how much in synch they always had been about the overwhelming beauty and passion of competing.

"It's gonna be tough. So it's gonna be fun."

"Yasssss!!! I can't wait! We'll fight all of them once more!!! It's gonna be amazing!"

He almost smiled, undecided if giving his partner a satisfactory open grin and finally setting for half a smirk:

"Hold your tits dumbass, and calm down. This way you will overdo yourself before it comes to being useful..."

"No I won't!"
"Anyway about extra practice I'd like to but I can't today. I have something important planned already. I'll make up for it tomorrow tho so be ready!"

Hinata looked sharply at him, rotating on one leg a bit, then closing eyes and shouting faking shock:

"Have you got a date? Awww... a date for the Obon? Aren't you romantic eheheh..."

Kageyama grabbed his shirt ready to lift him up and throw him to the moon:

"Care to repeat?"

"Ehi, learn to take jokes, you humorless grinch... I was kidding ok?"

"You two stop messing around!"

Tsukishima had evidently enough, both of their quarrels and of their lack of help with the first years at that moment:

"You either stay practicing or you leave and stop disturbing our work ok?"

Kageyama loosened the grip on Hinata's shirt, patting it smoother and giving him sign he was sorry for the overreaction, then turning to Kei said simply:

"Sorry Tsukishima, my bad. You're right I was being noisy and I was distracting you unnecessarily. I'll go now, please don't mind this and... see you tomorrow guys!"

Hinata waved goodbye along every other one in the gym; Tsukishima instead, having trouble still with the version of their King occasionally and so openly apologizing to others, just followed his way out of practice zone in silence. Then, shrugging the uneasiness off, without saying a word to him he redirected to the bunch of expecting first years who would be taught on how to block efficiently despite differences of size and power. They were all quite good already, he beamed with pride thinking how far the team was bound to go with them. Because the fact that was just a club they were in didn't mean it wasn't great to win while being at it.

Kageyama let the voices and the scratches over the wooden floor of the gym fade behind him. He wasn't the happiest about missing even the slightest part of a practice but what he needed to talk about that late afternoon was of extreme importance, and it couldn't be helped other ways.

"This gotta be solved. It's starting to bug me and I don't want to get distracted now that the real stuff's coming at us like the bullet train..."

His hand went to the zip of his gym bag.

Found it.

Good.

After a pair of miles more, he took a turn he hadn't in quite a long time. A feisty face was looking at him from the end of the road. And he could tell it was such as one because otherwise that wouldn't have been his destination that afternoon.

"Really Oikawa San?"

And the shortness of the sentence couldn't mask the emotional sound of it.

"Well, I like theatrics you know. This is just appropriate if you ask me..."
A little, little smile seemed to form on Kageyama's lips. It made the other widen his twice larger, too.

"Yeah. It probably fits. Shall we go in?"

And rotating on his medium finger a ring with three keys, Oikawa nodded:

"Yup. Make way, Tobio chan. You left here after me therefore your memories are fresher."

"Says the one with the extra keys..."

"Don't be a pain... and don't worry... no one is here for sure. Obon time is sacred at Kitagawa, you know it."

He did.

Taking careful steps into the yard they both had run over so many times, they reached the place both had most lived back then. And indeed it was appropriate for them to stay sit out in the open, on those marble stairs outside the first gym they ever shared, the only one where they did it with the same jersey colors on.

"It feels... a bit strange... doesn't it Tobio chan?"

Kageyama had a seraphic look on him. Like he was trying to hyper memorize every minuscule detail around. Then suddenly looking directly at his senpai, very naturally, very slowly he said back:

"No. Not at all. For me this feels just... very right."

Oikawa marveled at the answer, and even more at the way he reckoned it was making him feel.

There you go. How can he be this... unpredictable. Why am I always shocked by the things he says, or the things he does? And how can it feel right for him to be where he is... and with me, of all people?

But the way he was looking at him, dark blue eyes as impressive as ever, without a single trace of regret nor animosity, it was clear to Oikawa that yes: Kageyama was at ease right there. And he felt better thanx to that.

Cicadas had stopped their summer chants and the nature around was offering them a suggestive scenery. Tohoku severe grace seemed encapsulate both of their essences in it. A timeless captivating sense of power and beauty. But asking to them in that moment who was to be power, and who would be beauty could have been tricky. So another question rose up in the dying day:

"Why are we here, Tobio?"

"I need the advice of somebody capable to deal with people."

"So, since you're certainly the worst, you've addressed yourself to the best?"

"Precisely."

Oikawa chuckled dignified enough. At least he had standards.

"And who's that naive to have fallen to your very debatable charm, my otherwise undeniably kind-of-cute kouhai?"

Kageyama was to reach the letter he had in his gym bag, but a sort of fifth sense and a half prevented
him from doing it. Instead he faked his change of mind for clumsiness and stuttered a bit into a:

"Somebody out of school. Somebody I tend to meet through relatives. Somebody..."

He was flustered and getting red. Cute. Very cute indeed.

"... somebody a bit older... than me. Too."

He was naughty then. How unpredictable, again.

"Older? Oh... that is quite interesting," and Oikawa purposefully made himself slide near enough to elbow Kageyama maliciously "who would have thought you were into these things mh?"

The reaction was neat and firm. A stroke of elbow away, and a composure of stone, much like his gaze back at the older setter.

"And I am not. I am not into whatever these things are. I don't care. And that's the problem I need your advice for."

Oikawa transformed in his professionally sought after version. He was having a funny blast, he would admit later.

"Is she - because it's a she, right? - not attractive?"

Kageyama's face turned fully red: first for the initial half of Oikawa's question, and then for the question in itself:

"Is this what matters?"

Oikawa faked getting unnerved, but not very convincingly:

"Well... of course? What's the point in even start anything with anyone if they're scrubs?"

Kageyama sighed. He wanted to believe that behind his pompous facade he was actually not that frivolously shallow.

"She's actually very beautiful... I think. Not that I keep tracks of it but...Well, other people too... think she is..."

Tobio fully red faced was too cute for words, Oikawa thought.

"Then where's the problem?"

"Are you for real?"

"... well... seriously... where's the problem if a beautiful girl is interested in you?"

Kageyama seemed disappointed in how the conversation was being held.

"I thought you, you for sure would understand why this is a problem?"

"Excuse me Tobio chan: I am not kidding you; seriously... let me get you because right now I am definitely NOT following where you're heading..."

His face showed a certain concern in fact. He believed him. He felt nicely realizing he seemed to care about his idea in that moment. That was... important.
"Well... I thought you would back me in thinking that... with this I do... with this... we do... we can't waste time in side stuffs like having a girlfriend or something. I for sure know that I can't."

Oikawa's mouth opened in disbelief.

"What?"

It was clear they didn't sit on the same wavelength about the topic. Their faces were polar opposites in that moment but that didn't change Kageyama's mind a millimeter:

"I am serious about this. It's not that I didn't find flattering to be confessed at. I did. Also girls at our school have expressed interest in me, but this time, well... this time obviously it was different. It was... bigger and more intense as a feeling, when she got me cornered and said me all those things..."

He was still standing now, his face concentrated on a flashy memory, fists clenched, tone a bit huskier than usual. It was adamant that confession had hit home base somehow, but home base was not home run allegedly:

"... but even if it was kind of a... feeling... well it was nothing comparable to what I feel when I play. Nothing even remotely like it. And I don't mean in games. What I feel when I play, at practice, when we merely talk strategies and match ups... whenever I picture myself facing players that I want to oppose and beat with all I've got, and their teams, and their coaches, and their dreams... that electricity that spreads in me and makes me whole... that is what I live for. That is what I want to spend time feeling. That. Nothing else."

And he turned eyes piercing into Oikawa's, who was there sitting looking at him completely at a loss for words.

"Am I mad? You must think I am... even though...I think you feel something of... the same as I do?"

The older guy made himself stand as well, and moved nearby. Eyes drooping gently before re-locking with the other's:

"If I didn't know you really feel your happiest when you play, yes I would think you are out of your mind. But no... of course you are not mad. You are just you. You can't be the way others want you. You can only be yourself."

And telling his kouhuai that, he was reaffirming the same concept to himself. Be yourself is all that you can do in life.

"I just don't want to waste my time. And I don't want others to waste theirs on me. I have just one thing in mind... is that so bad? Does it make me a freak? Isn't it beautiful that I know already what my true passion and love are?"

This. This is why you are of a different kind. Because you call your obsession beautiful, and you wouldn't have it any other way. You really see yourself suffering and competing every day at your highest like the most wonderful thing. Without the anger I thought one should have to get further. Without the pettiness, and without the rage. And yes, you are a freak for it. But I can't fault you for this. Not anymore.

"Well, before you collect every possible trophy though, try to experiment a bit with other kind of pleasures... or you'd miss out, Tobio chan."

He wanted to sound wise and patronizing but he managed to assume the sweetest of tones instead, like he cared sincerely for him not to miss out his youth completely to devote to his sporty demon.
That voice snapped inside Kageyama like the sound of the Tsurigane, calling for the utmost attention and the totality of his senses:

"It's not that I plan to never love... it's just that now... I don't have time for it. And I want to say it to this person in a way that she can understand my denial being not against her, and not even against her offering. It's that right now, the only way I can be me is by playing. Every other thing, is not that is coming after: every other thing just doesn't exist."

_Oh... so is this the way a prodigy feels? That every single one of a prodigy's cell are oriented to the target their talent calls for? I have no idea. This is not my world. I am fascinated though. To witness this... it's rare I guess. I don't know if I'd like to be like this though... but it's a fascinating rarity to get exposed to._

"Listen: if this girl likes you, and I am sure she does, you just have to tell her exactly what you've told me now. She will understand, or at the very least she will feel you are being sincere at the maximum level you can. I know I would feel ok with something like that."

Kageyama lit up and his face began to soften. It was a less extraordinary occurrence as of late, that way he would mold his frowned traits into a less battling, although still intense expression:

"Oi... It's just that all I want to take care of is my road to bigger and bigger competitions. All that may get in the zone... I consciously erase... well, more or less. It's not always easy to accomplish that."

"You sound like a monk... you're scary."

A faint, little luminous smile then appeared on his face. That also had started becoming less infrequent. With the addition of the least visible one, his face would immediately turn into essential beauty. Oikawa realized that he could look very beautiful too. But strangely enough, he reckoned, not even that acknowledgment could turn him jealous that day.

"I'm just optimizing my efforts. I think logically way more than people assume."

"You do appear clumsy most of times, indeed."

"Say dense... I know this is the way I give myself off mostly."

"Never about the game tho."

"Never about it. That's right."

It was actually the very first time Oikawa had openly complimented his skill. But neither of them took note of it, because probably deep inside they both felt it was underlined despite how they had carried themselves while competing.

"I wonder when you've expanded your vocabulary this way... And..."

"My grasp of reality around me?"

The faint smile passed onto Oikawa's face then:

"Yeah. You sound grown up a lot, Tobio."

The younger intensively looking ahead of both, indecisive if turning eyes on the other again, but feeling a gaze resting on his own face from the side:

"You also look the part now, and I wish I could stop your growth spurt right this moment. You
mustn't grow any taller than me you know. That's so disrespectful!"

Hearing the tone of his forever-senpai getting back to fancy, pitch up and vibrating, Kageyama found the force to look back at him; the locks moved by the soft breeze, and those all-decoding brown eyes he had always thought were able to super-humanly understand every single element that was needed and useful to be understood:

"So that you could finally drop that *chan* right?"

"That can't happen in a million years. Forget it. T.o.b.i.o.c.h.a.n.!
That pouting.
The childlike energy.
All mixed with unfathomable aptness, that inexplicable precision he had in all his gestures, in all his explanations.
Oikawa could say the most perfect things, in the least appropriate way, just like him. But what mixture of this Tao was always making him resulting obnoxious to others, it would make his senpai invariably charming to everyone.
That was something so remarkable, he could have been envious maybe, if it were a possession of anyone else but the guy he was keeping looking up to.

"Oh well. I'll bear with it. How many years have you called me so anyway?"

No answer.
Just a familiar glance back at him.
They were a few, those years. They meant shared experiences and a fierce, rooted and special rivalry. There had been so many chances for them to say and to hear that name calling.
From those fading memories of his junior high days, he knew the ones which wouldn't vanish would always involve that diminutive addressing.

"You sound sappy. That's so not you, you freakishly dumb devil..."

"Oikawa San..."

"Oh please, cut it off, you too! Like you think of me with honorifics anyway!"

"But I do?"

Oikawa knew he did. Never understood why he did. But he knew from the way those dark blue eyes were penetrating his every fiber that yes, Kageyama Tobio was the most respectful kouhai he could have.

Damn stupid, damn impossibly cute Tobio-chan.

"Anyway we call each other so since way too many years. But... I like that we do."

"Yes..." Kageyama felt a proximity unknown to him in that very moment, a shot of blood flushing his cheeks in the duskling air of late Summer "I like it too. And I look forward to when we will battle against one another. Again."

"This if you will ever make it to a decent college..."

Kageyama stood up in the chilling air, the colors of the day all becoming gloomier and matching every minute more his floating hair:
"To play again on the same court as you, believe me, there's no effort I wouldn't make."

"Good. I take it as a promise then."

"Or a declaration of war?"

They checked one another a further little smile.

"Whichever you like better. Makes no difference to me because I'll still win in the end."

"Let's see."

"Yeah. Let's do it."

It was time to get back home. But there, in such a familiar space, it was hard to part ways somehow.

Kitagawa Daiichi Junior High.

They truly couldn't have had a better place to come back in a day like that.

Chapter End Notes

Mountain Day: 11th of August National Holiday. Just recently created by Japanese Administration.

Obon Festival: one of the most important Japanese recurrences, it is celebrated in Kanto region (which comprehends Tokyo) on around July 15th, while in the majority of the Country it spreads around August 15th, depending on the different setups of lunar and reformed calendars.

Tsurigane: sacred Buddhist bell hanging at temples, used to summon monks to prayers or to demarcate periods of time.
Chapter Summary

Exit, light,
Enter, night
Take my hand
We're off to never-never land

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Glad to meet you again, Kageyama kun."

"Likewise, Sakusa sama"

"Did you think about my proposal?"

"Well, I can barely think of anything else lately. But... if you are asking if I have an answer for you... not yet. I don't really know what to do at the moment."

"That's pretty disappointing. I long for the moment you will call me senpai."

Upon stepping into Yoyogi National Gymnasium Sakusa Kyoomi was the epitome of assurance. He didn't have to doubt his resolution decoding on his comrade's face a feature of indecisiveness. He had no reasons to believe his offer could be dismissed. Certainly not by the most driven, ambitious and capable 16 years old he had ever met.

"Good morning everybody. Glad to have you all here, guys. This is a fortunate time for our National Team. Bright talents are growing at fast paces, and we have great expectations for the future. Our intention is to make these youth teams the backbone of the National Team for the Olympics our Country will host."

As the voices of the coaching staff began to illustrate the modalities of the training camp the under 19 and the under 21 players would have been subjected to for the four incoming days, Kageyama realized that it wasn't just a dream.

He had been SELECTED.

Selected for the National Under 19 Japan team.

Selected.

The younger player to ever wear such a representative uniform, being born on the 22th of December.

"... we have gone a bit out of scratch with this selection this time, adding in players younger than we were supposed to, but we think we did the right thing. To all the professionals and the college students, we recommend you to not look down on them. They are, at all capacities, your peers. Good work everybody!"
When the ranks broke, he felt a firm grasp on his shoulder.

Burning brown eyes meeting his.

"There you go, Tobio chan. Jumping leaps once again, aren't we?"

Kageyama lowered a bit his sight. He was now slightly taller than his senpai after all.

"Oikawa San... it's... "

On his old enemy's face he couldn't see acrimony anymore, so that he could complete his sentence without fears of upsetting him:

"... it's an honor to be able to train alongside you after so many years. There is nothing which could make me happier."

And he bowed with such a grace that even Oikawa remained wordless.

"You... brat." He finally said with a little chuckle.

"Oikawa kun, it's time we move on our side."

When Kageyama lifted his head up, he met the stare of Ushijima. He had grown as well, getting even bulkier in the process.

"Ushijima San, I look forward to train alongside you too."

A further voice added itself on the mix:

"So do I, Wakatoshi. Our battle is still on, isn't it?"

The fact that Sakusa was on first name, no honorifics needed terms with former Shiratorizawa ace shocked both Kageyama and Oikawa, each one of them used to very different behavioral patterns from the two till that point, so that they couldn't hide their surprise, all showing in a mutual glance they exchanged.

"Of course it is, Kyoomi. Of course."

"Great. I can't wait to show you what we can do, Wakatoshi."

"You mean you with Kageyama kun? I am well aware of his skill. But you have little clues about what we are capable of instead."

Said Ushijima, confidently eye-siding Oikawa.

"Trust me: it will become irrelevant soon what anybody else could do. You can mark my words here and now. We will be the ones bringing Japan the medal at Tokyo Olympics. But I will be glad if you guys will be of some help too."

And after concluding his speech, waving a hand, Sakusa directed straight where Team B coach was calling for him and Kageyama to join.

"Ushiwaka chan..."

"Please stop calling me that..."
"Listen to me instead: who the heck wavy locks chan thinks he is?"

Ushijima sighed soundly.

"The best spiker this country has ever seen. And..."

Oikawa saw his jaw clenching and his eyes dagger out in Sakusa's direction:

"And, sadly, he may be not that far off the truth."

And closing in three steps the distance between himself and the rest of Team A, Ushijima Wakatoshi took his place among the brightest volleyball hopes Japan had to offer at the start of the Millennium.

Team A under 21 and Team B under 19 were meant to train non stop till the end of the week. The unusual opportunity had been set up the week before the Day of Respect for the Aged, and in a way to have such talented youth gathering together in plans to become the future pride of the Nation had a nice sound to the ears of some of the former members of the Japan Volley team who had won their gold decades prior, and who were part of the tutoring and scouting staff.

It was a positive moment in the Country regarding team sports. Volleyball in particular. Beside the names already in the National Team lists, there were more who had eyes after them. Some were too rough to aspire already at the National jersey, some had certain flaws to polish better, but the fact that the talent pool to pick up from was the widest in 30 years had boosted the confidence of the headquarters heads so much, many wanted to bet on medals in 2020 already.

And a couple of good reasons behind such unexpected cockiness in a Country famous for the understated manners were just at that moment trying evolved types of quicks with the help of volleybots, robots especially designed for the team practices.

"Kageyama kun, that was perfect. Mind trying it once more?"

"We can try as many times as you wish, Sakusa San."

Starting from the far side of the vanguard, Itachiyama ace attempted an even higher peaking jump: the power of his legs pushing him very well above the net with the entirety of his torso, the perfect arch of his back snapping forward at ball impact, creating a thunder like missile shot from the palm of his hand to the conjoined lines at the extremity of the other side of the court.

No hope to block in sight for the robots, but then again they wouldn't get their feelings hurt.

"Incredible. You are incredible, Kageyama."

The younger player blushed slightly, before retorting the compliment on his teammate, praising his perfect spiking form and the impressive might he could always transfer on the ball.

"So we are both incredible then. And this is the pure truth after all."

If being self aware had to be one of the primary qualities in an ace, the one he could currently set for was definitely the most prominent exemplary of the lot.

Sakusa Kyoomi was a prodigy too. Prodigies matching were the quintessential gift for any hungry National Team. Therefore, despite their very young age, they were already nurtured by the coaches of all ranks of the National Volleyball Organization. To everyone's surprise, considering their files read them as "socially problematic", the two seemed to
get along just well, despite their first encounter less than a year before at a youth training camp. Bonuses.

"Why are you smiling now?"

"Don't mind me, Sakusa San... but what you just said made me remember another time when somebody told me that I was incredible."

There was a clear nostalgic tone in his voice and Sakusa got interested in the topic exactly for discovering why.

"Well, you must have heard that plenty of times? I sure did."

"Actually... It never occurred to me, from somebody I was playing with anyway, up until that very day."

"Alright then. I guess that was from..."

"Hinata. When we were first able to do our quick with me freezing the ball up at his disposal."

The memory was clearly precious for him.

"And so...? You seem thinking more of this than you said."

"Sometimes I think Hinata could share also this stage with me..."

The sudden phrase escaping his lips unstoppable seemed to surprise Kageyama first and foremost. Sakusa kept a vacuous stare, much like he was being informed about totally irrelevant things.

"Do you really?"

Kageyama looked as he was internally pondering.

"I guess so. The guy learns new things at a rhythm I've never thought possible. He gets constantly better and better. Now he has reached the National Youth Camp level... and nobody thought he would have just last year."

"I think somebody actually did..."

Kageyama looked at Sakusa, as if he were to discover something unknown to himself about himself:

"Well... I can't say I did... I don't know? Back to last year when I was the one getting called for it, I was just happy to be getting picked. There was even a moment I looked down on him because he hadn't been chosen. It wasn't that serious anyway. I am more one to think about my stuff than anything else, so I didn't have plans to mock him, I just stated the obvious that I was moving ahead of him in the game."

Sakusa couldn't decipher the setter's mood on the subject. There was a conflicting light in his face, and he wanted to shift said mood to a defined status.

"He's unfit to broader stages though. I don't want to sound mean... but he can't overcome his physical deficit with mere want after he gets past medium levels."

Kageyama scoffed slightly.

"But Hoshiumi San is here still?"
Hoshiumi had been selected as reserve for the Team B ranks. Reserves weren't meant to be playing but they would subside in case someone in the ranks had to forfeit for whatever reason.

"He is a player fit for every role. A jolly. And he still taller. But beside that... I also think Hoshiumi won't be much longer able to compete at the top once he's to step up at college leveled games."

Kageyama's signature scowl started to creep back on his face.

"I don't agree. Forgive me for this Sakusa San, I don't wanna argue with you but... Sure height, weight, those are all important things to play volleyball. But there is also much more at play than a fit built. Hinata has extraordinary speed, jump, and an indescribable intuition, plus a wild, intense and primal need to get constantly better which is his real source of power in the game. You can't knock him down. He will always rise up and go further."

Sakusa could see before his eyes that the conflict hindering Kageyama's mood was rapidly turning into a decided position.

"But then he will get dwarfed if anybody comes with the same will to succeed, but also offering to the game stats those essential physical requirements. We all want to succeed here, don't you think? We all rise after having fallen, right? Don't you want to play and win the most than anyone else?"

"Yes... Of course I do."

"Well sure you do. And what brought you here among us is that desire to win, your obviously overwhelming talent at this game, your dedication and, not secondary, your body readiness for every aspect which is mattering in said game. You got it all. Your team buddy... he has not."

He couldn't deny that. Sakusa was right. And still...

"Sakusa San, in many ways you speak truthfully. But... I know him like no one else does. Trust my experience on this. There is no player who would deserve a chance at this more than Hinata. Being in a place like this... with players like you, like Miya San, would make him flourish in exceptional ways, I am so sure of this. What he can accomplish astonishes everyone. There is a fire in him... that no one has."

Sakusa wasn't exactly impressed by the peroration:

"Talking about Atsumu: he will join us tomorrow right?"

"Yes he will. His shoulder check went right so he can join us."

"Your senpai in Team A won't be jolly about it..."

"Oikawa San may look playful on the outside when he's not involved in a game: but believe me, as soon as the whistle goes, he will take all of us so seriously we will regret times when he was joking foolishly around."

Sakusa offered more of his unfazed eyes to Kageyama's claim. Then getting back in charge of the latest argument:

"Don't know about that. But if our game can be interesting then great. Back to that teammate of yours' case instead... I am not here to upset you but I do know that he could never face National teams where the smallest is taller than me and you. You can't waste a sixth of a battalion on the hope some miracle happens, and not merely once, but continuously. He may be good in high school competitions. But you do know that is where his physical frame can reach. Not beyond."
Sakusa was speaking coldly but not for lack of involvement rather than to prove his point as obviousness. He was sure his companion was convinced of the same, and that his reticence at admitting it laid only in a matter of friendly devotion.

"Volleyball is many things: but it is not a fairy tale. It is a sport where the tiniest wrong detail can destroy everything. And being far too small, far too tiny, well that is not even a detail. It's a defect in power and strength of play. I know deep down, if you take off from your conviction the friendly element, you certainly agree with me on that."

"I... suppose."

Looking at the disgruntled expression on Kageyama's face, Sakusa tried to find a way to cheer him up, the only way he had familiarity with.

"You remind me a lot of Honda Tadakatsu, you know?"

"You mean the legendary samurai?"

"Yes. I take a great interest in Japanese history and I have a deep fondness for Tokugawa times. In particular... I find that in volleyball there is great inspiration to be taken from ancient ways to conduct one selves."

"How so?"

Kageyama's face had become curious and not frustrated anymore.

"There is much of Bushido to apply to our sport. Particularly if one is very skilled at it. There is a need of guidelines to match sport with life, so that none of them gets wasted, but they get enhanced mutually instead."

"Just like old samurais were doing, with their life of battling for a superior cause?"

"Exactly so. I am glad you understand."

He wasn't sure he did, but feeling Sakusa's praise was making him feel good. That guy was somehow strange, but so many thought he was too, he could just feel relieved in his presence. He loved that their strangeness could match and not repulse one another. Sakusa with his calm eyes and his strong attitude was making him feel quiet and focused too. You can win every opponent with calm eyes, he thought.

That evening, Team B still Miya deprived gave Team A a really good run for their money, barely losing the game 3-2.

Coming off the showers room, Sakusa made Kageyama join him at the hairdryer zone:

"We did well. And we don't even play together at all, but it didn't seem the case tonight did it? If you look at this, and think that Wakatoshi and your senpai train together everyday now, it's a given that we can be so much better than them together."

"Better... than them? You don't need me to be better than you are, and I think if you'd play with Oikawa San you would be as delighted as Wakatoshi sama seems to be. He has always wanted to play with him and today I realized how rightfully..."

Sakusa couldn't avoid a laugh.
"Don't think so. At all."

For some reason, Kageyama felt hurt by that laugh. He couldn't stand anybody downplaying the senpai he so cherished and he was sure that was exactly what Sakusa intended doing.

"Oikawa San can play with anyone and make him give his 100%. This is the best any setter can do. He is still the best setter I know. But I am here to best him, and everybody else."

"So you still hold him on a pedestal?"

"Well, I admire his skill. He is the kind of player who can make others give their all. And use it in a beneficial way for the sake of the team. Anybody thrive in Oikawa's hands. Through Oikawa's hands actually..."

Sakusa's eyes then narrowed, his face barely inches away from Kageyama's, and his voice deepening like an oracle reveal:

"Fair enough then. But then you are that kind of player who can make not anybody, but the ones you choose to, come to develop beyond their supposed stage and subsequently give their 120%. Now tell me: what's better?"

Kageyama couldn't stand the intensity of Sakusa's stare. He seemed invested by a furor coming straight from one of the samurai stories he was so fond of. He wasn't used to people coming at him that way. He was fully unprepared to such a task.

"I... don't know... about that?"

Sakusa's face at that point was practically on his, but all he could determine near were his eyes, full of unspoken promises, full of worlds entire for him, for them to reclaim and rule.

"I want you to want me to be one of your chosen weapons, Tobio Kageyama. I want you to want me to be your weapon of choice. I want you by my side to be me not at 100, but at my 120%. This is my wish. And believe me I can go till the greatest of lengths to make any of my wishes come true."

The intensity was too big to bear. Backtracking small steps, Tobio fell on the bench behind him, with Sakusa effortlessly sliding down upon him to keep their faces almost united.

"I... don't... know what to say."

"Come to my school. We can play together the last semester. We can destroy any single team, smash any single record High school volleyball has ever seen. Wouldn't you like that?"

His head was breaking loose. All that he was feeling was a news for him. Anything around him, anything beside him and Sakusa's eyes and face sucked in a soundless kaleidoscope of blurred lines.

"Who wouldn't? And I don't mean just win... it is such an invaluable honor to be asked to play with you, Sakusa San. To be honest I am dazzling out. I can't even process that you truly would like me as a teammate."

Sakusa's smile at those words got lost on Tobio's senses because his eyes were still all that he could catch.

"Not just as a teammate. I want us to be the most spectacular pair on a net side ever. I want us to be a symbiotic unit, some partnership to be remembered for the ages."
The hand he was offered then had to wait to be shaken because it took Kageyama minutes to shrug his daze off and realize it was there for him to grab.

As Sakusa made his way out of the locker room, he plastered over his appearance that of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the shogun Honda Tadakatsu was a samurai for.

The shogun creating the Edo era transition, and the ronin becoming the greatest of samurais to shape a new future along.

He had to admit it sounded good, Sakusa's plan.

Really good.

Too much worked up to rest properly, he decided to stretch and lift some weights in the gym before going to dinner with the rest of the players. Mumbling over all that had happened that day, he was feeling deep satisfaction down himself.

It wasn't common for him to think about the way he was feeling. Mostly he processed quickly the pieces of his life to gain strength and further determination to progress; but too many unexpected and foreign events had taken place so he found himself lost in waves of feelings, unfiltered and varied.

He didn't really know what to make of those... feelings.

But he wasn't generally opposed to them.

Pretty content of his day, almost arrived at the dining room, he felt his mobile buzzing.

A text message.

Hinata's.

At the name visualized, an impromptu sense of shame and odd unease filled him up.

What was that?

Was he feeling like he would be judged by him for having felt so connected with another spiker?

That was absurd he digressed...

But then...

Why couldn't he read the message Hinata had just sent?

Chapter End Notes

Yoyogi National Gymnasium - the arena is located in Shibuya, Tokyo, and it is one of the two main places where Japanese Volley Team trains and performs games.

Respect for the Aged Day - National holiday in Japan since 1966, it is held since 2003 on the third Monday of September.

Volley bots are for real newly created robots which are being currently used by the Japan National Volleyball team to train itself.

Bushido is the code of moral principles which the samurais were required or instructed to observe. It is typified by 8 virtues:

- Righteousness
- Heroic courage
- Benevolence/compassion
- Respect
- Integrity
- Honor
- Duty/loyalty
- Self-control

Honda Tadakatsu - he was one of the Tokugawa Four Heavenly Kings, the most
legendary samurais serving the late Sengoku period into the Edo era they contributed to propel by serving Tokugawa Ieyasu. His legendary status is wide reckoned in the whole country.

**Tokugawa Ieyasu** - the founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate, and one of the three unifiers of Japan along his former Lord Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi.
Second, don't you tell me what you think that I can be
I'm the one at the sail, I'm the master of my sea,
The master of my sea.
I was broken from a young age
Taking my soul into the masses
Write down my poems for the few
That looked at me took to me, shook to me, feeling me
Singing from heart ache from the pain
Take up my message from the veins
Speaking my lesson from the brain
Seeing the beauty through the Pain
You made me a, you made me a believer, believer
You break me down, you build me up, believer, believer
I let the bullets fly, oh let them rain
My life, my love, my drive, it came from...
Pain!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Ahhhhh!!! Guys!!! Guys!!! Listen to me!!!"

Hinata rushed into the gym with such an impetus he almost crashed into the side wall to reach his team as fast as he could:

"I know what we'll be doing by the end of the training camp!!!"

"Barbecue again?"

Nishinoya and Tanaka said in one voice.

"Nope! It's better than that!"

"Better than a barbecue? Don't think it's possible to have anything better than it sorry..."

Karasuno vice captain crossed arms in a solemn stance, to give emphasis to his conviction.

"This is, Tanaka San: we'll be going to Tokyo Obon. With all the teams. Tomorrow."

Each one of Hinata's word, said in distinct voice and separated for relevance, depicted a bigger grin on every teammate of his. His own one already being the widest from the beginning, too.

"No way!!! Are you totally sure, Shouyou?"

"I've heard the captain and coach Ukai speaking of it while I was going to the toilet, Noyassan. It's
The eruption of enthusiasm resounded out of the gym.

"We have to win all games today and end this camp as the champions!!! Then we'll celebrate with well earned swag!!!"

To watch their bunch of guys overhyped and hyper activated come near in circle to exhale their final resolution was the finest greeting a coach and a captain could ask at their coming into the gym that for almost a week had seen them train along Nekoma, Shinzen, Ubugawa and newly recruited Nohebi Academy:

"Karasuno... fight!!!!"

Their battle mantra filled the building. Ukai took his place in the middle of the side line, while Ennoshita moved to lead his comrades facing him:

"Good to see ya'll so pumped, team! Today is our last day of training and we have a big surprise for you. But first, I want us to win this camp battle. We have a tradition of losses that is coming to an end today for this kind of stuff, innit?"

"Yessir!"

On their kids' faces, Ukai and Takeda, who had just entered through door, read the utmost certainty that would have been the final outcome. It was earlier than planned for the training games and they had to set everything for the four other teams joining, being their turn at managing and cleaning the facility that day.

"Where's Kageyama?"

Ennoshita asked Tanaka.

"He's out running around the block..."

"Is Kei with him? He'll get easily lost otherwise..."

"He is. They must be joining us in minutes..."

"Speaking of the devils..."

Kageyama and Tsukishima stepped into the gym with no sounds. When they learned from Hinata and Yamaguchi the novelty about the celebratory event planned for the subsequent day, they both shrugged it as they were being told of good forecast predictions in a far away country. In Kageyama's head the fact they had substituted tasty meat bonanza with a chaotic gathering seemed an humongous mistake, but he didn't exactly care either way.

"Tsukishima, today I'll try the fast set up we talked about two days ago... how's your back doing?"

"I'm fine, King. You don't have to hold back today."

"I wouldn't have anyway. Today is our last chance to practice it against someone as tall as Lev. Regardless of our success rate with it, we gotta try it as much as we can."

"Roger."

"Ro... ger?"
He's a lost cause.

"Never mind King. It's okay with me. Will Hinata mind tho?"

Kageyama's face went again clueless.

"Will your favorite commoner accept you focusing mostly on me in a game, even if just a practice one?"

"Cut the commoner crap, you tall glass of shit. And I don't play favorites. I am here to widen our team's options. Hinata and I are fine with the new side attack. It went amazingly well these days, so I can concentrate on you."

"Such an honor Your Highness..."

"Try to bow and I'll smack your head down to the floor..."

"You're too short for it, aren't you Your Not-So-Exaggerated-Highness?"

"I jump way higher than you can tho, so I can still crush that bonehead you got, you Four-Eyes-With-Zero-Soul demon."

"Deuce."

"Alright."

Their glances were sharp swords constantly clashing. But in their second year, and with many battles successfully fought side by side, their uncooperative personalities had come to accept they had to find a way to not slit each other's throats constantly, for everyone's sake.

"Looks like Kageyama and Tsukishima have grown accustomed to one another, haven't they?"

Coach Manabu was talking with coach Ukai after the last game of the training camp, which had seen Karasuno narrowly come on top of a totally renewed Nekoma:

"Eh... it's always an uphill struggle with those two. But whenever they find their right rhythm they are unstoppable indeed."

"They're both very intelligent players. But it's not easy when you have a double headed team..."

"Indeed. And they are both stubborn as hell."

But Ukai was gleefully smiling while describing them so. Therefore it must have meant he didn't feel that was much of a concern.

Stupid players are a problem. Smart ones are a resource.

At the dinner with the teams that evening, it was announced that Karasuno would have stayed a day more to celebrate Tokyo Obon alongside their hosts:

"It's required a traditional getup kids so tomorrow morning we'll be shopping!"

Hinata and Kageyama were only interested in food, but if shopping for a yukata could bring some takoyaki then long live yukatas?

After dinner Kenma and Lev joined Karasuno's pair for a little walk around before getting some well deserved rest.
"Kuroo will come with us tomorrow..."

Kenma's words were as softly spoken as ever, but the glimmer in his eyes was not as common:

"He's home to celebrate with his family, and has told me he looks forward to a reunion..."

An embarrassed silence coated the atmosphere. Lev and Hinata looking at one another to decide who would start speaking to break the impasse, with Kageyama drown into their mutism just because he had absolutely no idea on what he was supposed to make of the whole scene.

"Well... my sister will join us too."

Hinata brightened:

"Will she? Great! She had told us she would come seeing our camp but I guess University is a tough thing to arrange around?"

"Yeah she has tons of things to prepare even before she starts classes properly... say I get to see her only at weekends, and not always!"

Hinata refurbished his point of view, eager to let his frenemy know he found his sister captivating:

"She's very kind and seems so pleasant, so it must be hard for you to not see her often now?"

"Very. She's my star and I am hers. I miss her terribly whenever she's away."

"Will she be wearing traditional getups too?"

"I guess she will..."

"She's gonna be stunning right Kageyama? Kageyama... where the hell he's gone now?"

Kenma and Kageyama were already well ahead and on their ways back to the school lodges. Lev and Hinata had completely lost sense of their presence all taken up in their conversation.

"Shit... I just wanted to distract Kenma san... sorry Hinata!

"Don't need no apology Lev... I got that, and you did it right."

"Kenma San will have a hard day tomorrow..."

Hinata went darker in the face, even if for just a moment. Then jolting back up to Lev's:

"He won't, because you and I will make things right for him, won't we?"

Lev smiled with his eyes and the whole of his cheeks, nodding enthusiastically at his small friend:

"Absolutely Shouyou kun. Absolutely!"

When the morning came, at a very cheeky hour, it went down to a small group of Karasuno's staff to take the most willing among the players to some clothing shop, to buy all that was in order for a perfect Obon.

Yachi, Yamaguchi and Hinata offered themselves to tag along Takeda Ittetsu on a car kindly disposed by coach Manabu to reach the nearest mall. Then after conspicuous bugging Hinata forced Kageyama to join the group:
"You can choose better if you come!!! And I won't risk my head be chopped off in case I pick up for you the wrong yukata..."

"Dumbass! Any which could fit is okay!"

"I am no good at picking sizes..."

"Stupid airhead! You watch me daily change outfits... how can you mistake my size?"

"Would you be able to pick mine?"

"Well... maybe? I don't know but then why are you careless about mistaking others' sizes?"

Hinata wore his best Mr. Know It All face:

"Others won't get angry at me for my mistake. But you would for sure. That's why you must join us."

Kageyama felt defeated but his indomitable nature couldn't give up easily:

"What about Tsukishima then? Aren't you scared of his reaction?"

Hinata grinned diabolically:

"Yamaguchi knows all about his sizes..."

The freckled second years nodded in agreement before adding that he was used to gift his best friend pieces of fancy clothing since middle school, and that he could guess without fail his preferred tastes in fabrics as well. Not fully convinced, but clearly outplayed, the setter had to take his seat in the front of the car aside Takeda sensei, being the tallest among them, mumbling darkly all the way down the mall that Hinata's silly idea had costed him his morning running routine.

While the shoppers were downtown Tokyo, Kuroo Tetsurou arrived at his former school. His signature hairdo impeccably spiked as usual, his jeans torn the way fashion required that season, and a red Moschino sleeveless shirt reading I am better than you on the front and and you know it on its back.

It was earlier than he were anticipated to arrive but merely seconds after he had entered the courtyard in front of the main building Kenma made his way towards him.

Nobody was there beside them two.

Nobody needed to be.

As soon as they were one in front of the other, the youngest jumped directly into the open arms of the older, who engulfed him fully in the tightest embrace.

They didn't say a word.

After a while, Kenma just detached from Kuroo's arms and gave him a thin sweet smile, reciprocated in a mirror like reaction.

A few seconds later, the former middle blocker put his hand in his back pocket and took a smart card out for Kenma to have.

"It's the latest installment. I bet you don't have it yet."

Kenma seemed slightly embarrassed and lowered his sight to Kuroo's shiny golden kicks.

"Well..."

"So you have gotten it already?"
Kenma shook his head, making his long hair dance around his rosebud cheeks.

"No, I don't..."

"Okay... so?"

The setter raised up and with clear voice said:

"I've stopped playing those. Now I only play ball."

9.30 AM on July 15th. Tokyo. No earthquakes registered from the authorities in the area. But a huge one had actually taken place in front of Kuroo Tetsurou, and even though no one could have guessed, because his face and posture had stayed the same trough Kenma's reveal, that had been the very first time he had felt his friend could have made it on his own accord.

Which was at once one of the most beautiful and also one of the most heartbreaking moment of his life.

When Kenma brought the previous captain in the lodge where all of Nekoma were packing and getting ready for the Obon, ruckus ensued, much to Manabu's dismay. He had hoped his players would react more as the current captain rather than the former; all the shouting anyway demonstrated useless in convincing Kuroo to wear himself a yukata.

"No way. I am not part of the team anymore... heck I don't even play anymore, so it's fair for me to be distinguished when we will be rolling at the festival tonight. I didn't pick my perfect Osaka outfit to be confounded with a bunch of noisy high schoolers did I?"

Kenma smiled under the radar. His childhood friend hadn't changed at all.

In Kuroo's decisiveness and personal outlook of life Kenma had always found his shelter. For a decade, he had been his guardian and pillar, with reciprocal satisfaction in that very biased balance. But that morning they both were realizing life changes for everyone to be just an entity on his own. Connected to others if pleasing, but essentially each one separately searching for meanings individually. You can't live a life another designs for you. Looking at one another, they laughed thinking at the same exact thing, without need of telling it.

The one who pushed the other at playing, now doesn't do it anymore; and the one who had no interest in it at all, now has got only volleyball on his mind.

Strange life.

Beautiful, preciously crazy life.

"Kuroo, do you want to meet Tsukishima?"

The tall one instinctively nodded.

"Yeah sure... where can I find Tsukki?"

"I saw him running around the school just now..."

"Are we talking of the same guy who wouldn't do anything more than the average warm up?"

Kenma's clear eyes lighted up as he explained with happy voice:

"Yes. You'll find him pretty changed. But also... pretty much the same, too."

Kuroo laughed out loudly.
"It does sound weird. But I'll let you see it by yourself. Look, he's coming at us."

Kuroo put two fingers in his mouth and emitted the most freaking high pitched whistle ever; by the
time it ended Kenma was already retired in the lodge with his own hands covering his delicate ears.

"There there... lookie look who's running all alone?"

The two fronted one another for five poker faced seconds, then broke characters and gave each other
a warm salute.
They had kept in contact after the elder's' graduation, and actually deepened their friendship through
more than a common interest they found to be sharing.
But in the emails, or in the text messages they were using to communicate, Tsukishima had carefully
avoided to mention he had changed his approach to training that significantly.

"Since when do you use free mornings to run all alone, Tsukki?"

"Not that I owe you any explain but I generally don't do this alone..."

"And where's Yamaguchi then?"

Kei took off his earbuds and stopped the iPod nano pinched on his shirt.

"He seldom does this with me. The one I do it with... is the King."

... you'll find him pretty changed...

"But don't make assumptions, Tetsurou kun. I still can't stand his mug 99% of the time."

... but also pretty much the same.

"Well to be running with him often in a week you got to stand his mug 35% of the time at least?"

Kei tch-ed in order to deny any concession in such sense.

"Then you're effectively a masochist I see..."

The two guys sat under a oak in the school courtyard. Tsukishima finished to rehydrate himself and
took an energetic snack out of his pocket, crunching quietly on it. Kuroo registered it under things I'd
never thought I would see.

"Is this also part of the Kageyama guide to train oneself?"

"Stop being extra, ok? It's just common sense: if you burn energies and waste fluids, you gotta
reinstate them."

Kei's face was nowhere as indignant as his words were supposed to show. Kuroo registered it under
things I'd like to give a name to.

They started to ask one another's the whereabouts of their current lives; impressions of the new
school tasks in the college preparatory class Tsukishima was part of, the difference between being a
student in high school compared to being an University one, and how it was to come back after
months away to one's very and only home.
Then the discourse shifted to volleyball and it took exactly three seconds to Tsukishima to tense
again. Apparently the time to be taken to pronounce "Kageyama" appropriately.
Kuroo couldn't resist a little mocking. He was still the undisputed master of salt after all:
"Are you still obsessing over him? Because your reaction now it's... frankly disproportionate buddy..."

"I don't. It's only in your mind, really."

"Tell it like it is. You do obsess over him. The fact that you have taken some of his habits while still selling to others your distaste of him... isn't this a compulsion you have?"

Tsukishima pushed his glasses back up his nose with two of his long and lithe fingers, eyes training on a dragonfly passing in front of him, as dark blue as somebody's eyes:

"Nope. I have good taste and I could never obsess over something as incongruent and incomprehensible as my setter."

*My setter then. This is it already? Tsukki my dear... this is extra indeed.*

"Listen my friend: you are incredibly self aware of yourself and him. At all times. This is obsession. Or something very around that line. But I am not judging this. I would probably obsess on him too if he were to turn me into a volleyball star..."

"Shut up and cut your hyperbolic dictionary. Volleyball star... what the... tch! And I don't obsess on Kageyama. At all."

"Yes you do. During our match it was adamant. You were almost fighting him, questioning all of his decisions, particularly those intended for you... don't think I didn't notice that you two were silently battling for control... yet he could turn you into such a champion that day. That ruined us. The combo of you two. That was the final nail into our coffin. I still feel the burn of it... and it won't fade."

Tsukishima stayed silent. The dragonfly had disappeared from his sight. Kuroo by his side was collecting all the tiny movements his eyes were making. He was thinking hard. As per usual. Too cerebral for his own good, he thought of his complicated friend.

"He wants me as captain next year, could you imagine?"

Tsukishima confessed after minutes of silent break.

"Good choice. I second it."

"It's not. He is fitter than me for becoming one."

"He's not. He's a genius. You are a scientist. People do understand science, but are unable to get geniality because it's foreign. People could follow you more willingly."

"I don't deserve it."

"What are you saying here? The great Tsukishima thinks he's not cool enough for something? That'd be a first..."

Reluctantly Kei tried to verbalize his true feeling on the matter. He was looking relaxed sitting on the bench, but his eyes were glaring nowhere near and his hands were clasping too tightly. His legs were entwined firmly making them look uncomfortable and forced.

"I just think that there are more talented people in our team who would deserve the title over me. That's all."
That wasn't all. A moment later, he added:

"Even Hinata would deserve it before me."

"Being a captain has not to do with talent by the way... And you thinkin you have no talent? Are you kidding me? You have ton of it. As much as Hinata. With the plus that your talent is more constructive than his. You have made progress as big as his, if not bigger, considering he has a will to win you refuse to display. If you had it too... you would eat Hinata alive."

Tsukishima sighed soundly.

"He thinks so too... in a way."

"Hinata?"

"No. The King. He says my talent is really huge. Which is... agh... bothering me so!"

Kuroo could sense the real reason bothering his emotionally constipated friend was up to be named next:

"Why?"

"Coming from him? The talent made human? Please..."

"You should stop comparing to him and bringing yourself down. Nobody's match for his talent. But actually... is he the one looking down at you for it?"

"Well..."

"Is he? Or aren't you doing it assuming what you would think of yourself if you were to be judged by an impossibly talented individual?"

They were now facing one another; Key's eyes blown wide behind the glasses, fists still clenched and body retracted in a defensive position, like in a blink he could have gotten up to run away.

"You... whose side are you on?"

Kuroo smirked his usual way. He liked that guy, so smart but so naive in certain topics, a lot:

"Yours of course. I relate to smug underdogs."

Kei finally laughed from the heart:

"I hate you Tetsurou kun..."

"Pleased to please, buddy."

"Thank you for putting up with me tho. I am glad you came... and did you see Kenma San already?"

"Yes, of course. He directed me at you in fact."

Tsukishima could see his friend's face shift to a pensive one.

"Do you miss him don't you?"

He shook his head.
"Not as much as you guess, trust me. I do of course but...I was decided on leaving Kenma alone. He needed to become his own without me. That's why I chose an university in Kansai. He has the guys with him now... there is Lev, who adores him and Alisa who keeps an eye over him even with her studies taking over... he needed all this and I also needed my sole space."

Tsukishima wanted to dig deeper in Kuroo's space but a flashier and quicker curiosity took over beyond his conscious control:

"Alisa... do you know a lot about her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like... isn't she interested in juniors?"

This ain't the way this conversation was expected to go? What does he mean now?

"I think she's trying hard to get with the King..."

Of course.

"And it... bothers you?"

"Incredibly so."

Fist clenching level of bothering Kuroo noticed.

"I can't stand it: first hand with skills, then even interesting for somebody older and pretty... I don't get it. But of course he is so utterly stupid that he doesn't even realize his luck. Or care about it..."

Kuroo kept watching his friend and the more he was doing it, the more something didn't add up:

"So you're... jealous of him?"

Kei's detachment fell apart quickly, face starting to reddening up, and a trembling in his voice well distinguished:

"I can't be jealous of somebody so stupid he doesn't even get he's been chasing out can I? He is so inept... and still how... how can he be thought as attractive enough for an older girl, and an outstanding looking one at that? Is there anything life won't handle him on a silver platter?"

I see. Jealous indeed. Just not the way one would assume?

"You're way too fired up over such nothingness. Where did icy cold megane go? Didn't hot blooded people irritate you? You're sounding suspiciously like one just right now..."

Kei's face became scared.

What have I done? Why did I start to tell him all this? Why did I think all of this in the first place? This is no good. I gotta change topic immediately.

"How's Bokuto San doing?"

Kuroo couldn't be fooled that easily, but he played along in hope to calm his friend down enough to let him realize his own feelings better later on:

"He's well... Loud as a siren, but well. He keeps trying to convince me to get back playing. It's hard
to put up with him daily..."

"Didn't you offer him to share your flat yourself?"

"Pedantic. You are so pedantic Tsukki. Anyway that was before realizing how much of a burden he can be. Akaashi was a saint to keep up with all that on a court!"

"Does he plan on coming at your college next year too?"

"Maybe..."

"On academics or sports merit?"

"Academics. Don't think he would be offered differently."

"I see. I am also starting to think where I could apply for in college."

"Osaka's good. Let me say it."

"Like I'd like to spend more time with you there..."

"Ain't that the truth, smuggy?"

Tsukishima rose up to move back to the lodge and shower before it was time to get Obon ready. Kuroo also stood up. On their appearance mutually screened to be decoded they found signs their conversation was far from conclusive. But they had no more time left that morning to pick more puzzle pieces and fit them fixed:

"Ehi Tsukki..." The college student spoke on the verge of parting ways and get back to Nekoma's team lodge: "Don't you know what Francis Bacon said?"

"Be more specific: he said a lot of things didn't he?"

"He said that in order for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present."

"And?"

"You're a smartass... I am sure you can read subtexts can't you?"

And waving his goodbye, he went away swiftly giving the younger no chance of a reply.

On his way to the shower Kei thought about lights and darkness. No subtlety there, he reckoned his friend had shown. And not much fantasy either.

*I am the Moon. Hinata's the Sun. He's the dark shadow giving us a stage to shine in... I may be the moonlight but Hinata still the sunlight. Moonlight is weaker. But moonlight is the one that shines always when darkness falls down and inhabits it by definition...*

Kei swayed his head vigorously.
Absurd trail of thoughts.

*Why am I thinkin of all this?*

Absurd.

*Why I see him looking at me?*
Absurd.

Why suddenly my mind revolves around him?

Absurdly filling his whole head like a drop of dark paint into pure water, spreading fast and persistently changing the water into a dark pool, all that Kei Tsukishima was able to perceive in that moment was a direct offspring of dozens of Kageyama's details merging into that dark speculum. Futile resistance soon outpowered by the number of occurrences in his mind.

Is it true then... am I obsessed with him?

Chapter End Notes

Takoyaki - A ball shaped japanese snack made popular in the Kansai Region and one of the most typical Obon meals. During the Obon it is fairly common to experience this type of food throughout the whole of Japan.

Yukata - the typical traditional wear for hot summer months in Japan, both for men and women, with little differences between the sexes regarding for instance the measure of the arm sleeves and cuts, or the obi. Males wear in general darker colors and avoid flamboyant and floral patterns.
Brothers

Chapter Summary

If you could just walk on by
With signs just flying around
And if this storm was just emotion
Of your kid just trying out
If you could only lose these lies
And when your memory's lost on a hillside
And a wind takes you further forward now
And your world is a kite in the weather
Gently tied to your hand that is pointing out
There's a sky in this unknown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akiteru Tsukishima had always had a special kind of love for his own home. The pristine tenure of the garden, all the spaces perfectly kept, perfectly asymmetrical, perfectly balanced, had always spoken within himself suggestions of peacefulness and belonging. The house itself, so meticulously Japanese without lacking comforts of the new modern gears, had always had that embracing scent of wood and pressed tatamis which could instantly calm him down. Long lastingly.
And he certainly had his motives especially in the past for longing for anything which could make him more at ease with himself and the world.
Coming back and taking off his shoes at the genkan, Akiteru saw a familiar pair of trainers not property of his relatives, and still well known to their house nevertheless; the hour was rather peculiar for visiting people he thought but that person was family anyway so it didn't really matter to him.
Stepping into the kitchen, he saw his mom naturally engaged in conversation with their guest, all while cooking her delicious meals and preparing for dinner.

"Akiteru san, welcome back..."

"Hi Tadashi... longtime no see! Where's ..."

"Tadashi came alone. Kei had cleaning duties and had to stay longer in class."

"I see. Will you stay eating with us then? It's quite a while you haven't tasted mum's sasa kamaboko, and I remember you truly enjoying it..."

Yamaguchi seemed tempted, and on his freckled face a little hesitation got shown but he rapidly shook head to dissimulate any and said back that he had to get home soon, but that person was family anyway so it didn't really matter to him.
Stepping into the kitchen, he saw his mom naturally engaged in conversation with their guest, all while cooking her delicious meals and preparing for dinner.

"Akiteru san... can I have a word with you... in the garden?"
He felt it coming before any word had been pronounced and he was already on his way towards it, opening way for Yamaguchi himself.

"Sure. I was just about to step off in there. Follow me?"

They moved outside, sitting on the engawa and facing the sunlight of the early fall time dying and coloring the air with passionate nuances. Akiteru was used to spend time with his little brother that way there since their early days, and it was one of the most important memories of his childhood. As of late, since they had started doing it again after their awkward phase of separation following Kei's shock at his falseness during high school time, the garden had seen a few more of the Tsukishima brothers extended chats. That garden which seemed to be blessed by Omoikane's grace, making everybody willing to open up and try to resonate their deepest troubles, was their family refuge and embrace. And it was open for special guests to make full use of its prerogatives.

"You seem very worried, Tadashi... and if you are, and you have come here, I can only assume that..."

Yamaguchi nodded. He was clearly conflicted; and still his reaction was like he didn't want any name to be associated to his unwell state. Like avoiding it was a way to protect the one carrying it as his.

"Tadashi, you know that both you and I love Kei dearly. If you're worried about him, and want to speak with me of the reasons why, you must know that this is only between you and me. For his own sake."

Tadashi exhaled a sounding sigh, and looked Akiteru straight into his eyes. Akiteru faltered a bit; much like his brother, he would always get surprised at the way people could engage directly with others, switching from detached politeness to urgent need of truth in a split second. And the timid Yamaguchi had always been able to be that direct in case anybody he truly cared for seemed to be in danger.

"Kei is... strange. I mean... he is even... for me."

Akiteru could feel the proximity in Yamaguchi's words, but more than from those, he could picture the whole of his honest and pure attachment to Kei from the way his freckles were hidden by the color of his cheeks reddening from engagement, because it resembled a lot his own protective inclination to him as a brother, to be fired up physically about something which was struggling within him inside his heart.

"Has it anything to do with you starting to date your cute team manager?"

Tadashi instantly became bright red. So Kei had told Akiteru! He seemed so unfazed about it, he thought, but maybe feeling the need to speak about it with his older brother... he wasn't?

"Sorry Tadashi... I didn't mean to embarrass you... and it's lovely... and..."

"Was Kei upset telling you that we are... Yachi and I..."

"Dating you mean? No... and don't think he purposely opened his mouth to gossip either..."

That was not Kei Tsukishima at all, in fact. Gossiping just for fun, and about a friend? No way he could have.

"It was more something said in the heat of a talk to prove a point... it just escaped his mouth. And..."
"And?"

"He actually seemed... pretty proud. Of you."

The redness on Yamaguchi's face increased. So that was it. Good then.

"But if he seemed pleased... why did you think that could have been the reason for his strange behavior as of late?"

It became Akiteru's turn to feel conflicted about what to say or reveal next. But then he told himself what he had to Tadashi just moments prior. That they were both extremely caring towards Kei. And that it would be a safe conversation in the end.

"Because... the reason he had spoken to me about your blossoming dating life... was to compare it to someone else's..."

"His?"

The mere thought of Kei dating or wanting to date anybody without even hinting it to him made Yamaguchi's insides clench painfully. He had immediately felt the need to seek for his advice as soon as his own feelings for Yachi Hitoka were taking definitive shape. Friends must be there in times of need? Then, if so... why didn't he reciprocated with him? Kei was popular in their school. Calm, collected, successfully standing out in academics and sports life, he also had a pleasant appeal due to his height and cool manners which many girls found worthy of palpitations. Why he didn't tell him if one of those enraptured girls had caught his eye and maybe his heart? He must have known he would have given his all to be of an help to him. If he had needed it, of course.

"Actually... not his."

Akiteru had been sporting a very concerned furrowed brow. But what he had initiated couldn't be put under any rug at that point. So he went on adding:

"He was speaking to me about Tokyo Obon... "

"Oh yeah? About you and Saeko San? Man, how cool did she look thundering out at the festival with his taiko team? Akiteru San... you have the coolest girlfriend!"

Akiteru felt warmth in his chest just by the mention of Saeko. Tanaka's sister had been his true blessing for six months then, but they were just casually dating in July and he had the clear vision he wanted more from their relationship exactly by watching her that night banging those taiko drums like the beautiful goddess she was. He confessed his sentiment to her shortly after and instead of the dismissal he had expected she gave him the most passionate kiss ever and whispered she was eagerly awaiting for him to acknowledge he couldn't let her go, nor be half asserted with her either. Since then he had even presented her at his family home.

"Yes... I do feel like I am in a dream... but that wasn't what Kei was talking about with me then, either."

Tadashi realized it was time to just let Akiteru tell his story. It seemed something not to be broken to be finally said fair and square, and his own interruptions were more to delay the heaviness of the incoming passages than to satisfy any curiosity or small talk inclination. He had been the one willing to talk first after all.

"Sorry Akiteru san. I got caught in it. Go on. I will just listen, I promise."
"We were here a few nights ago. He was telling me about him being selected for the National Youth Camp next month, and seeking for a way to calm the doubts you know he still has about himself..."

Tadashi nodded. He knew the way Kei was good at downgrading himself very well. He hated that side of him.

"So, just thinking it would have shown him a different perspective I said that he couldn't drag himself down or he would have lost to Kageyama, who had been recruited there last year. I told him he was well stepping into his steps, catching up to him. Generally the mention of your setter's name has the power to fire Kei up because he just hates to be compared to him and wants to measure up a lot to him..."

Tadashi nodded again. But contextually his face became more absorbed in a trail of thoughts of his own, before snapping back and giving his full attention to Akiteru again.

"...but it went all awry from there. He simply... blanked. And for a minute he looked lost and away from here, from our talk, from everything."

"That's nothing new for me to hear. This is exactly what I came here for. I have seen him blank out like this too many times right now to not... wonder."

The two looked at one another's and tried to find the right words to continue their speeches, undecided on which one should have prosecuted his; then Akiteru took lead once more and kept adding up to his report:

"Of course, at that point I simply asked him what was going on, or if I had said something wrong. And he replied with a very beaten up expression that he was very far away from Kageyama still."

And Akiteru began detailing the entire conversation he and his brother had that evening. Adding plenty of hand gesturing, so to increase the effect. He was a very gesticulating individual, which wasn't very Japanese. But it was a very efficacious way to express oneself and Tadashi had no problems in visualizing all that needed to be from his record.

"He won't be at the Youth Camp with us this time. Hinata is livid about it. He has been called up by the proper National Team, along a couple other players we have faced in the Nationals. So you see? No matter what I do, I can't touch him. No matter what he says."

"What does he say then?"

"Nonsense as per usual. Like if I did my very best, I could be there with him. He meant in the Under 19 National Team... Yeah, sure. The day I see donkeys fly."

"I think he believes in you better than yourself. He may be not very good at telling stuff, but I think you are too harsh towards his intentions. He just wants to push you?"

"He's not this kind of inspirational friend you depict. Most of the times, he speaks his mind like a caterpillar onto others feelings. Far from being a fair pusher, trust me. And certainly not a friend."

"Hard to become one when nobody suggests they'd like to be one to them first?"

"How can anybody wish to be friendly with people who never share a thing about themselves? He only cares when it's about Volley. We don't know shit about him as a person!"

"This is a bit rich... coming from you Kei at least. I wonder what your teammates can say to know about you... save from Tadashi, I doubt you opened with any other of them at all..."
“You don’t say. And I can open with people... those I find good enough to do it with at least. It has happened with guys from other teams, for the record.”

"Still doesn’t make you any different from him: what if he also had friends outside Karasuno?"

"I am positive he hasn't because he just doesn't... he just CANNOT care enough to share himself with minions."

"A bit like you right? Didn't you just say you have to consider others good enough to open up with them? I still think Kageyama resembles you a lot. He is quite similar to you if you ask me...”

"No. He is not. I may be reserved, it's my nature but I don't purposefully hide things from others, do I? Instead... he does. It's like he's not part of a team either. We are things to him. He still use us... as things on a court."

"You seem very invested in this... “

"I am not. It just angers me... the feeling that we are little nothings in his eyes..."

"Sorry if I disagree. To me this all sounds just like a fit on your part?"

"What do we know about him? Nothing. Does he share anything about who he is, what he cares about, I don't say with me, because I know he would never, feeling like we hate one another... but his favorite tangerine either? Nobody knows what he is up to. Like at the Tokyo Obon... does anybody knows how Alisa Haiba and him went into the bushes? Not that we are a gossip club but in which locker room you don't hint at least a bit about things like these? Even to brag... fuck how can you just bypass completely a thing like that? And trust me... that was a damn huge thing!"

"This is so not you Kei... did you spy on all that?"

"I wasn't supposed to see it. But I did. And you know what? Minutes later he was among us like nothing had happened. Hinata even teased him. But he dodged all. Not even lies. We are not even worthy of those for him. So irrelevant to him, he doesn't even care about making stories up for us."

"You sound... a bit... jealous?"

"I am not jealous. I hate how he conducts himself like he's all far away and mighty. Like commoners like us can have a cute girlfriend, like Tadashi has Hitoka, say that... but him? No, he has not a girlfriend... he has an University student pine for him incredibly, but he cannot even care, bar those times when he surely experiences the kind of things only an older girl can teach you about..."

"Kei... listen to me. This is taking you beyond. You are exaggerating and placing blame where there is none. You can't assume anybody's intentions starting from prejudice and.. frankly... you do have lots of them regarding this guy. But you also seem to care in a twisted way about him enough to lose so much of your cool over what...? A kinky encounter he may have had at Obon? Dear God my brother... just let go! Maybe they are just very private? It's not your business nor your team's one to ask for him to tell you that, and I am pretty sure in his shoes you would hide it all as well..."

"You're right. I am exaggerating. It's that I thought he was someway starting to care about having a team... about being a part of something that is supposed to exceed oneself. I was fooled. We still only tools to him. In the broader sense."

"I fail to see how this fling he may have is relevant to such an analysis..."

"Alisa's thing isn't the only thing I know of him that I wasn't supposed to, Akiteru. There's something
more. Something worse. And as much as I would like to fuck everything off and stop to care... I can't. This is making me so angry and frustrated, it's like I reverted back to all I thought of him at the start. To think... I was starting to believe in him after the whole captain talks..."

Tadashi at that point couldn't avoid to recall himself the moment when the neo second years had started to guess about future captaincy. Hanami was in full bloom then and the team was gathering to have some talk together, to teach especially the first year recruits on how in Karasuno things were used to be spoken up. After new captain Ennoshita had presented the team, he had started to remember his own journey to the role, to inspire the new players at giving always their everything, even in times of self doubt and discomfort.

"I am living proof that anything can happen if you don't give up. And even when you do give up, but then you go back from scratch and realize you want to amend your mistakes, and grow up."

At that point their new first year setter, one that had entered their high school only to be given the chance to play alongside Kageyama, erupted with a cheerfulness only matched by Hinata's typical antics, shouting overexcited that the following year his idol should have been the next captain.

"We watched the guy like he had just opened a can of venomous worms, in between horror and repulsed expectation... we were sure Kageyama wouldn't have liked those type of proposals, let alone a first year interrupting the captain to spread useless opinions... instead..."

Instead the setter had looked at his emulator with calm stare, and without traces of irritation simply stated that although it was way too early to have such a talk among the players, he could have never been the next captain. That there was someone absolutely more indicated for the role. And that in his own opinion there could have never have been another option than to make Tsukishima their captain once they had entered their third year.

"Tsukki was the depiction of shock. I have never seen him more shocked at anything in my whole life. He just couldn't even talk..."

Then Tadashi reported in depths what went on to be said once his friend had found his voice back:

"Why me?"

"Easy. You are the smartest among us."

"You are as smart on the court if not more..."

"I am verbally inept in the heat of the play"

"So am I... often?"

"Not really. You're good at saying things. Mostly mean stuff and unnecessarily condescending ones but you can quick get your points across. I can't explain complicated stuff to save my life, we all know this don't we?"

"Is this a trick game? You can't be serious can you?"

"Except that I am always serious when it's about volleyball and you know it."

"Why me? Hinata even would be better..."

"Nope. He's getting better at doing lots of things during games but he still a crazy dumbass and none of us would ever obey him."
"And you would obey me?"

"No way. But I wouldn't disagree in trusting your judgment."

"So much that in fact you... would obey me?"

"Not a chance. I don't obey blindly. I decide whom to listen once this person has proved to be valuable on the court through mind and body. So, again... I am not opposed in trusting your judgement. Which doesn't mean I wouldn't tell you something is wrong with me, in case it'd be necessary during a play."

Tadashi ended his recall by adding that Kei that evening had expressed to him his difficulty at dealing with that situation:

"He kept telling me... or maybe he was speaking with himself loudly, that he couldn't accept how Kageyama was ready to hand him the captaincy. He couldn't understand how he could consider him not only fit for it, but rather the only one fit for it among us. He was saying like a broken record, which was so not him again, things like... I would have never chosen him, I would have rather left the team than being under his will... so why did he pick me so easily instead?"

"Now I get why you're worried about him..."

"It's like lately he is not himself anymore. I have trouble sometimes recognizing him. His reaction... even the way he speaks... have little to do with the Kei I'm used to. So... I came to you... to understand it better. What can I do to make the Kei I know get back to himself?"

Akiteru turned towards inquisitive Yamaguchi, explaining:

"Once in middle school, Kei spoke with me about this. He was already very intelligent and perceptive, so much ahead of kids his own age, but often in certain regards very well ahead of the majority of older kids too. He said this, and I remember it by heart because it hit me like bricks on my face then: "I am logically performing only when emotionally uninvolved. If I feel myself into anything, I can't skillfully analyze a thing, let alone rationally manage it." The words he used at 12... the way he could self read himself and the people around him... Back then I thought straight that my lil bro was a little Einstein."

"He is. He is smart and driven and has the greatest thoughts. That's why I can't stand to see him waste energies by fighting people he shouldn't even fight with in the the first place! He should just get back at being cool and a bit snarky and stop being a mess."

"I think he'd like it. But maybe now he can't. And maybe... this scares him up too?"

"Your brother is the coolest person I know. But he is also one of the most lonely. It's so rare he feels drawn to anybody, and it's sad that when sometimes he does, it has to be against and not in favor of..."

"You are speaking of Kageyama I guess."

"He instigates the strongest reactions in him. Always. Like a moth to a flame... it's unavoidable for him to move towards him. Even if it's just fighting spirits on his part, he can't ever let go."

"I think he's drawn to him because he can't read him. His intelligence and observations cannot decode him and this drives him mad to the point of fixation. He is his obsession and this is the reason he can't let him live. It seems to me from all that've seen and heard of him that Kageyama's cold detachment is real while Kei's a protective shield to hide a mess of deep unresolved feelings about a
lot of things he deals with. And lately these feelings also involve Kageyama, which doubles the trouble for Kei, seeing that he still detached for real, but Kei is starting to not being able anymore to detach himself from it all. This makes him both angsty and panicky. Must be hard to be his kind of teenager. What he probably doesn't understand is that being the kind of teen Kageyama is may be just as hard. In Kei's words, it seems to me that Kageyama is the loneliest kid ever. They actually have a lot in common, but Kei lacks the empathy to grab this. Both do. One because only noticing things about himself skillfully, the other because unable to consider others beyond limited situations, whatever the reason for."

"Is it pathetic if I confess that I hate this? I hate that a guy like him can move Kei this much, while it took me ages to just prove to him I could shake his reasoning?"

Akiteru chuckled, his eyes full of understanding and affection. Tadashi was a phenomenal friend. Like Kei had in fact another brother by his side. A skillful, fierce and unlimited friend who would do anything for him. Forever.

"Keep an eye on him. Trust his intelligence. Be there if, or better when, he will need to speak his heart out. It's all that we can do..."

"But it's also everything that needs to be done, right?"

Akiteru nodded.

"I think..."

"What?"

His smile opened up, and he squinted eyes to avoid to get emotional:

"I think that your manager has found the best boyfriend ever."

Yamaguchi didn't immediately catch it. Then he did, and went adorably red faced again.

"Tell me Tadashi... you get this red with her too?"

"Constantly... and so does she. They call us apple pair instead of happy pair..."

Akiteru laughed soundly, and as Kei was about to return, offered to accompany his friend back home, to avoid meetings which would have been hard to explain. The book that Tadashi was supposed to get remained in the library, and when Tsukishima came in his room, he wondered why.

"I won't bring it to him tomorrow. He has to learn how to be reliable."

And with a scoff he adjusted a picture on his desk which was of them two at their middle school graduating ceremony, before stepping down to enjoy the sasa kamaboko his mother was a champion to make.

Chapter End Notes

Genkan (玄関?) are traditional Japanese entryway areas for a house, apartment, or building—something of a combination of a porch and a doormat.[1] The primary
function of genkan is for the removal of shoes before entering the main part of the house or building. Genkan are often recessed into the floor, to contain any dirt that is tracked in from the outside (as in a mud room). The tiled or concrete genkan floor is called tataki (三和土).

**Sasa Kamaboko** is one of the local specialties of Miyagi, named after the bamboo leaf design in the family crest of the Date clan, who ruled the Sendai Domain. People of the region had a custom of making white meat fish paste into small patties using their hands, and grill them for preservation. This is said to be the origin of today’s Sasa Kamaboko. Grilled until it is golden brown, Sasa Kamaboko is crisp yet soft inside, easy to eat for snacks and nibbles as it is individually packaged. Nowadays, new flavours have been added to the variety - cheese, Shiso herb, and smoked. It is fun to experience the difference in flavours of each brand.

**Omoikane (思兼 or 思金)** is a Shinto god of wisdom and intelligence. His name means "serving one's thoughts." A heavenly deity, identified as a child of Taka-mi-musubi-no-kami, who is always called upon to "ponder" (omopu) and give good counsel in the deliberations of the heavenly deities. Appears to have descended from the heavens in the heavenly descent myth. OMOI, id., "think"; KANE, id., "metal," but preferably from the verb "to combine," "to possess simultaneously." "Thought-Combining Deity," a deity of wisdom or good counsel able to hold many thoughts at once or to combine in one mind the mental powers of many individuals.

**Engawa (縁側 or 援側?)** is a typically wooden strip of flooring immediately before windows and storm shutters inside traditional Japanese rooms. Recently this term has also come to mean the veranda outside the room as well, which was traditionally referred to as a nure'en (濡れ縁?).

**Taiko (太鼓?)** are a broad range of Japanese percussion instruments. In Japanese, the term refers to any kind of drum, but outside Japan, it is used to refer to any of the various Japanese drums called wadaiko (和太鼓 "Japanese drums") and to the form of ensemble taiko drumming more specifically called kumi-daiko (組太鼓 "set of drums"). Taiko have a mythological origin in Japanese folklore, but historical records suggest that taiko were introduced to Japan through Korean and Chinese cultural influence as early as the 6th century CE. Their function has varied through history, ranging from communication, military action, theatrical accompaniment, and religious ceremony to both festival and concert performances. In modern times, taiko have also played a central role in social movements for minorities both within and outside Japan.

**Hanami (花見?), ("flower viewing")** is the Japanese traditional custom of enjoying the transient beauty of flowers; flowers ("hana") are in this case almost always referring to those of the cherry ("sakura") or, less frequently, plum ("ume") trees. From the end of March to early May, cherry trees bloom all over Japan, and around the first of February on the island of Okinawa. The blossom forecast (桜前線? sakura-zensen) "cherry blossom front" is announced each year by the weather bureau, and is watched carefully by those planning hanami as the blossoms only last a week or two.
The Flow

Chapter Summary

Standing alone my senses reeled
A fatal attraction is holding me fast how
How can I escape this irresistible grasp?

Can't keep my eyes from the circling skies
Tongue tied and twisted just an earth bound misfit, I

Ice is forming on the tips of my wings
Unheeded warnings I thought I thought of everything
No navigator to find my way home

Unladen, empty and turned to stone
A soul in tension that's learning to fly
Condition grounded but determined to try

Can't keep my eyes from the circling skies
Tongue-tied and twisted just an earth-bound misfit, I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air around his platform went suddenly more solid, and quite smelly, as the wave of people extruded out of the sliding doors onto polished concrete. Sounds of recorded, metallic voices filled the space, and if one could have flown up above just two or three meters he could have seen masses of tiny figures move in rivulets out of the tracks like blood filling an human body after a heart attack resolved.

Kageyama had always had troubles in finding roads. Stepped onto the final line of his track, he was fidgeting. Moving first right. Then stopping again. Attempting to move on the left. And stopping once more. He was cluelessly aiming for the addresses written on the piece of paper he was holding, but the time was moving quicker than his resolve at asking, for the sake of himself, for somebody's help on the matter, and he knew that was a certain way to be late eventually.

Luckily he had been smart enough to arrive at the station way before the time he had thought would have been sufficient to be on duty, but he couldn't still stand that he had, undoubtedly he had to, ask some passenger about where to head next.

On his paper, there were three options written in maximum detail:

**Senday City Bus**
From JR Sendai Stn West Exit Bus Pool n. 10, 15, 16. Get on a bus for "Daigaku Byoin Keiyu" or "Kotsukyoku Daigaku Byoin Mae". Get off the bus at "Daigaku Byoin Mae." (about 20 minutes, 180 yen).

**Senday City Subway**
Take a subway for "Izumi Chou", and get off the subway at "Katayobancho" Station. (about 5 minutes, 200 yen). From North, 2 Exit, 15 minutes on foot to Yamagata.

**Taxi**
From JR Sendai Station to Taxi Pool, ask for "Tohoku University School of Medicine, Seyrio area" (about 10 minutes, about 1300 yen).

He kept watching the paper. And telling to himself that he couldn't... that he absolutely mustn't use option number 3. At all. Everybody could follow the other two ways to move. It would've been a waste of money to resort to the taxi, and just because... he had absolutely... no orientation at all. He was such a loser, for being that thick and dull whenever he had to move outside of a volleyball court. Scoffing and greeting his teeth without being conscious, he sure was a sight to behold in the confusion of the train station. But he was as usual so unaware of things around him he couldn't see people looking at him like he was making a scene out of himself, nor decode on a number of school girls a sort of disappointment in realizing such a handsome and tall guy must have had some trouble if he couldn't avoid to stay still in the middle of the main passage mumbling strange sounds and sporting a sorry and somehow scary face while at it. What a shame, they were telling among their group, that somebody so attractive must have definitely something unregistered about himself. But no... Kageyama really had no idea of anything happening around him, he could just feel the sliding of minutes out of his head telling him that he would have been unable to make it on time. That he would have had to excuse himself for being an idiot. That he would have made waiting somebody who had devoted so much of his own time to him, without an appropriate reason beside the fact that he was an hopeless case when it was about to move outside of a gymnasium. Damn him. The frustration was about to reach peak point, and consequently he had already reached for his pocket to find the money for option number three, when from his side a familiar and strong grip jerked his lower arm, still delicate and unobtrusive enough to not make him tense wrongly:

"Kageyama... it's all right?"

Kageyama zoomed in like a bolt to face the origin of the voice, instantly glad to meet the hazel brown eyes that were looking at him with the usual kindness and comprehension, and never a trace of pity, no matter the most humiliating circumstances.

"Sugawara Senpai... you're here?"

The other smiled with a teint of slight embarassment, but soon recollected himself to deny he had to do anything out of normality for being able to come at the station at that hour.

"You told me you had a lesson this morning?"

"It went smoother and shorter than I anticipated... so I could come and take you instead."

Kageyama was sure he had rather to flip and set tables, unlike what he was claiming; but his former teammate would have never admitted that he had worried for him to get lost in the big town, because that would have been a way to hint at a defect he had, and Sugawara Koushi was just too gentle, just too soothingly good to assume people had proper defects. People may had had little troubles at doing things...but never because deficient, only because inexperienced or untrained enough to overcome that deficit.

"Understood then. Thank you very much Sugawara san. I was having... problems. You know I am no good at taking directions in places I don't know..."

Sugawara internally chuckled; You have them also in places you are supposed to know... but then he just looked at his kouhai and the joy in having him by his side erased all other thoughts, like a summer breeze the oppressive heat. Taking him by the arm, he started make them move outside the train station.

"Did you grow more since last time, Kageyama? I keep feeling like I am shrinking compared to you
every time we meet..."
"Uh... it may be? I didn't have measurements since last month, and I am supposed to have them in
two weeks...I guess? If any, not very much anyway..."

He had probably grown another half an inch he told himself. But he didn't want to sound like he was
bragging about something which wasn't a direct merit, although his fervor in drinking milk may have
constituted a push for it, so he didn't say anything. Sugawara chuckled internally once more. He
could read his thoughts from any little motion his eyebrows would make. He could sense his
intentions from the way he would pause between words, trying to find some better suited ones to tell
what he wanted to, and he could give shape of words to the small grunts he would sometimes
accompany the pauses with, not finding the better suited ones he was searching for.

"So you've been selected for it, finally..."

There was a lot of pride in the way Sugawara had said the last bit of the phrase. And there was even
more in his eyes watching his underclassman becoming pink shaded in his cheeks at the catch of
such prideful assertion. He still couldn't believe that was actually happening.

"Well... yes."

He couldn't go on adding more. His brain was always shot by too much expansive light whenever he
would be thinking of it. And after all he still sucked pretty bad at determining which expression he
could use when in sudden need, despite being way more communicative than just a few months
before. But yeah... finally.
Japan National Under 19 Team.

Finally.
He would have dressed in red and white.

Finally.
For real.

"Well it will only be an internal camp... we will train with the Under 21 team mostly. I don't want to
think of this as something bigger than it is. Though... it is... big. For me it's the biggest thing ever... so
far..."

He didn't look at the way his former vice captain tensed slightly then; he wouldn't have understood
probably any way the regret in him for acknowledging that of course a National jersey would have
always come before the one they had shared with so much joy and glory just mere months past. They
were moving towards the parking area, but Kageyama was so taken up far in his vision of the
National Team colors fitting his frame like a glove he didn't even realize they were not directed to
any bus stop, nor metro line, nor taxi pool.

"Ehi Kageyama... where are you going? This is it... will you stop? Please?"

Kageyama snapped back into reality, bangs on his head moving around floaty like he was swimming
into water as he turned face back to Sugawara.

"Oh.... so this is..."

"Yup. This is my car. Say hi to Georgina!"

Georgina? Did he name his car? Who does such stuff?

"There there, Kageyama! Don't make such a face? Georgina won't like a passenger who doesn't like
her name?"
"It's not... that?"

Sugawara couldn't avoid to laugh plainly.

"You can tell me if you find it absurd that I gave a name to my car! I won't be offended!"

On his expression it was clear he wouldn't be. His eyes were shiny, his face open and that mole mark he had, even that was seemingly smiling and happy as the whole of his face, inviting Kageyama at expressing himself fully without second guesses nor regret:

"Well I can't say... I for myself would not name a car I guess... but then I have never had not even a pet to name so... it's not that I am experienced in such things anyway..."

He told it all flustered and cute, fast and eating some of the words while stumbling a bit on some others. Sugawara reached for him and opened the door to accommodate him inside the car, then very sweetly replied:

"I think Georgina will like you even if you don't think she shall have a name."

"Ok... great... because yes, I really don't think she should. But if you do, then... it's also fine."

Sugawara did smile at that. His kouhai had come a long way in those months.

He and Kageyama had set their meeting habit almost straight after his graduation in March. That day, after all the team celebrations, and a whole lot of cries and drunken speeches all the graduating members had shared, he found their coy star setter trying to have a word with him before his ultimate leaving off the locker room. He was touching in his respect of the emotional time he was having, and not willingly to impose his wish over the needs he may have had in that heavy partying day, but he could tell he was in great ambush and his reason for searching a moment to speak with him was important and undeniable. Just when he was emptying his locker, he invited him near to talk.

“Say, Kageyama… it looks to me like you need to talk a bit?”

The younger setter for the umpteenth time marveled at the skill his senpai always had to understand his mind even before himself, and trying to avoid to sound even more childlike than expected, assured he had also understood he was actually in a bad need to seek for his help, he said:

"Sugawara San... I just wanted to thank you for everything you've done for me this year. It feels like it changed me a lot. And you... truly… are a magnificent senpai."

Watching a guy who would normally just use a different intensity on his scowl to suggest emotional states putting so many words one after another, facing somebody else without having to scream or stutter, filled Sugawara’s heart with affection and gratefulness, and he said back that he didn't need to thank him, because what they had lived together that year would have forever remained in the entirety of his life like one of his most treasured memories, unchallenged until he would probably get married or have kids of his own.

“It has been awesome to play alongside you, Kageyama. And if there is anything you'll ever need off me, just tell me. I’ll still be your caring senpai no matter what, from now and onwards. Never doubt this.”

Kageyama's face became more relaxed; there was a way his eyes were glistening that could have been defined as pure happiness, even:

“There is something… something I would like to know…”
“Yes… and… that'd be?”

“How have you been able to be such a force for our team, and at the same time graduate with one of the best scores out of the whole school? That is amazing…”

Sugawara didn’t miss the peculiarity of the curiosity his underclassman was exposing. Kageyama never seemed interested in anything study related, being only absorbed in his favorite sport like nothing else could ever inhabit his mind or will.

“It is not so amazing, trust me. It just takes effort… but if one can put it in, then I guess anybody can do as me, more or less.”

“Just effort? I don't think so… one must at least be intelligent… I mean, I could never!”

Sugawara chuckled with a tad of repression of the laughter, to not irritate the very irritable guy in front of him.

“But… you are actually very intelligent I think? It’s just that you don't apply yourself at anything which is not volley related?”

Kageyama blushed slightly. Then denied he was anything but a thick headed kind of learner.

“No no… Sometimes I tried to concentrate and study… but it was just painful. My mind would wander instantly…”

“Mhh. I find hard to believe that you don't have any interest or feel any curiosity unless it is volleyball…and many people can't truly concentrate unless they are invested in the subject.”

“Well I do have curiosities… but… that takes time… to fulfill them… and time is limited so…”

“So you just devote it to the thing that matters the most to you. Am I right?”

Kageyama nodded, still expecting more from Sugawara, who would always finish his sentences mid way to make it easier for the person he was speaking with to follow his well directed reasoning:

“But what if being better at academics would be a key to a better volleyball chance too?”

Kageyama lighted up.

“Well, I have got better grades now so I won’t be grounded and risk to miss practices or games…”

“Yes… that is good. But it’s still not what you would be better doing.”

“It is… not?”

“Don't limit yourself. Think bigger. What if being a better student could open you the door to a better college, and to a better volley team? Sure, you can probably be scouted for that… but what if you had the entirety of options handly? What if the entirety of the chances you could scope in your life would strictly and only depend on you?”

Kageyama mumbled at the words of his senpai. First, to understand them. Then, to judge them. Then to decide if they could apply to him and his masterplan. Being in control. Being really in control of your own life. Wasn't this all he ever wanted since he could remember? Kageyama processed the vision his senpai was offering to him; not immediately, but gradually his face changed accordingly to his acceptance of it, until he realized the impact of what being a better
student could mean in the way of him being a better player. Sugawara wore then one of his most embracing smiles he had ever worn.
Judgement: positive.
Impact: maximized.
Outcome: useful.

“You’ve been rejected by Shiratorizawa back when you had to choose your high school; and although they are still crying over their mistake and we still rejoice to have you with us, this is a convenience that is a matter of luck, for us and also for you… But what if you have had the grades to enter there out of pure academic skill?”

“I would… have been not… denied. I would have played…”

“With Ushijima. And Satori. But thank God you haven't because you are just a volleyball genius with tragic school appliances aren't you?”

Kageyama's eyes were a pool of stars in a deep blue sky. He had understood. And that meant that he had started to WANT something out of his awareness. Knowledge for him had always meant a path to action. Abstract things weren't for him unless they could lead to something factual and measurable.

“Sugawara san… do you think you could find a way to… teach me… how to be…”

“A better student?”

Kageyama's eyes were at that point two Milky Ways ready to burst into the depth of the dark space.

“A good student. A student with more chances to choose his way. Could you help me with that?”

His kouhai truly had come a long way he thought.

“Of course I can, and that will be my special pleasure, to thank you for all the amazing days you’ve helped me have playing this last year in our team.”

They had sealed their deal in that locker room, and every three to four week since then they would have been meeting to assess Kageyama's steps in all subjects.

“I am glad you came today, Kageyama… I was a bit afraid you wouldn't after… last time…”

They were arrived at Sugawara’s dormitory in the campus, and he was opening his mini apartment giving shoulders to Kageyama, who was a few steps behind, carrying two packs of mineral water supplies they had stopped to buy on their way.

“You shouldn't have worried… I told you that was nothing…”

Then they went in, leaving on a small carpet the shoes before making ways to the small table on the left side of the tidy, perfectly minimal and elegant room.

“I still sorry for it all though.”

“Don't be. I never minded.”

He wouldn't have. But Sugawara still did. While preparing peach and ribes ice cold tea for two, his mind went back to their previous encounter effortlessly, like he could revive the scene right in that room.

They were scrambling throughout English papers he had given Kageyama to memorize and analyze
because ‘if you want to become a world class player, you need to master the mother tongue the world speaks in’ when at a certain point a book of Sugawara's lot fell onto the carpet, soundly as it was a big book. Kageyama picked it up and read the title, which was in English, like the majority of Sugawara's books.

“Neurology Digest. Texts from recent researches.”

Sugawara had handed Kageyama his booklets back, and had offered to put his own book back in a little shelf behind the bedpost in the right side of the spacious room, when Kageyama had spoken, carelessly, words that would have made anyone curious:

“Do some of… those… speak of… being… one track mind?”

Sugawara had instantly gasped.

“Well… yes. There are some of them… speaking about Asperger Syndrome, Autism…”

Kageyama had immediately tensed, and on his face the usual frown had grown.

“But this is not what I asked?”

Sugawara had felt guilty. In his mind, to have Kageyama, who could have been looked for a stranger not very familiar with him, the prototype of a slightly Asperger kid - and sure he had thought a bit of that at the start of his year at Karasuno - ask for something related to a neurological condition, had made him go way overboard, and he promptly apologized for the misdirected answer.

“Of course. I am sorry… I thought it was strange you would ask for these things anyway…”

“And why shouldn't I?”

It seemed from that point that no matter what Sugawara would be saying, the conversation was destined to dig a grave bigger and bigger for him, and for whatever remains of a friendship they would have been able to call from then onwards:

“Well… I… it’s just that… I never thought you could be interested in these stuffs… unless you are interested…”

“Because it touches me? Is this what you mean?”

Kageyama's face then had surely to be looking not very differently from when Hinata had hit his back head with a terrible serve. Sugawara had no idea what to do with it. He truly had anger written all over it, and he couldn't stand to have been the reason for such a shifting in his mood:

“Don't make me say things I didn't. Even though if you know what being one track mind is, you have to admit you cannot deny there are some elements of its kind of profile which fit the Asperger spectrum… if you know…”

“I do know what all of this is.”

To cut a senpai’s speech short wasn't Kageyama's way, unless he had been very, very much angered or stressed out.

But if he knew these things, Sugawara couldn't avoid to realize, maybe in fact… he had been checked for them?

“You do? Have you by chance… being…”
He stopped halfway before finishing the sentence because Kageyama's eyes were raging. So unusually for him, he appeared clearly bothered, and positively excited, although in his own kind of way. He was angry out of his mind, while still as cold as a stone planted in the middle of the room facing him like he could decide upon his next few words if letting him live or not. Sugawara was terrified. But also, still, very curious to understand what could be his reasons to show such a face to him.

“Please forgive me. I never meant to upset nor offend you. I study these things and they have always captured me. Of course you are not pleased that I mentioned you being maybe checked for these syndromes… it’s just that someone… seeing you always focused on just one thing…”

Once again he couldn't finish: Kageyama's leaned in on his face and with the calmest, freezing coldest voice he had ever heard from anybody said:

"So let me rephrase this... just because I am very into something, because that something makes me very happy, and uninterested in other stuff which don’t give any emotion to me, I have to be mentally impaired?”

The gaze he was underneath could weaken a champion, and Sugawara stuttered his answer, trying to sustain it:

“Don't... take it this bad... it's just... well I came to consider your way to concentrate was...”

“Was abnormal?”

He had to admit within himself that at first when he had met him… yes at first… maybe he had thought so… maybe… yes…

“Being slightly asperger isn't so uncommon though...”

Strange enough, the phrase Sugawara had thought would have signified his end in Kageyama's eyes calmed him down. Like admitting he had someway considered him different that way could open space for a further explanation he probably never had offered anyone before. With less burning eyes he then said:

“But I am not? And trust me I asked... professionals.”

Sugawara couldn't believe his ears. Was that truly the Kageyama he had thought to know?

“Did you?”

There was a pure and sole need of sharing and understanding radiating from Sugawara and that finished to calm Kageyama down completely:

“People keep thinking I am this idiot to anything which is not volleyball and while I may be... it's not due to a neurotic condition, but it is my choice. Volleyball makes me… the happiest person on this planet. Why a teen absorbed by let's say, video games or sex, but socially awkward is considered all fine but when it comes to my fixation on my favorite activity I shall be this kind of freak?”

He was seeming to be suffering a little due to this misconception. Resigned to be misunderstood but somehow frustrated to be. It was all a nuance though; for everything in him, from his voice to his external demeanor always seemed first the portrayal of cold detachment and impenetrability.

“Sorry. Maybe it's a wrong way to define your... talent? Something too big and outwardly estranged for us regulars...”
"That I have to become a freak to categorize it?"

He had a point. To categorize things which are rare is often a road paved with bumps and holes, and still, it seems to be one of the only ways humans use to not fear them too much. Being rare, he thought, is a bliss. And a trouble too.

"Sorry. I never meant to treat you unfairly. So... you did ask anyway if you were... peculiar?"

Peculiar maybe had to sound less harming? It probably did, because Kageyama answered without a flinch:

"Eh... I did researches first. We have... medical people in my family. Lots of books to check I guess..."

"And?"

"And when I was sure something was wrong with me, because nobody ever was understanding my passion, my drive and my requests to others to give always their best like I was... I asked... my uncle about...about being maybe really a freak...”

Sugawara could picture the very moment that had to happen. Kitagawa Daiichi time. King of the Court rejection. How much sufferance a prodigy could endure without cracking deeply, when left all alone on his own?

"And what he did tell you?"

"He told me that I was as normal as anyone else. And that to appreciate life, I had firstly to appreciate myself for what I truly am. Since then... I stopped to care altogether about people's judgment unless it was for my own good. Which probably adds to my freak side in their minds.”

"Yeah. It probably does."

"But I don't care. I don't force myself to anybody. But at the same time, I don't need anybody to be forced on me.”

Sugawara sighed. He had changed, but something in Kageyama would probably always stay the same nevertheless.

"We never forced you... did we?"

Kageyama understood immediately he was referring to himself and his former teammates. He slightly, just slightly moved his lips upwards:

"No. You never did. Which is why I have always liked being with you.”

Sugawara felt all the tension had faded; so much that he started to reminisce about the season they had shared. Kageyama, at that point completely oblivious to the studies he was supposed to complete under his guidance, offered a pretty unique review from his viewpoint about what his first high school year had meant. How much feeling accepted by Karasuno had given him a push in getting wholly better at the sport, but not just at that.

"I will always be thankful because you, and the captain especially... you never hated me for being angry... or looking or sounding like I were, even when I was not...”

"You were not angry... you were just frustrated in feeling unaccepted. Fears of rejection were rooted
in you. We helped break those, and you became the real you."

“You know… for a long time I really didn't care about people and what people would think of me, unless that was detrimental of my game of course; but even then, I would have not changed for anyone. I still think this… but you guys have somehow changed my perspective at this a bit as well…”

“Did we?”

“Yes. Majorly. You’ve made me understand that like I don't accept to be changed, others as well don't. You taught me that people are different and that it's exactly what makes sport in team… fun. For many years I didn't have proper fun playing… with others. I had it because of me… not because of other people with me.”

“And now?”

“Now I try to see things another way. When I first started to match Hinata… even when we were failing… I thought it was fun to try. It never ever occurred to me that failing could be fun…”

Sugawara had come near to Kageyama, and they were facing one another in a deeply connected stare:

“Now differences are not a mystery to shut out… but kind of… a resource to command?”

“You really can't avoid to link anything at the moment when you could command it can you?” Sugawara said that with another little chuckle; but it was a tender way to chuckle and Kageyama didn't feel bad about it.

“I guess that’s a part of me which cannot change?”

You are a king after all…

“But I am trying to do better… even if I admit that I want to understand others and their approaches which may be different to mine to apply it all to volley. I am not very good at this yet… but I am slowly getting… better I think. And most of all… I know I want to get better at this. So I will.”

_Determination. Resolve. Utmost dedication. Yes. You will in the end._

“Sure you will. But now try to deviate from that and let's concentrate about Shakespeare, can we?”

“Of course. Let's do it.”

The tea was spilling in their mugs and Sugawara was clearly on another planet. Kageyama didn't want to pressure him into anything because he felt he had done already enough forcing his senpai to take him at the station - he didn't technically but in a honest look at the situation, anybody would agree the poor university student had no other chance than to go and pick him up if he ever wanted him to show safe at his door, like any other time he had visited before - so taking studied breaks at sipping before recapturing his senpai’s mind wandering he took another look at the room he was in. Just when his eyes had stopped to a picture of definite importance, Sugawara went back on Earth, retaliating:

"Kageyama... Please, accept my apologies... Last time... I made you feel uncomfortable. It wasn't my intention. At all. And I hope I didn't ruin the sort of friendly, real friendly intimacy I felt we were developing..."
"Sugawara San, you don't need to apologize again. You didn't even need to do it first and foremost. I know there was no ill will on your part, and all is okay. I promise."

Instead of finding solace in Kageyama's words, Sugawara's everything appeared to be aggravating its tensing, until he spoke again:

"Then I hope you will take this I am about to ask you the best way. I have a favor to ask you, Kageyama kun. It has to do with what you could do for me in exchange for what I am doing for you. Do you still allow me to ask for this something for myself?"

"Of course. You are helping me so much... I have to repay you in whatever way you please. So ask me anything you want. I will do it."

The pause Sugawara took to prosecute his speech seemed forever lasting. And it was all in Sugawara's mind, too. He was practically shivering.

"I want to spend as much time as we can together."

"I don't think... I am... understanding?"

"It's nothing fishy, don't think worse of me please: it's that I have decided what to specialize in for my first year. And I need you to further my academics..."

"I still don't understand. Sorry if I am stupid..."

"You are not... it's me who I am failing to explain this the correct way. It's that I am scared to make you angry... again..."

"There's no way I could get angry at you."

Somewhere along their way, they had effectively come nearer. Sugawara could tell by a number of elements that his kouhai was quite at ease with him; that he was very respectful and responsive to him; that Kageyama was in fact one of the very few people he knew who couldn't lie. So if he was saying he would not get angry…

"Be my case of study."

The blunt and sudden request blurted out of Sugawara's mouth while his head bowed flashily in front of Kageyama, his hands joint above it like during a prayer, and his face covered by his luminous hair completely red.

"You want to prove that a stupid boy can become a good student in good hands?"

Of course. He did not get me...

"Stop it. You are the farthest I can think of from stupid. And no... it has not to do with our studies... rather than... your approach to sport."

"It is maybe connected with what we talked about last time?"

"In a way. But not the reason you may think of now. You have always fascinated me. Your way to dedicate yourself to what you love... And after our last chat... I made researches. Lots of them..."

"To find my syndrome or... what else?"
"Putting it this way, it sounds horrible. But please trust me... all I wanted to discover is a name for your wonderfully exceptional relationship with what you're passionate about; and this especially after how you've explained to me your own feelings regarding your talent and dedication and drive. I was sure it had to exist a name for that."

"Freakness?"

Sugawara sweetly looked upon the book he was holding since the conversation had started. It was a small book written in German, but bearing an English title and it had been put on the table they were taking the tea at; Kageyama hadn't even noticed it was there.

"It starts with an f indeed. But it has nothing to do with freakness. At all."

And turning the book to show its title to Kageyama, Sugawara with the most shining, caring smile told him:

"What you experiment which makes you so happy in playing has a name. In positive psychology it's called the flow or the zone.

Kageyama opened his eyes like he had to find a diamond into a bowl of clear water, scanning it to see a shape hidden by transparencies:

“Are you kidding?”

“No way. Now I am happy because I know that for calling you exceptional, I won't ever have to think you are a freak anymore. It's like having a super power. And it's what many geniuses have had in the past.”

Kageyama was still open eyed and open mouthed. Genius. How much he had always hated that word. But... the flow? A... super power? That... that sounded...

“Sugawara San. You truly are awesome. To... do this... for me...”

“Tch... tch... I am doing this for me too?”

Kageyama was not so sure of that. But he was sure in that moment he was feeling something very close to happiness. Something very close to belonging. Something very close to the concept of safety. And acceptance.

“So... will you be my case of study?”

The answer came as fast as a panting breathe.

“I will. I’ll be yours to be studied. Though I have no idea what it means...”

“You’ll see. And I promise it won't be an obstacle to any of your activities”

Upon setting a new series of tasks for Kageyama's study plan, Sugawara told him he would have to expect some questionnaires about his training regimes, and some about his feelings during games and practices. Very detailed question on apparently secondary elements like duration of the sense of expectations, judgements on the reactions he had on plays, and then other types of questions about physical impacts the games and practices were having on him.

“It's not gonna be much is it?”

“It won't be don't worry.”
Before heading out towards the station, Kageyama noticed again the picture he had before.

“Sugawara San… may I ask you… one thing? It is a personal one… so I understand if you will deny me an answer.”

Sugawara nodded.

“How are things going with Shimizu senpai?”

The momentary lapse of breathing in his mentor’s would have been a good enough answer for many, but Kageyama wasn’t versed in social readings and he failed to grasp it, maintaining a face of expectation which was calling for a proper answer, and not a metaphor:

“Well… it's hard to see each other seldom, when we were used to see each other daily…”

“But you two…”

“Oh, no… no… we started to date just around graduation time, that's true… but still… we were seeing one another for three years, practically every day. It is… as I said… it's hard now.”

Kageyama regretted his question.

“I am sorry for having put you in a bad mood…”

“You didn't. Life is made of ups and downs after all. But we love each other so… it will be all right in the end.”

Love. What an obnoxious thing.

“So I guess it's easier to match sport and school, but love and school it's more difficult?”

“It's just distances… really.”

Sugawara couldn't see where Kageyama was meant to lead him in that specific trail of thoughts, so he just cut it short and didn't seem to mind the fact that his kouhai was still concentrated, one hand over his chin, his eyes looking dim and down.

“Kageyama, let's hurry or you'll miss your train…”

“Yeah… sure… sorry, I was just… oh, nothing. Let's go!”

Love. Love is a mess. It can wreck somebody as cool and level headed as Sugawara San. It takes up way too much time. And forces. And everybody flips for it. No way. It just can't be for me. For another million years. Unless I can date a volleyball. That could work.

He reached the track of his train by pure luck and thanx to his long and powerful legs just in time. And as he sat down on his assigned couch…

“Tobio chan?!?”

That would have been quite the ride back, they both thought.

Chapter End Notes
Sendai University Indication all the notes of transports and all the elements regarding the place names and the activities/locations in this (and other) chapters are completely true and related to real Japanese settings of life.

References to the Manga and Anime such as the "magnificent" senpai referred to Sugawara, the memory of the terrifying face he made at a training game, and the notes about Kageyama discovering volleyball with Hinata could be fun are also part of the canon Furudate universe.

The Flow (Psychology) is a true field of study, which you can read more about here https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology) and it applies magnificently at the way Kageyama's character is portrayed in canon Furudate, avoiding the neurological patologies of other and more impacting conditions such as Asperger or even Autism, which sometimes get associated with his personality. I have a great interest in neurology and psychology, which is why I have loved to portray my Sugawara with, too. Being essential to my story to never transform too much the attitude of complete devotion Kageyama has to the game, I found this explanation could constitute a good and realistically possible key to understand his drive and passion without making him unnecessarily weakened by a mental condition of deficit in any other area. I hope it can be accepted and maybe even generate a sort of curiosity in the readers to try and understand better what the flow really is. It may be useful for many! :)

The Lantern Festival - PART ONE

Chapter Summary

The heart is a bloom  
Shoots up through the stony ground  
There's no room  
No space to rent in this town

You're out of luck  
And the reason that you had to care  
The traffic is stuck  
And you're not moving anywhere

You thought you'd found a friend  
To take you out of this place  
Someone you could lend a hand  
In return for grace

It's a beautiful day  
Sky falls, you feel like  
It's a beautiful day  
Don't let it get away

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I still don't get why we have to wear these…”

“Kageyama, this is no news: when is it that you get things?”

Hinata didn’t have to finish his sentence to start running around the bathroom, for as soon as his face had shaped into his trademark mocking one, his teammate had already started his usual chase, screaming dumbass all around.

“You two… have… to fucking stop this mess!!!”

Ennoshita had enough already. He was the only one bothered by the fact the team would be rampaging and hopping on its own for the whole evening at the Tokyo Obon, knowing there was a 200% assurance all of his guys would have caused damage and trouble. Two of them, in particular, if left on their own devices:

“Hinata, Kageyama: please, be considerate tonight. Don't pick fights. Don't get lost. Don't… get arrested?”

Hinata and Kageyama looked at one another like all their captain was saying could apply to anybody but them, honestly trying to figure out why he was so tense and worried.

“Don't fret yourself, Ennoshita senpai: we won't do anything you wouldn't, am I right Kageyama?”
The setter nodded with eyes closed and a solemnity he would concede in times of deep reasoning.

“We were just messing around, here, because Kageyama kun is against our traditions and hates yukatas…”

Kageyama launched a frying stare at the short middle blocker, losing entirely the aforementioned solemnity in a split second:

“Dumbass, I am not. It’s just that this is not our Obon… this is Tokyo Obon, and just because I am keen at traditions, I find it wrong that we wear these now, and not in a month when our own one will be held in Miyagi.”

“But you look really good in your yukata, you know Kageyama? I shouldn't say it… but you do.”

Kageyama immediately went red faced. He couldn't handle sudden and openly sincere praise by Hinata, no matter what, even after all that time spent together:

“Don't make fun of me, dumbass…”

Ennoshita chuckled.

“I am not doing it. You really do look good. I mean, not as good as me… but yeah. You look pretty good, grumpy.”

And with that last closure, the chase in the bathroom started back again, with Ennoshita resigned and leaving the two running after one another for many more minutes.

“Oi… we leave in fifteen. Be down there in time, you two. And don't break a thing in this dormitory, or else I swear I will make you rebuild it all with your tongues.”

And he would have.

When Karasuno team gathered for the final leave from Nekoma facilities, the entire staff of the hosting school were there, too. The coaches, the helpers, and of course the players. Everyone dressed in traditional getup to experience the most loved of the Japanese celebrations beside New Year’s one. Nekoma players had already shared their duties for their beloved ones who had died, and during that day and the previous ones they had visited the graves of their ancestors and had cleaned and washed their grave stones. They also had found convenient time to spend at their homes to offer them rice and fruits in the usual ozen set up, which constitutes of lotus shaped leaves filled with food and sweets left at the Buddhist altars each family has prepared at their houses. Some of the guys had also practiced their version of the Shiraishi Odori dance and maybe during the night, alongside the taiko drumming shows, they would have proven themselves at that. Even the school itself had set a little mukae-bi fire lantern zone in the backyard to honor the foundations of the complex. Inside one of the conference rooms there was a proper shrine for the mainfounder of Nekoma school, whom everyone there considered a master and a sort of family member. Chochin lanterns filled the place to praise and call his spirit back in the school as well.

“Obon is the best, Tanaka San…”

Hinata was beaming with joy and bolstering with expectations:

“Will we be seeing Saeko san tonight, playing won’t we? I can't wait…”

The vice captain put a hand on his teammate’s shoulder, grabbing it energetically to show him appreciation:
“I can't either. My sister is the best when she bangs that drum.”

“She is. She really pumps you up with overhuman power and force when she does it.”

And they meant it. It was her way to cheer the team up which had been proven so substantial to some of their best performances at the National Tournament after all.

It was late afternoon and the motion to the Obon would have been slow, given the traffic and the lazy pace of the attendees. The majority of the nearby neighborhoods viability had been restricted due to the Festival and a number of events had been planned all throughout that day until the very end of the night, when fireworks would have closed the celebration, not before a series of dance and percussion performances and of course not before the toro nagashi send off, which would have been especially spectacular seen from the Chidorigafuchi Boathouse. Senko incense was wafting through the streets, calling for everyone's devotion and setting everyone's mood.

On their bus, Ukai, Takeda and Ennoshita gave their instructions to the crowd.

“Keep your phones charged. Don't waste all batteries in taking videos or doing snaps or whatever you want to do. Be responsible. Don't wander alone, keep at least in sight with one other of us. In this paper we are about to distribute there is a map of the gatherings, a series of number and contacts… ehi Kageyama, that's especially for you ok?”

Laughter spread without being forced, while Kageyama sulked painfully at the claiming of evidence he would have probably gotten lost even with that paper in his hands.

“Don't worry Kageyama… I won't let you get lost”

Hinata quipped.

He was lucky in having him aside, even though he would have never admitted it; but he didn't want to be a burden for him that night. He didn't want to tame his energetic need to overdo things, overdo sightseeing or overdo tasting of the foods they would have found at the Festival. And he would do that, because for him Obon was an experience to be lived with calm composure. With intimate acknowledgment. Noise and chaos seemed to him truly unfit in such a day. He couldn't see how the Souls of the beloved Deads could be pleased in an atmosphere of relentless confusion.

“Don't worry for me. I won't get lost with all these notes. You don't need to be chained with me…”

He wanted to sound like he was feeling generous and willing to set him free for his good, but he probably ended sounding harsh and uncaring because Hinata seemed to get hurt:

“Oh, so you don't want to be with me? Fine. Get lost then. I won't look out for you once tonight, be sure!”

Kageyama was about to reply, but then he thought even if misunderstood, Hinata would be better off without him that night, and he just shrugged and rotated his head to the window, staying silent for the rest of the trip.

When they stepped in the parking area, the one which was still available and naturally the one most distant from the core of the celebration, the feeling of happiness expanding from the location became overwhelming. There were musical sounds reverberating from the gardens, and chatters filled with joyful laughs coming from all directions; weather was perfect, hot but not very humid and no matter the fact they were still in town, with the lights dimming down one could see small fireflies already trying to light up, while hiding from all sort of dragonflies which were flying still around.

It took very little for the team groups to break and recompose in smaller packs, and in a blink the bus
was left alone by everyone. Hinata ran away like a bolt up the sharpest path along with Nishinoya and Tanaka, Yamaguchi and Tsukishima left to the opposite way with Hitoka tagging along, and step by step everyone took a different road to the main zone, which was reachable by 7 different routes spread into Hibiya Park.

Kageyama had purposely tried to blend with the surrounding so that everyone would leave before him. As soon as Ukai and Takeda caught his plan up, he waived at them to not mind his state, and faking to talk to someone on his phone, he promptly took a casual direction himself to part from them as well.

Just when he was ready to end his recital, the phone rang for real.

“Here’s Hinata trying to…”

But on his display it wasn't his name popping up.

“Sakusa San?”

“Good evening Kageyama kun. Are you already at Hibiya by chance?”

Kageyama took a while to answer. It was seeming surreal Itachiyama’s ace would use his time to call him.

“Are you?”

He recollected himself enough to answer:

“Yes… we've just arrived…”

“So have I. Mind sparing from your team for a while?”

Like he hadn't already on his own intention…

“Sure…”

Then the obviousness he would have never been able nor to find Sakusa on his own, nor to let him found himself, being oblivious on how to explain where he actually was, hovered over his head like a maleficent ghost of disgrace, and he stuttered the rest of his supposed answer to Itachiyama spiker.

“Kageyama where are you? Line must be bad… I don't hear you clearly…”

“Eh… I don't… I can't really tell…”

Frustration was about to take control, when behind Kageyama a strong hand lifted his phone out of his grab, talking directly into it:

“He’s at the parking area F just outside the Elm Tree Field…”

On the other side, a growl could be heard along the words spoken after:

“Atsumu… is that you?”

And so could the irritation on the answer back again:

“Sakusa? What the hell.. I thought this was the orange shrimp?!?”

Kageyama in the main time had the image of idiocy scornfully pelted over him, like somebody had thrown a ball of greasy shame at him and it had remained attached to his face. He could not even
process what he was in the middle of.

“You wish. Anyway I am just behind you, if you are the jerk dressed with the bright yellow shirt and Kageyama is the well dressed gentleman right beside you…”

Miya Atsumu turned face to see a tall and broad guy with wavy black hair and a face mask approaching their direction, hands crossed and hidden inside his light purple yukata, a walk elegant and regular.

“Sorry Tobio kun… I thought you were lost and talking with Shrimpy kun…”

He smiled playfully at the still speechless Kageyama, who was having problems at dealing with the awkwardness of the unexpected encounter(s), and before he could answer anything senseful, Atsumu had already turned fully to face boldly Sakusa, who was about to close the gap between them. The phone was still in Miya’s hand. The night was also starting to fall and the lights of the Festival were at that point all lit up and sparkling colors around.

“Sakusa…”

“Miya…”

The two glanced with all of their self assurance instilled in their stare, then at the same time they turned to Tobio, who was nothing short of bewildered, and half bowed at him:

“Kageyama kun…”

“Tobio kun…”

Before straightening back to once more dagger one another with battling stares. At that point, finally, Kageyama went back to himself, exchanging salutes with them. He was very happy to be meeting them, and he wasn't much interested in how that had been possible, in the vastity of Tokyo.

“Sakusa San, Miya San… it's great to see you again.”

He bowed gently, and deeply, and his dark blue yukata embraced his growing shoulders like a velvet glove over defined muscular frame. His shoulders seemed to be made to wear such a piece of fabric.

“We just saw you two days ago…”

“But that was for playing!”

Said Sakusa and Kageyama back together at Atsumu's note. The two surprising matching even in the rhythm of the phrase.

“I know… but still…”

Atsumu seemed annoyed by the shared wavelength the other two guys had just shown off to have.

“Anyway Tobio kun you look gorgeous in that yukata. If only Sakusa, here, could learn from you…”

Sakusa didn't falter:

“Luckily he didn't learn from you, Atsumu. What kind of clothes are those? Don't you respect tradition?”
“I do, you history freak. But you know, this ain’t my Obon. I don’t wear yukatas lightly.”

Sakusa hummed. Kageyama had a brief talk with himself where he admitted he was quite in Atsumu's side there, but didn't want to disappoint Sakusa for it so he resolved to avoid any confession on the matter and tried to just get his phone back from the other setter. Miya realized he was still having his device, and gingerly gave it back to him.

“So where are your guys?”

Kageyama told them they were wandering around for a while, but that he had preferred a quieter way for himself. He went to admit he enjoyed a more private kind of Obon. Sakusa nodded, while Atsumu shrieked.

“Obon must be fun, camon!!! Ya’ll sound like Samu, for real…”

“Speaking of which…. Where is he? I mean… why do we have to stand the silly twin instead of the best one?”

Atsumu groaned before faking an assault to Sakusa. Kageyama was observing them like fishes in a pond. They were bantering a lot. They had done that also during the training camp he had been allowed to take part in a couple of days before, but their banter was different compared to his and Hinata's. There was always a sense of continuous and irreversible war between them. A war which was as serious as it was playful, for what he could decode.

“Osamu went to the movies with our manager. It’s a secret…”

“Guess no more, right?”

Atsumu pondered if he had done his brother wrong. It lasted one millisecond before he absolved himself fully.

“Nah… but you won't count. You are not from Kyoto NOTE and nobody you know could tell him anything.”

Before Sakusa could object to the very winding reasoning of Miya, Kageyama felt like asking why Motoya also wasn't with them that night. Sakusa said that he had chosen to go to the Festival held at Tsukiji Hongan-ji Temple, but he added that once he would learn he had meet him there instead, he would have regretted his choice. Kageyama blushed slightly. He had always been touched by Motoya’s gentle manners towards him.

“Komori has a soft spot for you, Tobio kun…”

Just when Kageyama was about to get seriously embarrassed by the innuendos in Atsumu's discourse, his phone rang again. Again he let a “Hinata what…” escape his mouth, and again, though, his wasn't the name appearing in the phone screen. He hesitated long enough in answering to raise concern in both of the guys who were walking aside him towards the core of the celebration for the night.

“O… Oikawa San?”

Sakusa and Atsumu looked at one another. Who was that?

“Yes. I am here too. Where are you now?”

Kageyama was tensed, they noticed. He was also visibly excited. And that didn't stand well with
either of the two other guys. Who was that he was talking with?

“Google maps coordinates? Wait… I am trying…”

Google maps coordinates? Sharp. Whoever that was, she must have been smart, they both thought. A valent troublesome opponent, if she was about to be also cute. While they were both looking at Kageyama sending his coordinates to that Oikawa San girl, they couldn't avoid to trace how their companion’s face had changed after the call. He had become instantly more lively. But he was still their grumpy, polite and very respectful companion after all:

“I am sorry to slow you down… it's my senpai who was calling…”

A senpai? A female senpai he had a clear crush on? How pure and cute, they thought. Their curiosity had risen even higher.

“No worries Tobio kun… I get you. It's typical to crush on older girls especially when they are cute senpai's isn't it?”

Kageyama was about to vehemently deny all of Atsumu's assumptions, when a sudden and loud chirping call filled the air:

“Tobio chaaaaaan!”

That was NOT a female voice.
That was NOT a female face.
Or body.
Or persona.
That was a freaking pretty and fashionably conscious guy waving at them, making Kageyama's face happy in unmistakeable ways. And why the hell he was daring to call him Tobio chan?
While Atsumu was feeling threatened by the guy entering their personal space like he was used to own those effortlessly, Sakusa kept a certain distance from the scene, focusing mostly on Kageyama's reactions. He was affected by that Oikawa guy. Deeply. So it would have been useful to know him to understand what in him could be so important to Kageyama.

Strategy. Let's plan it.

Oikawa came at them trying to dissimulate the surprise in finding Kageyama not accompanied by any of his Karasuno people; it had taken seconds for him to give a name to the guys with him, but that didn't came off from his behavior to them. Instead, as he stopped before the trio, he introduced himself with studied stance and talk, as he was used to do to charm people he would firstly meet. Kageyama allowed it, conscious out of the two, he definitely wasn't the one used to make presentations.

Sakusa and Miya also presented themselves, and the group resumed back their walk to the center of Hibiya Park.
A series of stalls lined up at any passage and Miya and Oikawa couldn't avoid to get caught by any of them. They seemed brothers, both dressed in studied torn black jeans and fitting flashy t-shirts, their taken care of hairdos similar as Oikawa's one had become shorter that summer, and both discovering a similar penchant for silly keychains in the shape of alien related puppets.
Despite the different accent, they also had a similar way to jab at one another. Kageyama was very amused by all that.

“So that's the senpai you had at middle school?” Sakusa inquired, telling softly while they were seating under an ample oak, waiting for Miya and Oikawa to get back from their shopping stops.

“Yes. It's him.”
Kageyama simply said. Sakusa would have liked a longer explanation for understanding more of it. But on the younger guy’s face he couldn’t trace much, beside a strange mixture of respect and regret. It made him wonder even more what to make of their bond. But he acknowledged it wasn’t a fair time to dwell into it. But then Kageyama added:

“He is… the best setter I know. He is my example, and what I aspire to be like. Oikawa San is my target. And I am still not quite there, Sakusa San.”

Sakusa stunned. That was Kageyama’s reason to perfect himself? A guy he never heard of? Unless that wasn’t…

“Sorry if I ask… but isn’t he the one Wakatoshi was willing to play with in high school?”

Kageyama for a moment asked himself who Wakatoshi could be, then realizing that was Ushijima’s name, he nodded, confirming to Sakusa that was, in fact, Oikawa Tooru.

“Mmh. Okay then.”

Sakusa didn’t sound too impressed, but then he never did about anyone, so Kageyama didn’t really mind it.

When the other two came back, they had a bunch of drinks in their hands, and a face of battle for one another:

“Say Tobio kun… which one do you prefer? Apple? Coke? Pineapple? Blueberry Ice?”

Oikawa smirked; and laughing lightly he took off from his back a little pack of ice milk, offering it to Kageyama, who lighted up like a three year old and grabbed it instinctively:

“Thank you… Oikawa San…” Atsumu snorted in pain, and that grew at the side sight of a triumphant Oikawa addressing him with his best V sign. That motherfucker.

“Won’t you thank me too? I picked up all these for you…”

Kageyama didn't understand but profusely thanked the guy as well, offering to share some of those, even though it seemed clear to the group he really didn't like any other flavor beside plain milk. Oikawa put his knife deeper in Atsumu's flesh:

“There, there… don't be sad Miya chan… I know Tobio from years. There could be no match between us, after all…”

Miya steamed off from ears.

“You can call your cat or dog or bird “chan”, dear Oikawa kun. And I know how Tobio likes milk. It's just that I like to push him at trying new things… and newsflash for you: it generally works out pretty well, doesn't it Tobio?”

The two were expecting from him an answer. But Kageyama hadn't one. They were both right after all.

“So?”

They said together. Kageyama sighed, and Sakusa took the chance to break the impasse:

“Why don’t we solve this little battle you two seem to have in a smarter way? We could involve Kageyama kun as well, if he’d like to…”
The other three went curious and asked how. Sakusa, moving his mask out from his mouth and pushing it for a minute under his chin said:

“You all love to compete don't you? This night it seems that you are taking every chance to best one another…” Kageyama frowned. He wasn't doing it. Sakusa noticed, but prevented the objection by continuing his speech: “you may not have done it so far, Kageyama kun… but I am sure you'll love my idea still…”

“Which would be?” Said Oikawa, intrigued and also stimulated by Sakusa's style. The guy seemed very smart to him. He was somber, but he could guess his depth nonetheless. And he couldn't resist a well thrown challenge.

“You all are setters. Setters are especially skilled in using their hands and fingers and wrists quickly, precisely and perfectly. And there is one typical Obon game which serves you right there…”

“Goldfish scooping!”

They said together, all of them three. Sakusa smiled, and replaced his mask back over his mouth and nose.

“Exactly.”

The three setters looked at one another's faces, they all smiled poignantly and then agreed at showing themselves off, with the older two starting immediately to promise the other hell for the incoming watery war. As they made moves towards one of the stalls which was keeping gold fishes in a pond, Kageyama spoke:

“But if it's a competition, shouldn't we have prizes, beside the name of calling it a victory for one of us?”

Sakusa's eyes lighted up. *There you go, Kageyama kun. Show us how you will fight to win.*

“Kageyama is right. Each one of us, let's claim a prize in case of win.”

“Or offer one, in case of loss?” Said Oikawa, who wanted to have a battle with Kageyama where he would have not backed off. It was a long time since they hadn't crossed swords in any way. Miya and Sakusa felt his competitive aura expanding tenfolds, as Kageyama's as well realized that was the point he had gotten so suddenly, so seriously excited. He loved the way he looked whenever consumed by agonism. He looked his best so.

“But I won't lose, to either of you, Oikawa San, Miya San.”

The two squeezed their eyes at him, then Miya said:

“I want you to come visiting me in Kyoto if I win.”

Oikawa felt like a whip chain had hit his back. This sleek guy… how could he dare?

“Then if I win… I want him to never ever do that. Is it ok?”

Atsumu's glare at Oikawa grew darker.

“Well… in case I win…” said then Kageyama “ I want you two to never argue in my presence anymore… and… can I ask you something in particular, Oikawa San?”

Oikawa nodded. His other request was just so him… so cutely him:
“Sure… but you won't win so…”

“I’d like for you to lend me the volleyball you got from the National team game you saw years ago. For a month.”

Miya and Sakusa looked at one another. These two and their shared past. They hated it.

“Fine. There's no need to deny you that since you won't win anyway…”

Miya elbowed Oikawa: “Don’t be so sure… to underestimate him is a mistake I wouldn't do twice…”

Oikawa just half smiled. He was already focused on the competition, and thinking to himself that he had never underestimated Tobio. He really never had, and he never could.

They chose a goldfish pounded stall aside Shinji Pond. Their presence went rapidly noticed by a number of girls passing through, and a small crowd gathered around them. Three handsome guys intently scooping for tiny fishes, and a fourth one serving as a sort of referee, standing tall and looking like a Greek god, despite a mask hiding half his face. That was a good sight to watch over. Quickly the crowd split in three different cheering teams, calling each competitor by the color he was wearing. Team Blue, Team Yellow and Team Green. After ten minutes, and despite his yukata was making his arm movements less free, it became clear the blue clad guy had the edge over the other two.

Kageyama was mastering the use of his own poi, carefully letting it all wet and conveniently inclined to minimize the chances water could torn the paper it was mostly made of. His quickness at scooping fishes by their heads was only enhanced by his ability in making them not move their tails before they would be deposed in the basin. He was impeccable at determining all the correct angles of his own motion, of each fish motions, and of the tools he had to use.

“His concentration is amazing… how does he do it?” Said one of the girls cheering for the green shirted guy, who was making hilarious sounds and going all ugh and geh without being conscious of it, breaking his appearance of perfection quite easily. But the girls cheering for him kept finding him totally handsome.

“Oikawa kun… you're losing… give up already…”

“Never. And by the way so are you, Miya chan. Don't you dread at thinking we won't be able to quarrel anymore if Tobio takes this?”

Miya shrugged, giving up to the fight: “I don't care… there are worst things than that. All I cared about was to win or to make at least you lose… so, I’m out now!” And he declared he was done, raising little cries from the Team Yellow supporters. Oikawa instead had no intention to end his fight before time had set off. He would never ever give up if Kageyama was involved. He’d rather die.

“Time’s up. Game has ended.” Sakusa proclaimed.

Kageyama had 13 goldfishes in his basin. Oikawa had 10. And Miya had 8.

“Kageyama won. So you two have finally to get along….”

It was like Sakusa had to restrain a laugh. Atsumu couldn't stand it. Oikawa nonchalantly claimed that would last a little anyway, as he was about to leave to meet with his landlord soon.

“I found my apartment finally!” He said, happy to shove to the others the fact he was about to
become independent and mark his passage into adulthood, while they were still high schoolers. His hand went studiedly to comb his tuft, which was as always the exact kind of wild and free.

“For your college?” Asked Kageyama. Miya and Sakusa were also attentive.

“Yes. And guess what? Guess who's gonna be at my University too, although in another subject field?”

Oikawa was strangely embarrassed about that, but when everyone around him remained silent, he went on: “Ushiwaka chan. Which means…”

It meant they would most likely play volleyball together in their University team. Kageyama's eyes blew up. Sakusa's ones went smaller. Miya didn't truly care at all.

“So you will finally play with Ushijima San? He will surely be overjoyed…”

Oikawa frowned. The irony of life. A decade spent opposing that guy almost… and then they would play along. Iwaizumi had almost passed out when he had told him so he said to Kageyama. Oikawa was about to say more, when his phone rang: “There you go… it’s my landlord, and he is on the other side of the park of course… I gotta go?”

Kageyama for a moment seemed saddened by his senpai’s forced leave, and everybody noticed it. Oikawa then asked if he wanted to take part of the road along him, so that he would reach the side of the park where all of his teammates were supposed to be. Kageyama would have agreed, but he didn't want to part abruptly from either Sakusa or Miya, who had been so nice to him that night. But they both denied it would have been a problem to them, suggesting they had their plans already set, and that he had to join his team back after all.

“Don't mind Tobio kun… we’ll see one another soon again. National Team calls up are coming in less than two months? And you can always come visiting me right? Right Oikawa San?”

Miya had said all of that trying to hurt deliberately Oikawa, as payback for a series of things during that hour or so: first, the National Team hinting, to piss him off regarding his playing career; then, the one about the possible chance of being visited by his kouhai, which could still be in play, given he had lost the scooping earlier.

“I guess you’re not so familiar with Tobio if you think he could travel alone until Kyoto and being able to not get lost…”

Kageyama wanted to rebuff that notion, but he didn't know what to say to being a credible protester. So he just frowned, again.

“I am familiar enough to know he would still like to come. And I am sure soon or later he will. By the way, it has been nice to know you, Oikawa kun. Always ready for another challenge, whenever you like.”

Atsumu's eyes were darting at once with fire and ice. His reactions could be so split, and at the same time overly intense in each opposite sides of them. Oikawa accepted his words with attention, memorizing things about him under a mental folder which would be read as “problematically valuable challenger”.

“We’ll meet again, Miya chan. And I won't lose then, just like I haven't today.”

“You haven't lost, but you haven't won either…”
Oikawa would have spared a “but look whose trail Tobio is about to follow now”, but he stopped before voicing it. Instead he decided to part ways with Sakusa and Miya in the best and most apt way, before taking Tobio along for a little while more. Kageyama profusely thanked his two National Youth Camp comrades with a really happy face. He didn't smile, but he could have easily, as his mouth went horizontal and his lips, they reckoned, could have truly seemed pointing upwards:

“Thank you so much for this day, Sakusa San, Miya San…”

“Day? Isn’t this more a night type of meeting rather than a day one?”

“Atsumu. Please. Shut up. Don't you see Kageyama kun is trying to be kind, while all you care about are nonsensical bits? Forgive him, Kageyama. It's not his fault if at birth all of the Miya’s brain went to Osamu…”

Kageyama at that point really seemed on the verge of laughter. Oikawa instead was plainly laughing, amused by Atsumu’s face an entire lot.

“Anyway, really… thank you guys. Thank you for everything, and also for the training camp time. I had a wonderful time here in Tokyo, and a lot has to do with you too.”

The two bowed back at Kageyama's bending in front of them, emitting a “likewise!” And then making move to go in their directions, as Oikawa and Kageyamawent to their own one, not before Oikawa too had again expressed his pleasure in having meeting them. While Oikawa and Kageyama were walking, Oikawa reprised his speech involving Ushijima and the fact they were about to play together. Kageyama seemed happy about it, so the other setter admitted he was at least curious in finding how all that could have developed.

“I still mildly upset about it… but I have also learnt that as you grow up, life teaches you new things in unexpected ways. So whatever tomorrow brings… I’ll be there, open arms to it. But yes… sometimes if I think of this… I am bothered!”

Kageyama was walking facing the road only. A part of him… maybe just a tiny part of him… was thinking how rightfully happy Ushijima had to be about being able to play alongside his senpai.

“Sakusa San seemed particularly bothered by that, too… when you've said it before.”

“That Sakusa guy… he seems… strange. I can't picture him yet.”

“He’s an incredible spiker. Really incredible. But he admires Ushijima San. I think he wants him to be great so he can be greater than him being great.”

Oikawa couldn't avoid a little smirk. His underclassman was learning how to project onto others. Scary.

“How perceptive, Tobio…”

“Please don't make fun of me…”

“I am not. You really are becoming so. And by the way… back to Ushiwaka chan… I think you two are quite similar now. You would probably play really well together.”

For years he had hated them both. Well, not that he properly hated them… he had felt the pressure of their talent and achievement diminishing his self confidence, and the frustration out of that had pushed him aggressively refusing their existence, for many years. But now he was different. He had matured into himself, and his own self acceptance had erased the worst feelings he had reserved to
both guys, opening new analytical perspectives about them and himself.

"I hope... one day... in the representative... we might maybe play together, Ushijima San and I..."

"Target down brat."

Kageyama went on to consider if he had offended Oikawa; but his face was calm, and not in a fake way. He was also looking ahead and his whole posture shown no sign of displeasure. He looked back at him with nothing but calmness, so Kageyama gained the courage to say again:

"But I don't think Ushijima san would play with me. Not if you're there. And you will."

Kageyama’s assurance in his chances couldn't pass unfelt to Oikawa. He was his biggest fanboy still. That thing would invariably make him feel conflicted. Kageyama wasn't able to hate in volleyball. He had never been able to: he could just ignore or admire. That was somehow another one of his peculiar strengths, and again one which was coming just so naturally to him. The fiercest and most victory oriented opponent on a court, still unable to hate any of his opponents. His force was flowing off of him only ignited by his confrontational desire. And it was something he had to deal only in reference to himself. That was a point in favor, as he would never waste useful energies getting too emotional over his court enemies, focusing just on their roles, and skills, and avoiding a lot of other elements which could drain his attention away. He was looking at him while thinking so many things, enough to make Kageyama doubt he had said something wrong; at that, Oikawa decided to bypass the part of the younger’s speech which was a clear praise of him, focusing only on its Ushijima part:

"Don't be so assured. He's like you. Result oriented in the end. He would use you as much as you would be willing to use him."

Once again, Kageyama didn’t seem convinced:

"I am far away from you in being... that great at using people. The right way I mean. I probably still unable to understand how to use people, especially when said people are not well inclined towards me."

"Yes. This might be. But you're sadly catching ground your usual astonishing pace. Look at the two guys we were with just before... aren't they your strong competitors? Still, they seem quite fond of you. This isn't happening by chance. This is because they feel you and what you can do for them. With them. So, aware of what you are or not, you are catching my ground already. You brat. Which is why I cannot rest."

Kageyama inhaled soundly. He was so good with words. He couldn't match that, ever. He was so capable of understanding everything and everyone... even when meeting people for one hour, he could successfully insert them all in personality boxes, skill boxes, type boxes. He was so... Good, damn it! How could he do that?

"Oikawa san..."

"Mmh?"

"Promise me... one thing?"

"Like... what?"

They were about to part. Kageyama had arrived at the point of Hibiya Park where a straight road would have taken him exactly at the yagura where the taiko drumming show would have taken
place. And he seemed in need to tell him the most important of things, under a moon which was sparkling and lighting everything with a beautiful shade of silver. And he spoke:

"Don't strain yourself. Don't overdo yourself. Wait for... the day when I can play with you again... to give more than you think you do?

That child. Worrying for him. Wanting him a piece for himself. The same child star struck with him when at middle school practice he would keep watching him serve for hours. Still, now older and taller and broader and just... more, the same child unable to lie, unable to think ill of anyone, unable to ask too much if not at himself. Still that kid. The kid he never could understand then when he should have had, and probably the one he was still unable to fully understand even now that they had grown closer. Much closer. He was worrying for him. How sweet.

"I can't stop being me. So I can't promise I won't do more than my best whatever I accomplish to make out of it. But... I can promise you if you get good enough... that I will be looking forward to that day too. The day when we could play again on the same court. And let's see who'll come out on top in the end."

Kageyama then did it.

He smiled.

His smile, so rare and unknown, made Oikawa Tooru skip a heart beat. It was amazing, the way his face would glow when smiling. The image engraved itself in his brain, although it lasted no more than an instant.

Kageyama had smiled; then, thanking Oikawa, he had ran away while cheering him goodbye, to not let him say anything more, and to prevent himself to say or do anything else, too.

He ran away, feeling content and euphoric. Happy to have not being alone after all, enjoying Tokyo Obon in that park. Yes, maybe that wasn't his own Obon, so his ancestors wouldn't have disapproved the fact he had fun that night. Because he had. He had enjoyed to be with people he found talented and interesting; people who were strangely liking him, God knows why. All of them were liking him; Oikawa included.

So yes: that beautiful day had been already one of the best of his young life, and he couldn't hold himself in feeling unusually light in his chest, whatever that feeling, out of a court, was meant to be.

Back where the two former Kitagawa Daiichi alumni had left Sakusa and Miya, the setter and Itachiyama ace hadn't yet separated, despite what they had claimed they were about to do when Kageyama had taken his way along Oikawa. They were still talking. And it was a seemingly mattering conversation, judging by Atsumu's way to move his whole body in front at a pretty still Sakusa.

"Ehi... Atsumu. Don't you think he was different just now... with that senpai of his?"

Miya nodded. Eyes darting away where Oikawa had been so near to his prize, his wish, his prey just minutes prior. His whole face a conglomeration of desire and desire of vengeance, so burning while all the lights around were coloring it fancifully. That Oikawa... he was dangerous.

"He was. Which is bad. But also... more interesting this way."

Sakusa put himself in front of the setter, his mask still on, his eyes meeting the other’s to find evidences he didn't need in the first place:

"There you go. The evil twin has found his next doll haven't you? And if you can play with it by fending off a villain... even better in your book, right Atsumu?"

"Tobio is not a doll. Even though he also is, don't you think? He is... so pure. Don't you want to
understand how?"

Sakusa kept scanning Atsumu’s eyes to find his usual malevolent inclination but it was alarmingly more difficult than usual. His eyes were burning a different kind of flame that night.

“You aren’t the type who protects nor purity and definitely nor pure people…”

“I think he could… show me a part of me I am not familiar with yet. When I think of him… something inside me melts against my better judgement.”

“You are just lusting after him. But you're right… he is pure and he could never imagine you being the most opposite thing to the concept ever.”

Atsumu groaned, offended. Then retorted back at Sakusa:

“Oh la la… isn’t this a first? Is maybe this THE Sakusa Kyoomi who is admitting he has actually cared enough about Kageyama to give him attributes and attention, and maybe growing into a will to save him from poor little me?”

Sakusa without glancing away, simply admitted he had started to consider him valuable. And that for sure he was ready to save him from Miya.

“We spoke these days. And what he says has interested me.”

“I saw you two talking the other day at the training camp for minutes. A thing shocking for the both of you. Motoya couldn't believe his eyes… what did he tell you to make you suddenly so torn up to him?”

Sakusa explained they were having a debate about which style of tossing was supposed to be the best one, and how the young setter was trying to convey his vision to him, with respect but also never once backing down at his doubts.

"My tosses ARE easy to hit. They are just hard to imagine. But if you do imagine them along me, then nothing's impossible."

"Well... isn't too hard to believe?"

"It is. Which is why my greatest task has always been to have people trust me there. I only met one person immediately, completely, recklessly doing so. This is why I enjoy play with him the greatest.”

Sakusa kept telling Atsumu that after that chat they had, he was studying for a physics preparatory test back in his dormitory. It was about elements of Einstein’s relativity and as usual he was applying himself with skill, when his eyes got caught by a note on the scientist’s famous quotes the book was also filled with.

*Logic can take you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere.*

In that exact moment, a vision of himself ruling the courts everywhere went to appear, distinct and solid before his eyes. A ball coming to him, and aside him, under it, the face of the person tossing it. As bright as a Big Bang explosion. As calm as the universe before it.

“I want to play with him. That is what I got out of that little chat we had. I want it. What you’ll make of it, Miya?”

Miya would have likely set Sakusa on fire in that very second. He didn't say a word, but it wasn't
needed for Sakusa to get. But he didn't care. That was the way Sakusa Kyoomi had discovered he could want like he never had expected before. That was the way he had realized how something could fill his every fiber and erase even his scare of germs and diseases. And Sakusa Kyoomi’s want would also mean he would have never stopped before reaching that something for himself. No matter what, or who, could have tried to shield him away from it.

"I won't let you have Kageyama, Atsumu. Sure you have been faster than me in setting your eyes on him, I’ll give you that. But it doesn't matter. It’s a marathon, not a sprint."

“Is it?”

Miya was smiling devilish and provocative.

“It is. That guy got me straight. I should've understood he was something this great when at All Japan Youth camp he was the only one getting that I was holding back… but back then my pride stepped in unfortunately, and I treated him dismissively.”

“After all you are an arrogant ass Kyoomi right? Everyone is just so below you right? Not that others can dare say you a truth you don't like to hear is it? Because we're all sluggish nobodies compared to you aren't we?”

Sakusa was having fun in riling Miya up this big.

“He might be not. He might be just like me. That is what I want to prove…”

"Why? You never like anyone, Sakusa. You never want anyone. Get back in your ivory tower and leave the pure child to my care…”

Sakusa leaned in to face directly Atsumu. He would swiftly overcome people that way. But Miya was not being intimidated in the slightest.

"I am interested in him. And like you say… I like how he is pure too. Not in your perverted way… he is like… a Shinto personified.”

“What the… hell? You and your absurdities…”

“You and your ignorance: you know the three virtues of Shinto?”

“Sincerity, Pure Heart, and Uprightness?”

“Exactly those. That's him when he plays. When I realized this…”

“You’ve started to want him. What a miracle… Sakusa Kyoomi has learnt how to be able to want someone…”

“It has happened. I admit it did. But let me add that the fact I don't want you doesn't mean I never wanted anyone else, you know..."

The irritation in the setter grew wider, making him lean into the spiker’s space his own aggressive way:

"If you want Tobio, we’ll fight for him then: because think of it... if I could have him on my side... I could imitate all of he does while being constantly around him..."

The thought was causing him physical satisfaction, as much as it was suggesting Sakusa a diseased nausea.
"Except that you can't imitate him. What he's got can't just be duplicated..."

Who knows? *But in the end... if by spending all days with him, I still wouldn't be able to get his plays style, I am sure I could definitely be able to get him at least. For myself. All mine. My most precious possession. Out of everyone else's reach.*

"Who knows? Fact is to have him by my side would at the very least mean that you wouldn't get him by yours, and that's something very pleasing to me enough."

Sakusa's devilish grin was hidden by his usual mask, but not the aura of intense intent coming off of his voice:

"Alright, Atsumu San: it's on."

"You betcha."

"You know how I never lose don't you?"

"Trust me: this time you will, may it be the only time it happens, this will be it."

And in both of their minds another human shape took place aside the luminous and slightly frowning one of Kageyama: a brunette, smirking and smug young man, patting him to drive him away from each one of them, well aware of his influence on the young kouhai. Oikawa Tooru, they wrote in their minds: welcome to our hell.

Chapter End Notes

**NOTE from Author** In my story, *I made the Kansai the Miya twins come from NOT HYOUGHO Prefecture, but the Kyoto one*. The two prefectures are colliding, but they are not the same territory. But since I love dearly Kyoto, I bended this fact to my like, given that so far not much of the twins' locations has been revealed properly yet. This will be particularly useful for my story in Chapter 15.

**Obon** (お盆) or just **Bon** (盆) is a Japanese Buddhist custom to honor the spirits of one's ancestors. This Buddhist-Confucian custom has evolved into a family reunion holiday during which people return to ancestral family places and visit and clean their ancestors' graves, and when the spirits of ancestors are supposed to revisit the household altars. It has been celebrated in Japan for more than 500 years and traditionally includes a dance, known as Bon-Odori.

The festival of Obon lasts for three days; however its starting date varies within different regions of Japan. When the lunar calendar was changed to the Gregorian calendar at the beginning of the Meiji era, the localities in Japan reacted differently and this resulted in three different times of Obon. "Shichigatsu Bon" ("Bon in July") is based on the solar calendar and is celebrated around 15 July in eastern Japan (Kantō region such as Tokyo, Yokohama and the Tōhoku region), coinciding with Chūgen. "Hachigatsu Bon" (Bon in August) is based on the lunar calendar, is celebrated around the 15th of August and is the most commonly celebrated time. "Kyū Bon" (Old Bon) is celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, and so differs each year. "Kyū Bon" is celebrated in areas like the northern part of the Kantō region, Chūgoku region, Shikoku, and the Okinawa Prefecture. These three days are not listed as public holidays but it is customary that people are given leave.
Goldfish scooping (金魚すくい, 金魚掬い? Kingyo-sukui) is a traditional Japanese game in which a player scoops goldfish with a special scooper. It is also called, "Scooping Goldfish", "Dipping for Goldfish" or "Snatching Goldfish". "Kingyo" means goldfish and "sukui" means scooping. Sometimes bouncy balls are used instead of goldfish. Japanese summer festivals or ennichi commonly have a stall for this activity. Both children and adults enjoy the game.

Tōrō nagashi (灯籠流し) is a Japanese ceremony in which participants float paper lanterns down a river; tōrō is a word for "lantern," while nagashi means "cruise" or "flow." This activity is traditionally performed on the final evening of the Bon Festival in the belief that it will help to guide the souls of the departed to the spirit world.

Shinto Virtues: Precepts of truthfulness and purification are basilar in the concept of Shinto, which underlines Japan ways of life. As the basic attitude toward life, Shintō emphasizes makoto no kokoro ("heart of truth"), or magokoro ("true heart"), which is usually translated as “sincerity, pure heart, uprightness.” This attitude follows from the revelation of the truthfulness of kami in man. It is, generally, the sincere attitude of a person in doing his best in the work he has chosen or in his relationship with others, and the ultimate source of such a life-attitude lies in man’s awareness of the divine.
Chapter Summary

Love, give me love
Anything you want I'll give it up
Lips, lips I kiss
Bite me while I taste your fingertips

Day drunk into the night
Wanna keep you here
Cause you dry my tears
Yeah, summer lovin' and fights
How it is for us
And it's all because

Now if we're talking body
You got a perfect one
So put it on me
Swear it won't take you long
If you love me right

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She gave herself one last look in the mirror, before deeming her own appearance appropriate. Downstairs, her family was waiting for her to finish her prepping without hurry. Her brother had already left to join his team in time for not being the last one arriving at the gathering, which he would have if he had agreed in waiting for her. Not that Alisa had tried to convince him in doing it. She had almost done anything in her power to slow the final touching on her toilet enough to exasperate all of his resistance, until his voice down below had given her signs he had given up.

“I'll precede you at the Festival, AliChan. You know where we are going to be so when you’re near just text me ok?”

She had given Lev her ok and as she had heard him closing the front door behind himself, greeted by the family, she had profusely smiled.

“Sorry my Lyovochka… I’ll meet you guys later. Before it, I need to meet him, and you’re going to assemble in two different places apparently…”

That night, she was determined. She would have been able to meet her crush, and she had hopes the feisty and shiny atmosphere of the Obon would have been a good setup for them to talk a bit, and maybe for her to discover if there was any evidence of a similar crush reciprocated in her favor. It had to be after all. She had to be in an advantageous position, given their ages - which she was bugged about, but which she mostly tried to not take into consideration - and level of experience - which he seemed tu sum up around zero, from hints she had collected on the matter - and well, given how beautiful she was, which couldn't be dismissed at all.
But in all their encounters so far, her teasing and her ways to find a breach in his detached attitude had always invariably failed; he was being constantly polite and gentle in his miens, but it had never been easy to read whatever was on that guy’s mind; let alone his heart, or whichever near.

She did have quite a number of chances to spend time with him before; but the very peculiar conduct of him, aloof and self centered, like around him there was a sort of dry stone wall that nobody could break, had resulted in her multiple attempts to some scanning and deeper conversation to be all aborted under-achievements. They had talks; sometimes even pleasurable and decently long talks. They had also a subdued kind of familiarity she couldn't underestimate, but nothing of the genre of intimacy she was looking for.

Not that Kageyama had actually understood any of her trials at getting nearer at him taking place. For how much Alisa had been intrigued and captivated by him, the circumstances and his natural reserves had always suggested caution to her.

Only that lately it had become increasingly difficult to stop her eyes trailing behind his every move. Any time she would be reminded of his presence or existence by his uncle, may it be by finding him at his home residence during some training session her class would have, or having him showing up briefly at the Faculty to get some family business done, she would easily crumble. Thoughts gathering to accumulate and accumulate until all she could remind herself of would be him. She would lullaby herself to the treat of the very soothing sound of his lower voice register, for any little speech he would be caught in saying, most often not at her, of course. She would drown into a haze of daydreams about him and the supposed things he would be making during his days. It couldn’t be all about volley his day, could it be?

No matter what, he was a teenager. It had to be more to his days than just a sport activity, no matter how born to be doing it he - really - was.

All she would anyway be able to picture in her guessing at those points would be sceneries of typical teenage life the very silent, elusive and fascinating young man would definitely be living, not any differently than her brother Lev.

Lev loved Volleyball a lot. A lot. But that was far from being his only way to live.

These kind of thoughts, as they would manifest, would always be taking a lot of her time up, too.

“Alisaaaa! Are you done? It’s getting a bit late?”

Her mum was right. She had done it again, getting lost behind thoughts of him. Thoughts about everything she could remember of him, enhanced by dozens of fantasies and self projections. And every time she would snap back from her romantic guessing to reality, she would tell to herself, to suggest a better containment:

“Young. Too young. Definitely too young, Alisa… Stop thinking all of this. He is way too young for you.”

But she was unable to prevent herself from falling deeper any time the two would meet. She was actually falling more and more even for each time she would just suppose they could meet. Her natural inclination for romance keeping her on trembling tiptoes, and with her complete cooperation, if truth had to be said.

And that night, there was no way she wouldn't meet him. It was inevitable, giving Nekoma and Karasuno teams’ plans.

But there she was, exacting and demanding Destiny to allow her a solitary meeting with him that night. Even a short one, she longed, would suffice. Hopefully.

“Will he think I look fine in this?”

She said in audible voice, taking the final glance at her summer kimono, a fluttering fountain of delicate and pastel colored flowers scattered all over her body, a bright green obi squeezing her
waist, accentuating her generous breast curve above it.

“He must. Who wouldn’t?”

She remembered well the moment when Cupid’s arrow had transfixed her irremediably. It had been not during their first encounter, back when Karasuno had beaten Inarizaki. That was still a strange and frustrating memory in her head, because Kageyama’s first reaction to her had been nothing short of a complete disappointment. And she had never been used to feel underwhelming to anybody, therefore she had always been quick at replacing negative pieces of her past with elaborated explanations about her encounters’ defects. Except that all it had taken for Kageyama to be faultless in her eyes (and heart ) would be a DVD of a series of games he had played, which she came to watch mere hours after said disappointment in him.

Her brother had left his DVD with a collection of Karasuno games and players on her own desk, before the Battle of the Heap Trash which was to be played, and almost moved by an inner call, she had put it in her video player, only to be swept away by the most intense series of close ups she had ever seen.

Back that night, she found herself stop and replaying countless times the part of the video dedicated to Karasuno setter, with her mouth drying and watering itself alternatively depending on the different scene cutting.

She had not been able to realize how beautiful he truly was while playing during her personal witnessing from the gym arena: she had just been bewildered by his aura of dominant skill and hypnotized by the obvious and commanding presence of his, but in that video she had been able to see his face, and while the expert camera guys who had stolen the video for Nekoma’s benefits were focusing on his hands and posture (perfect, perfect body… body posture… but still… body), all she could see was his amazingly concentrated, amazingly chiseled face. She had realized already he had a beautiful face when she had come down to meet him, but all she had gotten from him there had been a tired and steaming dripping awkward frown… and so she had tried to forget even then she had thought he was really beautiful, with his perfectly even skin, not bothered by any sign of young age, and made exceptionally stunning by the most beautiful eyes she had ever laid hers upon.

Watching Karasuno video, Alisa had felt her stomach twitching while simultaneously being torn apart in becoming a series of small pieces which would swirl around inside herself. She had felt at once euphoria and fright and wonder and although she had kept hearing a voice all along telling her she couldn't because he was way too young she had clearly, immediately understood she had gotten a huge crush on the guy.

A formidable huge crush on that guy.

The DVD was still on her desk that night, and before taking her leave to move down, she sent it a kiss and a wince of the eye (she had never been able to do that eye squeezing fancy thing everybody could without looking like she was in pain, in fact).

“See ya for real in minutes, darling baby boy…”

And out she went, direction: Hibiya Park.

She wandered a bit, then resolved in asking through a text if he was there, and where he was. She had planned it well, so that she offered him a valid reason she would have liked to meet him for and one fitting enough to ask for that meeting to be a quiet one: she had to give him a pair of keys his uncle had given her for his nephew. She hadn't had chances to land them to him at the training camp, because her commitments had been too many, and Obon was her last resort. Naturally, she could have gotten to the training camp in fact: but she hadn't just to save her chance with him for that Obon night.

Sly.
“But there are so many people I am terrified to lose them if I swim into the main areas of the park now…”

She began telling him by the phone, from a part of the park where the chaos was less noisy:

“It would be best if I could give you them out of those… where are you?”

Her luck seemed well available that night, as his description of his surroundings seemed to sound just like what she was watching; asking more about how dressed he was, she could point easily at a shape which was just steps before her, talking at a phone as well.

“Kageyama kun!!! I may be right behind you!”

One of the things she loved the most about him was that he had no idea on how handsome he was. Any hint at that would never cause reactions because he mostly wouldn't get it. Even if as time of their acquaintance passed by she was slowly realizing he maybe did, but he just didn't care to elaborate. It was refreshing, in a world full of vain guys, to have one who didn't pay much attention at his physical appearance without stepping down into unkempt-ness. His natural gorgeousness shone even more like that. His hair, so shiny and dark, gave always the impression he had just washed it, so floaty and delicately spreading a little hint of some basic scent which was unmistakable his. She could sense that scent from steps away, and she had done it also that night, when she met him, while he was to rejoin his senpais before the taiko drumming show which was about to start.

“Holy… Saint… Heavens…”

He turned abruptly, his hair moving like a Spanish folk dancer skirt around his head, shading his eyes, so intensely blue, and she couldn't take how great he looked in his traditionally sober dark nuanced yukata. He looked like a man, not like the boy he was.

“There you are, Alisa San!”

A smile would have looked good at that point, but she wasn't surprised he didn't wear one. That thin line his lips would open while greeting people was his cheering salute, she had already learnt and accepted. What she didn't know and never could imagine was that just a bunch of minutes before he had gifted Oikawa Tooru with one of the most splendid smiles she could have ever witnessed. But no signs had remained on his face by then. And now that she was finally close, she had no way to be complaining, because all of that she was seeing of him there, under the stars and the moon and the lights of the Obon was frankly breathtaking.

“Glad to meet you, Kageyama kun. Sorry to have had you move my way…”

“Don't mind… I was about to reach my teammates back just now… some of them will come picking me up in minutes…”

Alisa tensed. No way. Minutes? Far too soon then. She needed to discover how to prevent him from mashing with all the rest of those guys.

“Oh. So we’ll wait here? Here are your keys by the way…”

And she offered them into his hand. He closed his palm and she took a glance at how perfectly manicured it was.

“Thank you Alisa San. You're always so kind. And… well… we can start walking by ourselves while they are on their ways to me?”
A space for intervention then. Great.

“I’d love it. Let's go then…”

She pondered if offering him her arm to be taken, then gave up on the idea: he was walking with his arms crossed into the sleeves of his yukata. Looking so perfectly Japanese it was giving her a wonderful kind of heartache.

“You seem... quite happy tonight, Kageyama kun…”

Was he, he wondered to himself? He definitely was.

“I mean... you give off the kind of happy vibe I only perceive in you while you talk about volley, or when... you play... I guess.”

She became afraid she had said too much, but it was like she had said just the right thing instead. And like it had happen before, even though she had no idea he used to feel like that, Kageyama found easy to tell her many things he usually would not share. Maybe because she was older and he was feeling safer with her:

“Yes. I suppose tonight things have happened which made me happy, even if I was not playing.”

He had felt fine with people. Getting along with people. Having fun with people. And not just people: he had felt all of that with people he was looking up to and that had made him feel more than happy. He had felt accepted and tutored. That night he had felt a lot like a normal teenager. Not a prodigy, repellent or hard to get. Not a genius, whom people were uneasy around. Just a teenager having things to do and say along others. It had been great, that night. He didn't say any of that to Alisa. He just confirmed to her he was, indeed, happy.

“You look really cute when you are feeling happy. Your face and body relaxing... they look like they are warm...”

It had escaped her mouth before she could stop it. She would have liked to die, but again his reaction was different than what she had presented.

“Thank you. I like feeling that way too. By the way, Alisa San... your kimono has colors that are making your eyes stand out so much that they look even more beautiful than they always are. I am also happy I got to see that.”

Alisa's heart began to race. But she had to keep control of herself. Still that injection of flaring and soaring warmth she had felt, at the sound of his words, was really promising.

“You are the one talking about eyes...”

And she giggled. Kageyama somehow did the same, and they kept glances intertwined thinking exactly the identical thing in their own minds. Their mutual most standing out feature perpetually liked by the other. They both had no trouble admitting reciprocally how they loved to look at one another straight into them, even though it would have sounded bold and it would have looked mischievous to strangers. But Kageyama was always bluntly true, and that relieved Alisa enough to share at least that habit and allow herself to drown into his blue whenever she had chances. They would also easily talk about their eyes if occasion arose:

"Are your eyes... European by any mean, Kageyama kun? I wanted to ask you since a longtime ago...”
He registered the question mechanically and gave the answer as automatic; nobody ever asked him anything like that. Everyone seemed intimidated by his eyes just like by the rest of what he had to offer:

"My family has some foreign mixture. It dates back to when Japan was allied with England against Russians. Back then the grandfather of my grandfather was a military admiral and he fell in love with the daughter of his British counterpart. Despite being really discouraged about it by his family, he married her. She had eyes of my color, and maybe I got mines from her. But once I heard my uncle say it might even be a sort of permanent mutation in me..."

She was trying to get back to the eyesight intertwining, but coyly to not sell herself as the addicted she was, keeping telling herself those were the most beautiful eyes she would ever see:

"If they are a mutation, then it would be a fantastic one. They are incredible."

Generally she would get some appreciation back at this point. But the guy facing her didn't seem to want to reciprocate, though he was keeping eye contact with no sign of discomfort.

What the... what?
Did she lose all of her charm?
Why did he seem so unfazed by her presence?
Wasn't he just flattering her a second before?
What kind of unceremonious coolness was his at that point?
And just then she could hear the chatters and the screams of some of the Karasuno boys calling for him, ready to snatch him away from her already so soon. Too soon.

"Yours. They are incredible too. They are easily the most amazing eyes anyone could ever see. They… truly fit you, Alisa San."

He finally said flatly avoiding changing the composure of either his body nor face. Then with no sign of warning, at his team passing by to get on their side of the yagura the taiko team of Saeko Tanaka would be performing onto, he made a move and left her frozen in her place with the greatest chunk of questions plummeting her down.

What was that?
A compliment?
An… invite?
What was that?
She had to know. He couldn't leave now.
This time she wouldn't accept a defeat. This time she would not let him go just like nothing more was to be said, or nothing more was to be felt.
She shook back in herself, and focusing on the rear part of his yukata, she grabbed it with all her might, forcing him to stop and turn in her direction again:

“What… the…”

His face facing hers went like a stone.

“Alisa San… why are you…”

Her eyes were full of wet tears, ready to shower down.

“Please… don’t leave. Stay some minute more, before we all go to the yagura.”

Kageyama had no idea what to say, much less of what to do there. Hinata and the rest were already
placing themselves where they were supposed to, and apparently no one of his senpais had noticed
he wasn’t there along anymore, too taken in observing the preparation for the taiko drumming show,
too keen at moving rather than stopping to check for him again.

“We will lose our spots beside the yagura...come along, Alisa San? You can stay on our side if you
can't reach Nekoma's?”

“Please. Stay. There is a place where we can see all the show even better than there.”

Her face was still emotional, her extraordinary eyes still wet, without actual tears yet streaming.
And touched by those, he said yes.

“Ok. It wouldn't be nice to let you stay alone and now it’s too late for you to reach Nekoma guys on
the other side…”

Alisa’s face radiated joy, and in his chest something moved, which never had before once in his life.
She was really beautiful, especially when smiling.

“Where do we go?”

She offered him her hand, and without thinking much of it, he grabbed it. She jolted.

“Follow me. We climb beside this little mound, and we will be able to see everything from above.

“But isn't it forbidden?”

She sneezed quietly and smiled like happy children do, whenever they are reminded there are
impossible things to be done, but they don't believe it:

“It is... but nobody will find us if you follow my path. I have done this every year for more than ten
here... nobody ever caught me.”

They sneaked away from the allowed zone and went into a wooded part of the park, full of bushes
and low trees. They had to move with expertise to not stretch or strap their clothes. Then after some
mostly blind climbing steps into those greeneries, they came out on well cut grass, at the top of a little
mound where they could overlook all the action below them.

“This is the secluded top of the Dogwood Forest. It's my favorite place in the whole park.”

Kageyama noticed. She looked so happy.
There was a strange silence between them, and even the guy was able to decipher it was a kind of
silence which was speaking volumes. That situation... that situation wasn't a normality. Alisa wasn't
her everyday self. And not just because she was dressed in that shimmering kimono where each
flower seemed to offspring directly from her skin.

“Hope and possibility are born from bad luck and misfortune” [NOTE]

She said to break the silence.

“What do you mean?”

Asked Kageyama. She moved nearer to him, and he didn't do anything to stop her, nor to remove
himself from her reach. He liked that she was coming nearer and nearer. His mind began to waver.
His body began to send him signals of deep awakening.

“It’s something I already realized once... so I don't care if you are not convinced yet: I’ll take it as a
push… a push to get what I want…” she said, and bridging the final gap between their bodies, she
placed both her hands on his chest, delicately. Then flashing her eyes into his she went on:

“And what I want… is you. There is no way you haven't understood this by now…”

He had. That night of revelations he had. Though he couldn't tell what wanting properly implied, as
the only want he knew was the one of victory, that night he had understood the young woman in
front of him wanted something of himself no one else ever dared to. And that thought, that night, was
exciting to him.

“I… know…”

Alisa's hands on his chest went less softly pressuring him. She started to palm the flesh under the
fabric without trespassing any of his clothes; she wanted to feel his heartbeat matching hers from the
hands as her face upped on his, easy move as they were mere inches apart in height, even after his
continued growth those months.

“Good… that… you do…”

He was expecting to be touched as he could feel the weight of her breathing onto his skin, a foreign
sensation for someone as virginal as he actually was, but sensuously not unexpected as the intuition
of his desires were starting to take over, her natural scent more and more intoxicating as her face
would shift inescapably to feather touch his.

And so, what would be like to be kissed? His mind always so focused on just what he knew,
otherwise perpetually shut on things he was not interested in… what was his mind doing now, as it
seemed to being evaporating under the spell of Alisa's will to be near, oh so near to him?

What would be like to be kissed? He wanted to know. His lips wanted to get back being moist, as
they were dried and pulsating and calling for something he had no idea of, but which he wanted
badly there and then.

During the night he had finally felt like the teenager he was… why not going for the all in?
During that night which was being so absurd… why not step up and be not only Tobio the loner
sporty, but some kind of Tobio he had no idea he was allowed to be?

Was he himself anymore at all?

“Have you ever been kissed, Kageyama kun?”

His eyes blown wide into hers gave the answer his brain could not process to make his lips say; his
lips truly just wanted to be living that first experience which was a pure millimeter away; and they
stayed into hers, not shying away, fixed into Alisa's ones and that ignited her more, because Kings
don't back down at anything, and stay commanding even when they are in a position unknown, even
when they look vulnerable but feel dangerous underneath, because others can feel their power
waiting to be unleashed, and they worship that possibility of commanding a commander’s reaction,
just for once:

“Then let me be your first…”

She murmured, breathing every single small sound into his mouth, revering the way it looked,
pinkish under the moon, just the exact kind of full, to be taken with devotional care by her
experience and her devouring will. She would be etching herself into his life with his very first kiss.
She wanted that milestone for herself like she never wanted anything else in her life, and looking at
his face, a teint of temptation and a shade of embarrassment all making him feel twitching and
expectant, she reached for him, with all she had to give. When Alisa’s lips took on Tobio’s, their mutual softness jolted into a river of taste; it was a passage of frisky electrical bliss, and they naturally closed their eyes, just to reopen them to look at the other to realize that yes… that had been amazing. That had been a good clicking. Kageyama’s sight lowered to just indicate back at her lips for Alisa to do it again, because that had worked well, and she earnestly complied because he tasted just as well as he looked, and she wanted more as well.

Tobio had trained pleasures in his mouth to be the foods he would incline to; his appetite always at display for everyone around, suggesting that was one of the senses he had most developed, which was completely true, but he had no complete idea of how much developed his taste was until that point. He had no idea another person’s taste could make him so willing to get deeper, so that when Alisa’s tongue tried to open his mouth wider, his natural propensity for the sense of tasting allowed her with no resistance, and after just a short while, with perfect cooperation. Hands went up to her face, and he cupped her to learn himself how to explore her flavor better too.

She tasted like miso mint and fireworks. He was in pure delight.

“Alisa San…”

She covered his mouth with her hand, just to transform that motion into a sophisticated caresse, then into her way to touch possessively his face as they recommenced kissing: she could not believe he had never had one, because his way to kiss her was too appreciative and too curious and so teasing that her knees couldn't keep her in secure standing.

“Kageyama kun…” she softly said grabbing the collar of his yukata, and sliding down to let him follow her, knees on the ground, grass scratching their naked calves, and sides mercilessly opening to expose skin which shouldn't get exposed.

The heat promanating from their bodies was unmistakable and Alisa was feeling triumphantly drunk by her own sense of accomplishment now that she had him almost fallen on her, searching again for her face, her eyes, her lips and tongue, so aroused she could sense the extremities of his yukata tent up, and that was giving her a towering sensation of domination. But as she attempted to make their bodies friction in a more pleasant kind of way, Kageyama detached abruptly, emptying a space between them like Alisa would have never guessed any would try.

“Alisa San… what are you doing?”

She tried to act cool, but she had felt his jerking away like a punch in her stomach:

“Kissing you?”

Kageyama didn’t buy it. His face stopped to be warm and reddened by arousal and desire. Alisa would have done anything to stop that demotion, but she hadn't enough experience of Kageyama's finely tuned self awareness to realize that was impossible at that point, and that the magic was gone:

“That wasn't kissing you were trying to get…”

“Well, then that wasn't a no what your body was telling me mmh?..”

“Please Alisa San… don't ever do this again…”

“You didn't like it? Because it sure seemed you did…”
“Nothing of this means anything to me if I lose volleyball for it.”

Alisa didn't understand what he meant; Kageyama then, wiping all of his previous needy expression away from his face and composure, coldly explained:

“They could maybe overlook us kissing during the Obon, despite the fact we are outdoors. But what was the other thing you were doing, or start to try to do… that could not be ignored by people passing by. And what if some policeman would see us? I am a minor. I would be tracked down and get kicked out of school. And that would mean no volley ever anymore…”

“Sorry… but… aren't you exaggerating a bit?” She wanted to calm him down but to no avail. His face was angered even more because she seemed to not agree with his fears.

“I am not! This is only a game for you, and I admit I got carried along because…”

“Because you liked it. You liked me… and… us…”

His face remained hard. She couldn't get through anymore.

“Which naive teen would have been able to resist you, Haiba San?”

Back to the surname then. That was the harshest way he sounded, too. She would have liked to scream and throw back at him her dissatisfaction too, but maybe just in hope all that energy would shape back into a furiously satisfying kiss again. To break into his heart again. To have him back at her, eager to lean into her like they were just so a little before…

“I don't chase down teens, you know…”

Kageyama, still upset and scared, could not forget his manners in front of her, exposing herself so openly then, so he backed his tone with a more respectful intention and apologized:

“Sorry… I didn't mean to sound offensive… I am never good with words…”

Alisa looked at him with watery eyes. He found her eyes so extraordinary he could not deny them. To see them getting wet for something he had said wounded his pride and his fortitude. But still, he didn't back down:

“Alisa San please… let's leave here. Let's go where we are expected, and forget this…”

She took the hand he was offering her to stand up:

“You are cruel. And I could never forget this. I could never… willingly forget any of this!”

“Well I will. I am sorry again for being the way I am but… all this is not… for me. I don't want this to be my world. My world is what you know: a ball, a net, a court. This is me. Tonight… tonight must be just a parenthesis, a… momentary lapse of reason.”

And in his mind it would have been. That would have been the night when the loner sporty Tobio had been someone else for a while. And nothing more. He tried to lead them both on the main trail, to reach the place where they would reconnect with Karasuno and Nekoma people.

“But didn't you feel anything of what I felt?”

She was then silently weeping. Kageyama gulped. But he didn't break.
“What I felt… was not nearly enough to make me forget that volley is my one and only passion. My
sole priority. So please Alisa San: never do this to me anymore. Please. Let me leave now. I can't
stand that I have made you cry. You… you are… too good to be crying over this. And your eyes,
your beautiful eyes are not made for tears.”

Alisa's heart couldn't take his last sentence. She turned her head to not let him see how the tears
would be pouring from then onwards, and when he tried to approach her to check on her and
comfort her, she distanced him, praying him to leave her alone already, without making her even
more embarrassed than she already were.

“Kageyama kun… go now reaching your team. They're certainly out looking for you by now… I’ll
be… fine. I am fine I promise… I'll also get back home now, so that I can sleep over this and my
stupidity for the better… please go… and please…” she turned back to him, to smile her lovely smile
once more at him, so that he could remember it about her, and not her tears “… forgive me for this. I
never meant to cause you trouble…”

Kageyama nodded. His face was serious and concerned, but it was not harsh nor defensive anymore,
and she rejoiced intimately for that: “I know. I am sorry it had to be ending like this. But I am happy
that my first kiss has been a kiss from you. Goodnight Alisa San. Goodbye… Alisa San.”

And just like that, he turned away and disappeared into the never ending fuss of the Obon, avoiding
the bushes from which they had come and moving down from a small trail into the woods.

Alisa immediately after he went away fell back on the grass and choked. Keeping her face into her
hands, she cried like she hadn't in years. Not even when her first cat died she had felt so shattered
inside. Her back was hopping like a tremor had possessed her, and with the noises of the Obon
reaching their apex, the startlingly unfair contrast between her state and the loud happy chaos all
around her was keeping her insides wrapped tightly and bleeding pain.

Alisa was trying to find a reason to detest Kageyama.
Because of his denial. Because of the apparent ease he left her with. Because of the way his eyes had
gone back to be as cold and distant as the dark sky in a moonless night, just when a second before
they were burning with want… with want of her and a request for new things to try, just because of a
single, innocent - okay, maybe not so innocent - touch she had tried to give him.

But for how much her skin was burning with a melange of rage and shame, she couldn't forget any
that she had felt in those minutes when they had been in it together and really into it. The way she
could feel his lips on her, or his curious tongue intertwining with hers, licking and leaving her
breathless for the surprise of not having to guide him there, or how, at all. He had been the most
intravenously addicting pleasure she had ever had while kissing. and damn, those had been his
flicking first ever kisses… oh, boy… what he could be like after some well rounded practice?

She was keeping feeling his hands on her face, on the back of her head… into her hair strands,
cupping her and keeping her in the best place for getting more, and more, and more. Feeling his arm
pushing her and the other sustaining her back as they were falling into the grass… no she couldn't
detest any of that, no matter if she tried.

She had been in a blissful state that night. It had been so much more than she had hoped for.
He had been so much more than she had dreamed of.

Had he been different from usual…maybe then she could have hated that then, if his denial would
have been a strict departure from what she knew of him; but that was still very Kageyama indeed.

All of his actions that night had been him in a nutshell: instinctive, ruling, bluntly honest and sincere,
and always devoted first and foremost to his only passion. That night, just like any other time, that
incredible kid (because damn she had fallen for a kid, yeah she had! ) had just been himself. Same as
ever, in a new emotional environment but undoubtedly always the same type of guy at the end.

She had the feeling it would have been easier to take the place of his one and only passion as long as their bodies would connect… she thought she would have had the King’s roaring heart in the palm of her hand then, making her feel like a goddess for having turned his whole world upside down, and made him surrender to her under the pressure of teenage lust and experimental games… but there she was, instead: landed, stranded, hardly recollected and with an aching, aggravatingly aching heart.

Lost into him. Lost due to him. He seemed like the most beautiful starry night looking her into her eyes… and his skin with no blemishes or defects, as soft as a peach under her fingers, pressed onto her cheeks. The memory sent physical reminders that she had badly fallen for him, his eyes, his face, lips, voice and all that was him. Her body was remembering all the points it had touched his, and shivering still like molted lava would run and solidify and then crack to run hotter and hotter again. Alisa stroke her own arms to stop those shivers. But she couldn't stop her overflowing emotions. Her blood was all a running fire and her body a lighted pyre.

“Shit. I am hopelessly in love with him. Oh, God… what can I do?”

Because it was clear he would have never allowed her in his personal space anymore. She had done the only thing to him he could never accept. She had put in danger his chances at Volley. With her irresponsible behavior she had risked they would be caught, identified by police, and put into custody. Japan laws were not kidding regarding inappropriate outdoor conducting and definitely they were never condoning sexually compromised underage interactions. She would have been responsible for assaulting a minor but he could have also been expelled from school for being a male offender of her. And that would have been the end of his volley career for sure.

“What have I done? How can I make us go back?”

She would have liked, for the sake of her own dignity, to intend going back to the time when she would be a good role model for Kageyama. But what she actually meant with it, what all of herself really wanted to achieve was for it to put her back in his arms, connecting like a man and a woman do, and never see the end of it.

Dammit.

Chapter End Notes

**Yagura**: traditionally set up dancing stages prepped during Obon festivities. They are higher than the ground and they are the usual set up for taiko drumming performances which accompany the dances closing the festivities

**The first Anglo-Japanese Alliance (日英同盟 Nichi-Ei Dōmei)** was signed in London at Lansdowne House, on 30 January 1902, by Lord Lansdowne (British foreign secretary) and Hayashi Tadasu (Japanese minister in London). A diplomatic milestone that saw an end to Britain's splendid isolation, the alliance was renewed and expanded in scope twice, in 1905 and 1911, before its demise in 1921. It was officially terminated in 1923. It was mostly directed against Russia expansion and it established a number of Europeans living in Japan. During that time, it was common for military elites of Japan to have concubines from foreign lands residing in their territory, but it was vigorously discouraged to legalize those unions or the newborns from those. Mixed
Marriages in Meiji times were considered a wound to the Nation.

**Mutations of secondary characters** Nature shuffles our genes. The mutation of brown eyes to blue represents neither a positive nor a negative mutation. It is one of several mutations such as hair colour, baldness, freckles and beauty spots, which neither increases nor reduces a human's chance of survival. Mutations of secondary characters such as eye color simply shows that nature is constantly shuffling the human genome, creating a genetic cocktail of human chromosomes and trying out different changes as it does so. The eterochromatic irises are also a rare phenomenon which is often a mutation itself.

**NOTE** This sentence of Alisa Haiba is directly taken from the Haikyuu manga in which she appears.

**Age of consent and inappropriate behavior in Japan** Japan has a very scattering approach to the concept of age consent (which is technically ONLY 13) and the rules which define what is considered age appropriate and law abiding sexual conduct (especially outdoor). Japan statutory rape law is violated when an individual has consensual sexual contact with a person under age 13. At 13, Japan's base age of consent is the lowest of any developed country. However, many prefectures also have local "corruption of minors" or "obscenity statutes" (淫行条例) which raise the de-facto age of consent to 16-18, unless they are in a "sincere romantic relationship", **usually determined by parental consent.** For example, the effective age of consent in Tokyo by local statute is 18. The age of marriage is 16 for girls and 18 for boys with parental permission, and 20 otherwise (as stated in "ナス途「竜歩竜竜「ナナナに停?邸", the Child Welfare Act of Japan). Japan does not have a close-in-age exemption. Close in age exemptions, commonly known as "Romeo and Juliet laws" in the United States, are put in place to prevent the prosecution of individuals who engage in consensual sexual activity when both participants are significantly close in age to each other, and one or both partners are below the age of consent. Because there is no close-in-age exemption in Japan, it is possible for two individuals both under the age of 13 who willingly engage in intercourse to both be prosecuted for statutory rape, although this is rare. Similarly, no protections are reserved for sexual relations in which one participant is a 12 year old and the second is a 13 or 14 year old. It is also possible for teenagers who engage in consensual public display of affection outdoor to be prosecuted, and even expelled from schools or colleges, if they are considered villainous or lewd from passerby people. This is the reason for which many teenagers in Japan engage in affectionate exchanges only in their own houses or in the so called "love hotels" which can be having a 16 years old lower limit, allowing people from the range in between 16 and 18 to spend some time indulging in kissing and similarly not fully sexual activities.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The light of the day was slowly fading away. The school’s corridors emptying in blocks, depending on the schedules of the different clubs using the rooms in the main building. At the second floor, offices were still at work, but those as well were starting to get void as the minutes ran further.

“This is very confidential. I understand I made it clear, didn't I?”

“You’ve made yourself perfectly understood Kageyama Sama. Even though, I can't stress this enough, I cannot but hope that this won't be done in the end.”

The taller man deviated a bit his stare at the corner of the desk in front of his comfortable guest seat.

“It's not up to either of us.”

The older one put his Mont Blanc stylograph back on the desk, aside a few papers diligently put together in a neat pile. He took a swift look at the bottom of the paper at the top and sighed almost imperceptibly:

“True. Now if I could only prevent his final decision, unless it's still favorable to us…”

The silence grew, that kind of silence which can make people fear just a second of it added in the mix, so that something has to be done to break it, even when that something rings far from true.

“This school won't be much affected in case of a departure…”

The older man on the other side of the desk flattened onto his puffy directorial chair:
“I respectfully disagree on that. Wholeheartedly.”

A complacent smile surged on the other’s lips:

“But he has said he won't leave in any case before the October qualifier is completed.”

“Always considerate.” This time the sighing was well distinguished.

“He was really serious about it. Hasn't confessed why, but…”

“I guess he would never leave his teammates unless able to leave them at the top again. Or near enough to not feel bad about…”

“About becoming their adversary later.”

Both men nodded to the other, in acceptance of the truth.

“Please, don't add anything more. I can still hope this won't happen at all.”

“You don't believe he can pass Itachiyama Academy entrance exam?”

“Oh, no. I actually do believe he can. Lately his academic scoring has soared amazingly. We were talking right at the start of this month to move him in the advanced class. I was planning to ask him which cram school he was attending…”

“He isn't part of any of those?”

“He isn't? How did he manage to improve this significantly then?”

“My nephew… has more than the one talent everybody accounts him for. It's just that only that talent has the power to make him use his other ones…”

“I see.”

“Anyway, if you are aware Tobio could pass the exam…what are your reasons to hope the transfer won't be made, if I am not too bold asking?”

Karasuno Principal sighed again. He sounded like an old man developing a bad cold.

“A very… naive part of me still hold hopes he will keep choosing us.”

“Who knows. I have never been good in predicting anything he has ever done. We’ll see what comes next. Right now, let me thank you for your cooperation and help. I appreciate it. Very, very much.”

“It's our pleasure. Let's have a call by the end of the week, shall we?”

“Of course. Thank you for your time, see you soon.”

*Hopefully not too soon, Mr. Kageyama. Hopefully not soon at all.*

“Ehi, Kageyama kun… isn't that your uncle down the exiting path?”

Hinata was looking from the windows he was due to be cleaning the shadowed main path leading from the main building to the exit gate of Karasuno High School. September was ending and a lot of foliage was either changing colors or becoming less able to cast shadows on the ground.
The colors of the evening taking place of afternoon was making everything in the school area tinted of a beautiful shade of purple and gold, and the rays over Hinata’s gingerly colored hair made him look like his head was set on fire.

“It can’t be. He must be in Tokyo today. You’re mistaken. And slow. Move those hands dumbass or we’re gonna be late at practice resume!”

They had gotten permission to use the gym after his cleaning activities he had been forced to postpone due to a medical check. To not leave his teammate alone, Kageyama had offered himself to both help him in the cleaning duty and also in the final practice load. Ennoshita had left the extra keys of the gym in his setter’s hand by the start of the afternoon already. Kageyama was eager to finish the cleaning to get back in the gym and he was making no shortage of hints at his middle blocker that he was growing tired of his constant distractions.

Hinata, as usual, couldn’t just accept he was wrong, much less he couldn’t just satisfy Kageyama’s wish to get faster at their mundane occupation:

“Humpf. Every time you come back at me after you’ve got good volley news or practices you have this King Aura going on which I hate…”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh… let me see… the fact that during your last National Team break you never answered my texts at all? Or the fact that you’re back here since a week but you haven’t told me not even one thing about it unless I asked for it?”

Those damn texts. Shit.

“I answered… your texts…”

Hinata jumped off the chair he was using to reach the higher part of the window with his mop and protested:

“Write monosyllabic replies to my texts ain’t answering you know…”

“Whatever…”

“See? Just how I said. You are up on your high horse again now. Am I not as worthy of your proper words like Sakusa San or Ushijima? And look, I can always ask the Grand King about what you all have done, you know… I bet he’s going to tell me more and better than you would about what you’ve done those days…”

“Then… do it. Ask Oikawa San.”

The way Kageyama had cut his answer short wasn’t a novelty, and Hinata thought it were the effect of his hint at Oikawa Tooru being better than him at anything; but the reason the setter was upset had more to do with how he had compared himself to Sakusa.

The reason he was avoiding to detail to his partner what he had done at the National Team practice was that it would have involved the notion that Sakusa had proficiently pressured him in realizing his offer to transfer to his Academy was an unmissable opportunity.

“You can take the last test. It is right at the start of November, the middle of second term. You pass it, and two weeks later we’ll be teammates. You and I. And Komori. We’ll be unstoppable. And after that, even after we go from high school to University it won’t change much because Itachiyama has its own University campus. We can still train together even into your third year, with some appropriate permits, which we’ll easily obtain given we are in the National Team now.”
During the training days, Kageyama had gotten amazing opportunities to train with whom he was considering, faultlessly, the best spiker of Japan. Not the best young spiker of Japan. The best one plainly. They had an incredible chemistry, too, and for the young setter to feel such a playing connection with anybody had been quite the experience. He had been happy playing with Sakusa.

But happiness wasn’t enough to make up his mind on his offer. At first he had tried to convince himself the problem was mostly that to accept the offer he would have had to take a very difficult entrance exam to one of the Nation’s elite Academies. But when he had told his family, the reaction of everyone, particularly his uncle - of course, his uncle - was of full support.

*You can certainly pass that, Tobio!*

And deep within his heart, he felt that was true.

So back on the board. Why he couldn’t feel it was right to accept Itachiyama request? He knew the papers had arrived from the Academy offices to Karasuno’s one. He had also set a possible timetable for taking the exam. He had already registered in his mind all possible dates into his club volley schedule. He had also figured how to handle questions and reactions about his possible leave from all his teammates.

All… but one.

Of course all but the one he was currently with. Hinata simply would have never accepted his departure. He would have never ever forgiven him in case of a transfer.

He had tried to imagine if telling him he would have to move to Tokyo for family matters would have worked better with him. But lying wasn't his style. He would never lie for no one’s sake. He knew if he were to move, it would be only for his deliberate, singular, irrevocable decision.

“Oi… oh… Are you still with us? Planet Earth to Bakageyama [NOTE]… Can you receive me?”

Kageyama heard a buzzing noise after a while. Hinata was looking at him from the floor level. A concerned kind of look.

“Oh… sorry… what were you saying?”

Hinata pouted.

“Look, we’re done!” he said with his arms indicating the cleanliness of the whole series of glass windows in the corridor. The light was now truly fading, but it was stable enough to let anybody appreciate the fact the windows were, in fact, spotless right then. Kageyama felt relieved.

“Great. Then let’s go to the gym. It's already late…”

They ran to the spot. Hinata won, making their gap reduce at plus 6 in favor of Kageyama.

“You will be surpassed by the time of your birthday. It’s a promise!”

The time of his birthday. That time… that time could be never coming he thought. And his head went away again. Hinata didn’t miss it.

“Look Kageyama… are you ok? You keep… blanking out?”

*Shit. He's right. I gotta stop this.*
“I am fine, and you still a dumbass. I am not blanking out… I am just… hungry.”

That was not a lie. Kageyama was always hungry so he had told a truth anyway.

“I can't help that… I am sorry but I finished all I had to eat for today… Do you think you can still help me practice even if you are feeling debilitated?”

“I don’t feel debilitated you giant idiot… I am just hungry. I can still toss for half an hour with no problems…”

“Just half… an hour?”

Kageyama couldn't resist Hinata's request to train more. That was by far the thing he liked most about him. His endless stamina. His never stopping wish to hit his tosses.

“Listen, I have duties. We can't let the gym being open for more than another hour…”

“Good. An entire hour is good then… let's start straight so we don't waste a second?”

And they used the subsequent hour practicing all types of spikes. All types of receives, which Hinata was still imprecise at sometimes. They would have started to try for some serves as well, but the clock on the side of the wall was telling them they had to stop.

Naturally Hinata started to try to convince Kageyama at staying more. But his setter's sense of duty couldn't be bypassed. He was a very serious person, when he was not being an airhead, Hinata thought, giving up an impossible to win fight.

They closed the gym and went into their locker room. As they were about to exit and close that as well, Hinata grabbed the sleeve of the taller guy jersey and asked for his attention.

Kageyama looked at him with a painful stare.

“What more now?”

Hinata blushed.
Kageyama thought he was getting a fever. They had practiced maybe too furiously that hour?

“Oi, dumbass… is everything alright?”

Hinata nodded. But he was seemingly embarrassed and looking like all his energies had flown away. He was not himself. At all.

“Kageyama… I need to tell you… something…”

For an instant, Kageyama panicked. He knew. He was able to see me through. Shit.

“Sure… what is all about?” he asked, faking tranquillity.

Hinata looked at him with his large eyes, a feminine almost kind of eyes, with their eyelashes long and of a color more like his irises than his hair.
His face was bright red just like it instead.
Kageyama had never seen his teammate like that.

“I…”

He couldn’t speak. That really wasn't the usual Hinata.

“You…?”
Hinata gasped all possible air inside his lungs, like he had to try for the apnea world record right there, and squeezing his eyes shut, scrunching his nose, he exclaimed in a rush:

“I am in love!”

Kageyama stunned, while the guy in front of him became completely red, from the top of his head to his calves. All red. It was like standing in front of a human torch.

“Eh?”

“Please don't make this even more difficult… I said that I am in love ok? In love. Okay?”

Kageyama took a seat.

“O-Kay.”

Hinata let a few minutes pass by, and when he felt his body temperature had stabilized he whispered:

“I fell in love with… Hitoka.”

Kageyama hoped to have heard it wrong, though he was sure he did it right:

“You… fell in love with… who?”

Hinata cleared his voice and said more convinced:

“Hitoka. I think I fell in love with her immediately to be honest… but I realized it… only later.”

Kageyama's face went blue. All but figuratively. He was livid.

“Hitoka is with Yamaguchi. You can't be in love with her.”

“But I am. And… thank you for reminding me of the obvious, too. That was just what I needed to hear, you know…”

“Well you sure need to hear about common sense. I repeat that you can't be in love with her. This will destroy all of our balance…”

“I am not planning to step into them. I really don't. I am telling you this… just because I feel it… and I wanted… to tell you at least…”

“Why?”

“You… are so you. Why? Because out of all of the guys… of course I’d be telling you?”

Kageyama didn't understand that was Hinata's way to tell him he considered him his best friend. He didn't need to hear it because deep down he knew it, although, still inexperienced regarding human ways to interact, he could not see how to know something didn't necessarily give the same satisfaction as being told to know something. In Kageyama's mind, the most important thing was the statutory reality of something existing. Words might often be be very unnecessary in his world. He was still completely oblivious to the tenderness of diplomacy and flattery, as most of the times all of the sophisms words could suggest seemed to him ways to disguise and hide the pure truth. Truth couldn't and shouldn't be hidden. Truth must just exist to be followed. So for him, as he knew inside how Hinata considered him his best friend, as similarly all Hinata needed to know, and not to hear, was that the he did reciprocate that feeling, too. He was sure he had to know all of his real feelings towards him. If he did, he didn't need to hear about them, because he had already acknowledged the
fact they just were real. Naturally, Hinata was seeing things in a complete different way.

“Oh… whatever. My mistake. You obviously don't care…”

Kageyama understood enough about sociability in his second high school year to realize at that point he had to reply him something:

“I do. I do a lot in fact.”

“Sure… because you think I may ruin balances in the team… not because you care about how I feel.”

Hinata was right. And he was also wrong.

“It's true that I am worried about that… but the one I worry the most for… it’s you, dumbass! Why did you fall in love, and without even a chance to succeed at that? What's the point? What if your will to play will disappear just because you are distracted by this… kind of thing?”

On Kageyama's face Hinata saw a genuine concern. He did care in fact about him. It made him really happy, to be sure that he cared.

“You can't help when you fall in love? It just… kinda happens?”

“What about your game then?”

“My game? What do you mean… nothing changes about my game?!?”

"If you are to modify or loosen down on your approach to the game I won't ever be playing with you again. And…”

“And what?”

“And if you would change… all that… now… it’d be a waste, because you… you are really getting better at this!”

Hinata opened his eyes the wider he ever had done. Was Kageyama acknowledging him for his skill? A trail of small, pinching little electric blasts went all over his body. The guy only minding those who were valuable… was right there, just then… admitting that he was… getting good enough for his standards? He would have screamed and cried, if he only would properly say it.

"It won't change a thing… it is just a thing I feel… it's not something I can think of when I play… I swear I never do…”

Kageyama was clearly not bemused nor convinced. So Hinata kept going on:

“Trust me this is not and will not affect me when I play… and by the way we are teenagers: aren't we supposed to fall into this sooner or later?”

“It’d be better later. Especially for you, who has still to learn so much: your serves are like a grandma’s…”

Hinata then screamed. Obscenities.

“Sorry if we are not like you, the prodigy who has learnt how to throw missiles by just watching the Grand King’s ones…”
“Don't be stuck up. I am telling you this because I believe you can do well there too.”

Hinata quieted immediately.

“Okay…” he said lowering his sight aside, slightly getting pinkish at the cheeks “but… really… my game won't be affected at all. I promise. I just had to tell you that my heart flutters when I think she is around. But never if playing is involved. Never.”

Kageyama exhaled a deep breathe. All these stupid complications love was bringing up. What a nuisance.

"I don't care about it then. I mean, good for you to feel all of that, even though I don't see the point of it, but truly... It's of no importance to me as long as you still the same on court."

“Won't you support me in my love sickness then? How brutal…”

Kageyama had no idea how to answer that. Love sickness? What the hell was that?

“If you need a hand, I of course am gonna lend one to you… but I have no idea what all of this is so I have neither on how you could be helped by me…”

Hinata laughed lightly and brightly. He was trying. That was something.

“Don't worry. You won’t need to do much. Just… be there. It's not like I ever expected you to be Doctor Love or anything…”

Kageyama wanted to reply something vitriolic but he had no clues on how, so he mumbled sounds and tore his head in furrows like a kid in kindergarten. Hinata smiled, and went back speaking:

"So you plan to never fall in love, or whatever these things are?"

"I only plan volleyball."

“I know this. But… life cannot be fully that?"

Kageyama seemed disgusted by the sentence. And coming from Hinata, out of all people. The same Hinata who would always point out how Volleyball was his passion and reason to wake up each morning; the Hinata who would challenge everyone, earnest willing to beat them; the Hinata who had boldly stated he would have defeated him, the King, one day.

"For me, it is. And I thought you were the same as me. That's why we work despite all odds…"

Hinata could taste his partner’s bitterness and disappointment from the way he had slowly and precisely etched each word out, like they were to be carved in a stonewalled sign.

"I am still the same me. Don't make this I confessed you bigger than it has to be. I still me. I still want to win. I still want to be better than you.”

He didn't add the most important reason he was still the same Hinata. I still want to play with you and win everything together with you.

"I hope so.” Or else…

The last part was just a thought in Kageyama's mind. An heavy one at that.
If I sense you're not, I won't have any real choice to make out of Itachiyama offer... I could only accept it.

But looking at his partner, all intent in finding a way to demonstrate to him his dedication to volleyball and their playing bond wouldn't be weakened by his sympathy for Hitoka, he realized he hadn't yet decide what to make out of that offer because he felt belonging to that playing bond still. He realized his choice was that difficult because he wasn't a loner anymore. His sense of duty... was maybe involving loyalty now? And to which? To... whom? His confusion was making him feel frustrated. These feelings... these feelings were a pain in the ass. Much like his orange burden, right before his eyes still. That little guy, whom he was never able to ignore:

“I have always admired this... in you...”

That came out. Why in such a moment he had the need to tell him that? Stupid Tobio. You are stupid, Tobio.

“You... admire... me?”

Damage was done. He couldn't backtrack so he could as well say it all like it was.

“I admire your seemingly inexhaustible energy. You truly seem able to be full on in more than one thing. I could never. That's why it could only be volley for me.”

Then he added, for adding mockery which would soften his unbound praise he still was cautious to confess:

“But then nobody expects ever more from you, so...”

He would have preferred Hinata to fight him on that, but he went pensive and silent.

“They do about you though. Everybody just always expect more and more from you don't they? Because of the prodigy thing and all... it must be... hard... to do so much and then always have to do more.”

Kageyama shooked edges up. Hinata really was the one getting everything so naturally about him. He felt so glad to have somebody like him in his life. Too bad he was mainly a dumbass but...

“But I don't do what I do to please others. I do it because I know I can... so it becomes my duty to fulfill my destiny. People who are important to me, like my family... they would be happy if I would consider myself done with volley. For them... it's just a game... I don't do this to please anybody but my own will...”

“And... us?”

Kageyama frowned more:

“Us?”

“Yeah, us. Are you getting deaf, Kageyama? Us... as in the team. Us, you know. You get better and... we are also better. So while you do it for yourself you’re still doing it for all of us.”

Kageyama felt a weight on his chest. What Hinata was saying was at once making him happy and desperate. Happy to have found a place in that team. Because he really had found one. But the awareness at that point was also excruciatingly painful. Because after all he was pondering on how
to leave his place there. Those feelings… they were fogging his goals. He needed to clear his view. No matter how.

“It’s late. We gotta go. And about your love sickness… well… count. Count on… me.”

And he offered him his fist to be matched. He was sincerely offering his help, although it was a non-directional one.

“Now let's go for real… or we will sleep here.”

To move away from the locker room, and from the school, would have certainly helped Kageyama to clear his mind. The atmosphere there was still too heavy for him. He needed to be alone in his room to think. Think. Alone. Alone was the only way he could have refocused on his final target. His target was still the same. To be the best. That was it.

The two guys stepped down the stairs and made their way out of the school. They had walked not even ten steps out of the gate, that a familiar voice called their names, in a way they hadn't heard in months. They both turned their heads in synch, and met the shape of a young man waving at them, wearing a beautiful smile, and with his other hand captured from the one of a pretty girl walking by his side.

“Sawamura senpai!”

The guy put his arm down, waiting for an easy to guess approach from his underclassmen.

“Hinata! Kageyama! Longtime no see!”

The two younger guys jumped forward to step into their former and beloved captain personal space. Michimiya who was walking with him could only step aside before the two - Hinata, mostly - had risked to sweep her away. She was wearing a proud face, and her eyes were catching the scene like it was a thing of beauty. Her boyfriend was so happy to be reunited with those two.

“Wow, Kageyama… you’ve grown quite a lot these months?”

Kageyama blushed. Hinata by his side was the depiction of scornful and resentful. He had barely grown a quarter of an inch himself. Sawamura reckoned the feeling, and quickly, and wisely, added:

“Hinata, you seem to be more energetic and faster than ever! I thought you were literally flying to me!”

Hinata's face brightened like the Sun. Sawamura was still an amazing captain even as a retired one. The master of minds and moods. He would always understand them before themselves, and following their inclinations he would never make anybody feel left behind.

“Sawamura senpai… what brought you here? Isn't late to visit the school now?”

Daichi blushed. Michimiya followed through.

“Well… we weren't planning… meetings…”

Both youngsters wore their clueless faces.

“We were… celebrating… our anniversary.”
“You… were on a date… here?” Asked Hinata, always faster at talking than thinking.

“Yes. We started dating when you guys won against Nekoma… at the nationals. That weekend… Daichi kun came back here… to sign some papers for his college interviews and…”

“… and you were there too. And…”

Hinata couldn’t await and completed their missing speech parts:

“And you met and confessed and… kissed?”

Sawamura and Michimiya reddened majestically bright, and Kageyama knocked a fist onto Hinata’s head with a sizable might:

“You idiot! Is this how you talk to our captain? Apologize, dumbass!”

Hinata did it. His enthusiasm in discovering his former guide was happily in love had resonance with his own condition and he couldn’t fake his emotions.

“No need to apologize Hinata… Kageyama let him go… we’re fine…”

Kageyama left his grab from the other’s head and both listened to Daichi Sawamura recall of that day, and how each month they would find a way to take a walk around the school, around the hour they had their first kiss. It wasn’t easy given their commitments and the fact beside studying at college they both had part-time jobs to take care of but they had made it so far.

“We had to choose between working and playing volley in college but in the end we… chose life!”

Said Michimiya while partying ways with the high school guys, arm in arm with Sawamura.

“But we follow your activities of course. So for whatever need you may have… my number still the same, right guys?”

“Osu, Sawamura senpai!”

Replied Hinata. Kageyama nodded along.

A few minutes of walk more, and the two teammates also were to part ways to head at their respective homes.

“Ehi, Kageyama… don’t you think it’s beautiful that our captain is so happy?”

The other frowned.

“Well… yeah… great for him if he is… but it’s a waste he stopped playing. He truly was good.”

Good people renouncing so easily… I can’t see why he couldn’t go on a little more…

Hinata agreed, but he also said they were no one to question his decisions.

“People are different. We look after different things. We all live different lives. In the end, as long as he’s happy, it means he found what his life is all about, don’t you think?”

Do I?

“Mmh. Whatever. See you tomorrow, Hinata. And… be careful on that bike. It’s dark already…”
“Don't worry. I learnt my lesson well that time. See you tomorrow too, Kageyama kun.”

On his last walk home, Kageyama was relentless. More people involved sentimentally whom he would have never thought he would see. People good at volley deciding to quit it - such a blasphemy in his eyes! - to pursue life. Life.

What the hell.
Volley was life.
What one could need more?
He didn't need anything more.
He didn't.
Screw you, life and the mess you are.
All these improvised complications were only good to increase his confusion more. He didn't need that. He needed detachment. To analyze his own way he needed to get back to what mattered most.

*How can I win?*
How can I make all this chaos around stop to bugger me?
How can I kill this ball? [NOTE]

Circumstances could change.
People around could switch.
But in the end only one thing mattered to him.

*What I need to improve so that I can be the best and play the most?*

On his bed, he started to toss the National Team ball Oikawa had let him keep indefinitely. He didn't want it back when at the National Teams gathering he had brought it back to him - though he supposed that was mostly to piss off Miya Atsumu who had gone green at their talking about it - and he was glad his senpai hadn't. He was able to think very straightforwardly whenever tossing it.

*What do I need?*
To be with the best people… or to be… with the best players?

That.
That was it.
He had been able to give his indecision a canon, finally.
And now that his specific dice was spinning, it was up to him to make it stop.

*How can I kill this ball?*

Chapter End Notes

**Transferring from school to school in Japan** Japan scholastic year is generally divided in three branches for High School duties, with year starting with April/May/June/July, main holidays held in August, the second term starting in September/October/November/December and the final term, the third, being reduced in January/February/March, when the year ends. To transfer during the academic year is a procedure to be decided depending on both the exiting and the entering school. It is always requested an exam to be accepted in another school and these exams are generally very difficult because to be accepted while the year is in effect students have
to demonstrate the academic ability of a CONCLUDED grade of studies, which is as saying to enter a second year school, you have to take the exam as the second year would be actually completed. For a High School student to be accepted in any school it is necessary parental permission and a defined domiciliary address in the school area. Tutors may be also required to guarantee for the student incoming.

**Gakushū juku (Japanese: 学習塾; see cram school)** are special private schools (primarily in Japan) that offer lessons conducted after regular school hours, on weekends, and during school vacations. Cram schools are specialized schools that train their students to meet particular goals such as achieving good marks or passing the entrance examinations of high schools or universities. Many Japanese students feel relentless pressure to get ahead of the Juken-sensou 受験戦争じゅけんせんそう, also known as the "entrance examination war," so many kids attend a full day at school and then a few additional hours of cram school in the evening before doing a couple more hours of study at home so they can get to bed right around midnight.

**NOTE(s)** All the part noted in this chapter are directly taken from Furudate Manga and Anime publishing. Title included. They are all words actually spoken by the characters in efficacious context.
Senpais And Kouhais

Chapter Summary

The freedom train is coming
Can't you hear that whistle blowing?
It's time to get your ticket y'all and get on board
It's time for all the people to take this freedom ride
Got to together and work for freedom side by side
That's why I tell ya
I'm gonna ride on the freedom train
I ain't gonna live this way again
I got to get on the freedom train
From this day on
I'll be a free man, yes I will, I'll be a free man now
Look like the times are changing, people
The train is waiting in the station
Go on up to the mountain top and get on board
We gonna ride on through the valley
Under the clear blue sky
Every man is gonna walk right proud with his head up high

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of the departing convoy was mostly a whispering roller in the wagon A3 of the kaisoku.
To stay standing as the train was to leave a thing Japanese used to forget foreigners for, but only because they never expected foreigners to have the required fair manners anyway.
Then to stay standing and silent and unapproachable was something bordering offense for any kind of traveling passenger, no matter where they came from.

“Tobio chan, you're in the way… please sit down before you embarrass yourself…”

Kageyama did as he had been advised to. With small gestures he accommodated himself on his dedicated seat, careful to avoid touching with any part or prop of himself the person on the one aside his. He regretted to have not taken anything to occupy himself with during the ride, and for a little while he regretted even to have left home - unheard - the MP3 player Tsukishima had given him with a couple of playlists in he thought would have been useful for his running routines. He knew, as Oikawa seemed similarly devoid of books or magazines or earbuds in his ears, it would have taken little for his former senpai to try to speak to him.
He didn't know if he had energies enough for an hour of Oikawa's exclusive chatters.
Not that he had ever been submitted to any that long in his entire life… but he heard through the grapevine they could be intense to bare.

“So where were you, Tobio chan? It’s unusual you travel alone?” Asked the older one, with his hand relaxed on his cheek and the impeccable as ever mane gracefully framing his picture ready face.

The typically outstanding Oikawa Tooru, trying to judge things he had no acknowledgement of.
Kageyama innerly felt at his grumpiest. It’s not like they were that intimate he could monitor his motions, he thought. But he didn't say anything of what he was mumbling inside, because it was still almost a miracle in his eyes to have Oikawa, *that* Oikawa, to initiate a casual conversation with him, and he would have liked to not tarnish it with anything awkward. But the guy aside him was expecting an answer, and not a blank face, which was awkward enough in itself.

“So? Where were you?”

“I had a meeting…” said Kageyama with low voice.

Oikawa raised an eyebrow.

“A meeting… you?”

“Yes. A meeting. I had one.” And his voice raised in tone and increased in volume.

“Okay, okay, don't freak out… I was just curious you know? I just… always imagine you in a gym… To meet you in other places, like parks, or trains… it feels a bit strange. Sorry if I sounded rude ok?”

*Oikawa San spends time… imagining me?*

“You weren't in any gym tho, were you?”

“No.”

And silence returned. Thick like a winter coat. Oikawa didn’t like silence, so he tried to test waters another way. A surefire way, being Kageyama the one to be pushed into talks.

“Well… I was instead. More or less, I mean…”

The change in the whole demeanor of the other switched from night to day. Kageyama turned in his seat to offer the older setter not only his face but his open body stance. He was visibly engaged in the topic and his voice was troubled enough to sound shaky:

“You… were playing? Today? Where? And… with whom?”

Oikawa smirked. But his was not a malicious grin. He had just done it mindlessly complimenting himself for finding a breach into Kageyama's impassive bore. Not that he had many options at that. Just one would have always produced the required effect.

“You never change do you? But I did not play. I just had a meeting… yes, myself as well, stop looking at me like I am talking in Arabic or something. They invited me at a training camp. I was surprised before hearing I had been sponsored by my very proactive new ace partner…”

Kageyama irises widened enormously and his mouth opened by itself in a very natural and cute way. He looked like a kid receiving an unexpected late birthday present.

“Oh… my… did Ushijima San… do you and Ushijima San…”

The smirk on Oikawa's face now was a little less un-harming and his intentions at speaking generally less chivalrous.

“You're guess is right, Tobio chan: I’ve been called up for the National Team. National as in *Japan National Team*. You can congratulate me now. Take your time…”
He didn't need any. Kageyama was the portrait of surprise, but his surprise had only shades and undertones of happiness. That was clear and it was a shock for Oikawa to understand immediately those were the emotions he was feeling. First, because he thought Tobio could not even move the muscles in his face to bend it at a show of joyful kind, no matter if he had already experienced even fully displayed smiles by him; and secondary to that, he would have not imagined out of such a news, his only emotional reaction would have been joy.

“This is… awesome, Oikawa San! Congratulations!”

His straightforward enthusiasm forced Oikawa to stop smiling like an entitled idiot.

“Well… thank you? I was very shocked myself when I got told, I won't lie. If you think of it, I have no experiences at school volleyball out of Miyagi and I never thought they even had notion of my existence at all. But apparently they had, and they asked Ushiwaka chan what could be done if he and I were to play together. He said that we are teammates now and that he had no doubt we would rule college league this year, so in his opinion to call me for Japan Under 21 Team would have only been smart…”

Kageyama eyes were flicking with expectations and he voiced to be sure they would have in fact made a terrific pair on court. Oikawa chuckled at such praise from his kouhai. Then added that his and Ushijima’s National Team Selection would have trained with the younger one.

“I know.” Said Kageyama. And the light in his eyes was then flashing like a continuum of bolts.

“You do?”

A faintly fast pause. A breath taken in.

“Yes. Because I am gonna be in that younger selection.”

Oikawa stunned. Time began to stretch in his mind, like he was floating in his own brain. 

*He’s. Gonna. Be. There."

Too.

He’s gonna be there too…

What was he feeling then? Was he being able to be just happy for his kouhai and his incredible achievement just like the other one had just a minute earlier regarding his own?

Watching his face, his eyes burning under those dark bangs, burning like blue fires, with no trace of danger but a brilliance of competitive thirst, he felt like he was not *as happy* as Kageyama had been for him. But he felt also that he was still *kind of it.*

“Great. Then get ready to be crushed.”

And he faced him with eyes of his chocolate color sprinkled by lights themselves.

Kageyama couldn't even answer. He just half smiled while nodding and that did not mean he would have been fine in being crushed of course. It just meant he couldn't wait to live the day where they would share again a gym. It was happening, finally. The promise they had made in their own way, to face again one another… maybe to play again *with* one another…

It was reality now.

He didn't have to wait to be in college to get another chance, another sip from the cup of that rivalry which was so dear to him.

It would have happened soon.

So soon.

To switch from the weight of such a perspective, which was similarly fulfilling also his mind, Oikawa thought that trying for humor would have shed some pressure away. Humor always works.
If he didn't like silence, he liked even less complicated to explain silences.

“All considered, maybe your meeting was more interesting though… was it a date? Because definitely you can't have business like meetings can you?”

Kageyama went back from intensity burning the chiseled traits of his face to oblivion in a light speed span.
Humor works often then.
Not always.

“Date? I don't date… I thought I made it clear enough last time?”

*Oh yeah… last time. That girl confession thing. I wonder if…*

“Oh yeah! That girl you had to gently reject… Did you speak with her after our talk?”

“I did. We met last week. It was… an interesting day.”

*Sure it had to be. I wonder how you look when out on dates, Tobio. I could bet your attire still sporty clothes…*

“For being a kid with less sociability than the cactus in my grandmother’s garden, you sure travel and are subjected to a lot of *meetings* these days, aren't you Tobio chan?”

The other grunted.

“I may be not good with people. But I am trying my best. You shouldn't make fun of my efforts.”

He surely had grown, Oikawa thought of his once completely asocial underclassman. He could have been even popular if he had just tried to. He wasn't unattractive and he was good in sports. Very good. Well, he could do his thing. At least. But he didn't see any of the opportunities many if not every guy his age would have killed for as chances. He was seeing all those opportunities as dangerous traps. What a waste.

“No other confessions, out of those *efforts*?”

“Hopefully not. They are the worst. And I am not good at managing these stuff anyway so I hope to never have to deal with these things again until I graduate…”

His speech was cut by Oikawa laughing by his side. He was properly keeping his belly into his arms, and crying from laughter. Kageyama felt abused. But he didn't mind. It was expected from Oikawa. It was not very *abusive* after all. It was more like… a *friendly* teasing? Was this the way he used to behave with his Seijou’s people? Was this the kind of senpai he could have had if he had been there too?

“You are really the worst… poor Karasuno's girls if all they have left to play romance with is Chibi Chan…”

“I am fine in being the worst as long as I am the best on court.”

He was serious. And Oikawa stopped laughing. He hadn't even considered the provocation of his mentioning of Hinata. Truly humor wasn't Kageyama's forte. But he was definitely trying to be better with people. Alternate in results, probably: but he was trying.

“Anyway, Tobio chan… I think you’ve gotten better with your… talking skills.”
Kageyama checked near on his old senpai's face for hints of mockery. Finding none, he tilted his head inquisitive and the other replied he had noticed he was more open at speaking his mind.

“You get better each time we meet. I am sincere… you do. Even our first proper talk after my graduation… even that was good. And it hadn't been an easy day for you so…”

Their first meeting after they had discovered Kageyama's uncle identity had been after Karasuno had failed the Nationals back-to-back qualify. That day they had met at the house Kageyama's uncle owned in Sendai. The younger guy had chosen to sleep there to make his disappointment at his team results fade out, and Oikawa had come with his parents to dig deeper about the mentor ship the elder Kageyama had offered for his University classes in Tokyo. That evening, after dinner, they had gotten minutes to spend talking before Oikawa had to leave alongside his parents back to his home.

"You did extremely well against us. Kindaichi and Kyouken-chan did their best but couldn't overcome you. You are a bunch of brats, seriously: can you guys stop to being the bane of my school existence please? First Shiratorizawa, now we get you stopping us every time. It's unfair."

“We did well, but we lost to Date Tech…”

“Losses sometimes count as victories. For instance I know for sure our loss against you this time will help for our incoming victory next one. And I repeat: we did well… but it wasn't enough to pass through you, in particular.”

“Yeah… Seijou played very well. In fact you strained us until we lost Noyassan and that ruined us for the final match.”

“Are you purposely ignoring I kind of complimented you? Oh, whatever! But yeah... your libero and his sprained ankle… of course that cursed you in the final! No team can survive without its best defense. But I saw your last game. It was also a good one.”

“Not enough. Damn…I hate to lose. Sometimes I still feel the rage surging when I think of certain losses. I know soon or later everybody does lose... but I still hate it.”

“Gotcha. Anyway... what was your impression of us? Be honest please…”

“I am always honest?”

“Yeah... even too much sometimes…”

'I thought the team played well. You have great players still... but...Without you Kunimi wasn't the same.”

'He did well.’

'Not as he used to with you. He did better than he used along me tho.”

“Easy peasy, Tobio chan. That would be obvious. No one compares to the Great Oikawa Tooru!”

“Mmh.”

“You really are obnoxious... light up a bit? And Kunimi wasn't an easy task for me either, you know. When you were his setter it had to be worse... Maybe because back then none of you two felt like you were equal parts of the same team... don't you think?”
Kageyama flushed his memory of that conversation away, eager to ask Oikawa if he thought there was a main thing inspiring him in his style of play, and also willing to stop reminding himself about how his middle school teammates couldn't stand him:

“Oikawa San… now that I’ll be able to see your plays again… can you tell me what keeps pushing you going? I have always tried to name what makes you like playing the way you do…”

Oikawa closed his eyes for a while, as he was searching for meaning and needed no distractions to properly answer. He quickly marveled a bit he were actually about to give such an answer to the menace sitting aside, but he felt he wanted to tell him.

He wanted to speak his mind better with him as well, after years of hide and seek with the guy.

“Diversity. That enraptures me, Tobio chan. I long to decode diversity. Dig in it... study it. This makes all of my strategy plays I guess. Like an alchemist on a court, or a chef, I want to see how people and their skill combine to obtain the ultimate result.”

_To use all differences. So this is what makes him so strong?_

“Instead you only approach what you feel some connection with, and what you are confident to know, which is a little portion of what's possible... this will limit you, Tobio chan.”

But while he was saying his kouhai those words, he knew deep within himself it wasn't that true anymore. And that maybe it hadn't fully been true ever: the scarce discoveries his over talented rival had secured till then had more to do with his tendency to not give a chance to people for they wouldn't give any to him, than real lack of interest in differences on his part.

“I am trying to be more open minded about that. But now… if you don’t mind me asking…” he had turned his body ahead of himself and only his face was being kept in Oikawa's direction. He was shielding himself defensively. That question sure had to be of importance to him: “if you are so fond of diversities why you never got curious about me? I know we spent truly a very limited time playing together, and you were leagues ahead of me… but why you never got curious about me?”

The older guy felt his body thundered out by a tremor. That question. The question. He had been able to formulate it. He had been able to ask him. The Pandora’s Box was about to spread all its demons away. But that was maybe a good thing that could have happened. To the both of them.

“Curious about you? Oh, believe me… I have been! But the point was that… Well... you are not different. You are BETTER. That is a nuisance. It was back then. It still is now. And so I was curious about you… but then I learnt how to part curiosity from rashness.”

Kageyama took his time to reply. He had a sudden reply to offer, but he tried to count to ten to calm himself down before splurging it out. Sugawara had trained him well with that countering tactic. His eyes were back being a sparkling deep blue lake, fixing back a disconcerted Oikawa who had gone way ahead with his honest reply than he had originally planned to.

“But I am no... better? Not better than you. No way.”

Oikawa tried not to chuckle. He did try, but failed miserably so that the whole wagon went directing eyes on them. Normally Oikawa would have felt embarrassed but he did not. The most embarrassing thing for him had already happened and that had been seconds before when he had worn his heart up his sleeve and made Kageyama aware he had always been scared by him. He just lowered a bit his chuckling and from that Kageyama understood he was at ease with the whole conversation they were having. No malice. No pain. No blame.
“Nah you're right. I am a better player than you. You're just way luckier than I am in the topic moments of the most important games, aren't you…”

He was keeping suppressing small chuckles, aware that the total lack of humor in Kageyama would have not let him decode his irony in affirming that. And the younger setter did not realize Oikawa was actually trying to cope with the fact the best player of his generation was still thinking somebody like himself was better than him. Oikawa wanted to get back feeling anger about this… but he had passed that phase of his life. He was free to be himself even with the guy he used to fear most, and not feeling diminished or weakened by that freedom of acting like it pleased him best.

He wasn't able anymore to feel bad about Kageyama's way too massive, way too unfair talent, or the fact that his kouhai was too much of a simpleton to understand irony and sarcasm to points where he could look like an idiot, which he wasn't after all. Pacific in his former senpai's tranquillity, Kageyama went on speaking some more, because he had no idea of course of anything Oikawa was thinking in that revealing moment:

“Do you know when I did realize I needed a team, Oikawa san?”

“When?”

“Before our last game at the Interhigh… I went spying on you.”

Oikawa marveled. About the event, and the fact his kouhai was able to so casually talk about it. Kageyama was feeling free too along him. Maybe he always had. He always had been more talented than him in that, too.

“I was sure that you had gotten even better since the time you had beaten us the first, because… well, because that's just who you are, isn't it? So I went to Seijou in incognito… or something. I tried to disguise myself but that was an epic fail so I just went out of the gym where you guys were training, dressed in my sporty clothes.”

The memories were leaving traces on his face, a mellowing kind of them, and his eyes were becoming a warmer shade of deep blue, like to confess the fact to Oikawa was a pleasure someway. And it was, because by telling him, Kageyama was reviving the scene, picturing again what he did saw back then.

“You were surrounded by players from college I think, and I got amazed, so amazed by the way you could fit in and guide them in minutes, even though it was clear you had never seen them before…”

Oikawa mumbled a fond and rather surprised speech of his own:

“You are one of a kind, truly… can't you avoid to be this uselessly sincere? Do you want to make me even more egocentric than I am or what?”

Kageyama faced him with no change in his look:

“Why should I lie? This is what I thought, that you were astonishingly amazing. So I went back to my school and told Hinata that I could never in a million years get there were you were then…”

Oikawa was then grooving in his couch. Such an admiration, which he didn't deserve, from somebody so monstrous in talent he was ready to annihilate the competition in no time, but who couldn't stop looking up to him nonetheless:

“Well, doesn't look like you gave up, did you? You beat us so…”
“But not by myself. In fact I told Hinata after realizing it that even if I couldn't beat you… we could have beaten Seijou still. As a team. There I realized I needed one. You made me realize it.”

“Great! So it's my fault you found the key to pester us and win? Because you did... you obnoxious brat. I still sulky about it, just so you know…”

But there was no sign Oikawa was holding real grudges against Kageyama about that fact. Sport is a ladder to climb. Sometime you just have to stop and take a breath and look around, before you can step up again.

“Anyway, Oikawa San: I am still trying to prove myself on your path. I am trying to do my best in interacting with people. To understand them. A bit. I am even trying to help our rookie setter, and I think I am doing a fairly decent job being me… me, I mean.”

So he was a senpai himself now, and the imagine of him tutoring a starry eyed youngster caused Oikawa's insides to churn and melt. He was speaking of being a good senpai, or trying to be one, with him, who had been a terrible one in his own regard, like instead he had kept fond memories of his role to him.

His own kouhai, now a proud senpai trying his best, asking for a blessing?

“Even though you can't teach him how to be a genius like you, I am sure you are doing a good job with him. So I have heard at least... But ehi, Karasuno would be lost without you, right? Because no one could ever substitute you, the prodigy…”

Kageyama tensed. Would that be? Would that… be? Because… at the July camp… Sakusa… his idea… would that be so traumatic if he'd leave Karasuno?

“You still a better setter than me and you say you are not a genius so... I don't think Karasuno would crumble without me.”

If that was a hope he nurtured more than a conviction, Kageyama wouldn't have been able to decipher.

“It amazes me that you consider the fact we call you genius a sort of bad prank... it still pisses me somehow to realize you think it’s not a wonderful thing to be one…”

Kageyama would have liked to talk with him about the newly found flow thing which Sugawara had taught that very day. He would have liked to explain to him that he was not a genius... well, maybe somehow he was that too, but that in fact what he had was just a special power, a quirk, a trait... different from others, yes, but not partying him from others that much after all. His talent was more like having his blue eyes in a country where everybody's were just a different shade of maroon, rather than have... let’s say... four eyes?

But he didn't go there, because out of all the rest of the world, the only one who wouldn't make him angry at calling him genius was exactly his old senpai. He wanted to consider him a prodigy? Was he somehow pining for that thing off of him? Then so be it.

He was unwilling to strap that golden curtain Oikawa had wrapped him in out and reveal himself as another semi-valuable teenager in a mass of many others admiring his skills and durability and audacity on court. Whatever it was of the concept of being a genius that was fascinating to Oikawa, even when aggressively so, that was too precious for Kageyama to scissor it away.

“Sometimes people exaggerate this genius thing. Maybe I just get very happy when I play, so much that I concentrate for it a different degree…”
Oikawa nodded. Leniently. And calling out for Tobio to look at him, he said:

“I know. Iwa chan came to me one day, when we all were at Kitagawa, telling me there was this kid in the first year class who was the picture of happiness while touching the ball. He never described you only as a genius, or a prodigy, although you are and were clearly back then also one. He would mention that, he would… but he would always add ‘and most of all, he is the happiest whenever he would touch the ball’ [NOTE]. Every time he has spoken about you…”

“He could see the most important… better… the only important thing there.”

Oikawa nodded. He was the proudest when speaking of his best friend Iwaizumi.

“Iwa chan has always been super perceptive…”

“That's why he could always stand by you…”

There was a shade of jealousy mixed with admiration… was it that what Oikawa thought he was perceiving?

“I’d say more the reversal. Thanx to his depth, my shallowness could be grounded enough to let me as a whole to never disappear away from him.”

“I see.”

What was that face? Oikawa was feeling a different kind of vibe from the guy sitting aside him. He seemed so pensive. And he was looking breathtakingly beautiful while doing so.

“You're lucky, Oikawa San. For there is someone who knows you this well, and likes you this much. And who… makes you feel good. Even now that he is away.”

That wasn't jealousy Kageyama was projecting. It was more a sort of longing for something he was now able to theorize, but which he clearly never had experienced. Oikawa felt a weight onto his chest. And when he realized it, he jumped a bit in his seat, and then, as to shake that weight and that pressure and that little heat expanding in himself off, he said:

“But hey, do you know? He won't be far away today! In fact he's on his own train and we will arrive at the station pretty much at the same time…”

He would have added a sentence or two more, but he couldn't because Kageyama's face liquified his resolve at speaking. His kouhai had turned towards him, with an expression he had never shown him - and no one else? -, a face that was tender and soft and empathic and Oikawa faltered because Kageyama and empathy were just oxymoronic. He could feel his heartbeat skipping, and his mind blank and all he could know was existing in that moment was that face in front of him.

“This is beautiful. You truly are lucky, Oikawa San. I may be luckier on court… but you are definitely luckier in life.”

Then he turned away, facing the windowsill and lost in the increasing darkness of the evening which was dumping itself onto the scenery outside, so impromptu far away from Oikawa, and the train couch and everything belonging to their reality that nothing could bring him back. So Oikawa didn't even try to tell him anything more.

“Yes… yes I am…”

That feeble whisper was just for himself to hear; even though he would have liked, just in that
moment, on that train couch, for it to be heard by his far away lone passenger aside, so that he could
turn again towards him and say something out of context, and silly and idiotic and absolutely not
interesting to him. So that he could see again that face... and not feeling strangely guilty and
emotional trying to catch its reflex on a windowsill in the shady colors of the falling Japanese dusk
outside their train.

They were near to their stop, when Kageyama made his earlier way to the exit.

“Why do you move already? Are you sick of me again?”

He shook his head.

“No... but I guess Iwaizumi senpai will be there when you will step off. And it's a while you two
don’t meet is it? I think he will be happy to learn you will be in the National Team. There’s no need
for me to be there while he's greeting you for it... I am sure there are a lot of things you will have to
say to one another then.”

“Yes. There are a lot indeed.”

Kageyama smiled a thin, melancholic smile. He was so kind. He was dumb, and pure and kind and
Oikawa couldn't take it. He was moving away when he felt he had to ask him one last thing, because
the melancholy that smile had suggested was the shade of a past he wanted his kouhai to throw off
himself.

“Tell me, before you go Tobio chan... do you like people?”

Kageyama froze, his face mushy in choosing between looking dense or lost. What kind of question
was that one, out of the blue?

“Do you?”

“I guess... some people... and what does liking mean after all?”

Oikawa sighed and stared at him.

“I do. I like people. I like observing them. I like understanding them. I am good at commanding
them, as you say, because I am interested in them. People follow me because they get this interest of
mine, which comes if not before, at least along any consideration that there may be something about
them which could be useful to me. Before, for me... it always comes this curiosity rather than the
usability. Are you understanding me, Tobio?”

“I think... so... but...”

“But you are still only able to look out for the usability right now, aren't you?”

“I fear so... I still mostly like you say, unfortunately...”

_But I am trying. I swear I am._

Oikawa panted in relief.

“Then let's hope you never learn the other way...”

There was a sparkle in Oikawa eyes, while trying to carelessly moving his hands to afford a
magnanimous kind of invite at Kageyama to ask for more, which would have been enough for a
statue to start moving towards him, and learn talking:
“Why?”

“Because otherwise everybody will be drawn to you and I won't ever still hold not even the tiniest of chances against you.”

Kageyama for a moment stood in the middle of the pathway, like a shell deprived of a soul. Standing still, while the train was starting to stop, and the other passengers would start to move too. Again in the pathway. And nobody would have ever mistaken him for a foreigner, no matter how blue his eyes were. But he was not erasing his conscience from reality, and he had not stopped to perceive the world around; contrary to that he realized that what Oikawa had said to him was a weapon he had just be handed for him to master. A tricky one, but a decisive one. That had made his soul soar above himself. Beyond himself. So that for a while his body had been deprived of it. Harmlessly.

*I have to like people. Do I… like people myself?*

Facing one last time his senpai before stepping down from another wagon, he slightly nodded in acceptance and thankfulness. Oikawa reciprocated. He knew he had been given his greatest rival a code to a new stage of evolution of his game. He wasn't scared anymore though. He wanted to see if he would have been able to crack that code and make it his. He wasn't scared anymore. And for the very first time he felt like a senpai should, a way he never experienced to.

“Show me what will you do now. Tobio chan… show me.”

And with his right hand he traced the outline of his shape moving out of the wagon they had shared so naturally. He had truly been gracious, leaving to leave him and Hajime alone. He had truly been… *adorable.*

Though a true senpai would always think a kouhai of his is adorable, wouldn't he?

Wouldn't he?

“Iwa chan… say… do you think our kouhais are all adorable?” He asked on the way to his house, seating in the car along his childhood friend.

“What's this… uh? Are you drunk?”

“I am serious. Do you think our kouhais are adorable?”

“Listen, if you are on drugs just tell me and I'll beat you until you come down from this high. Because frankly… and I know well how much you can be an idiot… this is one of the stupidest things you’ve ever said!”

*So he does not. Fine. Well I do. All my kouhais are adorable… all. All of them. All equally adorable.*

Iwaizumi had to spend three quarters of hour at Oikawa's parental home before his strange questions about kouhais and adorability stopped to pop every now and again. He didn't mind much, because he was used to decades of absurdities from his best friend, and one to add to the poll was to be expected, especially after months they had been apart, but he had figured he would have focused more on the amazing news he was to wear the Japan jersey than silliness like those.

“Ehi Oikawa… so you're to train with Ushijima and Kageyama? Who would have thought, just a year ago…”
"Yeah…"

"What's with that tone now?"

"I had no tone. Shush…"

"You had one. I guarantee you."

"No. I had none. And there's no need to talk about those two, innit?"

"Well I certainly feel none. You're right. Let's go in your dining room? Your mum has prepared my favorite dish…"

"Yeah. I come home… and she prepares your favorite meal. My own family hates me!"

"Don't be jealous Shittykawa. When you frown your nose scrunches in a way which makes you look ugly…"

"I can't be ugly. It's just not possible. But nice try, Iwa chan…"

It was good to be back home. To be back with such a friend then was making home feeling even more so. Iwaizumi spent the night in Oikawa's room, like they had for years of mutual sleepovers. They talked until the wee hours of the morning. They talked about their lives, their friendship and the news they had for one another; they talked about their past, their present and their future. They talked about their studies, and they talked about their memories and their Seijou kouhais.

And not a single time Oikawa Tooru thought of any of them that they were adorable, nor spoke about it, reassuring Iwaizumi all was fine with the world.

Chapter End Notes

**Kaisoku (快速特急 Kaisoku Tokkyū)**. Type of medium fast train to travel from Region to Region in Japan. It's an express type of convoy. Kaisoku means rapid train, but consider it as a semi-express. This train will not stop at every station, but it will definitely stop at more than an express. It is one of the most used ways for people to move across the Country.

**Senpai (先輩, "earlier colleague") and kōhai (後輩, "later colleague")** are terms from the Japanese language describing an informal hierarchical interpersonal relationship found in organizations, associations, clubs, businesses, and schools in Japan. The concept is based in Japanese philosophy and has permeated Japanese society.

The relationship is an interdependent one, as a senpai requires a kōhai and vice versa, and establishes a bond determined by the date of entry to an organization. The kōhai defers to the senpai's seniority and experience, and speaks to the senpai using honorific language. The relationship is an interdependent one, as a senpai requires a kōhai and vice versa, and establishes a bond determined by the date of entry to an organization. Senpai refers to the member of higher experience, hierarchy, level, or age in the organization who offers assistance, friendship, and counsel to a new or inexperienced member, known as the kōhai, who must demonstrate gratitude, respect, and occasionally personal loyalty. The Senpai acts at the same time as a friend. This
relation is similar to the interpersonal relation between tutor and tutored in Eastern culture, but differs in that the senpai and kōhai must work in the same organization. The relation originates in Confucian teaching, as well as the morals and ethics that have arrived in Japan from ancient China and have spread throughout various aspects of Japanese philosophy. The senpai–kōhai relation is a vertical hierarchy (like a father–son relation) that emphasizes respect for authority, for the chain of command, and for one's elders, eliminating all forms of internal competition and reinforcing the unity of the organization.

Over time this mechanism has allowed the transfer of experience and knowledge, as well as the expansion of acquaintances, to maintaining the art of teaching alive. It also allows the development of beneficial experiences between both, as the kōhai benefits from the senpai's knowledge and the senpai learns new experiences from the kōhai by way of developing a sense of responsibility. The senpai–kōhai relation involves a comradeship that does not cross gender bounds; a male does not refer to a female as senpai.

This comradeship does not imply friendship; a senpai and kōhai may become friends, but such is not an expectation.

One place the senpai–kōhai relation applies to its greatest extent in Japan is in schools. For example, in junior and senior high schools (especially in school clubs) third-year students (who are the oldest) demonstrate great power as senpais. It is common in school sports clubs for new kōhais to have to perform basic tasks such as retrieving balls, cleaning playing fields, taking care of equipment, and even wash elder students' clothes. They must also bow to or salute their senpais when congratulated, and senpais may punish kōhais or treat them severely.

The main reason for these humble actions is that it is believed that team members can become good players only if they are submissive, obedient, and follow the orders of the trainer or captain, and thus become a humble, responsible, and cooperative citizen in the future. Relations in Japanese schools also place a stronger emphasis on the age than on the abilities of students. The rules of superiority between a senpai and a kōhai are analogous to the teacher–student relation, in which the age and experience of the teacher must be respected and never questioned.

The senpai–kōhai relation is weaker in universities, as students of a variety of ages attend the same classes; students show respect to older members primarily through polite language (teineigo). Vertical seniority rules nevertheless prevail between teachers based on academic rank and experience.

[NOTE] Real episodes out of the anime/manga; real sentences out of the anime/manga
Choices

Chapter Summary

In the morning
I could take the burning sun
I could be the only warning but I’m not the only one
So forgive me, Cause its more than I can bear
In demand I make my mind up by deciding not to care
Stop giving me choices
I’m the victim, of this day and age
I’ve forgotten how to feel
I’ve forgotten how to change
So I surrender, to the apple of my eye
I surrender to the wind, I will let the wind decide
Stop giving me choices…
I could Break it, I could break it till it hurts
I could take Whatever words you say, Pretend I never heard
So Forgive me, Shouldnt be so hard
It’s they way I’m put together, so you’re never getting past
Cant we talk this through?
Actions are not what im used to…
Cant we talk this through?
Actions are not what im used to!
Stop giving me choices…
(I surrender)
(Just forgive me)
Stop giving me choices…
Without Friction, We Would float up into space
Maybe you could be the friction that will keep me in my place
In the morning, I could take the burning sun
I could be the only warning but I’m not the only one…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The atmosphere outside the gym area was calm, the air roasted lazily by the last forces of an uncharacteristic mild August. Tsukishima was trailing behind two of his female classmates whom he had helped in their cleaning duties. The return after the August break had been a bit boring for him; the previous year at least they had the training camp with Fukurodani and Nekoma to fill his days with tasks, while this time he had nothing to do beside regular practice and studies, waiting for a fuller September to take over in a few days.
As he was about to part ways with his classmates, a familiar low voice captured his attention. The sound, a single voice speaking, was coming from the back of the gym. Outside of it.

"Oikawa San, you will be playing your best like always! You value your talent and the same does Ushijima San. You will be a great pair on court!"
Kageyama was still talking at the phone with his former senpai and Tsukishima was about to leave the other direction to enter the gym for practice when another reply caught his attention and stopped his motion:

“Yes, I couldn't imagine anything worse than have an ability you are uninterested in. Sometimes I think a bit of Tsukishima when I digress about this. If only he could love the game as you and I and Ushijima San do... he could be truly amazing at it."

Kei tensed and purposely retracted himself in a way to hide his presence to nearby students who might be out wandering for the vending machines around their gym. His senses all acuminate to catch more of that conversation which had suddenly turned out to be of an interest to him.

_The King talks about me? With Oikawa from Seijou? And... amazing? What the hell is that? I must have misunderstood..._

“Yes. This is true as well, Oikawa San…”

_What now? C’mon speak something I can place, you idiot King... this way I can't understand what you're talking about..._

“I will. Now I have to go, practice starts in five and I have yet to change... I wish you a wonderful season, Oikawa San. I will catch some game if I happen to be in town during your plays.”

_Shit. You minimalist jerk. And how many times do you plan to be in Tokyo anyway? Even if we qualify again for Nationals in the incoming tournament it's not like you're going to have free time there. Either you play or you go watching that guy at college tournaments you stupid volley freak..._

Kageyama moved quickly to the gym entrance by the opposite way Tsukishima did. When they met they looked at one another in their own way which was half a mutual warning and half a too studied attempt at global indifference. They nodded slightly in acknowledgment of one another and stepped into the place taking one the left, to sit near to Yamaguchi, and one the right, to bump just shy of Hinata.

The schedule for the team training which was to be explained was intense and challenging. They had waited two days to hear their coach and sensei speak the words which would inspire them for their next journey to glory.

“Listen, guys. This is it: we have ran out of excuses now. We are rested and motivated after July training camp and all our sparring games. We had August break, we had Obon both in Tokyo and here, and we had great ways to improve our team trust and merge, in and out of court. Our defeat against Date Tech is history and you don't have to be let down by it. We’ve grown since then. We’ve majorly grown. Now all we have to do is practice until we bleed to win October playoffs and go again at Tokyo Nationals. Are you ready? If you think you’ve ever trained yourself hard think again because you’re about to experience a new level of Ukai hell. Understood?”

A roaring “osu” thundered into the gym.

“Great. Let's start then. But beware: if any of you will skip warming ups and risk his muscles for the sake of time again I am personally gonna kick their asses. This is mostly about you, Kinoshita, Yamaguchi… skip even just one exercise at the start or at the end of practices and you're in trouble.”

Trouble was hovering upon the gym in fact, but it would have had nothing to do with players downplaying the importance of correct warmups that week. May it be due to the importance of the upcoming tasks, or with the general mood of the two guys, those days it seemed that Tsukishima and Kageyama just couldn't work together.
Tsukishima seemed even more of a malevolent tease than usual, even more so, at times, than during their first year, while Kageyama every now and again would wear a peculiar attitude towards especially him where he would stop accommodating his preferences to push him violently at giving more and more, deaf and blind at any consideration his teammate was doing already very well. Tsukishima would then mention the word talent like it were a bomb, or a flaming knife pointing at his setter's jugular through his accusing finger, and from there things would just turn for the inevitable worst:

“Listen, stop with this crap talent thing you always throw at me like I am not putting my ass off every damn day to be better and to make you all better too, Tsukishima! You just use that as an alibi to never do more yourself!”

“Oh, please! Do you want to compare efforts there, King? Yes, you do work hard… but we do it harder because to match you without us having your gifts is for sure a pain ok? So try to think out of your way sometimes and cut us some slack…”

“To have a talent isn't just a gift. It's a responsibility dammit! Why don't you get it?”

“I don’t get it of course because I don't have your prodigy reserved talents so shut up and leave me alone. I am already doing more than I can to follow you and I don't expect screams at me for it. I expect praise ok? So now you either are fine with me as I am and we go on or you can scream all you want and leave me alone! Take your talent to someone else because this is the top of what I can do. Full point.”

“I won't leave you alone and I will break sense into you if I had to trash your skull for it…this is nowhere near the best you can do and I won't ever let you believe it, even if I have to kick you for it!”

“You just try it King…”

“And you want to stop me if I would? With your physical frame… laughable indeed. And I had also told you how to eat to put more muscle on your damn bones…”

“Not everybody can grow muscles just by drinking milk you idiot…”

The gym was exploding again.

It was already the second time in three days that Tsukishima and Kageyama had started arguing like there was no tomorrow in sight.

But there were tomorrows and they had to play together in those, so it was more than just a tiny problem for the team to sever the tension away.

Ennoshita was really stressed out by his teammates, and when he was feeling that way he would become threatening.

His peaceful, regularly nice face would become reddish and reddish until he would explode in a bursting scream, all his body posing calm like he were saying nothing worthy, and the color on his cheeks coming back to normality at each more word he would scream. Hitoka used to say Ennoshita angered was like a giant statue changing colors while from its still inside the rumbling power of hundreds of bulls running would be shaped into words to be heard from the listeners outside. It was such an efficacious method to stop arguments even the coach Ukai would take a back seat and let the captain do the deeds.

“You two stop this right now! You are not kids anymore! You will play from now on like I decide you will and I better not hear not even a whisper from you two from now on unless you, Kageyama, don't want to end practice earlier and you, Tsukishima, don't want to keep going double. Right?!"
This would become the end of their open war they had those days, and the beginning of the cold one they would keep engaging, all made by snarky glances and tensed fists in between sets, spikes and blocks.

Then the practice would end with the both of them going at the showers in separate times along their most common companion, and using the lockers without considering one another at all, and then leaving without even greet the other a single gesture.

“You two should stop arguing… it puts the whole team in a dark haze…”

Yamaguchi attempted to talk bits of appeasing sense into his best friend, even letting go of his girlfriend that evening to focus on the matter of Tsukishima’s increasing displeasure at Kageyama at the start of their very important September, only to face a wall of bricks very well put together and impenetrable in the shape of his childhood friend’s most disagreeable sealed grin.

“Yamaguchi, please shut up. Today I can’t bear anymore to think of him. Let alone talk about him.”

“Exactly. You are way too perceptive of him.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry Tsukki… but I can't shut up. Lately you are just so strange when it comes to Kageyama kun. How to say it… there: think like this! If this were a game of Kagome Kagome, you would always be able to locate him anywhere around you.”

Tsukishima felt a rush of blood shooting to his head directly. All of his blood like a fire in his chest and brain, and oppose to there, all the rest running cold at his limb extremities. There was a lot of discomfort for him as Yamaguchi seemed to dearly care for the reasons behind his obvious difficulty at spending any time with their setter as of late. But he had no reasons to offer him to clear things up. He just hadn't and he wasn't liking to be subjected to interrogations about that in the first place.

“Oh please… shut up!”

“I will. For today. But this… this ain't normal and I will ask you again. I hope you know you can talk with me about anything, Tsukki. Anything. For real.”

Scoffing the gentle offer of his friend away, but still nodding at him in a place of a pronounced thank you, Tsukishima entered home, tired and nervous, but not willing to look anything like that to his family. Taking the stairs to reach his room, he placed his school backpack on the chair at the desk and lied on the bed with his long legs bent out of it.

Exhaling frustrated sighs which were making him also angry at himself.

Stupid King. I am doing my best already. What do you want? I don't have your talent. Fuck I don't have talent at all… so this I do is a lot, ok? I am not talented… but I am trying ok?

Tsukishima thought he should have said that to Kageyama. He should have said to him he had no talent, not that he didn't have the prodigy level talent. Because if he had worded his phrase so, maybe the other would have answered the way he had wanted to all those days.

The way he had spoken about him with Oikawa.

Fuck… why do I care for him to say that I have talent to my face, if I still don't believe I do?

The only relief in his night would be to think that the subsequent day there would not be any chance for him to be reminded of Kageyama. He would skip practice due to a call Karasuno's Principal had issued for him. It had to be something pretty important to ask for a practice skipping, being their
Principal a proud supporter of their team, but it didn't matter to Tsukishima.

“Tomorrow I won't be stressed out by that one. Tomorrow's gonna be a good day.”

The day started slow, and kept going even slower. Tsukishima would often find his classes repetitive and undemanding, which by contrast would make him think of other aspects of his life where to be demanded to over do would be routine. But that day he would aggressively fight that comparison by entrapping his brain with whatever physic or chemistry test at disposal. Yamaguchi had followed him closely during all their lessons, trying to find a space to speak with him alone and resume the discussion they were having the day before, but with no luck. By the time he had to leave class for practice, Tsukishima had gone to the bathroom and he couldn't even say goodbye to him.

An hour later, with a slight delay on the planned time, Tsukishima was asked to present himself at the Principal’s office. The door he knocked over remained closed, and after a few minutes he had the impression to be the object of a candid camera prank.

“Tsukishima Kei?”

A young woman dressed like a secretary asked him, coming out of breath from the end of the corridor he was waiting in alone.

“Yes? That's me…”

“I am the Principal aide and I have to ask you to forgive him for making you wait: unfortunately right after we called you here he had to take part in an impromptu meeting downstairs. He asks for you to kindly wait for him in his office. I am here to open it.”

She opened the door with an universal key, which surprised Tsukishima, and invited him at sitting comfortably inside.

“The Principal should come in minutes. Please Tsukishima San accomodate yourself and sorry again for the inconvenience. It was not the Principal’s fault…”

“I understand. I’ll wait as long as it's necessary to. Say to the Principal I am in no hurry. Thank you for letting me sit in here, too.”

The secretary smiled politely and left him alone in the spacious and well organized office. The two sides of it were full of shelved books and organizers, not too patched together, neither too emptied and far away from bunch to bunch to suggest they were just for show and not for use. Their Principal was a cooperative hard worker, it was common knowledge. His big, dark wooden desk was placed opposite from the door he had entered, near to a big window which was giving the whole room a lot of beautiful, natural light, useful to keep the three bonsai which were their Principal’s true pride in a peach condition.

Tsukishima eyed all he could, before the only things he had left to look at were placed on the desk. That was not as neatly kept as the rest, testifying work had been done earlier that day. He observed his telephone, his computer desktop set up, then passed onto a number of folders and papers piled up in three different blocks. One was of general papers, some of which looked like bills. One had to be schedules of the school activities, as they bared the same layout of those each class had to keep at disposal. The last pile, which was in front of him in fact, just turned to face the Principal once he would be sitting in his chair, that looked like a series of small folders with papers and forms inside. The kind of
archive folders many offices have to keep tracks of people's careers. Except that at the very top of it the first folder, of a recycled paper shaded in a tea color, bared a name he couldn't ignore. Tsukishima couldn't look away. The name on the folder at the top of the pile was so well readable he had no choices but starting wondering about the reason a folder with that name over was on the top of the Principal desk's pile.

“Tsukishima kun, you’re already here. Sorry for the wait. I had a meeting in class 3 downstairs.”

“I haven’t had to wait. I’ve just come. Did you need to talk to me, Principal?”

The man accommodated into his own directorial chair:

“Yes. We are thinking of moving you in class 6.”

“Karasuno has a sixth class?”

“We are going to. It is something which was planned for next year but we have decided to give students ready for it a sort of trial time to adjust to it.”

“Ok. And this class would be…”

“Even more advanced than the one you're currently in. Perfect to prepare yourself better for college. I am sure you are already targeting some college in your mind don’t you Tsukishima kun?”

The second year nodded. Then he briefly glanced at the pile again.

“Good. Then if you don’t mind… oh, let me find yours… here it is…”

The Principal extracted from the pile a folder with Kei's name onto, and from there he took off a paper to be signed for him.

“This is for your parents to sign. Some bureaucracy to allow you the passage.”

“Is it all?”

The Principal was searching another folder in the pile. Yachi. Her name was over the one extracted this time, put aside it swiftly.

“Yes. Can you send here Yachi Hitoka San after practice tomorrow, since today you were relieved from it? She’s in the list too…”

The list? Does it mean the bonehead King… is in the list as well? Impossible. Impossible.

“Sure… I will…”

“Thank you very much…”

The phone rang.

“Yes? Ok. Of course. I’m coming right now then…”

The Principal abruptly stood up, offering his hand to the student.

“I am sorry again, Tsukishima kun, but I have to leave once more… don’t say anything to your
manager teammate because I won't know which time I am back with all these meetings that keep popping up unwanted today and will probably for the next two days. I will call for her when my schedule is clear. Sorry if I leave you immediately… close the door after yourself on your way out, and if you like, make yourself a tea. My automatic tea maker makes an excellent one!”

The Principal went out. He was a really nice person. Very gentle. Always caring for his students. But tea wasn't on Kei's mind.
At all.
As soon as the corridor went completely silent, careless of cameras which could be in use in that office, his hand reached for the folder he had identified so clearly.

“IT's his. Holy shit… when did he get good with school?”

Throughout Tsukishima long fingers there were the results of latest tests Kageyama had passed with scores in between 96 and 99 over 100. He couldn't put his mind over what his eyes were seeing.

“Shit… we might end in the same class, what the fuck…”

And slamming the papers back in the folder with a sense of itching he was ready to leave the room. Only that a folded paper of grainy texture fell from it to the ground. Tsukishima had always been a curious kind of person.
A very curious kind.
Maybe too much of a curious kind.

“What's this…”

He took the paper.
Opened it.
And his heart stopped moving.

“What… the… hell…”

In his hand, well written in technical terms, was a transfer request from Itachiyama Academy for Karasuno student Tobio Kageyama to be fulfilled. All of which was already completely so, except from two lines.

The one to be completed with Kageyama's signature.
And the one with the date and the stamps of Karasuno.

“Kageyama's tutors have already signed this… and… the only thing left to be put in the date line is…”

The only thing left in the date to be determined was the day of the transferring. The month, November, and the year, their current one, were already there printed.

“This fucker…”

Tsukishima realized he had just done something he might get expelled for. Quickly putting things back on the desk as they were before his curiosity had taken the best out of him, he went out from the office with the worst mood he had ever had in that school.
He couldn't believe the way his discovery had him feel.
He didn't want any of those feelings, but he couldn't avoid them.
For a few hours, he faked indifference.
Then he woke up in the middle of the night after a nightmare he couldn't recall, but which had made
him sweat profusely. For two days he tried anything in his power to not cross Kageyama in any shape or form; he trained silently, with unsolicited high energy though, so that nobody, and especially not their setter, could ask anything to him directly during practices, then on the third day after his discovery, as his mood was continuing to swing too much to be controlled, he excused himself from practice faking some dehydration and left before anyone could object. But Kageyama had come running after him, not convinced by his acting, and they had another inevitable exchange before he had been able to actually go home.

The thought Kageyama would soon leave their school was undoubtedly starting to consume him. No one seemed to know; Kageyama himself would act completely normal, being his normality not communicative in the first place, so that Tsukishima would have doubted his conclusions regarding the transfer, if he weren’t totally sure his brain had not deceived him. September was filled with events, scholastic and recreational, but Tsukishima’s mood was more often than not acrimonious and bitter also with his own innocent classmates, rather surprised by his behaviors. Little sparks of unnamed anger would start to bite his insides rather too often, even for a person like himself; suddenly, then, he would wander absently, eyes lost and far away, shielded by his height and his glasses, unreadable for the many who were shorter than him, or uninterested enough to get his fading away from reality an impossible catch.

In those moments, all he could think of were questions. Many facets of the same one, in fact. Did they ever value Kageyama the way they should’ve had? No. They never did. Did they show him how much they were grateful he was with them, and not enforcing others? Most definitely not. Not enough. Ever. And weren’t they all aware that if they’d ever be switching setters with whichever other team, the result would invariably see them losing, and the other team gaining? Did they ever make him feel how special he was? How indispensable? No. Not a single time. And which one of his teammates had always shown him the least of care, fairness and consideration? No other than himself. Yessir. Tsukishima Kei. The most ungrateful one that ever was.

Kageyama then wasn’t much at fault for anything anymore after all. In that year and a half he had conspicuously changed in his team approach. A long journey as his standards were still painfully, undemocratically high, but he never asked more than he was giving himself. And boy, could he deliver in terms of dedication and hard working ethic…

He had also started to talk to try to convey his ideas, albeit never his emotions, if he had those at all; and in his really demanding way, it was clear he thought all of them were good. It was just that he would always think good had to become great, and great just greater. A simple task.

Not an easy one, but definitely a very simple one. NOTE

You stupid King… there is a limit after crossing which people won’t get any better anymore…

But what if Kageyama had agreed eventually with that trail of concepts, and realized his only way to progress was out of Karasuno in the end? Tsukishima couldn’t stop spinning around all those hypothetical steps his teammate was to take. For each single possible development he might have chosen, he would start to remember things Kageyama had said to him in all the months they had shared as teammates. From the first ones, when the two would never talk to one another, up until the most recent where they would quite often try to speak, at times even proficiently, not considering the last few days when they had just attacked one another, rather than properly talk.

The core of their exchanges, especially after their July training camp, had always involved the suggestion Kageyama was strongly after that he, Tsukishima Kei, had choices for his life to pick up
Choices.
Choices he would have never thought of himself if it weren't for his grumpy nemesis push.
Like the one of being the future captain, which the setter was still very stubborn about, and which he would mention rather often at any given chance.
Was he trying to convince him to be the best candidate because he knew he himself was going away? But he had thought of that back in April… in April… he did certainly not have the opportunity to transfer to Itachiyama?
Choices…
His own choices Kageyama was constantly speaking about…
Did he, Tsukishima Kei, have some for real?
Choices to try at being greater freely… did he have those chances himself?

He was really afraid to just try, his big ego too frail to handle trials with no sure access to success.
Did he have the luxury to love himself enough to allow his persona to fail at something he would put his everything in, without putting his own self love under rough scrutiny to shred it to pieces after?

Because in the end, he was one of those who hated losing the most, but unlike born champions like Kageyama he hated losses too much to risk his pride enough to compete for real for the wins.

“You can't really win big if you don't pour yourself entirely into something and accept your best may not always be enough to succeed.”

Did he have truly choices to spare, being his outlook on life deprived of any serious direction?

“You can't progress if you think you won't stand to ever lose after giving your everything. Because sometimes you're gonna lose even after giving your 200%. It will happen. What makes you a winner or a loser is what you can do to get even better after your fall. I learnt it from Takeda sensei. It's a lesson I won't ever forget.” NOTE

These were the words of the King, and he wasn't able to chase them away. They were a broken loop into his brain, and they were causing him a lot of tribulation.
The King’s words… as annoying and demanding and… inescapable as he was.
He had told him those already a few times.
They never got through him, because in Kageyama's world words and concepts were calling for facts and actions, while in his own one words were just echoes of perspectives he could never live for and by in the end.
His world was a series of houses of cards made of beautiful reasons which he would rather never sculpt into realities.
A way safer world, his own, than the prospect of failure anyway.
He hated to fail as much as he hated to lose, and those were twin demons he was constantly scared to face. Losses and failures were resembling open wounds on his soul. He didn't want to bear any, because his biggest pain had been caused by his brother's failure he had taken like it were his.

The King also hated to lose, but apparently he could stand the burden of it because he was able to accept the evolving power treasured into every misstep. So in the end the King, the brightest talent he had ever seen, the fiercest competitor he had ever met, could accept losses he wouldn't ever.

“Even his pride is of a better kind than my own… shit… I hate all this so much…”

He wanted to be like him. And at the same time he would have loved for him to disappear so that his presence would never remind him he could never ever be like him.
Disappear… and now he might, by going to the rival Tokyo Academy.
“If only he could love the game… he could be truly amazing at it…”

Stupid King. What concept did he have of him? Stupid, stupid King: in his way, more or less, he was trying to do his own best already to play, and he liked the game, didn't he?

Amazing… for him I could be amazing…

And in his room everything became a dark shade of beautiful blue. He recalled the last big spat they had just that afternoon, and all came back at him like fast running images on a roll, each word a punch somewhere between his face and his guts:

“Why don't you get that you could do so much? You do have talent you stupid lanky loser… you do have ton of it but you are freaking scared to work it out to make it make yourself a greater player… why? This drives me crazy… the way you waste yourself… you want to go home? Skip practice? Then go… you are of no use if you don't want to give your everything!”

“What if I could not give a flying fuck about this tho?”

Kageyama had darkened there. Then he had sighed and looked at him with that inescapable glare of his which would freeze anybody in place.

“That really would make me…sad.”

His open answer, zero stuttering and infinite sincerity, had floored him there, and he had felt a twist in his stomachs which the recalling had doubled:

“You shouldn't be so. It's my life. My preference. My prerogative.”

“I know. But… I would miss play with you. Or even against you. If you're to waste your talent just because that is not what you treasure about yourself, this also makes me sad. That'd be a loss for you, but also for the game. And since all that relates to the game is my precious reason to live… in a way you giving up and fuck this all you might become… it would affect me too.”

Recalling all the discourses, Tsukishima felt again all he had living the argument the first time; he felt again he had conflicting emotions barking to turn his mind into a set; he had felt surprised and happy that moment because he had been praised for his skills, but he also had felt inadequate because the one praising him was just too above himself in his own ranking.

To add to it, he had felt terribly because of the way Kageyama, an incompetent and silly individual who always had trouble sharing feelings of any kind, could state so naturally he would have been saddened by something he could have done.

Saddened.

Because of him.

Sure he had been so open because all that was referring to his precious game but… that statement… That statement had gone etching on his skin like a burning mark as he had pronounced it, making his facade of puns and indirect attacks crumble and dust away in a cloud of smelly smoke. Not that realizing it had stopped his resolve at not giving up any fight, though.

Not when he had felt it first that afternoon, and neither in his room where he was that evening. Fighting to protect himself would always come first.

Always.

To survive dreading inner wars the best way Tsukishima knew to was to place some kind of blame away from him and his impotence to find his way into life.

That had always been his exit strategy and he had tried for it also that afternoon.
He would have loved to ask Kageyama why he was caring so much, if he was ready to leave to Itachiyama; he had almost asked him but when the setter had looked at him with his blue eyes, bursting under his bangs… he had felt too much, to the point he had almost tried to punch that face which seemed always sincere but as cold as snow.

He hated the way Kageyama was naturally cold, even when claiming he could be affected by things. He hated the way he seemed like arctic snow: impossible to keep in hand unless one would get burnt by freezing or the snow would just melt by contact and slip away.

Recalling his afternoon, Tsukishima closed mindlessly his right hand, keeping the memory running, words in his ears that had been said, and thoughts in his mind he never dared to voice out:

“You know… maybe I trust better my brain than my body. And my talent will lead me to a good job which I may love eventually.”

“Sure. You are intelligent and a great student. You will certainly excel in other things… but what else has ever made your heart rush the way playing does?”

**Motherfucker… don't say this to my face… with your damn face so sure of the words you're saying.. get away from me… what can you know about my heart…**

“Say, Tsukishima… how great does it feel when your hand can stop a powerful spike?”

**Don't grab… my arm… don't!**

These arms… the way you master your body in perfect compendium with the flowing of your thoughts and feelings… all this… can it really be wasted for a career you can't even name yet?”

**Dammit King… leave my arm alone… don't… please stop touching me…**

“Answer me… can it really be trashed away, without giving not even a little try?”

“I can't just try, you freaking idiot! I can't…”

Kageyama at that point had been left empty handed as he had vigorously shaken his arm out of his grab. As the memory was re-lived by Tsukishima in the solitude of his room, he perceived distinctly the same urge to remove himself from a touch he was actually craving for. Kageyama wasn't in his room, but he was feeling still his touch on his skin, not lingering, but pressuring into his flesh. He tensed and made the same move he had when they had been together just like he were in his room after all.

And the memory kept running by, and the pain kept creeping up.

“I can't: I either do things or I don't…”

“Then do it?”

“I can't, I told you! I mean I can only succeed in things. Failure crushes me, and competition is not entirely manageable by just me and my efforts! I would… die if after trying I would left out failing. I can't do that. I am not cold bloodied and super perfect like you!”

**Leave me… please. Stop looking at me like you care… my body is not gonna stand it… don't look at me like you care about me… please… I will do something stupid if you keep gazing your damn blue eyes at me…**

“I thought I was the idiot King for you? Now I am perfect?”

**Shut up… my head spins… I wanna be alone… far away from you…**
“Tsukishima look at me for Gods sake! I am talking to you dammit!”

But he never looked back at him then. He had parted virulently from him running home, where he had thrown all of his belongings on the floor and had listened to music for an hour before his mum had called him downstairs for dinner.
He couldn't even remember what he had just eaten; his mind a fuzzy chaos made of blur and affliction.
Too many thoughts.
Too many words.
Too many choices.

“Better if I go sleeping. Much better.” He said in loud voice in his room which was not being friendly, a room which was filled with ghosts bearing stunningly piercing blue eyes, a room which was transforming his beloved dinosaurs into grotesque puppets laughing at him and his weaknesses.

“Yes. I’ll sleep and forget all this which is pointless and useless anyway. I’ll sleep. Now.”

And he did, still hoping hard no free wind would ever shatter all his beautiful houses of cards he had put up with so much heed in so many years, before things like choices and wishes and blue eyes had dared to sneak up to ruin them all.

Chapter End Notes

Kagome Kagome (かごめかごめ, or 篁目篁目) is a Japanese children's game and the song associated with it. One player is chosen as the oni (literally demon or ogre, but similar to the concept of "it" in tag) and sits blindfolded (or with their eyes covered). The other children join hands and walk in circles around the Oni while chanting the song for the game. When the song stops, the Oni tries to name the person standing directly behind them.

The song is a subject of much interest because of its cryptic lyrics which vary from region to region, and many theories exist about its meaning, but neither have been definitely explained.

Japanese ranking class system even though upper-secondary school is not compulsory in Japan, 94% of all junior high school graduates entered high schools as of 2005. The classificatory system of Japan High school classes is generally strict and comprised of the number of the class which changes year after year in order, plus another number increasing from 1 to 7/8 (or a letter decreasing from H/I to A) indicating the bigger level of the students attending those. For the ever important concept of ranking, graduations and hierarchies which dominate Japan culture please take a look at this link:


Private upper-secondary schools account for about 55% of all upper-secondary schools, and neither public nor private schools are free. The Ministry of Education estimated that annual family expenses for the education of a child in a public upper-secondary school were about 300,000 yen (US$2,142) in the 1980s and that private upper-secondary schools were about twice as expensive.

The most common type of upper-secondary school has a full-time, general program that offered academic courses for students preparing for higher education as well as technical
and vocational courses for students expecting to find employment after graduation. More than 70% of upper-secondary school students were enrolled in the general academic program in the late 1980s. A small number of schools offer part-time programs, evening courses, or correspondence education.

The first-year programs for students in both academic and commercial courses are similar. They include basic academic courses, such as Japanese language, English, mathematics, and science. In upper-secondary school, differences in ability are first publicly acknowledged, and course content and course selection are far more individualized in the second year. However, there is a core of academic material throughout all programs.

Vocational-technical programs includes several hundred specialized courses, such as information processing, navigation, fish farming, business, English, and ceramics. Business and industrial courses are the most popular, accounting for 72% of all students in full-time vocational programs in 1999.

[ NOTE ] actual words spoken by Captain Daichi Sawamura during the game with Inarizaki (see manga for reference); real episode involving Takeda Ittetsu after the loss with Seijou in the manga and at the end of the Anime, season 1.
City looks so nice from here,
Pity, I can't see it clearly
While you're standing there
It disappears, it disappears...

There was silence in the corridor.
And there were dim lights coming from a slightly open door.
The odor coming from inside the room the door did not close onto, a misty mixture of water steam and body wash.
The atmosphere inside the room, not silent, and far steamier than the legacy of a number of taken showers.
There were two guys who had remained in the room.
And, third between them, an awkward intensity which was expressed through bellicose murmurs.

“Well but you are wrong, Sakusa kun… see I am not gay. I can't even say that I am bi. I am me.”

“Unfortunately.”

“You know, genders are so passé. I am a very curious person, and as long as something or someone ignites a feeling in me, that's it… I am all for it. Male, female… does it matter? You may stop being a prude, putting your labels on people and being the usual arrogant ass who thinks he knows.”

The taller guy didn't even look at the shorter one, despite being practically in front of him; his sight passing him through, like he were a simple inconvenience in his space.

“But I don't put labels on things. Much less on you, Miya.”

“So I am at a lower grade than a thing for you now? How rude…”

The smirk from the shorter one in the room was satisfied and deviously entertained. That was seen by the other, who had finally looked at him right in the eye, with a cold glare which was a claim of superiority.

“You are neither a thing, nor anything lower than it… whatever you are, you are human of course.”

“Guess it's your way to compliment me now?”

“Dream on: this century won't see me complementing you…”

Miya Atsumu’s smirk became an open grin. His hazel eyes crackling with intention to attract. Trouble or praise it was all the same for him, as long as it could be something to play with, to twitch and mold into something else at his pick.
“Do I disgust you? Do you think you might catch a disease if you agree at playing a little with me?”

Sakusa Kyoomi felt the menacing aura extruding from Atsumu; rather unlikely for him, he yielded back enough to cause an enormous satisfaction in Inarizaki setter, who swiftly tried to close into the spiker’s personal stance.

“Hell stop with this nonsense and step away from me… don't you dare…”

“So you would never ever consider to try me on?”

Sakusa’s eyes fired flames of hatred towards Miya. Atsumu's triumphant expression then was an open admission he had lost retention of inhibitions and to give him any trace of a journey he might find the ability to walk in could have been a deadly mistake.

Sakusa Kyoomi was not the kind of person who could make mistakes, though:

“The day I die… better, the day you do”

To use aggression though would not decrease Miya's smile:

“Always this passive aggressive… and then, don't make it like death could sound fascinating…”

Atsumu was still very much near to Sakusa, but not as much as he would have considered worthy, and the other embarrassing.

“Atsumu… stop it. Just stop it.”

And by putting his towel back into his gym bag, Sakusa declared the match closed without saying it. Atsumu's smile faded from mischief into haughtiness, something Sakusa hated even more from him. But that at least came manageable, and way less dangerous for a person as detached and lordly as Itachiyama ace. If their battle had to be about superbly inclined behavior, Sakusa would have always ended victorious. This was reckoned by Atsumu as well. But Atsumu was looking for a thrill, not a throne.

“By the way, Sakusa… did you see that first year today?”

“Who?”

“The one coming from Karasuno… isn't he the cutest thing?”

Sakusa for a quick instant tried to recall the new faces he had seen during the day; remembering an annoyingly prideful and standing out one in the form of blinding dark blue eyes trying to measure him down, he couldn't avoid a tiny hiss:

“Another pretty target for your score? You are such a pervert… but yeah, I saw him. A little too arrogant for my like…”

“You are one to talk…”

Atsumu tittered, though he felt it was unusual for Sakusa to take notice of anyone that fast, considering his will to constantly avoid the bothersome presence of the rest of the world around him. He had no idea that day the first year from that obscure high school had dared to call Japan Youth National biggest attendee average. NOTE

“But what about him?”

There, Atsumu thought; not only Sakusa had acknowledged the guy, he had to the point he would
ask about him. Very unusual.

“He seems… interesting.”

“You are disgusting.” The contempt in Sakusa's face was the correct depiction of the concept of aghast. Miya felt flattered.

“See? That's it. Honesty is always the best way after all. Good you admit I disgust you.”

“You don't. I don't think of you that much to feel about you.”

The memory of that evening chat faded in time to not remind Miya Atsumu of its worst part, the part where he had effectively tried to steal a peck from Sakusa Kyoomi and he had ended twitching on the floor after a punch over his guts. To that day still, though, he hadn't regretted his move. It had procured him a very intense emotion and he lived for those. Whichever color they had, all emotions were something to look out for.

Atsumu jump-sat on his bed and grabbed his cell phone to slide it open on his favorite picture. He didn't want to be shadowed by any bad vibe that day.

It was a bright, fresh first Saturday of October in Kyoto and his guest was about to arrive, after a ride on the Shinkansen from Sendai. He had left on it at 5 in the morning to arrive in time to not call what would be their Kyoto morning wasted. He could have made him see something of his neighborhood before lunch.

He lived near to Higashiyama station, and at walking distance from the stunning Sanctuary Heian-jingu, the pinnacle of the architecture which was the emblem of the true spirit of Japan.

He could have taken him to Nanzen-ji temple after it.

There was so much he could have made him see, just around his house, and not a chance anybody could be left cold in watching all the amazing sights the ancient capital had to offer.

He would have wooed the person he was waiting for all day long and he was so excited about his coming he could not stop spinning in his own room.

His guest was the most important person in his life at that time, the one he would think of at any moment, if he hadn't to take care of an enormous amount of chores and commitments, being those his last months as an high schooler of a prestigious institution.

His guest was about to come and it was a sign from Destiny the fact he would.

His luck unperturbed as usual had blessed his wish even before he had hoped for.

Miya Atsumu had always taken for granted he was beloved by Destiny and Fortune, because all his wishes had always came true all his life. Maybe not at the best of times… but they all had, by serious extent.

“Atsumu? They have arrived. Step down to greet them? Osamu is already here…”

“I’m coming mum! Thank you for telling me!”

A last glance at the mirror, to check his own look his guest would have probably - surely - never even taken notice of, because he was the least interested person in fashion or style anyone could ever meet, and he smiled like Cheshire Cat. His guest was to stay for the weekend.

In their guest room, which was in between his one and Osamu's. That was what his parents had claimed they had arranged, but that would have not been the way things would go.

His guest would have slept aside him. That which hadn't been possible in their National encounters yet, that night it would have been reality, because he had planned it all too fine to fail.

And his mind, much like Destiny and Fortune, was also used to never fail him.

Kageyama had agreed in visiting the Miyas tagging alongside his prestigious uncle, who was to present at Kyoto Medical University one of his latest academic projects and achievements.
Miya Osamu had chosen a sport medical career out of his secondary school options, and he had asked Kageyama to find a viaticum to allow him to the conference, in hope to meet his uncle. He had already decided he would have studied at Kyoto Medical University anyway, because of the rank its Polyclinic had nationally, and also because it was very near to his home and the middle school he had attended as a child along his twin brother. Miya Osamu had always been a person loving stability, regularity and tradition. He also loved his hometown like no other place on Earth.

When he had requested the account for the conference, Kageyama had offered him to be arranged into a meeting with his uncle, and with the intervention of an eager Atsumu, the simple accountability for a meeting and a conference only Osamu had to attend had transformed into a weekend for the young setter from the north to be spent in Atsumu’s company while his uncle would have taken care of Osamu and the elder Miyas at the Kyoto University.

“Kageyama Sama, thank you for the opportunity you are offering to Osamu.”

Mrs. Miya, a beautiful woman with American traits bowed impeccably in front of Professor Kageyama, imitated by her husband, a tall and broad man with thick black hair and important eyebrows, and by an enraptured Osamu, who was speechless for being allowed in the presence of such an eminent scholar.

“Kageyama San, thank you for having allowed me to track contacts with your uncle” he said facing Tobio, who was always feeling not belonging any time people would thank him for things his uncle had decided by himself, “this is something I’ll forever thank you for. From now on, for anything you may need which I could play a part in providing to you, all you have to do will be asking. I swear.”

And he shaked Kageyama's hand with such a reverence the younger felt his cheeks starting to dye to pink.

“You’re thanking me for setting this all up, but I have no merit whatsoever in this. My uncle has decided it all, and I am glad because it seems to make you very happy; but it has nothing to do with me, for real. You don't owe me anything, don't…”

“Don't say that or poor Tobio kun will keep sporting pink cheeks all day, Samu…”

Osamu and his parents turned heads horrified towards Atsumu, ready to scold him for interrupting their guest in such poor manners, scared to have offended their even more important guest by his side, who had no idea the other Miya twin could be so uncaring about politeness and good handling: but they all had to stop their dirty glares at the bursting of a laugh, plain and well natured, the elder Kageyama erupted in:

“You must be Atsumu, the setter Tobio has spoken so well of… you are certainly a good knower of my nephew, because indeed this is what will happen if your brother keeps praising him for these days we are about to spend together. There is no need for it, as he has explained. Better, I am the one who is thankful, because you have accepted him in your house, allowing this rather sedentary child to see how beautiful Kyoto is. I didn't even have to insist for him to come, and that, I guess, has a lot to do with you especially, Atsumu kun. Am I wrong?”

Atsumu took a look at Kageyama's face, which was frowned and still pink under the bangs, and with a big grin he simply confirmed to his uncle that he had used all his solicitation skill to hone him into that weekend. Senior Kageyama seemed to be appreciative of that initiative.

“Excellent. Then I trust you’ll take a good care of him, because it seems he really doesn't want to follow any of my conference today, and he most definitely would not like to follow me and your brother tomorrow when I'm presenting him some of the colleagues at the Medical University over
here. But maybe you would like to come with us?”

Atsumu denied he would:

“I don't share my brother's fondness for Medicine Studies Kageyama Sama, I’m afraid. I could never listen to a tenth of what he could in 5 hours at the conference…”

“You wouldn't endure us? You are a very frank young man, Atsumu kun. I like that in people. I like that very much. Then, once again, take care of my Tobio these two days. He might never admit it but he was looking forward to come visiting. He woke up incredibly soon and with no problems this morning…”

And for whoever had known Kageyama long enough, that was a primary sign he was into things.

“I would admit it straight and with no qualms, that I am happy to be here: I would if anybody would ask. Otherwise, I don't see why I have to bother people with uninteresting notations about my mood…”

Atsumu grinned mentally at the way Kageyama had proven once again to be made of some other fabric than most; he had managed to defend his own reticency at manifesting emotions with a cloak of consideration for others’ preferences. And he hadn't done it to defer a critique, but just because that was, in fact, his truth.

There was nothing of himself that Kageyama found strange, because he had accepted his way to be as his own naturalistic, ontological essence. If people had problems with him, too bad for them. He couldn't do anything about it.

Atsumu loved that side of Kageyama deeply, because he was feeling the same about himself. Love or hate me, he was commonly thinking, I don't care.

This is me.

Once the light luggage of the younger Kageyama was taken out of the car Kyoto University had sent for the elder one’s comfort during his stay in town, Osamu and his parents took seats in it, ready to leave to the Campus where the bigwig would have also resided for that weekend.

“Atsumu, honey, please offer to your friend anything he could want. Make his stay easy and pleasant. If you will need anything, don't hesitate in calling me. I can be back home in a short span. And…”

“I know mum. I have access to the card. Thank you, I won't overuse it.”

“Actually, I was to say that you don't have to mind some little fancy extra these days. Make yourselves enjoy Kyoto as much as you like.”

“Mum… I was thinking… maybe Tobio would like it better to stay sleeping with me instead than in a room alone?”

“Do you think so? But I prepared the guest room already…”

“I’ll ask him which one he’d prefer. You see, he’s kind of taciturn if not stimulated but he is also completely sincere when questioned. He’ll tell me what he feels most comfortable with.”

“Okay. Then follow his wish. And have a beautiful day. We'll be back around 11 pm, from the programmed schedule. Kageyama Sama will have us for dinner. You two can join…”

“No thank you. This is Samu’s time and dream. Let him live it fully, and don't mind me. Look,” and he flipped a bit on the side with his head to call for his twin’s observation “ he is in awe. It was a
long time he didn't wear such a blessed expression…”

And it was true.

“Tobio…”

Professor Kageyama spoke to his nephew from the passenger seat before the driver would move the car to its destination.

“Yes?”

“Enjoy your weekend.”

“I will.”

The car departed like a big dark beetle bug in the elegant boulevard the Miyas lived in. Atsumu hadn't decided what to make of the way the two Kageyamas were used to act around one another. They were clearly engaged in a familiarity which was rooted in years spent near; and still, he had observed, there was something his Kageyama would not share not even with his relative, keeping that little quid of himself obscure and protected and part only of his own reality. Atsumu would have sold his soul to just name that secretive quid.

“Your uncle seems very cool, Tobio kun.”

“Yes.”

His face didn't match the admission he was, but it didn't either refuse it. What was their deal?

“Yes? Just… yes? You do know he’s like… a Nobel prize, right?”

Kageyama shrugged.

“Could I… could anyone ever forget?”

Atsumu realized he had stepped onto a mine field. He was conflicted because his curiosity was screaming for him to dwell more into the matter, while his strategic side was aware if he had pissed his guest off right at the start of their day together, all his hopes about it being memorable would have practically been killed.

But for once strategy went away, all eaten up by the real care he had in trying to know the guy in front of him better. He confessed to himself he cared to know what was in his heart, regardless of his own benefit.

“Sorry… I didn't mean to upset you…” and he offered a sincere apologetic face to Kageyama, to which the other replied with a sincere answer:

“Don't apologize, Miya San. It's not you… it's me, I know. It's always like this, with my family. They are the cool people with the fancy careers and the adult prospects and…”

Atsumu was waiting full of gratefulness for the rest of the sentence, proud to be confessed to by a guy who was generally completely shut about himself.

“… and I am the black sheep who will waste himself and his life playing a game.”

Atsumu got immediately what were the implications in Kageyama's mind. He knew because he had been object of a similar kind of reproof by his family. And he lighted up, because he knew he could have made him feel better about that. Honestly better.
“Really, I know what you mean there! Trust me, I do… but you know what? Are you happy with the way you want your life to be?”

The explicit request of Atsumu left Kageyama stupefied for a second, then he convincingly nodded, his face suddenly cleared up.

“Then there’s no way you aren’t as cool as your uncle or anybody else in your family. Don’t let anybody think differently and most of all, never let yourself do it.”

Cheered up by his host, the younger guy accepted a glass of milk before asking what they would do during that day. It was the first time for him in the former capital and he knew they could barely see some of it. He admitted he would rather walk sightseeing outside than get stuck in a museum, although he knew from his uncle’s notes they were near the Municipal Museum of Art. Atsumu explained they had a lot of options, and that they could have decided step by step, given the good weather they had for the day and the fact they were both good walkers.

“You just tell me anything you want to do, or see. When I proposed you to come I told you you could have chosen anything… I am just happy you’re here…”

Kageyama tried to guess why his host was so happy, and a quick idea passed through his mind:

“Miya San… it’s not just to have revenge on Oikawa San after the Under 21 beat us in the last retreat that you seem so happy in having me here, is it?”

Atsumu shrieked and although he admitted he would eventually try to sneak that up to his former senpai, he also said that he didn't feel like they had lost to the other team that time, so he was not planning to do it for revenge:

“We played very well then, didn't we? I arrived later than you guys, but we had a great series of performances in my opinion, nothing to be feeling losers for. Ushijima and your dear Oikawa won by technicalities… next time they won't.”

“Mmhh. I hope they won't because I hate to lose. But he is not my dear anything… it's just that since I was a kid, I have come to face him and there have never been times when I haven't felt the heat from our rivalry. It's something which pushes me at always giving over my best, because I know that is what he’ll battle me with.”

Atsumu smiled a different kind of smile than before:

“How cute. But we will still crush them. If you won’t crash him especially, I will. We’ll let Ushijima in Sakusa's care. He's always up for battles with him, who knows why…”

At the mention of Sakusa, Kageyama had a slight hiccup which went unnoticed by the other guy.

*Sakusa. It's almost time to decide what to do about… that thing.*

“Okay Tobio kun, let's go or we won’t have much of the morning left. Are you fine with Heian-jingu for starters then?”

Snapping back from his thought, Kageyama confirmed he was and taking his little anatomical one shoulder backpack along, he went following Atsumu, who exited him whistling happily an old american song his mother used to sing when he was a kid.

The Miyas lived in an affluent and infamous Kyoto neighborhood, steps away from Shirakawa Dori, the so called most beautiful road of Japan, were willow trees and ancient buildings are preserved to
remind passerby and visitors of the perfect balance of Japanese beauty from the past.
To reach their destination they decided to take that road and Kageyama couldn't avoid to be hit by
the extraordinary allure of the place. He started to understand why at any given time Atsumu would
make comparisons between Kyoto and any other town, always claiming for the victory of his
hometown, which was indeed like a diamond among other kind of precious stones.
The whole day the guys spent wandering around Okazaki Park area left the northerner at a loss for
words, which for once was an event caused by amazement and not annoyance nor boredom.
It was almost time to come back for the evening was starting to fall, when Atsumu suggested the
subsequent day they might have taken a trip to the nearby zoo. Kageyama accepted, but after a
while, their walk got interrupted by noises made by a lot of people coming out from gates into the
park.
Atsumu suggested to run towards the bus, because they wouldn't have gotten easy seats in case all
the people who were to exit from the public gyms there would move at the same time than them.
At the mention of the word gym, Kageyama changed face immediately.

“Miya San… are those public gym fit for volleyball too?”

“Yes. Okazaki Park has those too.”

“Couldn't we come back tomorrow morning and instead of going to the zoo…”

“Play a little?”

Kageyama's bobbed, expectant and anxious. While others would have never asked for such a plan,
in fear of disappointing a host keen at showing off the specialities of their own town, he had no
hesitation at doing it, and the sole trace he had intuition of his own peculiarity would reside in his
silence waiting for a confirmation, where all his confidence for a positive answer would be expressed
by the brilliant sparkling of his blue eyes under his dark bangs.

“Right. But I was so looking forward to it? Can I ask you something in return for my giving up at
seeing pandas?”

“Sure. Anything.”

Atsumu smiled, wide and full, eyes reduced in a thin line:

“Sleep in my own room tonight. It will save us lots of time tomorrow. We can wake up at once and
get ready faster…”

“Oh… well, it's okay for me? I didn't even know I was supposed to have a room?”

Atsumu chuckled unstoppable:

“Where did you think we would make you sleep, on the couch?”

Kageyama didn't understand what could be so wrong in his supposition. A couch would have been
fine for him. But apparently couches weren't for teenage guests. He chose to not try to explain that to
his companion. It would have made him laugh longer.

That evening the two decided to eat at home; the day had been fun and interesting but also tiring, and
they'd rather feel the comfort of a home meal than going to one of the numerous restaurants in the
area. Atsumu revealed himself as a pretty good cook, too, receiving open compliments by a delighted
Kageyama for his spicy curry.
After a little time spent in the living room post dinner, Atsumu called his mother to ask when the rest
of his family might come back home; once he was told things would have taken longer than
originally planned, he said they would have find the two of them both sleeping in his own room, and to let them quiet there, for the subsequent morning they would go round Okazaki Park to catch what they hadn't that first day, and maybe get a bit sporty in the main time.

“We will wake up all together, so that we can greet everyone properly tomorrow. Don't waste time for us tonight, because Samu and you too will have another intense schedule in a few hours. Think just of taking a well deserved rest when you guys come back. Have fun, bye!”

When the call ended, Atsumu invited Kageyama at transferring into his room which he had already customized for hosting his guest by extracting out of his own another bed. They brought Kageyama's light luggage in and they got ready for their bath before sleep.

“We have two bathrooms, and a little onsen one which works for one in a spacious way, but which would be cramped for two… do you want to try that? I generally use my parents bath tube anyway…”

Kageyama ducked his head, approving. He loved onsen baths at night.

“I prepared that too. Well, to be honest, mum did. Use all which is there, because it's at your disposal, then…”

“I'll set it all back for the next one using it myself, Miya San. Don't mind me. Thank you for your care…”

And he bowed, his way which was so proper, so deep, so refined; Kageyama bowed like an actual royal, making the passive gesture of kindness and routine a sort of kabuki enthralling motion. Atsumu went hypnotized by it.

“No way. You are our precious guest. Take your bath and leave it and come back here: let me pamper you, ok?”

Kageyama tried to contest, but after a while he had to give in and let Atsumu do as he wanted to; the older guy was ecstatic to spend the night aside him and while working to set their onsen back ready to use, he went imagining the ways they would have talked that night… maybe even… slightly… touched? Hand touches while… talking, maybe? Or…

But when he got back in the room, he found the guy sleeping. Sleeping like a rock. The disappointment arose inside him, who couldn't believe the quickness Kageyama had fallen asleep that tightly and irremediably. But when he got near to try to wake him up, he saw he had something in the hand which was near to his face, and out of the linens.

“A note?”

He picked up the piece of stretched paper, and all disappointment disappeared to let a rich sense of warming take its place.

“This guy…”

Conscious he would have straight fallen asleep as soon as he would lay, Kageyama had written a note to thank Atsumu for that day, and for the one they would live next. A gaunt, essential note to write which he had borrowed a post-it and a pen from his desk probably. A note Atsumu smothered and kept on his heart, glancing over the sleeping writer with endearment.

His plan to have him sleep in his room had worked. Sure he had not planned they would only fall to sleep there, but that note was already something to treasure for centuries so he could not call himself let down.
“Tobio kun…” he whispered inaudible “you don't know what you do to me…”

And before his own hand would pet on his guest luscious dark hair, he put himself under covers too, content the next morning the face he longed for would have been the first thing he would see.

The new day came as planned; the whole Miya family reunited in the kitchen for breakfast eager to ask reciprocally how the previous day had gone; from their animated and affectionate exchanges it sounded adamant that was a very modern, yet tight unit. All four members had a very different style of their own, in the way they carried themselves, and in their way to speak. Also their passions seemed to vastly differ, making their time together a flashy and catchy kaleidoscope to observe for anyone who could be in their company, much more so for a type like their guest, who could spend an entire day without speaking in his usually often empty nest. When Osamu had to leave with his parents, they promised to Kageyama they would be back with his uncle in time to have a proper salute with him, before the two guests had to be taken at the train station to catch their late afternoon Shinkansen back to Sendai.

They wanted to make sure their younger guest hadn't to feel let out.

At that point Atsumu had to intervene, to make clear they didn't need to worry since Kageyama had been taken such good care of, he would definitely come back soon.

At that bold claim, everyone, included Karasuno's setter, looked at him astounded.

Atsumu didn't backtrack, thinking for sure the incoming morning spent playing would have made his declaration a proven truth.

“This is the public gym Samu and I have trained at for every summer since elementary school. We’ll find good people to play against. Are you ready?”

They had taken a taxi to reach the public gyms at Okazaki, to not let a minute pass which could have seen them engaged in their favorite activity. Kageyama slit a grin like a sword cutting his face. His eyes were burning and he was keeping fidgeting with his fingers he had spent ten minutes manicuring that morning:

“When it's about this, you can't find anyone more ready-made than me. Ever.”

“Excellent. Because I haven't lost a two on two in three years here. And I am sure you want to show me and everybody else between you and Samu, you are the better player, keeping my record a winning streak…”

The sharpness in Kageyama’s glare became even scarier then. He was looking at the volleyball gym entrance like his mouth could foam from the expectation of playing.

“You can bet it.”

Atsumu patted his shoulder with confidence:

“Great. Let's show them how it's done then!”

The gym was a modern and renewed structure with multiple courts people had to book to play in. Miya had a visitor card because he was indeed an habitual user of the facility. Many people, the majority of whom were University students, greeted him as soon as he stepped into the place, so familiarly like he were their relative.

“This is Kageyama Tobio, a fellow player from the North. We are ready to challenge all of you with the same rules as always: two on two, one set, advantages, and the duo who wins is the one who keeps playing until defeat or lack of challengers.”
Kageyama realized if those were the rules, and Atsumu claimed he hadn't lost in three years, he and his brother used to sweep all other duos.

This is gonna be fun.

The sets went by, one after the other. The opponents realized quickly the new player was something rare to witness. He had impeccable form, even more so than the already exceptional Atsumu. He was slightly less potent, but he had a better aiming than the other. He also had a monstrous intuition and a knack to learn opponents style and tricks in a blink, just like his partner. In combination the two guys were a symphonic assonance of a perfectly synchronized volleyball machine.

“Damn ‘Tsumu, this guy is even more of a devil than you are… ehi, Kageyama… is that's how you're called right? I don't mean devil in a bad way, ok? It's that I never thought I would ever see in my life another one as crazy about volley as this one here…”

Atsumu explained the guy they had just beaten, the last for that day, since everyone else had left for Sunday lunch, was one of his early mentors at elementary school, and a senpai from second grade ahead.

“Miya San, don't worry. There's no word I take badly when I play, you know it. Well, there is one actually but…”

Atsumu chuckled until he began to snooze and quipped:

“Yeah yeah… I know. That King thing your Four Eyes likes to tease you with… does he do it still?”

“Occasionally. But less than before.”

Atsumu's senpai was baffled, trying to understand what the two guys were talking about.

“Kojiro San don't mind… and you are right tho: this guy in front of you is just like me about volley. That's why we work so well together, and the reason I like him so much!”

Kojiro Hiragami observed his kouhai. He knew Atsumu well enough to understand which level of liking his words implied but he avoided any hint at it. The guy with him seemed completely unaware of anything beside volley in that moment. Maybe he had misunderstood Atsumu's saying. But those two were certainly one great pair behind a net.

Damn if they were.

“Ehi, kid from the North! Come back and next time things will go differently, right?”

“I will. But they won't. I promise.”

Atsumu grinned.

There you go. I knew this would have made him willing to come back another time. There's nothing I plan which doesn't go my way…

After the extended morning spent playing against ordeals of opponents in the public gym, Atsumu and Kageyama came back at the Miyas by taxi again, both of them soaked in sweat and embarrassed to be the kind of bratty passengers who would leave stains on their seats due to misbehaving and inability to foresee consequences of their actions. They asked their driver if he were okay with them being gross and dirty seating in the car, and the
driver assured they were not the worst looking clients he had to travel, and that already that day. Apparently to be a taxi driver would let you see all kind of rotten people.

“We never thought we would have played straight for four hours… we didn't bring changes…”

“We didn't bring anything but ourselves…” whispered a super embarrassed Kageyama, who was not the person to care for look, but who was so drenched in his own sweat he seemed to spill from his pores like a smelly fountain.

The jovial driver, an overweight bald man with a dark toned skin, laughed at the guys reticence and accommodated them in the back of his car.

“You are good guys: nobody ever cares how they carry themselves here, they just order me around like I am a robot or something. Don't worry, sit down and enjoy your traveling. If you want a snack, take one of mines!”

And he opened a box in which he kept a staggering offering of ultra caloric barrels.

Overweight. Explained.

During the ride, after having indulged in a couple of the barrels they had been offered, both guys tried to rest. They also stretch the best they could in the restricted space at their disposal. The both of them had a complete acknowledgment of their own bodies’ needs and requests, and their physical routines were very similar. They seemed pleased in reckoning the mutual care given to their muscles to prevent soreness.

“So you guys are players… what do you play?”

“Volleyball!” They exclaimed with one voice. The driver smiled seeing the passion they could communicate with just a single word.

“Oh, nice… and… which level volleyball? You are tall and broad, but you both sport very young faces… what level are you in, if I may ask?”

“Japan National Under 19 Team level.”

That was also said with one voice. A proud, stony voice. The driver jolted a little in his seat.

“Oh... wow. So you're kind of a big deal?”

Atsumu was to reply, but Kageyama preceded him, with a stoic note which made the other shut his mouth indefinitely:

“We are no big deal. We just get the gift to play more, with the best people, against the best people. We’ll be a big deal if out of all this we can eventually make our Country proud. And victorious.”

The driver glanced at the guy in his rear mirror. He found a powerful dark blue glare fixing into him, so intensely he got frightened. That didn’t sound like a teenager. And even if his face was unmistakably fresh young and quite handsome, he didn't look like a teenager either. He seemed a well grown up man trapped in a teenage shell.

“Oh, ok. But let me know your names, guys, so that if you will make it to be a big deal, I can be vain with my people and say that I met you when you were just bright promises.”

*Bright promises.*

*Is this what we are?*
At the entrance, after Atsumu had paid the taxi driver and let him know their names, Kageyama was still pensive from the words that had been spoken. Atsumu caught him spacing out and pushed him into the house by sheer force, telling him he would have fallen hill in the chill of that day if he hadn’t immediately taken a hot shower.

He offered him all the necessary for it, and told him to use his own bath and shower aside the room they had both slept in. He would have used his parents’ hot tube.
By the time they had refreshed and changed, Kageyama was still mute.
Atsumu couldn’t guess what had gone wrong with him in the last span of their ride, so he resolved to just ask him out.
Kageyama answered he didn't feel like a bright promise. He hadn't done anything to deserve such a compliment yet. He did wonder why people were so easy at labeling young players with too high titles. High titles demanded high achievers, not tentative decent players.
Atsumu laughed in a roar.
Kageyama didn't understand why.

“You are truly funny, you know? People compliment you and you get demoralized…”

“I don't get demoralized…”

“Angry, then?”

“No… it's not that… it's just that… it sounds all so superficial when they think people of our age can be bright promises already. Like it’s easy to be one… it’s not. It's not easy to be a promise, because you gotta fulfill yourself, and lately all I see are good people stopping to care about volley and refusing exactly that, to fulfill their promise to the sport.”

Atsumu was hit from those words. Kageyama truly was serious about his passion. So serious he would suffer in losing troublesome opponents.

“Well, sometimes people have the talent, but their dream life is not setting on that you know? Take Samu… he’s really good at this, don't you think?”

“Of course. He’s a great player… but why are you pickin him up now?”

Kageyama's eyes were worried. He wasn't sure he wanted to listen to the continuation of what his friend was saying.

“Well, my dear brother will stop playing soon. If we go again to the National tournament- and we will, because there's no way we won't - that will be his last taste of volley.”

Kageyama sat down on Atsumu's bed.

“You say not… Osamu San won't play anymore after he graduates?”

Kageyama was shell shocked.

“Fu fu. He won't. I won't be able to make him change his mind this time.”

“This time?”

Atsumu explained how for years he had been the dragging twin. Kageyama could only feel frustrated.

Another good one giving up so easily. Like captain Sawamura. Like Iwaizumi San. Like Kuroo San.
Atsumu collected awareness his guest was spacing out once more. He teased him his playful way about being jealous he took personally and emotionally the news about his twin’s resolve, but Kageyama replied he was just saddened by the notion that another good player was ready to give up, impoverishing the scene in which he could evolve.

Atsumu smiled a sincere and clean smile. The kind of smiles only Kageyama was able to summon on him.

“You really have just that which can move you so… you are a monster!”

Kageyama didn't took it literally. He had learnt the way Atsumu used words. That was a compliment in his vocabulary and he also knew Miya would never offend him. Teasing, yes. Offending… not a chance. Even his old goody two shoes infamous call out had proven to be an invaluable push to him rather than an offensive snark. NOTE

“Tell me you will keep going on at least…”

“Would you be sad if I won’t?”

Sharply and straight, Kageyama answered positively that it would be a trauma to him. His face was hurt at the mere imagine of an Atsumu's deprived volley, his frown heavy and his eyes obscured by refusal; he was caring of his presence in his world, and to have this value for him made Atsumu feeling his heart soaring to Seventh Heaven.

Kageyama was so handsome when fighting with a little bit of pain; his hair so dark like a night fallen to last, his sapphire eyes calling for vengeance, his lips constricted in a sharp, downward line giving his face a weighing and trusting essentialism which was remarkably attractive.

He would have kissed him on the spot.

He would have tried with anyone else… but he wanted to conquer him for real, not just use him for his pleasure. That prevented him from acting on his instinct, and he remained out of Kageyama's personal space.

He cared too much of the consequences to invade it.

“Tobio kun… you won't be happy about this until you are a professional. Maybe in college it will get better but you know, this high school sport… for many is just a club. Just a fun activity. It's not their life. Only a bunch of us play seeing ourselves doing it all of our life.”

Kageyama snapped.

True. Holy shit! This is why I mostly don't get people… this is why I have trouble fitting. This is why I get let down by others’ doubting and giving up on volley, and also why lot of players think of me as a one track mind weirdo… It's because I know this is my life, and they know it's not theirs. We are walking the same road but with different destinations.

“And there’s nothing you can do about it Tobio kun… you must just accept it. And move on. Until you won't be around people who’ll be feeling this sport is their life, you are prone to get disappointed again and again…”

I won't be fitting in the road I walk in until all walking along me won't have the same destination I tend to.

“You… are so right, Miya San!”

Atsumu's breath cut off and his mouth dried up. The way Kageyama's face was intense just then, like
he had found something he had long lost or never possessed, was making his body tingle and
tremble. He was so beautiful, there in front of him, clueless about the storm he was into, pure like a volleyball
priest, untouched by trivialities and open at being assaulted only because he would have never
imagined to be able to suggest those kind of desires in a fellow player.

Atsumu had to rely onto everything he had to not give in and try to taste those puffy lips he had
parted to match his surprised open eyes. His lips when he would not seal them tight in his usual scowling attitude were indeed like a succulent
carnation. Beautifully shaped, and looking soft.

“You seem happy, Tobio kun…”

And there it was, the master sign that Kageyama indeed had found a reason to be happy: his tiny
smile he would wear, ever so quickly, could feel to others watching him like the appearance of the
sacred crane, coming down from the sky to bless people’s love and well being, and disappearing in a
burst of light leaving everybody overwhelmed.

“I am, Miya San. You're again the one able to clear my doubts with things you say, so easily. You
make me think of things that were clear in front of me, but that I couldn't identify before your help.
Thank you. Thank you so much!”

Be still… be still my heart. And be… well, less still my dick. Fuck if he keeps looking at me like that it
can't be helped… I want to ravish him. Shit…

“Awww, don't mind Tobio kun. In a way I’m like a sort of senpai to you too? In the National teams I
sort of I am, right? Now can you excuse me? I probably ate too quick while we were playing, or
maybe the barrels the driver gave us before were expired… I'll need the bathroom for a while…”

Kageyama didn't object, remaining in Atsumu’s room balcony enjoying the Kyoto view from there,
and not realizing the state his host was in.

Atsumu rushed in the bathroom at the other side of the apartment, which was his parents’ one and
not his, to take care of his raging boner. His reckless alter ego had grown almost completely, and hurting against the not smooth fabric of his
fancy underwear and sweatpants.
He was sweating, in need of release, and his mind set off thinking of all the ways he could have had
his guest in that moment if he only had tried to push his boundaries in no volley territory for once.
Because he was confident enough Tobio, with the right flattery, would have let him try.

For gratitude for his advices?
Because for natural trust of hierarchy he would never oppose a senpai he respected?
Reasons were futilities anyway: all he cared for was his certainty that if played the correct way, the
Tobio game riddle would have been successful without a doubt.
He didn't actually think Tobio had anything gay about himself. He had the impression he was
asexual but not due to lack of stimulus rather than, he had presumed, lack of time to dedicate to
pressuring things which weren't volleyball related.
He had the idea if he could push Kageyama into thinking playful sex would be a way to bond better
between teammates he would succeed at making the prodigious setter open at the possibility of being
in a relationship with him.

At global levels.
And he was fairly certain that if he could be the first, he would be easily the only one for him.
Because Kageyama was essentially a very serious, dedicated fella who would never flirt away from a
partner he had found of his taste. More important than that even, he had the feeling such a volley
oriented person could find likable only another volley freak.
So if he could be his first, they would become one forever.
On court, out of a court… right in his room where he was right now, where they could have gotten rid of all clothes while furiously kissing and licking and biting and scratching one another, wildly in lust and craving for connection.
That round ass of his he had often looked at unchecked during times Kageyama would shower or change, his thighs which were getting thicker at each new time he would see them, the inviting line of his broad back parting his playground in two, the back he would have loved to kiss on the right, and to bite on the left, hands sliding down on his narrow hips to keep him in place, and putting his firm cheeky bum over his own expecting dick.

“God yes… yes… like this… open for me, Tobio…”

The feverishly naughty breaths Atsumu was releasing in his parents’ bathroom were breaking in the midst of his coming, body curved in the weakness of the final spill, brain blanking in the final push before hotness would relieve him by exiting his fired up limbs.
He couldn't even direct his come, too big the feeling of his fantasized vision of a broken and licentious Kageyama under his will.
That face which could be so gorgeous with a thin layer of pain how glorious could have looked while holding back tears coming happily for the effort of taking heavy love from the back?
How wonderful a Kageyama experiencing *that* pushy burn for the first time, shocked, eagerly, impatient and needy, how splendid would have he looked takin his own overflowing passion all in?
Nothing would ever compare to that sight for Atsumu.
And imagining that holy like sight was for him a limitless source of exploding orgasms.
The fantasies of him being the top were generally his favorites, making his come the thickest, but he also had powerful and very satisfying ones with Kageyama taking the leading role, because he had easy intuition his ruling and assertive approach on court would better translate in a dominant position also regarding sexuality rather than not.
There Kageyama would wear his demanding and outwardly commanding face, one so strong he had felt moved from even during their game back at the Nationals; eyes like dark holes eating galaxies in, the dark horizon outlining an immense number of stars, those eyes would order him to give up and let him enter, harsh and raw and impossibly well timing his thrusts, because anything Kageyama liked his body to do, his body would do amazingly well. If that was the case with sport, it easily would translate as masterfully with sex.
He could bet it would.
Imagining to be manhandled by a willing Kageyama would cause Atsumu pyroclastic like releases, repressed pleasures which would eventually detonate and go off reaching burning peaks, and lasting in tangible ways for a longer time than most other orgasms he had.
To be serving and satiate the sexual urge of a King… he had never thought of doing anything like that before for nobody, but Atsumu would pay whichever toll, even that of becoming the bottom one, if that would mean he could have access to his precious obsession’s heart while willingly and adoringly violating his body.

That was what he wanted, in that order. He wanted Kageyama's heart first, although he would crave his body so relentlessly.
He wanted to monopolize Kageyama, surpassing even volley in his mind, soul, *life*.
That will was in the end his lighthouse guide. He wanted the monopoly of the King, to be a devoted servant of his reign.
The original idea he had, to get him to learn how to imitate him to maybe surpass him, had rapidly vanished months before, because the more he had spent time with the guy, the more he had become enamored with him completely as a person, not only as a player.
He could have learnt all his tricks on court, but not to steal, rather than to imitate with talent and devotion, to let him know he was so in love with him, his biggest wish was to be like him. To let him
know he had surpassed all the other cool things and all the other cool people he had targeted to make his own for years, and that when it had come to him, the coolest person who could do the coolest things he had ever seen, he had admitted he couldn’t make such coolness his unless by completing mirroring the original, like a fervent ministry.

“Shit, I made a mess out of myself and this bath… gotta clean everything or mum will kill me… and this smell… so persistent…”

Finding cleaning detergents in the cabinet, while throwing his clothes in the washing machine, Atsumu realized he hadn’t felt anything like what he was feeling for Kageyama in all his life. He had gotten it on with more than ten partners in his young playful life, 6 females and four males, and had felt and enjoyed himself a lot with all of them. He had thought he had kinda of fallen in love with a couple of them, one by each gender, but the more he was thinking about the guy who was in his room then, the more he was convinced he had never been truly in love before. Not even with Kyoomi.

He hadn’t felt this escalating passion and troubling totalitarian obsession not even regarding him.

“Oh you’re back, Miya San? Sorry if I lost the track of time here on your balcony.. it's all so beautiful from here… I felt so relaxed watching over your town from here, I couldn't stop. I’ll miss it tomorrow when I won't see it anymore.”

He hadn't noticed he had changed again his clothes. Phew. And well, the city looked in fact extremely nice from there, but Atsumu couldn’t even look out to agree with Kageyama, because all he could look at was him watching over, being supremely sensual in his abandoned position over the banister, hair moving with the wind like trails of silky darkness painted by Kami themselves for humans to wonder about their presence.

“I can’t see it clearly, Tobio kun…” muttered imperceptibly Atsumu “because while you standing there, all else disappears…”

He would have sorely missed him, when the day after he couldn't see him anymore nor on that balcony, nor in his room, or anywhere else near to his eyes.

“You can come back anytime. We will go again to the gym and we’ll arrange more two on two sparring games…”

Kageyama gave sign to agree, a fondness in his voice warm and captivating:

“I'd really like to. But…”

Atsumu had moved on the balcony as well, hands on the metallic support, back facing the outside, and face directed at the room inside:

“What?”

Kageyama was still looking at the town, hair floating in the afternoon breeze, his left elbow just a few inches away from Atsumu's left hand:

“Next time let's play two on two as adversaries. We will play together many more times anyway, won't we?”

And he turned from the town to catch Atsumu's face, which was also facing him there from top down:

“Yes. We’re gonna spend years, all our adult ones as pros, playing together. I can tell.”
Kageyama’s face went back to the town. He seemed content and peaceful, even though his austere glare had returned strong, the mellow atmosphere not influencing it no more.

“This is good then. Let's dedicate our best years to become the greatest players we can.”

Atsumu nodded, no sound made.
The happiness he could feel then wouldn't be measured or described with numbers or words.
He had just been admitted into his crush’s elitist space arranged toward the future.
A future made only of Volleyball and competition.
A future Kageyama would have sacrificed everything else to.
He had been estimated worthy of that journey of glory and blood by his crush, who was the best player he had ever met, and also the most demanding and high standard oriented person he had faced in his life.
He had been deemed worthy by that kind of person.
His target, his model, his prize.
His love.

I have years to make you mine, Tobio. And I promise to never let you go. Whatever it takes to stand by your side, I’ll do it.
Nothing’s gonna stop me now.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE Actual happenings in the Manga.

Note from Author: Kyoto is my most favorite place in Japan, like much of Kansai region. I spent particular care and words in this chapter because I meticulously recreated the itinerary I have been visiting in my three trips in the town, giving the Miyas a house in the location I love the most. As noted also in Chapter 10, Inarizaki fictional location is actually Hyogo Prefecture, which has Kobe and Himeji as main locations. To say one thing, I still have Heian-jingu picture as my iMac screen saver... All topical notes are truthful, included as usual the notes about the places of schools, universities and Hospitals. My advice is to go to Kyoto as soon as you can and fall in love like I did ;)

Higashiyama (東山区 Higashiyama-ku, meaning "east mountain") is one of the eleven wards in the city of Kyoto, in Kyoto Prefecture, Japan. The Southern Higashiyama District is Kyoto’s most famous and most popular sightseeing district, and for good reason: from Shichijo-dori in the south to Sanjo-dori in the north, it’s one long strip of first-rate sights. The itinerary here is described from south to north, but you could just as easily do it in reverse. It can be done in three or four hours, but if you slow down and eat lunch en route, it could take most of a day. The Northern Higashiyama area is second only to the Southern Higashiyama area as Kyoto’s most popular sightseeing area. In some ways, it’s more pleasant: there’s more greenery and even during busy seasons, it feels less crowded. The route here is described south to north, but you could just as easily do it north to south. It takes three or four hours to do this walk, but if you stop for lunch en route and really take your time, it could take most of a day. Note that the Path of Philosophy area will be very crowded during cherry blossom season.

Shirakawa DoriKyoto’s Shirakawa Dori is perhaps the most beautiful street in the
former capital. Located in Gion, one of the licensed geisha areas in Kyoto, it is a graceful and ancient street. Unlike much of modern Kyoto, which is full of clutter in the form of telephone poles and overhead wires, Shirakawa Dori ("white river street") is free of the wires. This affords a lovely view of the buildings and makes strolling a pleasure.

The Heian Shrine (平安神宮 Heian-jingū) is a Shinto shrine located in Sakyō-ku, Kyoto, Japan. The Shrine is ranked as a Beppyo Jinja (別表神社) (the top rank for shrines) by the Association of Shinto Shrines. It is listed as an important cultural property of Japan. Heian-jungu Shrine is one of the most important and visually impressive Shinto shrines in Kyoto. It’s worth a visit, particularly on Shinto festival days.

Nanzen-ji (南禅寺 Nanzen-ji), or Zuiryusan Nanzen-ji, formerly Zenrin-ji (禅林寺 Zenrin-ji), is a Zen Buddhist temple in Kyoto, Japan. Emperor Kameyama established it in 1291 on the site of his previous detached palace. It is also the headquarters of the Nanzen-ji branch of Rinzai Zen. The precincts of Nanzen-ji are a nationally designated Historic Site and the Hōjō gardens a Place of Scenic Beauty.

The Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art (京都市美術館 Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan) is one of the oldest art museums in Japan. It is located in Okazaki Park in Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto and opened in 1928 as a commemoration of Emperor Hirohito's coronation ceremony as it was initially called the Showa Imperial Coronation Art Museum of Kyoto. Okazaki Park and complex sports real public gym, and it's the only one with a vast compound dedicated to volleyball. Okazaki-koen, located in Kyoto’s Northern Higashiyama district, is home to two of Kyoto’s best museums, a concert hall, a major shrine (Hiean-jingu Shrine) and some great park space.

Kyoto City Zoo (京都市動物園) is a zoo located in Sakyō ward, near Okazaki Park, Kyoto and was established in 1903, making it the second oldest zoo in the country after Ueno Zoo in Tokyo. The Kyoto City Zoo is a member of the Japanese Association of Zoos and Aquariums (JAZA).

Sacred Animals of Japan: The Sacred Crane (Tsuru/Tancho)If any bird deserves the accolade, then the crane should be considered the fashion model of the bird world: tall, slim, long-legged, and always elegant. The Red-crowned, or Japanese, Crane is a potent icon. In symbolic form, Tancho, as it is known in Japanese, is the bird of happiness and long life (in fable it lives for a 1,000 years).

It is such a popular icon that it defines Japan, almost as boldly as do images of sacred snow-capped Mt Fuji, or the blazing sun on the white background of the national flag. From airlines to sake bottle labels, from wedding kimonos to elevator doors and chopsticks, so many different things are decorated with them. Meanwhile Japan's innumerable shrines are frequently draped with thousands of origami cranes, like colorful lei.
Lovers In Japan

Chapter Summary

Lovers keep on the road your on
Runners until the race is run
Soldiers you've got to soldier on
Sometimes even right is wrong

They are turning my head out
To see what I'm all about
Keeping my head down
To see what it feels like now
But I have no doubt
One day, were gonna get out

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alisa San, I am gonna travel to Tokyo for a personal matter by Saturday. I need to talk to you in person. Please, if you can, there is a café which seems to be pretty popular nearby the building I need to be at that day. If you can come there to meet, I would really be grateful to you. Let me know. I could be there I think sometime between 3 and 5 pm. I can't be more specific now, but I confide that I can narrow the time before Saturday morning. I really hope we can arrange this. It's very important for me. Thank you for listening.

It was 3 am in her dormitory and she couldn't stop staring at her mobile screen. Since she had received Kageyama's text that afternoon, the world had stopped spinning around, and all which was mattering to her had become that inscription.

She hadn't replied yet, because she was trying to figure out how she should have done it. The fact she would have been at that cafe wasn't optional: she would have gone even if they had cut her limbs off. But how to tell him, that was vital to decide and she was tossing in her bed trying to guess which side of her it would be better to remind him of through her answer.

He had read her letter.
And after that, it seemed that he wanted to see her.
That guy couldn't lie to save his life; better, he was not only completely and utterly honest, he also lacked any common filter to preserve his deepest motivations from people's scrutiny, so he had made clear he needed to see her and that it was important.
But… why?
To tell her to fuck off?
If that'd be the case, it wouldn't be a need to spare a trip and a meeting for. He could have just avoided her from then onwards. It wouldn't have been difficult, considering their residential locations.
Then maybe… her letter had miraculously gone throughout his recondite heart and revealed to him he had actually fallen in love with her and her brave confession?
Her own heart would have begged for it… but also that scenery didn't ring true to her.
How to tell him she would be happy to see him no matter the reason without sounding nor pathetic nor indifferent?
How?
3.40 am.
She would jump off the bed in 3 hours to a medical apprenticeship which would constitute the bone of her student semester as a future nurse, and she hadn't slept a minute.
What to write to him?
3.50 am.
*Tobio kun, sorry if I write you back this late. I tried to find the words to answer, and I’ve finally resolved myself in doing it as you would. This is exactly how I feel, so I hope to not seem neither pathetic nor indifferent to you if I tell that of course I will be there to meet. Nothing could stop me. Tell me where and when and I’ll be there, no question. I am free all day Saturday so it’s up to you to tell me what to do.*
*You made me very happy.*
Thank you.
3.57 am.
Two hours and a half of sleep would be enough for starting her training week right. Dreams came sweet and resting to her pacified soul, and she woke up full of energies to tackle her schedule like a pro.
The week passed with no overthrowing troubles, and by Friday afternoon her horizon had easily narrowed to become a bright and pleasant ribbon which was ready to be untied to make her completely joyous.

“Alisa, will you come tomorrow with us in Shinjuku? We want to see the new deals! In a few days is September and Hitomi says the Wego store is full of things we must get!”

Alisa was carefully packing her nurse stock back in her locker, before leaving for the weekend. Her friend and colleague, Yoshiko Tsurugi, was as usual the frilly and lovable mess everyone in their class liked her for. But that Saturday she wouldn't have been part of the girly fun which had been planned.

“Yoshi, sorry but not tomorrow. I can't come. I have a date. Sort… of.”

Tsurugi’s face expanded like a balloon shuffled and blown where eyes, and nose and mouth grow and grow until they burst.

“A date?!? Who's that, tell me tell me… please?”

Alisa smiled.

“I can't. Sorry. And… it's not really a date… it's…”

Yoshiko Tsurugi wouldn't be satisfied with unconvincing stuttering.

“Alisa, please…”

And she put in front of her friend the mirror she was keeping in her own locker:

“… this is the color of your face: do you think I can believe you even if you say it's not a date? I promise I won't tell anyone, neither Hitomi and not even Nanako… who’s that?”

Alisa thought that the fact she would turn bright red just by thinking of a guy was a definite low point about her personality. And she had to think about a guy in general to not turn from red to
purple, because if she had visualized properly the not-date she would meet, Yoshiko wouldn’t let her go away.

“I told you I can't tell you. Sorry. But don't worry. You don't know him. Nobody here knows him.”

And closing her locker, she went away waving a hand and smiling one of her flashy smiles people would be let transfixed from, allowing her whatever she would like to obtain. On the metro back to her parental house she would still sleeping at during weekends, all she could do would be to open her phone to the last message she had gotten that morning:

_Suzu Café in Shibuya. 15:30. Thank you._

Her heart was noisier than the train. Just a bunch of hours, and she would be seeing him.

Unlike what she had supposed, that night her sleep came easy and dreamless. She awoke with the most perfect mood she had in weeks and her family and her brother were the greatest companionship for her morning time.

When she consumed her lunch along them, though, she told them she had to be quick because she had a meeting planned downtown.

She used all her imagination to tell them to not mind without having to lie and also without telling anything of her real plan for the following hours.

Then after eating, she excused herself and singing one of the most current tunes at the top of the charts, she got ready to leave.

She was not the best traveler around Tokyo, despite being part of the town since childhood: the point there was that her taste for cuteness and pleasant proportions would make her remember only the sights of Tokyo which would touch her aesthetically inclined memory, making pretty much all the rest a forgettable blur, and therefore leaving her most of times lost in visualities which were all different sides of the same unknown.

Train and metro stations were at the top of her list of impossible-to-correctly-memorize places in her town.

Unfortunate minus, especially in a day like that, she would later regret.

All she could think of, while sucked into the mishmash of people who were in her same place at her same time, was that Shibuya station was another way to define hell. Dante Alighieri would have made his description of it based on the labyrinth that station was if he had gotten notion of it, guarantee.

She looked at the digital watch. 15.29. She was going to be late. Unforgivable.

Finally out on the road, she suspected she had gotten on the wrong side of the station overcrowded block. 15.34. She would have cried but it would have just made her afternoon worse if her light, yet carefully planned make up would melt in a river of tears.

Determined at acting more adult like, she observed quickly around her and she found the solution at a span distance.

A taxi.

For once her rather European look would be of use. And although she hated with all her might the stupid assumption that beautiful girls must be dumb to compensate for their looks, as in needs as she was she would put that idiotic idea at use too.

Faking a wobbly Japanese to the taxi driver, she convinced him to take her for a very short run under the impression she was to be tearing up - though her hovering cry was not a poser’s one: she would have been crying real tears in case of a refusal, being the hour she could read from the taxi clock 15.45 already - to Suzu Café.

Five minutes and a chunk of extra money later, she put her foot into the café, eager and humiliated to be there, but so late.

“Your friend is waiting there…”
The waitress told her, indicating one of the tables by the windows. While Alisa was about to thank her and move towards it, her steps stopped, like a wave of heath and light coming from there had gone through her.

Sat by the window, watching outside, she could see Kageyama with his face sustained gentlemanly by his right hand, long beautiful fingers into his glossy dark hair, and the other hand and arm resting on the table with a swanky, yet tasteful composure.

The light coming from outside was outlining his cheekbones, making them even more noticeable, and his lips, not sealed but slightly parted, had in full display their natural volume and pretty color. He was watching outside calmly and probably trying to wonder where she was, maybe bothered or maybe not, but what the light couldn't hide at her experienced sight was the amazing blue his eyes catching outdoors were wafting around.

His posture was so naturally endearing and he looked as stunning as Hikaru Genji had to in Murasaki’s Tale. He truly was the epitome of male handsomeness as described there: his silky straight hair, impossibly dark and shiny, which would move along air as every fiber of it were living a life of its own, resting and courting the base of his unbending nose; his skin, smooth and spotless, which she well remembered was velvety yet very toned at the touch… and those eyes, those indescribable mesmerizing blue eyes which could make anyone weak, glancing around.

“Miss? Is that one your friend?”

Alisa came back on Earth.

“Oh… yes. It’s him…”

The waitress smirked with a little malice:

“You have a really handsome boyfriend, I wouldn't let him wait any longer if I were you…”

Alisa frowned a bit, and moved towards him. He was not her boyfriend, but that didn't mean a niggling waitress could dare to have opinions about him.

She had been so upset by the waitress, she had moved to the table forgetting she would be facing her crush she had made wait almost half an hour alone.

“Alisa San!”

Kageyama stood to greet her, like he hadn't even considered she was late. He looked at her with the usual face, too, like their latest parting hadn't been complicated by tears. Or kisses. Or… regrets?

“Kag… To…bio… kun…”

Kageyama invited her to sit, and sat back himself. He was just like always: polite, never mincing, yet perceivably doting. She would not be aware that kind of receptiveness was a rarity coming from him.

“Tobio sounds fine. Please call me that, as you used to. Won't you, Alisa San?”

She smiled whispering ok. He was again in front of her. She was so exultant she couldn't stop the stomping of her heart. If only he could understand… if only he could accept her love… how much more happiness could she feel then?

Once they were both seated, they took the menus offered to them to pick up their orders. After that, they were left alone and that meant they could finally speak in liberty.

Alisa, who had picked her outfit after hours of different combinations tried in her room at her parental house, could not avoid to ask Kageyama how he had decided for his look instead.

“Where were you this morning then? You… are…”
Tracing her gaze on his own body, Kageyama lowered his own sight to his bust, and got where she was coming from:

“In my sporty clothes? Well… yes. I feel more comfortable in these… but for where I was, they fit too.”

Alisa seemed dubious. She knew he didn't care much for fashion, but even comfort had to stop somewhere. Especially when in Shibuya, Tokyo?

“And so you were at?”

“I was at JVA headquarters, which are here in Shibuya as well. I got… called up. By them…”

“Youth training camp? Lyovochka got called too, he told me yesterday at dinner…”

Kageyama had always thought she was extremely cute mentioning her brother any chance she could, with that pride depicted on her face, and her lovely way to smile while pronouncing his affectionate nickname. Such a wonderful sister she had to be…

“No. I haven't been called up for that. But Hinata and Tsukishima will be there with him, they got called there too. I…”

Alisa realized before he spoke, her brain always fast at putting hints together and give a name at patch worked prospectives, and exploded with a cheer in the middle of the serving their waitress was about to bring:

“Oh my!!! You got called by the National Team!”

The waitress, not the annoying one who had displeased her earlier on, almost launched their tray at their faces, caught by Alisa's sudden scream.

Alisa apologized profusely, the waitress put their orders in front of them, then she went background to tell to her colleague that the gorgeous guy sitting with the white haired tall witch must have been some sort of athlete which had to be good enough to play maybe in a National Team.

Back at the table, Kageyama was telling Alisa how he had been brought by his family in Tokyo that day to be briefed about a serious opportunity he was being offered to start to become part of the National Selection. Alisa fell once more in love with how fervent he could become when referring to what was dearest to him. Ah, if he weren't devoting all of his ardent passionate side only to a sport! But he was so prepossessing when fired up, she told herself, that it didn't matter that much which reason would that striking sight happen for.

“Congratulations then. I think you deserve this really really much…”

They fell silent for a moment. They were silently lost in each other's eyes again, like many other times, like that last time when getting lost there mutually had lead to kissing. Tears. And maybe… regret?

“Tobio kun…”

“I thought we agreed on my name before…”

“Tobio kun… tell me please…” Alisa was getting red basking in his eyes “… why did you want to meet me?”

Kageyama's pupils diverted; he turned towards the window to look at people walking outside, then inhaled a bit, and facing Alisa again he said:
“I had to after your letter. I would have had to even without it. But that… this…” and he put his hand in the pocket of his sporty jacket to extract a well known piece of paper he had carefully kept “… deserved a meeting. I needed to see you…”

Looking at the paper in his hand made Alisa relive its writing, and the redness on her face increased:

“I wrote the letter in a rush, a few days after… our encounter…” she didn't want to sound apologetic, because she didn't feel she had to apologize for wearing her heart proudly on her sleeve “… and I asked Lyovochka to help me to bring it to Karasuno, even though he had not, and still hasn't, any concept about what's written in there.”

Kageyama made a movement with his head which was to be read as an invite to go on with her speech.

“At first he said he would send it to your short middle blocker, with a note it was directed to you, but I didn't want to risk for no one but you to hold it. I feared for your reputation in case people other than you would open it, read it, and correct guess on it…”

Kageyama hardened. That fear she had was a direct fault of himself, for what he had told the girl the night when everything between them had gone south.

“Alisa San, you shouldn't have worried. Hinata may be a loud dumbass, but he is also honest and loyal. He would never open something which is not his…”

“But I didn't want to remind nor him nor anyone that…”

“That?”

“…that you were… bothered by this stupid girl who can't… just can't… simply… let you go. Cause they must have guessed… that…”

Kageyama slid one hand to touch the top of Alisa's left one. The girl jolted in his seat, promptly raising a shocked face to watch him, eyes wide, cheeks on fire, and a hint she was about to cry, if for what she had said, or due to his touch, nobody could've been able to tell.

“You don't have to call yourself that. Please, don't. You are many things and… not a single one of them that I can think of has anything negative about it…”

Alisa's eyes started to properly watering. Kageyama's ones were clear and fix on hers. He loved her eyes the same as always. They were so distinctive. A perfect fit. Lost in what he loved to watch, he was not able to suss out anything else: not Alisa's effort to dodge crying openly in a public place, or the fact she had laid her own hand he had feathery touched over his, intertwining fingers, or that she had moved her other one to her mouth, in surprise for what he had just said. He didn't apprehend any of that, lost in her eyes.

Those eyes which could slow him down, in the sweetest, most pleasant way, making his need to rush towards his goal momentarily braking and stop.

But that spell could last no more than moments, because his goal still was all he cared for in the end.

“Alisa San, I wanted to meet you to tell you this exactly: I… wow, let's hope I can make myself clear… I tried to find the right words in ways you wouldn't believe…”

Like resolving myself to ask Oikawa San, for starters...

Alisa had stopped to cover her mouth, and her hand freed had wiped her own eyes delicately. That the guy in front of her would take time out of his maniac routine for the sake of her hit her deeply. Sure, he was no smooth talker, but he was always sincere. To the point of paroxysm at times. People
were in general pretty taken aback by his behavior, seemingly cold because too intent in niche activities to suggest empathy, so he was rarely questioned openly but if they had just tried with no preconceptions to take a walk in Kageyama's world, they would have found a person nice to talk with, a bit funny for being unfiltered and direct where the majority of others would be deflecting and hiding, but somebody with clever intuition and a personal, eccentrically fascinating outtake on life. A person always, essentially candid. A rarity. An inestimable rarity he was.

“Take your time. I am sure you'll make yourself clear. You always do…”

“It's very important that I make you understand this well. Because I fear last time I acted too impulsively and rough… and that, although it was my intention to… leave… well that… probably wasn't the way to do it.”

Alisa gulped.
Was he regretting to have run away from her that night at the Obon? Oh, if he were…

“I am listening. Go on, Tobio kun.”

“Alisa San… when I left you at the Obon, I was unfair. I realized it too late to tell you, but what happened left me dizzy… confused… and scared.”

“Scared, that I got it. But do you think I would have made you risk for real your reputation?”

Again. That had to wound her a lot, to dig into it twice in a few minutes. Kageyama felt again the guilt of his past words echoing in his being, like accusations to himself and his poor foresight.

“I know you wouldn't have. But my scare… wasn't that. It wasn't only that.”

Alisa was studying the Sphinx like face of the guy in front of her, capable to word out emotional rockets with an unchallenged expression. How could he do that, it was enigmatic to her.

“What did I do to scare you then?”

“Well… you… chose me?”

Alisa looked at him baffled and iffy. *I chose… him?*

“What does it mean…that I chose you?”

Kageyama's face was still unperturbed like a stone, oxymoronic compared to each word he was saying.

“It means that you are the first ever human who has come that near and intimate with me, even if I am not really the kind of guy who gets this whole flirty or romantic thing at all. I have no idea how I am supposed to treat these things and that generally is enough for people to cross me out, which I don't mind at all by the way…”

What a coherent guy, and so troublesome at that, thought Alisa in the meantime.

“… but then you came, beautiful like Ame-No-Uzume and decided this dense and impulsive guy could be nice enough for you and…”

*Beautiful? He thinks I am beautiful? Like the Okame goddess? Me?*

“Hang on a minute… you think this of me?”
Kageyama looked at her like she had asked if he had two eyes or none at all.

“Would anyone in a sane mind think differently?”

Alisa had to think. Fast. With a neutral face. Kageyama had no idea about how to flatter, much less on how to co-opt people. He would never use words any other way than for stating his truth. Openly. There was no shame in truth for him, so naturally bold he would often seem inconsiderate to the rest of the world. That foolishly intrepid guy in front of her had just finished to claim forever her bleeding heart once again just by telling her he found her beautiful. And she couldn't believe how fast she had fallen back into that haze one million times worst than before.

“Tobio, don't do this to me…”

“This… what?”

She wanted to tell him to not let her hope; she wanted to beg him to not tell her she was beautiful, because her heart would not survive in being considered so much by him, without actually getting to get him in the end. She wanted to tell him she was not beautiful, he was, like a modern Genji, shining like a night full of stars. She wanted to tell him all that and then she wanted above all else to have him react at her words by pulling her close and start to kiss her just like that night, when she had given him his first kiss and he had given her a complete overturn of the priorities of her life.

“This… this. Don't tell me you think I am beautiful but that I scare you…”

Kageyama shook his head, asking her to let him explain himself better. His face seemed to also flinch a bit.

“Dear Alisa San, you don't scare me. No way. What scares me is that during that night I understood that what you did to me… better, with me could move me. Your choosing me affected me. A lot. So instead of running away blaming you like a stupid guy for things you weren't doing alone, I should have just admitted I had to move away not because I might have been caught, but because if I had not I would have never stopped… being there. With… you.”

Alisa had all words Kageyama was saying replaying and resonating in her head like angels saying, a blessing and taunting symphony of perdition which was calling her every sense. His face though was not as excited as she would have hoped to see after such claims. Why was he telling her all that? Why wasn't he leaping into her space to give her a proof of the inevitable attraction he was rightfully describing among them?

“But why… why stopping something… if you know it could make us happy?”

Kageyama's face went very serious there. Alisa felt her condemnation coming.

“This is what I need you to understand. I can't be happy if I am away from a court. And what you suggested to me then… would call energies away from my volley. I can't do that. But I wanted you here, after your letter, to tell you that is not your fault. To tell you under any other circumstance anyone else, me included if I were not like this, anyone would feel endowed with bliss in being chosen by you. But I right now… I can't bare to explore this any further. I am scared I would not been giving the whole of me to what matters the most if I would try to. Please understand me… don't blame yourself for this… Though I hope you also won't blame me, for loving volley more than my own life…”

More than his own life. Stupid kid. Stupid, wonderful and amazing kid. You say this, and with that face which now is mellowing, and if you would order me to set myself on fire for you I would. You
stupid kid who makes me even stupider… because even if you tell me this, I won't be freed from you…

Alisa puffed imperceptibly to resolve herself at replying. She had to make herself clear as well to him.

“I cannot accept this. No please… let me finish. I can't accept to give up on you now, after you've told me all this. Let me get this… you would say you care about me?”

“I do. I just care about volley the most, even more so than about myself…”

No lie in his eyes. What can I do? I can't lie either, much less to myself. I love him. I don't even hate volley… I just love him. Even more so than myself… is there an escape from this? And do I want to find it?

Alisa finished to sip his ice caramel edged coffee. She kept her eyes on the glass for a while then simply said:

“Well, fair enough. I do care about you, too. Even more so than about myself because it seems that even if I get you will be married to volley, this for me is not a sufficient reason to give up on you. You also don't blame yourself about this, please, ok? It's just like it is. This is what I feel. Don't know for how long, but right now this is it. I love you. I can't help it. What I wrote in my letter remains. I won't bother you, but I will keep you in my heart. Can you care about me even like this? Whatever this means in your volley world, can you still care a little about me, too?”

Alisa shoot up and offered her eyes to his. No failure allowed. Kageyama sustained her stare with his, and with his softest voice she had heard more than anyone else in the world he said:

“Of course I can.”

Alisa dared then aiming higher:

“Will you kiss me now?”

Kageyama almost smiled, and his voice came out even softer than before:

“That, of course, I can't Alisa San. I’m sure that we can find other ways to spend the rest of our time together today, won't we?”

Alisa chuckled and then she said she would force him to talk all afternoon, to repay her for the missing kiss. She knew he was one of the least talkative teenagers she had endured, but she loved his voice and also his way to express himself nevertheless. To talk with him was adorable because without knowing it he would show a series of different faces, depending on the matter of his talking, and to catch the mobility of his features, and his way to occasionally gesticulate would cause her heart skipping beats often.

Kageyama unbridled was one of the most darling things in the whole world, she thought.

Weather outside had started to worsen, and she asked how much longer he could have stayed with her before he had to go back to his family to return in Miyagi.

He answered he had around an hour more before getting back to them and that maybe they could have remained in the cafe if they had ordered something more, avoiding the incoming rain and the possibility of getting lost, which was an experience the both of them had lived a number of times already.

Alisa agreed, Kageyama then sent a text to his family to tell them they could have picked him up outside the cafe later, and when he finished Alisa started to ask him about a wide range of subject,
though soon all of them converged to the one the guy cared properly for. Kageyama started to truly get into conversation as soon as he had to answer the many questions she had regarding his teammates who were to be with her brother at Youth Camp. She wanted to know more of them because of her brother, but at the same time she wanted to make Kageyama talk about himself in relation to them. She was not aware she was the one person he was able to speak with so carefree and unleashed, of things he rarely got to open about with anyone. And Kageyama had also the necessity to put in words his opinions about his teammates, for reasons she would never guess, and purposes he had to ponder to shape his future at its best.

“Say, Tobio kun… what is about your short middle blocker that is so good you seem to always be at your happiest when you play with him? There must be something, because… well… he is quite short isn't he?”

"Hinata pushes me, and this is why I cannot slack off when we play together. He's the only one who strives for the top the same as I do. He may start from disadvantage, sure, but he compensates with impressive fixity of intention. He's the opposite of Kei who has so much given to him by Mother Nature, but who has almost inexistent willpower. I'll never understand that. Tsukishima is well built to this sport, incredibly smart, collected, registered. But he doesn't feel volleyball like he should and disrupts what it could be with his resignation. He makes me so angry at times…”

And she could see it: whenever Kageyama would cavort about his passion, his whole being would be lit up. His face would lose its frown, and get painted by the greatest variety of emotional expressions he could manage to convey. Talking about this Kei guy, she was reckoning, he was getting visibly frustrated.

“Maybe he thinks you make it easier because you are more talented and…”

Kageyama looked at her sharply, zooming his glare which could make people's blood run cold. She hesitated a bit in her trial at continuing her explanation and there Kageyama realized he had probably scared her.

"Sorry… I made one of my scary faces right? I know what you mean, but it shouldn't be the way people think about volley, or sport in general. People think that guys with some natural skill have it easy… but it's not like that…”

Alisa understood she had touched a sensitive spot. She invited him at explaining to her what he meant, with a soft cheer and her hands trying to find a place on the table which could be near to his, without looking too obvious. Kageyama caught one of hers with both his, and her heart dissolved in butterflies:

“People assume just because of my talent everything is easy to me. It's not, somehow it's a burden. Because if I do great things it's normal or effortless to them. Instead is like I have been given the best cards in the lot: if I lose it's my fault, if I win it's the given luck from the destiny. They never consider how I live to compete in order to become the very best I can. Sure my supposed best might be a tad higher than others' BUT this doesn't mean to be living with such a pressure and a push and my constant toiling to perfection is any kind of a party. It doesn't mean I don't train furiously to reach any option I can make mine the best I possibly can. I never sit on any achievement, because the one who thinks he has reached the top and stops climbing can only fall back behind. I don't really care if people understand tho. I don't ever care about anyone else because the harshest and pushiest judge I'll ever meet is myself anyway."

He was grabbing her hand like the force of his words and the one of his convictions could pass into her being by osmosis there in that contact. All she could say to him was that she did understand him. She wasn't sure she had, but she wanted it so much she wasn't lying affirming so anyway.
"I am sure you are not the only one feeling so. I also think there are people who can see and appreciate your efforts, people who know you're not where you are only by divine intervention…"

Kageyama nodded, surprised at her words, and realizing while she was speaking that yes, he was not completely alone in his performance towards the ultimate level of sportsmanship:

"You are right. I think I've met people who feel and think like I do about this, and therefore can see what I am trying to accomplish isn't anything but hard labour…"

"Can I ask you who are they?"

"Well, I think that Ushijima San thinks like me and if he does, this alone confirms me I am right in how I try to do my things because… you know, he is a really great player. Then I am sure Oikawa San thinks like me, and he is the setter I look up to since I was a kid... Then there is Sakusa Sama, an incredible, incredible spiker, whom I think as well isn’t much different to me regarding dedication and sacrifice. I’d say he's a tough book to read, and I cannot claim I know him that well to talk about him deeply. But I do feel he is very similar to me about being ambitious and hard working. And I could only learn from somebody like him."

Alisa couldn't avoid to smile at Kageyama, raptured in his own world. She would tell him he was never more attractive than when his eyes were a blue firework dictated and ignited by volley thirst. But she didn’t want to stop his hymn to the beauty of sport slavery, a thing she didn't really approve of, but a thing which was undeniably fundamental to the person she loved:

"The constant struggle to perfect yourself is the greatest journey ever and it fully has me into..."

Alisa jolted slightly. She knew about that part even too well. That was the reason he couldn’t let himself fall for her after all. But the way he was stating it, the incredible flame into his eyes, the power he could communicate then were all so fascinating and glorious she found herself even more in love with him than before.

"With your extraordinary talent and your even more extraordinary drive, I am sure you will become someone worth mentioning in the books of volley, Mr. Kageyama Tobio kun…"

Kageyama seemed taken aback by Alisa's confidence.

"Well, there is much that I need to work on actually… For instance I found that social skills in this sport are substantial and of a strategic use and I realized already a while ago there is so much I have to learn to become really good at volley, because as for social skill, you do know, I am a scrub. And what I lack there my talent won't help me in finding it, because it belongs to a side which is not technical but personal and emotive..."

"What do you mean?"

"I have understood that to become a true player I have to try to connect with other people... well, other players at least..."

Alisa found his confession of being socially retarded so tender, she covered his hands grabbing hers with her other hand to caress his precious knuckles; the guy gulped a bit, then looked at her fondly and went on:

"I feel lucky I could realize this all with Karasuno. Tho I can't express it because I suck at it I am very grateful to my teammates for all they did in this regard alongside me. I wish I could make them understand how much I owe to them all. I hope my contribution to our games will do that. I wish I could say it... but we all know I'm simply unable to approach such topics without looking like a fool.
This is another thing I admire Hinata for. He can speak his mind up so fruitfully to whoever...

“You really like this Hinata guy, don’t you?”

His frown and pout came back on his face at speed light. Alisa found it double appealing. It reminded her of the way brothers can hate to be considered loving one another, but how they would fight anyone attempting to harm the brother they probably had spent all day torturing playfully.

“He is… a dumb guy. Loud. Extenuating. But he is also a great player, because he never gives up. And he is the most socially skilled individual I have ever met. He has been able to talk with me since day one. Of course all he talks about is nonsense but… the fact he tried to talk with me, from the start… that was something.”

“Have you ever told him this?”

Kageyama's frown became a shocked mask.

“Eh? No way. And I never will… why should I?”

Alisa was entertained by his reaction. Talking about Hinata, he was showing his age way more than talking about anyone else, and she found that also adorable.

“Fine… but… can I ask you what you find most noteworthy in him, what you kinda envy him for?”

Kageyama put his hand on his chin, mumbling… then he said:

“I can't say I envy him for it, but… you know, everyone soon or later comes to like and take part for Hinata. His personality gains him allies in a way that mine could never. I find it extraordinary. But I don't envy anyone. Envying is an useless way to waste time.”

And with that, he had gone back to being the strangely wise and discerning teenager people had little clues about. This was the same guy who would never tell his teammate he was considering him so well, for the sake of bantering with him like they were children in a sandbox.

Gosh, she loved him so…

“Do you ever do puzzles?”

Asked Alisa noticing their time together was fast running out.

“I used to, when I was a kid… I remember I was pretty good with them…”

“And now?”

“I only seldom try futoshiki…”

“Futoshiki? So you like maths?”

“Well… no… Maths? No… it’s just… a way to kill time when sometimes I need to…”

He would do those in his lonely hours at home pretty often in the past; but with his new academic tasks Sugawara had carefully kept sending him, and the fact his social life had somehow requested more of his time as well, albeit just a little, he had found difficult to keep up with futoshiki in the previous months.

“So I think I picked the right thing for you in the end…”
“Uh?”

And she took out of her purse a beautiful onyx decorated box. Put it on the table and invited Kageyama at opening it. He did.

“Cards?”

“Yes. To have fun and play… either with yourself or… your teammates… or…”

“Friends and family?”

“Yeah. That too.”

“Why?”

“I like karuta games. You can learn poetry, they are beautifully drawn… they can excite or calm you depending how you use them. And also… isn't a bit like life is, to play those card games? You seem to agree, considering what you told me before…”

“Card games are like life?”

“Yes: everything is decided from the start, because the decks are just composed independently from your say on them, but you can discover new things depending on fate; depending on actions, taken or not. You can play them as puzzles, with pieces falling in without a regular order… or you play them growing scales or lines step after step, and you can't go on if you miss even the smallest one. Or you can… overturn any rule and just do what you want and create…”

“Something new. Something…”

“…yours.”

He took the box with the cards. Their hands touched in the passage of it from one to the other, and she felt like his long, perfect fingers were intentionally grazing over hers, softly, slower than one had to expect. And she shivered and it was not for the wind blowing around them, from some of the windows multiple customers had just open near to them.

“Thank you, Alisa San. I will treasure this.”

“Will you use them?”

“I will. Both alone… and not alone.”

Because now, she knew, he had teammates to play with. Friends, probably, to play with. She felt warmer thinking that awkward, adorable guy hadn't to be alone anymore. She could feel even though it'd never been a true bother to him, because all he cared about was still only volley back in his lonely times, he enjoyed more to have the chance to not being left completely on his own devices. He had been taught by his most recent part of life that you can't progress and level up just on your own, no matter how great you are. He had understood this surely only for the sake of his game; but Alisa could see that had also changed , and for the better, his life as a human.

“I hope one day I can play with those too…”

She whispered timidly, attempting to look at him without turning too red; he was offering her his most relaxed face. He looked tenderly savoring her face, flustered and undecided about how to react to his calm composure, which was at once so much his, and also totally new, because it was made
out of a sweet care, and that was for her something too dear to not move her completely.

The guy in front of her cared about her.
He just hadn't the time to dig deeper about that care.
He had said so.
That beautiful day, in that fancy cafe he would have probably never entered on his own will, he had said so, not convolutedly, but clearly enough.
Her heart could still hope…
One day maybe, one day he would have liked to discover why he cared about her. One day, maybe, he would have liked to understand which kind of nature his care belonged to.
After all, he was able to behave with her like with no one else.
Of that she was sure.
She thought about what he had said, that he felt she had chosen him, and it seemed to her that the reason behind the fact he was able to be that openly himself with her resided exactly in that choice he thought she had made, to not cross him out just because he was a bit awkward and peculiar.
All his feelings about the fact he was not able to inspire connection in others… maybe he felt she had broken the curse with her choice?
Like she had herself one, but loving him.

Love just comes… you don't get a choice there. It just happens, Tobio… and I hope the day comes for you too, when you will stop refusing this simple, eternal law.

She would have waited. She would have, if he only had given her a tiny hint more that his stubbornness was not invincible…

“You surely will.”

He didn't smile, because it was still rare to have him doing it.
His mouth just moved to speak, puffy lips forbidden, but so inviting despite their unreachable-ness.
Still his eyes… his eyes, she could have sworn it, they had smiled by sparkling more, almost as much as when he was talking about his volley, a few minutes before.

“I… count on it. I can be very patient. Don't forget it, you one track minded wonder, ok?”

Yes. His eyes were absolutely sparkling and she thought she could die on the spot because of them. One day, she swore, she would catch back her own sparkling Genji prince and he would kiss her again. Willingly.

“I won't. Thank you Alisa San.”

Alisa stood up, and he did the same. Walking towards the exit, she felt the eyes of that unkind waitress on them, and to piss her off, she moved the nearest she could to Kageyama, who looked at her like she had to tell him more, expecting a sentence from her, maybe another little snarky remark about his simpleness, which strangely didn't seem to upset the setter when coming from her mouth. She just caught his hand visibly one last time, and he let her do it and let her grab it, reciprocating.
Yeah… all those reactions to her gestures sure seemed pretty uniquely reserved to her. Alisa tried not to guess too much about it or it would have been impossible to let him go in the next few seconds.

“I just wanna tell you that whenever you like to meet, I will be there. And I won't miss a step in your journey to volley glory, though every time you will play against my Lyovochka, you know, I’ll cheer for him…”

Kageyama smiled.
A proper, full, stunning smile.
She felt destabilized by it, holding onto his arm even more.

“Fair enough. But I will do everything I can to make you question your support to him and not to me, hard. Let's see how it will go, ok?”

Alisa reddened, and her hold of his hand tightened another level. The guy wasn't bold only when playing, that was clear. He truly had a dominant personality, and an egotistical greed, about all things he liked to possess. She still wanted to drive his need to command towards herself. She wanted to inspire him a desire to exclusivity which would transmute in a boundless necessity of requiring her. Not merely her attention. Her. As a whole.

“Okay. Let's see then."

And with a chaste caress on her lovingly dozed face, he moved outside, to get into the car waiting for him to get back home.

Chapter End Notes

**WEGO Stores** Global fast fashion brands like H&M and Forever 21 have influenced Japanese fashion with their affordable, yet stylish clothing. But the Japanese mainstay WEGO is just as big, if not bigger, amongst those who are into Japanese fashion. WEGO is the best place to go if you want to dress like a Harajuku girl without spending massive amounts of money. Magazines and blogs have made it one of Tokyo’s top women’s clothing and accessory stores by frequently featuring Japanese street fashion geniuses who are quoted as saying, “I got this at WEGO,” lending it superstar street style cred.

**Suzu Café** Chain of fashionable coffee shop/lounge with multiple locations scattered all around Tokyo. The one in Shibuya is particularly known for its wide open windows on the vast road it's overseeing.

**Hikaru Genji** (光源氏ひかるげんじ) is the protagonist of Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*. In the story, he is described as a superbly handsome man. Genji is the second son of an emperor, but he is delegated to civilian life for political reasons and lives as an imperial officer. "Genji" is the surname as a noble demoted from royalty. His true given name is never referred to in the story, like most other characters. "Hikaru" means "shining", which is a nickname deriving from his appearance. He is also referred to in the book as Rokujo no In (六条院), sometimes abbreviated as In (院). He is often called Genji when speaking of the story. He is a fictitious person but it is thought the author was inspired by some historical figures, including Minamoto no Toru, who was a grandson of Emperor Saga, hence one of the Saga Genji clan.

**The Tale of Genji** (源氏物語 Genji monogatari) is a classic work of Japanese literature written by the noblewoman and lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu in the early years of the 11th century in "concertina" or "orihon" style made of several sheets of paper pasted together and folded alternately in one direction then the other (Lyons, 2011[1]), around the peak of the Heian period. It is sometimes called the world's first novel, the first modern novel, the first psychological novel or the first novel still to be considered a classic. Notably, the work also illustrates a unique depiction of the
lifestyles of high courtiers during the Heian period. The Tale of Genji may have been written chapter by chapter in installments, as Murasaki delivered the tale to aristocratic women (the nyokan). It has many elements found in a modern novel: a central character and a very large number of major and minor characters, well-developed characterization of all the major players, a sequence of events covering the central character's lifetime and beyond. The work does not make use of a plot; instead, events happen and characters simply grow older. One remarkable feature of the Genji, and of Murasaki's skill, is its internal consistency, despite a dramatis personæ of some four hundred characters. For instance, all characters age in step and the family and feudal relationships maintain general consistency.

**The Canon Of Male Beauty in Japanese Culture** Hikaru Genji has been vastly reckoned as paradigmatic for the concept of male beauty in Japanese Culture. In manga and anime, this is remarkably noted for the number of characters who sport similar features, such as straight, silky black hair who seem to naturally float, spotless skin, big oriental cut eyes, with a tone which "seems like the color of the deep blue ocean/sky" such as written by Murasaki. These canons are very often translated also in modern artistic creations to suggest handsomeness, and they are the source for a wide number of protagonists in manga or anime to be of a very similar and shared look.

**The Japan Volleyball Association (JVA)** is the governing body for volleyball in Japan. It was founded in 1927, and has been a member of FIVB since 1951. The JVA is responsible for organizing the Japan men's national volleyball team and Japan women's national volleyball team. Its HQ are located in Shibuya, Tokyo.

**Ame-no-Uzume-no-mikoto** (天宇受売命, 天鈿女命) is the goddess of dawn, mirth and revelry in the Shinto religion of Japan, and the wife of fellow-god Sarutahiko Ōkami. She is depicted as The Great Persuader, and The Heavenly Alarming Female. In kyōgen farce she is portrayed as as Okame, a woman who revels in her sensuality. She to the tale of the missing sun deity, Amaterasu Omikami.

**Futoshiki** (不等式 futōshiki), or More or Less, is a logic puzzle game from Japan. Its name means "inequality".

**Karuta** (かるた, from Portuguese carta ["card"]) are Japanese playing cards. In the various games, one can memorize and learn up to 100 poems through them. Karuta is often played as an educational exercise. Any kind of information that can be represented in card form can be used including shapes, colours, words in English, small pictures and the like.
The Problem With Baku

Chapter Summary

Lately, I've been, I've been losing sleep
Dreaming about the things that we could be
But baby, I've been, I've been praying hard
Said no more counting dollars
We'll be counting stars,
Yeah we'll be counting stars…

I see this life, like a swinging vine
Swing my heart across the line
And in my face is flashing signs
Seek it out and ye’ shall find
Old, but I'm not that old
Young, but I'm not that bold
And I don't think the world is sold
On just doing what we're told…

I feel something so right
Doing the wrong thing
I feel something so wrong
Doing the right thing…

I couldn't lie, couldn't lie, couldn't lie
Everything that kills me makes me feel alive…

Chapter Notes

For as long as he could remember, he had never been able to remember his dreams. Occasionally he would wake up in a sweat as a child, feeling constricted and scared yet unable to recall what had awaken him suddenly beside the certainty it were a nightmare, but also that had happened maybe less than a dozen times in all his life, and therefore his tendency and attitude regarding dreams had always been nonchalant and unimaginative.

Just a thing for people he wasn't very interested in anyway and something which seemed a forgettable experience he would never feel the missing of.

Probably Japanese pantheon wouldn't host Baku if it was not believed nightmares and dreams were comparable to misfortune and had to be eaten up without regrets.

His brother once had joked he was too smart to allow dreams to be remembered, and that'd be a way to keep illogically flamboyant occurrences out of his otherwise very engaged memory.

Maybe there was some truth in that, but differently than Akiteru thought.

Maybe, a tiny voice had started to suggest him a while into his teenage life, he wouldn't be strong enough to face the content of his real wishes as uncovered by his inmost mind which would spread open at night.

Maybe he was too weak to accept the full of himself (pros and cons) he would have had to consider
out of the free kingdom of his subconscious escalations.
Maybe there were too many perils in the recesses of his brain to risk to let dreams get out of there.
All the more good reasons to feel confident in his night morphing deprived state.
And all considered, even if the quality of his dreams would be proven to be of a good type, what for
in the end? They would just be happy and cool parentheses which could not impact his everyday life
in the slightest and on that account the inability to remember them was nothing to fret about.
In short, he had never cared about being unable to remember dreams, and he had never felt touched
by any of the very few he had actually come to recall, little motions of sleepy worlds which had
faded quickly from his mind in a matter of minutes in the morning.

Given then that all of that had basis, what was happening in his Sunday outset was a first in his life.

He had woken up in plain tranquillity.
He had opened his eyes not in a sweat.
He had not been badly shocked or shackled by any physical event: no sudden noise, no earthquake thrill, no alarm ruthlessly screaming out of place.
And still, what he was feeling was something powerful and persistent and, in all regards, mattering enough to be well remembered into the core of his awoken being and conscience.
He had immediate certainty those piercing pieces of visions he could still depict wouldn't quickly fade in the following minutes, and possibly ever, from his mind.

Damnit.
It couldn't go worse than that, he thought, starting to pant softly once realizing what his night had given to his day and while giving a swift look under his bed covers.

“Shit.”
The feeble light from the shutters openings was enough to let his eyes distinguish shapes around, in his usually dimensionally impaired acknowledging myopia. But he didn't want to reach for his glasses. What he was already capable to see, mounds on his bed, and moreover what he had understood to feel didn't need confirmation.

“Oh… fucking shit…”

He covered his face with his palms, staying like that for minutes.
Motionless.
Suddenly, breaking the forced darkness of his shut eyes shadowed by his large hands, a silhouette flashed from the memory of his night.

Well-defined.
Perspicuous.
Broad built up shoulder blades, a long, strong neck, and tufts of very black hair parting at the nape.
His hands moved to throw away the covers from his bed, a raging reaction of refusal and angered perplexity which didn't sort any comforting effect out, given that his doing had the consequence to expose even better the result of his night escapes, as streams of morning light illuminated his erection mercilessly.

“This cannot be happening…”

SHIT.
To start a Sunday this unsettlingly was truly not the way Tsukishima Kei had planned his first October weekend…
It truly, truly was unfair.

Why today?
He had planned to entertain himself and get relaxed since the week before he had wasted his weekend choked by celebrations of his birthday.

He had never been the person to care much about birthdays beside the stuffing of strawberry cakes he would be allowed to get himself into, so to dedicate two whole days to such a social and mostly boring series of meetings had left him drained and stressed out. Even the usual free practice on the previous Saturday had to be ruined by unnecessary cheering and partying, although it hadn't been detrimental for the intensity of the subsequent training, if he had to be fair.

Still, he had to endure more than he could stand Hinata's screaming, for he would take any chance in the middle of net transitions to scream that it was his day, inviting everyone at joining him for countless birthday jingles he had enough of after merely seconds.

Not that his glances full of reproach had stopped Hinata from doing it no less than 17 times, in accordance with his new age.

And after the celebratory Saturday at the club, and with his family home, he had to be the apple of the eye of his numerous relatives when on Sunday his parents had kept their home open for visitors willing to cheer on his teenage accomplishment.

Such a prolonged demanding environment had taken a toll on him so that during the following weekend he had hoped to be able to feel relaxed enough to enjoy nothingness, but since Karasuno Saturday practice less than 24 hours prior, he had turned even more sour and peppery than he normally would be, like he had to be forced by the entire town to become a pet puppet for a full week of birthday fun by imposed law.

And now… those dreams.

And the state his body was currently in.

Shit. Why me? Why me? Am I abnormal? Am I losing my mind? Is this what to be stressed feels like?

Those dreams he was perfectly able to remember, long and defined representations, long and defined commotions, well those dreams were nothing else than pointless poisons to his quite wounded self esteem, things that he didn't want to start his supposed quiet Sunday with, and things he absolutely had no intentions to frame into whatever concept box, nor that day, or ever after it.

But they were too clear, too real to not be thought over, unfortunately.

Were they punishments for the way he had behaved the day before?

Was his mind having a vengeance against its own master?

Were those dreams a sign from above he had crossed the line from salty chap into vitriolic asshole, and a chance to turn himself back into better territory by violent warning?

He hadn't been a cutie the day before, sure, but he hadn't been that much worse than many other times right? Did he deserve such a warning after all?

He knew he had been quite jerky on the previous practice, professing it was paltry, but everyone in his team and in his family had gotten acquainted with that side of him already, so it was not like he had done who knows what to deserve such dreams after dark, right?

Well, coming to think batter about it, while feeling very uncomfortable about his teenager explosion of early day vitalism, he had made it quite a bad Saturday for everyone around him… he could admit it with an acerb thwarting.

He had been using his sharp tongue like a katana for the whole day, truncating thoughts and hopes of
his relatives and teammates until nobody around him was even trying anymore to involve him in conversation. They all had kindly overlooked his mood, benefiting him of additional extra care, like his birthday had powers to last a week. Strong in his wrong, then, he had been super irritable, super irritated and super irritating. More than his usual. Way more. He felt sorry about it, while trying to soften his body in all his parts thinking of unpleasant things.

“I’ve really behaved stupidly yesterday…”

He didn't like to ask himself why tho. He hadn't done it the day before. His primary intention would have been to forget about said tetchiness on that Sunday morning, and most definitely to keep his brain shut completely about why he had been so susceptible and touchy at that practice. Too bad that, as he was facing his lower region in his own bed dying inside from embarrassment and shame while turning that slimy outrage into petty anger once more, he couldn't manage to do it, and that hurt. So he formulated another question to himself, focus shifting but just a little from the dreams he had just dreamt, and as his brain started to reasoning a tad further about it, he panicked without moving a single muscle of his body again. Another stony dread attack, and an ocean of dissent with himself and his life and the whole of his world took him over for a while. What a clusterfuck of a shitty Sunday.

Psych echoes of the answer he was more than able to give to himself about why he had been a complete mess since around 22 hours before were parroting into his ears; that inane answer which was the worst possible one he had ever given to anybody included himself about whatever matter had a dire effect on his persona and he hated to sulk about his reality at all times - he would find a valid reason to do it often - but especially on weekends. He placed great value on weekends, and he knew to waste two of them in a row would have ruined the remains of his sanity for the whole subsequent week. Maybe month.

“Let’s turn the tv on… maybe there is something nice to watch, something to ease my mind with and something I can frigging relax along…”

So he switched his room apparel on the channel he lastly had seen at a very low volume, still without his glasses on, and crossed mentally his fingers he would find solace.

“Our Sunday Report today is from the ever stunning Kyoto! One of the most beautiful places in the whole world! Catch its magic along us this morning and…”

Kei shut the tv off faster than eyes blinking. Wrong place. Wrong day. Wrong everything.

“Shit.”
His palms went again over his face, and the echoes returned, warped and cruel:

“Ennoshita senpai, why are we starting the warming up already? Shouldn't we wait for coach Ukai and… our careless and surprisingly late King?”

“Oh, no, we can start. Ukai San is coming in the next hour, he had to complete inventory at Sakanoshita, while Kageyama won't be here today.”

“Oh… is he… feeling unwell?”

“No, no… don't worry he’s very much fine. He is in Kyoto, along his uncle.”

“Kyoto? Truly bad timing his visit, if he has to skip practice to enjoy some leisure city discovery uh?”

“Knowing him, he’s gonna be training harder than we will actually: he’s hosted by the Miya twins there. I am fairly sure all he will enjoy about Kyoto will be some sparring game Miya Atsumu is going to put up for him especially.”

Tsukishima muttered growling words which sounded like a bad spell in Kyoto’s regard, then sprawled over his bed again, freeing his face from his clutching hands.

That had been the igniting sparkle for his rage bonfire.
A stupid reason to feel angry for.
A very stupid reason for a very stupid guy.

Very.
He had no rights to feel so broken by that trip Kageyama had taken to Kyoto.
He had not the previous day.
He was having none that morning.

But recalling his captain’s words, his stomach was clenching to the maximum.
Under his skin, wide all over his body, a little electricity spreading had made him feel cold and numb again, on that Sunday morning just as much as it had done the previous day in the gym.

He had felt betrayed on the day before.

And he was still feeling wronged so many hours later.
That was it, he could name the feeling.
Kageyama had left the team to play with other people, and he had felt, and he was still feeling, abandoned.
He couldn't stand to care about something like that.
Since he had discovered Kageyama's plans in Karasuno's Principal office, he had been vexed by unwanted feelings and unusual thoughts, all centered around the setter, for weeks.
For weeks he had tried to find an excuse to lash out at their setter about his discovery, so he would analyze Kageyama's behaviors and words at any given chance to pinpoint the tiniest hint of discomfort and carelessness about their team, never finding any.
From his actions and from his very rare words, no one could ever imagine Kageyama was getting ready to change school, team and town.
But Tsukishima knew.
And this knowledge was beginning to be too much of a weight for him to carry on.

“He will leave us anyway... I better get used to the idea he won't be at our practices much longer.”

And he glanced at the calendar, putting his glasses finally on.
“In what... four weeks? Maybe less. Interhigh qualifiers are in three...”

Another stomach twist.
That pressuring misery he couldn't bare.

“Better if I open the shutters...”

Putting his feet on the pavement, he heard voices from his night, echoes from a non living world, but even clearer than the memory of Ennoshita’s voice mixed with his he had before, and losing his walking balance he had to stand against the wall to not stumble:

"Treat me like I am precious, not because I am a King, but because I am your King."

There they were...

Why is this happening to me?

Hands crippling and tearing sport clothes up appeared like ghosts around him.
Scents distinct and personal of skin exposed after physical effort in cohort along the gesturing ghosts assaulted Tsukishima like slaps on his sensory receptors.
Sounds of a well known voice in husky registers no one had ever heard, and which he could realistically perceive... because damn, his dreams were even coming with sound and fragrance for fuck’s sake...
All back into his morning pain, the ghosts and the scents and the sounds shaped finally into that one face and that one body and all he could react with were surrender and defeat.

There they were, his dreams emerging from the night to conquer his day.

All so vivid.
All so realistic.
All so erotic.

Why... oh why me?
Why do I get hard thinking of his voice that way? How can I imagine it, if I never heard him so?
Why this sound makes me lose my mind? Why I would never want no one else but me to hear that???

There they were, multiplying...

Faint images of strong arms around his neck... getting less faint, getting accentuated onto his skin, like a burn, like a load felt for real.
Memories from a naughty night turning arousal, unproductive and addicting like a thirst for something you know will never be at your reach, and for that so much more desirable, like nothing else could ever satiate you unless it's that drink, and you have not even an idea of what it should taste like, but still you just want it badly.

Sunday morning was counting minutes into another hour, and in his closed room the visions from his secret night desires kept coming, increasing in clarity at each further flashing.

Feeling like a prisoner in his room where he couldn't stay standing still, and where he had slid from the wall to the floor holding his newly aching member in his right hand, Tsukishima started withering on his bedroom floor, unable to resist to his urge, until against his better judgement he had to give in to the replaying of his night visions and the feeling of heat and pleasure they were bringing back for him.
Closing again his eyes, hands free to move on his own body ready to be teased and satisfied, he forgot about tabu and he forgot about his principles and just let his memories rule him without restraints.

“Fuck… I can't hold back…”

There had been two versions of his dream, and they were stuck into his mind like he could see them before his very eyes. He couldn't believe during dreams the power of the mind could be so wide that one would be able to both act and feel and also see oneself as a spectator without missing a bit of the actions taken.

Tsukishima panted and muffed as he had to decide which vision he would like to remember first from his night.
Not an easy choice.

Both situations had felt breathtaking.
Both had him fondling in a sinful and stemless way.
Both were to make him whine and moan and cry, and both would make him nifty hard.

He licked his own lips anticipating the gratification he would give himself in a short while.
He had just to decide where to start from…
Which one of his two dreams he wanted to relive the most?
Both had plenty of fighting spirit, and yearning to control he felt comfortable with. They would both display a sophisticated lust for conquest, and a boasting passion underlined with young vitality and inevitable energy, which he liked because it would release his stress away from his morning and the bad tempered week he had had.
Both dreams were etched into his core, and he was feeling incredibly guilty yet incredibly excited for the both of them…

He longed to see both versions of the King, immediately, and neatly. Both of them were intense and unleashed. Both of them mesmerizing, like a bad drug you cannot refuse.

“I want to stick it into you, deep until I can fill you from head to toe and know everything about you from the inside, so until I’ll let your sorrow go away.”

Tsukishima had finally chosen.
The first of his two Kings stock, it would naturally be the commanding and domineering one.
The one he felt most naturally would resemble the real thing.
But in his dream, what was making Tsukishima go insane would be that Kageyama would differ from his reserved self.
He would be noisy, talkative and passionate, as driven as ever but almost looking desperate in his obsession to fuck him.

“Be my only possession I have to daily renew my rights onto… be mine, Kei… be always and only mine…”

Potently stroking himself, Tsukishima would see Kageyama's intent face with beads of sweats sparkling like pearls and diamonds, and he would get harder on the collapsing of his facial features from detachment into craving lustful appetite, a shift in look only determined by the setter’s desire of him.

Shit… I’d fucking be yours… if you would reclaim me this way, idiot King…

Squeezing his length aggressively Tsukishima let his room be filled by small moans, tiny hissing
hiccups of voice, all while recalling the hoarse and rough tone the giver Kageyama of his first dream would endlessly call his name with, cracking it more and more in the heat of conjunction until the final version of it would be a guttural and sturdy groan impossible to decipher, but explosively startling.

Thinking of the final expression of Kageyama's face before they would both come in his dream, frown looking as deep as ever, but quickly breaking at the peak of pleasure into a blissful epiphany of goodness, Tsukishima came in his hand, spilling hot semen over the floor and jolting until his back crashed into the side of his bed.

“Fuck… look what a loser I am… coming this much while remembering the King fucking me, and I have not even an idea on how to be fucked got to feel like…”

The fact Tsukishima felt miserable about his exposed weakness towards his teammate was only minimally true. He would not immediately think about the fact he had gotten a lecherous gay dream. He would first just think about whom he had felt such a desire for, like he were some sort of asexual assigned entity. At immediate thought, so, he would think about the fact he had concupiscent urges towards Kageyama and not a male named so.

That other consideration would come only later.

For starters instead, he would feel maddened that the person he had always felt most irritated from would made him come in a fountain-like spilling orgasm, like his ruling aura had transmigrated from volley courts to the very core of his own self.

Tukishima’s prideful and combative temperament was feeling damaged by the acceptance he had felt good imagining to be taken by his assertive coetaneous, but on the other count those same sides of his personality would beam if such an authoritative and recluse person would fall for him until a degree to be needing to have him for his own raunchy pleasure only, to the point of claiming him like an exclusive possession and to the point of changing his ordering tone to a sort of begging imposition, only in hope to touch him.

Sitting on the floor of his room, with his back at the side of the bed, Tsukishima could not avoid to battle his own libido, his own resolving at jerking off thinking of a person he was feeling the most competitive with, but for how much he was trying to chase away his actions that morning as foolish and coming from exhausting stress, he wanted more.

There had been two dreams. And the second one had him topping.

Just the right amount of revenge for his weakness in having picked the other dream as first masturbating source that Sunday.

Tentatively palming again his cock, to test a possible new reaction, he closed again his eyes, and he had just to picture Kageyama's face under his own weight as the receiving partner, cheeks heated and hair spread on the pillows, his long fingers shyly covering his hypnotic blue eyes darkened and bloomed by physical cupidity, to get hard again.

With a satisfied grin, he decided to jump back on the bed, to feel more pampered in his zest.

“What a sight, uh King? You are so cute down here at my mercy…”

The words Kei had said during his night dream came out again in his sexy morning routine like a whisper, and he felt the veins on his member’s shaft pull out as his hardness increased tenfold.

“Take this, Your Highness… it’s gonna hurt at first… but I can't stop now…”
Closing his eyes to let them stay so, Tsukishima got back into his dream vision, moving on the bed accordingly with it by getting on his knees over it. Moving his limbs freely, hand full of himself, trying to suppress his keens he could see neatly Kageyama's body under his, hips high and rolled to stay unite with him, the embrace of his beautifully thick thighs around his waist, and his sharply defined abs puffing and relenting with his thrusts into him like perfect working engines. In his dream, he would have one hand at the wall, and the other caressing and penetrate his muscular torso until his palm and fingers would leave marks on his skin. Then he would raise that hand around his neck, looking at him with possessiveness and hankering and when Kageyama would reciprocate with the same itching ache of want, calling his name softly but commanding even in his submissive state, Tsukishima would palm his cheek, then sustain his head until the two would impulsively and passionately kiss one another into carnal oblivion, quivering and clenching and biting one another's skin like they could survive on that and leave food for good.

“Bare with me a little longer, King… It won't take much more for me to…”

“Go on, keep hitting it there… oh, fuck, Kei you’re so good… give me more, flood my body with streams of yours…”

Recalling the way Kageyama's voice would be soothing and seductive in his compliant and acquiescent state made Tsukishima come again, emptying himself at the memory of that deep voluptuous voice which could be ordering while being subdued so naturally, and he crashed onto the mattress wet by his body fluids flatly, uncaring about the mess he had made of himself and of his room, quieted in his powerful double release and blanking out for several minutes of post coital self indulgence.

After a while, he jumped out of the bed and organized his laundry. Luckily for him, he was a very neat and responsible teenager who was used to set his room and linens and clothing all by himself. Nobody in his family would have been suspicious if he had washed all his bedroom covers and some of his night clothing on a Sunday morning because that was something he would do often. While programming the washing machine with his drenched belongings, just after having taken a much needed shower, he had to ponder about the situation he was in.

“This undefinable feeling I had no idea existed until now is… bad. I wonder if there is a formula to solve this problem…”

Because all his life had been sorted out like that until then. His very receptive and performing mind had always been capable to treat everything like a test to be passed or a problem to be solved. But this new kind of matter he could not face or think of without getting mad or just blushing, he knew that wouldn't be easily erased or passed through a simple logical analysis.

There was little of logic at the core of it all. In the back of his mind, his own voice would suggest a frightening thing to himself. Like what he needed to feel better weren't solutions but words instead. Words like… I want you… I love you… be mine…

He couldn't accept that. He wasn't mature enough. Passing a hand under his shirt after getting ready for breakfast, he let his memory wander one last time. He almost grinned at the irony of his life.
A year and a half spent arguing with that idiot, and now that he was to leave, his stupid sarcastic self had decided to trick him with wet dreams about that one guy.

What a pain.

God… I want both to dominate him… and get dominated by him! This is crazy… why… why me? I am not even gay… I have… never had thoughts like these before, and I surely don’t want to have them now, or ever… and I have had multiple girl crushes on my own!

I can’t be having these dreams?

Why… why?

This makes no sense.

I am making no fucking sense.

But for how much Tsukishima was trying to minimize the situation he had found himself caught into, he would not stop remember the tingling sensation of hotness his dreams would provide of Kageyama’s skin burning under his touch, or the wave of satisfaction he’d get sensing his body trembling ever so slightly anticipating his penetration, or the incredible pride he would experience when in his dream his companion would pin him down like a beast catching a deer to devour him and he would ask for his permission to open him wide for getting himself into, like nothing else, not even volley, would be of significance for him then, because all Kageyama could care of would be only him.

“Teenage hormones are a big bitch. Fuck them. Fuck myself. I’ll go out running before lunch, to clear my mind…”

And changing his clothes into sport gear, he went in his kitchen to get breakfast along with his family reunited, excusing himself for his behavior on the day before, and explaining his bad mood deeming it as stress for the incoming tasks he would face that month.

“Don’t mind, Kei… I know the feeling…”

His brother would always be his best defender:

“I see you’re up for jogging… can I tag along for a while on the bike? I have a date with Saeko downtown… we can have a bit of the road together can’t we?”

Tsukishima smiled a bit. His brother in love was so transparent and sweet.

“It’s alright for me but I leave in 15… can you be ready this fast?”

Akiteru nodded while finishing his smoked salmon.

When after 6 miles of running Akiteru had to part ways from his brother to take his own way to his fiancé Tsukishima followed him with his sight as he disappeared around a corner, eyes full of affection for him, and a chest having for his running effort.

“I am glad he is so much in love… that… must be… the way love is…”

And as he was turning back home starting to run again, the feeling of Kageyama’s presence came back like a bolt. He could see him by his side, running silently and concentrated with even breathing on whatever surface and pendency, always with no music to help, despite he had given him a running playlist more than once, all focused on the sounds around him and his finish line, always competing only with himself, that idiot solitary King who had successfully tried to become less of a tyrant without giving up to his solitary preferences.

“Yeah… I’d like to know what love feels like… because this can’t be love after all…”
And increasing the pace of his running he came home, where he relaxed for the rest of the day, reading and listening to music and talking a bit with Yamaguchi on Skype while playing an online video game.

The day after he tried to forget all about his weekend. It was to be an easy day at school, all his favorite subjects as lessons, and then there would be another day of practice. All routinely stability he could easily tackle. Except as the practice was approaching he realized he couldn't. He started to realize he would have consciously longed for that regal stoic appearance as soon as he would have distinguished the peculiar sound his steps would make on the wooden planks of their gym. He probably always had, but those dreams had made him aware of this pathetic status of his, and he couldn't stand it. Would that once more translate into quarrels? Would he be able to masquerade his attraction with displeasure now that he was sure of his true inclination? Why all that had to happen to him?

His teenage life was to be shattered from then onwards and he felt sick in his guts about it all.

*I have to resist just a little while more… some weeks, and this all is gonna end…*

To actually be able to remain calm and unaffected during the practice became a chimera pretty soon. For every time Tsukishima would hear Kageyama scream, he would get memory of his dreams, and get aroused. Then he would lose focus during his training with the team, and get on Kageyama's blacklist for the day, which was to imply even more screaming, and all in his direction. That was making the middle blocker’s day impossible, because he would constantly be reminded of their verbal sparring in his dreams.

In both versions, their usual verbal war would get even more intense when coated up for sex before loosing into lewd name calling and in Tsukishima’s memory all those sounds would reverberate into the ones of balls hit and blocked in the gym, making his movements on the court sloppy and slow and unfocused, causing his setter to go into an endless spat against him and thus exponentially worsen his body reaction in an unbreakable toxic chain.

“What the hell are you doing today, Tsukishima? Are you here or on the Moon you come from?”

*NOTE*

“Shut up King… mind your business with Hinata and leave me alone…”

Kageyama could not understand Tsukishima and his turmoil but a glance from Hinata suggested him to stop irritating their tallest teammate:

“Ehi, Kageyama… let it go. Also on Saturday Tsukishima wasn't feeling right… trust me, let's let him do as he likes for a while…”

Instinctively confiding in Hinata's opinion, Kageyama tried to not pay too much attention to the blonde from then onwards, but this somehow pissed the spectacled guy on the other half of the gym even more; when the two went to the same position under the net, with only it separating them from one another, Tsukishima could hear the setter talk a bit with Hinata about his weekend in Kyoto while launching at him dozen of perfect tossing the short redhead would impeccably spike from a ridiculous peak point:

“So you trained with Atsumu San? I am envious… it must have been sooo cool!”

“Miya San is amazing and it felt great to play two on two with him…”
Tsukishima caught a glimpse of blue sparkle in Kageyama’s eyes as he went on praising Inarizaki’s setter, and an urge of abusing him expanded in the whole of his being.

“Could you two stop talking while we practice? Tea time is not here yet…”

Kageyama fulminated him with irate eyes; that pushed Tsukishima at being even more obnoxious, but once again Hinata suggested the setter to back down and avoid direct accusations at the other middle blocker.
But all of them three knew it would not be easy for Kageyama to keep backing down, and since Tsukishima was not able to hide his discomfort which sounded more like irreversible irritation bordering hatred than anything else, after more of the same soup of salty remarks and subpar performance that day, at the middle of practice Kageyama snapped.

“Ehi Tsukishima what is the matter?”

*You are. Damn… leave me alone…*

“I am… off. We know it never happens to Your Highness but it does to me. Shush and let me be.”

The setter made a move to come near to the taller guy, but the middle blocker jumped like a stream of deadly electricity were buzzing at a step away. His face terrified, looking more disgusted than afraid.

“Ehi… seriously what is it with you today? What is this, a new habit crisis mode that you sport every month? Is it your personal version of a girl period or what?”

“Don’t steal my lines, King…” **NOTE**

“Fine. But now stop being a pain in the ass and let's properly train…”

*Step away… please…*

“Leave me the fuck alone!”

Tsukishima screaming shut the whole of the gym. All the people there looked consternated at him.
Yamaguchi had a face of trauma all etched over himself, feeling for his best friend.

“Ok. It’s sad… I thought we were getting better, me and you… but it seems I still the one making you feel this bad. I…”

*Don't. It's not... you…*

“I gotta go. Excuse me. Today I just… can't bare to be here…”

And asking rapidly permission to leave the gym earlier, Tsukishima panned himself and rushed into the club room.
As he stepped in, he lined against the wall and sighed painfully.
He took his sweater off, and stroke it searching for a sort of physical vengeance, all his body tensed and aching, and his head spinning in a nauseating vertigo.
His whole being was bubbling off, and he couldn't even hear how the club room door had been reopened.
He had his face into his hands, and he was unmoving.
At a certain point, he was not aware how many minutes had passed with him in that vulnerable position, he finally heard a step towards himself.
He parted his hands from his face, and he got to witness big blue eyes completely focused on him.
Oh, please... please NO... not you... no...

“Why are you... here?”

No matter how explicitly fucked he was, Tsukishima would never appear weak in front of anyone. Much less that one he was facing then.

“We gotta talk.”

Kageyama's eyes were concerned. They looked especially beautiful so, he couldn't avoid to think.

“You are not good at it.”

“True. So you will help me. And I am here more to listen than talking anyway…”

“Like I want to talk with you…”

You are the sole reason I am going insane... how can I talk about this with you?

“You will talk with me instead. Because I can't do anything to change if you don't tell me why you hate me so…”

Tsukishima gulped. The fact that the imperious setter would honestly seek him out to check on him, and would suggest to him to confess what he could do to make their relationship better came as a stagger to him. And really, he could look so expressively comely while on pins and needles he had to answer seriously to take the blame Kageyama was putting on himself away. It was a deserved reward at that point.

“I don't hate you.”

“Really? Trust me... you look the part greatly though. Last month, me. This month, me again... you do hate me in fact, just say it out loud…”

“I don't. You just... frustrate me.”

It was the most sincere truth he could name to the setter without having to explain the whole picture to him. A safer authenticity than the complete one would be.

“Eh... tell me how. I promise I will try my best to avoid what makes you feel that bad…”

Oh, King... if you only knew...

“Why?”

“Why? Isn't it obvious why? We need you... we need you at your best?”

Why don't you just need me... as me? And then... won't you soon leave, won't you go to Itachiyama, silly King... showing this much care, while knowing you'll be no part of this 'we' next month... what for? Why do you seem to truly care?

“You aren't at fault... I can't even understand what makes me react like I do…”

I am such a poser. I know what does instead... but I can't tell you... I’ll never tell you…

“Maybe you are stressed out by your studies? I know I am in no position to advice you there…”
Kageyama was really trying to help him. Tsukishima’s heart thudded.

“Well, a bird told me you're getting much better grades now?”

Look how cute he gets when caught in meritorious environment… oh King, you are such an idiot even now that I know for sure you are totally not…

“I… I… have no idea what you're talking about. And… well if I do it's all thanks to Sugawara senpai…”

“Oh. Wow. Who knew…”

He truly gets flustered when openly complimented. Adorable idiot…

“Nobody does.”

“Why not telling us?”

“Because I don’t think what I do is of any importance… I mean… what for? It's something I do… but it's not a secret or anything. If people would ask, I’d tell them…”

Such a simpleton you are… such an open idiot. So, would you confess about Itachiyama if I’d ask you right now?

Tsukishima paused, avoiding to speak while being carefully scoped by Kageyama, whose disquietude over him hadn't diminished. The taller one could bask in the shorter’s blue glances, feeling embraced by a warmth he was actually terrified about.

“Maybe I am just… confused about… I don’t know… things?”

Kageyama slightly chortled.

“About… things? Wow, I thought your vocabulary was immense… this sounds as accurate as I would describe something…”

Tsukishima paused, avoiding to speak while being carefully scoped by Kageyama, whose disquietude over him hadn't diminished. The taller one could bask in the shorter’s blue glances, feeling embraced by a warmth he was actually terrified about.

“Maybe I am just… confused about… I don’t know… things?”

Kageyama slightly chortled.

“About… things? Wow, I thought your vocabulary was immense… this sounds as accurate as I would describe something…”

Tsukishima felt suddenly better. That chuckle, and the fact he was in such a messed up state even Kageyama could make a joke about him put his pain and heed in a simpler perspective.

“Yeah… seems like I am downgrading fast, doesn't it?”

Kageyama sat on a chair, arms on the backrest, eyes still fixed on his teammate, and he attempted an hypothesis:

“Maybe you are in love? I heard that is something kids our age are meant to be experiencing…”

“And you must know…”

Tsukishima took another chair but not to sit over; he placed it in front of himself to roll it a bit in a gesture that seemed to calm him down enough to start speaking in his usual way. Kageyama immediately perceived the worst moment had gone.

“Sorry?”

“I… saw you. At the Obon in Tokyo. You. And Alisa San.”

“Oh… that. Well, then no. I am… not in love with her.”
“How heartless. She sure is isn't she?”

“She says so. I am sorry… but I can't reciprocate.”

*Is he... gay?*

“Are you…not interested?”

“I don't know. I will never allow myself to go deep enough with this kind of matter.”

“Eh?”

Kageyama stood up from his chair. The intensity of his gaze had changed focus, without losing power.

“I can't waste my time or energies like this. I have to reach my dream. Anything that is an obstacle or a potential threat to my journey has to be put aside.”

Tsukishima left the chair in a still position, to relax with his hips resting on the wall, long legs and back forming an angle, hands in his shorts pockets. The usual assessing smirk had made his way back on his lips and that was a sign for Kageyama things were resolving for that day.

“This is crazy. You are a fool. And it's impossible. You say so because it's clear you have never been in love…”

“Who knows. But what I know is that I can fully take care of one thing. And my thing… is volley. That's it. Call me fool. That's me.”

“Yeah. So… no love until you win the Olympics or something?”

Seeing that the snark also had come back left Kageyama alleviated and soothed. He felt at home with that version of Tsukishima. He preferred him that way. He had gotten used enough to it to feel it familiar.

“I haven't said so. I just said until my brain cannot take care full on at more than one thing… that thing is volley. Maybe when I grow up I’ll get smarter and I am gonna be able to be into more than one thing at once. Like you…”

“Like me?”

Tsukishima wasn't sure to have heard it correctly.

“You are very smart, I don't know how many more times I need to tell you this… you do enjoy it a lot when I do, don't you? But yeah, you definitely are. You are like Oikawa san, even if you are not good with people…”

“I am good with people…”

“No, you’re not. But you are very smart. It used to piss me off at first… because you knew you are smart and were looking down on me for it… but then I learnt to appreciate you were. Because of how useful that made your plays…”

*Oh, Lord... this full fledged idiot... is he for real?*

“You really only think of volley don't you?”
“I told you. By the way your intelligence is also part of your talent on court. A part our team can’t miss. So don’t be an asshole and come back at practice. Everybody is waiting for you.”

And with the most natural gesture, Kageyama leaned in to offer an agape Tsukishima his hand.

“Camon, Kei. Let’s put the past behind us. Come back in the gym with me, and let’s train to get back Karasuno into the National spotlight…”

Tsukishima froze.

The way Kageyama would pronounce his name would be prodigiously matching the one he had used in his dreams. That realization made the middle blocker hesitate in responding to the setter's offer, not for lack of appreciation, but for proper bewilderment.

When he understood his retarded response was making the other guy newly worried, he shook himself enough to act and he put ahead his own hand, leaving it mid air in front of the one which had been offered to him:

“Let's do it.”

He would have liked to be brave enough to corner Kageyama and ask him about what would be happening after they would bring Karasuno back to that National stage. He would have liked to just only corner him… And maybe… Try… Something?

But he wasn't that brave. And he was still very much confused.

Despite that he knew that hand he was being offered was coming from a sincere place. From a sincere soul. From a kinda silly, stupid King who was still a very honest and straightforward type.

And with all his might and will, Tsukishima shook Kageyama's hand, following him back in the gym to complete Karasuno's Monday training.

*Let's do it King. Let's do it together.*

Chapter End Notes

**Baku (獏 or 曫)** are Japanese supernatural beings that devour dreams and nightmares. According to legend, they were created by the spare pieces that were left over when the gods finished creating all other animals. They have a long history in Japanese folklore and art, and more recently have appeared in Japanese anime and manga. Writing in the Meiji period, Lafcadio Hearn (1902) described a baku with very similar attributes that was also able to devour nightmares. Legend has it, that a person who wakes up from a bad dream can call out to baku. A child having a nightmare in Japan will wake up and repeat three times, "Baku-san, come eat my dream." Legends say that the baku will come into the child’s room and devour the bad dream, allowing the child to go back to sleep peacefully. However, calling to the baku must be done sparingly, because if he remains hungry after eating one’s nightmare, he may also devour their hopes and desires as well, leaving them to live an empty life. The baku can also be
summoned for protection from bad dreams prior to falling asleep at night. To this day, it remains common for Japanese children to keep a baku talisman at their bedside.

**NOTE (1)** The Japanese word for moon is *tsuki* (月)

**NOTE (2)** Real occurrence in the manga.
The Best Friend I Never Had

Chapter Summary

And I don’t know if I’ve ever been really loved
By a hand that’s touched me, well I feel like
Something's
Gonna give
And I'm a little bit angry, well

This ain't over, no, not here,
Not while I still need you around:
You don't owe me, we might change
Yeah we just might feel good…

I wanna push you around, well I will, I will…
I wanna push you down, well I will, I will…
I wanna take you for granted…
I wanna take you for granted…
Well I will.

----
Sorry for the long wait, but holidays first and then the stupid strikes at Italian Universities got the best of me :/ I apologize and the rest of the chapters remaining (as you see I closed the count at 22) shall come all in regular updates between 7/10 days each. Even though this fiction will be the main core of a series so it's not like all will end with chapter 22 (which will allow me to go on also with the illustrations ). Thank you for your patience and enjoy this which is one of my fav chapters in the whole story :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So you won’t take the ride on the bus along us all?”

Hinata seemed personally hurt by the request Kageyama had just formulated to their coach, team manager and captain to precede the rest of Karasuno in Sendai by himself. Tsukishima glared at their short ace and that appeared to calm the over excitable boy down enough to let Kageyama answer, more than to him, to the entire team who was looking at his face awkwardly.

“I have a very important question to discuss with my family, and in particular with my uncle. He's on his way from Tokyo to Sendai right now and in about 40 minutes he can pick me up to be there. I don't want to have anything to occupy my mind with other than our games in the tournament from tomorrow and onwards, so I'm really asking for everyone's trust on this…”

To have the once completely silent and unaffected setter to solicit with earnestness and somehow humility for trust and permission not just the coach and the adults, but the whole team he was part of was marking the huge difference passing from the guy he had been at the start of his Karasuno adventure compared to the way Tobio Kageyama was right before his team’s new take at the Spring Tournament Qualifier, which would have started the subsequent day. A Freaky Friday if there were
to be one, giving the amount of talent which was to be amassed under Sendai City Gymnasium roof.

“Say, King… won't you risk to be late, or lost, if we let you do this?”

Tsukishima’s tone was not properly mocking. In his subdued way he was assisting his setter to prove himself in a better explanation than before, to allow him to gain that trust he had always cared so much for but which he had never felt himself dependable in others’ eyes enough to summon. Many had thought Kageyama's pride was the element preventing him from requesting credence, while in fact it had been for so long just the opposite. The loner boy had never felt capable to inspire complete faith in others, not like his emblem Oikawa, not like the ever jumping and cheerful Hinata, and convinced of his limit as inescapable he had for a long time given up on that part of his development as a player. No longer so. Not in Karasuno, not anymore in his second year. But Tsukishima would have never let his assertive and ruling setter escape the burden of having to formulate that request properly. A little vengeance for all the times the fucker had him forced to jump and sweat like an animal to catch tosses which were always pointing more upwards than the previous time.

“I will be there before anyone else. I swear. You please have to put your faith in me. Let me go in Sendai right now. And I will bleed to make us win this…”

Kageyama’s face went still for a moment; maybe that way to word out his sentiment was not the more suitable… a quick motion of his eyebrows under his ever shining bangs, and he adjusted its speech:

“… which means that I will do everything and anything in order to offer you all, every single one of you, just what you need to play at your very best. This way I have no doubt we will win and bring Karasuno again to the National stage…”

Tsukishima felt a bite inside him; Hinata at that point reciprocated the glare he had received before, noticing the sudden paleness of the tall middle blocker.

You really have become a nice speaker, King. The way you worded this all… the way you won’t bring US to the National stage, but just KARASUNO… you're telling the truth without saying it fully… but things will go as they have to, after all…

“So… do I have your permission to leave earlier?”

Every single person in the gym nodded.

No sound.

Just a very demanding and expectant look on every face.

“Look, Kageyama: if tomorrow we won’t see you at the gym before us, you're gonna stop drinking milk for a month, ok?”

“Tanaka San, that won't happen. And not just because I would starve intolerably without it for a month.”

“I take your word on it. I know your given word is something which doesn't go to waste.”

Kageyama felt his heart fumble at the locution of his vice captain, a warm puddle forming in the pit of his stomach; watching all his teammates’ faces he realized he finally had gotten it.

His teammates’ trust.

“I am very grateful to you all,” he bowed elegantly and deep, his only way to show pure gratefulness and respect “I promise this will help bringing Karasuno to Nationals. I swear I won't fail you.”
When Kageyama's uncle came to pick him up outside his High School gate, he couldn't avoid to notice the seriousness his nephew was sporting, even more strikingly he had evidenced the sharp and beautiful features of his concentrated face than any usual day.

“Tobio, have you talked about it with them?”

Kageyama took a while to answer, so his uncle thought at first his demeanor may have not been related to the choice he had expiring time to make, but then the guy sighed like his worried breath could embrace his doubts and vanish them, and he answered he hadn't found a chance to yet.

“I see. But you wanted to see me, so it means you have formed an opinion, haven't you?”

Kageyama's face went even more brooding.

“To be honest no… I haven't…”

His uncle’s mouth opened slightly in surprise without him taking his look away from the road ahead, like the good driver he was.

“Oh. It's unusual such a hesitation being you. Can I help you with your doubts, Tobio? Is this why you’ve asked for me to bring you in Sendai?”

Kageyama nodded, also avoiding to detach his sight from the road the car was moving into, trees and hills and houses passing by at regular pace, all in a blur around his senses which were not receptive at anything which weren't all the memories he had formed in the past two years, and the hopes he was cultivating for the next twenty. And in the back of his head, fixed like a bullet, the fresh recalling of that sentence, and the vision which had accompanied its pronunciation:

“I take your word on it. I know your given word is something which doesn’t go to waste.”

“I don't really know. I acknowledge this is something I have to decide by myself. I just needed a space of time on my own to do it. Forgive me if I have somehow used your name to obtain it…”

His uncle smiled swiftly and small. They had exactly the same way to do it.

“Don't worry my dear. Take your little time, you still have a bit of it. But… you have changed a lot in high school…”

Kageyama jumped a little in his seat:

“I am sorry…”

“That wasn’t a critique Tobio. The way you’ve changed isn't a bad way. And maybe it ain't even a change, rather than a blossoming of what you have always been.”

And their chat ended that way. They didn't say a word to one another in all the remains of their traveling.

When the car arrived at the elegant home the Kageyamas had since almost two centuries in Sendai, they were greeted at the entrance by the old housekeeper who had been nursing three generations of their family in Tohoku.

The puffy and cozy face of the old lady smiled with every part of it at the sight of the youngest Kageyama, then before uncle and nephew directed to the living room, she informed the house master that he had somebody waiting for him in there.

“One of your Tokyo students arrived earlier. He said you had requested him to bring a certain paper
The elder Kageyama nodded. As the younger was ready to move in the most secluded part of the house to not get in the way of his business, he stopped him:

“Wait, Tobio… you might want to say hello to my student…”

And he pushed his nephew ahead of himself, right into the large living room, minimally furnished with designer pieces, where a young man stood immediately at the sound of steps approaching, bending for greeting the owner of the house he was in.

“Oikawa San?”

At the reverberations of the all familiar voice, Oikawa Tooru faced up from his respectful bowing only to meet deep blue eyes and little bright flustered cheeks.

“Tobio chan…?”

After he had called his kouhai the usual way he was accustomed to, Oikawa went completely frozen. That was not a way to call a grown up teenager… especially in front of said teen’s uncle who was the most important person to rely on for his future career… but habits were hard to dismiss and he hadn’t considered the proper forms when he had seen once more how his strangely ubiquitous nemesis had a knack to appear often at unplanned times in the most unexpected contexts.

Kageyama's uncle seemed entertained by both young guys’ reactions: they were posing like broken dolls with hilarious faces, both in shock but at the same time both with a shade of serious glare in their eyes. These two have something which links them together, he thought, but he had to resist the urge of chuckling watching how stiff and funny their postures were still after more than one minute where they had just faced one another without speaking any other word.

“Tooru San, welcome in my house once again. Sorry for making you wait, but as you can see, I had to take care of family matters…”

Family matters indeed. Tobio chan is nagging. Everywhere. Any time. Urgh…

“Don’t even say that, Kageyama hakase… and…Sorry for my way to address Tobio. It’s not… appropriate I know.”

Kageyama frowned so deep his eyebrows touched. Why was Oikawa excusing himself so much? He would have not stopped to call him so anyway. Even if he knew it was incredibly irritating. If he was to continue, to lie an excuse was pointless. And it wasn't something his uncle would have cared about anyway.

“I actually found it cute. As long as it doesn't displease him, it's not something you should be sorry about, Tooru San.”

Oikawa looked at his kouhai with a face which was a perfect merge of fright and demand.

Please Tobio don't say anything awkward. Don't ruin me now…

“I… don't care. About names, I mean…”

And with spacing steps Kageyama exited the room to sit outside in the illuminated patio, leaving the other two at their planned activity inside.
After half an hour, the glass door window opened again. Oikawa sat aside him, a few inches on his left, and mirroring his kouhai position he balanced his back by putting his arm behind, hands sliding on the polished wooden planks of the walkable patio.

“Your uncle has invited me to stay, for dinner and then for the night. He will bring me back in Tokyo tomorrow along himself.”

Kageyama nodded, a very low and faible murmur of acknowledgment accompanying his gesture. It seemed to Oikawa he wanted to add something spoken to that, but he was keeping his mouth shut while observing the garden and the little koi pond in the right side of it, in perfect accordance with Sakuteiki principles, and he thought he had imagined it all wrong.

The sound of water flowing from the kakei into the tsukubai was hypnotically distancing Kageyama from the place he was sitting in, and Oikawa took a deeper look at his kouhai’s profile to decode the reasons behind his dozing off. There was something different that late afternoon about the guy, but he wouldn't have been able to make sense of it without some help.

He also thought there was an undeniable attractiveness into his growing up facial traits, which his drowsing away contributed to heighten, strangely enough.

“Would you've liked me to leave sooner?”

Kageyama shook his head.

His bangs moved like dark silky wires who had intentions of their own, revealing for an instant more of his forehead at sight.

Also that had a peculiar glamour in Oikawa's eyes he had never thought of before.

“No, no… it's fine if you stay. But… if you leave tomorrow… that means that you won't see any game… these days.”

Oikawa felt his blood melt at the way Kageyama had said that.

There was a bittersweet nostalgia in his voice which felt like a squeeze into his chest. He felt regret to have to leave. He had never even thought about the Qualifier Tournament because his life was on another stage at that point; and still the disappointed tone his kouhai had just used to tell him that simple sentence had affected his opinion about it till the point of remorse.

But it was way too late to change plans, and it would have not made sense to do it in the first place.

“Guess not.”

Silence returned.

Heavy and full of unspoken half ideas from both guys sitting on the patio. The air was chilling sensibly, and to stay sitting outside was starting to become not pleasant.

Oikawa wasn't one to like a tension he couldn't give a name to, and he definitely wasn't the type of guy to try to catch a cold stupidly.

“Tobio chan, would you take a walk before dinner? I have been told we have to wait around an hour and half for it… To stay sitting here won’t do any of us good, and you can't catch colds right now… nor can I.”

“Yes. Let's take a walk around.”

The two warned the housekeeper they would have taken a stroll around before dinner, then they exited the gate at the entrance of the property and with regular pace they started to wander.

“Tobio, are you sure you know how to come back?”
Oikawa wasn't convinced so he thought of setting his mobile with the mapping of the area they had to come back to. Prudence and experience called for that. Every now and again Oikawa was turning his head to face Kageyama; they were still almost the same height though the younger setter was continuing to grow and was a full inch and half taller than him by then, even though the haircuts they were sporting helped to minimize the visual impact in full favor of Oikawa's voluminous one. There was a worried and kind of melancholic overtone coating all of Kageyama's expression and he wanted to understand why, but the guy aside him seemed he would have resisted any attempt at being questioned, and he didn't want to upset him considering he would have slept at his uncle's places that night. Taken from their mostly wordless walk, they wandered allegedly aimlessly until a well known shape appeared before their eyes, illuminated discretely to not waste electricity and energy. Both guys' eyes widened. One’s did for the surprise of the location they had reached, and the other’s for the emotion the sight provoked, which was more intense than he had expected. Both of them started to attempt a diversion speech. Both of them failed at it, speaking at the exact same time and stopping to do it also at the exact same one. Oikawa was the one reprising first his discourse:

"Is it tomorrow then…"

Kageyama’s eyes were still wide and emotional. Such a difference from his always distanced glares he used to look the world with.

"Yes."

Oikawa closed his eyes, and tilted his chin a bit upward, like he was trying to catch a flailing scent in the air. Echoes of a past time he held dear in his soul started to fill his ears. A faint smile on his face, and a tender warmth in his chest made him delicately sighing.

"We are going to kick your sorry asses this time, Tobio chan…"

A deathly and sharp glare sprung from Kageyama’s dark blue irises; even the night seemed to pale for a second, and Oikawa stopped in his steps, which were pushing him inside Sendai Gymnasium Complex, which was partially open even at that hour. Setting ups for the tournament were still completing.

"No. No one will stop us. I promised it won't happen."

There was a different kind of conviction in the way the younger setter had pronounced his resolve. Even his natural confidence had never sounded similarly overbearing and Oikawa wondered what was Tobio’s determination foundation, but he didn't ask.

"I see. Well, be sure no one will let you get away with an easy prize."

"Easy prizes are not prizes at all."

Oikawa chuckled.

"Oh, dear… you truly won't ever change…"
Kageyama was looking like he always did whenever Oikawa was underlining his one mindset: clueless and unable to understand what was so strange about his attitude.

Oikawa looked at him understanding perfectly where he was coming from; it was irritating and adorable the way he could read his face effortlessly, and still never truly get what was in the guy’s mind, or why the guy’s mind had to actually work that strangely and uniquely.

In the past months, in fact, he had started to think it was cute to have that annoying kouhai around every now and again, after all.

“You know Tobio… last year… My last game with my guys… I hated to hand it to you. Oh… I really hated it…”

Kageyama's face changed at the sound of his senpai words, from resolute to slight frightened. But Oikawa's one was still relaxed, much like he were talking about a pleasing event rather than one of the worst days of his life. Kageyama couldn't understand why his face could stay beautifully open like that while confessing an obviously still munching pain.

“I thought it were so unfair we had to lose… and I spent my night tossing like a fool in my bed, because all I could see were the last moments of that game…” NOTE 1

Kageyama didn't know if he had to intervene or say anything. Oikawa seemed in a sort of ascetic trance.

“You said once that you went spying on me before that tournament…well then you have to know that the day of the final… I also couldn't avoid to come and spy… on you.”

Kageyama at that point couldn't have spoken if he had to. His face went utterly shocked. Oikawa smirked and went on still hanging on the fence at the entrance of the gymnasium, pleased of the reaction he had just inspired in his kouhai.

“I didn't want to come and watch neither you or Ushijima take the big prize. I didn't. But I couldn't stop myself from coming. And… while watching your game… somehow… I felt like it was at least better that if one between you and him had to win…maybe it was slightly better if it could be you, rather than him.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Mnhhh… to destabilize and mess you up so Seijou can win this tournament easily?”

“As if…”

“But… I guess… in some strange way… I may enjoy to talk with you, till the point it comes now easy to tell you things I thought I could never say?”

Kageyama's face flushing couldn't be hidden by the darkness which had completely fallen down. Oikawa caught it but he didn't gave signals he had actually gotten his kouhai’s embarrassed reaction.

“It's not like we talk… that much? It's more you the one doing it… generally…”

And despite still having well visible red cheeks, Kageyama dared to dart his eyes directly into Oikawa's who gulped a little.

The guy couldn't ever lose any battle against him, not even emotionally charging ones it seemed.

Also that was something that Oikawa had started to appreciate in ways he would have never believed just a little year before.

The place they were stopped at was a clear remembrance of those times which seemed way further away than they were in reality.
“Yeah… but now it seems like you are able to understand things that I say?”

Kageyama thought about it a little while, always keeping his eyes firmly on Oikawa's face. Then lowered them a bit, and said with a satisfied voice that it was half his merit, and half the fact Oikawa himself had tried more often to break his walls.

“If you have to hit it, do it until it breaks, right Oikawa San? Well… I think some breaking can be a good thing after all…” NOTE 2

Oikawa stood in amazement at Kageyama's speech. He really had grown up. There was a totally open boldness in his way to be purely sincere which was mind blowing for Oikawa. The guy acted and spoke like he had no pride to protect, no damage at it to prevent; for years he had thought that was complete smugness but he could see there it was just simple and utter honesty which guided the raven haired boy.

Honest to honesty, Oikawa found the force to ask his kouhai fair and square what was in his mind since a while that day:

“Tobio chan… tell me please: I see you are strange today. Why did you bring us here? Is there something plaguing you? For how strange you are everyday… this is even more than your usual strangeness… I think…”

Kageyama sighed deeply.

“Promise that you won't tell anybody about this.”

Oikawa had never seen a face that intense in his kouhai. That wasn't a request. That was his way to command. There it was, the look of the reigning prodigy.

It was extremely, extremely beautiful. Too beautiful to deny.

“I won't. Now tell me: what's up, Tobio?”

The two guys sat on the steps which were heading to the gym entrance. Side by side, with Oikawa looking at Kageyama who was looking up in the sky.

“This may be the last Tournament I play with Karasuno.”

Oikawa froze again.

“What?”

“I am about to take the admission test at Itachiyama Academy. Sakusa San has asked me to be at his school, so that we can be teammates for the rest of his third year, and get to train together all time.”

Oikawa couldn't say a word after Kageyama had spoken, though it was clear the younger setter was eagerly awaiting for his opinion on it.

After a few seconds, the older guy spoke.
He was trying to find the right way to speak his mind to his kouhai without sounding petty or jealous or patronizing.
Not easy, since what he had just learned was a bomb of a news.

“Oh. Wow. That is something… huge. I saw how Sakusa San was keen at you during the National training, but I never expected such a push from his part… is it really worthy? After all he will graduate in a little… do you think a few months with him value the price of throwing away a year and a half more with your team?”
“Well… it wouldn't be just for the rest of his time as third year there at Itachiyama. The Academy has access to the University on its own, so we could still train together even when he would take his Academic course into University…”

Oikawa mumbled.

“Total package then. I see. It’s just… that… I find it hard to see you doing it…”

“Well, my grades have gotten good enough to try…”

“Is that so? Great… but I wasn't thinking of grades actually…”

“Then what? Am I no good enough as a player?”

“Oh please… don't play me? Is this a way to force me to say you are? Forget it. I won't pet your pride this way…”

Kageyama scoffed.

“I don't need that. But I want to know what you meant before. Tell me please, Oikawa San.”

“Oh… well… I meant that it's hard for me to believe that you would leave Karasuno that easily. I thought you fit in there. It pains me to say it of course but… Karasuno is a good team. And you fit well in there.”

Kageyama nodded.

That was true.

All of that was true.

And still…

“You are right. I feel amazingly well in my team. And I wouldn't ever change it… but it’s Sakusa and Itachiyama we are talking about… How could somebody refuse such a chance?”

Oikawa gazed into Kageyama. His kouhai's face was pained by indecisive look. It was clear that choice was hard for him.

“It’s not about somebody's choice. It's about YOU Tobio. You don't feel part of your team enough to refuse? Then accept Sakusa's proposal. But it looks to me that your doubts are evidence of a different answer to this question…”

Kageyama fired back and lit up. It was not a matter of being part of something. It was about future chances at being the volleyball champion he wanted to be.

“Oikawa San, it's not that I don't feel part of my team: I do. But at Itachiyama I could become a better player, play with better players and learn even more…”

Oikawa thought deep. What was he going to answer then? That feeling which was tickling him… was the old one of jealousy? A Kageyama able to join Itachiyama and that monster spiker they had, wouldn't it be a Kageyama virtually impossible to catch in any way or form? The brightest talent, the setter genius, in the strongest team and with a genius spiker. There wouldn't be boundaries at their conjunction together, he thought terrified.

“All you say makes sense, I can't lie. It does. But still… I find it strange how you seem able to jump ships so easily now…”
"Would it be so terrible?"

"You mean being an ungrateful son of a bitch?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, I was just teasing you. I still like it you know...."

Kageyama seemed to not take personally the way Oikawa had just worded his phrase. He was still facing the sky tainting darker and darker, and in his heart he could feel a turmoil of different sensations, none of which was big enough to be followed solely. He thought it had to do with his limited life experience, and the fact he was still just a teenager. But there were ways to look at the whole situation he had been caught into which weren't of his liking.

"What if I am... ungrateful, that is..."

Oikawa shook a bit his head, tilting it towards his kouhai afterwards.

"You wouldn't be. You would do this just to step forward. I get that. I didn't mean my previous words you know..."

"I know. But this has nothing to do with how I'm enjoying being where I am. Because I do enjoy it. I truly, truly do."

Oikawa was seeing probably for the very first time how feelings could change the typical stoic and unreadable face of his underclassman in a variety of ways. He was letting his inner self take control of his appearance and that must have been a rarity to experience.

"Do you ever speak this openly with them?"

"You mean my teammates? Well... no. Why should I?"

And all over his face it was the sincerity of his ignorance on the matter. Kageyama for real was thinking all those emotions were something personal which would have not been of an interest for others, not even the ones inspiring them.

You are unbelievably dumb, and so tenderly cute...

"Hopeless case. I see..."

"Hopeless my ass. They never asked. So I didn't ever see the point in telling any of this. I would tell'em if they ever will."

That was also purely sincere offspring from Kageyama's heart. The guy, Oikawa thought, was at a complete loss regarding social interactivity. And he wasn't the only one he used to have around affected by that kind of community blindness.

"You are just like him. Two peas in a pod really."

"Mmmh?"

Kageyama looked at Oikawa in plain questioning.

"You sound like Wakatoshi-Kun."

"How come?"
“And you are also really the same considering how clueless and inept you two are regarding literally anything which isn't volley… no one accounts Ushiwaka chan for it because he looks so intimidating, but you are just so the same, indeed…”

“You mean you mock me about these things because I don't look intimidating to you?”

Kageyama's expression had changed into a less charged face, and more of a newly curious one. It was peculiar to hear his senpai talk about his new teammate, and a total surprise to learn such kind of stuff about him, too.

“I mock him too actually… but he seems unaffected. It's a bore to be with him…”

“People say often I am intimidating too though…”

In Kageyama's eyes there were blinks of competitive assertions again; he was more of his usual self just because of that already, and that eased also Oikawa who couldn't help himself at stating something slightly provocative:

“Awww… are you jealous Tobio chan? And don't scowl at me. Know it: you don't look intimidating like that… at all…”

You look… kind of… incredibly cute actually...

”You are unfair to Ushijima San… he adores you…”

“Tell me something I don't know?”

“I will. You know, last year, Hinata and I got lost during a run outside with our team. We ran so fast and so aimlessly we ended near to Shiratorizawa without conscience of it. Ushijima San was also running and we… well, I asked him if we could have seen his team train…” NOTE 3

“What? Are you serious?”

“Of course I am. He told us they wouldn't have gotten weaker just because we would see them, and challenged us to keep up with him. We did.”

“Are you telling me this to feel pompous?”

“No. I am telling you this because that day Ushijima San clearly stated to us you were an amazing player, who should have gone playing there with him…”

“Stupid Ushiwaka chan. So annoying he was back then with this insufferable statement…”

“He praised you to a point where I had to tell him I would have beaten him…”

“Tobio chan, always the same right? So self assured…”

“No no… it wasn't that. I was well aware I was aiming very high. But I wasn't aiming at him… I was aiming at you. If he had that consideration for you… a right consideration by the way… I had to prove him my value. Because it would have been another way to come at you.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“To make you see how much Ushijima San values you. And… I don't know… because it comes kind of natural for me to talk with you too? I’d never thought I would say this but… this is it. It does… I don't know why I told you this… I just felt like doing it?”
Oikawa looked at his kouhai avoiding to express his feelings. He also had never imagined the two could talk that open way. So unforced and so naturally. In their years at Kitagawa, they could have been close, if he hadn't felt that inferiority complex which had tarnished their opportunities of bonding there. But it had to do with also Kageyama's impossible personality hadn't it? It must not have been only his fault right?

“Whatever… you look at me like you could deal easily with Ushiwaka chan by the way, even if, thinking about it better, you are so similar you would probably never even speak to one another and you would grunt strange sounds only during games…”

From Oikawa's face Kageyama understood he was probably painting the actual situation in his mind, and he had to find it humorous because it seemed like he was on the verge of laughing.

“I can't say. But I don't think Ushijima San would run to play with me. Definitely not now that he can play with you. He just likes you too much?”

“Yeah… he does… I think he actually has a crush on me…”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh please Tobio… don't make that oblivious face… you really couldn't notice?”

“Notice what?”

“You… you! Don't let me explain? It's… embarrassing?”

Oikawa realized in Kageyama's mind and most definitely thoughts and feelings there had never been spaces to guess at people's sexual preferences or inclinations. After all, he was the guy who had rejected an older beauty because he couldn't waste time with heart troubles. Such a person would have never wasted a second in trying to guess sympathies other people may have had.

“You are also boring, Tobio chan. And now you're making me feel like I was gossiping or something… I bet you think of yourself you are above all this…”

Kageyama was the portrait of naivety and Oikawa realized it was useless to try to make him guess. He had either to speak openly, or shut up entirely.

“Anyway, what I meant is that I think that Ushiwaka chan has a crush on me. But since he is like you, he doesn't even understand he does probably, so he will never act on it…”

Kageyama slowly realized what his senpai meant, and his face went utterly red. He vehemently tried dispelling such an assumption, pointing out that Ushijima san was a male and that to spread rumors unfounded wasn't a fair behavior.

Oikawa laughed out loud, tears forming in his eyes:

“Oh please Tobio… are you serious? You know that male people can like male people right?”

Kageyama scrunched, but didn't back down:

“Of course I do? And they can… I mean, I am not judging any of that but… I think you are misinterpreting the likeness Ushijima san has for you? He likes you as a player… why does it have to be something else?”

Oikawa looked at his kouhai with fond eyes. He was young, and willing to quiet his hormonal awakening for the sake of his volleyball career, and he found sweet how he was trying, in his head,
to save Ushijima from being bad mouthed; he was truly adorable. And so unschooled about life, too.

“It has to be something else too because I feel it, Tobio chan. And if I weren't this well collected man of experience and wisdom, I would be affected, but luckily I am not. I can play very well with Ushiwaka chan, even if I will never reciprocate his kind of different interest.”

Kageyama begged for his senpai to change subject.

“Can we stop talking about this?”

“Well, you are feeling less dramatically though, now that the subject has switched don't you?”

Oikawa smirking was still irritating for Kageyama, but he had to admit that, in fact, he was feeling less pressured by his ongoing need to solve the puzzle about his incumbent choice.

“I do… but please stop talking about these things. Players can like players just as… players, you know… There's no need to build up who knows what other sceneries…”

“You are so dumb… are you telling me you don't even see how Miya kun looks at you?”

“Oikawa San please stop this…”

“Am I embarrassing you?”

“No. It's not… that…”

“Then what harm can my words do?”

“It's no harm but… now that I found players I like to play with even outside my team… don't jinx it with unnecessary observations. All I care about… is to play with people who love to play as much as I do. Don't suggest me to start to look at these guys with different eyes…”

“But would you even do it?”

“I don't think so…”

Of course you wouldn't Tobio. Oh dear… how troublesome you are… how pure…

“Then I could go on?”

Kageyama scoffed so loud Oikawa thought he were Iwaizumi reincarnated. A little shiver went through his back. Maybe he was exaggerating after all. Kageyama didn't need other ghosts into his nights. Maybe in the future he would have realized things that seemed crystal clear to the ultra perceptive mind of his senpai but right there it was of no utility to push him into trials of different perspectives, he was right about it.

“By the way that Miya… he’s gonna be good also as a wing spiker. His taste for risky business could be the cherry on top of a bold team…”

The quickness Oikawa could use in discerningly readjusting conversations was stunning. Kageyama felt the relief in that move as he were walking from darkness to light. Volleyball. He was speaking about the purest thing in his life. And in that purity Kageyama would always find his own place.

“Oikawa San, are you already able to plot schemes with him even tho you’ve just barely see him playing against you?”
“Well, I like to test waters… I have the researchers’ thirst… every new discovery excites me to the maximum.”

Kageyama nodded in plain agreement. He liked to look at the excited version of Oikawa. For years it had been a sight reserved for a team of people he was excluded from. For years he had longed to be able to get into the radiance which was extruding from his whole persona whenever he had thought of something correct (invariably correct) regarding facts, or people, or situations. Now he was feeling he could witness the radiant version of Oikawa with his own permission to, and that was feeling incredibly pleasant for him.

“Seems like you love to learn to understand…”

Oikawa stopped talking to look at his kouhai in awe:

“Wow… that’s deep coming from you, Tobio chan… I am impressed…”

“Stop please… making fun of me isn't a good look on you anymore, if it ever was…”

“But I am serious, honestly… you nailed it well, that thing about me…”

“Did I?”

“Mmh. Yep. But you also love to learn, after all…”

Kageyama put an hand under his chin; he was trying to decide if he agreed about what had just been said.

“I only love it if it's of an use… for things I like…”

Oikawa sneezed trying to suppress a laugh:

“Namely the only one you like…”

“I guess… is it so bad?”

“Nope. You're practical. It's a good trait. Boring, but good. You are curious in order to do. I am in order to know.”

With the hand under his own chin still, the younger guy assumed a solemn expression. Then turning to his senpai he went back abruptly to the subject he had dearest in those days:

“And since I am curious because I want to do… don't you think my wish to go at Itachiyama could fulfill the curiosity I have of what else I could become as a player there?”

"Wouldn't u just like to keep having fun instead? I don't think being in the strongest team is assurance of... being the best.”

Oikawa had said that with a very calm and embracing voice. It made Kageyama's senses alerted in full. The way his senpai seemed to genuinely care about his heart bending choice had greatly hit him.

"Why didn't you accept Shiratorizawa offer?"

Kageyama had correctly assumed that the Academy had offered Oikawa a switch, much like Itachiyama had been offered one to him.

"Back then I wanted to fight with Wakatoshi more than anything. Like a team. I wanted SEIJOU to
beat him to tell everyone and him especially that brain is better than force. Now that I play with him I know he is far from only force but back then he seemed this Godzilla we had to take down... and I could see me doing so only in Seijou. I loved every minute there. Every single one."

'And... what.. about..."

"About you?"

Kageyama nodded with a trace of sweet and begging light in his eyes, which were returning clear and brilliant under his dancing in the chilly air bangs.

"My will to fight with you was face to face. I would have still wanted to crush you whatever team I'd be on."

“This is true right now too I suppose…”

"Yep. It is. Still."

"Oh."

"But now... it's not bitter anymore. I've grown up too, and I hope you know."

Oikawa was gazing at Kageyama with a flame in his eyes which looked warm and pleasant to the younger setter; he wasn't feeling rejected by that flame, unlike when they had played a year before in the same building they were sitting outside at in that night, when all stream of fires Oikawa's eyes had directed at him had been directed against him to burn him to ashes. That kind of fire he was dedicating to Kageyama right there was not a funeral pyre, but a celebratory one.

"I do. I like our rivalry. It makes me better. I think great rivalries shape players for their best. You know, in a way I think if I go to Itachiyama I will gain another super worthy rival…”

“And that’d be?"

“Hinata, of course. After all, the first day I met him in middle school, he swore he would have defeated me.” NOTE 4

"But do you see Shrimpy as a rival more than as a partner?"

“Well... I don't know…"

Kageyama's mind blanked for a second; during that day when he had finally understood he had his teammates full trust, he realized he had always gotten Hinata's since day one. Sure, he would have been an amazing rival. But maybe… in that day when he also was getting along with Oikawa like he were the best friend he never had, maybe in that day it was natural to hope he had also gotten a best friend already and that a friend could be valued more than a potential rival?

"You're a kid Tobio. You should allow yourself some of the comfort of this age. Friends... challenges... stupid things that fade anyway so soon… don't underestimate them in your growth."

Kageyama snapped from his deep thinking, and covering Oikawa's words with his before he had finished, he confessed:

"I would have flown to Shiratorizawa…"

"But would you now? After beating them? After the National run? After all you have experienced at Karasuno?"
"No. Probably not."

"And in spite of this you would move to Itachiyama though?"

"I... don't know. But I would like to play with Sakusa San. I can't shake it off my head. I want to play with him almost the same way I'd like doing it with..."

"With?"

"...you."

There was the usual, scary annoyingly piercing gaze of truth in Kageyama's eyes and for the umptenth time Oikawa marveled at that kid’s fearless soul. His greatest rival. And somehow the greatest mystery his researching and capable brain wasn't able to solve. If it were a matter of the brain, he thought, Kageyama wouldn't be solvable probably. But was him really a matter for only his brain?

"Well you brat… in the National we may sort of doing it… playing together I mean…"

"I hope. We could play the two setters scheme…"

Oikawa felt again a fuzzy worm in his stomach. That super competitive kid was actually hoping to play in a scheme allowing the both of them to stay on court together. Silly Tobio. Incredibly cute, silly kid.

"A way to exclude forever Shrimpy from the team? Wanna cut his chances off now that you think of him as a rival?"

"It has nothing to do with that. And I truly would love to give Hinata our battle. I have always thought we could have a great showdown."

'Really?'

'I've always taken him seriously. Always considered him a potential peer. And sometimes I fantasize how it could be to stay... who knows, Sakusa San and I facing him and like... Miya San? Or better, Kozume San in case they would play together somewhere? I'd love it."

Kageyama's face had lit up in thinking about all the new combinations of teams involving himself and Hinata in opposition he could have tested; Oikawa got lost in his face all excited and focused, and he had quickly to regain control of himself to speak more:

'Oh. Wouldn't you miss him as partner then? It seems to me that you're really connected.'

'That's also why it's maybe better for us to try new things?''

'Well...''

'It's not easy to understand this. Which is why I came at you... this confused.'

'You look torn, not confused tho. You have to understand what you want most.”

'Yep'.

Oikawa tried to disentangle his kouhai's confusion. He was feeling proud of himself. The kind of senpai he had to be, he finally was. Even though in his own deep heart he knew he was content to help Kageyama as a person, and not because of a role he had to take.
‘But Karasuno ain’t only Chibi chan. Count everyone in the equation Tobio. Wouldn't you feel you left something else behind, unmade, if you're going to walk away now?’

At Oikawa’s words, for a reason he didn't waste time to elaborate, Kageyama figured Tsukishima's shape. That guy could have been a terrific player if he had given his 120%. He would have loved for Kei to develop until the National Team stage; but if they would part, who knows, who else would have gotten guts big enough to put up with his smug front? Would Tsukishima's passion fade away, without his pushes?
It would have been a shame.
A shame he would have felt bad about.

“Well, for how good my kouhai is in the team… I would lie if I claim nothing would change with my departure…”

"It still seem to me that you have to consider this better, Tobio chan. Time flies. Regrets at your age, unfinished business... it's all tricky. Especially for someone as simple minded as you are."

“I am not simple minded. I have a one track mind and… I like it this way.”

“Mmh. So you have to weight all elements in and evaluate which ones will concur in enriching your one and only expectation. You're not quite there yet.”

Kageyama looked at his senpai with gratitude. He hoped that was what his face was communicating at least, knowing how bad at expressing emotion with his face he was. Oikawa would have not agreed in full there though: for Kageyama's face was perfectly readable whenever he was letting himself go unrestricted and feeling safe.

“I am definitely not.”

“Trust your instinct at the end. Much like on court… the only way to not regret choices is to make those which are intrinsically a projection of your core personality. Something purely yours. Your instincts, even though to me they are all very absurd and bizarre, are what you also are. Trust them… just like you do when you play.”

Kageyama had understood. Thanking Oikawa while they were near to his uncle's home, he went back a little to speak again about the way his instinct during games were a thing of his own only. He was very interested in Oikawa's opinions there, and that evening it seemed they could speak of anything in a synchronization unimaginable for the both of them just a few months before:

“You think my game is pure instinct then?”

The older setter had to stop, closing eyes to figure out what he was thinking for real about that question.

“It's hard to tell, because you are smart as well on court, but yeah, there is a kind of crazy creation from your mind when you play that it has to be instinctively directed. It... is... kind of faster than reasoning? It is not filtered by logic? For a longtime I thought you were just stupid and foolish on court but now I tend to think it's just your style. An incredibly skilled and tuned instinct which makes you faster than the fastest brain in executing things. I hate you for this, you know… but whatever. I can measure up with you. My amazing brain. Your amazing instinct. It's a nice war, I think…”

Kageyama flushed the way he was always doing when praised. Of course Oikawa wasn't properly praising him... it couldn't be... but it was feeling good nonetheless. In such a peculiar evening, he was feeling he could have asked anything to his senpai and that he would have kept enlightening him
with his wise and spot on observations so he went on:

"Then what if your instinct fails you?"

Oikawa stood still, uncertainty depicting on his face:

"Fail...you?"

The two guys had returned to Kageyama's uncle home. They had moved rapidly to the kitchen to prepare a warm tea before dinner, to ease their throats after the hours spent outside in a snarky chilly air. Oikawa noticed how swift and precise his kouhai's motions were as he was dealing with teapots and mugs.

"Yes..." the younger guy reprised from where their conversation had been interrupted “What if something that is so ingrained within you that is part of you stop to... work at your benefit and becomes a reason to question your whole approach to something?”

"How can this happen after all?"

"I'm guessing... but what if? Isn't better to develop consciously a skill so well that you master any side of it with the whole of your being rather than see that something works just because... it does? Isn't way more satisfactory and also... more useful to work yourself on and on until you are sure something does happen... because you want to make it happen?"

Oikawa stunned. He was talking about his own overwhelming talent, as well as Oikawa's own self-nurtured skill. And it completely seemed clear now to him that...

"Are you saying you'd rather be me than you, Tobio?"

Kageyama was unexpectedly calm. Looking at his tea mug, his long and pristine fingers softly entrapping it, and not a single sign of embarrassment was visible. How had he grown in those few months...

"I can only be me so that'd be pointless wouldn't it? But I can see how tricky is to only rely on instincts, no matter how far they can take somebody meant to be born with... how to put it out... the 'Correct Ones'? It's something I always think of watching Hinata. He has spectacular natural abilities, way beyond the athletics prowess we all perceived straight off. But he had to train and tame most of them to become as good as he is now. Until he relied only on great instinct, he pretty much sucked balls."

"Mmh."

"Aren't you agreeing with me?"

Oikawa buried his piercing stare into his kouhai's and exhaled before saying:

"I never thought I could tell you this... but no. I don't." And he took a sip of tea before continuing “I get where you come from, but your talent and shrimps’ aren't of the same material. It has always made me incredibly angry to realize you honestly do think your talent compares so easily to other kinds of good skills..."

Kageyama was becoming uneasy...fearing that this trail of discourse would bring the old and moody and excessive and always-ready-to-be-mean-to-him Oikawa back:

"I..."
"Your talent is prodigious. I'd kill for it. I never craved anything more, it was making me mad to watch you at Kitagawa Daiichi."

He knew. He felt it every single day. He would have eradicated it from himself and offered it on a plate to his senpai for a long time if that could have meant they could get along and work together back then. If he could have had splendid evenings like the one they just had lived back then in his most lonesome days.

"But..."

Oikawa didn't look mean there. He was keeping eyes locked on his and Kageyama was feeling stupidly safe. That was not his old senpai. That was this new improved kind of older one he was starting to know so well it was making him happier than ever. All those feelings were calm and wide and extremely, extremely protective. If he hadn't been changing along, like he was, he would have gotten nervous about the situation. Instead he was sulking in it and feeling powerful.

"But?"

"But all I have done to become what I am now, as a player... as an individual... well a really big fair share of it has to do with you. With how conflicted you have always made me feel. I had to look deeply inside myself to accept how I am. To come to sincerely like it. And move on. And on. And again a little bit more on. That's why I can't stand to listen to you downgrading your gift. Your gift has made mines blossom. Your gift is miraculous and you should just accept it."

Kageyama was touched. But he had no time to think of that because Oikawa still didn't seem to understand what he meant previously. He didn't get his inmost fear:

"I do accept it. But then... what if one day it fails me?"

Oikawa Tooru was being given a handful.

"What are you scared of, you silly child? What you carry, it can't fail you. It's only YOU who could fail it without treating it with care, and respect."

So he DID in fact get his fear. How could he doubt his senpai's perfect perceptions...

"I know. It's all on me. And..."

"And sometimes it seems to you the weight of it is unbearable. Right?"

The mug was placed back on the table. Kageyama smiled one of his imperceptible smiles, his serious face immediately shining beauty all around unleashing its tension away, his eyes squeezing just a tiny bit on the unsipped beverage below them, and then avoiding eye contact with Oikawa, turning to the scenery outside the window the coffee table in the kitchen was placed next, he admitted:

"Yes. Every now and again it is."

Oikawa opened up in a smile of his own. He was looking out the same scenery now and feeling content. Lighter. More serene than ever. He was becoming a very serene person in Tokyo. His personal growth all due to his good discovery his deep sensitivity was one of his most interesting rather than troublesome sides. There was nothing wrong in being emotional. One could be emotional and very smart at the same time. Better, the combination of these two aspects of character could make anyone super aware of a great number of things. And awareness meant power. Awareness meant a chance to always step up to an even bigger growth. He'd never get enough of the feeling of being growing. Those were all talents he had.
"Just work out your self doubts. And move on yourself, gaining every day a piece more of your own life puzzle."

Kageyama's face was relaxed. His blue eyes barely free from hair strains sparkling with resolve. The intensity of his will extruding from his stoic, yet naturally elegant posture. He was certainly registering to his next target, moving pieces of his mind and dreams and wishes to compose a bigger picture right that moment:

"I will. Thank you Oikawa San. Thank you for today. I am glad you're here. I hope the dinner will be of your taste."

They moved in synch to face one another again.

“You haven't cooked it, so I am fairly sure it will.”

Kageyama's signature scowl made Oikawa side grin equally as typical. The two guys would have never stopped fighting, after all.

But there was a sense of comfort and normalization in their every spat which they both held dear.

Their dreams for their futures were very similar and traveling without moving that evening into exactly those dreams, they were feeling their road to them would have been easily shared. They would surely have countless more spats, and countless further growths together in that road, looking every bit like longtime, trusting, all around at ease good friends, or maybe something even bigger than it.

Chapter End Notes

**Japanese honorific System** The use of honorifics is VERY important in Japanese culture. Here are the most used honorifics:

**San (さん)**
The simplest translation would be “Mr” or “Mrs” (so this is a unisex suffix), but it signifies much more than that. “-San” is used with someone we respect and with whom one is not especially close, for example a colleague or boss, customers or anyone you don’t know very well.

This is a kind of default honorific, which leaves little chance for error (but watch out anyway). “-San” is used primarily with last names, but can be used with first names, for example one of your students or someone new in your social circle.

**Kun (君, くん)**
This is a less formal title with a lower level of politeness. In fact the symbol or kanji is the same as that of “kimi”, like "you" in its familiar form or the French "tu" (especially between couples). “Kun” is used with a friend, a classmate, a little brother or a younger boy. It is to be avoided using it when speaking to a girl because it is a masculine form, unless it is someone you are very close to (for this reason, it gives interesting insights into relationships in some manga animes or dramas).

**Chan (ちゃん)**
"-Chan" performs a function similar to "kun", except that it is used mainly with girls. It's quite an affectionate word, which might be used with a friend, a classmate, a little sister, a baby, a grandmother, a girl or a woman to let her know you think she is sweet."-chan" can also be used with little boys; though from adolescence, it becomes rather uncommon and it underlines an emotional proximity with the person addressed so.

**Senpai (先輩、せんぱい)**
This signifies that a person in a group has more experience such as a senior colleague or a high school senior if you’re in a lower grade. Generally it refers to someone older. As with "Sensei" is used interchangeably by sex, and does not necessarily follows the name. You might find it transcribed as “sempai”. Its opposite is “Kohai/kouhai” but it is rarely used when talking to someone.

**Sensei (先生、せんせい)**
You are unlikely to make any mistakes with "Sensei", which signifies a teacher, doctor, martial arts master or a recognised artist of either sex. It can be used after a surname or on its own.

**Sama (様、さま)**
A mark of deference and huge respect for those high up in society or those with a high status. This is the title used for God ("Kami-sama") or a princess ("Hime-sama") for example.

**Dono (殿、どの)**
Somewhere between "-san" and "-sama" but it's an old-fashioned title that is hardly found today except in certain administrative correspondence. It was more commonly used around the time of the samurai.

**Sensei and hakase**
Sensei (先生【せんせい】) (literally meaning "former-born") is used to refer to or address teachers, doctors, politicians, lawyers, and other authority figures. It is used to show respect to someone who has achieved a certain level of mastery in an art form or some other skill, such as accomplished novelists, musicians, artists and martial artists. In Japanese martial arts, sensei typically refers to someone who is the head of a dojo. As with senpai, sensei can be used not only as a suffix, but also as a stand-alone title. The term is not generally used when addressing a person with very high academic expertise; the one used instead is hakase (博士【はかせ】) (lit. "doctor" but the actual meaning is closer to "professor").

**Sakuteiki (作庭記, literally, Records of Garden Making)** is the oldest published Japanese text on garden-making. It was most likely the work of Tachibana Toshitsuna. Sakuteiki is most likely the oldest garden planning text in the world. It was written in the mid-to-late 11th century.[2] During the Kamakura period, it was referred to as the Senzai Hisshō, or the Secret Selection on Gardens before it acquired the title Sakuteiki in the Edo period.

**Tsukubai (蹲踞)** In Japan, a tsukubai is a washbasin provided at the entrance to holy places for visitors to purify themselves by the ritual washing of hands and rinsing of the mouth. Tsukubai are usually of stone, and are often provided with a small scoop, laid across the top, ready for use. A supply of water is provided via a bamboo pipe called a kakei. (家兄)

**NOTE 1** This is all canon content from the Light Novel of Haikyuu I have gently been addressed at by vin vio user :) So read it freely because it's original content from Furudate :) [http://bungoustraighthome.tumblr.com/post/155054106916/haikyuu-light-novel-vii-translations-master](http://bungoustraighthome.tumblr.com/post/155054106916/haikyuu-light-novel-vii-translations-master)

**NOTE 2** This refers to Oikawa's well known motto.

**NOTE 3** From Anime /Manga
NOTE 4 from Anime/Manga
Sunshine Burns

Chapter Summary

When you know that tonight
There are people back home which are talking to you
But then you ignore them still
All these questions they're forming like
Who would you live for?
Who would you die for?
And would you ever kill?
Oh, oh
I'm falling so I'm taking my time on my ride
Oh, oh
I'm falling so I'm taking my time on my ride
Taking my time on my ride
I've been thinking too much
I've been thinking too much
I've been thinking too much
I've been thinking too much
Help me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tsukishima would've liked any other partner in the dorm. But as they were after all teammates, it was only fair he and Hinata got assigned to share the room.
Looking at the papers in his hands, he sighed.
In front of him, bright red hair were moving in every direction.
That guy couldn't stay put in his seat to save his life, apparently.
The sighing of the teenager increased.
What was the last time an hyper excited kid had thrown up on a Shinkansen?
But he was hopeful that was the standard Hinata mode.
Always on the brink of self combusting, always rather able to contain himself enough not to do it.
What a phenomenon.
The short middle blocker was gleaming while on their train. Tsukishima felt like shit instead.
A bunch of thoughts were tattooed onto his mind, and he couldn't relax.
He was trying hard, unsuccessfully.
And in those papers, the name of his near to Hinata's one.
They would share that damn room.
There was no way in sight he would later be able to relax, either.
To relax and Hinata were just opposite sides of any spectrum in any universe.
He should have relaxed, though.
And maybe he should have given himself a chance to enjoy his incredible momentum.
Another win in the Qualifier Tornament, with a wonderful performance in the last set of the last game; and then, the absolute shock of being requested to attend the National Youth Camp, which had been put up rather attached to the end of the games they had just played.
Takeda sensei and coach Ukai had explained to them that due to the activity of the National teams,
the only window of time fit for the new bunch of trainees would have been that - quite strange - one.

NOTE 1
He could recall in his ears all the cheering he and Hinata had received at the announcement of their selection, and he could well remember the glances so proud at their direction from all their teammates.
He could well remember one of those, in particular.
The one he couldn't properly nor relax, nor enjoy anything for in that moment.
Was it that while they were traveling to Tokyo for the camp, with their school permission as they were to spend five whole days in the capital, another one of their teammates was bound to the same location, but for an entirely different purpose?
The sulking in his soul was heavy. Not even the music in his ear could ease his spirit up. Nor blank it. Nor shut any of the persistent voices telling him that while he was running to the National Youth Camp, the person who had been able to let him develop enough to being picked to be there was about to take the step which would have parted them forever.
Or rather, the one which would have made their teams different from that point onwards.
Which was the true reason he had been grateful to have been selected for the youth camp.
Not that he would ever admit it.
But out of all the valid motives he knew to be satisfied about being called up for that camp, he had just one to consider, because the only way he could have played with Kageyama for the foreseeable future would be to reach like him the real Japan National Team.

“Tsukishima!!! Isn't this amazing? Can you imagine? We are going to be in the National Team…”

Aging was not making Hinata any less naive.
Or noisy.
Tsukishima put his player in the pocket of his trench, and slid his earphones down on his shoulders.

“We are not. This is not it.”

Hinata scrunched his nose.

“I know. But it’s the step before it. We’ll catch up to YamaYama kun soon…”

Poor Hinata, thought Tsukishima, genuinely feeling for the blessed ignorance of his teammate.
Looking at his happy face, he wished he also did not know way more than the redhead did. He wished his feelings weren't a whirlwind of confusion and regret, and he wished he could just forget all about volleyball and chances and setters for a while.

“You always make everything so simple, don't you?”

Hinata looked at him like he were speaking in Esperanto.
If Hinata had a clue about what Esperanto were.

“What's complicated about this? We are good players. He is a good player. It's natural one time soon all us good players will play there in the National team?”

Tsukishima clasped his thigh with the hand which had just put the music player back in his pocket.

“You can't be serious…”

“About reaching the National Team? Of course I am…?”

“Not about that. I know in your mind you think of yourself like the greatest volley player ever…”

“I don't…”
“Don't interrupt people while they speak. You know it's very impolite to do so right?”

“Sorry… I didn't mean to, but it's not that I think I am that great.. yet…”

“But you do think you are at the same level as the King?”

Hinata thought about it, which was surprising for Tsukishima. He thought he would have immediately answered he did; when Hinata spoke again, he said he wanted to be. And that he would have kept doing more than his best to not being left behind their setter. Tsukishima could not avoid to tease him about his theories. His sadistic taste would not allow him to.

“Well let me tell you this: if we are able to be traveling where we are, to do what we are about to, it's because the King has shaped us into better players. Not because we are all of that.”

Hinata showed a great displeasure at his teammate’s statement. Many worthy comebacks seemed to gather into his brain, but he couldn't chose among them and the one he blurted out sounded like a bad hybrid which had no mordant.

“It's not true. We value on our own… and since when you are so aware of what Yama Yama does for you?”

“For us…”

“Whatever. I mean, you may be right, but I have developed on my own. You have too. Yes, he is helping us, but we are the one putting all progresses in motion?”

Tsukishima was starting to feel challenged. He also was feeling angry. He didn't like the way Hinata was speaking. He was way ahead of himself if he was genuinely thinking his progresses were only his work. He for sure knew his own weren't. Suddenly, an urge to just shut up Hinata by telling him he would have soon understood how consequential Kageyama's pushes and his progresses were started to build. It would have taken just a moment to say that by the time they would be back in Miyagi, he would have played without Kageyama forever, and he would have never been able anymore to be so shiny and damaging on a court. It would have taken just a single sentence of conceited brass more from the shorter middle blocker for him to reveal the truth; but Hinata stopped speaking and he felt his rage quietly puff out. After all, he didn't truly want to crash Hinata's dreams that carelessly. He didn't want to gossip. It was one of those things he just abhorred. But what would happen if Hinata, for whichever reason, would become aware of Kageyama's departure while at the camp? Would some Itachiyama people be there with them? Most likely. And they would most likely know by the time they would spend alongside them there that the transfer would be a done deal. What could Hinata do? The perspective was enough to inspire anybody to try and put a preventive band aid on the wound which was to be slit over his body. And soul. But Tsukishima hated to gossip. It wasn't his duty to provide those infos. That was his acknowledgment but his will to instead open up to Hinata… why he couldn't suppress it then? It was not to angrily punish him for being so recklessly pompous, or self assured in his skills. Was it that he wanted someone to share his grief with? Was it that he was hoping, out of boundary ropes of facts, that Hinata knowing could… would change something?
He was fidgeting.
But Hinata was way too excited to notice that. Tsukishima was feeling like looking from the edge of mountain slit, with winds heavily pushing at his back. The terror of the void. And its fascination. What if he would speak? What would it be like to jump into the unknown? Hinata started to question him shortly after. It was seeming to the energetic guy that there was something wrong with Tsukishima that morning. Something even more wrong than usual.

“Tsukishima?”

The younger guy snapped back from his reasoning, looking at Hinata's face which was showing a certain amount of concern.

“What?”

“So… I know that it’s not like we talk all that much but… it seems to me that… you are a bit strange today… if I said something wrong, even if I don't think I did… excuse me?”

There was honest will of being of a comfort which was expressed well by all gesture and posture Hinata had been offering to him in that moment, but Tsukishima could focus only on that denial of being wrong his teammate had pronounced. He was not used to give space to Hinata's outburst of care and it was coming easier and more familiar to him to try to put him at fault rather than not, so he just shrugged and bluntly answered there was nothing unusual about him that day. Hinata didn't buy it.

“It's a lie. I don't know what bothers you, but if you don't want to tell me, fine. I understand.”

And the two fell back to silence, and Tsukishima went back looking outside the window. As he was deciding himself to put his earphones back on to listen to more songs - and to avoid more conversations - Hinata spoke again, without looking at him, but clearly talking for his ears to hear:

“You know, Tsukishima… I think you should tell it to Kageyama kun…”

Tsukishima's face reddened improvised and suddenly. Hinata didn't seem to mind, or even notice, because he was still not looking at his companion.

“What…is… that I shall tell him?”

Hinata turned face, surprised by Tsukishima's tone of voice, which he had impression was somehow broken and stressed out; his face was as impassioned as ever though, so he thought to have mistakenly heard things.

“Well, about how you think it's mostly his merit if you have been called up here. When we go back from here, at our next training, tell him that. He will be happy…”

Tsukishima blood pressure increased exponentially in a minute: he hated how nonchalantly his teammate could speak of things he had no idea of; he would never tell anything like that at Kageyama no matter what… He hated how close Hinata was to the setter, or how close he thought he was, just like he thought he was similarly great on his own at playing volleyball… He hated how he could openly show he cared about Kageyama’s feelings, how it was natural for him
to speak on his behalf, even though Tsukishima was sure half of the things Hinata thought of the setter were just constructions of his own mind, and he truly hated how he had no idea there would not be other practices together in Miyagi, because right that very moment Kageyama was probably taking the admission test at Itachiyama Academy in Tokyo.

“Stop trying to get in my business, you annoying sunburn. I won't ever tell the King anything like that, be assured of it.”

Hinata slammed his palm on the little table between their coach seats. He was starting to get irritated by Tsukishima's stubbornness.

“You two are really the same… argh! Why can't you see sometimes speaking your mind and say nice things that you anyway feel is the best way to get along and… feel better?”

*Feel better? You say this would make me feel better, you stupid midget? Feel better HOW, since there won't be anybody to talk to when I get back in Miyagi? Feel better HOW, since it's all in your mind that the King would be happy in knowing I'd thank him for everything if I could, given that he is RIGHT fucking NOW doing all he can to move to another school, to set for another spiker, and block with another middle blocker instead of staying with US?

“Don't spin your mind too much, midget. And there won't be returns to Karasuno when I could tell anything to the King because, you know, there will be no King when we return…”

Hinata opened his eyes as wide as possible. He must have heard really wrong this time.

“The fuck are you talking about, Tsukishima?…”

Tsukishima Kei hated to gossip. With every fiber of himself. Tsukishima Kei hated to be bitter. He hated to be a nervous offender. He hated to be good at faking a coolness which wasn't his, and he hated to be bound to self harm his own feelings at any convenient step. He hated to be weak. But sometimes he couldn't help but to give in to his worst sides.

“You have to know that Kageyama is about, or maybe he is already in the midst of, taking a test which will allow him to be a student at Itachiyama Academy. Be well in your steps to reach out to him and play as he does in the National Team all by yourself because THAT is gonna be the only way you're going to ever spike one of his tosses again!”

Tsukishima had shouted in a rush all of those words; quickly, and every word had immensely hurt him, but at the same time all of the words had lifted a weight out of his chest. He could look at Hinata, and see the effect his words had on him. The short middle blocker was open mouthed, pale, and twitching. His eyes seemed to be on the verge of watering. The rest of their wagon had tried not to pay attention to two teenagers being too loud. The train was keeping on its course, and outside it was starting to rain.

“You… are not kidding, are you?”

The way Hinata sounded made Tsukishima feel for him, probably for the first - and maybe last - time in his life.
There was a sour and pathetic notion in the tone he had used, an unusual and weighting tardiness in his word stretching which made the taller guy regret his blunder. But it was all too late by then to regret what couldn't be amended anymore.

“I am not.” and then Tsukishima added, way lower in tone: “unfortunately.”

Hinata pushed his back into the cushion of his couch. The sound he made doing it so full and popping, like he weighted way more than he actually did. After a brief silence, he asked his glass wearing mate how he had learnt about Kageyama’s move, and in a while Tsukishima explained all he had to to make him as aware as he was of all details. Hinata tried not to take the news too badly. But it was a wasted effort.

“Why didn’t you tell anybody, Tsukishima?”

“It wasn't my prerogative to do so. I learnt it by accident. I couldn't.”

“Do you feel like he would have wanted us to know… or…”

“Do you mean if I think he would have liked for us to try and stop him if we came to be aware of his plan?”

Hinata nodded. He meant that, but he would have never been able to explain it that well.

“I have no idea. I also never got the chance to approach the subject with him…”

Or maybe I did… but I was too far up taken in my wet dreams about him to confront him seriously about this whole mess, so I never could try to go deep about any subject with Kageyama...

“I see. Well, maybe you did it for the better… though.”

“You say you would have tried to stop him?”

Hinata couldn't admit nor deny it. He was aware to get Kageyama to open up so widely about his own life would have been a stretch and a risk.

“Hinata, then I am glad I was the only one knowing because… it's something he had to decide by himself. I mean… it's his life and future career which are at play. I am glad I had second and even third guesses about this all…”

But in fact Tsukishima was not happy about any of his actions. He was keeping wondering if making Hinata part of his secret could have changed some of the outcome of the situation. More regrets coming for his sleepless nights, he feared.

“You think too much, Tsukishima kun… sometimes one has to follow his heart and see what happens…”

Follow my heart? Oh, if you only knew, midget...

“And you do it far too less than you should…”

“At least I won't have regrets this way. It's a fair trade I think.”

Tsukishima looked at Hinata in depth. He was surprised how the guy could come with such sharp and poignant quotes at unexpected times. He had a very defined vision of the world he belonged to, and a bravery he had more than once envied to him. He was irremediably dumb and rash, also, but if
one could enlighten just the inspiring sides of him, maybe he wouldn't result as annoying as he had thought he was for a lot of time. He also had been hit by the lack of overreacting he was demonstrating after his revealing of Kageyama's actions. He would have imagined Hinata would have started shouting or even crying. Instead he was sitting in his couch, moving less than he had before his leaking speech, and although he could clearly see he had been wounded by the news, he had no elements to blame him for. No lack of composure to reprimand. He felt inferior to him, once again, for exceeding his analysis and predictions.

“You know, Hinata… You are taking this surprisingly well?”

Hinata shook his head. His eyes were still wet, but Tsukishima was sure by then he would have never cried that day. Definitely not in front of him.

“I am… not. But it seems I can't do anything about it anymore… so…”

“But… wouldn't you feel left out if he's gone?”

“Well… it would be… bad. It will surely be bad without him. There is no point in denying the obvious.”

Tsukishima was scanning Hinata's face in search of a breaking point. But he was still calm and collected and he was starting to feeling irritated by it. Hinata was supposed to be extra. Extra loud. Extra moving. Extra everything.

“Well you look like you are not all too shattered about losing the main and most talented force of our team… oh, wait… this is probably because you still think you are our main force?”

Hinata hissed. Tsukishima was still Tsukishima he thought. Evil and cruel. But it was not the moment to argue with him:

“I am definitely a force. That's not it though. Of course I know our team will take a hit without Kageyama and I also would… but not because I would be losing a fantastic teammate… that too, of course, even though I would gain the opponent I’ve always wanted to beat…”

Tsukishima could not believe his ears. That arrogant midget was already plotting his impossible dream to beat a frigging prodigy who was about to join another prodigy in the best team Japan High Schools had ever seen? There was no limit to his indiscriminate pomposity.

“You’re lying. You feel left out by this news, confess it…”

“I don’t. I always thought his talent would soon or later part our ways. But not because I feel inferior to him. Just because… he is so good, so much that other people will always try to play with him…”

Damn you Hinata…how can you being at once this appreciative of him and at the same time so arrogant about yourself? Can’t you see by praising him you are also overpraising yourself? You two are on two different stages. Realize this. Damn how can you be… annoying…”

“Is that so? Sorry, but I can’t buy this. You are going to panic without him. And there's no way you can beat him if he goes to Sakusa. You could never beat him anyway. He’s a genius. The best setter of his generation. He’s a terrific server now. He has always been a great blocker. Heck…He’s even a better spiker than you, it’s just that for the role he has, he seldom can show it. He would just dwarf
you at anything if he would only try, and you know it.”

Hinata mumbled soundly. His eyes had stopped to look wet, and they had started to dart in Tsukishima’s direction all their ardor and fury. Hinata would never accept the possibility of being dwarfed by anyone, not even the God of Volleyball himself. He would always, always try to fight back even the scariest and most capable of adversaries.

“Maybe. But I am not lying. I don’t care if I would lose to him, I wouldn’t feel I am left out if I could share his volley love still, like an adversary instead of a teammate. That would satisfy me a lot too… you know… So until there is a chance for us to keep playing the same game, no, he will not and never leave me out.”

“You two are crazy. Equally crazy. Then, just so I know, what would you miss then? Given that we, as team, we would lose our only chance at being great again?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’d lose… him? As a friend? Because let’s be real… Kageyama wouldn’t be the type to keep this we have up, going as far as Tokyo would he? I mean… can anybody picture a person like Kageyama skyping with his former teammates, set up recreational coming back at home meetings, and things like that? I may be hopeful, but I am not stupid. I know we will lose daily contact in a blink when he moves…”

Tsukishima blanked. The sincerity in Hinata’s speaking representation of the future broke his heart. Definitely a type like Kageyama would not try to keep track of his former teammates, not for anything, but because it would steal time he could dedicate at practicing volley with his new ones.

“You… him… friends?”

“Well, not only I? You too? And everyone else? Don’t you feel like we all are friends? I do. And I know Kageyama enough to tell he does, too.”

“Well, it does not seem to me at least… that he consider us friends, I mean.”

“It’s because you are not used to him. But I am. I can read him. I feel him. Trust me on this. He thinks of us as his friends. 100%.”

Tsukishima had a very hard time picturing the cold setter feeling sentiments as warm and defined as those friends would inspire in his daily life. Maybe he respected them. He considered them something… somehow. But… friends?

“Does he not think of us all as tools? His own weapons?”

Hinata looked at his companion with a censoring glare.

“I have always wondered why you are like this…”

“Like… how?”

“You talk of yourself so badly. You keep feeling inferior to Kageyama, which is why you feel he could only see you as a … thing…”

“Volley wise… I am inferior?”

“I think he doesn't feel this way. You know why I think he and I worked so well together? Because I never, EVER, let him feel like he was superior to me. Ad he appreciated it because that’s the only way someone as incredibly talented as him could progress. Without someone pushing you for real,
nobody can step further… not even a genius like he is supposed to be.”

“But fact is, he *is* superior. He is superior to me, to you, to anybody not named Sakusa. Which is why he's going to be by his side…and not… ours.”

Hinata seemed to veil the brightness of his eyes. But he didn't let his sadness rise up enough to affect his mood to the worst.

“Then we will show him we can still progress, with or without him, no matter how more difficult doing it without him will be. Because this is all he is about. Moving on, and on, and on. And I believe he thinks we can be at his level. Or he would have never wasted his time or his efforts with us, certainly not in our Tournament last week. Don't you remember? The way he always said he would use whoever he deemed worthy, no, better, *essential* to win?” NOTE 2

“I do.”

“How many times has he used us, not as tools as you say, but as worthy teammates?”

Tsukishima lowered his head.
Kageyama had done it countless of times.
Countless of times he had tried to make him step up, until points the Kei of two years prior would have never even believed, if he had magic wands in his hands even.
For countless times, that stupid and idiotic and pushy King had put his faith in them; in him, to be always better than the game before.
Not because he wanted to order and rule, but because he wanted to share and move ahead.
And he couldn't have done it alone. But he had chosen to do it with them, and not others. Because, yes…he had to think they were good enough to receive his volley love from his very hands. Why it had taken so long for Tsukishima to get what Hinata had always understood about that guy? What a shame…

“What are you doing now, Hinata?”

“I am sending a text, can't you see?”

Hinata was frantically typing on his flip mobile. His little fingers moving at the speed of light and often canceling because the velocity would never match the grammar as well as requested for a dumbbell like him.

“Of course I can… I just *hope* you are not sending it to…”

“Instead I am.”

Tsukishima groaned, accusing the other of unstoppable stupidity:

“You know, I've always found useless his way to call you dumbass all the time but… seeing this… I really get him now.”

“Whatever, Tsukishima. I am sure in the grand scheme of things this will make him happy. Whatever future he wants to live. Let me be.”

Tsukishima clenched his tongue. There was nothing in Hinata's expectation which rang farther from the way he was seeing things. And still he would have *loved* for his text to produce some effect. Any effect. Actually, what he had in mind was a pretty specific kind of effect but his natural reluctance at keeping hopes too high couldn't help him being honest about it not even with himself.
“Whatever. Know that whatever is that you’ve written to him, I want no part in it.”

“Okay.”

For a while the two stayed a bit silent. In their heads, a stream of memories started to form and play, until the only way they had to not give in at the melancholy would be to start talking again. Tsukishima thought that on that train he and Hinata had talked more than in the past year and a half cumulatively.

“What are you thinking about? Even thought I think whom you are thinking of, at least…”

Hinata smiled a little and warming smile. He looked very soft and tender in that moment and Tsukishima felt bad for having started the conversation again with a patronizing tone.

“I wish I had been able to make him feel like he was part of us in full…”

“I think you mostly did. I for sure have been the worst one in this regard…”

Tsukishima had said that so quick he thought he had just imagined to do it; Hinata got surprised because it was the very first time he had opened up so uncompromisingly with him. Hinata had appreciated it a lot.

“Nah… it’s just that you are very similar. You clash with him because you’re both stubborn and prideful.”

“But so are you. Why you two never had serious spats… beside that one time when Tanaka senpai parted you…”

“I just think he has always felt like I was understanding him in my own way. And when he feels accepted, he is less clumsy about interactions…”

“Well, Hinata. I never thought you could be so… sensitive and analyzing?”

It was clearly the case. Behind his glasses, Tsukishima's eyes were open like a dragon was flying in front of him. Hinata felt quite proud of himself in that very moment. He had made the Sovereign Of Acid compliment him. That had been a pretty great day in that regard at least.

“That doesn't entirely come from me. Suga san and I have talked recently about him…”

Tsukishima marveled. At his invitation Hinata began to recall how he and Sugawara had recently met for he had encountered him along Hitoka while their former vice captain was with his girlfriend Shimizu back at Karasuno’s offices. Hitoka had advices to request and some material to borrow from the former manager on the team's behalf and he happened to tag along to help her carry what Shimizu would have lend her eventually. He was quick in adding that that day Yamaguchi had a medical check so he couldn't accompany her.

“I don't really remember how Sugawara and I started to talk about Kageyama, but somebody mentioned how his grade had soared recently, and we did…”

“So you knew about his grades?”

“Mmh… yeah?”

“Who told you?”

“Mmhh… what do you mean? He did, of course?”
Tsukishima sighed. Without asking furthermore he realized the confidence level those two had was clearly an exception in the usual way the setter would carry himself with people. But maybe, he briefly guessed with himself, Hinata had just asked him, and that pure simpleton had answered straightforwardly as usual.

“Anyway, I was speaking with Sugawara Senpai and he mentioned the fact he had been helping Kageyama studying since the third years’ graduation. He said that he is very intelligent, but lacks most acknowledgment about it unless stimulated by a strong interest…”

“Which, being him, just sums up about volley, doesn't it?”

Hinata’s face was a paint. There, Tsukishima could read thoughts fully developed like on a written book page; it was obvious in the shorter one’s opinion not only there wasn't anything bad in the way Kageyama was thinking only volleyball could constitute an apt push at studying, but also that to suggest otherwise would be quite offensive. The blond haired guy gave up at trying to put some better sense in that opinion even before his next blink of an eye.

“Well, of course? Anyway at that point I just mused that for being a very intelligent person he sure is terribly unsocial and awkward, which has always made me happy because with me… he kinda has never been… so…”

Tsukishima sighed watching the scenery outside the train running; it wasn't much of trail left before they would arrive in Tokyo:

“Volley freaks connectivity… oh! What a catch…”

Hinata started back talking giving a cold and serious glance at his teammate. Tsukishima felt his blood solidify. There was something plainly creepy about Hinata whenever he was at the peak of his intensity:

“Stop making fun of us. Listen to me… I know it's hard for you because you think I am an idiot but if you do - and by the way, I am NOT an idiot - you will maybe understand Kageyama a bit better. You are smart, so maybe what I am about to say will make more sense to you than it did to me… after all, I still understand him in my way… explanations don't have much impact as long as I do it right?”

Hinata's logic was purely instinctual. The usual way everything mattered in his life, Tsukishima reckoned. There was much of that redhead’s brain and the way it worked which could have been studied for him… but the point was that in the end, Hinata and Kageyama had clicked, and he and him had not.

Advantage Sun.

Moon on the move.

“So, Suga san started to speak to me about a thing Kageyama has which is called FLOW and which is a sort of super power his brain has which makes him able to have enlarged perception…? perceptivity…? How do you call that?”

“Perception…”

“Yeah, that, but in Suga’s words, it's kinda more than just that… anyway that skill makes him so good at playing because he is super receptive at a number of elements which in plays are visible, but
which normal people can't take into account all at once. It's like there, Kageyama is super social or something… and not only because he can read people's intentions, but also analyze the surrounding, like a machine…"

“Well, that would explain much of his talent…”

“Yep. And all that comes not only super fast, but super naturally to him…”

“That’s awesome… I suppose it's his genius thing…”

“Yep. But what Suga senpai added is that while this clarity and insight is in full display when he is on court, because he just lives it, he is awkward in other interactions because he has no idea how to make use of his intuition in normal life exchanges…”

“So, are you saying he is not dull or rude as a person, just… untrained at taking sociability into consideration?”

“Speak in a simpler language… what do you mean?”

Tsukishima's sighing was at that point more like a lamenting lullaby:

“I meant that he acts like he does with people because he is not used to the way all the rest of the world behaves in society?”

“That. More or less. Sugawara said that in other types of interactions outside of a game he is clumsy and clueless because he has never learnt he can mirror and understand things also there. When he is out of the flow he doesn't know how to do that, because he would expect things to go as smooth as they do on court, but they don't as people send messages he is not used to in normal life stuff…”

“It doesn't look like he cares much about how life outside of a court goes though… maybe that's also counting?”

“Put yourself in his shoes… if something would be so foreign to you, and people would seem difficult, and you would not find a use in trying to understand them… would you put an effort there yourself?”

Tsukishima widened his eyes until he couldn't do it more. That was truly Hinata's strength. That guy was incredibly empathic. He was able to get people's feelings, regardless if they were similar or not to him. That was the reason behind the fact anybody after a while would like him (not that he did like Hinata though), and the force pushing everyone at helping him, or wanting to be reciprocating his endless energy and enthusiasm. An annoying feature, but… also very useful.

“I guess not.”

“Exactly. So when Kageyama seems rude as you said… most of the times is just that he doesn't know how to express his point of view outside of a court…”

“Correct me if I am wrong, which I am not, but why you also call him names and blame him for being rude when he is among people if you are so conscious of all this about him?”

Hinata reddened. Damn Tsukishima and his fast brain.

“Well… in those cases… I just react at him? If I am personally involved, it's not like I can be calm and analyze this all can I?”
Tsukishima snorted. What a phenomenon of a guy he had in front. Very empathic, sure. But so often way too impulsive to make that count, allegedly.

“We gotta admit he is better at it though… He has tried to explain himself more at least…”

Hinata chuckled.

“He still a King as you say. He really believes he is always right. That translates from courts to outside it, and while on court he is mostly right… outside… well…”

“Outside he is not.”

Hinata nodded solemnly.

“Sugawara senpai, who has always been able to frame him right, said that Kageyama tries to learn how people behave in normal life when he is calm and feels accepted… and that he has felt so… with.. us.”

Tsukishima went back watching the train rushing the scenery like a movie without a sound. It had stopped to rain.

Outside, everything was running fast.

Life was running fast.

And it might have been too late by then to try to imagine how all the new ideas Hinata had contributed at making him have could have blossomed, now that… chances had ran fast and vanished, too.

“Yeah. I will forever remember how stupid he looked the first year at Nekoma’s when you and Noya and Tanaka senpai had started to dance for the barbecue we would get at the end of the camp… and that idiot was bobbing on his knees trying to imitate you…”

A squirming pressure on Tsukishima’s inside cut his words out; luckily while the train was having an announcement and the fact could be disguised.

“We are arriving, Tsukishima…”

“Yeah…”

They started to collect their bags. Movements unusually compact, even by Hinata. A sullen sense of oppression not one of the young players could or wanted to over analyze.

As they were moving towards the exit of their wagon, Tsukishima spoke again:

“Oi Hinata… you like Hitoka, don't you?”

“How…”

“Oh, please, don't guess who knows what… I just observed you. I am good at it…”

Hinata reddened like a bright orange tangerine turning into a tomato.

“So… why are you asking if you know it already?”

“Because I want to be a friend, since you feel like we all are. Don't try to do anything to make Yamaguchi suffer. Maybe I am your friend, who knows…. but I won't let anyone ever do anything wrong to him, because I am more his friend than others’. Understood?”

Hinata assured that he had.
“I can’t promise I will move over the feelings I have for her… but I can assure you I won’t ever play dirty. Nor attempt anything damaging Yamaguchi. It's not like me… to do those things…”

Tsukishima had to force himself not to sneeze. He also had to think it was not the moment to smile, because he had to look snotty and uppish as always to reach maximum effect.

“I know. After all, you’re good like the Sun, aren't you?”

“Mmh? Am I?”

Tsukishima chuckled.
That guy really was a category on his own. Peculiar.
Annoying.
Pervasive and difficult to escape.
Just like the Sun, indeed.

“You are. You can be good, I’ll concede you this. But… you know…”

Hinata was expecting some reveal. Tsukishima hadn't any, beside some really obvious realization:

“Sunshine sometimes burns. And you do it too. So please, during this camp… spare me some of your rays, ok? I can’t resist you that much. Be considerate of this, please.”

Hinata nodded.
The two rushed out from the train station railways to catch the metro and people wondered how such a shorter guy could match up the fast pacing of someone way taller than he was.
After the metro ride, the two stepped out of the underground and the shape of the gymnasium they would train at appeared.
Both thought exactly the same thing at exactly the same time.

*Our chance to meet him again where it will count the most. Let's do our best, and see what comes, because in the end, what only matters is to move on.*

Chapter End Notes

**NOTE 1** To fit with the timing of my story this National Youth Camp Tsukki and Hinata go to has been slightly anticipated compared to the canon one Kageyama has attended to.

**NOTE 2** Real occurence in Manga & Anime

**NOTE 3** Real occurence in Manga & Anime
Freedom

Chapter Summary

"All along it was a fever
A cold sweat hot-headed believer...

I threw my hands in the air, said, "Show me something"
He said, "If you dare, come a little closer"

Round and around and around and around we go...

Oh now, tell me now, tell me now, tell me now you know...

Not really sure how to feel about it
Something in the way you move
Makes me feel like I can't live without you
It takes me all the way...

I want you to stay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Tsukishima came home from Sendai gymnasium, his muscles were sore, he was tired he didn’t even want to eat, and despite his mother cheerfully complimenting him for having newly reached the Final of the Qualifier Tournament and pushing him at trying to look at least a bit proud of Karasuno's achievement, all he could think of and hope for was a hot bath, a very quick caloric intake, and his soft and cozy mattress.

“Tomorrow we will come over to watch you guys…”

Kei froze while finishing his meal. No one noticed beside Akiteru.

“That's fine I guess. But… why?”

His mother tried not to show her surprise at her son’s remark.

“What do you mean with that? Isn't it obvious we want to support you? We are all very proud of your accomplishments, Kei chan!”

Tsukishima's cheeks pinked up. No one else beside his mother would have dared to call his meter and 93 centimeters with such a cutesy and diminutive suffix. He liked the affection of her choosing that way to manifest, deep in his heart. But he had to deny it any time she would call him so.

“Mum, please… don't call me that?”

“If you fear I will do it tomorrow embarrassing you in front of your teammates I promise I'll be careful. But we're going to stand by your side. And I can't wait to meet all your other people beside Tadashi… especially that energetic redhead one and… the tall raven guy who's so good at playing
with you…”

Tsukishima froze a second time. And even his mother noticed.

“Are you ok, Kei chan?”

The guy collected quickly himself, disappointed for having caused concern to his mother.

“Yeah, sorry… I am just very tired…”

“Of course, it can't be helped! You gave a lot on court and so… let us clean up here, and you, you just take your hot bath and go resting in your room. Tomorrow you got to be at your best…”

To have his mother exert herself to be inspirational by giving competent motivational speeches regarding sport was awkward to Kei, but he could still appreciate her endeavor. He tried to remember if she used to be equally supportive when Akiteru was faking his high school volleyball career, but he couldn't. Those times were still a painful blur for him to attempt clearing.

“I can still do my chores though…”

“Thank you but no way. You have to rest…”

“I’ll do it instead.”

Akiteru offered swiftly to substitute his brother himself. Kei knew he wouldn't win against those two’s will to help him.

“Okay then… thank you. Next time I will do dishes twice in a row…”

As he was ready to move to the corridor and stepping up to the bathroom, Kei got stopped by Akiteru at their stairway bottom.

“Kei, how do your muscles feel? Seriously…”

He had to notice how stiffer than usual even his walk appeared. Athletes catch athletes like nobody else can.

“They're quite sore. We had massages after the game but… maybe not enough? Is that I am not very good at massaging myself, and I try to avoid to turn things worse with wrong maneuvering…”

Akiteru lighted up.

“I can help you with that.”

His smile was wide. It was evident how pleased he was to constitute a factual support for his brother. Kei felt warm.

He loved Akiteru so much. He had hated him with every energy he had, but that had just been another side of the same love. He was grateful things had resolved for the better.

His brother was one of the very, very few people he felt at ease relying on to, and the feeling of protection Akiteru could provide to him had more often than Kei would have admitted helped him melt away the obstacles created by his overworking mind.

“So take your bath in tranquility and then come to my room, and trust me all your pain will be just a fading memory!”
“Okay then. It could take a while though… I am still a bit cramp in there and…”

“I get it… you keep growing, it's only natural! We might have to renew the bathroom soon. At this point, I think it's no stretch to foresee you reaching two meters…”

Two meters. I actually might. My growing rates still summing up. And a two meters guy, even with moderate talent as myself… could maybe… I could…

“Kei… Kei? Are you listening…?”

Akiteru had continued to speak to him, but Kei, lost in thoughts, had stopped following him a while before. The older brother was sure his sibling had important things to mind, probably of the same species he and Tadashi had discussed about, but he knew for sure that night couldn't be the one to dig deeper on the matter.

His brother had to rest.

The following day he had to win.

No time for losers and absolutely no time for bothering subjects.

Kei would have found a way, his way, to deal with his troubles at a more convenient time.

Akiteru had unlimited confidence in his little brother's capacities.

“Oh… sorry, sorry Akiteru. What were you saying again?”

“Never mind, really. Go take that bath now. And then come to me. I'll be waiting for you.”

Tsukishima walked into the cypress wooden bath. His continuous growth had come to a point his favorite room in the house had become difficult to enjoy. But he still loved to spend time there. When the steam was making silhouettes of the minimal furnishing in the ample bathroom disappear, enhancing the perfume of the wood and the essences his mother always carefully polished and prepared, and he could soak in hot water losing perception of himself, he had always felt free.

He longed freedom most than many, and reckoning this aim at an early age he had always blamed himself for it.

Why a kid, now guy, with so many blessings in his life had always felt the urge of it?

That was one of the many questions his mind was evil enough to attack him with.

Ignorance and stupidity truly were helpful if people desired a simple serenity; something he could only dream of and reckon from afar, and by opposite siding.

He would sometimes question himself about any of his personality traits.

His crave for feeling liberated and utterly free would be one of the most persistently wondered about.

He had everything.

A stable and well off family; health; loving care by his beloveds; he was smart, skilled, and in the opinion of many around him - and his own, as well - quite the pleasant looking guy, a bit bony maybe for his height, but with a nice and defined face, beautiful eyes with a tone of maroon which had surprising amber tones, and which not even his glasses had ever permitted to not notice.

He had so many things working for him, while nothing to held him down in shackles of any sort.

Then why had he always needed a space for himself to allow his deepest core to wish for freedom?

And not only in that bath, where he could soak his own body into oblivion, feeling it almost disarticulating in the heat; also his brain, he loved to shut it off often by drowning its faculties into walls of sounds.
Kei Tsukishima lived with earphones attached to him.

He had started to love music long before, and he had a variant taste in genres and period of times regarding the most modern of art forms before photography and movies had appeared. He could easily name any song after mere seconds of intro plays, and he was able to memorize any lyrics with impressive accuracy and rapidness.

More than once he had thought about properly learning how to play some instruments, and at the start of his high school life he had actually tried to apply to the music club; then Tadashi had offered him to take part along himself in the volleyball one and he had given up to the idea, for obvious lacking of time.

He genuinely loved music, and he was grateful to live in times where its consumption could be so natural and wide. His mother had often told him how in the previous century people loving music as they both did had to wait for foreign products to come in very long times in Japan and how troublesome it could be for music lovers to have good collections of popular music. She would also often remind him how unpractical being actually able to play most of the music outside or everywhere as he could do with his phones, MP3 or earphones had always been when she was a teenager herself.

That was one of the reason which had pushed Kei at trying to involve his mother as much as possible whenever he had to buy new devices for enjoying their mutual passion into the house. He would also happily ask for her opinion about up and coming artists, and would seek her advice when he would dig to dwell into albums from older decades.

The love for music Kei felt had certainly be an inheritance from motherly side.

Neither his father or Akiteru had ever shown a similar inclination.

In fact, music had always been Kei's biggest pleasure, his shield and his refuge, and if he hadn't gotten Yamaguchi by his side since such a long time, he wouldn't have had trouble in calling music his own best friend, too.

Whenever songs of any kind, old, new, long, short, happy or sad had captured him, he would instantly connect at a physical kind of level with them.

Sounds, productions and words, they would inhabit his soul for a while or, if they'd happen to satisfy his inmost taste like gloves, he would make them indelibly part of himself, and he would be able to recall the exact kind of mood they would nurture in himself after years from his first listenings of them.

He had a great confidence with English because of his wish to learn songs lyrics. And when he consumed music, he would get inspired by words as well as melodies. Sometimes, and actually quite often, songs could help him deal with situations and feelings. Sometimes, or often, entire songs or pieces of them could speak his mind better than himself. To have artists and musicians who had felt like he could, had always been a comforting solace and also an inspiring push for him.

He had a fondness for playlists. Sometimes he would just juxtapose popular music of the moment, and create mixes for every taste; but he could also, when inclined, mix songs following a pattern, or a purpose.

Not that he believed people would ever be as perceptive or smart or acknowledged enough to actually realize the peculiar specialty of those mixes, but nevertheless he tended to use music as a soul messenger, too.

“Message in a bottle… message in a bottle…”

He started to hum that old song his mother loved very dearly, finally relaxed in the bath.
I should have included it in his last mix. He seems to love 80s music. But now... no more mixes. For him...

Kei put his hands on his face.

“Stupid thoughts cursing me...”, he whispered softly and bitterly.

His heart, mesmerized by the past and haunted by the awareness of the missed chances he had let slipping away, suddenly felt like strong nails had scratched it over; and Kei felt shattered and sad and useless because in less than twelve hours he would play the last game along a person he had realized he would have liked to play along for as many years as possible.

“Pathetic. I keep being pathetic. There’s no use of all this...”

He put his right hand down waters and with his palm facing upwards he started to gently move it in circle, looking at his long fingers wounded by the games, and laughing because his nails were still badly kept and all of a different length.

“He couldn’t force me at manicures, at least...”

But his heart bleeding was telling him he wished he had. He wished he had more time to force him at taking care of his fingers, too.

Tsukishima moved his hand up, out of water; as droplets were falling all along his wrist and arm, looking at his hand he promised he would have used all in his might to win the game which would be his last chance at playing with Kageyama.

He would have made him proud.

He would have made him remember how Tsukishima Kei could do, when willing to.

“Who knows... if in a small corner of your mind, you will regret, even for a second, that we won't play together anymore, Your Highness...”

And at that, he clenched his fingers into a fist and let his right hand plunge violently back under water, while droplets of liquid poured from his face into it as well.

After a few minutes, Tsukishima knocked at Akiteru’s room. His brother replied to step in in a short while, and as Kei made his way into his brother's room he questioned if he had things to do instead than massaging him.

Akiteru blushed and replied he had just given Saeko instructions on how to find him and their family the morning after at the gymnasium.

“You still blush anytime you mention her... it's...”

“Pathetic, I know...”

“...really sweet.”

Akiteru looked at Kei's face with an amazed and googling eyed expression. Did his brother purposely praise his sappy self?

“Why are you looking at me like I have been saying I believe in aliens or that Elvis’s alive?”

“Well... you... I mean... I thought you weren't into my overly romantic side?”

Kei scrunched his nose, and proceeded to take his glasses off while laying on his brother's mattress
with his back up towards the roof:

“I still find some of it cute nevertheless.”

Akiteru moved over his brother, sitting on his bum to reach all of his back and smoother it before starting to press where needed. Kei had come with only his pajama pants on.

While Akiteru was massaging him, Kei fell silent.

“Yeah, you really needed a bit of this. Your back is a marble block…”

“I stopped many spikes today. Shiratorizawa has gotten even better than last Interhigh, that Goshiki is a demon…”

“Well then you are a demon prince, because you blocked him mercilessly most of times…”

* A prince.  
* Princes… kings…

“My King…”

Akiteru felt at once Kei’s back freezing and his low voice pronouncing a little lamenting phrase. He stopped to massage his brother, and Kei turned up and back with wide eyes and a red face and a hand over his mouth.

“I… I… said it loud… didn't I?”

His eyes were terrified, the pupil a little point into a wetting golden brown disc.

“Well, it wasn't loud. But whatever it meant, yes, I heard it…”

Kei turned his red face to the right; his chest having, the hand still on his mouth.

“Kei, c’mon… it was nothing? I didn't even understand it?”

Tsukishima moved his trembling hand from his mouth; he couldn't face his brother. His heart was aching and his head was about to burst. He wanted *desperately* to not cry in front of him, but words had a will of their own he couldn't rule over anymore:

“I am… in love…”

Akiteru bent his knees to sit on his brother's leg instead then over his bottom; Kei was still looking aside and his head was attached to the pillow like he wanted to never move from there ever again. He looked so exhausted and frail Akiteru couldn't avoid to caress his cheek.

“And… isn't this a wonderful thing?”

Kei closed his eyes. Mute tears started flowing from the gates of his intertwined eyelashes. His head still glued to the pillow, making his profile stand out from it as it was a bright purple pillow Akiteru had.

“Since when such a pain could be called so?”

Akiteru moved and went sitting on the floor, facing his brother's face from the right side it was directed into, softly smiling at him even though it wasn't seen by a still eye shut Kei.
“To be in love is the proof we are human. And no matter what, to reckon we are… still wonderful. Trust me. I have suffered the hell out of it before Saeko came into my life…”

Kei turned his face whole into the pillow and used both his hand to press it more onto his head. A muffed voice, a little cracking, objected:

“My thing is not… the same!”

Now Kei was suffocating his crying. Akiteru could easily see it from his back puffing and relenting in syncopation. He wanted to help him release his anguish, but he knew how prideful and stubborn his little brother could be. He had to not push him. He had just to be there, like he had established with Tadashi.

“Love is love. Of course it is the same, my dear…”

After a little breathing spasm, Kei surged from his pillow mask and with red eyes and a disheartening expression he inquired:

“Is it? What… What if I am… gay?”

Akiteru didn’t fret and didn’t change a fragment of his expression he was offering to his broken hearted and scared little brother. He wanted more than anything else to make him feel ok with everything he was. And not only because some years before he was the one causing him the greatest of his life’s let down. He wanted Kei to know everyone is perfect just the way they are.

“What if? Well… almost ten per cent of the people are so in Japan so… no big deal?”

He looked at Kei’s face mold into a mask of disgust.

“Stop doing this, Akiteru. I am serious…”

His brother really needed a lot from him that night.

“So am I.”

“Oh, for heavens sake! Can you imagine me telling mum and everybody that I got a huge crush on one of my teammates… can you picture the outcome?”

Akiteru’s expression became even more loving and hospitable. He offered his hand to have Kei’s one to keep. Everything he was looking like was the very picture of empathy and understanding.

“Sure. For us you would still be Kei. The same Kei you’ve always been. And we would love you the same as we’ve always had. Have you got so little faith in us, to think any differently?”

Kei breathed heavy and tried to dry his eyes and face. Akiteru was being very serious as well, and all he was saying to him, every little word, with every little whisper, it seemed to have the power to calm his despair and heal his ache.

He shook his head at his brother.

“I… do… I do have faith in your love for me.”

Akiteru could now caress his brother's hand. His long fingered, bruised, beautiful hand.

“So… can I ask you… which teammate…?"

Kei became the reddest thing Akiteru had ever seen; he quickly added he could have avoided to
answer and that it was not important as long as he didn't feel neither judged nor oppressed. Kei lowered his eyes and just said that he thought he was feeling things towards Kageyama. Akiteru put the puzzle piece he had long thought of right into the middle of his brother's life situation he had tried to define in the previous month.

“Since when?”

Kei could never contemplate to share his wet dreams into the family, no matter how rightfully he did trust and confide in each one of them. He just said truthfully he had started to wonder about his feelings towards the setter in the past few weeks. He explained at a certain point he had started to think about him at alarming rates, until the thought of his companion had become a sort of lingering obsession. For days and nights.

“To be honest I have no idea tho…if I am gay or not…”

Akiteru could see how battling the thought of being emotionally or sexually inclined to a same gender person was to his brother. He probably had never thought he had similar propensities until the reality had come biting him right at the most unexpected of times, in the most unexpected of contexts. Kei was not a prude person. But he was very prudent and he probably needed more elements to resolve at thinking about himself as a homosexual.

“You mean you are also liking some girl right now?”

Kei for a minute looked pensive. He probably would have loved to say he did. But without also knowing he did, that would have been just pointless. And after all he was grateful he could finally lift that stone from his chest and have somebody important in his life with whom he could share his doubts and chagrin.

“No. I have not. But… how can I put this… it's only him making me question my sexuality. I thought I liked girls till… Well, till I started thinking so much about… him. It angers me a lot, all this…”

To be angry about himself was very Kei of Kei.

“I find this a progress for you. At least now you're being honest with how you feel…”

Kei understood straight what his brother meant. For the longest time he had expressed frustrations and negativity talking about Kageyama at any given chance. If he had to analyze things from an objective point of view, for some unfounded reason he had always held a grudge against him, even before properly get to know him. From the very starting point of their acquaintance Kei Tsukishima had treated that boy in a different way than any other people he had to interact with. He had thought for a lot of time it had happened due to a natural idiosyncratic reaction. But Akiteru was looking at him in that moment like he also could agree on the fact that maybe the reason was of a total opposite tone.

“Yeah… applause for me because of my eureka reveal then… Too bad I keep suffering, right?”

Kei was a teenager after all. Teenage times… when you are bolted up with massive feelings and you have no patience or foresight to understand not everything get gotten or solved or accepted in minutes. The infinite energy and the endless frustration which comes with the inability to drive it where one likes… how blessed can one feel when any little change can throw you off your feet without warning?

“My dear Kei… anybody does when it's about these stuffs? You are just like any other teenager.

Yeah right bro… tell me how normal am I when even his scent when he sweats can turn me on? Tell me how normal am I when looking at his shirt drenched and attaching to his pectorals I feel my stomach flutter and a wave of electricity jolt down my pants?

“Normal?”

“Of course. Hetero, gay… you still a very, a super normal teen!”

Kei didn't want to agree. He was a very stubborn kid after all. But maybe, the only difference between his sexual inspirations and those of others was that in fact he found Kageyama's pectorals arousing and not, say, that Sachiko girl’s he had in his class ones?

All considered, Sachiko had quite the rack. And she was obviously crushing on him. But never once he had cared about her or any other girl he had been receiving confessions from. He had thought for a while, he had thought before he had started those damn wet dreams, that his own indifference had to do with his high to be met standards. But maybe, it all had to do with the fact he just wasn't into girls after all?

“Who knows… I don't feel this supposed normality at all to be frank…”

Akiteru squeezed Kei's hand in his. He nodded at him. And caressed him.

“That also is very natural and very teensy. And that also has more to do with your age than not your gender preference…”

“You think so?”

“I sure do. I felt exactly the same at your age after all… cmon, you giant little brother… come here… let me squeeze you fully now…”

Kei felt happy and safe in being embraced by his brother. He abandoned himself into those arms like they were the ultimate cure of all his wounds. How safe was he feeling in Akiteru's care, like years spent refusing that love had gone without traces, finally.

When after a while, still into his arms, he got asked if he thought Kageyama may have gay interests as well, he went back to a somewhat dark mood, departing slightly from his brother's arms.

He had no idea.

He thought he may be wholly uninformed or just not interested in sex at all, given how he had treated Alisa Haiba and her confession to him. But he had seen very well how they had kissed at the Obon and that hadn't looked neither passive or impassioned.

Maybe Kageyama was truly just interested in volleyball as he claimed, and didn't want to get involved in anything capable of deviating his energy from his already established project of life, just like he had always explained.

“The King’s unreadable. He just cares about playing. For real.”

“You mean he has never shown emotion in interacting with school people at all? You have always described him as very detached… beside that Obon kissing with that girl you say, has he never really shown a different degree of interest about anyone else that you know of?”

Kei tried to remember the most he could. And trying to, he realized how many times he had actually carefully observed Kageyama in any situation, ever since their first year. Vivid images of scenes he had observed him in came into his mind like they were songs that he had memorized fully without conscience of it.
A bite of nostalgia and pain crunched over his heart.

“I think the only one I have seen able to move him more than regularly had to be Oikawa Tooru.”

“You mean the setter of Seijou?”

“Yeah, the former. Kageyama has always felt strongly about him. Anyone could see it in our team. I mean… for his parameters… I could say Oikawa is the single person he feels affected from the most.”

Akiteru mumbled something impossible to catch. Then asked again:

“But he was like his senpai at middle school, right?”

Kei nodded.

“The fact is, it seems like Oikawa had been a dreadful senpai to him actually. Which makes the King’s consideration for him…”

“…a bit strange.” NOTE 1

Kei’s heart tumbled.

For the very first time he had a small hope that his feelings weren't totally impossible to present. Because if also Kageyama could feel towards another guy…

He shook his head.

Probably Kageyama was just a grateful and starry eyed kouhai who admired his senpai for his skills even though his senpai had been a jerk to him.

Kageyama could effectively be that stupid after all.

“Kei…?”

Tsukishima excused himself.

“Our setter is a strange specimen. I gave up trying understanding him from the start…”

Akiteru laughed.

“Well, that's so not you. In the end, you never give up about things you like so… try using the rest of your high school years to solve the mystery about him?”

At that, Kei simply stumbled.

“K…Kei?”

He had gotten so pale Akiteru freaked out. Then quiet tears started streaming down his face, and Akiteru's worry increased conspicuously.

“You see…brother… the point is that… there won't be any other time for me to solve it…”

Kei looked destroyed. Collected, yet in pieces. Akiteru would have done anything to console him straight and fair. But even before his brother had explained why it weren't possible, he knew he couldn't have had.

“Tomorrow will be my last game with him as a teammate. He is about to transfer. No… please don't stop me now or I won't be able to go on, and God, I need to tell all this, because it hurts, because it has killed me for weeks to know this, and now I need to tell you all I know, or I am going to
Akiteru took Kei's hands once more and gave sign to him to continue.

"Kageyama will transfer to Tokyo Itachiyama Academy in a few days. I know about this by accident. I read the forms in the Principal Office one day I got called there for the composition of the Sixth Class. He should have been part of it as well, imagine… we would have been classmates, even… but it is not going to happen. Because he will leave Karasuno. He will leave Miyagi. He will leave us… and…"

A burst of choked tears resounded. Akiteru's hold straightened.

"…me."

Akiteru embraced back his desperate brother so tightly, he would feel all his tears and all his choked breaths. Like a balloon losing pressure, his body was clay into his embrace.
So weakening.
So shrinking.
Akiteru wished he could find the words to soothe Kei's pain, but he had understood immediately the posse of his struggle and trouble. As soon as he had confessed how his very first love he didn't even was accepting in full to have was to be gone forever from him, before he could even welcome his existence into his heart completely, Akiteru knew all he could have done for Kei would be standing by his side forever after the departure.

Or… was just that only he could have done?

"Kei… please please… listen… this isn't the end if you don't want it to be?"

For a while Kei just kept weeping onto his brother's shoulder. But like he had just pushed further a thought he had already thought over, at a certain point he raised from the embrace and declared that he would have gotten so much better at volleyball that he would have reached the same stage Kageyama was destined to be featured in.

"It won't. Because I swear that tomorrow I will spite out all the blood I have to make us win, and no matter what, even when he's gone, I will get better at this volleyball thing until a point I will play again where he will. I swear I will get to a point where I can be considered worthy of a Japan Team call up. I got height working for me, don't I…"

Akiteru got shocked by the passion Kei had manifested. Was he the same guy who had defined volleyball just a club activity to fill school extra hours?
Was he the same guy who thought he wasn't even talented enough to play the sport, the one who thought the short redhead in his team was light years more capable than he could ever be at playing?

NOTE 2

What did love do to Kei, to turn him into a sport killing machine, targeting successes?

"You certainly could… and… wow, I love to hear you say such things… but what I meant was more… that even if Kageyama goes to Tokyo… you could confess to him how you do feel about… him?"

Kei retorted his own shocked face to Akiteru.
He couldn't be suggesting… that… for real?

“What…? eh? No… no way… I can't ?”

“Why not?”
Tsukishima scratched his head. He wanted to find an effective reason. And he wanted also to tell the
truth. It felt liberating to speak so much truth that night. It had been painful and difficult but it had also felt good in a way to trash down all the houses of cards he had always carefully kept all at once in his life. That had felt a lot like… *freedom.*

“Akiteru I know what you mean but no… I can't confess. If there had been more time for us to get closer, and to get to know one another better… maybe I would have. But put yourself in my shoes… what for now?”

“He could reciprocate…”

“I doubt it… but even if, in the Realm of Impossible, he would… what for still? Wouldn't he be gone anyway? All this love thing is incredibly painful as it is… unrequited, not understood, unconfessed… It's already driving me crazy like this… Can you imagine the damage if I had to live my very first experience in a long distance term?”

Akiteru tried to figure it out. Kei was right. It would have been tragic.

“And by the way really… I don't think he could ever reciprocate…”

“This is only your regular pessimism speaking up… you cannot tell…”

Tsukishima tried to imagine how could it have been to confess. His heart was a washing machine in a spin-dryer mode. He couldn't resist its violence, but he craved for those evolutions and rolls nevertheless. That had to feel like life the most he had experienced in all of its duration till then. Scary.

But somehow… interesting.

Touchable.

Mattering.

“I just know I am not made to suffer a long distance thing in itself. I think too much, all the time. It would be a constant paranoia and I have already a sour personality enough without it…”

That was hard to deny even for his loving brother.

“If he wouldn't leave… who knows… maybe someday, I would have been able to test waters but right now… there is no way, no way this can happen. And it won't. Somehow I feel free now that I told you this all though. It's like… that already has helped me feeling better. Let's not ask for more. I wouldn't get anything beside more suffering…”

Akiteru took a look at his brother.

Kei was growing into a very smart and deep and also sensitive young man. He felt very proud of him. He felt like he could speak with him like adults do, because that night, his little sibling certainly had a passage and a shift in his age to grasp the sense of what he was about to reply him with.

“Dear Kei you can never be free if you don't fight for what you believe in and for what you want to know. You can't be free if you don't accept who you are. I am not saying it's easy or anything, because you know all too well how I have failed there too in the past… but even if Kageyama goes away… try to not have regrets. Tell him everything. No matter what, believe… whatever comes after… it's the only way to set yourself free. You have been able to tell this all to me… but are you really feeling free only out of this? I don't think so. Though I wish you whatever you think you want. And the point is that exactly… is it only this, that you want?”
Kei easily could deny it. Of course it was not all that he really wanted, to have opened himself only with Akiteru. What was it... what was it the thing he truly wanted, given that he would have never really confessed to Kageyama unless he would be assured he could have a chance with him?

Back into his room after a very long and mute cuddling with his brother, he lied on his bed, aware that he had soon to sleep or he would be just a zombie on court that morning. And he couldn't be. Because they had to win. Because he had to leave an indelible memory into Kageyama's brain. Heart? Nah. Brain. Brain would suffice.

*What do I want?*
What do I want?
What can set me free, until I can work my talent up enough to bring myself back where you are?
What can I tell you... before you go?
What can I do to have no regrets?

He wished he could tell Kageyama the magic formula to make him stay, but he had no hope that could exist. An offer from Itachiyama to play along the best player in Japan... There would be no way a volley obsessed genius freak like that setter could say anything but a loud and everlasting YES to such a proposal.

He knew it.

But Tsukishima wanted to communicate nonetheless some of his heart and soul to him before it would be too late. He wanted to tell him something, in exchange for a piece of freedom he could reclaim after his departure to work better towards Kageyama again in the future. He wanted him to stay, but he knew he had no way to make him to, and to him, love would never mean to cage anybody to a tomorrow they would despise anyway. Because even if that was his first real loving crush, Tsukishima knew that love does not mean to force someone else at anything. To love someone, as many many songs had taught him in years, it means to be selfless and honest. It means to be brave even if you feel weak. It means to hope with open eyes and open heart. Damn, if love weren't difficult...

Tossing in his bed, he was finding hard to catch sleep, as his mind was working hard.

After a few more tosses and huffs, he jumped out of bed, to sit at his desk. His face focused despite the tiredness. He took a couple of devices and lighted his laptop up.

He put his headphones on, and a comforting, brilliant acoustic guitar helped him finding a way to tell Kageyama what he could say to him without ruining any of them two.

He had hopes for both’s futures. Maybe he had hopes for both’s future. He had hopes that their futures would one day again converge into a singular unit, some way or
another.
He had always been patient after all.
And sometimes, chapters closing don't mean that the book has ended.

“This will do.”

In a short span of minutes, Kei closed all the devices, smiled a very tiny smile at his laptop shutting off, and finally went to bed to rest.

Music really had to be his best friend after all.

Chapter End Notes

Japan and LGBT Culture There are many ways to approach the subject, but everything has to start from the point that Eastern Cultures have a different approach than Western to the matter of homosexuality. This Wikipedia page https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_in_Japan may provide some information useful to start to understand why so much pop culture and literature, visual and written nowadays, tends to portray with quite an open mindness compared to Christian, Muslim and Hebrew countries the subject of same sex relationship. There are numerous forms of art known since centuries ago which dwell into this area. The most known are historical practices identified by scholars as homosexual which include shudō (衆道), wakashudō (若衆道) and nanshoku (男色).

Modern terms for homosexuals include dōseiaisha (同性愛者, literally same-sex-love person), gei (ゲイ, gay), homo (ホモ), homosekusharu (ホモセクシャル, homosexual), bian (ビアン, shortened form of lesbian), rezubian (レズビアン, lesbian) and rezu (レズ, shortened form of lesbian).

Modern Japan appears to be tolerant with LGBT rights, (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/08/23/national/social-issues/japan-survey-finds-90-parents-accepting-kids-came-lgbt/#.Wc6AeRO0P_A) although the natural reserved nature of the Country avoids open displays of affection (which has nothing to do with the sexual preference though, as it is meant for EVERY type of PDA among also consensual etero people) much as we have noted elsewhere in the notes of this work of ours.

The last survey has found recently that around 7.8% of Japanese people are identified as LGBT. (see this: http://www.dentsu.co.jp/news/release/2015/0423-004032.html)

This is why I have included in my story a believable amount of similar inclinations, and not more than it. I like to include a truthful amount of context in any creation of mine :)

Extracurricular Activities (clubs) in Japan Schools: Club activities take place after school every day. Teachers are assigned as sponsors, but often the students themselves determine the club's daily activities. Students can join only one club, and they rarely change clubs from year to year. In most schools, clubs can be divided into two types: sports clubs (baseball, soccer, judo, kendo, track, tennis, swimming, softball, volleyball, rugby) and culture clubs (English, broadcasting, calligraphy, science, mathematics, yearbook). New students usually are encouraged to select a club shortly after the school year begins in April. Clubs meet for two hours after school each day and many clubs continue to meet during school vacations. Club activities provide one of the primary
opportunities for peer group socialization. Most college bound students withdraw from club activities during their senior year to devote more time to preparation for university entrance examinations. Although visible in the general high school experience, it is in the clubs that the fundamental relationships of senpai (senior) and kohai (junior) are established most solidly. It is the responsibility of the senpai to teach, initiate, and take care of the kohai. It is the duty of the kohai to serve and defer to the senpai. For example, kohai students in the tennis club might spend one year chasing tennis balls while the upperclassmen practice. Only after the upperclassmen have finished may the underclassmen use the courts. The kohai are expected to serve their senpai and to learn from them by observing and modeling their behavior. This fundamental relationship can be seen throughout Japanese society, in business, politics, and social dealings.

NOTE 1 & 2: Real occurrence in anime/manga.
Chapter Summary

"Rising up, back on the street
Did my time, took my chances
Went the distance, now I'm back on my feet
Just a man and his will to survive

So many times it happens too fast
You trade your passion for glory
Don't lose your grip on the dreams of the past
You must fight just to keep them alive

It's the eye of the tiger
It's the thrill of the fight
Rising up to the challenge of our rival
And the last known survivor
Stalks his prey in the night
And he's watching us all with the eye of the tiger

Face to face, out in the heat
Hanging tough, staying hungry
They stack the odds still we take to the street
For the kill with the skill to survive

It's the eye of the tiger
It's the thrill of the fight
Rising up to the challenge of our rival
And the last known survivor
Stalks his prey in the night
And he's watching us all with the eye of the tiger

Rising up, straight to the top
Had the guts, got the glory
Went the distance, now I'm not gonna stop
Just a man and his will to survive"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Chaaaance baaaaallll!!!!”

“Come here, Kageyaamaaaa!”

Screeeeeeechn…

Screeeeeeechn…
KA-TUNK!

Wheee… It got in by a millimeter this time. Damn, this is no good. We have to be more consistent than this. Where we can go… We have options, but there is just one way to use them in the correct and most effective combination. Think Tobio. Think. They are stretching us.

Hinata can’t be overused. I need his explosiveness intact for the X attack. Kei seems to be tired in his jumps, better wait for his restoring and stop for a couple plays the double quick. Just for a little while.

Concentrate, Tobio… Think. Think.

Thing is, Yahaba is in top form, and his sequences with Kyoutani are synchronized to the maximum. But there’s still something I can do about it. Something WE can do about it.

It’s a risk, but Karasuno is the team that always takes either a risk or a punch, innit? Oh, great, it’s the half set timeout. Perfect.

“Kids, you’re doing everything right. Don’t panic. They are just a couple points ahead. Let’s keep doing all we are currently doing, no excessive movements and no chaos. We’ll get them.”

Yeah coach… or maybe not? What if they push forward with something unexpected? Can we really have the luxury of giving them the pivotal play? Wouldn’t be better to shock them ourselves, with the last thing they’re expecting now that they are ahead?

“Is something wrong, Kageyama?”

“Uhm… no… it’s… just an idea…”

“Which idea? Tell us, please…”

“Coach, could we try a 6-2 for a change?”

“You… would put… Saizo kun on court… today?”

“That’s not up for me to choose, Ukai San. But I think that to try something like that now that we are behind, but just in the middle of the second set could provide some trouble for them. They won’t expect this from us right at this point… and they have no idea we can afford the 6-2 yet. They don’t consider Saizo kun and Tojo kun as potential regulars yet…”

“I see your point, and I may overall agree with you, but do you really think your kouhai can face such a pressure already?”

Yes. He can do it. He won’t feel the pressure if he senses I got his back. And I sure have it. Kid’s good. And it’s time for him to ruffle some feathers. Look at his face… he’s beaming. He knows he can do it. And most of all… he WANTS to do it. Good kid…

“Kyouya kun… would you feel ok with it? It would be just for a while… to put em off balance…”

“Anything you think will work, I am all for it, Kageyama senpai!”

This kid… I truly like him. The fire in his eyes… it’s like watching myself in a mirror. And we do look like each other a lot, as everyone says… I am sure it can work, because he’s good and learns almost as fast as Hinata. His setting is precise enough to unleash both Tanaka and Ennoshita and also myself. The rest is up to me. I have to keep an eye on him and avoid Seijou to try taunting him. We’ll
protect you, Kyouya kun. We’re doing what Nekoma does with Kozume San. Let’s do it together. I think it will be fun to play with this mini me.

“Ok then. Let’s switch. Are you okay with this guys? Captain… do you think it can work? Senpais… do you?”

They do. What's this warmth… why does this make me feel so complete? Their trust… it means so much. Every time I get it… it’s like getting pork and curry… no matter how many times I do… it still the best thing ever…

“Alright then. Tsukishima, Tanaka, Hinata… let's show them how we do things! Nishinoya senpai, Ennoshita senpai… we are in your care. It's gonna be hard to cover half a spot more for a while…”

“We got your back guys. Make it rain fire!”

Sure we will. We can’t lose this. Seijou… your advantage won't last any longer.
I see everything you are about to do.
It won’t work.
We can stop your flow. And we are about to do it.

“King…”

Tsukishima seems strangely nervous today. But he still playing well. Maybe it's just a wrong feeling…

“What?”

“Their ace… He’s starting to jump repeatedly from the same spot only… it seems like…”

“His right leg has some trouble…”

“Mmh. Thought so.”

“Your sharpness at observing everything is always creepily accurate… you know?”

“I’ll take it as a compliment…”

“It is.”

So… if Kyoutani can't properly use his leg it means that they will do less flares and probably less to no slides… Kunimi ain't that good there yet… and Kindaichi can't completely change his rhythm to cover those options either…
Tides are turning in our favor…
And my senses are all open, my awareness is full.
I don't feel any pain, and I can hear my breathing clearly.
It sounds beautifully even, no matter how often I jump. It's one of those days when my body really does all I want it to do effortlessly and quick. Nothing seems to disturb me. And the team feels my readiness and it pushes all of them forward.
It's a beautiful day to play.
Really.

“Hinata…”

“Mmh?”
“Do you still have got some?”

“Yep.”

Of course. It's incredible. How can this guy be never gassed out? It’s like he has superpowers. How it’s that manga called Boku No Hero Academia? He belongs there… his super jumping power… Honestly he leaves me speechless every time. Endless stamina doesn't even begin to cover it…

“Then by the end of this rotation, get ready to peak with every jump of yours.”

“Do you mean we are gonna do it? Will we? Will we?”

“We will. Stop being so hyper, dumbass, or they're gonna smell it…”

Look at his face… he's so happy he can't avoid to show it… dumbass Hinata… mpff…

“Are you laughing?”

Shit. He got me…

“Don't be ridiculous…”

“Anyway… even if they could guess what we are about to do…”

“If we do it right, there's no way they can stop us.”

“Exactly.”

And we will do it more than right. Guaranteed.
It's time for this match to end.
There won't be a third set.

“Tojo kun, are you ready too?”

“Uh.”

“Oh…?”

“Tojo kun, grunting doesn't count as an answer. Despite our King being familiar with those.”

“Understood, Tsukishima senpai. I am ready, Kageyama senpai!”

That damn smirk is back. Tsukishima better wipe it out or I will make him jump two inches higher in one step… it’s irritating how Ryoma kun only follows his inputs. Maybe is the way he glares? Who knows. But Tojo is a beast. His power will soon cut Seijou in two. Look at him, Kindaichi. He’s what you could become, if you’d trust yourself more…

“Mineeee!”

“One touch…”

“Who’s gonna hit…damn!”

“Akira, cover on the right…”

“Shit… who the hell that one is?”
“Ryoma Tojo. He’s unpolished but… wow, he’s got an hell of a hit…”

See, Yahaba senpai? Kyoutani San is no more the biggest beast in Miyagi. Karasuno got its kraken. How does it feel when it bites you? And we have just started. Look how Karasuno learns from falling. Look how crows never stop stop soaring.

“Ehi King… that was a nice idea.”

“You mean to use Tojo kun now? Well, it's mostly your merit if he is not jumping senselessly here and there. You're taming him quite well. I could never…”

“You could. You would just need more time…”

“Nah. A life wouldn't work. You got him good enough. He doesn't need me…”

Again that strange face.

Why does he keep looking at me in this strange way?

Tsukishima is really not himself today.

He keeps looking at me in a way I can’t name, and he talks a lot.

He never talks this much during a game.

Especially with me, out of all people...

I thought he was tired before but…

Maybe he isn't tired.

It's not even unfocused he seems… just slower?

No it ain't that. He’s as fast as usual, or he couldn't keep up with blocks and spikes the way he's doing…

But I sense like he is glancing around. He’s very, very strange today.

Can it be that overzealous intent and analysis actually makes you like that in plays?

Whatever. As long as he keeps cutting Seijou right through and stopping Kindaichi, it's ok.

He wouldn't tell me anything about his state anyway, and that's it.

Not that I can mind everyone's mood you know.

Stay focused, Tobio.

Think.

Think.

Feel everything around you.

Feel everyone on court.

Look.

Focus.

Imagine.

DO.

“Hinata… do you think you can overlap with Tanaka San next time on the right?”

“Sure. What do you want to try?”

“Would you be okay with Saizo kun’s sets for a couple plays?”

“I can adjust. Why?”

“I want to rest for some minutes. And take a look at Seijou from outside. And then get back in on a serve standoff.”

“You want to try the improved serve now?”
“I’d like to. And if I do, and they get to save the ball, you are in the right position for…”

“A stack play. Along Tojo. Do you trust him enough to pull this off?”

“Do you trust me enough to let me try?”

“When did I ever not trust you?”

Yeah. That’s right. When have you not?
Your stupid face. Dumbass. Stop looking at me like a barking dog waiting for a meaty bone.
Dumbass. You really are a dumbass…

“Any single time when you contest my decisions, or any time when you neglect learning better basics, and keep asking me for tosses?”

“That doesn't count… Grincheyama…”

It does but you won't ever admit it so let's stop this.
It’s time. Let me ask for the substitution.
Look at Kunimi’s face…
He can't believe I am willingly asking to come out.
I am not out, Akira… I am aside to observe your gaming better.
Don’t underestimate Karasuno, Kunimi. Our weapons are many more than you can guess…

“Guys, let's not be fooled by Kageyama's subs. They want to trick us. Let's pull ahead now.”

“Yessir!”

“Kyoutani nice serve!!!”

Great serve.
Powerful, but not entirely aimed.
I know how long it takes to perfect aiming, Kyoutani kun.
It takes years.
I know it better than anyone else after all.
It takes also to have a model.
I got some.
I got Miya San.
I got Sakusa San.
And of course I got…

“Kageyama… ball is back to us. Want to get back in?”

“Yes, coach. If you please.”

“Go and exterminate them then.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Serves.
I know that nothing feels as good as tossing the perfect ball to me but somehow, serving is…
Another kind of beauty I like to court to make it fully mine.
The way I can touch the ball before hitting it…
This beautiful, beautiful ball…
Wanna be mine forever?
Oh, my darling ball…
Can I kill you now, with the whole of my heart?
Look, Seijou.
Look how I can adore the ball that I want to kill.
This time you're going to see how I can serve.
Just one more step…
Who knows if Oikawa San has changed plans and is here taking a look.
If you are, Oikawa San…
Just look at THIS and tell me if I have finally learned how to serve!

“What… the heck… was that?”

“Holy shit… look at the floor…”

“The impacting point… it has…

“… changed color!”

My darling ball… can I kill you once again?
Please, let me… Let me love you some more…

“Damn. I saw him serve missiles before, at the Nationals, at the past qualifiers but this… this is insane…” NOTE

“Stop babbling, Kindaichi! It’s just a serve. A strong one, but just a serve. Position!”

“Yes, captain!”

Are you looking, Oikawa San? I am finally happy of my serve. It's my own one. Not a copy of yours. But all that I am comes from what I have been, so a part of this, still has gotten also a bit of you in it…
Look how it flies…
So fast.
So strong.
Like a shining light…
This feeling of happiness I only get when I play…
It's what makes me feel alive…

“Kageyama… one more!”

One more…
Let's get it.
Look at all their faces… aim where you want… breathe…
Hinata, dumbass, I know right now you're burning to hit a spike… I can see it on your mug. But serving aces are the ultimate attack in volley, so you should be happy we are now ahead thanx to them…
See? Like Tsukishima. He seems happy that this could end the game…
Two more of these and all ends…
Tsukishima… why are you keeping looking at me that strange way today?
Do you also want to spike some more?
But no…
Look this perfect ball…
Today there are no limits of bonding between this ball and I.
Today really…
It’s my perfect play date…

“Damn… they are at match point…”

“We can stop them. Kageyama won’t keep hitting the line after all…”

My precious ball… be mine… one last time…

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaassssssssss!!!!”

“Alriiiiiiiiighhttttt!!!”

“Whoooooooooo-o-hoooooo!!!!”

“Na-tio-naaaaaalssssss!!!!

We made it.
Oh, my…
I am so relieved…
These guys, they deserve so much and I…
Oi… what the hell…

“Everyone… get out of my back!!!!”

“King… ehi…”

“Tsukishima… great final set. Great.”

“Final set uh…”

“Well… yeah?”

“King… listen… “

“What?”

“I prepared this new playlist… For you… I sent it through mail, check it, you can download it directly to your phone… And… if you got not enough space for the whole of it, at least listen to the one song I put as an extra at the end…”

“O…okay? Thank you?”

“And by the way… YOU have played a fantastic final set, not I…”

“Tsukishima… today you are very strange. You have complimented me? Are you sure you are alright?”

“Guess so. Please… just listen to that song, ok? And… for everything… today… this year… every single time we did play together… thank you, King… I hope I let Your Highness see what you wanted to see me doing…”

What the fuck does that mean… Kei… Kei! You stupid lanky idiot come back here… why… oh shit, Hinata… don’t jump on me now you dumbass…wait… Kei…

“Tsukishima! Stop!!! Hinata, damn… let me go?”
“Nope… those serves… you have to teach me how to do them… wow, you really seemed like you were throwing them cannonballs!”

“What about you learn at least a basic jump serve before attempting those? Have you got an idea how hard I trained for that?”

“You mean Mr. Genius hasn't it all already decked out?”

“Of course not, dumbass. And I am not a genius, by the way…”

“You are, indeed…”

“Whatever. I still have a long journey to embark on. Nothing's decked out at all, dumbass… I have so much to perfect, every single day I just take one little step more…”


Hinata… dumbass… you are one of a kind aren't you?

“New Little Giant’s Journey? I’d say Old Dumbass Journey fits way better…”

“Come here and say it to my face!”

“Why not… dumbass… dumbass! DUMBASS!!”

Well, he definitely is energized still… chasing me this way… and despite his short legs he can keep up nicely too… what a dumbass…

“Hinata! Kageyama! Stop it now!!!! We have the ceremony…”

“Sorry, coach!”

“Kids will be kids, Ukai kun…”

“You are way too permissive, Takeda sensei…”

“Karasuno! Stand up!”

Clocked. Well... these are good memories.
These laughs.
These tears.
These faces.
My hand on this medal.
On this shirt.
Good stuff.
Good journey so far, Tobio.

Chapter End Notes

**Saizo Kyouya & Tojo Ryoma** are my patch-up invention for the two first years who get sensible rotation in the Karasuno where Kageyama, Tsukishima, Hinata and
Yamaguchi are second years. I molded the first out of a blend with legendary ninja **Saizo Kirigakure** who has gotten a manga serialized on himself in Brave 10 and **Hibary Kyouya** of Katekyo Hitman Reborn fame. Both are physically and also to an extent psychologically a variation of Kageyama, and I have the conviction that Kageyama would love to have a kouhai to play with. He could be a great senpai to a skilled setter, because he has no desire to suppress others' talents, he only cares about learning more and growing more himself and that would be easily done with another skilled player he could teach. The two setters scheme would definitely be an option player Kageyama would love (and it would allow him to flourish also at any other role he could try for himself, given that in canon he is bound to be a phenomenal server - see just for reference last chapter in manga, n° 273 - and he is a talented blocker, spiker and receiver already). Ryoma Tojo is molded after Assassination Classroom **Ryoma Terasaka** and Beelzebub's **Hidetora Tojo**. Given the fact I think to be unstoppable Karasuno needs a very powerful wing spiker, I put together two beasts with apparently little manners but a heart of gold behind the scruffy surface. I think that Tsukishima would do his best taking care of those types because you need someone very intelligent to break through those kind of people. I also had a lot of fun imagining these two novelties for the team and I will like very much to draw them, when it's time to.

**Notes about volleyball schemes** that is complicated to put in when a lot of readers have no idea what I am talking about when I mention a 6-2, but I am a former player, and I come from a family of sport oriented individuals... I breathe sport and love volleyball almost as much as The Lord Kags does so... allow me just one chapter when all this can be hinted at :) I needed it badly :) Hopefully this can ignite some curiosity in people to try and practice volley themselves... that'd be great for me!

**NOTE** Real occurrence in manga/anime
"They say people in your life are seasons  
And anything that happen is for a reason…

Uh, and I heard ‘em say, nothing's ever promised  
Tomorrow today,  
And I heard ‘em say, nothing's ever promised  
Tomorrow today,  
But we'll find a way…"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He gave a quick outlook out of the window.
It was a foggy, gloomy morning and the rarefied atmosphere of the suburbs was hidden by shadows of wet layers, making every bush, every gate, every small tree seem more of a ghastly suggestion than a scenery of quietude, or sleepiness.
Fall was hitting Tohoku hard that morning.
The very early wake up call hadn't helped, either, as the dim lights of the after dawning were simply not enough to help clearing the sharpness of those Nature ghosts around the moving car he was into.

“Tobio, are you sure you don't need me to accompany you also in there?”

Kageyama shook his head, mumbling a little denial in a monotone voice.
If his driver wouldn't know better, she would have thought he was on the verge of falling back asleep.
Except that she could see all of the signals he had his brain in working mode, instead.
His sharpening pupils tuning finely on the smallest details of the undefined land sight displaying out of the car windows; the way they would enlarge and swiftly move whenever he would catch a tiny movement on the outside, the way his long fingers would mimic the gesture of grabbing, or the one of testing a water flow, and that unfathomable aura he would always extrude of complete concentration whenever his mind was occupied fully with one only target.

“Fine then. I'll leave you at the entrance, and when you will finish, please call this taxi company, and request for Saotome Akemi San’s services. Drop freely my name at it. He will take you home directly. I have to stay in town for a few more days myself…”

With a slight lateness, like the words he had been told had just replayed into his head in slow motion, subjugating other thoughts of more importance he had to mind, Kageyama objected:

“But I would rather take the train back home. After that. If… it’s okay with you, of course.”

His face was still focused on something outside, and one couldn't tell if it were just outside the car or outside the world as common people would know and see it.
The driver put affectionately a hand on Tobio’s leg and caressing it lithely just said:
“Of course. Do what makes you feel better, my dear.”

*Doing what makes me feel better…*  
*Doing what makes me feel better…*  
*Doing… what makes… me… feel…*

Kageyama rested his head on his bent arm, which was kept attached to his chest, just over his safety belt, while the lights of the highway they had just taken were forming fading flashing masks on his face; he closed his eyes, and just after he had briefly thought about the great grilled onigiri and nikumaki he would get a chance to eat in Tokyo again, images of a meeting he had weeks before suddenly popped into his head, taking his mind and senses away, while the car was silently heading to the capital.

He went back to an empty hallway in a College building.  
Strangely enough, his perceptions could make him see the scene he was recalling like he were a witness and also an actor in it, albeit for only a fraction of time.

He could see himself wrapped in sporty clothes, talking with a slightly shorter guy, also in sporty clothes, before his memory would allow him just to remember what had happened that day, exactly how he had lived it first hand.

Japan Youth Team sport uniform.

He loved the way he looked in those clothes. They always could make him feel warm and happy. And maybe his love for that outfit was so powerful he could enhance his brain enough to create a quick chance at looking at himself from outside, from his memories, for tiny precious seconds, to let him bask in the glory of the way he could look in red and white.

*“Could you explain yourself a bit, Oikawa San?”*

At the end of their practice, he and Oikawa had to undertake medical checks before getting the permission to leave the College gymnasium they were training at. For the umpteenth time, Kageyama had instantly taken the chance to spark a conversation with the guy he was still feeling the most comfortable in talking with about volley, feeling joyful at any new evidence that the fact had long stopped to irritate his former senpai.

*“Well, aren’t you dense, Tobio chan? What I just said is quite clear after all… I think teammates, comrades, companions are the people you’ve overcome something with and along… people with a similar path who have helped you through something, and whom you have helped too…”*

*“And friends? What are friends? I am not really sure if I can even understand… because I think I probably never had one…”*

Oikawa could perceive how much the question valued for his quite unsocial kouhai. He thought that despite getting enormously better at dealing with people in his second high school year, Kageyama was inexperienced enough to result often unable whenever involved in matters of social behaviors. He looked always extremely cute when he was trying to seek enlightenment from him about the subject he had always conversely excelled at.

*“So you just consider everyone in Karasuno as a teammate only?”*

Kageyama versed in deep thinking: grabbing his chin and deviating his eyes to gain awareness. Did he? Hinata… Hinata maybe was not just a teammate. Yes, he never told him this and he probably never would, but he felt amicable around him. Their banters were dear to him, though no, he’d never
told that dumbass and probably never would. Did he consider Hinata a friend? Hinata sure did. He knew. Did he reciprocate? In his heart, he did. Probably. Though he would never, ever tell Hinata directly because he had to know anyway already. He had to. That dumbass.

“...don't know. What are friends indeed? How can you be sure you consider someone as so? You must know... you have always had many...”

Oikawa smiled at the naivety of his way too cute (and way too tall) kouhai.

“Friends? Do you think so? I think I have had and I have... some of them. The rest are acolytes or something around it... not everyone I interact with, however long... is a friend?”

The blanking face of Kageyama could as well be read as complete inability to understand anything Oikawa was telling him at that point.

“I couldn't tell the difference...”

But that was the old himself, a voice insistently seemed to suggest him. Because the current Tobio Kageyama, probably could tell there was a difference, even though he still had troubles in understanding, probably, of which kind it could be. Watching him battling himself about topics he never could have imagined to discuss with the guy made Oikawa's smile turn from amused to fond.

There was a charm in the difficulty Kageyama was so eagerly determined to overcome about himself not being capable to give a name to his social needs which was youthful and ticklish to Oikawa, and which he couldn't overlook or ignore.

“Ok. So you want to know what a friend is... well this is for me at least...”

Kageyama was the portrait of expectant intensity, and Oikawa couldn't avoid to be fascinated by the way his eyes could sparkle of a deep shiny blue whenever something, anything could capture his entire being that way. He was alarmingly, disconcertingly beautiful when he was completely taken and attentive. And the way Oikawa was looking at him was also making Kageyama perturbed. To be watched by his senpai with that kind of care and interest, that was all he had dreamed of in middle school. And it was a sight to behold, and it was still something he would always feel grateful and excited for.

“Well... if a teammate is someone you've overcome something along... then a friend is someone willing to overcome anything alongside you, no matter what.”

“Willing... because of what?”

“That's the point: willing to do it just because it's you. No matter how shit you are... a friend will stand by you.”

Kageyama versed into himself. Thinking about Oikawa's words like a book made of pages reverberating light from themselves had opened in the middle of the sky just for him to read over. A magician summoning of epic consequences. And something which had deeply clicked inside him.

“But... isn't that also what love is?”

Oikawa stunned. The four letter word coming out from Tobio's lips seemed so out of place if not referred to a ball or a game and yet, just because of it, so much more captivating and precious.

“Well... yes. A friend loves a friend. Of course. But love in the classic sense...”
“That's more?”

That gaze. Those big open blue eyes he could never escape when he was a high school student… those eyes demanding answers… Those eyes were capable of making his mind wander until shutdown.

“I don’t… I can’t…”

“I’m sorry Oikawa San… I thought you had been in love before?”

Those eyes were weapons of impossible reach. “Did I?” Oikawa caught asking himself fidgety and quite scared, all taken into Kageyama's sparkling blue, living eyes entrapment.

“It's not like it's any of your business… and anyway, anyway I am gonna answer you still…”

Oikawa called up all of his mental strength to compose himself back to sound serious and believable, to reach what he called, with the usual ego, his “Oracle Mode”:

“Well love is even bigger than friendship. Love is the greatest choice. You must devote all of yourself to bring that other person you love at their highest point of happiness, because you can’t do anything else than care for that person, think of that person, wish to be with that person every moment of your life. So it’s like friendship love in a way, yes… just way, way bigger than it.”

Oikawa saw the face of Kageyama fly away from the place they were at: his natural instinct at decoding others’ body signals making him sure that for a brief instant, Kageyama hadn't been in that hallway anymore. When his spirit got back there where they both were standing, the sparkle in his eyes had imperceptibly changed color.

“Oh. Fine. That makes… quite some sense I think…”

“Of course it does… I said it!”

“And do you… think… that is possible for someone who has no friends to comprehend the feeling of… loving someone? Can one learn first what love might be, although never having experienced true friendship first?”

Oikawa’s breath cut off. A scorned thought materialized in his chest. A fear. No it couldn't be that. Didn't taste like it. A different pulsing push. A different kind of bite on inside his chest.

“What? Who… who would you love, Tobio chan?”

Kageyama genuinely looked at his former senpai with a dubious expression. His trademark, totally clueless face, which made Oikawa and his ego cringe for the turmoil he had instead just experienced, figuring who knows what revelation he would be subjected to in there.

“Uh? what do you mean? I have no one I love, or loved… I was just thinking that.. the way you're talking about love… that seems a very beautiful thing to live. But since I am no good at this friendship thing, I was just wondering if that won't prevent me from… loving someone… once, of course… once volleyball allows it…”

Oikawa would have screamed.

That kid.

That lost cause.

That adorable lost kid… CAUSE. That adorable lost cause…

"That's more?"
“Can I ask you something else, Oikawa San?”

“Sure…”

Oikawa thought any other question deviating from the matter of love and the likes would have been safer for him at that point.

“Do you remember that time at the gymnasium in Sendai when I met you with your nephew? It was a Monday…” NOTE 1

Oikawa instantly remembered.

“Yeah… I may…”

“I have always wondered… why did you help me then?”

What kind of overturn was that? Oikawa couldn't believe his ears. He started to question the level of mess that had to inhabit Tobio's brain. But the memory of that strange encounter suddenly mellowed his heart, and he answered with a melodic voice which for once had no tone of mockery.

“To be honest, I also have to wonder on why I did… you got your stopping toss after that, right?”

“Yes. And… a whole new perspective on tossing, too.”

Oikawa sighed. Watching over Kageyama had somehow always taken a toll on him, even when he had no actual intentions of properly helping, apparently.

“So… why did you help me?”

Oikawa tried to convey his reasons. But he had never really asked himself why he had done it. He had said sometimes that he just had complied to his senpai's role, but never believed that himself, first.

“And why did you ask me?”

“Well… you where there and…”

“And?”

“I was stuck and… whenever I have felt so… I had always you in mind. Even nowadays I am always like… what would Oikawa San do?”

Oikawa saw big blue eyes coming back again, stealing his will to look or sound detached. The way that stupid kid could say the most incredible things unaffected by them, and leaving others bewildered by them, was always a shock he could never get used to.

Big Blue Eyes Spell.
And a lot of trouble, if he had to admit.

“You really are something…”

“So why did you in the end?”

Persistence would always be one of Kageyama's most notable qualities, Oikawa whispered to his own acknowledgment. Then, sighing out louder, he said:

“First of all… the way you asked… it was hard to refuse right? I have never seen a more impolite
question style…”

“Well, at first you ignored me so…”

“Tobio chan, have they ever told you that when asking for a favor you mustn't order people around?”

“You know… us dictators tend to…”

“Is it humor coming out from your mouth? Awww how you've grown…”

“Be serious please…”

“I am. It's cute. Back then you would have never tried it. Anyway…” and Oikawa wore a peculiar face to prosecute his speech “if I did help you, I suppose it's because… I like to battle with people at their best, in the end…”

Oikawa accepted that was the main part of the real reason he had done it for. The main part… maybe not the only one, but the main part would be a good answer enough for that day, he thought.

“This is amazing…”

“I know… I know I am…”

“Not that…”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean… what you just said… Hinata repeats it all the time as well, he does it with any worthy opponent he meets…” NOTE 2

At the way Kageyama's face had lighted up at the recalling of Hinata's words, Oikawa had smiled. The kind of Cheshire Cat’s smile he was famous for.

“You know, Tobio… for being someone who claims he has no idea if he has friends or not, you sure do remember many things well when it's about certain people…”

“Do I?”

“Yup. And let me tell you… this ain't happening casually…”

“Who knows… for me it's always about volley first, so it may be, or it could be that I just take along with me people who can keep up playing with me? It's not really like I mind much, to be honest…”

“Your straightforward honesty is annihilating, Tobio chan. You can't even see such bluntness unfiltered could offend, do you?”

“But I have no intention to offend? Why is it that stating the truth could offend? Shouldn't be lying more offensive?”

“Well… in a way… yes… but…”

“For me, there would be no greater compliment than telling somebody I find the most fun in playing with them. If I had to choose between never having a friend, but have at least one amazing teammate… the choice would be instantly done…”
“I see. But let me tell you… you will learn that sometimes the best team isn't made by the best players… it is made by the best people. This is what I had in Seijou. And you know how I never ever regretted my choices there…”

“The best team isn’t made by the best players…”

The computer driver of the Lexus was announcing they were just minutes away from their planned destination. Tokyo was devoid of fog and the buildings were scintillating as it was coming to be a sunny day there.

“Tobio… were you saying something?”

“Uh… no. Not really.”

The driver smirked just a little. She was sure he had said something, but she preferred not to point it out.

“We are arriving, Tobio. Gather your documents to have them handy…”

“Already done.”

“Good. Then… do your best, Tobio. Whatever comes from it, we are proud of you.”

“Thank you. Also for accompanying me. Good chances with your work, too.”

“I will call you later today. If you…”

“I’d like that. Yes. See you in a while, then… have a good day!”

“You too. You too, Tobio.”

Taking his belt off, Kageyama took along a small backpack he hadn't used since middle school, a bit torn and discolored but otherwise well kept. The way it looked on his sole shoulder was giving out that it was pretty empty inside, but that there were papers in at least.

“Name and reason for visiting. Please.”

“Kageyama Tobio. I am here to take an admission test.”

The functionary at the entrance stall, placed on the side of the ample hall the teenager had just stepped into, gave a look at the guy in front of him, then opened the plexiglass window in front of him to allow the passage of documents. But the boy was apparently not aware of what he must have done by then, and he had kept his stony stance without moving a muscle.

“Do you have… documents with you? Something the Academy sent you to fill and deliver?”

Kageyama realized what he was supposed to land to the man on the other side of the glass, and without a blink nor a reaction, he simply took out of the backpack the folder he had prepared the evening before.

“These. I have these.”

The man looked again at the boy’s face, and a little, condescending grin appeared to twist his face.

He really is dull. There is no way he can pass the test?
“Perfect. Here's your badge. It opens all doors, blocks and elevators and you have to use it if you want to make the vending machines at each floor work. Your test will be held in Building B, third floor. Building B is just on the right side of this corridor we are in. Good luck!”

Kageyama took the badge, and after a little bowing to thank him for his job, he surged and glared at the man with his usual manner:

“Luck doesn't exist. Everyone is just the maker of themselves.”

And without hesitation he moved to the direction he had been told to follow, leaving the functionary dazed and confused in the stall.

After a couple of hours, he passed again in front of him, silent and with a calm expression. The functionary controlled his watch, because he couldn't believe the guy had taken so little to complete his test. They usually lasted four hours, and considering how the guy was seemingly cool, either he had passed it, or he didn't even take it.

Just when he was about to control on his screen what was happening in the corridor of the third floor in Building B, he heard an ebony voice filling the space around:

“Tobio Kageyama! Stop! Now!”

The functionary raised his head, and his jaw dropped. That was Sakusa Kyoomi in front of him, without his mask on, all rushed and red in his face. He was out of himself.

The man couldn't believe his eyes.

“Sakusa San. Pleased to see you. I am sorry to inform you that I failed the test. I hope to not have disappointed you.”

The functionary's jaw dropped even lower. That strange guy was daring to speak with Itachiyama most notable alumni in such terms of confidence? Was he completely mad, on top of being quite silly?

“Don't kid me. One of your examiners was my father… you failed it surgically. Careful to just miss it by one point. Careful to not fail entirely no subject. It was almost more difficult finishing it like you did than passing it… why, Tobio?”

What? That dense guy… what did he do? And why Sakusa Kyoomi kun seems so interested in all this…

“I…”

“Don't you think I deserve an explanation?”

“You deserve the truth, which is the only thing I'll ever offer to you anyway, Sakusa San…”

“I do?”

“Yes. I could never lie to you. Even if you will hate me for it…”

“Speak freely then. I cannot hate you. I just want to understand why you did this which is by far the worst thing you've ever done. To yourself.”

The functionary opened his glass stall to not miss a word. The two guys were talking like they were
alone there but the one who wasn't Sakusa Kyoomi had such a monotone and low tone he was fearing he would have lost his speech otherwise. That conversation seemed to be of an extreme importance and he was just too curious to understand what could have moved Itachiyama's greatest and strangest student so much.

“You are right. I failed purposely. And you… are right also on my way to do it: I have done it in a way which won't weight me off if… I try to come here…”

“Later… is this what you mean? You don't want to not come… you just…”

“I don't want to… I can't come here now…”

“Tobio this is a mistake… why not? Don't you like playing with… me?”

“I adore playing with you. That's the best feeling ever. I long to do it. You are a joy to play with… so perfect in everything you seem…”

“…made to do it with you. Because…”

“…we are the same.”

“Totally… compatible.”

Kageyama nodded. The functionary began to observe him more carefully. That guy had the same royalish stance and look Sakusa would sport, but unlike Sakusa, who hated people enough to avoid the majority of them like the plague, therefore trying to conceal his domineering approach, this other guy seemed to never even take into consideration people, and by that having his detached mannerism looking even more imposing than the other one's. Maybe that was the reason Sakusa Kyoomi seemed to have an high perception of him?

“Then… why? It makes no sense what you've done Tobio…”

“It does. I am confident I will play with you all in good time. But that can happen later. While… what I do now… has a terminal date anyway. I have felt like I can grow where I am more than I have done so far. I understood… that what makes me grow in my team… it can happen only there.”

Sakusa had moved to face Kageyama at a distance so limited it would have looked quite inappropriate if anybody could have observed.

“You’ll lose again to me this way…”

There was a tone of pleading in Sakusa's voice even the functionary shivered. Was he for real the unapproachable, ultra frosty, antisocial guy everyone in the Academy knew, respected and feared?

“Maybe. Or maybe not, who knows… but… the experience of defeat will also make me grow along them. Don't get me wrong… I breathe to win. But sometimes to lose can be as satisfactory if the winner is another target to aim to.”

“Am I?”

The functionary looked a little more at the guy who wasn't Sakusa. He had a very beautiful face, now that, he noticed, his annoying frown had softened, and his eyebrows had come to their most normal placement.
“Yes. And I will always love to play both against and with you. And we can still do all of that you know…”

“Japan team?”

*So this other fella plays in the Japan team too? Who would've imagined…*

“Yes. This until I am in college as well…”

The functionary saw Sakusa almost smile. He couldn't believe it and he knew nobody else would have ever believed he had seen anything like it, either. He thought he could have tried to take a picture, but then he chased the idea away. He was a professional.

“Will you be able to have fun without me?”

“Sure. I can have a very unique type of it playing with my team…”

“Can you?”

“Yes. The ultimate fun. Being able to push everyone ahead, taking the mess that my teammates are and find a way to make it work… all that is very entertaining to me. I realized it recently, but somehow I have always felt so with them. Oh…and you’ll see: get ready for welcoming Tsukishima and Hinata in the National Team. Because I swear I’ll bring them at a level where you will have to recognize them.”

The smile on Sakusa's face got even more open. And just when the functionary was ready to send his professional side to the Moon and snapping anyway that incredible picture which was offering itself so invitingly in front of him, Sakusa put his mask back on his face, and all his hopes crashed and burned.

“And this is the promise of the player or the friend?”

“Both. I think… because you know… to me the concept of friendship is a blur. But I well understand what I look for in a teammate and so, this promise I am making, whatever it is… I hope it works… for the three of you.”

“It… does. From my part… it does.”

Sakusa offered his hand to be shaken. And it got thankfully grabbed.

“It greatly warms me to know it. And, Sakusa San: I always toss to the one who's essential to win, so there's no way I would toss to anyone but you when you and I will be on the same side of the court…”

“This is what I wanted to hear.”

“But…”

Sakusa was left with his just shaken hand middle air, and it seemed a worryingly bad chosen move from the other guy's part. The functionary held his breath.

“But?!?”

“Well… I have truly understood that our sport isn't a single’s will token. And that we don't win alone. Or in two. We win in six. Sometimes in eight. Or ten.”
“And this means what?”

“This means that I will try my hardest to let you reckon other persons that I deem worthy. And like you… I don't accept easily to fail…”

“I actually don't *contemplate* to fail myself.”

The functionary nodded without being aware. Itachiyama Ace had never failed at anything once in his life, after all. That was the most known thing in the whole of the Academy.

“Neither do I.”

*Who the hell this strange guy thinks he is? Daring to say such things at Sakusa The Great? Inconceivable…*

“Which is why you and I will be the most majestic pair on a court Japan has ever seen, after all.”

“Yeah. We will.”

Kageyama smiled. The kind of smile he would offer when totally at ease, sudden, shining, precious like the rainbow captured in an opal stone. The kind of smile who would make anyone fall for him.

He smiled.

Sakusa took off his mask once more, and coming completely near to the other guy, he *embraced him*, prompting a full on shock in the entire being of the functionary, who thought people with the kind of sociopathic idiosyncrasy he had would never ignite themselves such an affectionate gesture, to come to willingly feel the contact with another person that openly:

“Fine. But I swear I’ll wipe you guys off the floor next time we match. You will pay for refusing me.”

Kageyama, still into Sakusa’s embrace, not at all questioning the specialty of the occurrence because he never even had concept something in Sakusa was strange in the first place, simply rebuffed, while the other detached himself from his body, putting eventually the mask back on and for good:

“I didn't?”

“Let me vent. You did. It's just that I am not able to deny you did it for a valid reason.”

And taking both to the exiting door, they disappeared from the struck functionary’s sight and ears.

All Sakusa didn't want to happen that day, it did. Shortly after he parted with Kageyama, his mobile rang. A stupid text from a stupid person who was probably grinning stupidly while writing it.

*You have lost round one, Kyoomi kun. Tobio won't be so easily at your mercy.*

How could Atsumu know already? Was he around Itachiyama? Spying somewhere? Sakusa was in the Academy's outdoors sitting on a bench, and looking back at his mobile he was trying to wonder what could have made Atsumu so informed about what had just happened with Tobio.

“Look how he tries to look around… It’s priceless when I get to mess with him this much, fufufu…”

“You are quite devilish, do you know that?”
“Aww don't try flattering me, Tooru kun. And by the way thank you for the precious information. I wish I could have talked a bit with Tobio but it's better if he isn't aware I knew about this day…”

Oikawa gazed from the Building A top down where his kouhai had walked the road until disappearing into the taxi he had called to take him out of Itachiyama Academy.

“See, Miya chan…”

“What?”

“Tobio won't be that easily at your mercy, either…”

Miya tensed. Then looking at the older setter, he quirky asked:

“What does it mean?”

“Just what I said. Tobio… is a very peculiar guy.”

Atsumu gave his latest ally a devious sight.

“And yours is just an advice… or is it a warning?”

Oikawa smiled, way more devilishly than Atsumu ever had.

“Who knows. You better never try hurting him tho. I am his senpai, and I won't ever allow it.”

“Surely you won't, senpai…”

“I take my duties seriously…”

“Fu fu… you are quite the interesting fella, Tooru kun…”

“It's Oikawa. For you.”

Miya Atsumu put his portable phone away in his bag, and took off of it a little, printed folder full of signed papers.

“You know, I am going to enroll at Itachiyama for University purposes, these are their signed papers… do you know what it means?”

Oikawa tried to sound uninterested, while proceeding to tie his cashmere scarf in a flamboyantly puffy knot.

“Let me see… it means that Sakusa will have a heatstroke when he realizes it… and that we will be rivals at College Tournaments…”

“This incoming year, yeah, it will mean only that…”

Oikawa looked at Miya straight into his eyeballs. He had perfect awareness of the implications he was hinting at for the following years.

“You are interesting too, Miya. I look forward to it.”

“No more chan for me? I feel under considered this way…”

The guy was a handful. Just the types Oikawa liked the most, after all. It would have been a fun year, the following one.
“You got to earn it from me. You have a long way ahead of yourself…”

Atsumu erupted in a fat laugh, and with total sincerity, he said to the older setter:

“You are really fun, Tooru kun. I may start to understand why sweet Tobio likes you that much!”

Oikawa felt a sting on his insides. But it was no time to think too much about that. He had a train to catch. Who knows if luck would have been on his side for another train ride, like other times from Tokyo stations.

On his taxi, riding toward Shinagawa Kageyama relaxed, echoes of distant voices merging in his head.

He felt light and fluctuating and content.
He knew what he had decided was the right thing.
It hadn't taken much in the end, because inside himself he had always known where he belonged.
That absurd team of thick headed and amazing people was just where he felt home the most. It was a beautiful feeling, the one of belonging.
Resting on the couch seat, he felt the weight of his mobile on the corner of his hip, and took it off his right pocket. It was an old flip model and he knew it was time to change it, but technology never had seemed to him something worthy wasting money after. The display was a mess tho, so he sighed and promised to himself to buy an iPhone next. It would have been useful also for playing Tsukishima’s playlists…

A sudden thought flashed his mind.

_That song._
_That song I never actually listened to._

Kageyama felt ashamed of his scattered memory.
Tsukishima had seemed to really care about that song, but he had just forgotten about what he had said after their Seijou game quickly, all taken with his admission exam and the likes.
He genuinely felt he had to apologize to the guy.
Then he felt uneasy by imagining how the other would have endlessly mocked him for that mistake, and he tried to convince himself that if he had listened to it right there, it would have been almost the same than having done it some days earlier.
Frantically trying to recuperate the file - _how many mails did he receive in the past days? Why so many people were sending him congratulations on the National achievement? Why did they care?_ - he conclusively managed to extract the only file Tsukishima had sent to him in two weeks, and proceeded to download just the last song on that list.
Putting earbuds into his ears, a beautiful acoustic guitar started playing into them:

> Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road, time grabs you by the wrist, directs you where to go…"

Kageyama’s eyes widened.
That song… that song seemed tailored for what he had just… undergone?
As the chords were progressing, and he was paying more and more attention to the words, he had the absolute certainty that song was meant to tell him a story. His own one.
He couldn't be fooled.
That song wasn't a simple song.
It was a message.

_Holy shit. Did he know about… today?_
In Kageyama's mind all the last conversations he had with Tsukishima materialized again. And suddenly all his glances during their game versus Seijou stopped to not making sense.

He knew.  
How long did he know…  
Since when… did he?

“So make the best, of this test and don't ask why… it’s not a question, but a lesson learned in time…”

Kageyama began to feel his cheeks reddening compulsively.  
Why didn't Tsukishima confront him if he knew?

“It's something unpredictable but in the end it's right… I hope you had the time of your life…”

Stupid lanky, sappy idiot. Why didn't you tell me if you knew?

“Tattoo’s of memories and dead skin on trial, for what it's worth, it was worth all the while…”

That's why he told me those strange words at the end of the game… he thought I would be gone for sure… He thought that would have been OUR last game together…

“It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right: I hope you had the time of your life…”

“We are arriving at the train station…”

The voice of the driver made Kageyama snap out of his thoughts. A quick realization, a glance at the time, then he asked for another destination.

“Is it too much of a trouble, sir?”

“No kid. Not at all. I told you I am happy to be of any help for you today.”

“Thank you. After that we can go back to the train station. Thank you. Oh… do you have a piece of paper and… no, the pen… that I must have it myself…”

“Eh… sure? Check that box right in front of your seat…”

“Thank you.”

And taking a bitten pen out of his worn backpack, he began to write a note. A short one, hoping the effect would be lasting way longer than the brevity of those written words may have erroneously suggested.

“Tsukishima Kei kun?”

The secretary of the gym dormitory gave him a signal to wait a bit further in his place.

“Yes, madam?”

“I have… a note here which has been left for you… it’s… oh there! There it is!”

And with an overly polite smile the young lady put in his hand a crunched paper, then she gave him his laundry charge and personal effects.

“Thank… you. Have a nice evening, madam…”
Holding his load of stuff, the piece of paper folded into his right hand, Tsukishima headed to his part of the dorm, already dreading the fact he and Hinata would sleep aside for days. Putting his basket on the side of his futon, he finally got to examine the poor piece of paper he had been given.

And there his heart flamed off.

“I certainly had the time of my life, thank you. That’s why I plan to keep on doing it exactly as I did so far.”

As fast as an arrow, Tsukishima went back to the secretary office, in hope to find the same lady as before.

“Excuse me, madam…”

The young lady looked at him with surprise. The guy seemed flustered.

“Yes?”

Tsukishima tried to sound calm. Not a chance, but he tried at least.

“The piece… of paper that you’ve given me…”

“Yes?”

“How was it delivered here?”

The lady smiled. Sweet youth.

“Oh… it was brought handy by a tall, gorgeous raven haired guy. He had very unforgettable blue eyes and his name was…”

“Tobio. Kageyama.”

The lady's smile widened in a soft and tender way.

“King. He actually told me to say that was his name.”

Kei used all his will to not decompose himself on the spot. Successful in that, he smirked pridefully and said lowly:

“That idiot. Serves me right…”

And bowing at the lady, he went back to what would have been his room for the rest of the week. He had to take the best of that experience too, and it was his full intention to do it, Hinata or not Hinata.

By the time the National Youth Training Camp had ended, it was back to business as usual for all of the Karasuno Volleyball Club members, even if their school was preparing major changes for the following year. The new scholastic calendar would have seen a new division system of the classes, with the implementation of a Sixth Class. The original plan to have a few months of trial at it had almost been scrapped over, but in the end, with the approval of the Students Council and the permission of the Parental Council it had been decided the Sixth Class system would have started
with the solar New Year.
Many students of all old ranked classes had the chance to take a series of tests to advance themselves into different setups than those they used to be in, and that was meaning for Karasuno's Volley guys that Hinata was trying his hardest to move from Class One to Class Four. He would have liked to stay with Yamaguchi now that Tadashi would be devoid of Tsukishima's company, since the blond had been chosen to be in the Sixth Class along Yachi Hitoka and, to the utter surprise of everyone but Sugawara, Saizo and obviously Kei, who knew already, Kageyama.

It was planned for the recruits of the Sixth Classes to come at school at 7.30 am on the first Monday after the Youth Camp Tsukishima had attended to be informed of all the details of their new scholastic stay, and that had already bothered Kageyama to no end, as he had to wake up even earlier than usual to practice his runs and not skip them due to that commitment. He would have arrived before anyone else in the Principal office, he thought changing his clothes into school gear in the gym restrooms, and that had always been a pet peeve for him, to look like he couldn't measure time well enough to just being punctual, and neither late or early. But as he was taking steps towards the office, he saw he wouldn't be the first one arriving there. A long silhouette was already standing aside the door, allegedly waiting for its opening. As he reckoned Tsukishima was the one standing, Kageyama wondered why he had come so prematurely. He closed the gap with long leaps and placed himself just aside of the other guy, his own back, too, all touching over the wall.

“So you didn't pass it?”

Tsukishima spoke, with no particular intention in his voice.

“Exactly. I didn't.”

“What a shame…”

There were hints of intentions now in Tsukishima's voice, but Kageyama couldn't say if they were mocking ones or not.

“I could have passed it if I'd wanted to.”

“Yeah, right…”

“I am serious.”

“I believe you are. Then why did you fail it?”

That which was connotative in Tsukishima's speech was not belonging to a need of teasing, neither one of parody or derision. Kageyama reckoned he was simply curious to understand what he had missed or misjudged to fail his prediction about the outcome of the test so majorly.

“Because this way you owe me to accept to be our next captain.”

Tsukishima didn't move a muscle, exception being his eyes widening a lot behind his glasses. Taking some seconds before replying, he then said back:

“Only if you're gonna be my vice, King…”

Kageyama snorted a little. Tsukishima's comebacks were a form of art in many ways, and he had started to appreciate that.
“Only if you start running 30 km a day, like me… and that's the minimal request, because a captain shall do more than a vice you know…”

“Always so pushy, innit, Your Highness?”

“I guess I am… with worthy people.”

“Just like a King, choosing his knights?”

“You know… as Hinata told us that time at that game at the start of the year… is it truly a bad thing to be kingly?”

Tsukishima would have loved to claim it was, and get back to the days when he would mercilessly try to wound Kageyama's pride and self consideration, thinking it would have made him feel better about himself. He would have liked, because now that he knew they would not only be still teammates, but they would also become classmates was causing his mind to be on constant overdrive, and it was amazing, but also complicate to deal with all that.

“Who knows. What I know is that if you dare to be annoying in our class, I won’t let you live easily…”

“And what makes you think that I could let you live it easily myself, in case you are the annoying one?”

The two guys exchanged their glares. They were perfectly able to condensate entire minutes of words into a mute exchange of glances. Their eyes were able to comprehend one another way better than their brains somehow.

“Well, let’s give this a try, won't we, King?”

“Mmh. But what about the captaincy?”

“I'll do as the King wishes. Happy?”

“I guess. I guess I can say I am, yeah.”

In the following weeks, in perfect Karasuno Volley Team Studying Training fashion, the entirety of the team helped the members who wanted to take a class switch improve their grades. Even their former senpais came when possible to lend a hand, and Hinata could experience by himself the greatness of Sugawara at teaching, just like Kageyama had for that year which was ending.

Before the Winter break, Hinata was accepted in Class Four, and the team suggested his achievement deserved a celebration.

At that, Hinata came up with another idea.

“What about celebrating all of our collective achievements this year, with a party before Christmas? We could make it for next week, like… on the 22 of December?”

Everyone agreed, enthusiastically. Only one person seemed unable to say a word, which wasn't of much notice for the team, given his usually low reactivity at matters of party and fun.

“Ehi Bakayama… I mean… we all have something to celebrate, don't we? Do you?”

There was something in Hinata's voice which sounded different, but Kageyama didn't catch on it because of his own course of thoughts:
“Well… that day… is my birthday, you know….”

Suddenly everybody reckoned it was; they all felt ashamed to have so carelessly overlooked the fact, but Kageyama, unusually receptive of their embarrassment, quickly and awkwardly tried to dismiss the thing, claiming he was not one to celebrate birthday anyways.

“And that is exactly one of the many things you shall change about yourself, Bakayama! So, it’s decided. It's even better this way. We will come celebrate your birthday at your house and while we’re there we will celebrate this entire Karasuno Year. Are we all agreeing, guys?”

Kageyama realized immediately as the whole bunch of his current and former teammates had started to yell resounding yeses it would have been pointless to deny them the party, so he agreed as well, and then proceeded to pick Hinata apart telling him he would have to help him convince his family to land all of them the house for the party.

“Tsk Tsk… Kageyama kun… don't worry. I will convince anybody. I will make anyone see how happy we are you're still with us…”

Kageyama paled.

“What? What does it means?”

Hinata realized he had spoken too much. But he couldn't find a decent answer in a decent time to erase Kageyama's suspicious glare, so he went with the truth, which was less tiring to think of:

“Well… erm… how can I say… I happen to know that a few weeks ago… you could have moved to Itachiyama and to Sakusa San…”

Kageyama felt a crack into his bones.

“You knew and… you never told me?”

“Well, I knew only the day when you actually had the test. And I knew… well, it's complicated to explain how I managed to learn about it… but anyway… then I saw you here, and it was clear none had been made of that moving away thing and well, since you never said a word about it before, I thought… it wasn't my place to force you to talk about it…”

Kageyama was feeling electric. It was a bit uncomfortable but also a bit warm. It was a strange feeling he never had felt before.

“I never meant to hide things from anybody. I would have told you, if you had asked…”

“You know, Kageyama… in the end… all that matters to me… is that you still here.”

Kageyama felt the warmth conquering the whole of his, chasing awkwardness away.

“Well of course… who else could you annoy otherwise…”

Hinata laughed, his bright eyes open and sincere.

“It's really not about that. Saizo kun ain't bad either is he?”

“Well…”

“But seriously. When I learnt about what you were doing that day, I truly feared you would be gone from here. Because I do know you only care about your game, and frankly, no one of us compares to
Sakusa kun. But…that would be not what I would have missed if you were to move to Tokyo…”

Kageyama turned the full of Hinata's body so that they could face one another completely in a mirror like position. His hold was strong on the shortest boy’s shoulders but none of the two had perception of it.

“Wouldn't it?”

“No. Yeah, I would have lost the most extraordinary partner, but I would have gained the most extraordinary adversary. As long as we could share the stage, even on opposite sides, that would still be okay with me. No. What I couldn't replace if you were to be going away…”

Kageyama's face was frozen in a breakdown mask.

“…it would be you… you as you. Not the player you. Just… you.”

“You would miss me as… me? You mean… even if I am not exactly this wonderful to be with guy? Even if I abuse you verbally and I mostly never allow you a thing?”

Hinata laughed and nodded.

“Yup. I know it sounds absurd and I do think it is actually so but… the truth is that… Yeah, I would have missed exactly that. I may be foolish, but I would have.”

And in Kageyama's head the definition of friendship Oikawa had explained to him, suddenly gained shape and it over-imposed itself onto the small redhead he had in front, fitting him like a coat of light and making him look different than before in his eyes.

“Hinata…”

“Yep?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being my friend.”

At the words of his setter, Hinata's eyes wetted. He did not cry, because he knew the guy he was facing would have beaten him if he had just tried to, but he felt emotional and satisfied and proud of himself just like they had just perfected a final volley move which would have been impossible to stop. Kageyama looked at him and his blue irises were seemingly iridescent. Maybe the Gods had decided that since the guy would have never been good with complicated words, he would have obtained a way to communicate his truest feelings by the different sparkles in his eyes.
Eyes are the Soul Mirrors, after all.
And Kageyama's surely were a really clear mirror, at that.

The subsequent week, on his birthdate wake up, he began from the earlier part of the day receiving congratulatory wishes.
The first one came from Alisa.
He took time to answer her, because he could understand how, coming from the young woman, even the simplest expression of joy for his birth time would be holding more than its regular meaning.
He could sense the difference, but such a credit could not make the boy do the shift in his behavior she wished for.
Still.
Yet?
Kageyama did not let unnecessary courses of introspection take the best of his morning anyway, so he just replied Alisa with a short thank you in the end, mixed along the notation that he was glad hers had been the first message to reach him that day.
Which, like always with Kageyama, was exactly the pure truth.
Coming in the kitchen to take his breakfast, he found beside the usual notes two packages wrapped in blue ribbons.
He smiled, and opened them.
He had received just what he was needing. They had gotten his hopes right.
His smile increased, and he thought the day would have been a nice one to live.
He had to prepare his house for the party. He had refused anybody's help to do it, saying it would have been nicer for everyone to just get the surprise of being invited in his house unexploited until the late afternoon, when the actual event would have started.
That was true, but not the entire one.
Fact is that he loved the solitude he was accustomed with in his house.
While he was moving furnitures to breeze the spaces out and decorating them, he kept receiving various messages of birthday acknowledgement from people who were greeting him from afar.
Each new message would be a genuine surprise for him.
He would not properly come to get why so many people would pay attention to his offspring recurrence, because he, first, never had.

“Happy birthday, Kageyama. Komoya wishes you a great day too, and he still as pissed as I am you’re not in Tokyo today. We could have celebrated this together, here. Still, happy birthday. We hope to see you soon.”

While decorating his house’s Christmas tree in the garden, Kageyama considered how Sakusa had trouble in letting go of things which had disappointed him. He had to find his choice regarding the transfer still hard to swallow. He would have soon amended himself at that. Nationals were around the corner after all, and his Karasuno was fully equipped do do better than the first time there.

“Tobio kun, happy birthdaaaaaayyyyyy!!! This comes also from Osamu but it's not like you shall mind him right? This is MY greeting and it's sent with the whole of my heart! Try to have fun and do not think only of volley, at least today! Live a little… but not too much or I will be sad I wasn't with you today, even more than I already am, okay? Love, ‘Tsumu.”

Miya.
What a type.
A chuckle flew from his mouth, then a little shiver told Kageyama it’d be better for him to get back inside. The tree had been decorated enough.
And it was in a corner, so it just needed to be seen partially, and the sides which would be seen were decorated pretty enough already.

Back into his kitchen, he put the phone on the table to serve himself a glass of milk, when a call had him stop in his action to answer:

“Oi, dumbass…”

“Dear Lord, Bakayama… is this the way to answer the phone?”

“Stop it. I saw it was you…”

“And this should justify you? It makes everything worse, actually?”

“Whatever… so… what do you need?”
“At this point I regret this call… but I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday… this until I realized
you don't deserve it…”

“But wait… aren't you coming here in three hours?”

“Well… yes? But that doesn't matter? I loved the idea to greet you also… by myself?”

Kageyama sipped his milk while mumbling he didn't see the need of Hinata's move, but then, placing
the empty glass back on table with a clocking and audible sound, he said:

“Thank you. I appreciate it. Now I have stuff to do though… see you in a while.”

And he closed the call, moving back to the fridge to begin extracting all the food which had been
prepared and left to be just heated or barely processed for the party.
The phone rang again, and Kageyama, half taken with hands full, pressed the voiceover without
minding, careful to not throw anything on the floor:

“Ehi, dumbass! I told you I have stuff to do, are you deaf or something?”

“Well, well, well… aren't you incredibly rude now…”

Kageyama froze.

“…Tobio chan?”

Stone in place, Kageyama tried to mutter back to the phone direction:

“O…Oikawa San… Sorry… I thought… it was somebody else…”

A pretty laugh could be heard from the phone. It was a lovely kind of laughter. It didn't seem a bitter
kind of it.

“Well, I sure hope so! I take the inconvenience of calling to greet you on your birthday, and I get
verbally abused? Tsk tsk… you should know better, brat…”

Kageyama took the phone in his now free hands, switching it from voice over to regular mode.

“I am really sorry. I… am very glad you called. I never expected it…”

“You are so unconsidered of your devoted senpai, Tobio chan…”

“Well, Sugawara San will be here in a while so…”

“Erm… what?”

“My… senpai? He's going to be here in my house along my teammates in a while… so I am not
unconsidered of him?”

The phone stayed silent.

“Oikawa San?”

Still silent.

“O… Oikawa… San?”

“Tobio, you are a hopeless idiot!”
“What have I done now?”

A pained sigh came from the other caller.

“Nothing. I suppose you really can’t see it. Anyway, what do you mean your team… comes? Are you maybe throwing a party over there?”

“Well… yes. But it was not my idea. And it’s not just for me… it’s more of a team party… for this year… and… stuff.”

Another laughing went streaming from the phone. That also seemed light and real.

“That is great, really. God knows if you need to be more social, my ultra derp kouhai. So… enjoy your party and your day, Tobio. We’ll catch one another surely by New Year.”

“Okay. Thank you Oikawa San. Have yourself great holidays. See you… hopefully soon?”

“Quite soon I am sure. Be well, Tobio.”

The call he had received from Oikawa gave Kageyama a boost of energy to complete all party prepping with quickness and precision.

Looking at the whole of his work, he confessed to himself he had done a good job.

To have that many people at his place would have seemed pure utopian supposition just a few months before.

But he felt gratified things had developed that way in the latest months.

In a tiny corner of his own being, be that heart or brain, it wasn't really mattering to pinpoint, he was feeling like it had happened also for a little effort he had done about himself.

He was feeling like his will to understand people had paid a bit off.

It had been of an interest to him because of his will to be a better player, sure; but maybe life was having a funny way to let people find things slightly different than they intended to, still equally important to them.

When the party started, Kageyama's house filled itself up almost immediately. Everyone came at once, as they had gathered prior to take the final road all as a team.

Everyone brought to him a little gift, which left the setter completely red faced and gleefully embarrassed for minutes.

Tanaka had brought along a series of dvd with all of their games that year; Ennoshita had given him a new set of heating gloves for his morning runs… Yachi had gifted him a very cool and technologically advanced phone case which could illuminate itself like a safety pillar in case he would get lost at night in strange places, and all of the other team members had chosen presents which could fit his needs perfectly.

Kageyama couldn't find the words to thank his people, and for a while he sat quietly on a couch observing everybody having fun and chatting, dancing and eating in his house.

He was a very silent person in that house himself.

The house had stopped to be noisy long before, and he had lived years contemplating calmness and seeking peace into those walls, like nothing had been missed along the living sounds.

Watching the mess around him, he thought once in a while a bit of mess would have been fun too, in his house.

After a couple of hours, it was decided to cheer with passion at any of the achievements each member could think of. Coach Ukai started, underlining their sport courses; then Takeda followed, remembering each student’s best feature in their academic accomplishments. Finally each player took words to express their personal gratitude for a specific event occurring during the year.

By the time the speaker had to be Kageyama, Hinata was ready to help him by asking him in detail about his specific reason to be happy about his year. Everyone assumed he would have spoken about
his National Team Call Up.
Kageyama instead took a stand up, and calling up for attention, he let the whole chaos quiet and
vanish, and unusually for him in such a different kind of environment, so social and bouncy, he
decided to speak without anyone asking him any question.
His face was serious, but serene.
Everyone anticipated he would have spoken about something pretty important just by the way his
face was looking, and the one his eyes were glistening around.
He had understood Kei and Hinata had known, but he had no idea if others had idea that he had been on the verge of leaving the team.
It didn't matter.
He felt like he had to speak his mind.
It would never come easy to him, it would always seem not mattering most of the times, but these
guys *deserved to know this time*, because the choice he had made in November had been entirely
their merit.
Or something.

"So, guys… thank you for coming today. I have to confess this is the first time I have gotten a
birthday party? I am glad it happened with you. I really am. You know… I don't really know what
friends are, and I can't say if I look at you guys like some… but I do know one thing: I know what I
look for in teammates now, and there is no place where I could find better ones than those I got here.
We won't always play together...and that's why I wanna do it while we still can. This is my
*okurimono* and it's for everyone of you, for the teammates I have and those I had here, in this team
which I'll forever love to call myself a part of. For everything you've given me since almost two
years... thank you so, so much."

And he bowed with the most graceful motion anyone had ever seen.
In his bowing, they read all the rest their setter's words had to signify, and everyone in the room
stood in shock.
To have that guy be so open in that kind of appreciative note would have been impossible to predict
even by the most hopeful person. It was funny because none of Kageyama's words had been sugary,
he almost denied they were considered friends by him, but after so much time spent along the guy,
every Karasuno Volley Team member knew that in their setter's world there couldn't be an highest
consideration than the one of being wanted as teammates. That was Kageyama's peaking point
status. And all of them felt proud they had achieved such a status in his eyes. Yachi cried for the
emotion, and the same did Sugawara in a corner of the room, while his fiancé was caressing his head
and repeating to him that part of the merit for Kageyama's changes had also to be ascribed to him; a
couple of seconds away from the moment when the silence of everyone would start to feel excessive,
Kageyama plugged his new iPhone in the Dolby system jack and said he had found a way to express
his point of view through the words of someone else:

“I know I am not very good with words, but I know what I want to say. So… this is what I want you
all to know… and it's also a good way to start your dances, if you want to try...”

From the speakers, a modern beat of a very recent song began to fill the room. Tsukishima was the
only one understanding immediately what was happening, and the one touched by Kageyama's
choice the most:

“I used to leave the doors unlocked and leave the lights on,
I used to stay awake, just counting hours all night long…
I had so many empty rooms inside the chateau, oh yeah..”

“Isn't this that new One Republic song, Tsukki?”
“Yeah…”

“…But ever since I met you no vacancy,
because of you…
There’s no vacancy, no empty rooms,
Got no vacancy… ever since I met you no vacancy…
Because of you…”

The words and the music kept filling the whole of Kageyama's house and although people like Nishinoya and Tanaka had no clue about hidden meanings in the song’s choice, some other like Sawamura and Sugawara and Ukai and Takeda had the clear frame of it laid down.
That guy had giant leaped for the entirety of the year, indeed, and certainly not only with a ball in his hands.

“These kids have all grown a lot, haven't they, sensei?”

“Yes. They have, Ukai San. They have.”

It was the funniest and noisiest birthday Kageyama easily ever gotten in his young life.
Waking up the morning after, he saw snow falling.
He felt warm.
Happy.
Whole.
He took his phone and saw Tsukishima had sent him a full new playlist, not for running purposes but just because he thought he would have liked the songs in it.
He smiled seeing that the last two songs, listed as bonuses, were Green Day's Time Of Your Life and One Republic’s No Vacancy.
Tsukishima had written something incomprehensible like *Repetita Juvant* at the end of the notes in the mail, but he thought after learning English for months it was too soon to torture him with another language, and decided he would not even ask his future captain what it did mean next time he would see the guy.
Then he launched a quick glance at the piece of paper where they had taken track of karuta round of games the night before, when only a handful of his teammates had resisted the shenanigans enough to play.
Caressing the box of karutas, and picking up a couple of them, all beautifully painted, he lightly smiled.
Alisa was right: playing those was a great way to memorize literature.
He had impeccably shown everyone how well he could repeat any kind of poetry verse the night before, after all.
Even though the sense of what he had mastered to repeat didn't quite sound clear to him, he knew he would have liked to play those games again, just to get better at them.
He had most definitely to thank Alisa again for gifting the box set to him.
And maybe he should have tried to play a bit with her too.

“1… 3… 4… 7… 10… 11… 2… 5… 16… 14… 9… 13… 6… 12… 8… 15… 17… 18… 20… 21… 19… 22.”

“What… are you mumbling?”

Hinata had come at him with droopy eyes, hair just like a fire creeping up, and he was trying to form coherent sentences in between a sneeze and a snore.

“I was recalling our winning sequence at the last karuta game this night… but why are you awake?
Cover yourself up,” Hinata was wearing just shorts and a shirt “it's snowing outside and you can't get sick…”

Hinata had stayed sleeping in because everybody thought it would have been bad to bike with a potential snowfall incoming.

“Aw, how kind that my bestest friend cares about me!”

Hinata was plain awake and as bright as ever.

“Who said you are?”

“You did. Around a week ago remember?”

The usual frown. Nothing scary anymore.

“I just said thank you for being my friend… “

“And to how many have you formulated such thank youse?”

“You are the… first one… I guess.”

“See?”

Kageyama honestly regretted to have been that open with the loudest and most self congratulating of dumbasses over all the entirety of the globe. Hinata's super satisfied and silly happy grin was irritating. There was no need of being so hyper about such a triviality.

“Kageyama…”

The shorter one pulled the other’s arm a bit.

“What?”

Kageyama was having troubles understanding Hinata's face. He seemed even happier than during their last victorious game.

“Thank you too. For being my best friend.”

A wave of joy which had to feel like happy fire inside spread through Kageyama. How could such simple words feel… that good? How?

“So… this time around…”

“This time around what, dumbass?”

“Well, this time you will come at the First Shinto Shrine visit too, won’t you? You can go running by yourself later…”NOTE 4

“We'll see…”

“What? No, we won't see at all! You're coming, end of the story!”

“Oi, oi… stop screaming, idiot dumbass!”
“I won't until you give your word on it!”

“Oh… well…”

“It's a yes?”

“It's a not no…”

Hinata laughed.

Then looking at Kageyama's face which had gone fixed on the outside snowfall, he rapidly wondered if he had crossed the line of his personal space too much.

But then suddenly the other reprised their talk:

“You know, Hinata… I can't tell you if I want to come because think of it… by not coming last time…”

“Mmh… what about it?”

“…didn't I get everything I may have wished for this year?”

Hinata's eyes widened.

That on Kageyama's face was a kind of expression he never had seen before.

He was glowing, although no proper smile was depicted nor about to appear to revolution his serious and always stoic persona.

And still, even when there had been no crack in his voice while saying what he just had, Hinata could feel warmth coming off from him.

“I guess so… though the Nationals… well, those you… well, we… didn't get them in the end.”

“We got them fairly enough. And this year, it's gonna be even better right?”

Hinata patted his back with a delicacy which wasn't his forte at all.

“You betcha. And yes, I get you, it may be all on us and no kami’s will involved there… But still, Bakayama… come with us none the less. It would never be the same, without you.”

Kageyama closed his eyes, and bending slightly his head, his lips quivered and turned up. A tiny, shy, beautiful smile gave his gloating the final seal.

“Yes. You may be right. Also for me, without you guys, it would never, ever be quite the same…”

Then turning back to full aloofness and striking his low voice to a deadpan tone, with nonchalant and natural ease he concluded:

“… dumbass.”

Chapter End Notes

Nikumaki Onigiri are rice balls wrapped in meat, glazed with a secret sauce and savorily cooked. It looks just like a simple rice ball wrapped in meat at first glance, but upon eating it, the taste of the secret sauce deeply marinated in the meat and the perfect balance brought about by the condiments added will spread a delicious taste in your
mouth. In Haikyuu, Kageyama is famous for constantly thinking about food even if

**NOTE 1/4**

Real occurrences in anime/manga.

**Personal Space in Japan** Personal space, or pasonaru supesu in Japanese language, is a highly valued luxury in Japan.

The Japanese historically lived in close-knit farming communities that valued collective goals over individual pursuits. People lived close together in wooden houses with walls that were literally paper thin. It was common for communities to bathe together in sento baths. You saw your neighbors naked and lived in close proximity to them. As a result, privacy became a skill.

**Mysophobia**, also known as verminophobia, germophobia, germaphobia, bacillophobia and bacteriophobia, is a pathological fear of contamination and germs. The term was coined by William A. Hammond in 1879 when describing a case of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) exhibited in repeatedly washing one's hands. Mysophobia has long been related to compulsive hand washing. The term mysophobia comes from the Greek µύσος (musos), "uncleanness" and φόβος (phobos), "fear". In Haikyuu canon universe, Sakusa Kyoomi is a clear germophobe.

**Shinagawa Station** (品川駅 Shinagawa-eki) is a major railway station in Tokyo, Japan, operated by East Japan Railway Company (JR East), Central Japan Railway Company (JR Central), and the private railway operator Keikyu. Despite its name, it is not located in Shinagawa Ward but just to the north in Minato Ward.

**Okurimon** it's one of the main ways Japanese use to express the concept of "GIFT". I have chosen this one in my novel because it means the kind of gift one gives to another to show consideration, respect, affection, and to celebrate a connection. I toyed with the fact that other kind of expressions which translate to "gift" could also mean the gift (talent) Kageyama possesses and knows to, so that it could be uneasy to determine which concept I wanted to underline at first. In all my novels, the words are chosen VERY carefully :) 

**Repetita Juvant** Ancient Latin for "Repeating Does Good".

**Hatsumōde** (初詣 hatsumōde) is the first Shinto shrine visit of the Japanese New Year. Some people visit a Buddhist temple instead. Many visit on the first, second, or third day of the year as most are off work on those days. Generally, wishes for the new year are made, new omamori (charms or amulets) are bought, and the old ones are returned to the shrine so they can be burned. There are often long lines at major shrines throughout Japan.

Most of the people in Japan are off work from December 29 until January 3 of every year. During the hatsumōde, it is common for men to wear a full kimono—one of the rare chances to see them doing so across a year. The act of worship is generally quite brief and individual and may involve queuing at popular shrines. The o-mamori vary substantially in price. A common custom during hatsumōde is to buy a written oracle called omikuji. If your omikuji predicts bad luck you can tie it onto a tree on the shrine grounds, in the hope that its prediction will not come true. The omikuji goes into detail, and tells you how you will do in various areas in your life, such as business and love, for that year. Often a good-luck charm comes with the omikuji when you buy it, that is believed to summon good luck and money your way.

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**THE KARUTA GAME SEQUENCE IS THE CORRECT SEQUENCE OF THE CHAPTERS:** 1… 3… 4… 7… 10… 11… 2… 5… 16… 14… 9… 13… 6… 12… 8… 15… 17… 18… 20… 21… 19… 22

**TSUKISHIMA'S PLAYLIST** at the end is the series of songs I have used for
summaries (plus the bonuses)

The Greatest (Sia ftr. Kendrick Lamar)
Ticket To Ride (Beatles)
Teenage Dream (Katy Perry)
Believer (Imagine Dragons)
Beautiful Day (U2)
Talking Body (Tove Lo)
E-Bow the Letter (REM)
High Hopes (Pink Floyd)
Lovers In Japan (Coldplay)
Choices (The Hoosiers)
Learning To Fly (Pink Floyd)
Freedom Train (James Carr)
Enter Sandman (Metallica)
Try (Pink!)
Little Brother (The Tallest Man On Earth)
Better That We Break (Maroon 5)
Counting Stars (One Republic)
Push (Matchbox 20)
Stay (Rihanna)
Eyes Of The Tiger (Survivor)
Ride (21 Pilots)
Heard'Em Say (Kanye West ftr. Adam Levine)

BONUS:
Time Of Your Life (GreenDay)
No Vacancy (One Republic)

End Notes

Multi chapter work. LONG work ;) English is not my first language so I'm open to be beta-ed along the lines.

Notes about Japanese way of living to be featured in the related chapters.
NOTE Additional original characters have been added to be beneficial to the sense of the story.
I am trying to write every character in a way they could rationally and logically develop in a further year of life given the time set of my story. For characters such as Miya Atsumu and Sakusa Kiyoomi, I am of course putting more of an invention into them because of what little we know of them from canon (look at the start of my writing arc, the Inarizaki match was in its first set play), but trying to keep them logic enough.
I am also creating illustrations for this (they will be added randomly even after the chapter will be all written, so keep looking out! :)

Haiba Alisa in Chapter 1 (Antifact)
Haiba Alisa in Chapter 2 (Let It Be)
Kageyama and Oikawa in Chapter 10 (Obon Festival Part 1)
Miya Atsumu in Chapter 10 (Obon Festival Part 1)
Sakusa Kioomi in Chapter 10 (Obon Festival Part 1)
The Lord, my beloved Kags, in Chapter 14 (Choices)
Salt Master Tuskishima in Chapter 14 (Choices)
Original Characters First Years Ryoma & Kyouya in Chapter 21 (A Genius' Journey)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!