The Trajectory of Laughter

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The Trajectory of Laughter

by PKSamurai

Summary

Some say laughter is the cure for everything, but they obviously never heard Miyuki laugh...
Chapter Summary

This is not a romance.

_Pant... pant..._

His shoulders heaving, a bead of sweat slowly made its way down the tip of his nose. The heat had solidified and was so overwhelming, he could almost touch it. The crowd was screaming incomprehensibly; the cheering squad was blowing their horns; the band's trumpets were raised toward the sky as the brass sound clearly rang down to the mound.

His eyes glanced at the scoreboard. Bottom of the 9th, Seidō High leading 4-3. Two outs, but the bases were loaded with a full count. Inashiro wasn't a national-level team for nothing, as shown by how far they'd pushed Seidō's pitchers. While Furuya had done his best, he'd started getting hit the second time around through the lineup, and after giving up two hits and then two walks in a row in the bottom of the 6th inning, Furuya had been switched out.

Since taking over, he'd managed to shut out their lineup up until now, but due to a fielding error, a batter had managed to get on base. The next batter had bunted, advancing the runner, and then the lineup had come back around to the leadoff batters who'd lived up to their name by hitting grounders and getting on base. If he could shutout the current batter—their cleanup, who was currently glaring daggers at him from the batter's box—Seidō would win and advance to the nationals at Kōshien. If he walked the batter—or worse, got hit—Inashiro would tie the score and even if they didn't score again, they would go into extra innings.

It was almost like his first year all over again. Back then, he'd faced off against Shirakawa and lost to the pressure. With a hit-by-pitch, he had allowed Inashiro a runner on base and helped kickstart their momentum which would ultimately lead to Seidō's turnaround loss.

But he was different now from who he'd been two years ago. He could feel the acute stares of his teammates on his back, could feel the weight of the number 1 on his back, could feel the piercing gaze of a certain person who he knew must be watching from the stands...

He breathed in deeply, and then locked gazes with Okumura, who held the mitt out from the catcher's box.

"Give me your best pitch," Okumura signaled.

He nodded and raised his glove to his face, concentrating on the batter standing before him. If anything, at least the loaded bases meant he didn't have to worry about anyone stealing a base. It was just him and the batter. This one batter who stood in the way between him and Kōshien. Between him and...

He coiled his body, raising his front foot.

_As if I'd let him._

Slamming his foot down on the mound, he released the ball. The batter swung. And...
"STRIKE! BATTER OUT!"

The crowd leapt to their feet and exploded into applause and cheers. His teammates were screaming, running towards him with wild, gloriously happy looks on their faces. Back in the dugout, to his surprise, tears were streaming down the assistant director's face.

"THE GAME ENDS WITH A GREAT PITCH BY SEIDÔ'S ACE! AS THE WINNER OF THE 120TH WEST TOKYO TOURNAMENT FINALS, SEIDÔ ADVANCES TO KÔSHIEN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 8 YEARS!"

Even as he was swarmed by his teammates, his eyes swept the cheering stands, looking for the one face that mattered to him the most: The person he'd thrown that ball for—the person who should have been there to catch it.

But before he could find him, his teammates had buried him, blocking his view. With a shrug, taking comfort in the thought that they could celebrate together later, he let himself revel in the sheer sweet exhilaration of victory.

After lining up and shaking hands with the despondent Inashiro team and then standing through a fancy closing ceremony, they raced back to the dugout to collect their equipment. Laughing and clamoring loudly amongst each other, he was about to leave with the others when the assistant coach called out to him to stay behind. Waving off Haruichi to go ahead of him, he turned towards her.

She had stopped crying, but her eyes were still red.

"Hey hey, why were you crying?" he asked, grinning. "We won!"

"Sawamura..." said Rei seriously.

The grin slid off his face. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I don't want to ruin this moment for you, but I know you'd want to know."

"What...?"

She told him, and for a long minute that seemed to stretch for an eternity, he didn't respond. And then –

"You must be joking," he said in a flat voice.

"I'm sorry," she repeated helplessly.

It was silent except for the distant ongoing roaring of the crowd, which was beginning to sound like a sick joke. Then there was a clanking sound as the bat he'd been carrying on his back slid off his shoulder and clattered on to the ground. With a thump, his baseball cap followed, slipping from his hand. The last to go was the winning baseball he'd been tightly clutching in his other hand. That too, fell to the ground.

Turning on his heel, Eijun left the dugout without looking back.

Haruichi was starting to feel rather light-headed from the rising fumes of the incense, but he didn't move from his seiza position.

If he looked around, everyone including him was wearing black. Except for the occasional hushed
murmuring and suppressed sobbing, it was quiet. And if he looked up at the centerpiece of the arranged flowers...

It was unreal looking up at the face in the portrait and realizing that this was it. Haruichi almost expected the older boy to suddenly appear around the corner with a sly smile on his face and reveal that it was some elaborate trick. It just didn't seem possible that someone as—well, talented and intelligent as him could be gone forever.

But then again, it hadn’t seemed possible at the time either for Miyuki-senpai to not be able to play baseball anymore...

On his right, Kuramochi shifted and got to his feet. With reddened eyes, he bowed once in the direction of Miyuki's portrait and then left the room.

Among the Seidō baseball team, Kuramochi had been one of the ones hit hardest with the news. He'd been vice captain while Miyuki was captain, and following Miyuki's accident in the fall tournament, had taken over as captain. And before that, they'd always been the closest to each other in personality and often hung out together in their classroom.

However, if Haruichi had to say, the one who'd been hit hardest had to be Eijun.

Their ace pitcher had been sitting on Kuramochi's other side, and with Kuramochi having left, Haruichi could now see him. He was in the exact same position as he'd been two hours ago when the wake began: His hands were on his lap, his back was straight, and his eyes bored directly in front of him—the perfect textbook seiza, which was in and of itself unusual for Eijun.

His face was blank and motionless, and if Haruichi hadn't known better, he'd have thought that it was Eijun's death they were mourning that day. But no—ever so imperceptibly, his chest was slowly rising up and down with every breath he took.

To be honest, Haruichi did not completely understand Eijun and Miyuki's relationship with each other.

Sure, Eijun had once said in passing that he had initially come to Seidō in hopes of forming a battery with Miyuki. The ex-catcher had also acknowledged Eijun's potential every now and then, giving him tips and helping him practice pitching. For the most part however, Miyuki had been Furuya's catcher because Furuya had been the team's ace the fall of their first year. Following that, because of Miyuki's accident, they hadn't had the chance to form a battery.

And yet, Eijun had been one of Miyuki's most frequent visitors while he was in the hospital. When Miyuki came back to school, he'd occasionally come by to the baseball field to give pointers to Eijun. Perhaps as a consequence, Haruichi had often seen Eijun practicing his pitches late into the night, driven to improve even more than before. Clearly, some sort of bond had formed between the two at some point—a bond strong enough to push Eijun beyond his limits.

To everyone's amazement, Eijun's growth surpassed even their wildest expectations, significantly increasing in both speed and control while retaining their natural erratically moving motion. By the end of the fall tournaments, everyone in the West Tokyo region knew his name. They'd started calling him the best southpaw in the region and the second Narumiya, the latter of which annoyed the pitcher to no end.

And finally, just a few days ago, Seidō had defeated their long-time rival Inashiro in the West Tokyo finals, to advance to Kōshien...
But judging by the cold, emotionless expression that looked so out of place on Eijun's face, Haruichi wasn't sure if their ace pitcher was ready to step foot on the baseball diamond anytime soon.

It was only after he'd gotten inside the shower and turned on the hot water, that Eijun let himself go. As soon as the water began pounding down on him, his shoulders began to heave and a loud sob tore itself from his lips, echoing through the stall. The tears streaming down his face mixed with the heavy water pouring down from the showerhead. Raising a hand, he wiped away some of the snot and slime coming out of his nose, not caring about how he must look like at the moment.

If Miyuki had been there, he'd probably have laughed in that snarky way of his and told him he looked absolutely pitiful.

But even thinking about what could've been—what should've been—made it worse, and he cried and cried until there was nothing left to come out, and then it was just the water, which had turned cold a long time ago.

All the strength in his legs had gone, and he let himself fall to the floor of the shower stall. Naked and cold, he curled up into fetal position, shivering, feeling the water poking down sharply on his back.

"You're coming to see us play, right?"

He'd called Miyuki the night before the final game against Inashiro. There'd been a brief pause. And then –

"Of course."

Eijun had let out a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. Despite how easygoing and relaxed Miyuki had seemed every time he came over to the field to coach him, he knew how hard it had been for the ex-catcher. It must have been agonizing to see everyone else working hard to achieve their dream of Kōshien, knowing that he could never be a part of the team again.

"Can you do it?" Miyuki's voice had interrupted him in the middle of his reverie. "Can you lead Seidō to Kōshien?"

"Yes," Eijun replied without hesitation.

"Good."

"I... I wish you were catching for me." He knew it wasn't fair of him to say it, but he couldn't help feeling the way he did. And he wanted Miyuki to understand.

A long pause.

"Okumura is a good catcher."

"I know."

Another long pause.

"I'll be watching tomorrow. Throw your best pitches."

"I will." Eijun hesitated, and then added in a halting voice, "I'll be throwing them to you in my mind."
Miyuki had laughed then, and then hung up. And that had been the last time they'd talked—would be the last time they ever talked.

It haunted him—the memory of Miyuki’s last laugh. No matter how hard he tried, Eijun couldn't tell if it had been Miyuki's usual laugh, or if there had been something else in it.

Permission, God.

He was starting to grow light-headed. His body was cold as ice, but at some point he had stopped shivering.

If you exist, this is the first and last time I'll ever ask you for anything.

Dazed, he watched the stream of water continue to pound down on the water around his face. The light was starting to fade.

I can't deal with this. I don't need anything else. I don't care what happens. I don't care about Kōshien. I just want to hear it one more time –

Eijun's eyes snapped open.

It was dark, and for a second he wondered if he was lying down on the bench in the dugout, before he realized that he was far too comfortable for that to be true.

He rose up, and his bedcovers fell down in front of him. Faint rays of light were streaming through the curtains on his left. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he realized that he was in his dorm room.

Confused, he got up—and immediately stumbled over a controller on the floor. Letting out a hiss of pain, he dropped to the ground. Why was there a game controller in the room? Okumura didn't play video games, and he didn't own any consoles. Had Seto come by again and forgotten it here?

Getting back up, Eijun vindictively kicked it aside. How had he gotten back in his room anyways? Had he passed out during a practice match and been brought back to his room? True, he had been working himself rather hard lately, but passing out on the field would be a first for him.

That was bad. He was the ace after all, and with the summer Kōshien tournament coming up, he had to make sure to stay in good condition. It was up to him to lead Seidō to Kōshien after all. He'd made a promise after all.

That's right. A promise with... who was it again?

He shook his head, trying to clear it of the dull ache he'd felt since waking up. It wouldn't do to trouble himself with unnecessary details—it'd only affect his pitching negatively. Quickly getting dressed into his baseball uniform, he left the room, slamming the door behind him with a great yawn.

It must have rained overnight, for the mist was thick, making it hard to see the grounds. The sun was only just beginning to rise, leaving most of the field in grey shadow.

Shivering, Eijun hurried through the fog. He was late, but hopefully the coach would understand. When he finally spotted a large body of figures standing in formation in the distance, he perked up and picked up his pace.

"...Hiroshi from Miyagawa Senior League!"

Eijun raised an eyebrow. Wasn't that... Ōshima's voice? What was he yelling about?
"I hope to play shortstop! I have confidence in my defense!"

As soon as his mind processed the words, he stopped cold. Instinctively, he ducked behind the shed. What was going on? Wasn't Ōshima already on the first string? Why was he talking like some newly recruited first-year vying for a spot on the lineup? Was the coach scrambling the team or something?

He felt himself sweat. He wasn’t about to be replaced, was he?

Something hard suddenly bumped into his back.

"Owch!"

Annoyed, he looked behind him, a withering retort at the tip of his tongue—and froze, as a boy with black glasses and a side-turned baseball cap looked back at him, rubbing his head.

Eijun's hands fell to his sides. The events of the past few days that he'd somehow managed to block flashed through his mind's eye, ending with the memory of strong incense fumes that made his eyes water...

Recognition flickered in the other boy's eyes and he pointed a finger at him.

"Sawamura... right?"

Eijun continued staring at the boy, his heart starting to pound in his chest. His mouth had fallen open, and a sound not unlike that of a drowning goldfish escaped him.

What was going on? Why did he look shorter? And so much younger? And more importantly –

_How is he...?_

"What's the matter with you?"

"...Miyuki?" he asked weakly.

The boy kneeling before him cocked his head in response, and then all of a sudden, understanding filled his expression.

"Oh so you decided to join the school in the end?"

_**Please, God. I just want to hear it one more time... his –**_

Miyuki's face twisted gleefully, and he let loose an unpleasant braying laugh that rattled his nerves.

"Late on your first day, huh? Treating the important stuff the same way as always, aren't you?"

...

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

"Haha!"

---

**Glossary**

**Full count** = The count is at three balls and two strikes. This means that the next pitch will either result in a walk or a strikeout. If they want to avoid a walk, the pitcher typically wants to throw in the
strike zone at a full count, which limits his pitches and makes it easier for the batter to predict what it will be.

**Hit-by-pitch** = The pitcher (accidentally) hits the batter with the pitch, which gives the batter a free pass to go on base. Also called a "dead ball" in Japanese baseball.

**Kōshien** = In Japanese high school baseball, the biggest tournaments are the Spring Kōshien and the Summer Kōshien, named after the famous stadium that the championship games take place in. The Spring Kōshien is by invitation, and is usually determined by results of regional fall tournaments. The Summer Kōshien is similar but is not invitational; the right to join is determined by results of the regional summer tournaments.

**Kōshien Rules:**

*These are nine-inning games that only go into extra innings if the score is tied

*Games can be called after seven innings if the weather is bad enough, except for the championship game which must go all the way to nine innings

*In regional tournaments (so not championship games), games can be called if a team is leading by at least ten runs after five innings, or seven runs after seven innings

Loaded bases = There is a runner at every single base, meaning a hit or a walk will allow the opposing team to score a point. Runners cannot steal a base when the bases are loaded though.

- **Note of Interest** -

* Sawamura Eijun is most likely named after Sawamura Eiji, a pro Japanese baseball player in the early 20th century who is regarded as the first great Japanese pitcher. There is even an award named for him called the Sawamura Award that is bestowed upon the top starting pitcher in Japanese professional baseball every year. Famous winners of this award include Yu Darvish (Texas Rangers) and Masahiro Tanaka (New York Yankees). *
"Ah... I must be dreaming." Eijun smiled bleakly at the bewildered boy in front of him.

There could be no other explanation for what was happening right now.

"What do you mean?" Miyuki asked.

He'd never dreamt in such clarity before. He could actually make out the scuffs of Miyuki's turned cap, and just the lightest blemishes of past scarring along the side of his face.

"This can't be real," Eijun answered, still feeling a bit dazed.

But the Miyuki of this dream misunderstood.

"Oh? So you've heard about how scary coach Kataoka can be about punctuality?" he said in a teasing tone. "Welcome to reality—Seidō has over one hundred people on the team. Worst-case scenario, he'll never even know your name – "

"Miyuki!" With a sudden burst of determination, Eijun leaned forward, grabbing the other boy's hand. For a moment, he reveled in its warmth and solidity.

*It feels so real.*

But it wasn't real, and before the dream ended, he knew he had to at least tell him—had to say goodbye.

"W-what is it?" Uncharacteristically stumbling over his words, dream-Miyuki looked taken aback. As his eyes flickered wildly back and forth between their enclosed hands and Eijun's expression, the mocking look on his face faded.

"I want you to know that I'm thankful to you for everything you've done for me," said Eijun. He could hear his own desperation creeping into his voice, but paid it no mind. While he'd never been known for his eloquence, he needed Miyuki to understand his feelings—needed him to know how much the ex-catcher still mattered to Eijun and the team, regardless of whether he was physically there with them or not. "Before you go, know that I will definitely lead Seidō to Kōshien. And that every pitch I ever throw for the rest of my life will be to you."

"W – "

"You're my catcher..." He squeezed Miyuki's hand tightly in his own. "No matter what, you'll be the only catcher capable of bringing out my full – ow!" Instinctively reacting to the sudden pain, his hands shot up to his sore head.

Seizing the opportunity, Miyuki protectively wrenched his freed hand back.
"What the hell are you talking about?" Frowning, Miyuki spun the baseball that he'd used to smack Eijun's head in his hand. "You're creeping me out."

"That hurt!" Eijun grumbled—and then his eyes widened. It'd hurt...?

"Who set you up to do this? Was it Kuramochi? Come to think of it, he said one of the new first-years was moving into his dorm room, that bastard..."

"Hit me again," Eijun said, his heart pounding.

"What?"

"Hit me," he insisted.

"You'll regret that," Miyuki promised darkly.

"Hit me — !" He was cut off as Miyuki leapt forward and smothered him with his hand.

"Shh!" the catcher hissed, casting an anxious eye around. "Keep it down, or we'll get caught!"

"Miweslkgmsg?" Eijun garbled through Miyuki's hand. When Miyuki looked quizzically down at him, he impatiently smacked his hand away and repeated his question. "This, this isn't a dream?"

"Even bouts of insanity won't get you out of this kind of pinch, if that's what you're aiming for." The older boy looked critically up and down at him. "Or have you hit your head on something recently?"

*I feel pain. This isn't a dream.*

Eijun stared down at his hands in wonder.

*This is actually happening.*

Raising his head, he locked gazes with the catcher kneeling before him.

*This is real.*

He couldn't believe it. How could this be happening? But there could be no other answer.

Unless some freak cloning experiment had gotten out of hand, somehow—*somehow*, Eijun had gone back to the first day of his first year at Seidō. Back to when he'd been a kid out of his depth who'd somehow lucked into being scouted for one of the best baseball teams in the region. Back to when he'd known nothing.

Back to when they'd been strangers.

But how? And why?

"Pull yourself together!" Miyuki snapped his fingers in Eijun's face, making him jump. "If coach finds out we're late, we're so screwed. We've gotta get out of this."

"How...?" Eijun stammered, still reeling from the shock. He shook his head, trying to reorient himself. "Can't we just apologize?"

"There's no point in apologizing now, because we'll get punished either way. But... what do you think would happen if you snuck into that line without anyone noticing?" Miyuki whispered in a conspiring tone, leaning closer towards him.
With a flash of déjà vu, Eijun realized exactly what was going on: On his first day at Seidō, he'd overslept thanks to a night spent playing video games. Terrified of Coach Kataoka's imposing aura, he'd been cowering behind the shed when he ran into Miyuki. That had been, in a way, the fateful encounter that would shape much of their following interactions.

And it was happening again.

Eijun's mouth fell open once more as he realized the full implications of what was happening: I'm reliving the past.

"So you get it?" Taking Eijun's silence as agreement, Miyuki had continued explaining his plan. "Take a good look at the line... When the guys in front finish their introductions, it goes to the second line. And when the guy at the end starts, everyone's focus is on him right? At that moment... you slip into the line quickly and silently—like a ninja!" Miyuki pumped his fist in an encouraging pose, flashing a bold grin.

At that, Eijun couldn't hold back a smile; knowing Miyuki as well as he did now, he could've slapped himself at how gullible he'd been back then to fall for such an obvious trap. But on the other hand, he could see why it had worked so well on him. Back then, he hadn't known how much of a trickster Miyuki was—or how rotten and self-serving his personality could be. He'd been blinded by his respect for the prodigy's prowess, as well as the good looks and smooth lines that accompanied it.

Miyuki was, after all, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

"So?" The older boy's voice rang out confidently. "You don't want to be screwed because of this for the next three years, do you? All you have to do is trust me."

Trust me.

"Got it." Eijun returned the self-assured look with a nod and was rewarded with a tiny victorious smirk that danced around Miyuki's lips. He hadn't caught it last time and had paid dearly for it. This time, however...

"Watch closely. You'll only get one chance," Miyuki instructed him in a hushed tone.

"I'm Kanemaru Shinji from Matsukata Senior League! My desired position is third baseman!"

Eijun had to chortle at the sight of his fellow classmate bellowing into the air. He'd forgotten how puny they all used to be.

The coach turned his head. "Next."

"Go – " started Miyuki.

But instead of immediately running, Eijun grabbed the baseball in Miyuki's hand, and before the other boy could react, he flung the ball with all of his strength in the direction of the first row of first-years. Next, grabbing the other boy's hand, he dragged him out from behind the shed and began to dash toward the lines, pumping his legs faster than ever before...

...and skidded to a stop as he felt Coach Kataoka's burning gaze boring into him.

Baffled, his gaze turned to the direction he'd thrown the baseball just in time to see it bump into the metal fence before bouncing pathetically down to the ground.

"...are you an idiot?" Miyuki's voice rang out scathingly behind him.
Eijun began to sweat.

He’d forgotten: The way he was now, he wasn't as nearly as strong as he'd been in his third year. He'd had a slight growth spurt at the end of his second year that added another 3 cm to his height, and put on a bit more muscle mass. He would never be a powerhouse like Masuko or Yūki of course, but his form had significantly filled out compared to his scrawny first year.

In his third-year body, that pitch would have cut invisibly past the first-years' faces—grabbing everyone's attention—and then slammed dramatically into the fence, hypothetically keeping everyone's attention to it long enough for him to slip into line.

Unfortunately, his current body possessed none of the muscle needed for that show of power, and the ball had just barely managed to even scrape the fence. All it had done was to make everyone turn their heads in his direction to see who'd thrown it.

As a result, both Eijun and Miyuki were now stranded before the baleful eyes of the coach and the disbelieving looks of the entire Seidō baseball team.

"Kid... You've got some guts being tardy on the first day. And you've got a twisted mentality for trying to sneak in, to boot." Coach Kataoka's gravelly voice sent shivers down his back.

"A-about that – "

"Go run for the rest of morning practice."

Eijun paled. He'd forgotten how scary Coach Kataoka could be particularly at the beginning of every year.

"Hyahaha! I can't believe these idiots!" Standing behind the coach were Masuko and Kuramochi, who leered at him. Despite their taunts, Eijun's eyes lit up, welcoming the nostalgic sight of his upperclassmen wearing the Seidō uniform.

"That goes for the two older guys rooming with him," the coach rumbled. Masuko and Kuramochi flinched. "You guys run too."

During his eventful first year on the team, Eijun had come to learn that the coach wasn't as rigid as he looked, and that he could weasel out of most minor blunders with some groveling. With that in mind, directly after morning practice—his face ashen from the exercise, as his current body lacked the stamina—he made a beeline for the coach.

"Gener – Coach Kataoka!" Eijun barely caught himself in time, knowing that the coach was less than likely to appreciate the nickname he had for him. The coach turned around, wearing an impassive expression, and Eijun immediately bent over at the waist into a deep bow. "I apologize for being late and disrupting practice! I swear on my honor that it won't happen again!"

After getting past the begrudging phase, Eijun had come to look back rather fondly and even gratefully on the events that had transpired in his solitary first months at Seidō—namely his being excluded from practices as a result of not having apologized to the coach—but in no way did he wish to relive the experience.

With some apprehension, he waited for a few seconds—and then to his relief, the coach finally grunted.
"It had better not," the man stated, and then without another word, he walked away.

Eijun's face split into a wide grin. He'd missed the coach’s guidance.

"'On your honor'?"

At the sound, Eijun turned around to see Miyuki smirking down at him. A lump rose in the back of his throat at the other boy's close proximity.

"Is that what you call dragging a helpful bystander into trouble with you? 'Honor'?"

"Haven't you heard? There's no honor among thieves, Miyuki." An arm slung itself heavily around Eijun, and Kuramochi's leering face came into view on his other side. "But you're not as dumb as you look, Sawamura, seeing that you had the tact to apologize to coach. He's really strict about stuff like that. If you hadn't apologized, he'd probably not have let you join practice or something."

Masuko held up a piece of paper: “I wanted to tell you but Kuramochi told me not to.”

"Hyaha! You'd have deserved it." As if to make up for it, Kuramochi tightened his grasp around Eijun's neck, making him light-headed.

Masuko scribbled and then held up another piece of paper. "They're lining up outside."

Kuramochi immediately released Eijun, who let out a small gasp, and with Masuko at his heels, dashed away. Sticking his hands in his pockets, Miyuki made to follow them but then glancing back at Eijun, he paused.

"I'd hurry up if I were you," said the catcher with a wave of his hand. "Otherwise, the breakfast line's gonna get too long."

Feeling his chest tightening, Eijun nodded.

"I'm coming!"

"First-years!" One of the assistant coaches called out to the gathered first-years. "We'll have you group into your preferred positions to see how you fare! Change into your spikes and meet me at Field B."

"Yes, sir!"

Haruichi stopped stretching and jumped to his feet, already wearing his spikes.

Well, here we go. It starts now.

Most people tended to overlook Haruichi because of his height and his frail looks, and he knew he hadn't left much of an impression on any of the coaches or scouts. Nonetheless, he hadn't joined the same school as his older brother to stay nameless for long.

And if there was one thing he had confidence in, it was in his baseball.

"Hey Harucchi!"

At the sound of his name—or at least what he thought was his name—he spun around to see the boy who'd been late that morning waving at him. With a grin stretched across his face, the boy approached him.
Confused, Haruichi looked around before pointing at himself questioningly.

"Are you talking to me?" he asked.

A look of perplexity flashed across the boy's face, which quickly transformed into a more guarded expression.

"Oh—that's right..." The boy cleared his throat. "Sorry. I heard someone saying your name before. You're Kominato Haruichi right?" He stuck out a hand to Haruichi, who hesitantly shook it.

"You're the guy who got caught this morning, right?"

The boy made a face. "Yeah, that's me. I'm Sawamura Eijun."

Well, he seems nice enough.

The two boys began walking together across the field.

For some odd reason, Haruichi found himself feeling at ease with the other boy, which was unusual for him. He'd often been told before that he was too introverted and quiet, but somehow with Sawamura, he found that the usual barriers were gone.

About halfway to their destination, a question rose to mind and without a second thought, he asked it, surprising himself.

"So, what's your position?"

"I'm a pitcher," Sawamura answered with a small grin.

Haruichi raised an eyebrow; something about the way the other boy had said it struck a chord with him. All of the first-years at Seidō had been the best players on their respective teams of course, so there wasn't a single person there who didn't have some skill to backup their claims. Still, for the most part, everyone was feeling a little nervous and self-conscious being at such a prestigious school—and it didn't help that the upperclassmen already practicing out on the field were showing some serious national-level skill.

But the way Sawamura had said it spoke of an earned, self-assured confidence, and the vibe Haruichi was getting from him was the same kind that he got from his older brother. He made a small smile—either he was really good… or really clueless.

"You there?"

Haruichi blinked, as Sawamura waved a hand in front of his face. He felt himself flush.

"Yeah. Uh... I'm a middle infielder. S – "


Haruichi blinked again. "How'd you know?"

There was a pause.

"...would you believe me if I told you I was from the future?" The boy smiled easily at him.

It was clearly meant to be taken as a light joke, but Haruichi found himself thinking it over seriously.
"So you're a time traveler?"

"I guess you could say that," Sawamura's smile widened into a grin. He looked so pleased, that Haruichi decided to keep playing along.

"Why would you go back in time to come here?"

"What else? To play baseball of course."

Haruichi cocked his head thoughtfully. "Why though?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why here? Why now? Why not the future? Has the world ended in the future? Is there some reason you can't play baseball in the future? Or were you sent here to do something?"

With every question, the footsteps beside him slowed down, eventually drawing to a complete stop. A playful smile on his face, Haruichi turned around—and jerked in surprise at the look on Sawamura's face.

"Sorry – " he stammered. "I like science fiction so I know a lot about stuff like that—and I said some stupid things. Forget about it."

"You do?" Sawamura's eyes refocused, and he grasped Haruichi tightly by the arm. "That—that's cool, I do too! So… what do you know about time travel?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, his tone tinged with some suspicion. While it didn’t feel like Sawamura was trying to make fun of him…

"Like… Why do most people get sent back in time? Hypothetically, that is."

"Sent back? Do you mean by… for instance… an external power?" Sawamura nodded frantically, his head bobbing up and down so wildly that Haruichi wouldn't have been surprised if he somehow broke it. "I… guess it's usually because there's something they regret having done or not having done in the past, and they're sent back in time to fix it."

"Does... does it work?"

The sheer desperation in the other boy’s voice was so apparent, Haruichi found himself feeling a little shaken.

"I'm… not sure. The thing is, they usually find out that they can't fix it. Either that, or they end up going back to their own time and… Are you okay?"

His face as pale as a sheet, Sawamura didn't respond. For a long minute, the other boy's eyes remained fixed on the ground. Haruichi noticed with alarm that his hands had grown white and were shaking, and was beginning to wonder whether he should call for help when suddenly –

"You two!" One of the assistant coaches scowled at them as he walked past. "Quit dawdling and hurry up already!"

"Yes, sir!" Haruichi answered, flushing red. He turned to Sawamura, but before he could say anything, the other boy silently began walking again at a brisk pace.

As he hurried forward to match Sawamura's longer strides, Haruichi couldn't decide whether he liked the other boy or not. But one thing was for sure—he was a freak.
As his feet robotically led him to the field, Eijun felt his heart sinking in his chest. His entire body felt heavy and it was taking his entire will just to keep walking. The surrounding sounds—the clinking of metal meeting baseball, the distant shouting of fielders—had become muted, the colors—the green of the grass, the brown of the earth, the white and blue of the uniforms—faded.

He could vaguely tell that Haruichi, who was walking just behind him, thought he was absolutely crazy, but he couldn't bring himself to care at the moment. Because after realizing that this wasn't all some warped dream, Eijun had gotten so caught up in the elation of seeing Miyuki—well, alive—that he hadn't stopped to consider why he was in the past.

And not just in the past, but back to his first year. What was it Haruichi had said?

"...there's something they regret having done or not having done in the past, and they're sent back in time to fix it."

Eijun reared his head back to look up at the sun, which was now high in the sky.

The last thing he could remember doing before waking up in the past, had been when he'd taken a shower after returning from the wake. What had he been thinking then?

Please, God.

Eijun had never really thought much about god. He'd always just sort of decided that he was, well, there and that had been good enough for him. He couldn't care less whether there was a god—or gods, he supposed—out there. However, just assuming that some—what had Haruichi called it?—external force had sent him back in time... Had there really been a purpose? What regrets did he have?

Eijun paused.

The better question was: What regrets didn't he have?

In the summer tournament of his first year, he had been the impetus that led to Seidō's loss in the finals. Because of him, the third-years had lost their opportunity to play in Kōshien, which eventually led to the coach's early retirement.

Following that, he hadn't realized that Miyuki had been injured in a game. He'd been so wrapped up in his own silly troubles that he hadn't even noticed the signs, which when he looked back later, had been so obvious.

And then despite knowing how much it hurt Miyuki to see them playing baseball, he'd kept making him come down to the field and give tips on his pitching. Kept telling him to come to their games, kept telling him that he would take Seidō to Kōshien, when he knew how much it would hurt the older boy that he would never be able to step foot himself onto the field at Kōshien—

Eijun's eyes widened and he came to a full stop. In a disconnected sort of way, he saw Haruichi give him an odd look and walk past, but he gave it no mind, because—what if that was why he'd been sent back into the past? What if he was here to take Miyuki to Kōshien?

Eijun began to tremble in excitement.

This was it. Surely, this was the answer.

He'd been sent back in time to take the third-years to Kōshien—to correct the wrong he'd done them
in his first-year, back when his pitches had yet to evolve, back when he'd known nothing.

This was it. He would become Seidō's ace in his first year, and take Miyuki and the others to victory. Who said that the past couldn’t be fixed at all? This time for sure, he would make sure to beat Inashiro in the finals, and go to Kōshien and –

Suddenly, as quickly as it had come, the elation that had been rising in his chest vanished.

And then... And then with his job done—then what?

“The thing is, they usually find out that they can’t fix it. Either that, or they end up going back to their own time...”

With the past changed, what would happen? Would he just continue to stay here, living out the rest of his high school years at Seidō? Would he return to the future, to find that everything had changed? ...or would he go back to the future—back to his own timeline? His real world?

The real world, in which Eijun had been an inexperienced pitcher his first year and in which Seidō lost in the finals. The real world, in which he hadn't become ace until his second year, when it was too late to form a battery with Miyuki—in which Miyuki had been hurt so that he couldn't ever play baseball again.

The real world in which Miyuki was no longer there.

A fierce pain seized his heart, and he gripped his chest tightly.

I don't want that.

-Glossary-

Infielder = The defense positions that cover the part of the baseball field closer to the batter, namely first base (1B), second base (2B), third base (3B) and shortstop (SS).

Middle infielder = Referring to both the second base and the shortstop, who are responsible for the 'middle' of the infield defense.

Second baseman = The player guarding second base. In the numbering system used to record defensive plays (and thus, in Japanese high school baseball teams), the second baseman receives the number 4.

Shortstop = The fielding position between second and third base. Regarded as the most dynamic defensive position in baseball because most batters are right-handed and slightly pull the ball, causing more balls to go to the shortstop than any other position. In the numbering system used to record defensive plays (and thus, in Japanese high school baseball teams), the shortstop receives the number 6.

-Note of Interest-

* Both Haruichi and his brother Ryōsuke (#4) are second baseman. Good second basemen typically need to be fast and agile, with very good range.

Kuramochi (#6) is a shortstop. Good shortstops are typically extremely agile and possess a very
strong throwing arm.

Ryōsuke and Kuramochi together with their perfect middle infield connection play, are considered one of the best middle infielders in the Kantō region (which includes west Tokyo, their Kōshien division).

In real MLB, some famous middle infielders include Derek Jeter (shortstop, New York Yankees) and Dustin Pedroia (second baseman, Boston Red Sox). *
Momentum

Chapter Summary

This changed everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As she watched the first-year boys pitching to the pitchback nets, Rei didn't know what to think.

That day at the baseball field, she'd seen a sight on the mound she'd never expected to find way out in the middle of nowhere: That was, the indomitable spirit of a true ace pitcher.

Captain and pitcher for an unknown, ragtag team, most of the boy's pitches throughout the game had been lackluster. But that final pitch, when he'd been driven into a corner with bases loaded and a full count—it was then that his true skill had been unleashed.

She'd seen the outline of it then, seen a glimpse of the monster he could become. None of his teammates had even a modicum of his talent, and the boy had obviously been having to hold himself back so that they could catch his pitches. Of course, without any real training, he had been equally rough all around the edges, and needed a lot of work before he could even begin to be useful to the team. But more importantly, the necessary talent and spirit had been there.

However...

Adjusting her glasses with a huff of frustration, Rei then crossed her arms across her sizeable chest.

Where'd it go?

From the way he was throwing, if she didn't know better she'd have thought Sawamura had been starved the entire past week. His face was withdrawn and pale and his pitches were going all over the place. His speed was about the same, but his control was non-existent and his energy completely sapped.

It wasn't totally unusual for a promising player to come to Seidō and then lose all faith in himself after being outshone by the others. But those were usually the kind who were mentally weak and who'd become accustomed to winning their entire lives; after underperforming for a few months, some gave up and left Seidō in the end, but there were others who bounced back and then grew at alarming rates. Rei had thought that even if he hadn't originally had the mental strength to cope with this level of stress, Sawamura would have been the latter sort, but it seemed that he was more sensitive than she'd expected.

Rei adjusted her glasses again and sighed. While Coach Kataoka had been looking over the pitchers during the skill evaluations, he'd barely glanced at Sawamura before moving on. In fact, he'd barely looked over the new pitchers before moving on to the other positions. It seemed that this year, like the year before, none of them had caught his eye. The only pitcher he'd given a second glance was a tall, introverted-looking boy named Furuya.

Rei had seen him pitch before, and it was true that his pitches were incredibly, no, amazingly fast. In
fact, the speed of his pitches were probably among the top five among high schoolers in all of Japan.

Giving one last look at the practicing first-years, Rei turned and began walking back to her office.

*What are you doing Sawamura? Seidō isn't going to wait for you!*

It was pitch dark outside before Yōichi finally returned to the dorm room he now shared with two others. He wouldn't have time for Street Fighter that night, but he thought he could probably squeeze in an episode of Black Lagoon…

Glancing at the tinted windows, he saw that it was dark, so he pulled out his key from his bag. Whistling aimlessly, he inserted it in the doorknob and turned—and stopped, as the usual *click* of the door unlocking didn't sound. He turned the knob—and it opened. Immediately, a muscle twitched on Yōichi's forehead.

*Who the hell forgot to lock the door?*

Kicking the door open, he stormed inside. Flicking on the lights, he tossed his backpack on his bunk and then threw himself down onto the floor. Looking around for the remote control, he spotted it near Sawamura, and with a foot, he lazily reached for –

"*What the hell!*" Yōichi yelped, his heart pounding in his ears as he scrambled backwards. Sitting mutely against the wall, Sawamura turned to him with a dead look on his face but didn't respond. "*Turn the lights on if you're here, dammit!*"

Sawamura gave a pathetic little sigh, and lowered his head. Yōichi stared, and then dropped to the floor again.

"What the hell's wrong with you? You depressed cos you messed up at today's skill evaluation or something?"

"That's not it," the first-year grumbled. "Leave me alone."

Immediately, Yōichi pounced forward and wrapped his legs around Sawamura's neck. Tumbling downwards, he pulled the younger boy down with his momentum, ending with a tight armbar.

"Is that how you talk to your superiors?!"

"Agh—not this again!" Sawamura yelped from between his legs, slapping at the ground.

Again? Have I done this to him before?

But some energy seemed to have returned to the boy, and after a few seconds, Yōichi released him.

"Y'know..." Yōichi sighed. It looked like he was about to have to give that talk. "It's not that I don't get why you're depressed. Loads of people get bummed out after their skill evaluations every year. But it's not like you won't have any more chances. You've still got what, three—no, two years left. Lately, Masuko's been coming home late, yeah? That's cos he's a third-year now. After this... there's nothing left for him. So right now, he's probably swinging a bat out somewhere, trying to get as much practice in as possible."

Sawamura didn't respond, but something seemed to flicker in his eyes.

"There's a lot of competition for third batter, and yesterday, he made just one error. But because of
that he was removed from the regular lineup. Everyone comes here thinking they wanna be the ace... or that they wanna bat cleanup... or just that they wanna be a regular and play in the game. But the truth is, there are only nine spots and we have close to a hundred players, so we have to work for them. The fittest make it and everyone else can only wait for their next chance.

So you're not the only one who feels the pressure. If you falter now, you'll only get left behind."

"I get that!" Sawamura suddenly jumped to his feet, startling Yōichi. He had a wild, distressed look on his face. "I don't... I don't want to be left behind either. But what if I have no control over it? What if—if I get on the team, I don't know what will happen in the future?"

"Haah?" Yōichi let out a sound of disbelief. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know what to do," the younger boy said helplessly, wringing his hands.

"You don't know what to do?" Yōichi repeated incredulously. His eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you here for then? We're all here to go to Kōshien. What about you?"

Falling silent, Sawamura didn't move, looking straight down at the ground. Then without another word, he opened the door and stalked outside, slamming it closed behind him.

Yōichi scowled.

What a brat.

Reaching for the remote, he finally turned on the TV only to see the ending credits of the show he'd wanted to watch start streaming up the screen.

Dammit!

Kanemaru uneasily looked out at the crowd filing into the watching area outside the fence posts. "Just like always... the crowds are pretty amazing on Sundays. A lot of different people are here to watch the practice... alumni and reporters too."

"Man, I'm getting so nervous. I couldn't sleep at all last night!"

"I can't believe we're going to be playing against the upperclassman... it hasn't even been a month since we joined the team," Kanemaru moaned.

"You guys all set?" Coach Kataoka came stalking over, and all the first-years jumped to their feet.

"Yes sir!"

"I'm going to give every single one of you first-years a chance to play... so I want all of you to be ready to go out at any moment."

"Yes sir!"

As the coach walked away to talk to the upperclassmen in their dugout, the first-years broke into excited conversation.

Meanwhile, sitting alone on the bench, Eijun glumly lowered his head.
Eijun knew he was being stupid, acting like a kicked puppy for the better part of the past month. His morose attitude certainly hadn't endeared him to his teammates or his dormmates.

But for some reason, Eijun couldn't help the intense fear that had managed to worm itself inside his heart—the fear that this dream-like reality would suddenly end, and that he would return to his future.

He wasn't sure why, but while he didn't know what exactly had propelled him into the past, he had a strange feeling of certainty that it wouldn't be permanent. And even putting that aside, he just couldn't bring himself to think that if he simply played along, everything would turn out fine.

No, he didn't dare think that, for how could he when they'd already taken Miyuki away from him once?

As a result, he was on alert at all times, prepared for any sudden event; he could never get a full night's sleep, waking up at hourly intervals. So with sleep deprivation added to his list of mental struggles, Eijun knew his pitching had been less than lackluster.

However, much of it had been on purpose. Fearing that if he drew attention to himself as a pitcher, Eijun had been purposefully throwing wild pitches. It hurt his pride as Seidō's ace to demean himself like that, but if he stood out and was promoted to the first string, he knew that there would be no turning back. He would have to really start gunning for Kōshien—and if Seidō defeated Inashiro in the finals this time around, who knew what could happen?

Eijun blamed all of the terrifying articles on time travel that he'd read on the school computers following his talk with Harucchi. They had all warned about things like time paradoxes and world lines and causalities and a bunch of other big words he didn't really understand. While he wasn't sure about the specifics, he'd gotten the gist that things could go horribly wrong if he messed up.

He liked to think that he'd grown up a bit since his first-year at Seidō, and it might have been this younger body's underdeveloped brain and raging hormones or whatnot, but just thinking about it all hurt his head.

With a frustrated growl, Eijun pulled at his hair. The bottom line was, to put it simply –

*I'm not cut out for this sci-fi business. I just wanted to see Miyuki again.*

"What's got you looking so down?" A voice rang out from behind him. "Though if what I'm hearing about you is true, that's just your default mood."

Eijun turned around and jumped to see the object of his thoughts grinning down at him. Wearing his baseball cap turned jauntily to the side, Miyuki was in uniform with his equipment casually slung across his back.

"Why're you here?" Eijun spluttered. "Shouldn't you be with the first string?"

Though today was the game between the first-years and the upperclassmen, they were only going up against the second string.

"Haha! The main force's got today off. Plus if we win the upcoming game, the Kantō tournament will be next."

"Oh..." Eijun squeezed his hands.
I want to pitch.

But could he?

"So when are you pitching?" Miyuki asked.

"Dunno... when I'm up, I guess," he said halfheartedly.

"What's up with you? Could you sound any less excited?" Miyuki shook his head. "You better get your act together if you ever want to be used in a game."

Eijun scowled.

I don't want to be lectured by you when I'm doing this for you!

But of course he couldn't say that. With a grumbled farewell, he dragged his feet to join the other first-years.

And so, the intrasquad game began.

The first-years began on offence, and as expected, Tanba struck out the first three batters in almost no time. At the third strikeout, the normally quiet pitcher let out a roar.

"Yeah!"

The nearby first-years flinched, and as the two teams switched positions, they gathered in the center of the baseball diamond.

Eijun was still benched for now, so he couldn't hear them, but judging from the way they kept sneaking uneasy glances at the upperclassmen's dugout, he could generally understand what they were talking about.

He remembered that he'd been stunned by it too, his first year. He hadn't quite understood then the acute pressure felt by the upperclassmen—the pressure to stand out to the coach and make the first string so that they could play in games. The pressure only increased with every year, and if it took scaring a bunch of first-years to showcase their talent... well, so be it.

"What's with you guys..."

Eijun looked up to see Kanemaru and a few other first-years scowling down at him.

"What?" he asked. He hadn't gone out of his way to make friends with them, but unlike his original first year, he didn't think he'd done anything to embarrass them.

"Shouldn't you be out at the bullpen warming up or something? But you're just moping around here, and that other guy's even sleeping."

Eijun looked beside him to see Furuya snoring away on the bench.

"There's no point." The first-year standing beside Kanemaru looked shaken. "Tōjo's out there on the mound right now, but just look at him. His team made it to the quarterfinals at nationals, but he's getting hit by every batter. He's falling apart. These two won't stand a chance."

"Yeah... we don't stand a chance. We've only been here a month..."

"This inning's never gonna end..."
But finally, after getting scored on 12 times in the first inning, the first years' pitcher managed to strike out the third batter. Shaken, the first years on defense practically fled back to the dugout to switch gear.

Unfortunately, their relief was short-lived as Tanba managed to strike out three in a row again.

"Strike, batter out! Three outs, change sides!"

"This is crazy," a first-year moaned.

"So this is high school baseball..."

However, Coach Kataoka seemed to have sensed the rapidly dropping morale.

"We're going to shift the pitcher and the entire outfield!"

Looking absolutely crushed, with sweat glistening at his temple, Tōjo returned to the dugout. Eijun watched as, without even the energy to wish them good luck, he collapsed on the bench. The boy would bounce back, he knew—he’d become a key member of their future team lineup. It'd just take some time.

The new pitcher and outfielders walked to their positions, practically shaking in their cleats.

And they too promptly fell apart and were destroyed.

Eijun winced as the upperclassmen scored their twenty-first run. He understood why the coach conducted this game every year, but that didn’t make it any less painful to witness.

"Pitcher change! Furuya Satoru, get on the mound!"

At the sound of his name, like a vampire popping out of its coffin, Furuya rose up. With his glove in hand, he serenely floated to the mound.

Despite himself, Eijun felt his mouth tug up into a smile. From what he remembered, Furuya in their first year had absolutely terrible control and practically zero mental strength. Nonetheless, his speed had always been the real thing. While Eijun had managed to snatch away the ace position in their third year, he’d had to fight hard for it. In comparison, the Furuya of now was nothing compared to what he’d eventually turn into...

But, Eijun thought, he should still give these guys a scare.

Stomping on the mound, Furuya sent the ball blazing down to the batter, who could only watch in horror as it bulleted past him.

With a crushing sound, it careened directly against the side of the catcher's mitt before suddenly lifting sharply and hitting the boy on the bottom half of his face mask. The first-year let out a shocked sound and fell backwards.

Looking stunned, everyone watched, frozen, until suddenly –

"How is your hand?" The coach knelt and motioned for the first-year catcher to hold out his arm.

"I-I think it's – ow!" The boy let out a hiss of pain as the coach grasped his wrist.

"It may be sprained," said the coach, eyeing it with a practiced eye. "Get it iced and go to the infirmary immediately afterwards."
"Y-yes sir." The boy shakily got to his feet.

"You!" The coach pointed at Kanemaru who flinched. "Help him with that."

"Yes sir!"

Then the coach looked at Furuya, who looked rather puzzled.

"You passed, Furuya," he said. "Be at the first string's team practice starting tomorrow."

Eijun closed his eyes. He remembered this moment happening before too, though it had happened a little differently from before. The coach had been hit in the face then, but he supposed the timing of the wind must have been off this time around...

"I wanted to pitch some more... but whatever," he heard Furuya say. "This way I'll get to team up with Miyuki-senpai."

Eijun's eyes flew open.

"Please wait a moment, sir – !" Suddenly realizing what that meant, the third-years had begun to protest. "He's only thrown one pitch. If it was at least three... or even two, we could get a real look at his style!"

"I want to let him continue..." The coach adjusted his cap. "But none of the first-year catchers I've seen today will be able to handle his pitches."

A deathly silence swept through the first-years' dugout.

"**Pitcher and catcher change!**"

As the next pitcher and catcher hurried to their positions on the field, Eijun looked down at his hands. They were white and tightly clenched against each other. Suddenly, he realized that they were shaking.

"This way I'll get to team up with Miyuki-senpai."

Though Furuya had thrown only one pitch, his ball had done its job of disrupting the third-years' flow. In the following third and fourth innings, the number of points they scored dramatically dropped. Clearly, they had lost their momentum.

Kazuya smiled, remembering what the first-year had said to him the day before.

"I'm not going to let anybody in here get a hit... so then will you be my catcher?"

"Haha," he laughed to himself. "And that's exactly what happened."

As the offence and defense switched positions again, Kazuya noted that the coach had already stopped paying much attention to the intrasquad game. He’d wager that could only mean that the coach had gotten a pretty good harvest.

With the way Tanba was pitching today, and with Furuya joining the first string, Kazuya could tell that the coach had decided on who to use for the following Kantō tournament. That meant that he was probably going to stop the game soon, especially since the remaining first-years had practically no chance of earning even a single point.
Furthermore, the coach must have already known that they were all at their breaking point by now. Any further, and they'd be irreversibly crushed—looking like the frontline of a war zone, the first-years looked positively haggard.

Suddenly, there was a buzz as Furuya rose to his feet and left the dugout. It seemed that he was giving up on the game and leaving early.

"Is that okay, Mr. Monster?" Kazuya asked teasingly, as Furuya walked past. "Not watching to the end..."

Furuya shrugged. "...it's already over. Baseball isn't so simple that one person can lead a team to victory..."

"Both teams line up!"

Kazuya turned to see the coach raise a hand, signaling the end of the game.

"See?" Furuya's lips curled. "The game's over." And he left.

Well, that'd been an anticlimactic end. Kazuya got to his feet and stretched.

_In the end, I guess the only interesting first-year this year is Furu—"

"General... coach!" A voice roared out. "I haven't pitched yet!"

Kazuya blinked in surprise—it was Sawamura. Though the coach was looking coldly down at him, he didn’t back down.

He felt a flicker of interest curling up. _Well well... what's this?_

"Who are you?" said the coach.

"My name is Sawamura Eijun!" he shouted, taking Kazuya aback by surprise. "I'm from Nagano Prefecture and my birthday is May 15th! My blood type is type O! _And I will be Seidō's ace!_

...a little too much information, but that's the spirit.

"The game's over, Sawamura..." a first-year grumbled.

"Yeah, just let it go..."

Sawamura whirled around. "I know I'm not the only player who hasn't even gotten to play yet! Have you forgotten? This is the game to prove ourselves! This is _your_ chance to show everyone. Don't you want to play with the team? Don't you want to play more baseball? If you haven't even gone out yet, can you honestly hold your head high and say you gave it your all? _Are you really ready to just give it up here?_

"Oh, shut up..." a first-year scowled. "Aren't you the one who's been trying the least hardest among us?"

"Yeah... unlike you, we're not here just because we feel like it!"

"We don't even have any catchers left!"

Coach Kataoka, who had been listening impassively to the first-years, looked around at this.
"Is that true? Where are the other catchers?"

"They're all already icing on the bench, coach..."

Sawamura's face fell. His mouth opened, as if to say something—and then it closed. All of his energy suddenly seemed to leave him, and looking defeated, he turned around.

At that, Kazuya rubbed the back of his neck.

*C'mon... if you look like that, I can't exactly stay still, can I?*

"Coach, I'll catch for him," he called out. "I already have my gear on me anyways."

Sawamura spun around. Meeting Kazuya's gaze, the younger boy's eyes widened.

"This is the first-years against the reserve players Miyuki," said a third-year.

"I won't be batting, just catching," said Kazuya, with an innocent smile. "C'mon, what could a wee catcher like me do against all of you big boys?"

As one, the second and third-years glared murderously at him. But it seemed that Sawamura's words had struck some sort of chord within the coach.

"What about the rest of you first-years?" He turned his baleful gaze towards the other dugout, whose residents all balked. "Do you want to continue the game?"

They all mutely looked at each other uneasily. And then –

"I'm not ready to just give it up here." One of the first-years, with a head of blonde hair, grounded out. "And I'm not about to lose out to this idiot here!"

"Me too... I don't want this game to end like this!"

"Let us continue, please! Coach!"

"...why didn't you all take the field with that kind of spirit from the beginning?" said the coach, stunning all of the first-years into silence. "After high school baseball, there is nothing else for you!"

He turned and glared at Kazuya, who sweated. "Change into your gear. You'll be catching." And then he turned to Sawamura, who visibly gulped. "For this last inning, you'll be the pitcher...so hurry up and get on the mound."

Once Kazuya had changed into his catcher gear, he jogged over to the mound where Sawamura was tossing a rosin bag in his hand.

"So, what pitches can you throw again?" Kazuya asked, covering his mouth with his mitt. He was only asking to be sure, since he remembered that the last time they'd formed a battery, Sawamura had claimed to have only fastballs in his repertoire.

However, to his surprise, the boy seemed to actually think it over before responding.

"A four-seam and changeup..." He seemed uneasy, as he didn't meet Kazuya's eyes.

What happened to all that spirit just now?

But he supposed the first-year had just been fired up at the moment. Now—with everyone's attention
on him and with the pressure of turning the momentum around, what kind of pitches would he throw?

"That's good. Have you learned any breaking balls yet?" he asked.

"...a cutter."

"You paused. No confidence in it?"

"That's not it," said Sawamura, looking as if he were struggling with something.

Kazuya raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see." The southpaw pursed his lips, clearly done with the explanation.

Kazuya shrugged, and returned to the catcher's box. Lowering his mask, he knelt down. Glancing up at the batter, he recognized him as a right-handed second-year who tended to play aggressively.

Kazuya moved his mitt to the outside corner of the plate.

Well, let's see what he's got.

As Sawamura began to wind-up, Kazuya noted with some interest that he had refined his messy form since the last time he'd seen him pitch.

However...

His mitt snatched up to catch the ball, which flew high and far from the plate.

"Ball!"

Kazuya threw the ball back to Sawamura, who caught it with a blank look on his face.

Well, that's no good.

No matter how aggressive the batter, that pitch had been way too obvious. Nobody would swing at a course like that. Sawamura definitely still needed to work on his control.

"Ball!"

Kazuya suppressed a sigh. This wouldn't do at all; Sawamura was throwing too high. His posture right now was too stiff. Maybe the pressure of playing in an actual match was affecting him more than he'd expected it to?

He glanced up at the batter, who was beginning to relax now. The batter's lips had curled up into a smirk, and with the count at 2-0 in his favor, it was clear that he wasn't going to be swinging until he got a strike.

Rising to his feet, Kazuya called for a timeout before jogging over to the mound.

"Okay... Relax!" he said, thumping the boy's chest with his mitt. "You're way too tense, and it's throwing off your aim. Don't think about it and just throw to my glove. Remember, we're partners right now."

"Partners..." Sawamura repeated.

"Yeah, that's right."
Something flickered in the pitcher's eyes briefly—but then it dulled. His shoulders sagged.

"I can't."

Kazuya's eyes narrowed. "What's the big deal? What do you mean you can't?"

"You don't understand."

Kazuya could've shaken the younger boy's shoulders in frustration. He realized that something must have happened to affect him like this, but the fact of the matter was that for the entire last month, the boy had been sulking around listlessly.

_We don't need someone who doesn't want to be here._

"No, I don't," he snapped. "But who was the brat going on about becoming ace? Wasn't that you? Why else did you come here?" Sawamura froze, and Kazuya knew he'd struck a chord. "You're thinking too much about this, Sawamura. Quit trying to use your head, and just look at my mitt."

For a second, the boy didn't react, and he was about to just give up and go back when Sawamura suddenly nodded his head.

Kazuya scratched the back of his neck and shrugged.

_Well, that's about all I can do for him I guess._

He returned to the catcher's box once more, and knelt down.

Kazuya trusted in Rei's judgment. Her recruits, while seemingly rough around the edges, were almost always on the money—one good example being his teammate Kuramochi, who was now Seidō's best baserunner. He didn't doubt what she saw in Sawamura, and had in fact, seen for himself some of the boy's latent potential that day with Azuma.

However, no matter how great their talent or potential, everyone's greatest barrier was in the end, themselves. If Sawamura couldn't get past this, despite his loud proclamations of becoming the team's ace, he would never even make the second string bench, let alone the coveted number 1 team number.

Kazuya sighed. Lowering his mask, he glanced back up at the batter to see how he was doing—and blinked. The batter had suddenly grown tense, gripping his bat tightly in his hands. A bead of sweat slid down his arm.

_What's up with him...?_

Automatically, Kazuya's gaze flickered back to the mound—and immediately found his answer. His eyes widening against his will, he stared.

The pitcher standing there on the mound… Who was that? It wasn't Sawamura... was it?

But it was.

...right?

If he didn't know better, he'd have thought the pitcher standing there was a completely different person from two minutes ago. But no—it was still Sawamura, in all of his average height and looks glory.
However... His eyes were completely different from before. On this new figure's face was a lion's gaze, completely focused and ruthless as it bore down on its unknowing prey.

Kazuya had never experienced this kind of intensity coming from the pitcher's mound before. The closest he could think of was the sheer force Tetsu gave off right before he hit a walk-off home run. It was an indicator of the most terrifying players. It was the intensity of a pitcher with the utmost confidence in his ability to strike out the batter—and the experience to prove it. It was unfortunate, but even their current ace Tanba had never shown such intensity on the mound, let alone Kawakami.

But that was impossible. There was no way a first-year pitcher could possess this kind of aura, especially not a greenhorn like Sawamura who'd just come from the boonies to play for the big leagues for the first time in his life.

As if in slow-motion, Sawamura began to wind-up. His arm pulled backwards. Miyuki narrowed his eyes: This form was a little different from what he'd seen so far. He concentrated on determining what kind of pitch was coming—but even as the ball came flying forward, Sawamura's arm never fully came into view, moving instead like a whip through the air.

Before he could even start to make sense of what that meant, the ball had slammed into his mitt with a gunshot-like crack that resounded across the field. He could practically see smoke rising out of his mitt from the sheer force behind it.

"...Strike!"

For a moment, there was stunned silence from the viewers. And then like a breaking dam, whispers began to pour out.

"What was that?"

"That was pretty fast, wasn't it?"

"Not as fast as that first guy, though..."

"What's his name again?"

_Hey, hey...what was that? That was at least 140 km/hr..._

He threw the ball back to Sawamura, who caught it and calmly turned around to adjust his cap.

So on top of that irregular pitching form, he had speed and power. What about control and variety?

Kazuya moved his mitt to the inner corner of the plate, and when Sawamura's face tightened in understanding, he knew that the younger boy somehow knew what he was asking for. He nodded, and with the same burning intensity, before he knew it, a cutter broke across the plate and slammed into his mitt. The batter remained standing frozen in the batter's box, anxiety dripping off of him like wax from a candle.

"Strike!"

Feeling a smile inadvertently shape his lips, Kazuya moved his mitt directly to the middle of the plate. This third pitch would seal the deal. If he could do it again...

A foot slammed down on the mound, and before Sawamura's arm even came into full view, another ball was firing out towards the batter. Desperate, the batter began to swing—but before he could complete the swing, the ball was already smoking hotly in Kazuya's mitt.
"Strike three! Batter out!"

"Nice pitch," he called out to Sawamura, who stared back at him with a blank look on his face. And then suddenly, a single tear rolled down the younger boy's face, startling him.

Before he could react, Sawamura raised his arm and furiously rubbed at his face with his shirt's sleeve. Then he lowered his arm and for what felt like the first time in ages, Sawamura's face split into a wide grin.

Kazuya shook his head; he must have mistaken a bead of sweat for tears. How unlike him.

But that's more like it.

After seeing Sawamura pitch against Azuma several months ago, he'd thought he could predict the boy's growth. Sawamura would come to Seidō, fail miserably and realize his limitations, and then work hard to surpass them. With the proper amount of careful coaching and shaping, and assuming that his talent was the real deal, he would achieve ace level by his third, or even second year. A true diamond in the rough—though not one that would be ready to form a proper battery with Kazuya in time.

Or at least, that had been what he'd thought would happen. But after that performance just now... Well. This changed everything.

Kazuya felt his mouth draw back in an anticipating grin.

We just might have a real monster in our hands.

- Glossary -

Rosin bag = A cotton bag filled with rosin power that pitchers typically use to take sweat off their hand, so they have better ball control.

Pitches:

- Four-seam: A fastball designed for velocity (usually) with little break, meaning it doesn't fool hitters but rather challenges their reaction time. If hitters can predict it, they can easily hit it. However, Eijun's four-seam moves like a breaking ball because of his unusual pitching form.

- Changeup: An off-speed fastball. It is thrown the same way as a normal fastball but arrives much slower at the plate. Commonly used by pitchers to trick and mess-up a batter's timing.

- Cutter: A fastball that breaks toward the pitcher's glove side as it reaches the plate; batters have a hard time hitting it with the bat's sweet spot, and it usually results in soft contact and an easy out.

- (canon) Sawamura Eijun Pitcher Data -

    Speed (2/5)
    Control (3/5)
    Stamina (4/5)
    Cutter: Lv4
    Changeup: Lv3
- (TTOL) Sawamura Eijun Pitcher Data -

Speed (5/5)
Control (5/5)
Stamina (4/5)
Cutter: Lv5
Changeup: Lv4
Four-seamer: Lv5

- Note of Interest -

* 140 km/hr is around 87 mph, which is already exceptional for high schoolers. Furuya can pitch at around 150 km/hr (~93 mph) which is amazing (and is why everyone is always in awe in canon). It's especially amazing because they're only first-years who still haven't reached their full potential. A high schooler who could throw in the 120 km/hr (~75 mph) range would be considered average. I believe that in canon, Sawamura pitches at around that speed.

In MLB, the fastest pitch ever recorded was 169.1 km/h (105.1 mph), thrown by Aroldis Chapman (Cincinnati Reds).*

Chapter End Notes

Edited chapters 1-3 on 16/4/14
Bark and bite

Chapter Summary

That's Miyuki-senpai to you.

Endō-senpai didn't want anything and Zono-senpai wanted a calpico... right?

With a shrug, Haruichi pressed the button for the soft drink, and it tumbled down with a clatter. Just as he bent over to pick it up, he heard light footsteps behind him.

"Haha... Being a fetching boy for your seniors?"

Haruichi straightened up and turned around to see his older brother leaning against the wall. With his usual unreadable smile on his face, he was sucking from a straw in a juice box.

"The spotlight today was on those two pitchers... Still, you hit and ran well. And you were the one who scored in the end."

"Ah..." Haruichi flushed with pleasure at the compliment. "I just got lucky." After Sawamura had started pitching, the first-years had managed to score two runs against the upperclassmen. Haruichi had stole two bases after a long hit to the outfield and ultimately managed to score one of the runs.

"I didn't expect you to enter the same high school as me," said Ryōsuke, stepping closer. "You always followed me in everything in the past, though. But if you always try to become my copy, you'll never surpass me." Still smiling, he passed by Haruichi. "Don't underestimate this place... It isn't as easy as you think." He tossed his empty juice box into a nearby bin and left without looking back.

Haruichi stood still, staring at his brother's retreating back.

Brother...

It was pitch dark outside the windows, but the indoor practice grounds were still illuminated in light. However, it was empty—or should have been, if it weren't for the tall first-year looking expectantly at him.

"Sheesh... Telling me to catch your pitches right now," Kazuya sighed, thumping his fist inside the mitt. "You're already part of the first string, aren't you? We'll get to practice together a lot." He paused, and then smirked. "You feeling nervous because of Sawamura?"

Furuya, looking as taciturn as ever, didn't respond. However, to his glee, Kazuya saw that the first-year's hand had tightened over the baseball.

Unable to help himself, he prodded him once more.

"You regret not staying until the end now, don't you?"

"Not really," Furuya said. "I don't care about watching games I'm not pitching in."
So he said—but Kazuya could tell it was bugging him.

Just as Furuya began to windup, he said, "I chose to come here to find my own place... So please don't disappoint me, Miyuki-senpai."

Kazuya blinked, momentarily taken aback.

*Disappoint him...?*

"Haha!" He let out a laugh, raising his mitt in preparation. If anything, that had been the last reaction he'd expected of the younger boy. "You're an interesting one, that's for sure. I like you!"

Furuya had the kind of spirit he liked to see in a pitcher. With Sawamura joining the first string as well, Kazuya was looking forward to what kind of excitement the year would bring.

"Are you sure about this?" Ōta asked dubiously, taking out the storage keys from his back pocket. "The lights are off and the door's locked."

"Coach Kataoka has a habit of thinking over team-related matters in there," Rei explained, crossing her arms across her chest.

"If you say so..." Fumbling with the lock in the darkness for a few seconds, there was finally an audible click as the key turned. "There we go."

The door swung open, and they stepped in—where, sure enough, Kataoka sat smoking a cigarette in the middle of the room.

"Coach Kataoka, so you were here!" Ōta exclaimed.

Wordlessly, Rei flicked the light switch, and harsh fluorescent light illuminated the small shed room.

"What did you two think of today's game?" the coach asked, without preamble.

Rei had to hold back a smile.

*As always, he gets to the point.*

"Well, even though the scores showed an overwhelming loss... there were some outstanding players at the end, weren't there?" Ōta answered with a thoughtful look on his face. "There was the small one on second... He's Kominato's younger brother, isn't he? He showed some good batting sense. Furuya Satoru, who silenced the crowd with only one pitch... And lastly, Sawamura Eijun. None of the batters could even swing at his pitches, with that presence he has on the mound. The fact that he's a southpaw was just the cherry on top."

"You were the one who scouted Sawamura, weren't you, Takashima?" Kataoka's steely gaze turned to Rei, who nodded.

"You have a great eye for talent, as always," Ōta praised her. "I didn't notice him at all until today's match, but he completely blew me away."

*You and me both, Ōta.*

In fact, Rei had probably been the most shocked of them all upon witnessing the boy's pitches. Whatever she'd been expecting from Sawamura, or even hoping for, it certainly hadn't been *that.*
"I plan to let Sawamura debut in the Kantō tournament," Kataoka announced.

"What?" Ōta seemed surprised. "I understand your desire to use him but shouldn't we confirm that today wasn't just a fluke?"

"You just said he blew you away today," Rei pointed out.

"Yes, but he could be the type whose performance is sketchy at best." Ōta looked worried. "I mean, he certainly wasn't pitching like that before, now was he?"

There was a pause, as Rei had to admit he had a point. However –

"It wasn't a fluke," Kataoka stated. "I could tell by his third pitch. With his deceptive form... he uses his right hand to form a wall and concentrates the strength of his body while releasing his left wrist at the very last moment. And with those naturally moving pitches, if he were to be paired with the right catcher, he could be unstoppable."

Rei's eyes widened; the coach wasn't the type to exaggerate or say things he didn't completely believe.

"The question is, why hasn't he been pitching like that until now?" Kataoka looked at Rei, who uneasily adjusted her glasses. "Was he like this when you scouted him?"

"No, coach," Rei admitted. "I saw that he had talent and recognized his presence when I saw him playing at his old school, but his skill level was nowhere near what we saw today. If I didn't know better, I'd say that the Sawamura we saw today was someone completely different from before." She paused thoughtfully. "Or rather... Today, he pitched like a much more improved version of himself."

With a frown, Kataoka stubbed his cigarette out on an ashtray.

"Regardless, I plan on using both Sawamura and Tanba as the starting pitchers for the team in the matches before summer. And as for Furuya..." Rei and Ōta blinked in surprise. "I'm planning on letting him debut in the Kantō tournament as well. He should make for an interesting closer."

Unable to completely reign in her heightened excitement, Rei's hands tightened around herself. Seidō High's baseball team of recent years had become well-known for their iron-wall defense and strong batting lineup, but without a reliable ace pitcher to shut down their opponents' offence, they had failed to advance to their goal of Kōshien.

But now, if Sawamura and Furuya could just live up to their expectations on the pitching lineup alongside Tanba...

It was late by the time Kazuya finally managed to peel himself away from the clingy first-year.

After the catcher easily caught his blazing fastball, Furuya's bullishness had completely crumbled as he began to cling on to Kazuya and beg him to catch for him. However, the younger boy had had to be satisfied with just ten more pitches, before they turned in for the night.

With a sigh of relief, Kazuya trudged up the stairway to the second floor of the dormitory building, looking forward to some long-earned privacy. He'd shared the room with Azuma in his first year at Seidō, but now that the hulking batter was gone, he had it all to himself.

Fishing his key out from his pocket, he began to aimlessly think about how to spend the rest of his evening.
Maybe I'll go pick up some pocari sweat at the vending machine... and a magazine from Kuramochi –

Suddenly, Kazuya stopped in his tracks, spotting a hunched over figure just by his doorway. The person had his Seidō baseball cap on, and was seated with his head bowed over so that he couldn’t see his face. Judging from his stillness, he had fallen asleep.

Mulling over what to do, Kazuya scratched his neck.

And then making up his mind, he gave the seated figure a sharp jab with his foot. Immediately, the boy yelped in pain and his head jerked up as he automatically leapt to his feet.

"Sawamura? What’re you doing here?"

For a second, the first-year looked lost, looking up at Kazuya with an oddly confused expression on his face. And then his face brightened.

"Miyuki!"

"That's Miyuki-senpai to you," said the catcher with a smirk. "What're you doing outside my room?"

"Well... I felt like seeing you," said Sawamura casually.

Kazuya blinked.

...I'm really popular with this year's pitchers, aren't I?

Noticing then that the first-year—dressed lightly in shorts and a t-shirt—was beginning to shiver from the night chill, he shrugged.

"Come on inside then," he said, holding up his key. Sawamura's face split into a grin. "That is... If you bring me a drink from the vending machine."

To his surprise, the younger boy readily agreed and without any further prompting, he dashed down the stairway.

Kazuya folded his arms across his chest, bemused.

He's more obedient than I thought.

By the time Sawamura returned to his room, Kazuya had already changed into more comfortable clothes and switched from his sports glasses to his everyday ones. He was idly flipping through an old issue of a sports magazine when the first-year burst into the room with drinks and snacks clutched in his arms.

"What took you so long?" Kazuya said, reaching for a can. To his surprise, he saw that Sawamura had brought his favorite drink.

"I got caught by Kuramochi-senpai," Sawamura grouched, tossing the rest of the items on the spare bed. "He gave me a real thrashing."

"Let me guess: For daring to strike out three upperclassmen in a row without any warning?" Popping open the can, Kazuya began gulping down the sweet drink.

"Nah... He found my cellphone and now he thinks I have a girlfriend back home..."
Startled, Kazuya choked on the liquid and for several seconds, preoccupied himself with his coughing.

"Are you okay?" Sawamura sounded concerned.

Embarrassed, he wiped his mouth.

"Haha... You didn't hear it from me, but Kuramochi's actually pretty shy around girls our age. He can't even talk to the manager girls."

A look of incredulous glee spread across Sawamura's face.

"So that's why he's always on me about Wakana!"

Is that the girlfriend?

"Anyways..." Kazuya put the empty can down on the floor. "So what happened today?"

"What do you mean?" Though as Sawamura was currently preoccupied with trying to open a bag of chips with his mouth, it came out sounding more like "Wheogmsgsn?"

"You were a completely different person today on the mound." Kazuya pointed at himself with a gleeful smile. "Did my words power you up or something?"

"Oh... Yeah, they did." Sawamura popped a chip in his mouth and began chewing loudly.

Kazuya blinked again. "Care to elaborate on that?"

"I guess... I just realized that I was thinking way too much about the whole thing. There's no need to think about anything else, I'm no good at that anyways, right? The best I can do, the best anyone could expect of me, is to just pitch as well as I can, and get to Kōshien with the rest of the team... Is what I figured, anyways. And whatever happens next... happens." With a thoughtful look and then a nod, Sawamura tossed another chip in his mouth.

"Oh?" asked Kazuya half-jokingly, reaching for a chip. "So you think you can lead us to Kōshien?"

"I will," said Sawamura simply, holding the bag out to him.

The second-year paused and looked at the other boy appraisingly. Though the chip crumbs scattered around the edges of his mouth took away from some of the effect, something about the look on Sawamura's face told him that he had absolute faith in what he'd just said.

...I'd say he was being all bark and no bite, but seeing the way he pitched today, he might actually follow up on that claim.

Suddenly, there was a loud banging noise on the door, grabbing their attention.

"Sawamura! I know you're in there!" Kuramochi's unmistakable voice sounded from outside. "Lights out in ten! And if you try turning on the lights when you come in, I'll slam you!"

"I'm coming!" Sawamura jumped to his feet, and the bag of chips he'd been eating dropped to the ground, spilling crumbs everywhere on the floor. "Ah... crap..."

"That's ten SECONDS! Hyahaha!"

"Sawamura..."
"My bad, Miyuki-senpai!" The first-year put his hands together in an apologetic pose as he raced to the door. "You can have the leftovers! It's your favorite, right?"

The door slammed shut.

Speechless, Kazuya stared at the closed door—and then he shook his head. He turned to the leftover boxes on the bed.

_As if he'd know my –_

He stopped and stared at the unmistakably white and brown box resting near the pillow. A picture of a burger-shaped chocolate biscuit was emblazoned across the top.

The next morning, as the first-years ran around the baseball field, everyone couldn't help but notice the radically different temperament of the boy who was now running at the head of the group.

Although he had always kept up with the group, he had usually hovered in the middle, with an aura so dark and gloomy that nobody had approached him. But that morning, he was leading the group with an easy—if increasingly strained—grin on his face and an attitude so disgusting cheerful they all wanted to give him a good kick.

"Congratulations on making the first string, Sawamura," said Haruichi, struggling to keep up with the pitcher.

"Oh! Harucchi!" said Eijun, raising a hand in greeting. "Call me Eijun."

"Are we close enough for that?" Haruichi asked, as blunt as always.

Although they'd cheered each other on at the practice match the day before, they had not talked much since their initial conversation.

"We will be," Eijun returned, undeterred. "Anyways, it sucks that you're second string. But with your skill, you'll make first string soon, don't worry!"

"Thanks," said Haruichi with a smile.

"**First-years, Furuya and Sawamura.**" Eijun perked up at the sound of his name coming from the PA system. "**Come to the bench as soon as possible.**"

Secretly relieved to stop running, Eijun headed to the bench. To his surprise, the assistant coach Rei, Miyuki, and Miyauchi—the other catcher on the first string—were waiting for them.

Cocking his head in confusion, Eijun looked around, but nobody else was there.

_Miyauchi? Where's...?_

Rei held up two sheets of paper. "From now on, you two will be getting a pitcher's practice menu. The amount of practice you will be getting will be twice as much as everyone else. Good luck. And also... The two of you may be pitching in the Kantō tournament next week, so I want you to confirm signs with the catchers here."

"Yes ma'am," said Furuya. He turned to Miyuki and bowed his head. "Please take care of me."

However, without responding, Miyuki smiled awkwardly. Rei coughed.
"Ah no, Furuya," she said, to their surprise. "You'll be paired with Miyauchi. Sawamura's with Miyuki."

Raising his head, Furuya's eyes widened. He looked between the two catchers, with a lost look on his face.

"Coach's orders, Furuya," said Miyuki.

"But..."

"I saw you pitching, you know." Miyauchi looked annoyed. "If speed's all you got, I can catch them too, no problem. I've practiced using 150 km machines before."

"I-I see..."

Rei turned towards Eijun, who hadn't said anything.

"So, Sawamura? You're okay with Miyuki, right?" She smiled, pushing up her glasses.

"Um..." Eijun began slowly. "Where's Chris-senpai?"

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- Glossary -

**Southpaw** = A left-handed pitcher. Southpaws are considered to have an advantage in baseball because 1) most batters are used to right-handed pitching, and 2) they face first base while pitching, making pickoffs easier.

*About Sawamura's pitching form* – It's the same as from canon, which if you don't remember, is a very difficult form to properly throw a pitch from. Sawamura is only able to pull it off because of his exceptionally flexible joints. It's a terrifying form because batters are unable to predict when the ball is going to come flying out at them, making the ball seem even faster than it actually is.

**Kantō tournament** = A baseball tournament that takes place twice a year, in the spring and in the fall. The Tokyo Metropolitan region only participates in the spring.

- Note of Interest -

* In MLB, one of the best southpaws of all time is Randy Johnson (San Francisco Giants, 2009) who had a lifetime ERA (earned run average) of 3.29. In his career, he threw 37 shutouts and has the highest number of total strikeouts amongst southpaws (4,875). *
That morning, underneath the wide blue sky, the entire Seidō baseball team stood at attention. Their eyes were all uniformly focused on the figure who stood before them: even through his black shades, Coach Kataoka's distinctive steely gaze was unmistakable.

"Listen up! There's still two months until the summer tournament. We can't be training aimlessly these coming days. The first step in climbing a small mountain...the first step in climbing Mt. Fuji...they may be the same first step, but the resolution needed for each one is different. So...which mountain should we be climbing?"

At his words, a mixture of determination and excitement was beginning to appear on the boys' faces.

"Day after day, you must put your life on the line to achieve your goals! As long as you have high spirits, your training for the days ahead shall never falter!"

"Yes, sir!" The team roared enthusiastically back in response.

And afternoon practice began.

While the infielders and outfielders practiced their batting and fielding, Kazuya practiced in the bullpen with the pitchers.

"Nice pitch Kawakami," Kazuya called out, throwing the ball back to the second-year pitcher. "Your form looks good today."

Looking embarrassed at the praise, Kawakami caught the ball. Nodding at Kazuya's signal, he started to bring his hands together for his next pitch, when he suddenly came to a stop.

"What's wrong?" Kazuya asked.

"I was just thinking that they're pretty distracting..."

"What is?" Following the pitcher's gaze, Kazuya saw a group of girls holding up their cellphones from behind the fence. As soon as he looked in their direction, their cellphone cameras started flashing, and the braver ones began to wave their hands and call for his attention.

"You're really popular aren't you, Miyuki," Kawakami remarked, bringing his hands together once more.

"Oh I don't know," said Kazuya, bringing his mitt up. "I could swear some of them were calling your name too. Why don't you try waving back at them?"

"No thanks...I know what you did to Kuramochi." Kawakami flung the ball at Kazuya with a little extra force than usual, making him reach upwards with a grunt to catch it.
"Worth a shot," Kazuya said, the edges of his lips quirking up as he threw the ball back. Last year, he'd tricked Kuramochi into asking out a girl in their class, only to find out that she was an avid fan of the catcher. The mortified shortstop had never quite been the same afterwards.

"Hey, Miyuki."

Kazuya turned to see Miyauchi, also fully dressed in his catcher equipment, striding towards them. He'd gone back inside a while ago for a drink of water, and Kazuya had been starting to wonder what was taking the other catcher so long.

"What is it?"

"Coach wants to talk to us," said the third-year, jabbing a thumb back towards the bench.

Nodding, Kazuya got to his feet. With a wave back to Kawakami, he began to follow the other catcher back.

"So I guess coach has reached a decision about the new pitchers?" Kazuya asked, thinking out-loud more than anything.

"I suppose we'll find out soon," Miyauchi said shortly.

"Haha! True enough."

Coach Kataoka had parked himself on the bench, and was flanked by the two main assistant coaches, Rei and Ōta.

"Miyuki." Without preamble, the coach looked at him straight-on. "I'm planning on using Sawamura in the upcoming Kantō tournament. I want you to have him ready by then."

"Yes, sir," Kazuya smiled.

This should be fun.

"Is there a reason why I'm here too, coach?" asked Miyauchi. Coach Kataoka's gaze switched to the third-year.

"Furuya will be in your care. Even if I don't use him for the Kantō tournament, I plan on letting him debut in the summer regionals."

"Yes sir," Miyauchi nodded, squaring his shoulders back. Kazuya could almost see the determined smoke steaming out of his nostrils.

It seemed that that had been all the coach had wanted to tell them; getting up, the coach and Ōta began heading to the batting area. Kazuya watched the coach's retreating back thoughtfully.

By adding two new pitchers to the lineup, which already included Tanba and Kawakami, it seemed that coach Kataoka had really gotten his mind set on the pitcher relay.

"Miyuki – I know that you've caught for both of them," Rei spoke up, tapping a pen against a clipboard. Kazuya turned towards her. "Is there anything in particular that you've noticed that should be added to their practice menus?"

"They could both work on their stamina...especially Furuya," he said after a pause. "But besides that, I think the usual should suffice for now."
With a nod, Rei scribbled something down. Then putting down the clipboard, she called for the two first-years, who soon came jogging to the bench, looking deeply out-of-breath.

"What is it?" Sawamura asked, wiping sweat off of his face with his sleeve. Noticing Kazuya and Miyauchi standing behind Rei, the first-year gave them a bewildered look. Even as Rei explained to him the situation, he continued looking back and forth between the two catchers with a curious look on his face.

"So, Sawamura?" Rei asked. "You're okay with Miyuki right?"

"Um..." For some reason, Sawamura was starting to look upset.

*Hey, hey...just yesterday you were talking about wanting to be with –*

"Where's Chris-senpai?"

Inadvertently, Kazuya felt his eyes widen.

What?

"What's this about, Sawamura? Chris is a second-string catcher," said Rei, looking perplexed.

"But...but..." the first-year spluttered.

"But?"

And then to everyone's bewilderment, he suddenly threw his head back, gripping his hair.

"Ahhh! I messed up!"

Back at home in Hokkaidō, Satoru had come to think of the snow as his friend.

Even when he was alone, it was his constant companion, always falling in place quietly and serenely around him. And best of all, no matter how fast he threw his balls, the piles of snow were an impenetrable block that always stopped them, even if no one else could.

And then he came all the way to Tokyo, and for the first time in his life, his constant companion was no longer there. Tokyo was much hotter – much more crowded than even Sapporo, the largest city in Hokkaidō, with people everywhere at all times – but in the beginning, he'd never felt so singularly alone.

However, he then found something that he'd never found in Hokkaido – the crisp, clean sound of Miyuki's mitt catching his ball. And with that – even in this alien, sweltering city, Satoru knew he had found the place where he belonged.

*I was right to come here...*

...or so he had thought.

"Ah no, Furuya," said the assistant coach, glancing at him. "You'll be paired with Miyauchi. Sawamura's with Miyuki."

Satoru froze, and then immediately, he turned to Miyuki.

*Tell her she's wrong. You're with me. You're my catcher.*
"Coach's orders, Furuya," said Miyuki. Satoru felt his hands beginning to tremble. He looked back and forth between Miyuki and the assistant coach, because – because –

*This is my place... this is where I belong!*

He lowered his eyes and then stopped trembling. His hands dropped to his sides.

Because *neither of them were looking at him*. Both of their gazes were firmly fixed on the other first-year pitcher. They'd already forgotten about him. Their mouths were moving and they were saying something, but Satoru had stopped processing everything because there was only him and the hot sun high above him that pounded harshly at the back of his neck.

Suddenly, a massive hand grabbed him by his arm, jolting him out of his haze.

Blinking, Satoru realized that the others had disappeared and it was just this other catcher who now stared at him with animosity obvious in his eyes.

Satoru could tell, because *they were the same kind of eyes that had followed him everywhere* back at home.

"Are you listening? The coach is thinking of using you as a closer, but he wants me to check..." And the catcher's mouth kept moving, but Satoru had stopped listening. His hands curled up into fists by his side.

*It's this all over again. He won't be able to catch my balls. If Miyuki-senpai's not the one who's going to be catching for me, what's the point of being here? I should just –*

Satoru jerked backwards as he felt an unknowable force clamp itself around his nether region. Raising his eyes, he saw the other catcher looking bullishly back at him.

"Um...senpai..."

"That's Miyauchi-senpai," the third-year said, continuing to squeeze Satoru's balls. "Now calm down. I know I'm not as good as Miyuki, but I can catch your balls."

*Literally...*

After his initial outburst, Sawamura had quieted down. Once Rei left them alone, he followed Kazuya into the empty bullpen with a morose look on his face. Turning around, he dug his elbow into the first-year's side.

"Who died?" Kazuya asked jokingly. Unexpectedly, Sawamura jerked at his words.

"D-d-die?" he stammered, looking wildly at Kazuya, who felt himself sweat.

He's surprisingly jumpy about some things...

"I mean, what's got you so down?"

"Oh. Well, I forgot about Chris-senpai." With a glum look on his face, Sawamura began to turn the ball in his hands.

"Have you ever even met him?" Kazuya frowned; Chris didn't usually join the rest of them for team
practice, as he was doing his own rehabilitation at the training center.

"Ah...I saw him play in a game in middle school," Sawamura muttered. "He was amazing. I thought I'd be able to form a battery with him sometimes if I came to Seidō."

Kazuya paused. He wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing this information, but if it would clear up the situation for Sawamura...

"Chris-senpai tore his shoulder last year. He's in rehabilitation at the moment, but he won't be able to play baseball this year." He smiled ruefully. "That's the only reason why I'm the starting catcher this year."

"I know," said Sawamura, his hands tightening over the ball.

For a minute, Kazuya observed the first-year in silence. Sawamura really was a mystery: there was the loud-mouth he'd seen several months back when the pitcher had been visiting Seidō, but then there was also the strangely tormented mood swings of the month past. On top of that was the unbelievable upgrade in pitching skill, and now, this unexpected reaction towards Chris... Kazuya considered himself a proficient reader of people, but where this first-year was concerned, he found himself stumped.

"You're too agitated to throw," Kazuya finally spoke up. "Go cool down with some fielding practice."

To his surprise, Sawamura shook his head.

"It's times like these when I want to pitch," he said. The catcher shrugged.

"Well then, let's go over your pitches," he said, punching his mitt. "I've seen your cutter and four-seam, now show me your changeup."

Wordlessly, Sawamura nodded. Changing his grip on the ball in his glove, the first-year pulled his arm back. Gritting his teeth, he flung it forwards. Calculating the ball's trajectory, Kazuya positioned his mitt.

Hm. It's not slowing dow –

His eyes widened, and he jerked his mitt sideways, but it was too late – the ball glanced off the side of his mitt and fell to the ground.

Slowly, as he looked up from the ball to Sawamura's focused expression, an astonished smile began to form on his face. Picking up the ball, he threw it back.

"So this is Sawamura's naturally moving ball...and he's got his powerful fastball and his horizontally breaking cutter too. If he just had a vertically breaking ball..."

"That was my eagle-grip, but I've got a circle changeup too," Sawamura said as he caught the ball. Kazuya nodded, and held his mitt out, and this time, caught the more traditional off-pitch ball.

After several more pitches, Kazuya had just called for a four-seam when he heard the crunching of heavyset footsteps behind him. Even before Sawamura's suddenly alert expression had registered in his mind, Kazuya turned around and saw to his surprise that coach Kataoka had come to the bullpen.

"Coa – " Kazuya started, but was cut off as Sawamura suddenly dashed past him. Screeching to a halt before the coach, the two stared at each other in a duel of death glares.
Coach Kataoka mutely crossed his arms across his chest. And then without warning, Sawamura dropped to his knees before the coach.

"Boss!" the first-year roared out, bowing his head. "Please let me form a battery with Chris-senpai for just one game!"

Kazuya blinked.

"Boss...?"

"What is this about?" the coach asked, his expression unchanging.

"It looks like he looked up to Chris-senpai before and wanted to form a battery with him, coach," Kazuya provided.

"Chris is an injured reserve player. I cannot use him in any of Seidō's games," said the coach. His eyes narrowed dangerously; Kazuya felt a chill run up his spine. "Or are you asking to sacrifice the team based on your whims?"

Sawamura looked up with an expression of fiery determination on his face.

"No! I'm going to do my utmost this year to ensure Seidō gets to Kōshien! But I owe a lot to Chris-senpai – back in...middle school, I really looked up to him, general. And the way he goes around now, with his eyes all dead – it's not right! He, more than anyone else, deserves to play!"

Without responding, the coach mutely looked down at the first-year, who was still resolutely bowed over. In the ensuing silence, Kazuya heard the sound of approaching footsteps; turning, he saw Furuya and Miyauchi walking into the bullpen. At the sight of the way the coach and Sawamura were situated, they came to a sudden stop, their eyes widening.

"You're going to ensure Seidō gets to Kōshien?" Finally, the coach spoke up in his gravelly voice. "Those are big words from a first-year who has yet to prove himself." The first-year's hands balled into fists by his side. "You're going to be the starting pitcher for the Kantō tournament preliminaries, Sawamura. If you can show to me there that you have the strength to do as you claim...then perhaps I'll listen to the rest of what you've got to say."

Surprised, Kazuya looked towards the coach, but his face was unreadable.

That's surprisingly lenient for the coach...he must be even more concerned about Chris that I thought, for him to say that much.

"...will you let Chris-senpai play then?" Sawamura asked quietly. Kazuya returned his attention to the first-year, who was slowly getting up to his feet. He brushed the dirt off of his knees.

"What?" The coach said. The first-year lifted his head, to reveal blazing eyes.

"If I can pitch a shutout in the preliminaries...will you let Chris-senpai play then?"

Kazuya's mouth dropped open.

Idiot, no matter how good you are, the opponent is Yokohama Academy! There's no way the coach will let you pitch the whole game!

But to his surprise –
"Very well," the coach agreed. Sawamura's face lit up. "However, Seidō has no need for braggarts who put their needs above their team...so if you let even a single batter on base, you'll be getting off the mound."

So essentially...a perfect game?

Leaving behind a shell-shocked Sawamura, Kazuya watched the coach leave, passing by Furuya and Miyauchi as he did so. Miyauchi gave Kazuya a significant look before grabbing Furuya by the arm and leading him out of the bullpen as well.

"Well...you've really done it now," Kazuya said at last, turning to the frozen first-year. "We're facing Yokohama Academy you know. They're a really strong veteran team, probably the best in Kanagawa." Sawamura didn't respond. "It's not too late to beg for forgiveness from the coach."

"...no...I've come this far." The pitcher shook his head. "If I want to show everyone that I'm not just talk...if I want to show Chris-senpai what I can do, I'll have to do this. And anyways, I trust in Seidō's defense. I just have to make sure the batters hit them where I want them to."

That's true...but him speaking like a veteran is kind of annoying...

Kazuya felt a wicked smile tug at his lips but quickly quashed it.

"But you know – Chris is injured. If you really wanted to help him recover, it'd be better for him not to catch now. Have you even talked to him about this?"

"No, but – "

"Come to think of it, I don't even think he's coming to the Yokohama game. He's got some kind of special training exercise that day..."

"What?!

But as Sawamura begin to flap around in agitation, Kazuya felt his teasing mood fade. He folded his arms across his chest and contemplated the pitcher before him.

Coach Kataoka had just told the first-year to pitch a perfect game against Kanagawa's best team. As far-fetched as it sounded, Kazuya did not think the coach would have brought it up had he not thought that there was even a small possibility that they could do so. Would Sawamura be able to rise to the challenge? Or would he crumble, right at the starting line?

His hands tightened around his arms, as he felt something akin to thrill rising within his chest.

Regardless...this is as much of a test for me as it is for Sawamura.

__________________________

After another long day at the training center with his father, Chris finally settled into the car. His father got into the driver's seat, slamming the door shut. As he turned on the engine, his father's favorite rock music began to blast through the car stereo, and when he began pulling out of the parking space, he looked back at Chris.

"Good work today," he said in his heavily-accented Japanese. "If you keep this up, we'll be on track to making a full recovery by next year."

Chris nodded. Letting his aching muscles ease back against the seat, he silently looked out the window at the changing scenery, keeping track of the passing time through the music. After six
tracks, Seidō's campus finally came into view, and as it ended, they were passing by the baseball fields. It was dark, but he could still hear the unmistakable cracking sound of bats from beyond the fence. Chris closed his eyes.

Once they'd driven up to the dorm gates, his father stopped the car to let him off.

"Get a good night's rest, son." With a nod, his father drove away. Watching the car's taillights grow fainter in the night, Chris shouldered his equipment bag – and winced in reflex, at the throb of a phantom pain. Walking up the stairs to his room, he saw that the light in the room was on; opening the door, he was greeted by the sight of Mimura, a reserve center fielder, changing out of his uniform.

"Welcome back, Chris-senpai," said the second-year, looking worn out. Chris nodded and put his things down. "We thought you'd be back soon, so Kanemaru's getting an extra drink at the vending machine for you too."

"Ah...thanks," he said, sitting down. Opening his desk drawer, he pulled out his training notebook to make some notes on that day's exercise. But before he could even pen a single word, the dorm room's door slammed open with a bang to reveal Kanemaru, panting heavily. Seeing Chris, his face lit up with a look of excitement in his eyes.

"Chris-senpai! You're here!"

By the look of his empty hands, he'd gotten side-tracked.

"What is it?" Chris asked quietly.

"I just heard from Ono-senpai...and it might just be a rumor – but apparently, someone overheard Sawamura and the coach make a bet!"

Sawamura...is that irregular southpaw first-year, if I'm right.

"A bet?" Mimura asked curiously. "About what?"

"If Sawamura doesn't pitch a perfect game in the Kantō tournament preliminary, he's getting kicked off of first-string! But if he does – Chris-senpai, you're getting put in first-string!"

Chris felt his eyes widen, as for the first time in a while, a jolt of something he couldn't quite name ran through his body.

What...?

-Glossary-

Battery = A collective term for the pitcher and catcher.

Shutout = A game in which a pitcher pitches the entire game without allowing the opposing team any runs.

Perfect game = A game in which a pitcher pitches the entire game and doesn't let any opposing players get on base – so no hits, walks, or hit-by-pitches.

Eijun's Changeups = He has two types of changeups; one is with an eagle-grip, another is the more traditional circle changeup. The eagle-grip adds Eijun's natural movement to the pitch, making it a
doubly hard ball to hit (and catch).

- Note of Interest -

* In MLB history, a perfect game has been achieved only 23 times. The most recent perfect game was pitched by Felix Hernandez (Seattle Mariners) on August 15, 2012. In Nippon Professional Baseball (Japanese pro baseball league), a perfect game has been achieved only 15 times, with the most recent official perfect game being pitched by Hiromi Makihara (Yomiuri Giants) on May 18, 1994. *
Did you get me a present? - Eijun's Birthday (May 15) bonus chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

~ Approximately four months "ago"... ~

The morning of Seidō's quarterfinal match against Sensen in the Spring tournament, the first string members hunched over in a circle. One by one, each member's right hand rose to cover their heart.

"Who are we?" The captain began.

"SEIDŌ, THE CHAMPIONS!" The first-string members roared back in response.

"Who's shed the most sweat?"

"SEIDŌ!"

"Shed the most tears?"

"SEIDŌ!"

"ARE YOU READY TO FIGHT?"

"YES!"

"Bearing pride in our hearts, we have just one goal!" The captain pointed upwards at the sky, and as one, the members followed suit. "THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP! LET'S DO THIS!"

"YEAH!"

As the first-string members continued to roar towards the sky, the new first-years and second string members could only gaze in a mixture of awe and envy.

"Awesome..."

"Their aura's completely different!"

"I've always wanted to do that cheer..."

"Man, I wanna be a part of the first string too!"

With their equipment slung across their back, the first string members began to make their way toward the bus.

"We're leaving soon!" One of the assistant coaches called out to the other members. "If you want to
come watch the game, get on the bus now.

"Yes sir!" They answered enthusiastically, and dashed towards the bus. The dugout was soon empty – except for one lone first-year who continued to stare fiercely at the passing first string members.

"You're not coming to see us play, Aramaki?" A second-year named Seto called out to him. "Even if you're in training, you're still allowed to watch the games, you know."

"...I'm going to stay behind," Aramaki responded, his hands balling into fists at his sides. "If I don't practice when you don't...I'll never be able to join you guys."

Forcibly turning his back to the bus, he broke into a sprint across the empty baseball field.

The sun was just beginning to set as the Seidō baseball team members settled into their dinner at the dorm dining room. In celebration of their overwhelming victory over Sensen the day before, the cooks had prepared a feast of curry tonkatsu, and everyone eagerly dug into the deliciously hot meal in a rare moment of quiet, punctured only by the call for seconds.

"Secon – " Seto broke off with a loud burp. Pounding his chest with his fist, he followed up with a bubble of smaller burps. "'scuse me."

"You're excused," Okumura sighed from behind him.

After picking up their second servings of curry, they began to weave past the crowded tables, looking for an open seat. Spotting a pair of first-years getting up from a table near the back, they slipped in, plunking down their dinner trays on the table.

As Seto pulled back the chair, he noticed the boy furiously gobbling down a bowl of curry from across the table.

"Oh if it isn't Aramaki?" he said with a grin. "How was practice?" The first-year pitcher glanced up.

"Oh it's just you Seto-senpai," he mumbled through a mouthful of rice.

"What do you mean it's just me?"

Without responding, Aramaki continued to determinedly chew. As the two second-years began to tuck into their food, he swallowed and then looked around curiously.

"Everyone's pretty quiet...what's going on?" Aramaki picked up a glass of water and began glugging it down.

"Hm? You don't know?" said Seto, looking bemused. "Tomorrow's the intrasquad game between the first-years and the upperclassmen."

Making a sound like a drowning man coming up for air, Aramaki choked, sending out a spurt of water in the second-year's direction. With a yelp, Seto jumped out of his seat.

"It's become a tradition at Seidō to let the first-years show off their skills in a game against the upperclassmen," explained Okumura as he watched Seto wipe down his shirt. "It's the fastest way for a first-year to get in the first string now."

"We're gonna have to go up against Sawamura and Furuya-senpai?" The first-year sitting beside Aramaki spoke up, looking anxious. "Can we even get on base with them pitching?"
"No," said Okumura bluntly, and both first-years' faces fell.

"You're not going up against the first string," said Seto, returning to his chair. "You'll be going up against the second string."

"Oh," said Aramaki, looking relieved – but at the same time, a little disappointed.

"You'd better perform well if you don't wanna lose your spot on the first string," said Okumura mildly as he took a sip of his miso soup. Seto made a face; he'd made a batting error in the last game, and had been taken off the starting lineup.

"Oh? So am I gonna be pitching against you, Seto-senpai?" Aramaki said with a grin of relish.

"You'll be lucky to pitch for a single inning, Aramaki," said the first-year beside him, making the pitcher scowl.

"Hey guys," said a new voice. They all turned to see Seidō's vice captain standing at the head of the table with his arms crossed across his chest. "Have you seen Sawamura?"

"Kanemaru-senpai! What're you looking for Sawamura-senpai for?" asked Seto, jumping to his feet. The tall third-year glanced at him.

"The coach's looking for him. He wants us to go over some videos of the team we're up against in the semifinals."

"The last time I saw him, he was looking at his cellphone," said Okumura. Looking perplexed, Kanemaru uncrossed his arms.

"Is it just me, or is he permanently attached to his damn phone lately?"

"Well yeah..." Okumura shrugged. "It's probably Miyuki-senpai."

Blinking, Kanemaru and Seto looked at each other, and then at Okumura, who continued to nonchalantly spoon curry into his mouth.

"Miyuki-senpai?" Aramaki asked curiously. "Who's that?"

Turning a baseball in his hand, Eijun leaned against one of the nets as he waited, trying not to think about his loudly protesting stomach. It'd been a hard and grueling practice, and he'd been looking forward to the promised victory dinner at the dining room, but the last time he'd seen Miyuki had been way back in March. He could always pick up some instant ramen from the vending machine later, after all. What did it matter if the menu happened to be his most favorite dish in the whole world?

His stomach whined insistently again. Patting it tenderly, Eijun tried to think about something besides what the rest of the team was probably digging into at that very moment. Any other thought was fine, just not the way he imagined the rich, thick golden sauce must look as it was poured over the chicken that'd been breaded and fried to perfect –

No! Don't think about the curry. Anything but the curry.

Casting his eyes around the bullpen, they passed over an abandoned glove – one of the first-years must've forgotten it – and then stopped at the sight of the baseball diamond that lay just beyond the dividing fence. Stepping forward so that his nose pressed right up against the cold metal, Eijun
silently took in the way the shadows across the field were slowly growing longer. It was almost zen-like, the way the rays of the setting sun bleached the field, the way the shadows changed ever so imperceptibly as the seconds of the day slowly but surely ticked by. Come to think of it, that was kind of the way it felt when he stood there on the mound and it was just a battle between him and the batter. Everything else faded and time became irrelevant, and it was just the batter glaring back at him and the sweat trickling down his brow and –

His stomach grumbled.

Eijun let his head drop forward, rattling the metal fence.

*I give up.*

Letting out a sigh, Eijun stepped backwards away from the fence. Pulling out his cellphone, he flipped it open. The phone's glowing screen lighting up his face in the growing darkness, he was just about to dial a number when an amused voice rang out behind him.

"What's Seidō's captain doing outside here while everyone else's eating dinner?"

Eijun whirled around, a grin already beginning to form on his face.

"Miyuki!"

"That's still Miyuki-senpai to you," said the older boy. Wearing the casual clothes of a college student, he stood just inside the bullpen's entrance. As he stepped toward him, Eijun carefully took in his frame, noting that he seemed to have regained some much-needed weight – or had bought new clothes that better suited his new body type. "You should've eaten dinner first. I was going to talk with Rei first, but I saw you waiting and felt bad for you."

"Tell me that first then," Eijun muttered; his stomach growled in agreement. "So? What're you here for?"

"I won't be here long," said Miyuki. "But I thought I'd drop by today, since I don't know when I'll be able to come by again."

"What? Why not?" said Eijun.

"It takes two hours to get here by railway you know," said Miyuki mildly. His lips quirked up in a half-smile. "And there's not much left for me to show you. You are the second Narumiya, after all."

Eijun scowled heavily, making the older boy laugh. "Haha! Just kidding, just kidding. So...what do the new first-years look like? Anyone the team could use for the summer?"

"You should've come tomorrow to check out the intrasquad match if you're interested," said Eijun. "I'd have reserved a seat in the alumni area just for you. Right next to that old guy who farts and screams a lot, that is."

"If you're so desperate to introduce me to your father, Sawamura, you could just ask," said Miyuki with a smirk. Eijun frowned – and then, rethinking it over, shrugged it off.

"Sounds more like what my gramps would've done than my dad," said the ace pitcher, with a faint fond smile. Suddenly, as a thought struck him, he paused. "Speaking of which...how're you and your dad?"

The teasing look immediately slid off of Miyuki's face, and was replaced with a dark shadow.
"The same as always...as always," he said in a nonchalant voice, looking away momentarily. After a few seconds of silence, Miyuki cleared his throat in a transparent effort to change the topic. "So the other reason why I'm here today is...your birthday's coming up soon, isn't it?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, it is." Eijun scratched his head. "I almost forgot. Huh...I'm gonna be 18." He grinned. "I'll be the same age as you again, Miyuki-senpai." Suddenly he perked up, as he noticed that Miyuki was reaching into his blazer's pocket for something. "Did you get me a present?"

"Catch," said the other boy in response, tossing something yellow that, as it spun through the air, sparkled once in the last receding rays of sunlight. With a practiced hand, Eijun reached out instinctively and grabbed it out of the air. Looking down at the glass bottle in his hand, he blinked.

"...ramune?"

"Haha! And not just any ramune, orange-flavored ramune. You've been wanting some, right?"

Eijun had used to occasionally gripe about the lack of the soft drink in Seidō's dorms' vending machines, but he'd never thought Miyuki had actually been listening.

"...thanks," he said, squeezing the bottle tightly in his hand. For several seconds, it was quiet, and Eijun was just about to speak up again when he heard the fizzing of a can being opened. Looking up, he saw Miyuki smiling at him with a can of pocari sweat in his hand.

"We're still underage so we'll have to do with this," he said, raising the can invitingly towards him. Eijun stepped forward, noting offhandedly the way the fence's shadow divided the other boy's face, and they clinked the two drinks together. "Happy birthday Sawamura."

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who are unaware, in canon, Seto and Okumura are future Seidō first-years who are seen watching some of Seidō's games. Aramaki is completely made up (though I named him after Aramaki Atsushi, a pitcher in Japan's Baseball Hall of Fame). I originally intended on having Aramaki run into Eijun at the end and have some Sawamura-senpai-worshipping going on but I then decided I'd like to give Eijun and Miyuki some alone time...so the first two parts of this chapter don't really serve a purpose except to show you the future generations of Seidō.

I also think that Eijun would make a great captain (he was captain of his middle school team too), and Kanemaru seems like a pretty dependable vice captain, so that's that little detail.

Anyways since this is a "bonus" chapter that doesn't really progress the plot (though hopefully it fills in a little background) I've also provided some other information:

A concise timeline that may prove helpful for understanding the Japanese high school baseball schedule –

General Timeline

Spring Kōshien (invitational): Late March - early April

Spring semester (new school year) begins April 1
Spring Tournament: April

(Ichidaisan vs Seidō, Spring tournament quarterfinals: late April)

~ approx. end of April/beginning of May: Game between 1st years and second string in Eijun’s first year ~

(Kantō Tournament Yokohama vs Seidō preliminary: early May)

~ Seidō summer training camp: mid June ~

Summer Tournament: July

Summer Kōshien: early - mid August

Fall Tournament: October

And next, here is the planned batting order for the Yokohama game – can you recognize all of the players on the Yokohama lineup?

Seidō:

Batting order-

1. Kuramochi Yōichi (6)
2. Kominato Ryousuke (4)
3. Isashiki Jun (8)
4. Yūki Tetsuya (3)
5. Masuko Tōru (5)
6. Miyuki Kazuya (2)
7. Shirasu Kenjirō (9)
8. Sakai Ichirō (7)
9. Sawamura Eijun (18)

Defense-

1. Sawamura Eijun (pitcher)
2. Miyuki Kazuya (catcher)
3. Captain Yūki Tetsuya (1st baseman)
4. Kominato Ryousuke (2nd baseman)
5. Masuko Tōru (3rd baseman)
6. Kuramochi Yōichi (shortstop)
7. Sakai Ichirō (left fielder)
8. Isashiki Jun (center fielder)
9. Shirasu Kenjirō (right fielder)

Yokohama:

Batting order-
1. Shimizu Taiga (7)
2. Izumi Kōsuke (8)
3. Tajima Yūichirō (5)
4. Shigeno Goro (9)
5. Azuma Yūhei (3)
6. Kitamura Kou (4)
7. Yaginuma Hayato (6)
8. Abe Takaya (2)
9. Mihashi Ren (1)

Defense-
1. Mihashi Ren (pitcher)
2. Abe Takaya (catcher)
3. Azuma Yūhei (1st baseman)
4. Kitamura Kou (2nd baseman)
5. Tajima Yūichirō (3rd baseman)
6. Yaginuma Hayato (shortstop)
7. Shimizu Taiga (left fielder)
8. Izumi Kōsuke (center fielder)
9. Shigeno Goro (right fielder)
Body language

Chapter Summary

And the very least he could do in return for him would be... - Seidō vs Yokohama part I

The morning of the Kantō tournament preliminaries, it was a perfect day for baseball: sunny, but not to the extent that the glare would affect the players, and nearly zero chance of rain.

"We will now begin the first round of the Kantō tournament between Yokohama Academy and Seidō High School."

As the siren signaling the start of the game rang piercingly through the stadium, the crowd began to murmur at the sight of Seidō's starting pitcher, who was tossing a rosin bag in his hand.

"That pitcher's a first-year, isn't he?"

"Where's Tanba?"

"What's Seidō doing? This is Yokohama."

Yokohama Academy's players, gathered in their dugout, were shooting withering glares at their opposing team.

"They're starting off with a first-year pitcher?" said the Yokohama coach, an irritated look on his face. Making an impatient snipping sound with his tongue, he turned to his gathered players. "We'll make them regret that. Listen up! We're going to take as many runs as we can this first inning!"

"Yes sir!" they roared back.

"Top of the first inning, Yokohama Academy's offense starts with batting leadoff, left fielder, Shimizu-kun."

Stepping up to the plate, the batter tapped his bat once on the ground, before lifting it up into batting position.

"Play ball!" cried the umpire.

For a moment, it was quiet, as Seidō's pitcher looked at the catcher's signals. Then, with a nod of his head, he raised his front leg.

It had been a long time since Eijun had felt as awkward as he did the moment he ran headfirst into Chris. It was the morning after he'd waged his bet with the coach, and unfortunately, rumors about it had already started to circulate around the team, growing more and more exaggerated with every telling.

"No, Kanemaru, for the last time, I'm not getting deported to Korea – ow!" Running into a sturdy frame just as he turned around the corner, Eijun stumbled back a few steps, bumping into Kanemaru who fell down to the ground. As Eijun lowered a hand to help him up, he glanced up sideways.
"Sorry about that, I..." He trailed off, his mouth dropping open a fraction. "Chris-senpai!"

His heart jumped to his throat at the nostalgic sight of the catcher dressed in Seidō's uniform. After Eijun's first year, Chris had graduated and moved to America to finish his rehabilitation. He'd returned for Miyuki's funeral, but of course, he'd been dressed in a black suit...

"Have we met?" The third-year asked quietly, looking down at him with soulless eyes. Shaking his head to clear it, Eijun gulped nervously; it'd been a while since he'd last seen Chris look so lifeless. But at the same time –

*This just tells me that I wasn't wrong for making that bet with the coach.*

Eijun bent over in a low bow. "Chris-senpai – I'm Sawamura Eijun, a first-year pitcher! I've admired you for a while as a catcher, and hope to form a battery with you!"

"...I see," he answered in his calm, low voice.

"Chris-senpai, this guy's the one I told you about last night," Kanemaru said, slinging an arm around Eijun's shoulder. "The one who made that bet with the coach!"

"I see."

Privately, Eijun thought that in a contest of who could last the longest without changing their expression, Chris could have given coach Kataoka a run for his money. Setting his shoulders back, his mind raced to find the words to best approach the estranged catcher.

"You must think I'm just a stupid first-year with no idea of what I'm getting into," he ground out. "After all, nobody thinks I'll be able to do it. But you understand that feeling don't you?"

For a split second, Eijun thought he saw something flicker in Chris's eyes – but then it was gone.

"This is the first time we've met, so I can't say I have any opinion of you at all," he said. Then with a nod towards Kanemaru, he began to walk away.

Eijun's hands clenched into fists. "I can tell that you don't think I can do it." The sound of his footsteps faltering, Chris stopped. "And truthfully speaking – I don't know either. But I want to tell you here and now, that I'm going to give it my all. I'm going to be completely serious about it. You think I can't do it...but if I can, if I do pitch a perfect game – will you play again?"

After a pause, Chris mutely turned around and gave Eijun an indecipherable look – and then slowly, he started walking away once more. Once he'd disappeared from sight, Eijun let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Why do you want Chris-senpai to play so much, anyways?" Kanemaru asked curiously, patting him on the shoulder. "He's injured, and on the second string. I don't think I've ever even seen him play."

"You don't understand how amazing he is," Eijun spat out.

It galled him, the way most of the other players on the team didn't seem to realize just how good Chris was, and just thinking about some of the idiotic things he'd said to Chris back in his original first year made him wince. It was small wonder Miyuki had gotten so mad at him back then.

But the way the catcher was now – dead-eyed and listless – nobody ever would. Eijun wasn't sure what exactly had caused Chris to change in his first year, but if he had to guess, it had been the chance to play once again in a game. It made sense – you had to get back in the game to realize how
much you loved it, after all.

Leaving Kanemaru behind, Eijun began to march towards the baseball fields, determined to get an early start on the day's running exercises.

He'd get Chris back on the team this time around, no matter the cost.

As the players lined up before the game to bow, Kazuya had to hold back a grimace at the sight of Yokohama's batting order. Starting with Tajima as the third-hole, Shigeno, Azuma and Kitamura followed in a neat line, and it was widely acknowledged that all four could have batted as cleanups for any other school. If that wasn't daunting, he didn't know what was.

And on top of that, they looked fired up, directing burning gazes at the first-year pitcher Seidō had dared to bring out as their starter.

The pitcher in question was currently looking up at the bleachers instead. With a frown, Kazuya followed his gaze to see the rest of the Seidō baseball team, who were currently cheering. Then, his eyes alighting on a tall foreign-looking third-year near the back, he felt his mouth form an 'o' in understanding. It seemed Chris had decided to come after all.

Heading back to the catcher's box, Kazuya glanced at Sawamura – and felt himself sweat. The first-year's eyes were burning even more fiercely than they had back in the showcase game, a look of resolve etched across his face.

*Don't let yourself get too tense, Sawamura.*

But as the game started, it seemed that his worry had been unnecessary. Just as he'd asked for, Sawamura's cutter slammed across the outside corner of the plate directly into his mitt.

"**Strike!**"

Unable to help himself, Kazuya grinned at the batter's stunned expression.

*Haha! That's my favorite kind of look.*

He threw the ball back to Sawamura, who grabbed it out of the air with his glove. Glaring down at the batter, the first-year's eyes glowed intensely with the force of a small storm.

Kazuya glanced to his left; looking rattled, the batter was readjusting his grip on his bat.

"*You scared him. He'll be watching the next ball, so let's go with one to the inside.*"

Sawamura nodded. Lifting his front leg up, his foot then slammed down on the rubber as his arm flung forward at the last instant.

"**Strike!**"

Kazuya felt his lips quirk up into a smile as he threw the ball back. Despite his seemingly hot-headed nature, Sawamura was throwing calmly and with good control. If he could keep this up, the perfect game could very well be within their reach. That was, as long as Kazuya didn't let himself get out-read...

"*Now show me a high fastball.*"

With another nod, Sawamura raised his front leg and flung the ball forward. The batter swung – but
with a slamming sound, the ball was safely smoking in Kazuya's mitt.

"Strike!"

Kazuya threw the ball back to the mound. Glancing at the Yokohama dugout, he saw to his satisfaction that they had fallen quiet. The leadoff batter was hurrying back to the bench, casting an anxious look back at the mound where Sawamura was tossing a rosin bag.

Kazuya grinned.

Get scared, get scared. That'll make you all the easier to predict.

"Batting second, center fielder, Izumi-kun."

Stepping into the batting box, the batter swung his bat experimentally once before settling into position. Looking back again at the dugout, Kazuya saw the Yokohama coach signaling to the batter, who touched his helmet in response.

Izumi...he doesn't look all that impressive, but he's got a good eye for easy pitches. He's a switch hitter too – we'll have to be careful with this one.

"A low moving fastball to the inside," Kazuya signaled, and Sawamura nodded. Quickly afterwards, the ball flew past the plate, and as expected, the batter didn't move.

"Ball!"

Lowering his bat, the batter held out a hand to the mound as he adjusted his footing. When he returned to batting position, Kazuya moved his mitt to the outside, and Sawamura nodded. As he flung his hand out, the batter swung – but just as he did so, the cutter broke up away from his bat, glancing off of the top of the bat. As it spiraled into the air directly above them, Kazuya held out his mitt to easily catch the pop fly.

"Out!"

Rising to his feet to throw the ball back to Sawamura, Kazuya glanced at the Yokohama dugout and saw to his glee that the coach had a dirty look on his face. He wouldn't be surprised if, after seeing a first-year pitcher on the mound, the opposing coach had ordered his team to score as many runs as possible in the first inning.

"Batting third, third baseman, Tajima-kun."

Tapping the dirt off of his cleats with his bat, the third batter got into batting position. Kazuya glanced up at the boy, and was unsurprised to see that despite the leadoff batters' failures, the third-hole was in a completely relaxed but effective stance.

Tajima looked even smaller in real life than he had on TV, but his 0.410 batting average wasn't something Kazuya was going to take lightly. Tajima marked the beginning of Yokohama's renowned power lineup: it'd be best to crush the head of it right now and cripple their second offence in the second inning.

Kazuya signaled, and then punching the mitt with his fist, raised it up. Sawamura nodded, and bringing his hands together, his foot slammed down on the ground. His arm whipped forward and the ball shot towards the batter, breaking sharply across the corner of the plate.

"Strike!"
"Bottom of the first inning, and the offense for Seidō High School starts from the lead-off, shortstop, Kuramochi-kun."

Stretching his shoulders one last time, Yōichi stood up with his bat in hand. He glanced up at the scoreboard, where a '0' was glowing beside 'Yokohama.'

*That's one inning and three men down...meaning eight innings and twenty-four more outs to go, Sawamura, hyahaa!*  

He tipped his head to the umpire and stepped into the batting box. Holding his bat up in the air, he eyed the opposing pitcher.

Since Yokohama was in a different prefecture, Seidō had played against them only once last year. The Kantō tournament wasn't important enough for them to bother personally taping Yokohama's games, so most of their preparation for the match had been by going through the official tapes of some of their prefectural games, as well as published scoreboards of Yokohama's games against other schools. Their starting pitcher, a second-year named Mihashi, hadn't pitched in any of the recordings, but they had some of his games listed in the scorebook – and even on paper he had stood out.

From what Yōichi had seen while the pitcher was warming up, his pitch speed was underwhelming – in fact, bordering on inadequate. But the fact of the matter was, he'd pitched shutouts against some of Kanagawa's best teams, meaning there had to be something else about his pitching.

As the pitcher began his motion, Yōichi tightened his grip on his bat. His role as the leadoff meant it was his job to get on base. Whatever tricks this pitcher had up his sleeve, it didn't matter. All he had to do was hit the ball and then his legs would follow up.

*You're in over your head, Sawamura...but still, I'll do my part to get you that perfect game!*  

The ball flew by him, and as he watched it pass by, Yōichi's lips drew back into a grin.  

"*Strike!*"

A nice curveball, but its slow speed killed most of its effectiveness. The Yokohama's battery was probably trying to psyche him out with a slow ball and follow up with a faster pitch – but if his base speed was this slow, it shouldn't prove to be much of a problem.

Returning his attention to the pitcher, Yōichi lowered himself into batting position. He watched the pitcher wait for the catcher's sign and then nod. The pitcher brought his arms together and then stepped forward. A few short instants later, the ball came flying out towards him.

*Outside!*

He swung, ready to begin running toward first base – and froze, feeling no resistance, as he heard the unmistakable sound of a ball slamming into a mitt behind him.

"*Strike!*"

Yōichi frowned, feeling puzzled. How had he missed such an easy fastball and let himself be cornered with a 0-2 count so quickly? Had he swung late? He thought he'd had the timing down – had he gotten too tense?

Swinging his bat once experimentally through the air, he returned to batting position, forcing out a
slow breath.

Concentrate, concentrate. I just have to get on base.

The pitcher nodded at the catcher’s sign and raised his glove to his face. His right arm flung out and the ball came flying down towards Yōichi. Focusing on the spiraling white ball, he tightened his grasp on the bat. It was another easy ball, slightly to the inside. Dropping his heel down firmly, he swung—with a clunking sound, the bat hit the ball into the ground.

Flinging the bat to the ground, Yōichi pumped his feet into the ground, eyes focused on first base. But before he'd gotten even halfway there, the pitcher nimbly ran forward to grab the grounder, and tossed it to the waiting first baseman.

"Out!"

As he slowed down to a stop, he heard a smattering of cheering from the bleachers on Yokohama's side.

Tch!

Quietly fuming on the way back to the dugout, Yōichi slowed down as he passed by Ryōsuke.

"It looked like an easy ball to me, but you should get a better look at it, Ryō-san," he muttered. Giving a small nod to indicate that he'd heard, the smiling third-year headed to the batting box.

Taking off his helmet in the dugout, as Yōichi turned around from dropping his bat into the receptacle, he almost bumped into Miyuki, who was leaning against the back wall.

"Even for you, it's odd that you'd miss so completely on such an easy ball," said the second-year catcher, a hint of a smirk on his face. Yōichi scowled, thinking back on the pitch.

"It was slower than I expected it to be," he finally said, throwing himself onto the bench. Wiping a bead of sweat from his temple, he looked back to the field just in time to see Ryōsuke swing – and send the ball into the ground right in front of the pitcher, who threw it to the first baseman.

Watching Ryōsuke begin to return to the bench with a slightly diminished smile on his face, the team fell into surprised silence.

"Mihashi...Mihashi..."

Tearing his gaze away from the third-year, Yōichi saw that Sawamura, sitting on the back bench beside Masuko, had a contemplative look on his face.

"You know something about him?" Miyuki craned his head to look at the first-year.

"I think I remember having played against him before..." Sawamura frowned.

"In middle school?" Yōichi asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Hm..." Sawamura sounded unconvinced, and with his brow furrowed increasingly deeply, he was beginning to look strained in the way only the most simple-minded could achieve.

"Well don't hurt yourself thinking about it," said Miyuki, sounding amused. "You just focus on your pitching."

Yōichi glanced to the side where Ryōsuke had just stepped down into the dugout.
"What'd you think of the ball, Ryō-san?"

"They come in some pretty nasty spots," he replied, taking off his helmet, "but that's all I could get for now."

Yōichi frowned but didn't push the subject; he wasn't exactly up there in terms of batting sense after all, and it wasn't completely unexpected for him to misjudge the timing of a pitch. The uneasiness he'd felt at that fastball was probably nothing – and if he couldn't hit it, he'd just have to aim for the other pitches. He wasn't trying to go for a long one; all he had to do was get on base after all.

Returning his attention to the field, Yōichi winced as Isashiki sent a fly ball to center.

Kneeling in the on deck circle with the bat perched vertically beside him, Eijun felt his gaze trailing from the scoreboard back to the field.

They were now at the bottom of the third inning. He'd gone through the entire lineup once now without giving up a hit, which he'd expected to an extent. Nobody could get down the timing of his moving balls after just one at-bat; in his first-year, he'd managed to jam even a monster like Raichi with his four-seam, and from what he'd seen of Yokohama's batters, none of them would win in a matchup against Yakushi's cleanup.

But then again, Raichi regularly hit home runs like they were nothing, so perhaps that wasn't such a fair standard to use.

The real surprise though was Yokohama's pitcher, who'd only given up one hit so far up against Seidō's explosive batting power, leaving the score still tied at 0-0. Granted, this was also his first time going through the lineup and his true worth wouldn't be tested until the second cycle – but his pitching form was fairly normal, and his balls maxed at 130 kmh. As expected of the reliable captain, Yūki had managed to make contact with the bat and get on base, but the following three batters had all struck out in succession.

With wary eyes, he watched as Sakai swung at the ball, sending it flying high up. The catcher stood up with his mitt raised, and caught it.

"Out!"

Using the bat to push himself up, Eijun got to his feet and began to walk towards the batting box.

"Bating ninth, pitcher, Sawamura-kun."

Tipping his helmet to the umpire, he swung the bat a few times, looking back to the bench for any possible instructions. Seeing that coach Kataoka wasn't making a move, he lowered into the bunting stance. A look of surprise flickered across the pitcher's face, and then he nodded at whatever signal the catcher had sent him.

As the ball came flying out, the pitcher began to run towards him, but Eijun leaned back and watched the ball go past.

"Ball!"

The pitcher returned to the mound, and Eijun returned to his bunting stance. But as the pitcher flung the ball at him and began to run towards him once more, Eijun quickly switched to his normal batting position, and swung. Feeling the bat make contact – not solid contact, but contact nonetheless – he threw it aside and began to run.
"Second!" he heard the catcher call out. Snapping his head to the side, his feet pounding on the dirt, he saw the second baseman running forward to scoop up the ball. In the same fluid motion, he threw it to the outstretched glove of the first baseman just as Eijun stepped onto the base.

"Out!" the base umpire cried out.

Though Eijun had been famously ridiculed (or feared) for being the 'god of bunts' during his three years at Seidō, he had worked on his actual batting. He'd never gotten to be as powerful a batter as, say, Furuya, but by his third year, he liked to think his batting had stopped being a liability on the team lineup.

As he trudged back to the bench, he consoled himself with the thought that at least he hadn't struck out swinging like Miyuki.

Still not having scored by the bottom of the fourth inning, frustration was starting to make itself obvious on the faces of the Seidō team members. It wasn't that they weren't connecting with the ball – but rather, they couldn't seem to get a good handle of the ball. Ryōsuke had managed to get on base, but Isashiki had send his ball flying into foul territory, where it was caught by the right fielder. Yūki had swung sturdily at his ball, but it had miraculously shot right into the pitcher's glove, who, after a second's astonishment, sent it to first, where Ryōsuke had narrowly avoided being tagged out. Masuko's fly to right had been caught, ending the fourth inning.

And now, it was back to Seidō's defense, and time for Eijun's second battle against the Yokohama cleanups. First up was –

"Top of the fifth inning, Yokohama Academy's offense starts with batting cleanup, right fielder, Shigeno-kun."

Shigeno, a third-year, was fairly tall and well-built. Back in Eijun's original timeline, he'd already graduated by the time Eijun had ever gotten a chance to play in a game against Yokohama Academy again, but he'd gone pro right afterwards and been drafted as one of the star rookies of the Yokohama Blue Oceans. Eijun remembered, because Wakana had gotten oddly starstruck with the slugger and wouldn't stop texting about him for the entire winter break of his second year.

From what Eijun could see of him now, however, Shigeno had a lot of power, but tended to swing at difficult pitches.

"Let's start with a fastball to the inside corner. It's okay if it misses the strike zone." Miyuki signaled to him.

Eijun nodded, staring down the batter, who glared right back. Bringing his arms together and raising his front leg high up in the air, he stepped forward, slinging his left arm forward at the last moment.

The batter swung, and Eijun watched as the ball flew up into the air to hit the fence with a rattling sound.

"Foul!"

After Miyuki signaled him for a lower cutter, the batter fouled the ball once more. Against his will, Eijun reluctantly felt some rising respect – especially with the second swing, he'd almost gotten the timing right, as expected of Yokohama's cleanup batter.

Glancing up at the batter, Miyuki seemed to have made a decision about the flow of the game, for he
Eijun nodded. Feeling the sun beating down on the back of his neck, he let out a breath – and then threw.

Obvious power rippling through his arms, the batter began to swing – but his eyes perceptively widened as the ball arced slowly through the air. Unable to stop himself, he completed his swing through empty air, and the ball landed easily in Miyuki's mitt.

"Strike! Batter out!"

A grin on his face, Eijun clenched his fist in triumph.

If he had to be honest, at the beginning of the game, he hadn't been exactly brimming with confidence over his chances of a perfect game. His current body was smaller and weaker than what he was used to, and even in the month he'd had to adjust to the changes, he hadn't been able to completely shake off the feeling that something was off with his pitching. But with the circle changeup just now as the successful finishing pitch, he could feel some more of his self-assuredness begin to return.

The following cleanups, Azuma and Kitamura, seemed wary of his newly unveiled changeup, and before long, the two lights beside the 'Out' sign on the scoreboard had faded, marking his fifteenth consecutive strike-out.

Eijun felt something thump into his back, and looking back, saw the fielders begin to stream past him to the dugout.

"Nice pitching," Haruichi's older brother said with his customary smile on his face. 

"Not bad at all!" said Kuramochi gleefully.

"Though it's only going to get harder from now on," said Miyuki with a smirk.

Feeling a small lump rise in the back of his throat, Eijun mutely ducked down into the dugout.

"Tanba, go into the bullpen and begin warming up," he said.

His cap falling from his suddenly frozen fingers, Eijun's eyes widened. Jumping heatedly to his feet, as jumbled words of protest rose to his lips, he took a step towards the coach. But before he could take another, a firm grasp suddenly tightened around his wrist and jerked him back. Automatically looking down at the hand, he then looked up to see Miyuki, still in his catcher gear, shaking his head at him.

The words catching in his throat, Eijun paused – and then mutely nodded, and was rewarded with a brief look of surprise flashing across the catcher's face.

The Miyuki of this timeline wouldn't realize it of course, but Eijun had long since gotten adept at reading the other boy's body language. "I understand how you feel" and "don't be stupid" and "this is more than just about you" could be understood just from the squeezing of his hand, the creased brow, and the flickering of his eyes to the coach's imposing form.

Taking a breath to calm himself, Eijun picked up his cap and dusted it off. He sat down on the bench, where he was joined soon after by Miyuki, who began to quickly take off his leg guards.
It was natural for at least one pitcher to always be pitching in the bullpen of course. If Eijun failed in his wager with the coach, he'd be called off the mound, and the game couldn't very well end there. Another pitcher would have to take his spot. However – the coach telling Tanba to start warming up had brought back into sharper focus the reason why Eijun was out there pitching on the mound in the first place.

He'd gotten caught up in the current of the game, but now, as he watched Miyuki pick up a bat and head out to the field, his gaze trailed up to the cheering stands, where he had last seen Chris...and there he was. He could just barely see him, standing solitarily nearby one of the bleacher entrances. He couldn't make out his face, but it was probably as cold and emotionless as it had been when Eijun had run into him.

Eijun squeezed his cap tightly between his hands.

*Twelve more outs, Chris-senpai, and I'll get you back where you belong.*

---

*"Bottom of the fifth inning, and Seidō High's offense starts with batting sixth, catcher, Miyuki-kun."*

As Kazuya stepped up to the plate, he glanced at the scoreboard and shook his head wryly. It was hard to believe it, but the score was still tied at 0-0, with Yokohama allowing only three hits so far. It was starting to look like the game would end up being a pitcher's battle; the first team to score would undoubtedly gain momentum and win the game. And while it was still too early to tell, Sawamura was holding up well. Though his pitches had solid power, he was pacing himself with all the audacity of an experienced pitcher, and if he could keep up this pace, he'd be ending the game with stamina to spare.

Best of all, Yokohama's coach looked thunderstruck, the Yokohama team members increasingly fearful, and the watching audience, if the increasing din was any indicator, was slowly beginning to understand what exactly was happening. Even in their own dugout, the other members were beginning to look at Sawamura with growing appreciation in their eyes. It was one thing to observe Sawamura's pitches in practice, and quite another to see him standing there on the mound in front of them, and striking out or jamming each consecutive opposing player.

Gripping his bat and getting into batting position, Kazuya felt another smile playing at the edges of his lips. He hated to admit it, but the fact that a wet behind the ears first-year could have such presence on that mound, while irritating, was reassuring at the same time.

And the very least he could do in return for him would be...

...to get on base here!

As the ball came at him, Kazuya swung, and felt the bat connect with a cracking sound. Pushing it forward, he watched the ball fly straight into the shortstop's glove.

...oops.

"*Out!*"

---

**Glossary**

Batting average (BA) = A measure of a batter's success rate in achieving a hit during an at bat,
calculated by the number of hits divided by at bats (1.000 being 100% hitting rate).

**Fly ball** = A ball that is hit in the air, usually very high. Fielders attempt to catch fly balls on their descent.

**Pop fly** = A specific type of fly ball that goes very high while not traveling very far laterally. From the perspective of the fielder, pop-ups seem to come straight down.

**Grounder** = A batted ball that rolls or bounces on the ground.

- **(canon) Sawamura Eijun Batting Data** -

  Defence (4/5) Shoulder – 4  
  Running (3/5)  
  Physical strength (4/5)  
  Mental strength (4/5)  
  Batting (1/5) Contact – 2, power – 2

- **(TTOL) Sawamura Eijun Batting Data** -

  Defence (4/5) Shoulder – 4  
  Running (3/5)  
  Physical strength (4/5)  
  Mental strength (5/5)  
  Batting (3/5) Contact – 3, power – 3

- **Note of Interest** -

* In MLB, the record for highest career batting average goes to Ty Cobb (Detroit Tigers) with a BA of .367. Babe Ruth (New York Yankees), widely considered to be the greatest player in baseball history, had a career BA of .342. *
Passing Sakai on the way back to the dugout, Kazuya stripped off his batting gloves and sat down on the bench. Crossing his arms across his chest, he directed a calculating look at the opposing team's battery.

They'd come at him from the first pitch, probably having realized how eager he was to hit. The ball had looked like an easy fastball so he'd swung without thinking too much about it – and his at bat had ended as soon as it started.

Silently, he watched as Shirasu swung; the ball flew high up into the air, hitting the fence with a rattling sound for a second foul. On the third pitch, Shirasu completely missed the ball, swinging through empty air.

Kazuya's eyes narrowed. Meanwhile, the Yokohama stands burst into cheers and Sawamura moved to the on deck circle.

Batting eighth, Sakai watched the first ball and on the second pitch, sent it flying into the air, which was caught by the pitcher, ending the inning.

"Keh!" Isashiki let out a bark-like laugh. "So that's what it was. That pitcher had a ball like that up his sleeve."

"And they waited until we started getting used to his pitches before slipping it in..." said Ryōsuke, with a rather scary look on his face. "Well, all that means is that we'll just have to get used to his one too."

Kazuya felt his lips quirk up in a smile, not surprised in the slightest that the upperclassmen had already caught on. It seemed that Sawamura wasn't the only pitcher around with an odd fastball – though in this case, he wouldn't strictly call it a 'moving' ball. It was simply deceptive.

Kazuya remembered back to the first inning, in which Kuramochi had completely missed the ball. He'd teased him for it then, but thinking it over now, Yokohama's battery had most likely used the pitch they were beginning to show more frequently now. Having seen it head-on only once for himself, he couldn't tell exactly how it was deceptive, but if he had to guess, he'd say it hadn't come down in the place where he'd been expecting it to.

However, some weird pitches by themselves shouldn't have been able to fend off a powerful batting team like Seidō for this long. To be able to discretely and effectively mix in an idiosyncratic pitch like that...

*Heh. Their catcher must really be something.*

Sitting in the shade of the Yokohama dugout, Abe took an aggravated swig from his water bottle as he looked out over the field. It was in between the fifth and sixth innings, and Seidō's players had...
already filed out with rakes for field maintenance. Their catcher and pitcher were throwing a ball back and forth in their bullpen, and as he watched, Abe's frown turned into a scowl.

"Keep that up and your face's gonna freeze like that one day," said Shigeno from beside him, as he tossed a ball in his hand.

"My aunt used to say that!" said Izumi, turning around with a short laugh. He was leaning against the railing beside Tajima, who'd rushed there as soon as Seidō's catcher and pitcher had come out. With his eyes glued on their throwing forms, he hadn't moved since.

"I'm surprised you can laugh," Shimizu grouch. "You realize we haven't gotten even a single hit off of that first-year yet?"

"You can't see his arm when he throws until it's too late," said Kitamura, as he pulled off his shirt. "The ball really does look faster when it's coming at you, then when you're watching from the side."

"And his four-seam's at least 140 as it is," Shimizu muttered. "I can't get a handle on his timing at all."

"It's not just you, it's all of us," said Izumi with a shrug. He nudged the boy beside him. "Tajima, you getting anything?"

"...he's got a seriously consistent pitching form while his balls break erratically in all four directions," said Tajima, though his eyes remained focused on their opposing pitcher. "He's a great pitcher."

"Think you can hit?" said Shigeno.

"If I know what's coming, I can," said Tajima, growing still as he always did when he was being absolutely serious.

"And that's the other problem," said Abe, his brow furrowing. "Their catcher."

"He's reading us like an open book," Izumi agreed.

"Miyuki Kazuya..." said Shigeno, looking up at the ceiling. "I've heard of him. There was an article about him."

They fell silent, looking back out at the catcher and pitcher duo. Abe took another swig from his water bottle.

"I can't say too much about his defensive play yet," he finally said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "But that catcher's dangerous."

"Bottom of the sixth inning, Seidō High's offense starts with batting ninth, pitcher, Sawamura-kun."

Stretching his shoulders in the on-deck circle, Yōichi watched Sawamura get into batting position. He'd been a little surprised to learn that Sawamura's batting wasn't all that bad. Yōichi had thought he'd be the kind of pitcher who sucked at batting and acted as a handicap to the team, but his stance was confident and relaxed.

However, that didn't stop him from hitting a grounder straight to the second baseman. As the red light next to 'Out' flicked on, Sawamura slunk past, and Yōichi got to his feet. He turned to look at coach Kataoka, but all he signed to him was to watch the first pitch, and then to hit.
"C'mon, Kuramochi!"

"Don't get fooled by the pitcher!"

"Kuramochi-senpai!"

Yōichi grimaced, as shouts rained down on him from both the dugout and the stands. This was his third at-bat. If he didn't get on base here – well, what kind of leadoff would he be?

"Play!"

For a few seconds, the pitcher stared back at him, leaning slightly forward. Nodding his head once, he straightened up, bringing his glove to his face.

In his first at-bat, the pitcher's deciding pitch had been what looked like a fastball, and in his last at-bat, it had been a curveball that he'd popped up. But since the last inning, they had been mixing in fastballs more and more frequently.

Yōichi glared, his hands tightening over the handle of his bat. He'd bet on the fastball, then.

Stepping off the rubber, the pitcher flung his arm forward and the ball shot out at him. Yōichi watched it pass by.

"Strike!"

It'd been a slider. But before he could worry about whether they'd be throwing him a fastball or not, the pitcher was already throwing the second pitch. Gritting his teeth, Yōichi swung – with a clang, the ball flew high up into foul territory.

"Foul!"

And again, he'd been cornered at 0-2.

The pitcher was smiling, and in response, Yōichi felt his scowl deepen. He adjusted his footing, and lowered back into the same batting stance.

The next ball came flying out on a tight course to the inside. Not trusting himself to be able to hit it well, Yōichi swung a few split seconds earlier than he might have, hoping to foul it off – and to his surprise, heard the tell-tale cracking sound of metal meeting ball.

Immediately throwing the bat aside with a clatter, he raced to first base. He could hear shouts but ignoring it, he focused on the base that tauntingly beckoned towards him – and only once Yōichi felt the hard surface underneath his foot did he begin to slow down.

"Safe!"

The right fielder threw the ball back to the pitcher, and Yōichi grinned widely as he took off his elbow guard. It felt good to finally feel some soreness in his legs.

"Batting second, second baseman, Kominato-kun."

Yōichi looked in the direction of their dugout, but the coach hadn't moved since his initial signs. It seemed he was leaving it up to them. He turned to look at Ryōsuke, who was now in batting position on the right side of the plate, and then at the pitcher.
Taking a few steps lead away from first base, he kept his front firmly facing the pitcher. The pitcher looked at him once, and then back at Ryōsuke. The pitcher went in the set; as soon as the pitcher's arm pulled back, Yōichi dashed toward second.

There was a loud clamor; as soon as Yōichi had slid to second, he looked back, and saw the catcher looking at him with a frustrated look, the ball clutched in his hand. With a scowl, he threw the ball back to the pitcher.

The pitcher went into the set, this time staying still for several seconds. Yōichi tensed up, getting ready. And then he threw; Yōichi watched Ryōsuke swing, and as soon as the bat had made contact, he ran towards third.

Sliding onto the plate, he heard the base umpire at first cry out, "Safe!"

Turning around, Yōichi saw Ryōsuke on first. The pitcher raised his glove to catch the ball from the left fielder.

"Batting third, center fielder, Isashiki-kun."

In the shadow of the dugout, Kazuya watched as Isashiki swung with a fierce battle cry. With a satisfying cracking sound, the ball connected with the bat and flew through the air towards center. Diving forward, the center fielder reached out with his glove and caught the ball – and immediately, Kuramochi dashed towards home plate. Still on the ground, the fielder twisted upward and threw. The ball gleamed whitely as it was thrown to the shortstop, who threw it toward the catcher.

But it was too late; Kuramochi slid on his legs, touching the home plate a full second before being tagged. Instantly, Seidō's stands burst into cheers, as on the scoreboard, a glowing 1 finally appeared beside Seidō’s name.

"Nice running, Kuramochi!"

"Close one, Jun!"

"Keep it going, Tetsu-san!"

Isashiki made a growling sound of discontent as he stepped down into the dugout with a grinning Kuramochi right behind him. Higasa – one of the reserve players – offered cups of water to the two returning players. In response, Isashiki grabbed the cup and downed the water in one fierce gulp – before carefully giving it back to Higasa.

"Thanks," he added, before plunking himself down on the bench with a dissatisfied look on his face.

"Don't mind it," Kazuya offered.

"Hyaha! You sure you should be the one saying that, Miyuki?" said Kuramochi, turning to Kazuya with a gloating look on his face. Kazuya felt himself sweat. But thankfully, before Kuramochi could say anything else, they were interrupted by the sound of a resounding cracking sound. Kazuya turned to see the ball bullet past the first baseman's outstretched glove.

"It went through the outfield!"

"Nice one, Tetsu!"

Amid the cheering in the dugout, Kazuya got to his feet, picking up his bat with a wry smile on his
face.

*Tetsu-san sure is reliable.*

Climbing out of the dugout, he kneeled down in the on-deck circle and looked around the field. They had two outs, but Ryōsuke was on third and Yūki was on second. As for the defense...the outfielders didn't appear to have moved, but the first and third basemen had moved in: it seemed they were gambling on taking out Ryōsuke at home and ending the inning.

Masuko, sturdy as a rock as usual, lowered into a batting stance. The pitcher – who didn't look as affected by the recent hits as Kazuya as hoped – nodded. Then drawing his arm back, he threw. Masuko swung strongly, and –

"Foul!"

Ryōsuke and Yūki returned to their bases. The pitcher raised his glove to catch the ball. Nodding after a few seconds at his catcher's signal, he raised his glove to his face and then threw.

With a powerful swing, Masuko's bat met the ball with a booming sound. The ball flew sharply to the outfield in a long line drive. Following its path with his eyes, Kazuya felt a thrill run through his body, and he shot up to his feet. It was going far – no, it was going to go over the fen –

A figure in white leaped up, and pushing off the fence, reached impossibly high into the air. He tumbled to the ground, landing on his front. Kazuya waited with bated breath – but a second later, the fielder lifted up his glove to reveal a white ball.

"Out!" the umpire shouted. "Three outs – change!"

The Yokohama fielders whooped as they rushed back to their dugout, tackling and patting the back of their right fielder. Meanwhile, the Seidō players, with incredulous looks on their faces, also returned to their dugout.

Kazuya hefted his bat up on his shoulder. While he was careful to leave the disappointment out of his face, the lost chance did feel a bit frustrating. That would've been a three-run homer, and they would've ended the sixth inning with at least a 4 run lead – pretty much guaranteeing their win. But now, while they were still in the lead with Kuramochi's run, Yokohama's right fielder's fine play had pretty much robbed them of their newly-earned momentum.

Just as he turned around to walk back to the dugout, Kazuya felt something cold land on his cheek, and paused. Lifting his hand to his face, he realized it was water. In confusion, he looked up, and saw that grey clouds had started to roil about, gathering above the stadium.

*Is it going to rain...?*

Eijun tossed the ball in his hand as he looked up at the scoreboard. The long line of zeroes beside Seidō's name had finally been interrupted with a '1' but after Masuko's near homerun, it looked more taunting than anything.

Turning back around, he saw Miyuki sitting down in the catcher's box. Miyuki raised his mitt, and with a nod, Eijun threw. The ball landed in the mitt with a satisfyingly resounding sound, and Miyuki nodded at him before arching his arm back to throw the ball back.

"Nice pitch," he said. "Keep it up Sawamura."
Eijun nodded, glancing at the dugout. Even if he hadn't been aiming for a perfect game, this inning would be especially crucial. The Yokohama players were pumped up from the miraculous save of the last inning, and their lineup would be coming back around to the leadoffs in this one. It was the perfect chance for their counterattack.

"Top of the seventh inning, Yokohama Academy's offense starts with batting first, left fielder, Shimizu-kun."

The batter stepped up to the plate, a mixture of anxiety and determination etched on his face.

"A four-seam to the inside," Miyuki signaled, and Eijun nodded. Facing the home plate with his knees slightly bent, he glared down at the batter – whose eyes lightly widened. Then, raising his leg, he clenched his right hand before flinging his left hand out with his full strength.

The batter visibly flinched slightly backward, and the ball landed in Miyuki's raised mitt.

"Strike!"

Eijun held up his glove to receive back the ball. As he waited for Miyuki's signal, he could hear the shouting coming from Yokohama's dugout.

"C'mon, Shimizu!"

"Don't be afraid of the ball!"

"Shimizu!"

"Same pitch, but outside and low," Miyuki signaled. He looked meaningfully up at the batter, who drew a slow breath and swung the bat once before lowering back into batting stance.

Eijun nodded, and with another glare at the batter, he threw. This time, the batter swung – and with a clunking sound, the ball landed on the ground, before bouncing up. Kuramochi dashed forward to grab it, and threw it to Yūki at first base.

"Out!" cried the umpire, and Seidō's stands erupted into cheers.

"Nice pitching, Sawamura!"

"Keep it up!"

The inning continued, and the next batter was sent off similarly with a grounder. As Eijun watched the batter return to his dugout, where his teammates were slapping him on the back encouragingly, he allowed himself a small grin.

"Batting third, third baseman, Tajima-kun."

With a look of absolute concentration on his face, the batter stared determinedly back at Eijun, and he felt his heart beat faster.

This would be his third cycle through Yokohama's infamous four cleanup lineup, and it began here, with this third-hole. If Eijun didn't give it his best, he knew without a doubt that he would regret it.

A tingling sense of what could only be called excitement swept like a current through his body, and his grin widened.
Nodding at Miyuki's signal, he brought his hands together and threw. Without any hesitation, the batter swung, and –

"Strike!"

Eijun raised his glove to catch the ball, noticing that the batter didn't look too taken aback. He muttered something inaudible to himself, and adjusted his footing. Miyuki, noticing this, lowered his mitt.

"Best not let him breathe in between pitches. Give me a cutter, low and inside."

Eijun nodded, quickly adjusting his grip on the ball in his glove, before throwing.

"Ball!"

And now the ball count was at 1-1. Eijun waited, watching the batter readjust his footing again. As soon as the batter had returned to his batting stance, Miyuki signaled to him.

Stepping down hard on the mound, Eijun flung his arm out, and watched his ball hurtle towards Miyuki's mitt. The batter swung, and with a cracking sound, his bat met the ball.

Taken aback, Eijun turned around with bated breath to follow the ball as it cut through the air, his heart beginning to thump wildly – and then it dropped down. Isashiki, leaping forward, just barely managed to catch it at the tip of his outstretched glove.

"Out!"

As Isashiki let out a vindictive roar – likely out of memory of his last at-bat – Eijun took off his cap and wiped the sweat off his brow.

Kazuya could hardly believe it, but it was true: for seven straight innings now, Sawamura hadn't let a single runner on base. Of course, some of it had to do with his leading – Kazuya wasn't going to be modest – but none of the opposing batters seemed to be able to get a good grasp on Sawamura's arsenal of breaking and moving fastballs, made formidable by his late pitching delivery. Combined with Seidō's solid defense, most of the batters until now had either struck out or been unable to hit a ball past the infield.

The next inning would be their true final obstacle – the last three 'cleanups' of Yokohama's lineup awaited. When the three-hole Tajima had come up to bat, Kazuya had briefly wondered if Sawamura would start tensing up – since he was still a first-year after all, and no one could be immune to pressure – but had been taken aback to see Sawamura grinning on the mound.

Of course, if Isashiki hadn't managed to catch that last ball, that would've been the end of the perfect game. But regardless, Sawamura hadn't lost, and his streak was now at twenty-one outs, zero hits.

"Bottom of the seventh inning, Seidō High's offense starts with batting sixth, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

Kazuya raised his bat, feeling a small smile playing at his lips.

The pitcher's arm flung out and the ball came flying out, breaking toward him – a slider – and Kazuya swung. With a clang, the ball shot straight into foul territory.
"Foul!"

Glancing down at the catcher, Kazuya quickly returned to batting position. From what he’d seen so far in this game, the catcher had called for pitches in a way similar to how Kazuya himself may have done – at least, with a pitcher specializing in control, the way this one obviously did. He’d noticed, while the two threw back to each other before the inning, that the catcher's mitt didn't move at all while catching the ball.

Now...if I were Yokohama's catcher, what would I throw here?

The pitcher nodded at the catcher's sign, and then the ball was shooting straight toward him. Kazuya swung, and connecting with a sharp cracking sound, the ball flew straight past the first baseman's outstretched glove.

Throwing aside the bat, Kazuya easily slid to first base.

"Nice batting, Miyuki!"

"So you can do it without runners on base!"

Passing his elbow guard to the first base coach, Kazuya felt himself sweat. That'd definitely been Kuramochi.

The inning continued: Shirasu followed with a bunt, and Kazuya moved to second. However, Sakai hit a pop fly to the shortstop, and with Sawamura batting next, Kazuya had all but given up on scoring that inning, when to his – and everyone else's – immense shock, Sawamura swung strongly at the ball, hitting it in a line drive to the outfield.

Snapping himself out of his astonishment, Kazuya ran to third, where he was waved at to keep running. Hearing shouting from the outfield, he dashed towards the home plate, watching the catcher holding out his mitt. As a streak of white flew through the air to the catcher's mitt, Kazuya slid on his feet, keeping his body low against the ground, and –

"Safe!"

"Yeah! Second run!"

"What was that, Sawamura?!"

"Nice running!"

Getting to his feet, Kazuya jogged back to the dugout, staring out at the field where Sawamura was standing on second. In the case of that first-year pitcher, it really was just one surprise after another.

Suddenly, a murmur of surprise swept through the stands; at the sound, Kazuya looked in their direction, and found that most of them were looking up. Joining them, Kazuya tilted his head back and then blinked, as drops of water landed on his sports glasses, muddying his vision.

It had finally started to rain.

So much for today's weather forecast.

The rain was coming down so quietly and gently, it almost felt like a cool mist to Eijun's skin, and oddly enough, it reminded him of something that he couldn't quite put a finger on. Tentatively, he
tested the mound under his foot, but to his relief, it was still firm. He wouldn't have to worry about his footing slipping – losing the perfect game because of a wild pitch would been awful.

"How does it feel?" Miyuki asked, walking toward him from the catcher's box.

"Fine," said Eijun, stamping on the dirt. "The rain shouldn't be a problem."

"Good. You've only thrown about 60 pitches – you're pacing yourself well," Miyuki said, turning around to head back. "Just two more innings to go."

"Top of the eighth inning, and Yokohama Academy's offense starts with batting cleanup, right fielder, Shigeno-kun."

It was strange, though. The forecast for that day had predicted only a 2% chance of rain. But then again, Eijun thought with a shrug, a 2% chance still meant that rain hadn't been out of the question. He supposed, if the wind moved a certain way and the clouds moved in exactly a certain way so that they gathered over the Tokyo area – then, it would rain.

Watching the built cleanup step up to the plate, Eijun idly thought to himself that he didn't remember it raining in this particular game back in his original timeline.

And then a few seconds later, as the implications of that dawned on him, he froze.

It didn't rain before...?

Dazedly taking in Miyuki's signs, Eijun's eyes wildly flickered from the catcher's mitt – to his face – to the batter's determined face – the umpire's expectant face – and then back to Miyuki.

Was he remembering things wrongly, or were things in this world already changing from his own timeline? No – he remembered watching this game before. That had been the day he'd first witnessed Furuya's pitching, and had first realized how imposing the obstacle between he and the ace position was. But now, instead of Furuya, it was Eijun standing on the mound. And on a day it hadn't rained – when it shouldn't have rained – rain was coldly and surely coming down. Nobody in the stands had brought an umbrella, so most had settled for bearing it, or had taken out a jacket.

Nobody had thought it would rain. But it was raining now.

His heart was beginning to pound in his chest. Eijun blinked, and then realized that Miyuki's mitt was still raised expectantly toward him. His body moved automatically, and he threw, his foot slamming down on the mound. The batter swung fully, sending the ball flying past Eijun, who was too dazed to turn and follow it, and –

"Foul!"

The Yokohama dugout was cheering for their cleanup, but Eijun had stopped registering all external sounds. Because this was what he had been afraid of. He had been afraid of the events of the past changing – of a butterfly flapping its wings and starting a hurricane, a hurricane that he would be unable to control, a hurricane that would blast him out from this time, which he already barely felt like he had a grasp on.

Suddenly, Eijun realized why the rain had felt so familiar. Just before he had passed out in the shower and woken up in the past, it had been this sensation of cold water and mist on his face...

Miyuki motioned with his hands, and with a jolt, Eijun realized that the catcher had just signaled to him twice, with an increasingly concerned look on his face. Jerking his head, Eijun felt his body
follow through with the motions. The ball came flying out of his hand, and the batter swung, and again –

"Foul!"

Eijun knew now – he wouldn't be able to bet on everything happening the same way it had before in his timeline, because *chance was chance*, and if it rained on a day that the forecast had predicted a 2% chance, then *anything* was possible, and liable, to change. It was all a matter of chance.

Things were going to change, and Eijun would be at the mercy of the future, just like everyone else.

And maybe, just maybe, the games wouldn't go smoothly this time around. Maybe a play would turn unexpectedly violent. Maybe a player would be switched out for a pinch runner, who would run desperately to home base, even if it meant ramming into the catcher...

*Maybe Miyuki will get hurt again.*

Feeling cold all over, Eijun immediately began to tremble. If he let anything happen to Miyuki again, he knew he would never be able to forgive himself. But if even the weather could change, how was he supposed to know what else would?

He'd thought that he'd put such questions aside, but now, they were bubbling up inside him even more fiercely than before. Why had he been sent to the past? Had it really been to take Miyuki and Seidō to Kōshien? Who had sent him? And if he did, what would happen?

"Time!"

The sound of Miyuki's voice cut sharply through the haze of his mind, and Eijun looked up, startled, to see the catcher heading toward him. The other infielders were also walking toward him, with varying levels of concern on their faces.

"What's wrong, Sawamura?" Miyuki asked. "You're completely out of it."

"Hyaha! Don't tell me you're finally feeling the pressure?" Kuramochi snickered. "Do you have that little faith in us?"

"We're all behind you, Sawamura," said Yūki, with a serious nod.

"Pitch to contact, Sawamura-chan," said Masuko.

"You're not alone," said Haruichi's older brother.

"Just don't forget to look at my mitt," Miyuki said with a grin.

Eijun blinked. And miraculously – like a spell being broken, he suddenly felt warmth spreading through his body, dispelling the cold. He dropped his head, lowering the rim of his baseball cap with a hand so that it would cover his face.

"Yes!" he shouted. He heard the others begin to return to their positions – Kuramochi aimed a light kick at his back before leaving – and when he raised his head, Miyuki was back in the catcher's box.

Eijun let out a slow breath, and locked gazes with the batter.

"Play!"

Since Eijun had become captain of the Seidō baseball team at the end of his second year, he had
gotten so used to the responsibility of leading the team that he'd forgotten just how much he could depend on them. He had forgotten that now, back in the past as he was – he was just a first-year pitcher again.

That was right. Whatever else changed, Seidō's team members hadn't changed. They were defending the field behind him.

And in front of him, Miyuki was leading him. He wasn't hurt. He was moving. Breathing. Laughing. And now, he was waiting for Eijun's pitch, with his mitt held up toward him. It was the sight Eijun had longed for in the future, when it had no longer become possible.

But it was possible now. And the best Eijun could do...

... *is to aim for his mitt*!

Slamming his foot down on the mound, his teeth gritted, Eijun thrust the ball forward. His cap falling off from the momentum, he watched the ball as it moved, as if in slow motion, towards the waiting batter.

But just as the ball began to curve towards the plate, the batter took a step back, tightening his grip on the bat, and then swung powerfully at the ball. There was a loud cracking sound, and with wide eyes – unable to react in time, for he was only human – Eijun watched as the ball shot through the air past him.

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**- Glossary -**

*Line drive* = A type of batted ball, sharply hit, and on (or slightly above) a level trajectory.
An old friend in failure

Chapter Summary

Looks like he's not totally immune to pressure after all. - Seidō vs Yokohama part III
(end)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When the first-year southpaw hit a double at the bottom of the seventh inning, the clamor from the stands all around Chris reached new levels.

"Nice pitching, Sawamura!"

"Keep it up!"

"Sawamura!"

"Wow, Eijun's amazing," said Kominato, looking around admiringly at the cheering crowd.

"He's completely different on the field from how he is in class," said Kanemaru with a rueful shake of his head.

"Batting first, shortstop, Kuramochi-kun."

"Is it true that Sawamura's got some kinda bet going with the coach?" a second-year asked with a dubious look on his face. Kanemaru glanced back at Chris meaningfully.

"Yeah. He's gotta pitch a perfect game or he'll get kicked off the mound."

"That's it?" The second-year sounded disappointed. "I thought the stakes would be higher."

"Well..." said Kanemaru hesitantly, but stopped short when Kominato gave him a warning look. Just as he did so, the cheering suddenly faltered – Kuramochi had just hit a grounder to third base, ending the inning.

"It's too bad we couldn't keep the momentum going, but we're up by two runs now," said another second-year sitting farther down.

"Yeah, if Sawamura can keep it up, we've got this game in the bag," his friend agreed.

Yokohama's players began to stream off the field. However, one lone figure in Seidō's white and blue lingered at second base – and as Chris watched, the figure raised his head and looked directly up at him to reveal a pair of fierce, lion-like eyes.

Chris froze, as what felt like an electric current ran through his body. A bead of sweat formed at his temple and slowly made its way down his face. For several long seconds, he found himself unable to move, glued to the wall behind his back...and only when the first-year finally began to walk back to the dugout, did the strange phantom hold on his body break. Chris looked away and swallowed hard,
feeling a lump in the back of his throat.

What are you fighting so hard for, Sawamura?

The skies above had begun to rumble, and as the watching crowd looked up, heavy raindrops began to plummet down toward them.

"Top of the eighth inning, and Yokohama Academy's offense starts with batting cleanup, right fielder, Shigeno-kun."

Squatting down in the catcher's box, Kazuya looked back at Sawamura with rising concern. The first-year had said that the rain wouldn't be a problem, and he seemed to be holding up well – but somehow, sometime in between their brief exchange at the mound and the cleanup stepping up to the plate, his condition had rapidly worsened.

Sawamura's face was white with pallor, and his frame was noticeably shaking with every short breath he took. And was it just him – it was hard to tell with the rain clouding his vision – or was Sawamura looking wildly back at him?

Looks like he's not totally immune to pressure after all.

Kazuya signaled to Sawamura, and then pounding his fist in his mitt, raised it up to him. As he watched, however, though Sawamura managed to jerk his head back in return, he didn't move for what felt like several increasingly long seconds. When Sawamura's eyes suddenly widened, his arm seemed to fling out instinctively – Kazuya's hand shot up to catch the ball, when the batter swung and –

"Foul!"

The ball flew out past the left field foul line, and Kazuya sat back down, his heart still pounding loudly in his ears. Sawamura on the other hand didn't seem to have even followed the ball with his eyes after it'd been hit. Physically, he was blankly looking back at Kazuya, but he could tell that mentally, the first-year was somewhere far away.

It took Kazuya two tries before Sawamura finally noticed his signals, and again, the ball came at a different place than what he'd asked for. The batter's bat connected with the ball with a clunking sound and –

"Foul!"

Barely holding back a sigh of relief, Kazuya got to his feet. Taking off his mask, he called for a time-out and headed to the mound. He could see the other infielders also making their way to Sawamura; it seemed that Kazuya hadn't been the only one to notice how strangely he was behaving.

"What's wrong, Sawamura?" Kazuya asked. "You're completely out of it."

To his surprise, Sawamura gawked back at him as if he were seeing him for the first time. Bobbing his head this way and that, he looked around at the rest of the team who had gathered around him with a look of bewilderment.

"You're not alone," said Ryōsuke, as perceptive as always.

"Just don't forget to look at my mitt," Kazuya added with a grin.
Sawamura blinked – and to Kazuya's relief, color flooded his face as the empty blankness of his eyes gave way to an emotion he couldn't identify.

"Yes!" Sawamura shouted back with renewed vigor. Kazuya returned to the catcher's box and putting his mask back on, squatted down.

Standing on the mound, Sawamura stared back at him, waiting for his signal. Focus had returned to his face, and his breathing had returned to normal.

As Kazuya took in the batter's stance and considered what pitch to call for, he couldn't help but wonder what could have possibly been going through the first-year's head. There was the fact that this was Sawamura's first official high school game, and on top of that, he'd gone into it with the burden of pitching a perfect game. Anyone would crack under it, and Kazuya honestly still couldn't get over how well Sawamura had done until now.

So why had he suddenly chosen to crack now, in this inning? He'd been grinning in the last inning up against Yokohama's three-hole. Kazuya glanced up at the batter again. Was it because this current batter, Yokohama's cleanup, was so much more physically imposing?

"We've got him cornered. Throw me your best moving fastball low and inside."

With his jaw set determinedly, Sawamura nodded – this time, a proper one – and glaring fiercely back at the batter, he threw. The ball came flying out of his hand, and Kazuya smiled, readying his mitt.

"Good. Just as I'd asked –"

Kazuya's eyes widened as with an audibly crunching sound, the batter took a firm step back, digging his foot into the ground. Power rippling down his arms, he swung deeply and with a crack, the ball bulleted past Sawamura's shocked face. Throwing aside the bat, Yokohama's cleanup took off toward first base.

Wiping the raindrops off of his sports glasses, Kazuya concentrated on following the white ball with his eyes. His heart was thumping so loudly, he was sure the umpire could hear it. Time slowed down as the ball began an almost leisurely downward trajectory in front of the right fielder – the wind had carried it farther and for longer than he had expected. With his glove outstretched before him, Shirasu ran toward it.

*Come on, Shirasu!*

The ball was just in front of him. It was so close to Shirasu, Kazuya could have sworn Shirasu's glove had touched it.

And then he slipped.

It wasn't a major slip – Shirasu didn't fall to the ground. His foot only lost its placement on the wet ground for an instant before he regained his balance – but that instant was enough. The ball dropped to the ground, and the Yokohama stands behind him burst into eardrum-splitting cheers. In a last valiant effort, Shirasu scrambled to grab the ball and then threw it to second base as quickly as he could, but it was too late.

"*Safe!*"

"First hit!"
"You're on fire today, Shigeno!"

All sounds from Seidō's dugout had ceased into a stunned silence, and Kazuya could hear uneasy murmuring all the way from their cheering stands.

_That cleanup...he out-read me. There's Yokohama's cleanup for you._

And to be hit at such a critical juncture, just when Sawamura seemed to have regained control of himself...with his jaw set grimly, Kazuya looked toward the mound, mentally preparing himself for the worst.

He blinked.

Once. Twice. And then, unbidden, Kazuya felt the corners of his lips lift upwards into an astonished grin.

Instead of hanging his head in defeat as he'd expected, Sawamura had turned around to face the outfielders. With his shoulders set firmly back, he raised his glove into the air.

"Sorry!" he shouted out loudly. 
"But there'll be more balls flying at you from now on, so thank you for defending!"

At his words, as if an invisible wall had been shattered, some of the life seemed to trickle back to the rest of the team.

"Don't worry about it Shirasu!"

"We'll get the next one out!"

Kazuya slowly shook his head wryly.

"Time out again please," he said to the umpire, and got to his feet. As he walked up to the mound, Sawamura turned around in surprise. Kazuya covered his mouth with his mitt. "Sawamura, that was my bad call."

"I didn't shake my head Miyuki-senpai," said Sawamura, also covering his mouth. He glanced at the player now waiting on second. "I guess he's just that much of a good batter...but that's okay, I'll get the next three out."

Kazuya paused.

"Sawamura...you've forgotten, haven't you?"

This time, it was the first-year's turn to blink.

"About what?"

Miyuki looked back at him incredulously in a way Eijun hadn't seen for a long time, and he felt himself sweat. It was a complicated mix of 'Are you stupid? You can't possibly be this stupid' and 'Good lord, I've been talking to a monkey'; he'd been on the receiving end of such looks practically every day of his first year, but Eijun had thought (hoped) that he'd grown out of it, rather like the way he'd outstripped the infamy of his poor batting.

"You've really forgotten, haven't you?" Without another word, Miyuki simply pointed to his right, and following it, Eijun saw their dugout.
"What're you –" Eijun stopped short just as he saw the dreaded sight of coach Kataoka stepping out of the dugout and raising a hand. "Oh. Oh."

He felt his heart begin to sink. He'd gotten so caught up in the game that somehow, the consequences of letting a player on base had slipped his mind.

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Sawamura-kun as pitcher is Tanba-kun. Pitcher, Tanba-kun. Replacing Miyuki-kun as catcher is Miyauchi-kun. Catcher, Miyauchi-kun."

At the second announcement, Eijun's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. He turned to stare at Miyuki – who on the other hand, didn't look surprised at all. Meanwhile, coming out of the bullpen, Tanba and Miyauchi jogged toward the mound, and Eijun felt himself shrink back with every step they took.

"Sawamura, Miyuki. You've done well...leave the rest to us," said Tanba, holding out his glove. Miyauchi nodded, determined steam coming out of his nostrils.

For a second, Eijun looked down at the glove, and felt his hold on the ball tighten. Slowly raising his hand, he looked at the ball – and then passed it into the glove. With his head bowed, he and Miyuki began to walk back to the dugout; the whole way back, he could hear the watching crowds cheering for them.

"Good pitching, Sawamura!"

"Hey first-year, you're amazing!"

But Eijun didn't dare raise his head – or rather, he couldn't. Not when he knew that a certain third-year must be looking down at him. He could feel the tips of his ears beginning to burn at the very thought, and the trek back to the dugout had never seemed longer.

"Lift that head up, Sawamura," he heard Miyuki say beside him. "You pitched beyond anyone's expectations today."

Eijun didn't respond, silently trudging closely behind the catcher. When they finally arrived at the dugout, the brief flicker of relief from the rain was only temporary, as the rest of the team crowded around him and thumped him on his back.

"Nice pitching!"

"I didn't think you had that in you!"

"Keep it up, Sawamura!"

"Sawamura." Through the haze that had come over him, this voice was different from the rest – and it took Eijun a second to process that it was Coach Kataoka's voice. Eijun slowly raised his head, to see the coach looking down at him with his arms crossed across his chest. "You've made the strength of your resolve clear. Now leave the rest in the hands of your upperclassmen."

"...yes sir," said Eijun, squeezing his hands tightly together. At one point in his life, the fact that the coach had acknowledged him might have energized him, but somehow, at that moment, he just felt drained.

Eijun sat down on the bench. Accepting the offered ice pack, he stripped down to his undershirt and began to ice his shoulder. The game was still going on and judging by the roaring of the dugout, a heated battle on the baseball diamond was taking place. But somehow, he couldn't find the energy to...
look up. Instead, he gazed down at his open hand. It was a different hand from what he had become used to seeing. The worn down calluses and lines and the hardness of his third-year hand were now gone, replaced instead by the softness of a first-year hand.

"You're disappointed, aren't you?" Miyuki sounded bemused. He'd seated himself beside Eijun and was icing his hand. "You really did think you'd get that perfect game."

"No I'm not," Eijun lied, but Miyuki smirked in that achingly familiar way that told Eijun he wasn't fooling anyone. He swallowed hard.

"It was just as much my fault as it was yours, Sawamura," said Miyuki. "But it's over and done with. We have to move on."

---

"3-1, won by Seidō High School! Bow!"

"Thank you!" The two teams, lined up in separate rows, bowed to each other. The siren signaling the end of the game rang over the sound of the dying rain throughout the stadium.

Yokohama Academy had ultimately managed to score a run at the top of the eighth, but Seidō scored another in the bottom of the eighth. With Tanba managing to keep them scoreless at the top of the ninth, the game had ended in Seidō's win.

As the rest of the team piled into the bus that would take them back to their school, Eijun hesitantly lingered by the door, ignoring the scattered drops of rain that flecked at his face. He was searching the faces of the crowds that were passing by the bus, while not being certain of who he was looking for. Finally, when the last person had boarded the bus, Eijun gave one last look at the passersby – but not recognizing a single face, he too got on the bus.

It was dinnertime by the time they returned to their school grounds, and everyone quickly returned to their rooms to change out of their uniforms before heading to the dorm's dining room.

"What's wrong with Sawamura-chan?" Eijun heard Masuko whisper in a low voice to Kuramochi from behind him. Having changed into everyday comfort clothes, they were walking along the grass – still wet from the earlier rain – in the courtyard in front of the dining room building. It had started to grow dark, and the lamps that lined the courtyard had been turned on. Several other members of the baseball team, as they passed by, raised a hand in cheerful greeting.

"He's probably still upset about getting switched out...even though he's just a frigging first-year," said Kuramochi without bothering to lower his voice, and Eijun could practically feel the irritation radiating off of the second-year shortstop.

Eijun wanted to protest, but when he opened his mouth, he found it impossible to say anything. Instead, he let out a sigh. He'd done well to shut out Yokohama's powerful lineup for seven innings, and he supposed rumors about him would start spreading through the region much like they had about Furuya in his original timeline. Nobody had expected it of him, and considering he was a first-year pitcher playing his first high school game in their eyes, that just made the feat even more extraordinary.

However, Eijun knew – that while he might be in the body of a first-year, mentally, he was a third-year. And on top of that, he had been Seidō's team captain and ace, and had led his team to victory in the summer tournament. He hated to admit it, but he'd become known as the second Narumiya for good reason.
Armed with all of these experiences, he had somehow been granted a chance to go back in time and in turn, give Miyuki and the other third-years a chance to go to Kōshien...but already, on the first leg of his journey, he had stumbled with Chris. Eijun couldn't very well pretend to be ignorant of pitching mechanisms and relearn from Chris, so thinking it over, he had thought that the best he could do for the catcher would be to give him a chance to play with the first string again and get back in the game.

But he had failed.

Eijun was not a stranger to failure, and he knew that that was what made him strong – strong enough to bear his team's hopes and dreams on his back that hot day back in the stadium when he threw the game-deciding pitch against Inashiro. But this familiarity with failure also meant he knew very well what it meant to lose. He had known it back in his original timeline, when they had lost against Inashiro, had seen it for himself when he boarded the bus that would take them back to their school. He had seen it in Miyuki's hard, blank expressions and in how even Tetsu – their unshakeable pillar and captain – had given into tears.

Masuko and Kuramochi had already disappeared inside the building, but Eijun remained outside. He could hear the sounds of their teammates laughing and eating inside, but he did not join them. Letting the dim light that lit up the darkened courtyard wash over him, he rested his forehead against the cold stone of the building and closed his eyes.

He hadn't really thought he would lose the bet. It wasn't because of pure overconfidence in his own abilities, either. Eijun had known that his going into the past wasn't a dream, but somewhere deep inside, he had thought that it must have been something like a dream. And in such a storybook world, he had thought that surely, the fates would smile upon him this time around, and that he'd get his perfect game. Chris would get a chance to play again as he'd planned, and the light would be restored to his eyes. Then with that accomplished, Eijun would go on to pitch for the summer tournament, they would erase Inashiro off the scoreboard, and then make Kōshien just as they should have.

However, what was happening right now was the ever-forward moving march of reality. While the reassuring knowledge that the third-years and the rest of the Seidō team were behind him had been pressed back into him, he still knew that the team that should have won didn't necessarily always win. He'd learned that the hard way in that fateful game against Inashiro in his first year – that in a game of baseball, everything could be turned and flipped upside down in the blink of an eye.

Eijun felt his lips slowly turn upward into a wry smile and his hands balled into fists at his sides.

"But then again, that unexpectedness is what makes baseball so exciting, after all."

"Is something wrong, Sawamura?" A quiet voice spoke out from behind him. Eijun's eyes widened, and in his hurry to turn around, he tripped on his shoelaces. Stumbling forward, he found himself almost falling into the arms of a taller foreign-looking third-year who looked down at him in consternation. His face was in dark shadow, not quite reached by the surrounding lights.

"C-Chris-senpai!" Eijun spluttered out, stepping backwards hastily. "What're you doing here?!

"Well...it's dinnertime," said Chris. Blushing a little, Eijun felt grateful it'd been this particular catcher he'd asked such a stupid question of. If it had been a certain other second-year with a mule-like laugh, he felt sure he wouldn't have heard the end of it.

"Don't let me keep you! Please go on in!" he said, scrabbling out of the way and gesturing toward the door.
"You're not eating?"

"Uh...I ate already!" said Eijun with a nervous laugh, patting his stomach. As if in response, it let loose a loud growl of protest. He felt himself grow even redder.

_Ét tu, stomach?!_

"...Sawamura," Chris started softly, tactfully choosing to ignore the sound. "There's something I want to ask you."

Eijun cringed.

_Don't ask about the bet don't ask about the bet don't ask about the bet –_

"In today's game..."

_Dammit._

"What were you thinking while you were standing there on the field?"

Taken aback, Eijun stopped wringing his hands and blinked.

"What do you mean?"

"I was watching during the game...and I wanted to know what was driving you to push yourself so far."

Eijun opened his mouth, and this time, a dozen different answers flew to him, imploding one after another inside his head. But in the end, only one remained.

"...I just wanted to remind you how exciting baseball could be," he said simply. "How fun it can be to be on the field, instead of just watching from the stands. How reassuring it can be knowing your teammates have your back. How even when no one thinks you can do it, you go ahead and do it and make them eat their words." Eijun paused, and then scratched his face with an embarrassed smile.

"Though this time...I guess they were right."

"The first time we met, you said that I must understand that feeling," said Chris. "Of no one expecting anything much from you."

"Was I wrong, Chris-senpai?"

For a long minute, the catcher didn't respond, and Eijun had started to wonder if he had fallen asleep when he finally spoke again.

"No, but the only person who'd given up on me was myself." Chris bowed his head, and when he did so, the rest of his face fell into focus under the light. "Thank you...Sawamura. For helping me realize that."

The blankness hadn't quite disappeared from his eyes, but Eijun could see just a little bit of something else beginning to stir inside them – the something else that told him that the Chris he knew was still inside there somewhere.

And that was a start.

Kazuya had just gotten up from his seat for a second helping of rice when he noticed Sawamura and
Chris walking into the dining room together. Stopping almost comically in his tracks, he stared as the first-year pitcher said something – and in response, Chris's lips quirked upward for a brief instant. It couldn't exactly be called a smile, but it was the biggest response he'd seen the other catcher make in a long time.

"Haha!" Kazuya laughed out loud in disbelief, startling several other players who were eating nearby. Crossing his arms across his chest, he shook his head.

_Sawamura...what in the world are you?

Chapter End Notes

I won't be going into the rest of the Kanto tournament, just assume Seidō does pretty well (lol).
Baton pass

Chapter Summary

It wasn't like him.

"Have you seen the scorecards of the Kantō tournament?"
"No, not yet – why?"
"Seidō beat Yokohama in the preliminaries."
"What, really?"
"And they beat Keio after that..."
"Wait, really? Keio?"

"They're saying Seidō's got an amazing new first-year pitcher who nearly got a perfect game off of Yokohama – "

With a snapping sound, Mei released the band he'd been pulling back, and the gossiping second-years fell silent, staring at him.

"You hear that Masa-san?" Mei turned to face the third-year captain who'd been stretching his arms beside him. "A first-year pitcher shut down Yokohama. Almost a perfect game, even...what do you think?" Masatoshi looked imposingly back down at him.

"If you're aiming for a perfect game yourself, you can forget it. You always take a while to warm up your arm."

"Whaaat?!" With an indignant splutter of protest, Mei frowned. "That's not fair!"

"I've seen the scorecard of that game – Yokohama was hitless until the eighth inning." With a grunt, Masatoshi resumed his stretching regime. "Seidō's not the same team they were last year. You'd better be prepared to face them at full strength, Mei."

Slowly but surely, like sap, Mei's pout disappeared into a contemplative grin. "Oh? If even you're going as far as to say that, this new pitcher of theirs must really be a big deal. I wonder what kind of pitches he's got?"

Eijun sneezed, turning his face away just in time to avoid covering Miyuki's face in gunk. "'scuse me." He snuffled, raising a shoulder to wipe his nose on his arm's sleeve.

"You're not coming down with anything, are you?" Miyuki asked, stepping forward.

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I just felt a chill," Eijun reassured the catcher, waving him back. Then with a toothy smile, he added somewhat jokingly, "Hey, maybe someone was talking about me."

Miyuki let out a small laugh, though his eyes glinted seriously. "You might be right about that. I
wouldn't be surprised if scouts from other schools are all buzzing about both you and Furuya now."

Coach Kataoka had sent out Furuya in the last two innings in the following match against Keio. Though he had gotten hit by their cleanup, he'd managed to keep Keio scoreless, ending the game with Seidō’s win at the top of the 9th inning.

"Me and Furuya, huh..." Eijun looked down at his gloved hand. He'd expected it of course, but he was still having difficult wrapping his mind around the fact that now that he was back in his first year, this would be the first time any of the other baseball teams had ever heard of him. That included Yakushi and Inashiro, Seido's greatest rivals in this prefecture – and on those teams, Todoroki Raichi and Narumiya Mei in particular.

**Narumiya...**

Inashiro had lost in the second round of the Fall tournament his first year, and in the Spring and Summer tournaments of his second year, either Inashiro or Seidō had lost before having a chance to go up against each other again. Seidō had finally beaten Inashiro in the Summer tournament of his third year to move on to Kōshien – but by then, Narumiya had already graduated and left the team. So thinking in that sense, despite being known as the 'second Narumiya,' Eijun had never even once beaten his fellow southpaw pitcher.

*This time around, though –*

Immediately, Eijun forcibly stopped himself from finishing the thought. He tightly clenched the baseball in his other hand, trying to smother the rising feeling of thrill in his chest.

It wasn't right for him to want to beat Narumiya once and for all. That wasn't what he'd gone back into the past for. He was here to take Miyuki and the other third-years to Kōshien, not to try to win against another pitcher out of pure egotism. That'd be too – well – greedy of him.

But then again – beating Narumiya would fall quite nicely along the lines of taking the senpai to Kōshien.

"Oi, Sawamura, you listening to me?"

Belatedly realizing that Miyuki was waving his hand in front of his face, Eijun blinked rapidly to clear his thoughts.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said that's enough for today. Go hit the showers."

"Already?" Eijun peered up at the sky, which was streaked with red in the glow of the setting sun. "It's not even dinnertime yet."

"I don't want you to wear yourself out; it's best that you rest up now while you can. Once the summer training camp begins, you'll be dreaming about sleeping."

Eijun winced, not relishing the thought of having to go through that hell once more in his mostly untrained first-year body. Miyuki grinned, apparently mistaking his pained expression for one of anxiety.

"What're you getting so nervous for? You're the one who almost got a perfect game against Yokohama, aren't you?"
Eijun opened his mouth to retort something back, but the words died unspoken in his throat as he noticed in the corner of his eye a passing figure. His face lighting up, he turned around and let out a shout: "Chris-senpai!"

"Oh – Sawamura." Chris slowed to a stop, hefting his sports bag on his shoulder. Eijun carefully examined his frame; though the third-year didn't seem to look discomforted or in pain, Eijun had seen with his own two eyes what he had to go through in his rehabilitation.

"Do you need help with that?" Eijun raised a hand in offer, but Chris shook his head.

"I'm just headed out."

"Oh yeah – aren't you supposed to be at your rehabilitation right now?"

Chris looked back at him oddly, and Eijun felt himself sweat, hoping he wouldn't ask why Eijun knew his schedule (he'd gotten it off of Kanemaru).

"The schedule got pushed back today."

"I see...so you're missing dinner, huh? That's a pity, I heard it's curry today – but don't worry, I'll save you my egg!" With a martyr-like nod, Eijun gave the third-year a thumbs-up.

"No – that's okay," Chris flatly turned him down. Nevertheless, there was a faint smile on his face as he headed toward the school grounds' gates.

Eijun waved him off and then turned back around expectantly. "So anyways about Yokohama, that was...all..." He trailed off and stopped. Blinking again, he looked around – but there was no one else there.

Where'd Miyuki go?

Thwack.

Thwack.

Thwack.

Satoru took a step back. Then, gathering all of his remaining strength into his fingertips, he took a step forward and flung the towel in his hand out.

Thwack!

The towel snapped through the air, a white blur carving its way through the dark of the evening.

Thwack.

After several more throws, Satoru finally stopped. Panting, he raised the towel to his brow, wiping off some of the sweat. His hands were hot, and he pressed them against his cold ears.

"Your form is looking better," a voice called out from afar. "But if doing that's tiring you out, you still have a ways to go with your stamina." Lowering his hands, Satoru looked up to see Miyuki watching him from on top of the stairway. He was dressed casually in sweatpants and a t-shirt, with a bandana pushing his hair out of his face. Satoru pointedly turned his back toward the catcher, gripping the towel tightly in his hand. "Hey now, don't ignore me!"
Satoru hesitated and then turned back around.

"Will you catch for me, Miyuki-senpai?" he asked. He wanted to hear the sound again – not that of a towel whipping through empty air, but of a leather mitt crisply welcoming a baseball into its fold.

With a rueful grin, Miyuki gestured to the metal bat he was holding.

"I'm here to practice my swing. And as I've told Sawamura, you should rest up for the night. The coach's going to have you start for the practice game against Teitō this Sunday."

At the mention of the other first-year pitcher, Satoru frowned. Taking a step back, he gathered his strength into the tips of his fingers, and then flung his arm out forward.

Thwack!

"Then I need to practice more...if I want to catch up to him," he said determinedly.

By the time his father had dropped him off at the school gates, it had grown chilly in the way summer nights tended to get. The sun had set hours ago, and the arid heat had transformed into an uneasy cold that nipped at the back of his hair, still wet from the shower.

As expected of the Seidō baseball team, however, Chris passed by several members practicing their batting out on the grounds. Many of them were from the second-string, and drained as he was from that evening's exercises, Chris sluggishly recalled that the coach would be picking one more person to join the first-string.

Personally, Chris thought that the position would go to Kominato - the younger one, who dormed in the room next to his. Even from what little he'd managed to see during batting practice, he'd been taken aback by the first-year's prodigious batting and fielding sense. In his opinion, the younger Kominato had the potential to become even better than his older brother, who was himself a force to be reckoned with.

Judging by the way their practices and plays were growing increasingly desperate, the other players on the second-string probably knew that too – that their chances of playing in the Summer tournament, already less than optimal, had grown closer to impossible. And yet, for the most part, none of them resented the players who were chosen for the first-string. For how could they, when the first-string players were right alongside them every night, practicing their swings and defensive plays, pushing themselves farther than anyone else?

Just inside the dorm gate, Chris could see someone swinging a bat. He glanced up – and seeing tufts of dark brown hair from under a white bandana, he stopped. But then the figure turned around, and he saw – to his relief? or disappointment? – that they were wearing a pair of glasses.

"You've sure got it rough...did you just get back?" It was Miyuki, with beads of sweat lining his temple. Chris mutely nodded, and with a grin, Miyuki lowered his bat. "I'm just about done here...let me get you a drink, Chris-senpai."

Miyuki led the way to the back of the cafeteria building where the vending machines were, and Chris followed. A pair of second-years who'd been dawdling around one of the machines waved to them, before walking back into their room, chattering loudly. When the two turned around the corner, the two catchers were the only ones left.

"Sawamura's been stalking you, hasn't he?" Miyuki spoke up amusedly, as he hovered in front of the machine's selection screen.
"Yeah...it's kind of creepy..."

The first-year pitcher seemed to have developed a sixth sense for knowing where Chris was at all times of the day, constantly popping up out of seemingly nowhere to try and help him with the most menial of tasks. Just the other day in the dining room, while wearing a bandana from Masuko's family shop, Sawamura had tried to give him twice the usual serving of rice.

"Hahaha! He's been working hard in practice though. His control wasn't bad to begin with, and it's getting even better now." With a clatter, two cans tumbled down into the receptacle. Miyuki bent over to pick them up, and pressed the cold can into Chris's hand. "Here you go."

"Thanks. He's gotten over the Yokohama game, then?" Chris asked absently, opening his can with a fizz – and then stopped, recalling with a flash why exactly Sawamura had gone up on the mound. Miyuki seemed to be thinking along the same lines, for he flashed him a knowing smile.

"Chris-senpai, what do you think of Sawamura? With his naturally moving balls and unique delivery form, and the way how even now, he continues to evolve...to a catcher, that kind of pitcher is somewhat alluring, no?" Miyuki took a sip from his own can. "After getting that double hit off of him, he seemed fine, so he doesn't seem to be the kind of pitcher who falls apart so easily. But I'm sure you've noticed as well – there's something oddly fragile about Sawamura. It's almost as if he's afraid the mound will be taken out from right under him – or like he feels he doesn't belong there. He's coming along better now but still...the ones who can best lend him that assurance would be us catchers, don't you think?"

Chris looked down at the can in his hand, feeling the way the cold metal bleached into his skin.

"As you say, I've noticed that about him as well...but I don't have the ability to help him." Getting up, Chris finished his can with a single gulp. "Once he stops concerning himself with things irrelevant to the team, Sawamura should be just fine. What you should be focusing on is how to best utilize both him and Tanba for the upcoming tournament...you'll have to work hard, number one catcher!"

Leaving behind Miyuki at the bench, Chris headed up the stairs to his dorm room. Reaching the top of the stairway, he stopped, and raised a hand to his shoulder. He winced, as a phantom pain throbbed through his upper body, and his father's words echoed through his mind:

"Yū...don't pay any mind to what's happening with the team. You just have to focus on building up your own body...your life as a baseball player has only now begun!"

Watching the Yokohama game, Chris had been left shaken in the wake of the tempest known as Sawamura. As if returning to his body after a long time of wandering the earth as a spirit, he'd felt back in control for the first time in a long while. And accordingly, his rehabilitation was going smoothly and the pace at which he was recovering his body was faster than anything the doctors and fitness trainers had predicted. But still, he would never be able to make it in time for the summer tournament – which, as a third-year, would have been his last chance to play for the team.

Chris had long accepted he would never play in Kōshien with the rest of the team. He had come to terms with it, and made peace with it in his own way. But for some reason now, every time he saw the first-year southpaw pitching during practice, he felt something thump inside him. His hands grew impatient, as if demanding to him why he wasn't wearing a mitt, and there was an itch in his chest that Chris had gradually come to realize wouldn't go away by itself. It was an itch to be out there on the field in his catching gear, seated behind the batter, signaling to the pitcher. The pitcher would nod and then after a tranquil moment – the eye of the storm – they would send the ball to where he was waiting with his mitt raised, the clean cracking sound of ball meeting leather music to his ears.
Chris knew –

*I want to catch for Sawamura.*

But he also knew that the way he was, he would only hurt the team.

Taking in a deep breath, Chris gave one last look down over the balcony.

*It's up to you Miyuki...to lead Sawamura and to take the team to Kōshien.*

Kazuya lingered on the bench by the vending machines for some time, long after he had finished his can of pocari sweat. By the time he raised his head and had gotten an inkling of how late it was, his whole body had become cold. Throwing the can in the trash can, he looked around, and spotted the bat he'd been using for practice on the ground by the bench. Bending over to pick it up, he stretched his leg muscles while he was at it, mentally berating himself for losing track of the time. It wasn't like him.

Most of the lights in the dorm rooms – usually faintly visible as a glow through the windows – were off, and hurrying up the stairs, Kazuya found himself being glad he had a single to himself. At the same time, though, it did mean that there was nobody to wake him up in the morning if he was so tired that he missed his alarm clock – ...hold on, who was that sitting outside his door?

"Sawamura?" Kazuya asked uncertainly. For a second, the figure, his face hidden under a cap, didn't respond, and Kazuya was about to regret speaking up first when the figure suddenly raised his head with a great groan.

"You sure take your time getting back to your room, Miyuki-senpai," Sawamura – for indeed it was him – moaned. Getting up to his feet stiffly, the first-year began to stretch his arms.

"You were waiting for me?" He was finding it difficult to keep the astonishment out of his voice.

"Of course," said Sawamura, giving him a look as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He then muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "I can't let Furuya have you all the time" but Kazuya couldn't be sure.

"You're never going to listen to me, are you?" Kazuya shook his head in exasperated bemusement.

"I said you shouldn't be wearing yourself out this early on."

"Speak for yourself, coming back to your room this late," said Sawamura with a sniff, and Kazuya had to concede the point.

"So? What're you here for? Don't tell me you want me to catch your balls?" With the way Furuya kept hounding at him to catch for him even after practice was over, Kazuya was starting to understand the necessity of restraining orders in the real world.

"No, I just wanted to see you," said Sawamura, and Kazuya felt himself sweat, wondering how the first-year could say that with such a straight face.

"Given up on dogging Chris-senpai for the night then?" he asked teasingly.

"Well, yeah. He's sleeping now," Sawamura admitted. Then, suddenly taking a step back, he turned his head away and let out a small sneeze. "'scuse me," he added thickly.

Kazuya's eyes immediately drew to the other boy's bare arms, and he frowned. Taking out his key,
he opened his door and flicked on the light. Kneeing Sawamura inside the room, he threw his bat aside on the floor and began to rummage through a basket of his clothes. Finding a clean sweater, Kazuya threw it at the first-year's head.

"Here, wear this before you catch a cold." Without protest, Sawamura tugged the sweater on. It was a little too big for him, as his hands disappeared inside the sleeves, and after having putting it on, he gaped back at Kazuya dumbly like a goldfish. Kazuya stared back for a second – before bursting into laughter. "You put it on backwards, you idiot."

"Oh." Uncomfortably, Sawamura tugged at the neck opening, and then slithering his arms back to his chest, he scrunched the sweater around until it was back on properly. "Better?"

"Yeah. You can wear that back to your room...else I'd have to worry about you catching a cold while going down the stairs."

"I'll wash it for you," Sawamura offered, in a tone that suggested he'd be doing Kazuya a big favor by doing so.

"And risk my sweater smelling like you?" Kazuya shook his finger. "Just give it back to me in the morning."

To his surprise, Sawamura didn't rise to the bait, but instead, looked around the room contemplatively.

"So you're the only one in your room, huh...is that why you're late to practice sometimes?"

"Haha! You're still holding that against me?" Kazuya smirked, recalling back to the first day of practice. The first-year let out a snort, and stepped out the door.

"I'll be banging on your door tomorrow morning so you'd better be up," he said, and then without another word, he left. Kazuya felt himself sweat again as the door closed shut behind him.

_Cheeky brat._

But as he passed by the mirror beside the drawer on his way to get his toothbrush, his reflection had a small smile on his face, and he had to stop and readjust his facial expression because Miyuki Kazuya did not smile like that.

Ever.

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_Omake -_

It was late evening by the time Aramaki reached Spirit dorm. His recruiter had already showed him around the baseball grounds several months ago – Seidō actually had _two_ practice fields just for their baseball team! Talk about being prestigious – but this was his first time visiting the area where most of the other baseball team members lived their daily lives.

From the courtyard, he could see two levels of dorm rooms. It was spacious and well-lit, but what marked it as different from just any other dorm was the baseball and fitness
equipment scattered in between the doors. Racks of bats and baseballs hung from almost every wall, and they were all worn down – though well taken care of – with use.

Aramaki could barely hold himself back from letting out an adrenaline-induced shout of excitement.

*Baseball-crazy life, here I come!*

Back in junior high school, he’d been by far the most enthusiastic about baseball in his team. Most of them had joined for the uniform, or because they needed an extracurricular – and in his three years, they’d never made it past the first round of any tournament. That was why everyone, him included, had been surprised when a recruiter sent him an invitation to join Seidō High School, one of the most elite baseball schools in Tokyo...but secretly (for he could never say so out loud) Aramaki saw it as destiny calling to him. He’d never thought of himself as being a particularly talented pitcher, but the recruiter had obviously seen something in him – and now, he was here at their dorms, ready to become a part of a team that frequently made Kōshien.

And boy, was he ready!

Humming to himself, Aramaki scanned the room numbers, remembering vaguely from what the recruiter had told him that his room was on the first floor. Almost immediately, he found it – his name plaque was hanging beside two other names. His heart began to thump faster as he read the names of two of his future teammates.

Okumura... Kōshū? And Sawamura Eijun...

Surely, being members of the Seidō team, they would be amazing players? Maybe they would even be on Seidō’s first string? The names did sound familiar.

*Hold on...Sawamura Eijun?*

Aramaki’s eyes widened. Wasn’t that the name of Seidō’s team captain? He’d traveled to Tokyo and went to some of Seidō’s games in the fall tournament after being scouted, and now that he thought about it, he felt even more certain about it.

*Wait – so my new roommate is Seidō’s ace and team captain?!*

Aramaki felt his mouth go dry.

*I don't know if I'm ready for this. They'll probably all laugh at me and kick me out of the team. I knew I should’ve stayed in Ōita...at least I was good there...*

"Who are you?" An unfamiliar voice suddenly spoke out behind him, and Aramaki jumped. Spinning around, he saw a boy with light hair looking back at him with vague – but rapidly fading – interest. He was holding a toothbrush and a face towel in his hand.

Aramaki gulped, and discretely pinched himself hard on his arm.

*Pull yourself together, this is no time to be chicken! You must be bold – swift – as forceful as a typhoon!*

"I'm...I'm Aramaki Satoshi. I just came from Ōita prefecture – I'm a first-year."
"Oh," said the other boy. "I'm Okumura."

"Okumura?" Aramaki repeated, his heart beating even faster. "Okumura Kōshū? Are you my roommate?"

"So you're the new member in our room?" said Okumura, without bothering to answer his question.

"Yes, I'm a pitcher. Nice to meet you!"

At that, Okumura looked a little more interested (though that wasn't saying much, considering how little of it there'd been to start with).

"I'm a catcher," he said. "Now, are you going in or not?"

Aramaki realized that he'd been blocking the other boy's way, and flushed.

"Sorry, go on in," he said, backing away and gesturing toward the door.

"What about you?"

"Oh – oh yeah, me too..." Trailing off, Aramaki stepped back forward. Okumura was looking at him expectantly, so after a moment, he gripped the cold doorknob and turned. It gave way, and when he pulled, it opened smoothly, swinging silently on its hinges.

What Aramaki saw when he opened the door, however, he would never forget for the rest of his life.

A floating white face, its eyes rolled upward unnaturally – lit up in the pitch black room with an eerie yellow light – a disembodied voice moaning, reverbrating through the room – and then as Aramaki stared speechlessly back, its eyes rolled back down to meet his. Realizing then that he'd met eyes with this strange creature – that death was imminent – that he should never have left home to come to this far-off foreign world where he knew nothing – Aramaki dropped all of his bags and screeched at the top of his lungs.

As he frothed and twitched on the ground, he heard distantly, as if through a long tunnel, an exasperated voice going, "Really, Sawamura-senpai?"

And then another voice, that let out an unrestrained laugh.

"Hey, it's a room tradition!"
BOOM!

The player swung, his face as white as a sheet of paper, but the sound of the ball slamming into the mitt could be heard plainly to everyone watching. In their dugout, the gathered Teito players' mouths collectively dropped open.

"Wh...what was that?!

"...wasn't that like 150 km/h?!

"Can a first-year player throw that fast?!"

Even the scattered scouts, observing the practice match from the area past the fences, were abuzz.

"Hey, don't forget to collect his data!"

"He only has fastballs...there should be a way to beat him!"

As he watched the increasingly panicked expressions of both the watchers and the opposing players, Kazuya's lips curled up into a smile.

If Sawamura was like a typhoon, sweeping his way onto the team with a near perfect game against Yokohama, Furuya was a ground-splitting earthquake – certainly not one to be ignored.

"Excuse me. Timeout please..."

Lifting his head in surprise, Kazuya turned to see Furuya raising his hand from the mound. His face had about as much expression as a wooden board, as usual. Getting up to his feet, he headed toward the first-year.

"What's wrong? We're ahead in the count...or do you want to confirm a signal?"

Furuya's eyes flickered down to his raised hand, and Kazuya followed his gaze. Seeing something dark red oozing out of the nail of his index finger, his eyes widened. Then, in a flash of realization, his brow furrowed in thought.

Furuya's method of pitching forced him to put all of his weight into his fingertips, and as he could now clearly see, his fingertips would pay the cost for such hard throwing.

But who would have thought he had such a weak point...

Raising his bloody finger to his mouth, Furuya licked it.

"Don't lick your hand with rosin on it..." Kazuya said, with a grimace. Furuya paused, and Kazuya sighed. "Now, get back to the bench without letting anyone see your hand. We can't let those guys
on the scout find this out."

"No, I can still pitch - " Furuya protested, but Kazuya pushed him forward.

"Just go!"

As Furuya grudgingly began to slink back to the bench, the coach must have realized, for he barked out, "Sawamura. Warm up your shoulder, now."

"You got it boss!" said Sawamura with a grin, jumping to his feet and swinging his arm. Kazuya smirked again, as he saw looks of relief begin to flash across the opposing team's faces.

They're in for a nasty surprise if they think Furuya's our only weapon.

But just then, a tall third-year stopped in front of the coach and stood firmly.

"Coach...I can go anytime!" It was Tanba. Kazuya blinked, watching the coach and the third-year pitcher look at each other.

"Tanba, you pitched the game yesterday, didn't you?" Ōta sputtered. "You seem to have already warmed up today, but - "

"Very well then. You pitch," said Coach Kataoka, crossing his arms across his chest. "But just for three innings. Sawamura, you'll pitch afterwards."

"Yes, sir!" Tanba roared. Putting on his baseball cap, Tanba began to jog toward the mound. Putting his mask back on, Kazuya walked back to the catcher's box and squatted down. As the other players returned to their positions to resume the game, he curiously looked back toward the bench. It looked as if the coach and Furuya were talking – and from the way the first-year was hunched over, it couldn't be good news.

The next batter from Teito got into position in front of him.

"Play ball!" the umpire barked.

Kazuya signaled for a curveball with his fingers between his thighs. Tanba nodded, and with a determined wrinkle in his brow, he threw.

The white ball shot out of his hands, directly barreling toward the batter, who stiffened, but just before it reached the plate, it bent sharply downward and slammed into Kazuya's outstretched mitt. It made a different sound from Furuya's ball – less forceful to be sure, but sharper and cleaner.

"Strike!"

Kazuya glanced down at the ball, before throwing it back to Tanba.

This is what it's like to be in one's third year...his curve is dramatically increasing in precision.

"Hey, do we outfielders have to just stand here like this all day?! Let them hit a little and make us work for it, Tanba!" Isashiki roared from center, while Kuramochi laughed his signature hyena snicker.

But with Tanba's next pitch, the batter struck out. Kazuya threw the ball back to Tanba, who adjusted his footing on the mound, stomping down on the dirt with his foot as if to reshape it. As the next batter got into position, Kazuya glanced toward the bench, where the coach was seated with a contemplative look on his face. Then, he looked at the bullpen, where Sawamura was currently
warming up his arm with Miyauchi.

Coach Kataoka would be assigning numbers to the first-string soon – the most important position of which would be of course number 1, the ace.

Tanba must be feeling pressured by these monster first-years...and I don't blame him.

In Kazuya's opinion, the ace number would come down to either Tanba, the third-year who'd been steadily sharpening his curveball over the past years, or Sawamura, the first-year who'd shown a powerful, and more importantly, reliable performance in the albeit short time he'd been here. Who got the number would all depend on what the coach wanted for the team, and Kazuya had confidence that the coach would make the right choice.

Kazuya signaled the next pitch to Tanba, who nodded determinedly. Kazuya raised his mitt.

But as for who I'd want to be the ace, personally...

The first-string members had all gathered at the indoor practice ground for weight training. While the bulkier members headed straight for the weights, Eijun made a beeline for the rack with the medicine balls. Though he'd been hard at work over the past few weeks training his body, he still wasn't happy with the strength of his core. Picking the ball up between his hands, he noticed Tanba right beside him, reaching for the ball beside it.

"Sawamura, where are you?" Eijun heard Miyuki call out from the center of the big room. He turned around to watch the catcher heading in his direction, but looking around at the rest of the room.

"Right here," Eijun answered.

"You should be using the medicine - oh," Miyuki came to a stop, with a peculiar look flashing across his face. Eijun raised the medicine ball toward him.

"Yeah I know," he said. After having spend two and a half years as one of Seidō's first string pitchers, Eijun was quite used to the pitcher's training and exercise routine.

"Furuya, you'll be using the medicine ball too," Miyuki said to Furuya, who'd been heading to the bands. "Strengthening your core will help both your stamina and your control."

"Stamina," Furuya mumbled.

As the sound of clunking heavy metal and grunting filled the air, Eijun got into position by the wall. Lifting his knee and stepping forward, he bent his waist and then slammed the ball down, popping his foot off the ground as he finished. The ball hit the ground before bouncing up against the wall. Eijun caught it, and repeated the process.

Beside him, Tanba was doing a similar exercise, except instead of throwing it straight down, he rotated his arms above his head. Miyuki was standing beside Furuya while instructing him on how to do the exercise, and as he watched them from the corner of his eyes, Eijun felt an inexplicable stab of jealousy. Thinking back, it had been Miyuki who'd expanded on Chris's teachings after he first joined the first string. But now that he'd went back into the past and already knew everything he'd been taught, all of that now would be as if it had never happened.

If it never happens in this time, how come I still know how to do it? Will I forget how to do it or something?, Eijun pondered to himself half-heartedly. Letting out a grunt, he slammed the ball down again. But as he reached to catch it after its bounce, he caught sight of Miyuki shaking his head.
Moving behind Furuya, Eijun watched as Miyuki reached around his body with his arms to fix the other pitcher's position – then the medicine ball smacked into his face. Eijun let out a surprised yelp of pain, taking a step back to catch his balance.

"Sawamura!" Tanba said in alarm, catching his own ball. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" said Eijun with a wave of his hand, trying not to wince. Looking down at the floor, he silently condemned the ball's descendants to life in a dumpster as it rolled innocently away.

"You idiot," he heard Miyuki's voice behind him, and then felt his hands gripping on to his shoulders. Eijun looked up and blinked, as the other boy's eyes roved across his face. "Where'd it hit you?"

"It's no big deal," Eijun said, turning a little red from the attention; the others in the room had started to look toward them. "It just hit my mouth."

"Hyaha!" Kuramochi, who had been running around the perimeter of the room, began to jog in place. "Looks like that medicine ball's got something to say to you, Sawamura!"

"Be more careful about hurting yourself, Sawamura," said Miyuki, stepping back. Eijun, who'd opened his mouth to retort back at Kuramochi, closed it, looking at the catcher in touched wonder – but then, Miyuki smirked. "I can't be around all the time to babysit you, you know. If you goof off again while I'm not there, it won't be my fault."

"What? I wasn't goofing off!" Eijun protested.

"You were thinking about Wakana, weren't you?" Kuramochi said accusingly, and Eijun felt himself sweat.

"You're the one always texting her on my phone," he grumbled.

But before Kuramochi could tackle him, a third-year named Endō pushed at Kuramochi as he jogged past, shouting, "C'mon Kuramochi, stop messing around!"

With the promise of death glowing in his eyes, Kuramochi ran off, and Eijun resumed his exercise.

The next thirty minutes passed quickly and uneventfully, melding in its entirety into a fixed, rhythmic routine as sweat began to trickle down his brow and his muscles clung down at him with their soreness. It was a good feeling; Eijun felt as if it were cleansing him, his mind emptying even if temporarily, leaving behind just the breath in his lungs and the feeling of the ball as it moved between the floor and his hands.

"Hey! Chris is playing for the second-string team right now!"

Absorbed in his exercise, Eijun would have completely filtered out the sound of the voice if the name 'Chris' hadn't broke jarringly into his thoughts. As it were, he paused, catching the ball in his hands, letting the words sink in – and then his eyes widened.

The other members of the first-string also paused, varying looks of bewilderment and shock spreading across their faces. Sounds of disbelief disseminated through the room – but Eijun had already begun to move. Letting the ball drop to the ground, he felt his cleats slam down on the ground as in one singular motion, he propelled himself across the room and out the door.

The slight breeze of the outdoors felt cool on his sweaty skin, but Eijun paid it no mind. Instead, he single-mindedly dashed to the secondary grounds, where – now that he thought about it – the
second-string was indeed playing a practice match against another team.

As Eijun neared the fence of the B grounds, he could make out shouting from both the scattered audience as well as from the team dugouts. Just as he reached the fence, panting hard – he saw a figure in the catcher's box throw hard with laser beam aim at third base, and the runner, looking shocked, threw himself back at the plate.

"Out!"

"Wow, what a super-fast pickoff!" said one of the bystanders near Eijun, looking impressed. "He managed to survive the loaded bases with no outs!"

"Everything turned around the moment that catcher came on," agreed another man standing beside him.

"Incredible," said one of the managers, her hand at her open mouth. "Why is he playing for the second-string?"

"Hahaha!" A familiar laugh rang out behind Eijun, and with a jolt, he turned around to see Miyuki, also looking slightly out of breath. "Good stuff as usual, Chris-senpai!"

"Miyuki...Sawamura!" The head manager turned to them, looking taken aback by their appearances. Eijun and Miyuki regarded each other in surprise – both the first ones from the first-string to arrive at the scene – and then grinned.

Returning his attention to the field, Eijun watched the game unfold, his mind flashing back to his own from his past. Indeed, this practice match against Kokushikan had been both his first and his last time he'd formed a battery with Chris in a game. It had been the first time he'd managed to bring his personal style of lifting his leg high together with his newly learned method of forming a wall with his right hand. It was the match in which life had fully returned to Chris' eyes, and Miyuki had watched his pitching with astonishment. The match in which Eijun had finally felt like he wasn't completely out of his depth – that he really belonged there, on the Seidō team.

So many memories had been made there – but now, he was watching from behind a fence, his vision of the field cut up into hundreds of tiny squares. Chris was squatting in the catcher's box, but another pitcher – a reserve from the second string – was standing on the mound, nodding his head to Chris' signals.

Eijun raised a hand to the fence, curling his fingers through its metal links. He could feel a faint sense of nostalgic longing tugging him toward the field like a magnet, but it was faint, for he could feel the presence of Miyuki and the others on the first-string standing behind him.

This was the view the others had seen back in his past, and now, Eijun was sharing it with them from the very beginning. On the other hand, he would probably never share the same kind of bond with Chris that they'd shared in his past – but there could be no regrets about it now. He'd done what he could for Chris, but even so, he had failed in bringing him up to the first-string. It seemed that while sometimes, a single flap of a butterfly's wings could churn up a hurricane, at other times, the flow of time was a torrential river which would simply splash around any rocks thrown in its path.

Letting go of the fence, Eijun took several steps back, until he was standing with the others.

It was sunset when all of the members of Seidō's baseball team lined up into rows in the indoor practice ground, their hands folded behind their backs. With the first-string members in the front two
rows, the second-string members in the following rows were ordered by seniority, third-years in the front. Tension was most noticeable there, the third-years barely able to contain the trembles that threatened to take over them.

"The person I call will need to carry the weight of our school name. Those who are not called, I'd like you to support the first-string this month until summer starts." The coach paused, and the tension was so thick it felt almost tangible. Several third-years even closed their eyes. "The new first-string player...is first-year, Kominato Haruichi." The coach paused again, but it was as silent as a graveyard. "Totaling twenty first-string players, we'll play through the summer. You may now leave to get rest for practice starting tomorrow. Third-years who weren't chosen, please stay."

Like an overdue sigh that had been finally breathed out, the first-string members and the rest of the second and first-years began to stream out of the grounds.

With a single look back at Chris and the other third-years who remained stiffly in place, Eijun followed them. But stopping just past the opening, he stepped to the side and leaned against the wall. He closed his eyes as he heard the coach's deep voice, and then the sound of the third-years who hadn't been chosen to play finally allowing themselves to fall apart and cry.

Eijun had seen the first-string selection happen more than a few times by now, but that didn't make it any easier to bear.

"Come on, Sawamura." Hearing Miyuki's voice, Eijun opened his eyes to see the catcher leaning against the side of a vending machine, his glasses dark.

"Yeah," he said.

It was a dreary, grey morning. Even without opening the window shades, from the darkness of the room, Kazuya could tell that it was raining hard.

_The training camp begins tomorrow so it's a good thing the weather forecast is predicting sun tomorrow_, he thought to himself, looking up at the blank ceiling. It was so quiet, he could even faintly hear the sound of the rain hitting the window panes and the tiles of the dorm roof.

After several minutes of letting himself indulge in the stillness of the morning, Kazuya finally got up.

Dressing casually in loose pants and a baseball shirt – there was no practice that day – Kazuya stuffed his keys into his back pocket and slipped into his sneakers. Turning the knob of his door, he opened it – and stopped, as he nearly ran into Sawamura, whose hand was raised in midair, ready to knock.

They looked at each other, and Sawamura lowered his hand.

"You do realize we don't have practice today," said Kazuya slowly.

"Practice is a lifelong commitment, Miyuki-senpai," said Sawamura sagely, folding his arms across his chest and nodding.

"Are you gonna be banging on my door every morning for the rest of my life then?" Kazuya shook his head, but for some reason, the first-year's face turned thoughtful.

"That sounds like a good idea...so you don't try anything stupid."

"Oh?" Kazuya crossed his arms across his chest. "What's that, Sawamura? Are you sure we're not
talking about you? How's that mouth of yours feeling?"

"Well enough," Sawamura grumbled, scratching at the corner of his mouth. "But starving."

"Haha! Let's get some breakfast in it then." Kazuya stepped out of his room and closed the door behind him. Sticking under the eaves of the dorm building to avoid the sheets of rain that fell around them, they began to walk to the dining room.

Sawamura was walking just in front of him, and as they made their way across the courtyard, Kazuya heard the other boy's stomach growl so loudly, he let out a small snicker.

"Oh man, I hope it's curry...I've really been craving curry," Sawamura said out loud, ignoring him.

"Curry? For breakfast?" Kazuya laughed again. "You're a strange one."

"It takes one to know one," said the pitcher, twisting around to shoot a bright grin at him and at the sight, for some reason, the laughter died abruptly, lodging itself like a rock in his throat. Taken aback, Kazuya had to clear his throat several times before it went away.

Picking up his pace, Sawamura hurried to the dining room with Kazuya following silently behind him. Several others on the team – including Chris, who smiled at them – were already seated there, digging into what looked like freshly-cooked warm rice, egg rolls, and miso soup, but Sawamura didn't look too disappointed.
This definitely happened before.

Just as the forecasters had promised, the second week of June opened with warm, sunny skies. Seidō’s summer training camp also began, with the symphony of metal bats hitting balls, rattling fences, and the shouting of practicing fielders.

It was the first day of the camp; having finished their classes for the day, Satoru and the other pitchers had warmed up and were now taking turns playing mock games, practicing multiple situations in which there were runners on base. Though a pitcher’s place was on the mound, once the ball was in play, they were expected to play as an infielder as well. However, as Satoru had almost never gotten to participate in any games during his middle school years, the glove felt awkward on his hand when he had to use it to actually catch the ball.

With a clang, a baseball went rolling on the ground to the right of the field. They were simulating a game in which the first baseman had to field the ball, which meant Satoru was supposed to run towards first base. Dutifully, he trotted to first and then held up his glove – but as he turned around to catch it, the sun's glare went into his eyes, searing them. He felt the ball bounce off the outside of his glove and go over his head before dropping to the ground. Satoru frowned.

"Furuya, don't miss such an easy catch!" Maezono, a second-year in the second-string barked at him.

Chris had been silently observing the pitchers until then, but it seemed he had reached a decision about something, for he said, "Tanba, Kawakami, Sawamura...go ahead to the bullpen." The three other pitchers turned to Chris, while Satoru blinked in surprise, wondering what he was supposed to do.

"Um..." Satoru said quietly. "What about me?"

"You're going to do this until you perfect it," he said, and Satoru felt himself sag. "And after this, you're going to catch outfield flies. Then, you'll have to throw back to the plate..."

As Chris continued to explain what he was supposed to do, Satoru felt himself zoning out. His gaze flickered to the backs of the other three pitchers who were walking to the bullpen, and then on the back of Sawamura in particular. While Satoru had been fumbling his catches and was slow on his feet to cover the plate, Sawamura had zipped around doing everything perfectly, as if it was all second nature to him. No – not if. It was second nature to him. It wasn't just that Satoru was simply poor at fielding either, because he'd noticed how impressed the upperclassmen looked as they watched Sawamura.

_How can we both be first-years...and be so far apart in ability?_, Satoru thought frustratedly to himself.

By the third day of the training camp, Eijun wasn't sure whether he was even awake or asleep anymore. All he knew was that he was almost constantly in motion.
In the morning, they warmed up with laps around the field before going to their classes. Then, in the afternoon, everyone worked either individually on their batting and fielding, or together in groups, simulating a thousand different possible situations on the field. After a short break for dinner, it was an endless repetition of pole-to-pole dashes and base running – exercises meant to drill the fundamental movements of baseball into your muscles – and then finally, they finished up with even more laps around the field. After which, they would wash up and collapse in bed for what felt like only a few seconds before they were waking up at the crack of dawn to repeat everything all over again.

Even worse for Eijun, he was stuck in his first-year body again. Years of weight training and muscle buildup had all been stripped away from him like a band-aid from a fresh wound, leaving behind a sore, aching lump of mass that wouldn't move as he wanted it to no matter how hard he tried. When his body refused to listen to him like this, practice became a matter of muscle memory rather than actual memory, and the edge he'd had over the other first-years practically ceased to matter.

After stumbling through the final lap around the field that day, Eijun flopped to the ground, wheezing and coughing out whatever was left of his lungs. Beside him, his fellow first-years joined him, and breathing hard, they looked up dazedly at the blurry night sky, too tired to piece even a single word together.

"Hey! Someone carry the first-years!"

Tanba was avoiding pitching to him – that, at least, was obvious. And if Kazuya had to single out a reason, he’d say it had to do with how their personalities clashed. Tanba was straight-forward and serious, while he generally wasn’t received that way. It was nothing new to Kazuya of course. After all, he had a long history of pissing people off, and he didn’t intend for it to stop any time soon.

However, they’d been on the same team for two years now, and Tanba had never made his aversion so blatant as to affect their behavior to each other. At least, until now.

Kazuya had spotted multiple times Tanba disappearing off with Miyauchi when no one else was practicing, and when Kazuya had offered to catch for Tanba, he’d been turned down. Clearly, Tanba was up to something.

"Have you been practicing the forkball in secret lately?" Sweat still pouring off his face, Kazuya seated himself on the bench, making sure to leave some distance between himself and the third-year pitcher. It was the fourth day of the summer training camp, and by now, everyone, not just the first-years, was starting to feel really wiped out. "With your height, Tanba-san, I think it's an excellent choice of weapon. But no matter what breaking ball you throw, it's the fastball that brings it to life. Please don't ever forget that." Glancing up, Kazuya offered Tanba the least smug smile he could manage – which was in his way, a peace offering.

But Tanba looked away, and with an irritated click of his tongue, he got up. Leveling a hard look down at Kazuya, he stated, "It's up to you to decide if it's useful or not. But I have faith in what I can manage – which was in his way, a peace offering.

Kazuya watched him go, the smile lingering on his face.

A typical pitcher he was, Tanba. Clearly he meant to do whatever he could to keep the mound to himself, especially now that a monster first-year like Sawamura had joined the team.

*Man, pitchers are all egotists. Though...being able to lead those egotists is why I enjoy being a catcher so much.*
"What's with that scary smile on your face?"

Kazuya blinked and looked up to see Sawamura peering down at him suspiciously. He was red-faced and sweating even more profusely than Kazuya, his dark hair matted around his face and sticking up at angles around his neck.

"Aren't you supposed to be doing your practice drills with Chris-senpai and Furuya, Mr. First-year?"

A guilty look passed across Sawamura's face, and he kicked uneasily at the ground at his feet, sending dust flying.

"Thought I'd come to...uh...see what you're up to," he said, and Kazuya felt his smile shift into a sly grin.

Right.

More likely, that he'd gotten too tired and slipped away to take a break.

Suddenly, an idea popped into his head. Casually, Kazuya perked up and then leaned to the side as if looking at something behind the first-year. He raised his hand and with a big wave, he called out, "Chris-senpai!"

Sure enough, letting out a spluttering gasp of disbelief, Sawamura's eyes went round.

"C-C-Christ-senpai?!" Sawamura spun around, wringing his hands. "I swear I wasn't goofing off, I was just – just...huh?" For several moments, he looked around confusedly, before finally realizing that there was nobody there. He sagged in relief – and then spun back around to face Kazuya with a furious stab of his finger. "Miyuki! You tricked me!"

"Pupupu!" It would never fail to amuse Kazuya how much Sawamura hero-worshipped Chris. He knew it would kill the first-year to disappoint Chris in any way. Personally speaking though, after seeing how much Sawamura had brought back some of the life in Chris' eyes, Kazuya thought the first-year would have to at least murder the catcher's father before being able to invoke a negative emotion from him.

"I was gonna bring you some more Every Burgers tonight, but you can forget that now! I'm gonna give it all to Chris-senpai!" With a final stab of his finger straight in Kazuya's laughing face, Sawamura indignantly stomped away.

But of course, Sawamura still showed up at his door that evening, red-faced, grumbling, and gripping a box of Every Burgers in his hands.

Kazuya would rather die before admitting it to him, but Sawamura's frequent visits...perplexed him.

In fact, 'perplexing' was a good word to describe Sawamura.

Why did the first-year come to see him so frequently? It couldn't be because he was lonely. He had Kuramochi and Masuko in his room, and both were always good company – even if Kuramochi did have an annoying tendency to practice his wrestling moves on people. Besides, Sawamura rarely stayed for long. Most of the time, he was in and out in less than five minutes. In fact, if the mere notion of it hadn't been so completely ridiculous, Kazuya would say that it was almost as if the first-year were checking in on him.

Kazuya had initially thought that Sawamura was coming over so that he could ask the catcher to catch for him. Now, he wasn't so sure, but...what else could it be?
"Well, well, well, look who it is. Who was it earlier that said they were going to give their Every Burgers to Chris-senpai?"

"I found another one," Sawamura grumbled, thrusting the bag into Kazuya's hands. "Stuffed all the way in the back. Past its expiration date. Probably gone bad by now." He turned around to leave.

"Wait, Sawamura," Kazuya called out, and the first-year stopped. Critically, he looked Sawamura up and down; he was still in his dirtied baseball uniform, the chest area completely brown with dirt. "Go wash up and then come back here. Bring Furuya with you."

"Furuya?"

For Eijun, dragging a tired and bewildered Furuya all the way up to the second floor of the dormitory brought back memories of his many laps around the field with his trusty sidekick tire.

"I don't want to," Furuya half mumbled for the fifth time as they stood outside Miyuki's door. Ignoring him, Eijun knocked on the door and a second later, it opened.

"Ah, finally," said Miyuki. He opened the door wider, and Eijun realized that most of the other upperclassmen on the regular lineup were inside. Masuko was snoring on the bed and Isashiki was on his stomach on the floor, watching Kuramochi and several others play Street Fighter on the TV. With an air of complete contemplation, Yūki was seated in front of a shogi board.

As they entered the room, Yūki looked up and eyed Eijun with interest, clearly identifying him as a potential rival. Eijun felt himself sweat.

"Tetsu-san and Nakata are commuters, so they come here to play when there're camps," Miyuki explained. "I called you two here because it's not bad to learn about the people playing defense behind you, right?"

Eijun blinked, taking in Miyuki's smiling face.

*So that's what was on his mind...*

Then, a muscle on his temple begin to twitch as he realized who exactly he was talking to.

"But really, you just wanted us to come here and distract them so you can get some sleep, didn't you?" Eijun said accusingly, and Miyuki's smile turned into a wide grin.

"I'm heading over to Zono's room to sleep. Seeya!" In a flash, Miyuki left the room. Aghast, Eijun slowly turned around, waiting for the inevitable –

"Hurry up and make your move," Yūki said seriously.

"Oi! Come and massage me!" Isashiki jerked his head at Furuya.

"Sawamura! Where's my juice?!" Kuramochi yelled out, furiously jerking his controller.

"That'll be grape for me," Nakata added.

His mouth making a thin line, Eijun felt himself shrivel down to the ground.

*Being a first-year again sucks,* he wept internally to himself.

Soon, he and Furuya were sent back outside with the missive to pick up drinks for everyone in the
room. Their arms full with cans, Eijun blearily pressed another button. With a clatter, it rolled out into the dispenser and he bent down to pick it up.

"Oh – the captain wants oolong tea," said Furuya behind him.

Eijun paused and then looked up at the other first-year. While Furuya had never been the expressive type, Eijun had learned how to distinguish between his facial expressions over the years. For some reason right now, judging from the slightly raised eyebrows and the partially opened mouth, Furuya was happy.

"Why do you look so – " he started exasperatedly, and then broke off, as a sudden thought struck him.

Eijun had never really noticed it before. After all, he himself was loud. And since he was almost always surrounded by people, he'd never thought too much about whatever was going on outside of his immediate vicinity.

But after he became the captain of the Seidō baseball team, he'd started to notice little things he'd never noticed before. Things like which members stayed up extra late at night working on their swing. Which members ate the most servings of rice at meal times. Which members reacted well to criticism, and which didn't react so well.

And he'd also learned that there were people out there who weren't always surrounded by people – people who found themselves standing alone, with no idea how to join in.

_Maybe Miyuki also had this in mind._

Eijun raised a hand and thumped Furuya on the shoulder. Furuya looked taken aback.

"C'mon," he said. "The senpai are waiting."

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"_Bow!_"

"Have a good game!" The two teams, one in white and blue and the other in white and black, roared. The members of each team turned and began to run to their positions – Seidō, the home team, to the field, and Kiryū, the visiting team, to their dugout.

Squatting down in the catcher's box, Kazuya watched Sawamura pick up the rosin bag by the mound. Judging from how relaxed he looked, he wasn't nervous at all, even though they were going up against Osaka Kiryū, last year's runner-up at Kōshien. But then again, normal expectations didn't seem to hold with that particular first-year.

Even before the lead-off Kiryū batter stepped up to the plate, Kazuya could sense the animosity coming off of the visiting team – much of it which was directed at the first-year pitcher who was currently blowing rosin dust off of his fingers. It was the same deal as it'd been with Yokohama. No one seriously expected any first-year to be able to hold up to the same standards as an older, more experienced player.

But Sawamura didn't just hold up to them, he blew straight past them as if they weren't even there.

"Play ball!"

Sawamura was still exhausted from the long week of the training camp, and his performance would naturally not match up to his actual ability – but still...
Kazuya's lips curled up in a smile as he raised his mitt. Sawamura began to raise his leg.

*You won't be looking down on him for long.*

"Out!"

"Yeah, that's the way to go about it, Sawamura!"

"Don't worry about it, Sawamura!"

"You've got this!"

Satoru saw the watching alumni cheer animatedly through the metal fence. Meanwhile, with an exhale, Sawamura took off his cap and wiped the sweat off of his brow. Putting the cap back on, he followed the others back to the dugout.

"Nice pitching," said Chris with a nod. Seated beside the coach and the assistant coach, he had been tasked with writing the score sheet for the game.

"You've done well," Yūki said with a nod.

"We'll just have to score again this inning," Isashiki growled.

Satoru turned to look at the scoreboard. Wiping the smirks right off of the Kiryū players’ faces, Sawamura had managed to hold them scoreless for four innings. However, perhaps inevitably considering his condition, they'd finally scored a run in the fifth inning, and just now, at the top of the sixth, they'd scored another run. Sawamura had managed to end the half-inning with a fly ball to third, but it was clear that he was struggling.

Seidō was still in the lead with four runs, but as expected, everyone was exhausted from the training camp and hadn't been performing well the entire game.

"Sawamura, I'm switching you out at the end of this inning," said the coach. He turned to Satoru. "Furuya, you're going up."

Satoru felt his eyes widen.

*I'm...going on the mound?*

If his ears weren't deceiving him, then this would be the first time he'd be playing in a real game since their game against Keio in the Kantō tournament.

Satoru shot a look at Sawamura – but the other first-year was simply sitting down on the bench with an exhausted look on his face. He'd accepted a towel from Haruichi and was now gulping down a cup of water.

Satoru squeezed his hands by his sides so hard, he was sure his nails would leave imprints on his palms, and that wouldn't do. Miyuki had even gotten him a vial of nail polish so that his nails would stop cracking so easily.

But if even Sawamura was getting hit off of by Kiryū, then what did that mean for him?

As if he had been reading his mind, Miyuki piped up from beside him, "Don't expect you'll be able to get by with just your speed today."
Satoru blinked and then stared at him.

"Miyuki-senpai," he said simply.

"You're tired so your speed's gonna drop. Expect to be obliterated." Miyuki grinned at him, and Satoru felt the slowly drifting snow inside his stomach begin to swirl up into a frenzy.

"I don't...I don't intend on giving away a single run," he said tightly.

It was the bottom of the sixth inning, and Seidō's offence had started with Yūki, who'd been walked to first. Masuko had failed to follow up, and now, with one out and one runner on base, Kazuya stepped up to the plate. Resting the bat on his shoulder, he looked out at the field.

Kazuya held back a sigh. Sawamura had thrown well considering how tired he was, but embarrassingly, he himself had been hitless so far at all of his at-bats.

The Kiryū pitcher grinned widely at him, revealing two rows of sparkling white teeth, and Kazuya shuddered. The pitcher raised his leg. Kazuya waited – and just as the pitcher entered his motion, he saw Yūki take off from first-base. The ball flew toward him, but he didn't swing.

"Ball!"

Behind him, the catcher raised his hand to throw the ball to second but it was too late; the Seidō dugout burst into admiring cheers. Irritably, the catcher threw the ball back to the pitcher. Meanwhile, Kazuya glanced at the dugout – and immediately, he spotted Kuramochi, who had a snarky grin on his face, and Sawamura, who looked decidedly unimpressed.

Kazuya felt himself sweat. He'd been a little cocky on his past at-bats, letting the meatballs by and aiming for the breaking balls, but that had obviously back-fired.

"It's about time I hit, or who knows what those guys will say to me..."

He lowered himself back into batting position. Their first pitch had been, as expected, a ball on a tight-course to the inside. But with the captain now on second base, if they used the same strategy they'd been using the whole game, they'd be throwing...

As the next ball came bulleted toward him, Kazuya stepped down hard and swung at the ball at his full strength, pulling it forward. The heavy clanging sound of impact rang like music in his ears, and as he threw aside the bat and began to run, he watched it fly straight along the right field baseline.

"Gotta fight power with power," Kazuya grinned to himself as he ran past first. Meanwhile, Yūki had made it back home with time to spare.

With Shirasu's sacrifice bunt sending Kazuya to third, it was time for Sawamura's final at-bat. Kazuya watched as the first-year lowered into a batting stance, a determined look on his face. He'd been hitless in this game so far as well.

"Two outs!" Kiryū's catcher called out, raising his pinky and index finger into the air.

Generally, Kazuya preferred that his pitchers not over-strain themselves but now that Sawamura wouldn't be pitching anymore, he yelled out, "Sawamura, remember to keep your eyes on the ball!"

Sawamura didn't respond, looking straight forward at the pitcher. His usual rowdy air had dissipated – or rather, wrapped itself tightly around the pitcher. His eyes were glowing the way they tended to
The pitcher, his face grotesquely twisted up in another grin, raised his leg, preparing himself to run – and as the ball left the pitcher's hand, he began to dash forward to home plate.

There was a hard clang of metal hitting ball. To his satisfaction, Kazuya stepped foot on the plate, and turning around, saw the center fielder bending over to pick up the ball while Sawamura slid onto first.

The day after the game against Kiryū, Seidō had just finished up its first game of the day against Inashiro. Both teams had sent out their reserve team rather than their regular lineup. Unlike with Osaka Kiryū, both Seidō and Inashiro were in the same block in the summer regionals, and it was clear that both coaches wanted to avoid revealing their hands this early on in the season.

It was Eijun's turn to clean up the dugout (one of his duties as a first-year) after the game, and so, he found himself hefting two big blue bags full of equipment across the field when he heard a somewhat familiar voice call out to him, "Hey you there with the bags!" Eijun stopped and turned around – and seeing the two faces looking back at him, he inadvertently froze. "Yeah, you. Is Sawamura throwing today?"

It was the captain of Inashiro, looking menacing with his arms folded across his chest, and beside him was the one who'd called out to Eijun – Narumiya, their ace. And unbeknownst to him, Eijun's immortal enemy. Eijun turned around fully to face them, his eyes slightly narrowing. As expected, neither had played in the previous game.

With a self-confident smirk on his face, the southpaw was casually tossing a baseball in his left hand. "I hear he's a complete monster, even though he's just a first-year. I figured I wanted to see what kinds of pitches he's got."

"You're just worried he might be packing more in his arsenal than you," said the captain – Harada, Eijun remembered. "You're as small as always."

"Shut it! I'm just genuinely curious!" Narumiya indignantly waved his glove at Harada, who remained immobile in his boulder-like manner.

"The first-years aren't throwing today," Eijun said, being careful about his wording, as neither had seemed to have recognized him.

"Seriously?" Narumiya whined, his mouth dropping open. "But that's what I came here to see! He got a shutout from Yokohama Academy, right?"

"Uh...yeah, I guess."

"Hey, how'd he do that? What's his top speed? What kind of breaking balls does he throw? Why isn't he throwing?" Drawing closer to Eijun, Narumiya rattled out question after question, his eyes sparkling. "Does he not feel well? Or are you just keeping him a secret?"

Eijun scowled, backing away. He respected the other pitcher's skills – it could be called in some ways complete, with a repertoire comprising of a sharp slider, a forkball, a fastball almost as fast as Furuya's, and a changeup. But there had always been something about Narumiya that irritated him. His pitching style was almost...condescending.

"You'll find out when the time comes," he said simply, and took vindictive pleasure in seeing how
Narumiya's face fell.

Leaving the two Inashiro players around, Eijun began to continue lugging the two bags toward the storage room – but he had only taken a few steps when suddenly, he heard Narumiya yell out, "Catch!"

Turning around, he was just in time to see Narumiya fling his arm back and then throw. The ball barreled out of his hands, spiraling high in the air before dropping down toward Eijun – who stepped aside and let the ball drop to the ground. It rolled for several meters before he stopped it with the side of his foot.

"You idiot, he doesn't have a glove," he heard Harada berate Narumiya.

"Sorry, can you throw it back?" Narumiya called out innocently, holding up his glove.

Setting down the two bags, Eijun bent over and picked up the ball. Tossing it in his left hand, he looked at Narumiya's grinning face.

*I'm probably going to regret this.*

Lifting his leg up high and forming a wall with his right hand, Eijun stepped down hard on the ground and then flung the ball forward.

Narumiya's eyes widened. He lifted his glove – but just before the ball reached him, it sharply curved to the right and glanced off of it. Dropping to the ground, it rolled away.

After several moments of shocked silence, Harada and Narumiya mutely looked up from the ball to where Eijun was standing. It was clear from the looks on their faces, that whatever they'd expected, the pitch he had just thrown hadn't been anywhere near it.

As for what happened next, Eijun had fully intended on coolly picking up the bags and walking away in a dignified manner, but it was not to be.

Eijun buckled forward as – "Thai kick!" – something hard collided with his behind. Letting out a decidedly undignified squawk of pain, he grabbed his throbbing behind, hopping up and down.

"What's the point of having you not play today if you're gonna go around giving the enemy teams a personal demonstration of your pitch?!!"

"And don't throw outside of the field," said an exasperated voice.

Through pained eyes, Eijun peeked up to see Kuramochi and Miyuki looking down at him, and was greeted with a strong – and unwanted – feeling of déjà vu.

*This definitely happened before,* he moaned to himself.

"So you're Sawamura," he heard Narumiya say in an odd voice. Eijun turned to see that the ace had stopped smiling and was regarding him with cold, icy eyes. For several seconds, they glared at each other. Then, Narumiya turned away, saying, "Let's go, Masa-san."

And they left.

"Haha!" Miyuki laughed as he bent over to pick up one of the blue bags Eijun had set down. "Just by seeing that one pitch, you made Narumiya feel threatened by you."

"We're gonna make them pay for last summer," Kuramochi said vindictively.
Eijun turned to give the retreating backs of the Inashiro battery one last look. Then, as he bent down to pick up the other blue bag, he suddenly realized that the hand he'd used to throw the ball was shaking. He stopped and stared at it.

"You nervous for this summer?" Miyuki said, also looking down at his hand. Without answering at first, Eijun opened and closed it reflexively.

"A little," he finally said truthfully. "But also...excited."

*I'm allowed to be excited...right, Miyuki?*

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**- Glossary -**

**Baserunning** = The act of running around the bases, performed by members of the team at bat.

**Home team vs Visiting team** = In baseball, the visiting team always bats first. This is also where the term 'home field advantage' comes from. Because the home team bats at the bottom half of the inning, they have the last at bats in any game. Meaning, if they are behind in score, they have the advantage of being able to hit a walk-off, and if they are ahead, their players get to rest if the visiting team fails to tie the score.

**Walk-off** = Not in this chapter, but addressed in the previous definition. A walk-off is any game move that ends/wins the game immediately (i.e. a walk-off homerun at the bottom of the ninth) and allows the players to literally walk off the field.

**Sacrifice bunt** = A batter's act of deliberately bunting the ball, before there are two outs, in a manner that allows a runner on base to advance to another base. This almost always results in the batter being 'sacrificed' (that is, getting an out), thus, the name.

**Pitches:**

- **Forkball:** A (vertically moving) breaking ball that moves like a fastball but drops down before it reaches the plate.

- **Slider:** A (horizontally moving) breaking ball that breaks down and away from a right-handed hitter.
The Shuhoku practice game had been going well. Seidō far outstripped the other team, being ahead by twelve runs to zero by the top of the seventh inning.

Kazuya even felt that he and Tanba had reached some sort of mutual understanding. For the first time in their time as teammates, the third-year pitcher had taken the initiative to reach out to Kazuya and ask him to take a look at his pitches. And during the game, Tanba had shown everyone on the team that his years at Seidō had not been for nothing. His strong spirit had been made clear, and Kazuya thought that just in time for the summer tournament, Tanba could finally be the ace they'd all been hoping he would become.

But then –

The blue batting helmet, cracked at the side, crashed into the ground. Tanba soon followed it, slumping almost unnaturally down.

"Tanba!"

With panicked expressions, Coach Kataoka—the rest of the Seidō team right behind him—dashed toward where the third-year pitcher had fallen face-first to the ground. Kazuya glanced at the responsible baseball, which was lying innocently by the pitcher's feet. There was a smear of red blood on it.

"I'm...fine...I can stand..." Tanba croaked unconvincingly. He tried to get up, but with a wince of pain, he fell back down.

The rest of the game was cancelled. An ambulance soon arrived, the red and white painted van bringing back unpleasant memories for Kazuya, and Tanba was taken away. The visiting teams Inashiro and Shuhoku left, and the Seidō team was dismissed for the rest of the day. In a nightmare-like daze, they returned to their dorms.

The events of what occurred in the Yakushi game during the fall tournament finals remained in stark clarity in Eijun's memories.

Even now, years later, he still had nightmares about it.

He'd once heard that some people dreamed in black and white, and he wished with all his heart that he could've been the same, if but to reduce just one detail that he remembered. But instead, he'd been cursed to dream in color, and so he did, revisiting every moment in vivid detail.

The whiteness of Miyuki's face. The whiteness of the baseball that hurled down from the mound to
where he was waiting. The cry of Strike! from the umpire, and then the sound of the brown bat dropping down to the ground with a clatter. The way Miyuki's body curved almost gracefully through the air and then the sickening sound of his body meeting ground, as a blue batting helmet rolled away...

Miyuki had fainted during his at-bat, succumbing to the pain of his fractured ribs. It was only as the siren of the ambulance began to ring in his ears that Eijun realized that something had been terribly wrong. And it was only after Miyuki's unconscious body was carried away on stretcher and only as the white door slammed down shut in front of his widened eyes, that Eijun realized just how much of a fool he was.

"Sawamura!"

Eijun jumped, and Kuramochi snapped his fingers in front of his face again. He'd been lying in his bunk bed, looking up blankly at the wooden planks of the bed above him. He had thought that he was alone, but it seemed that without his noticing, the second-year had come into the room.

"Kuramochi-senpai," he mumbled. "When did you get back?"

"What's wrong with you?" Kuramochi said, a note of impatience in his voice.

"Nothing."

"Like hell you are! You're all depressed again, aren't you? Is it because of Tanba-senpai?" When Eijun winced, Kuramochi let out an irritated scoff. "Don't tell me you feel responsible for it somehow?"

"I don't," Eijun said quietly. "I'm fine, I just feel bad for senpai."

But of course it was a lie. He couldn't help but feel responsible.

Sure, it had been two years since it had happened in his original timeline. However, Tanba had gotten seriously hurt and had had to miss the first half of his final summer tournament because of it. If Eijun had managed to remember and somehow warn him, he couldn't help but think that all of that could have been avoided.

In his frustration, he felt his hands curl up into fists at his sides. A heavy feeling coiled up in his chest and he pounded the wall, half-hoping it could be his outlet – and promptly, Kuramochi threw a pillow down at his face.

His hands falling back down on his sides, Eijun turned over so that his front faced the wall.

Why did I even go back to the past if I can't fix anything that went wrong...?!

When Kuramochi announced that he was heading out to eat dinner, Eijun pretended to be asleep, not in the mood to eat. And eventually, after several hours of tumultuous thoughts running through his head, he did manage to somehow fall into a fitful sleep.

But it was a dream filled with red and white ambulances and batting hats crashing to the ground...

The next day, as if reflecting their mood, the weather was grey and gloomy. Kazuya found it hard to concentrate in class, spending most of the time instead looking out the window at the rain peeing down from the overcast sky. That day was the day of the tournament drawings, but somehow, he couldn't bring himself to be excited about it.
After their afternoon classes, the entire team gathered at the indoor practice grounds. As they waited for the coach to arrive, they milled around uneasily, wondering what the announcement would be, or pored over the paper with the summer brackets that had been distributed to them earlier.

"Wow, check it out, look how many schools there are!"

"But we won't play Inashiro until the final..."

"And we'll be up against Ichidai in the quarter-final."

"Are the upperclassmen going to be okay?" Kuramochi looked uncomfortable as he looked over at the third-years, who were silently huddled in a corner. "They've looked completely defeated since yesterday."

Without answering, Kazuya crossed his arms across his chest, regarding the third-years solemnly. It was no surprise that they would be the most affected by Tanba's injury, as they'd all joined the baseball team together. The prospect of one of their own not being able to play in their final tournament was just depressing.

And for this all to be happening right when we're supposed to be getting our spirits up for the tournament...

Kazuya shifted, and tearing his gaze away from the third-years, he began to look for a certain first-year in the crowd. He couldn't say it out loud, of course. But when they'd all realized that Tanba might unfortunately be down for the count, he'd felt a sudden burst of relief that Sawamura had joined the team that year. Kawakami was a reliable closer and Furuya showed a lot of promise, but neither had the strength to carry the team in Tanba's absence. Sawamura, however – he was ace quality. Of that, Kazuya was growing increasingly certain.

But where was he, anyways? Kazuya hadn't seen him since yesterday, just before the hit by pitch incident.

"Have you seen Sawamura?" he asked Kuramochi, who for some reason, scowled.

"He's right there." Kuramochi jerked his thumb at a corner at the other end of the grounds, where lo and behold, Kazuya spotted the familiar brown-haired boy hunched over in the corner. "He's in one of his moods again. I think Tanba-san's accident really got to him."

One of his moods...?

Leaving behind Kuramochi, Kazuya weaved past the crowd of boys, heading straight for the first-year pitcher. Just as he came to a stop in front of him, Sawamura must have noticed the shadow on his face, for he looked up. Kazuya opened his mouth, a mocking remark at the tip of his tongue – and then stopped.

"What's wrong with you?" he said instead.

Sawamura looked terrible. His face was pale, with deep black bags under his eyes. He still had bedhead, with his hair sticking up all over at odd angles. His frazzled eyes widened as he took in Kazuya's figure.

"Nothing, I'm fine," he mumbled, clearly not fine.

Kazuya frowned. Kuramochi had really hit the nail on its head by referring to it as 'one of his moods.' If anything, it was the first-year's greatest weakness as a pitcher; the one vice in his aptitude
for being the team's ace. Once on the mound, Sawamura was strong and resilient – but he was oddly fragile at times too, and usually triggered by what seemed to Kazuya, to be completely random things.

Before he could say anything however, the coach and Rei entered the grounds. Quickly, the entire team lined up in rows, an uneasy and tense mood gripping them into anticipatory silence.

"I'm sure you've all heard, but Tanba's chin was cracked by the accident yesterday. Luckily, it's not a complete fracture, and his brain was not affected, either. But he might not make it to the prelims."
The coach paused, but nobody made a sound. Kazuya noticed however, that the third-years' faces had darkened. The coach must have noticed as well, for he continued, "However, this is my sincere opinion as the coach of this team, and the decision was not influenced by my personal emotions. I am giving the ace number to Tanba! And until he comes back, we will fight the battles as one team."
Kazuya nodded; he had expected that. It was the best way to unite the team when everyone was feeling down about Tanba. "With that in mind, Sawamura and Kawakami...and Furuya as well, expect to be playing more frequently than before. As for the third-years...I want you guys to take the reigns and help backup the pitchers now more than ever before!"

"Yes sir!" the team roared back, with more energy than they'd possessed before. The third-years too looked better, as some of the color returned to their faces.

Kazuya craned his head to look at Sawamura again, but the first-year's head was bowed over, and his face, hidden.

Afternoon practice had begun, and the field was once again filled with the familiar sound of swinging bats and shouting fielders. In the bullpen, Chris and the other catchers were currently working in rotation with the pitchers. Currently, Kawakami and Sawamura were throwing to Miyauchi and Chris, respectively.

Sawamura lifted his leg up. Then, in his signature form with his arm whipping out late, the ball came barreling out to where Chris' mitt was waiting, and –

*Bam!*

Chris looked down at the baseball, slightly smoking in his mitt. Good control and good speed, as usual.

*But...*

Chris threw it back to Sawamura, who caught it, and began to get ready to throw again. Soon, the ball slammed into his mitt again.

*Bam!*

*Bam!*

With the last pitch, Chris' brow furrowed, and he got up. He looked up at Sawamura, but the first-year's face didn't change – as it'd been for the entire practice session, it was blank and expressionless.

If it had been Furuya throwing to him, Chris wouldn't have given it a second thought...but this was Sawamura. Sawamura was the kind of pitcher who usually had a slight grin on his face whenever he was on the mound. He was, in fact, Chris' favorite kind of pitcher – the kind you could tell truly just loved the game, the kind who got giddy just by throwing a ball. Sometimes an aura of intensity enveloped the first-year, and then the grin would disappear, but it was usually back as soon
as the battle with the batter was over.

Now, however, it was as if some strange robot had taken Sawamura's place. The pitches were the same – whether it was about the control, speed or power behind the balls, there wasn't much to complain about. But the heart was missing. There was a light missing in the pitcher's eyes. It reminded Chris of something, and it hadn't taken him long to put his finger on what it was.

It was what he'd used to see every time he looked in a mirror, back when he'd been lost in himself.

Chris threw the ball back to Sawamura, who caught it, and then readied himself to throw again. Waiting, he raised his mitt, watching the first-year's face carefully.

This wasn't the first time he'd seen Sawamura look this way. Chris had caught a glimpse of it during the game against Yokohama, right before their cleanup had blasted a double past Sawamura. However, it had disappeared soon enough, and the first-year had laughed and grinned so normally afterwards that Chris had thought that perhaps he was better now.

Bam!

He should have known better however. After all, Chris knew first-hand what it felt like to be lost and how hard it was to find yourself again. Sawamura and the rest of the team had been a big help in his turn toward recovery but even now, there were still rough patches during his rehabilitation, when he felt phantom pains in his shoulder.

The question was, however, whether he could help Sawamura the same way he had helped Chris...and as he helplessly looked at the first-year's desperately blank face, he felt his heart sink like a stone to his stomach.

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When their homeroom teacher returned their midterm papers back to them, Kazuya barely looked at his grades before throwing them in his backpack. They were exactly what he'd expected them to be – mediocre. After all, he only ever studied just enough to get middling grades. They weren't ever high enough to warrant praise, nor were they low enough to invite a teacher's concern.

They probably wouldn't have made parents happy, but that wasn't something Kazuya had ever had to concern himself about. So in effect, nobody ever bothered him about his grades – and that meant all the more time he had for baseball, which was what really mattered in the end.

For lunch that day, Kuramochi was eating in the cafeteria. Kazuya had already bought a yakisoba-pan at the school store, so he'd been chewing on it by himself in the classroom when he suddenly realized that he'd forgotten to buy a drink. After a minute's deliberation, he got up from his seat and headed for the vending machines outside in the school building's courtyard.

With a clatter, a pocari sweat rolled out into the dispenser. Picking it up, he pulled back the tab of the can. As it made a slight fizzing sound, he raised the can to his lips and took a sip of the sweet drink.

The sun was in his face, so Kazuya turned around – and immediately, saw a familiar shock of brown hair half-hidden behind a tree. Even without taking a closer look, he knew it was Sawamura. It looked as though the first-year had fallen asleep under the shade of the tree.

Looking away, he finished the rest of the yakisoba-pan and crumpled the plastic wrapper before tossing it in a nearby trashcan. Kazuya turned to go – but even before he'd taken more than a few steps, he came to a sudden stop. He raised a hand, rubbing the back of his neck. He sighed. Then, he turned back and walked over to the grove of trees at the end of the courtyard.
Sawamura's eyes were closed. Kazuya leaned against the tree, folding his arms across his chest.

"Taking a nap all the way out here, Sawamura?" he said lightly, and wasn't surprised to see the first-year's eyes fly open.

"Miyuki," Sawamura said, blinking up at him in surprise.

"That's senpai to you," Kazuya reminded him.

"Miyuki-senpai," Sawamura corrected himself. Looking around, he propping himself up with his elbows. "What're you doing out here by yourself?"

"That's what I want to know. What, were your midterm grades that terrible?" Kazuya grinned.

Sawamura only made a non-committal sound, and gestured to a pile of papers he'd been using as a pillow. Bracing himself, Kazuya reached for the one at the top of the crumpled pile. Looking at the red score underlined at the top, he raised an eyebrow. It wasn't great, but it was a lot better than what Kazuya had expected. In fact, it was just a bit better than his own scores. "Kuramochi said he's never seen you even crack open a book, you know."

"That's because I haven't," said Sawamura. A second eyebrow joined Kazuya's first one. So did that mean Sawamura had done this well without even studying?

"I never took you to be such a brain."

"I'm not. I'm an idiot," said the first-year cryptically.

Kazuya felt himself sweat. "Try saying that to your fellow first-years who didn't do so well. How'd Kominato and Furuya do?"

"Harucchi did fine and Furuya just barely managed to pass all of them," said Sawamura.

Kazuya laughed. "I heard from Ono that Furuya's been working hard to study for them. Good thing too, or he'd have had to take makeup tests to play in the tournament."

Sawamura looked confused for a second, before his face cleared up. "Oh yeah...you can't join in any extracurriculars if you're failing." He frowned. "How'd you do, Miyuki-senpai?"

"Haha! You don't need to worry about me," Kazuya said easily. "I always study just enough for it not to interfere with anything."

"What would you do if you couldn't ever play baseball again, Miyuki-senpai?"

Kazuya paused, a little taken aback by the sudden question. "Hey now, where'd that come from? Don't say such things. Baseball is my life, you know," he said half-jokingly.

"I know," said Sawamura quietly. There was something off about his voice, but when Kazuya looked at the younger boy's face searchingly, it was unreadable.

They fell silent, watching other students passing through the courtyard. After some time, when there was nobody else left there, Kazuya glanced at the school clock, which was mounted on a pole at the yard's center. Lunch break would be over soon.

"I'm going back," he said, righting himself and brushing several stray leaves off of his uniform. "You should head back too."

"Okay," said Sawamura.
"I'll be passing out your numbers," said the coach, facing the rows of the Seidō team members.
"Come take your numbers as I call you. First, number 1...Tanba Kōichiro!" The third-year looked stunned, and for a second, he didn't move. The coach took the number 1 tag from a smiling Rei.
"What's wrong? Hurry up and get it." Immediately, Tanba stepped forward and took it with shaking hands. "Don't rush. Get better slowly."

Tanba returned to his original place, where the rest of the third-years crowded around him encouragingly.

"Continuing...number 2, Miyuki Kazuya."

"Yes, sir," said Miyuki with a grin.

"Number 3, Yūki Tetsuya."

"I humbly accept," said the captain with a serious nod.

"Number 4, Ryōsuke Kominato."

"Yes, sir." Kominato smiled.

"Number 5, Masuko Toru."

"Yes, sir," said Masuko with a firm nod.

"Number 6, Kuramochi Yōichi."

"Thank you!" Kuramochi grinned.

"Number 7, Sakai Ichirō."

"Yes, sir!" Sakai pumped his fist.

"Number 8, Isashiki Jun."

"Yeah!" Isashiki growled.

"Number 9, Shirasu Kenjirō."

"I'll do my best," Shirasu said with a bow.

"Number 10, Sawamura Eijun."

"Yes, sir," said Sawamura. The coach paused – perhaps taken aback by being called something other than 'boss' – before going on.

"Number 11, Kawakami Norifumi."

"Yes sir!" Kawakami looked determined.

under his bangs as usual, the younger Kominato accepted his number. "As for scorekeeper...Chris, you can do it right?"

With a small smile, the third-year nodded.

"I'm sure you all understand, but there's no second chance in high school baseball. Our hard work and the sweat and tears we've shed...have all been for this summer!" The coach turned to the captain, who nodded at him. "All right...do the usual."

The rest of the team stood back as the select twenty members gathered into a circle. One by one, each member's hand rose to their heart.

"Tanba, don't shout."

Tanba nodded, his hand raised to his chest.

"Who are we?" The captain began.

"SEIDÔ, THE CHAMPIONS!" The first-string members roared back in response.

"Who's shed the most sweat?"

"SEIDÔ!"

"Shed the most tears?"

"SEIDÔ!"

"ARE YOU READY TO FIGHT?"

"YES!"

"Bearing pride in our hearts, we have just one goal!" The captain pointed upwards at the sky, and as one, the members followed suit."THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP! LET'S DO THIS!"

"YEAH!"

Seidô's summer had began.

It was jam-packed inside the Meiji Jingu Baseball Stadium, where the 260 teams from both East and West Tokyo had gathered for the opening ceremony of the summer qualifiers. It was a hot and sunny day; with so many bodies in close contact with each other, even in the huge stadium, the air was hazy, shimmering dully above their heads.

Among the team, Furuya seemed the most affected, looking light-headed, but he seemed determined to stand on his own feet during the ceremony. Afterwards, Haruichi brought him a cup of water, and regaining his energy, he managed to exit the stadium in one piece.

While they waited for the bus to come pick them up, Eijun found himself wandering away from the rest of the team, looking absently out at the crowds of faces passing by.

260 teams...and in just under three weeks, only 2 teams will be chosen to go to Kôshien.

It was always unsettling to think of it that way. Eijun sighed.
And then behind him, someone cleared his throat, and said, "Sawamura."

Eijun turned to see Tanba, with Miyuki and Chris standing just behind him. He blinked, confused, his eyes flicking back and forth between the three faces.

"Tanba-senpai?" he said cautiously.

"I heard that you've been feeling down," said Tanba, looking uncomfortable. "Since I got...hurt. Is that true?"

Eijun felt blood begin to rush to his face, and his eyes widened.

"I don't...I..." he sputtered, wringing his hands. His gaze shot to Chris and Miyuki's faces pleadingly, but they stolidly looked back at him, and he suddenly realized that they were probably the ones behind this.

"The coach gave me this number 1 even though I can't play," said Tanba, gripping the front of his jersey tightly. "And I plan to be the very best ace I can be. But when I'm not on the mound, Sawamura, you're the ace. Do you understand?"

Eijun nodded, his gaze dropping to the ground. Feeling a hand clap him on his shoulder, he watched Tanba's feet walk away back to where the rest of the team was gathered.

After Tanba left, Sawamura mutely looked down at the ground, his hands trembling noticeably by his side. Chris and Kazuya exchanged looks – and then to his dismay, Chris left as well, leaving just him and Sawamura behind.

Clearly, for some reason, Chris thought Kazuya could do a better job than him at dealing with the first-year.

Kazuya felt himself sweat. If it had been anyone else, he probably would have left too, since he hated dealing with touchy topics like this. But for some reason, looking down at Sawamura and remembering how the first-year, oddly enough, kept showing up at his door with all of his favorite drinks and snacks, he couldn't bring himself to leave.

"So there you have it," he said instead, a little awkwardly. Sawamura didn't respond, and after a moment, Kazuya sighed. "You are an idiot, like you said. Do you see anyone else here blaming themselves for everything that goes wrong?"

"It's different for me," Sawamura said, in a hollow voice. "It's different. You don't understand."

"Then let me understand," said Kazuya as patiently as he could. The first-year looked up, and for a second, something seemed to flicker in his eyes – but then it disappeared, and his shoulders sagged.

"I can't."

Kazuya felt himself sweat again, as he recalled something very similar having occurred before during the intrasquad game. But this time, holding on to his patience, he asked, "Why not?"

To his surprise, Sawamura replied, "You'd think I was crazy."

Kazuya raised an eyebrow.

"I already think you're an idiot. What's it matter if I add crazy to that?"
Sawamura opened his mouth – and then closed it, without saying anything. Time ticked slowly by, and Kazuya was beginning to wonder if he and Chris had made a mistake by confronting him here – when he opened his mouth again.

"What if there was something you could've done to prevent something terrible from happening? What if...you knew it was coming, but missed the chance to say something?"

Kazuya blinked, not knowing what to say. That had been the last thing he'd expected. What did that even mean? On the one hand, Sawamura did seem to be trying to open up to him. But on the other, Kazuya was beginning to wonder if he really would need to have a serious talk with the coach about the first-year's sanity.

As he struggled to come up with something to say back, there was a long silence, during which the surrounding sound of the passing crowd seemed to bob up and down distractingly in volume.

"You mean...so...you're saying you're a psychic?" Kazuya finally said, trying to keep the skeptical note out of his voice.

To his relief, Sawamura shook his head. However, his eyes then raked over Kazuya's face, and what he found there must have disappointed him, for his face fell.

"Never mind," Sawamura muttered. He turned to go. "I told you you'd think I'm crazy."

Kazuya frowned, and stepping forward, grabbed him by his forearm.

"Okay, fine," he said hastily. "Let's say you somehow knew Tanba was going to get hurt. And what...you didn't say anything, because it slipped your mind?" Sawamura didn't say anything, but his expression tightened, and Kazuya knew that he'd hit the mark. But how could the first-year have known...? No – at the moment, that didn't matter. What mattered was setting things straight with Sawamura. Kazuya shook his head, clearing it of any extraneous thoughts for the moment. "Well if it hadn't slipped your mind, you would've done something about it, right?"

"But I didn't," Sawamura said, looking frustrated.

"Oh really?" said Kazuya. "Tell me, Sawamura, since when was your middle name Superman?"

"It's not."

"Oh sorry, was it Jesus?"

"That's not funny," Sawamura scowled.

"You're always getting hung up over these kinds of things, Sawamura," Kazuya said slowly. "As if everything that goes bad is somehow your fault. But even if you could have prevented it, as you seem to think...what about it? Isn't it enough that you were trying your best? Why don't you ever stop and think about the things you are doing right?"

"Doing right?" Sawamura echoed.

"Like when you helped the first-years get back their energy in the intrasquad game."

"I just wanted a chance to play," he grunted dismissively, and Kazuya shrugged.

"Fine, then what about that shutout against Yokohama? You did that for Chris-senpai, didn't you? And what else is there...I heard from Ono that you helped Furuya study for the midterms. Plus, just
now, you heard what Tanba-san said. Don't get the wrong idea, Chris-senpai and I might have approached him, but we didn't tell him what to say. Usually he's not the type to say what he did, but he did say all that to you. You know why?" Kazuya tightened his grip on the first-year's forearm. "Because he thinks he can trust in you. You got the number 10 jersey even though you're just a first-year, and nobody said a single thing. Because they all believe in you.

"So, Sawamura. The summer tournament's beginning now. We need our ace while Tanba's gone. Are you gonna be it, or not?" Sawamura took in a rattling breath, and Kazuya pushed on. "I remember a certain someone telling me that they weren't any good at thinking. That they were gonna just try their best to take the team to Kōshien. Do you remember?

"I'm..." the first-year began in a shaking voice. "I'm no good at this, I know." He raised a hand to wipe at something in his eyes, and Kazuya turned away, pretending not to see. "It just feels like sometimes, I fall into a...a hole or something. And I can see the light at the top, but I'm not big enough to jump out on my own. And it happens over and over again, until I don't even know whether I'm in a hole or not anymore."

"That's what the rest of us are here for, you know. To pull you out," said Kazuya lightly, still looking away. "No matter how many times you fall in. Whether it's on the field or off of it, we're behind you. Don't forget that."

"Okay," said Sawamura, with a small sniffle. Kazuya quickly looked back at him, but was relieved to see that his eyes, while red, were dry. Then he realized that Sawamura was pointedly looking down at his arm – which Kazuya was still holding on to. Immediately, he let go, and suddenly, it was his turn to be flustered.

"Come on," he said, cracking a grin instead. "The bus is here."

They were the last ones to get on the bus. Ushering Sawamura onto the bus ahead of him, they found that Chris—who gave Kazuya a small thumbs-up—had saved them a pair of seats in the front. Letting the first-year have the window seat, they sat down.

Sawamura must have been exhausted, for even before the doors closed and the bus began to move, he had fallen asleep. Watching the younger boy snore lightly beside him, Kazuya felt his thoughts turn to their brief conversation before.

"What if...you knew it was coming, but missed the chance to say something?"

What could Sawamura have meant about knowing what would happen to Tanba ahead of time? He'd said that he wasn't psychic...but then, how else could he know?

His elbow propped up on the arm rest, Kazuya leaned his chin against his hand. He'd grown up making his own meals so he knew how to cook of course. But besides that, he didn't really know about anything else outside of baseball, since he only ever read and watched things pertaining to the sport. However, occasionally in middle school, Kazuya had tagged along with some of his classmates to the movie theater, if only to see what the big deal was.

Well...maybe he's a wizard then like in that movie where they go to a school for magic. Or maybe he's like Doraemon and came from the future. Yeah, that would explain some of his weird behavior.

But the thought was so absurd, Kazuya shook his head, and laughed dismissively at himself.
This one occurs right after the ending scene.

To the horror of the coach and everyone on the first-string team, by the time they’d returned to the school campus grounds, they could all see that something was very wrong with Sawamura. He’d passed out on the bus, sleeping through Isashiki roaring in his ear and Kuramochi demonstrating one of his new wrestling moves on his legs.

Finally realizing that something was off, Kazuya had held his hand against the first-year's forehead – and realized that he was burning up with fever. At the exact moment that his eyes widened, the rest of the bus fell silent.

As soon as they reached the school, Rei and Chris took the unconscious pitcher to the infirmary. Meanwhile, the team began afternoon practice, but nobody seemed to be able to concentrate. Fielders were fumbling easy catches, and batters swinging at clear balls.

"We must be cursed..." Kazuya heard someone mutter. "First Tanba-senpai, now Sawamura..."

As soon as practice was over, Kazuya and the rest of the first-string made a beeline for the school infirmary – but on the way there, they were stopped by Rei.

"It looks like he's been pushing himself a bit too hard," she said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "But don't worry. The doctor said he's just come down with a slight summer cold. He'll be perfectly fine with a few days of rest." Sharing looks of relief, they dispersed, some headed to the dining hall and others headed to their dorms to first change. Kazuya was about to head to the dining hall, when Rei stopped him.

"Miyuki, can you take dinner to Sawamura? He's sleeping in his room."

Kazuya blinked, wondering why she'd asked him and not Kuramochi or Masuko, but agreed.

Fifteen minutes later, he found himself outside Sawamura’s room on the first floor, holding a tray of that day’s dinner in his hand. He raised his other hand to knock – but then thinking twice, he tried the doorknob instead. It readily gave way, and he opened the door.

It was dark inside, but the window was open, and the glow of the sunset was enough to light his way. Hoping that one of Kuramochi’s game controllers wasn't lying around on the ground, Kazuya began to carefully navigate across the floor to the bunk beds on the opposite wall.

Fortunately, Sawamura slept in the lower bunk. He was sleeping peaceably, his breath coming out evenly. Someone—likely Rei—had covered him with a thin comforter.
Placing the tray down on the floor beside him, Kazuya was about to go when a thought struck him. Turning back around, he knelt on the bed—ducking his head so as not to bang it against the top bunk—and placed a hand on Sawamura's forehead.

It was warm, but to his relief, it was nowhere near the furnace he'd felt on the bus.

Satisfied, Kazuya stepped back – and then suddenly, with a crunch, he felt something clunky stab into his foot. Barely managing to hold himself back from yelling out in pain, he hopped back, raising his throbbing foot to his chest.

_Freaking Kuramochi!_

Despite his best efforts to be quiet, however, Sawamura suddenly moaned something and began to shift in his sleep. Kazuya immediately froze in place, still holding his foot up – and then the first-year's eyes opened a crack.

Their eyes met, and Kazuya felt his heart beginning to pound in his ears.

"You look stupid," said Sawamura drowsily. Then his eyes closed again, and he began to lightly snore. Feeling himself sweat, Kazuya waited for a few more seconds, but it was clear that the first-year had gone back to sleep.

Kicking the game controller under the bed, he limped out of the death trap that others liked to call Kuramochi's room.

Thankfully, by the next morning, Sawamura had mostly recovered. While being teased mercilessly by the upperclassmen for being even frailer than Furuya, in a desperate effort to change topics, he turned to Kazuya.

"Were you in my room last night, Miyuki-senpai? I thought I saw you."

"Nope," said Kazuya. "Why do you ask? Did you dream about me perhaps?"

The first-year turned red and mumbled something incomprehensible, and Kazuya grinned, tucking his foot behind his leg.

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_Omake 2 -

"Btw, a selfish request from me is to see a little MeiXEijun scenes because I shipped them so hard. Don't ask me why but I just love this pairing a lot!" - BabyKangaroo

This one actually takes place "in the future" (so before the beginning of this fic, if that makes sense) in the winter of Eijun's second year at Seidō.

"Masa-san!" Mei called out, turning this way and that to try and spot the hulking ex-captain. But as big as he was, somehow, they had lost each other in the crowd that had gathered at Meiji shrine for New Year's. Mei scowled; it was times like this, when he wished he were just a bit taller.

"Masa-san!" he called out again, but no one responded. In his frustration, Mei wondered if he should just call Masatoshi. The short time they got off from baseball practice for Christmas and New Years was precious, and given how busy they both were during the
rest of the year—Mei with being the third-year ace for Inashiro, and Masatoshi having
gone pro right after graduation—it simply wouldn't do to waste their time looking for
each other.

Mei had just reached into his puffer jacket for his cellphone, when he spotted a familiar
face by the torii gate that led to the shrine. Letting go of the cellphone, Mei sauntered
over, his lips curling up into a smirk.

"Hey there. The 'second Narumiya,' was it?" he said, and the other boy's head snapped
up, a scowl forming on his face.

"For the last time, I'm not – oh. It's you," said Seidō's first-string pitcher, Sawamura,
distastefully. He looked less than enthused to see him, and internally, Mei sniggered.

"Me," he replied, in a self-satisfied voice. "Some call me the 'first Narumiya.' Well
actually, no one does. Everyone just calls me 'Narumiya.' How are you doing, 'second
Narumiya'?"

"What do you want?" said Sawamura suspiciously. "Don't tell me you stalked me here
just to brag?"

"Of course not!" Mei flippantly waved his hand. "I'm visiting here for New Years. You
haven't seen Masa-san, have you?" Sawamura shook his head and Mei let out a long-
suffering sigh. "You'd think with that bulk of his, he'd be easier to see. He should just
wear a big flashing sign on his head, seriously." He turned to eye Sawamura, who was
currently fiddling with his phone. "Who're you waiting for anyways?"

"That'd be me," said a voice behind him. Feeling his eyes widen a fraction, Mei turned
around to see a taller boy in a dark overcoat with square-rim glasses.

"Kazuya," said Mei, feeling immediately uncomfortable. They had only talked once
after Miyuki's...accident the year before. Mei had seen him watching from the crowd at
a few games afterward, but not knowing what to say, he had never approached him
again. "It's been a while."

"Mei," Miyuki nodded at him.

"You're late," Sawamura said accusingly, stabbing his finger up at the other boy.

"I was getting us some takoyaki," said Miyuki, holding up a plastic bag, and
immediately, Sawamura's face lit up. He lunged forward for it, but Miyuki swung the
bag back, holding it out of his reach. "Nuh uh. What're the magic words?"

Sawamura's face turned scarlet, his eyes flicking to where Mei was regarding them
incredulously.

"Can I have some takoyaki," he mumbled.

"Some takoyaki, what?"

"Can I have some takoyaki, Miyuki-senpai?" Sawamura finally let out, his face as red as
a tomato, and with a laugh, Miyuki lowered the plastic bag.

Sticks of takoyaki in each hand, the two soon wandered away, leaving Mei standing
very still in the cold.
After what felt like a very long time, he saw a disgruntled-looking Masatoshi emerging from the crowd.

"Where were you?" Masatoshi said exasperatedly. "I was looking everywhere for you. And answer your phone!"

"Masa-san..." Mei began slowly.

"What is it?"

"Don't ever change."

"Huh?"

**Well. That wasn't really MeixSawamura at all. It was just MiyukixSawamura...sorry but that's the only REAL ship! Aahahaha!**

Chapter End Notes

By the way, we're at episode 21-22 in the anime, timeline-wise.

(On a side note: I feel bad that I've been neglecting Harucchi but he doesn't really have any emotional trauma to work with...ahaha!)

Also...ColdestSnow has translated chapters 1 and 2 of The Trajectory of Laughter into Spanish! You can find it on FFN.
Growing pains

Chapter Summary

Ah, I love baseball. - Seidō vs Maimon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Looking around interestedly at her surroundings, Wakana followed the small crowd that was filing into the baseball stadium. It was a hot, dry day, and most of the excitedly chattering people seemed to have come prepared with towels and paper fans.

"This is the right stadium, right?" said Eijun's grandpa, wiping his face with a white towel of his own.

"Yes, this is the Fuchu Municipal Stadium," said Nobu, looking down at a piece of paper in his hand. "That's what it said on the schedule."

"And is he really the starting pitcher? For Seidō's important first game?" Eijun's grandpa sounded skeptical. "That idiot grandson of mine?"


Ever since leaving for Tokyo, Eijun hadn't responded to her text messages very often, and the few times he did, for some reason, the texts didn't sound like him. Wakana had put it off to him being busy with his new baseball team and school, thinking that he was probably being worked to the bone just trying to keep up with such a prestigious name.

"Our first game is in three days, against Maimon West High." That had been the first text from him in a while, and it had taken Wakana by surprise.

"Good luck! But are you even playing?" she'd replied back, and then thinking he wouldn't respond for at least another week – like usual – she'd put her cellphone aside.

Hours later, just before she went to bed, Wakana glanced at her phone and found another message from Eijun waiting for her.

It was a short text message:

"I'm starting."

Wakana blinked. She flipped closed the phone.

Then she opened it again – but the words of the message on the glowing screen hadn't changed.

Eijun?! Is the starting pitcher?!

None of the others, not even Nobu, believed her until she showed them his text. Then, somehow, Eijun's grandpa found out as well and declared that he was going to Tokyo to see the game.
Most of the others had been busy with summer classes, but Nobu and Wakana had decided to accompany him to Tokyo as well.

"There'll be four games played here today, with Seidō going second," said Nobu, as they stepped up the stairs and out onto the seating area. The green field suddenly loomed before them. "Looks like the game's just about to begin."

Following Eijun's grandpa, Wakana and Nobu seated themselves near the crowd that seemed to be dressed in Seidō's colors. In fact, most of the bleachers on that side were occupied by a group of high school boys in blue shirts holding cheering horns – Seidō's reserve team members, likely.

"They've even got a brass band and cheerleaders," Nobu remarked, sounding awed. "Seidō really is a big name, isn't it?"

They looked at each other – and then sweated. Nobody would say it, but unless they saw it with their own eyes, it was going to be difficult to believe that Eijun—come on, it was Eijun—would be pitching for such a famous team, let alone starting.

"We will now begin the second round of the West Tokyo Qualifiers between Seidō High School and Maimon West High School."

A group of blue and white-uniformed boys began to stream out onto the field and immediately, Wakana straightened up, searching for her childhood friend.

"The starting lineups for these schools are —"

Wakana's eyes shot up to the electronic scoreboard on the other end of the field. When they had entered the stadium, it had been blank except for the names of the two schools. But now, the names of the starting players lit up.

Beside her, Eijun's grandpa made a sputtering sound.

For unmistakably, batting eighth, was '1 - Sawamura.'

Maimon was playing as the home team, and their team members had accordingly spread out across the field. As Seidō's members got ready in the dugout, they critically watched Maimon's starting pitcher throwing back and forth with the catcher.

"Come on now...number 10? Where's the southpaw ace?" said Yōichi, resting his bat on his shoulder. "And he's a submarine pitcher."

In Seidō's pre-game meeting, they had cursorily gone over the data that the other third-years had gathered while scouting Maimon's first game of the summer. Learning that their ace was a southpaw, they had practiced their batting accordingly – but now, it seemed their preparations had been in vain.

"It's almost unthinkable, but he must have spent the past two years practicing this submarine pitch just for this summer," said Chris, looking up from his notes.

"Play ball!"

The siren signaling the start of the game rang throughout the stadium, and the watching crowd began to excitedly cheer for their teams.

"Kuramochi! Hit it!"
"Stir things up with your legs!"

Getting into batting position, Kuramochi smirked as he looked out at the square-faced pitcher standing on the mound.

*Now...what should I do?*

Of course, it'd be best for Yōichi to get on base: he was the leadoff man, after all, and once he made it on base, there was pretty much nothing they could do to stop him from stealing. However, it also wouldn't do to just hit off a pitcher they knew nothing about...

The pitcher began to wind-up – and then the right arm snaked out along the side of his chest, throwing the ball toward Yōichi.

Carefully following its trajectory, Yōichi followed the ball as it scraped past just along the outside edge of the plate.

"**Strike!**"

*Damn, that's slow...*

The crowd had started murmuring since Seidō's first three batters had all gotten consecutive outs in a three-for-three at the top of the first. Seidō’s players began to run out onto the field for their defense, and as their starting pitcher took to the mound, Coach Chiba—Maimon's only coach—burst into a belly-deep laugh.

"They're underestimating us!" he said, excitedly hitting the dugout railing with his horn. "Maybe they think they aren't, but deep down, they actually are...and we underdogs will have to take advantage of that." He stabbed a finger at the pitcher, who threw a rosin bag down. "The proof is right there – no matter how prestigious they are, they wouldn't use a first-year if this first game was important to them!"

*"Bottom of the first inning, and the offence for Maimon High School starts with batting leadoff, left fielder, Hasunuma-kun."*

With a nod toward the coach, Hasunuma stepped into the right-handed batting box.

"Play!" said the umpire.

The pitcher began to windup, raising his hands high above his head and lifting his leg high. His foot slammed down and his arm whipped out from behind him. The ball flew out of his hand, barreling straight toward Hasunuma, whose eyes widened, and –

"**Strike!**"

Scattered murmuring broke out through the crowd again.

"That's a first-year, isn't it?"

"How fast was that?"

The catcher threw the ball back to the pitcher. The pitcher waited for several seconds, calmly looking back at the batter for a few seconds before beginning his windup again. The foot came crushing down on the ground; the ball flew out, and Hasunuma watched with sweat forming at his brow as it
flew past him.

"Strike!"

From Maimon's dugout, the other team members began to yell out encouragingly.

"C'mon Hasunuma! You got this!"

"Their pitcher's just a first-year!"

Hasunuma shot an uneasy look at his teammates, before returning his attention to the mound. The pitcher nodded his head at something the catcher had signaled, and again entered the windup.

Hasunuma's hands tightened around his bat, and this time, as the ball shot towards him, he swung.

But just as the ball reached him, it suddenly broke away, and as he finished his swing, it met no resistance, slicing through empty air. Behind him, he heard the sound of the ball slamming into the catcher's waiting mitt.

"Strike! Batter out!"

Looking a little pale, Maimon's leadoff batter began to walk back to his dugout. Standing on the mound, Seidō's pitcher bent over to pick up the rosin bag again, a small smile on his face.

If Kazuya had been a nice person, he might have felt sorry for Maimon's batters.

However, he was not a nice person. And so, he unabashedly grinned as Sawamura returned the favor Maimon had done them at the top of the inning, with a three-for-three of his own.

The first-year's cutter broke away from the batter's bat, glancing off its underside before bouncing hard onto the ground. Masuko from third base ran forward, and grabbing the ball, threw it easily to Yūki's outstretched glove at first base.

"Out! Batter out! Change!" cried the umpire.

As the rest of the fielders began to run back, Kazuya got to his feet. He looked toward Maimon's dugout; their rather overweight coach had been moving around and making a lot of noise before that half-inning, but now, his whole body had become still, and his face was terse.

"Aiming for that called game, are we?" Kazuya remarked teasingly to Sawamura, catching up with him just outside of the dugout. Together, they walked down the steps into the coolness of the shade, where the other players began to slap the first-year pitcher's back. "Your pitches have more power than usual today."

Sawamura's pitching style had always been powerful of course, but Kazuya wouldn't exactly label him as a power pitcher. Furuya was your textbook power pitcher, whose heavy focus on velocity caused his control to drop. Power pitchers depended on their speed overwhelming the opponent and making them swing at even the balls. Sawamura's pitching on the other hand, while not as flashy or obvious as Furuya's, was much more unpredictable – which in turn, made it reliable.

"If possible, I'd like to aim for a called game in every round this summer," Sawamura replied.

Kazuya stopped short. He blinked, wondering if the first-year was joking – but while he was grinning, there had been a hint of steel in his voice, and a rather serious glint to his eyes.
"Hyaha!" Kuramochi laughed. "You'd better be prepared to back up those words!"

Meanwhile, as Yūki put on a batting helmet and stepped out of the dugout, the brass band and cheering squads began to perform.

"Hit it long, Yūki! Yūki! Yūki!" the reserve team enthusiastically chanted from the stands.

Meanwhile, Maimon's catcher stood up and raised a hand; it must have been a signal, for their outfielders immediately began to shift to the right.

"What an extreme right-side shift," Isashiki growled, hanging his arms off the dugout railing. "Are they only going to throw to the outside for the righties?"

Kazuya crossed his arms, surveying Maimon's formation. It had clearly been structured around an understanding and wariness of Yūki's batting.

They've certainly done their research. But...

"It's possible they might just walk him," Sakai muttered.

"You guys, take a good look at Yūki's batting," said the coach, without looking away from the field.

Maimon's pitcher nodded at a signal from his catcher. Stepping forward in a low lunge, he threw the ball from his side to the outside. Yūki didn't move.

"Ball!"

Looking perturbed, the pitcher threw again. Just as the ball flew out of his glove, his eyes widened – and Yūki swung. His bat made solid contact with the ball, which shot straight past the second baseman. The center fielder dashed forward, but the ball flew past his outstretched glove, rolling deep through the outfield.

The crowd burst into wild cheers, some people even jumping to their feet.

"Yeah! First hit!"

"Nice hit, Tetsu!"

With time to spare, Yūki slid on his feet to second base.

"We don't need a long fly. Hit low and strong, and obliterate their defense!" said Coach Kataoka.

As Masuko stepped up to the plate, Kazuya put on his batting helmet and walked into the on deck circle. Resting his hand on the end of the bat, he watched as Masuko swung his bat in the air in preparation before lowering into batting position.

The sidearm pitcher threw – and Masuko swung. His bat meeting the ball with a loud and satisfying clunk, the ball flew low through the air past the infielders, before landing. As the right fielder ran forward to pick up the ball, Masuko ran to first and Yūki to third.

"All right! Two hits in a row!"

"No outs and runners on first and third!"

"Batting sixth, catcher, Miyuki-kun."
Holding the bat between his hands, Kazuya started to make his way to the batting box. As the cheering squad shouted his name, the brass band began to play the opening notes to *Sharpshooter*, his favorite cheering song.

Entering the left-handed batting box, Kazuya raised the bat up, looking back at Maimon's pitcher with a small smile playing at the corners of his lips.

They'd finished off Kuramochi with a low slider to the inside at the top of the first inning, and he was rather hoping they'd start him off with it. In fact, he rather thought they would – with a runner on third and no outs, Maimon was probably expecting a squeeze play.

"Aim and swing," Kazuya cheekily sang along with the brass band.

The pitcher's arm snaked out from the side, and the ball came flying out of his hand.

Kazuya's smile grew wider. Extending his bat down, he swung – and with a loud clang, he struck the ball strongly, pulling it to right field. Dropping his bat, he ran, watching the ball as it bulleted past the stunned infielders.

Maimon's catcher jumped to his feet, shouting instructions, but it was futile: Kazuya slid to second, sending up mini clouds of dust around him. Masuko—with some visible effort—made it to third, while Yūki stepped onto home without even having to slide. The dugout and stands burst into unrestrained cheers.

"Yeah! First run!"

"Nice batting!"

Taking off his elbow guard, Kazuya grinned. Even from where he was standing, he could make out Kuramochi's sulking face.

*Ah, I love baseball.*

"Batting eighth, pitcher, Sawamura-kun."

"It's Ei-chan's turn to bat!" Nobu cried out, jumping to his feet. Wakana straightened up, dropping her feet down to the ground.

"So it is," said Eijun's grandpa, still sounding awed.

The batter stepping up to the plate at that instant, with his wide eyes and somewhat messy brown hair, was unmistakably Eijun. She'd recognized him right away when he'd stepped foot on the mound, as well, of course.

There had been a lot of obvious changes in Eijun's pitching, so many that at first she'd wondered if someone hadn't somehow possessed her childhood friend. His pitching form had changed, and while Wakana couldn't exactly call herself a baseball expert, even she could tell that it had gotten a lot more polished and consistent. His pitches too had somehow gotten at least 15—maybe even 20—kmh faster.

*Is that even possible in such a short time?*

But there were more subtle changes too. Wakana couldn't be sure, not until she'd seen him close up – but it felt like the atmosphere around Eijun had gotten a little...heavier. He'd still been grinning on the
mound, and it'd been the same grin as the Eijun she'd known back when they'd still been in middle school, but it had somehow felt different at the same time.

"Ei-chan's gotten more mature," Nobu remarked seriously, as if reading her mind, and Wakana squeezed her hands together. Over the years, more than once, she'd found herself wishing exasperatedly that Eijun would grow up a little. But now that it seemed like it had actually happened, she couldn't help but feel a little sad.

*Eijun...you've went through a lot haven't you, these past few months?*

As they watched, Eijun swung and connected with the ball with a cracking sound that even they could hear. Wakana's gaze followed the ball, as it flew far out to the outfield, where it was caught by the center fielder. The Seidō player who'd been on third tagged up, dashing home as soon as it was caught, and the cheering squad near them began to cheer Eijun's name loudly.

"Bottom of the fourth inning, and the offence for Maimon High School starts with batting leadoff, left fielder, Hasunuma-kun."

"Hasunuma!" his teammates shouted out from the dugout, a hint of desperation becoming apparent in their tones. "C'mon, you got this!"

Anxiously, Hasunuma looked toward Coach Chiba – who grimly nodded at him. His hands tightened around the bat as he looked up at the mound, where Seidō's pitcher was calmly tossing a rosin bag.

"Aim for that pitcher's four-seam!" the coach had told him before the half-inning. "That's your best chance."

*But how the hell do I aim for his four-seam if I've got no idea what's going to be coming at me?!,* he thought fretfully to himself.

Hasunuma couldn't believe that this was just a first-year pitcher. He had never before faced off against this kind of high level pitching. The balls broke sharply away from their bats, moving seemingly randomly in all four directions, and Hasunuma knew that even in a dozen at bats against him, he would not even come close to being able to time his swing correctly.

Seidō's pitcher began to windup, and he felt his heart speed up. The foot crushed the ground below, and the arm—*where is his arm, dammit!*—had just begun to come into view when the ball was suddenly already flying straight at him and –

"Strike!"

Blinking sweat out of his eyes—*it's only sweat, dammit*—Hasunuma lowered back into batting position. As he waited, the pitcher's gaze grazed his momentarily, and the intensity of what he saw there almost had him stepping back. Thankfully, the pitcher's gaze turned away, and he raised his hands above his head. Hasunuma tightened his grip around his bat so strongly, it chafed his fingers even through his gloves.

He didn't want to admit it. However...

*So this is the strength of a top-tier team... We never stood a chance, did we?*

As if answering him, the ball came flying out at him. Hasunuma swung. With a dull thunking sound, it spiraled up into the air before coming neatly down into the shortstop's glove.
After five innings, the game ended in a called victory for Seidō High School, with an overwhelming lead of 15-0.

"Game set!"

Eijun ran out with the rest of the team to the middle of the field, where Maimon's players had almost unanimously broke into tears. Their coach too, holding his cap to his sizeable belly, was crying unashamedly.

This is always the toughest part, he thought to himself, lining up beside Harucchi and Furuya.

"Bow!"

"Thank you for the game!” Both teams shouted, bowing. The siren signaling the end of the game began to reverberate through the stadium, and all the members stepped forward to shake hands.

"Good luck you guys!"

"You'd better go to Kōshien!"

"We have no regrets from a loss like this."

"Hey.” It was one of Maimon's batters – their leadoff, from what Eijun could remember. He thrust his hand out to him. "You're really something. Good luck."

Eijun grasped his hand, and shook it.

"Thank you," he said warmly.

Clearing out of the dugout with their equipment bags, the Seidō team headed out of the stadium. Their supporters were leaving along with them, but more people were streaming inside; there would be two more games in the stadium that day.

"Great job, Seidō!"

"Congrats on your first win!"

"Make it to Kōshien this year!"

"Ei-chan!"

Hearing the familiar voice, Eijun stopped short and turned around. His mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Nobu! Wakana! ...Gramps?! What're you doing here?!"

Eijun had texted Wakana that he was playing, but he hadn't even told them the location or time. He supposed they must have looked it up online, but he hadn't expected them to come all the way out to Tokyo – at least, not for the first game.

With a huge grin on his face, Nobu dashed toward him; Wakana and his grandpa hurried behind him.

"We couldn't believe that you were Seidō's starting pitcher!” said Nobu admiringly. "But wow Ei-chan...I'm not sure how it happened...but you were amazing today! It felt like I was watching
someone else play!"

"Hehe," Eijun laughed nervously.

"Eijun," said his grandpa, and feeling a small lump rising in his throat, Eijun turned to him.

"Gramps," he started. "I – ow!" He broke off as without warning, his grandpa raised a wrinkled hand and smacked him on the side of his head.

"Gone three, four months, and not even a single phone call! Your parents and I found out about today only because of Wakana!" Eijun flinched back as his grandpa threateningly raised his hand again. "Is that how we raised you?!"

"I'm sorry, I was busy!" said Eijun, clapping his hands together and bowing his head. To his relief, his grandpa—while still frowning—lowered his hand.

"Ei-chan, when'd you learn how to pitch like that?" said Nobu.

"Looks like going to Seidō was the right choice, Eijun," said his grandpa, a reluctant but fond smile appearing on his face.

"You really were amazing," said Wakana with a smile.

After several minutes of catching up, Eijun heard his name being called. He turned around and saw the rest of the team boarding the bus.

"You have to go, don't you?" said his grandpa, and Eijun nodded. Wordlessly, he stepped forward and hugged his grandpa tightly, who seemed taken aback but returned it after a moment. "Eijun?"

"Thanks for coming," he said, stepping back. Giving Nobu and Wakana each a quick hug—Wakana blushed furiously—he ran toward the bus. The door opened, and with a last wave to the three, he stepped onboard.

Miyuki had saved Eijun a seat (though he'd claimed the window seat for himself), and slumping down in it, he let out a sigh.

"Was that your grandpa?" asked Miyuki. He was leaning his head against the window with his eyes closed.

"Yep," he said.

"You look like him."

Eijun let out a small laugh, and sank back into his seat.

"You think so?"

"What, no one's ever told you that before?" Miyuki opened one eye and grinned.

"I've only heard it once before," Eijun replied.

The bus began to move, and he closed his eyes.

Gramps looks well, he thought to himself.

< - >
It had been at the end of his second year, when he'd received a call from his mother telling him that his grandpa had passed away after having a stroke.

He'd skipped school and even baseball practice for the day, spending the whole time curled up in his bed, sobbing uncontrollably. The only photo Eijun had of his grandpa was a candid one he'd accidentally taken with his cellphone over the New Year's break. It was a blurry photo that was half his grandpa's face and half his dad's leg, but it was the only photo that he had of his grandpa, so he clutched his phone to his chest and cried.

He couldn't remember what the last words he'd said to his grandpa had been. It'd probably been a hurried "seeya gramps!". His grandpa had seemed to be in perfect health over the break, so he'd never even suspected that it would be the last words he'd ever say to him.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Tensing, Eijun didn't answer – but the door opened. Thinking it was Kuramochi or Okumura, Eijun turned to face the wall, not wanting to show his face.

But it wasn't either of them.

"Sawamura. Rei and the coach got a call from your mother. They said that you were excused from practice for as long as you need." Eijun didn't answer. He heard a sigh, and then footsteps – and then the bed creaked, as the mattress sagged down behind him. "Sawamura." A warm hand touched him on his elbow. "Sawamura..."

And finally, Eijun broke. Turning around, with fresh tears dripping down his face, he looked up at Miyuki, who looked solemnly back at him.

"It hurts," he choked out. "I don't remember what the last thing I said to him was."

Miyuki didn't say anything, and let Eijun cry on his shoulder for a long time.

When the tears had finally started to dry up, he showed his photo of his grandpa to Miyuki.

"Is that...?"


Miyuki looked down at the photo for several long seconds.

"You look like him," he said suddenly. Surprised, Eijun looked doubtfully back at the photo again, but he couldn't see it. He'd heard plenty of times that he took after his dad, but his dad looked nothing like his grandpa either. He'd heard some tentative comments that he might have his grandpa's wrists and slap-ready hands, but...

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," said Miyuki, an uncharacteristically gentle expression on his face. "I'm sure."

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**Glossary**

*Called game* = A game that is ended (mercifully) early due to a significant difference in points. In regional tournaments, games can be called if a team is leading by at least ten runs after five innings, or seven runs after seven innings.

*Squeeze play* = A maneuver consisting of a sacrifice bunt with a runner on third base. The batter
bunts the ball, expecting to be thrown out at first base, but providing the runner on third base an opportunity to score.

– Omake –

"I'd like to see how Eijun has to develop a new battery with Koushuu, since the futuristic Miyuki is unable to catch for Eijun anymore." – Katiella

This takes place in the spring (beginning) of Eijun's second year.

For Eijun, it was strange not being a first-year anymore – and stranger still being called 'senpai' by the group of new first-years that had joined the team. During the past year at Seidō, he'd almost forgotten what it sounded like behind his name.

"Sawamura-senpai!" Eijun turned around, his ears perking up at the sound. It was one of the new first-year pitchers – a southpaw, like him. He was promising but rather unpolished, and had been struggling with his form, rather like Eijun had during his first year.

"What is it, Watanabe?"

"I was thinking over what you meant by 'forming a wall with your right hand,'" Watanabe said earnestly. "And I think I've really started to get a feel for it!"

"That's great!" Eijun said with a grin. "Keep it up, and you'll be making the bench in no time!"

"Do you think I could make the first-string by summer?" Watanabe asked nervously. Adopting a serious expression, Eijun clapped his hand on his new protégé's shoulder.

"If you're going to dream...dream big, young grasshopper."

"Right!" Watanabe beamed. "So...could you take a look at my pitches then?"

Eijun looked up at the sun, with a frown on his face.

"I don't think I can, today," he said apologetically. "I've got somewhere to be."

"Slinking off somewhere again?" came a quiet and acerbic voice. Jumping, Eijun turned to see Okumura – one of the new first-year catchers, and also the newest member of his dorm room – taking off his sweaty catcher gear.

To both his and Kuramochi's disappointment, their attempts at scaring him on his first day had barely fazed him, and after the brief initial exchange of introductions, Okumura had went directly to bed.

"Slinking off? Is that what it looks like?" Eijun felt himself sweat. But with just a small shrug of his shoulders, Okumura walked away.

"I'm not great with guys like that," Watanabe remarked, watching the other first-year leave with a disapproving jut of his lips, and Eijun had to agree.
Kōshū was disappointed.

He'd always had a high opinion of Seidō because of its good reputation for producing the most well-rounded baseball players. Rumors had started circulating in recent years that Seidō was no longer what it'd used to be, but after seeing their games in the fall tournament, Kōshū had thought that they'd been wrong.

Now that he was here, however, he wasn't so sure he'd made the right choice.

The fields and available equipment were of utmost quality of course, and there were many impressive upperclassmen—among the batters, Kominato in particular was a monster—but there was something missing.

After several weeks of this bothering him, Kōshū had finally realized that what Seidō was lacking was spirit – and with it, the sense of self-assurance that was the characteristic of the truly strong, and the critical key to victory. In his opinion, it was likely due to their not making Kōshien for the past seven consecutive years, despite coming so close to it so many times.

*I guess the rumors weren't so wrong.*

"Okumura, once you're finished stretching, head to the bullpen!" One of the third-years—a catcher named Ono—said to him during practice one day.

The Seidō coach was new—the last coach had quit the year before—but he seemed to recognize Kōshū's talent, and had promoted him to first-string before the end of his first month there.

Entering the bullpen, Kōshū saw the two second-year pitchers, Sawamura and Furuya, throwing back and forth with two other catchers. Upon seeing Kōshū, one of them stood up and switched spots with him.

Sitting down, he pulled on his catcher's mask and held his mitt up. Standing on the other side of the bullpen, Sawamura waited in the set position – and then bringing his arm back, he flung it out, throwing the ball straight toward Kōshū's mitt.

*Slam!*

Kōshū threw the ball back, and waited.

*Slam!*

As Sawamura continued to pitch to him, Kōshū caught each one and threw it back.

He knew that his ability to do so was one of the reasons why the coach had promoted him to the first-string. Sawamura's pitches moved erratically, and the other catchers had a hard time catching them.

And in fact, one of Kōshū's reasons in coming to Seidō had been out of a desire to form a battery with Sawamura. He'd found himself moved by the southpaw, by the way he lifted his leg up uniquely high, by the way his arm came out deceivingly late, and by the way his eyes glowed when he stood on the mound.

*Slam!*
Well, the form was still there. But Sawamura's eyes no longer glowed on the mound, and Kōshū felt almost cheated.

*Maybe I should have gone to Teitō instead after all,* he thought to himself.

Practice had just about ended, when Sawamura abruptly stopped pitching. Taking off his cap to wipe off a line of sweat, he hurriedly left the bullpen with barely a word to anyone else.

"Sawamura sure is in a hurry," remarked a second-year catcher. "Where's he headed?"

The other pitcher—Furuya—shrugged.

And then, another week passed idly by.

Kōshū was doing his homework in the room, when he heard the door open. Turning around, he saw Sawamura stepping in, looking drained. He glanced at the clock – it was ten o'clock.

"How'd it...?" Kuramochi—Seidō's team captain, and his other roommate—started.

Sawamura shook his head, and Kuramochi's expression darkened. "Oh." He punched the wall. "Damn."

"Should you be staying out so late all the time?" Kōshū said quietly, turning back down to his math textbook. "Sawamura-senpai."

"...what do you mean?" Sawamura said guardedly.

"Your pitches have been a little wild lately," said Kōshū, turning a page. "I think you need some more sleep."

He couldn't see the southpaw's face, but he could practically hear him scowling.

"I'm doing something important," he said. "You just don't know."

"You've been going to the hospital, haven't you?" said Kōshū, and Sawamura fell silent. "You've been going with that third-year."

He'd seen them leaving the campus by car several times, always sitting on opposite ends of the car. But always together. It hadn't taken him long to put the pieces together.

"Yeah, so?"

"Isn't he the one who collapsed in last year's fall tournament?"

"So what if he is?" Sawamura said, starting to sound angry.

"I'm just saying," said Kōshū, turning another page. "But don't you think you should be concentrating more on the team? Since that person's not a member of the team anymore. Or do you not care about the team anymore?"

The room fell silent. Kōshū flipped another page, the sound of the turning paper slicing through the air like a knife. Then, he heard the door open—a gust of evening wind swept into the room—and then shut with a bang, and he knew that Sawamura had left.

Suddenly, a hand slammed down on the desk beside his textbook. Kōshū looked up to
see Kuramochi glaring down at him.

"Look, you brat," he said coldly. "You know nothing about what's happened. And you don't need to know. But don't try and act as if you have the team's best interests in mind when you don't even give a damn about it."

After that, things got a little tense, but training for the summer soon began. As exhausted as everyone was all the time, there was little room to be awkward about anything, though Kuramochi continued to treat him rather frostily.

And soon, the summer regionals began.

It was in the second round that for the first time, Kōshū saw up close the ex-catcher he had come to replace.

He and Sawamura, who was starting, had been warming up, when suddenly the second-year southpaw's eyes widened. His head jerked back, as if he'd been slapped, and immediately, without a second glance back at Kōshū, Sawamura ran to the fence separating the field from the middle section of the stands. Perplexed, Kōshū lifted up his mask and getting to his feet, trailed after him.

"Miyuki!" he heard Sawamura shout out.

"How many times will it take to get through to you, Bakamura? That's senpai to you," another boy with black frame glasses, said with a smirk on his face. He was dressed in Seidō's school uniform; Kōshū immediately recognized him as the distant, shadowy figure he'd seen in the car alongside Sawamura.

"You came to see us play?" Sawamura said, with wide eyes.

"Haha! Why do you sound so surprised?" said Miyuki. "Of course I did." He looked at Kōshū, and to his surprise, directed his next question at him. "Are you a first-year?"

"Yes," said Kōshū with a nod.

"I see...well, this guy's a bit of an idiot but I'll leave him in your hands." Miyuki grinned.

The game soon started, and when Sawamura took to the mound, Kōshū could immediately feel that something was different. Unlike when they'd practiced in the bullpen, he felt his heart speeding up as the southpaw threw to him. And seeing the way Sawamura's eyes were finally glowing once again, he knew. It was the lion's gaze that had brought him to Seidō—to that field—to that catcher's box. To catch his pitches. The whole game, held by some mysterious force, he couldn't look away.

At some point in the game, after watching Sawamura jam yet another batter, Kōshū blinked wonderingly as a new realization struck him.

The spirit that he'd felt was missing, hadn't been missing in Seidō. It had been missing in himself the whole time.

As soon as he'd realized that, Kōshū wanted to punch himself for being stupid and wasting so much time thinking pointless thoughts such as whether he should have gone to Teitō or not, because the answer was clear in his mind:
After the game ended, the first thing Kōshū did was bow and apologize to Sawamura. The southpaw looked bewildered, but soon enough, he accepted his apology with an easy grin. He slung his arm around Kōshū's neck, practically choking him and saying things like "You're not such a bad kid after all!" when suddenly, the hold slackened.

Kōshū, who'd been trying to untangle himself, looked up to see Miyuki staring at them with a distant look on his face. Letting out a shout of excitement, Sawamura let go of Kōshū and ran toward Miyuki, chattering away about the game to him. As Kōshū watched, the ex-catcher's face broke into an exasperated smile.

So this is the person Sawamura-senpai was throwing for today.

Kōshū rubbed his sore neck, wishing for some reason that it was sorer.

"I must be a masochist," Kōshū murmured to himself. Dropping his hand, he looked back up at the two, and wondered if he'd ever be able to get Sawamura to pitch to him with those eyes.

He couldn't say.

...but that didn't mean he wouldn't try his damned hardest.

Chapter End Notes

So yes. That was the Maimon game, in one chapter, haha! (Just a small note here: Furuya pitched the fifth inning, not Eijun. So he wasn't being neglected.) That's because it's not really a plot-important game, its only purpose in the anime was to show how strong Seidō's batting lineup is (and impress upon Eijun how each team wants to make Koshien). I'll only cursorily go over Seidō vs Murata. The games should get more intense starting with Akikawa.

This is another side note but there's something I noticed. Narumiya's jersey number was 18 in his first year, and Sanada's jersey number is 18. Eijun's jersey number is 18 after the third-years graduate...coincidence?!! I think not!
Breakfast in an empty house

Chapter Summary

It was warm. - Prelude to Miyuki

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had been too short to climb up onto a hospital bed by himself when his mother got sick.

"Daddy," he said, squirming out of his seat and holding his arms out to his father. "Up!"

That had been their codeword for his father to lift him up and throw him into the air, but this time, his father didn't respond. He just stayed seated in the chair beside his, looking lost.

With a put out expression on his face, Kazuya turned to look at his mother, who was sleeping in the bed wearing a pair of white pajamas he'd never seen her in before. There were all sorts of plastic tubes coming in and out of her body and her mouth was covered with something hard and clear.

After struggling to get back on his chair for a few seconds, he gave up and plopped down to the floor.

Why were they sitting here in this strange place, watching his mother sleep? Why was his father ignoring him?

Suddenly an idea struck him. What if they were waiting for her to wake up, so that they could all go home together? Then, all he had to do was wake his mother up, right?

Ducking by the side of the bed, Kazuya burrowed under the white covers, the harsh lighting suddenly giving way to darkness. He reached out with a small hand—struggling to stand on his tip toes to reach—and then feeling his mother's foot, he began to run his two fingers across the sole. He'd always liked to do that, because her feet were tough while his were soft, and it always woke her up in fits of laughter.

But this time, she didn't move, and before long, he felt his father pulling him out from under the covers.

Later that day, he and his father went home by themselves.

"Where's mama?" he asked, fidgeting against the car seat's harness.

"Mama...needs to stay in the hospital for a while," said his father from the front seat. His back was to Kazuya, so he couldn't see him, but something sounded off about his voice.

"Hospital?" he repeated, struggling to form the unfamiliar word.

"It's 'hospital.' It's where people go to get better when they're not feeling well."

"Mama's not well?" Kazuya frowned.
"No," said his father softly.

"Then I give her melon seerup?" he said hopefully. It was what his mother had always given him when he got a runny nose or a sore throat.

"It's a little bit worse than that, Kazu-kun," said his father. "That's why she's at the hospital, so that the doctors can help her get better."

"Oh...then when she comes home, I give her melon seerup," he said, with a determined nod to himself.

But his mother never did come back home.

At first, Kazuya asked his father every day when his mother was coming back home, and after several months, his father yelled at him for the first time in his life. After that, he stopped asking, and as the months changed into seasons, and the seasons into years, he stopped thinking about it too.

By the time Kazuya had started his second year of elementary school, his mother being in the hospital had become the norm. His father spent fewer and fewer hours at home, spending almost his entire day at work, and that too had become the norm. It was only much later that Kazuya would realize why his father had to work so much.

He visited his mother once every week. She'd become dreadfully thin over the years, and what flesh she did have sagged like pale lumps of sand off of her bones. Kazuya couldn't remember what she'd used to look like before she was in the hospital. He looked at the few photos they had of her, in the days before she'd been sick—back when he was a baby—but he couldn't recognize her. It felt like he was looking at a stranger.

There were some days when she couldn't even speak, and he sat beside her bedside silently until his father came to pick him up at night. Over the years, Kazuya became intimately acquainted with all the cracks and stains on the walls of her room. He also became familiar with the antiseptic smell of the hospital and the taste of the dinner menu in the cafeteria. And things like the worried faces of people waiting in the emergency waiting room and the flashing of red and white ambulance sirens outside the glass doors, became a regular part of the background for him.

It had just started to coldly and slowly snow outside the window one Saturday evening, when his mother's voice suddenly woke Kazuya out of a small daydream in which he'd thrown out a runner at home base. His father had signed him up for Little League the year before, and being on the field was much more fun than being at home by himself.

"Kazu-kun," said his mother softly. "Is it snowing?"

A little surprised, he glanced outside at the white snow piling up on the window sill, and replied, "Yeah, it's snowing, mom."

It didn't snow very often in Tokyo. He wondered if a nurse had told her it would be snowing that evening.

"You can't play baseball...when it's this cold, can you?" she said, with her eyes still closed, and he felt himself brighten up at the topic.

"No, but it'll be spring soon, and then I can play a lot of baseball," he said happily.

"You're a catcher...right, Kazu-kun? Is it fun?"
Kazuya grinned. "It's the best position in the world. And the coach said I'm so good, he might even bump me up to the Major division early!"

"That's my...son," his mother hummed. "You must be a genius...Kazu-kun. But you've also worked hard, haven't...you?"

"Yeah, I guess," he said, blushing lightly, wondering whether he should show her the faded scar on the side of his head that he'd gotten during one of the practices. Squirming in his chair, he let out a small embarrassed laugh instead, and his mother smiled.

"I'll have to...get better by spring then, to see you playing."

"Yeah! Everyone else's parents come by a lot but dad's always too busy," Kazuya said excitedly, jumping to his feet. "I'll save you the best seat! And - and..." He trailed off as belatedly, he remembered that his mother hadn't left the hospital in over three years. The grin fading from his face, he sat back down.

"What's wrong?" his mother asked.

"But...well...you're too sick, aren't you?" Kazuya said uncomfortably. His mother fell silent, and after a while, he realized that her eyes had finally opened. She looked at him through filmy clouded eyes.

"Kazu-kun...should I let you in...on a secret? A secret that will help...me get better?"

"A secret?" Kazuya said hesitantly.

His mother beckoned toward him with her skeletal-like hand, so he got to his feet and kneeling down on the bed, he leaned beside her shrunken form. With some effort, she turned her head and then whispered, her faint breath tickling against his ear, "Laughter."

"Laughter?" he repeated, confused.

"It's the Miyuki family's greatest...and most secret medicine that's been...passed down over fifteen generations."

"But...what could my laughing do for you?" he said, starting to feel upset for some reason.

"Laughter can cure...almost anything," she said gently. "So don't ever stop laughing, Kazu-kun."

And with a trembling arm, she put her hand over his and gave it a light squeeze. It probably took all the strength she could muster to have done that, as she soon stopped talking and fell asleep again, but Kazuya kept his hand in hers the rest of his stay there. It was warm.

A week before spring officially began the next year, Kazuya was eating his breakfast cereal by himself when a call from the hospital came and told him that his mother had died in her sleep.

He put the receiver back down. He returned to his seat and picked up his spoon again. Dipping it into the milk and lifting some of the cereal into his mouth, he began to chew.

The sound of his teeth grinding on the grains rang unnaturally loudly in his ears. The cereal that had tasted so sweet just a few minutes ago now tasted wooden and soggy in his mouth, but he swallowed it. And then he put more wooden cereal in his mouth and swallowed that too, and he repeated it over and over again until there was no cereal left in the bowl. There was only milk, and looking down at his reflection amidst the stray crumbs of cereal floating on its surface, his throat felt tight, as if the cereal hadn't gone all the way down properly, and suddenly hot tears rose to his eyes, dripping down
his nose and into the milk.

With the spoon still clutched in his hand, he cried for a long time, simultaneously glad that his father wasn't there to see him, but also wishing he was there, if but to fill up—even just a little—that suddenly too empty house.

When Little League season began, and the coaches took him aside and told him that they understood if he didn't want to come to practice for a while, Kazuya surprised them with a big grin and an accompanying laugh.

At that moment, they looked so taken aback and then exchanged with one another the most disturbed looks, that the laugh he'd been practicing all week melted away into a real one.

They probably thought he was twisted, but for some odd, perhaps childish reason, that pleased him. At least that meant they would stop shooting pitying looks at him. He'd had enough of that from the nurses and doctors during his hospital visits.

As Kazuya laughed heartily, the tight feeling in his chest didn't go away. But he could feel it drifting somewhere into the darkness of his mind where he thought he could come to learn to stop thinking about it like how he'd once stopped thinking about when his mother would come back home, and he wondered, the sound of his laughter reverberating all around him – *is this what mom meant?*

Chapter End Notes

This is the prelude chapter for Miyuki's birthday chapter in less than two weeks (Nov 17). The chapter after that will be a transition chapter (covering Murata match as well) with some omake requests fulfilled, and then the Akikawa chapter. Thanks for your reviews everyone!

PS: I know I've been giving Eijun and Miyuki a hard time but happier moments await!
The passing seasons

Chapter Summary

Time continued to pass. - Miyuki's Birthday Chapter (part 1)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~ This chapter all takes place before chapter 1, so it is all in the "future" ~

"You won't be able to play baseball anymore."

With those eight words, Kazuya's life as he knew it ended.

"What?" was all he had to say in response.

The doctor's mouth opened and words came out, but as if reaching him through a long, winding tunnel, he could only catch bits and pieces—"a complication with your ribs and spine"—"never again"—"you're lucky you're still able to walk"—and then even those bits and pieces completely faded away into nothing.

While the doctor continued to silently mouth his incomprehensible words, Kazuya lay there, buried in the white pillows of the all-too familiar hospital bed, and idly wondered what his response would be if someone ever told him that the world would end in 24 hours.

He supposed it would be a simple "what?", if precedent meant anything.

A stream of people, mostly those from the Seidō baseball team, came in and out of his room over the next few days. At first, Kazuya went along and talked with them. After a while, however, he started to pretend to be asleep.

When he closed his eyes, everything went away. The doctors and nurses with their pitying looks, his teammates with their bewildered and shell-shocked expressions. Thoughts of the future—what am I going to do now after school?—and thoughts of the past—"You're a catcher right, Kazu-kun? Is it fun?". It was almost funny how easily all that went away with his eyes shut.

With everything gone, all that was left was the pain in his chest. The painkillers they had given Kazuya after the surgery didn't seem to help. It was a constantly ebbing pain. It got stronger and then softer, like the beat of a drum. Sometimes it was so loud, it felt like his heart itself was slamming against his ribcage, demanding to be let out. And sometimes it was almost so quiet as to be indiscernible, but he knew that if he just strained his ears, it would surely be there, scratching at his skin like the claws of an insect. It was that kind of pain.

Kazuya didn't cry. He hadn't cried in years. But it hurt to laugh.

With the curtains tightly drawn around his bed, it was difficult to tell the passing of time. They'd had to take out the digital clock at the bedside because the glowing made it impossible to fall asleep. So
instead, Kazuya marked the beginning of a new day with a nurse bringing breakfast. And he marked the end of a day when, without fail, Sawamura came to visit him in the hospital.

*Knock, knock.*

Kazuya usually pretended to be asleep during these times, so he didn't respond. Regardless, the door clicked open and sure enough, the first-year stepped in, still wearing a dirty baseball uniform.

He was alone this time, seeing as how he was closing the door behind him. He closed it gently too, instead of slamming it shut the way he usually did, which was uncharacteristic of the first-year. Confirming this all with one eye opened just a crack, Kazuya quickly shut it again when Sawamura turned around.

He heard his footsteps draw near his bedside. There was the screech of a chair being dragged closer to the bed, and then a thumping sound as he sat down. Something heavy clattered on the floor—likely the plastic bag he'd been holding when he came in—and then for several minutes, there was nothing but the sound of their even breathing.

Kazuya knew he was just running away from the inevitable confrontation with his teammates. The questions of "why" would spring from their lips, and he'd have nothing to offer them besides a simple "because." Even if it was inevitable, however, he didn't know if he wanted his first talk to be with Sawamura of all people. He had spent the entire last year laughing at the first-year or 'educating' the younger boy as a senpai. It would be entirely too strange and unpleasant to have to speak to Sawamura now.

However, with his daily visits, Sawamura was by far his most frequent visitor. Kazuya wondered why. Maybe Sawamura thought they'd let him skip taking his end of term exams?

It had been a little uncomfortable at first, pretending to be asleep while Sawamura presumably watched. But he'd gotten used to it over the past week, and Kazuya had just started to nod off into real sleep when Sawamura suddenly spoke up.

"Miyuki-senpai..." The sound of the first-year's voice seemed unnaturally loud, as if he were speaking into his ear, and Kazuya was suddenly wide-awake. "Please wake up."

He didn't know what possessed him that moment to comply. Maybe it was the desperate, urgent tone in the first-year's voice. But as if someone else were controlling his body then, he opened his eyes. Light filling his vision, Kazuya tilted his head to meet Sawamura's hard gaze. Contrary to what he'd thought, Sawamura was sitting a fair distance away on a chair. When their gazes met, the first-year's eyes widened dramatically, and his breath hitched in surprise.

"What is it?" said Kazuya.

Sawamura had clearly not been expecting an answer. He gulped, his hands scrabbling at his lap.

"H-how're you feeling?!"

"Fine," Kazuya said in a borderline sarcastic voice. Wincing at himself, he added, "Shouldn't you be at practice?"

Except for during the New Year's break, practice at the Seidō baseball team was nearly year-long.

"Practice ended early," said Sawamura.

So it was still early evening, then.
"And?" Kazuya prompted rather unkindly.

"A-and," Sawamura said, "Well, Takashima-san said you were going to be released next month. But you're going to be out of shape, huh? While I just get better and better as a pitcher. Maybe you won't even be able to catch my pitches anymore?!!"

"Nope," said Kazuya. "I won't."

Sawamura stopped fidgeting, and for a moment, Kazuya thought for sure that the first-year had realized what he meant. But then, Sawamura said with a nervous half-laugh, "The meds they put you on here sure make you weird. Of course you can catch my pitches. But I'm gonna get stronger so that you'll have to start working harder for it from now on."

"Is that so?" was all he said. He felt tired. "I'm gonna sleep, Sawamura."

"O-okay!" said Sawamura. He immediately jumped to his feet, and then tapped the side of the plastic bag with his foot. There was a thunking sound. "Oh...Kuramochi-senpai swore you liked milk coffee, and Shirasu-senpai thought you liked green tea. And Isashiki and Yūki-senpai mentioned some other stuff too. So we just put half the vending machine in here for you."

"Thanks."

For some reason, however, even after Sawamura left, he couldn't sleep.

Sawamura came the next day, and then the day after that. And the day after that. Sometimes, he brought more plastic bags, adding to the growing stack by his bedside.

After seven Sawamura visits, there was one day he didn't come. Kazuya had been thinking that the day felt unnaturally long, when suddenly, the nurse came with his breakfast and he realized that a new day had begun even though the day before had yet to end.

Sawamura came again that evening however, acting as if he hadn't missed the prior day. His eyes were slightly red when he came in, but Kazuya didn't ask about it.

He didn't particularly care.

After about another seven Sawamura visits, the first-year was jabbering away again about what the team had been doing. Kazuya was only vaguely listening, letting the sound wash over his form as he looked up at the ceiling. Sawamura had brought another plastic bag of junk food and drinks with him, adding it to his barely touched pile.

"Oh and Takashima-san said that you'll be out in two weeks," he updated Kazuya, as if Kazuya didn't know himself. "But you probably won't be able to enter the bullpen right away. Hey, maybe you can go to the same rehab place that Chris-senpai went to!"

"I'm quitting the team," said Kazuya tiredly.

"Kuramochi-senpai's been acting as the team captain while you..." Sawamura stopped. "Kuramochi-senpai's been acting as the team...cap..." He shook his head, and opened his mouth again, as if determined to finish his sentence, but all that came out were a few unintelligible, strangled sounds.

"It turns out my ribs weren't the only thing that cracked," said Kazuya. "I can't play baseball anymore. I'm lucky I can still move and walk."
"But you can go to the same rehab place that Chris-senpai went to." Sawamura wore an unnatural grin on his face. "You're going to get better. And then Kuramochi-senpai can stop having to be the captain."

"No," said Kazuya. "I won't." He shifted in his bed, turning his back to the first-year so he wouldn't have to look at his slackening face anymore. "Go back to school. You should be practicing with one of the second-year catchers so that they can learn to catch your moving balls."

"But..." he heard Sawamura's voice, edged with the same desperation as before. "I came to Seidō to be with you. You're my catcher."

"Do you want me to say I'm sorry?" said Kazuya.

After Sawamura left, he brushed his hand across the pile of plastic bags. It made a rustling sound.

Sawamura didn't come the next day, as he'd expected. Or the day after. It was a relief in many ways, though he had to ask a nurse to bring in an analog clock.

Several days later, Rei came to visit him at 1:54 pm. She had come once before, with the now ex-coach, when Kazuya had first been hospitalized. On the way in, they'd also apparently seen his father come in briefly to the front desk to sign some papers – but he had left immediately afterward without visiting his son.

"He's tired of hospitals," he'd explained to them.

When Rei first came in, her eyes immediately flicked down to the pile of bags at his bedside, but she made no comment. Instead, standing in her usual pose, she asked after how he was doing and exchanged small talk.

Then, she told him, "I didn't think you'd want to break it to them yourself. So I told the rest of the team about your condition a while ago."

"When was 'a while ago'?" he asked. A slightly perplexed expression flashing across her face, Rei delicately pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

"A few days after the diagnosis," she said.

"Ah."

"Why do you ask? Did you want to tell them yourself?"

"No, that's not it," he said.

"I see." Rei looked concerned, but she didn't press the issue. Instead, she changed the subject. "So Miyuki-kun...have you decided what to do about where you're living?"

The Seidō school had offered to continue letting Kazuya live in the baseball dorms for the rest of his third year, though he would no longer be a part of the team.

"I think you already know," he told her.

Sawamura's next visit was several days later, in the evening. 5:39 pm. Most likely a weekday, if the time meant anything.
Sawamura was empty-handed this time. He wasn't in his baseball uniform. He was dressed instead in a casual hoody and jeans, and his hair was slightly wet, as if he'd only decided at the last minute to come visit.

As the first-year grimly stood at the doorway, his hands folding and unfolding by his sides, Kazuya suddenly wondered how Sawamura had been coming here. The hospital was a fair ways out from the school campus. Had someone been driving him?

"You already knew then," Kazuya said, and Sawamura's head shot up, his face startled.

"I didn't know," said Sawamura in a small voice. "I'd just heard. I thought maybe it could be some stupid elaborate prank. You were-you were supposed to come back one day all dressed up in your catcher gear, acting like nothing had happened. And then laugh at us."

"I can still do that," Kazuya said.

"But you won't," said the first-year.

"Why not?"

"Because everyone would feel even more sorry for you."

Kazuya had no response for that. Instead, he gestured to the chair, and Sawamura sat down.

"So?" he said, not sure what he was asking.

"I don't know," said Sawamura, rubbing the back of his neck. "Do you...uh...wanna talk? About your..."

"Not really, no."

"I thought not." He looked embarrassed. "Well, uh, I'm not all that good at this but I can listen. You know. When you're ready."

"I think the fact that I had to hear that from you just now, pained me more than the surgery," he said, and Sawamura flushed. Feeling a faint stab of guilt, Kazuya changed the topic, gesturing instead to the younger boy's empty hands. "So you didn't bring anything for me this time."

"What's the point, if you're not going to touch any of it?" Sawamura said huffily.

"I do touch it," he said. To emphasize his point, he showed the first-year a half-eaten box of Every Burger. "You just gotta bring the stuff I do like."

"You've got a fussy mouth," Sawamura frowned. "My gramps would give you a good slap on the head if he were here."

"I'm an injured patient," said Kazuya. "He wouldn't dare."

"Fine then. What drinks do you like?"

"I like black coffee. And pocari sweat on hot days."

"I'll remember that," Sawamura grumbled.

After the first-year left, Kazuya turned the face of the analog clock away from his face. He didn't like knowing so exactly what the time was.
He looked up at the ceiling. He had come to memorize its features almost as well as his own over the past few weeks.

*Well, I guess it's time to open my eyes again.*

It had been nice, while it lasted.

When Kazuya told his teammates that he was moving out of the dorm, no one blamed him. In fact, they even helped pack away his things into boxes and moved them to Rei's car. At one time, Kazuya might have protested, but he was left with little choice in the matter.

"So you were the one who took this issue," came Kuramochi's accusing voice from the other side of the room; with his head buried under the bunk bed, the shortstop's butt danced in the air. Crawling backward like some kind of unhinged spirit, Kuramochi pulled out into view with a dusty magazine in his hand.

He opened it and triumphantly revealed a crumpled spread of a voluptuous naked woman lying in a sea of red petals.

"Wasn't me," said Kazuya, and Kuramochi made a snorting sound of disbelief.

Kazuya tightly gripped the top of his walking cane, and carefully got up from his own bed. Trying not to hobble, he slowly stepped to the doorway. Turning around, he looked at the newly emptied-out room. The only things remaining were the bare furnishings that had been there to begin with.

*This is the last time I'll be here,* he thought to himself.

"You're thinking something weird, aren't you?" said Kuramochi in a low voice.

"Probably," he said.

There was a honking sound, and Kazuya hobbled over to the railing to see Rei's car pulling into the courtyard. The side door opened, and Sawamura jumped out. Taking one look at Kazuya, his eyes widened in alarm and he immediately began to bound toward the stairs.

"He's gonna try and carry you again," said Kuramochi, eyeing the first-year. "Bridal style."

"I know," said Kazuya grimly.

As he waited for the inevitable, he looked back, for the last time, at the room that had been his home for the past two years.

*Goodbye, my old life.*

Maybe he was being overly sentimental. But the room, even as empty as it was, seemed fuller than the house that he knew was waiting for him.

Time passed, and eventually, Kazuya stopped needing the cane to walk. He dutifully continued to go to his rehabilitation sessions and his weekly checkups at the hospital, but the diagnosis never wavered: he would never be able to play baseball—or any sport requiring rigorous movement—even again.

Fortunately, Kazuya had been able to start catching up on the schoolwork he'd fallen behind on over the New Year's break, and by the time the winter trimester started, he was able to more or less
 commute on his own to school.

"I know you were probably hoping to go pro after you graduate. I don't want to seem heartless, but since that is now out of the question, maybe you should start focusing on your studies more," said his career adviser. "You're smart, Miyuki-kun, and with some effort, I think you could get into a decent college. Or...oh yes, your father owns a business, doesn't he? Miyuki Steel, was it?"

Kazuya told the teacher that he would sit for exams.

One wintery afternoon, he was sitting at his desk, looking out at the snow softly coming down the courtyard, when a voice rudely broke him out of his reverie.

"Is-is that a textbook?"

Kazuya turned to see Sawamura rubbing his eyes as if he'd somehow misread the name of the book in his hands. This was unlikely, as he knew for a fact that the first-year had 20/20 vision.

"What're you doing here? This is the second-year hallway."

"I can't even read the kanji in the title," said Sawamura, sounding amazed.

"You're the reason why Seidō didn't make top ten in the city academic rankings this year, aren't you?"

Sawamura fell silent, and Kazuya was wondering whether he'd hurt the first-year's feelings when he said in an odd voice, "Will you come to see our games?"

"I don't know," Kazuya answered honestly. To his surprise, Sawamura let out a shaky breath, a relieved smile on his face.

"That's better than a no," he said cheerfully. "I'm glad. I was scared you might hate baseball now."

"Baseball was my life," said Kazuya, looking back out the window again. In the distance, he could see the metal fence surrounding the empty baseball field. "I could never hate it."

Sawamura started coming by for lunch several times a week. It was the only time they could talk during the day, seeing as how the first-year was busy with baseball practice after classes, and Kazuya usually went straight home or to the hospital.

"Don't you have any friends of your own?" Kuramochi sucked loudly at the straw in his juice box. "I'm honestly sick of seeing your face. I see it more than I see my own."

"You should be thanking me then," said Sawamura, and quickly dodged out of the way of a sharply-aimed kick.

Kuramochi had just left to buy another juice box from the vending machine, when Sawamura's face suddenly lit up.

"I've got it!"

"Got what?" Kazuya said distractedly, trying to re-read the same paragraph for the fifth time.

"You said baseball was your life before. Well, then how about finding something else to make your life?" Sawamura said excitedly. "Something you could do without having to move your body too much?"
Kazuya felt his head begin to hurt, and put down his textbook.

"You don't seem to understand, Bakamura," he said slowly. "You can't just do that."

"Why not?" The first-year southpaw blinked.

"Well, first of all, what would I make my life?"

"I don't know. Video games?"

"Becoming a shut-in doesn't count as having a life, Sawamura."

"Cooking?" Sawamura pushed. He gestured to the empty bento box on the desk. "You always make your own lunches, don't you?"

Kazuya paused, impressed against his will that Sawamura had managed to notice. Maybe the first-year was more perceptive than he'd initially given him credit for.

"I only cook for myself," he said.

"You're not making this any easier for me," Sawamura grumbled, putting his head down on Kazuya's desk.

"Payback for the headaches you put me through," Kazuya smirked.

"Is it that hard? Finding something else to make your life?" the first-year sighed.

"What about you? What if you couldn't play baseball anymore?"

Sawamura blinked.

"Oh man. Wow. That'd really suck."

"Thanks," Kazuya said.

"If you couldn't play either though, there'd be the two of us. We could start a new club or something," said Sawamura stubbornly.

"The going-home club?"

"Yeah, it'd suck, but it wouldn't be so bad if you were suffering with me," said Sawamura, ignoring his jibe. "Well, how about...oh, I know!"

"Figured something out?"

"You could just make me your life," he said, turning his head to look owlishly back at Kazuya.

Kazuya stared mutely back at the first-year, wondering whether he'd heard the boy right. And then suddenly, in what felt like the first time in a while, he burst into laughter.

"I'm serious!" Sawamura insisted, his voice rising over the sound of his laughter. "If I'm your life, then you can still play baseball, sort of. I can pitch to you in my mind, and you can catch for me in your mind."

Kazuya continued to laugh, his out-of-shape lungs working themselves in a frenzy. He could feel the rest of the class staring, but he didn't care. His chest, sides, and back were all starting to hurt from
how hard he was laughing, but he couldn't seem to stop. It poured out of him, like sand.

He began to cough.

"Are you okay?" the first-year asked, sounding a little alarmed. There was a screeching sound, as he hurriedly got to his feet. "Should I call the nurse?"

"I'm fine," he wheezed, his chest throbbing painfully.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," Sawamura said, sitting back down. "I haven't heard you laugh in a while."

"Only because you've been acting less dumb than usual. Stop being so out-of-character."

"Okay."

Kuramochi soon came back with drinks for all of them—black coffee for Kazuya, and he wondered if Sawamura had told the shortstop—and after finishing that, the first-year went back to his own classroom.

As the math teacher droned at the front of the classroom, Kazuya looked outside the window again. It had stopped snowing. He wondered when the cherry blossoms would be blossoming again.

*Maybe I'll be ready to talk one day,* he thought.

Time continued to pass.

The cherry blossoms bloomed, and then fell, covering the courtyard with their pink petals. They were soon washed away in showers of rain, and then followed by a series of heat waves. The crying of cicadas filled the hot hazy air. Blue, open skies. Then, silence, as the courtyard filled with red and brown leaves. And after that, occasional snow and grey skies, clearing the air and preparing the ground for the cherry blossoms to bloom once again.

There were sad moments and happy moments. Mostly there were moments that didn't fall in either category but fell somewhere in between.

That summer, just before the Seidō summer camp, Sawamura followed Kazuya again to the hospital for his now monthly checkup. It began to rain, so Kazuya pulled out his old, trusty umbrella, and Sawamura mentioned that every time they took a step, it sounded like a honking duck. Ever since then, whenever it rained, all he could hear were ducks.

That same summer, after Seidō lost in the semifinals against Senkawa, Kazuya went home early, not knowing what to do. But there was a knock on his door later that evening, and he found a lost-looking Sawamura on his doorstep—how did he know his address? Had he walked all the way here?—still in his baseball uniform. He force fed the southpaw what he had been making for dinner, and then put him in bed. Sawamura almost immediately fell asleep, and for several minutes, Kazuya watched the other boy's chest rising up and down evenly.

When Sawamura told Kazuya with an astonished look on his face that he had been made captain,
Kazuya reached out and pinched his face.


Seidō lost in the finals against Yakushi that fall, a repeat of the year before, and this time, Kazuya didn't leave early.

Before Sawamura went back home for the New Year's break—he was an 'immigrant' after all, coming from Nagano—they went to the Meiji Shrine together.

In unison, they clapped their cold hands together and bowed their heads. After a few seconds, Kazuya looked over at Sawamura—he didn't have much to ask for, and he didn't want to bother asking for the impossible—and almost burst into laughter when he saw a bit of takoyaki sauce on the corner of his lip on an otherwise serious face.

He reached out with a finger and wiped it off. Sawamura's eyes flashed open and he began to splutter, making Kazuya laugh for real.

Several months later, when they found out that Sawamura's grandpa had passed away, Kazuya wished he had prayed even just a few seconds longer.

In early spring, when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom, his father came to his graduation ceremony to see Kazuya accept his diploma, and they even took a photo together. Then his father's phone rang, and he headed back to the car, talking in weary tones.

"You're still going to visit right?" said Sawamura, already dressed in his baseball uniform. "To see our games, I mean."

Kazuya opened his mouth – and then closed it. He looked back at his father's car; his father motioned for him to come.

"I have to go. Good luck, Seidō's captain." Kazuya raised a hand in farewell, and turned around. He took a step forward.

"Miyuki!"

He turned around to see Sawamura looking at him with a fierce and anguished look on his face.

"What?" said Kazuya. Sawamura's face fell.

"You're supposed to tell me to call you senpai," he said. Kazuya shifted to his other foot.

"I'm not your senpai anymore."

"I thought...I thought you didn't hate baseball."

"I don't," he said truthfully. "But you should stop clinging to me, Sawamura. You've got a bright future ahead as a pitcher. You don't need an invalid dragging you down."

Sawamura's jaw tightened, and he took an angry step forward. He lunged at Kazuya, and his eyes widening behind his glasses, he winced – but instead, almost gently, he felt an arm lope itself around his neck. A hand gripped his shoulder.
Holding him there, Sawamura looked at Kazuya straight in the eye, their noses almost touching, and he suddenly realized that they were the same height now. When had the other boy grown?

"Miyuki-senpai," he said. "You're the only catcher for me."

"Is this what they call a 'graduation day confession'?" Kazuya said, trying to smirk.

"I wasn't kidding when I said you should make me your life," Sawamura said, ignoring him.

"That'd be too lopsided," said Kazuya.

"I'm going to take Seidō to Kōshien this summer," he said.

Kazuya laughed.

"We'll see."

Sometime in late April, over a year since his accident, there was a call for Kazuya. Coming back from his college classes, he'd just put his bag down and begun to take his shoes off in the entryway, when his cellphone rang in his pocket.

"Miyuki speaking," he said, still grappling at the shoe halfway off his foot.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Seo from the Rehabilitation Ward at Tokyo General Hospital. I'm calling with some good news in concern with a past patient of mine. Could I talk to Miyuki Kazuya?"

"That's me," said Kazuya.

As they talked, the shoe fell out of his hand and clattered to the floor.

"...so what I'm saying, is that there's a new procedure that's just been developed," Dr. Seo gabbled excitedly. "It's still only in its early trials, but it could potentially be a cure for those like you on the cusp of paralysis. If you get this surgery, and everything goes well, you could be back in prime condition again!"

Kazuya's hand gripped the cellphone tightly.

"When is the earliest you can schedule the surgery?" he said quietly.

"Ah - what? Oh. I'm sorry, I was getting ahead of myself. You must understand," Dr. Seo said hesitantly, suddenly sounding concerned. "It's all in its beginning stages, and there are some risks involved - "

"When?" he demanded more strongly.

"In three months," Dr. Seo sighed. "The end of July."

"I'll do it," said Kazuya.

After scheduling an appointment with the doctor, he ended the call. For several seconds, he stood still. Something was stirring in his chest, something that had been coiled up tight and kept hidden in the darkness.

Immediately putting back on his shoes, Kazuya left his apartment.
Sawamura...I’ll be able to catch for you again, soon.

It was raining, so he took his umbrella out of his bag again. The sound of honking ducks ringing in his ears and water puddles splashing up around his legs, he hurried through the streets, heading straight for the nearest railway station. His heart pounded painfully against his ribs.

Kazuya didn't know what he'd say. Or whether he'd even say anything.

But he wanted to see him.

Chapter End Notes

So there we have it. Some of the mystery of the future has been revealed. (If you didn't understand the implications of the ending, re-read chapter 1 and chapter 6. Chapter 6 takes place right after the end of this chapter). I know it jumped around a lot, sorry. The sound of ducks was something I noticed with my own umbrella a few weeks ago when it rained.
Cicadas

Chapter Summary

Somewhere in the distance, he could hear cicadas. - Miyuki's Birthday Chapter (part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day after Seidō's match against Maimon, a group of excited girls huddled outside the door of one particular classroom in the first-year's hallway, whispering in hushed tones. They were of various statures and years, but they had one thing in common: they were all members of the Seidō cheerleading team.

"That's him isn't it?"

"Yeah – the monster first-year!"

"Somehow...he looks different from the photos..."

The girls felt themselves sweat as they compared the figure in their photos and what they saw before them: with his face pressed flat against the desk and a pool of drool steadily growing in size around his mouth, the first-year southpaw looked like anything but the promising future ace of the Seidō baseball team.

"Well, still, he was really amazing on the mound," a girl sighed. "I've never seen anyone like that before!"

"Maybe I'll cheer for him by myself next game!" her friend giggled.

"Ah, no fair! I had my eye on him first!"

"No, me!"

Moving away from the classroom, as the cheerleaders continued to squabble amongst one another—cheerfully, but with a potentially lethal edge underneath it all—they didn't notice the innocent-looking white binder falling to the floor in their wake.

As students walked around, each heading their own way—some to the cafeteria, others to the bathroom—the white binder was accidentally kicked from student to student along the entire length of the hallway, until it reached the stairway, precariously hanging over the edge of the top step.

There, at the end of its epic journey, it waited for its rightful owner.

Just as lunch break ended, a solitary figure quickly bounded up the stairs heading for the second-year floor. Just as he was about to pass by the binder, he slowed down.

Perhaps it was pure coincidence. Or perhaps the binder called out to him. The world will never know.
Whatever the case, he bent down and picked it up. With little ceremony—no one could have prepared him for the knowledge of what he had just found—he opened it.

Almost immediately, with a clatter, the binder fell to the ground from his frozen fingers.

After classes that day, all of the first-string pitchers—with the exception of Furuya, who was obediently running laps around the field—were throwing in the bullpen.

"Slam!"

"Nice ball," said Kazuya, throwing the ball back to Sawamura. "Your control is getting even better."

"The morning runs must be paying off," Chris said with a quiet smile. He, alongside coach Kataoka and Rei, had gathered at the bullpen as well to watch the pitchers practice.

"Slam!"

"Nice ball!" Miyauchi said encouragingly to Tanba, throwing the ball back. Kazuya concealed a smile; Tanba's serious expression spoke volumes of his determination not to lose to the first-years around him.

"Slam!"

Sawamura's pitch smoking in his mitt, Kazuya looked up to see the southpaw looking across at him with glowing intensity.

"Hey now, save the energy for tomorrow's match against Murata," he said, throwing the ball back. Sawamura raised his glove and caught it, but instead of getting ready to throw again, he looked down at the ball, turning it in his hand.

"There's another pitch I've been wanting to try, Miyuki-senpai," he suddenly said, and everyone else in the bullpen stopped and turned to look at them.

"Another pitch?" said Kazuya, instantly intrigued.

"See if you can catch it," Sawamura said, and without any pause, he brought his hands together and lifted his leg up high. Snapping to attention, Kazuya raised his mitt.

Like always, the arm whipped out almost impossibly late. As much as he had caught for Sawamura, it still unsettled Kazuya how the ball seemed to fly at his face out of nowhere. With his eyes narrowed behind his sports glasses, he watched the ball; the velocity seemed about the same as Sawamura's four-seam. But as it passed the area in front of him—the strike zone, if they had been on the field—it sunk down just enough so that it would have slipped below an average batter's swing.

Kazuya's mitt shot down to match its trajectory, and he caught it just in time.

"Slam!"

"A two-seam..." Chris murmured interestedly.

Sawamura's pitching repertoire, outside of his irregular moving fastballs, had so far consisted of a four-seam, a cutter, and a circle changeup. They were all variants of his moving fastball, but with the added bonus of Sawamura being able to throw them to where Kazuya wanted him to. The two-seam that he had just thrown was also a variant of the moving fastball, but with a vertical break downward.
"I'm the one who has to put up with your moving fastballs all the time," said Kazuya, throwing the ball back. "Don't underestimate me!"

"Of course not," Sawamura said with a wide grin, catching it.

"Show it to me again," said Kazuya. Sawamura nodded – but just as he was about to throw, there was a sudden loud commotion at the fence just beside the bullpen area.

"Look here!"

"Miyuki-kun!"

"Sawamura-kun!"

"Take off your glasses, Miyuki-kun!"

A group of eager girls had gathered at the fence, and were now flashing photos of everyone standing in the bullpen. Kazuya felt himself sweat, as he became momentarily blinded from the incessant flashing in his face.

"You're distracting them!" One of their managers said, distressed, trying to block the cameras.
"Please!"

"Keep throwing, Sawamura-ku...!"

But just as suddenly as they'd appeared, they abruptly fell silent. Before Kazuya's very eyes, the girls' faces all grew comically pale with fear. Looking around, he saw that, sure enough, the coach himself had looked in their direction.

At first stunned into silence under his unforgiving gaze, the pack of girls managed to mumble out a few apologies before immediately fleeing back into whatever rabbit hole fan girls popped out of.

"Are you ready, Miyuki-senpai?"

Kazuya turned around to see Sawamura looking expectantly back at him with a completely unfazed expression on his face. Raising a single eyebrow, he nodded and held up his mitt.

If I didn't know better, I'd think he was almost used to the attention...

After practice and dinner, they had their pre-game meeting during which they discussed the lineup of the team they would be facing the next day – Murata East High. And then finally, with that over, they were free to do whatever they wanted for the rest of the night. Some trailed off to the field or to the indoor grounds to practice their swings. The rest headed to the washroom to get ready for bed.

Once done washing up for the night, Kazuya climbed the dimly-lit stairway to the second floor where his room was. His towel hanging loosely around his shoulder, he came to a stop before his door. He reached to open it – and then paused.

It was quiet...too quiet.

Maybe they're not in my room for once, he thought to himself.

Gripping the doorknob, his heart pounding, he opened his door.
The door swung open.

Inside, he was greeted with the sight of almost the entirety of the Seidō first-string regulars sitting gravely on his floor.

Kazuya felt himself sweat.

"What's going on?" he said, looking around. The TV was off, and the shogi board was nowhere in sight. Instead, he could see what looked like a closed white binder at the center of the grim-faced group.

Conspicuously, he noticed that none of the first-years were there.

"Miyuki," said Yūki. He was sitting with his hands firmly resting on his lap and his legs properly folded behind him in the seiza position. "Are you aware that our school has a photography club?"

"A photography club?" Kazuya blinked. "I've seen their recruitment posters, I guess. Why?"

"We're not talking about just any photography club," Isashiki growled.

"A particular subsection, rather," said Ryōsuke.

"Ugah," Masuko said, sounding disgruntled.

"I'm not following," said Kazuya, sitting down. "Why're you all seated around this binder, anyways?"

The rest of the room glanced at each other and exchanged a solemn nod.

"It'll be faster to show it to you than to explain it," said Kuramochi. Reaching out with a hand, he gripped the cover of the binder—he paused dramatically, and immediately, the tension in the room jacked up—and then in one grand motion, he opened it.

Wordlessly, Kazuya reached out—the others parting before him as if he were the second coming of Moses—and began to flip through the pages.


Several minutes later, Kazuya finally turned to the last page. He closed the binder. The rest of the room watched him with held breaths.

"So?" he said, looking up – and immediately, pandemonium broke out in the small double room.

"So?" Isashiki roared, jumping to his feet. "So?! How did they even take these?!"

"How do I come out like this," Kuramochi flipped open the binder and jabbed at a page. "While you come out looking like Prince Charming?"

"Explain yourself," said Yūki, his eyes glinting.

"Yes, I'd like to hear this explanation," Ryōsuke agreed, a dangerous edge to his usual smile dancing on his face.

"What is this?" Sakai wailed, snatching the binder from Kuramochi and flipping it open with practiced surety to another page. "What is this?!"
"At least there is a photo of you," Shirasu mumbled from a dark corner of the room, and Sakai forlornly let the binder drop down to the floor.

"Well..." Kazuya said. "I knew about it, of course. I thought everyone knew."

"Knew what?!"

"That Kuramochi still sleeps with an old teddy bear," Kazuya grinned. Immediately, Kuramochi grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and began to violently shake him.

The truth was that the photography club at Seidō traditionally made half their profits selling fan books of the Seidō baseball team, featuring photos and close-ups of virtually every member (though it looked as if Shirasu had been forgotten this year). In fact, he was pretty sure that at least one of the girls who had been taking photos outside the bullpen earlier that day had been a member of the club.

Thankfully, before Kazuya was strangled to death, the door opened again. With his glasses knocked askew, he had barely had enough time to register a messy brown head, when the choking hold on his neck suddenly slackened.

In fact, the rest of the room's attention seemed to particularly hone in on one of the first-years who had just come in.

"Sa-wa-mu-ra," said Kuramochi threateningly, releasing Kazuya and advancing on the pitcher instead.

"He's not starting tomorrow, right?" Isashiki cracked his knuckles.

"What's going on?" Sawamura began to back away with a bewildered look on his face.

"Aniki," said the younger Kominato, his eyes widening. He pointed down at his feet, where the binder was spread wide open. "Isn't that a photo of you? In your... boxers? The-the penguin-patterned ones – "

Moving with a speed that left no doubt in everyone's minds who the best second baseman in the prefecture was, Ryōsuke swooped down and kicked the binder away from his younger brother's trembling hand.

"So tell us, Sawamura," said Kuramochi, swiping up the binder. At mach speed, he flipped it to a full-page color spread of the first-year winding up on the mound, and shoved it in his face. "Why is it that I don't see a single bad photo of you in here?!"

"And why are there more photos of you and Miyuki than the rest of us put together?" Isashiki barked.

"Sawamura-chan," Masuko shook his head, looking betrayed.

"Miyuki I can understand...but you?" Sakai continued to sob.

"Do you really use a bright pink razor, Isashiki-senpai?" Sawamura asked, gawking at the next page in the binder.

"That's it, come here! You're massaging my shoulders until you pass out!" Isashiki snarled, flopping down to his stomach. Sawamura blanched.

Meanwhile, Kazuya, who'd been trying to slip away, felt Yūki's firm hand seize him by the shoulder.
"There's only one way to settle this," said the captain, his gaze burning into Kazuya's as he pulled out a shogi board from under the bed. In disgust, Kuramochi threw the binder down, and it slid across the floor before coming to a stop at someone else's feet.

"Ah..." said Furuya, blinking down at a close-up of Tanba's behind.

It was only after three straight wins against the captain that Kazuya finally managed to get away. Warily getting to his feet, he left Yūki behind to seriously ponder down at the board. The others had all gathered around the blaring TV, watching as the younger Kominato's character pummeled Kuramochi's onscreen.

Unwilling to risk any unwanted attention by grabbing a pillow, he sneakily opened the door empty-handed and escaped into the warm summer breeze.

The door shut quietly behind him. Letting out a sigh of relief, Kazuya looked up – and stopped, seeing someone else already out there, leaning against the railing. A second later, the figure shifted; the light from one of the courtyard lamps fell across his face, illuminating it, and Kazuya immediately relaxed.

"So you managed to escape too, huh?" he said with a grin. He stepped forward to lean against the railing beside the other boy.

"I somehow convinced Isashiki-senpai that Furuya's a better massager than me," Sawamura said wearily. He shifted again, and this time, Kazuya noticed that the first-year was holding something in his hand.

"What's that?" he asked, gesturing to it.

"Oh, just one of the photos," said Sawamura, casually angling it away from him.

"Is that so?" said Kazuya just as casually. He looked down at the empty courtyard; the long shadows of the lamps extended across the concrete. Several seconds passed quietly by.

Suddenly, Kazuya turned and reached out with practiced swiftness. As if he'd been expecting it, Sawamura leaned away – but Kazuya tugged firmly, and successfully ripped the photo out of the other boy's warm hands.

"I hate it when you do that," Sawamura scowled, scrabbling upward for the photo.

"You're welcome," said Kazuya, holding it high out of his reach. He peered up at it, but it was too dark to clearly see. He could just barely make out two dark figures in the photo – but before he could get any more than a vague inkling of who they could be, Sawamura jumped up and managed to snatch it back out of his hand.

"I told you, it's just one of the photos, it's nothing special," Sawamura insisted again. But even as dark as it was, Kazuya could tell that the other boy's face was bright red.

"Haha!" Kazuya laughed, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Fine then. Fine."

Turning his attention up at the cloudy night sky, he let his hands drop on the cool railing. Slowly, he let out a breath. The warm breeze circled lazily around them. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear cicadas.

Minminminmin.
"Aren't you thirsty, Miyuki-senpai?"

Kazuya looked back down at the first-year, to see him carefully tucking the 'nothing special' photo into the pocket of his sweatpants.

"You offering to get me a drink?" he smirked.

"Only if you come with me," Sawamura grinned back.

Together, they began to head down the stairway.

Chapter End Notes

Part two of Miyuki's birthday chapter. This was inspired by doremishine itsuko and miniminmin's omake requests. It was an odd mix of baseball/not-so-serious moments. All written in a single hectic sitting so as to make it in time for Miyuki's birthday. So if there are any weird errors, sorry, it was inevitable.

And now, a proper Happy Birthday Miyuki! (Though I just realized that it's not actually Miyuki's birthday in any of the chapters.) If anyone is confused, chapter 15 was Miyuki's prelude, chapter 16 was the future!Miyuki (from Eijun's time) and this chapter 17 is the current!Miyuki.
Evening thoughts

Chapter Summary

But this guy's different... - Seidō vs Murata

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Three outs, change!"

Akikawa's members, all gathered at the far end of the bleachers in the stadium, watched as a three appeared beside 'Seidō' on the scoreboard.

"An eight-point difference in the fourth inning, huh...guess it'll be a called game for Seidō again," said Akikawa's third baseman with grudging admiration.

"That first-year's pitch was crazy, though," said his teammate beside him.

"Most of the outs were strike-outs...sheesh..."

"Though that's mostly because everyone in Murata is swinging at those high balls," sniggered their center fielder.

"I would too if I saw a ball that fast flying at my face!" said the second baseman with a nervous laugh.

"But they're changing him out for a southpaw this inning," said the third-baseman, propping his chin on a hand.

"I wonder why he's got a smaller number than that other first-year..." the left fielder said distractedly.

Seidō’s starting pitcher had been switched out for a pinch hitter, another first-year, at the bottom of the fourth inning. He was a shorter, messy-haired boy with the number 10 jersey on his back. He stood on the mound now, tossing a rosin bag in his hand.

"This southpaw doesn't throw as fast as that other first-year," commented Akikawa's center fielder. "Maybe Murata will get lucky and get someone on base."

Likely thinking the same thoughts, Murata's cleanup batter determinedly stepped up to the plate, gripping the bat tightly in his hands. If they didn't score in this inning and Seidō managed to score at least another two runs, their summer would end at the bottom of the fifth inning.

"Play!" barked the umpire.

Dropping the rosin bag to the ground, Seidō's pitcher blew the dust off his fingers. He leaned over as he waited for the catcher to signal; his face was too far away to see.

Then, with a nod, he raised his leg up high – and slamming his foot down on the mound, he threw. The batter didn't move, and –
"Strike!"

With a start, Akikawa's pitcher, who had been filing his nails, snapped to attention. His eyes narrowed. After the next pitch—"Strike!"—he put down the nail file.

On the third pitch, the cleanup finally swung – but unlike the two previous fastballs, this ball suddenly sunk below his bat.

"Strike three! Batter out!"

"He's got a weird form...and that four-seam looked fast," remarked Akikawa's catcher, his brow creasing. He glanced at his partner. "What do you think, Shun?"

"I'm still more worried about that other first-year," the second baseman piped in, shaking his head.

Akikawa's pitcher sharply regarded the southpaw as Murata's fifth batter stepped up to the plate.

"There are plenty of countermeasures for a pitcher with nothing but fast balls," he said dismissively, with a glint of his eyes. "But this guy's different..."

Taken aback, the rest of the Akikawa team fell silent and returned their attention to the baseball field.

The southpaw pitcher quickly retired the next two batters with a grounder to third and then a pop fly to the shortstop. As the rest of the Seidō team ran back to their dugout to change equipment for their offence, they slapped their pitcher's back, and he grinned widely.

Grimly, Akikawa's pitcher folded his arms across his chest.

After a single short half-inning, there wasn't much he could conclusively say about the southpaw's abilities. But something about what he'd seen just now made him uneasy.

The day following the Murata match, Satoru was throwing in the bullpen with the other pitchers. It was a hot, searing day – hotter than anything he'd ever experienced before back home.

After throwing a pitch, Satoru was waiting with his glove outstretched for Chris to throw the ball back, but unexpectedly, the catcher got to his feet.

"Furuya, go cool down," said Chris, taking off his face mask.

"Huh?" he said, wondering if he'd misheard due to the sweat in his ears.

"If you keep throwing, you're going to faint. You're barely standing on your feet as it is."

Satoru blinked, and then looked down at himself. His shirt was soaked through with sweat, and suddenly, he realized that he was breathing very hard. His arms were flushed red.

"What's going on?" said Miyuki. He and Sawamura had stopped their practice, and were staring at Satoru. Miyauchi and Kawakami on the other end of the bullpen had also come to a stop.

"I can still throw," Satoru insisted, raising his already soaked sleeve to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. He could feel Sawamura's curious gaze on him.

It was hotter and harder than anything he'd ever gone before, and Satoru had never pushed himself like this before in his life. But then he had seen the way the others looked at Sawamura, their eyes filled with admiration and trust; heard the way Sawamura's pitches sounded in Miyuki's mitt...
At first, Satoru had been simply frustrated. How could they both be first-years and be so different? How come Sawamura had found a place on the team so easily...while he hadn't?

*It's no different from how it was at home,* he'd thought tiredly to himself.

One weary day after practice, he had been leaning against the wall, watching Sawamura talk animatedly with Haruichi and Chris about something, when a figure stepped beside him. Satoru looked to see that Miyuki, wearing a small smile, had joined him against the wall.

"Finding it hard to join in?" asked the catcher.

"Some people belong, and others don't," Satoru said, and to his surprise, Miyuki laughed.

"Yeah, Sawamura's always surrounded by people," he said, raising a hand to the side of his neck. "But you know...he's probably the most worried of us all about his place here."

With that cryptic statement, Miyuki left him and walked over to join the group standing with Sawamura.

For the first time in a while, Satoru had a hard time falling asleep that night. He had always been isolated, so feelings of isolation were nothing new for him. Isolation, he could sleep on. However, what plagued him that night and kept him awake was different.

*But you know, he's probably the most worried of us all about his place here.*

Satoru wondered what Miyuki could have meant by that.

"Coach!"

Satoru snapped out of his reverie, and looked up to see that Coach Kataoka had just entered the bullpen. He had been watching Tanba pitch to the net outside, but it seemed they had both come to check on the others.

"What's going on here?" asked the coach, looking around.

"Furuya – "

"I can still throw," Satoru insisted stubbornly, clenching his hand tightly.

"He's probably not used to Tokyo summers," Sawamura suddenly spoke up, to Satoru's surprise. "Since he's from Hokkaido."

The others all turned to look at Sawamura, and then looked at Satoru, realization slowly dawning on their faces.

"The game against Akikawa is at 10," said Chris, looking at Satoru with quiet concern. "But it will be one of the hottest days of the summer so far."

"Please let me start," said Satoru.

"Hey now, Furuya – " Miyuki started, but the coach raised a hand to stop him.
"When you say you want to start," he said in his steely voice, "do you have confidence that you won't be a hindrance for the team?" The bullpen was completely silent. Satoru could feel everyone staring at him, and he felt a bead of sweat drip down his temple. He nodded tightly. "...very well, then. You'll start by pitching the first three innings. Sawamura and Kawakami, you two will finish the game."

"Yes, sir!" the pitchers cried back in response.

Satoru's eyes flickered against his will to Sawamura, but the other boy had already turned away. He could only see the number of his jersey on his back. Miyuki had approached Sawamura, and when he stepped foot behind him, his body partially blocked the number, so that what looked back at Satoru was the number '1'. Satoru felt his hands clench tightly together.

It felt like it had been a long time since Haruichi had last spent time together with his older brother like this. As sweat dripped down his face, even the evening breeze felt uncomfortably warm on his skin.

Seated on top of the crate, Ryōsuke continued to toss the balls to him and Haruichi continued to hit them with his bat, sending them flying into the pitchback net.

"As usual, you swing without any hesitation," said Ryōsuke with a smile. "During the game tomorrow, don't just gawk at Sawamura pitching. Get yourself ready too."

"Huh?" said Haruichi, pausing, his breath coming out in little pants.

"You were pinch hitter in the first game, remember? The coach uses the players who are doing well in practice."

Slowly, Haruichi's face lit up, as he realized that his brother had complimented him.

"Ah...I've just been swinging this whole time," he said, feeling apologetically giddy. He offered his bat to his brother, but Ryōsuke shook his head.

"Don't worry about me. Practicing at this point won't really help me. I just need to give my all tomorrow." He raised another ball from the crate. "Here, swing more."

Haruichi felt himself sweat.

*But I've been swinging for almost an hour...*

Nevertheless, with a small smile on his face, he continued to bat. As he did so, his motions became increasingly precise and automatic, becoming more and more ingrained in his muscles. A white baseball jumped into his vision, and he swung – and with a *clang!* it hurtled into the net.

Time slowly passed, and soon, Haruichi's mind began to travel.

"*Don't just gawk at Sawamura pitching.*"

It was true that Haruichi had spent much of the time in prior matches simply watching Eijun pitch. But he wasn't embarrassed, because the same could be said for almost everyone else on the team. There was something about Eijun's pitching that just made it difficult to look away.

*Clang!*

It was strange to think how, just a few months ago, Haruichi had thought of the southpaw as a *freak.*
And for a while following it, he'd been so gloomy and distanced that he'd been impossible to approach. But now, Eijun was quite literally the rising star of the team – their true ace in Tanba's absence. When he went up on the mound, it was like a load had been taken off of the team's backs. Somehow, Eijun's going up on the mound felt like their victory had been all but confirmed. Eijun himself might not have realized it, but Haruichi felt it very tangibly whenever he stood in the dugout.

*Clang!*

It wasn't just on the field, either. Even off of it, it felt to Haruichi that Eijun had rapidly become an important presence to the team. He wasn't its core, not yet, but without him, the team dynamic would be very different. He was the rallying point for the other first-years of the team, and a valued underclassmen for the senpai – especially the catchers. Haruichi wasn't ever in the bullpen, but even he could tell that Miyuki and Chris in particular regarded Eijun highly. The fact that a fellow first-year like him could have inspired such trust from such outstanding players would never cease to amaze him.

*Clang!*

It made him wonder sometimes, however, why Eijun had been so odd in the beginning. In their first real conversation together, they'd bantered about sci-fi and time-traveling, and then Eijun had taken it a bit too far.

Actually, now that Haruichi thought about it, Eijun had been relatively normal until they'd started talking about that particular topic.

*Clang!*

Of course, the very idea of it was ridiculous. Haruichi enjoyed science fiction and his older brother Ryōsuke liked horror, but it was just their hobby. Neither really believed in aliens or ghosts (though they both acknowledged that they could exist somewhere in the universe).

*Clang!*

To think that he'd even for a second considered that Eijun may actually be a time-traveler from the future, made his cheeks warm.

*Clang!*

However – sometimes, when Eijun thought nobody was looking, Haruichi had seen the grin fade from his face and turn into something more natural. He looked somehow older then. Somehow, he looked as if he were revisiting a very old friend. And then Haruichi couldn't help but let his thoughts wander...

*Clang!*

But of course, he firmly told himself, all that was impossible.

*Clang!*

Anyways, his older brother was right.

The game against Akikawa was tomorrow, and if Haruichi wanted to play, he couldn't spare even a single thought elsewhere.

*Clang!*
I really want to see how Eijun teach Furuya for his midterm exams. Furuya always strike me as someone who will never get too close to their teammate since he is kinda keep to distance, so I am wondering how Eijun manage that. So, if you don't mind, would you try to make it in omake? - cyclonesystem

This takes place sometime before the midterms (they were returned in chapter 13).

Snow was falling all around him. Snow rain. Whitely, it lighted down on the trees and on the windows, and then melted into raindrops that dripped down to the ground. The sun was gone, hidden behind clouds that filled the sky with grey.

Drip. Drip.

He was outside. He was dressed in a baseball uniform, but for some reason, it wasn't getting wet. He raised his hand into the air, but instead of landing on his palm, a white snowflake landed on his cheek instead. He reached for it – but as he did so, he realized that it wasn't a snowflake anymore. It was a cicada, buzzing loudly in his ear. The buzzing grew louder in his ears – and suddenly, it had a voice.

"Furuya-kun! Psst!"

"Huh...?" he said slowly. All of a sudden, as if breaking through a haze, a crack of sunlight struck like lightning through the cloudy sky – and when he blinked again, he suddenly realized that he was no longer outside. He was sitting at his desk in a classroom, dressed in a school uniform. It was afternoon, and searing sunlight spilled in through the window.

"Furuya-kun, it's lunch break now..."

Satoru blinked a final time, and saw that Haruichi was standing beside his desk.

"Lunch..." he repeated dazedly, and right on time, his stomach grumbled.

"You should really pay attention in class, Furuya-kun," said Haruichi, but his words sounded distant, as if he were talking to Satoru from the other end of a tunnel. "The teacher was going over everything we'd have to know for the – "

"I'm hungry," said Satoru faintly, and got up. Leaving Haruichi behind, he left the classroom and headed to the cafeteria.

There was a line when he got there. Without thinking about much beside the growing pain in his stomach, Satoru got in line. However, the line was moving agonizingly slowly, and after several minutes, he realized that he recognized some of the voices talking in front of him.

"Yeah, those lines are parallel, so those opposite angles are congruent...probably."

It was, to Satoru's dull surprise, two other first-years on the baseball team. One was a blonde-head named Kanemaru, and the other was none other than his fellow pitcher on the first string: Sawamura.
"Oh, I see. And then...?" Kanemaru pointed at something in his workbook, and Sawamura frowned, wracking his brains.

"Hm...and then if you do that, you can take the sine of the given angle to find the length of the missing line. I think."

"Oh!" Kanemaru's eyes widened in enlightenment. "Yeah...that makes sense! I get it. Thanks, Sawamura."

"Sure, sure!" said Sawamura, rubbing the back of his head in obvious relief. Kanemaru closed the workbook, and tucked it under his arm. He smiled wryly.

"But seriously. How the hell do you know how to do that, and not even know what a geometric proof is?"

"Oh hey look, there's curry today," said Sawamura loudly, pointing up at the menu. Kanemaru shook his head in exasperation.

The line then began to pick up in speed, and Satoru soon found himself holding a tray with a bowl of ramen (the ramen in Tokyo paled to the ramen in Sapporo, but he would take what he could get). He looked down at the bowl—his stomach growled loudly—and then around at the cafeteria, hoping to spot Ono or Miyuki. Almost immediately, he found Ono. However, he was sitting with Sawamura and Kanemaru.

"Hey, Furuya, sit here!" Ono called out, waving to him. Silently, Satoru slid into the seat beside Kanemaru, and put his tray down on the table. "How's the studying going?"

"Studying?" Satoru blinked. He picked up the soup spoon, and sipped some of the hot ramen broth.

"The midterms are soon, you know?" said Kanemaru through a mouthful of rice. With a clattering sound, Sawamura excused himself to get a cup of water.

"Midterms?" Satoru blinked again. Breaking apart the wooden chopsticks, he picked up a piece of brisket.

"You do know that if you fail your midterms, you won't be able to play in games anymore, right?" said Ono. The brisket fell from Satoru's chopsticks.

"I'm not even on the starting lineup, and I'm still studying during my lunch break," sighed Kanemaru.

"It'll only get harder from now on," said Ono with a laugh. He clapped Kanemaru on the back. "You're a good batter though. You've got a better chance of getting on the lineup than me, so keep at it."

"Ono-senpai, that was disturbingly self-deprecating..."

Sawamura came back, struggling with three cups of water in his hands and one hanging down from his mouth.

"What's wrong with Furuya?" he asked, staring curiously at Satoru as the others each took a cup from him. Kanemaru and Ono turned to look at Satoru, and finally noticing his pale expression, they blanched.
"I don't think he realized we have midterms coming up," Kanemaru said, sweating.

"Oh," said Sawamura, sitting back down. He took a sip from his cup. "Well, I didn't either."

"You're weirdly smart about some things though," Kanemaru pointed out.

"I'm not," said Sawamura. "Just...I remember things."

"Yeah, yeah," Kanemaru waved a hand dismissively. "But well, at least Furuya knows what a geometric proof is. Right, Furuya?"

All three of them turned to look at Satoru. When he didn't respond, Ono cleared his throat. He opened his mouth, a look of uncertainty flashing across his face – but before he could say anything, Sawamura spoke up.

"Furuya, come with Harucchi after practice and we can study together." Sawamura turned to Kanemaru. "Can we go to your room? Kuramochi-senpai would probably kick us out of mine."

Kanemaru paused, obviously a little taken aback.

"Uh, sure."

"Well then with that settled, let's eat," said Sawamura with relish, and the others obediently turned to their food.

Satoru dug into his ramen. It had cooled down a little, but it was still thick and delicious.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, mostly covering what a few of the other characters have been up to. (If you forgot, in canon, Yūki blasted a two-run homer at the bottom of the fifth to end it in a 10-0 called game.) The Haruichi scene was mostly inspired by an omake request from miniminmin.

Happy Thanksgiving to everyone in the USA.
On the morning of the game between Seidō and Akikawa, the sun seared down on the stadium. Vision was slowly starting to grow hazy and the air was heavy with heat; sweat glistened at the temple of every body in the stadium.

"Top of the first, Akikawa Academy’s offense starts with number 1, center fielder, Ninomiya-kun."

The members standing in Akikawa’s dugout had been shooting the rest of the Seidō team rather dirty looks since they had all streamed into the field. Kazuya had initially wondered whether it was because Furuya was standing on the mound, but realized the truth after taking in the largely empty cheering stands on Akikawa’s side of the stadium.

"Keep your eyes on the ball, Nino!"

"He can’t throw faster than the machine!"

While Akikawa’s first batter stepped up to the plate, Furuya blew the rosin dust off of his fingers. Kazuya smiled, as he took in the first-year’s expression. There was a determined glint in his eyes. Furuya had been fired up more so than usual ever since hearing from the coach that he would be starting in today’s match.

Furuya had come a long way from how he had been at the beginning of the year. He seemed more eager to prove himself as a necessary member of the team, more eager to stand on his own. And if Kazuya wasn’t misinterpreting the atmosphere, he thought that the change had probably been largely influenced by Sawamura’s presence.

"Play ball!" cried the umpire.

Kazuya took in the player’s stance. He was a left-handed batter, and to his surprise, he was not holding his bat short. Kazuya knew for a fact that Akikawa’s players had been watching their previous game against Murata, which meant they had seen Furuya pitching before. Most of Furuya’s balls were usually high, so Kazuya had been expecting Akikawa to hold the bat short to try and make contact for a line drive.

Well, let’s see how they react to the first pitch.

Kazuya held his mitt up high.

Come!

Furuya’s foot slammed down on the mound, and his hand flung out. The ball barreled toward him
and blasted into his mitt. Wearing a stunned expression on his face, the batter veered slightly backward. As usual, shocked and impressed whispers began to spill out from the watching crowd.

Getting to his feet, Kazuya threw the ball back. It had been a strong pitch, with Furuya's trademark cannon-like power. It was nice that since Furuya was pitching for only three innings, they could afford to let him go all out from the get-go.

However, even after Furuya's starting high pitch, the batter continued to hold his bat long. Judging from that, and the way the batter had exchanged nods with the coach, led Kazuya to suspect that Akikawa had come up with a strategy for Furuya.

Sure enough, four pitches later –

"Ball four!"

Throwing aside the bat, Akikawa's first batter began to jog toward first base wearing a relieved look on his face.

"Yeah, nice job!"

"Nice one, Nino!"

"Number 2, third baseman, Hashimoto-kun."

The batter – another lefty – set up in the batting box, and Kazuya had to hold back a frown. This second batter was also holding the bat long, and despite his show of practice swinging, Kazuya could tell that he wasn't going to swing either.

"Ball!"

Furuya's lack of control, even more so than his lack of stamina, had always been his greatest flaw. They had gotten by with Furuya due to the batters swinging at even his high balls, but Akikawa's batters were clearly prepared to try and wear Furuya down.

Furuya was only pitching for three innings, but if he kept walking batters, the half-inning would never end.

Once the count had reached 3-0, Kazuya made up his mind. Lowering his mitt to the ground, he signaled for a splitter.

A look of faint surprise appeared on the usually blank-faced first-year, but Kazuya didn't budge. After a hesitant second, Furuya nodded, and a second later, he began his throwing motion and –

The ball rocketed out and dropped to the ground, spinning to a stop once it collided with Kazuya's mitt.

"Ball four!"

With a clatter of the bat, and to the cheers of his teammates, Akikawa's second batter walked to first base while the first batter walked to second.

"Number three, shortstop, Ōnishi-kun."

To Furuya's obvious consternation, Kazuya signaled for another splitter, but with a terse nod, he threw it again. As expected, Akikawa's batter didn't budge.
"Ball!"

With a small grimace, Kazuya glanced down at his mitt, and then stood up to throw the ball back. The ball had dropped a little more than before this time, arriving at the plate at the very edge of the strike zone. In Kazuya's opinion, it had been a little inside, but it seemed that the umpire wasn't going to award them any of the close calls with a strike.

Kazuya had hoped that throwing the two breaking balls would help Furuya loosen up his shoulder more, but it seemed that he was still a bit too tense.

Being fired up wasn't a bad thing of course, but if it meant that Furuya was too tense to fully throw down his arm, then the first-year could very well find himself being switched out even before his three innings were over.

*Come on Furuya,* Kazuya thought as he raised his mitt. *You've got Sawamura behind you. Throw your best.*

"Number 5, pitcher, Yeung-kun."

Satoru watched Akikawa's pitcher, a tall bespectacled boy – he thought he could vaguely remember from the notes that he was an exchange student from overseas – step up to the plate.

As he waited for Miyuki's signal, Satoru bent over to pick up the rosin bag. He had managed to strike out the third and fourth batters, leaving two runners on base. If he could just strikeout this fifth batter, the half-inning would be over.

Satoru's gaze flickered to the bullpen, where Sawamura was supposed to be warming up. However, it seemed he had stopped and was observing the game instead. Not wanting to meet his eyes, Satoru quickly averted his gaze. He dropped the bag to the ground.

Nodding at Miyuki's signal, Satoru quickly threw from the stretch and for the first time since the game had begun, Akikawa's batter swung. His heart skipped a beat, but to his relief, the ball dropped below the bat.

"Strike!"

Satoru raised his glove to receive the ball from Miyuki. As he did so, he met the batter's eyes, and was startled to see the intensity radiating out of them even through the glasses.

Miyuki held his mitt up high once more – but this time, when Satoru threw, Miyuki had to reach outside the strike zone to catch it.

"Ball!"

Satoru took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. He knew that they had to end the half-inning with this batter. He couldn't fill the bases like this, not when he could accidentally walk another batter and give the other team a free run.

"We're right behind you," said Yūki encouragingly from first base.

"Let him hit right here!" said Kuramochi.

"Don't worry about the runners!"
Suddenly, amidst the encouragement raining down on him from the cheering stands, there was a slamming sound from the bullpen. Satoru immediately looked – and saw Sawamura pitching to a catcher. As he watched, Sawamura straightened up from his pitching position, and leveled him with a stolid, challenging stare. The message was clear: that Sawamura was ready to take the mound from him at any time.

Satoru felt a bead of cold sweat travel down his warm face.

*I've finally found a place I can belong. I don't want to give it up.*

Miyuki signaled to him for a splitter, and Satoru nodded.

Before he entered the set, he closed his eyes briefly, trying to recall the many hours he had spent practicing his pitches. Before coming to Seidō, he wouldn't have thought it possible for him to work so hard. However, after coming to Seidō, for the first time in his life, he had experienced what it meant to have a team – and what it meant to fight for his place.

"*But you know, Sawamura is probably the most worried of us all about his place here.*"

Satoru opened his eyes.

Miyuki had told him that after practice. It had taken Satoru a while to understand what he'd meant, but he thought he understood now: even Sawamura, as amazing as he was, must have worked hard to get to where he was now. In fact, he was working hard even now to stay where he was. Satoru had seen it for himself.

Satoru knew that compared to Sawamura, he was somewhere far behind. While he'd always been aware on a visceral level that there were many pitchers better than him out there, because Satoru had always been pitching by himself, this was the first time he'd interacted so closely and so frequently with someone like Sawamura.

But surely, he could catch up to Sawamura one day...? And take his place on the mound...?

Slamming his foot down on the mound, Satoru threw. Akikawa's pitcher swung, the metal bat a gleaming blur in the sunlight.

With a loud *crack!* the bat connected. Jerking back, Satoru spun around and watched with a sinking heart as the ball flew past high above him.

"It's okay, Furuya!"

"Don't worry about it, we'll get the runs back."

After Akikawa's pitcher had batted in two runs with a triple, Furuya had walked the following batter but managed to get a strikeout from the seventh batter, finally ending the half-inning.

Eijun watched as the fielders swarmed around Furuya, trying to ease the other first-year with encouraging words. To Eijun's surprise, there was a visibly shocked look on Furuya's face. His face was paler than usual, and his undershirt looked soaked through with sweat. Eijun hadn't counted, but he thought Furuya must have thrown at least 30 pitches.

Wordlessly, Furuya disappeared into the dugout.

*I don't think I've ever seen Furuya look so shaken*, Eijun mused to himself.
He turned away to look at the scoreboard, where a '2' was glowing beside Akikawa's name.

Eijun remembered Akikawa's pitcher, Yeung Shunshin. He was the 'clockwork' pitcher with amazing control, and from what he remembered, Seidō's players initially struggled with him, much like they had struggled with Yokohama's pitcher in the Kantō tournament.

However, while Eijun didn't want to be overconfident, he couldn't imagine them losing. Not when he distinctly remembered what it felt like to defeat even more amazing players such as Taiyō from Teitō High.

Kuramochi was Seidō's leadoff for his base-stealing ability, not for his batting skills, so Eijun was disappointed but not surprised to see his bunt fail. Yeung was also a better defensive player than he remembered, running smoothly forward to grab the ball and toss it toward the first baseman.

"Out!"

"Top of the third, Akikawa Academy's offense starts with batting fourth, right fielder, Shiratori-kun."

Kazuya looked up at the increasingly higher sun in the sky, and then back at Furuya. Despite two walks in the second inning, they had managed to not give away any runs. However, Furuya's condition hadn't improved since then, and the growing heat was certainly not helping.

Yeung's two-run triple had clearly shaken the first-year. It was surprising; Kazuya hadn't expected Furuya to fall apart like this. He'd given away hits before, after all. So what separated this match from previous ones?

Spreading his arms open, Kazuya tried to encourage Furuya.

"You can do this," he said mentally. "Just relax and throw down your arm!"

He raised his mitt, and Furuya, his face still pale, threw. Akikawa's batter didn't budge.

"Ball!" said the umpire.

Carefully keeping his face composed, Kazuya threw the ball back before sitting back down. It seemed that while Akikawa's pitcher had completely won the umpire over to his side, Furuya had lost the umpire's faith. Most close calls were being judged as balls now.

It was a close fight, but six pitches later – "Ball four!" – the bat dropped to the ground and the batter jogged to first base to the exhilaration of his team.

They'd certainly been riding their momentum since the first inning. After scoring two runs off of Furuya, their left fielder had managed to make a miracle scorpion catch and rob Yūki of his base hit. Ever since then, they'd all been excitedly following along their coach and pitcher's lead.

The next batter was the pitcher Yeung, but fortunately, Furuya's ball dropped reasonably low. Yeung still managed to make contact – his ability to concentrate was incredible, Kazuya would give him that – but was kept to a single.

Runners on first and second base, no outs...Furuya's at almost sixty pitches...

Kazuya looked toward the dugout, but the coach's arms were folded across his chest. He returned his attention to the mound, where Furuya was tossing the rosin bag in his hand again. Even from where
he was sitting, he could tell that the first-year's breathing had started to grow irregular. Kazuya had made Furuya change his undershirt the previous inning, but his new shirt was already soaked through with sweat.

Making up his mind, Kazuya turned to the umpire, saying, "time!" He headed toward the mound, and the infielders came in as well. Looking uncomfortable, Furuya adjusted the rim of his baseball cap.

"We're defending behind you, remember," said Ryōsuke, his usually well-kempt hair sticking up at the side.

"Focus on the batters," Yūki nodded encouragingly, his sweaty sleeves clung to his arms.

"You've got all these reliable senpai defending behind you," said Kazuya, blinking sweat out of his eyes. "Just throw like you usually do."

"Get 'em one at a time, Furuya!" said Kuramochi, the front of his uniform already brown with dirt.

Furuya nodded tersely and looked away. Kazuya followed his gaze to the bullpen, where Sawamura was warming up his shoulder.

He frowned. "Keep focused on the game, Furuya." Furuya's eyes snapped back. "When you're on the mound, you're throwing for all of us."

They walked back to their positions, and Kazuya squatted down in the catcher's box. With the game resuming, Akikawa's sixth batter stepped up to the plate. Letting out a fiery battle cry, he swung his bat before holding it over his arm.

He held his mitt up high.

"The ball you're most confident in, Furuya!"

A storm swirled around in Furuya's usually calm eyes, and four pitches later –

Clank!

The batter threw the bat to the ground.

"Ball four!"

Seidō's dugout and cheering stands fell silent as the runners each advanced a base. The bases were now loaded, with no outs.

Kazuya looked toward the dugout, and saw that Coach Kataoka had finally stepped out.

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Furuya as pitcher is Sawamura. Pitcher, Sawamura."

Satoru grew still. He fixed his eyes on the dirt mound below his feet. His hand automatically clenched hard into his glove. The others surrounding him were silent. From the distance, he could hear the sound of approaching footsteps growing louder and louder. Just before it reached him, it stopped.

"Furuya."
Satoru saw a glove open before him. He didn't move, squeezing the ball tightly in his hand. Memorizing its sensation. Despite the intense heat on his face, it felt like ice cold snow was swirling around in his stomach. He wondered if he'd have to go back to his hometown.

"Oi, Furuya – " started Kuramochi, but he fell silent.

Satoru looked up, and saw Sawamura looking straight back at him with a steely look that looked out of place on his face. He raised his glove toward Satoru.

"I'm going to be pitching for you as well now, Furuya," said Sawamura. "For all the pitchers of this team. Just like you did."

Satoru hesitated – and then slowly, he pressed the ball into Sawamura's glove.

Watching Furuya walk by himself back to the dugout, Eijun picked up the rosin bag. He knew that it was his fault Furuya had been so shaken. In the original timeline, Furuya had never really had a rival during their first year, so his place on the team had been assured. By the time Eijun had caught up to Furuya, his fellow pitcher had matured and improved enough to have confidence that regardless of Eijun, his position was secure.

The Furuya of this timeline however, probably didn't quite feel as if he belonged.

"Number 6, first base, Kunimi-kun."

Staring back at Miyuki, Eijun forced himself to focus on the game at hand. The bases were loaded, and while he was confident he could get the necessary outs, there was still the pressure of knowing that even a minor slipup could result in more runs for Akikawa. It was still early in the game, but Seidō could not allow Akikawa to ride on the first inning's momentum any further.

Miyuki held the mitt at the inside of the plate. Eijun locked gazes with Miyuki, and sensing the familiar intensity emanating from the catcher, he felt himself relax. Somewhere deep inside, he felt that he and Miyuki together were invincible, and this gave him the clarity of mind that he needed.

Crushing his foot down into the mound, forming the wall with his right hand, and finally releasing his wrist – the ball shot out, hurtling straight toward the batter.

The batter flinched backward.

"Strike!"

Eijun held out his glove to catch the ball from Miyuki. The batter, throwing an uneasy glance at his cheering teammates in the dugout, settled back into a batting stance. Miyuki squatted back down, and this time he held his mitt at the outside corner.

Eijun threw, and this time the batter swung, but his bat only barely managed to clip the ball and –

"Foul!"

He raised an arm to wipe some sweat off of his forehead. The sun was high in the sky, and it was hotter out here on the mound than it had been at the bullpen.

For the third and final pitch, Eijun threw one of his moving fastballs. The batter looked visibly flustered facing him from the batting box. The ball arced past him.
"Strike three!"

Finally, the heavy silence from the Seidō stands shattered as everyone jumped to their feet and began to roar out his name.

"Sawamura!"

"Nice pitching!"

"One out!" Eijun called out, raising his hand into the sky. The others on the field raised their hands in answer.

"Number 7, catcher, Sekiguchi-kun."

Akikawa's catcher was one of the biggest players on their team, and from what Eijun had seen so far, he was a slow runner. There was power in his swing, but he was not very good at making contact, which made Eijun the worst pitcher he could have faced.

Miyuki signaled for a low four-seam, and Eijun nodded. He let out a slow exhale.

Just as he began to windup, however, he lurched, as for a split second – his vision fragmented. Suddenly, instead of looking at Miyuki's mitt, he was above his body, looking down at himself. His body was still moving, as if controlled by something else.

The next second, his vision had realigned and returned to normal, but the ball had already left his hand. Eijun felt his mouth drop open, a warning cry belatedly spilling out.

Miyuki's eyes widened. Shooting up to his feet, his mitt reached up – and just barely, managed to catch the ball.

"Ball!"

Collectively, everyone in Seidō's side of the stadium let out a sigh of relief. Miyuki, looking perplexed, threw the ball back to Eijun. Eijun caught it, and looked down at his hand. It was his hand, the same hand he had looked down at for the past couple of months. But in that split second, it had felt as if it wasn't his anymore.

What was that?

Eijun looked back up, and met Miyuki's gaze. There was an obvious question there – but Eijun shook his head.

After a moment's hesitation, Miyuki sat back down.

Akikawa's team was calling out encouragements to their batter. Eijun could feel the three on-base runners practically searing holes into his back. The batter tipped his helmet at a signal from his bench.

Pushing all that aside, Eijun focused instead on Miyuki's mitt. It was in the same position as before, and Eijun knew that it was Miyuki's aggressive way of telling him that he had confidence in him.

This time, Eijun threw the ball exactly as signaled. Flinging his arm out, he watched the ball bullet toward the batter. The batter's face paled, and likely moving instinctively, he swung.

With a clunking sound, the white ball shot straight back at Eijun. His catching arm automatically shot
straight up, helped by the honing of the summer camp, and the ball slammed into his mitt. Without pausing, Eijun turned around – the runners had started moving as soon as the bat had made contact – and threw the ball toward third base.

The runner, clearly taken aback, stumbled.

"OUT!" the umpire cried out.

- Glossary -

Pitching positions:

- **Windup** = A pitcher is in the windup when, with the ball, the pitcher stands on or directly in front of the pitching rubber (located at the top of the mound), with his feet pointing toward home plate. The windup has a relatively slower execution, so therefore is better suited for situations in which there are no baserunners, or when the lead runner is on third base, since it is difficult to steal home plate.

- **Set / Stretch** = A pitcher is in the set when, with the ball, he stands on, or directly in front of—and touching—the pitching rubber, with his toes pointing toward the side (toward third base for a right-handed pitcher) and his arms apart at his sides. This initial part of the set is called the **stretch**, because the pitcher usually stretches toward home plate to take signs from the catcher. A pitch from the set, having a relatively faster execution, is preferred when there are baserunners. Faster execution is important to prevent stolen bases.

**Pitch:**

- **Splitter** = An off-speed pitch that suddenly drops towards home plate.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your reviews, and Happy Holidays/Merry Christmas to those who celebrate it. Sorry about the long delay. I wanted this out in time for Christmas, so it's a bit hurried (writing baseball is hard!). Next chapter, a bit more batting, less pitching. (Poor Furuya. I feel bad.) Also, things are about to pick up pace and get way more intense.

Ahhh the new manga raws bring me joy. I'm glad it didn't go the way I predicted. I'm very interested in seeing how it will go from now on. I wonder if there will be a time skip?
Chapter Summary

We're taking back this game starting now, you damn pitcher. - Seidō vs Akikawa part II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Out, out!" roared the umpire, and Seidō's filled side of the stadium erupted into jubilant cheering.
"YES!"
"YOU GO, SAWAMURA!"
"Masuko-senpai!"
"Nice play!"

Meanwhile, looking crestfallen, Akikawa's baserunners returned to their dugout.

"Sorry, everyone," apologized Akikawa's catcher, Sekiguchi. "I thought I could hit, since he throws slower than their first pitcher, but..." He trudged down the steps, taking off his helmet.

"I know what you mean," said their first baseman, Kunimi. He bit his lip. "That guy's pitches are a lot scarier when you're actually standing in the batting box."

"Don't worry about it," said their teammate, slapping the two on the back. "We're still in the lead."

"What were his pitches like?" Yeung asked, turning to stare at the opposing team's dugout. The pitcher's defense had been better than he'd expected from a first-year.

"His form is weirder than I expected," Sekiguchi explained, looking worried. "You can't see his arm when he throws."

"His pitches were...horrible to try and time," said Kunimi. His brow crinkled, as his teammates exchanged dubious glances. "It's hard to explain."

"Now, now, keep your heads up," said their coach, clapping his hands. The rest of Akikawa's team members turned toward him. "You all did very well, getting Seidō to switch out their starter this early in the game."

"Yeah, we got that monster first-year out!"

"We'll get this one switched out too," grinned the third baseman, Hashimoto.

Without answering, Yeung uneasily slipped on his glove.

"Bottom of the fourth inning, Seidō High School's offense starts with number 3, center fielder, Isashiki-kun."
"Jun-san, your helmet!" Kuramochi yelled out behind him.

Seidō’s cheering squad roared out his name, and as he always did, Jun straightened up and carefully bowed. "Let's have a good match."

Moving into the batting box, Jun held the bat straight up into the air and adjusted his helmet. His mouth stretched down in his usual scowl.

Jun wasn’t in the mood to give out compliments to the opposing team (in fact, he never was), but he would grudgingly admit that Akikawa’s pitcher had done well to keep Seidō scoreless for the past three innings.

However, it was completely unacceptable that he and the rest of the third-years had been unable to support Furuya, while the first-year had been trying his best on the mound. They’d failed to score off of this damn pitcher, and Furuya had been switched out for their other first-year pitcher, Sawamura – who then saved them from a situation of loaded bases and no outs. As if that wasn’t embarrassing enough, Sawamura then followed up the next inning with three consecutive outs.

Jun’s dignity as an upperclassman refused to accept to be continuously shut down by this pitcher —this damn pitcher who’s been looking so calm and collected this whole damn time—while the first-years were working so hard.

Just a single look at Tetsu, who was kneeling in the on-deck circle, and the other third-years, told Jun that the rest of them felt the same way.

*We're not going to just sit back and watch!*

Tightening his grasp on the handle of his bat and leaning over the plate, Jun glared determinedly at the opposing pitcher. Without cowing, the foreign pitcher coolly stared back – and then began his pitching motion.

A second later, the ball shot out of his glove and hurtled straight toward what felt like his face. It was clearly meant to cow him – and at that thought, Jun felt something inside him snap.

Forgoing the ‘proper’ swinging the batting coach had tried to hammer into him, Jun dug his heel back and raised his bat up high.

"You'd better be kidding me!" he roared, and vindictively smashed the ball forward in a line drive. Throwing the bat aside, he ran, keeping his eye on the ball.

It bounced and rolled in deep left field, and Jun was waved past first base. Akikawa's fielders were shouting toward each other – but Jun slid easily to second base, before coming to a stop.

He let out a roar of victory, pumping his fist into the air.

*Damn straight!*

"Seidō! Seidō!"

"Jun-san!"

Akikawa's pitcher threw a sharp glance at him from the mound. Jun's scowl deepened.

"What're you looking at?" he growled out – but either the pitcher didn't hear, or he simply ignored him, for he turned away without responding.
The brass band began to play 'Lupin the Third'; steadily and calmly, Seidō's captain stepped up to the plate.

"Number 4, first baseman, Yūki-kun."

Akikawa's catcher motioned something nervously to the pitcher, but he shook his head. After Tetsu lowered into a batting stance, the pitcher glanced at Jun, and then turned back to face Tetsu. Jun took a few steps lead – and as soon as the pitcher entered the set, he began to dash toward third.

There was a loud and solid clang! – but the ball flew into foul territory, and Jun returned to second.

Tetsu lowered back into his batting stance, which was as firm and unyielding as always. In the lull before the pitcher entered the set, Jun took a few more steps forward, his eyes moving back and forth. His muscles were tensed, but Tetsu's eyes were glowing as they always did when he stood in the batting box. His concentration was practically superhuman, and Jun knew with certainty that Tetsu could bring him home.

It seemed, however, that Akikawa's pitcher must also have felt this. Four pitches later, for the first time since the game had began, he gave up his first walk. The intense aura faded from Tetsu as he dropped his bat and began to jog to first base.

Akikawa's pitcher wiped sweat off of his brow, and Jun straightened up, letting out an approving growl. He'd clearly cowered before Tetsu's swing, as he rightfully should have from the get-go.

We're taking back this game starting now, you damn pitcher.

Following Yūki's walk, as the coach had ordered, Masuko—to the surprise of the watching crowd—executed a perfect bunt. The ball bounced off the bat and slowly rolled toward the pitcher. Isashiki and Yūki both advanced to the next base. Masuko dutifully ran toward first base, before turning back to the dugout at a more leisurely pace.

"Exquisite bunt, Masuko-senpai!" Eijun called out, high-fiving Masuko as he came down the stairs. He looked meaningfully toward his other roommate, who leaned against the railing beside him. He added loudly, "It takes real skill to pull off a bunt like that."

"You tryna say something?" Kuramochi raised his fist.

Eijun had forgotten (how could he have?) but in his first year, Kuramochi had struggled against pitchers who specialized in control. He'd gotten better over the next year to make up for this weakness, but for now, it felt immensely satisfying to once again be able to rub some salt in his wound.

I might have picked up on some of Miyuki's nasty personality, Eijun sniggered to himself.

As if in response, 'Sharpshooter' began spilling out on to the field. His ears perked up at the song, and Eijun turned his attention to the batter now setting up in the box.

"Number 6, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

Eijun grinned in relish. For a situation such as this, with one out and runners on second and third, there was no other batter—except Haruichi, perhaps—better suited than Miyuki.

After Miyuki's injury, it had been his catching that Eijun had missed most, of course, but his clutch hitting had also also never failed to fill him with awe.
And of course…Yeung is Miyuki’s favorite kind of pitcher to face.

Meanwhile, Yeung motioned toward his fielders, who nodded and all shifted in closer. He shot a challenging glare at Miyuki. It was clear that he intended to make Miyuki hit a grounder and then throw out the runner at home.

Eijun leaned over the railing, his eyes completely fixated on Miyuki. He thought he could feel goosebumps running up his arms.

As Kazuya had expected, there would be no easy pitches from Yeung. They weren't fast, but they came in tightly at all the corners of the plate.

It excited him, getting to bat against pitchers like Yeung. He was a different kind of pitcher from Furuya and Sawamura. He threw mechanically and precisely, living up to his ‘clockwork’ name in every way. Against his better judgment, Kazuya had gotten so caught up in Yeung's timing that he'd even accidentally swung against a high ball that he should have let by – and now, the count was against him with two strikes.

Kazuya adjusted his helmet. Batting like this, after Sawamura had come through so spectacularly for the team, was—admittedly—embarrassing.

Swinging his bat in the air, he glanced at the dugout, wondering whether Sawamura would be shaking his head at him – but to his surprise, the first-year was yelling out his name alongside the rest of his teammates.

With a small grin, Kazuya settled down into his batting stance.

Haha! Sorry Akikawa. But when my pitcher's cheering me on like this, I can't not answer.

His mind raced through the pitches Yeung had thrown at him so far. Yeung's mastery over his control really was amazing; it was better than any of Seidō's pitchers, even Kawakami and Sawamura. With the strike zone split into nine subsections, he'd been cornered with three well-placed pitches.

Yeung's last two pitches had been high and inside. And if Kazuya were his catcher, he would end it…

With a low and outside curveball!

As the ball flew toward him, without any hesitation, Kazuya swung. His bat connected solidly with a satisfying thunk!

Releasing the bat, exhilarated, Kazuya began to run.

Everyone was shouting – Akikawa's fielders in panic, and Seidō's in excited encouragement. Off deep in the outfield, he saw the tiny speck of white bounce away from the center fielder. From the corners of his eyes, Kazuya could see the other runners rounding around the diamond.

By the time he slid to third, Isashiki and Yūki were already high-fiving each other at home. The game was finally tied.

"Number 7, right fielder, Shirasu-kun."
Akikawa's catcher, Sekiguchi, anxiously locked gazes with Shun while Seidō's batter set up in the batting box. The crowd was still uproariously cheering from their sixth batter's timely two RBI triple. Their own dugout had grown silent, and their fielders' faces looked strained.

Sekiguchi had known it was too good to be true. It was a miracle that Akikawa had managed to keep Seidō scoreless until now. Sure, they had Shun, who was easily their best player, but Seidō's entire batting lineup was filled with monsters. It was as if they were playing against a team of Shuns.

And while Shun was Akikawa's only pitcher, Seidō had four pitchers in their bullpen. Sekiguchi had held out hope while batting against their first pitcher. However, Seidō had replaced him with another pitcher. This current pitcher wasn't even their ace, he was just a first-year – but after just a single at-bat against him, Sekiguchi was finding it hard to imagine that any of them could get even a base hit from him.

They might have had a chance if it was just that pitcher against them, but of course Seidō's catcher was another monster, with the ability to perfectly lead him.

Seidō's seventh batter lowered into a batting stance. Sekiguchi glanced at the runner on third – the monster catcher. With just one out, this was a perfect situation for Seidō to go for a squeeze play. And from the data Akikawa had meticulously collected on Seidō's batters, he knew that the current batter held the highest percentage of successful sacrifice bunts.

Sekiguchi felt his heart start to pound against his chest. His mask felt heavy on his face.

They'd given up two runs in this inning, and lost their lead. If Seidō scored another run, he didn't know if Akikawa would be able to recover.

*Not while that southpaw first-year is pitching.*

"One out!"

"One at a time!"

Signaling to Shun—who nodded—he stood, setting up his mitt. Shun's arm flung out. As expected, the batter quickly changed to a bunting stance, and the runner at third immediately took off.

The bat made contact with the ball, sending it rolling toward the motion. It was a good bunt. Sekiguchi urged Shun to run faster, hovering behind the home plate with his mitt ready.

Shun!

The runner wasn't a particularly fast runner, but he'd had a fair lead before taking off. The rolling ball was in Shun's reach. The runner was almost at the base—it was going to be a close call—*if we don't want our summer to end here, we have to stop them here at all costs!*—Shun tossed the ball toward his mitt—were they going to make it?—heart pounding, Sekiguchi fought the urge to grit his teeth, bracing himself for the impact, refusing to move out of the way –

The runner dropped to the ground and began to slide—Sekiguchi lowered his mitt to tag him—but he was too close to him. Sekiguchi brushed him with the mitt, but the runner was still sliding, and he felt his foot crash against his legs. Losing his balance, Sekiguchi bowled over, landing on top of the runner. Upon impact, he felt the wind get knocked straight out of him.

With a small wheeze, still holding the mitt against the runner, Sekiguchi turned desperately up at the umpire, who looked down at them silently for a heart-stopping second –
Raising a fist, the umpire yelled, "Out!"

Eijun watched in horror as Akikawa's catcher collided with, and fell on top of Miyuki. Upon impact, Miyuki's head bounced once against the ground.

Eijun's hold on the metal railing tightened. Suddenly, all he could think about was how Akikawa's catcher was one of the biggest players on their team. And now, Miyuki was on the ground. Why wasn't he moving?

His face felt hot. His entire body felt hot. It felt as if every drop of blood in his body had begun to boil. His vision was turning red.

"Out!"

The spectators in the stadium erupted into cheers, and Eijun wrenched his hands away from the railing. His legs were shaking, and he ordered them to move so that he could head toward Miyuki. Something was pounding painfully against his eardrums. The sound around him was dropping away, as if it had been muted.

I have to get to him.

"Sawamura!"

Was someone calling to him? But none of that mattered –

I have to get to Miyuki.

A hand grabbed him by the shoulder, and shook him. A snarl ripping out of his mouth—don't get in my way—Eijun turned, and found himself nose-to-nose with Kuramochi.

"Miyuki is fine," said Kuramochi, his voice cutting like a knife through the din. "Calm down. He's not hurt at all. Breathe."

...he's not hurt?

Dazedly, Eijun stepped back. He looked out at the field – and, sure enough, Miyuki was back on his feet. His pants were dirtied, but he was walking back to the dugout, wearing a clearly irritated half-grimace, half-grin on his face.

As if sensing Eijun's gaze, Miyuki directly met his eyes, and the grin faded. A confused look replaced it.

The blindingly bright spots were fading from Eijun's vision, and his ears popped as all sound was suddenly restored. He blinked, and he was back in the dugout. His hands hurt.

"Are you okay, Eijun-kun?" Haruichi asked tentatively.

"I'm fine," he said, and was relieved to hear the calmness in his voice.

He glanced around the dugout, but it seemed most of the others on the team had been distracted by the play. Only Kuramochi and Haruichi were looking at him. He let out a deep breath. He didn't want to worry the team any more than he already had, when he'd thrown that wild pitch in the third inning.
“Number 8, left fielder, Sakai-kun.”

For some reason, unable to bear the thought of looking at Miyuki any longer, Eijun began to stalk toward the back room. He felt sick. Something had coiled up in his stomach. For a lurching moment, he thought he would hurl. He put out a hand to steady himself against the back wall. It was cool to the touch, a sharp contrast to the heat of the outside field.

All of a sudden, Eijun realized that he didn't want to play anymore. He wanted the game to be over.

*I want this game to end.*

It was a sudden thought, borne out of fear and shock. He knew this, but he couldn't stop it from flooding his mind.

*I want this game to end.*

Eijun closed his eyes.

Gradually, his heartbeat slowed down. His breathing grew even. What felt like icy coldness spread through his body, simultaneously numbing and sharpening his senses.

"Top of the fifth, Akikawa Academy's offense starts with number 9, left fielder, Takada-kun."

Lowering his mask over his face, Kazuya squatted down in the catcher's box. He looked out at where Sawamura stood, tossing his rosin bag as usual – but the mirth and excitement that usually accompanied his pitching had completely disappeared.

Sawamura had been strangely silent since Kazuya returned after his failed run. After being checked for injuries and given a clean bill of health, Kazuya had made a light teasing comment to the first-year—"Don't you think Yeung and I would make a great battery?"—but he'd been ignored.

Now standing on the mound, Sawamura had never looked as serious or cold as he did now. Somehow, standing there, the first-year looked older than he had a right to look. His eyes were glowing at full intensity, but they were also dark with another emotion that Kazuya didn't recognize.

Kazuya felt his brow furrow as he raised his mitt. He had to admit it: he was never going to understand what went through Sawamura's head.

*Should I be worried?*

On a more immediate level, Kazuya felt concerned about how this current Sawamura would pitch, and how it would affect the game. As the main catcher, this was normal for him. But on a deeper level, somewhere buried deep in his chest, he felt something shift uneasily. It bothered him, personally, seeing Sawamura look this way. It bothered him, because it told him that there were still sides to Sawamura that he knew nothing about.

*Since when did I care so much, anyways?*

Sawamura's foot slammed down onto the mound. His arm flung out. The ball was a blur as it streaked past the frozen batter and into Kazuya's mitt.

"Strike!"

Hushed murmuring spread like wildfire through the crowd.
What was that?

Kazuya looked down at the smoking ball in his mitt, before getting up and throwing it back. That had been Sawamura's fastest pitch so far.

He set up his mitt this time on the outside low corner. Sawamura threw, and the batter swung, but his timing was completely off –

"Strike!"

Had that pitch been even faster?

Kazuya threw the ball back. With a frown, he punched his mitt with his fist before holding it back up. It had been a powerful pitch, to be sure, but it hadn't felt like the southpaw's usual pitch.

Pace yourself, Sawamura. You're not Furuya. We're still only halfway through the game.

"Strike! Batter out!" the umpire said. "Change sides!"

Yōichi wondered if it were possible to get whiplash from changing sides so quickly in a game. It felt like mere seconds since Sawamura had taken the mound, but Akikawa's second batter was already dragging his feet back to their dugout.

"Great pitching, Sawamura!"

"Keep it up!"

There was a tight smile on Sawamura's face as he jogged back to the dugout, but Yōichi wasn't fooled. Something had changed in the first-year – his pitching had felt unnatural, almost forced. It lacked the feeling it usually had.

As expected, Miyuki must have picked up on it too. Without taking off his gear, he was murmuring something in a low voice to Sawamura. Yōichi couldn't hear what they were saying, but after a minute, Sawamura shook his head. He then got up, leaving Miyuki behind, and began to change his equipment.

"Bottom of the fifth, Seidō High School's offense starts with number 9, pitcher, Sawamura-kun."

"C'mon Sawamura!"

"Wamura!"

Putting on his own helmet and picking up his bat, Yōichi climbed out of the dugout and walked to the on-deck circle. Carefully observing Sawamura, he hunched over and began to stretch his shoulders. Strangely enough, against his expectations, Sawamura's batting stance looked better than ever.

His head and eyes pointed directly at the pitcher, and his elbows were comfortably spaced. From the way he had been swinging the bat, Yōichi could tell that Sawamura's grip was firm, but relaxed. It seemed that Sawamura was calmer than he had expected.

The ball flew out of Akikawa's pitcher's glove. Sawamura didn't move.
The pitcher raised his glove to receive the ball. The catcher signaled something, and he nodded. After a still moment, he began his pitching motion. The ball flew down from the mound.

Sawamura swung. With a clanging sound, the ball soared straight out, landing hard on the ground just past the foul line.

"Foul!"

Akikawa's pitcher turned around, a look of faint surprise flashing across his face. Sawamura returned to his batting stance.

Another pitch, this time in and high, and Sawamura didn't even flinch as it nearly grazed past him.

"Ball!"

The count was now at 1-2. The catcher signaled something to the pitcher, before moving his mitt low and outside. Straightening up, Yōichi raised his bat to his shoulder. The next pitch would be the deciding pitch. He could feel it.

Sure enough, at the next pitch—a curveball, the same pitch they'd tried on Miyuki in the previous inning, and Yōichi had to admire their tenacity in repeating it—Sawamura swung strongly.

"...strike! Batter out!"

His face hidden under the helmet, Sawamura remained unnaturally long in his swung position. Akikawa's dugout burst into cheers.

"One out!"

"Nice pitching!"

Akikawa's pitcher raised his index finger up into the air, a small smile on his face. Sawamura finally lowered his bat.

"Number 1, shortstop, Kuramochi-kun," said the announcer.

"Nice try," said Yōichi, raising a hand toward Sawamura as the other boy passed by him. Sawamura didn't respond, and taking in the look on his face, he let his hand drop.

Sawamura's eyes were cold and his features twisted in a way he hadn't known was possible on the normally grinning first-year. He was almost unrecognizable. If Yōichi didn't know better, he'd have thought that some sort of wrathful spirit had taken possession of his body.

Nevertheless, as Yōichi stepped up to the plate, he found himself feeling glad that Sawamura was on his team, and not the opposing one.

*If looks could kill...every single member of Akikawa would be dead by now,* he thought grimly to himself.

- Glossary -

**Clutch hitter** = A batter who hits safely more frequently when men are on base or the team is behind
in the score.

Run(s) batted in (RBI) = A statistic used in baseball to credit a batter when the outcome of his or her at bat results in a run being scored.

Chapter End Notes

(Drama. Drama everywhere.)

Early happy new years to everyone.

Jun’s batting in the Akikawa match was my favorite performance from him. He really does swing at whatever he wants, lmfao.

@Recent anime episodes (62/63): I knew it was coming but nooo... I want to punch Narumiya in the face. Anyways, I'm liking the (identical?) fire in Miyuki and Furuya's eyes, though you could argue that their way of coping with the loss is not exactly mentally healthy either.
Running

Chapter Summary

And right now…the husband's getting the cold shoulder… - Seidō vs Akikawa part III (end)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the top of the sixth, while Seidō's southpaw pitcher blazed through yet another series of consecutive outs, excited voices – particularly those belonging to the locals in the watching crowd – began to chime out in awe.

"Who the hell is that number 10?"

"Is he really a first-year?"

"Sawamura…Sawamura Eijun?"

With a clanging sound, the crowd watched as a ball was sent flying straight into the shortstop's glove.

"Out!"

Sitting in a row separate from the rest of Seidō's blue-shirted reserve team, the managers also leapt to their feet, breathlessly beating their cheering horns against their hands. The most vocal of them all, Sachiko, screamed out the southpaw’s name, while the two beside her giggled.

On the other hand, the only first-year manager, Haruno, bit her lip as she looked down at the field. "But…did Sawamura-kun always look so…scary?"

With a towel wrapped around his neck to mop up any remaining sweat, Yeung sat down in the cool shade of the bench. He closed his eyes, resting them in the brief break he had before it was his turn to bat – which, judging by the lightning pacing of the opponent southpaw on the mound right now, would barely amount to any time at all.

When he heard his teammates suddenly begin to start buzzing to one another, he opened his eyes. "What is it?"

"Shun…take a look at Seidō's bullpen…" said Ninomiya.

Right on cue, Yeung heard a distinct slamming sound coming from the bullpen's direction. Lifting his gaze, he turned to see that another Seidō pitcher had started warming up. He was Seidō's sure-handed sidearm closer.

"They really have no intentions to play their ace, do they?" said Sekiguchi.

Ripping off the towel, Yeung gave the catcher a tight-lipped smile. "They don't need to. Their future
ace is already standing there, on the mound."

Accepting his batting helmet from Sekiguchi, Yeung stepped out of the dugout and into the on-deck circle.

"Number 4, right-fielder, Shiratori-kun."

Even from where he was watching, the tension on the mound was incredible. The southpaw, Sawamura, stared coolly back at home plate with a sharpness like cut glass. Shiratori lowered into a batting stance, and Sawamura nodded at a signal. Without pause, he threw in his uniquely late motion. The ball rocketed down the mound and straight into the catcher's mitt.

"Strike!"

It still wasn't at the speed of their other first-year, but the southpaw's pitches had gained some velocity, throwing off Akikawa's batters even more.

Yeung felt his hands instinctively tighten around the handle of his bat. At this rate, with this pitcher on his stride, their loss was just a matter of time. He knew they had to do something soon to throw off his rhythm, or at least match it with their batting.

The question was, could they rise to the challenge?

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Despite his brother's warning, Haruichi found himself unable to look away from the mound as, at the top of the seventh, Eijun got his fifteenth consecutive out since he had taken over in the third inning.

Akikawa's catcher, swinging belatedly at a low cutter, sent the ball rolling in the ground toward the mound. Eijun shot forward, picked up the ball, threw it to Yūki at first and –

"Out! Change sides!"

When the fielders returned to the bench to switch for their offense, Haruichi heard his name being called by the coach, and a moment later, found that he was going in as a pinch hitter.

As he began to pull on his batting gloves, Haruichi felt his mouth curve up in a pleased smile.

His brother was right then—when isn't he?—when he said that the coach used players who were doing well in practice.

Haruichi had been feeling rather left behind as the only first-year on the team who wasn't used regularly in games. He also knew that there were some second- and third-years on the team who held a carefully-hidden grudge against him for filling up the last spot on the summer's first-string team, and he was eager to prove himself.

As Haruichi went to the receptacles to pick up his wooden bat, he noticed that Chris—who was, as usual, sitting on the bench beside the coach and recording the game—was wearing a troubled look on his usually composed face.

He hesitated, wondering whether he was reading too much into it. "Um…Chris-senpai, is something the matter?"

Chris looked faintly taken aback at being addressed, but smiled. "No, there's nothing wrong. Just…" He turned his head. "…something seems rather off about Sawamura."
Haruichi followed his gaze to find it resting on none other than Eijun, who, with a cup of water in his hand, was sitting silently beside Masuko. "Yeah, I've noticed it too."

Eijun had been acting strangely ever since the bottom of the fourth inning, when Akikawa's catcher had fallen on top of Miyuki. Haruichi had never seen his friend before like this. Eijun was many things, but in the months Haruichi had known him, he had never been this – cold.

Eijun was rebuffing anyone who approached him, which was probably why Chris seemed hesitant to say anything. It wasn't negatively affecting Eijun's pitching, after all. The few others who'd noticed —namely Kuramochi—seemed to be under the impression that Eijun was just being moody again, but Haruichi thought it was different from before.

However, there was nothing he could do, besides doing his best to help the team win the game. After all, even Miyuki was getting nothing out of the southpaw, and everyone on the team knew that Sawamura was by far the closest to Miyuki. Nobody could say how it had happened, and nobody really talked about it. However, it was undeniable that there was something between the two.

Offhandedly, Haruichi thought to himself that there must be some truth to the baseball adage that battery mates were akin to being husband and wife.

And right now...the husband's getting the cold shoulder...

"Seidō High School has called for a substitution. Replacing number 8, Sakai-kun, pinch hitter, Kominato Haruichi-kun."

Yeung had been waiting for Seidō to make their move for some time now, but he was admittedly taken aback by the pinch hitter they sent out: a tiny first-year who looked as if he'd made a wrong turn somewhere on his way to a Little League game, and ended up on this field instead. On top of that, he was using a wooden bat, to boot. Yeung half-irritably wondered whether the prestigious school wasn't completely looking down on Akikawa.

Of course, as he soon found out, appearances were deceiving. The pinch hitter hung over the plate, and Yeung sent a pitch straight in front of his knees to the very edges of the inside corner. It would have been a difficult ball to hit even if the first-year had been using an aluminum bat – when suddenly, he opened his legs and twisted, blasting it straight past the infielders.

As Seidō's bleachers burst into cheers, Yeung, in grudging admiration, watched the first-year shyly raise a fist in a guts pose.

Wiping off the sweat on his brow, he bent down to pick up the rosin bag, and noticed that the next two batters in the lineup—Seidō's southpaw pitcher and their shortstop—were talking with their coach.

Sekiguchi came up to the mound.

"Don't worry about it," he said, pressing a new baseball in Yeung's hand. "We'll shut down the next three again."

They couldn't hear what Seidō's coach—a man in shades who wouldn't have looked out of place at the head of a yakuza gang—was saying, but the two players were looking out at the field and nodding. Seeing that, and wondering what they were talking about, all of Akikawa's fielders couldn't help but feel a bit more on edge.
"Number 9, pitcher, Sawamura-kun."

The southpaw stepped up to the plate, swinging his bat.

Yeung had watched him completely shut down Akikawa's offense for five straight innings now, and he had no doubt in his mind that he was one of the best pitchers in the Kanto region. While it was disheartening that they were helpless in the face of his pitching, it reminded Yeung of what exactly he had come all the way to Japan to play baseball for.

Sawamura lowered into a batting stance, and met Yeung's gaze with his own cold, simmering one. Yeung felt himself sweat. On the other hand, from the way the southpaw had been glaring at them for the entire game, it also felt as if the first-year had a personal vendetta with the Akikawa team.

It may have affected another pitcher of lesser nerves. However, Yeung was not so easily intimidated.

Nodding at Sekiguchi's signal, he began his pitching motion – and just as his arm came out, to his surprise, Sawamura suddenly lowered into a bunting stance. Yeung immediately began to run forward – but he lurched unsteadily to the left, while Sawamura's bat tapped the ball, sending it rolling perfectly down the third base line.

_Drag bunt?!_

Sawamura had already taken off for first, while Hashimoto—Akikawa's third baseman—was running forward to field the ball.

The southpaw was not an especially fast runner, and would probably have been tagged out at first if Hashimoto hadn't fumbled the ball. The extra half-second this error earned Sawamura was enough, as his foot landed firmly on the base.

"Safe!"

As he watched Akikawa's defense self-destruct on the field, Kazuya could not bring himself to feel anything other than a dull sense of relief that the game would soon be over.

Two errors in a row had filled the bases, with no outs, and now, Ryōsuke was stepping up to the plate. Sawamura waited on second. Was it just Kazuya, or was Sawamura beginning to look worn down? It wasn't noticeable unless one was paying close attention, but he was unmistakably breathing harder than he had before.

Coach Kataoka must have thought the same. "Higasa – tell Kawakami that he's going in the next inning."

Kazuya had been thinking about it ever since he'd noticed something was wrong in the fifth inning. What had set Sawamura off? Was it because Akikawa's catcher had fallen on top of Kazuya? But that made no sense. He'd been fine, after all.

Furthermore, as he'd kept close watch, he was starting to question who Sawamura's anger was directed against. It was starting to seem less and less like it was Akikawa.

Anyone else watching may have thought Sawamura was – for some reason – ticked off at the Akikawa team, but 'anyone else' had not been catching for the southpaw for the past few months. 'Anyone else' had not spent time bantering and eating with Sawamura for the past few months, or been woken up by the other boy in the early cracks of morning and dragged to practice.
Kazuya had.

Now, as he saw how, even as he looked directly at someone, Sawamura seemed to be looking elsewhere and how his eyes grew increasingly dull with every passing inning – he wondered if Sawamura wasn't, for some inexplicable reason, angry at himself. But it wasn't just anger, either. There were other emotions mixed in there – and at the bottom of it all, Kazuya found, was weariness. Deep, deep weariness.

Kazuya felt his mouth twist into a hard line. Why hadn't he noticed any of this until now?

He had approached the first-year halfway through the game.

"Hey now Sawamura, what's gotten into you?" he'd tried to say lightly.

"Nothing, Miyuki-senpai."

"There's no need to push yourself like this. Pace yourself, or else you'll burn yourself out."

Sawamura then gave him a blank look, before shaking his head. He got up then, to leave. But before he turned, he paused. "I'd rather burn out, than lose…again."

With his fingers steepled, Kazuya looked at his back, with the number 10 tag on it, before looking down at his feet. Lose what again? Kazuya hadn't been able to catch the word.

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"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Sawamura-kun as pitcher is Kawakami-kun. Pitcher, Kawakami-kun."

"Nice pitching, Sawamura!"

"Sawamura-kun!"

"You were amazing!"

As Nori hurried out to the mound, cheers and applause rang out for the first-year he was replacing. He glanced at the scoreboard: a glowing 6 had lit up next to Seidō's name for the seventh inning, putting their score at 8-2.

He felt well-prepared, as he'd started warming up his shoulder from the sixth inning, and riding the wave of excitement of the seventh, he was raring to go. Thanks to Furuya and Sawamura, Seidō also had a lead of six points, and now, he was getting to start off a fresh new inning, without any runners on base passed on to him. For Nori's job as a reliever, there was no situation as comfortable as this.

Bending over, Nori picked up the rosin bag and determinedly flexed it in his hand. As a senpai, he had a duty to follow up to the first-years' performance.

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The game continued.

The eight inning passed quickly, with neither team scoring. At the top of the ninth, after a battle of sheer perseverance, Yeung got on base, and then managed to reach second on a bunt. However, his teammates were unable to follow up, and he remained stranded on second as the umpire called out the end of the game.

Slowly, he took off his helmet as tears ran down the faces of his teammates. They had played for
nine straight innings and every muscle in his body was screaming. But to him, it felt as if the game had gone by in a flash.

"Seidō, eight to two. Bow!"

"Thank you!"

The viewers rose to their feet and clapped for both teams, and the siren marking the end of a game rang throughout the stadium.

With their win against Akikawa, Seidō High School had now advanced to the quarter-finals.

The team quickly gathered their equipment and cleared out of the dugout – the next game between Ichidai and Yakushi would be beginning soon.

Chris lingered behind, though he had only his backpack, in order to keep an eye on Sawamura.

He had thought that the first-year might protest to being switched out in the eighth inning. However, instead, Sawamura had jerkily nodded and moved to ice his shoulder without a single word of protest.

Now, systematically packing his equipment bag, Sawamura left the dugout ahead of the other first-years. The younger Kominato gave Chris a worried look before chasing after him (Furuya, who'd been in a gloomy mood all game, plodded out after them).

Only Chris and Miyuki were left now.

Miyuki slowly packed his bag, his eyes hidden under the shadow under his sports glasses. Pulling up the last zipper, he slung it on his back. Turning around, he seemed genuinely surprised to see Chris. "Chris-senpai?"

"Miyuki…you haven't forgotten, have you? That you're Seidō's main catcher now."

Miyuki's mouth thinned. "I haven't."

"But…don't forget that you're also Sawamura's catcher," Chris said quietly.

A beat passed – and then Miyuki's jaw grew slack as for a brief instant, an astonished expression crossed his face. Somehow, Chris thought, it made him look younger.

Then it faded, and his mouth curled up in his usual roguish grin. "Who do you think I am, senpai?"

As he watched Miyuki hurry up the dugout stairs and step out into the sunlight, Chris simultaneously felt that a weight had been taken off his shoulders, while something else sank in his chest. Somewhere deep inside, he still wanted to catch for Sawamura. And maybe the opportunity would come one day. If it did, they would make an amazing battery. He knew that with a sense of calm, unwavering certainty that he didn't quite understand.

However, Chris knew that it was not his mitt Sawamura was waiting for.

By the time Kazuya had caught up with the others, they were all filing into the seats of the stadium to watch the next game. He looked around, but couldn't find the familiar head of messy brown hair. Where was Sawamura?
He took several steps up to the top-most row, where Furuya was sitting by himself. "Hey, Furuya. Where're the rest of the first-years?"

Furuya blinked a few times, looking dazed. "...Sawamura and Haruichi went to the bathroom."

Kazuya frowned. Leaving his equipment bag on the bench, he went back down the stairs.

There were two bathrooms located on opposite sides of the stadium, both located at similar distances away from the field exit. After a moment's hesitation, Kazuya chose to turn to the left.

In the lower floor corridors, there were random passersby here and there, who, catching sight of his baseball uniform, cheered and waved their hands. He walked past, watching out for a flash of white and blue at every bend or corner.

Finally reaching the bathroom, Kazuya popped his head in. Immediately, he saw a Seidō uniform, and he felt his breath rush out of his lungs as relief washed over him.

"Sawamu – " He abruptly stopped.

Sakai blinked back from the sink. "Miyuki?"

Kazuya felt himself sweat. "Have you seen the first-years?"

Sakai shook his head no, and feeling oddly disappointed, Kazuya left and began to walk back the way he had come. The other bathroom was all the way on the other side of the stadium. By the time he reached it, the first-years would probably already have left and returned to the field. It made more logical sense to just go back.

For some reason, however, his pace quickened, and when he reached the field exit, he ran straight past.

More passersby cheered as he went by, but there was no familiar face to be found. By the time the blue sign of the bathroom came into view, Kazuya was starting to feel more and more like an idiot – when a white leg stepped out.

Then the rest of the body followed, and he slowed to a stop. His heart was pounding. From the running, probably, he thought.

"Miyuki-senpai?" said Sawamura, in a dead sort of way.

Some of the tension had eased away and the coldness was less apparent, and Kazuya felt grateful for the younger Kominato. However, he could still sense guardedness playing at the ends of his forced smile, and the weariness – as it had always been, he now realized – was ever-present.

There were many things he wanted to say, but Kazuya felt unsure, for the first time in a long while, how to say them.

As he tried to organize his thoughts, in an effort to take up some time, he walked over to the wall and leaned against it. He crossed his arms.

Then, he opened his mouth, and what slipped out was, "Oi, Sawamura. You're lucky Nori was available to relieve you. Otherwise, at the pace you were going, you'd probably have fallen apart. You've got a lot of self-reflection to do today once we get back."

Inside his mind, Kazuya let out a groan.
Sawamura blinked. "Okay."

He tried again. "Did you see the faces of the Akikawa players though? Haha! You really scared them. Not a bad tactic, actually, now that I think about it..."

"Huh?" Sawamura seemed confused, though it looked as if even adjusting his facial features was taking a lot of effort. "Why?"

"You didn't even realize, did you? I thought Tanba-san and his shaved head looked scary on the mound, but you could've given him a run for his money with the way you were glaring at all those batters."

"Oh." A faint look of guilt crossed his face. "I didn't mean it. I just...wanted the game to be over."

Kazuya shook his head exasperatedly. "And normally I have to drag you out of the bullpen."

"Well, I didn't feel good today." Sawamura's eyes darted to the side.

"Why not?"

"I just didn't," Sawamura said, his tone tinged with some of his old stubbornness.

Kazuya sighed. "Alright, I get it."

"Get what?"

"The way you get all depressed and annoying every time something goes wrong...the way you know everything that I like...and the way you got so angry after that catcher landed on me at home..." Sawamura's eyes had comically widened, and he took an involuntary step backward. "I get it."

"Y-y-...you get it?" Sawamura squeaked.

"You're..." Kazuya closed his eyes and lowered his head. Then he opened them. "You're secretly my fan, aren't you?"

It was amazing how many different shades of color someone's face could go through. In a matter of seconds, Sawamura's face went from deathly white, to a more natural shade of white, then to his actual face color, and then to pink, and finally, a burning, bright red.

"Miyuki Kazuya," Sawamura growled, his hands balling into fists. "I don't even know why I..." he trailed off, mumbling something furiously under his breath.

"Hahaha!" Kazuya laughed heartily, glad to see even more of the odd, brittle coldness falling away from the first-year. It hadn't suited him. Now, finally, he could see the Sawamura that he knew resurfacing.

"Why'd you come to the bathroom anyways, if you're just gonna poke fun at me?" Sawamura grumbled.

"To see you," said Kazuya truthfully. He exhaled. Then, he raised a hand and beckoned to the other boy. "C'mere for a sec."

"What do you want?" Sawamura peered back suspiciously, but without any hesitation – still grumbling complaints – he stepped closer.
When Sawamura was within range, Kazuya reached out, grabbed him by the wrist, and dragged him in closer.

He had seen Sawamura do it before, to his friends and to his grandpa. And he thought that he had once used to be on the receiving end of it as well, a long time ago.

It was what Chris would have wanted to do for Sawamura, he knew. And maybe, it was something Kazuya wanted to do as well. Maybe.

Before he chickened out—he knew that if he hesitated, he would back out—Kazuya reached in and put his arms around the smaller boy.

Immediately falling silent, Sawamura stiffened in surprise, and after a moment, began to squirm. Kazuya responded by locking his arms tighter around him.

"Keep still, Bakamura," he said. His heart was still pounding, and he wondered if he'd somehow gotten out of shape. "This is something I only do for my fans."

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**Glossary**

*Drag bunt* = A ball that has been hit by a batter who started to run towards first base while holding the bat back over the plate, typically in an attempt to get a hit rather than to sacrifice.

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**Short Omake**

*Earlier, during the game.*

There was visible discontent and frustration in Akikawa's dugout, and most of it was directed at the southpaw pitcher standing on the mound.

"That first-year's pitches are getting faster and sharper," one complained. "How is that a first-year?"

"Maybe he's actually a third-year but they somehow managed to get him listed as a first-year?" another one suggested, sounding half-serious.

"What are you even talking about?" his teammate said, sweating.

"Keep your heads up, boys," said their coach, clapping his hands. "The game's not over yet."

His encouraging words were met with uncomfortable silences and shared glances.

"I dunno coach…" one muttered. "That pitcher's freaking me out. I can't even swing when he looks at me."

"Right?"

"Oh so it's not just me?" The boy let out a sigh of relief. "Thank god."

"The way he glared at me…it felt like he'd murder me in my sleep if I tried to even hit his pitch." He shivered.

"Yeah…and then he'd probably kill the rest of your family, for kicks," a boy sniggered.

"Forget baseball," his friend joked, "He could probably make millions off of making horror movies."
There was a pause.

"Does anyone have their phone on them?"

"What for?"

"I wanna take a photo of his face and scare my sister with it."

"I have one. Here ya go."

Several seconds later, there was a flash as the phone's camera went off.

Little did Sawamura and the rest of Seidō know, that his face would eventually be forever immortalized online, and celebrated as an urban legend.

- Short Omake -

After the game.

Flattening up as much as he could against the bathroom wall, Haruichi wished he hadn't decided to be considerate and let Eijun and Miyuki have their talk privately.

They were making it extremely difficult for him to come out right now.

Chapter End Notes

Uhh I didn't realize Sawamura getting mad would be so exciting/cool for people. Sorry I didn't really expand on it. He'll be cooler in later chapters, I promise. Yakushi and Raichi are coming up whoo!

Belated cheese alert in this chapter…hope it went over well. (RIP Chris-senpai thank you for your sacrifice).
There was the *clang!* of a metal bat squarely hitting a baseball – and then right before Raichi’s eyes, a small white blur was flying straight past the pitcher.

Raichi’s legs were moving even before his brain had finished processing that it was headed in his direction. Knowing he wouldn't make it in time otherwise, with his eyes still firmly fixed on the ball, he threw himself forward. He extended out his glove, and then—*slam!*—felt it come to a secure stop inside his grip.

Pleased with himself, he quickly clambered back up to his feet. "Kahahaha! Here!" Enthusiastically, he arched his arm back and threw – and then watched it fly high above the first baseman's outstretched glove.

The crowd began to roar in incredulity. "A wide throw!"

"What's that third baseman doing? Is he a newbie?"

Still frozen in his throwing position, Raichi heard his teammates begin to join in. "Raichi you idiot! You've gotta be kidding me!"

"Get your head in the game!"

Raichi picked up his cap, and nervously tried to laugh it off. "Kaha…ha…"

"Don't try to laugh it off!"

Maybe it was to be expected. After all, this was the first time his father was actually letting Raichi play in a game.

In fact, he had never played in a game before. Not a game like this, anyways – against an actual team, with an actual pitcher. A pitcher who had even pitched in *Kōshien*.

And with actual teammates, too. Raichi was much more used to swinging his money tree bat by himself under the bridge, as his father looked on. True, his teammates from Yakushi were yelling right now, but it was new, and it wasn't such a bad change, he thought.

Putting his cap back on, Raichi returned to his position by third base. His stomach was grumbling again, and he thought longingly of the bananas waiting in the dugout. He couldn't decide which he looked forward to more: eating, or getting a chance to bat against Ichidai’s pitcher.

After a moment's rumination, however, he quickly decided:
After all, while he could eat bananas all the time (his father could usually afford them at the very least), it wasn't every day that a chance to bat against such a strong pitcher came around.

Raichi felt his limbs beginning to tremble with excitement again, as they had done just before the game. He could hardly wait.

It was in Eijun's second year, on the eve of their New Year's break, that he first realized that what was between them was not completely ordinary.

They had spent the day together, first by themselves at the Meiji Shrine to pray, and then later on they met up with Kuramochi and Haruichi, at a festival. It was enjoyable, strolling past the various stalls as they ate dango and steaming hot taiyaki.

When the time came for them to separate, it had gotten dark. The others were going home as well. Kuramochi was from Chiba and Haruichi was from Kanagawa, which were both closer to Tokyo than Nagano—where Eijun was from—and they left ahead of him.

By the time Eijun and Miyuki arrived at the station platform, they still had ten minutes before his train departed. They spent most of it silently, seated on opposite ends of a bench. They had talked all day, but now that Eijun was about to leave, they both fell silent.

There were other people on the station platform, pulling along their rolling suitcases or lugging a duffel bag like Eijun. Single mothers with their children, lone college students, businessmen. They passed by, one by one or all at once.

It started snowing. Slowly, puffs of white descended from the dark sky, their outlines illuminated briefly in the light from the platform lamps before fading away on the tracks. Some people stopped, pointing up at the snow with a finger or pulling out their smartphones to snap a picture.

"Passengers boarding the 18:30 train to Nagano, the train will arrive momentarily on Platform 1. Please wait behind the yellow lines."

Eijun turned to look at the train sliding quietly into the station, and then when he turned back around, found Miyuki looking straight at him. For some reason, even though they had been looking at each other all day, Eijun felt his palms getting sweaty under his gaze.

"What is it?" he said warily. "Do I have takoyaki sauce on me again?" His hand crept up to check his face, but suddenly, Miyuki's hand shot out from across the bench and grabbed him by the wrist.

They both stared at Miyuki's hand, which then dropped away as if he'd been burned. "No," was all Miyuki said.

Eijun got up, slinging his duffle bag securely over his shoulder. Miyuki rose to his feet as well, shoving one hand casually into his pant pocket while raising the other to the back of his neck.

The train doors slid open, and people poured out onto the platform. Once the train was empty, the people who had been waiting began to board.

"Well, see you then, Miyuki-senpai," said Eijun. He stepped one foot into the train.

"Oi, Sawamura."
Eijun turned around, and then suddenly, before he'd even realized what was going on, he was in Miyuki's arms. For several long, yet short, seconds, the older boy held Eijun tightly against his chest.

This wasn't the first time Eijun had been hugged by a friend, but he'd never felt his heart pound so furiously in his ears like this before. And with Miyuki, of all people.

Well, considering what they had been through together, maybe it wasn't as out of the blue as he'd thought.

"I must be really special for someone like you to hug me…Miyuki-senpai." His voice came out muffled.

Miyuki snickered into his ear, and then he stepped back onto the platform. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Bakamura."

"The train is departing."

As the announcer's voice rang out throughout the platform, Eijun suddenly realized that his face was burning scarlet. Miyuki grinned.

"I'll…I'll text you every day," Eijun blurted out.

"You'll be back in a few days. Idiot."

The doors slid shut between them. The train began to move out of the station. Keeping Miyuki's raised hand in sight, Eijun hurriedly walked to the end of the train, ignoring the funny looks of the other passengers. However, as the train picked up speed, the station platform became nothing but a blur and before long, Miyuki's lone figure disappeared in the horizon.

For what could have been seconds or minutes, they stayed locked tightly together. Miyuki's arms were wrapped around Eijun's back, and with his face pressed into the crook of the older boy's neck, he could smell Miyuki's lingering sweat and a whiff of freshly-applied deodorant.

Exhaling, Eijun felt himself slowly relax into Miyuki's arms. He closed his eyes.

Why had he come into the past? Had he been sent there? By who? Or what?

Was it possible to change the past? Was it possible to change the future?

How would the things he changed affect the future? Was what he was doing making it better or worse? Or was it making no difference at all?

Could he do it? Could he lead Seidō to Kōshien?

Could he save Miyuki? Could he have saved Miyuki before?

There were so many questions. Too many questions. And the whole time, they had been whirling around in his mind, going in and out, wrapping themselves around his neck in a dense, clustered, knotted, choking cobweb that he simply did not know how to unravel.

"Why would you go back in time to come here?"

Haruichi had asked Eijun that question a long time ago, and he had not been able to answer back then. He had tried to think it over in his head. He had tried to come up with a logical answer for an illogical question, and tried to bluster out an answer that would give whatever powers may be a
reason to keep Eijun there in the past.

It had been so hard, wondering if he was doing the right thing. He’d fretted if it wasn't all just an accident and he was simply making things worse. Sometimes, it took him hours to fall asleep, afraid that the proverbial rug would be pulled out right from under his feet, and that he'd wake up in the shower, dripping cold and alone.

Now, however, rising up as a balloon slipping free from the ocean, there was one thing shining clearly in his mind. It was something he had probably been aware of before on some level. However, only now, crackling and fizzing like a sparkler on a dark summer night, did Eijun truly understand.

He was not here to take the senpai to Kōshien, though he certainly would do his best to help. Kōshien was not a place he alone could take the team to after all. It was a place that the team as a whole took themselves to.

He was not here to save Chris or Tanba.

And he was not here to save Miyuki, either.

"Tell me, Sawamura, since when was your middle name Superman?"

Eijun had struggled alone for so long, stubbornly trying again and again to put his broken self back together, never quite accepting that there were some things he couldn't fix on his own.

Why was he here, then?

The answer, he now saw, had been there all along: *I am here because you are here.*

It was as simple as that.

Eijun had not realized how loud it had been in his head, before this moment when everything became still and silent. Silent, except for the sound of his beating heart.

When Sawamura's body suddenly slumped against his chest, Kazuya briefly wondered whether the other boy had fainted in shock – before this speculation was rudely interrupted by the sound of quiet, but unmistakable snoring.

Kazuya took a step back as he tried to support the sudden dead weight. "Oi, Sawamura."

There was no response. Putting his hands on Sawamura's shoulders, Kazuya pulled back, and saw that the southpaw had somehow, indeed, fallen asleep. His eyes were closed, and the worry lines on his brow had relaxed. His lips were parted slightly open.

It made him look young, Kazuya thought. The southpaw actually looked his age for once. It was almost kind of – dare I think it? – cute –

Sawamura made a loud, content snorting sound and as Kazuya watched, a line of drool spilled down from his mouth.

Kazuya felt himself sweat.

As he tried to decide between the merits of physically carrying Sawamura back, or simply waking the boy up – the first-year was heavier than he looked – Kazuya caught a sudden glimpse of movement at the bathroom doorway. Shifting, he met the gaze—or what he thought was the gaze, it was hard to tell with all that hair in the way—of the younger Kominato.
Wait...how long has he been there?

Kominato let out a small, nervous cough. "Uh...hello Miyuki-senpai..."

Kazuya sighed. "Help me carry this idiot back, will you?"

As Mishima slid to first base, Raichi straightened up. He squeezed the handle of his bat. His heart was racing.

"Number 4, third baseman, Todoroki-kun."

The aluminum bat he was using was much lighter than what he was used to. He could barely feel it weighing down in his hold.

Remembering just in time to bow to the umpire, Raichi stepped into the batter's box. He lowered into his batting stance, and looked toward the mound – where a real, live pitcher stared straight back.

While chomping his way through a bunch of bananas, Raichi had watched their recorded videos of Ichidai's ace pitcher with the others in their clubroom over and over again. And now, he stood here, where the pitcher himself was waiting before his very eyes.

The intensity he had felt in the videos was incomparable to the sheer force emanating from the pitcher right now. What felt like an electric shock went through his body, and Raichi's mouth slanted upwards in an uncontrollable grin. His whole body was bursting with energy. He wanted to hit the ball. What kind of ball would come his way? He wanted to hit it. He wanted to hear the sound of his bat slamming through the ball.

The pitcher nodded. He entered the set position – and then, he threw. And then, just like that, the ball streaked toward Raichi.

It was almost here. The moment was almost here. It was coming. Was it a straight fastball? No, it was –

Slamming his front foot down, Raichi swung, his body's power exploding out into the bat. With a booming sound, he felt it connect with the ball, and it bulleted out of sight.

Unmoving from his swing position, as he recalled the ball's trajectory, Raichi let out a breathless laugh. "Kahaha...A-awesome. The ball bent right in front of me!"

It had been just like in the videos. He knew it now, for sure. Playing against an actual pitcher and feeling the ball get crushed against his bat was way more awesome than just imagining one in his head.

More! He wanted to blow away more of this pitcher's pitches. He'd hit his slider just now, but he knew the pitcher had a bunch of other pitches up his sleeve. And knowing that this wish would be granted soon, because this was baseball and his chance to bat would come around again through the lineup – well, this game was awesome, just as he'd imagined it.

"Hey, start running..."

Raichi reared back and let out a roar. "BASEBALL IS AWESOME!"

They stepped out of the stadium to the sound of cheering and hollering. The crowd made way,
making a clear path for them to walk through.

Normally, he would have been reveling in the sweet aftertaste of victory and indulging in the adoration of his fans. However, at the moment, it was all he could do to not throw himself to the ground and kick the air.

"Narumiya-kun!"

"Narumiya-kun, nice pitching!"

"Go all the way to the finals!"

Mei didn't wave back. Instead, still fuming, he pointedly turned to glare at the coach – who resolutely looked the other way.

"Hey," said Masatoshi, his decidedly *unsupportive* catcher who was walking beside him. "You're still sore about that? You're such a small man."

Mei felt himself snap. "I can't believe you switched me out! If I'd pitched until the end, I could've pitched a no-hitter!" *That* would've shown that first-year southpaw brat from Seidō that he wasn't all that special.

"Who cares? We were up by a lot. The coach did it so you could rest – "

"I wasn't tired! I could've finished it!" Stomping, Mei picked up his pace. "Unbelievable!"

"...you're making me want to strangle you." Masatoshi's voice grew serious, and Mei reluctantly came to a stop. "Three more until nationals. If we lose, we're done for good, Mei. You need to have strength in reserve for all the upcoming hellish matches."

Mei frowned, but didn't answer. It wasn't as if he didn't know all that.

"C-coach!" It was their manager, who had been observing the game in the other stadium.


"How were the games in Fuchu?" Mei asked eagerly. Seidō and Ichidai should have been the winning teams. He was looking forward to seeing who'd win in the quarterfinals.

And even more so to crushing the winner of that outcome in the finals.

The manager took a moment to catch his breath, before looking up with a serious expression on his face. "Ichidai Third High lost to Yakushi."

After the game was over, Miyuki and Kuramochi dragged a drowsy Eijun, who had somehow managed to sleep through the excitement of the entire game, back to the bus, while Chris helped carry their bags.

Haruichi accompanied Furuya, who had suddenly announced that he had to go to the bathroom. By the time they came back out however, everyone had disappeared, and then they disagreed on which way their bus had been.

It took several minutes of walking the wrong way—by the end of which, they found themselves staring at a dead end fence—and then they had to run in the opposite direction.
They faltered, however, when the sound of something heavy swinging through air entered their ears, and just around the bend of the back of the stadium, they found two figures dressed in baseball uniform. One was seated on the ground, picking his ear, while the other, a boy with a scar on his cheek, was repeatedly swinging a bat.

_Todoroki Raichi…?!_

"Another hundred," called out the man – who was Yakushi's coach, as Haruichi now saw. "Make sure the batting you did today completely sinks into your body. You're running home after you're done."

Despite the rapidity of the boy's swing, each and every swing was compact and powerful, and sent visible shockwaves in the air.

Haruichi could feel the hairs on his arms stand up. The boy wasn't all that big but his swing was even more amazing from up close. He could only begin to wonder how much the other boy had to have practiced to get to the level he was at now.

After a few more explosive swings, Todoroki finally paused, and began to take quick, shallow breaths.

"Hey! No slacking!" said the coach.

However, it seemed that the boy had not been resting. "Today's pitcher…had so much energy. He was so aggressive…and there are a lot more like him in the country, right?" The boy smiled. "I want to hit and hit and hit and hit." He reared back. "I want to play against every pitcher in the country! I want to blow them all away! Kahahaha!"

The coach blew a fleck of ear wax off of his pinky. "You want to be a pro, right, Raichi? If you become a pro, you can do that every day."

Haruichi could sense Furuya steaming, the last bit of gloom slipping away to give rise to a smoldering fire. He felt himself sweat. As good as Todoroki had been to hit a homerun off of Ichidai's pitcher, that was all rather big talk considering he was still a first-year like them.

_Though, Eijun-kun's just a first-year too…_

"Well, you took down Manaka who went to the invitational. There's been some talk about a monster first-year around here, but right now, the only pitcher who's worth your time in West Tokyo is… Narumiya Mei, from Inashiro. That's probably it."

Upon waking up the next morning, a particularly fine morning as it were, Seidō's first-string members were bemused to find Furuya running extra laps around the practice field.

"He sure is looking pumped up," said Kuramochi, his voice laced with wonder. "I wonder if it's because of Sawamura?"

Sawamura blinked. "What'd I do?"

"Well actually…" The younger Kominato looked uncomfortable. "What happened was…"

Several minutes later, after Kominato had finished explaining what he and Furuya had overheard behind the stadium, the first one to break the silence was Isashiki.
"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!!" he roared, bursting to his feet. "Those two seriously said all that?! That we're not even worth playing against?!!"

"No, not directly – "

"But they did! They're completely looking down on our shiny head and messy head!"

"And?" Ryōsuke popped up behind his younger brother, wearing a scary smile. "You didn't come back without giving them a beating, right?"

His teeth bared, Kuramochi threateningly punched a fist into the palm of his other hand. "Bring it on, Yakushi."

Masuko's stomach growled angrily.

"Be it Yakushi or Ichidai, whoever stands in our way is the opponent we have to defeat," said Yūki sagely, though his calm words were somewhat offset by the blatant fire radiating off of his form.

Kazuya smiled, pleased to see his teammates looking fired up.

So they're saying the only ones worth playing are Inashiro, huh? That's a bold statement against our pitchers…and especially this one here.

He turned to look at Sawamura, who'd been staring out at the field. As if sensing his gaze, the first-year perked up and turned to look back at Kazuya, and a jolt, like lightning, swept through him.

...Lumps in his throat? Pounding hearts? Jolts running through his limbs?

Oh boy, Kazuya thought to himself. I might be in trouble.

Sawamura grinned widely back, a hint of relish gleaming in his eyes. "Well…we'll just have to show them, won't we?"

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- Short Omake -

Takes place right after the Yakushi vs Ichidai match, on the way back to their dorm.

At the sound of cracking gravel and a jolt of the moving bus, Eijun opened his eyes. Blearily rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he sat up in his seat.

The bus was mostly quiet. It seemed everyone had either fallen asleep, or was listening to music.

Miyuki was sitting beside Eijun. With his arms crossed across his chest, his head was tilted back. His cap, which usually sat at a jaunty angle, now covered his face. His chest almost imperceptibly rose up and down evenly in sleep.

Their knees were nearly touching, Eijun suddenly noticed. In fact, from the way they were both sitting, it wouldn't seem weird at all if their knees actually did touch.

After a moment's hesitation, Eijun opened his legs out an inch further, and felt his knee brush against Miyuki's.
Hehe.

Leaning his face against the window of the bus, Eijun closed his eyes again, and soon, slipped back into sleep.

- Short Omake -

Directly afterwards.

Kazuya smirked into his cap.

Chapter End Notes

There are even more cheesy moments to come. Prepare yourself. (Almost 90k words in though and they've only just hugged SMH lol).

Thanks for the reviews/comments.
Nightfall approached the Yakushi campus, and though they had just returned victorious from a hard-fought battle against Ichidai—the region's spring champions and favorites to win—the atmosphere was far from celebratory. Rather, with a fiery air of gritted determination, most of the players continued to practice their batting on the field.

Yakushi's coach stood at the forefront. He was a scruffy-looking middle-aged man, but he observed each player with a surprisingly keen and demanding glare. "If you can't bunt in practice, I'm not using you! So you'd better get cracking!"

Meanwhile, under the coach's instructions, the first-years—the team's cleanups, as they were—were all gathered in the clubroom. For the past two hours now, they had been watching a video recording of the game that had occurred just before theirs earlier that day: the game between Seidō and Akikawa, from which Seidō had emerged the winners.

Picking up the remote control, Yakushi's first baseman Mishima rewound for a bit, before putting it back down with a frown. "That southpaw's a first-year like us, right? His pitches aren't as fast as that Furuya guy's, but that cutter of his is sharp. Paired with his four-seam…it's gonna be a tough one to call."

"He didn't let a single batter on base in the Akikawa game." His friend and teammate Akiba crossed his arms. "None of them except for their pitcher was much of a batter, but still…he didn't walk anyone, either. Seidō's battery sure is impressive."

"Well, of course. Top schools like Seidō always get the pick of the litter. And even if we do somehow find a way to deal with those first-year pitchers, they've got that sidearm, and right-handed ace waiting…" Mishima clicked his tongue in irritation. "It's annoying how they're all different types of pitchers."

The door clattered open to reveal Yakushi's ace pitcher, who seemed a bit worn down from practice. He looked at the video playing on the screen. "What's this? You guys are still watching that?"

Mishima craned his head back. "Ah – Sanada-senpai. Raichi's dad told us to study it."

"The coach did?" After a moment, Sanada's surprised look rearranged itself into one of amusement. "It's funny how thoroughly he makes us do this. You guys were watching Manaka-san's video to hell, too."

Raichi, who had been silently chomping on a banana the whole time, finally spoke up. "His pitch was amazing and just as I imagined."

"Really…" Sanada's smile widened. "And how about Seidō? You got them in your head yet?"
Akiba's mouth twisted in thought. "That southpaw's pitching style...it's a bit like yours, isn't it, senpai?"

"Sanada-senpai with better stamina and control," Mishima amended.

Sanada sweated. "Hey now...that's not very nice."

Raichi lowered the banana from his mouth. "Those two were very interesting. Especially that southpaw...there's something about his pitches. I think he's hiding something. Something that didn't show in the video..." He looked up, the fire in his eyes barely contained. "Seidō High! I want to play them now! Like, right now!

---

The afternoon before the day of the quarter-finals, all four of Seidō's first-string pitchers were gathered in the bullpen, practicing their eclectic variety of pitches with their respective catcher.

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---

Slam!

Wincing, Ono glanced at the smoldering ball in his mitt before getting to his feet and throwing it back to Furuya.

"That was still a bit high," he called out. "Let's try it again, from the slide step."

Furuya nodded tiredly, raising a shoulder to wipe the sweat off of his face.

Slam!

Chris, who'd had to lower his mitt to the ground to catch the ball in the dirt, looked a bit strained.

"Sorry!" said Kawakami, looking worried.

Chris looked up and smiled. "Don't worry about making them bounce. So long as you keep them low, you won't get any hits to the outfield."

"Right!"

Slam!

"Not bad, Sawamura," Miyuki called out, throwing the ball back to the southpaw. Sawamura grinned widely back, snatching the ball out of midair with his glove. "We'll be able to use this in tomorrow's match."

Slam!

As she watched the players from outside the bullpen, with a pleased smile, Rei crossed her arms.

"Furuya still needs to work on his stamina, but these three are in pretty good condition."

"They are," Ōta agreed proudly.

Slam!

Letting out a sound of exertion, Tanba threw. The curveball bent in the air, before landing high in Miyauchi's mitt.
"It's still off," said Coach Kataoka.

"Yes, sir," Tanba nodded.

Rei adjusted her glasses. "I can see Tanba-kun really wants it, but he's still not in his best condition."

If he could manage it, Tanba's comeback would be big for the team. Not only would it boost the third-years' morale, it would also help relieve some of the burden from the rest of their pitchers – particularly Sawamura, who had done a spectacular job of carrying the team through the middle innings in their games until now.

The upcoming games, however, would be much tougher than their games so far. And while it was all too easy to forget it sometimes, Sawamura was still a first-year. He had two more years left to play for Seidō, and Rei knew that the coach would not want for the southpaw to overstrain himself.

Sawamura had done well pacing himself in all of their games, but in order for Sawamura, as well as the other pitchers, to pitch their best in the battles to come, Tanba's return to the rotation would be key.

Having been called to the indoors practice grounds, Satoru watched with a heavy heart as Coach Kataoka, in a squatting position, dug at the ground with a stick.

Ever since the end of the Akikawa game, Satoru had been waiting to be told by the coach that he was no longer on the starting lineup. It was to be expected, after all. The only thing he knew how to do was to throw fast. He'd thought that would be enough. He'd clung onto this one ability his whole life, even as it isolated him.

The Akikawa game had shown Satoru, however, that baseball was not to be taken so lightly of.

Satoru glanced at Sawamura and Kawakami standing beside him.

He had gotten fired up again when he'd overheard the Yakushi coach dismissing Seidō, but he knew there was a good chance he wouldn't even be given a chance to pitch. He couldn't say anything, however. He didn't have the right to. Because unlike Satoru, they had done their job of holding down the Akikawa team. Unlike Satoru, they belonged here. They deserved to go on the mound.

"About tomorrow's starting pitcher..." said the coach. His fingertips clenching into his palms, Satoru bowed his head. "We'll go with Furuya again." Satoru froze. What? Had he just misheard the coach, or...? "However, we'll go with a quick switch. Sawamura will go in from the fourth, with Kawakami on standby from the seventh."

Kawakami nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Depending on how the game goes, it'll probably change a little. Sawamura, be ready to start any time."

"Yes, boss."

"Don't call me boss."

Satoru's right hand was trembling, so he reached over with his left hand to grab and still it. His eyes felt hot. And what was this light feeling in his chest?

He closed his eyes, and then opened them, but the scenery before Satoru hadn't changed. The coach
was still digging at the ground, talking to the other assistant coaches.

Satoru exhaled. He'd been given another chance to go up on that mound. Another chance to prove to himself, and to the team, that he belonged. This time, he wouldn't blow it.

Though practice ended relatively early in order to allow the team members time to rest, it was still dark out by the time the players began to return to their rooms.

Following the debriefing with the other three pitchers, Kazuya was beckoned by the coach to accompany him to the practice grounds. Rei joined them as they steadily walked to the field, and soon enough, he began to make out the sounds of the third-years, who were apparently still batting against Tanba.

Slam!

"Hey, that was a good pitch! Tetsu couldn't even swing!" Isashiki's voice rang out gleefully.

"That was a ball," said Yūki, who stood in the batter's box.

Isashiki shook his head aggressively. "No, that was definitely a strike!"

"Boys, it's time you got some rest," said the coach. At the sound of his voice, the third-years turned around. "Also, that was a ball."

Kazuya looked at Tanba, who was taking deep breaths on the mound. "I'll help you stretch, Tanba-san."

Tanba didn't move, evidently wanting to continue to throw.

"Are you still not satisfied with how you are?" asked the coach.

Silently, Tanba raised his arm, wiping his mouth area with the back of his hand.

The coach folded his arms across his chest. "The sixth inning. Start warming up in the sixth inning."

Tanba's eyes widened. Taken aback as well, Kazuya turned to the coach. He had spoken differently to the other pitchers, stating that Tanba was in no state to take the mound.

"Yakushi is a strong team," the coach continued. "Tomorrow's game might turn into a brawl. If that happens, I'll need you on the mound. You're the ace of Seidō, after all."

Tanba looked down at his hand, and then back up at the coach. "Am I really needed, coach?" His voice sounded uncertain.

The coach steadily gazed at the tall third-year. "Are you talking about Sawamura?"

It was quiet. No one else dared to move or make a single sound.

"Don't you think you made a mistake giving me the number 1 jersey, coach?" Tanba said forcefully. It was plain to see that it was paining him to say so.

"Do you think I did?" asked the coach in his steely tone.

His hands balled into fists by his sides, and Tanba's mouth twisted. "I..."
"Have you forgotten how hard you have worked to get here, Tanba?"

Tanba's eyes perceptively widened. He swallowed, and his jaw set. "I...No, coach." He took a deep breath, and straightened. "I'll be ready whenever I am needed, tomorrow. As the team's ace."

The coach nodded. "Show me what you've gained over these past three years."

"Yes sir!"

As he watched some of Tanba's confidence return to his eyes, Kazuya felt his mouth curl back in a smile. So the coach had told the youngsters that Tanba wouldn't be pitching, to remind them of their duties, while reminding Tanba separately that he was the third-year ace of the team. The coach was always thinking one step ahead, and always for the team. Kazuya had nothing but respect for the man.

While the other third-years circled around and teased the blushing Tanba, Kazuya glanced back at the dorm building. The lights were starting to flicker on as the rest of the team began to wash up and turn in for the night. The knocking on his door would undoubtedly start soon as well – somehow, without his notice, his room had been turned into the go-to hangout spot for bored team members.

Normally it was a bit of a thorn in his side, but as he saw yet another light turn on, Kazuya felt his smile twist wider. *I wonder if he'll come too...?*

Drying his face with a towel and feeling refreshed, Haruichi opened the washroom door with a clatter – only to find Eijun and Furuya huddled together with an air of conspiracy.

"...so you see, next time if you get hit, just blame it all on Miyuki-senpai," Eijun said, slapping Furuya on the back.

Furuya nodded solemnly. "I see."

Haruichi felt himself sweat. "What're you guys talking about?"

"Harucchi!" Eijun straightened up. "Nothing much, nothing much. Are you excited for tomorrow's match?"

"Yeah," Haruichi said, with a nod. "Everyone's pumped up, it's all kind of thrilling. I hope I can bat tomorrow."

"You did an amazing job as pinch hitter in yesterday's game," Eijun said proudly. "I don't see why the coach wouldn't put you in tomorrow too. I'm rooting for you."

Haruichi felt his face go warm, and grinned. "Thanks." He'd noticed that Eijun was surprisingly vocal about his support. It almost felt as if he were being cheered on by an upperclassman sometimes. "You're in a good mood today, huh."

"I haven't felt this good in a long time," Eijun admitted. Momentarily, Haruichi wondered if it had anything to do with Miyuki – and as if reading his mind, the southpaw added, "I bet the others are in Miyuki-senpai's room again."

"Miyuki-senpai's room?" Haruichi repeated.

"You didn't know?" Eijun cocked his head. "What do you do in your free time then?"

Haruichi sweated again. "Don't you study, Eijun-kun?"
Eijun waved a hand dismissively. "Exams are over and there's a game tomorrow. Who's crazy enough to study? Right, Furuya?"

"…We could bring the senpai drinks," said Furuya hesitantly.

"Oh, great idea!" Without a moment's hesitation, Eijun grabbed Furuya by the wrist, who willingly allowed himself to be dragged in the direction of the vending machines.

Haruichi smiled, stepping forward to follow them. *I'm glad to see they're both looking more cheerful.*

In the annals of the history of the Seidō baseball team, it was an unspoken but widely acknowledged truth that baseball and the team came first above everything else. Virtually every hour not spent in class was spent either in practice, or in the basic necessities of mundane life, such as eating and sleeping. Naturally, this meant that there was simply not enough time for girls.

That did not mean, however, that they couldn't think about girls. Or talk about them.

The second-years of the first-string had gathered in Kazuya's room. They had gotten bored after a few rounds of street fighter, and once the TV was turned off, the flow of the conversation naturally turned to their second favorite topic (the first being baseball).

Higasa contently leaned back against Kazuya's bedpost. "The managers looked really cute today."

Kawakami nodded, his face turning slightly pink. "The onigiri today was amazing. Sachiko-chan's onigiri are always the best."

"Hyaha!" Kuramochi laughed, and then added teasingly, "That's just because Sachiko always gives you the best ones."

"Takako-san's onigiri was quite good too," Shirasu added.

"Yui-chan pinned her hair up," Higasa said, his face relaxing dreamily. "Did you guys notice?"

Kazuya smirked. "I know Kuramochi did." Immediately, he raised a hand to block a pillow that Kuramochi had just thrown at him.

"Shut it!" Kuramochi scowled, the tips of his ears glowing red. "You're never gonna let that one go, are you?"

"Pupupu! Nope!"

Higasa looked interested. "What happened?"

"Don't – " Kuramochi started, but it was too late.

"Kuramochi asked Yui-san out last year, but got totally shot down," Kawakami explained.

Kazuya and Higasa bent over in laughter as Kuramochi, with a howl, tackled Kawakami to the ground and trapped him under his legs until the pitcher begged for mercy.

"Anyways," Higasa continued on, once everyone appeared to have regained a reasonable amount of oxygen. He shot a shrewd look at Kazuya. "Miyuki, what's your type? Kuramochi won't shut up about girls, but I don't think I've ever heard you talk about them."

"My type?" Kazuya said airily.
Thankfully, he was saved from having to answer by a knock on the door. Kawakami stood up and opened the door, to reveal the three first-years of the first-string team. To the second-years’ delight, they were holding a variety of drinks in their arms.

"Alright!" said Kuramochi, jumping to his feet. The others joined him, crowding around the front door.

"Is there any green tea?"

"What about calpico?"

"There's something for everyone," said Sawamura, grinning.

"What about me?" Kazuya called out from the floor. Without further prompting, Sawamura plucked out a blue can from Furuya's arm and tossed it down to him. Catching it easily, Kazuya opened the tab with a fizzing sound.

"Eijun-kun was right." Kominato, sounding rather awed, joined Shirasu by the TV. "This really is the team hang-out spot."

"Well, Miyuki's the lucky one who gets a double all to himself this year," Kuramochi said, poking a straw inside a juice box.

"Hey hey." Kazuya raised his hands in mock defense. "I was alone with Azuma-san in here last year. I deserve this."

"So, Miyuki?" Higasa pressed insistently. "Your type? Now that all the kōhái are here, you have to tell."

"His type?" Furuya blinked.

Sawamura, who'd been bent over trying to open his drink, suddenly raised his head. Feeling a slight thrill, Kazuya's lips drew back in a smile. *This should be interesting.*

"Well, I like them just a bit shorter than me," he began languidly, casually glancing around for one particular first-year's reaction. "With big eyes, and tanned skin. A little dumb, and kinda moody at times. Someone who's always trying to get the better of me – but failing. Miserably."

To his disappointment, his target of interest didn't react, and as he trailed off, his words were at first met with silence. And then –

"There really is something wrong with you, isn't there?" Kuramochi shook his head.

Shirasu nodded in agreement.

"I feel sorry for your future wife," Higasa said soberly.

"Haha! Thanks," Kazuya laughed into his drink.

For a following peaceful moment, it was silent except for the sounds of everyone taking a sip of their drink.

Suddenly, Sawamura said loudly, "Oh, are we talking about our types, Higasa-senpai?"

"Yeah, we are. You got one?"
Sawamura nodded. His eyes roamed around the room, landing on everything except for Kazuya. "My type's the really gentle, quiet kind who'll never raise their voice with me...They have to be taller than me, and kind of good-looking and sturdy, with a bit of foreign blood mixed in, and - and have two first names..."

Kazuya felt himself sweat. So basically Chris-senpai?

"What kind of stuff have you been looking at?" Kuramochi sniggered.

"This whole team's filled with weirdos," Higasa muttered. "Anyways, what about you, Kominato? Furuya?"

"Ehh?" Kominato seemed flustered, while Furuya looked completely lost for words.

From there, the conversation flowed easily on, and by the time the others got up to return to their own rooms, most of the tension regarding the upcoming game against Yakushi had eased enough for them to fall asleep.

"Go straight to bed," Kazuya ordered Furuya and Sawamura, as they stepped out of his room. "Especially you, Sawamura. Don't mess around with Kuramochi's video games."

"I won't," said Sawamura huffily. Jamming his feet into his slippers, he began to walk away.

Kazuya started to close the door – and then hesitated. Looking at Sawamura's slouched back, he raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck.

Making up his mind, he swallowed, and then called out, "Hey Sawamura." The first-year turned around with a half-annoyed, half-questioning look on his face. "My type's the kind who remembers my favorite drink and snack...and is always showing up uninvited at my door with a stupid grin on their face."

Sawamura paused – and then he smiled. "I know," was all he said, before, noticeably lighter on his feet, he disappeared down the stairs with a confused-looking Furuya in tow.

Kazuya stood still, waiting for the sound of their footsteps going down the stairway to fade away. It was dark out on the open corridor of the dorm's second floor. Most of the lights in the other rooms had turned off. The only thing he could hear now was the crying of the cicadas.

Minminminmin.

Finally, slowly and unbidden, he felt the corners of his mouth pull themselves up in an unrestrained grin.

What kind of game were they playing at?

Kazuya thought he knew, but he couldn't say for sure. Not yet. He'd never felt this kind of thrill run through his chest like this before. If he had to say, it was closest to how he felt on the field, sitting behind the cleanup of a strong opponent team as he decided what pitch to signal for. At the same time, however, it was different.

If they kept going, Kazuya knew, there would be no going back. Any further, and everything would be unchartered territory. Did he want to keep going?

He didn't know. Not yet. But so far, he thought he rather enjoyed the feel of it.
To think, however, that Sawamura of all people would make Kazuya feel this way...well, considering how forcibly Sawamura had managed to worm into his life over the past few months, maybe it wasn't so unexpected.

Closing the door firmly shut, Kazuya looked around at his empty room, his smile fading only slightly at the sight of the soda cans and juice boxes strewn around on the floor.

Anyways, Kazuya thought to himself as he bent down to pick up one of the soda cans. As interesting and new as whatever going on between him and Sawamura was, it would have to be put aside for later. What mattered now was the summer tournament and their goal of making Kōshien. Kazuya didn't want to risk doing anything that could result in the southpaw underperforming at such a crucial juncture.

There would be plenty of time afterwards for him...or them, he supposed...to figure things out.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your comments/kudos.

The second half of this chapter is basically a long omake. Hope you enjoyed it anyways. Next up is the Yakushi match.
On the day that would determine the four strongest baseball teams in all of West Tokyo, the stadium was packed and teeming with a wide variety of viewers.

Many were locals simply interested in the sport; some were students or alumni, crowding along the bleachers in their common colors to support their teams; others were members of potential rival teams, there to record the game; and here and there were reporters, who were particularly interested in the dark horse team Yakushi. They had beaten Ichidai, and were now facing Seidō, a powerhouse team that had nonetheless been unable to taste the sweet victory of the championships in six long years.

As each team waited in their dugout for the game to begin, Yakushi's coach glanced toward his son, who was steadily (and simultaneously) making his way through his fifth and sixth bananas since they'd left their bus.

"Hey, Raichi. Don't eat so much before the game. I let you bat first because you were so eager to hit." With the air of dangling a mouse before a starving cat, Coach Todoroki slyly grinned. "If you don't show results today, you're not eating dinner."

Immediately jumping to his feet, Raichi tackled his father and furiously began to noogie his head. "That's the one thing I can't forgive!"

Horrified, his teammates rushed to the struggling pair.

"Stop, Raichi!"

"Raichi!"

"Then hit!" choked out the coach from between the flurry of limbs. "Smash Seidō!"

The clamor in the stadium began to die down as the PA calmly announced: "We will now begin the quarter-final between Seidō High School and Yakushi High School."

The Yakushi team members, lined up on one end of the field, crouched down as they glared at their opposing team.

"Alright!" Coach Todoroki yelled. "It's your turn to work now! Hit for yourself! Defend for yourself! And go get a taste of victory!"

"Yeah!"

On the other end of the field, Seidō's team members crouched down in a line as they threw identical glares back at the other team.
"Your throws, your steps, and your swings reflect who you are," rumbled Coach Kataoka. "Throw away all doubt! Believe in your baseball!"

"Yeah!"

At the signal, both teams raced to the center of the field where the umpires were waiting. As they lined up, facing each other, it became increasingly apparent that a certain member of the Yakushi team was attracting more than his fair share of glares.

Sweating a little, Sanada smiled. "Everyone's glaring at you."

Mishima glanced at his childhood friend. "Did you do something, Raichi?"

Bewildered, Raichi let out a nervous laugh. For some reason, the Seidō team members seemed bigger and more imposing than they had onscreen. And why were they all glaring at him? Though— he suddenly noticed—one of them seemed more amused than anything. It was Seidō's southpaw, and when the boy realized that Raichi was looking, he grinned. Unnerved, Raichi stared back.

"Bow!" the umpire shouted.

"Let's play!"

While the others returned to the dugout and went out on the field to take their positions, Satoru took a firm step on the mound. For a second, with his eyes closed, he allowed himself to revel in the sensation of the firmly packed dirt under his foot.

Hearing the crunch of an approaching footstep, Satoru opened his eyes to see Miyuki stepping up the mound.

"Man, they've really gone and done it now, making that guy their leadoff..." The catcher grinned. "But your pitches aren't all that easy to hit, either."

As Miyuki walked back down to home plate, thoughts began to pass, one by one, through Satoru's mind.

"When you say you want to start, do you have confidence that you won't be a hindrance for the team?"

Satoru had nodded to the coach then, but his only thought then had been whether he could perform better than Sawamura. Would he be a hindrance for the team? Satoru didn't know what that meant. All he knew was that if he was better than Sawamura, then he wouldn't be a hindrance. His goal, therefore, had been a burning determination to catch up to Sawamura, and to take his place on the mound.

That had all fallen apart, however, in the Akikawa game, and he'd been switched out.

After the terrible announcement, Sawamura had come toward the mound and told Satoru, "I'm going to be pitching for you as well now, Furuya. For all the pitchers on this team. Just like you did."

But the southpaw had been wrong there. Satoru hadn't been pitching for anyone but himself. After all, that was all he had ever done his whole life. His pitching had been the only thing he had, so even when no one could catch his fastballs, Satoru had continued to throw them. It was natural to not want to let go of the one thing he was certain about. Or at least, had been certain about.
"About tomorrow's starting pitcher...We'll go with Furuya again."

Despite all that however – despite his failure to hold down Akikawa, the coach had given Satoru another chance to go up on the mound. Despite his every weakness being put under the spotlight, the coach had acknowledged him, and none of the other players had protested at this decision. They'd all nodded in agreement, as if it was the most natural thing that he should start the game.

Even Sawamura, with a grin, had said, "Give them hell for us."

What did this all mean? Satoru wasn't sure. But he thought that maybe, it was okay for him to be selfish. It was okay to want to dominate the mound. That was just the kind of person he was, and he had been accepted despite of it, or perhaps for it. He had his weaknesses, and he would continue working on them. But as he now realized, he wasn't alone on the field – or even on the mound. There were other pitchers, his rivals, who wanted the mound just as much as Satoru did. What that meant in the end, however, was that these rivals would be giving their all in the game to connect one inning to the next.

My rivals are also my teammates.

It was hot on the mound. Even through his spikes, Satoru could feel the firm dirt below.

Todoroki stepped up to the plate. He was a first-year like Satoru, and had batted cleanup against Ichidai but was now the leadoff batter. His eagerness to bat sizzled off of him in waves of intense, excess energy.

"Right now, the only pitcher who's worth your time in West Tokyo is...Narumiya Mei, from Inashiro. That's probably it."

Satoru's eyes narrowed. With those words, Yakushi's coach had not insulted just him, but the entirety of Seidō's bullpen – and by extension, the rest of the team. The team that had accepted Satoru and, as he now realized, the team that he was a part of.

He glared back at Todoroki. He wouldn't back down. He had three innings to prove himself on the mound – three innings to guard the team's defense, before entrusting it in the hands of the next pitcher.

"Play ball!"

Ignoring Todoroki's excited laughter, Kazuya held his mitt up.

Furuya began to windup. He raised his leg, his arm shot out, and the ball barreled free from his fingers, spiraling down from the mound. Todoroki let out a sound of amazement – but as Kazuya's mitt shot up to catch the high ball, he didn't move from his batting stance.

Slam!

Faint wisps of smoke rose up from his mitt, as the stands exploded into the typical awed cheering. With a small smile, Kazuya looked down at the ball in his hold. It had been a bit high but...

Looks like Furuya's prepared to fight today.

To his surprise, Todoroki suddenly let out another laugh. "The ball just went graaah! It was even more awesome than I imagined!"
Kazuya raised an eyebrow. He had to hand it to the strange boy: he'd hoped the fastball would scare Todoroki off a bit, but he was still hanging on close to the plate.

Sitting back down, he signaled for a splitter. Furuya nodded, and a few seconds later, the ball came blazing down from the mound, before suddenly dropping off just before the plate. To his disappointment, Todoroki didn't move again, simply watching the ball pass by with a strangely thrilled look on his face.

"Ball!"

Two balls, no strikes... Kazuya had expected Yakushi's cleanup to be more aggressive in his batting style. Annoyingly enough, however, it seemed he had a good eye – perhaps even better than his own.

From the Yakushi dugout, Todoroki's teammates began to yell out what Kazuya assumed was their form of encouragement.

"Raichi, we don't need a walk!"

"Hey, you ate my banana, didn't you?!"

Glancing up at Todoroki's compact batting form, Kazuya turned back to Furuya and signed for another high fastball. Even if it made the count worsen, this was not a batter he was willing to risk throwing in the strike zone for. At least, not with Furuya's relatively straight-forward pitches.

Furuya nodded. He began to wind up, and then, pulling back, he threw down his arm. The ball shot out. Kazuya waited expectantly; it was a good, strong pitch, and the course wasn't bad –

Suddenly, Todoroki raised his bat, and just as the ball reached the plate, he swung. With a clear, resounding *clang!* the bat slammed into the ball, sending it careening high into the sky.

Kazuya jumped to his feet as Todoroki threw aside the bat and began to run. His eyes glued on the small figure of Isashiki racing to the back fence, Kazuya thickly swallowed. The ball didn't seem to be losing any velocity. Even from the distance, he thought he could see Isashiki mouthing out some swears. Was the ball going to go over the fence?

*There's no way –*

Suddenly, the ball curved slightly downward and crashed into the fence. To the uproarious clamor from the Yakushi stands, it bounced down to the ground.

"Agh, just a bit more and it'd have been out of the park!"

"Run, Raichi!"

With a thrilled laugh, Todoroki slid to second base, and a few seconds later, Kuramochi received the relayed ball. Wordlessly, Kazuya stared at Todoroki, who was currently receiving abuse from his teammates for not having gone on to third.

It seemed Todoroki didn't have much game experience. However, from the way he had purposefully swung slightly above the ball in order to not lose to the force behind Furuya's pitch, it was undeniable that he had gotten the better of the both of them in this first round.

*Damn.*
Kazuya felt his mouth draw tightly back against his teeth. He turned back to the mound—and saw that with his head bowed, Furuya was squeezing the ball hard in his hand. At the sight, Kazuya felt himself snap out of whatever reverie he'd been caught up in. Gaping around in shock like this was exactly what Yakushi would have wanted.

"Furuya!" he called out. Furuya looked back up, and Kazuya made a loose circling motion with his hand. After a moment, Furuya nodded, and to his relief, the first-year's hold on the ball visibly relaxed.

"Number 2, left fielder, Akiba-kun."

The current batter stepping up to the plate was, if Kazuya's memory served right, another first-year cleanup like Todoroki. With another tricky batter such as this one, it would be best to start off with a splitter. Accordingly, Kazuya set up his mitt, and several seconds later, having come set, Furuya threw.

The batter swung through empty air as the ball dropped before the plate and slammed into his mitt.

"Strike!"

Getting up to his feet, Kazuya grimly threw the ball sharply back. Even if Todoroki was a monster, as long as they could take out the more human batters following him, it wouldn't be a problem.

He'd presumed too soon, however, as in the next pitch, Akiba also swung above the ball, sending it shooting just past Masuko's reach and landing just inside the foul line.

Pushing his mask out of the way, Kazuya jumped to his feet. "Back home!"

Sakai in left field ran forward for the ball—but it was too late, as with another round of fevered laughter, Todoroki easily slid behind Kazuya to home.

Seidō's cheering stands had gone completely quiet as the infielders gathered at the mound around Satoru. His stomach was flip-flopping, and he thought he could feel the glowing scoreboard burning into his back.

Despite all of his determination, just as he had with Akikawa, he'd given up the first point of the game to Yakushi. Satoru felt himself slightly deflate. He couldn't help but think that if Sawamura had been pitching, he would have gotten three outs in a row and closed the first inning perfectly.

From where he stood on the mound, he could clearly see the southpaw warming up in the bullpen with Miyauchi. In fact, Satoru thought the sound of the ball slamming into the mitt had grown louder. The message was clear: Sawamura was available to be switched in at any time.

However...

Satoru closed his eyes, and for a split second, the searing sunlight was gone. Then, he reopened them. He exhaled, feeling the air rushing out of his lungs.

Standing just before Satoru, Miyuki raised his mitt to cover his mouth. "I'll make plays centered around the splitter, but your fastball is still your best weapon." He paused. "Remember. Trust in the teammates covering your back."

"Don't worry about the runners," said Yūki, with an encouraging smile.
Masuko raised a finger. "Just focus on the batters."

Satoru nodded back. "…Yes!"

He would probably need constant reminder for a while – but he was the one currently standing on the mound. His place was here, and it was pointless to compare himself to how someone else would have done in his place. What mattered now, in this moment and space, was that the team and coach had trusted in Satoru enough for him to start the game. It was only natural then, that he should return their confidence.

"Nice pitching, Furuya!"

"Nice one, Furuya!"

Haruichi offered a towel to the pitcher, who had just stepped down into the dugout. "Nice pitching, Furuya-kun!"

Accepting the towel with a grateful nod, Furuya wrapped it around his neck and sagged down onto the bench. After having given up the first point to Yakushi, Haruichi had worried that Furuya may self-destruct again as he had done with Akikawa. However, to his pleasant surprise, Furuya had staunchly continued and finished the inning without giving up another point.

Haruichi smiled. Both Furuya and Eijun were amazing, in their own ways.

A sudden movement caught Haruichi's eye, and he turned to see Miyuki seated on the bench, taking off his equipment – reminding him that of course, much of the credit would have to go to the upperclassmen's defense as well.

Just as he was about to look away, Miyuki suddenly straightened up, and got to his feet again. As Haruichi watched, Miyuki stepped forward to the railing, and directly looked at something. Following the direction of his turned head, Haruichi's eyes moved to the cheering section of the bleachers. Was Miyuki looking at their cheering squad?

"Slam!"

Haruichi's eyes immediately slid down to just below, to find the bullpen, where Eijun was currently warming up his shoulder.

After a beat, he looked from his friend's figure back to Miyuki – but the catcher had already moved away, and was now heading to the water cooler.

…what was that about?

As Haruichi's gaze lingered curiously on Miyuki's back, a scene from the night before inexplicably flashed through his mind.

After the time spent in the alleged team hang-out spot, he had gone downstairs ahead of his friends to start washing up for bed. After brushing his teeth, he'd stepped out of the washroom just in time to see the shadowed, but unmistakable shapes of Furuya and Eijun coming down from the stairway.

A little surprised, Haruichi began, "You guys sure took – " but then abruptly came to a stop, as Eijun fully came into view. It was dark, but even in the dim lighting, Haruichi could see that the southpaw's face was pink. He was wearing a wide, almost silly, smile, and without even noticing Haruichi's staring, made a beeline straight back to his room. When Eijun's door closed shut, Haruichi
gave Furuya a questioning look – but the other boy only shrugged.

After a moment of inquisitiveness, however, deciding that he had more pressing matters at hand, Haruichi had put it aside and then promptly forgotten all about it.

Why was he thinking about that now?

Sure, since they had just come down from Miyuki's room, the person Eijun had last been in contact with could very well have been the catcher. And now, though albeit only briefly, Miyuki was going out of his way to look in the direction of the bullpen, when he had no urgent or apparent reason to. Maybe he was thinking of strategies for when Eijun's turn to pitch came around?

But come to think of it, the conversation when they first entered Miyuki's room had felt a bit off to Haruichi. At Higasa's urging, Miyuki had started talking about his type in…girls, and Haruichi hadn't missed the way his eyes had fixed on Eijun's for several long seconds. He'd thought Eijun must have noticed it as well, for he'd seemed a bit more flustered than Haruichi was used to seeing from his friend.

What had Miyuki said again? 'Short, big-eyed, moody, and a bit dumb'? What kind of description was that?

And of course, he could hardly forget when, just after the Akikawa game, he'd panicked when he found them hugging outside the bathroom...

Suddenly, Haruichi's mouth went dry as his eyes, unbidden, turned back to the bullpen again. Surely not…?

For some reason feeling rather as he had the time he'd accidentally come across Zono's hidden stash of porn, Haruichi wrenched his eyes away. His cheeks felt uncomfortably warm as he forced himself to return his attention to the field, where Kuramochi was now stepping up to bat.

Everyone on the team knew that Miyuki and Eijun were close. It was to be expected that they'd mess around with and look out for each other. He was definitely just reading too much into it.

"Strike! Batter out!"

Seidō's blue and white stands burst into wild cheering as, at the top of the third, their first-year power pitcher promptly got his seventh consecutive out.

"Nice pitch, Furuya!"

"Nice pitching!"

Coach Todoroki clicked his tongue in half-amusement and half-irritation. "It's not a pitch they can't hit…"

Despite his instructions, none of the batters following Akiba had been able to get a proper hit off of Seidō's starter pitcher. And now, thanks to the runs Seidō's batters had easily scored off of Yakushi in the first two innings, they were losing.

However –

"Number 1, third baseman, Todoroki-kun."
Looking as hungry to bat as always, Raichi stepped up to the plate, and at the sight, Coach Todoroki felt his grin sharpen wickedly. Raichi's swing had the power to turn the game around. He'd fallen just short of a home run in his first at-bat against this pitcher…but this second at-bat would remedy that.

Just as he'd thought that however, suddenly, Seidō's catcher got to his feet. "Time – pitcher change, please."

Coach Todoroki's mouth dropped open – and a second later, he closed it shut, gritting his teeth. It seemed that Seidō's coach was even more aggressive than he'd thought, if he was already changing out the pitcher after just a single cycle through Yakushi's lineup.

"You're not gonna give our batters room to work with, is that it?"

And of course, the one replacing the pitcher could only be that other first-year, the southpaw whose name was starting to make its rounds around the tournament. He hadn't taken the rumors seriously at first – supposed "monsters" always popped up every year. However, the videos of Seidō's game against Akikawa had admittedly given him pause.

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Furuya-kun as pitcher is Sawamura-kun. Pitcher, Sawamura-kun."

Excited whispering began to buzz from all around the stadium as a grinning figure from Seidō's bullpen began making his way to the mound.

Sitting on the bench behind him, Sanada let out a whistle. "That pitcher's come out, coach."

Raichi, who'd looked bewildered at first, let out an eager laugh. A bead of sweat slipped down Coach Todoroki's brow.

*It's in your hands... Raichi!*
As they watched the dual figures of Seidō’s battery commune on the mound, the tension filling Yakushi’s bench, seen in the wariness in their eyes and in the stiffening of their spines, was so thick it could have been cut with a knife.

Glancing out from below hooded eyes, Coach Todoroki swung his arm across the back of the bench. "The Akikawa batters were completely crushed by that southpaw. He's got good control and power in his pitches, but he's apparently been shutting down every team in the tournament so far." He began to dig his pinky into his ear. "That's not normal. Which means, therefore, that there must be something more to his pitches."

Sanada grinned from the shadows. "He's similar to me, isn't he, coach? With his moving fastballs."

"Let's hope that's all he's got," Coach Todoroki grunted, and then craned his head toward the rest of the team. "Whatever the case, boys, he's levels above what you've faced until now. But you lot haven't been swinging your arms off all day for nothing. If you don't want your summer to end, you know what to do!"

"Yes, coach!"

For Eijun, it was almost jarring to see Raichi stepping up to the plate once more.

He had thought that the semifinals of his final summer tournament had been the battlefield for their final facedown. Their rivalry had been well-noted over the years, and for the most part, it had been an exchange of give-and-take, with neither really gaining a clear edge over the other. Raichi had gotten another homerun off of Eijun in his second year, but after that, he had always managed to, at the very least, keep Raichi to base hits.

Of course, all things came to an end. In that vein, it was mutually and implicitly decided that the semifinals of their third year would determine once and for all who had come out on top.

Eijun could remember the day well.

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It had been a hot, scorching day, befitting of the season. The stands were overflowing with supporters for both teams—by then, Yakushi had permanently made its name in the region and gained a large following—and the air was filled with the unintelligible mixing of brass sounds and people's voices, all to the background of the low thrumming of drums.

It was the top of the ninth. The score was 4-3, Seidō having managed to grab the lead in the fifth
inning. There were two outs, but the game was by no means set in stone. The third-hole was up to bat, with Raichi waiting on deck ("Kahaha!"), the promise of assured victory gleaming in his eyes. If only the batter could manage to pass the proverbial torch to Raichi – then surely, with his bat, he would be able to turn the game around.

With a keen glance up at the batter's stance, Okumura signaled to Eijun from the catcher's box. Eijun nodded.

And then two pitches later – clang!

The batter threw aside his bat and desperately began to run. And as the ball spiraled whitely through the open air, in that single instant, Eijun could have sworn that the entire stadium had fallen quiet. Was it a moment of prayer? Or of barely-contained, hushed excitement?

The moment the third baseman, Kanemaru, caught the ball with his glove, the short silence gave way to an expanse of screaming and cheers. The commentator began to shout over the crowd's uproar about the stunning defense of the Seidos battery.

For a long while, Raichi stood unmoving in the on deck circle, his bat clutched in his hand.

At the end of the game, when the two teams lined up at the center of the field to shake hands, Yakushi's team members were crying and helping each other stand up.

Tears were streaming down Raichi's face too, but as a third-year, he stood tall and firm now. He and Eijun shook hands, and as always, Eijun found himself marveling at the rock-hard quality of the other boy's hand.

"Don't go thinking that this is settled, Eijun," said Raichi, not making an effort to wipe away the snot dripping from his nose. "We'll settle this in the pro leagues."

"I don't know," Eijun grinned, pumping his hand. "You'll be too famous for the likes of me by then. You'll probably have forgotten all about me."

Raichi didn't smile back—he was still too down about his loss—but he gripped Eijun's hand almost painfully. "No…I'd never forget you. I'm glad I met you."

He let go of his hand and then before Eijun had even finished processing his words, Raichi had already moved on. He helped a second-year to his feet, and then standing strongly beside the rest of his teammates, without staggering under the other boy's weight, he began to head back to their dugout.

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If Eijun had thought that their semifinals facedown had been rather lackluster and anticlimactic, perhaps it was because it had not been the grand finale after all. He had returned to the past and now, Raichi was a first-year again, and Eijun himself was back in his first-year body. It seemed that they had now come full circle.

Of course, the tables were flipped this time, as Eijun now distinctly held the upper hand. However, looking at how hungrily Raichi was regarding him right now – a thrilling shock traveling through his stomach, Eijun could feel his hands tremble in anticipation. His mouth curved upward in an open smile. Raichi was clearly not going down with a fight.

And hell, neither was he.
Kazuya covered his lower face with his mitt. "That first-year watched two of Furuya's pitches, and then nearly blasted a homer on the third. He's the real deal, alright."

Sawamura nodded. "Yeah…Raichi's amazing."

"'Raichi'?" Kazuya repeated. "You know him?"

"Nah. Anyways – let's get this started, senpai."

Kazuya raised an eyebrow, but didn't press for an explanation. Lowering his mask over his face, he walked back to the catcher's box. He squatted down. Todoroki, who had been rapidly swinging his bat through the air, returned to the plate with an anticipatory laugh. The umpire called out for the game to resume.

Taking in Todoroki's clearly eager, yet tightly controlled stance, Kazuya looked toward the mound—and for a split second, felt as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of his lungs.

Sawamura's smile was still there, but it was a lingering vestige. There was nothing 'light' about it anymore.

The last time Kazuya had felt this level of intensity had been right at the beginning, when they'd teamed up for the intrasquad game and when he'd first caught a glimpse of what Sawamura could do. Not even in the Yokohama game had Sawamura looked as serious as he did now. His eyes were that of a predator, focused only on his prey and in that instant, blind to everything around it.

For a pitcher, that kind of willpower was a double-edged sword. It could make them incredible – but at the same time, they were also liable to focus on just that one goal and lose sight of their surroundings in the process.

Kazuya felt his mouth part open in a small smile.

Sawamura was lucky, then, that he was there. As long as he was there, and as long as Sawamura looked at his mitt, the southpaw wouldn't lose his way. Kazuya would make sure of it.

So just throw to where my mitt is, Sawamura.

"Play ball!"

Sawamura – he was the southpaw pitcher who'd grinned at Raichi during the lineup at the beginning of the game. He was still smiling now, but the air around him had noticeably changed. The intensity reached all the way to where he stood in the batting box. In fact, it almost felt as if Raichi was facing off against Ichidai's Manaka again.

This time, as he lowered into his batting stance, Raichi returned the grin. The moment was finally here. Furuya had been exciting to bat against, but his balls and strikes were blatantly different and once Raichi adjusted his eyes to the speed and reaffirmed his timing, he had confidence he could blast a home run.

This pitcher however…the key to unlocking his pitching was a little bit less obvious. Raichi hadn't quite been able to put his finger on it from the video recordings. Was he a moving ball pitcher like Sanada? Or was there something more to the southpaw?

Whatever the case, Raichi couldn't wait to see for himself what his pitches were like. And of course, to smash them away.
Sawamura nodded at a signal. With a step of a foot and then a slight turn, he began his windup. He lifted his leg up high. His foot pushed down on the mound, and his body was rotating but the hand had not yet come out –

And then before he knew it—*whoosh!*—the ball was roaring down the mound toward Raichi.

"*Whoaaad!*" he exclaimed out loud. His whole body itched to swing – however, with the promise of dinner dangling before him, he kept his eye on the ball and managed to hold still.

As the low ball barreled toward the plate, it noticeably moved outside before slamming resoundingly into the catcher's mitt.

"*Ball!!*

"Kahaha…!" Raichi stared down at the smoking mitt, before looking back up at the mound. Sawamura was facing the plate, ready in a fielding position.

Raichi turned to Yakushi's dugout, where his father was watching. He flashed, as they'd signaled, a series of winks—*just as we expected, he's got a unique pitching form!*—and received a thumbs-up and a wink in return.

Raichi lowered into his batting stance. The first pitch had ran away to the outside just as it approached the plate—what would the next ball be?

Sawamura nodded again – and then once again, before he had realized it, the ball was firing toward Raichi.

He could feel his heart beating naturally faster in his excitement, as he watched the ball's trajectory. It was going to be high. It had speed—not as much as that Furuya guy's, but about the same level as Sanada's fastest pitch—was it going to be another fastball?

Just before the ball crossed the plate, it suddenly cut sharply away from his chest, and –

"*Strike!!*

Raichi couldn't stop grinning. There it was: Sawamura's cutter. The video recordings of the Akikawa game hadn't done it nearly enough justice. That cutter was *sharp*. It was an even more amazing pitch than he'd expected it to be. Sanada had one of the most amazing cutters he had ever seen, and the pitch just now was on a level similar to Sanada's – except since Sawamura was a southpaw, it had broken away from Raichi instead of in to his chest.

Taking a step out of the box, Raichi began to take several practice swings through the air. Though he'd seen it only once, he could now imagine its trajectory in his mind. Visualizing another cutter coming in his direction, he swung, his bat audibly sending out a blast of air. But no – that would send it popping up. Visualizing another one, Raichi swung – yes, that was more like it!

His teammates from Yakushi's dugout were, as usual, yelling out threats disguised as encouragements:

"C'mon Raichi! You ate my banana!"

"Smash it away!"

"*Kahaha!!*" Raichi lowered into his batting stance once more. What ball would they throw next? Would they try the cutter again? He hoped they would. He wanted to try hitting it. He wanted to
blast it into the distance. He wanted to hit now!

As if reading his mind, Sawamura began his windup, and then the ball was shooting toward Raichi.

He stepped forward—it was low this time, around his knees—and tilting his body as he rotated, he swung. Even as his bat made contact with the ball, however, Raichi knew that it'd land in foul territory. It felt all wrong on his bat, and sure enough—*clang!*—it bulleted straight outside the foul line.

"Foul!"

It had been a cutter again. Raichi was sure of it. But the timing was hard to get down with Sawamura's strange delivery form – and the ball was heavier than he'd expected.

The catcher threw a new ball back to Sawamura, and Raichi bent his knees, lowering into his position. They'd thrown a moving fastball and two cutters so far. What would come next? Was it going to be the four-seam, to try and finish Raichi off? He couldn't decide which he wanted – they both sounded awesome. He wanted to try his hand again at the cutter, but he wanted to hit the four-seam too.

*Well, I'll just smash away whatever comes!*

Raichi heard the catcher bump his fist into his mitt, and then in response, Sawamura nodded. He entered his windup. The raised leg came down, the foot crushing into the dirt. The arm was hidden from sight even as Sawamura rotated his body.

Raichi took a step forward, transferring his weight to his hips and legs. And then the white ball was suddenly in his field of vision, spiraling toward him, but –

His eyes widened. Even as his body automatically began to rotate, he tried to slow down his bat because –

*A changeup*?!

However, it was too late. Before the off pitch ball had reached the plate, his bat had already finished its swing. His teeth gritted, Raichi winced.

"Strike! Batter out!"

Immediately following Raichi's swinging strike, Seidō's stands exploded into cheering. Yakushi's team members, on the other hand, fell into astounded silence.

"Tch," Coach Todoroki said irritably, picking inside his ear with his pinky again.

"A changeup…that wasn't in the data," said Akiba, folding his arms across his chest.

Mishima looked shaken. "I think this is the first time I've seen him get a swinging strikeout."

Coach Todoroki reared his head back to look at their ace. "Oi, Sanada, you should start warming – wait, where is he?"

"He's already left, coach."

"Bottom of the third inning, Seidō High School's offense begins with number 1, second
His hands folded over the railing of their dugout, Yōichi watched as Ryōsuke's small frame stepped up to the plate. As always, there was a small smile dancing around his mouth, but it seemed a little more genuine—or at least, less terrifying—than usual.

He glanced to his side, where Sawamura was currently shouting out encouragements along with the rest of the team.

*And it's all because of this idiot of a first-year.*

They sure had come a long way since that first game against Yokohama. Yōichi couldn't even remember what Sawamura had been fussing about. However, there had been something riding on whether Sawamura could pitch a perfect game or not. He'd thought at the time that the first-year was in over his head – and in fact, Sawamura hadn't been able to do it in the end. But now, Yōichi thought that if Sawamura brought up another match with a perfect game at stake…

Well, at the very least, he wouldn't laugh.

*Clang!*

With a well-aimed hit that sent the ball flying just past the shortstop's head, Ryōsuke ran to first with little trouble. Jun roared in his customary way while setting up at the plate and Tetsu moved out on deck.

"Sawamura, keep yourself hydrated," came Miyuki's voice.

Without moving his head, Yōichi glanced sideways and saw Miyuki's face appear on Sawamura's other side. Compliantly shrugging, Sawamura stepped back, and then the catcher fully came into view. He was pulling on his batting gloves. Without saying anything, the space between them feeling almost alive, they looked out at the ongoing game.

Yōichi wouldn't ever say it aloud of course—there were some things that were just too embarrassing to be put into verbal words—but Miyuki had changed a bit over the past few months. For the better, probably.

While Miyuki had been toeing the—admittedly thick—line between having common decency and being plain rotten from the start, ever since Chris had seriously injured himself during their first year, he had really let himself go. The first few weeks had been especially bad. Everyone on the team had gone out of their way to give the catcher his space.

He'd gotten much better since then, though he'd never be popular. At the very least, he didn't complain when half the first string was hanging out in his room. However, there was something about Miyuki that had always held people, including Yōichi himself, at an arm's distance.

It was still there. But somehow, being around Sawamura made the distance seem to shrink – even if just a little. Was Yōichi being overly optimistic and reading too much into the situation? He didn't know. He hoped not.

Just when Sawamura came back between them, his jaw dripping with water, Jun hit a grounder that advanced Ryōsuke. Tetsu stepped up to the plate, and the brass band began to play.

Kuramochi moved away to talk to the returning Isashiki, and then it was just him and Sawamura.
"They'll be bringing out their real ace soon," said Sawamura, looking across the field to Yakushi's bullpen.

"The shootball pitcher?" Kazuya thoughtfully looked out at the field. "Maybe. It's a little early in the game, but they're probably panicking over you shutting out Todoroki."

Sawamura shook his head. "I doubt that. That was just round one. Round two with Raichi's when it'll really get interesting."

Kazuya took in Sawamura's relaxed form. His arms spilled comfortably at either side, and his back curved naturally over the railing.

"You don't seem worried," he remarked.

Sawamura snorted. "I've done enough worrying over the past few months."

*Boom!*

At the sudden explosive sound, they both turned to the field with a start—somehow, as they talked, the game had been muted into the background—and saw Yūki looking up at the sky, his legs blurring into action. Kazuya's mouth fell open, and immediately, he searched for the ball—and caught it just as it flew over the fence, and disappeared from sight.

"*Home run!*"

"Tetsu-san, you're unstoppable!"

"Nice batting!"

"Yūki-senpai, nice batting!"

As he stepped firmly on the first base, Yūki victoriously raised a strong fist into the air.

Shaking his head in mute admiration, Kazuya stepped back from the railing and picked up his bat. He was going to bat following Masuko—though with Yūki's two RBI home run, anything that happened in the rest of the inning would be little more than a sideshow.

Just as he set foot on the stairway out of the dugout, he heard Sawamura call out his name:

"Miyuki-senpai!"

He turned around. "What is it?"

Sawamura was still hanging over the railing, but his face tilted casually toward Kazuya. "Even if Masuko-senpai doesn't get on base, it'll be totally uncool if you just strike out."

He felt himself sweat. "...You're saying I can't hit when no one's on base, aren't you?"

"I'm just saying."

"Oi, Sawamura," Kazuya said in a mockingly warning voice. "You seem to conveniently forget it all the time, but I am your senpai."

Sawamura grinned and rocked back on his heels. "Hey, senpai."

"What is it now?"
"I'm glad I met you."

Kazuya paused. He took another step up the stairway, his foot crunching into the dirt of the open. His hand squeezed the handle of his bat. Finally, he said, "Don't you feel even a little embarrassed saying stuff like that?"

"I think I'd regret not saying it more," said Sawamura. Then, he thrust out his lower lip. "Wait, you're not glad you met me?"

Taken aback, he found himself staring at the sudden pink of the other boy's protruding lip. After a beat, he opened his mouth, and said –

Blaring over the sound of the stadium's cacophony, the PA announced, "Yakushi High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Mino-kun as pitcher is Sanada-kun. Pitcher, Sanada-kun."

Sawamura, who had immediately looked up at the sky at the sound of the announcement, lowered his gaze back to Kazuya's. Wearing a pleased expression as if to say 'I told you so,' he asked, "Sorry, what'd you say?"

"Nothing," said Kazuya.

He stepped fully out of the shadow of the dugout and into the sun. Masuko stood ready at the plate. From the other side's bullpen, a tall uniformed figure was jogging toward the mound. The field was wide and open. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the reviews, comments/kudos (and the follows on tumblr)! The next chapter is going to be quite eventful in a way nobody probably expects. I apologize beforehand.

Anyways, will Yakushi make its comeback?! Look forward to it.
Kazuya could feel it – there was a tangible change in the atmosphere as soon as Yakushi's shootball pitcher stepped out on the mound. Yakushi had just gotten a two RBI homerun scored off of them, and the score was now 6-1. There was only one out and Masuko, their five-hole cleanup batter, was stepping up to the plate. Despite Yakushi's grim state of affairs however, when Sanada received the ball in his glove, the curtain of glum silence fell away as his teammates began to yell out encouragements.

Todoroki shouted, "Sanada-senpai, send them all my way! I'll stop them all for sure!"

"I'm too scared to send them your way," Sanada replied, grinning. "You might make errors."

From their dugout, Yakushi's coach barked, "Raichi, don't drag Sanada down! Make sure you confirm where he's throwing every time!" There was a pause. "'Cause you're an idiot!"

Todoroki's face flamed red as he yelled back, "Shut up, you good-for-nothing dad! It's in the genes!"

Yakushi's team members, as well as the people in the stands who could overhear their bantering, burst into light-hearted laughter.

Kazuya kneeled down in the on-deck circle. There was no doubt about it, then, that Sanada was Yakushi's true ace and mood maker. The question was, why hadn't Sanada started the game in either this match or the prior one against Ichidai? Unlike Seidō's bullpen with its multiplicity of high-level pitchers, Yakushi was obviously reliant on Sanada alone. Their pitcher who was officially wearing the number 1 jersey, Mino, was a mediocre pitcher at best.

The umpire crouched down. "Play!"

There was a brief, tense lull on the field. Then winding up, Sanada stepped off the rubber and threw the ball and –

_Crunch!_

Masuko jerked back but it was too late, as the ball bounced against his elbow guard before tumbling to the ground. Kazuya could hear audible intakes of breath from his teammates in the dugout.

_"Hit by pitch!"

Grumbled abuse rained down from the stands. Fortunately looking unharmed, Masuko dropped his bat and headed to first base while Sanada took off his cap and bowed in apology.
Kazuya stood up and began to head to the plate, and the notes of his walk-up song began to resound down from the brass band section. Stepping into the lefty batting box, he adjusted the dirt with his foot.

"Number 6, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

Straightening up, Kazuya locked eyes with Sanada. Tossing the rosin bag in his hand, Sanada wore a surprisingly feral grin.

A wild pitch right off the bat, and he didn't even look fazed... Wild throws weren't exactly Kazuya's forte. Pitchers with good control were so much easier to predict.

However...

He glanced back at the on-deck circle, where Sawamura was now kneeling. Perhaps sensing his gaze even through his sports glasses, Sawamura looked up – and smiled.

Kazuya looked away.

"'Even if Masuko-senpai doesn't get on base, it'll be totally uncool if you just strike out'...right?" he said under his breath.

Sanada threw down the rosin bag on the ground, and Kazuya exhaled. He didn't want to allow Yakushi to get back on their feet just because their ace pitcher was on the mound. The best scenario would be for Seidō to crush Sanada in this inning. By doing so, they would pretty much assure the outcome of the game. Or who knew, perhaps they could even aim for another called game.

Feeling his familiar grin return, Kazuya lowered into his batting stance.

Sorry for you, but I'm going for this one.

"Miyuki!"

"Let's take it all this inning!"

The Seidō cheering squad was pulling out all the stops as their catcher—Miyuki, another one of their dangerous players—stepped up to the plate. The familiar notes of Sharpshooter rang down from the stands and the batter set up in the box. Taking in the cutting, resolute look on his face, it was clear that he was here on business.

Shunpei felt his mouth curl back in a narrow grin. Of course he knew it'd be better in the long run to take it slow and pace himself at the beginning – but there was no way in hell he'd back down from such a challenge.

He checked the runner on base—as expected, Seidō's hulking five-hole wasn't taking much of a lead—and then looking back at Miyuki, came into set position. He exhaled. Raising his leg, he then pushed it forward, transferring his weight forward only at the last possible moment as he threw his arm down.

Miyuki wisely chose to draw backward as the ball flew past his face.

"Ball!"

Raising his glove, Shunpei received the ball back from Watanabe. Far from being cowed, however,
Miyuki lowered back into his batting stance, leveling Shunpei with a focused gaze.

He nodded at Watanabe's signal for the second pitch – and then having come set, he threw. Miyuki didn't move this time, watching the ball shoot past his chest.

"Ball!"

"That's 2-0!"

"Pitcher can't throw any strikes!"

Still grinning uncontrollably, Shunpei felt a bead of sweat trek down his brow. Two balls, no strikes…things could get bad if the count got any worse for them, especially against the current opponent. Glancing anxiously up at the batter, Watanabe must have felt the same way, as he signaled for a cutter.

It was a bit early in the game—he adjusted his grip on the ball in his glove—*but why not?*

Having come set, he threw, grunting in exertion. The ball streaked down toward Miyuki, whose eyes lit up in anticipation. Expectantly, he began his swing – just as the ball bent in toward his chest.

*Clunk!*

The ball met Miyuki's bat at an angle, bouncing down into a skidding grounder. Looking astonished, Miyuki began to dash towards first base as the big one on first ran for second. Fukuda, their second baseman, ran forward to field the ball. Grabbing it mid-bounce in his glove, he tossed it to Kobayashi, their shortstop – who nearly fumbled the catch but managed to affirm his grip, as he stepped on second. Amidst shouts, he threw it toward Mishima's outstretched mitt at first. Shunpei heard the sound of the ball slamming into leather just as Miyuki stepped foot on the base, and –

"*Safe!*" cried the umpire, to his disappointment.

Oh well. At least they'd gotten the force out at second.

"Sorry, Shun," Kobayashi called out, looking mortified.

"No worries," Shunpei replied back with what he hoped was a reassuring grin.

The situation was now two outs, with a runner on first. (The runner in question, to Shunpei's amusement, still wore a rather stunned look on his face.) He would be facing the bottom of Seidō's lineup from here on – not that such a thing meant anything when facing a team of a prestigious name like theirs.

Seidō's brass band had started to enthusiastically play again. To the accompaniment of drums, the cascading notes of *Southpaw* rang down from the stands.

"*Number 7, pitcher, Sawamura-kun.*"

Sawamura – AKA the first-year pitcher who'd set Shunpei's teammates on edge from the moment he'd stepped foot on the mound. Even from the distance of the dugout, he'd been able to feel it: The level of intensity Sawamura gave off just wasn't normal. It'd set Shunpei on edge as well—though unlike most people, he actually rather enjoyed the feeling—enough to send him into the bullpen earlier than planned.

Leaning forward and rotating the ball behind his back, Shunpei waited for Watanabe's signal.
Fortunately, from what Shunpei had seen in the game against Akikawa, Sawamura's batting was nowhere near the level of his pitching. Though of course, he had no intention of letting his guard down.

Suddenly, he noted that—as if Shunpei had somehow personally affronted him—Sawamura was staring almost belligerently back. Shunpei felt the corners of his mouth twitch. Maybe Sawamura was offended that he wasn't the only one on this field who could throw a cutter?

With a furtive glance up at Sawamura, who was swinging his bat in the lefty's box, Watanabe signaled for a shootball. Checking the runner on base, Shunpei straightened up.

His shootball, as he'd been told, was much sharper than it appeared from the sidelines. Even someone like Raichi, without seeing it firsthand from the batter's box at least once before, wouldn't be able to hit it. And for someone around Sawamura's caliber, Shunpei wagered it'd take at least a season's worth of at-bats before he could even begin to try getting down the timing of it.

He lifted his leg. Keeping his arm pressed back, he moved forward, waiting until the very last instant to throw down his arm—and the ball shot out of his hand, hurtling toward Sawamura.

Sawamura didn't move, watching the ball pass by instead.

"Strike!"

Shunpei raised his glove to receive the ball back, and as he did so, he noticed that Sawamura was grinning. Grinning?

Signaling for the same pitch, Watanabe set up his mitt. From the set position, Shunpei raised his leg—and then brought it down. His teeth gritted, he threw his arm down, and the ball flew out from his hand, heading straight for the batter.

To Shunpei's surprise, Sawamura, almost as if he'd been expecting it, swung in a clean, compact rotation and—clang!—solidly met the ball with his bat. The ball shot past Shunpei and over the shortstop's head. The center fielder dashed forward to field the ball, but it was too late, as Sawamura slid safely to second.

And now, to the incessant cheers from Seidō's stands, Seidō had yet another runner in scoring position at third.

His back tingled. No doubt, Coach Todoroki was directing a very dirty look at him.

Shunpei sweated. "Ah, crap."

Grabbing his glove, Yōichi streamed out of the dugout with the rest of his teammates and took his position on the field.

Sanada's taking the mound at the bottom of the third and jamming Miyuki had startled them. However, when Sawamura somehow managed to hit a double off of the same pitch, the shootball pitcher no longer seemed the threat he'd posed to be. Nevertheless, the eventful third inning ended with Sakai's grounder to the pitcher, leaving the score at a strong 6-1 lead in Seidō's favor.

With elation running high, they entered the fourth inning.

"Top of the fourth, Yakushi High's offense starts with batting second, left fielder, Akiba-kun."
Looking toward the dugout and seemingly receiving no instruction, the batter stepped up to the plate. He was one of the three first-years who'd played as cleanup in Yakushi's game against Ichidai. He'd been overshadowed by Todoroki, but during Seidō's pre-game meeting, they had all been warned not to let their guard down during his at-bats.

"Play!" cried the umpire.

Yōichi waited as Sawamura watched Miyuki's signal. After a second, he nodded, and then began his windup. He threw. Yōichi tensed – but the batter didn't swing.

"Ball!"

The batter looked unsettled and stepped out of the box, swinging his bat. Yōichi didn't blame him; the first time he'd experienced batting against Sawamura's late delivery, he'd felt like taking a step out for a breather as well.

Miyuki stood up and threw the ball back to Sawamura. The batter returned and lowered into a batting stance.

Sawamura nodded at a signal, and a few seconds later, he threw. As the ball flew down the mound, Yōichi tensed – and this time, the batter swung. With a dull thunking sound, the ball bounced down to the ground. While the batter desperately dashed to first, Sawamura scooped up the ball and tossed it to Yūki's mitt.

"Out!"

"Nice pitching, Sawamura!"

"Keep it going!"

"Nice pitching," he heard Ryōsuke call out.

"Batting third, first baseman, Mishima."

As the batter set up in the batting box, Yōichi looked at Sawamura—who was tossing the rosin bag in his hand—and then back at Ryōsuke. He was smiling as usual, and Yōichi felt his thoughts briefly wander to the past.

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His first year at Seidō already felt as though it'd happened so long ago, that it was hard to believe it'd only been the previous year.

Yōichi had easily been the best baseball player in his junior high school, but upon his arrival at Seidō, he'd quickly come to the jarring realization that if he let up even a little, he was very much a cog in a well-oiled machine that could easily be replaced.

It was around this time, when he'd been trying to make sense of his new teammates, that he'd been paired up with Ryōsuke. One day, during a fielding session, Yōichi missed one of his tosses. And then just like that, flashing the fakest smile he had ever been graced with before in his life, Ryōsuke said, "You suck."

Startled, Yōichi found himself unable to say or do anything, besides to think, What's his problem?!

Unfortunately, since Ryōsuke was an upperclassman, and a rather scary one at that, he couldn't even
tackle him. So instead, he kept his head down for the most part. He continued waking up every morning at the crack of dawn. He diligently went to fielding practice. He put in his time at the batting cage. And most of all, he watched.

He observed how the others got right up with him at the crack of dawn. How they pushed themselves, buckets of sweat pouring off their backs, to keep up with the others during their grueling runs. How not a single word of complaint escaped their lips as they repeated the same exercise for the thousandth time. How after even all that, without anyone telling them to, they swung their bats hundreds of times, deep into the night.

Finally, he reached a conclusion:

*What the hell. They're not frigging cogs in a machine. They're all just a bunch of baseball-crazy idiots.*

And one of the biggest idiots of them all was Ryōsuke, who'd been his resolute partner ever since. They weren't particularly close off the field, but they knew they had each others' backs. Perhaps more tellingly, Ryōsuke was probably the only person who could get away with telling Yōichi that he batted worse than his kid brother (which he'd found out this year, was not actually an insult).

Yōichi had been watching from the stands when Seidō lost their chance in the summer tournament last year. So maybe it was because he was actually on the starting lineup this year and was closer to the action now, but somehow, he couldn't imagine their team losing even a single match this year.

It felt like everything had come together just right this summer. There'd been some mishaps of course, what with Tanba and his injury, but with Miyuki (who was a genius on the field, though Yōichi hated to admit it) leading Sawamura and the rest of the bullpen – with their upperclassmen providing the offensive fire – with their tireless outfielders, defending their backs – and with he and Ryōsuke connecting to one another in their double play combination, it really felt as though nothing could stop them.

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Sawamura tossed down the rosin bag, shaking Yōichi out of his thoughts. He blinked, dropping his shoulders. He discretely glanced around, wondering if anyone had noticed his momentary zone out.

Turning left, Yōichi was greeted by a scary smile from Ryōsuke. "Keep your head in the game, idiot."

Yōichi felt himself sweat. Though his eyes seemed to be permanently closed all the time, his partner somehow never missed a single thing.

Sawamura soon began his windup, and after a terse second, entered his throwing motion. His gaze sharpening, Yōichi tensed in anticipation. The batter swung – *clank!* – and the ball shot down to the ground.

"Shortstop!" Sawamura shouted, but of course, Yōichi was already moving.

"Hyaha!" Scooping up the ball with his glove, he turned in the same motion and jumped, throwing it sharply toward first.

"Out!"

It was perhaps by pure luck that Raichi managed to catch the ball. When Seidō's cleanup captain
stepped up to the plate at the bottom of the fifth inning, right away, even Raichi had been able to feel the intensity. He'd been mostly paying attention to the pitchers of course, but even he couldn't help but to feel a wave of admiration.

Fortunately for Sanada, Raichi's hands reacted faster than his brain (his fielding tended to be better when this was the case). Seidô's cleanup swung, and before Raichi had even realized the ball was heading his way, his glove jumped up.

The impact of the speeding ball was so powerful, it knocked his hand back.

"Kaha…ha…" Raichi laughed weakly, looking down at the smoking ball in his grasp, and then back up. The batter gave Raichi an impassive look before returning to his dugout, and the game continued. The fifth inning ended with the following Seidô batter sending a grounder to second.

"Out! Change sides!"

"Nice pitch, Sanada!"

"Sanada-senpai!" Raichi called out, tapping their ace's back with his glove as he passed by. His stomach gurgling greedily, as soon as he'd returned to the shade of the dugout, he dove for the first banana he saw (never mind the fact that it wasn't his).

"Good job Sanada," his father drawled out from his draped position across the bench. "You gave me a scare in the third inning, but I guess even Seidô hasn't pegged you yet."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment, coach?" Sanada said, sounding amused as he stepped into the dugout. Putting down his glove, he turned to look at the scoreboard. "We're still quite a few runs down, though."

Raichi's father dug his finger into his ear. "I didn't expect any of you to get a hit off that southpaw in the first cycle." He removed his finger, and blew off whatever he'd dug out. "It's about time now, though, for you all to start shaking that pitcher up."

Resolutely chomping down on his banana, Raichi stared out at the field. Seidô's fielders were starting to come out. He focused in particular on their pitcher, who was talking to his catcher on the mound.

Having finished his first banana, without looking away, Raichi reached for another banana.

"Tell me what you said before," Eijun wheedled.

But Miyuki only smirked. "I told you: You snooze, you lose."

He had been attacking Miyuki at random intervals since the third inning, trying to surprise him into telling Eijun what he'd said. After all, he had gone out on a limb there to say something embarrassing, and while he wasn't holding out for much from Miyuki's end, it was driving Eijun nuts not knowing what the other boy had said in response. It was probably something stupid or mocking, but Miyuki's refusal to repeat himself had lit a small birthday candle light's worth of hope for Eijun.

Hope for what? Well…Eijun wasn't sure. It didn't really matter, either, he thought. He just wanted to know what Miyuki had said.

Eijun tried to make a winning puppy face. "I was paying attention, I swear! It's just that I couldn't hear you over the stupid PA."
"Well, tough luck."

"Seriously?" Eijun frowned – and Miyuki laughed.

"How about this then." Eijun felt his ears perk up. "Get the next three batters out, and I'll tell you what you missed."

For a moment, Eijun brightened, not quite understanding the reason behind the wicked grin on Miyuki’s face. And then suddenly, as the scoreboard—listing all the players' names—behind Miyuki came into focus, it hit Eijun like a bag of bricks.

Miyuki sniggered.

"Batting ninth, center fielder, Ōda-kun."

Squatting down, Kazuya raised his mitt.

Sawamura had gotten the first out already with a grounder to second, and if he could get this one out, there was only one more to go before Kazuya had to spill his 'secret.' But of course, that last out was the colossal mountain in their way.

As soon as Sawamura had realized that Todoroki's at-bat was coming up in this inning—Kazuya could pinpoint the exact instant this realization had occurred—he'd fallen silent. And now, he wore an expression that was so determined and full of intent, Kazuya thought that if Sawamura did somehow manage to get that out from Todoroki, he might even actually tell him the truth.

Kazuya signaled for the first pitch to Sawamura, who nodded. Beginning his windup, he took a step and then turned – and then flung down his arm. The ball roared down toward the plate, and the batter swung – but the ball, glancing off his bat, continued its path and slammed into Kazuya's mitt.

"Foul tip!"

Kazuya got up, and flung the ball back. Sawamura caught it in his glove, and then arched his arm back to wipe the sweat off his brow. As soon as he was ready, Kazuya signaled for another pitch, and then pounding his fist in his mitt, set it open.

When the ball came shooting toward the plate, the batter swung. With a dull thunk! it made weak contact with the ball, sending it rolling on the ground toward the mound. Sawamura ran forward to pick it up and threw it toward first.

"Out!"

The batter, who'd only half-heartedly started running toward first base, veered away and trudged back to Yakushi's dugout. On his way, he clasped the shoulder of the next batter, who'd stood up in the on-deck circle.

"Let's go, Raichi!"

"Nice pitch, Sawamura!"

"C'mon Raichi!"

"Sawamura-kun!"
The names intermingling around them from the various shouting crowds, Kazuya checked in the direction of the dugout to see if there were any signals from the coach – but as expected, there were none. Squatting back down in the catcher's box, Kazuya waited as the batter rapidly swung his bat through the air.

Standing on the mound, Sawamura was tossing the rosin bag in his hand. He didn’t seem quite as relaxed as he had before, but that was understandable. And if Kazuya had thought that Sawamura couldn’t handle the pressure, he wouldn’t have made their little joking wager.

"Batting first, third baseman, Todoroki-kun."

"Kahaha!" Stepping up to the plate with an eager, almost demonic look on his face, it seemed Todoroki had been greatly looking forward to round two.

Kazuya felt his mouth part open in a smile. To tell the truth, he had been looking forward to it as well.

Sawamura leaned forward, holding the ball behind his back as he waited for Kazuya's signal. With a glance up at Todoroki, Kazuya moved his mitt to the outside. If he was as eager to bat as he seemed, perhaps they could get him to chase the ball.

Sawamura nodded, and straightened. He brought his hands together, raising it over his head. He lifted his leg and then pushed it downward, his foot slamming down on the ground. As always, before his left arm came into view, the white ball was already flying toward the plate.

Todoroki let out an excited laugh, but didn't swing.

"Ball!"

Tsk.

Kazuya threw the ball back, and squatted back down. As he'd expected, they probably wouldn't be able to fool Todoroki with the ball's placement. Their best bet would be to throw off his timing with the speed of the pitches – though no doubt, he was waiting for the changeup now. Perhaps something in between, then?

Making up his mind, Kazuya signaled from between his legs. Sawamura nodded, and a few seconds later, the ball flew toward the plate.

Todoroki swung strongly, sending out a blast of air in his bat's path. Clang! A white streak, the ball raced outside of the foul line.

"Foul!"

Kazuya got to his feet. Receiving the new baseball from the umpire, he threw it to Sawamura's waiting glove, and then sat back down.

"Kahaha!" Todoroki said happily, swinging his bat through the empty air. "His timing is kinda hard to get down…was it like this?" He swung again, blasting more air. "Or like this? Kahaha!"

Signaling between his legs, Kazuya set up his mitt on the outside corner of the plate. Sawamura nodded, and a few seconds later, the ball flew towards the plate.

Todoroki swung again – clang! – and this time, the ball bulleted just barely outside the foul line.
Kazuya felt a bead of sweat drip down his brow. If it had been only a few inches inside, it would probably at least have been a two base hit.

To be able to come this close to getting down Sawamura's timing during just his second at-bat...It was a testimony to how terrifying a batter Todoroki was. He was a ball of immense natural talent mixed with incredible physical discipline that could not have been possible without years of constant, repeated training. It was difficult for Kazuya to imagine how many hours he must have spent in his childhood simply swinging a bat.

With another signal to Sawamura, Kazuya moved his mitt to the inside corner of the plate.

*We're going to tackle this aggressively, just the way you like it.*

A small smile forming at the corners of his mouth, Sawamura nodded. He straightened up, adjusting the ball in his glove. Squarely facing the plate, he brought his hands together.

Above them, the sun shone alone in the clear sky. Its rays stretched down from its high point, lighting up motes of dust that glittered faintly by the stadium scoreboard.

Sawamura's eyes were glowing. He raised his leg up high, balancing on it for a few still, serene seconds. And in that instant, for Kazuya, the din of the crowd seemed to fade away. He couldn't have looked away even if he'd wanted to.

Breaking the spell in a burst of renewed movement, Sawamura brought his foot down, slamming it down firmly onto the mound. His arm was still drawn back – and in a blur of white, the ball flew toward the plate.

It was a good pitch. It was coming where Kazuya had asked for. Sawamura's cap had fallen off and was tumbling, almost as if in slow motion, down to the ground.

Todoroki swung, his aluminum bat flashing in the sunlight.

As if already knowing what was about to happen, Kazuya felt his throat lock painfully. His heart began to pound in his ears.

*CLANG!*

The ball, its momentum reversed in a single instant, bulleted in a line drive straight back to the mound. Sawamura didn't even have time to widen his eyes.

With a sickening crushing sound, the ball bounced off the tip of his raised glove and slammed straight into the side of his head. Sawamura crumpled to the ground. For a moment, he appeared to be seated – and then in a jumble of rigid limbs, he tumbled over, and all Kazuya could see was a still, prone body.

The blue cap almost gently, almost mockingly, landed on the ground beside him.

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**Glossary**

*I added a few terms that I'm sure most of you already know by now, but I figured it couldn't hurt.*

**Bullpen:** The area where relief pitchers warm-up before entering a game. Depending on the ballpark, it may be situated in foul territory along the foul lines of the playing field or just beyond the outfield fence. A team's roster of relief pitchers is also referred to as "the bullpen". These pitchers usually
wait in the bullpen if they have not yet played in a game, rather than in the dugout with the rest of the team.

**Count:** The count refers to the number of balls and strikes a batter has in his current plate appearance.

It is usually announced as a pair of numbers, for example, 3-1, with the first number being the number of balls and the second being the number of strikes.

**Force out:** A force out (aka force play) is made when a baserunner is forced to leave his base when the batter becomes a baserunner himself, and a fielder successfully tags the next base before the runner can reach it. No run can score on a play in which the final out of the inning is recorded on a force out, even if the runner crossed the plate before the final out was recorded.

**Foul tip:** A batted ball that goes sharp directly from the bat to the catcher's hands and is legally caught. A foul tip is considered a strike and the ball remains "in play." A foul tip is treated as equivalent in every respect to a pitch at which the batter swings and misses.

**On deck:** Being 'on deck' refers to being next in line to bat. The batter who is on deck waits in a location in the foul territory called the on-deck circle.

**Pinch hitter:** A substitute batter. The replaced player is never allowed back into that game. The pinch hitter assumes the spot in the batting order of the player they replace.

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**Commonly Asked Questions:**

1) **What is Kōshien?**

First of all, the tournament Seidō is in right now is not Kōshien. They are playing in the summer regional qualifiers which decides who gets to go on to Summer Kōshien. One team from every prefecture (two from Hokkaido and Tokyo) in Japan, by winning their prefecture's qualifier tournament, gains the right to participate in Kōshien. Summer Kōshien itself takes place after these regionals, and is the equivalent of nationals.

There is another Kōshien in the spring (Spring Kōshien), which is invitational only. A team that wins their prefecture's fall regional tournament is basically guaranteed an invitation. However, because it's by invitation, a team that didn't win but performed well, still has a chance to get an invite.

Which is why, in the manga—I'll try to avoid spoilers—that team still gets to play in Spring Kōshien even though they lost to you know in the fall tournament (lol).

2) **Are fouls strikes?**

Fouls do count as a strike in the count. However, you can't strikeout on a foul. For instance, say the count is 2-1, and the batter hits a foul ball. Then, the count will become 2-2. But if he hits a foul again, it'll stay 2-2, and even if he hits another foul following that, it'll stay 2-2 for as long as he's hitting only fouls. This rule applies to an unlimited number of foul balls.

3) **Is this whole story Eijun dreaming?! Is he going to wake up and find out none of it happened?!**

No.
Thank you all for your reviews/comments/kudos!

About this chapter…

-I didn't intend on using Sanada's POV but a few people seemed oddly excited to see his character so I tried giving his POV a whirl.

-The random Kuramochi flashback was me taking a break from writing pure baseball lol.

-I'm sorry Raichi you're just destined to hit all the pitchers.

Today (2/20) is apparently one of the designated Misawa days. I've been really enjoying the flood of misawa in my tumblr dashboard anyways, thank you all for making such awesome stuff.
One moment, he had just finished his pitching motion and was looking at the batter, and the next, the scenery had suddenly flipped and he was on the ground.

His eyes were probably open, but everything was a haze of dirt and shadow. There must have been something going on, for somewhere in the distance, it sounded as though a large number of people were shouting something. He couldn't make sense of a single word, however.

Something tight inside his head throbbed in searing pain. It felt as though something inside his head was trying to hack its way out with a blunt knife.

The rest of his body felt heavy and unmovable. His limbs were twitching, but he had no control over them. As if a hand had wrapped itself around his very soul and pulled at it, he could feel himself slipping out of his body. The tenuous thread tying him to his body was ripping apart at the seams.

Amidst the chaos, starting to feel more and more frightened, he reached out blindly in the darkness – and found a light. While he couldn't see it, as everything was a blur, he knew for certainty that it was nearby. But even that was just barely out of his grasp. He couldn't quite reach it. Not on his own. Suddenly tired, he let his hand drop.

Was he dying? Or was he already dead?

The irony of the situation didn't escape him. He'd been worried for so long about others, that the possibility of he himself dying had somehow slipped his mind…and yet, it had been there from the very beginning.

He couldn't move or speak. He could only feel himself seeping helplessly out of his body, drop by drop. If he could, he would have cried.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair.

He hadn't been able to say goodbye this time either…

Sawamura had only just hit the ground, when Coach Kataoka raced out of the dugout. An instant later, the rest of the entire team scrambled out, joining the others at the mound.

People were shouting. Everyone looked stricken.

Somehow, without his realizing it, Kazuya must have stood up and walked toward the mound at one
point, for he suddenly found himself at the periphery of the crowd. The medics that had rushed out onto the field blocked Sawamura's unconscious body from view, and he wasn't sure if he should feel grateful or uneasy.

And then someone—Kuramochi, pale-faced and fearful—moved away and Kazuya saw a shock of brown hair.

At that, something in his chest tightened. His fingers dug painfully into his palms.

They soon came out with a stretcher. They carefully loaded Sawamura and his fallen cap onto it and—accompanied by Rei—carried it out of the stadium's exit. The people in the stands stood up and craned their heads to follow them. Kazuya thought he could see the familiar red flashing of an ambulance.

Then, he was alone on the mound.

Dimly, he registered that there were other people still standing around him. But somehow, it felt as though he was the only person there. The field had never before felt this empty. It was a terrible feeling.

…However, it was not an unfamiliar one.

Kazuya closed his eyes. He took in a deep breath – and then exhaled, slowly. As the air rushed out of his lungs, he could feel himself regaining control over his body. Forcibly, he unclenched his fingers, one by one, and his hands sighed in relief.

What was the situation? During Todoroki's at-bat, Sawamura had gotten hit by a line drive and had been taken out on a stretcher. Was there anything Kazuya could have done to prevent it?

No.

No, there was nothing he could have done.

He exhaled again. And while the tight feeling in his chest didn't go away, he could feel it drifting into the darkness where he didn't have to think about it.

Kazuya opened his eyes, and to his relief, most of the haze had dissipated.

He immediately looked around, regaining stock of his surroundings. The umpire was discussing something with the coach. Todoroki was hovering by first base, looking uncertain and upset. His teammates were dazedly returning to their positions on the field or in the dugout.

The scoreboard in the distance continued to display their scores. The skies were still clear.

When the game finally resumed, it almost sounded like a cruel joke when the PA rang out, "Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Sawamura-kun as pitcher is Kawakami-kun. Pitcher, Kawakami-kun."

Amidst the buzz of the whispering crowd, Kawakami anxiously stepped out to the mound and began talking to Miyuki.

As Yōichi watched, he could feel himself zoning out. It must have been readily apparent to Ryōsuke, but the third-year, his usual smile gone, did not say anything this time.
Yōichi had never felt as shaken as he felt now. This wasn't the first time this summer that he'd seen a pitcher getting hit by a ball, what with Tanba's accident and all. But he'd seen Sawamura's body just after he'd been hit. His eyes had been open, but they'd been blank and unresponsive, and if Yōichi hadn't seen the slight movement of Sawamura's chest rising up and down, he'd have thought he was looking down at a corpse.

He'd felt it then, strongly. That while baseball could be truly fun, sometimes, it could also be equally terrifying.

"Number 2, left fielder, Akiba-kun."

The Seidō dugout had fallen quiet, wracked with a thick tension that was threatening to verge on becoming suffocating.

Wherever Haruichi looked, he could see the same expressions on everyone's faces: worry, anxiety, fear. With the metal railings clenched in his hands, he himself had been rooted to the same spot for a good while. His legs had long since fallen asleep.

Despite the grim atmosphere however, the game had to continue.

"We are all worried for Sawamura," Coach Kataoka said just before the inning resumed. "But we have a game to finish. Don't let Sawamura's pitching go to waste!"

The team members tried to rally themselves together, shouting back, "Yes sir!"

Unfortunately, it was easier said than done.

*Clang!*

Casting the bat aside to the ground, the batter began to race toward first base. Kuramochi, grimacing, dashed forward – but the ball just barely shot past his reach, escaping into the outfield. The batter stepped past first base, and by the time Sakai fielded the ball and threw it back, he'd already slid safely to second. Meanwhile, Todoroki reached prime scoring position at third.

It had been a ball that Kuramochi could have caught eight times out of ten, but no one said anything besides Kawakami who called out, "It-it's okay!"

Kuramochi gritted his teeth and presumably—though Haruichi was too far away to make it out—apologized.

"Number 3, first baseman, Mishima-kun."

The Yakushi dugout, which had been unusually subdued since the game break, finally began to make noise as the team members moved about with renewed vigor.

"Kominato," Coach Kataoka suddenly said, and Haruichi nearly jumped. As it were, he took a step back and winced, his legs tingling painfully.

"Yes, coach?" Haruichi hobbled over to where the coach stood by the dugout's entrance. On the way, he passed by Chris, who was keeping score of the game on the bench – and noticed with a pang that the handwriting on the sheet of paper was visibly shaky.

"Go to the bullpen and tell Tanba he should be prepared to go out at any time."
"Y-yes sir!" said Haruichi.

He stepped out of the dugout, the sunlight searing his eyes. As he hurried over to the bullpen where Tanba was currently warming up his shoulder with Miyauchi, the sound of the ball slamming into a mitt grew increasingly louder.

However, just as Tanba noticed his incoming presence and came to a pause, there was the clang! of a bat meeting a ball. Haruichi turned around and saw to his dread a white ball flying straight to right field.

*Don't drop!*

But as if mocking his very thought, it almost immediately dropped to the ground. Yakushi's stands burst into roaring cheers, the batter reached first base with a raised victorious fist, and Todoroki stepped on the home plate.

Haruichi's gaze flickered to the scoreboard – and as he watched, a '1' appeared by Yakushi's name, raising their score to 6-2.

"What is it, Kominato?" Haruichi heard Tanba ask.

Startled, he turned back around. "I…have a message from the coach. He said to be ready to go out at any time."

Tanba nodded, his jaw firmly set. "Alright."

His message delivered, Haruichi slowly began to walk back to the dugout. As he did so, he noticed that the infielders had gathered around Kawakami at the mound in a timeout.

"Sorry," said Kawakami miserably. "That was my fault."

Kazuya paused, taking in the sidearm pitcher's glum expression. His eyes looked unfocused and despite having started warming up just the prior inning, he already seemed worn out.

"Your pitches have power, but you're being too tense," Kazuya said at last. "Try to relax."

"Y-yeah, sorry," Kawakami said, his gaze darting down to the ground.

For several tense seconds, nobody moved or made a sound. Kazuya looked around, and taking in the overall looks on his teammates' faces, felt something clench in his stomach.

"We may be in the lead," he said, a brusque note slipping into his voice. The others looked toward him. "But Yakushi's more than capable of overturning that the moment we let our guards down. Please don't forget that."

Suddenly, there was the sound of air escaping teeth, and Kazuya turned to see Kuramochi regarding him with sharp eyes. "Oi, Miyuki…are you…"

"What is it?" he said, turning slightly.

Kuramochi hesitated – and then muttered, "Never mind."

Kazuya could feel Kuramochi's lingering gaze but to his relief, Yūki spoke up. "Miyuki's right. Don't forget what the coach said. We're all worried about Sawamura. But before we can do anything, we have to finish the game first."
"Ugah," Masuko nodded.

"We've all got your back, Nori," said Kuramochi.

"Relax, relax," said Ryōsuke.

Kawakami smiled weakly back. "Right."

"Out! Change sides!" barked the umpire.

Looking relieved, Seidō's fielders began to run off the field. Several of them crowded around their sidearm pitcher, slapping his back.

Sprawled across the bench in the Yakushi dugout, Coach Todoroki sighed. He tilted his head back to look up at the ceiling. "After all that, we only managed to score one run."

"We already had two outs before Raichi," said Sanada as he picked up his glove. "And we got lucky their shortstop reacted late during Akiba's at-bat, truthfully speaking."

"Lucky that Raichi hit that southpaw, you mean," said someone under his breath.

Everyone in the dugout who'd overheard shifted uncomfortably, avoiding each other's eyes.

"Bad business that," Coach Todoroki grunted, straightening up. "That wasn't the way I wanted to see that pitcher get taken down, and I'm sorry it happened...but we came here today to win. Don't forget that, boys!"

"Yes, coach!"

Satoru, with his shoulder iced, had been restlessly sitting on the bench since the third inning. Even then, the bottom of the sixth inning went by in a flash.

It seemed that not even Miyuki, who'd looked more serious than Satoru had ever seen, was able to do anything against Yakushi's pitcher.

The white ball blazed down from the mound, and Miyuki swung – but made weak contact, resulting in a grounder straight to the pitcher. The pitcher promptly scooped it up in his glove and tossed it to their first baseman.

"Out!"

Miyuki returned to the dugout and wordlessly took off his batting helmet. As he passed, Satoru held out a cup of water to the catcher – but he walked straight by, his eyes completely focused on something in front of him.

Satoru looked down at the water in his cup, and after a moment, took a sip from it himself.

He'd been shocked along with everyone else, when Sawamura was hit in the face by the ball. It hadn't seemed real. The game had been going so well. How could everything have been flipped upside in the split passing of a second?

But when Coach Kataoka told Haruichi to deliver his message to Tanba in the bullpen, Satoru felt a sudden ripple of jealousy. It fervently bubbled to the surface of his mind, swift and dark.
He wished he hadn't been removed from the game. Once a player was replaced on the field, they weren't allowed to return for the rest of the game. That meant that no matter what happened, Satoru wouldn't be able to stand on the mound again.

Even though Sawamura was finally gone…

Suddenly, Satoru felt his face burn with an unfamiliar emotion. He frowned down into his cup. Somehow, it didn't feel right to feel this way. After all, just the day before, Sawamura had given Satoru tips on recovering from hits. And before that, he had often dragged Satoru and Haruichi to Kanemaru's room to study for his midterms…

He was worried about Sawamura, of course, because they were—he supposed—friends, after all. But somewhere not too deep inside his heart, Satoru was also wondering if this meant he would get to start more now.

He shook his head and then took another sip of water, hoping the coldness would get rid of the ugly feeling.

It definitely…wasn't right.

Kazuya grimly knelt in the catcher's box. He looked up at the scoreboard at the back of the field, registering with some surprise in the back of his mind that the sun had barely moved its location since the game had begun. It felt as though an entire day must have passed, but in fact, it had been less than two hours since the game's start.

In a series of unfortunate flukes, Yakushi had managed to score another run in the seventh inning. After a drawn out battle with the first batter, who'd eventually been walked, the following batter hit a double that escaped past Masuko's mitt. The next batter then hit a sacrifice fly, bringing the first batter home.

Kawakami had thankfully gotten the next two outs with relative ease, ending the half-inning. However, Sanada followed up by shutting down Seidō's lineup, and they'd been unable to score any runs.

They had yet to score a single run off of Sanada. At 6-3, the gap between their scores was slowly but surely getting smaller.

And now, they were back at the top of Yakushi's lineup, which could mean only one thing.

As Yakushi's monster stepped up to the plate for the fourth time that game, Kazuya thought he could hear funeral organs playing in the background. To his credit, Todoroki was no longer laughing – but at the sight of the boy's face, Kazuya felt something momentarily seethe inside of his chest. Immediately, he forcibly quenched it.

"Top of the eighth, Yakushi High School's offense starts with batting first, third baseman, Todoroki-kun.'

Wearing a silence that somehow didn't suit him, Todoroki stepped into the batter's box and lowered into a firm, unyielding batting stance. Kazuya felt a shiver run down his spine. For a boy of relatively small stature, he had the presence of a huge, looming, and insurmountable wall.

Raising a finger to his mouth and biting down on it, Kazuya examined Kawakami, who was tossing a rosin bag in his hand. He looked better than he had in the sixth inning, and his control had improved. The question was, would it be enough to face Todoroki?
If cornered, Kazuya wasn't below evading the fight and walking Todoroki. He was loath to run away, and it had its own risks – but at a moment like this, when all Yakushi needed was a quick surge of momentum to completely turn the tables in a single inning, he was willing to do whatever it took to ensure their victory.

Turning to the dugout, Kazuya met the coach's eyes. However, Coach Kataoka tipped the rim of his cap and then nodded in his direction. The message was clear: Kawakami will keep pitching. Play as normal.

Kawakami looked expectantly back at Kazuya from the mound, but his mind had gone blank. The sunlight beat harshly down on the back of his neck. A bead of sweat ran down his face.

Yōichi felt strangely calm.

He still knew nothing about Sawamura's condition, and the game situation had only gotten gradually worse. However, he had returned to his senses when he saw Miyuki.

Yōichi hadn't been able to tell at a distance. Miyuki wasn't the type to show his feelings on his face, and he was always wearing his sports glasses or regular glasses, making it doubly hard to tell. In fact, outside of when he was washing his face, Yōichi had never seen Miyuki without his glasses. He usually wore them even inside the bath.

When they'd all gathered at the mound, though, Yōichi had sensed something was off. Appearance-wise, Miyuki hadn't seemed any different from his usual victory-oriented mind. Yōichi had initially been a little in awe that while everyone else was still so obviously shaken, Miyuki was already forging ahead.

Something about Miyuki's voice though, and the way he was positioning himself, sent alarms ringing in his head, and taking a closer look, Yōichi saw the reason why.

The distance between Miyuki and the rest of the world, the distance that had been disappearing over the past few months – it was back again. And once he'd realized that, Yōichi couldn't find it in himself to wallow any longer in what now felt like self-indulgent worry.

"...batting first, third baseman, Todoroki-kun."

Todoroki stepped into the batter's box, tightly clutching his bat.

There was a long, almost unnatural pause – and then Kawakami nodded at a signal and straightened up. The noise in the stadium dropped a level as everyone collectively held their breath.

Yōichi tensed, bending his knees, ready to spring into action.

Kawakami threw, his round face tightly drawn in exertion. The ball raced down the mound. Todoroki swung, his entire frame rippling with power.

*BANG!*

With an explosive sound, the ball burst into the sky.

Yōichi gaped, his eyes widening. He wanted to move, to do something to stop it. But there was nothing he could do.

It was going…going…
As he waited for Miyuki's next signal, Nori tried to calm his breathing. But his heart was racing, and his shoulders were heaving, and as he looked down at the ball in his hand, he thought he could see a slight tremor.

In his mind, he couldn't stop replaying it: over and over, he saw the motion of the ball as it blasted from Todoroki's bat straight into the air, and disappeared over the ballpark's fence. The feeling of initial disbelief had swiftly crumbled into an almost painful lump of fear and anxiety that lodged in the pit of his stomach.

Miyuki had tried to calm Nori down, saying it was his leading that was at fault, but he knew that he hadn't thrown the best course. The coach and the team had needed Nori at this moment, to protect their lead when Sawamura and Furuya couldn't – and he had failed them.

Seeing Miyuki signal with his fingers, Nori numbly nodded. He adjusted his grip on the ball in his glove. A beat passed – and then he threw, the ball sliding out from his fingers.

The batter didn't move.

"Ball four!"

Nori took off his cap and wiped the accumulating sweat off his brow. Meanwhile, to the cheering of the Yakushi stands, the batter threw aside his bat with a clatter and made his way to first base.

Just as the next batter bowed to the umpire and entered the batting box, Nori saw movement in the corner of his eye. He turned – and saw Coach Kataoka stepping out of the dugout. His heart began to sink.

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Kawakami as pitcher is Tanba. Pitcher, Tanba."

Bending over, Kōichiro picked up the rosin bag and reveled in the familiar feeling of the cloth in his hand. It felt like forever since he'd last stood on the mound.

Getting injured and sitting out for most of the tournament certainly hadn't been how he'd expected his final summer at Seidō to go. As the ace, he had expected—wanted—to face Kaname and Ichidai in the finals. That was what he had been working toward for these past three years, hadn't he?

The situation Kōichiro now found himself in was laughably different. He had gotten injured in a practice game, and Kaname had gotten injured in the quarterfinals against Yakushi. However, while Kaname's summer had ended, Kōichiro's summer was only just now beginning.

It was a bitter feeling. But at the same time, he was grateful. To the coach, to the team, to the other pitchers, for pulling Kōichiro along all this while. And to Sawamura, who despite being just a first-year, had led Seidō this far.

His rivalry with Kaname may have been his driving force, but right now, what mattered was that he was the team's ace. The number one rested on his back. He would gladly pass it to the next ace of the team, when the time came. But for now, he had been entrusted with the ace number.

And Kōichiro had a great deal of debt to pay back – to both the team that had brought him here, and to the opponent team that had brought his best friend and rival to his knees.
Propping his hand against his bat, Tetsu kneeled in the on-deck circle. Jun, letting out a roar, set up in the batting box.

"Batting third, center fielder, Isashiki-kun."

It was going to be a close game.

Thankfully, after Tanba took the mound, he managed to end the half-inning without giving away another run. It had helped to alleviate much of the shock of the home run, but the truth of the situation was, Yakushi was bearing close on Seidō's heels. No doubt, whether they were able to score or not this inning would be the determining factor of which side won the game.

"Yūki," he heard the coach call his name.

Tetsu stood up and turned around. "Yes, coach?"

The coach was standing just inside the dugout with his arms crossed across his chest. His expression was stoic, as usual, but his brow was furrowed more so than usual. Tetsu could tell the coach was worried — and not just about the possibility of their losing. Right after Sawamura's accident, he had been visibly shaken, more so than Tetsu had ever seen the man before.

"I've asked a lot of everyone on this team this summer," said the coach. "And I've asked a lot of you. Both as this team's cleanup and captain. It's a heavy burden, as you know. But for the team's sake — I need you to lead them until the very end."

Tetsu nodded. "Yes, coach."

Clang!

He turned around to see Jun toss aside his bat and begin to toward the base. The ball was bouncing on the ground. The second baseman dashed forward, grabbed it, and with a twist of his arm, tossed it to the first baseman's outstretched mitt.

"Out!"

Tetsu stood up, gripping the bat tightly in his hand. Jun passed by, wearing a disgruntled look, and briefly clasped his hand on Tetsu's shoulder. It was heavy.

"Batting fourth, first baseman, Yūki-kun."

Stepping up to the plate, Tetsu looked back at the Yakushi pitcher that had given the entire Seidō lineup such trouble since he'd stepped foot on the mound.

As he did so, he could feel everything within and around him squeezing in on itself.

The pressure. The expectations. His team. His duty. It all solidified, packing in on itself until it took on a form. It was heavy, but it wasn't a burden. It was his armor. It made Tetsu stronger.

With an exhale, he lowered purposefully into his batting position.

Everything had muted or faded away — everything beside Tetsu and the ball in the pitcher's glove. There was a lull. And then the ball moved, a white blur in the darkness. It shot toward the plate — but it was just barely outside. He didn't move.
Somewhere in the distance, a voice barked, "Ball!"

The ball returned to the pitcher's glove. There was another lull in time. Patiently, he waited.

And then once more, the ball moved toward Tetsu.

Having made thousands, perhaps millions, or even a billion swings over the years, the swing was now an ingrained part of Tetsu. The bat was an extension of his very arms.

He swung, his hips and back foot rotating as they had so many times before. The ball curved, but it didn't matter. He may not have known what was coming, but his bat, having encountered so many pitches before, knew how to meet it.

For a brief moment, he felt the force of the ball's momentum fighting against his bat, and then —clang!—it was gone.

Letting the bat go, Tetsu began to run.

As though making up for their silence until that moment, the Seidō stands exploded into exhilarated screaming and cheering.

"Nice batting!"
"Yūki, nice batting!"
"Captain!"
"Tetsu-san!"

Standing on second base, Yūki wordlessly responded by pumping his fist into the air. On the opposite side of the field, Yakushi's dugout was quiet.

Meanwhile, Kazuya picked up his bat and stepped out of the dugout's cool shade. Immediately, he could feel the difference in temperature. He kneeled down in the on-deck circle. Had it gotten even hotter outside? It felt as though the sun was threatening to burn the back of his neck. Even sitting still, sweat poured down his back.

Supporting himself against his bat, Kazuya peered at the distant scoreboard. Bottom of the eighth, the score was 6-4. Seidō had a runner on second, but there were already two outs.

Kazuya glanced at the batting box, where Masuko was setting up. His heavy jaw set, he looked determined to make a hit. Kazuya's gaze then flickered over to the mound. Sanada had shut down their lineup until now – but judging from the weary way he was bending over to grab the rosin bag, it looked as though pitching since the early part of the game was finally starting to take its toll.

Once Masuko had lowered into his batting stance, Sanada leaned forward, waiting for his catcher's signal. After a few moments, he nodded. Straightening up, he glanced at Yūki, who'd taken a few steps lead from the base. He came set – and then lifting his leg, his teeth gritted, he pushed downward, throwing down his arm.

In a compact rotation, Masuko swung—clang!—and the ball flew high into the sky. As Masuko began to run, Kazuya followed the ball's trajectory with his eyes. It soared for several seconds – and then dropped in front of the center fielder.
The dugout and the stands roared. Kazuya pushed himself up with his bat.

"Top of the ninth, Yakushi High's offense starts with batting seventh, catcher, Watanabe-kun."

Seated by himself in the shade of the bench, Raichi munched on a banana. He'd lost count of how many he'd eaten — though judging by the number of peels on the ground, he'd eaten at least half the team's.

Raichi wasn't all that hungry anymore, but when he wasn't fielding or batting, he needed something to do. It was a strange feeling, not being hungry. He couldn't remember the last time he hadn't been hungry.

His father had promised to buy Raichi tonkatsu for dinner though, since he'd hit a home run. Though that was on the condition, of course, that Yakushi won the game.

"Batting eighth, shortstop, Kobayashi-kun."

Sanada was leaning against the railing. He looked exhausted, and had a towel wrapped around the back of his neck, but he was yelling. Akiba and Mishima were also there beside Sanada, shouting something.

In fact, the rest of the team were there: Yamauchi, Fukuda, Mino, Watanabe…

Raichi blinked and froze mid-chew. The banana mulch in his mouth felt soggy.

"Batting ninth, center, Ōda-kun."

Raichi reached for his bat. Mishima shoved a helmet on his head, and he stepped out into the scorching sunlight.

He kneeled, his eyes widening — and then suddenly, as though the mute button had been turned off, the sound of the stadium blasted all around Raichi.

"Ōda, let's go!" he heard Watanabe shout.

"Ōda-senpai!" Akiba.

"Pitcher's scared, Ōda!" Mino.

"Ōda-senpai!" Sanada.

Standing in the batting box, Ōda searchingly looked in the dugout's direction — and met Raichi's eyes. Startled, Raichi stared back — and in response, Ōda nodded. Roaring in determination, he swung his bat through the air and then facing the pitcher on the mound, he lowered into his batting stance.

Finally, clumsily, Raichi jumped to his feet, his bat clattering uselessly to the ground.

"Ōda-senpai!" he yelled out, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Ōda-senpai!"

Clang!

Desperately, Ōda began to run — but the ball did not get far before the shortstop scooped it up in his
glove and threw it to first base. The ball slammed deafeningly into the first baseman's mitt.

Ōda fell to the ground, banging his fist down. On the other side of the field, Seidō's team members were jubilantly screaming, piling on top of their shaven-head pitcher. But from behind Raichi, one by one, his teammates began to step out of the dugout, crying. He could hear his father sniffling. Raichi felt a hand land on his shoulder, and looked up to see Sanada. His eyes were red. At that, Raichi's eyes began to burn and his throat grew thick.

They'd been about to win. They'd been so close. It would've been his at-bat next... But the game was already over.

They would not be having tonkatsu that night.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your reviews/kudos/comments!

Literally this chapter is like 3 chapters worth of content. I didn't want to drag the game out though, so this fast-paced/digested version is what you get…
Then and now

Chapter Summary

Visit and do what? Peel apples?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~ The very first part of this chapter is a continuation from chapter 16. Everything afterward is in the present. ~

Stepping out of Harajuku station, Kazuya squinted up at the sky, and then looked down at his watch. It was just barely past five – the sun wouldn't be setting for at least another hour.

Which also meant that the Seidō baseball team was probably right in the middle of their afternoon practice.

He had been in such a rush to come here, that such details had somehow managed to slip his mind. Before he knew it, he'd found himself sitting on a seat in the Shinkansen headed to Tokyo, still dressed in the clothes he'd attended lectures in earlier that morning, and tightly holding an umbrella that was dripping rainwater from its tip onto his shoes. And now, two and a half hours later and about 7,000 yen poorer, Kazuya was stranded in front of a station with nothing to do for at least another two hours.

Taking out his smartphone, Kazuya quickly sent a short text message, before putting it back in his pocket. Then, hefting his backpack up his shoulder, he began walking. The streets were crowded with the mute colors of passing cars and people streaming across the crosswalk.

Despite having been gone from the city for only a few weeks, it felt a little strange being back. Had the cars always sped by this quickly? Had there always been this many people?

As he walked further on, veering away from the main roads, the cars and the people disappeared. Eventually, his feet came to a step and Kazuya found himself staring up at a huge torii gate.

The path from there was long and lined with thickening trees. There were a few other people there, but it was nowhere near as crowded as it had been when he had last visited on New Years. It was quiet, almost unnaturally so. And yet there was so much green everywhere, that it felt as though something was missing – and soon enough, Kazuya realized that what was missing was the crying sound of cicadas. It was too early in the year for them to come out, but it was startling to realize the meaning of the silence. The cicadas had always come and gone without his notice every summer.

Kazuya felt relieved when he finally saw the shrine in the distance.

Slowly climbing up the stairs, he drew past the wooden columns and stepped into the shade of the shrine building. The offering boxes came into view. When he'd last been there, there had been so many people that the offering boxes had been taken out from the shrine. Thousands of people had lined up to pray – but now, he was the only one standing there. And while he hadn't had anything to ask for the last time, now...
Digging his hand into his pocket, he pulled out a 50 yen coin and tossed it into the offering box. Bowing, he clapped his hands, and then bowed again. He closed his eyes.

By the time Kazuya left, the sky had darkened into rich shades of red and orange.

He walked down the long winding path, and soon, the trees thinned out into buildings and streets. There were even more people than there had been before walking all around him, and the air was thick with the sound of the crowd's chatter. And yet somehow, he felt as alone as he had back at the near-empty shrine.

Suddenly, something in his jacket pocket vibrated.

Shifting his backpack to the other shoulder, Kazuya moved to the side of the street and pulled out his phone. The LED screen had lit up: You have 1 new message.

Unlocking his phone, Kazuya opened the message. After a few seconds, he smiled.

With the front two seats taken by the driver and Coach Kataoka, there were three seats left available in the car that was headed to the hospital.

"Kuramochi, Masuko," called out the coach, his brow furrowed. "You're Sawamura's roommates."

"Yes, sir," Yōichi and Masuko immediately answered. Stepping forward to stand behind the coach, Yōichi turned around to face the rest of their teammates.

The mood had considerably lightened from the elation of their recent victory. However, while it was nowhere near as tense as it had been back in the dugout, a pervasive grim silence still hung over them.

"There's one more seat," said the coach. "Is there anyone else who would like to go?"

Uncertainly, the boys shifted in their positions and shot glances at each other. As the seconds passed, it was apparent that an increasing number of these glances were aimed in the direction of a certain member standing in the front row – but he didn't move.

Finally, Chris stepped forward, his jaw taut with quiet worry. Yōichi's hands curled into fists by his sides.

Coach Kataoka turned to talk to the driver, and the rest of the team began to file onto the bus that would take them back to their school grounds.

Yōichi took a deep breath. "Yo, Miyuki."

Miyuki came to a slow stop. "What?"

"C'mere for a sec."

With a glance back at the bus doors, Miyuki wordlessly followed Yōichi to the other side of the vehicle. For several seconds, Yōichi stared at the catcher – but with his face angled slightly to the side and the sunlight reflecting straight down at them, he couldn't make out his expression.

"Why aren't you going to see Sawamura?" he finally asked in a low voice.

Miyuki shoved his hands into his pockets. "I thought Chris-senpai should go."
"Bullshit," Yōichi snapped. "That's complete bullshit."

"Why do you care?"

Yōichi felt a muscle in his forehead twitch, as for a second, he seriously considered slamming the other boy to the ground. It was clear Miyuki was worried about Sawamura – so why couldn't he just admit it and go to the damn hospital with them?

Holding himself back, he grounded out, "This is Sawamura we're talking about, you realize? He's our team's pitcher. *Your* pitcher. You're the one Sawamura's always hanging out with. *You* should visit him."

"Visit and do what?" Miyuki said drily. "Peel apples?"

Yōichi scowled. "No! I don't know. Just - just sit by his bedside. Or...maybe he's awake, and you could talk to him."

"Sitting by someone's bedside won't save them," said Miyuki with a hard look. "No matter how long you stay there."

Yōichi opened his mouth – and then closed it. *What do you say to that?*

Before he could think of a reply, he heard his name being called. Shooting Miyuki an exasperated glare, Yōichi headed back around and saw Masuko standing outside the car, the others already waiting inside. Picking up his pace, with an apology, he climbed in the car.

The door slammed shut, and the car began to back out. From the window, Yōichi saw Miyuki stepping up the stairs to the bus.

"What happened?" Masuko muttered from the side of his mouth. On Yōichi's other side, he saw Chris level a concerned look at them.

"It's nothing," he muttered back, shaking his head. Under his breath, he added, "Miyuki just being an idiot as usual."

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"...Game set! Inashiro Vocational School advances to the semifinals! What a magnificent shutout as the ace, Narumiya, passed on the baton to Iguchi. Now, all four stadiums have finished their games and we have our four semifinalists. *From Block A, Seidō High School, with a relay of four pitchers. From Block B, Sakurazawa High School, a public school with top-notch education. From Block C, Inashiro Vocational, the winners of last year's tournament. And from Block D, Sensen Academy, the veteran quarterfinalist of the west. Which school will win a ticket to the dream stage? The first game will start at 10:00 AM in two days – ""

The TV screen blinked off, and Chris lowered the remote control. "That's it. With Inashiro's win, we have all four semifinalists."

"So we're up against...Sakurazawa?" Isashiki growled. "Can't say I expected that."

Pulling out a notebook, Chris flipped to a page. "A famous academic high school, and the only public school in the prefecture's semifinals. They've lost in the first round for the past twenty years. However this year, they've got an ace with a knuckleball, and have managed to keep all the games they've played in this summer so far, low scoring."
Murmurs filled the meeting room.

"A knuckleball?"

"I didn't even know Sakurazawa had a baseball team."

"The dark horse of this tournament, then?"

"I know you all must be wondering about Sawamura," said Coach Kataoka from the front of the room, and immediately, the noise level dropped to silence.

Though they all had seen the car drive into the driveway, the coach had gathered them right away for the game meeting, and nobody had gotten the chance to talk to the members who'd gone to the hospital.

The coach motioned at the assistant director, who stepped forward, and everyone straightened in their seats.

Pushing up her glasses, Rei looked around at them. "Sawamura-kun has been drifting in and out of consciousness, but he's not in critical condition. The doctor says it's a side effect of his concussion, and once his condition stabilizes, he should be able to return to campus."

In a sigh of collective relief, feeling as though a heavy burden had been taken of their shoulders, the members relaxed into their chairs, some even smiling.

"On that note, however, Sawamura will not be able to pitch for the semifinal game in two days," said the coach. With that in mind, about our starting pitcher… I'm thinking about going with Tanba. Can you do it?"

Tanba nodded. "Yes, sir!"

While the other third-years smiled at their friend, the coach continued on. "Kawakami, I know it's a tough job, but be ready to go as usual."

"I…yes. Yes, sir." Kawakami said, squeezing his hands together.

Coach Kataoka looked toward the very back row, where the underclassmen were seated. "And Furuya. It'll be hard with your stamina, but I'll need you to start warming up midgame as well."

Furuya, who had been slumping in his seat, visibly brightened. "Tanba, Kawakami, Furuya. I've been asking a lot of you pitchers, but with Sawamura injured, I'll need you all to pick up the reigns for the semifinals. You can do it, right?" The three pitchers nodded. "That's it for the regular players then. Finish up early and get a lot of rest."

"Yes sir!"

Throwing himself back on the mattress of his bed, Kazuya looked up at the wooden slats of the above bunk bed.

It had been a long day. His muscles were sore, and while he usually reveled in the feeling, he just felt tired at that moment. But at the same time, he didn't want to go to sleep – not yet.

Lying down on his stomach, Kazuya turned his head to face the wall.

They would be facing Sakurazawa in two days, then. And their ace pitcher threw a knuckleball… That was rare. The knuckleball was different from other pitches – thrown so as to minimize its spin
in flight, its trajectory was erratic. Every pitch was different, meaning that not only was it a difficult pitch to hit, it was a difficult pitch to throw and catch. Mastering the knuckleball could take years. Had their ace pitcher spent his entire high school baseball life learning to throw that one ball? And had their catcher spent his entire high school baseball life learning how to catch it?

Kazuya felt his mouth draw back in a wry smile. *They must've been practically married to one another.*

As for how they would prepare to hit a knuckleball...it was hard to say. It wasn't as though they could really practice hitting an unpredictable ball. In the end, it would all come down to how consistent their ace was at throwing it and placing it in the strike zone.

Kazuya turned his head again. Listlessly, his gaze wandered around his room, before coming to a rest on his desk and chair. His books were neatly stacked on the side – but they were all textbooks and sports magazines, and for once, he didn't feel like looking through them.

He raised his head, as for a split second, he wondered if he should go and borrow a different sort of magazine from Kuramochi – and then almost immediately, recalled that no, he didn't particularly want to. He let his head drop.

The room was still. The lighting felt bright and overly warm. From the open window, he could hear the sound of crying cicadas.

*Minminminmin.*

His gaze drifted – and suddenly came to an uneasy stop on a box by his lamp. It was white and brown, with the words 'Every Burger' emblazoned in cheery block lettering across the top.

Kazuya pushed himself up. Getting up, he paced the room several times. He stopped. He raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck.

He sighed.

*Maybe I'll get a drink from the vending machine.*

First patting his pockets down to check if there were any coins—there were none—he walked across the room to his basket of clothes. He knew he had a few couple of 100 yen coins left in his school uniform pants. Rummaging through the basket, Kazuya tossed aside a pair of sweats, some old boxers, a sweater –

His stomach twisting, he stopped just short of letting go of the arm of the sweater.

The summer was too hot now to wear such a thick top. The last time he'd worn it had been in its early months, when the nights were still chilly. In fact, the last person to wear it had been...

"I'll wash it for you."

"And risk my sweater smelling like you? Just give it back to me in the morning."

Sitting heavily down on the floor, Kazuya dropped the sweater back into the basket. He leaned back, until he was lying on his back, looking up at the blank ceiling.

…Damn.

Feeling refreshed, Wakana stepped out of the bathroom, letting out a content sigh as the cooler air
met her face. Tipping her hair to the side to dry it with her towel, she called out, "Mom! I'm done with the bath."

She turned to head to her bedroom – but when her mother didn't respond, she hesitated. Still drying her hair, she began to pad her way to the living room. "Mom?" Her mother was standing by the counter talking in low tones into the phone, and just as Wakana stepped into the room, she put down the handset. Slowly she turned around, a troubled expression on her face, and Wakana felt her heartbeat begin to slightly pick up. "Mom?"

"Oh, Wakana," said her mother, looking faintly surprised to see her. "You're done with your bath?"

"What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

Her mother raised a worried hand to the side of her mouth. "I just got a call from Sawamura-san. Apparently, Eijun-kun got in an accident at his game today."

Stiffening, Wakana dropped her towel. "Ei-chan?! Is he okay?!"

"His parents and grandpa are already in Tokyo, at his hospital – "

"He's in the hospital?!"

"Sawamura-san sounded terrified, the poor woman. She said the doctors said it's only a concussion, but for some reason, he hasn't woken up yet…Wakana, where are you going?!"

Feeling sick, her heart pounding, Wakana raced back to her room and immediately began rifling through her closet for her clothes. She had to tell Nobu and the others…and if at all possible, they would be on the train to Tokyo first thing in the morning, to see their friend.

Her cellphone raised to her ear, Rei walked along the path separating the two fields. "…Yes, of course. I hope your stay at the hotel was accommodating? …I'm glad. No, it is no problem at all. We are all worried for Sawamura-kun as well. …Yes, I understand. I'll be there by…" She glanced down at her watch. "Nine, then. Yes, thank you, goodbye."

Ending the call, Rei lowered the phone.

The day before, she had contacted Sawamura's family as soon as she'd found the opportunity, and they had arrived in Tokyo around evening time. They had been understandably quite worried, but if she could take the mother's tone of voice as an indicator, they seemed to have relatively calmed down since then.

Raising a hand to her glasses and adjusting them, Rei looked down at her watch again, and began to head to her car.

It was terrible that Sawamura had met with such an unfortunate accident during the game. She would have felt the same had it been any of the Seidō boys – but having been the one to personally scout him, she admittedly felt a certain attachment to Sawamura.

As she passed by the fields, Rei noticed that they were empty. The boys had been jogging earlier that morning, but they were probably eating breakfast now.

Just as her Honda Civic came into view, Rei stopped. "Miyuki-kun? What're you doing here?"

Dressed in casual clothes and with his hands in his pockets, Miyuki was standing by her car.
"Rei-chan," he said, shifting. "Coach Kataoka told me to wait for you here."

"Coach Kataoka?" Rei reached into her handbag for her keys. "Why?"

"To go with you to the hospital."

She paused. The hospital?

That was…surprising. She knew Miyuki didn't like hospitals. Rei hadn't been surprised to not count him among Sawamura's visitors the day before. After all, when Chris had gotten injured the year before and been temporarily hospitalized, Miyuki had refused to go visit – even when she knew how much he'd admired Chris.

So for Miyuki to go to the hospital of his own volition…

Rei hid a smile. "Alright then. Get in."

Pushing past glass doors, Kazuya was met with the all-too familiar sight of the reception room. People were seated and flipping through magazines, or pacing back and forth in small circles. The doors pushed open, and a group of nurses bustled out, clipboards held in their arms.

Worried faces, anxious faces, bored faces, excited faces – it was the same sight, as always. And while the smell of antiseptic wasn't quite as potent, as he followed Rei from the counter to the elevator, he could already begin to catch whiffs of it.

Others joined them on the elevator, but most of them got off on the third floor, and then it was just him, Rei, and a tired-looking doctor. They were quiet, letting the faint elevator music filter around them.

They hadn't talked much in the car, for which Kazuya was grateful. If it had been anyone else, he probably wouldn't have bothered asking – but Rei was the kind of person who, while keen-eyed, knew when to mind her own business.

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped out, leaving the weary doctor to continue his ascent alone. Kazuya trailed after Rei. Her heels clicked loudly on the floor, masking the sound of his own footsteps.

Finally, she came to a stop in front of a door. She raised her hand and rapped firmly with her knuckles. After a few seconds, the door opened, to reveal a middle-aged woman with short brown hair.

Kazuya froze, and took an automatic step back.

"Takashima-san!" Sounding welcome, the woman drew the door back even further to reveal two men—one of whom he recognized as Sawamura's grandfather—sitting by a hospital bed.

"Sawamura-san, it's good to see you again," Rei said warmly. She turned to Kazuya with a smile, and grabbed his arm in a pincer-like hold. "Come on in, Miyuki-kun."

Feeling himself sweat, Kazuya followed her in.

"Miyuki-kun, was it?" The woman, who could only be Sawamura's mother, said.

"Ah…yes," Kazuya said, bowing his head. "I'm Miyuki Kazuya, a member of Seidō's baseball team."
"You're their catcher, aren't you?" said the grandfather. "I remember you from the game!"

Kazuya quickly turned and bowed again in their direction.

"I'm Eijun's dad," said the man sporting a pompadour. "So if you're the catcher…you must be Eijun's catcher?"

"My son must always be giving you so much trouble," said Sawamura's mother, looking embarrassed.

"It's no trouble at all," he said politely.

"That idiot grandson of mine has been making trouble since the day he was born early," the grandfather snorted. Then, turning back around to the bed, his face softened. "But he's grown since he went to Seidō."

"Please, Takashima-san, Miyuki-kun, take a seat," said the mother, gesturing to the chairs by the other side.

"Thank you," said Rei, and they sat down.

"Would you like some apples?" The mother raised a tray of sliced apples to them.

Kazuya opened his mouth to decline – but suddenly feeling embarrassed, he instead quietly accepted a slice.

"Have there been any updates on his condition?" Rei asked.

Sawamura's mother's face fell.

"The doctor seems perplexed as to why Eijun isn't stabilizing," the father explained. "They're suggesting that if he doesn't completely gain consciousness by evening, they'll retake his brain scans."

"He'll be fine, he's tough," the grandfather said gruffly, though he looked as though he was trying to convince himself at the same time. "I raised Eijun, remember, and I've never held back from smacking him when he deserved it. A ball to the head is nothing."

"Maybe it was bound to happen," the mother began to sniffle. "Baseball is a dangerous sport, after all…"

"The doctor said Eijun got lucky," said the father. "If the line drive had hit Eijun directly on the head, the injury could have been a lot more serious. But it bounced off his glove before hitting him, so he got away with just a concussion." He turned to look down at his son, a faintly proud look on his face. "He'll be alright."

"He's worked so hard," the mother said softly. "He has to." Wiping a tear from her eye, she laughed embarrassedly. "I'm sorry, I've been quite emotional all morning."

"No, it's quite understandable," said Rei. She checked her wristwatch. "You've been here for several hours already, haven't you? Have you had breakfast?"

"Well…we ate our ekiben leftovers at the hotel," said the father.

"And Hanako's been peeling apples this whole time," added the grandfather.
"You must be hungry," said Rei, getting up. "Please, it's not much, but allow me to treat you to breakfast in the cafeteria."

"Oh no, we couldn't," the mother said hastily. "You've already paid for our train and hotel expenses…"

"It's the least I could do when Sawamura-kun was injured while in our care," said Rei firmly. "Please, I insist."

"I would," said the mother, wringing her hands, "But I don't want Eijun to wake up with nobody in the room…Dear, how about you take grandpa and get breakfast with Takashima-san?"

"But what about you?" the father frowned.

Kazuya cleared his throat. "If you don't mind – I can stay."

The others in the room all turned to stare at Kazuya.

"Are you sure?" asked the grandfather. "You haven't had breakfast either, have you?"

"I had cereal before coming here," he said.

"Well…" Sawamura's family looked at each other uncertainly. "If you're sure…"

After a short pause, and murmured thanks, they got up and left the room with Rei. The door closed, muting the sound of their conversation, and then it was quiet.

Now, it was just Kazuya in the room.

Relaxing against the back of his chair, he exhaled.

He had not expected Sawamura's family to be there. He supposed he should have. It was only natural, he supposed, that parents would come running if their son was in the hospital. But somehow, the possibility of it had completely slipped his mind.

Kazuya leaned forward, resting his elbows on the bedside.

…

To be truthful, Sawamura just looked like he was sleeping. There were bandages running around his head, but besides that, he looked the same as he always had on the bus, his head lolling against the bus window.

Leaning back again, Kazuya looked up at the ceiling, beginning to feel increasingly stupid.

After all, it wasn't as though his being there was doing any good. Sawamura was still unconscious, and he could've been spending this time in the batting cage or catching for one of the other pitchers. Kawakami in particular hadn't looked good. The semifinals was tomorrow. What was he doing? It wasn't like Sawamura was going to wake up just because Kazuya was sitting there.

He'd even gone and made things awkward with Kuramochi by not going to the hospital with them. But how could he have, when the others had all been staring at him like that?

Crossing his arms, Kazuya looked down at the other boy's sleeping form. "Oi, Sawamura…Wake up already, so we can go home."
Half-heartedly, he waited – but of course, Sawamura didn't move.

A nurse came by soon afterward to change Sawamura's IV line, and not wanting to get in the way, Kazuya headed to the lounge. It was a quiet space, with a few armchairs and a couple of vending machines in the corner.

Slipping in a coin, he pressed the button for black coffee, and a second later, the black can came rolling out in the dispenser. Picking it up, he was about to head back – when he paused.

Turning around, Kazuya looked around at the available drink selection. Mango tea, orange juice, honey milk latte, black coffee, cocoa latte, pocari sweat, green tea, barley tea, nata de coco, asa no yoo…

What did Sawamura like?

Kazuya tried to remember – but though they'd gone to the vending machines on their campus multiple times together, he couldn't remember Sawamura ever showing any real preference for a particular drink.

Something twinged in his chest. Sawamura had somehow always known what he'd liked, showing up at his door with his favorite drinks and snacks. Kazuya had to admit, the younger boy was a lot more attentive than he looked. Either that, or he was psychic.

Finally, Kazuya pressed a button, and another drink dropped to the dispenser. Scooping that up as well, he began to walk back to the room.

Without Rei in her heels walking in front of him, his footsteps resounded just slightly through the hallway.

There were more people around than there had been just a few minutes ago. The hospital was coming to life, with more people pouring out of the elevators. Phones from the reception desks were ringing and doctors and nurses were walking with more urgency from ward to ward. And yet somehow, he felt as alone as he had in his room the night before.

Turning the corner, Kazuya opened the door to the room – and came to a stop as for a brief instant, he forgot how to breathe.

Sawamura, who had been sitting upright and holding his arm out for the nurse to take his blood pressure, blinked back at him.

Kazuya swallowed thickly, and felt his hand, still wrapped over the doorknob, tighten. "Finally decided to wake up, Sawamura?" His eyes wide, like a blind man that had just seen the world for the first time, Sawamura mutely continued to stare. Struck by a sudden possibility, Kazuya's throat suddenly turned dry. His stomach churning, he turned to the nurse. "Is something wrong with…?"

But at that, Sawamura shook his head, and then wincing, stopped.

"I'm fine, senpai," he said, his face splitting into a wide smile. But even as he smiled, fat tears began to leak from his eyes and drip down his face. "I'm just happy to see you."

Chapter End Notes
*Trumpets fanfare* Our hero has returned!

Thanks for your supportive reviews/kudos/comments.

(I have no idea what Sawamura's mother's name is so I just gave her my grandma's name.)
Laughter

Chapter Summary

Sawamura was not by any means a pretty crier.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The very first part of this chapter is a continuation of chapter 6. Everything afterward is in the present."

"Happy birthday Sawamura."

Pushing down on the head of the bottle with his hand, Eijun heard the clinking of the marble dropping down. Raising the bottle to his mouth, he took a sip. The ramune fizzed in his mouth, a sweet, warm taste, and he had to wonder how long Miyuki had had it in his pocket.

His head tilted back, Miyuki was still drinking from the can. Slowly, uncertainly, Eijun's eyes trailed down to the older boy's Adam's apple, bobbing with every swallow.

Miyuki abruptly lowered the can. "Oi, Sawamura." Eijun felt himself flush. Had Miyuki noticed? "Do you remember when you said I should make you my life?"

Taken aback, he blinked. Shifting his weight to his other foot, Eijun peered warily at Miyuki, who now seemed to be examining his can. "Yeah...what about it? Are you going to make fun of me for it again?"

"You said something corny like you'd pitch to me in your mind, and I could catch for you in my mind."

"Oh...yeah, well, I meant it," he said. His face warm, he took another sip of his ramune.

Miyuki's mouth curled back in a smile that was half-mocking, half something else. "What if I could really catch for you again? Wouldn't that be something?"

At that, Eijun paused. It didn't sound like the kind of joke Miyuki would normally make. Lowering his bottle, he tried to search the older boy's face - but at the same time, Miyuki shifted slightly away, his glasses shadowing his expression.

"What're you talking about?" Eijun finally asked. "Did something happen?"

There was a split moment of silence that had just begun to verge on the unnatural, when Miyuki turned back to him, his expression clear. "Nothing's happened. I'm just messing around."

Eijun looked down at his bottle, and shook it. The marble clattered against the glass. "...Are you sure?"

"Well, I did just come back from visiting Meiji Shrine. Think some god out there was listening?"
He quickly looked up – but Miyuki was smirking now. He hesitated. And then not knowing what to say but uncomfortable not doing something, he took another sip.

It had taken Eijun some time—longer than he would like to admit—to be able to notice when Miyuki was hiding something. He probably still missed it sometimes. However, whereas he had been completely blind to it before, he thought he could catch fleeting glimpses of it now, like shadows cast by falling snow on black roads.

Of course, seeing something and knowing what to say or do about it were two completely different things.

Miyuki finished off his drink, and squashed the can in his hand. "I'll be going now."

"Already?" Eijun frowned. "You just got here."

"Hm? What's this, did you miss me?" Miyuki said, with a teasing look. "I came here to talk to Rei-chan, though."

"But...you said you came here because of my birthday."

"And now that that's over, I'm done here."

"Oh." Eijun lowered his eyes. He didn't know what else to say to that. "Alright then."

There was a short pause. "Alright, then. Seeya, Sawamura." Miyuki's feet started to turn, to walk away.

Despite the warm breeze, despite the warmth of the ramune in his hand, Eijun felt cold. Something in his chest ached. Thoughts were running through his head in a jumble. After not having seen Miyuki in a while, and after having looked forward to seeing him again for so long, he didn't want to say goodbye like this, not already – but his tongue felt heavy and leaden, and his mouth dry, as though filled with sand.

Taking a step forward, he blurted out instead, "You'll come to our games this summer, right?"

That hadn't been what he'd wanted to say at all, but it was the only thing that had come out of his mouth.

At that, Miyuki stopped. He turned around. He looked back at Eijun, and for a second, he thought he could see something in the other boy's face –

Then, he laughed, the fine, sharp angles of his face drawing back. "Hahaha! Maybe I will, if you ask nicely."

"I am asking nicely," Eijun managed to let out.

With only a snicker, Miyuki raised his hand in a wave. And then before he knew it—before Eijun realized that he hadn't even said goodbye—he was gone.

He could feel himself drifting in and out of consciousness.

On one side, it was bright. As bright as the sun. He could sense people moving, talking. At first mostly unfamiliar voices, and then later, some more familiar voices. Chris, Kuramochi, Masuko, and then his family. His parents. His grandpa. It was warm. Blinding.
The other side in comparison, was shadowy and dark. Foggy and cold and confusing. Scary, even. But just as he was about to step towards the bright side, he thought he saw something flicker in the shadows – and stopped. And turned around.

He waded through the foggy space, calling out. Time passed, and even as he began to shiver from the cold, he didn't stop calling out, waiting—needing—to hear an answer back. He could hear voices calling out his name from the warm side, as tempting as sirens, but he didn't stop.

There was no logical reason for him to be in the dark. The warm, sunny side was waiting. He would be surrounded by people he loved there. He knew this. So why was he out here in the cold, shouting his throat raw for someone who didn't reply? Who was he looking for?

Sometimes, he wished he had never seen the flicker in the shadows. If he had never seen it, he wouldn't have been here in this darkness. He wouldn't have known what it felt like for his chest to ache like this. He wouldn't have felt so alone.

Gradually, however, despite his stubborn clinging, the darkness was dissipating. There was an unknowable force—a hand?—forcibly pulling him out of what he now realized had been a hole. He craned his head back to see that the circular light of the opening was drawing every closer, and though he struggled and grasped to hold onto the shadows, they slipped out of his hands, like particles of sand.

Eijun opened his eyes.

Searing, painful circles of lights filled his vision.

"Sawamura-kun?" said an unfamiliar voice. It was coming from a pink blob floating above him. Eijun blinked again, and the blob began to sharpen into a face. "Sawamura-kun, if you can understand me, can you blink again?" Eijun blinked in response.

His surroundings were coming into better focus. He was looking up at a ceiling. The dazzling light was coming from somewhere there. It hurt his eyes. Dazed, he turned his head to the side and saw that he was lying in a bed. A hospital bed. And the person talking to him was…a nurse?

Eijun stiffened. Immediately, he forced himself up – and then winced, as the room began to spin around him.

Where was he? Why was he here?

And most importantly – what year is it?

"Sawamura-kun, how are you feeling?" asked the nurse.

"I'm-I'm fine," he said. "Just confused."

"That's perfectly understandable given what you've been through," said the nurse kindly. "Your parents should be back soon to fill you in. For now, could you hold out your arm?" Blinking, Eijun complied. As he did so, he opened his mouth to ask for the date – but then clammed up. He was too scared to ask.

With the sound of ripping velcro, the nurse wrapped a cuff around his arm. Eijun looked down at it. Was it just him, or did it look a bit thin – rather as it had in his first year? Or was he just seeing what he wanted to see?

No, he didn't want to think about it. His head felt like it was splitting into two and everything was
spinning, but it was easier this way. He wondered – if he closed his eyes again, would this bright, blinding world disappear too?

The door opened, and instinctively moving at the sound, Eijun turned his head.

Slowly, the hazy figure standing at the entrance grew into focus.

Eijun couldn't speak. He couldn't look away. His eyes felt hot. His chest throbbed.

"Finally decided to wake up, Sawamura?"

He'd forgotten again. The person he'd been searching for hadn't been in the darkness. He'd been here, all along.

Kazuya froze. The drinks he held tucked under his arm felt cold, the moisture seeping through his shirt to his skin.

*Why is Sawamura crying?!*

He couldn't even look away as he had done the last time, that long-ago sunny day of the opening ceremony (had it really been less than a month ago?)

"Uh... How're you feeling?" he said, still hovering uncertainly by the doorway.

To his alarm, Sawamura started crying even harder at that, tears sliding silently down his face as his nose began to run.

"Oh dear," said the nurse. "He's probably overwhelmed, the poor thing." She placed a comforting hand on Sawamura's shoulder, before picking up a clipboard at the end of the bed. "Well, your vitals seem just fine, so I'll leave you two here while I tell Dr. Ichimura the good news."

Bustling past Kazuya, she left the room. The door closed shut, in a final sort of way.

He hesitated, and then looked down at the ground, before looking back up at Sawamura. He took another step closer to the bed – and then another. His upper lip trembling, Sawamura sniffled.

Kazuya stopped. "Oi, Sawamura, why're you crying?"

"Because," Sawamura answered in a thick voice.

He felt himself sweat. "...Because why?"

Sawamura sniffled again, and then, with a watery eye still fixed on Kazuya, he raised his arm's sleeve to wipe his face. "Because I'm happy to see you."

Without answering at first, Kazuya reached the bed, and sat down in the chair. He put the drinks down on the bed. Then he asked, "Why?"

"Why what?"

He raised a hand, rubbing the back of his neck. "Aren't you just glad to see a familiar face?"

"No...I was scared," Sawamura said, looking straight at him. (Sniffle.) "I thought I'd never see you again."
Kazuya paused. And then raising a hand as though to scratch his face, he glanced at the bedside table. The tray Sawamura's mother had been using to serve apples with was still there, though it was now empty. "Well, you're the one who got smacked in the face, not me. Though you got lucky. The ball bounced off your glove. Do you remember?"

Sawamura raised a tentative hand to his bandaged face. "Not really. I just remember that we were… we were…" His eyes widened. "The game! Against Yakushi!"

"Yeah."

Wringing his hands, Sawamura asked in a weak voice, "How'd…how'd the game go?"

Kazuya hesitantly looked down at the ground. "Sawamura…" He heard an audible intake of breath, and while it was taking all of his willpower to do so, he held back a grin. "It's not your fault. Nobody blames you."

It was quiet. After a few seconds, he discretely peered up – and was taken aback to see fresh new tears forming in the younger boy's eyes.

Oh, damn.

"I'm just kidding, Sawamura," he said, hastily backtracking. He instinctively reached out with a hand, and then lowered it, unsure of where to place it. "We won, 7-4. We're in the semifinals. Our next opponent is Sakurazawa." Tears were still pouring down Sawamura's face. Helplessly, Kazuya added, "Oi, I told you, I was just kidding. Nori and Tanba-san were able to hold Yakushi down. It was…fine…"

He trailed off as slowly, but surely, Sawamura's mouth curved up in a sly, knowing smile.

"Of course they did," said the younger boy, wiping his eyes again with his sleeve. "I knew you were just messing around with me."

Taken aback, Kazuya opened his mouth, and then closed it. Did I just get played? He hesitated. And then, embarrassed, he prodded at the drinks he'd brought at the end of the bed. "…Are you thirsty? I brought us some drinks."

Thankfully, Sawamura looked interested. "What'd you get?"

"I wasn't sure what you'd like. So I just got you some orange juice."

"Orange juice, huh?" With another sniffle, Sawamura held out an expectant hand. Kazuya reached for the bottle and opened the cap, before giving it over. Sawamura tilted his head slightly back, and took a drink. When he lowered the bottle, he was wearing an oddly pensive look on his face. "Wait…If the score was 7-4, that must mean Yakushi scored…three more times after I got hit?"

Kazuya drew back with a wry look. "It was close. Everyone was pretty worried about you, you know. Nobody was performing well, and Yakushi almost made a comeback with Todoroki."

Sawamura nodded, his smile fading. "I'm sorry about that. For making everyone worry about me."

"It's not your fault," said Kazuya.

Without answering, Sawamura took another sip of the juice. "So…you guys must've scored again, if it ended at 7-4. Was it off of Sanada, or did they switch pitchers?"
"Sanada, bottom of the eighth. He was running out of gas by that point."

"Yeah, his stamina wasn't all that great back then," said the pitcher, with a far-off look.

*Back then?* But before Kazuya could comment, Sawamura's gaze refocused. He grinned. "If everyone was worried, that must mean you were too, huh? Did you strike out swinging on my account, Miyuki-senpai?"

Hesitantly, Kazuya crossed his arms, leaning further back against the back of his chair. "Of course not. I was focused on the game and thinking about how to win. I was the one who got Tetsu-san home."

He'd expected Sawamura's face to harden at that but to his surprise, he snorted. "That sounds like you."

Uncertain, Kazuya paused. "...You don't mind?"

"Of course I do!" said Sawamura, with a wave of his hand. "But I'd rather we won than lose. And you're here now, right?" At that, he began to look around curiously, as if expecting the rest of the team to start popping out from behind the curtains. "Where is everyone else anyways?"

Kazuya tried to clear his throat. "The semifinals are tomorrow. They're all at practice."

"Oh, right," said Sawamura. He began to shift around in his bed, adjusting his pillows. "Why're you here then?"

As lightly as he could, he said, "I wanted to see you."

Midway through picking up a pillow, Sawamura froze for a single, still moment. And then he twisted around, his entire face already starting to flush pink. His eyes disbelievingly searched Kazuya's face, and he must have found something there for he raised a closed hand to his mouth – and suddenly, he began to laugh, in an embarrassed, but pleased sort of way.

At the sound, something caught in Kazuya's throat.

His usual teasing words and quick reversals were at the tip of his tongue. He'd been planning on taking it back with a sly smile, as payback for the trick Sawamura had pulled on him. And yet for some reason, he couldn't say anything.

Sawamura was not by any means a pretty crier, but Kazuya could only stare. At the way his red, puffy eyes closed and disappeared into folds when he laughed. At the way his already big mouth grew even wider.

How did Sawamura do it? He was rash, wearing his emotions on his sleeve. He swung from tears to laughter in a flash, and changed from a bouncing ball of energy into a pit of despair in the span of a moment. He was the most difficult kind of pitcher to lead. The most unpredictable, the most challenging.

Kazuya couldn't have looked away even if he'd wanted to. And he didn't want to, he realized.

All of a sudden, the laughter came to an abrupt stop. Still red-faced, Sawamura peered suspiciously back at him. "What're you staring at me for?"

"You're kind of amazing, Sawamura," he said.
"Huh?"

"You were a crying mess just five minutes ago, and now you're laughing." Kazuya shook his head. "How do you do it?"

Sawamura looked confused. "Huh? What kind of question is that?" He folded his arms across his chest, cocking his head to the side. "I mean, I wanted to cry five minutes ago, and just now you made me laugh. It's pretty simple."

A typical answer for Sawamura. He cried when he wanted to cry, and laughed when he wanted to laugh... It was as simple as that. Maybe it had always been that simple.

"You've got juice dribbling down your chin," Kazuya finally said, pointing it out with a finger.

Sawamura raised a shoulder to wipe his face. "Is it gone now?"

"No, you still have some over there."

"Here?"

"No, more to the right."

"Here?"

Kazuya sighed, and beckoned with his finger. "C'mere."

Obediently, Sawamura leaned forward. Reaching down to grab his sleeve, Kazuya raised it to Sawamura's face – and then suddenly, he realized how close they were.

It wasn't the first time they'd been this close. They'd held each other before, after all, after the game against Akikawa. But this time, it felt different. He could feel the other boy's warmth radiating off his skin. And Sawamura looked straight back, his eyes slightly widened, as if he himself was marveling at their proximity. For a moment, they were still. Frozen.

And then Sawamura visibly swallowed, the Adam's apple of his neck bobbing.

At that, something in his stomach twisted. A heated spark shooting down his spine, Kazuya pushed forward –

When suddenly, the door burst open with a cry of "Ei-chan!"

His face hot, Kazuya immediately pulled back, noticing from the corner of his eye that Sawamura—who must have leaned even further in at some unknowable point—did the same.

In a ruckus of excited sounds, a group of boys and a girl rushed toward the bed. Meanwhile, his heart beating fiercely, Kazuya's hand shot out to grab the tray on the bedside table, and holding it before him like a shield, he rose to his feet.

"Ei-chan, you're awake!" One of the boys, who Kazuya thought he could vaguely remember having seen before, looked close to tears.

The only girl there, with chin-length brown hair, sat down on the bed, worry intermingling with relief on her face. "Eijun, you're okay, right?"

"Wakana?" Sawamura gaped, gawking around. "Nobu? Akio? What're you guys doing here?"
"Of course we're here," his friend said with a grin, wiping his running nose with his sleeve. "You'd be here if we were the ones who got hurt."

Sawamura's family was gathered at the door. The father was smiling, with his arm around his wife, who was wiping at her eyes. The grandfather was also smiling, with tears running unashamedly down his lined face.

*He must've gotten it from these people,* Kazuya thought to himself. Then, moving out of the way as Sawamura's hometown friends crowded around the bed, he made a beeline for the door.

"Miyuki-senpai!" He heard Sawamura call out. "Where're you going?"

Kazuya paused, something like a thrill running through his chest, and he raised his free hand in a small wave. "I'll be back, don't worry."

Rei was just outside the room, talking with a smile to someone—the coach, probably—on her cellphone.

"Oh, Miyuki-kun," she said, lowering the phone and covering the speaker with her hand. "Where are you going?"

"I'm just going to the bathroom," he said, stepping past her.

Raising an eyebrow, Rei gestured at the tray he was still holding in front of his lower body. "With that?"

"This?" Kazuya looked down at the tray. "I'm going to...wash it."

Picking up his pace, he headed down the hospital corridor. He could feel Rei's gaze boring into his back, but he didn't care. His face, his whole body felt hot. He needed to cool down.

People were staring as he searched for the nearest bathroom. Other patients, visitors, a passing nurse. He thought he even saw the tired-looking doctor he'd seen earlier on the elevator, giving him an odd look. He must've made a funny sight: a high school boy shuffling by, perhaps slightly pink of face and holding a floral-patterned tray against his crotch.

At the thought, Kazuya couldn't help but laugh.

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Chapter End Notes

Lol all the hospital fluff

Thanks for the reviews/kudos/comments, as always!

Additionally, it has come to my attention that some of you are understandably confused about the timeline and the various flashbacks I've been throwing around.

Here is the master timeline of chapters with flashbacks/omakes so far –

Chapter 15: Miyuki's childhood
Chapter 16: Miyuki's injury (taking place over about a year and a half), encompassing the follow sub-chapters -
~Chapter 14 omake: Okumura's chapter (Eijun's second year, Miyuki's third year)
~Chapter 13 omake: At the end of Miyuki's third year and Eijun's second year, they visit Meiji Shrine for New Year's (where they encounter Narumiya)
~Chapter 22 flashback: Eijun returns home to Nagano after the visit to Meiji Shrine with Miyuki
~Chapter 14 flashback: After returning to school from New Year's break, Eijun hears news that his grandpa has died
~Chapter 10 omake: Aramaki's chapter (new first years arrive on campus in Eijun's third year)
Chapter 28 flashback: Miyuki returns to Tokyo, visits Meiji Shrine
Chapter 6: Eijun's birthday chapter
Chapter 29 flashback: Continuation of Eijun's birthday chapter
Chapter 25 flashback: Seidō's victory over Yakushi in Eijun's third year
Chapter 1: Seidō's victory over Inashiro, Miyuki's death
When Kazuya returned to the hospital room, he was met with the sight of Sawamura—surrounded on his sides by his clamoring friends—struggling to push himself off the bed.

"Are you sure, Eijun?" said his friend, pursing her lip.

Sawamura waved her off, his brow furrowed in concentration. "I said I'm fine, no need to baby me!"

Still holding the now pristine clean tray in his hand, Kazuya stepped through the open door. "What's going on?"

At the sound of his voice, Sawamura looked up, his face brightening. "Miyuki-senpai!"

"Oh Miyuki-kun, there you are." Rei turned around. "I was starting to wonder what was taking you so long."

"Eijun's insisting that he's ready to go back to school," Sawamura's mother explained, wringing her hands. "But Eijun, you should stay at least the rest of the day here."

"I'm fine, mom, don't worry. Right, gramps?"

"Well, you heard what Dr. Ichimura said." The grandfather smiled. "He seems energetic enough, at least."

"But the doctor said there might be side effects for a while..." The mother helplessly regarded her son. "Are you really sure, Eijun?"

"Yeah, I'm fine!" Sawamura repeated. As if to demonstrate, he stood up and with a grunt, began to stretch his arms. "See?"

Sawamura's father turned to Rei, his face contemplative. "What do you think, Takashima-san?"

"Ah...if the doctor says it's okay," said Rei, pushing up her glasses. "And if he's ready to go back, we'd be more than happy to take Sawamura-kun back."

Sawamura turned to look at his mother, who crossed her arms. There was a pause – and then visibly deflating, she sighed. "Well...I suppose there's no helping it th – "

"Yes!" Sawamura cheered. Then to the alarm of everyone in the room, he dashed forward and sprung at Kazuya.

His eyes widening, Kazuya had just barely managed to drop the tray before Sawamura collided into him, his hair knocking his glasses askew.

Crashing into the floor with an ear-splitting shattering sound, Kazuya heard the tray's demise before
he saw it. Most of the pieces broke in the first second – but a lone piece spiraled in circles before finally coming to a defeated stop. In the deafening quiet that followed, Kazuya swayed under the considerable weight of Sawamura, who had wrapped himself around his torso in a passable impression of a mortified monkey.

"...I apologize, Sawamura-san," Rei said at last. "I'll be sure to compensate you for that."

Sawamura's mother blinked. "Ah...no, that's quite alright..."

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**Clang!**

Colliding off of Yūki's bat, the white ball slammed into the net, spinning furiously in place before dropping to the ground.

"A knuckleball that's shut down all the teams in their tournament block until now, huh?" said Isashiki, as he rested his bat against his shoulder. "I really can't imagine it."

From where he was practicing his swing, his voice slightly strained in exertion, Ryōsuke added, "We've never played a practice match against them either."

**Clang!**

Yōichi, who'd been tying his shoelaces, got up. "Their ace's a third-year, isn't he? Doesn't it seems a bit strange that we've never even heard of them before?"

"They may've been saving him for this year," growled Isashiki, tapping the bat restlessly with his hand. "Like what Maimon tried against us."

"For them to reach the semifinals though..." Ryōsuke smiled. "They might've taken their opponents by surprise."

**Clang!**

"All we can do is to have confidence in our baseball," said Yūki, ever the pillar of immovability. He raised his bat for another swing – and then lowered it, looking at something beyond the fence.

Yōichi turned, following his gaze, and saw a nondescript dark blue car passing by. "Is that...?"

Turning at the dormitory entrance, the car rolled across the gravel. The doors opened, and Yōichi could make out the figures of what looked like the assistant director and Miyuki stepping out of the car. For a split moment, he wondered with a pang whether they were alone in the car – when Miyuki turned to help another figure out of the car.

"Well, well," said Ryōsuke, lowering his bat as well. "Look who's back."

Yōichi grinned, his tense hold on his bat slackening just a bit. What was it Miyuki had said just yesterday? "Sitting by someone's bedside won't save them no matter how long you stay there"?

"Hyaha!" He'd make Miyuki eat his words.

---

Quickly drawing his hands together, Furuya threw his arm down, sending the ball flying across the bullpen.

**Slam!**
Chris held up his mitt, which now held the smoking ball. "Nice pitch."

His face lighting up a fraction, Furuya raised his glove to receive the ball back – when suddenly, there was a flurry of movement just outside the bullpen.

Kawakami and Miyauchi, wearing identically questioning looks on their faces, paused their practice. Chris slowly reached up for his mask.

"Hey, he's back!" someone shouted. Furuya jerked, and the ball dropped from his glove down to the ground. "Sawamura's back!"

"Sawamura?" Kawakami repeated, his voice cautiously hopeful. Letting out a sound of assurance, Miyauchi crossed his arms and nodded his head.

Chris looked down at his mitt and smiled. *Looks like you did it.*

After saying goodbye to Eijun and his assistant coach and teammate, Wakana and the others headed straight to the train station, where they got on the first train headed to Nagano.

It was a bright, sunny day. As the outside scenery began to transition from buildings to rice fields, the sunlight filtering through the windows illuminated their seats in warm light.

Settled into the plushy seat across Wakana's, Nobu snapped apart his chopsticks and began to ravenously dig into his ekiben.

Meanwhile, her ekiben left untouched, Eijun's mother let out a worried sigh. "That boy…I wonder whether a day will come when he'll stop making me worry so much for him?"

"You can't mother Eijun forever," said Eijun's father, snapping apart his chopsticks. "It's all a part of growing up."

Eijun's grandfather chortled, gesturing to Eijun's father. "This one here made his mother worry on her own deathbed."

Eijun's mother sighed again. "Well, at least it looks like he's made some good friends at his school."

"Don't worry Oba-san," said Nobu, his cheeks swelling with food. "Ei-chan's always been surrounded by friends."

"Yeah. I'm surprised he remembered our names," Akio piped up jokingly from the other side.

At that, something in her heart twinged. Her appetite gone, Wakana lowered her chopsticks and looked out the window. The high-rises of Tokyo had long since disappeared. All she could see were fields of waving stalks, extending out into the horizon.

Eijun had looked glad to see them. But it'd been nothing compared to how his face had lit up when his teammate returned to the room.

Wakana was happy for Eijun, of course. Happy that he'd found his place in his high school. After all, she'd wondered whether he wouldn't come back from Tokyo in a rage, complaining loudly about how elitist and snobby the city-folk were. Whether he wouldn't come back the same Eijun she'd known since they were babies. Maybe even hoped.

However, having visited his opening game in the qualifiers and now coming back from the hospital, Eijun felt in some ways like a completely different person. Even though it'd only been a few months...
since he'd left Nagano.

Wakana looked down at her half-finished box. It was her favorite chicken rice ekiben, but at the moment, it looked as unappetizing as brown rice.

Sometimes, she couldn't help but nostalgically think, boys grew up too quickly.

"No practice for you today, Sawamura," said Coach Kataoka.

"I –"

"And you'll be sitting on the bench for the entirety of tomorrow's game. Is that clear?" said the coach in an iron voice that told Eijun that there would be no compromising.

Eijun felt a tendril of fear run down his spine. "Y-yes coach."

The door to the coach's office closing shut behind them, Eijun dragged his feet as they walked down the hallway.

"Haha!" Miyuki snickered. "Well, what else did you expect?"

Eijun hung his head. "I knew today'd be a no-go, but I thought maybe tomorrow…"

"Oi, weren't you listening to the doctor, Bakamura? You're lucky you got away with a concussion. You can't just waltz back in and expect the coach to let you play."

"But I'm fine!" Eijun sighed, sticking out his lower lip. "Well, what'm I supposed to do all day then while everyone practices?"

Smirking, Miyuki reached out with a hand to pull open the door. "The coach said you can't join practice. Not that you couldn't be out in the bullpen."

Eijun felt his mood brighten at that. He lifted his head. "That's true, I –" He broke off as the door opened and sunlight suddenly streamed in. Bright yellow circles searing painfully into his eyes, he took an automatic step backwards. His head had started to spin again. Something throbbed.

"Sawamura?" he heard Miyuki say from what sounded like a distance. "What's wrong?"

"…Nothing," Eijun managed to let out. Forcing his clenched fingers to relax, he reached up to shield his eyes. The throbbing only marginally diminished. "It's just…really bright today."

When the gate to the bullpen swung open with a creak, everyone stopped to look. First to step in was Miyuki, who'd changed into his protective catcher gear – and then Sawamura came into full view. At first, no one moved. His hold on the ball slackening, Satoru held his breath.

And then Sawamura snapped to attention. "Reporting for duty!"

Chris smiled. "You're late."

With that, like a dam that'd been released, the other pitchers and catchers surged toward the southpaw.

"You had us worried," said Kariba, grinning widely. Ono lightly slapped Sawamura's back.
"Good to see you back, Sawamura," said Tanba. Kawakami nodded.

"Hyahaha!" A recognizable laugh rang from outside the bullpen. The gate opened again a crack, leaving just enough room for Kuramochi to pop his head in. "So you finally got your butt out of the hospital, Sawamura. Don't think that'll excuse you from my wrestling mane – " Breaking off, Kuramochi's face suddenly disappeared and the gate clang shut.

"What'd I say about slacking off during batting practice?" came Ryōsuke's voice, light but warning.

Miyuki snickered.

Sawamura turned back around. Then, with his hands by his sides, he bowed. "I apologize for causing everyone to worry! And thank you for carrying the game through even when I worsened the situation!"

Everyone smiled – and then pointedly looked at Tanba. Turning slightly red when he noticed, he coughed. "Well…that's what teams do. Right, Sawamura?"

Sawamura grinned. "Osu!"

The inside of the bullpen was relatively shaded, for which Eijun was eternally grateful. While there, sitting on a chair that one of the catchers had brought for him, it didn't take too much to force himself not to grimace. And thankfully, as caught up in practice as everyone else was, no one seemed to notice how quiet he'd become.

Fighting against the urge to close his eyes, Eijun's mind raced with questions. What was going on? Why did it feel like he was staring straight into the sun? Why did his head hurt so much?

The only time Eijun could remember feeling something similar to this was back when he'd been much younger. It'd been summer break, and he'd been playing amongst the stalks as his grandparents worked in the field. He'd grown drowsy under the afternoon sun, and had fallen asleep. He'd woken to nausea and a splitting headache and had only barely managed to get up before toppling down again. Fortunately, his gramps had been looking and spotted him right away.

Except Eijun was pretty sure that this time, he wasn't suffering from heat exhaustion. It was probably just a side effect of his concussion, as the doctor had mentioned.

Still, there was no way he was going to let this slip to the team. Otherwise, the coach could possibly even prevent Eijun from observing practice. Hopefully, the dizziness and sensitivity would go away on their own soon.

"Oi, Sawamura," said Miyuki's voice.

Eijun's eyes flung open – with a pang, he realized that they'd closed at some point without his realizing. Miyuki was looking down at him through narrowed eyes. He laughed nervously. "Hahaha! Watching practice is more boring than I realized…I almost fell asleep there."

Miyuki raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Well, I'm going out to the bench to change my glasses. Why don't you come with me then?"

Before he could stop himself, Eijun made a face. His eyes flickered to the fence. Through the gaps, he could see the sun blasting its rays at full strength across the field. He looked back at Miyuki, who was looking down at him expectantly. "Ah…well…the thing is…" He jiggled his leg. "My foot fell asleep."
"Great, you can walk it off then."

Eijun deflated – and then steeling himself, got up.

Stepping out of the bullpen, the sun was every bit as bad as he'd expected. As soon as he'd stepped foot out of the shade, he cringed. Burning hot pain racking his head, his surroundings started to slowly spin around him again. In a disconnected and random way, he wondered whether this was what being in Tokyo felt like for Furuya.

"Sawamura?" he heard Miyuki call out.

"I'm coming!" He took a slow breath, and then took another step forward. Raising both hands to his brow to shield his eyes, he squinted. Fighting to keep Miyuki in focus while not toppling over, he inched his feet forward.

Finally, after what had felt like hours but must've been only a few minutes, Eijun felt the cool shade of the dugout fall over them. He let out a sigh of relief, and sat down on the bench. Raising a hand to his head, he massaged his throbbing temple.

"Don't get too comfortable," said Miyuki lightly, as he zipped open his bag. "We're gonna head straight back."

Eijun tried not to grind his teeth. Was it just him, or did it sound like Miyuki was making fun of him?

"Why're you changing your glasses anyways?" he grumbled. Come to think of it, he hadn't even known Miyuki owned more than one pair of sports glasses.

"Hm?" Miyuki continued to rummage in his bag. "Just felt like it."

Eijun would've rolled his eyes, if it wouldn't have hurt to do so. Turning to avert his gaze as much as possible from the sun, he looked down at his scuffed sneakers. Wasn't there a way he could shield himself from the sun without drawing attention?

His mind flashed to his baseball cap. Come to think of it, he'd left his in Rei's car. Would it seem weird to go and get it now? There was nothing wrong with wanting to wear his cap, right? It was a hot day for everyone.

"Hey, Miyuki-senpai, can we – " Eijun stopped, as he felt something cold touch the bridge of his nose. Looking up, he saw, with a jolt, Miyuki's face looming just above his. At the sudden proximity, Eijun's mind jumped to when they'd leaned toward each other at the hospital, and he felt a different kind of heat rush to his face.

Wordlessly, Miyuki slid what felt like the frames of a sports sunglass over Eijun's eyes. With an extra layer shielding his eyes from the sun, the world around Eijun fell into dark relief.

"Wear this, Bakamura," was all Miyuki said.

That evening, Haruichi found himself sent out with Furuya on a mission: to buy enough chips and drinks to feed the small horde of first-string members that had gathered in Miyuki's room.

Bending down to pick up yet another can from the vending machine's dispenser, Haruichi added it to the pile in his arms. He turned to Furuya, whose arms were also already overflowing. "Think that'll be enough?"
Furuya nodded, and they began to walk across the dormitory courtyard. A passing pair of boys on the reserve team waved to them, and Haruichi waved back.

"Even though it's the semifinals tomorrow, everyone seems pretty relaxed," he said, adjusting a box on his pile. "I don't think anyone's really looking down at Sakurazawa, but it's true that Sensen or Inashiro would've been the more formidable opponent."

"…Yeah," Furuya agreed.

As they turned to climb up the stairway to the second floor, Haruichi curiously regarded the pitcher. He'd seemed even more taciturn than usual during dinnertime, which could be considered a feat in itself.

"Is something the matter, Furuya-kun?" he asked.

Blinking, Furuya looked surprised to be asked the question. They reached the top of the stairway, the sound of their footsteps reverberating around them. Furuya opened his mouth – and then the door to the room flung open. Warm light, and the chatter of conversation spilled out into the night air.

"There you are!" Isashiki growled. "What took so long? I'm dying of thirst already!"

"Sorry senpai!" said Haruichi, hurrying forward.

As he waited for his turn with the Playstation, Yōichi's gaze wandered around the room. Since the first-years had returned, everyone had gotten settled in with a snack and a drink.

His oolong tea unopened by his side, Yūki was hunched over the shogi board, a look of absolute concentration fixed on his face. On the other side of the board, looking resigned, Miyuki sat sipping from a pocari sweat. Masuko was snoring away on one of the beds. Seated in front of the TV, the two Kominato brothers were versing each other on his Playstation while Isashiki occasionally barked out suggestions to them. Furuya sat in the corner with Nakata and Sakai, looking bewildered as Nakata lay a deck of cards between them.

And finally, Sawamura reclined on the remaining bed, watching the TV. As Yōichi watched, Sawamura's hand crept up to a pair of sports sunglasses on his head, and he idly lowered the frame over his eyes.

Yōichi had noticed that Sawamura was wearing them when they returned to the cafeteria for dinner. What were they for?

He thought he knew. Having grown up roughhousing his whole life, Yōichi was no stranger to concussions, though he'd never been hit with anything as serious as a bulleting baseball. Side effects of concussions, such as headaches and light sensitivity, were no joke. He'd been smacked in the back of his head before with a spinning bat once (it was a long story), and he'd had to walk around in sunglasses for the entire following week.

Sawamura hadn't said a peep, though judging from his sunglasses, Miyuki or someone had cottoned on. It wasn't hard to see what was going on: Sawamura was pretending to be fine to not worry the team, and in order to convince the coach to let him pitch in the finals. Of course, that was assuming that Seidō passed the semifinals. Although, while he wouldn't say it out loud out of fear of jinxing their team, Yōichi thought the odds were most definitely in their favor.

Still…it was typical of the southpaw to try and hide something was wrong. For the most part, he was doing an irritably good job too, as most of the others hadn't seemed to notice. The only thing that
gave it away for Yōichi had been the sunglasses. Once he'd started getting suspicious, the other signs had made themselves more obvious.

Letting out an exasperated grunt, Yōichi thumped his foot against the frame of the bed, but Sawamura didn't seem to notice.

Once everyone had given up trying to rouse Masuko from sleep, they filed out of the room. (Yūki left with Kuramochi to sleep in Masuko's bed for the night.)

"Go straight to bed," Kazuya said warningly to Furuya, who nodded, before following Haruichi down the stairs.

He felt somewhat concerned about the first-year, who'd seemed a bit lost throughout afternoon practice. Hopefully, whatever the issue was, it wouldn't affect Furuya tomorrow. Kawakami hadn't seemed too affected from the homerun that Todoroki had hit in the match against Yakushi. However, they couldn't really know until tomorrow, when the heat was on. Tanba hadn't recovered enough from his injury to pitch an entire nine innings by himself, and judging from what they'd heard about Sakurazawa, Kazuya wouldn't bet on a called game. That meant that, worst came to worst, Furuya would be needed to pitch for at least half the game.

For some reason however, Kazuya couldn't see a bad outcome coming out of the upcoming game. The entire day since their return from the hospital, his body had felt light. Practice had gone well. The heat of the sun had felt good on his skin. Dinner had been delicious.

Sawamura—besides Masuko—was the last one left in his room. He stepped out. But instead of going straight down to the first floor, he leaned against the railing.

His hand resting on the knob of his open door, Kazuya paused. He raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck. The night breeze brushed against his face. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the shrill crying of the cicadas.

Minminminminmin.

Making up his mind, Kazuya let the door of his room close shut. Stepping forward to stand beside Sawamura, he leaned across the railings. The shock of the cold metal sent goosebumps up his arms.

"I was this close to getting it out of you," Sawamura suddenly said, looking down into the courtyard.

"Huh?"

Sawamura shifted. "Back during the match. You said if I could get the next three batters out, you'd tell me what you said."

Kazuya blinked – and then his mouth rearing open, he snickered. "Haha! You still remember that?"

"I really wanted to know, you know." Sawamura frowned.


Sawamura twisted around, curling his arms around the railings. "Yeah, well, I bet I can guess what you said."

He smirked. "Oh really now?"

"Yeah really." Sawamura huffed. "I bet you said you were glad to meet me, too."
Kazuya took a step closer to the southpaw. "Wrong," he said softly.

He leaned in – but with his face mere inches away from Sawamura's face, he stopped. His heart rate had started to speed up. Sawamura looked up at him with wide eyes. He thought he could hear Masuko's snoring through the door. Was that the sound of footsteps below in the courtyard, heading toward the stairway, toward them?

His whole body felt uncomfortably hot again, as it'd done before in the hospital. Except this time, he didn't have a tray to hide behind. Kazuya paused.

And then, letting out an impatient sound, Sawamura grabbed him by the neck of his shirt. Pulling him down, he pressed his lips firmly against Kazuya's.

Behind his glasses, he felt his own eyes widen.

One second. Two seconds. Three…

Sawamura let go. Kazuya felt the other boy's breath come out warmly against his mouth before he reared back. His lips tingling, Kazuya blinked in astonishment down at Sawamura.

"Liar." Sawamura stuck out his tongue, the pink of it flashing momentarily in the darkness.

"You got me," Kazuya said. Reaching out, he wrapped his hands around the younger boy's face. Sawamura closed his eyes. Kazuya leaned in again. This time, he didn't stop.
Morning fog

Chapter Summary

What were they doing?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Light morning fog rolled into the Seidō campus, accompanied by the sounds of doors opening and slamming shut, and footsteps making their way through the courtyard and spilling into the open grounds.

The members of the Seidō baseball team had begun to leisurely converge alongside the field fence. Despite the significance of the day, almost everyone seemed at ease, as they chattered and stretched their limbs — with the conspicuous exception of one.

Dragging his feet across the ground, Nori was making his way at a snail's pace, and even though Yōichi and Shirasu had left after him, they soon caught up. Exchanging a glance with Shirasu, Yōichi drew closer to the second-year pitcher.

Casually, he pulled his arms up and folded them behind the back of his head. "Morning, Nori. Were you able to sleep last night?"

Nori looked up to reveal a brave, but somewhat restrained smile. "...A little."

Warning alarms clanging in his head, Yōichi opened his mouth, wondering whether the homerun from Yakushi's game was still weighing on Nori's mind — and then thinking better of it, closed it.

"We all know, you know," said a voice. "That you're always doing your best to do your job."

They turned around to see Miyuki stepping forward, his lips curved back in a smile. Yōichi felt himself sweat, somewhat miffed that Miyuki'd managed to say what he couldn't. And yet for some reason, Miyuki's smile looked somehow different—less sly—from usual that he couldn't bring himself to make his usual face of disgust.

"Nori-senpai!" piped in another voice – Sawamura, who had disappeared early in the morning and was now, to Yōichi's faint surprise, trailing behind them. "I might not get a chance to pitch today... but I'll be doing my best to get better by the finals. Let's both do our best in our own ways today!"

"Sawamura," Nori said, blinking.

"This coming from the guy who just left the hospital yesterday..." Yōichi commented with a wry grin. "Where'd you disappear off to this morning anyways? You'd better not have been out running in your condition!"

"Still..." Miyuki said, clearing his throat. "His optimism is something you could learn, Nori."

Nori slowly nodded. "Yeah."
The lights had not yet been turned on in the indoors practice grounds, and the sun had only just begun to rise. It was still too dark to make out the words written on the bulletin board, but the words had already been carved into the eye of Haruichi's mind: Total victory! Two more wins! Let's go to the nationals!

Gazing at the board beside him, his brother stood with his hands shoved in his pockets. "Today's the 29th. The final's on the 31st. Two more games, no matter what happens. We'll have our answer in two days. Do I go to nationals…or do I retire?"

Three years ago back home in Kanagawa, they'd been standing in similar positions as well. That'd been when his brother had first told Haruichi that he'd be going to a school in Tokyo for baseball. Haruichi could still remember the sense of bewilderment and betrayal that'd seized him at that moment – the twisting sense that his brother was going somewhere out of his reach.

That frustration had been what'd driven Haruichi to come to Tokyo as well. To Seidō, where he'd met some truly amazing people that he'd never expected to meet. As his brother had warned him, Seidō was not as easy a place as he may've unknowingly expected it to be. And yet, Haruichi had somehow managed to find a place here that he'd never found before – with Eijun and Furuya. Kuramochi and Yūki. Miyuki and Chris. The entire team. His team.

Sometimes, when Eijun was pitching on the mound, Haruichi found himself wishing he was out there defending on the field as well. But that'd be impossible of course. Not while his older brother was still on the team. And despite everything, he hadn't forgotten his original objective.

His hands balled into fists by his side, Haruichi swallowed hard. "Aniki. It's our first and last time to make nationals together. I want to go to nationals."

Ryōsuke turned around, and looked back at Haruichi for several long seconds. Then, he smiled. "Stupid. I'm only worried you won't make the bench of eighteen people." He began to walk away.

"Huh?"

His brother paused. "Only eighteen people can be on the bench at nationals. You can't play, Mr. Twenty."

His eyes widening behind his bangs, Haruichi jerked back. "Huh?!"

"C'mon, let's get breakfast," said Ryōsuke, softly laughing.

Momentarily taken aback—his brother usually ate with the other third-years—Haruichi felt himself lighting up. He took an eager step forward. "Okay!"

"Morning Furuya-kun," said a bright voice. "Ready for today's game?"

Blearily, without looking up from the egg roll he was trying to spear on his chopsticks, Satoru nodded.

There was a pause. And then – "Is anything wrong?"

Satoru looked up, and meeting Haruichi's concerned face (or what he thought it might look like, hidden as it was behind bangs) he wondered for a split moment whether he should say something. Just then, however, the door opened with a clatter. At that, Satoru felt himself clam up again, and shook his head.
"Eijun-kun!" said Haruichi, turning to Sawamura who'd just walked in. "How're you feeling today?"

"Good enough to pitch for nine innings straight," Sawamura replied, pumping his fist.

"At a little league game, maybe," Miyuki smirked.

Sawamura scowled, and punched Miyuki's chest. Letting out a laugh, Miyuki playfully swung his arm over the other boy's shoulder.

As the two began to walk toward the serving area, Haruichi stared after them. "…Eijun-kun and Miyuki-senpai sure are close, huh?"

Satoru blinked down at his chopsticks.

Close? Was that what you called it?

The day before had been a haze of conflicting emotions for Satoru.

"Hey, he's back! Sawamura's back!"

It was difficult to describe how he'd felt at that moment. Had his hand jerked from relief – or from something else? Had the pang in his chest been from joy at his friend's return – or from something else? Something uglier?

Satoru didn't know what to think. He'd never felt this bothered before. At least, not by something that wasn't directly related to baseball. One thing was for certain, however: Satoru didn't like how it felt. Not the mixed feelings themselves, nor the creeping shame.

Since Sawamura's return, the rest of the team had been in high spirits for the rest of the day. And yet somehow, Satoru's gloom must've been especially overt, for even Sakai had noticed.

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"You alright, Furuya? You've been quiet today. More so than usual I mean. Are you nervous about tomorrow's game?"

It was easier to agree, so Satoru nodded. He then turned to Nakata. "…Jacks."

"Go fish." As Satoru drew a new card, Nakata peered at his hand. "If you've got something on your mind about the game, you can always ask us about it. Or the catchers. Miyuki's right here too." He peered suspiciously at Sakai. "Sevens."

"Go fish."

Nakata sighed and drew a card, but Satoru's mind had already started racing. Later that night, he left with everyone else. However, as soon as he'd reached the first floor, he split from Haruichi, paced around for a short while, and then headed back up to the second floor.

He'd just wanted to ask Miyuki for some advice. While Satoru wasn't paired up with Miyuki often outside of games, the second-year had always taken some care of him, getting him things like nail polish. And seeing as how some of it concerned Sawamura, he'd thought it somewhat appropriate. After all, everyone on the team knew that Miyuki and Sawamura were close.

Except Satoru hadn't realized exactly how close they were, until, just as he turned the bend of the stairway, he spotted them standing together in front of Miyuki's room.
At first, he wondered whether Miyuki wasn't giving Sawamura some strange face massage. But then they swayed, and some of the light from the courtyard lamps fell on their faces and—oh.

His eyes widening, Satoru froze in his tracks. His face heated up, and several seconds later, he slowly—quietly—inhaled his way back downstairs. After rallying some of his senses together, he returned to his room where he proceeded to spend the rest of the night staring up at his ceiling.

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Satoru knew that he could be a bit slow on the uptake sometimes, but even he knew what he'd accidentally laid witness to.

Now, as he struggled to pick up his egg rolls with his chopsticks, Satoru wanted to do nothing more than to sink face first back into his bed and forget what he'd seen.

The door slid open again. A pair of heavy footsteps entered the room. Kuramochi and Shirasu were openly gawking. Satoru halfheartedly glanced up. A beat later, with a clatter, his chopsticks dropped to the ground.

Coach Kataoka and Assistant Coach Takashima's voices floated down the hallway into the silenced dining room.

"After breakfast, we'll have a short meeting."

"Yes, sir."

Crossing the open doorway, the pair walked inside. "We'll leave by seven."

"Okay, sir."

"On the bus, make sure we—" The coach came to an abrupt stop, catching sight of a certain saddened third-year. There was a long pause. "…Masuko. What are you trying to prove?"

Masuko’s shoulders sagged in defeat, the room's light reflecting off his newly shaven head. As the rest of the watching team members burst into howls of laughter, Satoru blinked and bent over to pick up his chopsticks.

They’d usually sit near the front or in the middle of the bus. But this time, without either of them having to verbally put it into words, they sat together in the back of the bus. Sawamura got the window seat.

Once full, the bus began to move out, the sound of tires running over gravel crackling out in the morning quiet.

The sun had risen. The bus hummed below them. Rays of light streamed in through the windows, lighting up motes of dust that faintly shone in suspension around Sawamura. Kazuya reached out, watching how the light fell in a golden stripe over the skin of his hand, before cutting abruptly off into black shadow.

Sawamura, who'd been dozing, opened his eyes. Catching sight of Kazuya, he stared— and then asked, "What're you doing?"

"I thought there was something on your face," he immediately replied. For Kazuya, it was a habitual, practically instinctive way of response.
"Liar," Sawamura said, sticking out his tongue. And then, without looking to check whether anyone was watching, he leaned in and nuzzled Kazuya's hand.

In a flash, the events of the night before—had it really been less than a day ago?—began to flood his mind.

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"You got me," Kazuya said.

Reaching out, he wrapped his hands around the younger boy's face. Sawamura closed his eyes. Kazuya leaned in.

His mouth bumped into the corners of Sawamura's – and then tilting his head, he kissed him. Gently, tentatively. Kazuya'd never done this before. The closest he'd ever come to it was from watching scenes on a cinema screen.

But as he was beginning to understand, seeing was different from doing and feeling, and even as he thought this, Sawamura surged forward and started kissing back. Kazuya could feel the warmth of Sawamura's body pressing against his body. He could taste his breath, warm and moist. His heart pounding in his chest, he drew back.

Sawamura opened his eyes. Looking up with a dazed expression and sounding somewhat disappointed, he asked, "Is that it?"

Kazuya blinked – and then his mouth curved back in a smile. He leaned in again, this time pressing his lips more firmly against Sawamura's. In response, Sawamura let out a muffled whimper. His lips slightly parted, inviting Kazuya even further into the heat of his mouth. At that, some of his smile faded as he felt something heated spark inside his chest and groin.

Where was this coming from? How had they come to this point?

Kazuya shifted and felt his glasses frame bump into something. He paused, and this time it was Sawamura who drew back with a panting sound. They separated, both taking in shallow breaths, neither quite yet having gotten the hang of breathing and kissing at the same time. Looking at each other. Sawamura's face was flushed red, his mouth slightly ajar, a sliver of his tongue glistening in the dim lighting. Kazuya imagined that he must look the same.

There was no avoiding it now – no stepping delicately around the point, as Kazuya had done until now. They—he and Sawamura—were both guys. What were they doing?

But then Sawamura stepped in, and reached up to Kazuya's face. As he watched, Sawamura lifted his glasses up, sliding them up to the top of his head. Everything around them fell out of focus, blurring into each other. All except for Sawamura, whose face was drawing close to his. Then, they were kissing again. And feeling how Sawamura's frame fit into his own as he reached out with a hand against the cool railing to steady them, Kazuya found that he didn't care. The only thing that seemed to matter right now was that Sawamura was here.

Well...Kuramochi's magazines never really did all that much for me, anyways.

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Leaning back into the shade of the bus, Kazuya propped his chin against his left hand. His face feeling slightly warm, he tried to focus on something else. Beside him, Sawamura yawned.
He had a semifinal game to think about. It wouldn't do to get too excited here. At least, not about the images that were going through his head right now...

It was nearly time for the match to begin. The day was getting to be another warm summer afternoon, but there was a pleasant breeze sweeping in waves across the stadium.

*Slam*

"Nice ball!"

As the members of the Sakurazawa team waited in the shade of their dugout for the game to start, they could hear the sharp sounds coming from Seidō's bullpen. Raising a glove to receive back the baseball, their ace paused — and then stepping forward with his cheeks puffed in exertion, he threw.

*Slam*

Hanging off of the dugout's railing, Furuki whistled. "That curveball looks sharp. But I guess they're not using that southpaw today then?"

"Of course not. You saw the video." Tamukai, who stood next to him, winced at the memory. "I could hear the ball hitting his face from the recording."

"Still, they've got all those other pitchers. Especially that Furuya guy... I bet nobody here's expecting us to win," Koga commented dryly.

Hashida shrugged. "Well, it's Seidō. We could probably only win one out of ten games against them."

"Moron. Don't say that right before the game."

"In order to make that one win possible, haven't we been working hard?" said their coach in his gravelly voice as he gazed out at the field.

"P-professor," Koga stammered out, getting to his feet.

From where he'd been silently sitting, rotating a baseball in his hand, Nagao Akira smiled.

The coach turned to look at them. "Boys, it's time we made history today."

The crowd was still milling into the stadium when the announcer's voice rang out: *We will now begin game one of the semifinals between Seidō High School and Sakurazawa High School.*

"Both teams, line up!" shouted the umpire.

Bursting out of their respective dugouts, the team members of Sakurazawa and Seidō charged to the center of the sunlit field.

"Let's go!"

Chapter End Notes
The line "Well…Kuramochi’s magazines never really did all that much for me, anyways" has always bothered me. I left it at that because I didn't want to delve into sexuality since that's a whole different ball game. I want to stress, however, that in no way am I belittling the more complicated issues behind sexuality, and apologize if it has offended anyone.
The digital numbers of the alarm clock glowed blue in the dark – 11:50.

From the open window, Eijun could hear the occasional sounds of passing cars, which increased and decreased in volume like waves. And from the opposite side of the room, the occasional snoring sound that seemed to pop in just as its predecessor had been forgotten in silence.

It was hot. Even with his covers bunched to the side, his legs were starting to stick together with sweat.

Forcibly unsticking his legs from each other, Eijun shifted position for what must've been the umpteenth time. Facing the wall this time, he reached out with a finger to trace a formless shape on the cool plaster.

He couldn't stop thinking about Miyuki's words from when they'd last met.

"What if I could really catch for you again? Wouldn't that be something?"

"Think some god out there was listening?"

What could Miyuki have been talking about? It'd seemed as though something was weighing on his mind. And yet, the only thing Eijun had been able to say out loud was to tell Miyuki to come to their games.

Letting his hand drop to his side, Eijun sighed. Sometimes, he really frustrated himself.

Suddenly, as though in response, there was a creak in the bunk bed above him. And then –

"...can't sleep, senpai?"

Turning to fall flat on his back, he shot back, "I could ask the same of you." It was quiet for a short pause, before another turbulent snore broke the silence. Despite his ill mood, Eijun grinned. "...doesn't look like Aramaki's having any issues though."

"Does he ever?" came Okumura's dry reply. "You're usually snoring away by this hour too, senpai."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm surprised you can sleep through the two of us."

"Takuma lent me his earphones."
After a beat, Eijun propped himself up on his elbows. "You wear earphones to bed? Is that why you never answer me in the morning?"

"No, that's just by choice. Is something bothering you, senpai?"

He blinked, a bit taken aback – but not particularly surprised by Okumura's usual brand of frankness. "...is it that obvious?"

"I'd say it's because I'm your catcher…but you're not a particularly hard one to read," said Okumura, and even in the dark, Eijun could practically see the acerbic look on his face.

For a long pause, Eijun didn't respond. He fell back on his mattress instead. In the following quiet, he could hear the sound of his own breathing, made irregular by his increasing awareness of it. A car passed by outside, tires spinning audibly over gravel.

It was finally Okumura who broke the silence. "Happy birthday, Sawamura-senpai."

Eijun looked over at the alarm clock – 12:05. "You're late." There was no response except from the other side of the room, where Aramaki made yet another snorting noise. He took in a deep breath. "Okay, well…you're smart, Okumura…so…well, can you tell me – how, how do you help someone who doesn't really want to be helped?"

"What?" Okumura said flatly.

"W-what d'you mean what?" he stammered back.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I mean…I'm asking for a—uh—friend of mine you see…"

"Right."

"I…that is…you know what, never mind." Feeling somewhat warm, Eijun shuffled around to lie flat on his stomach. He buried his face in his pillow.

"You don't," said Okumura. "You can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped."

The sun had just begun to set as the Seidō baseball team members settled into their dinner at the dorm dining room. To perhaps fatten them for the approaching summer training camp, the cooks had prepared a feast of katsudon. Everyone eagerly dug into the deliciously rich meal in a rare moment of quiet, punctured only by the call for seconds.

"Seconds pl – " Okumura broke off with a small hiccup. He blinked once, looking surprised. Then, determinedly holding up his tray, he continued, "Seconds please. Excuse me."

"...you're excused," said Haruichi embarrassedly, scratching the corner of his cheek.

After picking up their second servings of pork cutlet, they began to weave past the crowded tables, looking for an open seat. Spotting a pair of second-years getting up from a table near the middle, they slipped in, plunking down their dinner trays on the table.

As Haruichi pulled back the chair, he noticed the boy furiously gobbling down rice from across the table. "Oh, Watanabe-kun. How was practice?"

The first-year pitcher glanced up from his bowl – and then seeing Haruichi and Okumura, grinned
widely. "Kominato-senpai! Okumura-senpai!" He waved at them with his spoon, ignoring the sounds of protest from the boy beside him as flecks of onions flew into the air. "Practice was great! I'm really getting my form down, I think."

"That's good to hear," Haruichi said encouragingly, passing a napkin to the other boy.

"Though I'm still light years behind Furuya-senpai and Sawamura-senpai of course," Watanabe hastened to add, glancing at Okumura, who'd begun to dig into his bowl without comment. Looking over at the catcher, Haruichi felt himself sweat. He had to wonder whether Okumura even knew the first-year pitcher's name.

"That's not what I heard yesterday while you were squabbling with Aramaki," said a new voice. With the exception of Okumura, they all turned to see Seidō's center fielder standing at the head of the table with a grin on his face. "Hey guys. Have you seen Sawamura?"

"Tōjō-senpai! What're you looking for Sawamura-senpai for?" asked Watanabe, waving his spoon once more.

"I've got something to give back to him," said Tōjō, gesturing to a plastic bag he was holding.

"He's in the bullpen," Okumura said, in an almost worn-down sort of way. "I don't think he wants to be disturbed right now."

Tōjō turned to the catcher. "Huh? Why not?"

"He was on his phone," he replied with a shrug.

Looking perplexed, Tōjō nevertheless chose to drop the subject. Plopping down into an empty chair, he began to peel a tangerine instead. Ignoring the dirty looks of the boy sitting next to him, Watanabe looked curiously at Okumura, who continued to nonchalantly spoon rice into his mouth. Taking a sip of his miso soup, Haruichi couldn't help but smile.

"Hello?"

There was nothing wrong with the call, but his voice sounded somewhat muted. It was as though there was something on the line blocking his voice, as though something greater than their usual distance lay between them.

Eijun opened his mouth, and then closed it. Curling his fingers through the metal links of the fence, he bowed his head, wordlessly looking down at his sneakers.

"…Sawamura? You there?" Of course, caller ID had given him away.

"Miyuki-senpai...!" he finally said, trying to speak with his usual bravado. He kicked at the dirt. "What're you doing right now?"

He could hear a jingling sound, and then what sounded like an announcement being made from Miyuki's side of the line. "I'm at the train station, waiting for my train. Pretty boring. How'd your birthday go?"

"Fine," said Eijun. "We had cake."

"What kind of cake?"

"Vanilla. With chocolate frosting."
"Mhmm. Did you save me a slice?"

Eijun's foot stopped. "Are you gonna be back in Tokyo soon?"

"I've got a check-up in two days."

"Two days?" Eijun echoed, his heart leaping into his throat. "Didn't you just have a check-up a few weeks ago?"

A pause, as another jingle and announcement came through the speaker. "My doctor wants to check something. It's nothing serious."

"Oh. Okay." Untangling his fingers from the fence, Eijun took a step back and sat down on the bench. He tried to clear his throat. "If something serious does happen…you know you can tell me right?" But as he spoke, there was a rumbling sound across the line, the sound of a train arriving in a station.

As Eijun waited for the noise to clear, he realized that out on the field, there was a lone figure in the distance running laps. He thought he could guess who it was.

Reaching out with a single hand, he snapped open the tab of the can he'd picked up at the vending machine. Raising it to his mouth, he took a sip. It was cool and mildly sweet.

The background noise faded away. "Well, the summer tournament's almost here. Think the team'll be ready by then?"

"The team's looking good. The first-year pitchers are a bit rough around the edges, but they've got spirit."

"How's Okumura doing?"

Somewhat taken aback, Eijun blinked. "Fine, like always."

"He's a good catcher."

"I know that."

A pause. The running figure in the distance had turned the corner, and was growing bigger now, the setting sun at his back.

"Oh yeah – I couldn't believe it, but they'd completely run out of oolong tea at the station," came Miyuki's voice, sounding amused. "Guess what I got instead?"

"What?"

"Orange-flavored ramune. It was the only one left."

Eijun squeezed the blue can in his hand. "Yeah? I got something different from usual too. I'm drinking it right now."

"What'd you get?"

"Pocari sweat."

Another pause. "...Haha! Tastes good after a hard day's practice, doesn't it?"
"Yeah," said Eijun. "Yeah."

From Miyuki's end of the line, there was another jingling sound, and then the sound of an announcement. "My train's about to arrive. I'm gonna end the call."

"Okay."

A final pause. "And I know, Sawamura. That I can tell you."

It fell silent, and Eijun didn't have to look down at his screen to know that the call had ended. Putting his phone down on the bench, he took another sip of his drink. And another.

The sound of running footsteps grew louder and louder. Soon, shoulders slightly heaving with exertion, the figure came to a stop. Catching sight of Eijun sitting in the bullpen, he hesitated. Panting, he bent to pick up a towel. Straightening up, he nodded at Eijun.

"What're you doing?" Furuya asked, mopping his neck.

Eijun took another sip. He raised his sleeve to wipe his face. "That's what I should be asking you." Getting up to his feet, he took an even breath. "C'mon. Let's get dinner."

"You don't," said Okumura. "You can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped."

Breathing facedown into his pillow, Eijun didn't respond. He'd known that already. And not very deep down. It just hadn't been what he'd wanted to hear.

In the still darkness of the room, Aramaki let out another snore. Something creaked above him. And then quietly, almost as though speaking to himself, Okumura added, "The only thing you can do is to let them know you're there. Waiting."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the belated birthday chapter.

I can remember a year ago, struggling to finish Eijun's birthday chapter in time. Well I didn't make it this time either, but here we are again. It's incredible how quickly time passes. I'm still writing this fic (though substantially further in) and you guys are still (presumably) reading.

Thank you all for staying with me over this past year. Here's to another one.
"Top of the first, Seidō High's offense starts from the lead-off, shortstop, Kuramochi-kun."

As he watched Kuramochi step up to the plate, Chris lowered the tip of his pencil onto the scorebook. Coach Kataoka, as usual, was standing solidly beside him, surveying the field. A passing breeze swept into the dugout, sending the pages flapping half-heartedly up.

Unmoving in the batting box, Kuramochi watched the first pitch go by.

"Strike!" cried the umpire.

While the opposing pitcher raised a mitt to receive back the ball, Seidō's team members began to shout encouragingly to Kuramochi. Up in the sky, the clouds must've moved, for the metal end of his pencil began to glint in the sunlight.

A breath of something warm tickled his ear, and Chris felt something weigh down on his shoulder.

"Huh…so this is scorekeeping?"

Slightly shifting to catch a glimpse of tussled brown hair, Chris smiled. "You've never done it before?"

"Nope. I mean, this is something managers do, isn't it?" said Sawamura blithely, turning his head to look up at Chris. A beat later, as though realizing who he was talking to, a look of vague horror dawned on his face. "N-not that I'm saying anything bad about that of course."

However, before Chris could reply, there was a sudden commotion on the field. Throwing aside his bat, Kuramochi began to run. The ball bounced a few times on the ground infield before being scooped up by the second baseman, who threw it to first and –

"Out!"

Isashiki stepped out to take his place on deck and Kuramochi trudged down into the dugout.

"How was it?" asked Chris.

With a heavy frown, Kuramochi removed his helmet. "The movement's a lot more random than I thought it'd be from the video."

Chris exchanged glances with the coach. "There's some wind today."

"What's the deal with knuckleballs?" Sawamura asked curiously. "I've never faced a knuckleballer
"A knuckleball's a type of moving ball, like the pitches you throw," Chris explained, turning. "The pitcher throws the ball in such a way that it doesn't spin upon release. Even the pitcher himself won't know how it'll move."

"Today's wind will make the ball's motion even more random. However, that goes for the opponent's side as well," said Coach Kataoka. At the sound of his voice, the others on the team looked toward them. "Keep an eye out for balls and once you're on base, opportunities for passed balls."

"Yes sir!"

Clang!

Colliding off of the bat, the ball bounced off the ground before skidding through the infield.

"Second!" Akira cried. Already in motion, Matsuzawa raced forward to scoop up the ball in his glove. He threw it to Koga at first, the ball cracking with a welcoming sound into the waiting mitt and –

"Out! Three outs! Change!"

Letting out a slight exhale, Akira began to run back to Sakurazawa's dugout. His teammates surrounded him wearing mixed expressions of relief and exultation.

"Yeah! Akira!"

"Nice pitch!"

Waiting for them inside the dugout, Coach Sanae wordlessly pumped his fist. At that, Akira finally grinned.

Karino slapped Akira on the back. "We did it! Three for three against Seidō!" His tone delighted, he added somewhat giddily, "With you, Akira, just maybe..."

On the other side of the field, the Seidō players were coming out of their dugout. As Akira turned to face them, a tall player with a shaven head stepped out. Perhaps sensing the scrutiny, the player looked in his direction, and for an instant, met his gaze.

His grin fading, Akira felt a bead of sweat trek down his face. "Maybe or not, we'll have to score some points off of their bullpen first."

"Right!"

With an accompanying sound of exertion and a crunch of dirt, the ball rocketed down from the mound. The batter swung, but with a resounding slam! the ball careened into the waiting mitt.

"...strike three! Batter out! Change sides!"

Leaving their positions, the players began to stream off the field.

"Nice pitch!"

"Nice one, Tanba!"
The third-year raised a hand to the rim of his cap, wearing a pleased but embarrassed expression. Running beside him, Kazuya grinned.

Because of his injury, this was Tanba's first game of the summer as the starting pitcher. Considering their opponent and his solid performance in the second half of the Yakushi game, Kazuya hadn't been too worried—nevertheless, it was a relief to see the ace return to the mound in a complete recovery.

"Tanba-senpai!" A familiar voice from the dugout interrupted his thoughts.

Descending down the stairs, Tanba paused—and then with a small smile, slapped the waiting hand. The other members streamed into the space around them, eager to resume their offense.

Meanwhile, the waiting figure turned to Kazuya. "Miyuki-senpai! Lemme help you out of that." Feeling the first-year brush his back as he knelt behind Kazuya, a shiver ran down his spine.

Spinning around, he firmly pulled the other boy up by his arm. "Oi, I can do it myself. You just stay seated, Bakamura."

"It was just a small concussion," Sawamura complained, but he willingly got back up to his feet. Seeing his lip jut out in a slight pout, Kazuya felt something flip-flop in his stomach. Doing his best to ignore it, he led Sawamura to the bench and seated him before bending over to pull at his guard straps.

"Top of the second inning, Seidō High's offense starts with batting fourth, first baseman, Yūki-kun."

As Masuko kneeled down in the on-deck circle, cheering rang down from the bleachers. Yūki stepped up to the plate. Holding up the bat in his hand, he lowered into his batting stance.

There was a slight lull, as Sakurazawa's pitcher looked back at Yūki. Then, he began his pitching motion—leaning slightly back, he threw the ball overhand. However, instead of bulleting down the mound as a fastball, it seemed to almost slip out of his hand, floating through the air, and then—

"Strike!"

A smattering of murmurs broke out from the crowd. Without moving, Yūki looked down at the catcher's oversize mitt, before returning his gaze to the pitcher.

After another short pause, the pitcher threw again. Once more, the knuckleball seemed to float through the air—but this time, Yūki's bat moved. In a blur of burnished metal, it swung and with a clang! it hit the ball.

Throwing aside the bat, Yūki began to run. Meanwhile, the ball shot past the pitcher. Bouncing off the ground with a thud, it was going to the outfield—

In a flash of red, Sakurazawa's shortstop threw himself forward. Visibly strained with his teeth gritted, he stretched out his glove—and just barely caught the ball at its tip. Without any hesitation, he twisted his body on the ground, and threw it to the waiting mitt at first just as Yūki stepped on the base bag. The first baseman turned and held his mitt up to the umpire.

There was a pause as the umpire stared. And then he raised his right hand in a fist. "Out!"

Sakurazawa's dugout burst into elated celebration. Pulling his bat out of the receptacle, Kazuya raised an eyebrow. With a bow, Masuko stepped into the batting box.
"Batting fifth, third baseman, Masuko-kun."

Kneeling in the on-deck circle, Kazuya focused his gaze on the opposing pitcher. Even while facing off against an imposing batter like Yūki, he’d looked composed. It was clear now that the pitch hadn’t been developed over this summer. As he’d suspected, the battery had been patiently preparing their entire high school baseball career for this very summer.

However, that wasn't to say that they'd perfected it. Or perhaps it'd be better to say that the pitch itself was flawed.

As the ball dropped to the ground, Masuko watched it pass by.

"Ball four!"

Masuko threw the bat down on the ground, and Kazuya got up.

There was only so much a pitcher could do to control the trajectory of a pitch such as this—a pitch that was characteristically left to the mercy of the passing wind. For a knuckleballer, giving up walks at an above-average frequency was to be expected. It was a double-edged blade, so to speak.

"Batting sixth, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

Setting up in the box, Kazuya looked back at the Sakurazawa pitcher. Despite giving up the walk, as expected, his expression still looked as tranquil as the untouched surface of a pond.

*Now...what pebble can we throw to break that calm surface?*

The pitcher drew up, beginning his pitching motion. Leaning back, he then thrust his hand forward, releasing the ball. Facing it head-on for the first time and seeing its complete lack of spin for himself, Kazuya couldn't help but feel a lurch of respect for the pitcher.

It was coming in erratically—it was probably going to be a bit high. Kazuya let it past. However, just before it reached the plate, the ball suddenly lurched down to the height of his belt.

"Strike!"

Lowering his bat, Kazuya let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. As random as these pitches were, it seemed there really was no point in trying to figure this battery out.

"C'mon Miyuki! Let's do this!"

"Miyuki-senpai! Blast it away!"

At the sound of the second voice, Kazuya jerked back. Looking at the dugout, he saw that—sure enough—leaning against the railing between Kominato and Kuramochi, was none other than Sawamura. Still wearing Kazuya's non-prescription sports sunglasses, even as Kazuya watched, the first-year backed away from the railing.

While the younger Kominato turned to presumably ask Sawamura something, Kazuya lowered back into his batting stance. As he watched the knuckleballer nod at his catcher's signal, he felt himself sweat. Why'd he expected anything different? Of course the idiot wasn't going to let himself stay still on the bench like he'd been told to. He had to be out there cheering with the rest of the team.

It felt as though the contents of his stomach had begun to simmer. Once he got back to the dugout, he decided, he'd ask Kuramochi or Chris to keep a more unforgiving eye on Sawamura.
Suddenly, his mind snapping back to the situation at hand, Kazuya realized that Sakurazawa's pitcher had begun to throw. The hand had already come out—the ball slipped out—and then in the following split instant, it was floating through the air, heading straight for him. Was it going to be in the zone? Or was it going to slip away into a ball?

There was no way to know. At least, not until it was too late. His hands tightening around his bat, Kazuya swung—and felt it make contact just as the ball began to break. Throwing the bat aside, he began to run.

In his peripheral view, he could make out the white ball rolling through the infield, and Masuko running to second. The second baseman was dashing forward to scoop up the ball with his glove—he threw to the shortstop, waiting at second, who turned to relay it to the first baseman. Gritting his teeth, Kazuya returned his attention to the looming first base, urging his legs to move faster.

Just before his foot stepped on the bag, he heard the telltale sound of a ball slamming into a mitt. Running through, Kazuya slowed down to a stop.

"Out! Three outs! Change!"

Taking off his helmet, Kazuya returned to the Seidō dugout. As the rest of his teammates clapped him on the shoulder and began to head out of the dugout for their defense, he heard Kuramochi remark, "Hitting into a double play, eh? That's not like you."

Kazuya's brow furrowed. What was that? He'd barely noticed the ball was coming.

Damn.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been that distracted during an at-bat.

Rocking back and forth on his heels in the back of the dugout, Sawamura called out, "Don't mind, don't mind!" The southpaw grinned cheekily. "Even the best of us makes mistakes."

Stripping off his gloves, Kazuya felt himself sweat. To think he'd broken his concentration for this... Nonetheless, he felt his lips curve back into a smile.

"Let's go, Tanba!"

"Tanba-san!"

The enthusiasm of the watching crowd was running high however, and amidst the excitement of the mid-game, the view of the field was blocked by the bodies crowding the dugout railing.

Sitting on the back bench, Eijun adjusted the sports sunglasses resting on the bridge of his nose.

He hadn't been lying when he'd said earlier that morning that he felt better. But there was still an odd, almost painful ringing somewhere between his ears. It felt unnatural in how disorienting it was. He was almost glad that he wasn't out there on the mound, pitching, which was a rare sentiment to be sure. In fact, the only other time Eijun could remember feeling this way was at the end of his second year, after he'd received the news about his grandpa.

Looking up, he could make out the scoreboard over his teammate's heads. It was the bottom of the fourth inning. Both teams had yet to score a run, filling the rows with zeroes. Honestly, Eijun was surprised. He hadn't expected Sakurazawa to be able to hold them completely scoreless halfway through the game.
Who were they, even? He'd been surprised to learn that Seidō was facing Sakurazawa in the semifinals. That hadn't been what had happened in his original first year. All of the teams that they'd faced so far had been familiar to Eijun, but for the first time, a game that hadn't happened in the original timeline was happening now. This, he was certain of.

What Eijun couldn't quite remember, was which team they had originally faced. Had it been Sensen? He supposed it was possible that Sensen and Sakurazawa had somehow switched blocks this time around. However, he couldn't remember facing off against Sensen in his first-year. And if he strained his head too much trying to recall what had happened, it only worsened the ringing in his head.

Eijun felt himself sweat. *Was Sensen really that boring of a team?*

---

*Slam!*

"N-nice ball, Furuya!" Ono called out, wincing down at his smoldering mitt.

Itching with the ever-perpetual burn to throw again, Satoru impatiently raised his glove to catch the ball.

"Is it really okay for you to go all out in the bullpen like this?" Kawakami said, sweating.

Miyauchi got up, throwing the ball back to the second-year. "Tanba's form's looking good today, but this is his first game as a starter this summer. Put some of that fire away, or you'll burn out before you get a chance at the mound."

Satoru hesitated. Then, quashing the swelling sense of dissatisfaction in his chest, he nodded. Raising his shoulder to wipe the sweat off his lower face, he turned to look at the ongoing game.

It was the bottom of the fifth inning, and the stalemate in scores between the two teams had yet to give way. While Satoru wasn't particularly concerned, he did feel a vague curiosity nipping at him—exactly what kind of pitches could this knuckleballer be throwing to keep their upperclassmen scoreless for half the game?

Slowly, his gaze drifted to their dugout, where the rest of the team members were dangling off of the railing. There was Higasa, Endou, and... that third-year whose name Satoru couldn't recall. Then, there was Sawamura, who was now easily recognizable with his sports glasses.

"He's amazing, isn't he?" he heard Kawakami speak up.

"Huh?" Satoru turned back around and was surprised to see Kawakami standing beside him. At the other end of the bullpen, Miyauchi was talking to Ono about something, gesturing at his mitt.

"Sawamura, I mean." Kawakami stared past him. "Even after that accident, he's already back in the dugout, cheering everyone on."

"Oh…yeah," Satoru said. It was true, after all. Sawamura was so far ahead of him, so bright, he had to wonder whether he had the right to even consider the other first-year a rival.

"And…you're pretty amazing yourself," Kawakami added.

"…Huh?" For a moment, Satoru wondered whether he'd misheard, or whether Kawakami was talking to someone else. But no, the sidearm pitcher was looking straight at him.

"Well…even when batters hit off of you, or when the coach switches you out, you're always fired up
and ready to get back on the mound." Kawakami's face had taken on a light shade of pink. "Meanwhile, I'm..." He stopped. "Well, I'll need to do better as your senpai."

"Nori, don't lose to the first-years!" Miyauchi barked. Kawakami smiled embarrassedly.

Satoru blinked, processing Kawakami's words. He wasn't sure what the other pitcher had meant. It was Sawamura that everyone thought was amazing, not him. He was probably misunderstanding. But for some reason, his throat felt tight.

"Ball four!"

Hearing a small commotion from the watching audience, they all turned to see the Sakurazawa batter drop his bat and jog to first base. Meanwhile, the runner on first moved to second.

Miyuki stood up from the catcher's box, signaling for a time-out. As the other infielders headed to the mound, Tanba took off his cap. Even in the distance, Satoru could make out the sweat glistening on Tanba's bare head.

"Um...Furuya-kun." After a beat, Satoru looked down. There was a pink mop of hair looking up at him—it was Haruichi. "The coach wants you to come to the dugout."

Kneeling on-deck, Akira could palpably feel his heart pounding loudly in his chest. With two runners on base and only one out, this was the best chance they'd had so far all game to score. If they could score even a single run here and then shut down the team's offense for the remaining innings... then it was possible. It could happen.

Akira took in a deep breath. No, he had to calm down. Getting too excited or nervous would interfere with his pitching. They couldn't fall here because of that.

Opening his eyes, he looked at Seidō's players that had gathered on the mound. They were a top-notch team of all-stars, alright. Anyone could see that every single one of their players was better than anyone on Sakurazawa. He'd even read about some of them in magazines before too. He could remember the buzz over that sly-looking catcher of theirs. Personally, Akira was surprised he hadn't heard more about their captain. Batting cleanup, the intensity of his at-bat at the top of fourth inning had left him feeling so shaken, he'd walked the following two in the lineup.

But still...the scoreboard didn't lie. They were tied, 0-0. Sakurazawa was in prime scoring position. Even if it was a one out of ten chance, if they could pull it off in this inning—then Sakurazawa could beat Seidō. For the first time ever, Sakurazawa, a public school, would make it to the finals.

Suddenly, Akira noticed that Seidō's players had turned to look at their dugout. He followed their gaze to see that their coach—a daunting and formidable-looking man, a far cry from their Coach Sanae—had stepped out.

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Tanba-kun as pitcher is Furuya-kun. Pitcher, Furuya-kun."

- Glossary -

Passed ball = In baseball, a catcher is charged with a passed ball when he fails to hold or control a legally pitched ball that, with ordinary effort, should have been maintained under his control, and, as a result of this loss of control, the batter or a runner on base advances.
There tends to be a higher incidence of passed balls when a knuckleballer is pitching. The physics that make a knuckleball so difficult to hit make it similarly difficult to catch. While teams with a knuckleballer on their pitching staff often employ a special "knuckleball catcher" who is equipped with a knuckleball mitt, similar to a first baseman's glove, it is still extremely difficult to catch.

- Omake -

This takes place in Eijun's second-year, during the summer just before the training camp.

It was a relatively slow spell at the hospital. In the waiting room, the only other person there besides Eijun was an elderly man reading through the evening newspaper. As he watched, the man flipped the paper around, revealing the sports section at the back. He could make out a photo of a Kōshien stadium, presumably accompanying an article about the upcoming summer season.

With a ding, the elevator doors opened, and someone stepped out into the hospital's reception room.

Brightening, Eijun jumped to his feet. "Miyuki-senpai!"

The doors closing behind him, Miyuki stopped. "You don't have to come with me every time, you know. The training camp's coming up soon. You could be in the bullpen right now."

"How'd it go, senpai?" Eijun asked, pretending he hadn't heard.

Miyuki shrugged, and adjusting his backpack on his shoulder, he began to head straight for the exit. "The same as usual."

"That's good news in its own way, isn't it?" Eijun said, hurrying to catch up. The glass doors slid open, and the cool air-conditioning of the hospital gave way to a warm, humid breeze.

"Sure, sure..." Miyuki stopped. Holding a hand out, he looked up at the sky. "...is it raining?"

Eijun peered up. The sky was grey with clouds—and as he looked, he felt something wet and cold drip down onto his nose. "Uh oh...I think so." He looked glumly down at his school uniform, wondering if he could get away with not washing it.

Suddenly, he heard an odd honking noise. Eijun turned to see Miyuki holding up an old grey umbrella.


Though he knew he was the type to join without invitation, Eijun felt himself hesitate. He eyed the narrow space beside the older boy. For some reason that he couldn't put his finger on, he felt nervous. Flustered. But why?

Miyuki began to walk away. Honk. Honk. Where was that sound coming from? Were the umbrella's rig wires loose? "Hurry up or I'm leaving you."

At that, Eijun gave in and dashed forward, ducking under the umbrella canopy.

"That wasn't too hard now, was it?" Miyuki said teasingly. It could've had to do with the umbrella's curvature, or maybe it was Eijun's imagination, but somehow, Miyuki's voice sounded closer than usual.

"The umbrella's too small," he grumbled. Honk. More and more droplets of rain were coming down
now, and he could feel them hitting his shoulder.

"Then get in closer," said Miyuki. Before Eijun could protest, he felt Miyuki's arm snake around his back and pull him in closer. His side brushed against Miyuki's. And at that, even though it wasn't the closest they'd ever been, for some reason, Eijun's face began to grow warm. His palms were sweating. He wanted to shrivel into himself. But at the same time, he wanted to explode.

*Honk honk.*

The touch of Miyuki's side burning into his arm, Eijun looked down at the greying pavement. What was wrong with him? Maybe he was sick? Except he never usually felt like this. It was only recently that he'd started to feel this way. Maybe he'd picked up something at the hospital.

"Sawamura?"

*Honk honk honk.*

Though…if Eijun wanted to be honest with himself, he had to admit that he only felt this way around a certain someone. And well…he wasn't completely ignorant as to what his symptoms could mean. He'd read through the entirety of *Kimi ni Todoke*, after all. But…Miyuki of all people? Why?

*Why not Chris-senpai?!*

"Sawamura."

"What?" Eijun finally answered, a touch grumpily. He turned—and seeing Miyuki's face looming directly above his own, for a split second, he felt his heart stop. He took a step back, and felt his head bump into the umbrella's wires. *Honk.*

Miyuki raised an eyebrow. "Something wrong? You look out of it."

"I…I…" Eijun stammered back. As though making up for its brief lapse, his heart was pounding harder than ever. With a nervous laugh, he looked away. "Did…did you know your umbrella sounds like a duck?!"

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoy the omake. It's inspired by the story's artwork on FFN, and I expanded on it because someone I know said they enjoyed the brief umbrella scene in chapter 16. Now that I look back on it, it also reminds me of one of Kokonotsu's dj.
The end of the world and then some

Chapter Summary

A touch of wind, just barely enough to blow a sakura petal off a branch. - Seidō vs Sakurazawa part II (end)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Ball four!"

Wearing an overtly unapologetic look of relief, the batter dropped his bat. Kazuya grimly eyed the bat as it clattered down on the ground.

Out on the mound, Tanba removed his cap to wipe a line of sweat on his head. He'd pitched well, getting this far without giving up any runs. Nonetheless, his lack of experience in opening games this summer—though none of it his own fault—was starting to make itself apparent.

Perhaps thinking the same, the coach had emerged from the dugout. Kazuya felt his jaw tighten. That wasn't to say that none of this was his fault. The whole game, he'd felt off. While it was more obvious when he was batting, he could sense that his game-calling was being affected too.

The thrill he felt while playing baseball was there, of course. It was always there for Kazuya on the baseball diamond. On this day however, he could feel another emotion running right alongside it. It wasn't the usual drum-like adrenaline that beat in his heart and pumped through his blood, deafening him to the sounds of the outside world. No, it was a strange, light feeling that threatened to dim and take the edge away from his razor sharp focus.

What was this sensation?

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Tanba-kun as pitcher is Furuya-kun. Pitcher, Furuya-kun."

Leaving behind the shadow of the dugout and stepping foot on the field, Satoru could immediately feel the shift in temperature. The summer sun had always been hard on him, even more so since he'd come down to Tokyo. But at that moment, he felt lighter than ever to be returning to stand under it.

When they saw Satoru approaching the mound, the rest of his teammates shuffled to make room for him in the circle.

"Sorry, Furuya," Tanba apologized, handing the ball over. "I didn't want to pass it to you like this."

Caught off-guard, Satoru blinked down at his glove. "Ah…no, it's…" Unable to think of an appropriate continuation, he trailed off.

Fortunately, the captain picked it up, saying, "You did well pitching for five straight innings without giving up any runs, Tanba."
Reaching up, Kuramochi slung an arm around Satoru, who had to hunch over to accommodate the height difference. "Hyaha! Now leave it in the hands of the underclassmen, Tanba-san."

As the rest of the infielders returned to their positions, Miyuki paused. "Don't get too tense now, Furuya. You should be able to blow them away even without going all out."

To Satoru's dismay however, at the sight of the catcher's grinning face, the memory of two swaying figures in the dark flashed through his mind. Feeling tongue-tied for the second time in as many minutes, Satoru quickly nodded and glanced away. Seemingly not noticing his discomfort, Miyuki headed to the catcher's box without further comment.

In an effort to clear his head, as had been drilled into him countless times, Satoru glanced around the field to confirm the situation. With one out, there were two runners on first and second. The current batter up was Sakurazawa's catcher.

"Play!" the umpire commanded.

Satoru took in a slow breath.

"And...you're pretty amazing yourself."

With the sun at his back, he drew his hands together.

It was over for their catcher as soon as Seidō's pitcher threw his first pitch. Akira had been able to tell, from the way Hidokoro had immediately flinched back and from how, following that, he'd started biting his lower lip. He'd come to know his partner quite well over the years, after all. While Hidokoro was the best at making contact on their team, he'd never been particularly tenacious in the face of overwhelming brute strength.

_Slam!_

"Ball!" cried the umpire.

Catching sight of the thin line of smoke rising off of the catcher's mitt, Akira felt another bead of sweat trek down his face. With a pitch like that, it was little wonder Hidokoro had been unable to do anything. It was nothing like what any of them had ever experienced before.

He could hear the usual encouragements and taunts filtering out from Sakurazawa's dugout.

"Nice eye, Akira!"

"Pitcher's got no control!"

But of course, what they didn't know was that Akira hadn't chosen _not_ to swing. Rather, he'd been physically unable to. Everyone already knew that the pitcher threw a 150 km/h fastball, and they'd prepared accordingly for it the best they could. However, facing it from the batter's box, it'd felt even faster than that. As the ball had roared down toward Akira, it'd almost felt _alive_.

Ignoring the cries, Seidō's catcher stood up and threw back the ball. "Nice ball!"

Turning back to face the mound, Akira eyed the pitcher with an incredulous gaze. This was seriously the pitch of a first-year? The boy was tall, but like most underclassmen, his uniform was a bit loose around him, which meant he'd yet to fully grow into his body. Which then meant that his fastball—already seemingly untouchable—wasn't even in its final form.
And to think, if the rumors about Seidō's other first-year pitcher were true, that this power pitcher wasn't even their most formidable…

Seidō's pitcher nodded and straightened up. Akira's hands tightened over the handle of his bat. Soon, the ball was bounding toward him, and –

"Strike!"

Akira let out a rattling exhale. Full count.

It was superstitious, perhaps, to think this way. No doubt he was being affected by the countless stories of his classmates praying to Tenjin-sama before their exams and passing them. But when Akira had first seen the recording of Seidō's game against Yakushi and reached the part where the southpaw had been carried out of the game, he'd felt his heart begin to beat faster. While he'd felt bad for the other boy, it almost felt like somehow, miraculously, a path was being cleared for the unknown Sakurazawa team. The question was, would the path take them over even the famous Seidō? Would it lead them to their dream?

Taking in a slow breath, Akira lowered back into his batting stance.

They were past the midpoint of the game, and they'd finally managed to send Seidō's curveball ace off the field. No matter how fast the pitches were now, they couldn't stand to be scared and miss an opportunity to score. As fast as possible, as soon as possible, he had to get on base. No matter how.

Having come set, for a moment, Seidō's pitcher met Akira's gaze. And then he threw, his arm swinging downward. The ball roared as it raced toward Akira, who had to use all his willpower to stay still.

Slam!

A pause—and then, "Ball four!"

Throwing aside his bat with a clatter, Akira began to jog towards first base. Meanwhile, his teammates each moved forward a base, filling the bases.

They couldn't fight this pitcher with fire. The key, instead, was patience. They had to lie in wait and find the chink in their armor. It was a strategy for the weak, Akira realized. But it had worked for them thus far, and if precedence meant anything, there was no reason why it couldn't work again.

Kazuya looked up at the umpire, who nodded back. "Time!"

As he approached the mound, he could see Furuya looking down at the ground. While Furuya's opening game had always been weak from the start, Kazuya had hoped that his recent experience in the summer games would've improved it.

Maybe I was being overly optimistic?

From what Kazuya could remember, Furuya had seemed fine when he'd been switched in—but that was the tricky thing about pitchers. You could never really tell with them.

"Furuya!" a voice from the dugout shouted."You have to carry on Tanba-senpai's dream!"

At that, Kazuya turned—and of course, it was none other than Sawamura, who was dangling from the railing. Even as he watched, an anxious-looking Kominato hurried up and—"Eijun-kun!"—
tugged the first-year back.

Standing nearby, Tanba's shaven head had taken on a red sheen of embarrassment. "I'm not dead you know…"

Kazuya felt his lips beginning to twitch. With a fellow pitcher casting such a large shadow, he thought—struggling to tear his eyes away from the dugout and failing miserably—it was little wonder Furuya was struggling. Adopting a half-teasing, half-cutting tone, he dropped casually, "So, Furuya, how long do you plan on being in Sawamura's shadow?"

After a beat, Furuya's voice quietly replied, "Miyuki-senpai… I'm the one on the mound right now."

Kazuya blinked. That hadn't quite been the reply he'd been expecting. Turning around, he found to his surprise that—far from the defeated gaze he'd been expecting—Furuya was staring back at him fiercely. His eyes burned with an almost blue-like sheen that, while simultaneously reminding Kazuya of a certain southpaw, was different from anything he'd ever seen.

Seeing that, Kazuya's mind went blank. For a still moment, he didn't respond.

And then, before he'd realized himself what he was doing, he'd doubled over and begun to laugh. "Hahaha!"

"Oi, Miyuki…" he heard Kuramochi approach apprehensively.

It was inappropriate to be laughing here—but he couldn't seem to stop. It poured out of him, like sand, and as it did so, Kazuya thought wistfully, *The starting catcher position sure is wasted on me.*

One thing was for certain: he'd underestimated Furuya.

In some distant corner of his mind, he'd been wondering whether the presence of Sawamura would hinder Furuya's growth as a pitcher. After all, sometimes, Sawamura shone so brightly, it felt as though you could get eclipsed in his shadow and disappear.

And yet sometimes, as Kazuya was coming to realize, he could help you find your own light.

"…I know, Furuya," he finally managed to let out, his laughter dying away as he attempted to straighten up. *And sorry,* he apologized privately. He'd been so caught up in the haze of his new feelings that it'd clouded his vision of the field. He hadn't been playing like his usual self. He hadn't been playing like Miyuki Kazuya.

But no matter what happened, he reminded himself, baseball was his life. It'd been that way for as long as he could remember and he had no plans on changing that.

Everything else was secondary.

---

Holding up a finger into the air, Miyuki called out, "One out!" Then, fixing his mask back on, he squatted back down.

The catcher's laughter still ringing in his ears like an irritating tune he couldn't get out of his head, Yōichi raised an eyebrow. "What's up with Miyuki?"

Positioned near second, Ryōsuke laughed softly. "He seemed somewhat out of it, which is rare for him. Though it looks like he's come back."
Yōichi felt his brows knit together. *Tell me about it.*

Even amongst Seidō's baseball-crazy members, if someone were to ask Yōichi who the number one crazy was, he would've directed them to Miyuki's double without a second's thought. The *world* would have to end for someone like that to be distracted during a baseball game. And even then, Yōichi didn't think he'd blink an eye if the catcher hurried to the field in one final mad rush for a game.

So for Miyuki of all people to be distracted during—and not just any game, but the frigging *semifinals* of the summer qualifiers… either Yōichi was going to have to reevaluate everything he'd ever thought he knew about the catcher, or the world was indeed, coming to a jarring end.

Even just a few weeks ago, the latter would've seemed more likely. Now, however—well, he wasn't so sure.

"*Number 6, second baseman, Matsuzawa-kun.*"

Hunching down, Yōichi forced himself to focus back to the game at hand.

As the batter set up in the box, he glanced around at Sakurazawa's baserunners. With two outs and the bases full, they all wore identical expressions of concentration. That was understandable: this was their best shot at scoring so far in the game, and most likely, their last.

But what a situation to be finding themselves in… Flashing back to his casual confidence the night before, Yōichi felt himself sweat. Had he jinxed their team after all?

"Let's go, Matsuzawa!"

"Matsuzawa!"

There was a pause, as Furuya waited for Miyuki's signal. Then with a nod, he came set—and threw. Yōichi tensed.

*Slam!*

"*Strike!*" the umpire cried, pumping his fist.

Looking dazed, the batter stared down at the ball for a moment, before lowering back into position.

Miyuki stood up to throw back the ball. "*Nice ball!*" Squatting back down, he signaled for the following pitch. Furuya nodded—and threw. Yōichi tensed.

His face twisted with exertion, the batter swung. *Clang!*

Yōichi watched as the ball popped up high into the air, spinning whitely in midair before dropping straight down into Masuko's glove.

"*Out!*"

"*Batting fourth, first baseman, Yūki-kun.*"

Draining a cup of cool water, Eijun leaned back in the shade on the back bench. With everyone else crowding the railing, he could hardly see what was going on in the game. He hadn't been able to
refuse, however, when Chris of all people had asked him to stay seated.

Eijun frowned into his cup. There was only one person who knew about this weakness of his. Or rather, only one person who'd actually use it against him.

Still, he tried to appease himself, Miyuki had done it for his sake. If he wanted to pitch in the finals in two days, he had to recover as quickly as possible. And if Eijun was serious about changing the outcome of that game in this time, it was absolutely crucial that he play.

And then…and then what? What came after that?

"Number five, third baseman, Masuko-kun."

Eijun felt something in his chest twinge. It'd been a while since he'd last thought about how he'd gone back in time in the first place. While it'd weighed heavily on his mind in the beginning, he'd made peace with it in his own way. But now, as the date of the fateful match drew inevitably closer, he could feel some of the uncertainty creeping back and wrapping its tendrils around him.

Since returning to his first-year body, Eijun knew he'd made some splashes in the flow of things here and there. Even now, he was currently face-to-face with one of the outcomes: he was fairly certain that Seidō had never gone up against Sakurazawa in his own time.

Despite that, Eijun knew that he had yet to make any truly significant differences. Or at least, he didn't think so. But that would all change if Seidō was to emerge victorious against Inashiro this time around—for the Seidō team members, at the very least, the rest of their summer would drastically differ.

And if that changed, what would happen then?

"Number six, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

Reacting on instinct to the sound of the name, Eijun jumped to his feet. He turned, all but prepared to slide out from the bench, squeeze into the crowd at the railing, and rejoin the rest of his team in cheering—but then, at the sudden rustling sound of what sounded like a page being flipped, he came to an abrupt stop.

Seated in front of Eijun, Chris made a small coughing sound. Sweating, he sat back down.

"Miyuki!"

"Hit a big one!"

Top of the sixth: two outs, with two runners on first and third. A single base hit would give Seidō the lead. And with Furuya's pitching currently on fire, that would give them the momentum to carry the game to the finish line.

Re-strapping on his batting gloves, Kazuya stepped into the batting box. Furthermore, he'd been hitless the whole game. Even if the scoring situation had been less ideal, for the sake of his batting average, he wanted a hit here.

Carefully, he watched as Sakurazawa's pitcher checked the bases. Yūki, who'd taken a larger than usual lead from first base, stared calmly back. After a pause, the pitcher lifted his leg. Just as he moved forward to throw, Yūki took off.
"Steal!" came the warning.

His eyes perceptibly widening, the pitcher threw down his arm and released the ball. Slipping out, it floated through the air towards Kazuya. He leaned back to let it past. The ball dropped down, landing in the catcher's mitt, who immediately jumped up and threw to second—but it was too late.

The base umpire opened his arms. "Safe!"

To the cheers of their team, Yūki got up and brushed the dust off of his pants. Now, both runners were in scoring position, and at the very least, Kazuya wouldn't hit into a double play like he had in his first at-bat.

Lowering back into a compact batting position, Kazuya readied himself. The pitcher, wiping his sweat, put his cap back on. Coming set, he paused—and then began his throwing motion. As the arm came down, Kazuya tightened his grip on his bat.

The ball floated toward him. It was within reach. Taking a step forward, transferring his weight, Kazuya swung, rotating his back foot as he crushed the ball forward with his bat. Clang! He followed its trajectory as it flew high into the air—outside of the foul line.

"Foul!" With that, the count was 1-1. Kazuya adjusted the dirt on the ground with his foot. He had to admit, especially with the wind blowing around them, it was impressive that the catcher had yet to be charged with a passed ball. It was a testimony to the amount of practice and time this battery had put in.

The ball flew out of the pitcher's hand once more. Kazuya swung.

"Foul!" One ball, two strikes.

He'd sure been quickly cornered. A cursory glance around told Kazuya that Isashiki and Yūki were hovering by their bases, ready to burst into action with every hit. But it didn't feel as though he'd be able to get used to a knuckleball any time soon—not when the timing and placement of every pitch were this random. And yet, he had to get on base here. As it was, if they continued to be carried along in this stagnant flow for much longer, the chances of Seidō losing a game that they could've won by all rights grew that much proportionally higher.

"Ball!"

If worst came to worst, Kazuya had been hoping that with Furuya's power pitching, the Sakurazawa's team members would start to crack under the pressure. Unfortunately, perhaps bolstered by Furuya's tendency to give away walks, they had yet to make an error.

On Seidō's side as well, they'd all fallen into the trap of lowering their guard and underestimating their opponent. While it hadn't been purposeful, it'd been somewhat inevitable given their prior knowledge about the Sakurazawa team's lack of experience. Kazuya was at fault as well, having been as distracted as he'd been in the first half of the –

"Relax, relax!" a familiar voice broke in. "Stop thinking so much! You're too tense! If you don't hit with runners on base, when will you ever hit?!"

"Eijun-kun!"

Without having to look, Kazuya felt himself sweat. Looks like even Operation Chris failed.
Nonetheless, he could feel some of the tension leaving his body. He exhaled, feeling the air rush out of his lungs. The idiot was right. At this point, thinking about it too much wouldn't help. What he had to do here was simple: he just had to hit the ball.

Lowering back into a more comfortable batting position, Kazuya looked straight back at the pitcher. After a pause, the pitcher nodded at his catcher's sign. Drawing his leg up, he brought it down, his arm flinging fully downward.

In the following instant, the ball floated through the air toward Kazuya. It appeared to be coming in the strike zone, but it could change at any moment. All it would take was a slight change in air current. A touch of wind, just barely enough to blow a sakura petal off a branch.

He stepped forward, transferring his weight to his hips and legs in a full swing.

*Clang!*

Colliding off of his bat, the ball was so small, it momentarily seemed to disappear in the open sky. Kazuya took off, watching in his periphery as Isashiki dashed to home.

Far out in the outfield, the center and right fielders were converging on the same spot with their gloves outstretched—when the ball dropped onto the field just between them.

As Kazuya was waved past first, Isashiki returned home. The watching crowd roared.

"*Second!*" shouted Sakurazawa's catcher.

His feet pounding into the ground, Kazuya could see the second baseman waiting with his glove outstretched. He could feel the ball being desperately thrown in their direction. The bag was just ahead of him. The second baseman reached for the ball. Dropping down, he slid leg first through the dirt. Just before his foot touched the bag, he heard the telltale sound of ball meeting leather.

However, as the dust cleared, the second baseman—his face twisted with anxiety—stepped foot back on the bag. The center fielder must have misjudged the distance, for it appeared he'd had to step off to catch the ball.

Kazuya looked up at the umpire, who nodded. "*…safe!*"

Feeling the sun's gaze scorching his back, Satoru didn't think he'd ever felt this hot in his life. It almost felt as though he was on fire. But instead of burning his body into a crisp, it blazed inside of him, granting him an impatient energy that flickered out with every pitch he threw.

He didn't know how many pitches he'd thrown—surely he would soon be approaching the hundredth threshold—but Satoru didn't think he'd ever felt as good as he did now.

Tossing down the rosin bag, he leaned over, waiting for Miyuki's signal. After a pause, the catcher motioned with a finger, and then a sideways motion against his inner thigh. Satoru nodded. Punching his mitt, eyes glinting, Miyuki set up close to the inside of the plate. Satoru took in a breath, and exhaled.

Then, pushing his leg forward, he threw down his arm, releasing the ball from his fingertips. His feet instinctively taking him forward, Satoru watched as it bulleted through the air. The batter swung—but escaping the bat, the ball careened into the waiting mitt and—*slam!*

"*Strike!*" cried the umpire, punching the air. "*Batter out! Change sides!*"
In response, Seidō’s team members began to stream off the field, slapping Satoru on the back. "Nice pitch, Furuya!"

From the watching crowd too, voices were raining down on them.

"You're amazing!"

"Take Seidō to the finals!"

"Good going, Mr. Monster!"

Catching the last shout just as Satoru began to step down in the dugout, he blinked. Monster…?

That wasn't the first time he'd been called by that nickname. They'd called him that back in Hokkaido, too. But hearing it now, at this time, at this place, surrounded by these people—it felt different.

Before he could think much further on it however, he came to a stop. At the bottom of the stairwell was Sawamura, who—through a pair of sports sunglasses—looked unblinkingly up at him from the shadow of the dugout. Any other time, Satoru wouldn't have thought much of it, but seeing the glasses now, he couldn't help but be reminded once more of a pair of intertwined figures swaying in the dim light…

"I won't say I'm not jealous," Sawamura started with a frown. "Because I am. But…" And then as abruptly as it'd appeared, the frown cleared. In its place, the southpaw grinned. Strangely enough, while the radiant grin was nothing new, Satoru thought that it somehow made the first-year look older. "But nice pitching. Furuya."

Jealous? What did that mean? Sawamura was jealous? Jealous of what?

Not knowing what to say, Satoru simply nodded. Sawamura turned around and began to walk away. His gaze following the southpaw's back—to the water cooler—his thoughts drifted once more to the scene he'd inadvertently come across the night before.

He hadn't known what to make of it then, and he still didn't know what to make of it now. But… maybe it didn't matter. After all, regardless of what they did off the field, once on the field, they were his teammates.

"You've finally stood there," said a voice—Miyuki. Taking off his helmet, he looked straight at Satoru. "At the starting line of the ace dispute."

Satoru felt his body going flush with lightness. Though he'd come to a stop, as the rest of the team members brushed past him into the dugout, someone grabbed Satoru by the arm and pulled him down with them.

No matter what, he thought to himself as a shoulder jostled lightly into his chest, he didn't want to step down from the mound.

But even more than that, he never wanted to have to leave this team.

"Bottom of the ninth, Sakurazawa High's offense starts with batting ninth, center fielder, Karino-kun."

Everyone on their team had crowded the railing of their dugout, calling out their support. It was all
they could do at this point. They'd held on, but at the top of the seventh, Akira had given up two runs, and then in the following inning, another run. And now, at the bottom of the ninth with Seidō leading three to zero, this was their final chance to score.

The entire game, they'd been lying in wait for an opportunity to rear its head. For a chance to come, the way it always had in their past games.

On the third strike, Karino swung through empty air, the weight of his bat dropping him to a knee.

"**Number one, left fielder, Furuki-kun.**"

It hadn't really been anyone's fault that they'd been scored upon. While Akira had managed to keep his calm the whole game and throw his knuckleballs to the best of his ability, the pitch did have its weak points. As for the relay from center—well, they'd already known that Karino's arm wasn't the best, and it was amazing that it'd been as close as it had been.

On a full count, Furuki let the next ball pass. Strike.

"**Number two, third baseman, Tamukai-kun.**"

Waiting. Waiting. It was a game for the weak, but they were weak. They'd known that and made their playing style their own, and that was enough. Or at least, had been enough.

Akira felt his hands ball into fists by his side. He'd thought for a delirious moment that they could get to Kōshien. That even a public, non-recruiter school like theirs could dream. That a miracle could happen in their final summer. That the gods were on their side.

*Clang!*

The ball spiraled high in the air. In that instant, the entire stadium seemed to have fallen silent. Was it a moment of prayer?

When the ball landed in the catcher's mitt, the sound of the impact seemed to echo jarringly all the way to the dugout. Around them, cheers exploded across the stadium. With grins stretching from ear to ear, the rest of Seidō's team members piled on top of their pitcher.

"**Game, set!**"

He felt dizzy. He'd pitched for nine innings straight, after all. With all the adrenaline draining from his body, it was suddenly all he could do to walk. Slowly, Akira joined his team members in walking out onto the sunlit field. In a dim sort of way, he thought he could hear the others crying, but for some reason, tears didn't come to him.

This whole time, he'd been thinking about it the wrong way, it seemed. The gods weren't on anyone's side.

"**Seidō, three to zero. Bow!**"

"**Thank you for the game!**" they shouted, bowing. The end-game siren began to ring shrilly throughout the stadium.

His entire body feeling numb, Akira stepped forward to shake hands—and all of a sudden, realized that he was facing Seidō's captain, the cleanup who'd left him shaken in the fourth inning.

"Good game," said the other boy, gripping his hand firmly.
Akira nodded. Letting go of the hand, he turned around. As he did so, he didn't know why he said what he said next. But he did, in a half mumbling voice. "...It was a miracle we got here, anyways."

To his surprise, however, Seidō's captain must've heard, for he responded, "No...no one gets this far on a miracle."

At that, Akira froze. Then, he spun back around—but Seidō's captain had already turned his attention elsewhere, smiling at his teammates.

Slowly, he looked around at his own teammates. To his left, Inamoto's head was bowed and his shoulders shaking. To his right, Hidokoro was biting down on his lip as tears dripped from his eyes. Akira's gaze dropped to his partner's bare hands—they were callused and bruised, and as familiar as his own. It was only natural, considering how many hundreds of hours they'd spent practicing together, fumbling after the ball. But, he supposed, those times were now over.

His eyes finally starting to sting, Akira closed them. "...Yeah," he said thickly to no one in particular. "Yeah."

Flush from their victory, as they squabbled excitedly amongst each other, the team rushed to clear out of the dugout. The next game in the stadium would be between Inashiro and Sensen—not only would it be a battle between a champion and a veteran team that everyone was eager to see, but it would also determine their opponent in the finals.

By the time Kazuya had finished packing, the only ones left in the dugout were...

Digging his heels into the ground, Sawamura tugged on a blue bag. "Chris-senpai, please allow me the honor of carrying this for you!"

"I can handle it, Sawamura," Chris replied, holding firmly on to his bag.

Taking in the scene, Kazuya shook his head in exasperation. "Oi, Sawamura. How many times do I have to tell you? You're in no condition to be helping others right now."

"I feel fine though," the first-year insisted.

"Really?" Kazuya held up his own equipment bag. "Then why don't you carry this for me?"

To his surprise however, Sawamura stuck his tongue out and giving up on Chris' bag, wordlessly exited the dugout alone. Kazuya felt himself sweat. Was he upset over Operation Chris?

"It must've been frustrating for him, being unable to do anything the whole game," said Chris, looking after Sawamura's retreating back.

Kazuya rubbed the back of his neck. "...sorry for sticking him on you, Chris-senpai."

Chris shrugged. "I didn't do much. It was mostly Kominato's efforts." He paused—and then smiled in a knowing sort of way. "And there wasn't much either of us could do to stop him during your at-bats, anyways."

Before Kazuya could respond, Sawamura bounded back into the dugout, waving his hand furiously. "Chris-senpai! The coach's looking for you."

"Got it." Nodding at Kazuya, Chris picked up his pace and left.

As the sound of Chris' footsteps faded, Kazuya saw Sawamura sneak a shifty look at him. His feet
coming to a stop, he adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder. He waited, fighting the urge to smile.

"…well?" Sawamura said huffily. "Aren't you coming, Miyuki-senpai?"

Taking a step forward, Kazuya brushed the back of his hand against the first year's. "Yeah, I'm coming."

No matter what happened, baseball was his life. It'd been that way for a long time, and he had no plans on changing that. Everything else was secondary.

"What're you staring at me for?" Sawamura muttered. The tips of his ears were glowing red, he noticed.

Kazuya grinned. "You're cute when you're sulking."

"I'm not sulking," Sawamura sulked. Then as if to prove his point, he grabbed Kazuya's hand. Intertwining their fingers together, he held Kazuya's hand up to his face and nuzzled it.

Taken aback but in no way displeased, feeling the warmth of Sawamura's skin, Kazuya felt a shiver ran down his spine.

Baseball was his life.

It'd been that way for a long time. And he had no plans on changing that. But...with someone as crazy about baseball as himself—with this person alone, he thought—maybe, just maybe...

...won't you share it with me?

- Short Omake -

After the game.

Flattening up as much as he could against the dugout wall, Haruichi really wished he hadn't decided to be considerate and let Eijun and Miyuki have their private time.

Chapter End Notes

(Hides my face.) The cheese is unstoppable.

Well that was a somewhat anticlimactic (and short) game lol! And yeah Furuya pitched in the ninth too, so Kawakami didn't actually end up playing. Which may've been for the best considering his state.

For those asking, TTOL will have around 45 chapters total.

Thanks to everyone for reading and commenting!
Meteor

Chapter Summary

The only thing left remaining was his heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Though the summer heat had only grown even more oppressive as the day progressed, there appeared to be no end to the bodies streaming into the already crowded stands of Jingu stadium.

Under the watchful gazes of the Sensen team members in their dugout, the Inashiro team took to the field for their pre-game warmup. As they did so, the volume of the cheers noticeably went up a notch, leaving no doubt as to which team was the prefecture's favorite to win.

"Narumiya-kun!"

"We came to cheer you on!"

"Narumiya!"

"Let's go to Kōshien again!"

Resting his bat on his shoulder, Hideaki glared up at the screaming crowd. "Damn. Why're they cheering only for Mei? This sucks."

"Quit complaining." Tsubasa sounded amused. "He's our ace, after all."

"But he can't get a girlfriend," Shirakawa muttered in his usual dead-pan voice.

Leaning against the railing of their dugout, Carlos drawled, "That's because he's a little boy."

Slam!

Mei held out his glove to receive back the ball. Digging his heel down on the ground to adjust his footing, he next adjusted his cap. Once satisfied, he glanced in the direction of the cheering bleachers and grinned. "Kōshien stadium was nice, but… I really like Jingu stadium too." Starting to rotate his shoulder, he turned to face his catcher. "I wish we played games every day."

"You just don't want to practice." From the opposite side of the bullpen, Masatoshi raised his mitt. "Now, give me another fastball."

Mei felt his grin grow even wider. As blunt and unforgiving as his catcher was, there was none other who could catch his pitches as well. Bringing his hands together, he threw and—slam!—the crisp, clean sound of the catch rang out.

No one on the team would tell it to his face, but Mei knew how much his pitching had stabilized over the past year. All the hellish running he'd done during the off-season had done its job in improving his stamina and core.
As he raised his glove for the ball once more, Mei could feel multiple gazes burning into his back. Even without turning to directly face them, he knew who they belonged to. He'd noticed the blue and white uniformed members of the Seidō team filing into the stadium as soon as they'd come in. No doubt, they were all watching to get as much data on him as possible before their upcoming match in the finals.

*Pupupu!* The inside of his chest going warm with self-satisfaction, Mei began his pitching motion. *You'd better watch closely. I'll change all of your dreams and hopes into despair.*

However, despite his glowing—and deserving, in his opinion—confidence, a sudden thought struck Mei: Was that upstart first-year southpaw of theirs with them too? He'd heard about the injury, and knew he hadn't taken to the mound on that day's match against Sakurazawa.

Mei was loathe to admit it—and he wouldn't ever say it out loud even if it killed him—but during the training camp, he'd been somewhat taken aback after catching sight of the first-year's pitch. It'd been off the field and he'd barely seen the ball. Nonetheless, the late delivery form and the curving trajectory of the ball had left a disgusting feeling in his mouth that Mei couldn't wash out no matter how many times he tried (and he had).

"What's the matter, Mei?" Masatoshi threw back the ball. "You're looking distracted."

"It's nothing, Masa-san," he said lightly.

Grabbed the ball out of the air, Mei released an exhale. A pause—and then he threw again. *Slam!*

Well, it didn't matter who Seidō tried to use in their pitcher relay in the finals. No matter how good your defense was, if you couldn't score, you couldn't win the battle. He'd just shut them all down and secure the win for Inashiro with a squeaky clean 0.00 ERA record.

After all, *he* was Kantō's—if not the nation's—number one southpaw.

"Come get your lunch please!" called out one of the managers. At the sound of her voice, everyone on the Seidō team perked up to see that the managers had lugged in several cardboard boxes.

"We have multiple types, so pick what you want."

"Everyone, over here!"

One of the managers pulled a mischievous grin. "First come, first served!"

Kuramochi's eyes lit up. "Do you have a hamburger set?"

"Can I get a fried chicken one?" Kawakami asked eagerly.

Sawamura began to wave. "Katsu for me!"

While the others began to crowd around the managers, Kazuya looked back out at the field.

Since the end of their game against Sakurazawa, the wind had completely died down, leaving behind in its wake an unmoving, smothering heat. The sun was almost at its peak in the sky.
Kazuya focused in on the figures standing on the field with a hard gaze. It was a good thing their game had been in the morning. As much as Furuya had adjusted to the Tokyo summer, he wouldn't have lasted as long as he had under the day's intolerant heat.

Inashiro versus Sensen—a match between the reigning champions led by the famous Coach Kunitomo, and the veteran quarterfinalist team led by the experienced Coach Ugai. Speaking neutrally, both teams were excellent contenders for winning that summer's right to Kōshien.

Crossing his arms in front of his chest, Kazuya's mouth drew back in a sharp grin. This was the first time in three years Seidō had made it to the finals in the summer stage. Having come this far, he couldn't wait to take either of the teams on. Though if given a choice, of course, he knew that they were all itching to pay Inashiro back for the previous year's semifinal. Amongst the third years, Isashiki and Yūki in particular looked affected, glaring hungrily down at the field.

"Get your drinks here everyone!" cried out a manager beside him, pulling open an icebox.

Momentarily dropping his gaze from the field, Kazuya turned to her. "Can I get a pocari sweat and a ramune?"

It was only ten minutes after everyone had gone that Haruichi finally managed to unstick himself from the dugout wall.

As he slowly made his way to the stadium bleachers, several hurrying passersby bumped into him, offering a brief apology when they saw his uniform, but he paid them no mind. Feeling numb, he couldn't help but think that—in some ways—this was even more awkward than the time he'd discovered that Maezono had a thing for girls with glasses.

Emerging into the bright and open area of the stands, Haruichi squinted from behind his bangs as his eyes adjusted to the searing sunlight. However, before he could regain his bearings, he heard a pair of rapidly approaching footsteps. And then—

"Harucchi! Where were you?" rang out the voice of the one person he ostensibly didn't know how to face at the moment.

Haruichi almost jumped. Turning around to face his friend, he managed to stammer out instead, "I uh...went to the bathroom."

Eijun raised an eyebrow. "For that long?" Suddenly, a look of understanding flashed across his face, and he nodded sagely. "Oh, I see. Well, maybe you'd better stay away from the fried chicken sets then."

Haruichi felt himself sweat. "...Right."

The gods must have taken pity on him, for Kuramochi chose that moment to jab a pair of wooden chopsticks in Eijun's direction. "Oi Sawamura, get me a drink."

"The drinks are closer to you than they are to me," Eijun pointed out.

"Yeah?" Kuramochi cracked his knuckles. "Guess what else's close to you?"

Eijun shot up to his feet. "Will that be a water or an oolong tea for you, senpai?"

As the southpaw scurried over to the icebox, Haruichi cast a look around—but from what he could tell, Miyuki was absorbed in his own lunch and chatting casually with Chris.
Haruichi's brow furrowed. Had he misunderstood what he'd seen? Nothing seemed out of the ordinary between the two. And yet—

"You're cute when you sulk."

His face starting to heat up again from the memory, Haruichi ducked his head. It was a good thing his bangs covered his face, because he was sure it must be red from second-hand embarrassment.

Having unmistakably laid witness to those words, unless he was being punked on camera, he couldn't be misunderstanding. No matter how close two friends were, that wasn't something you dropped around casually. Especially coming from the team's catcher Miyuki of all people—no, there was definitely something there. And then what Eijun had done afterwards with Miyuki's hand only sealed the deal.

Once the initial blow of shock was past, however...Haruichi had to admit he wasn't exactly surprised. The signs had been there. Despite his niggling suspicions, he'd dismissed the idea before, because, well, that'd mean they were—Haruichi blushed—well, gay.

After a brief flare of resurging embarrassment, an unsettling sense of shame lodged in his chest. Haruichi scratched his chin. So what if they were...? From the way Eijun and Miyuki were obviously hiding (or at least making an attempt to) their relationship, they clearly didn't want anyone else to know. And that was just fine with Haruichi. Though if Eijun ever approached him about it, he thought to himself with growing conviction, he'd support his friend as much as he was able.

"Aren't you going to eat?" came Furuya's voice.

Haruichi looked up to see the other first-year staring at him with a concerned look (it would've appeared blank to any passing bystander but he had long gotten adept at reading his friend's facial expressions).

"Sorry," he said, getting back up to his feet. "I am."

If even Furuya was asking Haruichi if he was okay, he was definitely letting himself get too flustered by it. He would carry on around his friend as he always had before, he decided—or try his best to. At the very least, Haruichi thought to himself with an embarrassed half-smile, even if he slipped up, he could count on Furuya to not find out.

"We apologize for the wait. We will now begin game two of the semifinals between Inashiro Vocational High School and Sensen High School."

It'd been a while since Eijun had last seen this particular Inashiro regular team all gathered like this on a field. In fact, if the bittersweet taste of nostalgia filling his mouth wasn't a lie, it'd been over two years.

As the players took to their positions, he squeezed his clasped hands together.

_I want to play._

But no. He had to be patient. Their game wasn't for another two days, and he had to recover as much as possible by then.

"How're you feeling?" Chris asked. Eijun turned to the third-year to see that he was smiling in a knowing way.

Still, Eijun was a little surprised by how much he was looking forward to the game. He'd always wanted to pay them back, of course, since it was something he'd never gotten the chance to do in his original time. But somewhere deep down, he'd wondered whether he'd still be haunted by some of the doubt resulting from the outcome of that game. While his time with the yips had ultimately helped him grow as a pitcher, it would be a lie to claim it wasn't still a painful memory for Eijun.

And yet, at that moment, all he wanted was to be standing on that mound with his eyes fixed on Miyuki's outstretched mitt.

"Top of the first inning, Inashiro Industrial's offense starts with batting leadoff, center fielder, Kamiya-kun."

As the foreign-looking boy set up in the box, a group of school girls sitting several rows below the Seido team erupted into cheers.

"Kamiya-kun!"

"Carlos-kun, hit a home run!"

Behind him, Kuramochi made a tching sound, and hearing that, Eijun grinned wryly. After all, this was still nowhere near the level of fan craziness that would ensue once Kōshien began.

Thinking back, it'd been a shock for them all when they saw Inashiro fall in the championship finals. Having made it that far, it'd seemed inevitable that Narumiya and his team would really take the throne. But at the end of it all, the name of the conquering team—the name that'd been uttered countless times throughout the nation for days on end following the game—hadn't been theirs. No, it'd been...

Eijun paused.

It'd been...

Suddenly, a sick throb split his head, and Eijun stopped short. His vision momentarily fragmenting, his head fell back. As though looking through a haze, he could make out two suns in the sky where there should've been one. His grip on his bottle slackened. With a dull clattering sound, it dropped to the ground. The remaining ramune splashed over his sneakers.

Then as quickly as it'd come, the throbbing faded. Before anyone could react, Eijun bent down and picked up the bottle. "Sorry, my fingers slipped," he managed to say out loud.

The others returned their attention to the game. And as should have been the case, there was only one sun in the sky once more.

Looking down at his hand, Eijun could feel something coil in his stomach. His throat dry, he swallowed hard.

What was that...?

Clang!

Throwing aside the bat, Hirai began running to first. Sensen's third baseman dashed forward, scooping up the skidding grounder in his glove. Twisting, he threw it to first and –
"Out!"

Crossing his arms behind his head, Mei let out a noisy exhale. "Really, Tsubasa-kun!"

Wearing a look of disappointment, the second baseman wordlessly jogged back to the dugout.

"Number 8, left fielder, Soyogi-kun."

"Neither team's put a run on the board yet," said Yabe, scratching his head.

Yoshizawa's eyes narrowed. "Their baseball is boring, but definitive."

Midway through strapping on his shin guards, Masatoshi paused. "That pitcher's arm swing and pitch angle all make full use of his height."

"Bah!" Mei burst out, waving a dismissive hand. "He's just tall. All you have to do – "

"Out!" His hand dropping by his side, Mei's lips thinned. "Three outs! Change!" Grabbing his glove, he sullenly got to his feet.

The dirt crunched under his feet as he stepped out of the dugout. But before he could take another step, he heard the audible sound of cracking. Mei turned to see Coach Kunitomo staring at him with his usual chilly gaze.

"You know what to do," said the coach.

"Bottom of the third inning, and Sensen High's offense starts with batting eighth, Konagayakun."

Pushing off the rubber, Narumiya threw, flinging his arm deep toward the ground. The ball sped toward the batter, who swung and –

The umpire pumped his fist. "Strikeout!"

As Inashiro's team members began to stream back into their dugout, the crowd below them roared. Leaning back, Kazuya glanced at the scoreboard. Though Inashiro had cycled through their roster once without scoring a run from Sensen's gigantic curveball pitcher, the second time through, their lineup had exploded.


"With breaking balls mixed in, it's not going to be easy to hit those pitches..."

Ryōsuke smiled somewhat dangerously. "Yūki was the only one who hit a double off of him last year."

A flash of yellow suddenly caught Kazuya's eye. Straightening up, he looked down at the field to see that it was none other than Narumiya passing near the wire fence, looking for all appearances like a prince gracing the common folk with his presence. It seemed that the southpaw was only glancing up at the crowd—but just as Kazuya realized who it was, their eyes met.

After a beat, though his eyes remained as cold as ice, Narumiya's mouth curled up in a crooked grin.
Without any further acknowledgement, he turned, and rejoined the rest of his teammates.

None of the others seemed to have noticed, but Kazuya wasn't surprised. It'd most likely been for his benefit, after all.

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While Kazuya wasn't sure how the other boy had gotten his number, he'd decided to play along and show up at the agreed-upon spot. With that said, he'd prepared himself for anything, but when he turned the corner and saw who was waiting for him, he still found himself taken aback.

"Well, well…" Coming to a stop, Kazuya glanced from face to face. "What's with the gathering of the all-stars? Carlos from Jōnan Senior League. Shirakawa from Marugame Senior League. Yamaoka and Yabe from Takahira Senior League." Turning to the one seated above them—the one who'd undoubtedly called them there—he felt a smile creeping on his face. "Did you call them all here…Mei?"

Narumiya flashed a grin. "That's right. And you too, Kazuya. If you come with me, I can form my ultimate team."

Kazuya laughed wryly.

Shirakawa—a face he in particular recognized from Edogawa's games against Marugame—turned away in obvious disdain. "I don't really care if you're the catcher, but Narumiya wants you." Since the shortstop had played on the same Senior League team as one of the best catchers in the prefecture, Kazuya didn't blame him for the lack of interest.

"Inashiro invited you, too, right, Kazuya?" Narumiya raised a hand towards Kazuya in an obvious gesture of cooperation. "Why don't we make the ultimate team together? If we all get on the same team, national domination won't be just a pipe dream."

So that was Narumiya had been plotting? To gather the best players in Tokyo and sweep the nation?

"Inashiro's Coach Kunitomo has a lot of experience under his belt and they have the best equipment in Tokyo," Carlos' eyes narrowed. "It's a great environment, too."

"And above all, you won't have to play against Narumiya," said Shirakawa. His eyes flickered to Kazuya's. "You're in, too. Right, Miyuki Kazuya?"

For all its audacity, it wasn't a bad plan. It was ambitious, sure—but from what Kazuya knew of Narumiya and the other gathered players, he thought they had a good shot at it. And once upon a time, he may've even agreed to join them.

His mouth lingering in a smile, Kazuya glanced down at the tiled ground. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry, but you see, I already got an invite from Seidō a while ago. I can't join you guys."

"Wha?" Yabe exclaimed in a tone that couldn't have been more incredulous if Kazuya had turned down a winning lottery ticket. "You being serious right now?"

His expression unchanged, Narumiya finally stood up. "Seidō…huh? They've only made Kōshien once since their old coach quit. Compared to what Coach Kunitomo has achieved, Coach Kataoka is just way too green."

Kazuya scratched his neck. "Well, it's not really about that." Nor was it something he'd ever say out loud—at least, not to the ones who'd gathered here. "Inashiro's a team with a bunch of all-stars like
you guys, right?" His hand stopped, and he looked straight at Narumiya. "So… I'd rather face you as an opponent."

Looking wholly unsurprised, Narumiya's smile widened.

"Are you stupid?!" said Yabe.

"Oh, you're too kind," Kazuya said lightly.

Yabe gnashed his teeth agitatedly. "It's not a compliment!"

"Haha!" Kazuya snickered—guys like Yabe were always so easy to mess with.

"Kazuya," Narumiya called down. "I'm gonna ask you one last time — "

"Sorry, no," he broke in immediately.

A beat passed—and then the southpaw's smile turned crooked. Kazuya could tell: The next time they saw each other on the field, Narumiya would stop at nothing to crush him.

His business there done, ignoring the others' pointed stares, he turned on his heel to leave. Likewise, Mei.

"Top of the seventh inning, and Inashiro's offense begins with batting fourth, catcher, Harada-kun."

Living up to his reputation as the center pillar of the team, Harada stepped up to the plate. Towering in frame and built like a rock, he was by far the most intimidating member of that team. And acting as Inashiro's captain, catcher, and cleanup all at once, with that man around, had Kazuya gone to that school, he probably would've been sitting on that bench.

Yet even so, if it hadn't been for that one decisive game in the first year of middle school—that game when Kazuya first tasted defeat on the baseball diamond, then he very well may have been cheering in that dugout with the rest of them.

His gaze leaving the field, Kazuya looked down at the other uniformed members of his team sitting in the rows below—at Chris, sitting with a straight back beside him—and then further down, at Sawamura, who appeared to have fallen asleep.

That he was sitting here in this seat, in this uniform, in this proximity… Perhaps, he thought to himself with a smile, it'd all been decided on that solitary summer day.

The siren signaling the end of the game resounded through the stadium, and the watching audience burst into respectful applause for both the teams. The cheering voices, however, overwhelmingly supported the team that had emerged victorious.

"Mei! Nice game!"

"Inashiro's the best!"

As the Inashiro team members ran to the fence to thank their cheer team, Narumiya pumped a victorious fist into the air. "Yeah!"
"Just one more win!"
"Masa-san! Let's go again this year!"
"Yamaoka!"
"Yoshizawa!"
"Mei-chan!"
"Narumiya-kun!"
"Mei!"

Surrounded by voices clearly favoring their upcoming opponent, the air had grown notably tense around the silent Seidō team.

Finally, Isashki got to his feet. Glaring at the uniformed figures, his fingers were twitching, as though impatiently reaching for a bat. "The winners go to Kōshien. It's the best game to pay them back for last year."

Amidst the sound of excited post-game chatter, with both of the day's games over, they got up from their seats. As they began filing out, someone moved past in the row behind Satoru, jostling against his side—and abruptly, he flinched.

"Who's going to the bathroom?"

While the others split off, Satoru made to join the main group leave the stadium—but before he could, to his dismay, Miyuki stopped him. "Furuya, you don't need to go to the bathroom?"

Keeping his face blank, he shook his head no. At the same time, he casually covered his elbow with a hand. Miyuki paused, and in that brief span of time, Satoru felt a bead of sweat slide down his temple—but then to his relief, the catcher shrugged. "Alright then."

Taking care not to bump into anyone else, Satoru following the rest of the team out of the stadium where they were greeted by straggling bystanders cheering for them.

"Seidō! Make it to Kōshien this year!"
"I'll be cheering you guys on in two days!"
"Just one more win!"

The bus had pulled up by the back of the stadium. Carefully loading his sports bag into the luggage compartment, Satoru was the first one to enter the bus. The doors hissed open, and a breath of cool air swept into his face. Climbing gratefully in, it was only after he had found his seat that he gingerly released his hold on his elbow.

He blinked down at it as dull pain laced up his arm. It was discrete—but it had swollen and changed color into a tender pink.

_Since when did it...?_

Hearing someone else beginning to step up the stairwell, Satoru turned further inward. Closing his eyes, he pretended to be sleeping. Only once he'd heard them pass by and then heard the telltale
thumping of a body sliding into a seat, did he open his eyes once more.

Scrutinizing his elbow with an increasingly uneasy eye, Satoru felt his heart begin to beat faster. What would happen, he wondered, if the team found out?

While Miyuki waited outside in the corridor, Eijun and the others entered the bathroom. Situating himself in front of a urinal, he zipped down his fly. Finally, after a moment, he cleared his throat. "Ah—Kuramochi-senpai, I'm trying to remember but, uh, do you know who won this spring's Kōshien?"

Without missing a beat, he heard the shortstop grunt, "Tsuruga kehi. What, you weren't even watching?"

"Oh, yeah, hahaha, right..." Hiding his disappointment, Eijun finished his business in silence.

The name of the team wasn't ringing any bells. Granted, he'd always preferred playing baseball to watching it, but he'd started keeping up with at least the Kōshien games once he'd gotten into Seidō. He'd been hoping to find a cue to probing his memory about the summer Kōshien of his first year—but it might as well have been a blank page.

Standing in front of the sink, Eijun watched the cold water rushing out of the faucet. Behind him, the door to a stall swung open and soon, Haruichi began washing his hands in the next sink.

As though caught in a daze, he stared into the torrent of water, pounding down onto his hands before slipping away down the drain.

Dimly, Eijun registered the dull squeak of a faucet knob shutting off, and then –

"Eijun-kun, is something the matter?" he heard Haruichi ask. "You've been washing your hands for a while now."

Forcing a grin to his lips, Eijun shook his head. "It's nothing. I just... there's something on my hand that's not coming off, is all."

Nodding, Haruichi left the bathroom, and then it was just Eijun standing there.

What was this uneasiness permeating throughout his body? The doctors had warned Eijun that there would be side effects following his concussion. That was why he'd been extra sensitive to light and prone to headaches. But...back during the game, when he'd dropped his bottle, it'd felt different. It hadn't felt like how he'd felt when the sun seared his vision. Instead... Eijun paused. Instead...it'd felt similar to that time during the Akikawa game, when he'd lost control and thrown a wild pitch.

"Oi, Sawamura." Kuramochi popped his head inside the door. "Hurry it up, we're keeping everyone waiting."

"Sorry," he called back. Splashing his face with some of the water, Eijun turned off the faucet. Wiping his hands on his pants, he turned.

And then just as he took a step forward, the world around him split into pieces.

Like a looking glass fracturing into spidery cracks, his vision fragmented and suddenly, he was no longer gazing at the door but rather, down at his body. His body, which had slumped down on the counter.
Simultaneously however, as though zooming rapidly out, Eijun was losing focus of his body in the bathroom. The corridors, the stadium, the city—everything was growing smaller and smaller, until it was all nothing but a mass of threads that threaded through a black empty space. It extended back for as far as the eye could see, thick and jumbled, disappearing into nothingness. Just ahead of him however, the threads were unraveling, falling apart at the seams.

But suddenly that too disappeared, and instead, Eijun found himself floating in an open sky. Or at least at first, it seemed like he was floating. Before he knew it however, he realized he'd been falling, picking up speed in tiny, exponential increments. Soon, he was falling so fast that the stars that'd been shining around him became nothing but blurs of light, and the air around him had grown fiery hot. He was plummeting, he was disintegrating. Before his very eyes, his hands crumbled away into sparks of light. Next to go were his feet. And then his arms, his legs, even his face. The only thing left remaining was his heart, beating, faster and faster until—

"Sawamura!" he heard Kuramochi yell.

Feeling as though he was breaking through a cold, ocean surface, Eijun's eyes snapped open. Searing light making its way back in, he felt the familiar burning throb in his head.

He was back in the bathroom again, with his knees planted firmly on the floor. He was whole again. His breath having caught somewhere in his chest, he was panting. He'd broken out in a cold sweat.

Kuramochi, his face stricken, looked back at him, and distantly, he realized only a few seconds must have passed.

_Bang!_


Taking in a deep breath, Eijun exhaled. Taking care not to tremble and pushing aside Miyuki's arm, he clambered back up to his feet on his own. "I'm fine. The…" Casting his eyes quickly about, his gaze landed on a white and yellow warning sign. "The floor must've been wet. I just slipped. Sorry."

Chapter End Notes

We haven't seen Narumiya in this fic since before the Yakushi game—it's been a while, indeed. I look forward to writing more from his perspective. As for Sensen... I've got nothing against the team, but as I'm not very interested in them, I elected to skimp on their POV. Apologies to anyone who was looking forward to it.

This chapter's got a lot of scenes that were copied verbatim from the anime. I hope some of it was still refreshing/new for you all anyways.

Lastly, if I opened a poll (FFN) called "Who should bottom, Miyuki or Sawamura?" would you vote in it?

…Just kidding.

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I'm sure there are other posts online with the same information, but I will reiterate it here to the best of my understanding.

To start things off, here is a (basically identical to the one in chapter 6) timeline of major tournaments in Japanese high school baseball:

- March: Spring Kōshien ("Senbatsu")
- April: New school year begins
- July: Summer regional qualifiers
- August: Summer Kōshien
- October: Fall tournament
- November: Meiji Jingu tournament
- Winter: Off-season, school year ends

"Kōshien," named for the stadium it takes place in, is the biggest event in Japanese high school baseball. It takes place twice a year, once in the spring and once in the summer. It is a 2-week national-level tournament that pits regional champion teams from all over Japan against one another, each one seeking to be crowned as the ultimate victor in a quest for "national domination" (全国制覇 zenkoku seiha).

In Summer Kōshien, every prefecture in Japan has a representing team. In addition, Tokyo and Hokkaidō have 2, making a grand total of 49 teams. To gain the right represent their prefecture, the team has to win in a single-elimination tournament—in this case, the summer regional qualifiers. In the anime, what we saw of Seidō in the summer were these qualifiers. What Inashiro went on to afterwards was the actual Kōshien.

Spring Kōshien works a little differently. First of all, there are fewer teams (32), which is why as we see in the anime, West and East Tokyo teams all participate in one big tournament. Next, teams are invited to participate by a selective committee every year. Whether a team receives an invite or not is dependent on their performance in the fall tournament. Usually, a team that was victorious in their regional fall tournament will receive an invite (unless there is a huge scandal). Teams that didn't win but showed a strong performance may also receive an invite.

The Meiji Jingu tournament is a lesser-known tournament that follows the fall tournament. All the champion teams that won their regional fall tournaments participate in it. The winning team is guaranteed a spot in Spring Kōshien, and their prefecture also gains an extra invite for Spring Kōshien.

Hope that clears up any confusion.
Red thread

Chapter Summary

Or perhaps the catcher had rubbed off on him more than he'd expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tension coiled thick in the air of the Spirit dorm dining room, as all of the players' attentions focused on the glowing TV screen in the corner. On the screen, a white-uniformed pitcher with bleached hair threw, and the batter swung through empty air.

Chris flipped a page in his notebook. "In the end, he only threw four changeups. Then six forkballs, nine sliders, and his main pitch was a fastball."

"Sensen's batters were by no means weak," Isashiki grounded out. "But he shut them down completely."

The pitcher on the screen threw again. This time, the batter helplessly watched it pass the plate.

"That's a crossfire pitch into right-handed batters," said Chris grimly. "He used that pitch well."

"Crossfire," Sawamura echoed. "That sounds...familiar."

In the midst of turning a page, Chris stopped. Kazuya turned around to see that Kominato's mouth had dropped open. "Oi, Sawamura, what're you talking about? You've thrown it a few times too, with your cutter."

A look of faint surprise flickered across Sawamura's face, before fading away into something that could only be described as resignation. "Ah...right."

From across the room, Kuramochi shot a glare at Kazuya, who shifted in his chair.

"So?" Ryōsuke looked at Yūki, and the others followed suit. "What do you think, after last summer?"

Yūki, who'd been sitting silently with his arms folded across his chest, gave a nod. "We have two batters in the front who can disrupt the opponent. We have batters who can adapt to the situation—and most importantly, everyone swings with confidence. This year, we will definitely be able to take Narumiya down." At his words, the gathered team members grinned at their captain, the prior tension nothing but a memory. "So let's play our baseball until the end."

Everyone—except for Furuya, who looked around in confusion and pushed back his chair to belatedly join them—burst to their feet. "Yeah!"

Kazuya smiled. He had to hand it to Yūki: Their captain sure knew how to rouse everyone's spirits. He could understand how Yūki had been unanimously voted to the role.

Once the racket had died down, the post-game meeting came to an end. As the others began to leave
the room, Kazuya caught a glimpse of a head of messy brown hair attempting to slip out the door. Just as he opened his mouth to call out his name, he heard Coach Kataoka's gravelly voice do it for him.


Wearing an indecipherable expression, Sawamura stepped into place next to Chris. Beside the coach, Rei folded her arms below her chest. "Sawamura-kun, how've you been feeling?"

"Good." In spite of his words, his voice sounded less than enthused. "The sunlight's gotten better and my head doesn't ache that much anymore."

Rei exchanged glances with the coach, before turning to Kazuya. "How about you, Miyuki-kun? Chris? Have you noticed anything?"

"He does seem better," said Chris carefully. "However, I think he should make another visit to the doctor tomorrow to be sure."

"Of course," said Rei, pushing her glasses frame up.

"Miyuki," said Coach Kataoka. "What do you think?"

"I'm of the same mind as Chris-senpai," he answered.

"Why is that? Have you noticed anything?"

"…I believe it'd be best to exercise as much caution as possible."

There was a pause as the coach's eyes pierced into Kazuya. He felt a bead of sweat form at his temple. Then, Coach Kataoka nodded. "Very well then. Sawamura—provided the doctor finds nothing wrong, you'll play in the final."

He had expected Sawamura to show at least some excitement at that, but to his surprise, he only jerked his head. "Yes sir."

At a nearby table, there was a clatter as Kuramochi and Ryōsuke—who'd been discussing the recording—got up from their seats. "Ah, Ryō-san, are you free after this?"

"Hmm, I suppose," said Ryōsuke, just before slipping out the door. Kuramochi moved to follow, but before he did, he turned around. Casting a significant glance in Sawamura's direction, he glared at Kazuya again, who felt his jaw set.

Even without you telling me, I know.

Words couldn't do justice to what he'd felt earlier that day, when he opened the door and saw Sawamura kneeling on the bathroom floor. At the sight, his chest had seized up in actual pain, as though something inside it was being held in an iron grip. What'd caused it however, hadn't been so much the posture, but Sawamura's face.

Kazuya had seen Sawamura depressed. He'd seen him uneasy, confused, disappointed, lost, furious, anxious. And every now and then, he'd spotted fleeting moments of fragility in the other boy. But at that moment, for the first time, Sawamura had looked past that point. He'd…been broken.

After that, once they got on the bus, Sawamura closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep the whole ride. Kazuya knew he was awake from the unevenness of his breathing, but couldn't find it within
himself to approach him. Sawamura had insisted that he'd simply slipped, and it was true that he did
seem fine after that.

However, at the same time, it wasn't as though Kazuya could just let it by. He was Sawamura's
catcher—and perhaps more, now.

With the meeting dismissed, Sawamura began to head to the door. Kazuya raised a hand to the back
of his neck, rubbing it. "Sawamura." The first-year paused. "Come with me to my room for a b—"
He stopped short as the other boy held up his hand, palm-first, to his face.

"Sorry, senpai," said Sawamura, with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I promised Harucchi I'd
play catch with him."

Kazuya didn't miss the way the younger Kominato glanced in surprise at his friend, but he didn't say
anything. Instead, rooted to the spot, he could only watch as the first-years left.

What could you say to that?

Lean back in his chair, Mei let out a big yawn. "I'm so sleepy. Can I sleep now?"

"It's still only eight…"

"Only if you've memorized the data on the Seidō batters," Masatoshi said irritable. "The average
score for their past three games is 6 runs, and 7.5 for the two before today's. Unlike our previous
opponents, their batters are at a national level."

Smirking, Mei folded his hands behind his head. "Then they'll be the perfect warm-up for Kōshien."

Masatoshi scowled. "That's the kind of overconfidence that'll—"

"First batter," Mei began loudly, cutting him off. "Kuramochi's speed is something to worry about,
but that's only if he gets on base. The real threat's the next batter, Kominato-san, since he can hit any
pitch. Third, Isashiki-san often swings from the first base, even if it's a ball. Masuko-san, in the five-
hole position, is good against fastballs. I also need to worry about Kazuya if he's up when Seidō's in
a position to score. Masuko-san, in the five-hole position, is good against fastballs. I also need to worry
about Kazuya if he's up when Seidō's in a position to score. But... the biggest threat on their team is their
cleanup and captain, Tetsu-san."

Mei lowered his chair, sitting up straighter. "He got a clean one off of me last year, too. If I can get
him out, we can build momentum." He glanced at Masatoshi. "Do I need to know anything else?"

Looking resigned, Masatoshi closed his eyes. "That's enough." Which was high praise from his
catcher. Pleased, Mei grinned. "Make sure you get a massage before you sleep."

"Okey dokey," he said. Rising to his feet, he left the room. Closing the door shut, he began to
saunter toward his room. While it was a double, he had it all to himself that year.

Mei hadn't missed the way the other two were gawking at his back. But despite what everyone else
on the team thought, it wasn't as though he went into a match completely in the dark about the batters
of the opposing team. He really had been making sure to keep tabs on everyone that he found
interesting.

It was just that, until recently, Mei hadn't found other batters particularly interesting. After all, for as
long as he'd been playing baseball, his pitching on its own had always been enough that it didn't
matter who the batter was.

As he'd learned the previous summer however, the stage at Kōshien was different.
Entering his room, Mei didn't bother to turn on the lights. Climbing up to the top bunk, he sat down, leaning his head back against the wall. After a minute, finding the moonlight too bright, he grabbed his covers and pulled it over his head.

While Kōshien had been different, he too was a different person now from who he'd been a year ago. *Overconfidence?* Mei knew that he talked big for someone of his stature. But there was no way he'd fall here, not when he'd come this far. Not when he hadn't gotten his revenge. Not when he had yet to see what the view looked like from the lonely peak of the nation.

The night had grown late, but Kunitomo didn't move from his armchair. Resting his head against his hand, he watched the recording of their upcoming opponent's quarterfinal game. Halfway through the fourth inning, the door opened, and the club president Hayashida came in. Looking unsurprised to see Kunitomo still in the office, he joined him.

After a few minutes of silent observation, Hayashida asked, "Will they be using Sawamura in the final, you think?"

Using the remote control, Kunitomo paused the screen, letting it stop on a still of the southpaw winding up. "I can't say for sure. It depends on the severity of his injury. However, we will prepare for the match under the assumption that he'll be pitching."

Unpausing the video, he watched the first-year finish his throwing motion. His brow furrowed. He'd been wondering it for a while now: Where had Sawamura come from, and how had Seidō gotten their hands on him? His pitching form was consistent and stable on a level that took years of punishing training, and polished in a way that suggested careful guidance. And yet no one had ever heard of the boy until his debut this spring with Seidō.

"Even if Sawamura does play, I'm sure they'll be switching pitchers often," said Hayashida.

Kunitomo's eyes narrowed.

Kataoka's pitcher relay strategy…while it made sense on paper, he'd never found it particularly appealing. He put his faith in the more traditional strategy of a single ace carrying the team through a game. Some people argued that a three- or four-legged table was more stable than a single leg—but teams weren't tables. And not all legs were created equal.

"Starting with Sawamura, if we crush Seidō's pitchers…we can win."

Were it not for the crowds of people gathered outside the field fence, it would have seemed like any other day of practice. However, with their minds preoccupied by the upcoming final, the audience soon faded into the background. After a heated session of morning running—or baking, as Nori privately considered it—and batting practice, they had a quick break for lunch. Following that, thankfully, the pitchers and catchers gathered in the bullpen for their own separate sessions.

Unfortunately, with all four of them throwing at the same time, the catchers calling out various pitches, and the coach watching them in his usual if-looks-could-kill manner, Nori was finding it difficult to concentrate.

"Nori, show me a sinker!" Ono called out.

He nodded. Raising his leg, Nori swung his arm around his side, and released the ball—which plummeted to the ground, hitting the dirt. His teeth gritted, Ono dropped his mitt to the ground, catching the ball on its bounce.
"Shoot—sorry!" Nori shouted.

Ono got to his feet and threw back the ball. "It's okay! Your speed's looking good. Just a little higher!"

Catching the ball, Nori adjusted his footing and returned to the rubber. He took in a deep breath. Careful, careful. He had to be careful. His control had to be perfect. His pitches weren't blisteringly fast like Furuya's, nor did they have the power and unpredictability of Sawamura's. As a sidearm, if his control was off even by a little, it was game over for him. Nori had come face to face with that reality in the Yakushi game. His nervousness had resulted in Nori throwing the pitch higher by a single ball's width—but that'd been enough for their cleanup to hit it out of the park.

He knew he'd been off ever since then. It was probably why the coach hadn't sent him out in the semifinal game against Sakurazawa. Even though he'd been warming up from the second half, waiting to hear his name being called.

Careful, careful.

Slam!

Glancing to his left, Nori caught sight of Furuya, who'd just thrown a pitch. The bullpen was shaded, but he was sweating profusely. Even as he watched, the first-year raised his sleeve to wipe his brow.

Wait—sleeve…? Why was Furuya wearing his long-sleeved undershirt?

"Slider, next!" Ono called.

Snapping his focus back on the catcher, Nori nodded. He let out a slow exhale. He was in no situation to be letting his attention wander, not when the final was tomorrow.

But even as he thought this, all of a sudden, he heard an all too familiar shout that sent cold chills running down Nori's spine. "Oi, oi, what's this?"

"Yer that stupid brat from that one time. Why're ya in the bullpen?" At the sound of the strong Kansai dialect, Kazuya felt himself sweat.

It can't be.

Turning around, he found that indeed, it could be. The ground seemed to shake under the weight of the boy/man stomping toward them. His face twisted in a look that promised unparalleled pain, he growled, "Don't tell me yer on the first-string team?"

Looking completely unconcerned despite the oozing malice, Sawamura blinked back. "Oh. Chubby-senpai."

Everyone else in the bullpen froze. Breaking free from a stunned pause, Azuma inhaled, blowing himself up to his full towering stature. And then he exploded. "Ya tryna pick a fight, ya twerp?!"

Reaching out with a hammy hand, he grabbed Sawamura by the collar. "I remember ya saying something about not liking famous schools! So what're ya doing at our school?!"

"I don't remember any of that," Sawamura replied dully, his head lolling back and forth as he was shaken.

Kazuya felt a muscle twitch, and took a step forward. "Azuma-senpai."

"What?" growled back his previous roommate.
"He's going to be pitching in tomorrow's final. Could you let him down?"

Azuma stopped. He stared in disbelief at the dangling first-year. "This brat?"

Kazuya didn't blame Azuma for his incredulity. Thinking back—had it really been less than a year ago?—while traces of the boy he'd first met were still present here and there, the Sawamura he had come to know over the months might as well have been a different person.

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"Damn you! You're making fun of me, aren't you!"

Looking at the younger boy's heavy scowl, Kazuya laughed. "Just leave it all to me. I know Azuma-senpai's batting habits well."

"It's got nothing to do with you!" Grabbing Kazuya's hand, the boy—Sawamura, was it?—tried to push him off. "This is between me and him!"

"Is that how you see it?" His voice took on a steely note. "Then…do you plan on playing baseball by yourself?" That obviously struck a chord, as Sawamura froze. "I don't know what kind of baseball you've been playing, but the best pitches are works of art produced by the pitcher and the catcher working as one."

"Works of…art?" Sawamura echoed, still somewhat skeptical, but sounding dazed.

Kazuya hid a smile. The nail was in place. All that was left was to hammer it in.

Stepping back, Kazuya clapped his hand on Sawamura's shoulder. "I'll draw out your best potential. You just need to trust my mitt and throw your best pitches. It's that simple. We can become the best of partners." He thumped the other boy's chest with his mitt. "I'm counting on you, partner."

Sawamura flushed. "O-okay…"

There it was. Well, that'd been easy—as he'd expected. One look at the boy from the country, and it'd been fairly obvious what he needed to say. Now, the only thing left to see was how much of Rei's expectations were warranted.

Settling down in the catcher's box, Kazuya grinned with relish. Let's get this monster-slaying started then.< - >

Their face-off with Azuma had been the first time they'd made a battery. If Kazuya remembered correctly, for the strikeout pitch, Sawamura had thrown the ball straight down the middle of the zone. Thanks in part to the natural movement of his ball, and in part to Azuma's cockiness, the cleanup swung through empty air. Perhaps it'd been the first time he'd ever experienced such a thrill while pitching, for the younger boy then threw his head back and let out a roar of joy.

The Sawamura at that time had only thrown fastballs (or his own breaking version of them). The Sawamura at that time—even though he'd still been in middle school—had, for better or for worse, gotten in Azuma's face. The Sawamura at that time had been impudent. Noisy. Hopelessly naïve, falling for Kazuya's words without a second thought. Were it not for his pure, simple-minded love for baseball, he couldn't have hoped to have matched anyone else on that field that day.

At the sound of Azuma clumping away, Kazuya tore himself away from his thoughts. Back in the
bullpen, he found Sawamura straightening the front of his shirt. Ignoring the stares of the others, without another word, he looked expectantly back at Kazuya. After a moment, he sat back down and set up his mitt.

The Sawamura he saw now might as well have been a different person. And yet undoubtedly, they were one and the same.

It was always dark before he knew it. The days were so long in Tokyo during the summer, it seemed to Satoru that they would never end. But then he looked up and suddenly, the skies were black.

Though practice had ended early, he'd purposely avoided taking a bath until it was late in the evening, past when everyone should've been in their rooms. When he entered the changing room however, he found to his initial dismay another figure standing there.

Noticing the door opening, Kawakami turned around. Drying his hair with a towel, the other pitcher seemed surprised to see him. "You're getting in the bath now? I thought I'd be the last one today."

"Ah...yeah." As he took in Kawakami's friendly expression, for some reason, Satoru felt a stab of what he'd recently come to know as guilt. However, it was accompanied by a sense of puzzlement because while he could recognize it, that didn't mean he understood why he was feeling that way. After a moment, he looked down at the ground.

"Well, g'nite then," said Kawakami, sounding bemused.

"Good night," Satoru said back, relieved. Only when the door had shut behind the other boy did he finally undress.

The air in the bathhouse was foggy with steam. Taking care not to slip on the tiles, Satoru washed first with the shower before settling down in the bath. As the hot water lapped over the tender skin of his wrist, he sighed in contentment. Letting his head fall back against the bath tub wall, he closed his eyes.

He'd hoped that the swelling would calm down over the night. But as soon as he'd opened his eyes that morning and tried moving it, pain had laced through his arm. Despite that, Satoru had somehow managed to get through the whole day without anyone noticing. It'd been rough on his nerves, wondering whether the catchers would notice, since he'd been throwing carefully to avoid flinching in pain—but he'd noticed that everyone seemed distracted that day.

Suddenly, to his surprise, Satoru heard the door opening. His eyes flashed open, and met those of one of the worst people he could've come across at that moment.

"Ah, Furuya," said Chris, nodding in greeting.

Satoru sunk further into the bath, until the water came up to just below his nose.

With neither being particularly prone to making small talk, it was silent as Chris washed himself. Raising his head out of the water only when he needed to breathe, Satoru wondered if his wrist's coloring was visible through the bath water.

Thankfully, when Chris entered the bath, he sat on the other side of the tub as Satoru. Putting a towel over his head, Chris leaned back against the wall. Finally starting to relax, Satoru had just closed his eyes again when the older boy's voice spoke up, echoing in the steam. "You were throwing carefully in the bullpen today."
Immediately, Satoru tensed—but the third-year didn't look accusatory. "Ah...yes." He stopped there. However, while most people would've let it go there, Chris continued to look at him, so he added, "Since I've been told I...need to pace myself better."

"I see."

Satoru paused, fumbling for the words to say. Chris waited. "Though...I don't know if I'll even get to play in tomorrow's game."

A splash of water. "I'd thought you had more conviction than that," said Chris. Satoru didn't respond, too lost for words—and the older boy smiled. "You've been trying hard to support the team. The coach hasn't missed that."

Something twisted uncomfortably in his chest. Under the water, Satoru clasped his hand over his wrist. "...Yeah."

Mashing the attack buttons of his controller, Yōichi leaned closer to the TV. Gritting his teeth, he glanced at his health bar, which was rapidly plummeting into the red.

"C'mon, c'mon ~"

Knock, knock.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the screen, he called out, "Sawamura, get the door."

There was no response.

"I think he's sleeping," said Endō, sounding equally distracted.

Just then, the player on the screen, dealing a forward heavy punch, cancelled into an uppercut. "Shoryuken!"

Before Yōichi's despairing eyes, the last remnants of his health bar disappeared.

"K.O!" Letting out a roar of defeat, Yōichi's character, Zangief, dropped to the ground.

Endō pushed up his glasses in smug victory. Yōichi grunted, and put down his controller. Turning around, he looked in the direction of their bunk bed. "Oi, Sawamura."

The lump in the bed didn't move.

Yōichi raised an eyebrow. Granted, the final game was tomorrow—but it was because of that, that he felt too tense to just fall asleep. That was why he'd invited Endō over to play, though, now that he was getting slayed, he rather wished he hadn't.

At least it seemed Sawamura was listening to the doctor's advice about getting plenty of rest. A smiling Rei had informed them that morning of the southpaw's clean bill of health stating that he was in good enough condition to pitch. Everyone on the team had been relieved, but it'd especially been the case for Yōichi, after what he'd seen in the bathroom. Maybe Sawamura really had slipped back then.

Knock, knock.

With a sigh, Yōichi crawled to the door. Twisting the door knob, he opened it a crack. "What is i—oh, it's you."
He pulled the door further open to reveal Miyuki, who stood looking oddly sheepish in the outside light. "Is Sawamura here?"

"He's sleeping," he answered, jerking his head toward the lump.

"Oh."

Yōichi eyed the two cans the catcher was carrying. "I can take those off your hands for you, though." To his surprise, Miyuki silently handed them over. As it was always best to maintain a healthy amount of skepticism around the catcher, Yōichi's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "...these aren't poisoned or something, are they?"

With a shrug, Miyuki turned to leave. "You'll have to try it to find out."

For a few moments, Yōichi stared down at the drinks—Fanta—and then looked back up at the retreating back. "You wanna play a round with us?"

Waving a careless hand, Miyuki continued to walk away. Yōichi watched his solitary figure get swallowed up in the evening shadow.

"Is something the matter?" he heard Endō say.

"Nah." Closing the door, Yōichi snapped open the cold can. Raising it to his mouth, he took a sip of the frothing soda. Smacking his lips, he crowed, "Last round, senpai. Ready to get creamed?"

"In your dreams."

The door to the storage room opened with a clatter. It had turned dark outside, but enough moonlight filtered into the room to reveal a figure sitting still at its center.

"I knew we'd find you here," said Ōta, stepping inside.

Rei followed inside, wearing a small smile. "Coach, you should get some rest."

Kataoka didn't turn around. After a long moment, he said, "What do you think our chance of winning tomorrow's game is?"

"Eh?" Ōta blinked in surprise.

"With the way things have turned out, saying that it's 50-50 would be underestimating the opponent."

"That's not true!" Ōta protested. "I'm sure our players will – "

"That is true," said Rei calmly. "To be frank, I think it's 40-60 in their favor. I have faith in our players of course, but it'll be difficult to score so many runs off Narumiya-kun. It'll come down to our pitchers, and how many runs we can hold them down to. To avoid the weaknesses of a pitcher's relay, the most ideal outcome would be to have Sawamura-kun pitch for five innings, and Tanba-kun to close the game… But while it looks as though Sawamura-kun will be able to pitch tomorrow, there's no saying how his injury will affect his gameplay."

Kataoka raised his gaze, looking up at the moon. "The rest will be up to the goddess of victory. It doesn't matter if it's by luck or if we barely win. Either way is fine. I just want to take them to Kōshien."
"You wanna play a round with us?"

Waving off the invite, Kazuya began to walk back to his room. He could feel Kuramochi’s gaze on his back, but after a few moments, he heard the door close. Reaching the stairway, he began to heavily pull himself up the stairs.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting. Sawamura was obviously going out of his way to avoid him. For whatever reason, he wanted to be alone. So why was Kazuya trying so hard to –?

Raising a hand to rub his neck, he let out a sigh. It wasn't as though he didn't know the answer to that already.

Thump. Thump.

There was someone coming up the stairway behind him. Kazuya felt something flicker in his chest. Who could it be at this late hour…?

"Oh, Miyuki," said a heavy set boy, passing by with a bat in hand.

"Zono," Kazuya responded with an acknowledging jerk of his head.

Jumping up two steps at a time, Zono went ahead of Kazuya. Trailing behind, when Kazuya reached the second level, he was greeted by the sight of green flooring stretching out before him, long and empty. He strode forward, the darkly illuminated trees on the other end of the building looming closer with every step he took.

Just as he reached his door, the floor lights blinked out, indicating that it was lights out time. Finding himself awash in darkness, he gripped his door knob. He began to turn it—and paused.

Minminminmin.

Kazuya released the door knob. "I'm here, you know," he said aloud.

There was no response, and he was about to feel silly—when he heard someone step into place behind him. Turning around, he saw Sawamura taking his baseball cap off, the courtyard light shining at his back.

"I know," he said.

The future was changing. In small steps and in great leaps.

Tomorrow, if it was Seidō roaring triumphantly to the sky while Inashiro fell to their knees, his whole world as he knew it would change. The future he had come from would irrevocably unravel and become undone, replaced by a brand new knot of threads.

It was clear to Eijun now. If Seidō won the summer qualifiers, the third years wouldn't graduate early. If they made Kōshien, the coach would no longer have a reason to retire. If the coach was no longer retiring, Miyuki would no longer be under pressure to lead the team to victory in the fall regionals. The same pressure, the same stakes that would cause him to dismiss and hide his injury…

Eijun felt quiet certainty grip his heart. This was the final crossroads. If what he'd been working all summer towards should come to fruition—if Seidō won the game tomorrow, it wouldn't be a matter of his returning to his timeline, as he'd once feared. No—the future that had made him who he was would unravel, disappear. And he, with it.
What did it feel like to disappear? Who would be left behind? Who was the person named Sawamura Eijun?

He didn't know, and it scared him.

His heart was racing, pounding so loudly he thought the whole world could hear it. A sudden wild, terrible thought had breached the surface of his mind: What if Seidō didn't win? What if Inashiro won, as they'd done before? What if everything went on as it should have?

Would he be able to cling on, then? Uneasily, perhaps, but still there? Even if that meant a possibility that Miyuki would...?

Suddenly, the lights around where Eijun was sitting turned off, and he was floating in a sea of darkness. Too weary to be taken aback, and his eyes heavy, he closed them without putting up a fight.

_I'm here again_, he thought to himself.

A hole. A black hole.

No matter how many times Eijun thought he'd escaped for the last time, he suddenly found himself back there again. The little remaining of his heart that he could still feel, wrenched. He couldn't get out after all, then. Once he'd fallen in, he wondered, was it truly inescapable?

"I'm here, you know," came his voice.

Eijun's eyes opened. For a moment, he sat still. His view of the trees standing just outside the building began to blur. Pushing himself up, he turned the corner, and Miyuki was standing there, his frame lit up in the glow of lamplight.

The door clicking shut behind them, they fumbled in the darkness. Ushered on by a strange sense of urgency, Kazuya swiped for the light switch—but missing, stumbled into Sawamura, who staggered back.

Giving up on the lights, Kazuya buried his face in Sawamura's neck, prodding him backward with his legs. As Sawamura nuzzled back, his hands took on a life of their own, sneaking up under the other boy's shirt. Feeling the warmth of Sawamura's flat stomach under his hands, a thrill ran down his spine, and as something hot and needing curled in his belly, he felt himself twitch. Within a few beats of heat, the front of his pants was tight and straining, and a nudge of his knee told him that Sawamura was in a similar state.

They bumped into something—the bed frame. Moving on instinct, Kazuya pushed down on Sawamura—carefully, avoiding his head—and he fell back on the mattress without protest. The bed creaked as he swung his leg around to climb on top, his mind a heated haze. Sensing Sawamura looking up at him, without any further preamble, he leaned back down and, their noses bumping into each other, they kissed.

He couldn't think. His whole body felt hot. Everything in his head that was usually there was gone, or somewhere in a corner that didn't seem to matter at the moment, and the only thing racing through his mind was the feeling of the body, warm and solid, trapped below his.

"Miyuki," Sawamura panted into his mouth.

Suddenly, he felt Sawamura's hands pushing him back. At first puzzled, Kazuya simply leaned back,
but a moment later, his unspoken question was answered as he felt hands slipping into the waistline of his pants. His eyes widening—*is he really...?*—he jerked back. Undeterred, Sawamura brushed his fingers against the bulge in Kazuya's pants, and even at the light touch, he let out a groan.

"It's okay," Sawamura said in a strangely calm voice. He cupped Kazuya with his hand, and as his heart began to beat even faster than he'd thought possible, he couldn't help but think that the first-year seemed almost older than him...

"Stop," he somehow managed to wrench out. After a beat—to the traitorous disappointment of his lower regions—the hand drew back. His elevated heart rate still pounding in his ears, Kazuya rolled off to the other side of the mattress. He exhaled in an attempt to cool his heated face down.

"Sawamura...what's got into you?"

A pause. And then in a quiet, muffled voice, "I wish we could always be together."

Kazuya blinked. "What's that supposed to mean?" But it was silent, except for the sounds of their breathing, and so, in a voice he hadn't realized he could make, he added, "We can be."

The bed creaked. "That's impossible."

What could you say to that? He'd been thinking it over for some time, but he didn't respond, not at first. Instead, after a moment, he reached out and found Sawamura's arm. Trailing his fingers down, he took Sawamura's hand. "We're a battery, aren't we? Partner."

"We're a battery, aren't we? Partner."

His body stiffening, Eijun felt his breath leave him. For a brief moment, the Miyuki lying in front of him seemed to flicker out, replaced by an older, more worn down version.

"*What if I could really catch for you again? Wouldn't that be something.*"

"*Think some god out there was listening?*

The phantom-like illusion was gone in a flash, and in his place, the Miyuki he'd come to reacquaint himself with was there once more. But despite that, Eijun felt something inside his chest, something tight and hard that he hadn't even realized was there, begin to crack.

It wasn't as though there hadn't been any signs. When Miyuki had visited Eijun for his birthday, he'd been hiding something. He'd sensed it. But he hadn't said anything—he'd been too naïve, too afraid.

"*Can you lead Seidō to Kōshien?*

"*I'll be watching tomorrow. Throw your best pitches.*"

He'd thought he couldn't feel his heart anymore. But thinking about what had been, and what could've been, a fierce pain seized his chest, and then he couldn't hold it back anymore. Hot tears welling up in his eyes, he finally found the words he hadn't been able to say in time.

"I'm sorry." He could feel snot and slime beginning to drip from his nose, and he knew the Miyuki before him wouldn't understand, but for the moment, he didn't care. "I should've known. You... It was my fault. I never meant to push you that way. I just wanted to be with you. I'm sorry."

He couldn't help but think: What if he hadn't asked Miyuki to make Eijun his life, all that time ago? What if he had spoken up to Miyuki? What if –
"Pbbt...haha!"

Eijun blinked, his thoughts abruptly cutting off.

I...what...?

This sound—it couldn't be. But—Eijun's mouth dropped open—it was: Miyuki was laughing.

Watching the outline of the catcher laugh into a fist, he grew so bewildered, his tears stopped. "Wh-what's so funny?" he asked weakly.

Immediately, Miyuki stopped short. "Aha, ah...sorry. I just...your face. The moonlight was reflecting off all the snot on your face and you looked..." He coughed, perhaps thinking better of it. "Ahem. Sawamura. You haven't pushed me into anything. I want...this just as much as you. It's just that—you know—tomorrow's the final game, and well, maybe we'd better put it off."

For a moment, Eijun stared, not understanding. Did Miyuki know what had—or rather, was going to happen?

Confused, his gaze dropped to their clasped hands. And then, realization striking like a bolt of lightning, he flushed. "That's not what I—that's really not—"

"Right, right," said Miyuki in an appeasing tone. "Sawamura...if something's going on, you know you can tell me right?"

His face beginning to cool down, Eijun hesitated. He could feel Miyuki's hand, slightly bigger than his own, squeeze his. Even though this Miyuki knew nothing. He felt a lump rise in his throat.

When he was ready, he rubbed his eyes, cleared his throat, and replied, "I know. And I'm okay now. Really."

To himself, he couldn't help but think that he was a lot more like Miyuki than he'd thought. Or perhaps the catcher had rubbed off on him more than he'd expected.

The hold relaxed. "Alright then. Now, with that out of the way...say...Kuramochi said you were sleeping in your bed. What was that about?"

"...I stuffed my pillow under the covers."

"So no one's expecting you back in your room?" Without waiting for a response, Miyuki pulled Eijun into his chest. "Then stay here."

"I'm gonna get your shirt wet," he mumbled.

"I'll live."

Eijun closed his eyes. Lying this close to Miyuki, he could smell the other boy's slight musk. He could feel his heart beating above his own, at first rapid but gradually growing steady as they both grew acclimated to each other's proximity. At least, until Eijun shifted, letting his leg fall between Miyuki's. In response, Miyuki's heartbeat grew faster once more, followed by something hard poking into his stomach.

"Sorry," Miyuki said, sounding uncomfortably awkward in a way he wasn't accustomed to.

At that, suddenly, Eijun felt something warm bubbling out of his chest. He opened his mouth—and then to both his and Miyuki's alarm, he started to laugh.
He couldn't stop. It poured out of him, like sand. He laughed so hard he began to cry again, and then Miyuki smothered him with his hand, warning that those next door would hear, and how even though they were a battery, it'd be *really* hard to explain why that was a legitimate reason for them to be sleeping together.

He finally fell quiet then, but he smiled. He smiled so much his face ached, because the Miyuki before him was different from the Miyuki he'd first gotten to know, and yet, undoubtedly, they were one and the same.

Once he'd calmed down, Eijun found himself drifting off into sleep.

It wasn't that he'd managed to better figure out his situation. The future, and what tomorrow would bring, was just as uncertain. However, somewhere in the intervals between crying and laughing, there was one thing that'd been made clear.

Who was Sawamura Eijun? He still didn't know, and it scared him. But if it was for *this* person, he thought, he could be brave.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of people seem to be wondering about the direction of the story, asking whether I'll make it a "happy" ending. Naturally I won't answer any of these questions. All I can to do is to ask you, as the reader, to lend me your faith.

To my half-joking question about the poll, the reader response—while mixed—seemed to favor Sawamura bottoming. While it doesn't matter since this is still (mostly) a T-rated fic, I found it amusing.

The next chapter will be "Miyuki's Postlude" and then in the following chapter, we will launch into the beginning of Inashiro vs Seido.
Thank you

Chapter Summary

It'd been different in the summer. - Postlude to Miyuki

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~ This takes place after chapter 32 and just before chapter 1. ~

"Are you sure about this?" Wearing a troubled expression, the doctor drummed his fingers on his desk. "As I told you earlier over the phone, it's a highly new, high-stakes procedure. You'd be better putting it off until it's undergone further testing."

"And how long will that take?" Kazuya asked.

"...at least another 10 years, would be my conjecture," Dr. Seo admitted. Taking off his glasses, he directed a piercing gaze at Kazuya. "You do understand the possible consequences? Should we encounter any complications during the procedure, you could become completely paralyzed...or worse. Fatality is not out of the question here."

He got up. "The end of July, right?"

The doctor sighed. "Very well. However, considering the level of risk surrounding this operation, I strongly recommend that you alert all loved ones about this decision."

During class, Kazuya always sat in the middle of the lecture hall. Too close to the front, and he thought he could feel the professor's eyes on him. Too far back, and he'd have to stop for a breather before reaching his seat.

He didn't have friends, really. There were faces Kazuya recognized in several of his classes, and they'd more or less greet each other. However, since he wasn't part of a circle and he rarely went out with anyone on Fridays, that was about the extent of his relationships with his classmates. It wasn't an altogether uncommon situation in college and in some ways, he thought to himself, it wasn't too different from how he'd spent high school.

Sometime in late spring, just as the professor had taken to the lectern, one such acquaintance—a guy with messy brown hair named Saitō, if he recalled correctly—threw himself into the seat next to Kazuya.

"Hey...Miyuki-san, right? Would you happen to have the notes from yesterday?" he asked in a hushed, pleading tone. "I just couldn't get myself out of bed, would you believe it."

Kazuya showed him his binder—which was blank, except for the underlined words 'Public Policy' and beside that, the date.

After a beat, Saitō looked up and nodded solemnly. "That'll do. That'll do."
"Miyuki-san!"

Hefting his bag higher up his shoulder, Kazuya turned around. "What's up?"

Flashing a bright smile, Saitō held out his cellphone—an older flip model that Kazuya instantly recognized. "Can I get your mail address?"

Kazuya raised a scandalized hand to his mouth. "Are you that way?"

He grinned. "A group of us get together sometimes to go out. Y'know, just having fun. You seem like a cool guy—I'd like to invite you along, is all."

With a shrug, Kazuya pointed his phone at Saitō's to transfer his info, and after a few seconds, his phone beeped with a new message. Immediately, Saitō turned around and crowed towards someone in the back of the classroom—"Erika-chan, you'll come to our next mixer now, won't you?"

"Saitō-kun!" came a female voice, sounding flustered.

It turned out that they both took the train to get to campus, so occasionally, they walked the road to the station together.

"I'm just saying—is it illegal if I'm in my own bathroom?"

"It sure sounds illegal."

Saitō sighed. "That's what I thought." Folding his arms behind his head, he gave a sidling glance at Kazuya. "Oh yeah—I've been meaning to ask, you wanna join us tomorrow? We're going to an izakaya after class."

"Is Matsumoto-san going to be there?"

"Erika-chan? No."

"Alright then."

Saitō raised an eyebrow. "What? D'you have a girlfriend already or something? You can tell me."

"No, nothing like that. I'm just not interested."

"Oh, okay," Saitō said, looking relieved for some reason. They fell silent, until they entered the station building and Saitō pointed at a vending machine. "Hey, aren't you thirsty? What d'you want? I'll treat you."

Scanning the selection, Kazuya was about to state his usual—but catching sight of something, he changed his mind. "I'll get a ramune then. The orange-flavor."

Pressing the button, Saitō made a face. "You like that? I think it's kinda gross."

Clatter!

"Yeah," said Kazuya, bending over to pick it up from the dispenser.

After going their separate ways, he was waiting on the platform for his train when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Wondering whether it was Saitō again, he took it out. Looking at the caller ID, he felt his lips draw back in a smile. "Hello?"
The air was thick with smoke from the grill and the sounds of animated voices. At their table, however, the conversation had winded down, leaving only a single piece of beef that everyone had politely refused to take. Soon, with a clatter, they all pushed their chairs back to go—that is, all except for one.

Kazuya shook his shoulder. "Oi, it's time to go."

"I really didn't mean to do it," Saitō sobbed, pounding a fist down on the table. "I just wanted a hot dog! How was I supposed to know the baby was on the grill too?!"

"You...wait, what?"

"Ignore him, he's talking about a game," said a girl beside them.

Saitō vigorously shook his head. "S'not just a game! It's a lifestyle!"

It was a good thing, Kazuya thought to himself, that he hadn't taken a certain person's life advice and gotten into video games.

It was around halfway through June that Kazuya had an unexpected visitor. He had just finished his last classes for the day, when all of a sudden, he heard an amused voice call out his name.

"Miyuki!" He looked up to see Saitō grinning from the hall's doorway. Saitō jabbed a thumb backwards. "Your boyfriend's looking for you."

In the middle of adjusting his bag strap, Kazuya blinked. "My what?"

With a shrug, Saitō led him to the window. Almost immediately, he spotted an all too familiar figure standing outside next to the bicycle racks, holding up a cardboard sign that read 'Miyuki Kazuya' in big screaming letters.

"S'that why you always turn me down when I invite you to mixers?" Saitō teased, lightly punching Kazuya on the shoulder. "Man, it's okay, I don't judge."

"Idiot, that's my kōhai from high school," he replied.

"Your high school? You mean he came all the way here from Tokyo?"

But Kazuya had already left.

Hurrying down the stairs as fast as he could—a speed which could only generously have been termed power walking—Kazuya felt his brow furrow in thought. The summer regionals were coming up. So what the hell was Seidō's captain doing here at his college campus? It took almost three hours to get here on the Hokuriku line from Tokyo. It wasn't as though he could've just waltzed over for a quick visit during his lunch break.

For a split second, Kazuya wondered whether there was another Miyuki Kazuya on campus—but pushing through the glass doors out onto the courtyard, streaked in red from the glow of the sunset, he felt his last misgivings give way.

Before he could open his mouth to call out his name, the brown-haired figure turned around. His face brightening, he lowered the sign and began to run toward Kazuya, who slowed down to a less punishing pace. "Miyuki-senpai!"
"Oi, Sawamura," Kazuya called out, trying to hide how out of breath he was. "What're you doing here? Don't you have practice?"

His excitement visibly fading away, Sawamura skidded to a stop. His gaze shifted. "It was, uh, cancelled today."

"Cancelled," Kazuya repeated. "Right. A month before the summer regionals, and…they cancelled practice. Was the field on fire?"

"It might've been," Sawamura said huffily. But taking a look at Kazuya's expression, his shoulders sagged in defeat. "Okay fine. I'm skipping today. Just so you know, I did properly tell the coach, and both Kanemaru and Harucchi are still there. And, well..."

Suddenly, Saitō's voice chimed in at his shoulder, "So you're Miyuki's kōhai?"

Looking eager to change the topic, Sawamura nodded his head. "Yes! My name is Sawamura Eijun. I'm from Nagano and my blood type is type O!" He bowed. "Nice to meet you!"

"Nagano, huh?" Saitō grinned easily. "I'm from Iida."

Sawamura's eyes lit up. "Chikuma here!"

"Ahh, Chikuma... that's kinda far. I've only gone once as a kid, to pick fruits."

"In the summer right? Apricot Village?"

"Yeah! Man, even now I think those were the best apricots I've ever tasted."

Kazuya, who hadn't even known Saitō was from Nagano, watched as they jabbered away for several more minutes in an exchange which finally culminated in the two making a promise to visit Hawaii together.

"Lemme get your mail address?" Saitō flipped out his cellphone, and Sawamura immediately took his out as well. "Hey, we've got the same phone! Sweet!" Once that was done, Saitō swung an arm around Sawamura's shoulders. "You seem like a cool guy. Say...I was gonna invite Miyuki over anyways, but if you guys don't have any plans, you wanna come out with us?"

"Oi, oi..." Kazuya started, but Saitō put up a hand.

"A couple of us are hitting up a karaoke box, and well, you know." Saitō winked. "The more the merrier."

"Sawamura needs to get back to Tokyo – "

"Sounds fun!" Sawamura broke in loudly.

"Great, that's settled then!"

Identical grins stretched across their faces, Saitō and Sawamura turned to face Kazuya. He felt himself sweat.

Keeping in mind a college student's budget, they'd all crammed into the single dimly-lit room. Blindingly bright strobe lights flashed in time with the music. Somehow, Kazuya found himself wedged on a couch between Saitō and a female student from a different college.
As two others sang a duet in front of the room, he noticed the girl sitting across from them leaning towards Sawamura.

"So Sawamura-kun, which college are you from?"

"I can't hear you, sorry," Sawamura said, shaking his head.

The girl moved in even closer, putting her mouth practically to his ear to repeat her question. With lively pop music blasting from the speakers around them, Kazuya had to lean in closer to listen.

Sawamura blushed. "Oh, uh, I'm still in high school."

"What, really? Aww!"

"Miho-chan's got a thing for younger guys," her friend grinned.

"Miyuki-kun?"

Putting his elbows down on the table, Saitō leaned forward. "You're from Seidō, like Miyuki, right? Were you on the same baseball team?"

Despite himself, Kazuya raised an eyebrow. He couldn't recall ever telling Saitō he'd played baseball. Had it slipped out one night after one too many beers? But that was unlikely, as he'd always made sure to stay within his limit.

"Yes, I'm the ace," Sawamura said, looking even more embarrassed. "But when Miyuki-senpai was on the team, I was just the relief."

"Miyuki-kun!"

Kazuya jerked to find the female student beside him wearing an indignant look. "Ah…sorry, what?"

She flashed a smile, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "What do you like to do in your free time?"

"Ah—watch TV, I guess," he said lamely.

"TV?" She laughed, as though he'd said something funny. "What about books?"

"Every now and then, sure." *Magazines mostly*, he admitted to himself.

"I was wondering whether you'd be the more intellectual type, but I guess not," she said teasingly.

Waving a hand as though to catch their attention, Saitō bent in front of them. "Of course not, he hangs out with me! What made you think that?"

"Well you know, the glasses. Or are they non-prescription?"

"No, my eyesight is pretty bad," Kazuya said. "But it's genetic."

"Genetic, huh?" She playfully brushed her fingers across his arm. "Who do you get that from?"

"My dad, I suppose."

"You suppose? You don't know?" She laughed again, and then brought her face closer to Kazuya's. In a lower voice, she asked, "Well, what about your looks? Has anyone ever told you you're quite
the looker?"

He paused, thinking. "I might've heard it once or twice."

"Naomi-chan, Miyuki's got a girlfriend already," Saitō said loudly.

The coy expression fading from her face, the girl drew back. Looking sullen, she folded her arms across her chest. "Well of course he does. All the decent ones are always taken, I swear."

"Oh? Miyuki-senpai, when'd you get a girlfriend?" Kazuya looked across the table to see Sawamura staring at them with a slight flush to his face. His eyes darted down to a cup in the younger boy's hands. "Congratulations! I didn't know."

"Who gave the high schooler a drink?" he asked aloud.

Sawamura scowled. "You're underage too."

"Now, now, that's enough of that!" Saitō said hastily, jumping to his feet. "C'mon, who wants to sing the next song with me?"

When Kazuya returned from the bathroom, he found the karaoke box mostly emptied. They must have gone outside for a smoke, for there was still someone lying passed out on the floor in front of the monitor—and on the couch, was Sawamura, looking dourly down into his cup.

Striding forward, Kazuya tore the cup away. "Get up. You need to get back."

Sawamura didn't raise his head. "Your friends are nice. S'it fun being with them?" It seemed that when he was drunk, some of his original country-boy inflections returned to his speech.

"It is fun." Kazuya sighed, putting down the cup. "Sawamura, why did you come here? What were you thinking?"

"D'you know what someone said to me?" Sawamura said, ignoring him. "They said I should just wait. But the thing is...I don't wanna wait."

"Nobody told you to," said Kazuya. "Now get up."

"Make me," he grumbled.

In a flash of inexplicable anger, Kazuya grabbed the other boy by the collar and tried to push him back against the couch. But as he realized too late, Sawamura was bigger and heavier than he'd used to be, and he himself was no longer who he once was. A throb of searing pain ran through his chest, and he let go of Sawamura, who fell back down with a thud.

His hand was trembling. Looking down at it, Kazuya clenched it into a fist so tightly, his knuckles turned white.

"Miyuki-senpai."

He turned. Sawamura had raised his head, and even in the dim lighting, Kazuya could tell that he was looking up at him in that way he'd been noticing for some time now. Seeing that, he felt the anger seep away as quickly as it'd come.

For years, he'd held back. But in that moment, something inside him snapped. Kazuya moved closer, stepping forward so that Sawamura's legs were between his. Reaching out with a hand against the
couch, his gaze trailed down to the other boy's parted lips. He leaned his head forward, and then he was so close, he could feel Sawamura's breath on his mouth, heavy with the smell of nihonshu.

At that, he abruptly stopped, and reality crashed into place around him.

They were in a public karaoke box. The others could be coming back at any moment. And above all, this was Sawamura.

Kazuya inhaled sharply. What was he doing? He'd made up his mind, hadn't he?

He began to draw back—but suddenly, making an impatient sound, Sawamura grabbed his hand and jerked him back down. Before he'd quite understood what was going on, Sawamura pressed his lips against Kazuya's, and this time, he felt his eyes widen.

Several seconds later, the grip on his hand relaxed. Kazuya reared backwards. Sawamura was flushed pink—though how much of it was the alcohol's influence and how much of it was from something else, was unclear.

"Sawamura," he said, blinking. That was the only thing he could've said at that moment.

"It was about time," Sawamura mumbled. He sank down onto his back on the couch, and looked up at Kazuya with an unflinching expression. Opening his arms wide in a clear invitation, he said in a hard voice, "C'mon, senpai. I'm right here."

He must have been more affected by the alcohol than he'd thought. Or maybe after all this time, Sawamura had rubbed off on him more than he'd expected. With only a moment's hesitation, Kazuya joined him on the couch, his knees sinking into the plush on either side of the other boy's legs. Feeling Sawamura's heart pounding below his, he kissed him again, and again, and again, and Sawamura returned each one.

Naturally, after a short while, the front of his pants grew tight. He knew Sawamura must've noticed, because his eyes shot down.

"Sorry," Kazuya offered, wondering whether they were moving too quickly for the younger boy.

In response, Sawamura shifted, rubbing his lower body against him, and he thought, *Guess not.*

He didn't know how much time passed as they clumsily held each other on that couch in the karaoke box. It could've been ten minutes, it could've been an hour. At one point, the door opened, and a ray of light fell on their entangled figures.

"Oh shit," he heard Saitō's voice say, and the door clicked shut again.

"You're cheating on your girlfriend, y'know," Sawamura said into his mouth.

"She'll live," said Kazuya.

"I love you, y'know."

Instead of responding, he kissed Sawamura again.

That following Monday, Saitō tiptoed around Kazuya, and while it was amusing to watch his friend flinch every time their eyes met, the novelty quickly wore off.

"Yeah, I'm gay," he said. "Got anything to say about that?"
"No," Saitō said. He averted his gaze. "I wasn't kidding when I said I don't judge."

"Alright then."

There was a pause.

"Does your...err...boyfriend know?" Saitō shifted uncomfortably. "That you're...you know...getting the surgery."

"No."

"Oh," he said, and for a moment, Kazuya thought he looked rather happy.

Weeks passed. Summer reached its high point, the cloying heat causing his clothes to stick to his skin with sweat. Newspapers piled up on his desk.

Two days before the day of the summer regional finals, Kazuya checked into the hospital. For the first time in what felt like a long while, his father drove him in his car.

"When will you be released?" asked his father. He was looking straight ahead. Sitting in the back seat, Kazuya could only see his face through the rearview mirror, and even that was mostly hidden behind a pair of dark glasses.

"The doctor said that if all goes well, I'll spend at least a month in rehabilitation," he replied.

"I see."

He got out of the car and was about to close the door, when his father said, "Kazuya."

"Yeah?"

Though his father didn't turn his head to face him, Kazuya could see his fingers clenching tightly over the steering wheel. "Do you have to do this?"

He paused. "No. But I want to."

"That's what your mother said too," said his father.

He didn't respond.

The hospital room was as Kazuya remembered it. Cramped, with white walls and white ceilings, and the smell of antiseptic permeated his senses.

Lying back on his bed, he was somewhat reminded of the day in the dark karaoke box. A day that'd started like any other. A day of mistakes, perhaps. But while he still didn't know whether he regretted it or not, it was too late to take it back now, and he had no plans to try and do so.

Well, what about your looks?

When the girl had asked Kazuya that question, he'd been struck with a sudden realization. His father? His mother? What did they look like?

He didn't know. He couldn't remember.
Bzzzt bzzzt.

His phone began to vibrate. Letting it ring for a few times, Kazuya finally bent over and picked it up.

"Well, well," he said. "If it isn't the monster ace Sawamura. What could the esteemed second Narumiya want from me?"

The voice on the other end of the line snorted. "Very funny."

"Haha! I try."

"Have you ever considered going into stand-up comedy?"

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "Sadly, I fell five points short on the written portion."

There was a short pause. "Wait—there's actually an exam for it?"

"Never change, Sawamura."

He could sense the younger boy scowling even over the line. "I'm not like you."

A smile playing at his lips, Kazuya agreed. "You're right."

He wasn't an idiot like himself, for one.

"...You're coming to see us play, right?"

Taking his time, he answered lightly, "Of course." In the corner of his eye, he noticed that there was a digital clock on the night stand. He began to run his fingers over it. "Can you do it? Can you lead Seidō to Kōshien?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"I...I wish you were catching for me."

His hand dropping down to his side, Kazuya thought of all the things he could say. "Okumura is a good catcher."

The voice on the far end sounded perplexed. "I know that."

"I'll be watching tomorrow. Throw your best pitches."

"I will." The voice hesitated—and added, "I'll be throwing them to you in my mind."

With a laugh, Kazuya ended the call.

Dropping the phone by his side, he lay down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling, and for a moment, everything was still.

When he could no longer take it, he tore his eyes away. Letting his gaze wander instead around the rest of the room—the bed's footboard, a solitary chair, the door—it came to a rest on the closed window beside the bed. He could see the day's last few rays of sunlight shining through. It was silent, except for the sound of his beating heart.

It'd been different then, he suddenly remembered. All the way back, a long time ago, when he hadn't
been the one lying on the bed, but the one sitting beside it. He'd spent days, weeks, months there, oftentimes going for hours without speaking, and sometimes, his heart felt so loud, he'd wondered whether it was the only thing left of him.

But it'd been different in the summer. The windows had been wide open then. Sunlight had poured in on top of the bed. There'd been a frail, warm hand clasped below his. And everywhere, all around them, the sound of cicadas, filling the room with their piercing cries.

Swinging his legs over the side of his bed, Kazuya got to his feet. One step, and he was at the window. He pushed at it. At first, it didn't budge—a little stuck from lack of use, perhaps—but after a few more tries, it finally gave way and slid open. A warm breeze immediately wafted in his face, and like a distant memory stirring in the dust, he could hear it once again.

\textit{Minminminmin.}

"That's what your mother said too."

\textit{Minminmin.}

"I love you, y'know."

This noise... Thinking back, it'd been with him every summer evening when he'd thought he'd been alone in an empty house—he just hadn't realized it then. And while he hadn't been able to find the words he wanted to say before, they came to Kazuya now.

"Thank you," he said aloud.

Nobody responded, of course. But at the very least, he thought the cicadas must have been listening.

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

Thank you to kyyhky for some really amazing fanart that is way sexier than anything I can write:
http://kyyhky.tumblr.com/post/128432560700/more-scenes-from-ttol-by-apodays-because-will

If there are terms in this chapter that you are not familiar with, chances are I covered them in this post:
Incense

Chapter Summary

At this point, there was no saving him, was there? - Seidō vs Inashiro part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~ This very first part of the chapter takes place the same time as the first half of chapter 1. ~

Some of the others had to rent their suits, but Eijun had his from the year before. His mother had gotten it tailored since then to accommodate his growth.

It was a blur of faces. The smell of incense was overwhelming, clouding his eyes and filling his ears. Somehow, Eijun couldn't seem to gather who was there, but only who wasn't there.

Kanemaru wasn't there. Eijun thought he could vaguely recall someone saying that he'd gone ahead to Hyōgo with the rest of the team members to represent them for the opening ceremony.

Chris wasn't there, though there was a missing call from him in Eijun's call history.

And the person who should have been there... He wasn't there either.

Eijun shivered. His chest felt cold.

Sitting near the front was Miyuki's father. He was so quiet, it almost felt as though he wasn't there. When Eijun had arrived and bowed to him, he'd seen his face. It'd been hidden behind a pair of dark frames. All he could think at the time was how empty and vacant the man's expression looked—and how like a mirror it was. Except Eijun had a feeling that the man had been that way for a long time.

Beep beep beep...

Yōichi groggily opened his eyes.

As the alarm continued to noisily make its existence known, he looked up at the ceiling and wondered what had possessed him to play Street Fighter instead of sleeping the previous night. But no—he perked up—this was no time to be lying around. It wasn't just any morning. It was the morning of the summer regional finals. Feeling more alert, he rose up into a sitting position.

"Morning," said Masuko, who was already changing.

"Morning Masuko-senpai," Yōichi returned. Clambering down the side of the bunk bed, he noticed an unmoving lump still in the bed below his, and rapped its side with his foot. "Get up. You went to sleep frigging before me, dammit."

The lump didn't move.

An uneasy feeling overtaking him, Yōichi reached out to pull the covers back. "Oi, Sawa – "
Stopping short, he blinked. He pulled the covers back completely. He turned around. "Where's Sawamura?"

When Eijun woke up that morning, for some strange reason, he thought he could taste incense in his mouth. But his brain was still sluggish with sleep. And as soon as he'd opened his eyes and saw the person lying beside him, the taste faded away.

It must have grown unbearably hot at some point in the night. Miyuki was on his back with an arm pressed against the plaster wall, perhaps in a last ditch measure to cool down. For a moment, Eijun watched the catcher's sleeping frame, his chest rising and falling almost imperceptibly.

Since the alarm had yet to go off, he was about to go back to sleep when he noticed something rectangular in shape lying above Miyuki's head: His cellphone. It was a different model from what Eijun remembered, but he supposed that was natural, seeing how this was several years earlier from his own time. Normally, he would've let it go at that, since he knew—perhaps more than anyone, thanks to Kuramochi's unwanted detective work—what it felt like to have his cellphone privacy violated. But just then, a sudden thought struck him.

Taking care not to touch Miyuki, Eijun took the phone and flipped it open. It was locked with a pin number, but—he held his breath—the year of his birthday worked, and the home screen popped up.

Tempted as he was to nose through the pictures (though thinking about it, Miyuki probably had nothing except the pre-saved photos that came by default with the phone) Eijun opened up the address book. He scrolled down, noticing that most of the contacts were things like 'Dry Cleaners' and 'Pizza', and then came to a stop at a single entry:

_Dad_.

Glancing at Miyuki's back and then down at the phone screen, Eijun quickly tapped out a short message. Before he could think it over and change his mind, he pressed send.

_Beep beep beep_...

Just as the alarm sound alerted Eijun, he heard Miyuki groan. Putting down the phone where he'd picked it up, he closed his eyes. A moment later, he felt the bed creak as Miyuki turned and got up.

Wondering whether it'd be more appropriate to pretend to wake up or to wait for Miyuki to wake him, it took several seconds for Eijun to realize how silent it'd become. Before he could stop himself, his eyes flashed open—and met Miyuki's.

After a beat, Miyuki grinned. "Rise and shine, Sawamura."

_"The West Tokyo Tournament Final will begin at 1:00 PM. Today will be a hot day, so please drink plenty of water and be wary of heat stroke while you enjoy the game."_

Stepping out into the open bleachers, on instinct, Wakana raised an arm to simultaneously shield herself from the blast of sunlight and the roaring of the crowd.

_Taking in the scene, her eyes widened. "What a crowd."

_"It is the finals after all," said Eijun's father. However, as he looked around, he seemed impressed as well. "Who'd have thought this time last year that Eijun would be pitching in this stadium?"_
"That's right." Eijun's grandfather puffed his chest up proudly. "I'd have expected him to take at least another year."

Biting her lip, Wakana looked down at the field, searching for her childhood friend. "Is it really okay for Eijun to be playing so soon after his concussion?"

"Takashima-san said the doctor's given the all clear." Eijun's father paused. "And if what they're saying about Inashiro and that Narumiya kid is true...they're going to need him."

Gathered in their dugout in various degrees of preparation, the Inashiro team members gazed out across the field at their final opponents.

"Sawamura's back after all, just like the coach said," said Yoshizawa, his brow twitching. "And he's the starting pitcher to boot."

Hirai leaned forward. "A battle right off the bat...well, this is Seidō."

"But that isn't to say he's made a full recovery." Shirakawa gazed eagle-eyed at the figure winding up in the opposing team's bullpen.

Giving no notice as to whether he was paying attention to his teammates' conversation, their ace yawned widely.

Harada leveled a look at him. "Did you not get any sleep last night? You've been yawning all day."

"Have I?" Narumiya blinked away tired tears. With his eyes narrowed, Harada appeared to be contemplating a response, when Narumiya's lips curled back into a humorless smile. "Don't worry. No need to be a worrywart... I was just thinking of ways to defeat them and got too excited to sleep."

When the two teams began to line up in front of their dugouts, the noise in the stadium reached new levels as the watching stands began to roar for their favorites to win.

"The West Tokyo Qualifier final is about to get underway. Under a blue summer sky, both teams walk out to the field.

Inashiro is here to take their second consecutive summer title. Seido is here to get revenge for last year and go to nationals for the first time in six years! They're both top-tier teams nationally! Which one will take this game?"

"Let's go!" shouted the captains.

"Yeah!"

"The crowd welcomes both teams with a round of applause as they run out. They're showing their respect to all the teams that have played, and their excitement for this game."

"Bow!" barked the head umpire.

The two teams bowed sharply. "Good luck!"

With Inashiro being the first to defend, Narumiya had already taken to the mound. As the fielders warmed up with a relay, Seidō's team members huddled around their coach.
"Wait for a meatball until you're cornered. Don't be afraid to strike out, and swing for a specific pitch." The coach's gaze circled around the huddle, making brief eye contact with every individual. "It's hot today. There isn't a pitcher who won't crumble if we make him pitch enough."

The members nodded in affirmation.

"Let's go!" Yūki roared.

"Yeah!"

"Batting for Seidō in the top of the first is their first batter and shortstop, Kuramochi-kun."

Mei raised an eyebrow. If he recalled correctly, Kuramochi was a switch hitter—so why is he hitting left?

"Play!"

Oh wait—of course. There was the other thing this particular batter was famous for. According to both the rumors and the visual he'd seen of it in the Seidō recording, Kuramochi's top speed was nearly comparable to that of Carlos. If Kuramochi was batting left when conventional baseball wisdom dictated that he should bat right against Mei's southpaw pitching, that meant that he wanted to be that much closer to first. In other words, he was prioritizing his speed.

Nodding at Masatoshi's signal, Mei raised his leg and began to wind up. It's obvious you're going for a bunt.

He threw, the ball breaking free from his grip, and instantly began to sprint forward. To his surprise, however, Kuramochi didn't fall into a bunting stance as expected and –

"Ball!"

Coming to a halting stop, Mei frowned and returned to the mound. He could hear Yoshizawa returning to cover his base as well; everyone was on guard for a bunt. But of course Seidō's leadoff was going to waste their time and try to pretend like they weren't going to do the obvious.

Masatoshi paused, and then gave the sign for the next pitch. Mei nodded. Glaring back at Kuramochi, he began his pitching motion and then threw—but once again, Kuramochi didn't move.

On the third pitch, just as Mei was beginning to irritably wonder whether he really was going to try and hit, Kuramochi shifted his grip on the bat as if to switch his stance. Reacting automatically, Mei began to run forward—but instead of squaring down and finishing the bunt, Kuramochi reared back at the last moment.

"Ball!"

As he straightened back into a regular batting stance, a faint grin appeared on the shortstop's face. Mei felt a muscle twitch on his brow. You little...are you going to bunt or are you not?!

With perhaps more strength than necessary, he crushed his foot down on the mound. The ball careened past Kuramochi and audibly slammed into Masatoshi's mitt.

And the verdict was…

"Ball four!" shouted the umpire. Mei balked, and the crowd began to murmur in surprise.
Throwing aside the bat, Kuramochi pumped his fist. "Right on!"

Feeling heat boil up from the pit of his stomach, Mei yelled, "So you weren't gonna swing?!!"

"Don't walk him, stupid!" snapped Masatoshi.

Mei was about to retort something back, when he felt an icy gaze from the direction of their dugout grilling into his back. The heat evaporating, he hastily closed his mouth shut.

While it was still just the top of the first inning, they had one out with Ryōsuke's follow-up bunt, and Kuramochi was safely in scoring position on third. In the stands, the crowd supporting Inashiro had briefly fallen into stunned silence, but were rallying once more, calling out encouragements to Narumiya.

"Batting third, center fielder, Isashiki-kun."

As Isashiki stepped up to the plate, Inashiro's outfielders began to move in, clearly preparing to grab an out at home plate. Taking a bold lead from third base, Kuramochi let out a taunting laugh.

"Hyaha!"

His face taut with determination, Yūki stepped out of the dugout and into the on-deck circle. Tugging on his batting gloves, Kazuya watched Narumiya wait for their catcher's signal. He had no doubt that Inashiro's battery would be aware of how good Isashiki was at pulling to right field. He shot a warning glance at the third-year, who was aggressively setting up at the plate. There won't be any easy outside pitches, Jun-san.

Narumiya nodded. He paused, taking the chance to twist his head and glare at Kuramochi. Then, he began his pitching motion. An instant later, the ball flew out of his hand, hurtling down to the plate. It had the initial movement of a fastball—but at the last second, it bent. Kazuya felt his brows knit together.

Was that a slider?

Despite being taken by palpable surprise, somehow—likely out of sheer willpower—Isashiki managed to finish his swing. Clang! It shot high up into the air, soaring out into the outfield.

"Fall!" Kazuya heard Sawamura chant.

Sure enough, it dropped to the ground between second and center. The stands began to cheer, their voices reverberating around the open stadium. Meanwhile, Kuramochi leisurely stepped home—Seidō had officially taken first blood, leading 1-0. Letting out roars of delight, the rest of the members rushed around the dugout's entrance to welcome the shortstop back.

Kazuya turned his attention to the next batter up. Their trumpets raised toward the sky, the band had begun to perform once more.

"Fourth batter and first baseman, Yūki-kun."

While Yūki began to set up in the batting box, Kazuya watched Narumiya closely. Instead of stomping his feet and throwing a tantrum as he'd expected, the southpaw was coolly tossing the rosin bag in his hand. After a few tosses, he let it drop to the ground.

"Tetsu!" Isashiki shouted from first. "Demolish him! Let's score another run here while we're – " He broke off and dove for the bag, as without warning, Narumiya shot a pickoff in his direction.

"Safe!"
Waiting for the ball, Narumiya held out his glove. What Kazuya could see of his face had become curiously devoid of emotion. He wondered—what did that signify? With Narumiya, one could never tell.

Harada thumped his fist in his mitt and held it up. For a moment, Narumiya stood still. And then raising his leg, he threw. As he followed the ball's trajectory, Kazuya blinked. Were his eyes deceiving him, or was the ball going straight down the middle?

Not one to let meatballs by even on the first pitch, Yūki swung—but to Kazuya's surprise, the high ball arced past him, slamming into Harada's mitt instead.

"Strike!"

It definitely wasn't the pitch the catcher had called for, judging from the way Harada irritably threw back the ball. His expression unchanged, Narumiya caught it.

Kazuya adjusted his helmet. Has Mei lost it?

He hadn't expected Narumiya to crumble this early on in the game…but if he had, that meant all the better for Seidō. If possible, he wanted at least another run with Yūki and Masuko, to give them a lead of 2-0—whatever would lessen some of the pressure on Sawamura. The first-year had said he was fine, and it was true that the sunlight no longer seemed to bother him as much as it had. But that hadn't stopped Kazuya from insisting that Sawamura continue to use his spare sports glasses.

Folding his arms across his chest, Kazuya returned his attention to the mound. Would they use it here? The changeup.

Narumiya threw.

Power rippling down his arms, Yūki swung—and meeting the ball with a clang! sent it popping vertically up, slinging into the net. Despite the thick tension in the air, Kazuya had to smile. Yūki had swung through empty air on the first pitch, but he'd already gotten the timing for it on the second. He'd expected nothing less from their captain.

Harada motioned something, and finally, the cold blank expression on Narumiya's face wavered, giving way to a faint grin. Kazuya felt his smile fade.

"Take him down, Mei!"

"Hit it long, Tetsu!"

He could feel it—the changeup was coming. While it was a bit sudden to confront the wild card of Narumiya's arsenal this early on in the game, Kazuya couldn't have asked for a better chance at it: With Narumiya having lost his cool at giving away a run, and a runner on base while their cleanup was on deck, this was the perfect opportunity to crush Narumiya's money pitch and seize the momentum.

To the backdrop of drums and chants, courtesy of the cheering squads, Narumiya raised his leg. His body bending inwards in his signature style, he slammed down his foot and flung the ball forward. It looked like his usual fastball delivery—but instead of bulleting down the mound, the ball spiraled toward Yūki at a fraction of its expected speed.

Kazuya felt his nails dig into his palms. Yes! It's the changeup!

Instead of immediately going in for the swing, Yūki waited. His hips were rotating, but his arms
were still: It was apparent he had been waiting for the changeup as well. As though in slow motion, Kazuya watched the ball spiral down to where Yūki was just beginning to swing his bat. If it continued on its trajectory, it would be a sure hit.

But even before Kazuya had realized what was going on, it dropped down. And for the second time in as many minutes, their cleanup and captain swung through empty air as the ball slammed sharply into Harada's waiting mitt.

The umpire pumped his fist. "Strike! Batter out!"

The grin on Narumiya's face stretched into a gloating leer as the southpaw stared Yūki down. Kazuya felt a bead of sweat roll down his brow. So that changeup wasn't just an off-speed pitch then. It also dropped down like a…screwball?

Whatever the case, one thing had been made clear: Narumiya was not the same person he had been the year before. And the game was only just beginning.

"Bottom of the first. Seidō is on the defense. On the mound is their first-year pitcher, #10, Sawamura."

At the sight of Seidō's own southpaw heading toward the mound, the crowd burst into delighted welcoming cheers.

"Sawamura-kun! Welcome back!"

"Hey monster pitcher, show them what you've got!"

"That first-year really is okay, then?" Ninomiya—Akikawa's center fielder—sounded surprised. "I thought he'd be out of the season with a ball to the head like that."

While some of the other older members of the Akikawa team had decided to return to full-time studying for their upcoming exams, most of them had come to see the final game of the summer tournament. After all, it was the game in which the team that had crushed them went up against the incumbent champions.

Yeung's eyes narrowed. "We'll see, won't we?"

"This is Sawamura's second time starting a game in this tournament. Due to an injury in the quarterfinals, he did not play in the semifinals and was expected to sit out for the final as well, but he has indeed returned as the starting pitcher!"

While Carlos waited in the on-deck circle for Seidō's fielders to finish warming up, the rest of Inashiro's team members sat back in their dugout to observe their opponents.

"He hasn't given up a single run in this tournament so far," Yoshizawa remarked.

"Good for him," Mei snorted out loud from the back. "He's not the first pitcher to do so."

"You're still mad about losing that record, aren't you?"

"I am not!"

"His unorthodox form makes his pitches difficult to time," said Harada, ignoring their ace. "He can paint the corners, and he's got a cutter and an off-pitch." He paused. "I can't say there are any
immediately apparent weaknesses to his pitching. But right now…”

"Yeah," Hirai nodded. "It's up to see how his injury has affected his pitching."

"What's with that weakling conclusion, Tsubasa-kun?" Mei sounded grumpy. "Whether he's injured or not, he's just a cheeky first-year. He obviously needs to be taught his place."

"Look who's talking," Harada shot back irritably.

"Bottom of the first. Inashiro's offense begins with number 1, center fielder, Kamiya-kun."

Taking in how Carlos was languidly swinging the bat back and forth, Kazuya motioned to the infielders: *Watch out for his bunt.* From first and third, Yūki and Masuko nodded in understanding.

Like their own Kuramochi, Carlos' greatest assets were his legs. Even with a pitiful grounder, he had the speed to get on base.

Focusing back on the mound, Kazuya signaled for a moving fastball to start things off. While the fastball was Carlos' favorite pitch, it was also the pitch Sawamura was most comfortable with. Nodding, Sawamura dropped the rosin bag. Bringing his hands together, he began to windup.

At the sight, despite himself, Kazuya found himself holding his breath.

He'd seen it plenty of times before, of course—Sawamura's windup. But seeing it out here in a game, on the dirt mound of a stadium, was different from seeing it in the bullpen during practice.

Sawamura lifted his leg up high, higher than anyone else. And yet somehow, he still managed to keep perfect balance. As he moved forward to pitch, his foot came down, crushing into the ground. Just when it seemed like it was too late, his hips impossibly rotated, and then even before Kazuya could register seeing his arm, the white ball was already spinning through the air, heading straight for his mitt.

Jerking in surprise, Carlos swung, perhaps out of instinct. However, it was too late as the ball slammed into Kazuya's mitt, making a cracking sound like a gunshot.

"Strike!"

"Oi, oi…” Carlos said, sounding none too amused. "How's a pitch like that fair?"

Kazuya grinned. "It's not." Getting up, he threw the ball back to Sawamura.

Until that point, the first-year's face had been calm and focused. But taking in Kazuya's expression, Sawamura broke out into a grin as bright as morning snow that somehow sent something flip-flopping in his stomach. With an internal groan directed at himself, Kazuya crouched back down. He was definitely in deep. *Too* deep. At this point, there was no saving him, was there?

But that was just fine with him—he didn't want to be saved. Not now.

"Number two, shortstop, Shirakawa-kun."

It was hard to believe that the game that had haunted him in his nightmares—the game that he'd been looking back on and looking forward to for so long, was finally here. It was already the bottom of the first inning, but it was only as he looked down from the mound at Shirakawa's figure, that
the here and the now of this moment really began to present itself.

A long time ago, he had faced off against Shirakawa and lost to the pressure. With a hit-by-pitch, he had allowed Inashiro a runner on base and helped kickstart their momentum which would ultimately lead to Seidō’s turnaround loss.

But he was different now from who he’d been those years ago.

He could feel the acute stares of his teammates on his back, could feel the weight of the number on his back, could feel the piercing gaze of a certain person who crouched in the catcher's box right before him…

He breathed in deeply.

*Give me your best pitch,* Miyuki signaled. He nodded and raised his glove to his face, concentrating on the batter standing before him.

In this moment, it was just him and the batter. This one batter who had once stood in the way between him and Kōshien, and who now stood between him and the waiting mitt.

He coiled his body, raising his front foot.

*As if I'd let him.*

Chapter End Notes

It's Nov 17th in Japan, and that means Happy birthday to Miyuki.

Hey guys. Really sorry about the long hiatus. I was preoccupied. And starting a baseball match chapter has always been a hurdle. Most of this was from the beginning episodes of the Seido vs Inashiro game in the anime... but the following chapters should divert quite substantially.
The view from the outfield

Chapter Summary

Tick tock. - Seidō vs Inashiro part II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Crunch!

The sound of Sawamura's feet crushing down on the dirt reverberated from the mound. Released from his fingertips, the ball blasted down to the home plate. With his teeth gritted in an uncharacteristic display of frustration, Shirakawa swung.

Yōichi tensed, ready to sprint at a moment's notice to wherever he was needed—but it turned out to be unnecessary. Slam! Light wisps of smoke furled out from the mitt behind the plate. Miyuki grinned shamelessly.

"Strike! Batter out!" roared the umpire, punching the air.

For some reason, Sawamura let out a victorious shout, sounding as though he'd just struck out the cleanup at the bottom of the ninth, instead of the second batter of the game. If Yōichi had been situated a bit closer and they hadn't been in the midst of the freaking summer finals, he'd have given him a good kick to the back of his knees.

Or actually… Thinking back to what Yōichi had felt earlier that morning, perhaps not.

Upon seeing Sawamura's empty bed the previous night, for some inexplicable reason, Yōichi had felt something akin to panic roil in the pits of his stomach. He'd tried to distract himself by bustling about in the washroom, but the corner of his mind that he couldn't control had continued to ruminate over it. In the end, it took some time to put his finger on what the source of this strange feeling was. He'd just begun his morning stretches in the courtyard when he saw Sawamura and Miyuki furtively emerging from Miyuki's double room. And in a flash of confusion and relief, it struck him: That somehow, he'd been waiting—expecting for Sawamura to be gone. What did that even mean?

The way Yōichi had found Sawamura on the floor of the bathroom following the Sakurazawa game—it hadn't ever really slipped his mind. It'd been circling about like low-borne fog in the valley of his mind. Why? Even now, he couldn't say. There were a lot of things he didn't know about Sawamura. Like for one, why he'd spent the night at Miyuki's place.

…on second thought, he didn't want to know.

"Number three, third baseman, Yoshizawa-kun."

"Sawamura! Bring it!"

"Yoshizawa, blast it away!"

Despite being in the midst of the clashing shouts, and despite his opponent being the forefront of
Inashiro's famed cleanup lineup, Sawamura seemed unperturbed. Nodding at Miyuki's sign, he straightened up. He raised his leg, arcing it high up in his signature form. Then, his body unfolded, his leg straightening down and his foot crushing down on the dirt. The ball flew out in a sharp trajectory towards home, speeding past the batter's unmoving form. Yōichi tensed.

The umpire pumped his fist. "Strike!"

Relaxing, he straightened up. With Sawamura's unique pitching style, one couldn't ever really tell what was going to come his way. But that was what made it all the more interesting to defend behind him.

Throwing the ball back, Miyuki crouched back down. After a moment, he quickly signaled two signs in succession. Sawamura nodded, and Miyuki lowered his mitt to the inside of the plate. Sawamura began to windup. Yōichi hunched down, his legs tensed and muscles coiled, ready to burst into action at an instant's notice.

Sawamura threw, the ball rocketing down the mound. Yoshizawa's foot slammed down into the ground, and he swung his bat, crushing it into the ball.

"Clunk!"

The white ball cut through the sky, flying past the mound too quickly for Sawamura to react. Yōichi was already moving, his body having reacted before his brain had even processed what had happened. The ball was growing bigger and bigger—it was too far away, he had to run faster—reaching out with his glove, Yōichi put in an extra burst of energy into the heels of his feet, and leaped forward. Just as his body's weight began to pull him down, he felt something slam into the pit of his glove. Tumbling down to the ground, he felt the breath momentarily knock out of his lungs, but paying no mind to that, Yōichi raised his glove into the air.

"Out!"

If he was to be perfectly honest with himself, it had not surprised Mei to see his teammates being taken down in a row like that. For some time now, there'd been buzzing about the first-year southpaw whose pitches had devastated entire lineups. While such rumors were almost always blown up by the newspapers for the sake of pitching a story, from what Mei had seen so far, they hadn't seemed entirely baseless. And where there was smoke, there was fire.

However, for his teammates to be taken down this easily? By a first-year who was not only recovering from a severe concussion, but had started the season with practically zero prior experience in actual games? Mei felt a muscle in his temple twitch. Who the hell did he think he was?

"Top of the second. Seidō's offense begins with number 6, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

Mei coldly eyed the batter stepping up to the plate. He knew that some of Sawamura's success had to do with this catcher here. No matter how good a pitcher was, he could only truly shine when paired with a catcher who could bring all of the fire out. And at least in that respect, there was no one better at that than Miyuki.

That was the very reason why he had once scouted Miyuki to be on his dream team… but that'd been before he'd met Masatoshi.

Their captain was crouched right now in the catcher's box, carefully observing Miyuki as he set up. Mei knew that Masatoshi held Miyuki up in high regard even as a batter. No matter how many times
Mei had explained—or perhaps ranted was the better word—about how Miyuki was a piss poor batter when there weren't any runners on base, he was going to call for something unnecessarily overboard. That was just the kind of catcher he was: He never left anything to chance.

Suddenly, Mei felt Miyuki's gaze match his own. He felt a crooked smile rise to his lips, and saw Miyuki return it ever so slightly. The challenge was clear. Who would crumble first—he and Masatoshi, or Sawamura and Miyuki?

Mei drew his hands together and began to windup.

Miyuki had made the wrong bet when he went to Seidō instead of Inashiro. I suggest you choose wiser this time.

Pulling his mask down over his face, Kazuya knelt down in the catcher's box.

Well, the top of the second had gone by a lot faster than he'd wanted. Kazuya had hit a fly ball to center, and the batters following him—Kadota and Shirasu—hadn't fared much better, with soft grounders to the infield. Despite his petulant attitude, it seemed that Narumiya had gotten over the run in the first inning sooner than Kazuya had hoped. There'd been a rhythm to the southpaw's pitching that hadn't been present in the first, and if it continued like this, he foresaw nothing but trouble ahead.

"Bottom of the second. Inashiro's offense begins with number 4, Harada-kun."

Of course, the most important thing right now was getting the outs and finishing the inning as soon as possible.

Kazuya looked back at the mound, where Sawamura was tossing the rosin bag. The first inning had gone about as well as he could have asked for. The final pitch had been a bit higher than what he'd asked for, but thanks to Kuramochi and his dextrous catch, it hadn't presented any problems. However…

Kazuya's brow knit in consternation. The issue was how they'd proceed onward. Sure, Sawamura was getting the outs, there were no complaints there—but while the casual onlooker may have missed it, anyone who'd been paying a fraction of attention over the tournament would have realized that there was something different about the first-year. The most apparent difference was in his pitch count. Sawamura had always had good control, and it wasn't to say that the way he was throwing now was wild or rough. Nonetheless, it was an undeniable fact that it was taking more pitches than it had ever taken before to get the necessary outs. Was it just a testament to the ability of Inashiro's batters? Kazuya didn't think so.

Following the diagnosis of the concussion, Kazuya had been mentally preparing himself for the worst, but with the way things were, it was difficult to place Sawamura's condition. Especially when the first-year was keeping his mouth shut like now, the best anyone could do was make an approximation. Secretly, Kazuya thought that the game would have been in the bag if Sawamura had been at his peak condition. But he wasn't, and that was just the way baseball was. It was an unpredictable game in which anything could happen in a split instant. Fortunately, if worst came to worst, they had three pitchers lined up and ready to take over the mound.

Sawamura dropped the rosin bag and looked back at Kazuya, waiting expectantly for his signal. Kazuya felt something in his chest thump with a returning echo. No matter how Sawamura's injury may have affected his pitching, if there was one thing that was still the same, it was the way his eyes glowed on the mound. It was a predator's stare, ready to pounce on its prey when the timing was
As Kazuya signaled to Sawamura, a distant memory suddenly pressed on his mind. It felt like it had happened an eternity ago—that night when Sawamura had first shown up at his door with chips and drinks.

"So you think you can lead us to Kōshien?"

"I will."

Kazuya's lips drew back in an insuppressible grin.

Baseball was a team effort. It took the whole team to get to Kōshien. But while it was irrational, childish even, to think this way—Kazuya knew that at the bottom of the ninth, it was Sawamura's pitch he wanted to be catching.

The ball, low and out, streaked past the plate and slammed into the catcher's mitt. There was a pause as the umpire made his judgment. And then –

"Ball!" he barked out.

Masatoshi let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, and relaxed. He'd been lucky with that call. It'd been right on the edge, and could have been called either way. With the count at 1-2, he'd been gambling by letting it go, but truthfully speaking, he didn't think he could have reacted even if he'd wanted to. It seemed that this first-year pitcher of Seidō's could pitch to the far corners, high and low, at will. And with the way his pitching delivery hid his release time, Masatoshi wasn't surprised that he'd yet to give away a single run in this tournament.

There was a difference, however, between this game and the other games that first-year had played, and it was that Sawamura had suffered a concussion only a few days prior. At the moment, it was subtle, but having been Inashiro's starting catcher for the past two years, Masatoshi had a good eye for spotting when a pitcher was trying to hide his exertion. He saw it now, in Sawamura. His breath was growing more uneven, and his undershirt was already half soaked through. The effect on his pitching would only grow more and more apparent as the game progressed.

There was one more difference as well, and it was that they were going up against Inashiro, the school that had defeated them the year before. No doubt, they were hungry to get their revenge.

Masatoshi snapped back to attention as he saw Sawamura began to windup. For a moment, they locked eyes. In some of Inashiro's earlier games, Masatoshi had cowed the other pitchers with just his stance and his gaze, but Sawamura didn't so much as waver. His foot crushing down on the dirt, he threw. As before, his arm whipped out, and before he'd even realized it, the ball was coming straight for him.

Taking a step forward, transferring his weight between his hips and legs, Masatoshi swung.

Clang!

The ball spiraled high into the sky. Irritably, Masatoshi watched as the right fielder jogged forward, his glove outstretched.

"Out!"

Bursting to their feet, Seidō's stands erupted into delighted cheering.
"Sawamura, nice pitch!"

"Nice catch, Shirasu!"

That was what he deserved for not focusing during his at-bat. Grimacing, Masatoshi began to head back to the dugout, mentally bracing himself for the inevitabil –

"Masa-san! You call that a swing?!"

He sighed.

"Top of the third. Seidō's offense begins with number 9, Sawamura-kun."

Adjusting his helmet, Eijun bowed before stepping into the lefty batting box. Letting his bat hang freely, he looked up at the mound to see Narumiya staring him down with a death glare. The reason was obvious: Following Harada's fly ball to right, Narumiya had met a similar fate with a fly ball past the third base foul line. Eijun felt himself sweat.

It was a strange feeling to be standing here, eye to eye with Narumiya. Just a few months ago, he had never thought that he would ever face his fellow southpaw again—whether as a pitcher or as a batter. Narumiya had gone pro directly out of high school, and despite encouragements from the coaches and scouters to do the same, Eijun had been planning on going on to college.

In fact, if he thought about it, he'd never thought he'd get the chance to face Raichi again, either. Or Yeung, the exchange student from Akikawa. He'd never thought he'd be able to play on the same team as Yūki, Isashiki, Kuramoto, Masuko, the older Kominato, Shirasu, Sakai. Chris. Miyuki. All these opportunities—he'd never stopped to really think about what it all meant.

Nodding at his catcher's signal, Narumiya straightened up. Eijun lowered into his batting stance. After a pause, he began his windup—and then threw. The ball roared straight toward Eijun and –

"Slam!"

"Strike!"

Letting out a breath, Eijun leaned back as the catcher threw the ball back. He hated to admit it but once he got rolling, Narumiya's pitches were in a league of their own. During the summer Kōshien in which he'd made his name, he'd been known as… what had it been again? Eijun shook his head.

Narumiya began to windup, and then he threw. The ball was coming in a bit high—Eijun swung.

"Clang!" He watched it fly far outside in foul territory. Damn. With just two pitches, he'd already been cornered, 0-2. So far in the game, Narumiya had mostly thrown fastballs and sliders. The only change-up he'd shown had been against Yūki. What would he show Eijun here?

With a nod, Narumiya raised his leg. He pushed downward, throwing his arm down, and then the third pitch was flying at Eijun. It was coming straight down the middle. Eijun felt his eyes widen. He took a step forward, transferring his weight as he rotated, swinging completely.

Just as his bat was about to meet the ball, it suddenly bent and – clang! Eijun dropped the bat and began to run, but he could see the shortstop backing up.

"Out!"
In a field a fair distance away from Jingu stadium, a group of boys dressed in pinstripe baseball uniforms had gathered together.

**Clang!**

Technically, the remaining Yakushi team members were supposed to be in the middle of batting practice. However, the vast majority of them were currently circled around the radio that one of the retiring third-years had left them.

"…Kominato the hitter, with two balls, one strike. Narumiya's getting ready. Now the pitch… he swings! But it's a foul, and that's strike two…"

**Clang!**

"Narumiya's winding up, and – there it goes! The ball's soaring into the outfield, center fielder Kamiya is running backwards to catch it and – yes, he's got it! He's caught the ball, and that's three outs for Seidō, ending the half-inning."

Some of the others who'd been listening let out a sigh. Shunpei grinned. "What, are you actually cheering for Seidō?"

"Of course not," said Akiba, his expression troubled. "But we did lose to them…so I don't want them losing to anyone else besides us."

The others mumbled in assent.

**Clang!**

Mishima leaned back. "Oi, Raichi, you're really not gonna listen? Seidō's in the lead, 1-0."

Shunpei looked behind them just in time to see—**clang!**—a white streak rocketing out of their field. As could be predicted, Raichi was practicing with their school's pitching machine. He'd originally been doing his usual routine of image training, but Coach Todoroki had insisted that Raichi get in some practice time against real baseballs as well.

There was a crackle of the radio, and they all returned their attentions as the announcer's voice rang out: "It's the bottom of the third, and it's Inashiro's offense. Number 8, Soyogi, is up to bat, and Sawamura's back on the mound. Despite concerns over his injury several days ago, he's shown quite tenacious pitching over the past two innings… Sawamura's winding up. He pitches and – swing and miss! Strike one for Soyogi."

Following their defeat in the game against Seidō, the last few days had felt like a haze for the Yakushi team. On the same day, they'd returned to their school grounds and pretended not to notice the hastily stowed aside congratulatory banner. Despite Coach Todoroki's prior threats, thanks to the parents' association, they all ate pork tonkatsu that night.

On the morning of the next day, the third-years said their goodbyes and formally retired from the team. For a while, the remaining second and first years all sat around and looked at each other. Then suddenly, they'd heard the sound of a bat clanging against a ball. It'd been Raichi, of course. And so, without another word, they each picked up their own bats.

"…With two outs and no runners on base, we're back at the top of Inashiro's lineup, and this'll be round two of their battle against Sawamura. Number 1, Kamiya is up to bat, and from the looks of it, he's more than ready for their rematch. Sawamura's getting ready. And here's the pitch… Kamiya
All of a sudden, it struck Shunpei that it'd been quiet aside from the announcer for a while. He glanced back at the pitching machine. It appeared that Kobayashi, his eyes fixed on the radio, had forgotten to insert a new ball into the machine—but Raichi made no move to alert him. He was in his batting stance, and would probably swing on instinct if a new ball shot out at him. At the moment, however, he stood still, his ears perked up in attention. Shunpei smiled.

"...ball four! Kamiya walks, and Inashiro has a man on base!"

There was a stir in the watching audience as Carlos threw aside the bat with a clatter and began to jog to first base.

Eijun raised his arm and wiped the side of his face on his shoulder. It'd been a while since he'd last walked someone this early on in a game. He could kind of remember that he'd used to do it all the time as a first-year, but he didn't think too hard about it—it'd only make his headache worse. He'd taken off Miyuki's sports glasses because he was still unused to wearing it, and didn't want it to affect his pitching. He was starting to wonder however whether that'd been a mistake. But was it even the sun that was making Eijun feel this way?

"Number two, shortstop, Shirakawa-kun."

There was a strange, deep ringing in the corners of his ears. He could feel an unnatural shortness to his breath and his sleeves were already plastered to his arms with sweat. Currently, it was at a level that Eijun could handle, but the ringing was distracting him. And it was steadily growing worse.

"Time!" said the umpire.

Miyuki stepped toward him. "Oi, Sawamura…"

"My head does hurt," Eijun said, and a look of surprise flickered across Miyuki's face before giving way to concern.

"Of course," he replied. He turned to the dugout and began to raise his hand. "Go sit down and – "

"But I can still pitch." He squeezed the ball in his hand. "I can still do it. As long as I'm needed here."

At first, Miyuki didn't respond. Instead, after a moment, he raised his mitt to cover his mouth.

"Shirakawa's up next. Be on guard for a hit-and-run play." He tapped Eijun's shoulder. Then, he turned and began to walk back.

"Play!" the umpire said, snapping his hand forward.

Setting up at the plate, Shirakawa shot a withering glare at Eijun. He didn't seem to have appreciated their gift of a strike-out in the first inning.

Miyuki signaled for a low, outside moving fastball. Eijun nodded. Letting out a deep breath, he straightened up. He glanced at Carlos, who was taking a big lead as expected, and tried to convince himself not to notice it. There was no point in being overly conscious with a runner like Carlos on base, since it'd only serve to further distract him.

Bringing his hands together, he began to windup. Just as he'd started to throw his arm down, he heard the unmistakable sound of Carlos taking off for second base. Gritting his teeth, Eijun released
the ball, throwing it at full-strength, and it hurtled down the mound. Miyuki had already jumped up to his feet to prepare to catch the ball. But to Eijun's surprise, Shirakawa took a step outside—and swung.

*Clang!*  

Before he could react, the ball bulleted past Eijun and through the infield gap. As Kadota ran for the ball, Carlos rounded past second and sprinted onward to third. Kadota leapt forward to scoop up the ball in his glove—but just as it bounced sharply off the ground, it skidded in an odd angle past him. The Inashiro stands began to roar. Carlos stepped on third—and waved onward, continued running.

"*Back home!*" Miyuki shouted. Eijun's heart began to pound in his ears.

Finally grabbing the ball, Isashiki reared back and threw. As befitting of one who'd once aspired to be a pitcher, the ball flew in a laser beam-like trajectory across the outfield and toward home plate, where Miyuki was waiting with his mitt outstretched. But Carlos was already on the ground, sliding. Just as he edged across the plate, sending up a cloud of dust in his wake, Miyuki caught the ball and tagged him. Simultaneously, they looked up at the umpire, who'd hunched down to ground level to determine the timing. There was a pause.

The umpire stretched his arms wide open. "*Safe!*"

Eijun felt his heart grow still. Carlos got up and pumped his fists in triumph. The stands were roaring unintelligibly. Miyuki looked grimly down at his mitt. The fielders were silent. In the dugout, Eijun saw a foot step out into the sun. At the sight, his hands balled into fists.

No.

He wasn't ready to get off the mound.

Not yet.

When Haruichi stepped out from the dugout, the crowd began to buzz in confusion. The infielders gathered around the mound seemed equally confused, until he reached them and explained to them Coach Kataoka's orders. Eijun seemed stunned, but after a moment, he nodded and pressed the ball in Furuya's glove.

While Miyuki talked to the umpire, Haruichi ran back to the bench.

"*Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Kadota-kun in the left field is Sawamura-kun. Replacing Sawamura-kun as pitcher, is Furuya-kun. Pitcher, Furuya-kun.*"

He'd expected Eijun to at least be allowed to finish the inning before being switched out. But it seemed the coach had something else in mind. By sending Eijun out to left field, was he giving him a second chance to pitch later in the endgame? Or was he only sending him there to put pressure on Inashiro?

Climbing down the stairway and into the shade of the dugout, Haruichi sat back down. He looked out at the field, where the fielders were throwing a few trial throws with Furuya. He could feel his fingers digging painfully into his palms.

What was he doing? Eijun and Furuya were out there on the field, doing their best—and he was
sitting in the dugout, going out on the field only when he had to deliver the coach's instructions.

He could hear his older brother's words echoing through his mind: "Don't just gawk at Sawamura pitching."

Through his heavy front bangs, Haruichi's gaze flickered restlessly from player to player. The field had never seemed so big. His eyes had always been fixated on second base, where his older brother was. The thought of playing another position had never even occurred to him before. But right now… he just wanted to be on the field where the others were. He just wanted to play.

Eijun blinked. "Left…field?"

"That's what the coach said," Haruichi replied, though he looked rather lost as well.

At the sound of incoming footsteps, Eijun turned to see that Furuya had reached the mound. Wordlessly, he held out his glove. Eijun felt his back stiffen. He squeezed his hand over the ball.

It was still only the bottom of the third inning. He'd been working this entire summer toward this game. How many times had he bragged about this game, saying that he would take Seidō to Kōshien? And yet now that the time had come, he was being switched out. Even though he hadn't done anything.

"Hyaha! Aren't you lucky," said Kuramochi. "Coach's giving you a break."

Yūki nodded. "We're just back at square one."

"We'll just have to score another run," said Masuko.

Miyuki didn't say anything, but Eijun felt his hand briefly clasp his shoulder. It was warm. He let go of the ball.

Far out in the outfield, despite looking rather downcast, Kadota gave Eijun his glove. Eijun blinked down at it, before slipping his hand in. He flexed the glove with his hand, crinkling the leather. It was his first time ever playing left field in an official game.

"Welcome to the outfield, first-year!" Isashiki barked.

"Spitz-senpai," Eijun replied automatically.

"Spitz…?! What's that?!"

"Ah – I mean, Isashiki-senpai," Eijun corrected himself. He'd forgotten that he'd never called the center fielder by that nickname in this time.

Isashiki narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but didn't press the issue. "Don't get too down, Sawamura. You've got the other pitchers behind you. The coach put you out here for a reason."

"I know," said Eijun.

"Out here, we can't see what you can see in the infield…" said Isashiki. He began walking back to his position. "But in turn, there are things here that only we can see."

While the stadium was packed in front of the baseball diamond, nobody was sitting in the outfield bleachers. Everyone always wanted to sit behind the home plate after all. Standing here in left field, though Eijun could still hear the distant hubbub of the crowd, it was much more muted. It was almost
as though he was listening through a wall.

Looking up, through the fence wires, he saw the scoreboard. Black and hulking, it was a lot bigger up close than it had appeared from the mound. The words Inashiro and Seidō were up on there. The score was tied 1-1. Their team members' names were on there too. His name by '1' had been replaced by Furuya and reappeared beside 7.

The clock at the top said it was about half past one.

"Batting third, third-baseman, Yoshizawa-kun."

Tick tock. Tick tock.

Time was a strange, funny thing. It had a tendency to repeat itself. But as Eijun was starting to realize, it was the little, seemingly insignificant details that got changed along the way that defined it in the end.

The time that he was living through for the second time—while it may have started from the same point as the previous timeline, somewhere along the way, it had begun to change. Where would the trajectory of this new story take them?

"We can't see what you can see in the infield."

Suddenly, Eijun noticed he couldn't see Miyuki anymore. In the outfield, the most he could see of Miyuki was a dot all the way on the opposite end of the field. At the thought, he felt his breath catch in his throat. His heart begin to race again... But just as soon as it had come, he felt it slow down again.

He couldn't see Miyuki—but his shoulder was still warm.

With a runner on second, the small figure that was Furuya threw from the stretch. The even smaller figure of the batter swung. And in the next instant, a white dot was spiraling through the sky, straight to left field. Eijun raised his glove and held it up to the sky.

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A belated note about how players are announced in-game and on the scoreboard.

**In-game**: Every player has their individual team jersey number that they wear on their back to indicate their position on the field (that applies from 1-9, but 10+ can be whatever position). This number however has no relevance to how they are announced in-game when they're coming up to bat. The players are announced by their **batting lineup number** and then their position. So yes, that is why even though Sawamura technically wears the number 10 jersey in Seidō, he is announced as "number 9, pitcher, Sawamura-kun." It is the same as saying "batting 9th."

**Scoreboard**: In the same vein, on the scoreboard where the players are listed, Sawamura will be listed under 1 even though he isn't the ace, because 1 simply means whoever is playing in the position pitcher. Anyone who is on the field as pitcher will be listed under 1 regardless of their individual team jersey number. Now that Sawamura is playing left field, his name will be listed under 7 (left fielder).

Hope that clears up some confusion.
Chapter End Notes

I can never get through as many innings in a chapter as I want…
Senpai

Chapter Summary

'An eye for an eye,' he believed the phrase was. - Seidō vs Inashiro part III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Top of the fourth. Seidō's offense begins with number 3, center fielder, Isashiki-kun."

Kneeling in the on-deck circle, Tetsu looked toward the batting box where Jun was setting up. As he let out his usual roar, Jun stabbed his bat in Narumiya's direction, and despite the tense mood, Tetsu felt the corners of his lips twitch: There was no other man he would have wanted to entrust as the batter before him. It was thanks to Jun that he was always able to bat feeling at ease.

This time however, it seemed it was not to be, as Narumiya threw a slider that Jun hit into a soft grounder. "Out!"

Rising to his feet, Tetsu made his way to the plate. Jun gave him a warning look, which he acknowledged with a slight nod. After the end of the first inning, Narumiya appeared to have hit his stride, for he had yet to give away a single hit.

With a sharp bow, Tetsu entered the batting box. "Number 4, first baseman, Yūki-kun."

From the nearby bleachers, he could hear the brass band playing *Lupin the Third*. His team members were yelling out his name from the dugout. Waiting on the mound, Narumiya tilted his head back as he adjusted the rim of his cap.

Settling down into his batting position, Tetsu let out a slow breath. As usual, everything else faded away, leaving behind just the ball in the distance and his bat. Following a short lull, the ball moved, blurring whitely through the darkness. It shot straight toward him. He swung. "Strike!"

Tetsu lowered his bat, and felt some of his surroundings seep like static back into his vision. Though he'd gone up against Narumiya multiple times, each at-bat always felt slightly different. Some of it, of course, had to do with Narumiya's ability as a pitcher, but it was also a testimony to Harada's skillful lead as a catcher.

The ball returned to the glove. Tetsu waited, and then once more, it was zooming toward him. It looked to be on the same course as the previous pitch, meaning it'd be right at the corner of the plate. This time, he swung a millisecond faster, and he felt his bat make contact. However, it wasn't a clean hit, and the ball shot off to the right of the foul line.

With that, the count was 0-2. Tetsu let out another breath. While he'd said to Sawamura that things were simply back to how they'd been at the start, that wasn't exactly true. After taking over the mound, Furuya had managed to end the inning without giving away any more runs, but unless they could get a hit off of Narumiya, the momentum would inevitably shift to favor Inashiro. He tightened his grasp on his bat. For the sake of the first years, and the following pitchers, he wanted to fulfill his role as cleanup and get a hit here.
Narumiya began to windup. Tetsu focused, zeroing in on just the ball. What would come his way next? A rocketing fastball, clocking its top speed at 148 km/h? A slider that broke sharply away just before the plate? A changeup that broke deceptively like a screwball?

In a streak of white, the ball flew straight toward him. It was going to be in the strike zone. Taking a step forward, Tetsu swung his bat without any hesitation. But as though sensing his resolve, the ball seemed to purposely drop away from his bat and – slam!

His surroundings returned in a thunderous crash. Tetsu felt a bead of sweat slide down his temple. For an instant, he met Narumiya's gaze, his eyes glowing with cold triumph.

"Strike! Batter out!"

The top of the fourth inning came to a quick close, as all three of Seidō's cleanups were taken down within a matter of minutes. Seidō's cheering stands fell into an uncomfortable silence and Inashiro's bleachers uproariously cheered for their ace.

As Satoru adjusted his footing on the mound, for perhaps the first time in his life, he wished he wasn't standing there. Despite his best attempts at covertly resting his wrist, the pain had only gotten worse. Whereas it had previously only hurt when he exerted pressure on it, now, it throbbed like a searing burn at the slightest touch. Even more than that, however, at the thought of throwing poorly and letting down the team's expectations…he shivered.

Somehow, by doing his utmost to make sure he didn't throw a wild pitch, Satoru had managed to get the out in the previous inning even though his pitch speed had noticeably dropped. While Miyuki had looked surprised, he didn't say anything in the dugout beyond a warning to not drink too much water.

"Bottom of the fourth, and the offense for Inashiro begins with number 4, catcher, Haradakun."

Kneeling on one knee, Miyuki threw the ball back to Satoru. At the impact of the catch, sharp pain spiked through his wrist, and he had to bite down on his lip to stop himself from wincing. As he waited for Miyuki's sign, Satoru suddenly felt glad he wasn't facing the rest of the fielders; it would've been harder to hide in the face of all of his teammates.

"Furuya-kun!"

"Furuya, take them down!"

"Seidō, let's go to Kōshien!"

Signaling for his signature fastball, Miyuki punched his mitt. Staring down at the plate, Satoru swallowed. It looked farther away than it usually did. Feeling a band of sweat around his forehead, he adjusted his cap. Then, he began to windup as purposefully as possible. Mindful of minimizing the pressure on his hand, he threw—but despite his efforts, Miyuki's mitt darted upward to snatch the ball out of the strike zone. Raising a brow, Miyuki threw the ball back. He began to roll his hand in a way that made Satoru internally wince, signaling for him to relax.

While the crowd had fallen into a lull, the occasional rising voice seemed to be almost leering at Satoru. The mitt on the other end opened up, but it looked smaller than usual. Bringing his hands together, he began to wind up and then he threw. His wrist throbbing in tempo with his motions, with a clanging sound, the ball flew high up into the foul net.
"Strike him out, Furuya!"

Holding his hand between his thighs, Miyuki signaled for a splitter. Satoru nodded and gingerly adjusted his grip on the ball. He threw. The ball flew down the mound. Just as it dropped, the batter swung—and missed. The crowd erupted into cheers.

As distracted as he was, he was finding it hard to think. Fortunately, the umpire signaled the count: 1-2. So that meant that somehow, Satoru was ahead in the count. Receiving the ball back from Miyuki, he felt a grateful heart surge up toward the catcher. After a short pause, Miyuki signaled for a fastball: *High and in.*

"C'mon, Furuya!"

"Bring it, Furuya!"

There were so many people cheering for him, calling out to him. Depending on him. He had to answer them through his pitching...

Winding up, Satoru slammed his foot down on the dirt, stabilizing his body as he threw down his arm. He felt the ball fly free from his fingertips, and somehow knew that it was the fastest pitch he'd thrown so far. It traveled down the mound, high and inside, just as Miyuki had asked. But—Satoru felt his breath catch in his chest—the ball was going too deep. It was angling inward and inward. As if in slow motion, the batter's eyes widened, and he began to take a step back in an attempt to avoid it but it was too late, Satoru could see the—**crssh!**

Spiraling in place for an infinitesimal moment, the ball crashed into the batter's shoulder. Satoru felt his heart drop, and in a flash, the cheers from the crowd turned into a collective gasp. The batter reared belatedly back, dropping his bat as his hand jumped to his shoulder.

The call came almost immediately. *"Dead ball!"*

Though the Inashiro team members looked prepared to surge toward him, the batter stopped them with a raised hand, and stripped off his elbow guard. Satoru took off his cap and bowed in apology. The surrounding silence was as loud as a midnight storm. He could hear the sound of the batter's spikes crushing into the dirt.

*"Time!"* said the umpire.

Miyuki and the other infielders came toward him.

"You look strained," said Haruichi's brother.

"Did you hurt something?" asked Miyuki, wearing an inscrutable expression. In response, Satoru's gaze flickered down to his wrist before he could stop himself. He immediately looked away and shook his head—and suddenly, Kuramochi's hand snaked out and grabbed his arm. Satoru flinched and tried to pull away, but with his eyes narrowed, Kuramochi firmly pulled back his sleeve to reveal his wrist, which had grown swollen and purple.

Somehow, in the bright sunlight, it looked even worse than it had back in the washroom. For what felt like the longest second in his life, the others simply stared. And then—

"You *dumbass.*"

---

The game was temporarily put on hold as the emergency medical personnel took a look at Furuya's
wrist. The outfielders returned to the dugout, their perplexed expressions turning into looks of concern when they learned of the situation.

It seemed Furuya had somehow injured his wrist in the previous match, and had been hiding it this entire time. As an athlete, it was one of the worst things they could do to themselves. Even a relatively minor injury, if left untreated, could knock you out of the entire season—or worse.

Kazuya ruefully shook his head. "I knew he was an idiot, but not to this level." At that, for some reason, Sawamura raised an eyebrow at him.

Within minutes, the door opened. Everyone perked up to see Furuya come back out wearing an unreadable expression. Rei shook her head. "He can't pitch any further in this state. And he refuses to leave to get further first aid."

"Please let me stay until the end of the game," said Furuya, facing the coach.

Coach Kataoka gave him a hard stare, before nodding sharply. "Fine." He nodded to the younger Kominato, who hurried out to the bullpen. Soon afterwards, he came back with Tanba in tow. "You can go, right?" was all the coach asked.

"Yes, sir!"

As the players began to stream back out onto the field, Kazuya lingered behind, wondering whether there was something he should say to Furuya. Even though it'd been a stupid thing to do, he thought he could understand why Furuya had hid his injury. They all could. So in the end, Kazuya didn't say anything—although he was the starting catcher, it somehow didn't feel like his place to. Sliding his mask back on, he crouched down in the catcher's box.

But, he thought to himself, Furuya sure had come a long way from the beginning of the year. Kazuya recalled how during the intrasquad game, Furuya had even tried to leave early because he'd given up the game for lost. Back then, he hadn't been interested in any games that he wasn't playing in. And yet now, even though he was out of the game for good, he was insisting on staying to watch. Surely, Furuya did this knowing what this game meant to the upperclassmen of the team. Even if from the sidelines, he must have wanted to do whatever he could to contribute.

After all, wasn't that why Sawamura was now standing in left field?

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Furuya-kun as pitcher is Tanba-kun. Pitcher, Tanba-kun."

Yōichi crouched, hovering in his position between first and second. Watching Tanba toss the rosin bag in his hand, his thoughts turned to Furuya. How bad could their team's luck be? First Sawamura, and now Furuya was injured. Even Tanba had been hurt just before the season had started. For all he knew, Kawakami could be hiding a stomach ulcer or something—it was a possibility, considering all the karaage he ate.

"Number 5, pitcher, Narumiya-kun."

Haphazardly swinging his bat, Narumiya was making his usual racket—this time, about getting revenge. Privately, Yōichi wondered why Narumiya was in the central five-hole position of the Inashiro lineup. His performance was spotty at best, and he struck out more often than not. It was possible he was a clutch hitter, rising to the occasion when the need called for it, but considering how easily Inashiro had coasted along in this tournament so far, it was a tough call to make.
Sure enough, two pitches later, despite all his loud bluster, Narumiya hit a fly ball to center field and stomped back to his dugout. Taking the moment to catch his breath, Tanba took off his cap. The sunlight reflected brightly off his shaved head, and seeing that, Yōichi felt compelled to wipe his own neck as well. It was another hot summer day.

"Number 6, first baseman, Yamaoka-kun."

With his hulking build and long sideburns, Yamaoka had always reminded Yōichi of an ape. In sharp contrast to the previous batter, he stepped silently up to the plate. Yōichi glanced at first base, where Inashiro's other ape, Harada, was hovering, but he didn't expect him to try and steal. He was a classic power hitter, relying not on his legs but on his hits to circle the bases. Yamaoka was the same way.

As Tanba began his pitching motion, Yōichi tensed. However, Yamaoka let the first pitch by, simply watching its curving trajectory.

The umpire punched the air. "Strike!"

Yōichi yelled out an encouragement to Tanba. Despite not having pitched very much in the tournament, the third-year pitcher was doing well in his opening inning. Seeing Tanba begin his pitching motion once more, he tensed again—but suddenly, Yamaoka dropped into a bunting stance. Pushing his bat forward to kill the ball's momentum, it dropped straight down along the first base foul line. Shit, that's a good bunt. Harada began to run to second base. Tanba, who'd begun sprinting forward, scooped up the ball in his glove. Turning, he threw to Yūki, who'd stepped in as much as possible.

"Out!"

Meanwhile, Harada had safely reached second base, and Inashiro's stands began to loudly cheer. Yōichi let out a slow, rattling breath and straightened up. The situation didn't look too great: they had two outs, but a runner was now in scoring position. Sure, they were at the bottom of the lineup, but that meant nothing against a nationally-ranked team like Inashiro, where even their ninth batter could've batted cleanup in a lesser school.

"Number 7, second baseman, Hirai-kun."

Tensing up on the balls of his feet, Yōichi stared down the batter. If Yamaoka and Harada were textbook power hitters, the definition of 'contact hitter' would've had Hirai's picture beside it. He didn't have much power, but his on-base percentage was, alongside Shirakawa's, one of the best in Tokyo. It was more likely than not that they put the ball into play during their at-bats. Sure enough, after fighting obstinately for a full count, Hirai swung compactly, and to the elated roaring of the Inashiro stands, hit a line drive that slipped through the infield gap for a single. That left them at two outs, with a runner on first, and another in prime scoring position on third.

At a signal from Coach Kataoka, Miyuki stood up and motioned to the infielders to move back to their standard positionings. As Yōichi wiped his sweaty face on his shoulder sleeve, he caught sight of Sawamura in the left field, pacing back and forth. At that, somehow, he felt a muscle twitch.

You stupid first-years…worry about yourselves first!

Miyuki appeared to be contemplating something, as it was taking longer than usual for him to make a sign. Kōichiro waited in silence, making sure to keep an eye on the runner on first, who was taking a
big lead. He knew it was his fault they were in this situation; the course of his last pitch had been weak, coming in higher than what Miyuki had called for.

At last, Miyuki motioned: *Curveball, low and away.*

Kōichiro nodded. They wanted to keep the hit infield as much as possible after all. Gathering his hands together, he shot another look at the runner on first, and then turned back to face the plate. He threw from the stretch and with a *clang!* the ball flew outside the foul line.

Miyuki pushed down on the air with his hand: *Keep it low.*

Filling his lungs with air, Kōichiro let out a long breath. He didn't want to admit it, but he was nervous after all. While it was still only the fourth inning, Sawamura was in left field and Furuya was out of the game for good. Whether the coach planned on putting Sawamura back in the game or not, Kōichiro thought it was about time that he started acting like the team ace that he was.

Raising his leg, he began to throw—when he saw, from the corner of his eye, the runner take off for second. His eyes widened; Inashiro was being aggressive *here*? At this point?

"Steal!" came the warning cry.

Jerking on reflex, Kōichiro released the ball earlier than he'd intended. It soared in a high trajectory through the air toward the plate—it was going to be a wild pitch. He felt his stomach clench in fear, his gaze automatically turning to the runner on third: If it was a passed ball, the runner would certainly come home.

But suddenly, Miyuki leapt up to his feet as though he'd been expecting the steal the whole time—which, considering it was *Miyuki*, was highly possible. Reaching out his hand, he caught the ball in his mitt and in a single fluid motion, passed it to his free hand and threw. The ball bulleted straight to second base, where Kuramochi was waiting with his glove outstretched.

"*Out! Three outs, change!*"

The crowd applauded and letting out an answering whoop of relief, the fielders began to stream back to the dugout. Miyuki stepped into place beside Kōichiro and grinned in a way that should've irritated him, but for once, he thought he could understand the meaning behind it.

The announcer's voice rang throughout the stadium: "*Top of the fifth. Seidō High's offense begins with number 6, catcher, Miyuki-kun.*"

There was a clattering sound as Hidokoro settled back in his seat. "Oh good, I made it back in time."

"Stop waving your hands, you're getting water on me," Inamoto complained.

"Oh, sorry." Patting his hands dry on his pants, Hidokoro peered out at the scoreboard. "So did I miss anything?"

"Just the part where Seidō's catcher threw out the runner on second and ended the inning," Akira said with a grin.

Hidokoro's face fell. "Of all the plays I could've missed, it had to be that one." As a catcher himself, he was naturally most interested in Seidō's catcher. He sighed. "At least I get to see his at-bat…" He trailed off as just then, the catcher hit a fly ball straight toward left field. "*Got,*" he corrected himself.
Now that Sakurazawa's summer was officially over, most of the other members had turned their undivided attentions to their studies. None of them were likely to get baseball recommendations—and as their school was renowned for its academics more than its athletics, there was more pressure on them to perform well on exams. Nonetheless, it was their last year after all: Akira wasn't going to give up the chance to see the match-up between the two finalist teams. Hidokoro and Inamoto, who were also graduating, had felt the same way.

"Number 7, left fielder, Sawamura-kun."

For a moment, they watched in silence as the Seidō's seventh batter set up on the plate.

"Wonder how long Sawamura's gonna be in left field?" someone sitting in front of them mused out loud.

"I came today to see him pitch against Narumiya," another voice complained.

Blinking, the three of them looked at each other.

"It's been pretty even so far," said Inamoto. "But if I had to say, Inashiro's got the edge."

Sawamura swung and fouled off a pitch.

Hidokoro shook his head. "It's still only halfway through the game, and Seidō's still got some great pitchers in reserve. It's too early to call."

"Inashiro's reserve player's pretty good as well," Inamoto offered.

"He hasn't pitched in a situation when it mattered, though."

"This is just that debate, isn't it?" Akira finally said. "There's Inashiro's more classical approach with having the ace carry the team…and then there's Seidō's relatively newer strategy of using a pitcher relay."

"We had just you, Akira," Hidokoro pointed out.

Akira nodded. "Exactly."

Inamoto raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

At a full count, Sawamura swung. Akira watched the ball spin through the sky and land in the third baseman's glove. "A strategy's just that—a strategy. In the end, it all comes down to the players."

Simply put, the members of Sakurazawa had been no match for Seidō. It was a bitter medicine to swallow, but a necessary one. And now in the finals, Seidō and Inashiro, two of the strongest schools in West Tokyo, were battling for the crown. While the matchup was about as even as it could've gotten, in the end, the team that desired victory more would emerge the winner. Would it be Inashiro, with their lone ace? Or Seidō, with their multiple aces?

It was difficult to say. But privately, Akira thought, if he had to say the team that he wanted to see win…

Standing far out in center field, Jun cracked his neck. Soon however, the sound reminded him unpleasantly of Inashiro's coach, and he stopped. A ways off, down at the mound, he saw Tanba throw. The batter swung. Jun tensed as he saw the ball fly high towards the outfield—and then
relaxed as he saw it go far outside into foul territory.

The top of the fifth had ended unfortunately quickly, with Narumiya collecting three successive outs. At the memory, Jun scowled. Just how long was that punk planning to continue his streak?

They were now in the bottom of the fifth. Following two swift outs from the ninth and first batters, Tanba had struggled against the second batter, Shirakawa, for multiple pitches before finally walking him. It seemed the fight against the three-hole Yoshizawa was going down along the same path, as he had fouled off almost every pitch so far.

Catching a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, Jun turned to see Sawamura pacing back and forth. He snorted, but didn't say anything. Even if he had said something, he doubted Sawamura would listen to him. In situations like this, actions spoke louder than words.

With a visible crack, Yoshizawa hit the next pitch with a powerful and compact swing, sending the ball soaring through the sky. It was heading in Jun's direction, but it was still at a speed that split through the air. If it didn't drop soon, or if the wind carried it any further, it would go over his head.

Keeping his eyes trained on the ball, Jun sprinted backward. "Fall, dammit!"

Right on time, it finally began to drop—but Jun realized he was already at the back wall of the stadium. Undeterred, without losing any speed, he jumped. Colliding hard against the wall, he felt his breath get knocked out of his chest as he bounced himself up. Straining to reach the ball, he gritted his teeth—and felt it brush into the very tips of his fingertips.

Landing down on the ground, Jun staggered once but held a firm grip on the ball as he raised it high into the air. Gritting his teeth, he shot a glare down at his arm: It hurt like hell and would probably bruise in the morning. But still, he noticed when he looked back up that Sawamura had finally stopped pacing. He thought it was well worth the price.

While the others in the dugout hydrated themselves or cheered for the other members' at-bats, Chris was, as usual, seated on the bench besides the coach as he wrote down the game. He admittedly did feel the usual distance he felt during games. However, it was no longer the empty feeling it had once been. Some people, maybe even his father, may have considered that to be giving in—but he didn't think so.

With a practiced eye, he surveyed the scorebook before him. After Tanba had hit a fly ball to second, Kuramochi had managed to fight with Inashiro's battery for a base on balls. Though he was unable to steal due to Narumiya pressuring him with pickoff attempts, Ryōsuke followed with a safety bunt, allowing him to reach second base. Now, with their best runner in scoring position and the cleanups coming up to bat, this was their best opportunity yet to reclaim their lead.

Just as he had finished writing down the last pitch, a flash of pink caught Chris' eye. Looking up, he saw the younger Kominato sitting beside Furuya, who was now icing his wrist. Taking in Furuya's expression, Chris paused his pencil.

He'd been as shocked as anyone else when he'd seen the state of his wrist. Apparently, Furuya had been hiding it since the Sakurazawa match. A long time ago, Chris thought he might have wondered how he had not noticed—especially since he'd met him in the bath the night before. But being who he was now, with the experience that had brought him to that bench as a manager, Chris understood only too well how easy it was to hide yourself. As he'd learned the hard way, the world was a vast and soundless place.
Nodding at his catcher's sign, Narumiya threw from the stretch. In an uncharacteristic display of patience, Isashiki let it pass. "Ball!" And now, the count was 2-2.

The catcher threw back the ball. Narumiya raised his glove to receive it—and suddenly, Kuramochi took off from second base. Taken aback himself, Chris felt his eyes widen. Following a split second of stunned silence, the crowds began to clamor. Inashiro's catcher barked something and pointed at third. Narumiya, perplexed, spun around—but it was too late. Sliding onto the third base bag, Kuramochi straightened up with a mischievous grin splitting his face.

The other members—including the younger Kominato, who somehow seemed particularly taken by the steal—rushed to the dugout railing.

"Kuramochi!" Ōta cheered, pumping his fist.

"They didn't see that coming at all," said Chris. "That was a big play." It wasn't every day that a baserunner, even one as fast as Kuramochi, tried to steal third—and especially not during a throwback.

Coach Kataoka nodded, wearing a small smile. "It was."

"Now, if Isashiki-kun and Yūki-kun can follow thro..." said Takashima. She trailed off as with an audible "Oryaah!" and a following clang! Isashiki crushed the ball with a fierce swing. Their breaths collectively held in anticipation, they all followed the ball as it flew out to right field. It dropped—and just out of the reach of the right fielder, landed inside the foul line. As the right fielder scrambled to throw back the ball, Isashiki ran through the first base bag. Kuramochi, his legs a moving blur, came home, putting Seidō back in the lead at 2-1.

Watching the light up by Seidō's name on the scoreboard, Masatoshi paused and then sat back down in the catcher's box. His head lowered, Narumiya kicked the dirt, but to his surprise, showed no other reaction. He'd expected the southpaw to start throwing a tantrum, heedless of the fact that they were currently under the scrutiny of thousands of gazes.

Masatoshi acknowledged that the hit they'd just given away had been his fault. He hadn't expected Seidō's shortstop to steal third base, and it'd obviously thrown Narumiya enough that the course of his next pitch had been rather weak. The correct move to make would have been to call for a time-out and give Narumiya a chance to collect himself. However, he'd been too hasty, and Seidō had capitalized on that to take the lead once more.

If it was any other pitcher, Masatoshi would have called for a time-out even at this point to make sure that their head was back in the game. But just then, Narumiya looked back up, and Masatoshi was reminded that he was not, in fact, just any other pitcher.

"Number four, first baseman, Yūki-kun."

Squaring himself, he set up his mitt: Come!

His eyes as sharp as cut glass, Narumiya nodded. Folding inwards, his foot crushed into the ground and his arm flung down. The ball roared toward Masatoshi. The batter swung. Slam! The impact resonating throughout his body, Masatoshi could smell smoke rising off of his mitt. "Strike!"

Looking down at the ball, Masatoshi rolled it over with his fingers before throwing it back. This was fine. Seidō may have gotten the better of Inashiro in this inning, but that didn't mean it was over. Not
by far. They’d get their revenge, and then some.

Judging from the expression on Narumiya's face at the moment, that was a promise.

After getting sent off the field, Satoru had stripped off his shirt and was now seated on the bench with an ice pack over his wrist. Every time someone passed by, he tensed up—but they didn't address him. He'd been waiting since Kuramochi had pulled back his sleeve for someone to say something. But besides the initial outbursts of surprise, no one had said anything. Not even Miyuki, not even the coach. Not even Sawamura. He'd thought they would get angry, since he'd worsened their chances at winning the game. Maybe even kick him out of the dugout. Instead, he was now greeted with silence. It almost reminded him of his junior high school days, when the other members of Tomakomai had stopped talking to him until he left.

Passing by, Higasa handed Satoru a cup of cool water. Taking it with a slight dip of his head, he looked down at the water's surface before taking a sip.

This silence however, he thought, was different.

*Clang!*

The white ball spiraled through the sky, straight to left field. Satoru raised his left hand and held it up to the sky. His hand's dark outline blocked out the sun. For some reason, feeling uneasy, he lowered his hand.

The game so far was a hard one for Kazuya to read. The tides shifted this way and that, changing with every play. Seidō may have gotten the lead in the last inning, but Inashiro's battery had managed to jam Yūki once again to end the inning. For their captain and indisputable best batter to be outdone for three at-bats in a row—it'd effectively put a damper on their exhilaration. Just what the hell is Mei playing at here?

"Bottom of the sixth, Inashiro's offense begins with number 4, catcher, Harada-kun."

Kazuya glanced up at the hulking batter. He had a certain presence of his own, and even now, the tension in the air was tangible. While there were batters better at making contact than Harada on the Inashiro lineup, there was no doubt that he was the linchpin of their offense. Taking him out here would be essential—and to do that, they needed to go on the offensive themselves and corner him aggressively.

He signaled to Tanba, who nodded. His shaven head glistened with sweat. He began to windup. He threw. Harada swung, the air visibly rippling behind his bat—*clang!* The ball shot high into the air, sailing into the foul net.

"Nice ball!" Kazuya called out to Tanba. Receiving a new ball from the umpire, he threw it back. Sitting back down, he cast a critical eye around the field. With a powerful swing like that, if the ball came even close to being within reach, it'd definitely be carried to the far outfield—if not further.

After a moment, Kazuya made up his mind and signaled: *Curveball, inside and high, to the chest.*

Tanba hesitated. When faced with a power hitter, most pitchers preferred to throw to the outside, to try and get them to chase the ball. Kazuya wondered whether Tanba was going to shake his head—but to his surprise, he nodded. Straightening up, he held his hands together in his glove—and then threw.
Though Furuya's hit-by-pitch in his last at-bat must have still been fresh on his mind, to Harada's credit, he didn't flinch and swing. Instead, he calmly let the ball pass by. "Ball!"

Damn. As expected, Inashiro's catcher wasn't an easy nut to crack.

For the next pitch, Kazuya signed for a fastball to the outside—and it was here that Tanba did shake his head. Puzzled, he tried signing a curveball to the low outside. When Tanba shook his head once more, he realized what the third-year was looking for: the forkball. Kazuya hesitated. He knew Tanba had been practicing it in the bullpen, but they had yet to use it even once in an official game. And he wanted to use it now, here? Against the cleanup, in this match?

As he took in Tanba's determined expression, in a sudden flash of clarity, Kazuya understood what had to be going through his head: Just as Kuramochi had taken Inashiro by surprise, he wanted to take the chance to use this new pitch and reverse the flow of the game once more.

...well, why not.

He didn't know whether it was worth the gamble, but it was clear that Tanba had his mind set on the pitch. Kazuya signaled for the forkball, and with a nod, Tanba straightened up. Adjusting his grip behind his glove, he stepped and turned. Raising his leg, he twisted his body and pushed it downward as he threw down his arm. The ball shot out of his hand and flew toward Kazuya's waiting mitt.

Harada swung—and suddenly, just as it reached the plate, the ball dropped. It slammed into Kazuya's mitt with a satisfying crack. "Strike three! Batter out!"

Unable to help himself, Kazuya grinned unabashedly. 'An eye for an eye,' he believed the phrase was.

"Top of the seventh, and Seidō High's offense begins with number 5, third baseman, Masuko-kun."

Getting up to get himself a drink of water, Ryōsuke found himself automatically scanning the dugout for the familiar mop of pink hair and—yes there he was, leaning against the dugout railing. He’d never admit it out loud, but he was always keeping an eye on Haruichi.

His younger brother had always been a bit of a headache for Ryōsuke.

Haruichi loved baseball just as much as he did, and his batting sense was just as good, if not better, than his. Ryōsuke had always thought it would be nice to have two Kominatos playing on the field—but Haruichi had insisted on playing the same position, second baseman.

What had Haruichi said on the morning of the Sakurazawa game? "Aniki. It's our first and last time to make nationals together."

Didn't he realize that if they played the same position, they could never play baseball together?

"Number 6, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

At the sound of the announcer's voice, Ryōsuke snapped his attention back to the game. Looking disappointed, Masuko was coming back into the dugout, and Yūki was staring out at the mound while emanating a fiery aura.

"Oi, Tetsu, turn it off. You're scaring Kominato," said Jun, with a barking laugh. "Look, he's
trembling."

"Ah, sorry."

Ryōsuke paused and turned back at that. Haruichi didn't seem to have heard them, for he didn't react. His bangs which usually covered his face had fallen to the side, and Ryōsuke could see his eyes focusing on the field. He looked down at the railing—and saw that his hands were, indeed slightly trembling.

He smiled. Judging from his brother's face, he didn't think it was out of fear.

Maybe, he thought to himself, they really would be able to make nationals together.

---

*Slam!*

"Try your sinker now," Miyauchi called out.

Nori nodded. Beginning his pitching motion, he swung his arm around and threw. The ball dropped, and to his dismay, plunged down into the ground before sharply bouncing up into the catcher's mitt.

"S-sorry!" he shouted.

"Don't mind," Miyauchi shouted, throwing back the ball.

He took a deep breath. *Careful, careful.* He'd begun warming up in the bullpen at the bottom of the fifth, but even though it was now the bottom of the seventh, his shoulder still felt tight.

Tanba had gotten off to a great start, but signs of wearing down were starting to show. It was a hot day, and Tanba was going through his second cycle of the lineup. Even as Nori paused to watch the game, the ninth batter tossed aside his bat and began to jog to first base. Tanba took off his cap and wiped his forehead, his sweat apparent even all the way from the bullpen.

Nori turned to Miyauchi for confirmation, and the catcher nodded curtly. At this rate, Nori would be going out soon—and with Furuya and Tanba out of the game, that'd leave just him and Sawamura as the remaining pitchers of Seidō's relay. Furthermore, Sawamura at this point was a wild card—it was anyone's best guess how much the repercussions of his concussion would affect his pitching. Which meant that it was crucial how Nori performed. If he froze up like he had in the game against Yakushi, then it was game over. The third years' dreams would come to an end, just like that.

At the thought, Nori felt his stomach flip-flop. *Careful, careful.* Miyauchi opened his mitt again. Keeping his weight shifted to the back of his body, Nori lifted his leg. Swinging his arm down, he threw.

*Slam!*

Sawamura, Furuya, Tanba—they were all amazing in their own way. Not so deep inside, Nori felt he wasn't much in comparison to them. His greatest strength was that he was a sidearm pitcher, adding diversity to Seidō's pitching roster. Nonetheless, that didn't mean he wasn't without his own brand of pride. While he didn't have Furuya's raw talent or Sawamura's presence, he'd raised his pitching to a level of control that'd only been possible after years' worth of sweat and sore muscles.

Speaking in all honesty, the stakes of this game made Nori want to throw up. But, he reminded himself, he was no longer a first year anymore. He was a second year—a senpai. And as a senpai, he had a duty to stand up straight and tall, and face forward.
Nori could only hope that that would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

That was a rush through a bunch of innings. The next chapter will wrap up the game. And then we will finally be in the endgame of this fic.
Silence

Chapter Summary

The inning's not yet over. - Seidō vs Inashiro part IV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Number 3, third baseman, Yoshizawa-kun."

Without saying a word, Mei put on his helmet and picked up his bat. Normally he would have shouted something at whomever was up to bat to vent whatever he'd bottled up on the mound, but with the way things were, he was in too much of a bad mood to do even that. Instead, tapping his foot on the ground, Mei fumed in silence.

At the top of the eighth, Seidō's ace had stepped down from the mound and was replaced by their sidearm. After a drawn-out battle, Shirakawa successfully fought for a base on balls, and was now hovering on first.

Meanwhile, letting the first pitch pass to test the waters, Yoshizawa hit the following pitch into a fly ball to right field for their first out.

"Number 4, catcher, Harada-kun."

Mei had enough self-awareness to know that he gave the third-year catcher the most grief out of anyone else on the team. But that was because Mei knew that he was the only one who could take it: Masatoshi was just that kind of person. And now at this juncture in the game, Mei knew with (mostly) unwavering certainty that he would come through because, again, he was just that kind of person.

Clang! Masatoshi fouled off the pitch, making the count 1-2. He'd been cornered.

Mei's grip tightened on the handle of his bat. He glared at the catcher, sending out mental brainwaves that were half encouragement, half abuse. If they were going to score, now was the best time. Kawakami's face had been rather pale as he'd come out of the bullpen. At the memory, Mei let out a snort—considering he was a closing pitcher, he didn't seem to have the necessary guts.

It was time for the next pitch. Nodding at a sign, Kawakami drew his hands together, and with a quick glance at Shirakawa, he threw.

Masatoshi stepped in, his foot slamming down on the dirt, and he swung. Clang! Connecting solidly, the ball bulleted past the first baseman's outstretched mitt and out into the far outfield. As the crowd came to life, the right fielder chased the ball, and Shirakawa passed second with ease and advanced to third. Masatoshi on the other hand—while a man of many talents, running was not one of them—slid onto the second base bag just before the ball was relayed to the shortstop. Straightening up, Masatoshi stripped off his gloves and regarded the stands with a calm and level gaze.

Whatever qualms he may have had with his catcher now assuaged, Mei stood up.
Following the hit, Seidō called for a timeout and Miyuki and the other infielders talked to the sidearm pitcher. When the huddle dispersed, Mei entered the batting box.

"Number 5, pitcher, Narumiya-kun."

Now that he was standing closer to the pitcher, Mei thought he could hear him muttering something under his breath. 'Hairful'?

Shooting a nervous look at Masatoshi, Kawakami threw. Despite his obvious anxiety, the ball flew in sharper than it'd looked from the dugout. Mei swung and missed. "Strike!"

"Nice pitch!" Miyuki shouted to his pitcher, throwing the ball back.

The next pitch was a slider—but before Mei could swing, it dropped to the ground and bounced wildly on the dirt. As Miyuki dove to stop the ball, Shirakawa took a tentative step forward to home base—and then stopped. Mei turned to see Miyuki already up on his feet with a hard, warning gaze, poised to throw the ball.

His lips drew back in a grudging grin. You bastard.

The next pitch came. While the previous pitches had crowded the corners, this one was the closest to the middle of the zone by far. Not one to turn down such a tasty morsel, Mei swung—and was satisfied to see his bat make solid contact with the ball, sending it straight past the pitcher's alarmed face.

Dropping his bat, he took off. He could hear the fielders shouting instructions at each other. Waved past first, Mei began running to second. From the corner of his eye, he saw Shirakawa reach home with ease, and the third base coach was waving Masatoshi on as well. As Mei reached second, he turned to see Masatoshi sliding at home just as Miyuki tagged him.

The umpire spread his arms open. "Safe!"

While neither he nor Shirakawa were the type to congratulate the other, they nonetheless raised their fists in acknowledgment of their cheering stands.

Stepping firmly on the second base bag, with the triumphant poses of his teammates fresh on his mind, Mei didn't hesitate to aim for third. He was by no means a fast runner, but he had done his fair share of running over the past winter and he was confident that Seidō would be too distracted to notice –

Something not unlike a white laser streaked past his face, and an instant later, the second baseman reached out and tagged Mei with his glove. As though in a lame punchline, Mei skidded belatedly to a stop just before the bag and turned at once to see Miyuki giving him a hard look. He felt himself sweat.

"OUT!" cried the umpire.

Amidst the cheers, good-natured laughter began to rain down at Mei from the stands. All the exhilaration left him in a rush. Ignoring what the base coach was saying, Mei flopped down on the ground and found himself looking up at the sky. He opened his mouth to grouch something—and then closed it. Suddenly, somehow, as though everything was finally catching up, his body felt overheated and sluggish.

I really should've slept more last night...
This had to be a nightmare. Any moment now, he would wake up in his bed drenched in cold sweat, and realize to his great relief that it'd all been nothing but a horrible dream and that the finals was still tomorrow.

His heart pounding painfully in his ears, Nori waited, but he didn't wake up. In a last pitch of desperation, he looked up at the scoreboard—but the number '2' that had lit up beside Inashiro's name didn't waver. His head dropped, and he saw that his hand was trembling.

It seemed there was no other choice but to accept this nightmare as reality. Despite his best efforts to pitch carefully, he'd gone and blown Seidō's lead: It was the eight inning and the score was now 3-2, in Inashiro's favor. And it was all his own fault.

In an instant, the game against Yakushi flashed through Nori's mind all over again. He'd let their cleanup slam a home run, and almost let Sawamura's hard work go for naught. And back then, completely cowed, he'd stepped down from the mound. His situation now was rather the same.

But, Nori thought, there was one difference, and that difference was that this was not the first time that it had happened. While it'd been only a few days ago, he'd barely been able to lift his head then. This time however—somehow—he found himself managing to look back at the faces of his teammates who now surrounded him.

"Sorry Nori," said Miyuki, raising a hand in apology. "That was my call."

Miyuki, he thought offhandedly to himself, was a bit different lately. It was hard to describe. His baseball was a bit less...desperate.

Nori shook his head. "No, it was my fault. Sorry."

"Nori – "

"But we're at two outs now," he said. "I just need to get us one more, right?"

While Miyuki blinked at him, Kuramochi slapped Nori on the shoulder. "He knows what he's saying."

After a pause, Miyuki nodded. He tapped Nori's shoulder with his mitt. "I won't let any balls pass me, so throw with all you've got."

As the others returned to their positions, Nori looked back down at his hand. It was still trembling. And yet, he knew that the only pitcher left after him was Sawamura—who was amazing to be sure, but in the end, still just a first-year with a days-old concussion.

"Number six, first baseman, Yamaoka-kun."

As they entered the ninth inning and found themselves trailing 3-2, Coach Kataoka gathered the players in a circle. It was only a one run difference—but it was a heavy one. Though their jaws were set in determination, glimmers of apprehension and anxiety could be seen in almost each and every individual. Curiously enough, Yōichi noticed that Sawamura somehow seemed the most tranquil out of all of them.

"Narumiya only threw two changeups in the first half of the game—and both times, it was against Yūki," said Chris, glancing down at his notes. "Since the beginning of the sixth inning, the battery's started mixing it in more, but it's clear that they've made it the deciding pitch…and no one has managed to hit it yet."
The other players grimly looked back at the coach, who appeared to be in contemplation. Yōichi stole a look at their captain, whose aura had blazed up once more. He'd faced against the changeup the most out of any of them so far, and each time, Narumiya had gotten the better of him. No one said anything, but from the looks on their faces, it was clear what they were thinking: If even their best batter couldn't hit it, what were their chances?

Coach Kataoka folded his arms, and at the movement, Yōichi's gaze snapped back. "It's a pitch that won't be captured within a single game. From now on, throw away the changeups and go after his straights."

Everyone nodded. "Yes sir!"

"Top of the ninth, and Seidō's offense begins with number 2, second baseman, Kominato-kun."

His brother was no longer smiling.

Haruichi knew his brother well enough to know that it meant one of either two things: either Ryōsuke was being pushed over the edge, or he'd already fallen off of it. He didn't know his brother well enough to determine which of the two it was, however.

That wasn't to say that Ryōsuke didn't try during his every at-bat. As far as Haruichi knew, his brother's every movement and action was filled with purpose. The smile he always had on hinted at it: that everything he did was moving according to some plan. But the very few times he'd seen Ryōsuke pushed over that ledge, the smile had disappeared—and what lay under that was less certain, more volatile. The outcomes were just as drastic. For one, Haruichi was fairly confident that the hulking neighborhood bully who'd made his life miserable for a few months, could no longer look at the color pink without flinching (a characteristic which was, luckily for him, attributed to his uncompromising masculinity).

Clang! The crowd collectively held their breaths as the ball soared far out in foul territory. It was a full count—it'd been a full count for the past three pitches. His brother straightened up, his brow glistening with sweat, and Inashiro's ace pitcher scowled.

By this point, it was a battle of wills. Even though he was as far from the line of action as he could be while still standing in the dugout, Haruichi could feel goosebumps rising on his arms from the pure tension in the air.

Clang!

Haruichi was no stranger to watching his brother from the sidelines. It'd been that way for as long as he could remember. Whether he was cowering in the corner as Ryōsuke tackled a sixth grader twice his size, or cheering in the crowd with his father while his brother secured the game-ending double play, Haruichi had been used to—and had been more than happy to—admire his brother from a certain distance. A distance which, he was starting to realize, had always been created by himself.

Claang!

When Ryōsuke went to Tokyo for high school, it had been the first time his brother had put distance between them. Perhaps that was why it'd shocked him so much back then.

Clang!
"Don't just gawk at Sawamura pitching." His brother had said 'Sawamura,' but Haruichi wondered now whether he hadn't meant something else as well.

Something rang out below him. Haruichi looked down to see that his hands were trembling. At the moment, they were gripping the railing, but for an instant, he imagined them gripping the handle of a bat and his breath caught in his chest. Clenching his hands shut, he shook his head.

When he looked back up, it was just in time to see a pitch sweep past Ryōsuke's face. The ball slammed into the catcher's mitt, and for a still moment, the umpire didn't move. Then he made a hammering motion. "Strike three! Batter out!"

Looking unusually frustrated, Ryōsuke returned to the dugout.

Tetsu knew that the only reason Ryōsuke would have let a ball pass at a full count without swinging was if the ball had been outside the strike zone. The fact that it'd been called a strike told him that the umpire had been affected by the level of tension running through the air. While it was unfortunate, it was just the way baseball worked.

"Number 3, center fielder, Isashiki-kun."

Before going up the stairs, Tetsu turned to the coach, wondering whether he had any more words to offer for guidance. However, it seemed that the coach did not have any such words, for he only looked at Tetsu and then with a sharp nod of his head, turned back at the field. Nonetheless, it was enough—Tetsu knew the coach, and even more than that, what the coach wanted. Sometimes, after all, such things did not have to be spoken to be understood.

Unlike Ryōsuke's at-bat, Jun's ended almost as soon as it'd began. The pitch came in tantalizingly as an inside fastball, and unable to help himself, Jun swung—just as the ball broke sharply away. It was a testimony to Jun's determination that he still managed to connect with the ball. Nonetheless, making a dull thunking sound, it rocketed from his bat to the first baseman. Scooping up the ball with his mitt, the first baseman jogged back and stepped on the bag with time to spare. "Out!"

That made it two outs. Jun's mouth twisted in disappointment. Picking up his bat on his way back, he cast a silent look at Tetsu. This silence too, he understood.

"Number 4, first baseman, Yūki-kun."

As Tetsu stepped up to the plate, the cheering squad started singing *Lupin the Third* as they always did. Though it was his fourth at-bat since the beginning of the game, and though he had yet to make a safe hit, their voices were none the less subdued. On the contrary, they seemed even louder and stronger than before.

He exhaled, letting the single breath of air take his surroundings away. With it, the voices of the crowd and of his teammates, the silence of the coach—all of it faded away. Tetsu lowered into his batting position, his eyes fixated on the one point in space that mattered in that moment: the ball in the pitcher's glove.

There was a lull. And then the ball moved, shooting straight toward him through the darkness. He swung—and it ran away from him, slamming into the catcher's mitt instead. He thought he could hear the umpire shout out something, but he paid it no mind.

On the next pitch, the ball averted its path to the far outside, and he let it pass. His only purpose was to hit the ball that came in the strike zone: the space between his knees and the midpoint of his torso.
In some ways, as he’d likened it in his head once while playing a game of shogi, the strike zone was like a gate, and Tetsu was an armor-clad defender of the fortress. The ball was an invader, and it was his duty to throw it back out of the gate. If the ball was within the gate, it was within his reach—and he did not have the luxury of failure.

The next pitch came, blurring in the darkness as though making a maneuver to confuse his eyes. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. He could see the trajectory of the ball curving away, and the ghost of his bat fading into thin air as he swung. He was going to miss by a fraction of a second, he could see it—but even though he had practiced his swing a billion times, there was still a delay; his body was still just a bit too slow to follow his eyes. He finished his swing, and the ball disappeared within the gate.

Fwoo. He let out another breath, and with that, he felt even his own body disappearing. The rate of his heart beat, the rhythm of his breathing—none of that mattered. The only things left were his bat and the white baseball, which had returned to its glove. There was a lull in time. And then it moved, arching backwards like a catapult before being propelled through the air toward him.

As the ball flew down from the mound, Jun felt his eyes widen. It'd looked like Narumiya's usual fastball delivery, but it came out at a fraction of its speed: his changeup. Tetsu was sitting on 1 ball, 2 strikes—if he didn't swing here and it was in the strike zone, the game was over. But just at the beginning of the inning, the coach had told them to throw away the changeup… Ah, shit.

All of a sudden, he saw Tetsu take a firm step forward.

The movement of the ball may have been different from the other pitches so far, but Tetsu didn't register any of that. All he could see in that moment was the ball, spiraling through the air toward him. It arrived at his gate, and without any hesitation, he stepped down and swung, meeting its center dead-on. He could feel the ball's momentum fighting against his bat, but he finished his swing—and the ball bulleted back to where it'd come from, and then even further beyond that, disappearing into the blackness. It was gone.

His duty fulfilled, Tetsu would have stayed there—but to his distant surprise, he found his hands releasing the bat, and his legs moving on their own.

When his surroundings finally returned in a burst of color around him, he was somewhere in between first and second base. The Inashiro fielders stood still, making no move to field the ball, and the umpire's hand pointed at the air, making a circling motion. The stands were on their feet, roaring, but even then, they were on the verge of being drowned out by the singing voices of Seidō's cheering stands: "Men have their own world… which if put into words, is a shooting star that streaks across the sky…"

Raising his fist into the air, Tetsu finished rounding the bases.

Looking up at the scoreboard and at the ‘1’ that had lit up beside Seidō's name, Mei gritted his teeth and bit down so hard, he thought he could taste blood in his mouth.

A home run.

A freaking home run.

It was the top of the ninth, and he'd been just one out away from securing a win. But now, with a single pitch and a single hit, the score was tied. The runs he had gained back in the previous inning
meant nothing now. Mei felt his stomach churn; it was as though he was standing on a ship in the middle of a storm, the deck sweeping this way and that at the beckoning of the gales and waves.

What kind of guy completely struck out on a pitch three times in a row and then blasted it out of the park on the fourth? Well, apparently, Seidō's captain did.

Masatoshi called for a timeout, and his teammates surrounded him on the mound, their faces showing varying degrees of emotions that Mei didn't care to categorize. In truth, Mei wanted nothing more than to punch a wall and perhaps several other things besides that—but he wasn't clueless. He was the ace of Inashiro. They were the champions, the kings of West Tokyo. It wouldn't do to make any show of weakness.

"The ball was a bit high, but it wasn't a weak course at all." His brow furrowed, Masatoshi turned to face him. "Your pitch count's over a hundred now, Mei."

Mei forced a grin. "If he could hit that, I can only take off my hat to him."

Carlos let out a dark chuckle. "True enough…"

"We're just tied again," Yoshizawa grunted. "It's our offense next, we'll end it there."

Shirakawa glanced at Mei through narrowed eyes. "That is, as long as —"

"This inning," Mei cut in sharply, and Shirakawa fell silent. "I'll end it with this next batter."

The others looked at each other and then, their various expressions hardening, turned to nod at Mei. Ending the timeout, they returned to their positions.

Dropping the rosin bag, Mei faced home plate, and seeing Seidō's five-hole setting up, he tilted his head back to wipe his sweat. Despite his bold words, he wasn't so certain that he could do as he'd promised. Without any sort of adrenaline rushing through his body, he was feeling increasingly heavy and slow. Furthermore, Masuko was fairly good at nailing fastballs according to the records, and sure enough, after having just had his changeup get blasted away by Yūki, Mei wasn't sure whether he could throw it again so soon…

Meeting Masatoshi's gaze, he felt his lips draw back in a dark grin and swept the last thought away. Who the hell was he kidding? He'd throw it now if he had to. Whether it'd just been hit or not, whether he was exhausted or not, none of that mattered—not when Kōshien was calling to him. He could hear it: the sounds of the crowds there, which would have drowned out the cheering of this stadium, the screaming of his teammates as they raced toward him. It'd been calling him for a year now, and Mei had every intention of responding to it.

Nodding at Masatoshi's sign for a slider, Mei drew his hands together. Lifting his leg up, he began his pitching motion. He flung his arm down. The ball left his hand and shot straight into the waiting mitt. "Strike!"

"Kawakami, I'm leaving this inning to you," said Coach Kataoka.

Having fully expected to be switched out at the bottom of the ninth, Nori felt his eyes widen. He could feel the others' surprise as well, and some of them shot a curious look in Sawamura's direction before they could stop themselves. "Yes, sir!" he replied.

The coach's gaze went from Nori to Miyuki. "Connect us to the tenth."
Understanding dawned on Nori, and his gaze shifted to Sawamura. The first year had been uncharacteristically silent for the past few innings. At the moment, as though he hadn't heard the coach's words, he was staring out at the field, his face displaying an odd mixture of fascination and stillness.

The final showdown between Seidō and Inashiro wouldn't take place in the ninth inning. No, they would not allow that. The game had to go into extra innings for that, and Nori had a feeling that when it happened, he would be icing his shoulder in the dugout. Nonetheless, he felt a flicker of pride warm his chest: Even several games ago, he did not think that the coach would have trusted Nori enough to bridge such an important game to its final stage. That he was standing here in this place, at this moment in time—Nori didn't know how and when he had gotten there. And while it was scary and made him want to throw up, it was also exhilarating. There was no other place he would have wanted to be at the moment.

Looking down at his hand, Nori wondered: Was this how Sawamura and Furuya had always felt about the mound? Was this why they were always ready to return to the mound, even if it was on their knees? If so—even though he was the senpai, it seemed he had a lot left to learn from his underclassmen.

It was in between the ninth and the tenth innings, while both teams were preparing their equipment, that the coach called out, "Kominato."

Haruichi didn't answer at first, and it was only when Furuya tugged his sleeve that he realized it was him and not his brother the coach was calling. "Yes, Coach?"

"It's the top of the tenth inning. One out, with a runner on second, at the bottom of the lineup. What would you do, if you were the coach?"

Taken aback, Haruichi blinked. "I'd send out a pinch hitter, sir."

"Who would you send out?" The coach continued on. Though his body was facing the field, Haruichi could feel his gaze grilling into him. His heart thumping, he opened his mouth to answer—and then closed it. His ears were growing warm at his own audacity. But as though Haruichi had spoken aloud, the coach nodded. "You're still just a first year. Can you do it?"

Welcomed back to the field with the heralding notes of Sharpshooter, Kazuya bowed and entered the batting box. "Top of the tenth, and Seidō High's offense begins with number 6, catcher, Miyuki-kun."

From the dugout, the coach signaled: "Aim for a pitch and hit."

With the score tied at 3-3, and Kawakami having successfully—if narrowly—prevented Inashiro's lineup from scoring at the bottom of the ninth, they had gone into extra innings. Kazuya recalled hearing about a game that had gone on in a stalemate for fifty innings, a debacle that'd taken place across four days. However, he had a feeling that this game was soon reaching its close: There was a storm broiling within both teams, and it was just a question of who could outlast the other.

It was now the middle of the afternoon. The heat was so oppressively heavy, the air shimmered around the mound. Even Narumiya's gaze, which had been as sharp as ice at the beginning of the game, seemed to have faded in part from the heat.

The coach had said it in the beginning: "There isn't a pitcher who won't crumble if we make him
"pitch enough." Who would crumble first? Inashiro's indisputable ace Narumiya, who had been pitching from the first inning? Or Seidō's multiple pitchers, who had been passing the baton from one person to the next over the course of the game?

Holding his bat just a bit short, Kazuya lowered into his batting position. Narumiya began to windup—and threw. The ball sliced through the air, straight toward his face. He reared back to avoid being hit, and it slammed into the catcher's mitt. "**Ball!**"

Narumiya's face was hidden in the shadow of the rim of his cap as he received the ball back, but Kazuya thought he could make out a crooked smile. He felt his own mouth arch back in an answering grin. **This little...**

The next pitch was a slider to the far outside, and Kazuya fouled it off, bringing the count to 1-1. Following that, Narumiya threw a fastball to the low inside which was called as a ball, and then another fastball just one ball's width away, which was a strike: 2-2.

Kazuya tightened his grip on his bat handle. He was cornered now. Would they come at him with Narumiya's money pitch here, the changeup? Surely not—they hadn't thrown it since Yūki's timely home run after all. And most pitchers would want to avoid throwing the same pitch that'd cost their team their lead. The smart move would be to prepare for and aim for a fastball here…

Suddenly, he saw Narumiya shake his head at his catcher. After a pause, he shook his head again, his eyes blazing under his cap. Finally, Inashiro's catcher must have given up and signed what Narumiya wanted, for he jerked his head in assent and straightened up. Narumiya winded up. Letting out a breath, Kazuya lowered into his stance.

The ball came soaring out of his hand, spiraling slowly through the air as though moving through water. Kazuya tracked its movement as it seemed to slip through the grey space, frame by frame. It was a good thing, he thought to himself, that Narumiya was still as pigheaded as he was, for if it had been any other pitcher, he would almost certainly have struck out. But it was Narumiya on the mound, and of course, he'd thrown a changeup just to show that he could; that there was only one person capable of hitting it in Seidō—and that it wasn't Kazuya.

His lips drew back. Taking a step forward, he swung, and met the center of the ball with his bat. **Clang!** Shooting just past Shirakawa's outstretched glove, it escaped into the outfield. Tossing aside the bat, Kazuya caught just the merest glimpse of Narumiya's widened eyes before he ran for first base. He slid safely onto the bag just as the left fielder picked up the ball, and getting up, he stripped off his elbow guard.

Without looking at Kazuya, Narumiya kicked at the dirt on the mound.

Seidō's cheer stands enthusiastically clacked their cheering horns together, and the brass band began performing the fanfare-like opening notes of *Southpaw*: "**Number 7, left fielder, Sawamura-kun.**"

But as the southpaw stepped up to the plate, Kazuya saw to his surprise that instead of settling into his usual compact stance, Sawamura was turning his head this way and that, as though it was his first time standing in a batting box. His eyes roamed from the mound, to the outfield, and finally came to a rest on what—to his confusion—could only be Kazuya himself.

He felt a shadow of unease flicker in his chest. Sawamura had been acting oddly absent since he'd been sent to left field. Kazuya had thought it was simply one of his moods, but from the way Sawamura was looking at him…well now, he wasn't so sure. Just as he was about to call out to Sawamura, the umpire said something to the first-year. Tearing his eyes away from Kazuya, Sawamura finally set up his bat.
Kazuya felt Narumiya's gaze burn into him for a moment, before he threw from the stretch. Sawamura dropped into a bunting stance, and met the ball, perfectly killing its momentum. While Narumiya ran forward, Kazuya took off.

"First!" shouted Harada. Just as Kazuya stepped on second base, he heard the base umpire call out behind him, "Out!"
The crowd clapped for Sawamura's successful bunt. Kazuya straightened up, keeping an eye trained on Sawamura who began to head back to the dugout. One out, with a runner on second. The coach could do all sorts of things here—Shirasu was coming up to bat now, and he was a reliable hand at both bunting and hitting.

With a tip of his helmet in the direction of the dugout, Shirasu stepped into the batting box. Kazuya took his lead, watching Narumiya's back. He took another step further, and then another—and suddenly, Narumiya turned and threw towards second. Kazuya stepped back in a hurry.

As soon as Narumiya had turned his back again, Kazuya took another bold lead: While he wasn't Kuramochi by any means, at the very least, he could try and distract the pitcher and make it easier for the batter.


"Shirasu!"
"C'mon, Shirasu, pitcher's scared!"

Once more, Narumiya threw. Kazuya took off, following the baseball from the corner of his eye, and this time, with his jaw set in determination, Shirasu swung—and connected. Bulleting back out, the ball flew past Kazuya, who reached third, and was frantically waved to home base. He could hear shouting from Inashiro's fielders, and he grinded his feet into the ground, home base looming closer and closer.

Harada took off his face guard, and roared, "Back home!"
Kazuya dropped to the ground and slid feet-first. Harada's mitt descended on him just as he felt the bag beneath his foot. They looked up at the same time at the umpire, who solemnly stared at them. And then he punched the air. "Out!"

He felt his stomach drop. Getting up, he didn't bother brushing the dirt off of his uniform. Ignoring the sounds of the celebrating Inashiro fielders, Kazuya returned to the dugout. "I'm sorry," he apologized as he met the coach.

Coach Kataoka crossed his arms. "That was a call that could have gone either way." He looked around at the rest of the gathered team members. "The inning's not yet over."

Kazuya suddenly realized that Kawakami, who should have been batting ninth, had stripped off his shirt and was icing his shoulder. He and the rest of the players were staring at something outside the dugout. Following their gaze, Kazuya turned to see a flash of pink—a boy with a slight frame, carrying a wooden bat as he made his way to the batting box.

"Seidō High School has called for a substitution. Replacing number 9, Kawakami-kun, pinch
Stepping up the plate, Haruichi could feel the gazes of everyone in the stadium burning into him: The audience, the opposing team, Furuya, even Eijun.

And of course, his brother.

The stadium had gone as silent as the eye of a storm: It was a wordless question posed to their coach, demanding to know the line of reasoning behind sending out a first-year in this critical juncture.

While this wasn't the first time Haruichi had been sent out as a pinch hitter, and while this wasn't the first time people were gawking at him, his heart was beating so loudly it threatened to drown out the silence. The crunching of his spikes on the dirt as he walked to the batting box resounded in his ears: *Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.*

Reaching home plate, he bowed to the umpire. He brushed his bangs out of his face and let his bat swing through the air a few times. Standing here, Haruichi thought, he had a much wider view of the field than he had from the dugout.

How could he have never figured out such a simple thing before? The whole time, he'd been watching his brother's back and gawking at Eijun's profile, content to admire them from afar while dreaming of one day catching up to them. And yet it was by standing there on that field, by playing, that he could be by their side.

Chapter End Notes

Happy holidays everyone. As this year draws to a close, this fic is also reaching its end… This chapter originally finished the Inashiro game and had a lot more of Eijun, but it was getting way too long (more than 8000 words) so I cut it in two, moving all the Eijun sections to the next chapter.
Goodbye

Chapter Summary

And there was only one thing left to do. - Seidō vs Inashiro part V (end)

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Memories of the past, memories of the future that was being undone—as though a stone had disturbed a pond, they rose up to the surface of his mind before scattering back down into its depths.

*Crestfallen, they climbed silently into their bus. While the inside air was heavy with disappointment, through the windows, they could see the grinning Yakushi members, surrounded by an admiring throng of people congratulating them on their victory.*

*It'd been another close match. But in baseball, the only thing that mattered in the end was who won, and the crown of this year's fall tournament had once again been snatched away from their fingertips.*

*He leaned his forehead against the cool glass. He could hear some of the others sniffling, but he was the captain now, so his own cheeks were dry.*

*There was a person standing a short distance away from the bus. At first glance he may have appeared to be a part of the crowd, but he was not. He was at its edge. He was tall and mostly straight but still a bit hunched over, like a ferry man waiting for his next boatload of passengers, and was watching the bus, his expression unreadable behind his glasses.*

*When the bus left the stadium to bring them back to their dorm, it was dusk. The days had been growing shorter and colder. On the way, they passed through a line of tall gingko trees. The leaves which had been green in the summer had started to turn yellow. Sooner or later, he knew, they would all fall.*

"Kominato!"

"Bring Shirasu home, first-year!"

"Kominato-kun!"

Amidst the sound of the increasingly louder cheers, Haruichi saw Narumiya tilt his head back and eye his wooden bat. His lip curled in a familiar look of disdain.

Haruichi lowered into his batting stance. He was used to people looking down on him because of his small stature.

"Play!" He heard the umpire bark.

With the bases now cleared, Narumiya began to windup. As he took in the southpaw's pitching form, Haruichi let out a deep breath. Narumiya's body folded inwards, and his foot slammed into the
ground. He threw down his arm, and in the next instant, the ball screeched toward Haruichi.

It blew in high and inside, and he could have sworn it cut through a strand of his bangs. "**Strike!**"

Straightening up, Haruichi looked down at the smoking ball resting in the catcher's mitt and swallowed. With just that one pitch, he could understand why Narumiya was so highly regarded. While he didn't have an exceptional pitching form like Eijun or the blistering speed of Furuya, his pitches—and this was after ten straight innings of pitching—packed the power and authority to shake the heart of any batter.

Nonetheless, Haruichi fell back into his original stance. He couldn't, wouldn't cower here. Not when it was his brother who was watching him for once. The pitches Ryōsuke had struck out on—he would get their revenge.

Narumiya winded up. For a moment he stood still, balancing on one foot on the mound. A ray of sunlight cast down on his figure, whose face remained in shadow, and Haruichi was suddenly struck by the image of a lone king looking down from his hill castle over the rest of his kingdom. The next instant, Narumiya flung his arm down.

The ball was flying straight toward him. It was the same pitch as before. Taking a step, Haruichi began to swing—when abruptly, he saw the ball beginning to break away from him. The way he was swinging now, he would miss. It was happening over a matter of mere milliseconds, but somehow, Haruichi could see the ball better than ever before.

Loosening his hold on his bat handle even as he swung it, he let it slide an inch out before re-tightening his grip—and met the ball just in time. He could feel the ball colliding and straining against him, fighting back, but rotating his hips, Haruichi held his ground and continued his swing.

**Crack!**

To the sound of splintering wood, the ball flew out, shooting past the pitcher's outstretched glove. Haruichi let go of his bat—which was just barely still in one piece—and began to run.

Even before he slid onto second base, the roar of the crowd told him that Shirasu had made it home. He straightened up, and as he turned to give his gloves to the base coach, he saw his brother watching him from the dugout. As Haruichi looked back, Ryōsuke smiled.

Feeling his ears beginning to burn, Haruichi returned it.

*Stepping out of the train station, he was greeted with the familiar sights of his hometown: Low-rise houses with tiled roofs, and fields made barren by the cold. The mountains loomed on all sides in the not-so-far distance, and the clouds hung so low in the sky that they looked like mist rolling across the mountaintop. He wondered whether they would bring snow with them.*

*His father was waiting outside the station in his pickup truck. He got in, and as they drove farther out into the outskirts, the sound of passing cars faded, leading to stretches of fields.*

*"You should see the size of the apples this harvest," said his father. "They're the biggest I've seen in years.*

*Eventually, they reached their neighborhood. A lone figure in working clothes walked beside a field and his father slowed the car. He rolled down the window to reveal the grinning face of Nobu's father.*
"Ah, back for New Year's? It's good to see you back around here. I heard about what happened to your team's catcher...Really terrible news, that. Well... I expect I'll see you at the shrine with Nobu and the others, but just in case, have a happy new year's!"

"Happy new year," he said back.

His grandpa was waiting outside when they arrived, his breath coming out white in the open air. Inside the house, judging from the mouthwatering smell, his mother was making soba for dinner.

The TV was on, showing a group of newscasters sitting around a table and laughing about the results of a holiday survey. A tray of unpeeled apples was on top of the kotatsu, and they were indeed the largest he had seen in a while, some even reaching half the size of his face.

Picking one up, he rolled it around in his hand. Maybe, he thought, he'd bring one back for Miyuki.

Three outs. Just three outs separated them from Kōshien, the stage that had eluded their team for the past several years.

Before the fielders went out, they gathered in a circle around their captain, who looked around at them with a steely gaze not unlike that of the coach. "We've all brought this game this far. I've got nothing more to say. You all know what to do."

"Yeah!" they roared back.

"Sawamura," said Coach Kataoka. At the sound of his name, the first year looked startled. "You're going out in the tenth."

Sawamura nodded. "Yes, sir."

"See, what'd I tell you?" Kuramochi lightly punched Sawamura on the arm.

The others began to stream out of the dugout, sprinting to their positions as though their toil over the past ten innings had never happened. Kazuya went out ahead, and several seconds later Sawamura came out as well—without his sports sunglasses.

Kazuya walked over to his side and raised his mitt to his mouth. "How're you feeling?"

"All better." Sawamura grinned.

He hesitated, but the strange blankness was gone from the other boy's face, so he nodded. He tapped the first year on the arm with his mitt. "Just three more outs, Sawamura."

"Seidō High School has announced a change in players. Replacing Sawamura-kun in the left field is Kominato-kun. Replacing Kawakami-kun as pitcher is Sawamura-kun."

"Here he comes," said Carlos grimly.

Narumiya, who was currently sitting on the back bench with a towel over his head, didn't respond.

"Bottom of the tenth, and Inashiro's offense begins with number 2, shortstop, Shirakawa-kun."
While it wasn't exactly the bottom of the ninth that Kazuya had envisioned near the beginning of the game, as the batter stepped up to the plate, he could feel his heart racing in anticipation. Lowering his mask over his face, Kazuya crouched down. He glanced up at how Shirakawa was holding his bat, and noticing the amount of sweat dripping off of the usually composed shortstop, he looked back at the mound.

He blinked.

Sawamura was doing it again. He was making the same expression he'd made in the batting box—as though it was his first time standing there, like he'd never seen it before.

Kazuya frowned. Had something happened while Sawamura had been in the left field? And yet the few times a hit had been sent in that direction, he hadn't made any errors, fielding the ball as he always had in practice.

After a moment's pause, Kazuya signaled: "A cutter, high and inside."

Sawamura nodded. He began to windup—and then threw. And just as he'd asked for, the cutter slammed across the inside corner directly into his mitt. "Strike!"

Relief blossoming in his chest, Kazuya stood up and threw the ball back. "Nice ball!" He was being stupid again. Sawamura was still recovering from his concussion, it was only natural he'd act strange. It was a wonder the first year was still able to throw this well—a testimony to his inexplicable and yet befitting skill.

"A low and outside two-seam."

With a nod, Sawamura lifted his leg. His foot slammed down on the rubber, and at the last instant, his arm flung down. Shirakawa swung and missed. "Strike!"

No balls, two strikes. Kazuya heard Shirakawa let out a low breath before settling back down into his batting stance. To his credit, despite the immense pressure he must have been feeling, he didn't look scared. No doubt, his experience in Kōshien the previous year had something to do with it. He must have faced all sorts of players on the national stage and learned all sorts of things—the specifics of which Kazuya didn't know, for he had never been to Kōshien himself.

But Kazuya doubted that Shirakawa was ready for Sawamura. Japan isn't ready for him, he thought.

For the strikeout pitch, Kazuya held his hand between his thighs and signaled for a circle changeup. It was the same pitch they had used to strike out Yokohama Academy's cleanup once upon a long time ago.A small smile appeared on Sawamura's face, as though he was remembering the same game—which, now that he thought about it, had been their first official game together as a battery.

Sawamura winded up. He threw, his arm coming out deceptively late in his peculiar style, and Kazuya had to wonder at how consistent and stable his pitching form had become. Even to his own eyes, it looked in every way as though he was throwing his usual straight fastball, and yet, the ball arced slowly down the mound. Shirakawa took a step forward and swung—but caught inevitably off guard by the timing, he struck only empty air. The ball slammed crisply into Kazuya's mitt, the sound music to his ears; it was a tune that only Sawamura and Sawamura alone could have created. "Strike three! Batter out!"

Clang clang clang clang.
As the warning siren rang and the railroad beams lowered, he came to a stop. Steadying his bicycle with his foot, he drummed on his handles a song his father had been singing the night before. A pink petal drifted down and brushed the back of his hand before falling down to the earth.

Clatter clatter clatter.

The train began to pass by.

This day marked the beginning of his third and last year at Akagi Junior High School. The finality was mutual; the name would soon disappear since the school was being demolished.

Ever since he and his friends had found out the previous year about their school's imminent termination, they had been practicing their fielding skills every opportunity they got. They only had a few bats and balls between them, and didn’t even have a baseball diamond to practice on—but if they could somehow win the tournament in their prefecture and go to the national level, then at least, the name of Akagi would remain. The years they had spent there wouldn't disappear.

They hadn't been able to get together much during the winter, but they were going to practice after classes that day. He couldn't wait.

The last of the train passed and the beams rose back up. He put his foot back on the pedal, and with a grin, he surged forward.

Bottom of the tenth inning, Seidō back in the lead 4-3, and one out with no men on base. It was almost as ideal a situation as Yōichi could have imagined—except of course, for the fact that Inashiro’s cleanups were now coming up to bat.

"Number 3, third baseman, Yoshizawa-kun."

Crouching down, Yōichi glanced around as he always did to make sure of their positions—and suddenly noticed that Ryōsuke was facing away from him. It wasn't obvious. In fact, the second baseman himself probably didn't realize it, but his body was turned toward left field, where another figure with the same pink hair was currently standing.

"Ryō-san," said Yōichi.

Ryōsuke turned back, smiling. "Sorry."

From the way the third year was acting, Yōichi thought, you'd think it was the first time he was playing on the same field as his younger brother. Which, now that he thought about it, was actually true for at least the time they'd been at Seidō.

"Strike!" the umpire cried, punching the air. That made the count 0-2. As the other fielders shouted out encouragements to Sawamura, the first year adjusted his cap and then nodded at a sign.

Yōichi straightened up. Any concerns he might have been harboring about Sawamura's performance had been completely stripped away. Even from his position, he could tell how sharply the pitches were breaking and how precisely they were finding their target. It wasn't the best performance of Sawamura that he'd seen, but there was something resilient about the way he was pitching now. Sawamura's every move seemed to have a purpose behind it; as though with each and every pitch, he was carving its impression on his body.

Despite himself, Yōichi felt a wave of admiration surging up. The southpaw pitching in front of him now was a far cry from the boy he'd first met. In the beginning days of the year, he'd been like a
wild, distressed animal, quivering in a corner and babbling nonsensically about the future. But now, as Sawamura began his signature pitching motion with his leg lifted high enough to climb the sky, there was no more fear. He was an unwavering pillar—a true ace.

And yet at the same time, there was something transient about it all.

Perhaps that, Yōichi thought to himself, was what made Sawamura so strong.

*Clang!*  

At the sound, Yoichi hurtled back down to his surroundings as Yoshizawa connected solidly with the ball. The next instant, it was hurtling past him, too fast for Yōichi to react. Helpless to do anything but watch the white streak passing by, his eyes widened. His heart stopped. Yōichi lurched forward, a strangled shout halfway out of his throat—when he saw a blur of pink dashing in front of him.

While Yōichi could only gape, Ryōsuke threw himself forward with his glove outstretched, his jaw set in concentration. He landed on the ground so hard, Yōichi felt his own teeth rattle—and caught the ball. Twisting his body around on the ground, without even looking, Ryōsuke threw the ball.

Before he'd even registered this however, Yōichi found his body already moving, just the same way he'd pushed it over countless numbers of drills. Leaping up, he caught the ball in midair and spinning, threw it to Yūki's waiting mitt on first. A split instant later, wearing a look of disbelief, Yoshizawa ran past. "Out!"

Awed, Yōichi's turned to Ryōsuke, who to his surprise, held out a fist toward him. He still had on his usual smile, of course, but now that Yōichi looked closer, there was something just a little bit different about it. Taking a step forward, he bumped his fist against the third year's.

The afternoon heat was heavy, like an unwanted blanket wrapping itself around him. He hadn't done anything yet but his shirt was already sticking to his chest. Even the watermelons, which had been cool when his mother first cut them, were now growing warm. With a scowl, he grabbed another slice and grumpily ate it anyways.

The cicadas were being loud as usual, screaming shrilly from the trees.

"Oh, be quiet," he said. Of course, they didn't listen—rather, he thought they grew even louder. In fact, now, it sounded like they were laughing at him. He clambered to his feet. "Shut up!"

He heard the door slide open with a clatter. "What're you making a racket about?" It was his grandpa.

"The cicadas are always so noisy," he said crossly. It was summer vacation but he couldn't even watch TV with the windows open. "I wish they'd just all die."

Without warning, his grandpa's hand suddenly snaked out and slapped him across the head. "This idiot grandson of mine!"

Yelping in surprise, his hand leaped to his head. "What was that for!"

"Apologize to the cicadas right this instant!"

As he rubbed his head, he had half a mind to refuse—but at a twitch of his grandpa's hand, he grudgingly dipped his head in the direction of the trees. "I'm sorry."
His face softening, his grandpa sat down on the veranda and patted the spot beside his. Keeping a wary eye on the lined hand, he gingerly sat as close as he could get while still leaving enough distance to make a speedy escape if necessary.

"Do you know how long a cicada lives?" his grandpa asked. He shrugged and spit out the seeds. All he knew was that they always came and went with the summer. "While it depends on the breed, they can live up to six, ten, even seventeen years."

"Seventeen years?" Despite himself, he felt his eyes bulge. That was practically ancient.

"But they spend all of those years underground, sleeping. At the very end, in the summer, they come up and live just one week on the surface before they die." His grandpa gestured at the trees. "What would you do if you had just one week left?"

"Watch a lot of TV," he answered, still in a sullen mood.

His grandpa rolled his eyes. "I'm going to take you to the sports center tomorrow. Maybe you'll find something fun there." He paused and leaned back. "What the cicadas do, is shout. At the top of their lungs, they scream, telling everyone within their range that they exist, and after a week of this, they die and fall. So let them enjoy their one week, alright, Eijun?"

He nodded. "Alright."

His grandpa smiled. "Now, how about we go out to town for some shaved ice?"

His face lit up, and he jumped to his feet. "Yeah!"

"Number 4, catcher, Harada-kun."

It was rather befitting, Eijun thought to himself, that his opponent at this point in time would be the cleanup, catcher and captain of Inashiro. There had been someone else he once knew, who had held those three exact positions. Someone very important.

His heart was beating: Babump. Babump. Babump.

"A four-seam, high and away," Miyuki signaled, and Eijun nodded. Raising his leg, he clenched his right hand, making a wall, before flinging his left arm back and throwing it down. Harada swung —clang! The ball flew up into the net.

Miyuki received a new ball from the umpire, and threw it to him. Catching it, Eijun bent over to pick up the rosin bag, and as he did so, he heard shouting coming from both dugouts. From the corner of his eye, he could see Narumiya kneeling in the on-deck circle. His jaw was set and his features as still as though carved out of stone.

"Same pitch, outside," came the sign.

That too, was fouled off.

"Cutter, to the outside."

Clang!

"Same pitch, a ball's width more outside."
It was a pitch that could have been called a ball, but Harada fouled that off as well: It seemed even the great captain of the champion team could get nervous.

Raising a hand to snatch the ball out of the air, Eijun felt a bead of sweat drip down his brow. Was it just him, or did Harada seem larger than he had before? The entirety of the strike zone was within his reach. If his control was just a little off, it'd be as though Eijun was serving up a dish for him to demolish.

Miyuki must have thought the same thing. For several long moments, he didn't move.

Babump. Babump.

Finally, Eijun saw Miyuki's fingers flash. "A moving fastball. Your best pitch." He opened his arms wide in a gesture that told him he'd catch it wherever he threw.

Eijun's brow crinkled in surprise. A moving fastball, here? True, the batter would have no idea where it was coming, but the same could be said for Miyuki. If he let a ball pass here...

All of a sudden, Miyuki thumped his chest with his fist. He was grinning in that mischievous and self-serving way that was guaranteed to piss off their opponents, and it was clear what he was saying: "Trust me."

How unfair, Eijun thought. That didn't leave him much choice, did it?

He nodded, and Miyuki's smile broadened. Changing the grip on the ball behind his glove, Eijun brought his hands together. He lifted his leg. His foot stamping down on the dirt, he threw.

"Eijun," Wakana said, her voice coming out in a squeak.

"Is this really happening?" Eijun's grandfather looked dazed.

"One more out, Ei-chan!" Nobu yelled into his cupped hands.

Eijun's father covered his face. "Tell me when it's over."

The ball travelled through the air, following a trajectory that even Eijun wasn't sure where it'd go. Without any hesitation, Harada swung, his arms rippling with tightly controlled power. It was apparent he'd been waiting for a straight fastball. However...

Slam!

Thin fumes swept off of the mitt that had been waiting. It opened a fraction, revealing a sliver of white.

"Nice ball," said Miyuki, his eyes glowing.

There was a collective intake of breath. The umpire paused, perhaps taken aback himself. And then he hammered the air. "...STRIKE! BATTER OUT!"

The crowd leapt to their feet and exploded into applause and cheers. His teammates were screaming, running towards him with wild, gloriously happy looks on their faces. Back in the dugout, tears were streaming down the assistant coach's faces.

"THE GAME ENDS WITH A MAGNIFICENT PITCH BY SEIDÔ'S FIRST-YEAR"
PITCHER, SAWAMURA! AS THE WINNER OF THE 118TH WEST TOKYO TOURNAMENT FINALS, SEIDŌ ADVANCES TO KŌSHIEN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SIX YEARS!

Even as his teammates began to sprint toward Eijun, his eyes turned back toward home plate, looking for the one face that mattered to him the most: the person he'd thrown that ball for—the person who had been there to catch it.

He needn't have searched, however. Miyuki was already there. He'd taken off his mask, and was wearing the widest grin Eijun had ever seen from him. Without saying a single word, he ran straight toward Eijun, who raised his arms into the sky just in time as he crashed into him. The distant ongoing roaring of the crowd faded away. Miyuki raised him into the air and Eijun felt his baseball cap fall off.

He could hardly dare to believe it: This was it. He'd done it—they'd done it. Seidō had won. They were going to Kōshien, to battle on the national stage for the ultimate crown. The third-years were going to Kōshien.

Miyuki was going to Kōshien.

Even amidst all the ruckus, he could hear his heart beating. It was getting louder and louder, like drums pounding in rhythm on a ship that was drawing closer and closer to the shore: Babum. Babum. Babum.

Ever since going back to the past, Eijun had only ever thought about wanting to take Seidō to nationals. Now that it was really happening, for the first time, he thought of the new future that he knew nothing about. The possibilities were endless, and he thought, he would have liked to throw to Miyuki's mitt in Kōshien as well.

All of a sudden, as though the world had been unmuted, Eijun felt the sounds around him surging back to life. The crowds were still on their feet, roaring their approval. The members of the cheering squad and band were playing a triumphant song. His teammates were gathered around him, their faces filled with elation. In the dugout, Ōta was still crying, and Rei was wiping away tears. Coach Kataoka, standing tall, wore an expression of utter pride.

The baseball field stretched out around him. The scudded brown dirt, the green grass. The black scoreboard, ugly and large, rising up into the blue sky. The clouds scattered above, and the searing sun that had charred them every day of the summer.

And of course at the center of it all, Miyuki Kazuya.

Having let Eijun back down on the ground, for some reason, he was wordlessly staring at him now. Eijun smiled.

His memories that were slipping away even now from his consciousness—they were the indefinable things that made Eijun who he was. Even as they disintegrated, one by one, somehow, he was still managing to keep a hold on himself. But he knew that it was only a matter of time before that too slipped away.

Eijun wasn't afraid. No, that was a lie—he was still afraid somewhere deep down. But he could be brave, because he wasn't alone. Because,

*Miyuki has always been with me.* Eijun's face was starting to ache from smiling so much. *Miyuki Kazuya will always be with me.*
Eijun could have repeated his name for hours—days—and he did not think he would ever sicken of it, but his time in this borrowed body was almost at an end. His week on the surface was almost over. And there was only one thing left to do.

Rearing his head back, Eijun shouted at the top of his lungs: "OSHI!"

His teammates' faces at the hands of defeat… it was a sight that, as the captain, Masatoshi had never wanted to see. Shirakawa's usual scornful look was gone, replaced instead by an unsettling one of loss. Carlos' face was twisted in an apparent effort not to cry. Yoshizawa stood at attention, tears and snot running unashamedly down his face.

Strangely enough, the person he had most expected to cry wore an utterly calm expression.

"Get in line," Masatoshi said.

Helping each other up from the ground, his teammates got in line at the center of the field opposite the jubilant Seidō players, in stark contrast to their radiant faces.

"Bow!" barked the head umpire.

"Thank you for the game!" they roared.

The sirens signaling the end of the game rang out throughout the stadium, and the watching audience members got to their feet, clapping.

After shaking hands, he led his team members to the fence to face their cheering team, many of whom were still crying. They bowed deeply. "Thank you for cheering for us!"

Back in the dugout, Masatoshi bowed his head before the coach in a silent apology. Coach Kunitomo put his hand on his shoulder in a rare display of warmth. "You did well, Harada."

After packing his equipment—an act which, thanks to his numb fingers, was done with some difficulty—and feeling a vague sense of unsettling finality as he zipped his bag, he looked around the dugout. Most of them were quietly packing, even as they wiped tears and slime on their sleeves.

Their team this year really had been strong. The strongest yet in years, in his perhaps biased opinion. He'd wanted to take them to Kōshien again, and show the entire nation just how strong they were. Just how hard they had all worked. And most of all, he'd wanted...

He found Narumiya in the dark corner, packing his bag silently by himself. He approached him, but the second-year didn't look up.

"Sorry, Mei," Masatoshi said. "I wanted to take you to the peak of this nation."

Narumiya didn't raise his head, but something wet dripped from the tip of his nose. "Stupid captain. That's what I wanted to say."

Masatoshi didn't smile. But he thought about how, despite all the tantrums and all the headaches, he had enjoyed catching for the southpaw. Before he retired, he decided, he'd catch Narumiya's pitches one more time in the bullpen. It wouldn't be quite the same as in Kōshien stadium, but it'd have to do.
As they exited the gate, they were greeted by a crowd of people who'd been waiting for them. Their friends, their parents. Sawamura, of course, was surrounded by his family and junior high school friends. Kuramochi waved a hand at a young woman who was pretty enough that she had to be his sister (or else he wouldn't have had the guts to do so). The Kominato brothers were talking to a middle-aged couple who, judging from their pink hair, could only be their parents. A taciturn-looking elder man nodded at Furuya.

Kazuya had no place there, and he was about to join the rest of the team members when, all of a sudden, a flash of reflecting light caught his eye. He faltered, and then stopped. He turned. "Dad…?"

He could hardly believe his eyes, but it was true: It was his father. He'd been standing silently behind all the others, his face hidden behind his dark glasses as usual. If the sunlight hadn't reflected off of the lenses, Kazuya thought he would have completely missed him. And being the man he was, he'd have probably left without saying a word.

"Kazuya," said his father, finally stepping out of the crowd.

He felt his brow furrow in thought. "What're you doing here? Did something happen at the factory?"

His father paused. "I got your message."

"Oi, Miyuki," Kuramochi's voice cut in abruptly. Kazuya turned to see that the second-year and the others were looking at him expectantly, ready to go. He turned back to his father, about to excuse himself, but somehow, at the sight of his father's face, the words stuck in his throat. He stood there, unable to speak, when to his surprise, another voice came to his rescue.

"We'll be waiting on the bus," said Chris.

Kuramochi shot Kazuya a curious look, but allowed himself to be ushered away. Though he had half a mind to want to follow them back, Kazuya felt something stopping his feet, willing him to stay there. He could feel his father looking at him. He swallowed.

"Miyuki-senpai!" Desperate for any reason to put the inevitable off just a bit longer, he looked up once more. He was just in time to see Sawamura raise a hand in what could only be farewell.

"Goodbye!"

Goodbye? What was that supposed to mean?

Nevertheless, the corners of his mouth helplessly drawing back in a returning smile, Kazuya raised a hand, thinking about how odd Sawamura was sometimes and still, about how that was just one of the things that made him Sawamura Eijun. "Seeya."

Chapter End Notes

Happy early new year's. There are three more chapters.
Nightfall

Chapter Summary

One by one, the lamps in the courtyard lit up, guiding them home.

He could hear the high voice of a young boy reciting his essay in a distant first grade classroom somewhere. The sound rang out into the empty hallway, passed the board with their pinned drawings, and then escaped through an open window into the sky.

"...is a policeman. He protects our neighborhood and helps everyone. He is the best dad in the world. My dream is to one day be a policeman too." Lowering his paper, the boy bowed to everyone's applause. His grinning father, dressed in a freshly ironed police uniform, clapped the loudest.

The beaming teacher came up to the front of the classroom. "That was wonderful, thank you Makoto-kun. Next is...Kazuya-kun."

Before he got up, he checked the back of the classroom one more time, wondering if he could have somehow overlooked him. But every face staring back was a stranger. Pushing his chair back with a skidding sound that sounded abnormally loud to his ears, he walked to the front of the room.

Unfurling his paper, he cleared his throat. "My name is Miyuki Kazuya. I like baseball. I am a catcher. I live with my mom and dad, though my mom is somewhere else right now. My dad owns a factory. He is very busy all the time since he meets a lot of important people. My dream is to become a pro baseball player when I grow up, and have my mom and dad come see me play."

There was a pause as the adults looked at each other, and then they broke into scattered applause. He bowed and walked quickly back to his seat. With another ear-splitting screech as he pulled out his chair, he sat back down and the teacher called out the name of the next student.

He wasn't the only one there whose parent hadn't come; there was another girl who went to the front of the room and then burst into tears. He felt a bit better after seeing that.

The girl was still crying after school had ended and they were all going home. She was standing in front of the shoe cubbies with tears and snot streaming silently down her face. He had to stop and marvel at her. Didn't she care about the people around her seeing her?

He was wondering whether to approach her or not—strictly out of curiosity, of course—when her eyes widened and her tears abruptly stopped. She sniffled. Then she broke out into a wide smile. "Daddy!" She ran forward to the door, where a harried-looking man in a business suit bent down on a knee and with a practiced air, lifted her up.

"I'm sorry, Yura-chan," he said.

For some reason, his chest ached after seeing that.

While it wasn't the day he usually went to visit his mother, he went that day. It was one of her better days; she could open her eyes and even talk, a bit at a time.
"...and then she just kept crying and crying until her dad came to pick her up!" he said. "She's silly, isn't she?"

He'd thought his mother would smile at that, but instead, she looked a little sad. "I'm sorry, Kazu-kun. Your dad's busy...because of me. Please understand." She covered his hand with hers.

He didn't understand, but he nodded anyways. "Okay."

It wasn't until his mother disappeared that he came to understand. And while it'd once made his chest ache, he got used to not thinking about it, just as he had gotten used to his father always been too busy with work to come to his games. He understood. So he stopped inviting him to his games as well.

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Kazuya couldn't remember the last time he'd faced his father like this. Even when he was home for the holidays, his father had always been working in the factory. And yet he was standing here now, outside of Meiji Jingu Stadium. He wasn't wearing his usual factory jumpsuit either; he was in a clean, stiff suit that was a tad too formal for a sporting event.

For a long minute, they stood there in silence. Kazuya noticed he was taller than his father now. Though he didn't know whether that was because he had grown or if his father had shrunk.

To his surprise, his father spoke first: "Congratulations." His voice had a bit of a rasp, like a door which's hinges had rusted away.

"Yeah," Kazuya said. He paused and then added, "There must've been a lot of traffic on the way here."

"Some," said his father.

"A lot of people come to these games, huh?"

His father nodded. "I saw." Kazuya wondered whether he'd been watching from the start or whether he'd come partway through the game.

They fell silent again. Many people were still walking around the stadium, and their conversations spilled into their silence, swelling up and down in waves as they walked past.

Raising a hand, Kazuya rubbed the back of his neck. "It's really hot today, isn't it?"

"Not too bad," his father answered.

"Were you coming back from a meeting?" he asked. His father had used to wear suits every now and then for a business meeting with a client. He hadn't worn one in a while, and Kazuya had been wondering whether business had gone down.

For some reason, his father hesitated. "Something like that."

Maybe, Kazuya thought, the meeting had been nearby the stadium. However, that still didn't explain how his father had known what time the game was—or even that there'd been one at all.

As they stood there, mindful of the arm's distance between them and even more mindful of keeping that distance, Kazuya looked at his father's face, half-hidden behind his dark glasses. They had originally been for his work, which subjected him to dangerous sparks that could damage his eyes. When had his father started wearing them outside of the factory?
Kazuya raised a hand. "Bye, dad. My team's waiting." His father raised a hand back, and he turned to go when, a thought striking him, he stopped. "By the way, what message were you talking about?"

At first, his father didn't respond. Understanding, he smiled, and took a step forward—when, once more to his surprise, his father said, "You sent me a message this morning, didn't you?"

Kazuya blinked. *This morning?* He hadn't even looked at his phone since the previous night. After all, he'd been rather preoccupied with… *Ah.* "Right. Thanks." He hesitated, wondering whether he should say goodbye again. Before he could decide however, his father walked away.

Heading back to the bus, he pulled out his cell phone. He'd thought he'd just imagined Sawamura putting back his phone in the morning… had he been using his phone? Had he somehow sent a message to his father? Why? And for the record, how did he even know his pin number?

*Maybe Sawamura really is psychic after all,* Kazuya mused to himself as he opened his inbox. Sure enough, at the top was a message to the user *Dad.* The subject line was blank. He opened the message, wondering what kind of essay Sawamura had had to write to get his father to come.

He read the message and blinked, wondering if there was something wrong with his sight.

It was a short message: *We have a game today.*

He tried to scroll down, but there was nothing after that. His feet slowly came to a stop. The crowd moved around him, like river currents around a fallen rock, and their conversations filled his ears.

Kazuya looked back and saw the last of his father's back just as it was swallowed up by the crowd. He squeezed his phone in his hand. It felt like a lump had risen in his throat.

When he returned to the bus, while the others were rowdily jabbering away, he found Sawamura sleeping near the back. Though, just like Kazuya, Sawamura had always preferred the window seat, he was sitting in the aisle seat—presumably to give him the window. Seeing that, he felt the lump in his throat grow even bigger.

Taking care to not wake him up, Kazuya sat down in his seat. He pulled out his cell phone again and opened his inbox. Staring at the message, he felt the inside of his mouth go dry. He closed his phone, and thought about getting a bottle of water—but decided against it, in case he accidentally jostled the first year sleeping beside him in the attempt. He next tried to distract himself by watching a line of drool forming at the corner of Sawamura's mouth (and to his vague embarrassment, found even that endearing).

Finally, he took his phone out again and before he could change his mind, he quickly sent a short message to his father: *Thank you.*

He waited. And as usual, there was no answering vibration that indicated a response.

Before, he would have written it off as his father just being his usual self. This time however, he closed his eyes and thought of how when he'd left forms on the table, they'd always been signed by the next morning in his father's sloping handwriting. How once every week, there had always been an envelope with money on the counter, enough to buy groceries and then some left over to spend as he wished. And how every new year, there was always a saran-wrapped platter of sashimi waiting in the refrigerator.

Maybe, Kazuya thought, there had always been a response and he just hadn't been listening. He'd thought he understood, but maybe he hadn't understood anything at all.
Sawamura seemed taken aback to see Kazuya when he shook him awake.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," he joked.

"Uh...huh," said Sawamura.

When they entered the dining room, they were greeted with the ear-splitting bangs of party poppers, and showered in confetti in Seidō's colors. And then, the sound of clapping: the managers, wiping away tears; the assistant coaches; Rei, who smiled widely; and finally, Coach Kataoka.

He stepped forward, and the clapping died away. "Today, you challenged a mountain and overcame it. And yet, one must keep in mind that there is always an even bigger mountain in the horizon." The coach looked around at their faces—and then smiled. "However, that is a challenge for another day. Today is a day of celebration. Your hard work paid off today, and from the bottom of my heart, whether you were in the dugout or in the bleachers, I am proud of each and every one of you in the team." He paused. "With that being said, the cooks have prepared something special for dinner"—there was a loud shout of excitement—"and you may feel free to spend the rest of the evening as you wish.

"Yes, sir!" they roared back.

Elbowing each other in the line, they settled into their seats with a clatter. Then without further delay, they dug into a dinner of curry tonkatsu hot enough to burn the insides of their mouths, filling the room with the smoke of conversations.

"How's your wrist doing?" Kawakami asked Furuya, his cheeks even rounder than usual as he munched away.

"It's okay," the first year answered, awkwardly spooning himself rice with his left hand.

Slamming down a drained bowl of miso soup, Miyauchi let out a snort. "He might not make it in time for the opening game though."

"Speaking of which, looks like you'll have to stay bald for a bit longer," Isashiki snickered at Tanba.

"It's our good luck charm after all," Ryōsuke said, reaching up to rub his head.

At the neighbouring table, Kuramochi dumped half his second serving onto Sawamura's plate (before going for thirds). "Eat up, Bakamura."

"Ugah." Masuko slid a pudding cup across the table.

"What say you and I have a match after this?" Yūki said to the younger Kominato, placing an imaginary shogi piece with his fingers.

Spooning curry into his mouth with one hand, Sakai flipped through what looked like a photo album with his other. "Hey, Shirasu, check this—they didn't forget you this time!"

"Oi, Miyuki!" Hearing his name, Kazuya turned to see Isashiki gesturing towards him. "C'mon, rub Tanba's head for luck."

He leaned languidly back in his chair. "I don't know...at this rate, he might go bald forever."

Tanba flinched backwards, and held up a firm hand. "I decline."
At the sight of his alarmed face, the others broke into laughter, the sound of which resonated in waves around the dining room before escaping, note by note, through the open windows.

After dinner, the members dispersed: Some returned to the peace of their rooms, while others flocked to the indoor practice grounds. Kazuya was pondering what to do, when he spotted the familiar mop of brown hair ducking below Kuramochi—who was dragging an unfortunate soul to his room, no doubt to practice his newest wrestling move—and disappearing outside. As though pulled by gravity, he found his feet moving in that direction as well.

The setting sun had bleached the sky orange and purple. He found Sawamura waiting for him under the dorm gate, the gate's shadow dividing his face in two.

"What're you going to do?" Kazuya asked, drawing to a stop. "Wanna play catch?"

Sawamura smiled and somehow, it looked different from usual. "I'm gonna take a walk." He gestured towards Kazuya in a mute invitation, and he followed him.

They walked past the grounds and the storage room. He'd expected Sawamura to stop at the bullpen, but he passed by that too.

It was as they passed by the ground sign that Sawamura began to talk.

"I thought for sure it'd happen right after we won against Inashiro," he started, scratching his face. "But I guess in reality, it doesn't end quite neatly like that."

"What're you talking about?" Kazuya asked, curious but not altogether surprised.

"Do you remember a while back, during the opening ceremony? When I said I knew something terrible was coming?"

He did remember. "Yeah." While it felt like a lot of time had passed since then, it had been only a little more than three weeks. In the same vein, while he'd only known Sawamura for a few months, it somehow felt as though he'd known him for several years.

"I wasn't talking about just Tanba-senpai," said Sawamura. "You see, I...someone important to me... he was injured badly, and couldn't play baseball anymore. He tried to get surgery for it, and well, he died." He laughed into his fist, sounding embarrassed. "That's why I was such a mess in the beginning."

Kazuya felt his feet beginning to falter, but Sawamura kept walking forward, so he did too. "I see."

As thought a rock had lodged itself in his throat, he couldn't say much else. Images of Sawamura's various mysterious moods were flashing through his mind, and like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, they were starting to fall into place.

"But you were there." Sawamura turned to look back at him. "Thank you."

The sun had mostly set. There was only a bit of light left on his face. When the sunlight struck his eyes just like that, Kazuya noticed, they were a clear, amber color.

Sawamura pointed at something in front of them. "Look!"

They had reached the edge of the campus, and trees lined the path. Following Sawamura's finger, Kazuya found himself staring at a tree trunk. He cleared his throat. "What am I supposed to be looking at?"
He heard it before he saw it:

*Minminminmin.*

Cicadas really were one of the ugliest creatures he'd ever seen. Their squashed-looking bodies and segmented wings bore a sickly sheen, and their eyes were dull beads that looked as though they'd been attached in a mere afterthought. They didn't do much either. Their only saving grace was that they clung to their trees—though with the way their constant shrill crying pierced through even walls, they were a bit of a nuisance.

Kazuya had never hated their sound, however.

"That sure is a fat one," he said. "Loud, too."

Sawamura stuck out his tongue. "That's rude."

"I said 'that,' didn't I?"

"I want to catch it," Sawamura declared.

He raised an eyebrow. "From up there?"

"Help me up!"

Kazuya felt himself sweat. But at the sight of Sawamura's expectant face, his reluctance crumbled away. Kneeling down, he let Sawamura clamber on to his back and sit on his shoulders before—with a muffled grunt of exertion—standing back up. "Can you reach it?"

"Just...a bit short." He could hear the strain in Sawamura's voice, and then felt him pushing upwards. "I've almost got it. If I can reach just...a bit higher — " Snap! To the unmistakable sound of a breaking branch, Sawamura fell back down on his shoulders. At the sudden unexpected pressure, Kazuya teetered backwards—and with a yelp, fell down in a clamor of waving limbs and leaves.

The world spun and Kazuya found himself staring up at the sky. Just the barest tinges of color were left. He could hear Sawamura breathing above him.

"Well, did you get it?" he asked.

*Minminminmin.*

"It got away." He could hear the grin in Sawamura's voice. "Pretty fast for a fat bug."

For a moment, it was silent. And then Kazuya spoke: "Bakamura."

"Miyuki."

Kazuya raised his upper body up on his elbows. "That's Miyuki-senpai to you."

With his eyes closed, Sawamura was lying on his back. "That's Sawamura to you."

Kazuya blinked, and then laughed. "*Haha!* True enough." He paused. "I'm glad I met you."

Leaning over, he brushed his lips across Sawamura's cheek and then kissed him.

When they returned to the dormitory, it had turned dark. One by one, the lamps in the courtyard lit up, guiding them home.
Kazuya didn't dream very often. Or rather, he didn't remember them. Sometimes, in the instants right after he had woken up, he thought he could catch a fleeting glimpse of an image, a sound. But it all slipped away through his fingers. Like sand.

That night, he found himself in a dream. He could tell, because he was staring face to face with someone who could only be himself. They were standing, just the two of them, in what looked like a huge black space.

Ah, he thought, staring at his doppelganger. *I must be dreaming.*

As he looked closer however, he started to discern differences between them. The other Kazuya looked a bit older and skinnier. His hair was cut shorter, and upon even closer inspection, he was a bit more hunched over.

"Who are you?" he asked.

And then the other Kazuya told him.

The black space around them burst into colors as he told him of a different world's future. How there, Seidō had originally lost to Inashiro in the summer finals, and Kazuya had gotten injured in the following fall tournament. How he had been unable to play baseball after that, and how he and Sawamura had gotten closer.

He learned why Sawamura had known his favorite snacks and drinks, and why he'd been able to guess his pin number. He learned that after graduating high school he had ran away to another prefecture, and that Sawamura had come chasing after him.

And finally, he learned how he had died.

Kazuya didn't cry. He hadn't cried in years. But as he finally understood what Sawamura had been carrying around all by himself, his chest ached and ached. Even though he gripped his chest, he couldn't reach the source of the pain.

When the other Kazuya had finished his story, the world around them was nothing once more.

Once the initial shock was past, Kazuya found only more questions bubbling up inside his mind. "What happened to you...me, then? Why are you here? How is Sawamura here?" he asked. The other Kazuya didn't—or perhaps couldn't—answer him. At that, his hands balled into fists. "I'll forget this all when I wake up, won't I?"

The other Kazuya didn't move, and a terrible thought struck him. "Wait... but we won against Inashiro this time, which means the things you just told me won't happen any more. But... Sawamura is from the future, isn't he? What's going to happen to him now?"

Resolutely keeping his silence, the other Kazuya still didn't respond. He only tilted his head to look at him. However, somehow, he knew.

"I have to stop Sawamura," he said. He began to look around for a way out, but there was nothing. "How do I get out of here? Let me out!" There was no response, and as Kazuya looked at the silent, mirror version of himself, he hated him. "I don't want him to go," he said.

And then suddenly, as though he had fallen, he was looking up at the other Kazuya. All of a sudden, his clothes felt too heavy for him. Looking down, he saw that they were too big for him; his hands and feet had shrunk.
"Don't leave me alone," he said, his voice as high as a child's.

No, not as high as a child's—he *was* a child. The black space around him was gone again. The other Kazuya was gone too. He was standing in front of a door, his house door. He was alone.

Slowly, he looked up and down. The door looked huge and menacing somehow, making his child's hand even punier in comparison. Raising himself up on his tiptoes, he grabbed the doorknob and tried to open it, but it didn't budge. Curling his hand into a fist, he raised it to knock instead—and then hesitated.

What was on the other side of the door?

What if it was something that would make his chest ache even more? Maybe, he thought, it'd be better if the door stayed closed.

If he just stayed there, he knew he'd be stuck there. But, he thought, it was probably easier this way. At least this way, it wouldn't hurt.

He took a step back and looked up at the door. It was silent.

Kazuya's eyes snapped open. His heart was racing. He got up in his bed. He'd broken out into a cold sweat.

It was still dark. Had he had a bad dream? No—he couldn't remember. Images were flashing past in his head, too fast for him to comprehend, and then before he could do anything, they had all disappeared. The only thing left was an empty, hollow feeling in his chest.

In a daze, he looked around his room. For a moment, he covered his face with his hand. Then, swinging his leg over the edge of the bed, he got up. He didn't want to go back to sleep. He didn't want to dream again.

Stumbling across the floor, he grabbed his doorknob. A shadow of a memory flittered past. Ignoring it, he twisted and pulled it open.

Outside, it was still the middle of the night. Someone must have turned off the courtyard lamps, for it was almost pitch black outside; they were far enough in the outskirts of Tokyo that the city lights were nothing but pinpricks in the distance. Kazuya raised a hand, but he realized he had forgotten his glasses. He couldn't see anything.

He stepped outside—and immediately, bumped into something. "What...?"

From the feel and size, it was a person. Who could be sitting here outside his door at this time?

"Sawamura...?" he asked. There was no response. So he shook him. "Oi, Sawamura!" To his inexplicable relief, there was a groaning sound and the person on the ground before him began to move. "What's going on? Why're you sitting out here? Oi!"

Finally, the person spoke. And from the sound of his voice, Kazuya knew that it was definitely Sawamura. But it was filled with confusion, and his first words pierced like a knife through his heart: "Who are you?"
For some reason, it felt like he had forgotten something very important.

When Eijun opened his eyes, he found himself in a strange, unknown world.

The first strange thing he saw was a person staring down at him. It was dark, and Eijun could barely make out his features. He did not think he had ever seen him before, however.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The stranger didn't respond.

Dusting off his pants, Eijun got up, trying to collect his gatherings. What was he doing here? The last thing he could remember was... He paused. What had he been doing?

His brow furrowing, he tried to remember—but everything in his head at the moment was a senseless blur, as though he had been dreaming for a very long time. It was a bit unnerving.

"Very funny, Sawamura," the stranger said at last.

Inexplicably, his voice sounded familiar. "Sorry, do you know me?"

"Sawamura," said the stranger again. He was gripping something in his hand—a doorknob. In fact, there were many other closed doors around them. Was he in an apartment?

Eijun's eyes traveled from the stranger's hand to the name plaque beside the door. "Mi...yuki..." he read, rolling the word around with his tongue. The name was familiar as well. He felt as though he had read it before; 'Miyuki' was not a common family name. A shadowy memory fluttered through his mind. A laugh...?

The stranger took a step toward him. "This isn't funny –"

Finally, it struck him. Eijun clapped his hands together. "I got it! You're that catcher! The one who caught for me at Sei...Seidō, right?"

He could have let out a sigh of relief. How could he have forgotten? It was slowly coming back to him now, like an electric blanket warming up. After having been scouted by that woman, he'd even pored over that magazine spread in Baseball Weekly.

Flashing a sheepish grin, Eijun scratched the back of his head. "Wahaha! Sorry about that. I can't believe I forgot you." Bending down, he squinted up at the other boy. "Though it might be because you're not wearing your glasses. What's up with that? Is it for fashion?" He'd heard some people in Tokyo did that. The stranger—or rather, Miyuki, didn't answer. Eijun waved his hand in front of his face. "Hello?"
"What're you saying? You know me, Sawamura." Saying just that, Miyuki took another step closer to Eijun—and then suddenly, he grabbed his hand. Then, before Eijun could do anything besides widen his eyes, the other boy yanked him in closer. Their faces were right in front of each other. Eijun felt his heart beating faster and faster, and despite never having been in such a situation before, he knew what the stranger—no, Miyuki—was planning to do.

Wrenching his hand free, and reacting on instinct, he slapped the catcher on the face.

His head snapped sharply to the side—but Miyuki didn't make a sound. After a moment, he looked back at Eijun and stared at him instead with a blank expression, and he was beginning to wonder whether he'd made a mistake, when the other boy smiled. Or at least, Eijun thought he did. It was too dark to tell.

"Erm," Eijun began, starting to sweat. "Sorry, I thought you were going to…"

"No, I'm sorry," said Miyuki. He took a step back. "There seems to have been a misunderstanding. I'll take you to the coach's office."

The following events happened so quickly, it all felt unreal to Kazuya.

Early next morning, Sawamura, who remembered nothing that had happened since the year had begun, was taken to the hospital for another brain screening. The doctors found nothing out of the ordinary, and pronounced that his sudden amnesia was likely a side effect of his concussion.

Will Sawamura eventually regain his memory?, they asked.

Only time can tell, was their helpless answer. Furthermore, since they could find nothing wrong with Sawamura—in fact, they noted that his brain waves seemed more stable than before—there was no reason for him to be hospitalized.

At the news, as he spit vitriol in his head, Kazuya had to hold himself back from punching the wall.

That afternoon, Sawamura's parents came once more to Tokyo. After talking briefly with Sawamura, wearing worried expressions, they disappeared into the office with the coach.

Meanwhile, all the members gathered in front of the dormitory building. As Rei explained to them what had happened to Sawamura, their confused expressions changed into varying degrees of shock and concern. Soon, the topic that had immediately jumped to their minds arose: With Kōshien coming up so soon, the decision had to be made that day. It was out of the question, of course, that Sawamura would participate with the team at Kōshien. But did he want to go along with them to Nishinomiya—that is, did he want to stay with them, a group of strangers?

The other members had quickly filled Sawamura in on the events that had happened until now. At first, Sawamura didn't seem to believe them.

"Me? You're saying I was a pitcher good enough to take the team to Kōshien?" Sawamura began to laugh. "Ah... I mean yeah, sure I guess I could if I trained up a bit. Though you're the first people to ever say that to me. Besides myself, that is. Wahaha!"

When nobody else laughed, Sawamura abruptly stopped. Standing in their midst, he looked around at them. He must have sensed something in their gazes, as whereas his expression had been merely curious before, it filled with confusion. And perhaps, just a bit of fear.

He swallowed. "I want..."
However, Kazuya couldn't hold it back any longer. Without letting him finish, he stepped forward, eyes flashing. The others parted naturally to let him into the center of the circle. "Oi, Sawamura. Come with me to the bullpen."


He jerked his thumb in the direction of the field. "We're saying one thing, and you're saying another. There's only one way to deal with this, and that's with a baseball."

The others muttered in agreement, and Kazuya fixed his eyes on Sawamura, waiting for his reaction. If it had been the first-year he'd come to know, he would confidently rise to the challenge. No, more than that, he'd blow past his expectations.

But...this Sawamura...who was he?

Looking anxious, Sawamura's eyes were roaming around the team members, perhaps trying to spot a familiar face. He looked younger than he ever had before. In fact, Kazuya thought, he rather looked his actual age for once. His gaze flickered past Kuramochi and Masuko, and then settled on Rei—who merely crossed her arms. Next, even though he shouldn't have recognized Chris either, he turned pleadingly to the third-year, who'd been standing silently by Rei's side. Chris only gave a nod, but at that, a look of resignation crossed the first-year's face. He finally turned back toward Kazuya. His hands opened and closed by his sides. And then he jerked his head in assent.

"Fine then," he muttered. "I'll show you."

Somehow, that made Kazuya's stomach boil.

The walk to the bullpen was longer than it'd ever felt before. None of the others had come with them for some reason, so it was just the two of them. Sawamura plodded wordlessly behind him. The conversations that had, over time, sprung so effortlessly into the air between them had disappeared, as though sucked away into a vortex.

Once at the bullpen, Kazuya picked up one of the spare mitts and squatted down on the opposite side. He held up the mitt, positioning it so that it would be smack in the middle of the strike zone. Sawamura visibly gulped, and began his pitching motion.

Kazuya felt his heart drop like a weight.

This was Sawamura. He knew how Sawamura pitched.

So who was this boy winding up before him?

The ball came flying toward Kazuya. It lacked control, but it had barely any heart in it, and Kazuya caught it easily. Without saying anything, he stood up, and threw the ball back. Crouching back into his catching position, he held up his mitt.

Please, he thought.

Sawamura winded up again, and then the ball came flying toward him. It flew high up and out, and Kazuya caught it so easily, he thought he would throw up. Clutching the ball tightly in his hand, he looked up.

"This isn't you," he said. "This isn't you, Sawamura."

At first, Sawamura looked merely taken aback at that. And then, drawing himself up, he glared at
Kazuya, animosity flashing in his eyes. "What the hell? Who are you to say that? Who are you?"

Kazuya didn't, couldn't, answer. Something tight was spinning in his chest. He couldn't bear it. So instead, he left the bullpen. He didn't look back, and nobody called for him.

That evening, Sawamura packed his belongings and left with his parents. The members all gathered to see him off. When the car had disappeared past the ground sign, they walked back to their rooms in a daze. The happiness they had felt upon winning the finals game just the day before already seemed a thing of the past.

Touching his cheek, Kazuya began to climb up the stairway. His footsteps echoed hollowly around him, one by one.

It was funny, he thought, how much difference a single suitcase and a duffel bag could make. The dormitory that had always seemed so full and lively, felt so empty now.

It was funny, and yet, he couldn't bring himself to laugh.

Haruichi almost couldn't believe it.

"Kominato," said Coach Kataoka. His face was somber. "You're number 18 on the Kōshien roster."

There were only eighteen spots on the roster. Everyone knew whose spot Haruichi was taking, but no one said a word.

His brother clapped a congratulatory hand on his shoulder before leaving with the other third-years.

While the rest scattered, Haruichi stood still, rooted to the spot. How should he feel? He wasn't sure. He was now going to Kōshien with his brother. His dream was about to come true. But at what price?

He looked around for Furuya but the other first-year had disappeared. His stomach turning, he stared down at his feet. Or what he could see of it anyways, through his hanging hair.

It'd never bothered him before, since he had always been able to see what he wanted to see. However, ever since the finals game, Haruichi had been starting to realize that sometimes, the things he didn't or hadn't wanted to see were worth seeing as well.

What was it that Eijun had said to him the night before the Yakushi game?

"You did an amazing job as pinch hitter in yesterday's game. I don't see why the coach wouldn't put you in tomorrow's game too. I'm rooting for you."

Slowly, Haruichi fingered his bangs. He'd had them for as long as he could remember. But perhaps, he thought, it was time for a change.

For Satoru, who had been waiting with bated breath as the coach named who'd be going to Kōshien, there were two moments of shock.

The first shock came when the coach announced the number 10 position: "Kawakami Norifumi."

"...yes sir!" said Kawakami, his eyes flickering back to the coach.

The second shock came right afterwards: "Number 11, Furuya Satoru."
Satoru exhaled. "Yes, sir."

Coach Kataoka paused. "I'll need you two and Tanba to pick up the reigns in Sawamura's absence."

"Yes sir!" they answered.

After they were dismissed, Satoru immediately headed toward the grounds to run laps.

The sun had just set and it had grown dark, but he'd been banned from the bullpen until his wrist was completely healed. In the meantime, he wanted to run as much as possible.

Given his wrist injury, he'd had a niggling worry in the back of his mind that he might be removed from the roster. Inevitably, when Coach Kataoka came out and told them about Sawamura, a dark feeling of relief had bubbled in his chest. And sure enough, with the team down to three first-string pitchers, Satoru had made the roster.

With that worry settled, now, he thought, he could run in peace.

Before he'd even finished running one lap however, Satoru felt his feet coming to a stop. He stood still, wondering what was wrong, and willed his feet to keep going. But they were too heavy.

It wasn't until he looked up and saw the moon that he realized: He had grown so used to running under the blazing heat of the Tokyo summer sun, that now that it was cooler and more comfortable, it felt strange.

At that, Satoru suddenly thought of the car that had left the school earlier that day, and felt his eyes growing moist.

Crossing his body with his left hand to grip his other arm, he sank down to the ground.

This tight feeling in his chest—Satoru knew what this was. He had felt it many times before, when he'd watched the other children playing baseball without him.

"So you see, next time if you get hit, just blame it all on Miyuki-senpai!"

What had he been thinking? With Sawamura gone, he hadn't just lost a rival. He'd lost his friend as well.


Without saying a word, Masuko sat down on the floor. After a moment, he pulled out a pudding cup from his pocket and ripping back the cover, began to slowly eat.

When Yōichi's foot began to hurt, he kicked the wall one more time for good measure and then flopped down on the ground beside Masuko.

*How dare Sawamura forget us,* he raged to himself. And then even more angrily, *How dare we let that happen to him.*

After a few seconds of mental warring, Yōichi got up again. He couldn't stay still, not with this terrible, itching feeling. He paced the room, glanced at the empty bunk bed, and then at Masuko, who now forlornly stared at his empty cup.

Letting out a sigh, Yōichi went outside. Peering across the metal railing, he looked down at the courtyard. As predictable, not a soul was around for him to tackle and vent.
For a moment, he considered going to Miyuki's room, but on second thought, changed his mind. No doubt, the four-eyed idiot would be moping in his room, trying to pretend Sawamura had never existed.

He could see it so clearly, Yōichi let out a snort. *As though that's possible.*

Somehow, before they had completely realized it, Sawamura had crept into their lives and become an irreplaceable part of it. He was a pest, he was.

"*Sorry! But there'll be more balls flying at you from now on, so thank you for defending!*"

Yōichi felt the pit of his stomach boiling again. He scowled. Who the hell got amnesia in this day and age anyways? Gritting his teeth, he kicked the railing. *Clang.* The sound of vibrating metal echoed around him, fading with every repetition before disappearing into silence.

Though his foot hurt, it hadn't helped at all.

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Soon afterwards, the Seidō team traveled to Nishinomiya, in Hyōgo prefecture, where they settled into a hotel a short distance away from Kōshien Stadium. The mood, which had been quiet on the train ride there, began to spill over with tension, and conversations started buzzing between the members.

How would they proceed? Though Furuya's wrist was quickly healing, he would not make it in time for the first day, leaving Tanba and Kawakami to handle the all-important opening game.

"Sawamura's not here now," said Yūki. "But everything he's done for the team wasn't for naught."

"In our opening game, we'll show that damn first year what he's missing out on," Isashiki growled.

"He'll come crawling back," Ryōsuke said with a dangerous smile.

Kazuya didn't say anything. He knew that as the main catcher, he should be actively encouraging Tanba and Kawakami. But the others were looking at him with such understanding eyes, he felt his throat go dry and his gums locked together.

They had defeated Narumiya and Inashiro. They had reached Kōshien, the stage that had eluded their team the previous summer in a bitter defeat. National domination was no longer just a pipe dream; they were finally at the start line. Everything Kazuya had ever wanted was at his feet.

He should have been brimming with excitement and joy, but he couldn't feel anything at all.

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It was a relief when they got off the train and Eijun saw the familiar houses and fields that he'd grown up around. Tokyo was much more crowded and filled with tall buildings and towers, but somehow, it felt empty and vacant without the mountains circling them.

When they arrived at his house, Eijun found his friends waiting with worried expressions. Relieved to see them after having been surrounded on all sides by strangers, he ran to them and hugged them.

"Ei-chan! What happened?"

"Eijun, are you coming back for good?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," said Eijun, wiping his nose with a wide grin. "Stop crying, Nobu."
He couldn't answer their questions about whether or not he'd go back. He had remembered on the train ride that he had decided to go to Seidō after all. He'd been pretty taken with the catcher—Miyuki Kazuya. But how could he have forgotten four months' worth of memories? He wouldn't have believed them, if he hadn't seen for himself that it was late summer now.

However, he still didn't quite believe that he'd been the pitcher to strike out the cleanup of the opponent team in the final game. He hadn't even been able to take his junior high school team past the first round. And yet somehow, in the past four months, he had become a pitcher good enough to be called a monster? It didn't make any sense.

At the bullpen, he'd shown that jerk catcher Miyuki that he was right. He'd had the nerve to say something like "This isn't you", as though he knew Eijun better than himself. But after two pitches, he'd looked sick and left the bullpen. With that, Eijun had proved himself right.

Somehow though, he felt worse after that.

After his friends went back home, Eijun retreated to his room. His head, while much better than before, was still somewhat hazy, and it was not a pleasant feeling.

Lying on his back on his bed, Eijun looked up at the ceiling. His stomach hurt. It'd started to hurt as soon as they arrived at the station in Tokyo. Except it didn't hurt in the way it usually had before. It was a twisting, aching kind of pain that no matter where he probed, he couldn't reach it.

Rolling off his bed, he went back outside. "Gramps, can we go to the pharmacy?"

There was a veranda in their hotel room.

While the others threw themselves on the beds and turned on the TV, Kazuya went out onto the veranda. It was a small, rectangular box, and he could see the other rooms' verandas stretching this way and that all around his.

When he glanced down, he found an empty cicada shell on the floor. After a moment's contemplation, he bent down to pick it up. It was dry and cold. Stepping forward, rolling the shell around in his hand, he leaned against the veranda railing.

There weren't any trees around. How had the cicada shell ended up there? Had the wind carried it there?

He let out an exhale, feeling the air rushing out of his lungs.

There was no more escaping the thought of it now: The last time Kazuya had looked down from a railing like this, he had been with Sawamura.

He had been wondering for several days now, when he found himself alone: Had Sawamura somehow known that he would lose his memories? Was that why he had told him about himself near the end? Was that why he had said 'goodbye'?

"That's a bit lopsided, Sawamura," he said aloud.

Nobody responded, of course. Not the crows, not even the cicadas.

This ache in his chest—it wasn't too long ago that Kazuya had felt this way. He could still vividly recall that horrible feeling after Sawamura had been hit by the line drive and lost consciousness. He'd tried to not think about it, but in the end, Kazuya hadn't been able to do anything about it himself.
Only when Sawamura had come back, had that empty feeling been filled in.

It was the same deal now. No matter how much he thought about it, Kazuya knew he wouldn't be able to reach an answer. It had always been this way in the end, after all.

*Maybe Sawamura will get his memories back,* Kazuya entertained himself. *Maybe he'll come back like before.*

And then a quiet voice in a distant corner of his mind reminded him that sometimes, people didn't come back.

Kazuya looked up at the sky. It was a cloudy day. He rolled the shell around between his fingers again.

He didn't know why he knew. But it was with a strange, terrible certainty that he knew that the Sawamura he had known was gone for good.

Maybe it was the way he had slapped him. Maybe it was the way he had winded up and pitched. Or maybe it was the way he'd looked at Kazuya and found him a stranger: *Who are you?*

If it wasn't for that, Kazuya would have tried to stop him from leaving. Maybe. But he knew, now.

The Sawamura he had met behind the shed building, late on the first day of practice.

The Sawamura who lifted his leg up impossibly high and whose arm whipped out deceptively late.

The Sawamura who grinned on the mound after striking out the batter.

The Sawamura who waited outside his door with drool pooling in the corner of his mouth. The Sawamura who knew that he liked black coffee, and pocari sweat on hot days.

*The Sawamura who had known Miyuki Kazuya.*

He was gone. The Sawamura who'd been left behind was not the Sawamura he had known. Everything that had happened between them might as well have been a dream. A good dream. A dream he hadn't ever wanted to wake up from.

Unfortunately, reality was reality.

People came and went, just like the passing seasons. This was nothing new to Kazuya. While it ached, there was nothing he could do about it. The timing was unfortunate, but that was how life was: Kōshien was coming up. The stage he had craved for so long—the path to going pro, was right before his eyes. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes there. The slightest distraction, and it would all come crumbling down. Holding onto things that he couldn't have would only lead to further confusion. The best thing he could do, the only thing he could do—the only thing he knew *how* to do, was to let go.

Kazuya dropped the cicada shell over the railing and watched it plummet to the concrete below. Maybe, he mused to himself, it would find its place in some kid's bug collection.

Returning to the room, he slid the door of the veranda shut behind him. The others were on their way to practice their swinging in a nearby park. Picking up his bat, Kazuya followed them.

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August 7.

The first day of Kōshien opened to a hot, sunny day.
Water surged through the nearby creeks. Cicadas hummed on their trees. Leaves flashed in the sunlight.

Crowds streamed excitedly through the open doors at Kōshien Stadium. Brass bands performed their school songs. Cameras flashed.

Following the opening ceremony, the third game of the day was between Seidō High School and Nishiura High School.

Hundreds of miles away, at the Akikawa school grounds, Yeung was wiping sweat off his brow as he practiced pitching to the corners to his teammates. His second summer had ended with the bittersweet realization that he still had much to learn about Japanese baseball. The fall tournament would be his last chance, and he was determined to give it his best shot.

Clang!

On the Yakushi grounds, a few scattered spectators had gathered by the fences to find out what the racket was about.

Clang!

Raichi, tears streaming down his face, was blasting ball after ball out of the field with his ferocious swing.

Clang!

"What's up with him?" someone asked.

Clang!

"Apparently, Seidō's southpaw can't play anymore," Sanada replied. "There was a small piece about it in the papers this morning."

Clang!

"He knows it's not his fault, right…?"

Clang!

Sanada crossed his arms, looking bemused. "I'm pretty sure he's more upset that he won't get to bat against him again, than anything else."

Clang!

In a school classroom on the Sakurazawa campus, Akira found himself looking at the clock every fifteen seconds, willing the minute hand to move faster. It was just his luck that the study session had ended up to be at the same time as the opening game of Kōshien.

The game he really wanted to see was the last game of the day, but every game would be worth watching of course. All the top-ranked teams in the nation, gathered at one stadium to fight for the ultimate crown… Even if the dream was now out of his reach, it was still a truly amazing event.
Not everyone on the team felt that way. For one, Karino had said that he didn't want to watch baseball ever again. Akira suspected that he'd crumble sooner or later, however. Baseball was something that, once captured, you could never really get out of.

He looked at the clock again, but only two minutes had passed. Letting out a sigh, Akira sagged lower in his seat.

"The third and final game of the day will take place between Seidō High School from West Tokyo versus Nishiura High School from Saitama. The ballgame will begin shortly."

Crowds were still moving into the jam-packed Kōshien stadium, ranging from uniformed school cheering teams, to reporters, and to people who simply loved baseball. While it was not as hot as it had been at the beginning of the second game, there was something about the excitement of the summer Kōshien stage that made everything seem more heated.

"First on defense will be Seidō High School. We will now introduce each position's player."

Whispers began to break out as a tall, clean shaven player stamped on the mound.

"With the honor of opening his school's first game in this tournament, third year ace, Tanba Kōichiro."

Polite applause scattered from the audience.

"The catcher is second year starter, Miyuki Kazuya."

His eyes not visible behind his sports glasses, the catcher shifted in his position. As all of the following fielders were introduced to applause, the other team's leadoff batters began to emerge from their dugout.

"Top of the first, Nishiura High School's offense starts with number one, first baseman, Oki-kun..."

There was a lone figure running laps around one of the Inashiro grounds. He had gone out in the early morning, and after morning practice had ended, had ran all afternoon as well.

"At least he's not holed up in his room this time," said Yamaoka, wiping his neck with a towel.

"For now," Shirakawa muttered.

Taking off his catcher gear, Tadano Itsuki wondered if he should say something.

Meanwhile, Carlos, who'd already taken off his shirt, stretched languidly. "Well, I don't have anything particularly better to do. I'll join him for a lap or two."

He took off. The other remaining members of the team looked at each other—and then joined him. Falling into place behind their ace, with thoughts only of the coming fall tournament, they ran forward.

Eijun was unpacking when he saw that there was a journal among the books he had hastily thrown into his suitcase.
He opened it, and was taken aback to see notes written in his handwriting. There weren't many entries, and the entries that were there talked mostly about what they'd eaten or the team they'd played against. But it was a strange feeling, not remembering any of the events that were listed there. It almost felt like another person had been using his body.

A chill ran across his back at the thought, and he tossed the book aside—when something fell out. As Eijun bent over to pick it up, he saw that it was a photograph. He turned it over.

He didn't recognize the place in the photo at first. It wasn't a very good shot; it'd been taken while it was raining, and a rain drop must have fallen on the lens, for a corner of it was blurry. After a few moments, Eijun realized it was the side of Seidō's dormitory building.

There were two figures standing under the eaves, likely to avoid the rain. One of them, he realized with a jolt, was himself. He was grinning. The other figure was Miyuki Kazuya, and he was simply looking at the figure that was Eijun.

Holding the photo in his hand, Eijun stared at it for a long time. While it didn't mean anything to him, he couldn't look away. His stomach was twisting again. For some reason, it felt like he had forgotten something very important.

"Eijun! It's time for dinner!" called his mother.

"I'm coming!" Finally tearing his eyes away, he put the photo back in the journal and went outside.

His grandpa was sitting at the table, and when he saw Eijun, his chopsticks stopped in midair. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

His grandpa gestured to his face. Eijun reached up with his hand, and was taken aback to see his fingers come away wet.

"Eh?"

He didn't know why, but he was crying.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the photograph at the end is the one in chapter 17.

Edited 16/4/23.
The crowd was roaring. **Something must have happened, for the people around him had jumped to their feet, but he couldn’t tell what was going on.**

"What is it? What is it?" Straining on the tips of his toes, he excitedly jumped up and down. Despite his best efforts however, the only thing he could see were people’s backs.

**Suddenly, he felt a pair of strong hands grasping him around his waist—and then for a moment, he was flying. He soared above all the other people, and he could see the field. A player was running around the bases while the others watched—a home run!**

**He landed softly on a set of shoulders. His father's voice asked, "Can you see, now?"**

"Careful," said his mother from somewhere below. **He felt her hand on his back, supporting him.**

He grinned. "Yeah!"

This smell. This sound. This dirt. This atmosphere.

Summer Kōshien was in many ways, the same as how Kazuya remembered it.

The last time he'd been here was in the beginning of his junior high school years, when their Senior League coach took the team on a field trip. Seeing the best high school baseball players in all of Japan duking it out, it'd fired them up to practice even harder, so that perhaps one day, they could be the ones standing on the field instead of just watching from the sidelines.

Yet being there now, he saw that it was different after all, on the field. While hundreds of bodies were no longer pressing around him, it was somehow more heated here.

**Slam!**

"Strike three! Batter out!"

The crowds, a sea of faces surrounding them on all four sides, roared deafeningly. The sky above was a blue basin, filled with clouds.
It would all have been perfect, if it weren't for the singular dark line running down the upper left of his vision.

He'd found a slight crack on his sports glasses that morning. He had a spare, of course, but he didn't touch it. While the crack didn't hamper his vision in any way, it was still a bit distracting.

"Nice ball!" he called out, throwing the ball back. Tanba nodded and caught it. Adjusting his cap and then stamping down on the ground, Tanba took a deep breath.

He was nervous; Kazuya could tell. They were all a bit nervous. But they had come too far to be affected—the tension was working to keep them on their toes, instead of hampering their performance.

Top of the 6th, and the score was 4-2 in Seidō's favor. Tanba had really outperformed himself; his curveball had never been sharper. Despite not having had much actual gametime in the regional tournament, his pitching had gone up a level. The whole team had, in fact.

Their opponent, Nishiura High School was a school that had made a bit of a splash in the papers as a team almost completely comprised of second years, that'd only come together the previous year.

"Number three, second baseman, Sakaeguchi-kun."

Checking how the batter was setting up in the box, Kazuya signaled to Tanba, who nodded and straightened up. He winded up, raising his leg up high—and just then, for an instant, a cloud must have moved, for a sudden ray of sunlight shone across Kazuya's face. The crack in his glasses must have been bigger than he'd expected, because for a moment, the light filled his eyes. And for an instant, Tanba was gone. In his place was a shorter pitcher, one with an unorthodox pitching form and unpredictable moving fastballs...

The cloud moved back. Tanba threw, his hand coming down like a whip, and the ball flew towards Kazuya's mitt.

_Slam!_

As the game progressed, Chris could see the team gradually reviving. They'd been a bit stiff at first, resulting in their giving away two runs in the second inning. But as though they were finally realizing where they were—the hallowed ground that was Kōshien—they'd begun to stretch out their wings.

While Chris stayed in the dugout of course, he recognized the honor of being there at all. When he'd been at his lowest point during his rehabilitation, he'd thought Kōshien was completely out of his reach. And yet, in his final summer, the team had brought him here.

Pausing his pencil, Chris looked around—at the scoreboard in the back, the masses that had gathered to see them. It was a sight he would never forget.

_Claang!_

As he wrote down the pitch, he wondered what Sawamura was watching at that moment.

While Sawamura hadn't remembered Chris either, he had a feeling he knew.

"It's a full count, and with two outs, Seidō's got a runner on base. They'll want to score here if they
want some breathing space when they enter the top of the ninth... Here's the pitch. And—it's a line drive between center and right!"

Swallowing, Eijun grabbed the front of his pant legs and leaned in closer to the TV screen.

"Masuko is running... and he's safe at first! But Yūki is left stuck at third thanks to a laser beam throw from Nishiura's captain, Hanai, in right field."

With an exhale, Eijun sank back against the back of the couch.

He'd never been altogether too interested in watching baseball games, preferring to play the game himself. But as expected, Kōshien was special. And despite not knowing anyone on the team, there was something about the faces he'd seen just a few days ago being broadcasted on national TV.

*Seidō sure is strong,* Eijun marveled to himself. They were all incredible players, moving with a surety and speed that could only have been a product of talent and unbelievable effort. It was all way beyond what he'd ever experienced.

To think that over the past months, he had not just been one of them, but a player so widely acknowledged by them—it was still mind-boggling.

"The count is 1-2; the battery's managed to corner Miyuki with some nicely located sinkers. He's been called a clutch hitter, will he be able to pull off a hit here...?"

*Miyuki...* Eijun felt his brow furrow. He'd been the first face he saw when he woke up. Which meant that for some reason, the person he had been for the past four months had decided to go to Miyuki's door in his last moments.

Apparently, they'd been a battery together.

His memory was still rather dim, but Eijun remembered that the first time they had met, Miyuki had said something along the lines of their becoming the best of partners. It seemed he had been right.

"And there the ball goes! It's soaring to the far outfield-and it hits the back wall! The center fielder's scrambling for the ball, and Yūki makes it home without any trouble, bringing the score up to 5-4, *Seidō.* Truly a clutch hit indeed from *Seidō's* catcher, Miyuki Kazuya."

"We're going to finish this here!" Yūki shouted.

"Yeah!" they roared back.

Just before Haruichi was about to leave the dugout, Furuya came forward and handed him a cup of water.

"Eh? I'm okay," said Haruichi. But at Furuya's insisting, he drank it in one gulp.

Haruichi had come in as a pinch hitter the previous inning; this would be his second time playing as a left fielder. As he stepped out onto the dirt of Kōshien, he saw a flash of pink and then a passing smile.

"There seems to be an abundance of left fielders lately," said an approaching voice.

Haruichi turned to see Isashiki jogging behind him. He scratched his face. "Ah...sorry."

Isashiki grinned. "Nice haircut."
One out, with a runner on first and second and the bottom of the lineup coming up.

Kazuya took a quick look around the field, before standing up and motioning for the outfielders to come in closer to prepare for a tag out at home.

"Number seven, left fielder, Mizutani-kun."

Kawakami nodded at his signal and straightened up. The fielders called out encouragingly. Throwing from the stretch, Kawakami released the ball.

Immediately, the batter dropped into a bunting pose. Taking into consideration the player's talents and the situation, Kazuya had thought it was likely he'd do so.

But even though he'd been preparing himself for it, he felt his heart thump. And then for an instant, he saw another player standing there, completely halting the ball's motion in a perfect bunt.

His mitt faltered.

Letting out a groan, Eijun buried his face in the couch pillows.

"Passed ball! The catcher, Miyuki, makes an unexpected error here and seizing the opportunity, the runner has stolen third!"

Wasn't Miyuki Kazuya supposed to be a genius catcher? He'd relocated the magazine spread concerning the second year; it'd proclaimed him to be the possible savior of Seidō's struggling team.

Eijun let out another groan and looked back up.

"Is something wrong, Eijun?" His mother called from the garden, sounding worried.

"Sorry, I'm fine," he called back, his eyes remaining fixed on the screen.

Raising a hand to the mound, Kazuya mouthed a silent apology. Kawakami, looking unnerved, nodded.

He crouched down, and allowed himself a grimace. What was he doing? As a catcher, it was his duty to lead the pitcher, not cause more problems for them.

He had to end the inning here at all costs. If Nishiura managed to tie the score here, the momentum would inevitably shift in their favor, and then the result of the game could swing either way.

That was the unpredictability of baseball that he'd always loved: The way how, in the heat of a game, a team that was in all respects cornered, could step up their play at just the right moment, and seize victory against all odds.

There were so many facets to baseball, he could think about it endlessly, night after night, and never grow bored of it.

So why was it that at that moment, he would rather have been anywhere else but in that catcher's box?

Eijun was on his feet now, pacing in front of the TV.
Following the catcher's error, the battery had managed to get an out and then walked a batter, filling the bases.

"Seidō has called for a timeout. The infielders are gathering are the mound and... it looks a bit tense. The shortstop appears to have the catcher in a headlock."

The shortstop, Kuramochi, had been one of Eijun's roommates at the dorm. He could remember that Kuramochi had scared him with face paint when he arrived, but following that, they'd played Street Fighter together.

Watching Kuramochi release an unresponsive Miyuki, Eijun felt himself sweat. Perhaps, he thought, he had dodged a bullet by leaving the dorm.

The runner on third had taken a bold lead from the bag.

After a moment's consideration, Kazuya signalled for the pitch. Kawakami nodded. While his round face looked strained, there was a determined edge to it.

The bright side of the bases being loaded, was they didn't have to worry about a steal: It would be a duel between the battery and the batter.

Punching his mitt with his fist, Kazuya set it up. Kawakami visibly exhaled and began his pitching motion. He felt a bead of sweat drip down the side of his face. Even over the din of the spectators, he could hear his heart pounding in his chest.

His arm snaking out from the side, Kawakami threw. The batter stepped forward to swing, and from the corner of his eye, he saw the runner on third began to sprint for home.

*Thunk!*

The ball collided with the bat and shot back down on the ground, before rebounding past Kawakami's outstretched glove. Isashiki and the younger Kominato ran forward to field the ball.

Kazuya tore off his mask and shouted, "*Back home!*"

Covering his face with his hands, Eijun peeked out through the crack between his fingers.

Scooping up the ball in his glove, Isashiki flung the ball toward home. The runner was still running. Kazuya's heart pounded furiously; he could feel blood rushing to his face and ears. The ball grew bigger and bigger as it spiraled toward his mitt—and then he caught it. He looked up at the runner—who was dropping to slide. He didn't stop.

Somehow, Kazuya knew what was going to happen before he knew it. The runner's eyes were widened; he couldn't stop. They were going to collide.

However, the thought to get out of the way never even occurred to Kazuya.

Lowering his mitt, he tagged the runner just before he felt the runner's shoulder crush against his ribs. *Crrrrshh.* As a stabbing spike of pain jerked through his upper body, the heels of his feet dug back into the dirt—and then he toppled over.

Struggling to not let go of the ball in his mitt, he crashed down face-first, his sports glasses smashing
against the ground. He could taste dirt in his mouth.

For a long moment, Kazuya lay there, breathing hard. His face stung. His chest felt like it was on fire.

He inhaled. And then getting up, he showed his mitt to the umpire, who held up a fist. "Out! Game set!"

Kazuya's head fell back in relief. The crowds jumped to their feet, roaring.

"Sorry about that..." apologized the runner in a mumbling voice.

His vision had become distorted, showing jagged lines piercing through the sky. He tore off his glasses; the crack had widened into multiple spidery fractures all across the front. It looked as thought it would shatter at a single touch.

He heard rapidly approaching footsteps, and saw a flash of messy hair. He held a ginger hand up to his rib cage, and flashed a smile. "I'm fine, Sawa..." Almost immediately, he stopped.

Looking startled, Kuramochi stared back at him, and he felt his smile fade.

In that instant, as though sucked up in a vacuum, the surrounding world lost its saturation. Colors, sounds, smells. The touch of the ball still clutched in his hand.

Everything had turned grey: The green field, the brown dirt, the blue sky. The faces in the crowd, the color of his hands.

Kazuya stood still. The rest of his teammates had converged and were asking him something, but he couldn't understand them. He couldn't hear them.

Yōichi had thought he knew Miyuki pretty well—or at least as well as anyone could hope to get, with the way the catcher held everyone at an arm's distance.

He had never seen him like this before, however, and he didn't know what to think. Miyuki's face looked completely drained. His eyes were dull and blank. There was something else as well that looked off, and it took Yōichi a second to realize that it was the first time in a long while that he was seeing Miyuki without his glasses.

"Oi, Miyuki, what's the problem?"

"You alright?"

Miyuki didn't respond.

Yōichi scowled. Miyuki had been about to call him 'Sawamura,' hadn't he?

He'd let it pass until now, but he couldn't hold it back anymore: It was on the verge of boiling in the pits of his stomach. "You freaking idiot. You haven't learned anything from before, have you? It's okay to admit you miss someone, you know?" When Miyuki still didn't respond, he seized him by the neckline of his shirt. He had just opened his mouth to deliver another withering comment—when Miyuki's expression suddenly crumpled in pain. Taken aback, Yōichi let go and stepped back—and saw Miyuki gripping his chest.

*From the collision...?*
His eyes widening, he turned around and spotted the assistant director walking toward them. "Takashima-san!"

As soon as he saw that Seidō had won, Eijun turned off the TV. His heart was racing so fast, he thought he'd have a heart attack if he kept watching.

That last play had been breathtaking. The showdown between the catcher and the runner—Miyuki hadn't flinched at all, firmly standing his ground to the very end.

He was really an amazing catcher.

Eijun looked down at the palm of his hand, and then balled it into a tight fist. He clearly remembered now, how he'd been taken by that boldness and audacity when he first met Miyuki. To have a catcher like that catch for him every day... it'd be a dream.

No, it actually happened, he reminded himself.

The catcher had certainly seemed to know Eijun—or at least the one who'd been pitching at Seidō for the past summer—saying things like "This isn't you, Sawamura." But no matter how hard he strained his brain, he couldn't recall a single thing about Miyuki.

Returning to his room, Eijun looked up at the ceiling. His brow furrowing in thought, he turned several times.

It was odd. His mother was in the garden picking vegetables and his grandpa and father were out on the field. His friends were coming over later that day for dinner. Everyone was excited and happy to see him back. And yet, what was this feeling?

His stomach hurt again.

The world had ended.

That was how Kazuya felt, looking up at the all too familiar white ceiling of the hospital room.

"It's fractured, and it'll hurt to breathe for a while," said the doctor. "But the good news is how quickly you received medical attention. A fracture like that, as slight as it is now, could have become a lot worse if left untreated. With this, as long as you take care not to overdo it for the next few weeks, you'll be playing baseball again in no time."

Don't you see?, Kazuya thought.

Don't you see? The world has ended. I don't care anymore about baseball.

There was a mirror in his room. When he saw his reflection, he looked so pathetic, he laughed. It hurt, but he laughed and laughed.

When the last echoes of his laughter had faded, the only thing left was a burning pain in his chest and the sound of the clock hands turning.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

"It's okay to admit you miss someone, you know?"

Raising an arm, he covered his face.
"And then Akio ate it all, tail and all!" said Nobu.

"And how was it? Was it disgusting?"

Akio nodded solemnly. "I threw up."

"He threw up," Nobu echoed.

"Awesome."

"Egh." Wakana wrinkled her nose.

"Should I bring out more apples?" asked his mother.

"Yes please!" they answered.

While the others jumped to their feet, Eijun looked outside and felt his smile fade. It had gotten cloudy.

After hearing the diagnosis regarding Miyuki, Yōichi sighed. Very loudly. Feelings of relief and exasperation were warring within his head.

First Sawamura, now Miyuki. The game in the finals round, and now their success in the first round of Kōshien.

They really were cursed, weren't they? Had some bored god out there gotten tired of messing with the pitchers, and decided to move on to the catchers?

*Let us celebrate a win for once*, he raged silently up at the sky.

That evening, Rei drove Miyuki back to the hotel. For the most part, it was a silent ride. She talked about the weather ('Looks like it might rain, soon, doesn't it?') and got only a grunt in response for her trouble.

*Well, that might have been deserved.*

Coming to a stop at a traffic light, Rei glanced to her left. She could only see the back of his head; Miyuki was looking out the window.

There was something clearly wrong with him—which was in its own way, strange. She considered herself a good reader of character and Miyuki had always struck her as someone with a very tight lid on his emotions.

Were his ribs bothering him that much? Or was it something else?

As though he had been listening in on her thoughts, Miyuki suddenly spoke: "Rei-chan."

"Yes?" she answered.

"Can I ask you something?"
In a celebratory dinner, the rest of the members were treated to a meal of yakiniku in a restaurant filled with thick, sizzling fumes. Their mouths watering as they waited for the meat to turn brown, they all sat poised with their chopsticks held high in the air.

"Eat up, eat up," said Ota, raising a pair of metal tongs into the air.

"Thank you for the meal!"

Chopsticks darted down and began snatching away the pieces of smoking meat.

"Eijun, the bath is ready!"

The stomach pills he'd taken hadn't helped at all. Maybe, he thought, soaking in a warm bath would help.

Filled to the brim and feeling warm and toasty after a visit to the bathhouse, the others were all in their rooms, either knocked out in bed or watching the news coverage on the Kōshien games.

Yōichi, on the other hand, found himself standing outside Miyuki's door. He looked around quickly to make sure the horizon was clear. He sweated. What am I doing?

Raising a hand, he knocked.

There was no response. He wasn't surprised, and he would have kicked the door and left there on the spot—but there was something about the way Miyuki had looked earlier that day, that stopped him.

Miyuki's face, without his glasses, had looked strangely vulnerable.

Making up his mind, Yōichi grabbed the doorknob and twisted—it turned. He pushed open the door.

He blinked.

Kazuya had just about finished packing his bag when the door flew open. There was a moment of stunned silence. And then:

"You're a goddamn idiot," came Kuramochi's scathing voice.

"Yep," said Kazuya, zipping the bag shut.

"You're supposed to stay in bed."

"Yep."

"Do you know where you're going?"

"Yep." Kazuya adjusted the strap on his bag and was about to leave—when he paused. He looked at Kuramochi, who stared back at him with an unreadable expression. He raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "...Do you think it'll work?"

Kuramochi shrugged. "I don't know." In response, Kazuya ruefully quirked his lips up. He'd expected as much.

He was about to pass Kuramochi out the door when the shortstop added, "If it doesn't, I'll beat him
up for you. Since you're an invalid for now."

He stopped. He turned and cleared his throat. "Thanks."

It was raining when Kazuya left the hotel.

He hadn't brought an umbrella, and he was in too much of a hurry to care, so he let the rain fall on his head.

He'd taken a pain killer before he left, which helped. As long as he took care where he stepped and didn't jostle his body too much, the pain was bearable.

Water puddles splashing around his feet and the sound of rain filling his ears, Kazuya hurried through the streets, heading for the nearest railway station.

Sorry, Rei-chan.

He'd asked her for Sawamura's address, which she'd pulled up on her phone. She had then given Kazuya a knowing look and said that she'd drive him there herself after Kōshien was over, and to not do anything stupid.

But he couldn't wait that long.

He wanted to see him.

After drying his hair, Eijun paced in his room a few times. He paced outside in the living room several times. He went out to the veranda and looked at the pouring rain. He came back inside his room and then sat down on his bed.

Getting up, he pulled out his phone. There was only one new message from Wakana. He was about to answer it but instead he closed his phone and began to pace again.

The hotel had been farther from the station than Kazuya had expected.

Every few minutes, he looked up at the darkening sky and then down at the time on his cellphone. In his urgency, he'd forgotten to recharge his battery, and it was down to the red zone. With every passing minute, he felt his heart beating faster and faster, pounding painfully against his ribs.

When he finally arrived at the station, his phone had died and it was completely dark out. There was almost nobody else there besides a few attendants. The air was thick with the smell of rain.

Kazuya looked at the time table, and then walking over to the bench, he sat down. He'd missed the train by two minutes.

He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Kneeling on the ground, Eijun breathed in and out deeply.

Then, picking up his phone, before he could lose the nerve, he quickly pressed the name Miyuki-senpai that he'd found in his phone book.

The dial tone rang. Eijun's toes squirmed as he waited.
When the call went to the answering machine, he didn't know whether he felt relieved or disappointed.

"Excuse me? Are you alright?"

Kazuya looked up to see a station attendant regarding him warily.

"Sorry," he said, quickly getting up. He winced.

He was about to leave the station, when he saw an old poster for a Little League tournament on the wall. For some reason, he stopped and stared at it.

Minutes passed. Slowly, his eyes traveled to a phone booth beside the poster.

Kazuya rubbed the back of his neck. And then he rummaged in his pants pocket for a coin.

When his phone suddenly began to vibrate, Eijun almost dropped it.

After a moment however, he felt his excitement fade away; he didn't recognize the caller ID.

Stabbing the reject button, Eijun collapsed back down on his bed.

Listening to the answering machine, Kazuya hung up the phone. The coin clattered down into the refund slot. He stared at the dial pad. Then, he put in the coin and dialed the number again.

While he might have walked away before, there was a strange force pushing him. He didn't know quite what it was. But it was stronger than the doubtful voice whispering in his ear to quit.

Eijun's phone rang again. This time, he ignored it.

Clatter.

He dialed again.

After the same unknown number called his phone three times in a row, Eijun picked up on the fourth attempt.

"What do you want!" he half-yelled into the phone.

There was a shocked pause on the other line. And then, a relieved voice. "So that's how it's going to be, is it?"

Eijun felt his stomach flip-flop. He sat up. "...Miyuki?"

"That's Miyuki-senpai to you."

Hearing Sawamura's voice, Kazuya felt his chest ache. It was a different pain from his rib injury.

"So," Kazuya said. He paused. His mind had gone blank. "Uh... how are you?"

Kazuya's brow furrowed. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it'll go away on its own..."

They fell silent.

Kazuya's thoughts were racing. His eyes searched his surroundings rapidly, grasping for a topic. Finding none, he looked outside. "Well... Is it raining over there too?" He mentally slapped himself.

"...uh, yeah it is, actually."

"Hm. It's a good thing it rained after our game."

"Yeah... I was watching."

"You were?" Kazuya blurted out. He cleared his throat. "I mean, that's nice."

"You guys were amazing." Sawamura's voice was admiring. "I was blown away." He paused. "I said my stomach hurt earlier, and I've been thinking... the person I was, before. I think...they probably wanna go back."

Then you should come back, Kazuya thought. He tried to say it, but his tongue suddenly felt heavy, and what came out instead sounded more like, "Zenyu shcomack."

"What?"

He inhaled once. Exhaled once. And then did it again. "Then you should...come back."

The other line fell silent. The only sound was the rain, falling in place around them.

"Can I?" Sawamura asked. Kazuya felt his heart jump up to his throat. "Everyone thinks I'm this amazing pitcher, but I'm not. You saw it yourself. I mean, you even left the bullpen, and... well, everyone'll just be disappointed."

Kazuya gripped the receiver tightly in his hand. "I said it before, didn't I? Even the way you are now... We can become the best of partners. You just need to trust my mitt."

"But... I don't even know you," said Sawamura.

At that, Kazuya felt his breath falter. It hurt after all, hearing him say that. He coughed. "Miyuki Kazuya, catcher. My birthday's November 17. Blood type B. Hometown, Tokyo. I like pocari sweat on hot days. And you?"

"...Sawamura Eijun, pitcher," came the reply. "Nagano Prefecture. My birthday is May 15, and my blood type is O. I like orange ramune." By the end, his voice sounded stronger.

"Did that help?"

"Uh... Not really. Sorry."

Kazuya tried to think of a reply to that, but finding no immediate answer come to him, he looked around again. This time, his eyes landed on the Little League poster he'd seen earlier. Its edges were yellow and fraying. It'd probably be taken down soon.
His thoughts began to take him to his own Little League days. Thinking back, he sure had played baseball for a long time. He too had started at a young age and it'd been his whole world ever since. But how had he started Little League, again? It was a faint memory, one as frayed as the poster before him. He couldn't quite remember the details. All he could remember was snow and something warm in his hand...

_Kazu-kun, should I let you in on a secret? A secret that will help me get better?_

There was a slow intake of breath on the other line, and Kazuya answered, "That's alright. It'll just take some time."

"**Maybe I... I don't know. You don't have a game tomorrow right? Can I... I don't know, maybe come or... you know what, never mind.**"

"**We don't have a game tomorrow,**" Kazuya confirmed.

"**Okay.**" Sawamura sounded relieved. "**Maybe tomorrow then. Maybe my stomach will stop hurting then. It's really a bother.**"

He let out another exhale. From looking at the poster, an idea had struck him. "Hey, Sawamura... wanna know a pretty good medicine for stomachaches?"

"**Medicine?**"

"**A secret medicine.**"

"**A...secret?**"

"It's the Miyuki family's greatest and most secret medicine that's been passed down over sixteen generations," he said. And then he laughed. Not because it was funny or because it hurt, but because Sawamura existed in the world.

Perhaps this, Kazuya thought, was what she had meant.

That night, Kazuya returned to the hotel, soaked to the skin. He found Rei pacing in the lobby. After one look at his bedraggled figure, she sent him into the hands—or rather, fists—of Kuramochi, who shoved him into the bath. Following that, he had his bandages replaced and was sent to bed where he promptly fell asleep.

And that night, he dreamed again.

He was standing before the door once more. It loomed above him, stretching so far up he couldn't see where it ended.

He would have stayed there, keeping his distance and just watching the door. But suddenly, he heard a voice: "**Miyuki-senpai.**" And then he felt a hand pushing him from behind. It urged him forward. It told him that it'd be with him.

So he took a step forward. He raised his hand, and he knocked on the door that he hadn't been able to open before.

_Knock. Knock._

The sound resounded all around him, ringing like a bell.
The door opened.

When he entered, he found himself standing in his house kitchen. The very same kitchen he'd once eaten cereal and made fried rice in by himself.

Except it wasn't empty anymore.

His father was there, sitting at the counter, reading a newspaper and eating breakfast. His mother was there too, stirring a pot of miso soup. She was as she had been before she'd withered away, but he recognized her. Perhaps sensing his gaze, she turned and looked surprised to see him standing in the doorway.

"Hm? What is it? Did you forget something, Kazuya-kun?"

He glanced down, and he realized he was no longer in a child's body. He was in his own body, in his school uniform.

"Aren't you going to be late, Kazuya?" said his father, looking up from his newspaper.

He tried to clear the lump in his throat. "Yeah... I'm going. I just forgot... to say goodbye."

His mother beamed. "Have a nice day."

His eyes opened.

It was dark. The hotel room's ceiling stretched above him. It was blurry, even more so than usual.

Something hot and wet was dripping down on his neck. He covered his face with his arm.

After a long minute, Kazuya exhaled and sat up, ignoring the stab of pain that accompanied the movement.

His room curtains were drawn. It was still the middle of the night; he could see the glow of the lamps lit outside. He crossed the room and sliding open the veranda door, he felt the night breeze on his arms. It had stopped raining at some point; the air felt crisp and cool.

And somewhere in the distance, so quiet he almost missed it, he could hear it once more:

Minminminmin.

Their cry had kept him company on many a summer evening, even when he hadn't realized it. In the same way, while he had thought he could let Sawamura go, he hadn't realized that Sawamura had become a part of his whole world.

How ironic, Kazuya thought. He'd always made fun of Sawamura for being an idiot. But like a bad punchline, in the end, he had been the biggest idiot of them all.

Sawamura still didn't know Kazuya; he could sense it, keenly, even over the phone, and his chest ached at the knowledge. He knew now however, that he would rather live in a world where Sawamura Eijun didn't know Miyuki Kazuya, than in a world without Sawamura at all.

The situation hadn't changed much. After all, Sawamura's memories hadn't returned. And yet, he could admit it to himself now: He missed Sawamura. He wanted to see him. He wanted to hold him. His chest felt tighter and tighter the more he thought of him, growing almost to the point of pain. It was tempting to want to let go, and to not think about it. That was what he'd always done before.
However, that ache too was a part of him, so he decided to hold onto it.

*Minminmin. Minminmin.*

The cicadas continued to shout into the night, mistaking the lamps' lights for the sun.

Keeping the veranda door open, Kazuya returned to his bed and looked up at the ceiling. He had been an empty husk before, but now, there were so many things he wanted to do. He had to thank Kuramochi and Rei in the morning. After that, maybe he'd send another message to his father, updating him on their Kōshien results. And then maybe he'd go and ask Chris for tips on how to best rehabilitate.

He couldn't see Sawamura now; there were hundreds of miles between them and the trains didn't run this late at night. But soon, he would be able to see Sawamura again. It was dark now, but the sun would rise again.

Soon, it would be tomorrow.

---

*Fin.*

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**Epilogue**

*It was dark. Shadowy. Cold. He couldn't see anything. And at first, he couldn't do anything besides shiver there.*

*But he could hear the sound of water, rushing beside him. Its voice called to him, giving him courage. So he began to follow the sound, step by step.*

*It was dark for a long time. He didn't know how much time passed as he followed, blindly, to where the sound was taking him. It was frightening. It was cold.*

*He would have faltered, but the sound continued to tug at him, urging him onwards. So he kept going. Step by step. Step by step. Until each step was no longer a conscious decision, but rather a movement as natural as breathing.*

*Gradually, in the darkness he had thought would never end, he saw a flicker of light in the distance. It was tiny at first, nothing more than a speck. But it grew larger and larger, and soon, he realized that it wasn't just one light. There were hundreds; thousands perhaps, even.*

*They were paper lanterns, each housing a candle with a tiny flickering flame. Tiny, but warm and*
vibrant in its own way. They were all floating along what he now realized was a great river. One by one, they bobbed in the water, passing below a bridge and then beyond it. To where were they going? He didn’t know.

There was another person there. He was kneeling on the shore, and just as he reached him, he released another lantern onto the river.

The person rose to his feet and turned around to face him. His figure was just a bit crooked, but seeing him, the person seemed to stand straighter. He smiled. “There you are. I’ve been waiting.”

At the sight, his heart began to throb. He felt his steps begin to pick up in speed—and then he was running.
Chapter Summary

Snippets of what might have happened in The Trajectory of Laughter.

Chapter Notes

This is just a collection of snippets of scenes that never made it into the actual story. They’re very scattered/brief and don't make sense without context. Nonetheless, I had them lying around, and thought, why not...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~ In the original draft of chapter 21 (Running), when they first hug, it's a lot more awkward than how it eventually ended up... ~

"I was angry because I'd thought they hurt you," Sawamura said baldly.

Kazuya paused, taken aback. Of all the things that could have been Sawamura's answer, that had been the last thing he had expected. He had been fine after all, only slightly winded. And besides, why did Sawamura care so much about what happened to him? There were other catchers on the team. Maybe it was something related to how upset he had gotten over Tanba's injury? But the look on his face told Kazuya that no, it was something different.

"Really?" He said lightly, with a small laugh. "Well, thanks, I'm honored you care so much."

Kazuya put an arm around the other boy in a companionable fashion, intending to ruffle his hair or something, the way he'd seen Kuramochi do. But to his surprise, Sawamura immediately reached in and wrapped his arms tightly around him, burying his face in the crook of Kazuya's neck. It was a warm, almost unfamiliar sensation, and the laughter that he had been so carefully nurturing died in his throat.

---

As soon as Miyuki put his arm around him, Eijun, without thinking, reacted. It had once been such a practiced, familiar motion, that he returned the embrace without a second thought.

It was only when Miyuki stiffened in his hold, that reality came crashing down like a bag of bricks around Eijun.

That was right... For a single, blissful moment, Eijun had forgotten that in this timeline, he and Miyuki might as well have been strangers.

Feeling a stab of throbbing pain in his chest, Eijun stilled. Miyuki was so warm, and he could feel his heart beating against him. He didn't want to let go.
Remember this feeling, he told himself. *This might be the last time you ever feel it again.*

Just as he moved to step back however, he felt Miyuki wrap his other arm around him.

Not daring to move, Eijun stood still. For several seconds, they stayed locked tightly together. His hands were clasped on the flat of Miyuki's broad back. Eijun could smell Miyuki's lingering sweat and freshly-applied deodorant even through the crisp smell of detergent from the clean clothes he had switched into. His chest was firm and solid against his own. It was all so real and current - *I'm really here and you're really here* - Eijun thought his heart would burst.

Finally, Miyuki pulled back, and Eijun let go.

"Let's head back now," said Miyuki, in what sounded like a carefree voice, as if what they had exchanged was an everyday occurrence. He turned away, his expression hidden under the shadow of his glasses and cap. Rubbing at his neck with a hand, Miyuki began to slowly walk away.

---

*~ In the actual fic, they first (finally) kiss in chapter 30 (Sunglasses), but in the original draft, it happened just a bit earlier on in chapter 29. ~*

Some people laughed when they were in pain. He had known this. He had done this. It was better than crying. If you laughed, no one knew how you felt. But if you cried, everyone knew.

He had never realized, however, that sometimes, crying didn’t mean you were in pain.

Sometimes, people cried because they were happy.

And then without any further preamble, his mind set, Kazuya pushed forward. Their noses bumped – and he kissed him.

…

When he drew back, Sawamura’s eyes were still wide open. He gaped at Kazuya, his mouth flapping up and down, incoherent sounds squeaking out.

“How was it?” Kazuya asked, resisting the urge to raise his fingers to his still-warm lips.

“I…did you just…why…?” he said weakly, wringing his hands.

“I wanted to.”

Sawamura froze.

A beat passed.

Another beat. And then another.

With a face burning as red as the sun, Sawamura jerkily raised his sleeve and wiped the remaining mixture of snot and tears from his face.

“So?” Kazuya prompted. Something in his chest twisted free almost painfully.

In response, Sawamura, his eyes squeezing shut, leaned forward and wrapped his arms tightly around Kazuya. “More,” was all he said.

Kazuya complied.
It was the day before the surgery, and he really should've been elsewhere. And yet there he was again—standing before the offering box of the shrine.

Unlike the last time Kazuya had come here, there were crowds of people, mostly tourists, milling around. Footsteps, going up and down the stone stairwell. Clattering and murmuring around the green boughs of the giant wish tree. And of course, cicadas, crying relentlessly in the background.

They had been with him every summer evening when he'd thought he'd been alone in his room with his windows wide open, waiting for the sound of footsteps. He just hadn't realized it then.

Pulling out a 10 yen coin from his pocket, Kazuya was about to toss it in the offering box—but just before it slipped out of his fingers, he stopped. He began to turn it over in his hand instead, feeling the smoothened edges. And then to himself, mostly, he said aloud, "What am I doing here?"

Minminminmin.

The shrine structure stood tall in its dark majesty. A summer breeze blew through its empty halls.

---

He couldn't hear any of the machines running, but the lights in the factory were on as they always were. Kazuya supposed his father was re-oiling and re-wiping down the equipment again.

Once inside the house, perhaps out of habit, the first thing he checked was the refrigerator. But there was nothing inside, not even beer, except for a flickering light bulb that needed to be changed. In fact, in the whole kitchen, he found only two boxes of instant ramen on the counter.

After a moment, Kazuya closed the door and went to his room.

Lying down on his bed, the only thing he could see was the ceiling. Having been a constant fixture in his life growing up, it was as familiar to Kazuya as his own face: Smooth white plaster, and a small crack where he'd once accidentally bounced a baseball too high. In fact, he was surprised nothing had changed. There weren't even any cobwebs in the corners. Did his father hire someone to clean the house? Whatever the case, as though it'd been frozen at some point in time, everything was exactly as he remembered it.

Kazuya felt his mouth draw back in a thin smile, and after several further indulging seconds, he forced himself to get up. He had to pack for his stay at the hospital. If the surgery went well, he'd been told he'd be in rehabilitation for an extended period of time. That being the case, he'd be allowed to have someone bring in more of his personal affects. But if the surgery failed… well, in the worst case scenario, he wouldn't be needing anything else but his suit.

Heading for his wardrobe, he began to pass by the window—and paused. With a hand, he pushed at it, and as though the hinges had been recently oiled, it easily slid open. A breath of warm air blew into his face.

Minminminmin.

---

By the time he left, the day had turned late and the skies had bleached the streets red. Kazuya had just closed the door behind him, when he heard the sound of tires rolling over granite. Glancing
down, he saw a faded blue sedan pulling up in front of the house, and he came to such an abrupt stop that his chest ached.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he walked down the stairway and got in the back seat of the car. Without a word, they backed out of the driveway.

The trip wasn't long. Following a brief stint in traffic, the face of the hospital soon loomed before his eyes. It was by no means an unfamiliar sight, but it was still enough to send his stomach flip-flopping.

Just as Kazuya was about to step out of the car, he heard a voice. "When will you be coming back home?"

He stopped. Wondering, he looked back to see—but his father, sitting in the driver's seat, was facing straight ahead. A lump formed in the back of his throat.

The car behind theirs honked impatiently.

Hefting his bag higher up his shoulder, Kazuya grinned. "I'll be back before you know it."

---

After his diagnostic tests, Kazuya was taken to his hospital room. The moment the nurse left, he felt an uneasy chill run down his spine, but unable to put his finger on it, he sat down on his hospital bed. A moment later, his phone began to vibrate. Letting it ring for a few times, he finally bent over and picked it up.

"Well, well," he said. "If it isn't the monster ace Sawamura. What could the esteemed second Narumiya want from me?"

The voice on the other end of the line snorted. "Very funny."

"I try."

"Have you ever considered going into stand-up comedy?"

Kazuya let out an exaggerated sigh. "Sadly, I fell five points short on the written portion."

A pause. "Wait, there's actually an exam for it?"

"Never change, Sawamura."

He could sense the younger boy scowling even over the line. "I'm not like you."

Kazuya smiled. "You're right."

A sharp intake of breath. "...You're coming to see us play, right?"

Taking his time, Kazuya answered lightly, "Of course." In the corner of his eye, he noticed that there was a round analog clock on the night stand. He began to run his fingers over it. "Can you do it? Can you lead Seidō to Kōshien?"

"Yes."

"Good."
"I...I wish you were catching for me."

His hand dropping down to his side, Kazuya thought of all the things he could say.
'I'm in the hospital right now.'
'I'm doing something stupid again.'
'I want to see you.'

All he had to do was say it. But when he finally opened his mouth, what came out was, "Okumura is a good catcher."

The voice on the far end sounded perplexed. "I know."

If he spoke up now, he thought to himself, he wouldn't be alone tomorrow. He knew that without even a second's thought as to the consequences, Sawamura would be at his door.

Kazuya wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"I'll be watching tomorrow. Throw your best pitches."

"I will." The voice hesitated—and added, "I'll be throwing them to you in my mind."

He laughed and ended the call. Letting out an exhale, he put down the phone. What was he thinking? He'd already been dragging Sawamura down long enough as it was. Besides, he'd be unconscious during the surgery. He didn't need anyone by his side.

Kazuya raised a fist into the air. "I can do it!" he said aloud, and hearing his voice bouncing around the room, instantly felt rather foolish.

He hesitated—and glanced in the direction of his phone. It didn't move. His hand dropped by his side onto the bed. It was silent, except for the sound of the clock hands, ticking steadily and surely in his ears.

Something suddenly struck Kazuya. Pushing himself up, he looked around—and lo and behold, he couldn't find any windows. He let his head fall back on the pillow, a small smile forming on his lips. Raising an arm, Kazuya covered his eyes.

Ahh.

He couldn't hear the cicadas anymore.

~ An unused scene that was supposed to go in chapter 38 (Incense), right before the Seido vs Inashiro game ~

The next morning, as soon as Mei had stepped foot on Inashiro’s private field in Hachiōji, he found himself being mobbed by a flock of eager reporters that followed him wherever he went. Even when he eventually excused himself for a bathroom break, the moment he came back out, a group of determined reporters that’d been lying in wait jumped to their feet.

“Narumiya-kun, how’re you feeling? Anything to say about tomorrow’s game? It’s with Seidō, who you faced in the semifinals last year.”

Mei pointed a finger up at the sky. “My goal is nothing less than to be the best in Japan. For now, I’ll
“start with Tokyo!”

“Don’t get cocky!” Masatoshi growled from behind the pack.

Looking up at the hulking catcher, Mei held back a snigger. Pupupu! This was part of why he loved being a pitcher. Even the captain, cleanup and linchpin of the team played second fiddle to the ace when it came to the reporters’ attentions.

“Narumiya-kun, what is your opinion on Sawamura-kun? He’s Seidō’s first-year southpaw pitcher, and lately, a lot of comparisons have been drawn between you two.”

Mei felt his radiant smile slightly diminish. “Comparisons?”

The reporter gave an eager nod. “Yes, for instance, some people are starting to call Sawamura-kun the new best southpaw in Tokyo.”

“…in Tokyo, huh?” Mei raised a hand to the back of his head, offering a placid smile. “Haha. Ha. Well, isn’t that nice. He gets to be compared to the best pitcher in Kantō.”

“Don’t call yourself that,” came Masatoshi’s usual irritated voice.

~ In the draft before the final copy, Miyuki actually met up with Eijun near the end, instead of calling him ~

Sawamura opened his mouth. He paused—and then, “It feels like I’ve forgotten something—something really important. But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to remember it.” Biting his lip, he gripped his chest tightly. “I don’t know what to do—to stop feeling this way.”

The other boy wore a lost, almost blank expression, and his eyes had grown faded and dull. It was a far cry from the crying, laughing person he’d gotten to know over the months. Kazuya felt his fingers clench into the palms of his hands. Wasn’t there anything he could do for him?

It hurt. His chest hurt. Even though there was nothing gripping his heart, he felt like it would burst. And even if it grew bearable or even faded away, he knew it would always hurt somewhere. No matter how much time passed and how many people came and went.

As though emerging from a long, black tunnel, Kazuya could see other faces beginning to flash through his mind as well.

His father, sitting alone in the dark before a blaring TV with empty cans of beer scattered on the ground. His mother, beckoning towards him with a skeletal but warm hand. Chris, sliding forward on his knees through the dirt with his mitt outstretched for the ball. Kuramochi, stuffing a magazine into his hand. The rest of his team, standing out on a sunlit baseball field.

And Sawamura, standing before him. Except in this case, it wasn’t in his mind.

The tight knot in his chest—it ached, but it was a part of him, so Kazuya held on to it.

Slowly, letting out an exhale, Kazuya leaned over in front of Sawamura. An idea had just struck him. “Hey… Should I let you in on a secret?”

Looking somewhat taken aback, Sawamura blinked. “A…secret?”

He couldn’t laugh—not just yet. But he could smile, so he did. “You see… It’s the Miyuki family’s
greatest and most secret medicine that’s been passed down over sixteen generations.”

~ The following is a collection of scattered scenes that was supposed to make up a rather different ending where Eijun does change the past, but still goes back to his own timeline, in which Miyuki remains deceased ~

“Sawamura?” Miyuki turned around.

Eijun felt his breath leave him. His heart was pounding. Everything around him felt as if it were in sharp focus.

He had been cowering for so long now. He had been hiding in the past, wallowing in his guilt, because he had been too afraid, too terrified, to return to the ‘real’ world. All because he’d thought Miyuki would no longer be there.

But now he understood.

Miyuki has always been with me. Tears began to unabashedly run down his cheeks. Miyuki will always be with me.

“Sawamura…?”

There was no world Eijun could go to in which Miyuki did not exist, for he existed in Eijun’s every breath and laugh.

---

Miyuki was gone. Eijun knew that. Miyuki was gone, and he would always be gone.

But his memories of Miyuki…though they would fade with time, they would always be with him. His memories, in which Miyuki continued to live on.

It wouldn’t be the same, of course. But time would pass, and the pain would lessen over time, as it always did. Of course, it would still always hurt somewhere…however, the good memories too, would always be with him.

Both the pain and the warmth. They were a part of him now. And in that way, perhaps, Miyuki lived on.

It could all just be pretty words, or a desperate self-induced delusion – anything to ease the heartache. But to think that there was someone in the world who still thought of Miyuki…to think that there was someone still talking and laughing about a memory of Miyuki…that Miyuki was thought of in this world, even if by him alone…

It gave him strength.

Not too much. Memories were a poor substitute for the actual, physical, living, breathing being.

But it gave him just enough to take another step forward.

One step at a time. One by one. Over and over again, until he could walk without having to push himself or think consciously about it. Over and over again, until walking was a natural movement and not a deliberate, painstakingly chosen choice.
And for now, that was enough.

---

“Seidō has announced a change in players. Replacing pitcher Furuya-kun, Sawamura-kun. Pitcher, Sawamura-kun.”

“Eijun-kun!”

“Second Narumiya!”

“Sawamura-kun!”

“Kantō’s number 1! Next, Japan’s number 1!”

"Are you ready, Sawamura-senpai?”

Eijun grinned. “Of course I am.”

It must have been the hottest day of the summer, but the stands of Kōshien were jam-packed. The crowd screamed incomprehensibly. The cheering squad blew their horns. The band’s trumpets were raised toward the sky as the brass sound clearly rang down to the mound.

Eijun took a deep breath.

He coiled his body, raising his front leg up high. He slammed his foot down on the mound – and threw. The ball flew down in an arc-like trajectory from the mound to the waiting batter.

It would be hard, Eijun knew. And it would always hurt, somewhere deep inside.

But he had to keep living. For his grandpa. For his parents. For his teammates and his friends. For all the people who had shown him their love.

For Miyuki.

And above all, for himself.

“Strike!”

Ultimately, I changed the ending to what it is now, because I felt it would be better served to switch to a Miyuki-centric ending rather than an Eijun-centric ending. There was also the selfish desire to keep Miyuki alive, even at the cost of Eijun’s consciousness... and the deciding factor was that the mental fortitude required for the above ending was not one I myself was ready to accept.

That's the end of these snippets.

I'll use this space to thank everyone for reading The Trajectory of Laughter. When I first published the ending, I didn't write an ending message because I didn't know what to write. I still don't know what to write...

Another round of thanks, then, to clarie, for finally managing to finish the fic (lol); to pau, for her 45 spanking reviews. To neko too, for her random check-in messages on tumblr.
And to the person who inspired much of the second half of this fic... Thank you.

So, that's that.

Just one more thing--a lot of people have sent me songs that remind them of TTOL:

- **Hallucination** - Matsushita Yuya
- **Mirai (Future)** - Kobukuro
- **DAWN** - Aimer
- **Anata ni deawanakereba (If I Hadn't Met You)** - Aimer
- **Takaramono (Treasure)** - Kawano Marina
- **Ichiban no Takaramono (My Precious Treasure)** - Angel Beats!
- **Kimi no Kakera (Pieces of you)** - Atari Kousuke
- **Aishiteru ~always with you~** - Kourin
- **Kienaide (Don't Disappear)** - yozuca*

- **Photograph** - Ed Sheeran
- **Midnight** - Coldplay
- **See You Again** - Wiz Khalifa ft. Charlie Puth
- **We Might Be Dead By Tomorrow** - SoKo
- **When You Find Me** - Joshua Radin ft. Maria Taylor
- **Little Do You Know** - Alex & Sierra
- **Fix You** - Coldplay
- **von** - Kanno Youko
- **She** - Galileo Galilei

Fanart


A birthday gift from clariecandy:
Chapter End Notes

adios amigos for real now
One day

Chapter Summary

Five years have passed.

Chapter Notes

This is set after the events of the final chapter of TTOL. Miyuki is in his final year of college; Sawamura is in his third year.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pant... pant...

His mask weighing heavily down on his face, he could feel a bead of sweat slowly making its way down the tip of his nose. The sounds of the cheer team and the screaming crowd rang in the distance, sounding oddly muted even though they were right behind him.

He didn't have to look at the scoreboard to know their situation: Bottom of the 9th. Two outs, with bases loaded and a full count. Beside him was their opposing team's cleanup: A typical towering, hulk of a power hitter who was on the fast-track to becoming this year's number one draft pick.

A movement in front of him caught his gaze, and he returned it just in time to see the next year's number one draft pick tossing a rosin bag in his hand. He was no stranger to the sharp lion's gaze on the pitcher's face, but it never failed to send a shiver of thrill down his spine.

Dropping his hand down, he signaled—and a moment later, received a nod. Then came the windup—the foot slammed down on the ground, and the arm whipped out through the air. The batter swung, power rippling through his body—and with a gunshot-like crack, the ball slammed into his waiting mitt.

The umpire punched the air. "Strike three! Batter out!"

The screaming crowd exploded into cheers behind him, and he threw off his mask, racing to the mound. The rest of his teammates had spilled out of the dugout and somehow, had managed to swarm the pitcher before he reached them. Fighting through the crowd, he spotted the messy brown-haired head at the center of their attention.

Grinning, his heart bursting with pride, he started, "Sawa -" Abruptly, he stopped.

A strange man he'd never seen before was staring back at him.

His mouth went dry. "Who are you?"

Kazuya’s eyes flashed open.
The room was dark. His heart was still thudding in his chest. The sound of passing cars filtered in through his open window.

Sitting up, he shook his head, trying to reorient himself.

What had that dream been about? The first half had been a replay of their game against K University last week, which had ended in their victory. But unlike in the dream, the pitcher had been...

"Miyuki?" a voice groaned in the dark. "Is it time to get up?"

In the dim lighting from the window, Kazuya could make out Sawamura's vague outline rising grudgingly out from below the covers.

"No, you've still got a few hours," he said.

Without another word, Sawamura's head dropped back down on his pillow.

Resisting a sudden urge to turn on the lights, Kazuya lay back down, turning on his side to face the other occupant of the bed.

Sawamura was already sound asleep, the shadows unmoving from his closed eyelids. The steady rhythm of Sawamura's breathing filled his ears, drowning out the sound of his heart.

Eventually, at some point, he gave in once more to sleep.

Beep beep beep...

The sound of the smoke detector woke up Kazuya for the second time. Faint rays of sunlight streamed in through the window. Grudgingly forcing his body upright, he instantly saw that he was the only occupant of the bed.

With a yawn, Kazuya swung his legs over the side and rose to his feet. Crossing the room in two short steps, when he opened the door, his face was bombarded by a haze of burning smoke and in a flash, he remembered—it was Sawamura's turn to make breakfast.

Beep beep beep beep...

The alarm continued to sound. Just beyond the frame of the kitchen entryway, a pan of what appeared to be sunny side up eggs sizzled on the stovetop. Sawamura was on his toes, fanning the detector with a makeshift paper fan. For a moment, Kazuya stood still, silently admiring the taut frame partially hidden behind an apron, and the glimpses of tanned skin here and there...

Beep beep beep -

Striding over, he slid open the window. Cold morning air rushed in against his warm face. "Morning."


Beep...

"It wouldn't be a problem if you didn't always burn the eggs," he said, eyeing the blackened edges.

Beep... The alarm stopped.
Sawamura jutted out his lower lip. "They're not burned. They taste best with a bit of crunch." He pointed at a covered saucer besides the pan. "Anyways, I knew you'd complain so I'm poaching some eggs for you."

"Who said I'm complaining?" Kazuya said with a grin - and then shivered. "Go on, put on a shirt," said Sawamura. "The toast'll be done in a minute."

When he returned to the bedroom, he noticed that his phone was flashing with a notification. It was a text message from his father.

*Got two emergency orders in today. I'll be late. Go on without me.*

It seemed that business had been picking up for his father as of late, and their already limited time spent together had become all but nonexistent. Briefly, Kazuya toyed with the idea of whether it was all just an excuse—that in reality, his father had found out about his relationship with Sawamura. However, just as quickly, he dismissed it: For better or for worse, he doubted his father cared who he took to his bed.

With a rueful twist of his lips, he closed his phone.

Despite being a year below him, Sawamura somehow didn't have class until the afternoon, and Kazuya found himself walking the commute alone.

He took the usual shortcut through the park. Members of the university's cultural dance club practiced their moves by the vending machines. A group of young children played soccer on the grass. The cherry blossoms that had filled the paths just a few weeks ago had all but disappeared, leaving behind new leaf buds.

It was a testament to the size of his university that even after four years there, the sea of people milling through the campus was still largely unknown to Kazuya. It wasn't until he neared his lecture hall that he spotted a familiar face: His teammate, Saitō, who appeared to have been waiting to ambush him.

"What's this I hear about you skipping practice today?" Saitō sounded skeptical, and Kazuya couldn't blame him—he could probably count the number of times he hadn't attended practice over the years on a single hand. He'd gotten lucky until this year and the anniversary of the date hadn't conflicted with any of their practice days.

"I'm not skipping, I got permission from the coach," he replied, pushing open the door. "I'm visiting someone."

Following Kazuya into the lecture hall, Saitō sounded curious but didn't press the issue. "Well, I suppose it doesn't matter too much at this point. You've already got the interest of at least half the pro league anyways."

"And yet none of that will matter if we can't score in any games this season," said Kazuya, sliding into a seat. "So you'd better work on that on-base percentage, Mr. First-hole."

"Are, aye captain." Saitō saluted—and then in a more serious tone, added, "Have you thought about what Sawamura's gonna do when you're gone?"

Perhaps a bit too loudly, he slammed open his notebook. "He'll be fine. He'd have his pick of the lot if they let him."
"Still, you two were together even in high school, right? I guess… the dream battery's finally gonna have to split up."

In a stab of irritation, Kazuya turned to retort back, but stopped when he saw that Saitō wasn't smiling.

Whereas on other days, he would have met Sawamura at the subway station to head to the baseball field, on this day, Sawamura was waiting for him by the main gates of the west campus.

"Where's your dad?" he asked, craning his head and looking around as though Kazuya had somehow hidden him on his person.

Kazuya shrugged. "He's busy but he'll probably be by later."

As the graveyard was located in Saitama, it took several train transfers and a long bus ride before they arrived. It was a quiet day. The only other person there was a monk, who was sweeping the dust at the temple entrance.

Most of the grave markers were well-kept. Some had flowers. A few were not so well-kept, the inscribed names almost unreadable with smudge.

Sawamura poured water down the front of the grave marker, while Kazuya lit the incense sticks. Clapping his hands together, Sawamura bowed his head. Kazuya watched the incense smoke curling through the air and rising up to the murky sky.

The last time he had been at a grave, it had been for Sawamura's grandfather, who'd passed away of a stroke the previous year. With tears rolling down his face, Sawamura had gripped Kazuya's hand so hard, he'd lost all feeling in it for an hour. He'd wondered then whether Sawamura would ever recover, but as the months passed, the pitcher's smiles had gradually returned—as they always had before.

His thoughts returning to the present, Kazuya looked to the side to see Sawamura still praying with his eyes screwed shut, and wondered what he was praying for. Closing his own eyes, he put his hands together.

Usually, he had something to say. Yet for some reason, at that moment, nothing came to him.

The izakaya was hazy with smoke and filled to the brim with the sounds of sizzling meat and superficial conversation. It was a local favorite of their university, and Kazuya more often than not found himself being dragged there following long days of class and practice.

On this particular evening however, Kazuya was meeting an old high school teammate for the first time in months.

"Ryou-san sends his regards," said Kuramochi, popping a soybean in his mouth. "And that since we'll be dropping by your next game, you'd better win so we don't waste our time."

Kazuya smirked into his beer. "Waste your time, huh? Why in the world would I ever want to do that?"

While Kuramochi may have once lost his temper with him at the slightest provocation, it (sadly) seemed his friend had wisened up from their high school days.

"I'll…see what I can arrange," he muttered, wiping foam off his chin and running mental scenarios of all the possible blackmail he held against the prior shortstop.

Not everyone on the Seidō team was still playing baseball. While the obvious catches, such as Furuya, had gone directly pro upon graduating, the majority had chosen to attend college. Some, such as Kuramochi and Shirasu, had quit playing baseball in pursuit of a salaryman career. Yet others seemed intent on turning pro after graduating college—such as the younger Kominato, who had miraculously shot up another five centimeters in height and joined H University's celebrated lineup.

People often asked why Kazuya and Sawamura had gone to college instead of turning pro straight out of high school. He'd never given a straightforward answer, but the reason was clear to him, and it rose up now, unbidden, in his mind: Pro players can't choose which team they play for.

At the thought, his hand tightened over his mug handle.

"So…" Kuramochi lit up a cigarette. "You ready to finally enter the pro world?"

"I've seen a scout here and there," he said evenly. "But I haven't given it too much thought yet."

This raised an eyebrow. "Have you brought it up with Sawamura at least? You two are still living together, aren't you?"

Kazuya paused—and shrugged. "It's still months away, and I figure the topic will come up when the time is right."

"Hm." Kuramochi blew out a ring of smoke. "Well, that's fine, I suppose. As long as Sawamura doesn't come knocking on my door because he just found out he's homeless, anyways."

Kazuya didn't bother saying anything. Instead, feeling Kuramochi's eyes drilling into him, he reared his head back and downed the rest of his drink in a single gulp.

The night was dark, and the way lit by the glow of vending machines. A lone, possibly drunk man weaved silently by on a bike before disappearing down an alley.

Somewhat buzzed himself, Kazuya stopped in front of a vending machine and pulled out a few hundred yen coins.

Black coffee, green tea, barley tea, pocari sweat, calpis, coca cola...

He must have been feeling nostalgic after seeing Kuramochi, because he suddenly recalled how, in high school, Sawamura would show up with cans of pocari sweat at his dorm room door.

Though it had in reality only been a few years since then, it felt as though a very long time had passed.

At one point in his life, baseball had been the only thing that mattered to him. His sole thought then had been to make Kōshien with his team, and to achieve national dominance. Things would probably have continued on in such a manner too, if that idiot Sawamura hadn't come bursting rudely into his life.
Sawamura didn't see it that way, however—he still didn't remember anything about his first summer at Seidō, after all.

And it had been some time since Kazuya had last drank pocari sweat.

Reaching out with a finger, he pressed the button for the unsweetened green tea.

Opening the door to his apartment, he was surprised to find that the lights and TV were still on. Sawamura was waiting for him on the couch.

"You're still up?" Kazuya took a quick look down at his watch; he'd ended up staying out later than he'd intended.

The pitcher's face looked sour. "Well, well, look who it is, slinking back home in the middle of the night. If it isn't Miyuki-senpai. Were you out with those girls again?"

He felt himself sweat. "No, I told you, I was with Kuramochi."

Sawamura hadn't taken it too well the previous week, when some of Kazuya's female classmates had tagged him in their photos at a drinking party.

"Oh." Sawamura blinked. "I... oh." He deflated. "Sorry. I got asked again today whether you had a girlfriend or not."

"Yeah? What'd you say?"

"That you do have one. A very jealous one who's also very hot and who happens to be really, really good at baseball."

Kazuya considered it. "Two out of three... that's a new record."

Sawamura grunted, but remained somewhat subdued. Instead, he looked down at his phone.

"You waiting for a call?" asked Kazuya, taking off his jacket.

"Yep."

"Let me guess: Chris-senpai."

Sawamura rolled his eyes. "As a matter of fact, no. Okumura."

Kazuya frowned. "What's he want with you?"

Call him petty, but he'd never gotten over the smug look Okumura had given him on the day of Kazuya and the other third years' graduation. (To his glee, Sawamura was eventually paired with the other second-year catcher, Yui, instead of Okumura).

"Nothing really. He's just been looking for a new apartment, and asked me for advice."

He stopped. "You? For apartment hunting advice? Why's that?"

"Well, I've been thinking lately you know," said Sawamura, not quite meeting his eyes. "Since after you graduate, you'll probably have to move."

Kazuya didn't respond.
The main theme of *Lone Wolf and Cub* began to play, and Sawamura stepped out to take the call.

A replay of a recent game between the Hanshin Tigers and the Saitama Lions was playing on the TV screen: The blonde, almost slight, pitcher stared down from the mound in a chilly glare that would've cowed almost any other batter. The current batter in question however, was not just any other batter; on the contrary, he seemed to relish it, as with a maniacal grin on his scarred face, he laughed instead. "Kahaha!"

Raising the remote control, Kazuya turned off the TV. The bright image disappeared in a flash, and he found himself staring at his reflection on the black display.

While everyone else had been going down their own paths in life, Kazuya had staved it off for as long as he could. Even when he had first gone off to college on his own, he had been reassured by the knowledge that Sawamura would be joining him. But the seasons had continued to pass, and now, he would be joining the pro leagues, where the reassurance of before was no longer there. Soon, he knew, his everyday life with Sawamura would be coming to an end.

Though he had thought that he was the only one worrying about it, it seemed he was far from alone.

Kazuya tried to imagine it: Moving to another city, joining a new baseball team. A new dormitory, a new bullpen. Texting Sawamura *good night* before falling asleep, and waking up to a responding *good night* text. Slowly, but inevitably, the number of texts they exchanged growing more and more infrequent.

The thought of it was so lonely, he got up to his feet and began to pace. He looked at the front door.

It was silent, except for the steady ticking sound of the kitchen clock.

*Tick tick tick...*

Determinedly forcing himself to not look at the front door again, Kazuya turned his gaze instead towards the opposite wall.

It had once been bare, but now, it was covered with photos they had put up over the years.

His eyes were drawn to one particular photo in the center—it was a candid shot of the pair from their high school days. He still remembered the moment that'd been captured: On their way to breakfast, they had been walking below the eaves of the dormitory building to avoid the rain.

Sawamura, on the other hand, always said that he didn't remember anything.

*Tick tick...*

Slowly, he stared at the other photos beside it. Some were older, some were newer. There was the photo they and a couple of friends had taken at a hot spring inn a few years before. Kazuya looked awkward as he usually did in photos, while Sawamura cheekily flashed a victorious V sign.

*Tick tick...*

One of the earlier photos showed the old Seidō baseball team, lined up in rows in identical white uniforms, with Kazuya seated in the center as the newly minted captain.

Beside that, a photo showed the battery duo snickering identically into their mitts.
And below, Kazuya held the national flag at a ceremony, looking uncomfortable in a cap that he'd worn properly straight for once.

*Tick tick tick...*

Sawamura grinned in front of a giant wooden *torii*, his hand reaching out to grab what appeared to be Kazuya's arm while the rest of his body remained out of frame.

The two of them plummeted downwards on a rollercoaster: Sawamura screamed happily, while Kazuya looked like he was about to hurl.

They sat perched on a chairlift, their snowboards hanging below them and their breaths coming out as white mist.

*Tick tick...*

His gaze came to a stop on a photo by the edge of the wall. It was the most recent one, which Sawamura had put up just a few weeks ago. It wasn't a terribly exciting photograph; it just showed the two of them walking under the shade of the trees in the park. It'd been taken on one of their commutes to the university.

Looking at it now, Kazuya thought that it reminded him of their older photo from high school—the one that Sawamura didn't remember, and yet treasured enough to put in the center of the wall.

*Tick...*

Tearing his eyes away, he swallowed back the lump in his throat.

After a moment's hesitation, he reached for the doorknob.

The evening breeze greeted him once more as he emerged into the outside air. Sawamura stood just outside, his phone nowhere in sight, looking from the metal railing down at the dark street below. Kazuya let the door shut behind him.

It was not yet summertime, and a hint of the winter cold lingered in the air.

Without turning to look at him, Sawamura said, "Maybe you'll get picked by the Giants or the Swallows. Maybe I will too."

"Saitama and Chiba are right there." Stepping forward, Kazuya wrapped his arms around him. "And I'll be back in the off season."

"I don't mind moving farther away from school," said Sawamura. "The commute wouldn't be so bad."

"And once I leave the dormitory, we could look for another place together."

Sawamura sniffed. "Don't cheat on me with another pitcher."

Despite himself, he laughed. "Haha! If you have to cheat on me, it can only be with Chris-senpai. Definitely not Okumura."

"Or maybe I'll get drafted by the same team. You never know."

Clearing his throat, he pulled Sawamura in closer. "We'll make it work."
Sawamura rubbed his face against his arm. "Yeah. I've been praying, just in case." He then proceeded to rub his behind on another part of Kazuya's.

In the darkness of their bedroom, Kazuya looked up at the ceiling. He could hear Sawamura's breath beside him, and feel its vibration in their shared sheets.

He didn't have an incense stick there with him, but at that moment, he thought his voice would reach the skies.

*Thank you*, he said. *I'm doing well.*

As though on cue, his phone vibrated. Half-tempted to ignore it, after a moment, Kazuya blearily looked at his screen. It was a text message from his father: *Busy day today but managed to go before sunset.* As he watched, his phone vibrated once more and a new text appeared: *Have time this Sunday? My treat.*

Kazuya paused, thinking. He texted back: *Sushi sounds good.*

Dropping his phone back down, he closed his heavy eyes.

It had been a long day.

When he went to see his father, he thought, maybe he would bring Sawamura and formally introduce him. They had been together for five years now, after all. It was about time.

Chapter End Notes

To add context to this story: In Japanese Pro baseball, teams choose their players by lottery every fall. Players have no say in which team they are assigned to. There are a bunch of teams in the Tokyo vicinity (as mentioned), but also teams that are far out in other prefectures. Pro players play on average ~150 games throughout the season, which lasts from April to October.

Tldr; To all worried readers, Sawamura and Miyuki are doing well.

Works inspired by this one

*Failing at Unreadable* by *orphan_account*

Please *drop by the archive and comment* to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!