Summary

Hyotei!Ryoma. Eventual Atoryo. Echizen comes back to Japan and arrives at Hyotei High, a sullen and angry genius. Atobe takes him under his wing, but both must leave the shadows of their past and their legacies to understand each other.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The rumors are afloat as soon as Keigo enters his final year of Hyotei High: *Tezuka is back in Japan.*

The whispers begin in an excited flurry of hisses, cultivated in locker rooms and soon traveling through the hallways like wildfire. Those who do not care for tennis nevertheless participate in the gossip mill. Who cared about a racket and a net when you had Atobe Keigo? Everyone at Hyotei was all familiar with the name Tezuka Kunimitsu and his ratty Seigaku school, and their own Hyotei team that Atobe had led gracefully if not successfully against the legendary tennis player (and all quickly smile guiltily at the events that should not be explicitly mentioned, not even amongst themselves). Soon the words reach one, long crescendo: nationals, will we see him at nationals? (*If we even go this year,* they all say, and look away again, more abashed but also sullen and quiet.) Soon the rumors escalate, and some who are more interested than the rest are left wondering if Echizen would also grace the courts of Seigaku along with Tezuka; such rumors, wild enough as they are, are soon squashed. In the end, only the name Tezuka falls upon Keigo’s ears on day in his first period. He sits back and folds his arms before the teacher is about to take roll.

“Tezuka,” Keigo says, not so much as relishing the name as assessing for confirmation, “He’s back?” He ignores the chattering of his classmates and their fugitive glances, merely dismissing them with a bland smile. His eyes are only for his second-in-command.

Oshitari shrugs and adjusts his glasses. “So I’ve heard,” he drawls, “But what are the chances? Surely there are many people in Seigaku with brown hair and glasses. Don’t overexcite yourself, Atobe.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing anything so crass,” he sneers, and raises an eyebrow at the genius. Oshitari looks bored at the entire conversation, his legs casually spread apart upon his seat, his textbooks yet unopened. “I’m surprised that you’re not as unnerved as I am. If Tezuka is here…” he trails off and frowns a little. “If he’s even here,” he says. “I would have thought he would have contacted me, at the very least. How rude.”

Oshitari finally breaks out of his blank face to give out a laugh. “Atobe, you’re *rivals.* He shouldn’t have to call you.”

“He called me well enough when he was in Germany back in middle school,” Atobe says, his tone now undoubtedly petulant. He puts on a grimace. “Very homesick he sounded too. Last time I heard, he’s still there.” He shakes his head. “Rumors, then. What an utter waste of time.”

Oshitari gives him a little smirk, and shrugs. “It’s better that they’re rumors, captain,” he says, so pointedly, even for Oshitari, that Keigo snaps his head up to glare at him, “We’ll be facing them at the regionals. I don’t really like the thought of meeting such a strong player from the very start. Do you?”

Keigo stays silent, and Oshitari continues to look at him. Keigo lets the silence stretch beneath them and the tension flow until Oshitari can feel the strain, and finally lets his lips curl slowly. “They still have Fuji,” he says, “If you think you're up for facing him this year.”

This is what Keigo likes about Oshitari Yuushi, whatever qualms he might have had about the genius over the years. They had fought for the nationals after middle school; twice they had failed.
First to Rikkai, then to another black hole in one of the new tennis teams at Nationals. Both were close tiebreakers, but a defeat was a defeat, as Keigo well knew and his father was quick to point out. They are third year students now; next year, they will be in university. Keigo will be wherever his grandfather will order him to be, and Oshitari in medical school. Keigo’s father had told him the day before in a stern voice: *don’t let anything lag you behind this year. Your future comes first.* And he had looked at Keigo gravely until Keigo agreed, his words and vows as easily as they would come. He was used to telling his father white lies and doing whatever he wanted. He would excel in his studies and go to nationals. It would be the year, his year. He is wondering whether Oshitari had the same resolution. Now he sits back and waits for Oshitari’s reply.

Oshitari laughs, just as their homeroom teacher bursts in breathlessly. “Oh, Keigo,” he says in an infuriating voice, “It isn’t like you to beg so nicely.” 
Keigo smiles, a not quite so nice smile. “I wasn’t begging,” he says through gritted teeth. He is about to stand up, about to proceed to lead the class to greet the teacher with a bow. Oshitari smirks at him from his seat.

“I do live to serve the King, Atobe,” he says sweetly. Keigo ignores him and leads a formal bow towards the teacher.

He pretends that a weight in his heart had not just lifted.

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Japan in mid-February was cold.

“It’s not that cold, Ryoma,” Rinko sighed from the doorway, “Snowing a bit, but hardly the worst temperature that you’ve been facing. You shouldn’t huddle so much in the covers.”

Ryoma ignores his mother, not even for the smell of the steamed rice and grilled fish drifting from his doorway. He is still safe and sound in the bundle of his blankets, not even Karupin to snuggle up to him. The thought of his cat makes his throat well up. He stomps it down.

"Ryoma."

He doesn’t answer back, his form a petulant ball against his bed. He glares out at the darkness his huddled form provides him.

“There’s food on the table if you’re hungry,” Rinko says after another beat of silence, as if Ryoma’s nose couldn’t smell the hot food, “I’ll be back before dinnertime, hopefully, but who knows what clients I’ll have today….I asked Nanako to check up on you, is that okay?” Rinko hurries on as if she would know the silence that would have followed up to her question. “I also brought back brochures from the school you’ll be going to. I think the freshman orientation is in a week’s time. Hyotei is only a five minute drive from here, so I could easily drop you off on my way to work—“

The rambling of his mother does not register to him until she mentions his school. He sits up, hurling his beloved blankets out of the way as he finally stares into his mother’s eyes. Rinko blinks.
“Hyotei?” he repeats. He hasn’t spoken for the past three days, ever since they had landed in Narita Airport with their luggage and without their cat (and his father, but he is refusing to think about that right now), but this was another thing entirely. “I thought I was going back to Seigaku.”

Rinko just stares at him, until she finally catches his words and opts for a sigh. “Oh, Ryoma,” she says, and Ryoma hates how her sighs are long and weary. It was a sigh before bad news, before telling him things that he hated knowing and knowing he hadn’t a choice in the matter. “Ryoma, I don’t think you should finish school at Seigaku. High school is different from middle school, you know.”

“I don’t see how different,” he says, glum and very willing to put up a fight if necessary. But Rinko smiles at him a little, very heartbroken and so very full of love it make him feel sick.

“I would have enrolled you into Seigaku if you were going to play tennis,” she says, “But you said you wanted to go to college, right? Hyotei would give you better chances for admissions. Well.” She looks away. “If you still don’t want to play, that is. We did bring all your rackets back.”

His eyes do not sting, he tells himself. He is being silly and a brat. As his father had consistently told him fondly (he erases that too and replaces his father’s fondness with malice).

“I—no,” he says quietly, “No. I—I’ll throw them away today. Didn’t have the time.” That’s a lie, he knows, he had all the time back in the States when he was set packing, and time after he came back but Rinko nods at him as if his answer was the most natural reply in the world, and she offers a tentative smile again. “So I’ll be back before dinnertime,” she repeats, “And then we can look at the school brochures together, okay? See if you would like it there. They have a great library,” she adds, somewhat sheepishly, “And a nice, up-to-date lab equipment too. You like working at the shelves, don’t you? It’ll be good for you.”

His mother thinks that he always stacked books and offered to work at the library because he liked books; she does not know he ventures there often because the place was quiet and devoid of stupid people hollering insipid questions. He nods quickly to ward off his irritation. “Okay,” he says, and moves to huddle back in his bed again. He hears Rinko sigh, but she bids him goodbye and moves forward to his bed. He feels a press between his blankets; Rinko had kissed his blanket-covered head. “Be good,” she murmurs against the cloth, “Play some video games if you’re bored.”

He doesn’t answer her.
Chapter 2

Tread carefully, stranger.

The looks that greet Ryoma as he takes his seat in the grand auditorium is not as hostile as Ryoma imagines it to be. There are merely curious, eyes that hide behind steel, as his new classmates in their seats watch him as he maneuvers towards the back.

“We sit in alphabetical order,” one girl tells him politely, as she slightly blocks his path. She looks at his nametag; her eyes widen a bit, but she gives no indication that she knows him. She gestures to a chair a few seats away from them. “I think you sit over there.”

He nods. “Thanks.” He sits by his designated seat and waits for the principal to come up to the stage, for the school president and for the school song to be rung. Afterwards, he can sleep and gaze out of the window until class ends.

The tie that hangs around his neck is very uncomfortable. He was used to the gakuran form, with their black stiff collars that barely smudged and their crisp white shirts. The Hyotei blazers were too pale for him to mess around seriously, and the cuffs were overly elaborate and tiny. His vest hung loosely around his waist. Rinko had tsked at him for that and gave him a timid smile.

“You should eat more, Ryoma,” she had said, trying to bunch up his wool sweaters and belting his trousers to no avail. “Those pants need to be filled in.”

He was awkward in his new uniform, he knew. He slouched and lowered his eyes too much, didn’t bother to straighten up. It was obvious that everyone around him knew each other, from their synchronized stares that he received, to their chattering around him.

Not that he cared. Not that it would make him want their company, god no.

The principal rambles. New year, new beginnings. A new, crisp spring awaits them. Aim for the best, dear students. Etc. His speech is relatively short, and Ryoma claps when everyone claps, stands when he is nudged. He follows like a mechanical robot.

“And now, for our—“ the principal coughs a little; already, girls are standing up, and Ryoma is wondering what all the fuss is about until—oh. “Our school president’s speech. Ladies, please sit down. Atobe-kun.” And he nods, a little exasperated, passing the microphone to a tall and familiar figure. Ryoma stares at him.

Oh. I forgot that monkey king went to this school.

New beginnings, indeed.

Atobe Keigo is taller than Ryoma remembers him to be. He is dandy as all the rest of his classmates, as well groomed in his tie and shirt uniform, nothing out of place. Ryoma had only seen him in sweaty tennis gear; but this was, indeed, new. His face is white against the glaring stage lights, and he seems very comfortable looking around the huge auditorium, his eyes assessing the
students beneath him. Ryoma thinks that their eyes might have met; but, he tell himself, he is being fanciful. Atobe doesn’t know that he is here, does he? He still slouches further back into his seat.

Almost involuntarily, the whispers come. Ryoma listens, horrified and amused, as the whispers come from all sides, from the squeals to the roaring approval of a name that Ryoma did not really wish to hear.


Good god, Ryoma really wasn’t ready to worship a monkey.

Coach Tanaki was an idiot sometimes.

There are days when Keigo really longs for Coach Taro, with his succinct air and his grave mannerism. At least he wasn’t a chattering idiot, and his only words were clear-cut and to the point. Always a nod, a raise of fingers and—“You may go, Atobe.” A voice with some dignity. And perhaps another nod to accentuate his authority. Keigo sighs inwardly. Those were the former glory days he thinks, glum.

He is outwardly all smiles, of course. A very polite, very nasty smile of yes, and what can I do for you so you can peel yourself off the heel of my shoe smile, but he doubted that his coach would know the difference. Or he would point out such a difference.

“Coach,” he says, and ignores the rest of his classmates in the background. “What can I do for you?”

Coach Tanaki is huffing, as if he had been running around the hallways straight to Keigo’s homeroom. Uncouth. But the coach had been a sports journalist for the Asahi newspaper in his former life before he became a coach. Keigo supposes that running would come naturally to him. “Ah. Atobe-kun,” he says, a little breathless, “I’m sorry to bother you before practice, but—I thought I’d just share something with you. If you have a moment?”

“Well, I don’t know how to say this, Atobe-kun,” the coach finally says, “But—“ I know already, Coach,” Keigo interrupts him, a little breezily, impatient to get it over with. “Tezuka’s back, isn’t he? It’s been all over the school.”

“Tezuka?” Coach Tanaki’s eyebrows furrow in confusion before shaking his head. “I—no, no. Nothing of the sort. I just got the new regulars list from Seigaku, and there’s no Tezuka Kunimitsu
under the list. Believe me—that—“ And he gives out a little laugh as Keigo stops in his tracks and
stares at him, a little taken aback at the unexpected twist. “I wouldn’t have had the patience to run
to you homeroom for that, Atobe-kun. A Wimbledon Junior champion in the high school circuits,
imagine! I would have fainted!”

“I’m sure you would have,” Keigo says dryly, trying to cover his surprise. “I can’t try to guess at
your sudden outburst, then, I’m afraid.”

Coach Tanaki smiles at him, his eyes alight. “It’s good news for us, I think,” he says, quite
solemnly. Keigo likes his coach best at times like this, silent and brimming with a slow glow Keigo
is more accustomed to. It is the crackling fire of want and ambition. So Keigo waits for his coach
to have his chance at his small dramatic pause. “It’s Echizen. Echizen Ryoma is in Hyotei this
year.”

Echizen Ryoma. And Keigo really stares at his coach, not even registering the sound of the bell
signaling for class. He murmurs, after a beat, “Echizen?”

Coach Tanaki nods forcefully. “Yes, yes!” he says, “I thought he would have been the Junior
Champion last year, to be honest, because the way that boy played for—”

“You shouldn’t insult Tezuka that way, coach,” Keigo cuts off, still a little dazed, “Tezuka would
have still beaten his former rookie in a match even if that brat hadn’t forfeited at the last minute. I
played him, once,” he adds, because the coach is now looking inquisitively at him.

“What? Oh—oh.” His coach smiles, a little chagrined. “I think one of my reporters covered that
match years ago. You were…in middle school, weren’t you?”

Keigo doesn’t answer to that. His thoughts are already whirling, and he isn’t up for one of his
coach’s stammering fallouts. He only bows a dismissal and walks to his next class. The freshmen
will be milling in later than the second and third years, he thinks, he has a week to gather his
thoughts about him.

And so.

This is where Keigo is now; in front of the auditorium, behind his principal’s small sighs and in
front of fawning schoolgirls. He doesn't care for the worshipping right now, though, not when it
doesn’t suit him. He scans the rows and aisles of first years and sees—

Well.

He sees Echizen very briefly, a blur of black and green, as the boy is wiggling further down into
his seat. He can’t see what face Echizen is making from here, but he can guess at the younger
boy’s scowl, imagines it as clear as day from the last time he had seen that scowl. It had been a few
years, he thinks, surprised, and yet, seeing the small figure inside a foreign uniform, Keigo is
beginning to doubt the passing of his years. He quickly tears his eyes away, and his smirk grows
bigger.

This year, he thinks, will be interesting.

He speaks his recited speech. He speaks them with great flourish and drama, and the students eat it
all up, feast upon his words and the flair it represents. They are students of grandeur and riches,
after all. They are a school filled with pride and dignity. He wonders, dark amusement creeping
upon him, whether Echizen was a man enough to fill the great and incessant ambition that was
Hyotei, would be able to fill the need of greatness these students would crave.
He concludes his speech with a small impromptu; already the principal is out of his seat, his face almost begging for this ordeal to be over with. He sits down gloomily when Keigo doesn’t let go of the mike.

“And of course, this would go out for all the sport teams,” he says, and suddenly the great room is silent, it is eager for his next words, ready to stomp and clap to his words, and Keigo puts great weight into them, “But, since I represent the tennis team, I suppose I should say—“ He lets out a smirk, brimming with confidence, daring anyone to speak of the past two years of continuous failure; no one, of course, does, “This year. It would be our year.”

They all stand. They cheer a great roar.

Keigo’s eyes are there when Echizen’s eyes snap up to meet his. They are the same hazel brown eyes that Keigo remembers, as they narrow at Keigo. Keigo is sure to meet the boy’s stare, eye for eye, as he lets the smirk linger in his lips, as he hears the crowd cheer for the future. The past misfortunes are forgotten; this year, they will avenge everything.

(This year, a voice whispers inside his mind, this year. It is the last year that you may do this. He ignores this voice.)

He likes to think of matches as a chess game. It didn’t matter how many bishops he had lost over the years; how many knights that were set back. He still had a queen. He was still in the game, not yet devoured. He was the King; Echizen had once been Tezuka’s knight, and now Keigo had him under his thumb.

*Tread carefully, Echizen Ryoma. Or this school can devour you whole.*

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When he first speaks his name, his classroom is utterly silent. He isn't sure what to make of that. He stands in front of the class with his new uniform and expressionless face as the teacher writes his name on the blackboard, turns to him with a smile and announces his name. He is assigned to a seat near the window.

*It’s fine, Ryoma thinks, bored already, It’s all fine.* He tugs down the sleeve of his blazer and loosens his tie. Habit, he thinks; the tie feels like a noose.

The class soon starts, and Ryoma leans back at the edge of his seat. Japanese Literature, his timetable says. He makes a face.

He had promised his mother. He had said that he would try. (Or he had stared into her sad and begging eyes, her tepid smile, and told himself that he would not do anything that would remind both of them of Nanjiroh. Echizen Nanjiroh is only a name now.)

Time passes for first period as he stares resolutely at the kanji and printed letters in front of him. He writes and scribbles down whatever the teacher is saying in his version of hurried English, but soon dozes off half-heartedly. He is already glum for his future prospects at education.
The bell rings; as the teacher leaves the classroom, everyone’s eyes swerve to Ryoma as soon as they are able to divert their attention away. He can feel them, their eyes boring into his skull, as he feigns disinterest, writing away the last notes of on the margins of his textbook.

“You’re Echizen Ryoma,” one boy says, after a beat of staring and prodding, a silent tug of war on each side. Ryoma looks up.

The boy that spoke does not look very hostile; he is only tilting his head and coolly assessing him, his hands in his pockets and looking very snob. But he is biting his lips, unsure how to proceed. “I —I, er. I saw your matches last year. In that Junior Championships final? You were good.”

Ryoma only looks at him until the boy is squirming. He puffs his chest out to hide it. “You might have won it,” he continues, his voice now a bit sharp, because Ryoma is still staring at him with inertia without speaking, “But you just, you know, chickened out in your last match. You were in Seigaku,” he adds now, voice rising, “Middle school year. I remember you.”

Ryoma studies him, this boy with his neatly combed hair and smart eyes, looks around the room. Sees them all: the girls with their plaited ties and red cheeks, boys with their gangly arms and fine glasses. They are all well bred and study him, his peculiar presence here, as if he is an interesting specimen.

“Yeah,” he finally says, his voice empty of tone, “I think I remember being there.”

The boy narrows his eyes. “You beat our captain,” he announces, and around him, there is finally a bit of fidgeting. “I didn’t take you down for a coward then. Guess I thought wrong.”

Ryoma smiles.

What did this boy know, this boy with his pale skin, his ironed crest, his perfect cufflinks. What did this boy know about dark locker rooms, foreign lands, the dank smell of sweat. What did this school know, with their bumbling cries of worship and adoration? Nothing, he supposes, and that was one reason to pity this rich boy who was nothing in Ryoma’s eyes.

“I beat a lot of people with tennis,” he says, with his same bland tone that betrayed nothing, “Your captain wasn’t that special. While I guess you were busy being a ballboy.”

The boy opens his mouth, closes it. His eyes flash, and Ryoma has made himself an enemy. So be it; he didn’t come here to make friends. He especially didn’t come here to bow down to some faux-royalty.

What utter rot.

The bell rings again; it signals the end of break and the beginning of second period. It sounds like a warning, his classmates’ eyes riveting back and forth from the nameless boy to Ryoma, their eyes blacker with every stare. They scuffle into their seats. No one looks at him; like a colony of ants, they enact such synchronized movements, they oddly fascinate Ryoma. Almost.

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Nanjiroh forbade him to play his last game. He had been in the hospital then, rifling through a battered book. In front of him was a chessboard that Ryoga had brought with him for one of his visits.
Ryoma didn’t know that he had forfeited until after his old man had told him, and when he heard the news he had thrown the worn copy of his book at his father and screamed. It was the first time he had ever shouted at his father, much less after his hospitalization. Days passed when he would not speak but would pass the hours with his book and moving the chess pieces according to the rules.


The King was a fucking useless piece of shit, Ryoma soon learned. The King retreated; he teased and stepped back before the enemy Queen could gobble him whole. The book wasn’t very specific on how he could win a game; but that would come for later, he thought. It was the only book on hand; he absorbed the words hungrily, almost madly.

His father had not avoided the impact of Ryoma’s book, but he did not look at Ryoma as he screamed, “You had no right!”

Those were the last words he had said to his father.

When he had packed his bags and heaved his luggage onto the conveyer belt in the airport and had boarded the plane headed to Japan, Tezuka Kunimitsu had already won the Wimbledon Junior Championship by default. He was barely sixteen.
Chapter 3

Ryoma soon learns that about half of the boys in his class are hoping for a spot in Hyotei’s tennis club, and the other half are all fans of the said tennis club. The teacher passes out a sheet of paper for them to list their designated extracurricular club activities, and as the list passes on to Ryoma, he notes that most of the boys had listed tennis as their first choice. He writes, underneath his name, Library Assistant.

His seatmate is a busybody. He had seen the exchange between Ryoma and the glasses boy (‘Who?’ Ryoma had asked blankly when his seatmate hissed he had just picked a fight with the son of a top investment back president) and is now craning his head to see what Ryoma wrote. When he does see, all he does is make a face; surprisingly, he doesn’t comment on Ryoma’s choice and merely shakes his head at anyone who passes by Ryoma’s head in a secretive manner.

Why anyone would want to be squashed in a room that would hold two hundred members, Ryoma has no idea.

“It’s hard to get in the club at all, you know,” his seatmate finally bursts out, just before the bell is about to ring for the third period. Ryoma looks blearily at him, already tired and lax.

“The tennis club,” he continues, when Ryoma wouldn’t grant him an answer. “You have to play off with the regulars, and see how you match up with the sub-regulars too. And then the coach tests all sorts of things. From what I remember,” he adds defensively, when all Ryoma would do is raise an eyebrow at him. “That was what we did in middle school, too. We’re not just there to make up big numbers.”

“That’s nice,” Ryoma says blandly. He is debating whether to take off his blazer and make a pillow for his head for the next class. The teacher had been called away to a faculty meeting, and the class hour was switched to self-studying. Most of the class was too busy talking about what club activities they hoped they would get.

The door opens, as Ryoma is just about to doff his blazer to do just that. Heads turn halfheartedly, and then later, they all swerve, momentarily frozen, as an older boy with his green nametag stitched on his blazer comes into the room. Ryoma’s year wore yellow nametags, so he must be a second year. Which was an anomaly, considering that second years were a floor above them and had no reason to loiter about in this floor.

Strangely he looks familiar; light brown hair that is very straight and thin, a sneering façade, and callous hands.

The older boy walks around the front of the room until his eyes meet with Ryoma. Eyes narrow, and he marches up to Ryoma almost grudgingly, as the rest of his classmates look on. The chatter had subsided; all is left is a tense silence.

“Echizen,” the older boy says crisply, and immediately cringes. Ryoma studies him, his blazer hanging loosely by his arms. He cocks his head. He must have played this boy once, he surmises. He narrows his eyes and wonders what would be the least irritating thing to do.

Surprisingly, the older boy takes one look at Ryoma’s contemplating look without any offense. He merely sighs and gestures to his green nametag that read Hiyoshi Wakashi. “Read the name before you try to exert your brain power,” he says stiffly, “Also, I’m not really here for pleasantries. The coach wants to see you.” And with another cringe and a half-sneer, he turns around. “Hurry up, I
don’t want to stay here longer than I have to.”

“Hiyoshi-senpai!” A few call out, standing up; they bow lowly, as Hiyoshi waves them off in what could be said as a friendly gesture. “It’s been a long time, senpai!”

“Ah.” Hiyoshi does not offer any more pleasantries with his underclassmen as he waits for Ryoma to wear his blazer again and stand up. He looks at Ryoma’s nametag and uniform, scanning his form cursorily with a small frown. “It’s weird seeing you in this uniform,” he mutters. Ryoma does not know what to answer to that, but Hiyoshi turns around sharply and walks over to the classroom door. Inwardly sighing, Ryoma follows.

At least this will allow him to reject the team outright to the coach. But damn, he still wanted his nap.

The coach was a very untidy man, with his rumpled hair and glasses askew, and his smile was too bright and gushing for Ryoma’s liking.

“Echizen-kun!” he nearly chirps, and nods towards Hiyoshi’s direction. “Thank you Hiyoshi,” he says with a grin, “I can take it from here.”

Hiyoshi grunts, but he does a bow without another look at Ryoma. His exit is swift and sudden, the coach’s room suddenly very dark. The door closes behind him.

Ryoma consciously makes sure to straighten his back as he gingerly sits down on the chair across from the smiling coach, and looks around slowly. A small wave of anxiety attacks him, but he quickly monitors his breathing and curls his hands into fists. Look around, his mind commands. He looks, and sees that the room, although small, is not at all leery, and is stacked with books upon books in crammed shelves, with the desk also overfilled with various magazines and articles.

“Always reading, that’s me,” the coach says with a small smile, as he sees Ryoma craning his head to look at some of the titles. “I was a reporter in my former life. Although, I really should tidy up my desk one of these days.” He laughs nervously as he rubs his chin with the palm of his hand. “You can say that I’m a fan of yours.”

“Oh,” Ryoma says. He doesn’t know what to say to that without sounding impolite.

The coach coughs a little, and gives out his hand, which Ryoma takes out of reflex, and remembers to bow at just the last minute. “Coach Tanaki,” he says with a smile, “I just wanted to say….well, I do hope that you’ll be joining the tennis club, Echizen-kun. I don’t really want to play favorites, but you’re just asking to be put on the regular’s team. I guess you could say we’re pretty short on Singles,” he continues, as Ryoma’s silence stretches out, “I don’t know how much you remember, but I think the Hyotei high school team would be the same team you fought against in middle school, that is—”

For the first time, Ryoma feels true annoyance surge up inside him. “I don’t remember,” he cuts in, rather rudely, and Coach Tanaki is left a bit like a gaping fish, “I played them somewhere early in Nationals and slept for most of the rounds.”

The coach opens his mouth, closes it. “I—I, of course,” he says, adjusting his glasses. Ryoma almost feels ashamed of himself, but does not apologize (still Nanjiroh’s bad blood in you, he thinks; kills that thought too). “I’m sorry, of course,” he says with a little laugh, sounding contrite,
“You played other players, better ones, I daresay, than—” He coughs again. “Well, although I must say, your match with Atobe-kun was quite good when you were in middle school. Intense.” It was Ryoma’s turn to be surprised, his eyes widening. “Oh,” he says, “I didn’t know you knew.”

“Reporter, remember?” the coach replies, his easy grin back in place, “Also, I’ve been in this school for a bit, so I know all of Atobe-kun’s—shall we say—” he gives a smaller cough again, this time a little dramatically “—weaknesses. He doesn’t like talking about that match.”

Ryoma lets a little smirk play on his lips without warning. “I shaved his head off,” he says. Coach Tanaki laughs at that.

“That was quite childish of you,” he says, “And of Atobe-kun, allowing you to do that. I forget—that sometimes, you know. When I saw some of your matches. That you were a kid sometimes.”

Oh. Ryoma’s smirk fades, and looks down at his knees. His hands are still fisted into a ball.

“I don’t mean that badly, of course,” the coach hastily adds, as he senses he had said something wrong, “It’s just. The Junior Wimbledon—I think you and your former captain, Tezuka Kunimitsu, yes? You two took that little competition by storm. I don’t think the Western press was up for anything like that. You could have won it,” he says, suddenly quiet and almost wistful. “You’re so young, but I thought….well, it’s not my place to say, but. You made quite a small exit for yourself after that. I was so sure that you could have won it.”

“I don’t play,” Ryoma says brusquely. His throat is closing in. He can’t hear this. The room is engulfing him; he wants to breathe. He must get out of here.

(Dark rooms and showerheads dripping droplets of water. A voice.

Ryoma, Ryoma. Your backhand was very poor today. I don’t think that’s the way I taught you. Do you feel poorly?)

Coach Tanaki looks at him; he feels the gaze even as he is hunched down, his eyes downcast and lips tightly pressed.

I must get out of here. “I wish you would,” he replies, “Everyone at Hyotei has to sign up for a club activity, so I thought….well. What are you planning to do, then?”

“Library,” Ryoma says shortly. “I…..I like to read too.”

The coach laughs a little at that. “Do you now,” he says, but he sounds almost sympathetic, almost befuddled. Asking, what do tennis players read in their free time when they’re not tired from chasing balls every day? The unasked question irritates Ryoma enough to lift his head to glare at the coach. “What kind of books do you read?”

“Stefan Zweig,” he answers, his words still clipped. He has the pleasure of seeing the coach’s eyebrows raised; he had not expected that. “I liked….I read the Chess Story.”

“……Ah.” The coach doesn’t speak for a minute. His sympathetic cajoling is gone, as his eyes turn serious and inquisitive. “I’m sorry; that wasn’t what I was expecting. You do like to read. Zweig is, well. He is a good author. Brilliant, in fact. And the Chess Story is one of his well-known pieces.”

“I was hospitalized,” Ryoma says; he doesn’t know why he is telling this stranger this, but the flicker of acknowledgement in the older man’s eyes…it was something he craved for, something that had nothing to do with tennis. “When….before my final match. I read it then. It’s good.” He says this all in a rush, in a whirl of breath, and it is jittery and rough, but the coach nods as if he had said something profound. He offers Ryoma a little smile when Ryoma looks somewhat horrified at his sudden confession.

“There wasn’t anything on the media about you being hospitalized,” he says mildly, and holds up
his hands as Ryoma is about to open his mouth. “And of course, I didn’t hear it from you. But yes, Zweig gives you comfort when you’re sick and gloomy in bed. I read that particular piece myself, when I was somewhere around your age. I was beaten up by a couple of kids.” He laughs at his words, but this time it sounds forced. “I wanted to be a tennis player too, when I was young, you see. Well, some people didn’t really take it too kindly and decided…to have their way with me, let’s say. I ended up moving schools.”

Ryoma listens. It is easier to breathe now; his throbbing is gone, and is soon replaced with indignation. It is a foreign feeling. They shouldn’t have done that.

“I suppose not,” the coach agrees, and Ryoma realizes that he had spoken his thoughts aloud, “But I guess sports isn’t all about whether you want to play or not. All these players, they have their little turfs, I think. But you would know better than I would, I daresay. Anyway—“ The coach gives him a sheepish grin, “Anyway. I ended up moving schools and came upon Zweig one day and read the same thing you did. Confined to a hotel room with nothing to do but a chess book, eh? What a desolate life that protagonist had led.”

“….It’s the way he became the best,” Ryoma says. Then, “If that’s the price he had to pay, I think it’s worth it.”

The coach shakes his head at him. He laugh this time is more natural. “I think you’re still young,” he says, “As was my original point. But yes, I see where you’re coming from.”

Ryoma frowns. He is about to open his mouth to argue the point, but when he does, the words that come out are not what he expects. “If I join,” he says, “If I do get into the tennis team. I don’t really want to be in the regulars.”

The coach looks surprised at Ryoma’s sudden change of thought and then at his new request. “That’s not a problem,” he says slowly, “But… I don’t understand. Don’t you want to play the other players in the high school circuit? There are new faces, new schools. The people you’ve played have gotten stronger too.”

Ryoma wants to retract his proposal. Wants to say, No, it was a joke, I’m not actually signing up. This is idiotic. I didn’t come into this posh school to play tennis and ruin my life yet again. Fuck. This is a conditioned response, don’t mind me; I spent most of my life chasing balls, you know? I’ll be along my way to my non-tennis future.

“It’s not worth it to play if there’s an egoistical monkey as captain,” he says instead. The coach pauses and looks as if he wants to laugh. He refrains at the last minute.

“…..Well,” he finally says, “Atobe-kun did earn his Singles One position by plummeting all his upperclassman in his first year. I can’t see why he’d object to you doing the same.”

Because that’s too much work, and I don’t crave the spotlight like that complete narcissist. Ryoma shrugs a little and sighs. He is too worn out to talk any longer.

The coach waits for another rejection, a retreat. There isn’t any. I am a conditioned dog, Ryoma thinks wearily, woof woof. Fuck you, old man.

“So you will join?” Coach Tanaki looks elated, and his grin is the same friendly force it had been when Ryoma first met him. “This is great news! Echizen-kun, I really don’t think you’ll regret this. You just—you belong in the courts, after all. So, I’ll just add you onto the team and—your jersey! Good god, your jersey! Well.” The coach beams at him, and Ryoma is wary of this hyper giddiness. “It would be good to see you play again Echizen-kun,” he says, “I wasn’t joking when I
said I was your fan. You play tennis like I haven’t seen anyone play.”

Ryoma studies the older man warily. He had heard that line, before; a softer voice, wonderment entwined in those words, *Ryoma, don’t think I have seen anyone play like that. You play beautifully. You make tennis into an art form, I am astonished.* He doesn’t trust such softly spoken words. “How do I play?”

The coach hesitates a little, and Ryoma is suddenly afraid that he is to hear the same cooing words again from a different. He is going to be sick if he does. But the coach pauses, and the next words are unexpected.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way,” he begins, “But when you were younger, you played with a strange sense of euphoria. That I could understand. But…later. In your Wimbledon matches. You played with rage, Echizen-kun, such fervent rage.” He shakes his head a little. “I thought that would consume you,” he says, and Ryoma hears the wonderment in the coach’s whisper; but it is a different astonishment, it is an altogether different sickening feeling this time. This time Ryoma feels exposed, bare. “The rage. But it didn’t; you controlled it until you wielded it.” He meets Ryoma’s eyes. “That’s good, Echizen-kun, very good, but you should know. Raw emotion can never serve as an ammunition.”

Ryoma had no reply to that, save: “I think I managed well until now.”

Coach Tanaki takes of his glasses. He offers Ryoma a weary smile this time, before he wipes his glasses and puts them on again. “So you did,” he agrees softly, “I suppose that’s what I meant when I said you’re still so young.”

The silence that follows is like a curse.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Ryoma finally runs into Atobe and they all have a pleasant chat.

Keigo picks at his dinner when the call comes.

He smiles a little at his mother, who gives him a mock-scowl. “It’s not very polite to bring your phone to the dinner table, Keigo,” she admonishes, and with a laugh, “But I suppose it’s best not to keep the caller waiting. Is it from your father?”

“Ah. No.” Keigo pauses; wonders why his mother does not know his father’s whereabouts. “He told me that he had an important client to entertain today. He’s going to be late.”

His mother’s façade drops a little. “Did he now. Well.” She looks down at her plate and her theatrics is replaced with a blank look. When she meets his eyes again, she attempts a smile. “Take your call, dear,” she says mildly, “I shall just mourn another dinner wasted, shall I?”

“Mother,” Keigo says, a little exasperated, and looks at the caller. Hiyoshi. “It’s nothing, I’ll be very quick,” he promises. He slips out of his chair and heads over to the door and out into the large hallway. The corridor is not lit but for a dim overview, and overall the long hallway looms larger than life. Keigo leans against a bare wall and makes sure his mother cannot hear his voice before he presses take call.

“Really Hiyoshi,” is the first thing he says, “I think that about three years of being your captain would make you at least know when your captain is having dinner.”

There is only silence on the other line, and Keigo taps one foot against the marbled floor while waiting for his underclassman’s reply.

“…Did you know?” Is the first thing to come out of Hiyoshi’s mouth.

“Are you being intentionally thick, or—“

“I am very sorry,” Hiyoshi says, formally (and Keigo is amused to note, through gritted teeth), “that I have interrupted your dinner plans. I just got home from judo and didn’t see the time.” There is another pause. “Echizen is in Hyotei this year. Did you know?”

“I must say,” Keigo answers after a beat, “That our student gossip mills are atrocious. Everyone was blathering about how Tezuka would come back to Japan, and we have his little runt instead. And yes,” he cuts in, before Hiyoshi could yell at him, “Of course I did know. It’s my duty to know. Coach Tanaki was leaping over the moon and back.”

“I think he made Echizen into a regular,” Hiyoshi says. He sounds strained. “Just. No matches, no formalities, nothing.”

Keigo wants to cross his arms and look at the heavens for answers. He opts for a sigh instead. “Is
this some sort of petition, Hiyoshi?” he asks flatly. “Loathe as I am to admit it, Echizen hardly lacks any credentials to enter the regulars. He came second place in the Junior Wimbledon matches. Not that you would need reminding of that.”

“Of course I don’t,” came the clipped tone, “It was the only thing anyone was talking about.” There is another pause. “I wanted to fight Echizen for my position, at the very least.” And his voice sounds so stiff and petulant that Keigo is taken aback a little. He blinks.

Hiyoshi Wakashi is very traditional sometimes. He came to the tennis club one day to defeat him years ago, and played judo because he was expected to pursue his family name and obligations. It was the same story for most of the students at Hyotei; at the end of the day, they all had duties and expectations to fulfill. What was interesting about Hiyoshi was that he sometimes wanted to subvert the status quo. But while he announced subversion with his typical grave manner with a smirk, he did it rigidly and followed every rule in the rulebook. He wanted to dominate with legal justice by his side. He was unlike Keigo, who sauntered over to the courts on his first day and beat everyone singlehandedly and announced, also singlehandedly, that he was to be the captain of the club. It was how he was about to be such a competent captain when Keigo had left middle school, and why Keigo would hand him the position once again after he graduates.

“Don’t be absurd, Wakashi,” he says, finding his footing, “Your regular position isn’t just his to take. He’ll fight you for the match line-ups, the same as anyone else. He can play the bench referee sometimes.”

“But it’s true that,” and another pause. “With him, we can strengthen both our Singles and Doubles. We have you,” he says grudgingly, “And Oshitari-senpai, but he plays better in doubles. So we need a strong Singles line-up to…go to nationals. I just wanted to make that clear. I can give my spot up. If we can win.”

*Once a captain, always a captain*, Keigo thinks, amused. Out loud he replies, “This is all well and good, but you’re forgetting that I’m the captain. I’ll make Echizen turn cartwheels if it pleases you and vice versa. Don’t excite yourself over things beyond your control, ahn?”

There is a huff of breath; Keigo thinks it’s a laugh, but when Hiyoshi speaks, he is very grave. “I think if you order him to do that, he might shave your head a second time. Maybe this time without your permission.”

“I think you just asked for ten laps for practice tomorrow,” Keigo says mildly, and reconsiders. “Or make that twenty. Don’t interrupt my dinner again, unless you’re dying of some blood loss. Even then. Call Kabaji.”

“….Usu.” Keigo doesn’t have time to wonder whether that was sarcastic or not, because Hiyoshi got off the line and left Keigo to hear the blaring beep of the phone.

“Why do I always get stuck with the most impossible brats,” he mutters to himself. He straightens up and sets his phone to mute. He enters the dining hall again, all smiles.

His mother is sitting alone amidst their vast and glorious dining table. The chandelier lights glare above her; she is only a small, huddled figure in the room, her face beautiful and blank. She looks up as he enters.

“Was it important, darling?” she asks. She has not touched her food since he left.

“Somewhat,” he answers, and gestures to her plate. “You should eat mother. I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”
She laughs at that, and leans over to touch his hand lightly. Her fingers are cold. “That’s what your father always said to me when he was younger,” she says lightly. She looks a little tired.

He has a cutter knife nestled inside the lapels of his jacket.

Rinko doesn’t know, of course. She thinks that she had confiscated the last of his razors, the remainders of his Swiss knife, and forbade Nanako to leave the kitchen knife lying around. Every sharp object inside his house is under lock and key. When Nanako joined him for dinner one night without his mother, she sighed a little and commented, “Aunt means well, but she really is very old-fashioned, isn’t she, Ryoma-kun?”

He had just blinked at his cousin while picking out a bone from the cooked fish. “Sorry?”

She had smiled at him, a little, watery smile. “Well, she seems to think, it’s not as if you can’t just go over to the next stationary store and buy yourself a letter opener now, right?” She spooned miso soup from the pot and handed a steaming bowl over to Ryoma, which he accepted without a word. “Honestly…I don’t know why she thinks you’re a child.”

“…She’s never seen me grow up,” he said after awhile, and he knew then that he sounded a littler bitter. He was a bitter, angry kid and Nanako was right; the next day, he had gone over to the neighborhood store and bought a stationary cutter knife. It irritated him that Nanako wasn’t so easily fooled.

Nanako opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it. They ate the rest of the meal in silence.

But, Ryoma consoles himself, but. He had only drawn very fine line across his wrists; there wasn’t anything worth digging flesh and bleeding a cut. Some days just the small weight of the knife inside his pocket was enough; that it was an exit card for him, that he had a choice whenever he wanted to leave. There was only a very big gash on his right wrist anyhow, and it had mostly closed up. He only needed the existence, nothing more.

The paper that Coach Tanaki had given him is crumpled at the bottom of his bag, no doubt. He didn’t want to enter another tennis club with its ridiculous rules, but he didn’t want to enter the cramped quarters again to retract his offer. He went home that night and ate his dinner in silence alone. Rinko was out late with another client; Nanako was busy with her studies. Ryoma ladled some soup onto a bowl and stirred it without appetite. He missed the meows that would have filled the empty house.

The paper sat in his bag, all till the next day. He is bored and restless in class again, especially in English, but he does his best to sit still and take notes. Teachers sometimes chance a look at him and pause at his name; he had been Japan’s household name for a year, after all. But Ryoma ignores the looks and the occasional questions after class—so will you be going pro again, Echizen-kun?—all with a thin smile, and hopes the hours will pass by quickly.

Then of course, he just had to run into Atobe.
It's lunch time. Students are milling about in the hallways and are headed over to a separate building that is the dining hall. The cafeteria occupies an entire building and separate floors for each year, and yet another separate floor for the tennis team. Apparently, Atobe had built and funded the building even before he had come to the school.

Ryoma senses Atobe even before he sees him. It's how the students act around here; the way they falter their normally aggressive steps and take another look back. They pause and their eyes glitter strangely. Some bow. Others just gawk.

Atobe Keigo is taller in person without a stage to widen the distance between them. His slim waist accentuates his broad shoulders, and his face is pale without the mark of teenage acne. He walks each step with a certain calculation, lazy but regal, as his hands are loosely by his sides. His uniform drapes his thin but muscled form very well, and his shoes gleam in the sunlight.

His eyes are blue when they meet Ryoma's.

It’s not as if time stopped. But the students are all silent, as they part ways for Atobe to pass through, all until Ryoma, until they are standing across each other and no one is in their way. Until Atobe’s eyes land on him, and he is forced to look back, as the spectators all look back and forth like this is a tennis match.

He suppresses an eyeroll and a scowl. Atobe walks closer.

He had never liked those eyes; they dismissed him when he was younger, and one thing Ryoma hated was being overlooked. He hated it with a vengeance and fury, and perhaps after all these years, this is why he can admit that was why he had shaved off Atobe’s hair. He did not look kindly upon people who ridiculed him, even though at the end, it had been more than that, had been more than Atobe’s petty bet and his insistence that he could never reach Tezuka’s tennis.

Ryoma doesn’t really remember. He was never a fan of reminiscing over past matches.

Atobe stops a few feet away from Ryoma, his eyes betraying nothing. There is not even a smirk adorning his lips. He merely tilts his head and does not look away. “Echizen,” he drawls out, and that, finally, is what gets Ryoma to scowl. As soon as Ryoma breaks face and frowns, Atobe’s face morphs into a smirk as well. It is not very friendly, but it was better than the expressionless face that first greeted him. “What a surprise. Not very pleasant, but I suppose it’s to early for that.”

He wonders if he should greet Atobe with ‘monkey king’ and make everyone gasp in indignation. It might be funny, but it’s also too soon for that—he thinks his seatmate would murder him during his nap. He opts for silence.

Atobe raises an eyebrow when Ryoma doesn’t speak. “Have you gone mute while you were aboard?” he asks, and it’s a deceptively pleasant tonethat is nevertheless mocking. Ryoma’s scowl grows deeper.

“No,” he says shortly, “You’re also in the way.”

There comes the gasps of horror, he thinks. His classmates look upon him with wide eyes, but of course Atobe is entirely unfazed. Good god, what must it be like, to be worshipped by the entire school? Not very pleasant, Ryoma concludes, it’ll only make for a big ego. What do people do with an inflated ego?

“I was looking for you, actually,” Atobe says, “Otherwise, there’s no reason for me to be loitering around in the first year’s floor now, is there?”
“Oh, I dunno,” Ryoma replies dully. He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Thought there were other first years you had to terrorize.”

“How flattering.” Atobe turns around a little, and the path clears way for him again almost instantly. “Believe me, brat,” and Atobe gives him another smirk, and this time, it is amused and cold, all at once, as his eyes are completely unreadable. “If I had really wanted to terrorize you, you would know it. Isn’t that right, Kabaji?”

“Usu,” Kabaji responses from the side, and Ryoma looks over at the tall second year in concealed surprise. He hadn’t noticed the bulk, he had been so silent. Kabaji? he thinks. The names are very unfamiliar to him.

“Fortunately for you,” Atobe continues, and with a snap and a gesture of his hand, a lazy wave towards the elevator, “I was looking for you so you can mingle with the rest of the…regulars on the top floor.” He grimaces a little, his smirk finally faltering. “I suppose Coach Tanaki would want me to introduce you to them.”

“Ehhh?” A voice finally breaks out, and Ryoma is at first relieved, then disgusted, as his seatmate pushes his way towards the crowd to gap openly at Ryoma. He is not the only one; most of his classmates have already heard the news that Ryoma would not be joining the tennis club, and are now looking at him with some surprise and wariness. “Echizen! I thought you said you were going to be at the library?!”

_I didn’t say that_, Ryoma thinks snidely, _You just saw what I wrote_. Out loud, he says, “I didn’t say to him that I was joining the regulars. I just said I’ll be in the club.”

“Is there a difference with you?” Now Atobe looks bored. “And here I thought coach was all done buttering you up. What a waste. I’d hardly be the one to flatter your ego, Echizen.”

Ryoma finally lets his annoyance dominate him and rolls his eyes. _Fuck everyone_. “I don’t need anyone to flatter my ego,” he says, “Unlike some people, I know when I’m actually good, thanks.”

There came the louder gasps, and an even colder smile from Atobe. _Very smooth, Ryoma_, a voice from somewhere in his mind sighs, _I thought you wanted a quiet school life. What happened to your solace and peace? Better yet, what did I tell you about provoking the enemy?_ He tells the voice to shut up; the voice was too rationale to be his own.

“I see you’re as polite as ever,” Atobe says; Ryoma doesn’t know if he’s actually insulted, “Shame that Tezuka never succeeded in installing manners in you. If you’re adamant about being a non-regular, be my guest. Altogether,” and here Atobe slightly sneers, “I never took you to be such a mediocre achiever. Or perhaps second place has always suited you.”

Good god. The gasps are replaced with sniggers now, and his peers do not bother to hide it. _Hostile ground, Ryoma_, the voice purrs again, and this time, Ryoma half-heartedly lets it roll over his brain. _Hostile, enemy grounds. Tread carefully here; you don’t know what you’re up against, do you? Do not provoke a yapping hound._

“Maybe I just want the top spot or nothing at all,” he says easily, and allows his frown to cease; he mirrors Atobe’s previous not-so-friendly smirk and cocks his head. “I don’t why you haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Ah.” Atobe’s sneer is replaced by something feral and dangerous. His eyes do not leave Ryoma’s, as the sniggers dissolve and there is, finally, absolute silence. “You’re saying you want my spot.” He says this very softly, almost like a deadly beast, as Ryoma does not break eye contact. “How
unsurprising, coming from you. You’re very lucky that I take such challenges to be…interesting.”

His lips curl. “I have no qualms giving you my Singles position. If you can earn it, of course.”

Blue-grey irises. Sharp cheekbones, bared teeth. “Can you?” The question is thrown at him
carelessly, as onlookers await. What a spectacle they are making.

*Of course I can,* Ryoma thinks, unbidden scorn charging his emotions, *I beat you once; I beat all
of you a long time ago. I was about to beat Tezuka Kunimitsu too, but that wasn’t my fault. And
still. And yet. Why was that never enough?*

He does not voice out his scorn. He only thins his lips and says, “I guess that’s the Hyotei way,
then. All’s fair and merited.”

“I suppose.” Atobe shrugs. “Or, you can say, I have always believed that age does not determine
one’s ability.” And his smirk this time is bland, almost wry. The coldness dissipates and replaced
with a mild demeanor once again. He turns sideways, about to head off; he motions Kabaji to step
forth. “As anyone can see with you.”

Before Ryoma can wonder whether that was a compliment or an insult, Atobe fully turns around
and walks away without another backwards look at Ryoma. “I’ll tell the regulars that Seigaku’s
prince thinks too highly of himself to dine with them, then, shall I? I’m sure it’ll make them warm
up to you very quickly.”

With Kabaji at his heels, he is gone and swallowed by the flux of the first years, their eyes all wide
and gaping at him.

No one speaks, and before anyone can, Ryoma too, turns the other way and walks away, from the
opposite direction that Atobe went.

For first-time reunions, he supposes that it could have gone worse.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Echizen is off the regulars before he even begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ryoga had first brought the book at the hospital along with an old chessboard.

“Nicked it from a yard sale across our street,” he said. He was unshaven and unsmiling, but he managed a brief twitch of his lips as he raised a hand as if to pat Ryoma’s head; at the last minute he seemed to think better of it and shrugged. “Thought you might be bored, chibisuke,” he said, and patted the book. “Maybe you’ll like chess, eh?”

Ryoma did not speak in those days. He did not touch the newfound trinkets that his older brother had delivered to him at first, content to let them lie besides him while he had the choice of ignoring them. After a while, though, he thought he would be going mad, counting the tiles of the hospital walls and ceilings. The white space suffocated him.

What did the media say about him in those days? He did not read the newspapers, only knew that the media had never taken to him kindly. They had thought he had the Samurai blood in him, that he was a natural talent, that his plays were all violent and bloody because he had never learned to hone his primitive skills into something more. They thought his playing was unreal, the way he should brandish his racket. Players crumbled beneath his feet like marionettes. The Executioner, they named him.

He is only a reflection, they said in a chorus, The Executioner does not exist as his own self.

What they said about him after the hospital, Rinko bundled those words and tatters of newspapers daily with a tight face. “I’m going to sue the lot of them,” she said, so viciously and seriously Ryoma thought that it was possible.

He had laughed.

The Chess Story was not a chess manual; most likely Ryoga had brought it along without reading it, and automatically assumed that it was a basic manual instruction; neither of them knew how to play chess, after all. But the book was crammed full of words and quotations, and Ryoma frowned. He looked at the chess set, his protruding wrist that linked to his bony white fingers. His callouses had softened by then. He rifled through the book.

In it, the protagonist is arrested by the Nazis and is confined to a hotel room for days and weeks. He is not given anything to do, anything to distract him. All awaits him are interrogations and threats, and he believes that he is going insane. One day, he chances upon a chess manual in one of the hotel drawers. For days after, he reads the book until he absorbs it, until the protagonist tries to
keep sane with the variable positions of the chess pieces. He envisions the board in his mind and
tries to play the game inside his mind. That is how he survives the war, he would later say. That is
how he became a great chess player; by imagining and projecting the best chess games in history
inside his head during his long confinement. The protagonist goes on to defeat the best chess
master in his day on a cruise ship. He is great and anonymous. He is a tragedy waiting to be
written.

Ryoma read the book, reread it, until his mother found out he was reading and brought him other
books to keep him entertained. But after that particular book, he stared at the abandoned
chessboard, fingered the various chess pieces. They were quite smooth and good for something
that was from a flea market; Ryoma had fingered each nook and carve of the bishops and knights
and the pawns. He set them up, black and white, all in perfect order. He studied them and their
positions, tried to replicate a past game. Sometimes he upset them, made them wild in disarray, but
he preferred them best in their neat little two rows.

Perhaps that book had saved his life. He had told the therapist as such, but added, “Not that I was
thinking of dying.” His therapist had looked at him with sympathetic yet cool eyes, weighing on
his words. “Of course you didn’t,” she said, “You were very brave.”

Ryoma had hated that verdict and never went to another session again.

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His first practice is nothing to boast about; it ended in a complete disaster, of course, but he had
expected this.

“First years don’t get special treatment around here,” a bulky boy snarls in his ear as they were
lining up after schol. He amends his statement a moment later, “Well, no one except Atobe buchou.
But obviously, he’s different.”

Ryoma ignores him. The morning had been too cold and the sun was only just coming up. There is
too much buzzing inside his head, chitter chatter, voices rising into a roar. They are marching
down to the center courts and down to the clubhouse, all in a neat file. They are like soldiers: grave
and in-tune to the beat. His new tennis uniform is baggy and his elbows look pinched. Did he wear
his bandages? His wristbands? They would hide his scars better.

“Hey, first year! I was talking to you!”

There is a small pause as the boy who was shouting grabs Ryoma by the collar. The marching
stops, as the boy fists his hand onto the thin cloth. His fingers dig his collar and Ryoma is pulled
closer to him, beefy cheeks and small, beady eyes. “I don’t know what they taught you in hotshot
America,” the boy sneers, “But we respect our senpais here in Japan. Did your thick skull forget
that?”

Strangely, there are no titters that accompanies this boy’s words. They were all so eager to laugh
on Ryoma’s behalf when Atobe was there; now, only his companion manages a weak snicker, and
when he looks around and sees that no one else is laughing, he sobers up and tugs at his friend.
“Let it go,” he says a little warily, “The regulars will be here soon.” The rest of the people in line
are scuffling their feet and looking nervous. They do not meet Ryoma’s eyes.
There are always boys like him everywhere Ryoma goes, who is now grabbing Ryoma for all the good it would do him. He met such people since he could play tennis; it came with being a good player with no mannerisms to speak of. These were the boys who could only speak with their fists and their taunting mouths, who couldn’t do a good serve that would redeem them in Ryoma’s eyes. These are the boys in locker rooms, who await his return and sabotage his rackets and jerseys as their retaliation for being weak. These are the boys who had followed Ryoma throughout the ages and countries, their greedy, empty eyes and gaping mouths. And so the same players, the same enemies, the same shadows. The only thing that changed was the voice in Ryoma’s mind, cooing, whispering, You can beat them, you can crush them. Remember what I have taught you. You can pulverize them, from their joints to their arms. You can stomp them like the little insects they are.

It was dangerous to listen to this voice, as honey-sweet and dulcet as it sometimes was. The voice meanders inside his head even as he looks flatly at the older boy, seething, in front of him, unbidden thoughts coming into his mind, Of course he’s scum. He’s a nobody and he will be another nobody while I would have won the Junior Championship at fourteen.

“What do you want?” he says. His voice is even.

“What do I want? What do I want?” The buffoon parrots his words in a loud, dramatic voice as his face distorts into a smirk, then a snarl. “What I want, you little brat, is a match. I’ll show you all,” and a wave of an arm flourishes in his wake, “that your matches were a fluke. You’ve just never met the right opponents before.”

What is it, Ryoma thinks, now a flicker of amusement coming towards him, about these people? They think the world of themselves.

They enter the courts silently; his wrists throb. The boy gestures to him. They enter an empty court.

There was a time when Ryoma would have taken a challenge like this to heart. He would first play the opponent with his right hand, take down a Twist Serve, and have the pleasure of other people gasping by the sidelines. How did he do that, they would all whisper, amazed, The ball just bounced and ran off the court!

His opponent would eventually be beaten. But there were too many of these same people, who demanded that he was a fluke, that he was a little kid with some fancy tricks and a fancy father. They demanded that he challenge them personally, again and again, until Ryoma sometimes felt he was fighting with shadows and replications of bigots and pests alike, who were all worthless but numberless, who were a great, shapeless entity. Sometimes he felt it was better to stand still and let the storm pass him by.

After all, he had already told the Coach and Atobe both, that he had no interest in playing for the regulars. They would just have to accept that. He was not going to be playing a pawn.

The boy’s serve is fast and powerful. Ryoma would have returned it when he was five.

But he lets it pass him and the ball falls smoothly past him, a smooth curve ball. Even the upperclassman, for all his bravado, cannot seem to believe that he had managed a shot past him, and stand there for a moment, looking a little agape and wondering. But soon he snaps out of it and smirks, and throws his head back. He laughs.

“See, see?!” he crows, and the spectators are still deadly silent. “See that serve! Even a hotshot
from America can’t return it! It’s totally awesome!”

“Good for you, Kazuhi,” a voice shouts out from the bleacher stands, and the boy—Kazuhi?—grins at Ryoma crazily, his eyes alit.

“That’s what you get for looking down on our school!” he shouts from across the court. He tosses a ball and serves again.

How boring, how banal. How weak. Ryoma can see from here how he is throwing the ball and how the beefy hand cannot even aim the sweet spot of the racket correctly.

Oh, Ryoma, the voice tsks, Whatever happened to your fighting spirit.

He does not raise his racket to hit the ball. He does not run across the net to return it. It is a one-sided game and soon, everyone is seeing how immobile he is standing, how he is rigid in his stance while the older boy is delivering his serves madly.

Kazuhi is grinning furiously and the crowd is deadly silent. Kazuhi is not an idiot; people are not completely stupid, no matter how much Ryoma wants to believe otherwise. He knows that he is only winning by default.

“You little shit!” he screams across the net. Ryoma does not even twitch. “Return the ball! Are your eyes blind? Return my shot, damn you!”

Ryoma doesn’t. He minds sighs, laughs softly. His mind is a blackness of teeth.

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Keigo hears about the game later.

It’s that kid, Echizen, someone whispers, words gargled and muddled throughout the hallways, He didn’t even lift a finger to Kazuhi. He just stood there like a marionette and didn’t even swing his racket.

I heard that he was going to be a regular. He got called away by the coach on his first day.

Without any matches? He’s not going to play?

Maybe he was scared. I heard that he turned white.

Kazuhi’s serves are pretty good. But still…wasn’t he overseas?

Is he strong?

Is he able?

Maybe he’s a fluke.

Whispers and treachery are dangerous, Keigo learnt over the years. He could place Echizen in a regulars position now and bear the titters and the doubts that would linger in their team. Of course
Echizen Ryoma was good; no one who had seen him actually play had ever doubted that. Whether he would now play for Hyotei…well, that was another matter entirely. If this was indeed the Echizen Keigo thought he knew back in middle school, it was very unlike Echizen to actually pass up an opportunity to cut Kazuhi’s (underserved) ego. Keigo knew Kazuhi from his student profiling: father was a well to do stock-manager, he played tennis horribly but had invested in new rackets and balls for the tennis team to compensate, would be made into a sub-regular because of his sharp (if erratic) serves this year. And he had wanted his debutante match with the new star rising rookie. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what Kazuhi was going with this. The question then, was, why was Echizen playing along to Kazuhi’s antics.

Besides him, Coach Tanaki is biting his lips and looking around the student conference room. He seems a bit ill at ease, or perhaps it was because it was late in the afternoon. Keigo was sure that his coach had a very distasteful caffeine addiction.

“Atobe-kun,” the coach begins slowly, “I still want Echizen to play in the regulars.”

So there it was. The coach was too naïve sometimes; he thought that placing Echizen in a foreign school with a new team would allow him to play his best and against his old school, Seigaku. Because with or without Tezuka, they will be facing Seigaku, and Echizen will soon have to face up to his former upperclassmen. But Coach Tanaki is thinking that nothing really matters, that all Echizen needed was a racket and a ball and he would go chasing scores and rallies off the tennis net. Before the match (or lack of) with Kazuhi, Keigo had thought so too. Now, he is crossing his legs and leaning against his chair without comment.

“That match was provoked,” the coach continues, undeterred by Keigo’s silence, “It’s against the rules to even play any matches yet, you know that. Echizen was just following the orders. This wasn’t official; of course he’s not going to stand still in a real match.” Coach looks around again.

“Say something, Atobe-kun.”

Keigo twirls a lock of hair around his forefinger. The sun is about to set and already the morale is down. Here they thought they had a new superstar; and they had seen him with his limp arms and unmoving statue. Nothing could be achieved if discontentment is sowed.

This was how Keigo ruled a team. One instills awe and presence; without those, a kingdom would crumble.

He opens his mouth. “Everyone saw the matches,” he says slowly; Coach Tanaki’s eyes turn to him, beseeching and anxious, “They’re all talking about it. They’re saying that Echizen was…scared.”

The coach sputtered. “Of course he wasn’t!” he says, and Keigo wonders amused, how is it, that this reporter who had never seen the boy play in person stand here and defend him most valiantly? “You know that’s not true! Why would Echizen of all people be—” And the coach catches himself and flushes. He shakes his head a little. “I mean—not that I’m trying to belittle Kazuhi’s plays, but Echizen—Atobe-kun, you played Echizen. You know how he is.”

Yes, Keigo thinks, But how do you know? Out loud, he says evenly, “Do I? I only knew him when he was younger than this. Perhaps he had changed. The Echizen I knew never backed from a fight. This Echizen doesn’t even bother.”

The coach stands up now, and paces a little around the room. “He couldn’t have changed,” the coach says shortly, a little madly, that Keigo is forced to raise an eyebrow, “He was playing just last year. All his matches. They were brilliant, if a bit off. How could a person change so much in a year?”
“….We could win without him,” Keigo says, after a brief pause; Coach Tanaki is aggressively walking around in circles and his eyes are flashing. It is so rare to see him like this. “Echizen is a good player, but of course he’s replaceable.”

At this Coach Tanaki snaps his head up and looks at him; Keigo sucks in a breath and regains composure immediately and meets the coach’s eyes. He sees the words imprinted on there: no he isn’t, no, without him Hyotei would lose. He beat you once before. Older now, he would beat you again.

The coach does not say anything, and Keigo makes sure to look back evenly and does not break away eye contact. His face would be a cool façade, his insides boiling.

“Have you seen any of his matches?” the coach offers at last. His voice has gone quiet; gone is his agitation, replaced only with weary resignation.

“I’m afraid I’ve been busy,” Keigo replies, a bit coolly, steeling his fingers against his chin. He feels the meeting coming to a draw, and he sees his victory. He imagines telling Hiyoshi, well Wakashi, it looks like you have your spot after all. Take heed from Echizen’s antics, ahn?

Coach Tanaki’s lips twitch. “But you’ve seen all of Tezuka’s matches.”

“Some,” Keigo allows. “But of course, Tezuka’s another matter. He was…he was unique.”

“So was Echizen.”

“I do hate to remind you,” Keigo says, “But I’ve seen that boy play. He plays well, but he’s only a genius out of many. There are many others like him.”

“Are there now?” The coach smiles. It is a tired, bitter smile, his eyes obstructed by his glasses and his speaks very softly. “They called him the Executioner in those final rounds. I’ve seen Echizen play too, Atobe-kun. You should see those matches sometimes.” There is a slight pause. “He never lost a point.”

Keigo frowns. “That’s unusual for championship matches,” he allows, “but not unheard of.”

“I suppose so.” The coach shakes his head a little and his smile eases. “Well, then. It seems as if you made up your mind. We’ll be making a Wimbledon champion into a mere ballboy.”

“Almost champion,” Keigo corrects him, “Tezuka won the title.”

Coach Tanaki shrugs, his smile intact. “Yes, yes. Well. Almost champion. That’s that, then.”

“Yes,” Keigo echoes, and he wants to dismiss Coach Tanaki now without being too impolite; his head was hurting.

What did Tezuka see in the boy?

What did Tezuka say to the boy to make him fight for him?

But the coach turns around, just as he is about to exit. “Oh—but I forgot. The lineups against Fudomine were due today. I—I’m afraid I submitted in the lineups already and—“ he bites his lips. “I listed Echizen in Singles Two. We have sub-regulars lined up for doubles but—“

“We’ll manage,” Keigo cuts him off, “That’s only one game lost if he decides to stand in the courts like an idiot. Fudomine won’t be that strong.”
(That was what he had said years ago too. He wonders if this is karma, how his life will proceed from hereon: a circle and a loop that is traversing and intertwining, not able to break free of the incessant chain of losses and narrow victories.)

Coach Tanaki nods. “I see. If he doesn’t play….then.” He hesitates. “But…Atobe-kun. People don’t really change, you know. You know him better than you think.”

Keigo does not answer to that.

(Their match was a sham: he had laughed at the boy and offered his hair as a consolation prize. *You are not Tezuka*, he had said to the boy; the boy had retorted with a snort. Years later, even after their deathly tiebreak and even after their maniacal laughter, even after Echizen’s surreal memory loss and his subsequent admiration of the boy, that is what he remembers most. He remembers dismissing the boy for everything he could not be and would never be. He remembers thinking the boy would not grow to become better than him. He remembers shouting at Tezuka, as if it were only the two of them, mocking Tezuka for putting so much faith in a little brat who Keigo was in truth, afraid of. He was afraid of the boy’s potential, and so he dismissed it.

You cannot feel fear in the face of ignorance, he knew.)

Chapter End Notes

Wow it is taking sooooo long to get to the damn matches. Everyone FIGHTTTTT.

Also, beware of a Echizen who is going to kick everyone's ass. But he's going to be all angsty while doing it, so don't feel too annoyed. I'll get to that, I promise. This is going to be the darkest Ryoma and the darkest Keigo I have written to date.
The young Tezuka Kunimitsu, they all called him. Lights, camera, action. With Ryoma, however, they all attempted nervous smiles that faltered off. They looked away and cough. Bright lights; here is the camera now. Smile for it. You are now in the public eye; everything you say will count against you.

Executioner.

Who gave him such a childish name, Ryoma didn’t know. It must have been one of the third-rate reporters, and the name had struck as each line up proceeded and each game won. It was said in staged whispers and wonderment and bewilderment. How does the boy do it? They all wondered.

So this was where they were now: a foreign country, a captain and a rookie, older but the same rigid postures. Ryoma was wearing a scowl, but he sat straight, as Tezuka was saying something to the reporter, who was bobbing her head enthusiastically.

“You’re both very young,” she purred, and her lipstick shined as she spoke, “And very, very able in so many ways. So what’s next for you after this?”

“More tournaments, we hope,” Tezuka replied neutrally; he had been trying to catch Ryoma’s eye throughout the interview, but Ryoma stared straight ahead into the background towards the cameraman. A shadow moved behind the speakers and the staff members. A hand waved.

The reporter tittered. “Of course,” she said, “Young, very young, as I’ve said, and so much talent. But I was thinking…what are your long-term goals? After tennis? Do you have a beau back home?”

Tezuka blinked, not understanding the question. “Beau?” he repeated.

The reporter smiled a bit offhandedly, even a bit pityingly. Ryoma saw it from the corner of his eyes. Oh you Japanese boys, she said with her eyes, you with your poor English skills, it’s a wonder you have come off this far in our country. Where will you land next? You have reached the farthest you will ever go.

“Girlfriend, I meant,” she amended, looking very sincere and eager, her mouth not betraying any of her thoughts, “Any love stories that your fans should be clued in?”

Tezuka thinned his lips a little and shot Ryoma another glance. Ryoma ignored it. “I….that’s not my priorities right now,” he said slowly, “We would be focusing on tennis for the next few years.”

“Are you now.” The reporter slackened a bit; it was no fun talking about games that everyone had seen. The public wanted love interests and gossip; she turned her eyes to Ryoma. He felt her sharp eyes inquiring at him. “And you, Ryoma?” she asked with a small laugh. “You haven’t said a word all interview, letting your captain—is that right? What a great coincidence!—speak for you. What would you do without your tennis?”

The shadow and the hand disappeared. Where is he? Ryoma thought, irritated. He’s supposed to
“Ryoma?” The reporter repeated, a little louder. Tezuka gave him a disapproving look, as if that would work now. They were rivals and competitors; he would play Tezuka in a few weeks.

You would crush him, a voice purred.

“I would rather die,” he said abruptly, sudden anger dominating him. Why was he here, with his tailored shirt and buttoned cuffs, sitting straight and stiff to listen to this faux bitch talk her way through insipid questions? It was boring. He was almost about to perfect his next set of serves, after all.

The reporter paused. “Die?” she said, astonished that Ryoma had even spoke at all and unnerved by his answer. “Well…that’s a bit profound, isn’t it? Maybe you’re saying that tennis is that important to you? What do you say, Kunimitsu?”

“I meant,” Ryoma cut in, his disdain smeared in his words, cold and devoid of any emotion other than annoyance, “that right now it’s pretty stupid to think about anything other than tennis. Of course I would die; there’s nothing for me but tennis.”

The reporter and Tezuka gaped at him. A moment later, Tezuka attempted to salvage the situation and steered the topic to safer grounds, nothing about death, nothing about absolution, and Ryoma stayed mute throughout the whole ordeal.

The reporter did not ask him any questions after that.

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Strangely, it is Hiyoshi who is most taken by the news.

Lunchtime: they all sit in a long table, picking at their steamed rice noodles and sliced, thin meat slabs boiled in broth. Keigo ushers the school butler to serve them up peppered pickles and steamed sprouts to top off the soup, but Ootori shakes his head, as does Shishido on the other side. The rest of them just ignore the platter of food and look at Keigo.

“So,” Oshitari says after a strained silence, “So. The rookie won’t be on the regulars.”

Keigo frowns at his bowl of broth and noodles, but picks up his chopsticks and gestures discreetly to the others to do the same. “How correct those hallway gossips are,” he says snidely, “First Tezuka comes back, and next Echizen is placed and dethroned out of the regulars, all less in a day. Nothing has been confirmed, you know.”

“What we’re confused about,” Shishido says, “Is why. Because of Kazuhi? He’s an idiot.”

“That’s what we know,” Keigo replies, making his voice intentionally bland. “What people know is a different matter. They’re saying that Echizen is a fluke.”

“Well, of course he isn’t,” Hiyoshi cuts in hotly, and flushes when others turn to him in inquisitive silence.
“Well, Wakashi,” Keigo comments, raising an eyebrow, “I didn’t know Echizen could have found a staunch supporter amongst us.”

Hiyoshi nips his lips and turns red. His glasses are crooked again, as he fumbles his fingers to adjust them. He glares at his soup.

“...I followed his matches in England,” he mumbles to his food, “He’s good. He’s going to make us go to the nationals.” His head snaps up, red cheeks and all, to look at Keigo resolutely. “He can make us win,” he says.

“One match,” Keigo says. His bland façade is slipping; he is having the same conversation that he has had with the coach the other day, and with Hiyoshi, he does not have to hide his irk, “His one singles match isn’t going to define our team scores. We don’t even know what he’ll do in the matches—he might stand there like a simpleton during the official matches.”

Now Shishido frowns at him. “That’s a bit far stretch, isn’t it, though?” he says slowly, “I mean, maybe Echizen didn’t play because. You know. Kazuhi is an idiot and Echizen really doesn’t like idiots? Maybe like you?”

“Ryou,” Keigo says, and when he speaks Shishido’s first name, everyone freezes in their seats and quickly looks down at their lunch, “I would appreciate it if you stop trying to delve into the mind of that brat. Why is everyone wanting Echizen on this team? We can win without him. Pray,” and here he lets his voice drop to a degree, cool and dismissive, “never compare me to him. He still has a long way to go before he can ever be hope to be as good as me.”

As soon as he says those words, a younger, cockier voice fills his head and he immediately twists his lips—you still have lots more to work on—and glare at everyone to comment on his choice of words. Fortunately, no one so much as dares crack a smile.

“Are we settled then?” Keigo says, “Can we eat now? Or shall we go into a heated debate about how one first year would not allow Hyotei to fall?”

Mukahi breaks the silence by picking up his spoon and grumbles, “Good god, Atobe, don’t go all sniffy on us. That’s what you tell your adoring fans. Allow Hyotei to fall. Yuushi, tell him that was lame.”

“It was dramatic, captain,” Oshitari says, a twitch of a smile coming into place, “But we all share that sentiment. Hiyoshi.”

“...Usu.” Hiyoshi allows.

Keigo sighs and rubs his head.

The match with Fudomine is coming up in two week’s time. Fudomine does not have Tachibana now; he had returned to Osaka and it was uncertain whether he would come and play back for the final high school circuits this year; if he was, it would be for Shintehouji along with Shiraishi and Chitose. That school was not exactly a team Keigo wanted to face up against, not because they were good per say, but because the lot of them all wore him out with their gay jokes and rattling redhaired rookie. He does not voice this thought aloud, but only comments about the line-ups.

“Echizen is still playing for Singles Two in the districts,” he says, “Coach turned the sheets in as soon as he confirmed that Echizen was in our school.”
Hiyoshi gives him a look. “So he was going to get the position,” he offers pointedly.

“He didn’t though, did he?” Keigo replies, his voice sounding terser than he felt, “Fudomine isn’t the black hole that we knew it to be, it’ll be an easy game. Echizen won’t affect our team results.”

“….They’re still vicious,” Oshitari comments quietly, “From what I remember. Their team is in bad taste.”

“With horrid backhands,” Keigo dismisses, “We can crush them in doubles, and that’ll be the end of it.” He offers his team a bored, bland look as if to convey or else. “I wasn’t kidding when I was talking about this year. We’re going to nationals and we’re going to crush Rikkai.”

His team looks back at him, their eyes sharp. He offers them a smirk and they each return it, save Ootori, who gives him a tentative smile, and Shishido, who only scowls at him.

“Atobe, work on your speeches,” he says, “They’re turning lamer each year, I swear.”

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The headlines this morning glares at Ryoma at breakfast:

NEW SAMURAI IN THE U.S. OPEN?—ECHIZEN RYOGA

Ryoma crouches, one hand opening the door the apartment, the other picking up the folded morning newspaper. The chill from the hallway is creeping up his thin shorts, and he braces himself as he stands up again, his eyes skimming over the words.

Echizen Ryoga, 17, has said in yesterday’s press conference held in Los Angeles that he would be joining the contenders for this year’s Open, competing with various players around the world for a chance at one of tennis’s most prestigious titles. He will be joining Tezuka Kunimitsu, 17, who won last year’s Junior Wimbledon matches and is now training in Augsburg, Germany for the upcoming tournaments. It is unknown whether his younger brother, Echizen Ryoma, 15, will be joining him for the upcoming competition. Echizen Ryoma had come second place in last year’s Junior Wimbledon Championship by default, as he did not turn up for the final match against Tezuka Kunimitsu—

Ryoga. Ryoga was playing in the Open.

For a little while, all Ryoma could do was stare at the bolded words flashing across the paper. He closed the door behind him and was in a semi-trance through the walk to the dining table, where
Rinko was setting out the paper.

“Ryoma, did you get the papers? That’s unlike you.” Ryoma can hear the smile in her voice, her amusement seeping out when she sees that he isn’t paying any attention. “Ryoma? What’s wrong?”

He is more affected than he should feel about this. What did he expect—that Ryoga was going to forfeit this year? Why would he? This turn of events should be very reasonable. He opens his mouth to say just that but what comes out instead is—“Mom. Did you know Ryoga was playing this year?”

Rinko is looking at him, and to the papers that she is clutching. She does not say anything, and that is all Ryoma needs to know. He looks up and sees her eyes. She looks worried. There are thin lines creasing near her eyes. “I didn’t think it would be made into headline news,” she murmured weakly.

Ryoma looks at the title again. Ryoga, a small grained picture in the margins, grinning broadly. This is an earlier picture of him, Ryoma is certain. Ryoga had filled out over the last few years, always up from six to go to the gym and press bench weights.

“He’s an Echizen,” he hears himself saying, “It’s a good story.”

What else was he supposed to say to this, he had no idea.

The papers greet him in morning practice.

He goes straight to the common locker room and finds his designated number, 21, and his locker is already demolished with red spray paint, ugly and crassly done, in an atrocious scrawl: FLUKE. Next to the sprayed words on the locker door is a cut out of today’s newspaper headlines, and a better, colored version of Echizen Ryoga’s face plastered next to it.

Ryoma doesn’t know what to think of this, maybe except to laugh. This was beyond childish—it was moronic. But clearly people didn’t think so, as they traded furtive glances in the crowded locker room doors and each made sure to give Ryoma a once-over. They looked nervous—but also strangely gleeful, like a pack of hyenas now quite sure about who to prey on.

Yes, a pack of hyenas, the lot of them; so eager to rip off the nearest head with no consequence. Ryoma returns their looks pointedly, his little smirk coming naturally to him. They all seem taken aback at his smirk.

That is, until Kazuhi comes in and raises an eyebrow dramatically at the state of Ryoma’s locker as he passes by. He flounces his Hyotei jersey about and makes sure that he is in Ryoma’s eyesight when he reaches his own locker number: 20.

“Oh, look here,” he says loudly; the humming of voices naturally cease as Kazuhi’s thundering octave disturbs the morning chatter. “Looks like our celebrity got himself a welcoming treat.” He gives a cold, nasty smile and a nod towards Ryoma’s locker, its ugly red paint dry and the newspapers tactlessly placed, and pursues his lips. It is all so comic and very fake, Ryoma is sure
that Kazuhi is the one behind it. “It’s too bad, you know. I saw the headlines this morning too. Echizen Ryoga is going to represent Japan along with Tezuka. What about you, little runt? Say,” he adds, with a particular nasty grin, “Never heard of this new Echizen fellow. Maybe he was the wild card in your household, what do you say, huh? Echizen?”

Ryoma doesn’t answer him at first. He stares at Kazuhi, his broad frame and his taunting lips, stares until he sees Kazuhi’s smirk fall off and Kazuhi narrows his eyes, cruel amusement gone and glares back at Ryoma.

“Oi, koukai,” Kazuhi says flatly, mirth gone from his voice and steel replacing it, “I asked you a question. Or are you just as dumb in real life as you are in the courts?”

His mind slithers and whines. Oh Ryoma. You idiotic child. You know you want to crush this moronic trash. You know you want to see his eyes bulge with fear and make his hands clammy. You know you want him to bow down to your might.

YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO.

“I don’t know, senpai,” Ryoma answer back, his voice also flat and devoid of any madness he feels, “Seeing that I never was dumb in a court before.”

Silence. The rest of the first years around him seem to have frozen around him, and it is Kazuhi who breaks this by laughing. His sense of humor has returned.

“You haven’t?” he asks mockingly. “Maybe you’re forgetting that you stood there like a little kid while I beat the shit out of you yesterday! There’s no need to act tough, Echizen. We’ve seen how you crawled against me.”

His ears are racing with blood as he allows a trickle of emotion to show in his face. At his smirk, Kazuhi’s face morphs into something ugly, something mad, as Ryoma opens his mouth and speaks, deceptively light.

“I didn’t think you were stupid enough to think that I was going to play someone not worth my time. Senpai.”

Just then, the loudspeakers announce in the riveting room: “First-years set up the balls and practice your backhand drills. Second-years, untie the nets and get ready in position for rallies.”

Kazuhi does not answer him after that. He storms out of the room, his eyes ablaze and promising murder.

Ryoma can’t wait.

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What Keigo had expected out of Echizen, he truthfully does not know. But not this.

Echizen’s Hyotei uniform fits him horribly; the smallest size is still large for him, and the elbow
joints could be seen from the creases of the long-sleeves jersey. His knees are too knobby and
loose over his sweatpants. There is no muscle anywhere to speak on the boy; he does not look as if
he could even return a powerful smash.

Echizen lags behind in laps, does not do the backhand drills, stares mutely and blankly at every
receiving ball, does not try to return any ball that is served at him in question. Keigo has not seen
the boy pull out his own racket; he is using the school’s and it is working horribly on him. He is
just as good as the next first year beginner; he is swinging out of bounds, and the balls that he hit,
he makes sure that they are all out of court lines. He only does what is expected of him and waltzes
out of the tennis courts at the sign of the bell and dismissal.

By the end of the week, Echizen’s tennis number is debunked to 199, and Coach Tanaki looks
worried.

“He’s playing in the districts next week,” he says to no one in question, but Keigo is in his vicinity
and he could hear the sheer agitation lacing the coach’s words, and wants to point out that it was
the coach’s brilliant idea in the first place. Instead he says mildly, “Echizen’s one game is not
going to affect the matches as a whole.”

The coach does not seem to hear him. “It must be because of his brother,” he mutters, “Echizen
Ryoga. It must be shock, or is it? What is he thinking of? If he’s not putting himself into shape, he
might lose and this it—“ he snaps his head up and turns wildly around, meets Keigo’s eyes.
“Atobe-kun, he might lose,” he says despairingly.

Keigo wants to sigh and go smack his head against the court fences. Instead he crosses his arms
and opts for a frown. “He’s going to cost us one match,” he says, “It’s not the end of the world.”

“Fudomine is going to put their best doubles.” Coach Tanaki bites his lips and looks around. “We
put up our subregulars. We never put our regulars for the first round of district matches so I—“

“I know the routine,” Keigo finally snaps, a bit wearily, and Coach Tanaki gaps at him a little,
“And we placed Mukahi in Singles Three. Our subregulars are not that disastrous. Have more faith
in the team you’re leading.” He pauses. “Coach.”

Coach Tanaki closes his mouth. He nods slowly.

Yet, even as Keigo boasts confidence and snaps at the regulars to snap the balls harder and drills
the subregulars (all the while rolling his eyes at how Kazuhi is pointing out how he should
challenge the Wimbledon himself next), he himself is feeling nauseous. He cannot help but study
the boy in his spare time, his arms crossing and standing out in the bleachers, as Echizen is lazing
about from court to court, picking up balls and not holding a racket. It all seems so foreign.

He is disappointed. He can admit this inside his head and feel justifiable about his feelings on the
matter. Here was this kid, who had once defeated him in an exhilarating match when they were
fighting for the title of the nationals, and that kid was also Tezuka’s joker card, who had been the
shining position as the Singles One player even when Tezuka had been around. Tezuka had
stepped aside for that brat and even threw away his right arm. Echizen had flourished under
Tezuka’s guidance and transformed into a player that even defeated Yukimura.

And now…..? Here he was, in another school just barely a year after his fame and championship,
already rotted down and unmotivated. He staggers about like a weakling; Keigo had no use for
weaklings. But Echizen’s eyes, when they meet his own; they are still able to make him shiver.

Echizen’s eyes are gold and blazing fire.
Damn you Tezuka, he thinks, irritated at his rival and sometimes-friend, How did you draw out this boy out of his shell when he first came to Seigaku?

They run into each other after the first years have gone.

Well, that’s not quite true—Keigo intentionally waits for the boy to finish tying the nets and collecting the balls, waits impatiently in the student lounge and peers out through the windows to see the underclassmen trickling out of the common clubhouse one by one. Echizen has library duty today—he had checked via Kabaji—and he would be later than the others in getting ready to go home. This would be the only time that Keigo would be able to come onto him unannounced; other times, Echizen is always the last to arrive and first to leave; Keigo clearly commanded all first years today to mop the courts and tidy up the storage space, each and every one of them. Echizen would be doing his part after his library activities, Keigo had seen to that.

So he waits.

Echizen goes into the clubhouse with the last of the rolled up nets, and Keigo takes this as the cue to leave the windowsill and out of the lounge to enter the courts himself. His steps are brisk and quiet, making sure to be steady as he approaches a mere few feet outside the large building that held all the clubhouse members. He waits for a few minutes.

Echizen comes out not late after that; Keigo makes sure to act busy inspecting the grounds, and looks towards Echizen’s way only when he hears the footsteps falter and eventually stop.

Their eyes meet. Keigo smiles thinly; Echizen doesn’t bother at all.

“Echizen,” he says, his tone neutral and composed, “For someone who had publicly declared my demise on your first day, you don’t seem to be making too much of an effort to dethrone me.”

“Oh.” Echizen’s initial surprise at finding Keigo is soon replaced with boredom and a look that Keigo doesn’t like. “That was before I found out that you were running a monkey house.”

Echizen’s lips curve. “Monkey king.”

Keigo does not frown at that. He expected this childishness and taunting; what bored him, then, was how predictably Echizen was acting. The same jibes and pokes—the boy thinks that his jokes are never getting old. He responses dismissively, “Shame that you couldn’t manage a decent backbone enough to insult me in front of the school. There’s no audience to gasp at your treachery, is there?”

“I expected that,” Echizen says. He shoves his hands into his uniform pockets and shrugs. “I wouldn’t have cared, but imagine what it would’ve done for your ego.”

Keigo’s smile grows strained. “Really now,” he says, “You do have some disastrous manners to speak of. How flattering that you’re using it for me.”

Something flickers in Echizen, something that rises up to his face and dies out before Keigo could contemplate what it would be. Echizen’s face is suddenly clean and cool. “What do you want?” he
Keigo pauses for a second and lets the strain play out. “I want you to stop acting like an idiot,” he says clearly and coldly, “The matches are coming up soon and you’ve yet to have a proper warm-up match. From your lack of form, I doubt that you’re practicing outside of school. I don’t care what you do after Fudomine, but I do hope for your sake that you don’t create a nuisance out of yourself.”

Echizen finally cracks a smirk at this. It’s not a carefree and pretty one at all, and his eyes are theatrically wide as he tilts his head. “Monkey king,” he drawls out, “Are you threatening me?”

“Don’t be barbarous,” Keigo says, his patience, once again, wearing thin. It has been a long week of trying to console his fretting captain, his sullen teammates, and a nagging Kazuhi to boot—confronting Echizen like this was not his best idea, and he was running out of options to play polite. “I was just saying to stop playing the simpleton. As if you actually lost to Kazuhi. Why are you letting everyone think that? Have a match with Taki,” he throws in, out on a whim, thinking, this is for the team, Taki, try to understand how my mind is working right now, yes?, “He’s one of our top sub regulars. No one will be able to say anything once you win him.”

Echizen is still staring at him with his odd smirk and wide eyes. “What makes you think that I’ll play him?” he asks lightly.

Keigo narrows his eyes. Patience. He is just a brat and two years younger than you. “Because,” he replies, measuring his words precisely and carefully, “You didn’t play Kazuhi because he wasn’t worthy enough. Though god know—” and here he does allow disdain to creep into his words”—that didn’t stop you before when you were younger. But that’s neither here nor there. Taki is different.”

“He isn’t.” Echizen raises an eyebrow. “He’s just as weak as anyone here.”

Keigo stares at him. Echizen is still thin, even from this close up. But face to face, Keigo also notes other things about him: how laggard he is, how he is holding himself in a slouching manner, how tired his face looks. His eyes, apart from his mocking light, are dull and flat. His cheeks are gaunt.

“Have it your way,” he says slowly, “I won’t stop you if you want to snuffle along the lowest ranks.”

“I’m so glad,” Echizen says, sarcasm dripping with every word, “That I have your approval. Can I go now?”

He is about to turn away and already about to leave. Keigo wants to snatch the boy back and bash his thick skull in until the boy gets it. This is my last year, you imbecile, he wants to shout in the boy’s ears, next year I will not stand in these courts and I will not play in the circuits. I will never have the chance to go pro. I will never play Tezuka again, I will never feel the thrill of a good game that would have my ears ringing. My life will be defined by lunchtime matches with old man who are feeble in their serves and backhands. My matches will be with the ladies and boys who have never played as you or I have ever played. I will have to smile graciously and pretend I am having a marvelous time with beginners, and I will despise you, I will tear you apart, Echizen Ryoma, if you take away this one, last chance from me—just as you had done years ago.

Just as about Keigo is about to reach out and do something incredibly stupid, however, a book falls out of Echizen’s open bag.
Keigo sees the title, just as Echizen finally expresses something other than amusement and disdain to turn around at the sound. He looks miffed, then a little mortified, as he stoops down to snatch the book out of Keigo’s vision of sight. Or he tries to; Keigo is faster and the book is soon in Keigo’s hands. Echizen does not even try to reach out for it but stands there with frozen face.

“I didn’t know you took a liking to German writers,” Keigo says, a little snidely. Here was an area that he was supreme and where he positively knew Echizen failed at. “But isn’t Hesse a little too much for your bedtime reading? What could *Demian* possibly offer you?

Echizen reverts his eyes back to Keigo; his mortification is gone and replaced with a strange wariness and weariness, all at once. “It’s a book,” he points out slowly, “I read it. There’s no mystery behind it.”

“Do you?” Keigo’s smirk is back and his cruel mirth inside him, bubbling and simmering. “Can you quote anything that moved you?”

*Of course you can’t. Of course you can’t, because without your tennis I cannot define you—nobody can. And without your tennis, you are just an uninteresting boy that I must dismiss, that I must not let get the best of me. You must have nothing that I want, nothing that I need.*

But of course, this is Echizen Ryoma. Who is obnoxious to a degree, who is impossible to deal with at the best of times, who is maddeningly brilliant and unexpected in others. He opens his mouth.

“The bird struggles out of the egg. The egg is the world. Whoever wants to be born, must first destroy a world. The bird flies to God. That God’s name is Abraxas.”

Echizen’s voice is oddly strange; oddly fierce as he says the lines that Keigo had once read when he was younger than he was now. Keigo sees Echizen’s lips moving, his own mouth unconsciously forming the words inside his head, thinking, *The egg is the world. I must destroy the world.* When did he first read those ensnaring lines?

He is, once again, thirteen. He is the captain of the Hyotei middle school team, and his vice captain is a sleek player and one year older than him. He is disgruntled that he is in Singles Two, and a second year from Seigaku is playing against him.

That second year is Tezuka Kunimitsu.

His vice-captain was defeated soundly against the solemn youth, with his perfect serves and strong receives. Tezuka played with a grace that no person his age should possess, allowing the ball to curve around him and controlling the court. But even then, Keigo saw that Tezuka was not playing at his fullest, not at his brightest, and still he had won with unspeakable beauty and perfection. And Keigo had fisted his hands into hard balls and yelled at his upperclassman because he could not understand that beauty.

Because he had never seen anyone play like Tezuka Kunimitsu had, and it was the sort of tennis that Keigo had once wanted to achieve, a grace that Keigo did not have.

It was the day he first read *Demian* and thought of Tezuka.

And now, he is hearing Echizen quote the lines that he had long ago read and had buried, read and practiced harder and harder to defeat his self-proclaimed rival in his final year of middle school, only to be defeated by an upstart rookie who should not have made him feel anything.

Echizen’s tennis is abandon. It is a mirror of everything. It is kitsch, a medley of the lowest playing
styles and the highest aspirations. It once had Hiyoshi’s judo and it would have Yukimura’s piercing rallies. Echizen’s playing style is like their generation’s computer backfiles and records. Muddled together, it is ultimately nothing.

But so was Keigo’s.

He knows this in the depths of his heart: he can pull out a long match with Tezuka or he could rise for an attacking rally with Echizen. He can pull off a few tricks from Oshitari and he can observe other players and play to their weakness. His tennis is not whole and it does not have an overarching harmony. He made his tennis to win his opponents, nothing more grandiose than that. Compared to Sanada’s harmonious elements of nature and Tezuka’s harmonious balance between light and shadow, his tennis was staggeringly lacking.

That is what he hated about this boy in his mind. Seeing him now, with those serious eyes glaring at him, as if daring to speak his mind and disdain, Keigo finds that he cannot completely despise him.

“Funny thing that you should read,” Keigo says, his words not betraying the headache he thinks he is going to have, “I would have never expected it from you, but small wonders happen, I suppose.”

Echizen does not even sneer in reply; he snatches the book out of Keigo’s hand and turns away without a word.

Chapter End Notes

Wow Keigo, stop being in such denial over your feelings.
People ask him why he is infuriated with Tezuka Kunimitsu.

He was twelve when he had first landed in Tokyo, his father’s butler, Michael, to greet him solemnly and hold out his hand.

“Young Master Keigo,” he had said, and Keigo immediately liked him for it, the way that he had pronounced his name and not his family one, “You car awaits.”

That defined his relationship with the butler who now took matters of his household: always a step back, always lurking in the shadows, but ready and always alert with a towel or aspirin in hand, who would hold out his hand to Keigo without hesitation, not because of some affection that Keigo is not deluding himself with, but because it is expected of the butler.

He relished in the expected.

He met his father in many years, and he was astute and grim just as in Keigo’s memory. He nodded briefly and held out his own hand to Keigo, who looked at it and thought, what a smooth hand. What a large one. How cold it seems.

Father catches his eyes observing, and his lips twitch in what Keigo assumes is a smile. “It looks like England taught you a thing or two, Keigo,” he says gravely.

*That is not all it taught me*, he wished to say, his throbbing callouses and burning wrists hidden under the long sleeves of his sweater.

He was one of the richest heirs in Japan; his father had amassed a fortune with the stock market and investments in the 1980s, when Japan was truly booming and ready to take forth America as the next leading global economy. Japan was unstoppable—until it collapsed with all the credit spending, all the greed and consumerism that Japan could not handle. His father was smart enough to take away his savings and wealth right before the bubble in Japan burst, and their family came away all the more affluent from it, while the rest of the economy staggered.

But such tidbits were not considered exotic or extraordinary in England, a strange land with Kings and gloomy castles in the fog with their spring gardens. Those things were very ordinary in Keigo’s dormitory in Eton, where he had stood hand in hand with Kabaji, wary of the blond boys milling about in their bored and slouching demeanors.

Those are the years that defined Keigo; the days when classmates would squander away their
afternoon days horseback riding or squash, and Keigo naturally loitered to the tennis courts, until he was shoved down and met with a vicious sneer, “Can you even serve a ball, little King?” they all said, and it was found out that he was weaker than them because he was too young. He was met with dirt and grovel, and no one could do anything about it. This was a school filled with the finest and richest heirs of the land; whatever complaint Keigo could address would have been met with blank eyes of the headmistress and a pursuing of the lips. “Oh dear,” she would have said, and fluttered her hands.

So Keigo did not cry at the injustice; he trained. He trained his tennis into something vile and cruel, as he began to crush his opponents one by one. He first worked on his serves, and made it powerful enough to faze the opponent. He let his rallies cut through his enemies until their wrists were strained from the pressure it would take to return his ball. He hoped that one day he could hit the opponent’s racket right out of his hands.

_Someday_, he had also thought then, with a grim determination.

This past of his is important, he thinks, when it all comes down to Tezuka. He would not volunteer such information about his past, of course, and his teammates would dismiss his respect and dedication for Tezuka as one of their captain’s oddities out of many, but they would come off not knowing. Everyone save Kabaji, of course.

Tezuka Kunimitsu appeared one day out of the blue in Keigo’s second year, at the start of regionals when his vice captain was to be playing against him. Tezuka was a thin boy, but his serves were very fast and perfect.

And his tennis was beautiful—that was what made Keigo stand up then, ignoring Coach Taro’s questioning tone, “Atobe?” and stared at Tezuka’s serves and his rallies.

Tezuka’s tennis was devoid of any malice.

What did that mean, exactly? He cannot put his feelings inside his head without sounding like a young idiot all over again. It was the type of tennis that he once wished to pursue: a tennis form that was perfect and symmetrical, cool and logical that could cut through any emotion Keigo was feeling. Each serve calculated to aim at a precise angle, each backhand that was meant to enter a particular field of vision, and each shot made with the utmost care—every swing that Tezuka had shot, he shot with a cool rationale that Keigo had once aspired to be. Until he was forced onto his knees and was made to create his own tennis out of sheer desperation and rage: I will be better than them. I will rule over you all.

That strange land overseas, that strange England land with their queer customs and riches. It had made him stronger, but it has distorted his tennis. He could never again perfect his tennis form without thinking of his own motivations for bettering his game: I must crush them all, I will become the sole ruler of you. But Tezuka’s tennis was not only perfect; it was intact. Tezuka had never felt the same rage and desire as Keigo had, and still Keigo felt that he might lose and Tezuka would appear all the more nonchalant for it. For Tezuka it was only a game. He always considered the larger picture of his team; he had never played for himself.

That night, after he had seen Tezuka play for the first time, he stared at himself in the mirror, continually repeating, The egg is the world. I must first break the egg in order to be born. I must break the world.

_How true that is,_ he thought, _when one saw Tezuka Kunimitsu play. How can I win against him?_
And so it is a shame then, when Tezuka, who is overall a very shy and reclusive person, would have chosen Echizen as his young protégée and wished well for him, and Echizen had to shove Tezuka’s dedication back without a care, as if Tezuka’s sacrifice would mean nothing to him. As if he could laugh and dismiss the talent Tezuka had seen all those years ago.

And still. He cannot help recalling back those golden eyes staring back at him. He had thought them empty and drained, pure nothingness when he had first met them, years later. But that wasn’t it—when Echizen had taken Demian out of his hands, Keigo had seen the golden eyes blaze and that—that was a familiar heat, very dark and ugly.

*I will become the best*, those eyes screeched at him, *I will become the best or I will die trying.*

Those were emotions that Keigo could always, shamefully, relate to.

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The next week passes without any incident. Kazuhi is still sneering at him the locker rooms but to Ryoma’s surprise, there are still others, after the initial first days have worn off, who are shy in their eagerness to talk to him.

“I recorded some of your matches,” a timid boy comes up to him one day, smiling nervously and furtively glancing at Ryoma’s locker number as if he couldn’t believe it. “I really liked your serves.”

Ryoma blinks at him, a bit taken aback. It was still morning then; he was not yet awake. “Oh. Thanks,” he says, not knowing what else he should say. He wasn’t used to having people compliment him on his tennis skills outright; James had taken care of most of that.

*James.*

A voice laughs inside his head.

Ryoma shakes it off just as the boy rattles on, “I mean—I still like your Twist Serves, just because they’re so classic,” he gushes, “But your other serves—like, like your slicing serve, you never really put a name towards it, or your snake serve, or even your—“

“Cap it, Kindaichi,” Kazuhi growls from the other side, and the first year shuts his mouth with a small *eep*. But strangely, Kazuhi does not say anything more to Ryoma.

The week passes as such: no one bothers him, already bored by his lethargic nature. Sometimes he watches the players swing their rackets by the bleachers as he picks up stray balls, and sees how amateurish they are, the way their positions aren’t very smooth. Only the regulars seem to manage to perfect their forms and return a ball at a passable level. He could observe this all within a mere second, and know where their weaknesses were, where they would fail to return a ball if Ryoma was playing them.

Well, everyone save Atobe.

Ryoma was avoiding Atobe, not that it needed much prompting on his part, because it seemed as if
Atobe was also leaving Ryoma alone after their incident from the week before. Or perhaps Atobe was busy; he was trying to (from what Ryoma had heard from other club members) petition the Board Committee that Hyotei wanted to change the line-ups for their first district matches, and Ryoma didn’t think much of it, until the line-ups were actually posted on the day before the match.

The morning before the first match was abuzz with anew vigor and agitation. Everyone gives him darting glances that had not been present ever since his first day; some leery, others nervous, most of them hostile. It makes more sense when Kazuhi shoves everyone aside and glares at Ryoma as if daring him to comment on the sheet of paper posted onto their clubhouse door.

Fudomine

- Singles One: Atobe Keigo
- Singles Two: Echizen Ryoma
- Singles Three: Mukahi Gakuto
- Doubles One: Shishido Ryou & Kazuhi Eiichio
- Doubles Two: Aei Munero & Minae Kuroso

“What the hell are you playing at, you little brat?” he says loudly, and it rang across the silence courtyard as the rest of the non-regulars took a step back. “You haven’t been even near a court since you got here! I have half a mind to go to our buchou and—“

“There’s no need, Kazuhi,” a voice cuts in, sharp and smooth, and immediately everyone stands at attention and straighten out their arms. Their eyes flicker.

It was rare for Atobe to come to morning practice, but on that day he was, and with a casual air of dismissal he walks forth Kazuhi and addresses him, not even sparing a glance at Ryoma. “I would have thought that you would be glad to be playing Doubles with Shishido,” he drawls out, “Try not to let the match down, ahn?”

Kazuhi lets his chest out. “Of course, Atobe buchou,” he says defiantly. “I won’t let Hyotei down. What Echizen would be doing, though, is completely—“

“The coach and I already discussed this last week,” Atobe cuts in, causal and bored. Ryoma gives Atobe a sharp look that is not returned. Atobe is treating him as if he were not present. “Rest assured, this is only a one-time deal. Our coach was a bit too…eager in submitting the line-ups. There’s nothing that I can do about it.” He gives the non-regulars a sharp glance all around, save for, Ryoma notes, him. “Are there any objection?”

“No, buchou,” they all say in a chorus. Ryoma stays silent.

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The matches are a disaster.
Karma, Keigo thinks back wearily, not even daring to lean against the bench as his Doubles Two is utterly crushed and his Doubles One barely manages to scrape through. *Karma. This is what happens when the Coach decides that a little brat is going to be our joker card.*

So far, they are at a tie; but Mukahi is up against a power and endurance player who Keigo had not seen in Fudomine last year. The next player, the one who is going to play in Singles Two, is also a newbie that Keigo had once seen in the nationals league. They were playing a vicious lineup. Keigo was going to have a headache.

“Atobe-kun, please don’t look so glum,” Coach Tanaki says next to him, his voice thin with worry. “Mukahi isn’t that weak. Give your regulars some faith.”

Keigo rubs his temples with his forefingers and refrains from snapping. He replies evenly, “Mukahi is only good when he is covered by his doubles player. Without Oshitari, or even Hiyoshi, he is going to suffer from lack of stamina and power, both things that particular Fudomine brute excels at right now. After this we have Echizen playing. So, I hope that is some justification for why I want to look so glum.”

Coach Tanaki coughs lightly. “Echizen can still—“

“This is our one ticket for the regionals!” Keigo finally snaps at him, and shuts his mouth when Coach Tanaki looks at him, very much taken aback. Shishido gives him a sideways look and even Oshitari looks a bit surprised. Thankfully, no one else had heard amidst the loud cheers from the Hyotei side. “I’m sorry,” Keigo says dutifully, but he finds that he cannot offer any more than that, and looks about resignedly. “Well, where’s our rookie then? It seems like Mukahi won’t make this through.”

“Here,” a thin, cold voice says, and suddenly Echizen is jumping over the bleacher’s front lines and landing on the court grounds without a sound. His ankles look very fragile. Keigo frowns at that.

Echizen is wearing his jersey and has the school racket with him, not even a bag of spare rackets. Keigo grounds his teeth and tries to exact patience. “What are you doing here,” he says calmly instead, “Aren’t you supposed to be warming up?”

Echizen raises an eyebrow, and a small smirk plays at his lips. “Warm up?” he echoes, “With who?”

“With the wall if necessary, you little—“ Keigo stands up, sits down again. He rubs his forehead again and waves off the rest of the regulars who have now stood up as well, wary and alert. They have never seen Keigo lose his cool during an official match before. Keigo inhales a breath. “Never mind,” he says tersely. “Sit down, if you want, and I do hope your opponent is going to give you horrific cramps.”

Echizen only cocks his head at him, his little smirk still in place.

“Game, Fudomine, 6-4!”

Hyotei’s cheers calls suddenly drop dead; Mukahi collapses on the service line and stands up again. Keigo can see his knees shaking. The crowd is watching Mukahi stand with his weak knees, and stare at the nonchalant opponent who is walking up casually to the net line, waiting to shake hands.

“Mukahi,” Keigo says in a clear voice, “Don’t bother, come over to the sidelines. Kabaji, help him
Fudomine’s player is looking at him, with a nasty smile. He rolls his head around. Definitely not like Tachibana, Keigo notes. “What very poor manners the Hyotei team has,” he sneers, and Hyotei’s silence is all the more pronounced with Fudomine’s stomping and booing.

Besides him, Echizen is rolling his racket between his fingers.

Mukahi comes over, supported by Kabaji, covered with sweat and dirt, wheezing lightly.

“That—that guy,” he gasps, “That—he wasn’t in one of your videos, Taki! He’s not in your profiles!”

“No,” Taki acknowledges quietly, “He must have been Fudomine’s joker card.” With a sharp look at Keigo and Echizen, he conveys silently, just like Echizen was ours.

Mukahi turns his eyes towards Echizen. The Hyotei crowd is still silent, and everyone’s eyes are focused on Echizen, the way his casual aloofness showing how much he doesn’t care about this match.

“Look, Echizen,” Mukahi growls, “I don’t care how many great big hotshots you played over your dazzling career, but those are fucking bygones, and right now, what I’d like to know is—“

“Gakuto,” Shishido cuts in, and hands him a bottle of water. He doesn’t look at Echizen, but his mouth is forming a thin line. “Stop sprouting bullshit and drink up before you become dehydrated.” He nods vaguely at Echizen’s direction. “I think it’s your call,” he says tersely.

“Singles Three, Hyotei, Echizen Ryoma!”

Echizen walks forth; the Hyotei crowd is utterly silent.

“Echizen,” Keigo says, and he knows the coach is tensing besides him, but damn it, damm him, it was his fault after all—but the name is all Keigo can say. He digs his fingers under the skin of his own arms and glares at the standing figure, his eyes not even trained at Keigo. Keigo sneers under his breath. Insolent brat. Fucking insolent brat. He wants to mess up the line-ups and call the game quits. This brat would cost him the nationals.

Echizen merely grips his racket tightly, and walks forward. He doesn’t even acknowledge Keigo’s call. His step is even and precise; he doesn’t care about this match, he will ruin it as he had ruined his regular’s spot.

When this match is over, Keigo thinks, he will order Echizen for a match, and the prince will fall beneath his feet. He will crush the boy, this boy with his apathetic attitude, his easy smirks, his useless hands. It is the least he can do for himself.

What a waste. Tezuka was wrong, all those years ago.

The opponent is a leery lanky who is a buffoon. He imagines a voice inside his head; it comes to
him unanswered, unbidden: **Ryoma, look at how he moves his arms. He how he wants to put on a show. See his eyes. Note his sneer. Predict his next swing.** There is laughter inside his mind. **See and take heed, Ryoma. You can take him down, can’t you? I trained you well enough, haven’t I?**

He snaps back, lashes inside his mind. Shut up, he tells the voice, very loudly, Shut up. I can win this without your help. He’s a nobody.

The voice stays still, miraculously, and Ryoma is only met with blissful silence as the opponent bounces the ball. What was his name? It matters little.

The crowd is stomping in a dull rhythm; it is not the time yet to fire up. But the Hyotei cheers are duller; this is their last chance, and they all expect him to fool around and lose.

The opponent serves a hit ball and it whizzes over his net. The crowd from the other side madly cheers; Ryoma does not even try to return it.

That goes on for the rest of the game.

He observes the serve: how the opponent’s form is, how he would toss the ball into a straight arc into the air before hitting at the highest toss. How the ball is a straight cut like a knife and is meant for speed and not strength.

He sees the ball and thinks, **too slow. It’s too slow.**

There is no art in that serve. It is a serve perfected by hours of gruel practice, of backhands and weights, a textbook serve that he had managed to hit when he was ten, return when he was twelve. It is a speed serve whose purpose is only to whizz past. No grace and flair. Nothing—it makes is all so boring.

But the opponent is not to know about this. He is to think that his serve is great and unbreakable, and crow and jiggle about the court. He is to dance his victory dance too soon and Ryoma is to stand still and act dumb.

He is to crouch and wait.

“Game, Fudomine, 4 games to 0!”

The crowd behind him is dead, there is not even a sound. There is not even Atobe to stomp across the court to kill him, although he knows that the monkey king is tempted to. But he doesn’t care about the team. He only cares about his pride, and he only cares about winning. **So I guess some things haven’t changed.** He closes his eyes.

“Oi, look, Kakuke, I think he’s giving up! He closed his eyes!”

“Don’t let the poor kid wet his pants, Kakuke! Damn, what was that Hyotei captain thinking?”

He can’t help it; he smiles.

After all these years, he still **loves** to take down his opponents by surprise.

“Change court!”

“Hey, kid,” his enemy sneers under his breath, as they pass by, his voice too low for the referee to hear, **“I think your captain is going to kill you after this. Maybe I’ll go easy on you, what do you say?”**
Ryoma doesn’t answer him. He only lets a smile play along his lips; his opponent starts at that, narrows his eyes. They think he’s gone mad.

“Serve, Hyotei Echizen!”

Ryoma closes his eyes, opens them. He feels the ball under his palm and tosses the ball in the air.

The ball is so foreign after all these months. Victory is not.

The humming inside his head cackles madly.

What a naughty boy you are, the voice comes, amused and sleek, What happens to naughty boys, Ryoma? Hmm?

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Something changes when Echizen opens his eyes and tosses the ball. Keigo feels it because he feels his burning anger being replaced with something cold.

He has seen that smile before. Many times, and yet it was different. He would not have forgotten a smile so devious, so taunting, no matter how many years would have passed; it riled him up too much, reminded him of his own smirk and confidence. He had seen that serve in a tiebreak that had once obstructed his path at glory and later on in glowing, frozen TV screens as the rest of Japan was bent forth wondering who would be the new rising tennis star. But this.

Echizen was many things. Never had he smiled so cruelly in Keigo’s memory. Never had he thrown a serve as a form of attack and slammed the racket frame as if his life depended on it.

Echizen serves. His serve is fast and powerful, and it is the exact copy of the opponent’s serve.

Fudomine’s player stands dumbly for a moment. He whips his head to see where the ball had landed. No, Keigo amends, the serve was faster. It was better.

“Fluke!” Kakuke snaps, loud enough for Keigo to hear. Echizen’s smile is still on his lips and he shrugs. He tosses the ball again. And in no time:

“Game, Hyotei! 1 game to 4!”

The Hyotei stand is still deadly silent, but for different reasons this time; they are utterly transfixed. They know that the tide had changed. And suddenly, Keigo knows what to do.

“Well, what are you doing?” he says, in his cool and demanding voice, “Have you forgotten our call?”

They all stand, rigid. They raise their legs.

They stomp madly and holler. They shout their warring cry.

“Hyotei! Hyotei! Hyotei!”
Keigo crosses his arms and watches.

When Echizen tosses the ball, it is a swift and sharp rise, and when the racket smacks the toss, it is just as cutting and precise. It cuts through air.

The Fudomine player doesn’t know what hits him, as the serve goes on.

They change service lines. The opponent is fuming.

“Fluke!” he screams at Echizen, his face red. The referee gives him a sharp whistle blow. Echizen only waits for him to serve.

Serve that Fudomine kid does; Echizen returns it, as if the first four sets had been nothing more than a show. He returns it as easily as he had not done before. The balls flounder and turn, and Echizen returns each with a very precise aim. The balls wheeze past.

“Is that the Tezuka Zone?” Shishido mutters besides him, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. “It’s been awhile since we’ve seen that.”

Keigo is about to affirm this, but soon he blinks his eyes and slowly shakes his head. “I…no,” he says, half to himself, “He’s running around the court. Tezuka uses the Zone to gravitate the ball towards him. But Echizen—he’s…”

“He’s using his right hand,” Oshitari comments dryly, “I think we’ve all forgotten what a cocky brat Echizen had been. Good to know some things hadn’t changed.”

Keigo remembers the coldness in Echizen’s eyes and does not reply to that.

There is no need to see the rest of the game. Echizen is playing and toying with the fuming boy, as he staggers around the court.

“Game, Hyotei Echizen! 6 games to 4!”

The crowd is roaring and frenzy with glee. It was a victory that was unexpected, a victory that would get them one step closer to the regionals. Around him, the name Echizen is in an uproar, and Coach Tanaki is all smiles, looking very relieved.

“I’m glad he came to his senses at least,” he says, rubbing his glasses and waving towards Echizen. Echizen walks over to them, his smirk gone and his blank face intact. “Good god, Echizen! You gave us all such a scare—“

“What the fuck,” Mukahi interrupts, and around them, the cheering is suspended for a moment as the redhead shoves his doubles partner over. He points an accusing finger at Echizen, now in front of the benches. He had hardly sweated, Keigo notes. “What were you playing at, you brat? You could have beaten him from the start! What was the big idea, then?”

Echizen mutely assesses Mukahi. His nonchalance is back, as is his inertia, as is his emotionless persona. He shrugs. “I thought he would’ve been stronger,” he says.

Mukahi doesn’t buy that. He sneers and crosses his arms. “Look, it’s all great you’ve won and everything, but you gave us a fright. Next time, if you can take someone down, take that kid down, will you?”

“Gakuto,” Oshitari intervenes, his hand around Mukahi’s shoulder warningly, “He did well, don’t berate him so.”
“I’m not berating him,” Mukahi says in a huff, “I’m saying that he should leave the suspense showing-offs to our captain.”

At this, Echizen’s eyes survey towards Keigo; Keigo meets those hardened gold eyes without a flinch and levels a look back.

“Heh,” Echizen drawls out, not very amused, “Were you scared I was going to lose?”

Before Keigo could answer to that, Echizen goes on. His voice is flat and dismissive. “And of course I’m not going to just bulldoze someone I didn’t even know. That’s how you lost earlier, right, senpai? Because you underestimated your enemy and didn’t know he was a stamina player.”

Mukahi sputters. Echizen blinks, faux-innocence, and gives out a slow smirk. There are remaining edges of the cruelty Keigo had seen in the courts.

“I’ll head off to the bleachers then,” he says, and doesn’t wait for an answer. He turns away and slithers back up the steps and is swallowed by the great body that is the Hyotei tennis team.

“What an anticlimactic boy,” Oshitari says cheerfully, and shrugs to Keigo. “I think that’s your call, Atobe. Make it count, hmmm?”

“When have I not?” Keigo shoots back; but his eyes follow up the steps that Echizen has left behind.

Throughout the rest of Keigo’s match, he slices his opponent with a blissful air of victory, and Fudomine crumbles at their feet. After Echizen, it is such an easy victory; if one knew where Echizen would head off, it was easy to predict the enemy’s downfall so easily.

It was a shame that Coach Tanaki was right after all. Echizen’s match did matter.

Keigo thinks back to Echizen’s serve, his rallies, and his final shot. Of course Echizen was holding back, but that wasn’t what rankled Keigo so.

Perhaps he should take heed of Coach Tanaki’s advice and watch Echizen’s Junior Wimbledon matches.

Chapter End Notes

Urgh I want Ryoma's backstory and angst to be (semi) over so I can make him snark with the rest of the Hyotei team and have some sexual tension with Keigo!!!!!!

The woes of a long multi-chapter .....
Chapter 8

“I want you to play me, Echizen,” Taki says a week later, as soon as he sees Ryoma.

Ryoma takes the books out of Taki’s firm hands and raises an eyebrow, nodding at the Silence Please sign. Taki takes no heed of this, however, and continues in an equally loud voice, “Or all of us—I mean us subregulars—, really. This is getting ridiculous. Everyone knows you’re a nationals player. No, wait. Everyone knows that you’re a world ranking player. It doesn’t make sense—or at least, I don’t think—“

“Library, Taki-senpai,” Ryoma finally interrupts, with an edge in his voice. Around them, students are giving them looks.

“Oh.” Taki straightens up from the counter and tucks a strand of hair over his ear. He frowns to hide his embarrassment. “I’m sorry,” he says, quieter. He coughs. “Sorry—I just. But…erm, so. Yes. I do want you to play me. And the rest of the subregulars. It’s only fair.”

It’s been a week since the Fudomine matches. Everyone is jubilant and talking about how Atobe’s last game was proof that this year was indeed, Hyotei’s year and that Atobe was invincible. Some first years, out of Kazuhi’s vicinity, even came up to Ryoma to congratulate him on a victory well won, and with some tentative smiles, suggest that he aim himself for the official regulars position next time. All this Ryoma accepted without fanfare and a small nod, a curt dismissal. All this Ryoma accepted without Atobe’s presence, and he thought that Atobe would leave him alone—and that was also true. Atobe did not summon him, or confront him about his victory, or how he went about it, even though Mukahi was giving him glares and loud jibes that Ryoma mostly tuned out. He still had his low ranking number. And he thought that would be the end of it.

When he thought back to the match with Fudomine, there was no grand master plan behind it. He had wanted a victory and he knew that he could have won it. It was a child’s play compared to the steely postures that he had faced just last year. These player were untrained and unclipped amateurs, of course Ryoma could plummet them. But now here was Taki, with his hardcover books that Ryoma suspects as a cover, and looking at him with those serious eyes.

He tries to cough up a good response to this. “I don’t play anymore,” he finally settles. He makes sure his voice is barely audible, so that Taki must strain over the counter to hear him. “I have library duties too, senpai, and I’m not interested in…becoming a regular.”

Taki frowns deeper. He doesn’t look angry about his refusal, though, and lets out a small sigh, fiddling with the covers of his newly checked out books. “Atobe did tell me it would be a bad idea,” he says wearily, and at this Ryoma narrows his eyes. Since when did monkey king know anything about my thoughts? “But I thought—wait no. I think Atobe is wrong on this matter. If you truly didn’t care, Echizen—” And Taki’s head snaps up, his eyes fierce. “—I don’t think you would still be in the club at all. There is a resignation form, you know.”

“….The coach would have just dragged me back in,” Ryoma points out. Taki gives a little shake of his head.

“And you would just as quickly gone back out.” He says, and gives a small twitch when Ryoma
frowns at him. “I remember your match with Atobe, you know. I was the one keeping the scores.” He hesitates, and continues on, “Do... do you know Shishido? The one with the cropped hair and the blue hat? Looks very vicious and shouts a lot, although I don’t think he had any incidents this year—but.”

“He plays doubles,” Ryoma says slowly, “...with... the tall sophomore.”

“Ootori,” Taki supplies with a small smile, “Yes, him. I lost to him once. When we were in middle school. I haven’t been on the regular ever since.”

Ryoma stays silent.

“So I always saw everything from the sidelines,” Taki goes on, his voice quiet and serious, but losing his earlier incessant tone, “It’s very odd to be an observer in this team, you know. No one wants to do it; they all want the spotlight here. That’s what defines Hyotei—I think. But there are some perks to seeing everything. You get a clear sense of where this team is going to go and how far.” Taki lets out a deep breath. “Frankly, I want to go to the nationals. I don’t think we can go without another player to back Atobe up. Or vice versa—mayhap Atobe would be the one to support you, who knows.”

Ryoma looks at Taki sharply at this. Taki meets his eyes and gives out a little shrug and a small smile.


Around them, everything is so deadly silent.

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Keigo finally gets around to seeing the matches.

Coach Tanaki has them all recorded; he had blushed a dull red when Keigo thumbed the labeled recordings without a word. “I have Tezuka-kun’s matches too, I think,” he mumbled, “If you’re so inclined.”

“Thank you,” Keigo had said mildly, “I think I’ll pass on his.” He brought them back to his screening room, where he now sits, pushing each recording in chorological order, from the preliminaries to the semi-finals, when Echizen had played Roger Schmidt, a half-Japanese player who played for Germany.

The first matches were typical of the boy: Keigo sees a pattern of Echizen’s Twist Serves and his Cool Drives, his specialties and his form of attack. Those moves Keigo was all too familiar with in his own matches. So Echizen had not really changed before the tournaments. Keigo skims and fast-forwards the first few sets with a frown.
The crowd is screaming with frenzied glee inside his head. The Fudomine player is red faced; he shouts Fluke! Fluke! Over and over again but all Echizen does is smile. Keigo cannot get the smile out of his mind. It is sharp and vicious, white teeth and glinting. Echizen was about to devour his opponent and crush him. He was not about to show him any mercy.

*What was that look?*

Echizen had never been a predator on the hunt.

The first real matches set in the Wimbledon courts are when Echizen’s serves changes.

He does not use the Twist Serve anymore. Keigo sees Echizen toss the ball with his left hand and the ball forms a straight line right above his head, and Echizen slams the ball midway against the frame of his racket right in the middle. The ball cuts through across the net and lands straight towards the opponent’s floundering racket. The racket cannot even skim past the ball.

Echizen’s returns and rallies are very straightforward and nothing to note about. Keigo does not see how Echizen tosses of cuts through the balls, but only sees the boy’s face as the match progresses. Echizen has bags under his eyes and he constantly looks tired, but there is at first a grim setting of his mouth, then later the flat lips begin to morph into a small smile that shows teeth. Later on, still, Keigo sees how Echizen’s opponents stumble and fall to their knees, frothing in the mouth. Almost like Yukimura’s *yips*. But their faces do not convey horror or fear; they only convey anger. The opponent’s hands and knees twitch.

*Muscles spasm*, Keigo notes.

What is interesting is that Echizen’s scores, as Coach Tanaki had noted, is constantly 6-0. He does not miss a single point, and he plays, as if bored by the whole process of playing. He swings his racket in a faux-careless manner and hits the ball like a plaything, but everything is meant to pass across the net.

During a time out, Echizen walks out of the court and heads over to the benches, and Keigo does a double start when he sees who Echizen’s coach is. He was broad shouldered, his blond hair very tidy and swept out of his face on the camera screen, his blue eyes very bright and assessing Echizen’s condition with a small smile.

James Browing had hung himself in his hotel room last year, a timeline that coincided neatly with Echizen’s sudden disappearance in the tennis world. But on screen, the young coach’s face is radiant and very calm, as he hands Echizen a bottle of water and they sit side by side. There is no death lurking upon the coach’s eyes as he talks to Echizen. Echizen’s head is down, nodding mutely at whatever Browing is saying, and the opponent on the other side is being severely penalizing by his own coach.

The camera zooms in and out of Echizen’s face, the commenters’ words ringing in Keigo’s ears.

“What is next for this young Japanese boy?” the voice booms. “How far will he go? There has never been a play style like his, not even from his father, the late Nanjirōh Echizen. What a star. What a bright future this boy will have if he wins the tournament.”

Those eyes that flickered to the camera once, and head back down. Echizen dismisses the furtive lens of the camera.

How cold those eyes looked.
They all see the matches a few days later.

“Taki challenged Echizen to a match,” Shishido tells him in passing, furrowing his eyebrows. “And all the subregulars. I asked him about him, and he just said it was the only way Hyotei would win the nationals.” He looks helplessly at Atobe. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“He’s going to lose, of course,” Keigo says wearily, thinking how Taki was an idiot. He had been staying up for the past few nights, catching up on the last few matches that Echizen had played, his style growing more vicious with every set, his serves and returns colder and more inhumane. Keigo still doesn’t know what to make of that.

(The Pinnacle of Perfection was a door that Echizen had achieved first amongst them all. He sees it with his own eyes when he is fourteen and had lost to the brat just a few days earlier, and he sees how effortlessly Echizen returns the ball that the Child of God had sliced towards him with a grin. It was done in such a breezy manner that Keigo felt like the rally was a form of staged art, the way Yukimura and Echizen hit the ball back and forth, a stretch of a ball, never stopping. Yukimura was growing desperate, but Echizen. The boy was smiling.

Years later, the same victory smile is etched upon the boy’s face in the videos, but the innocent grin is gone, replaced with malice and a glint that Keigo does not like.)

“He is,” Shishido affirms, “What is that idiot thinking?”

“He wants Hyotei to win and go to the nationals,” Keigo says, “As you said. Really, Shishido, do I have to translate everything for you?”

Shishido scowls at him. “You said just the other week that we didn’t need Echizen to actually win,” he spits out, his hands balled up into fists. “If you think that’s true, maybe you should stop this. Our next match towards regionals is going to be—“

“I was wrong,” Keigo cuts in, intentionally toneless and bland, “I was wrong about Echizen and about our team. We need him, you saw what happened with Fudomine. It would certainly take off a great load off my—why are you looking at me like that?”

“You just said,” Shishido repeats slowly, “That you were wrong.”

Keigo sighs and rubs his head with the palm of his head. “Yes, do gloat all you want, Ryou,” he sneers, “I was wrong and Echizen would surely help us win the nationals. If the brat is even considering a spot.”

Shishido is looking at him, all at once lost and mystic. “But why is Taki doing this?” he says.

Shishido is a rough person. He will understand many things: for example, he will understand that he will never be as good as Keigo in tennis, but he accepts that position in his life and will support Keigo’s Singles position with his own victory so that he may pass along the line to his captain. He will strive to always win, and if he doesn’t, he will train harder and fight harder. Shishido Ryou is a fighter; he was arrogant once when he was younger and brasher, but after he had experienced loss once, he was prideful and arrogant enough to think that he would not experience that feeling again if he trained hard enough. He was not so prideful enough as to ignore the help of his
underclassman, and he was not as proud to bend his knee in public and cut off his hair. In a way, then, Shishido Ryou knows the bitter taste of failure, and accepts this enough to fight against it.

But that’s just it—Shishido will always be the protagonist in his own stage of failures and victories. He must play and he must support the team in some way. He must grovel if he must, he would be publically humiliated if needs arise, but he will crawl back to the spotlight and fight with his teeth and blood.

Taki was never as an aggressive fighter as Shishido. Taki had once accepted defeat from Shishido with a calm dignity that Shishido had never managed, because Taki knew what was best for the team. In the end, Shishido is a fighter; Taki is a strategist.

Keigo looks at Shishido, his blazing eyes and ferocious face. He allows a small smirk. “Not everyone wants the title of the regular, Shishido,” he says, “Not if it’s going to let the team down.”

Shishido just stares at him, but Keigo does not elaborate further.

And so, here they are: the courts are surrounded by people, but all is silent as Echizen steps into the court, with his thin shoulders and stick legs. Across from him the subregulars, from grim-faced Taki to sullen Kazuhi, they all line up against him. Even Kazuhi does not venture out anything snide; Taki must have talked to him earlier.

They stand in position, all lined up against the edge of the courts as each of them step up into the court. Echizen looks impassive.

Taki starts off; he tosses the ball and serves. Echizen hits it back without even bothering to see the ball.

And on it goes. It begins. No one speaks.

Echizen’s tennis is grave and very vicious. It is beautiful and nothing Keigo has ever seen.

His subregulars all fall, one by one, in corpses. One is a power player and his smack is nullified by Echizen’s hit. Another is a volley specialist and Echizen demolishes the curve into a limp form. And yet another is good at everything and Echizen only gives him a sharp little smile and gives him a shot that makes his racket fall out. They all fall under a swing and crumble to their knees.

It is destructive. It is awful. It is grotesquely bedazzling and Keigo cannot take his eyes off the younger boy.

Kazuhi is hit the hardest; his serve is smashed at the first swing, and Kazuhi is left gaping at the dent Echizen had made in his racket. He sputters and closes his mouth. He twists and on his face Keigo sees unfiltered shame and rage. What a child still, Keigo thinks, as Kazuhi stomps off the court without a word, as if he really thought he had a chance.

No one takes a point.

When the games are all up, Echizen walks out of the court, and around him are disheveled limbs and bodies scattered around. They have yet to get up and all are covering their eyes with their arms. Their shame is private and very collective; Echizen has not even broken a sweat.

Echizen doesn’t pause in front of him when he exits the courts through the bleachers but merely breezes past with another cool glance, and the smallest size of the tennis uniform barely fits him; his arms are too wiry and his shoulders are too bony. He was a small kid and he grew up into a lanky and thin one. He was a cocky runt that turned into a cold monster.
The rage that would later help him win all his games, that vast and ugly thing, he first felt it when he was twelve.

It’s the nationals and the sun is hot. The night before, it had suddenly rained out of the blue, and the matches had been postponed. They fought two matches that hot afternoon, one doubles and one singles. It was the match against Hyotei, and Ryoma was to play Atobe.

Atobe stood up when the crowd cheered for him. On his face there was an air of serenity and a casual raise of an eyebrow. He had crossed his legs, almost bored by his turn as he ushered in a blond boy and gestured for the crowd to go on. He was not looking at Ryoma.

_Echizen, Tezuka_ voice echoed inside his memory, but he ignored it then.

He snapped his fingers.

He had expected Atobe to be furious, or at least peeved; instead, Atobe turned to him with a little smile and a look that made his blood boil—it was a look that he remembered when he was very young, a look that Ryoga had often tossed to him in sunny California, their backyard awash with the smell of bitter grass. He is on his knees and his racket is on the ground.

_Aw, Chibisuke_, he heard Ryoga’s words echoing in his ear, _You’re so cute! You think you can actually beat me!!!_

Atobe’s eyes dismissed him and told him facts that he already knew.

_You’re not even close to Tezuka level yet_, Atobe had observed.

_So?_

The razor was clutched in his hand after his match, his blood boiling.

_But of course I’m not Tezuka_, a voice rang out, _Of course not. But one day I will be better than him, just like one day I will win my old man._

Atobe was good, Ryoma admitted to himself, as the match wore on; no, he was more than good. His tennis was flawless and desperate and nothing like Tezuka would ever hit to him. He had played Tezuka once, goddamn it—it was like playing against a vast ocean that was only calm and endless.

Atobe, he played like fire. One step closer to the net, and he thought he would shrivel. Atobe’s eyes were burning; each hit across the net was a chore to fend off as their tiebreak continued.

_You will never beat me_, Atobe shouted to him across the net, his voice frenzied. And Ryoma almost believed him. Perhaps not today, he had thought, perhaps not.

But he had, and the razor clutched in his fist, as he sauntered over across the over side of the net and walked towards the fallen king was a mixture of pure glee and euphoria.
Atobe was not Ryoga—he had never defeated his brother. But.

Someone called him to stop. He did not listen. He stared back at the listless eyes that were unblinking, the azure eyes that showed him an ocean.

*What will you say, monkey king,* he thought, razor whirling in place, as the crowd and the noise dissipated, his senses only for Atobe, *when you wake up and see how you hair is.*

Later they will ask him why he went through with the bet. It was a childish bet on a whim, and Atobe was surely not serious when he offered his hair as a prize. They ask him why it mattered.

*That’s just the thing,* Ryoma wants to say, *he offered Tezuka an arm when they fought. He dismissed me with his hair even after I beat Sanada.*

But he does not know how to say that without leashing out his anger. He shrugged.

(Later, when he got his memories back just before his final showdown: he blinked at Atobe across the net and saw the hair intact; he slowly smiled and drawled, *Heh, nice wig, monkey king,* and strangely, Atobe did not call him out on it. He had merely raised his eyebrows and turned away.

*You better show a tolerable performance with the Child of God, Echizen,* he had only said, and had twitched a smile. *Not that I expect any less from you.*

He doubts Atobe would remember this. It was a spur of the moment, the final game in the nationals. Everything was at stake; everyone had a right to be a little senile.)

James saw that rage the first time they met; he laughed and touched his arm, gripped his chin and made him see into cold fish eyes.

*What a star you will make,* he had said sweetly, *what a dazzling star, Ryoma.*

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Hiyoshi hands him his new regulars uniform.

“Not there,” Hiyoshi sighs, pained, when he sees Ryoma stepping over across the court and into the large clubhouse, “That’s for the club members. The regular’s clubhouse is this way.” He scowls, as if it was personally painful for him to lead Ryoma into the hut of the privileged and the gifted. Ryoma mentally rolls his eyes but follows the older boy silently. The rest look onwards, their wary, assessing eyes.

“This it the card that’s going to swipe you in.” Hiyoshi gestures to the door entrance as he waves a card in front of Ryoma; he is saying all this with a mumble, and Ryoma has to strain to hear him, “This is going to be the shower rooms, next over there is the lockers, that’s the lounge—“

“Why,” Ryoma cuts in, and Hiyoshi falls silent, giving him a withering glare, “is there a sofa in the middle of the clubhouse?”

Hiyoshi looks like he wants to sneer, but one look at the inviting leather sofa sitting stark middle in
the lounge makes him bite his lips. He looks torn between wanting to defend his captain whom he personally does not like and sneering at the audacity of Ryoma’s question. “Atobe-buchou’s preferences,” he mutters, “he built this just before he came over to high school.”

Ryoma just stares at the sofa, dumbfounded.

“Regulars don’t have a fixed schedule,” Hiyoshi continues in his gritted monotone, “But that doesn’t mean you can get easy and laid back. You’re going to play matches once a week with the regulars and the subregulars, check in at the ball machines at least twice a week and—” here Hiyoshi finally curls his lips and makes a show of looking at Ryoma up and down, “You obviously have to go to the gym.”

Ryoma frowns. “I do?” he intones flatly.

“You’re too thin,” Hiyoshi says without missing a beat, “You need to gain more muscle for your serves, and your legs are too adolescent. You don’t look like you can hit up a good serve.” Hiyoshi pauses and twitches. “Contrary to all our expectations.”

“I won my matches with my adolescent legs, thanks,” Ryoma says. Hiyoshi sneers and opens his mouth, but before Ryoma can hear what he has to say, the clubhouse door opens.

“Hiyoshi you’re here already!!—and Echizen.”

Mukahi is a bouncing senior, and his dislike of Ryoma is plastered all across his face as he glares at Ryoma. Ryoma meets his eyes evenly.

“….Urgh.” Mukahi averts his eyes dismissively and stomps over to the locker room and calls out, irritated, “Yuushi! Stop lurking in the entrance and get in here!”

“I think I lost my card key again,” Oshitari answers back evenly, and steps into the door. Hiyoshi gives a little bow and Ryoma follows it without thought. “Oh, Hiyoshi, you’re here. And Echizen.” Oshitari’s smile is closed but without malice, as he tilts his head and observes him. “Quite a match you played against the subregulars,” he comments.

Ryoma doesn’t know what to answer to that except, “…Thank you.”

“Yuuuuuuushi!!!!”

“Coming, coming.” And with another not-so-smile at both Hiyoshi and Ryoma, he too, heads off to the locker rooms. Hiyoshi stares at the pair before giving off a small sigh. Ryoma doesn’t think Hiyoshi meant it to come off as exasperated. He holds his silence.

“We also have regular lunches together,” Hiyoshi says after a moment, “But that’s just your preference. Obviously you don’t have to—” He stops, and bites his lips. He looks frustrated as he runs a hand over his hair and glares beyond Ryoma. “…You don’t have to,” he continues, in a quieter voice, and he sounds somewhat resigned and tired, “Just show up for practice and pretend you’re hitting the balls. Or something. People talk here.”

Ryoma watches Hiyoshi resolutely not looking back at him.

“Okay,” he finally offers. The new regular uniform is new and laundered. The small nauseates him.

Hiyoshi is still staring at the wall as he addresses him. “You hit a really sharp serve,” he says after a while, “I guess it makes things more interesting after all.”
Ryoma narrows his eyes and here, Hiyoshi finally turns his eyes to him. Hiyoshi is wearing a small smirk that makes his eyes lighten.

“You don’t think you’ll be completely undefeated here, do you?” Hiyoshi asks lightly. “Just a matter of time.”

“And you’re saying you will?” Ryoma asks, raising an eyebrow.

Hiyoshi just continues to stare at him with that small smirk. Strangely, Ryoma relishes in this familiar hostility. He allows a smirk of his own and shrugs.

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Keigo hears it from Mukahi later in stuttered indignation.

“I saw him,” Mukahi would repeat like a broken record, over and over again, “I saw him! Okay, Atobe, fuck, I saw him, but all he said was that he was going to teach the kid a lesson. I thought it was tennis! I thought it was a match! Yuushi, tell him I didn’t mean it!”

Oshitari is still then, as he stares at Atobe with inaccessible eyes. Atobe does not see the pair in front of him as his head is white.

“That’s beyond even your level of stupidity,” he says in a faraway voice, “Of course he wouldn’t challenge Echizen to a match. He lost once, didn’t he?”

It is raining. The night had passed and a new day dawns. The sun is about to set, and Echizen is missing.

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“Oi, Echizen.”

Kazuhi leans against the courts as Ryoma picks up the remaining balls scattered across the courts. Strangely, he does not look aggressive, but almost cheerful. “The captain wants to see you.”

Ryoma straightens himself and frowns at the remaining balls that he has to pick up. Kazuhi follows his trail of vision. “Let some other first years pick that up,” he says casually, “You’re a regular, aren’t you?” He offers the title with a light jibe, and even laughs a little. Ryoma slowly turns to him with narrowed eyes.

He is still bad at reading people. When he was younger, he thought that this was unnecessary, that all he must do is to step up the courts to a showdown, and after a game, everything would be set to ground zero. He did not care for off-court interactions. He soon realized that most people did not think this.
Kazuhi was typical of most people that he had encountered: a cruel braggart who would stalk the empty courts and declare his skills superb. This smiling, twitching Kazuhi was not in Ryoma’s equation.

He thinks about it for a minute, then shrugs. He sets down the ball basket. “Okay,” he says, and walks towards the older boy.

Kazuhi watches him, almost hungrily, his black eyes glittering strangely. The sun is lowered in the sky, and the silhouette of the boy’s frame is set alit and red as Ryoma comes closer. Kazuki turns around, and they walk silently, Ryoma right behind him.

The Hyotei school grounds are large. Inside the school grounds, there are signposts that point to where each building is located, a full running ground track, tennis indoor courts and a swimming pool. Ryoma had seen all this in the brochures that his mother had left for him, but he was only interested in the main building and the tennis courts. Kazuhi leads him to a new part of the school that Ryoma had not explored before, from the big, paved main roads of the school to the smaller, twisted paths. The grounds are cobbled and vines twist in the small arches.

“It’s a shortcut to the captain’s hideaway,” Kazuhi says, when Ryoma stumbles a little as he follows behind. Ryoma is leery of how calm Kazuhi sounds, a very unfamiliar tone on the boy. He walks without hesitation in front of him, taking no note of how dark the path is growing due to the setting sun and also the bigger overarching trees. “It’s behind the school gardens.”

“Hideaway?” Ryoma repeats, not really expecting an answer, but Kazuhi takes this as a cue to look over Ryoma and give him a queer smile.

“Well, you wouldn’t expect our captain to mingle with the rest of us, do you?” He says evenly, almost kindly, as if Ryoma was simple and stupid. Ryoma suppresses a scowl. If Kazuhi was going to be cordial, then he supposed he could manage to play along. He falls silent.

The walk is convoluted and the school gardens are in disarray, the more they walk. They pass a few more building walls until they walk across a little clearing. The path curves upward and the path is more ragged. It seems that no one tends to these parts of the grounds.

An alarm bell rushed down Ryoma’s spine. It is his voice this time, ringing inside his head. *Why does this feel so familiar?*

“Is this really the right way?” Ryoma finally asks, and in his ears the foreboding question sounds horribly cliché and bland against his ears.

“Of course it is,” Kazuhi says, now with a touch of impatience, “Atobe-buchou doesn’t want anyone to find this place out, of course.” He pauses. “Well, everyone except for the tennis members.”

They walk to a small clearing after the small climb, and Ryoma is taken aback at the small shed standing in the middle of this small plain. The shed—there was no other word for it, for it looked like a small room held together by passable walls and a small door—was strangely tidy, but nothing glamorous, and certainly, Ryoma felt, nothing Atobe himself would have built.

Kazuhi stands next to him, shifting his feet back and forth. He says, a little impatiently, “Well? He’s waiting for you.”

Ryoma stares at the small, homely shed. It is all very strange, almost surreal, he thinks. He is thinking of another enclosed space, another blackness. He is thinking of—
“Hey.” Kazuhi snaps his fingers, and Ryoma blinks. “It’s not good to keep the captain waiting, you know.” There was a new edge to his voice, Ryoma thinks. He is suddenly aware of how the trees are thick in this side of the school grounds and how they close around him. The sun is almost about to set down and it is soon dark.

Ryoma says slowly, “What’s so important that he couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

Atobe had, after all, kept his distance ever since his match with Fudomine. It had been Hiyoshi who had given him the uniform, and ever since then, for the past couple of days, he had skipped the regular lunchtimes, preferring his place in the school rooftops with his headphones, napping or staring up at the sky. He had only seen Atobe in small glimpses and had been content with that.

Kazuhi shrugs. “You don’t really question Atobe-buchou here, you know,” he says tersely, “Really, Echizen, you’re so reproachful of everything. You’re a twisted little shit, you know that? Maybe that’s why you’re not fit out for the big league yet.”

Ryoma slowly turns to him. Kazuhi meets his eyes and even smiles.

“Your brother,” he continues, when Ryoma stays silent, “He’s the one who’s going to compete in the U.S. Open, isn’t he? There must be reason the Samurai chose him over a former prodigy—“

“That’s,” Ryoma cuts in coldly, “really none of your business.”

Kazuhi pauses, and the smile is intact. “It really isn’t,” Kazuhi agrees easily, to Ryoma small surprise, “I’m just pointing out, Echizen, you’re too wary over stupid things. Atobe-buchou called you here. Must’ve been a reason.” He nods to the humble, closed door. “Go on, he’s been waiting since classes ended. Must be something important.”

*Atobe wouldn’t do this*, Ryoma thinks somewhere inside his mind. Atobe would not call him without notice and relay a message to this upperclassman who hates Ryoma. Atobe isn’t an idiot.

But like a lamb, he walks slowly towards the shed and opens the door. He does not hear Kazuhi following him.

The room is what Ryoma expects it to be when he takes the first steps inside. It is cozy, but not well kept, as if no one had come here for some time. There is a tattered mat against the corner of one wall, and a chair that is empty.

The room is empty.

A cold chill spikes up Ryoma’s spine, and just before he can whirl around to get of the small shed that is dark, the door behind him closes with a snap.

He turns around and lunges to the door, turns on the handle. It does not budge. Before he can register the complete and total darkness, Kazuhi’s voice rings out from the other side.

“Take some time to cool your head down in that shed, little rookie. No one comes around to this part of the school grounds, not even the watchman.” There is a guffaw and a thump against the door. “Take as much time as you need. You have all fucking night.”
The room is dark.

At first Ryoma closes his eyes. He should scream. But even as he tries to open his mouth to do just that, a great and terrifying lump wells up his throat and he is unable to utter a word. There is complete despair inside him.

Help, he thinks. His mind screams. Help, help, help.

His closed eyes offer him solitude and a delusion that he is voluntarily inside this room; but soon he feels the stale air and the chill, as well as the four walls engulfing him. They enclose around him and the walls are ominous with their silence.

The weight of his cutter knife. It is still there, he thinks blindly. Think, Echizen. Don’t lose focus.

He fills his mind with his voice. Because—because—

He grapples his fingers inside his pocket and the small and thin object is warm against the palm of his hand. He grips it. I have a way out, he chants. His knees wobble; he staggers down onto the floor. The cold cement floor penetrates through his thin shorts as he sits down. He feels his hands shaking.

The voice must not coo to him. It must not emerge.

He presses the small slide button and the knife blade slides out silently. Ryoma feels the sliding and gently feels the sharp point with the tip of his finger. He wants to press down, but—

Not yet, a voice whispers; not his voice, but the voice that is older and amused, cooler, not yet, Ryoma. We have all night to do so, don’t we? You heard that ratty boy. No one is going to come.

It is here he regains his voice and screams. The name comes unbidden to him; he pleads.

James. Let me out. James.

No one comes.
James Browning was the best tennis coach in the junior league circuit that year, and Nanjiroh had been very lucky to get him. It was James, with his winning smile and blue eyes, who had first approached Nanjiroh and shaken his hand, exclaiming about the great Samurai and his winning serves. This was all under the blazing Californian sun, where Nanjiroh had been loitering around the palm trees and trying to sneak away for a drink.

“Yes, well, they did help me win a few sets, back in the days,” Naijiroh had replied, fake modesty betrayed with his shit-faced grin, and was treated out for lunch. By the end of the meal, James was Ryoma’s new coach for the season and Nanjiroh had been very proud of himself.

“See boy, that’s what a father does—he makes things happen, you know!” Nanjiroh exclaimed that night, thumping Ryoma on the back and making him scowl.

“Che,” Ryoma muttered, “I thought he was supposed to be the best. Why would he ask you first?”

“It must be all about my never-ending charms, eh?” Nanjiroh says with a straight face, and cackles madly a second later. ‘What do you say, dear?’

“I’ll say your rice is getting cold and the trash still hasn’t been sorted out,” Rinko said mildly. “But good for you. Ryoma, what do you say to your father?”

“I didn’t need a coach,” Ryoma muttered, shoving a spoonful of rice and making a face, “Could win without one.”

Ryoga is with them at the table; he offers a broad grin when Ryoma looks his way and twirls his chopsticks in the air and wags his eyebrows. “I don’t know about that, chibisuke,” he singsonged, “from what I can tell from your smashes, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

Ryoma scowled at him, but he did not deny that a coach—any coach, really—would be better than his loitering old man.

He met Browning the next day. He was thin and rakish, with a smile curling about his lips as he surveyed Ryoma. His eyes were unsmiling. They dissected him, Ryoma thought, stared at him as if he were a curious specimen.

“Ah,” he said after a pause, and he looked at Nanjiroh as he said his words. “The Samurai’s son.” It was a curt dismissal in Ryoma’s ears.

In America, Ryoma did not know yet what he wanted—he only had victories against middle school boys up his sleeve and the Japan Nationals to show for his tennis. He did not know yet whether he wanted something more—but he did know that his stage would be bigger than the one he had
played. He had wanted to play in Wimbledon.

He wondered if Browing had seen all that, seen his ambition in his eyes when he dismissed Ryoma. He had never thought to ask.

Later, memories would converge and dilute him: his first impression of Browing would always be marred by what he would know after about his coach. He would forever be biased. Later, when reporters and policemen alike would ask him, *but why you? Why did Browing choose you? he really had no answer to give all of them.*

So he will go along with his overall impression of Browing. He had always thought that Browing was a cold, dead man.

Browning suggested that Ryoma join the other competitors from Europe to train in London, and within a week, his suitcases were packed and Karupin was mewling incessantly at him whenever he tried to get out of the house.

“She’s going to miss you,” Rinko said with a small laugh.

Ryoga was silent and smiling throughout the whole ordeal, and Ryoma could not help but ask him, “Why aren’t you playing in Wimbledon?” he must have pouted when he said that, perhaps even a bit peevish, because Ryoga laughed and his eyes grew comically wide as he answered loudly that he had no idea his chibisuke brother worried so much about his big brother’s welfare and whatnot, etc. all in such a loud voice that Ryoma did not think to ask again. He had never received his answer anyhow. But before Ryoma was about to board the plane, Ryoga stopped him for a brief second, called him by his birth name. Ryoga had never done that.

“Ryoma,” he said, and he paused, and that pause gave Browing permission to push him gently through the boarding gate.

On the plan ride, Browing had inspected Ryoma with a constant smile and a dismissal, “Call me James, young Samurai,” as if everything with them was a joke. He had not taken much attention to Ryoma then, did not even see Ryoma play and Ryoma was irritated and even angry throughout the entire ride, because he was traveling across the ocean for a chance to play in one of the more intense tennis competitions in the world, and here was this lanky man ignoring him as if he had no desire to teach Ryoma anything. Ryoma didn’t even know whether this man’s reputation was a fluke, did not know why he was so coveted in the first place. He did not know if Browing knew just how good he was.

“When are we going to practice?” he asked, and Browing answered something airily, and did not look at him at all throughout the plane ride, the first days in London. Browing did not give him a full answer to his question at first.

Not until they were at a court and Browing swung his racket between his thumb and forefinger and smiled at Ryoma, saying mildly, “So, let’s see what you’re made of then, hmm?” Not until Ryoma had his blood boiling even as he was finally twisting up a smirk as he got ready to serve. He remembered all the almost-forgotten names back in Japan, the better players who had scorned him,
and that rage came back as he served a sharp Twist Serve. Browning returned it easily.

And so, not until did they play a full set did Browning call the game to a halt and laughed, his laughter this time altogether different, cold and amused, as he tapped Ryoma’s shoulder with his racket, “Little Samurai,” he said, “Of course I saw your matches. I’ve seen you play. No need to show off for me.” And Ryoma had stared at him, almost perplexed at the cold smile and the deadened eyes, as Browning stared right back at him.

“You’re tennis lack too many things,” Browning had said, his words flung out by the wind and entering Ryoma’s ears like a cooing promise, “But I see a lot of potential there. Surely. We’ll make something out of you yet.”

Ryoma found his voice, “What do I lack?”

Browning shrugged, his eyes already looking casual and light once more. “Rage,” he said, “Although I sense it there somewhere inside. You’re too lazy, I think.” He gave Ryoma a thin smile then. “Don’t you want to surpass your father?”

(Later in the police reports, after Browning death, this is when Ryoma finds out that Browning’s father was once a tennis player who had only ranked near the regionals level back in England. His father was from Surrey, and Browning had fled to London at a young age, traveled to America when he was barely legal. He avowed to become something, Ryoma imagined. Browning did not talk about his father, had never mentioned his family. But only in death did the mystery unravel—Browning’s fury came from his ambition to become somebody. He saw a kindred spirit in Ryoma. The police did not understand; like a goldfish he looked at the reports and still gaped, but why? The whispers and the questions, and Ryoma thought them all stupid. It was so clear then, it was so obvious. James had seen his own father inside Nanjiroh. James had thought he had seen himself in Ryoma, that young angry boy with his freckled face in Surrey, where the sun was rare and the wind balmy and mild. Where nothing really ever happened when James wanted to be someone great.)

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Practice was all matches after matches with Browning, who was slowly turning into James inside Ryoma’s mind. James was all smiles and cool demeanor, easy to like and even easier to dismiss sometimes. James’ serves were nothing special, but they took a toll on Ryoma after a couple of sets, and whenever Ryoma staggered to the benches to rest, James always followed with a little smile, water bottle in hand, and chided Ryoma to gain some weight and strength.

“You’re not very tall for a tennis player,” he remarked more than once, “And you know how true that is, stop scowling.”

James was affable and distant, always playing matches with him and barely pulling out a full game. Ryoma was once again wondering, under the London rain and its humidity, just what James was good for as a coach, even if his rallies were quite adequate. There was nothing special.

That is, until Ryoma made a mistake and did not return James’s ball for the first time.

It was nearing the tournaments and Ryoma thought that the line-ups would not be as hard as he would have thought (and he would have beaten them all even if they were difficult). He was
somewhat pleased that Tezuka would also be entering the competition and a rare smile came up his face when he saw the name that even James asked about his face. “Old school captain,” Ryoma said, and James had frowned at him for a second before he caught himself. “What a little kid you sometimes are,” he had said, and even that tidbit did not really bother Ryoma much. So with the official matches coming near, and with the unbidden excitement that he would soon be playing Tezuka again, he had missed a ball.

One moment he was swinging his racket in midair, hitting nothing and the next—James was suddenly upon him, his thin body hopping up over the net and into his line of vision, his cold and angry eyes crowding his own, James’s racket swung wildly into an arc to land against Ryoma’s arm.

Ryoma gaped and stepped back instinctively, but James held his arm fast, gripping it hard. The racket did not come. The swing paused midway, and Ryoma saw how the air is sliced—whooosh—and he felt the warm air. It tingled.

“You could have hit that ball, boy,” James said mildly, “Don’t get your head up in the clouds.” He let go of Ryoma’s arm.

“Return all the balls. It’s the least you can do.”

James headed back over to his side of the net. Ryoma stared at him from behind. His arm throbbed from the pain.

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The cutter knife is digging inside his wrists now as he tries to breathe.

When did it all start, the police would try to ask him again and again. When you boarded the plane? Did he try to do anything then? Did he touch you?

And Ryoma could not try to summon up the dismissive James and the aloof James from the early days. When he tried though, all he could think about was that first time when he missed a shot, when he got careless and when James had came upon him. Was that when it started?

The darkness invades his thoughts and James’s voice inside his head is a crowing roar. He had never been there before—only in death did James come and invade his dreams and visions, calling to him and waiting.

Wasn’t this the starting point then? Isn’t he going mad over a ghost?

James, who had one day pressed a knife onto him. Presented him with that sharp object with his sharp smile and whispered, here is how you draw blood, boy. This is how you pull out your rage. This is your way to victory.
The matches began with a press conference, and Ryoma sat mutely over the reporters and the people who were clicking away at everyone but him. He was a nobody then, with his black hair and eyes, his thin form. Everywhere around him, people had been blond and tall, with their confidence breezing. James stood alongside him, his gentle fingers misleading.

“Ah,” one reported had called out, “Echizen! That was a name years ago, wasn’t it? Are you the son of the Samurai?”

Before Ryoma replied, James had cut in, with a laugh and a twist of his hands, “What an ugly name. This boy will surpass his father yet. What do you say, Ryoma?” And he had stared down at Ryoma with his gaze and Ryoma was forced to look up at him.

“If the James Browing says so, it must be true!” Someone called out, and Ryoma started then, not yet knowing about James Browing and who he was. He frowned a little and tried to see who had said that, but James pressed him down.

The first matches were not hard, but they were not exciting at all. He used his Twist Serve, his attacks as he had been taught, and almost used his Pinnacle of Perfection. Overall, it was rewarding and his opponents weren’t annoying.

After the first round, James dragged him to their apartment hovel and locked him up inside the bathroom for three days without light.

Their apartment had two rooms; one that was hardly used. There was nominally Ryoma’s bed and his clothes; mostly he collapsed after training in the living room and James slept in hotel suites. The apartment was something the Wimbledon games had offered them, and only after the matches did James yank Ryoma by the hand to the bathroom, where no window filtered inside the dank rooms. Everything inside was dark.

It was bearable on the first day. There was the sink and the toilet, and as Ryoma pounded on the door and gave up, crouched on the cold hard floor, he thought how irrational James was about one match. James did not respond to his mild poundings against the door.

The second day, Ryoma was sick from the water he drank from the tap and all day he was vomiting, clutching the toilet seat. He was cold and hungry, and the door was still locked. He was delirious.

The bathroom smelt of sharp antiseptic; Ryoma could still remember the dank odor of that dingy apartment. It was always gloomy and cold, and everything was dark. His voice echoed. He screamed sometimes, when James would lock him inside time and time again. He would scream and beg and later he would break the faucet with bloodied hands out of blindness and helplessness. The water would sprout everywhere and his hands would be bandaged. He could still hold a racket. When James had opened the door that one time, he was met with Ryoma’s red hands and his shaking legs. James had a twinkle in his eyes.

“That look,” he had said softly, “It’s a good look on you, my boy.”

But that would be weeks and months later to come; the first time, on that third day, James opened the door to find a sick and shivering Ryoma curled up against the bathroom tub, crying and asleep, and in his sleep Ryoma heard James make a disgusted noise. He felt himself being kicked. “Up,
boy.” A snarl. “Your play in the first match was atrocious, and now you fail to see the whole point of what I was trying to teach you. What a hopeless case you are. Up!”

What was so bad about it? Ryoma wanted to ask. He won; he had won and had shaken hands and the reporters were shocked. He did not snap or sneer at anyone. Only James was dreadfully unhappy.

Ryoma was heaved up and he stumbled out of the bathroom; the light blinded him and he felt weak in the knees.

James grabbed him by the chin, and Ryoma, awake now, was forced to meet James’s eyes. James had blue-grey eyes, his iris diluted water and like the London fog, hazy and murky. He held Ryoma’s gaze and it turned into steel and iron.

“Boy,” he had said softly, “I told you what you lacked. Don’t you want to become the best? You’ll never become anyone in this petty state of yours.”

His chin would always be bruised.

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He had told his therapist once, “He didn’t always hit me.”

His therapist was an old, kindly woman who crooned at him with a bland smile and wrote everything he said on her notes even though they had a recorder going on for their sessions. He always looked at her white walls as he spoke his words and usually she stayed silent. But at this statement, she had looked up from her notes and offered him a tight smile that twitched. “Ah, Ryoma,” she said sadly, “That’s what most people say after what happens to them. People like you, in your state. Victim’s guilt, we say.”

Ryoma stared even harder at the white walls and did not know how to justify his words and story.

“He..” he tried slowly again, and coughed slightly. “He kept me away from the reporters. He took care of my meals. He was my trainer.” He said the last part exasperatedly, and wondered what was wrong with that particular word. What did James mean to his tennis? “He helped me win.”

He did not see his therapist’s face when she answered, “He was a sick, sick man, Ryoma. You don’t need to explain his actions.”

James had not killed himself yet at this point.

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James never lashed out; all his hits were intentional and calculated, as his eyes always assessed
Ryoma carefully and with a detached interest. Sometimes Ryoma felt that under him, he was not a person but a dead animal, a corpse to be pulled apart and put together again.

Ball machines in the mornings with a five kilometer speed; lunch time, running and the gym, in the afternoons, matches and rallies, sit ups, push ups, jogging, swings, serves, dinner, more rallies, ball machines, running. More, James always said.

The training did not unnerve him; what did was James’s twist of the mouth whenever Ryoma used his Twist Serve of his Drive B, or all his old techniques. James sneered at him. “Are you auditioning for a circus, boy?” he shouted at Ryoma across the net, and Ryoma stared at him, studying James’s body language carefully, to see if James would leap across the net to thrash him, “Are you playing childish games?”

James showed him how to hit a ball in midair without gravity, how to use speed as his weapon, how to hit the ball effortlessly so that no opponent could return a powerless ball. James showed him how to strain opponent’s muscles, how to give them muscle spasms, how to destroy the opponent. He floundered at James’s lessons. James never played a real set with Ryoma but gave out shots. Ryoma returned them all, and for the ones he did not, each one meant a day in the bathroom. Dampness and darkness.

One day after a day in the bathroom, weak but defiant, Ryoma had looked at James.

“That wasn’t how I was taught tennis,” he said clearly, his legs shaking from the cold.

James cocked his head and stared back at him coolly. “No?” he inquired. “Then tell me, boy, did your father conquer the world in his own little way? When he was playing for fun?”

His bruises blossomed in his torso, where no one could see, his thighs, his armpits, his collarbones. He was beginning to wear long sleeves. James shoved him and rubbed his head against the showerhead walls. His skull throbbed where James held him against the floor. The sound of the water dripping was louder than James’s sneering sometimes, when James whispered, “When will you learn? When will you get what I’m trying to teach you?”

His games were getting better, sharper. His opponents were crumbling under his feet and the thrill of the game was nothing more than mere calculation. James was always in the sidelines, always smiling, always handing him a water bottle and a towel, ready to fuss over him and wave off the reporters. Until they headed off to the apartment hovel, where Ryoma staggered to the sofa and James stopped him with a grip on his arm, hard and cold. “That hit you did on your last game,” he would say mildly and deceptively, “It was such a weak move. It wouldn’t have worked save for the fact that you were lucky.” He squeezed Ryoma’s arm and let go.

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Then there was the first match when Ryoma closed his eyes and opened them, seeing his opponent across the net.

He had met Tezuka the day before, and Tezuka had startled at him, offering his hand with a small smile and warm brown eyes. Ryoma was surprised to see his captain’s eyes so comforting, especially because now he had James’s eyes to return to.
“Echizen,” Tezuka had said, “You look….” And Tezuka paused as he frowned a little, looked at his wrists and blazing eyes.

(What did Tezuka see? Ryoma never thought to ask.)

Tezuka did not finish his sentence, because at that moment James came upon them with his smile and a wave. “Ah,” he said affably, “Ryoma’s captain. How very, very nice.” And with steel that only Ryoma could hear, “It would be nice if you two could make it to the finals. What a match that would be, don’t you think?”

Tezuka nodded slowly. “…It’s nice to meet you,” he said, and even to Ryoma’s ears they sounded stiff and awkward. “You’re James Browning.” Tezuka looked at him again, and Ryoma did not think to meet his former captain’s eyes.

“And you might be the next Wimbledon champion, I daresay,” James said warmly, and Ryoma started at that; he jerked his face up sharply to see James smiling at Tezuka quite openly. He had never smiled like that with Ryoma. “What a bright future you have in front of you.”

And so there it was, Ryoma thought, the old familiar rage brewing deep inside of him, borne when he was twelve and American, when he was brash with his plays and everyone dismissed him because he was young.

It was James’s casual smile that made him open his eyes and throw the ball into a sharp, straight curve and hit the frame of his racket neatly against the ball. The ball was not his signature move. It was all about speed and non-gravity. It was about crushing the opponent.

“And, here is young Ryoma Echizen! That’s not his usual line of play!”

“He’s been making a series of smooth victories throughout this tournament, along with his fellow Japanese player, Kunimitsu Tezuka—“

“Currently under the tutelage of James Browning, this young Mr. Echizen, and—good god, look at that ball!”

The serve and the rallies are everything that Ryoma had perfected over the weeks and the grueling silences inside his mind. In the dark bathroom, he had envisioned a court and counted rallies and the serves he would need to make to win victories. Complete victories and complete glory.

“He took a service ace!”

“That’s—that was—remarkable, quite remarkable—“

During the break, James stood up and Ryoma was greeted with a wide smile, without any hidden meanings, as James handed him his bottle and a towel.

“Ryoma,” he whispered, and Ryoma stopped in his tracks and blinked. This was the first time James spoke his name.

His heart had fluttered.
James began to kiss the palm of his hand.

The kiss was an imprint, he thought. They held many promises, and James’s own fascination.

“What thin fingers you have, my sweet,” James once said. He was red, and drunk, Ryoma thought, because James came to the apartment that night smelling of sweet grapes and fries, and as Ryoma was lounging on the sofa, curled up with his cold and hard racket, James had staggered towards him. He took Ryoma’s hand.

“Do you know,” James said to him, his voice bright and slurred, his smile crooked. He looked young then, almost with innocent awe, “You might be the champion of this game, Ryoma. What a star you’ll be.”

Ryoma stared at the way James’s mouth moved, how his teeth were white under the night lamp. How his fingers were held under James’s bigger hand.

“All the players you taught,” he finally said, “They all became champions, too. That’s why they call you the best.”

James stared at him then, his soft glow dimming, his eyes growing sharper. Ryoma does not look away, even though he is regretting saying this while James is not himself. The racket besides him would not help.

“Oh?” James said softly, “Have you been looking up on me?”

Ryoma bit his lip. He narrowed his eyes. “Everyone’s talking about how good you are,” he said, and his voice was cool. That was good—James had never liked hesitation. “Maybe I thought you were a fluke.”

James’s eyes bored into his, and Ryoma held them. How did one deal with a wild predator?

“What a smart boy you are sometimes,” James said, after a moment, and he had still not let go of Ryoma’s hand. He smiled. “Did you know I taught your brother once? He ran away before I could show him what it took to be champion. Shame. Did he tell you that?”

Ryoga.

He remembered to find his voice, and he erased the last silences that Ryoga gave to him before he left. (Did he know? Did Ryoga know what Ryoma was signing up for?) “So? I’m going to become better than him anyhow.”

“You already are.” Another kiss, and the sound is hollow in the room. It echoes. “You already are, my dear boy.”

Blue, blue eyes. How dark they looked at night. Ryoma opened his mouth and did not take his hand away. He never did. “Play a match with me.”

Those were old words, old taunts. Those were the words that Ryoma knew how to convey in the end when he had been younger and now, when he was older still. After all those years, after everything, those would always be the words to seal his resolution. It was the only way how he could communicate.

James’s eyes crinkled. “I always play with you,” he said lightly.

James showed his teeth. He did not answer.

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James, who left Surrey and worked in many odd jobs in London, who learned street tennis first before he enlisted in any tournaments. James, whose serves were strong and aimed to hit his opponents and meant to cower them. James, who would later target his balls carefully, meticulously at his enemies and make them kneel. Who would play his own matches and be disqualified because of his violent playing techniques. James, who had created his tennis by delving into his rage and blood to create victory.

James, who taught him about the beauty of this violence.

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The knife inside Ryoma’s hand now.

Ryoma, the voice said to him one day. look what I have. This is going to make you forget your anger. You will see how your blood is flowing. This is what it means to be alive. See my wrists? See how beautiful they are.

I will press down for you—and see, see here.

See how the blood is flowing.

Don’t cry, Ryoma. This is showing you how alive you are. Doesn’t this take away your pain?

He cannot envision a court inside this darkness. The air was too stale, the ground warm. Ryoma heaves. He throws up only vile, and night is coming upon this dark shed. He is in Japan—this foreign land, where James had never been. He is so empty inside.

James, he thinks, James. It is his prayer. His voice is very hoarse.

James had once commented how his cries sounded like an wounded animal. He looked so amused when he said that, Ryoma did not think to ponder why.

The last thing he remembers is James’s hands closing in against his throat.

This was before the police. This was before he thought to himself, almost blindly, but I want to live. He thrashed then; now, he can only curl up and let blackness consume him.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry to keep all of you waiting! I'm sorry that this is such a slow update but I promise that I will see the end of this fic for those of you that are reading it! Thank you for the reviews, they always make my day! I promise to reply to each and every one of them when I get the 's system of reviewing feedback makes me too lazy to navigate it all, urgh.

Reviews are (always) welcome! (especially with this fic because I have my doubts on it lol I have no idea how I'm going to plot out all those matches...ewwwww)

Chapter 10

In his later matches, the newspaper called him the Executioner. What a silly name, James laughed. Somewhere around this time, Ryoma learned to twitch his lips along with him, even as his wrists turned into thin red lines. Criss Cross.

_They say that your court is a graveyard, Mr. Echizen. What do you think of when you play? What do you think about, in your young mind?_

Ryoma stared hard beyond the camera. He said dully, _I think of the next ball. Where I should hit it._

Much later in the hospital, his father said to him, voice tired and subdued, “Ryoma. I should have known then. Your interviews. The way you spoke. It wasn’t the boy I knew.”

Ryoma did not answer back.

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The semi-final with Roger Schmidt was when Ryoma perfected his tennis.

After the match, James stood up and clapped amidst a silent crowd, and he would later reported to a frozen camera, “That is what you would call a star.” James had smiled at the reporters and Ryoma had stayed silent. It was when Ryoma served the ball and made it stop, made Schmidt flounder and hit the thin air. It was when Ryoma first sent a tennis player to the hospital.

Roger Schmidt’s right arm was immobilized; he might never play tennis again, they would all later say. Ryoma had felt nothing over this.

Nothing mattered except that James had patted his shoulder, and had smiled at him with genuine
fondness.

“Tezuka is next then, isn’t he?” he asked, and it was horrifying, Ryoma thought, at how empty he felt at hearing his old captain’s name.

He had nodded.

James touched the callouses on his palm and tsked. “Take better care of your hands Ryoma,” he said seriously, and that was the James who would sometimes appear in his dreams, not a monster or a madman, but a man who had loved tennis once and had loved Ryoma because he could play a game set that James never could.

This time, Ryoma thinks, he wouldn’t wake up.

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Echizen does not appear for practice the next morning.

Keigo was never fussy about routine; if a player had the skills and the abilities enough to make it into the regulars, then by all means, Keigo was willing to overlook certain rules. But this was Echizen, who had shown up at the morning drills ever since he became a regular, and who had half-heartedly swung his rackets under the narrowed eyes of Hiyoshi. Keigo looks around and does not see Echizen.

He thinks nothing much of it until lunchtime.

“I warned that brat,” Hiyoshi mutters, looking very peeved as he is glaring at his bento. “He’s taking our regular team too easily.”

“If you work on your stamina and level it up enough to play at the nationals, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation,” Keigo notes, and Hiyoshi’s glare is quickly directed at Keigo until Hiyoshi gets his senses straight and realize that he was picking a losing fight with his captain. Hiyoshi lets out a small ‘che’ and hangs his head down.

Mukahi shrugs. “You can’t help it, can you?” he says, “I mean, the brat doesn’t really have any Hyotei loyalties. He’s not even friends with most of us here.”

“Does he even have friends?” Shishido says.

“…..No. Maybe Atobe.” And when Atobe opens his mouth to refute the sheer ridiculousness of the notion, Mukahi waves a hand in his direction. “I mean, the brat should feel some connection to you. Or something. You’re the only one who played him—the one that actually counted, Hiyoshi, stop looking at me like that.”

“I,” Hiyoshi begins, but Oshitari cuts him off, “Wakashi, yes, you played him and got plummeted. You shall have your bloody revenge come Monday. Atobe,” he addresses his next words to Keigo. “Maybe you should have a talk with him.”

Keigo makes sure that everyone is sufficiently quiet before he punctuates his next words. “Do I
look like a nanny to you all?” he drawls, “I don’t care if Echizen is playing hooky as long as he can
win his next matches. The end. I thought our club didn’t coddle newcomers.”

“He looks depressed,” Oshitari points out. Keigo thinks of dismissing this, but thinks better of it
and opens his mouth. He can’t think of the right words to express his childishness. In the end he
settles for, “I don’t think the brat would appreciate me coming in as a substitute for Tezuka.”

Oshitari smiles. “Having a talk with him doesn’t make you a mentor, Atobe. It makes you a decent
human being.”

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In the afternoon, it is raining. Echizen is still nowhere to be seen.

“Erm, Atobe-buchou.” A first year is wavering at the regular clubhouse entrance. Keigo doesn’t
remember ever seeing him before, but the boy looks anxious, so Keigo nods and gestures the
younger boy to enter.

The first year steps into the clubhouse gingerly, biting his lips. He does not even stop to look
around the regular clubhouse in awe as he blurts out his words in a rush of breath, “Atobe-buchou
—I—I—Echizen hasn’t been in class today. He was fine yesterday, and we were supposed to practice
serving together, or at least he said he would, and I—”

“Stop,” Keigo says, and the boy takes a small breath. He straightens up and says in a steadier
voice, “The teacher’s been asking about him.”

Keigo raises an eyebrow. “I see,” he lies. He really did not see.

Mukahi turns around and rolls his eyes. “He’s just playing hooky,” he dismisses, “I guess he thinks
he’s above all rules now.

Keigo slowly turns toward Mukahi.

Mukahi is tugging off his shirt without looking at Keigo, his eyes downcast. His ears are faintly
red. Keigo narrows his eyes.

He had known Mukahi for six years, and as captain, he often knew too many things about his
teammates that he did not care to know. Mukahi was a bad liar, and Keigo could always see it from
a mile away even without giving too much thought into it.

His ears would always turn red.

“Thank you, Kindaichi,” Keigo says slowly, still looking at Mukahi. He remembers the boy’s
name just in time. “I’ll look into that.”

He hears the boy’s stammering, “Yes buchou!” and the awe that was there, as how he had
remembered the boy’s name. Normally he would have preened at such a simple task as such to the
team, and normally he would have done more than to have dismissed the first year. But there was
something more important he had to do.
Keigo waits for the boy to leave, and when the clubroom door closes, it is only then he addresses Mukahi.

“Where’s Echizen?” he asks. His voice is cold.

It is raining. Practice is over and the team is gone, save for Mukahi and Oshitari. Keigo stares Mukahi down as Mukahi slowly turns a dull red with each accusation.

“I didn’t do anything,” Mukahi first spits, and when Keigo cuts him out he begins to stammer.

“Don’t be idiotic Mukahi, I know perfectly well when you’re lying,” Keigo says. He is standing still, and with a flash of eyes warns Oshitari to leave.

“I just—hell, I just saw Kazuhi, okay?” Mukahi finally turns his head around Oshitari and pleads, “Yuushi, where the hell would I know where Echizen went?”

“What does Kazuhi have to do with this?” Keigo asks, raising an eyebrow. He crosses his arms.

“He said that he was going to teach Echizen a lesson. A match or something,” Mukahi snarls, “That was yesterday.”

“And you said?”

“I said good riddance, it’s not as if we’re going to give him stuffed bears and flowers, are we? I said go ahead, whatever, do what you want with him, I’m sure that Echizen could handle it—”

“Pray define,” Keigo cuts in, “Whatever.”

There is a pause. Mukahi’s face is now turning a dull red. “I meant a match!” he snaps, “Of course I meant a fucking match! Yuushi, say something!”

“No,” Keigo says, “Oshitari, go home.”

Oshitari hesitates. Keigo glares at him and Oshitari meets his eyes warily. “Sorry, Gakuto,” he says, his voice light and betraying no emotion, “I just remembered that I have dinner plans.”

Keigo’s head is drawn at a blank as Oshitari packs his bags and observes Keigo.

“He wouldn’t have done any lasting damage on Echizen,” he says quietly, “Not if he’s attending Hyotei. He wouldn’t be that….idiotic.”

Keigo closes his eyes.
They search the school grounds in silence.

Occasionally Mukahi would stomp his feet louder, a small rebellion on his part, but soon he would quiet down and Keigo would be free to access his mind about where a lanky fifteen-year-old boy would be. It must be the school grounds, Keigo says firmly to himself, ignoring the nagging feeling that is growing inside of him, Otherwise…where else would they look?

“Atobe,” Mukahi says, over the sound of the rain, but Keigo ignores him at first. He continues to walk forward.

“Atobe!”

“What?” Keigo says testily, “If you’re going to vouch for your innocence one more time, I will personally schedule a match with you tomorrow and drop you off from the regulars. Shut up.”

There is another strain of silence.

After another round of the school grounds, Mukahi sighs and says, his voice a sulk, “I think I remember Kazuhi say something about the school guard.”

Keigo sighs. His hair is matted and his uniform is already soaked. The school gates would close soon. Already he hears the distant roaring of the cars; the teachers are starting to leave. “Yes?” he inquires.

“I mean…Kazuhi said that he was going to meet up with Echizen where even the school guard doesn’t come.” Mukahi takes a breath. “Is there such a place in this school?”

Keigo thinks. He looks around.

The sky is grey and he is starting to grow cold. He doesn’t try to think of the younger boy as he searches his mind, this school where he had often walked around, a place where he used to hide when he wanted to read a book, his many hideout places, the shady vines and oaks some girls dragged him towards to confess their love…

“At the edge of the basketball court, there’s a forest clearing,” he says slowly, his mind whirling, “There’s a small shed there.”

Mukahi stares at him.

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The shed is very small, and quiet. No sound emerges.

“So,” Mukahi says, “I don’t think anyone’s in here?” He looks around, shivering. “False alarm. Maybe we should just call his house. Maybe he’s just sick?”

Keigo gives him a look so full of disdain that Mukahi holds up his hands in surrender. “A thought,” he mutters. “Geez, Atobe, you don’t even like the kid.”
Keigo takes a step forth and Mukahi follows. He yanks open the door of the small shed. The first thing he smells is copper.

_Blood_, he thinks.

Then the sunlight filters inside the dank and dark hovel; behind him, Mukahi gasps as he only looks at the figure before him.

“I—” he starts, his footsteps advancing, but Keigo puts a stop to that; his arm is out to desist the other boy.

“No,” he says, and walks forth.

Echizen is curled up against the wall of the shed and does not stir at the sound of Keigo’s footsteps nor Mukahi’s gasp. He crouches next to the huddled form that is Echizen, and turns the boy around. A lifeless arm flaps against his chest; he catches it with his hand easily and inspects the damage.

The boy had a cutter knife inside the side of his pocket, he sees; the knife is lying next to the boy, deceptively harmless, streaked with specks of pale red. He sees the wrist he is now holding; the cuts are done hurriedly and with an amateur flourish, but beneath them, there are older scars and white lines. _This is why he is always wearing his jersey._ He thins his lips and checks for the pulse. It is faint, but still there. Minimal damage then, he thinks. The boy’s eyes are closed; his mouth is partly open. White foam lingers around the corners of his lips.

“He’s claustrophobic,” Keigo says quietly, and adds sharply, when hears Mukahi’s footsteps again, _“Don’t come over here Mukahi, and don’t make me repeat myself.”_

“Is he dead?” Mukahi’s voice is a shrill whisper and Keigo hears the fear lacing the redhead’s words, “Oh my god, is he dead?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Keigo says scathingly, “He just had a panic attack and fainted.” _When_, he doesn’t want to know. His chest tightens. He lets go of the boy’s wrist gently, and puts his own hands under the boy. Shifting around a bit, he heaves the boy up and nestles him against his torso; Keigo is surprised that Echizen doesn’t weigh more. Echizen fits easily inside Keigo’s embrace, despite his somewhat tall and lanky figure. He is suddenly struck by the thought at how Echizen did not ever join them for lunch, at how he has never seen Echizen in the lunchroom at all, not only at the regular’s table. Why do such useless memories come forth at a time like this? His heart is hammering but he makes his face impassive. It would not do to fall apart while the boy is still unconscious.

He stands up, Echizen’s thin legs dangling helplessly against him.

“I—” Mukahi stops when Keigo turns around with Echizen, his eyes bulging, “He has blood on him, Atobe!”

“Brilliant, Mukahi,” Keigo says, “As if you haven’t smelt it the moment we came in. But I suppose I can’t expect much from you in this area, can I?”

Mukahi shuts his open mouth and his horrified face soon sharpens with a glare. Keigo meets those fierce eyes with his own coldness.

“It’s not my fault,” Mukahi says slowly, his voice terse, “I didn’t do it, Atobe. Fucking hell.”

Keigo shifts the boy’s weight so that Echizen’s head was not lolling around but secure under
Keigo’s arms. “No,” Keigo says, his words devoid of anything, “But you didn’t do anything about it either, did you?”

That’s not fair, he knows. Mukahi was an idiot and childish to a degree. He would have raged at Echizen and called him names and sneered at him; but that was as far as Mukahi would get. He wouldn’t lock Echizen in a shed overnight; he wouldn’t use such petty and useless revenges. But Keigo is too angry to care.

He should have—they should have known Kazuhi was a dangerous idiot.

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The first thing Ryoma thinks about when he opens his eyes is his mother.

It is very bleary, coming back into the world. The world is a blur; he blinks once, trying to retain his focus. As his vision clears, he tries to sit up, but soon an arm prevents him from that, and a strange, new voice, “Echizen-kun, you can’t sit up yet. Let me take the needle out for you.”

That’s when Ryoma realizes; he is in a room full of white hangings, and a needle is stuck alongside his arm. There was a reason for his blurriness, he thinks. He shifts around some more.

“Do listen to the nurse, Echizen, and lie still.”

He stops, and looks around.

Atobe is on the other side of the bed across the nurse, and as the nurse fusses around and takes out the needle and dabs his wrist and arm with alcohol, all the while tsking about the state of his wrist, Atobe’s eyes stay on him, no emotions shown in those eyes. Ryoma is reminded of a predator before it leaps forth to rip its prey apart; he makes sure to not look away first and glares.

Surprisingly, it is Atobe who backs down, a little resigned, a little exasperated, even, as the nurse nods briskly and taps his wrist once. “You can sit up now, Echizen-kun,” she says, and he makes to sit up, only his head refuses to cooperate.

“Here,” Atobe says, and before the nurse could prop his pillows up so that he can lean back against the bed without any harm, he reaches out and catches Ryoma’s arm gently, and allows the nurse to slide an extra pillow between him and the bed frame for his back. “Careful,” he adds, as Ryoma’s glare does not abate, “You’ve just come back from the land of the dead.”

“Atobe-kun,” the nurse says, so severely that Atobe’s bland façade drops a little and he looks ashamed, “I wouldn’t joke about things like that, if I were you. He was found during practice, wasn’t he? What were you doing for tennis drills, I’d like to know—”

“I,” Ryoma says; he voice comes out in a croak, but at his voice, both Atobe and the nurse look at him, “I—got lost, not during practice. It’s not a big deal,” he goes on hurriedly, as the nurse narrows her eyes, “Does my mom know?”
The school nurse pursues her lips. “I haven’t called her yet,” she says slowly, disapproval layering her every word, “But of course I was about to—“

“No,” Ryoma says resolutely, just as Atobe intervenes smoothly, “I told your mother that you were due for an overnight training session.”

At this, both the nurse and Ryoma swerve to look at Atobe, who looks back at Ryoma with a small smile. “School registry,” Atobe says to Ryoma’s unasked question, “Quite a few perks for being school president, I should think.”

“Well, really.” The school nurse sighs, now almost exasperated, as she looks at Atobe and Ryoma’s wrists again, her face now tired. “Training sessions, is it now? You boys think yourselves very smart. I’ll let go of it just this once, Echizen-kun, but—” and she fingers Ryoma’s wrist again, this time not the red, new scars but his old ones, and he takes care not to flinch—“Have you been doing this often? And answer truthfully,” she adds in a warning tone, as Ryoma is about to open his mouth, “Or I’ll sign you off to a therapist. School nurse authority does allow me to do that, you know.”

Ryoma looks at his wrists and the nurse’s hand holding him in place, a little disgusted. He wishes that Atobe wasn’t there. “…Sometimes,” he mutters, aware that Atobe was listening to every word. “It helps me not to think,” he adds, only because the nurse has now fallen silent and Atobe is looking down at his own hands in inexpressible interest. “But not as much as I used to.”

The nurse sighs a little, and lets go of his wrist. “Okay, then,” she says quietly, “Okay. You shouldn’t do it anymore though, yes? Try not to. Or I really will call your mother. A school nurse —” and here she throws a withering look at Atobe, who meets it with a small but insincere smile, “also has all the student’s registry on hand. Not just our very able school president.”

Keigo gives the nurse a nod. “But of course,” he says, and crosses his arms, falling silent. She nods back in grudging approval, and nods at Ryoma too, her face softening. “I haven’t called your guardian, so maybe you should? It’s six, Echizen-kun. I think the school’s janitor is about to close the school gates.”

“Oh.” Ryoma turns to look out at the window; the sun has already set, twilight fading into view. It is still the last days of winter, and the sun is quick to hide behind the frosty night skies. “I…didn’t know how late it was,” he says slowly. It hurt to talk; he works at his mouth and tries to swallow. A lump forms inside his throat and he grimaces a little. The nurse notices and smiles a little wearily.

“I think you might have screamed a bit too much in that little shed, Echizen-kun,” she says, “Make sure you drink some hot water, and rest for a few days.”

Ryoma nods, and shifts on the bed, trying to remember where he left his phone. “I should call—“ he begins, but Atobe beats him to it. He stands up.

“I could drop him off, sensei,” he says without looking at Ryoma, “I already have my driver waiting.”
The walk from outside the infirmary to the school gates is more awkward than he can say. He grips the edge of the bedrest to quell his shaking legs, and barely hobbles a few steps before Atobe looks at him and sighs. “Wait,” he says, and he walks over to where Ryoma is barely standing. “Here.” With one arm, he grabs his tennis bag and heaves it around his shoulder; with his other arm, he guides it around Ryoma’s waist loosely.

“What—-“ Ryoma starts, but Atobe just gives him a flat look and gestures to Ryoma’s two hanging arms. “Put one arm around me,” he instructs. Befuddled, Ryoma obeys, and Atobe ends up half-carrying, half-dragging him out of the empty hallway towards the exit. The silence is huge, as their footsteps seem to pounder against the walls; they do not speak until they get into Atobe’s car. Atobe’s driver is ready for them at the school entrance, and he holds out a hand for Ryoma’s bag, which Atobe gives him. As Ryoma moves to get free of Atobe’s grasp, Atobe prevents it, and with another blank face, he says, “I think I should carry you. On my back,” he adds, when he sees Ryoma’s almost horrified expression, “Don’t be picky, Echizen, you can barely walk.”

“I’ve been lying down for half a day,” Ryoma says, when he finally gets his voice back. “Of course I won’t waltz out of here on my first try. It’s fine.”

Atobe rolls his eyes. He looks tired. With another gesture, he signals the driver to go forth and levels a look at Ryoma. “I can carry you either way,” he says shortly, “I’m just giving you the option of what would be more dignified for you.”

Ryoma has never been fazed by Atobe’s glare.

“It’s only a few steps,” Atobe says, irk etched across his face, “Or are we going to stand here until you make up your mind?”

_Ryoma, you are such a dawdling child_, a voice mumbles inside his head. Ryoma flinches outwardly at that, but the voice persists. _Oh, you thought me gone? I wonder why—this is not the first time I came back. I always come back, don't I?_

“Echizen.” Atobe calls him, but Ryoma all but shoves Atobe roughly; Atobe staggers out of surprise and the force Ryoma puts in his shove; they fall apart, and Ryoma regains his footing. He exhales.

_Who is this boy? The voice whispers gleefully. He looks very posh and groomed. Is he helping you? What did he do for you? Child, my dear Ryoma, listen to me. You are so, so foolish after all these years, after all the things that I have taught you._

_Yes, Ryoma thinks blindly. Yes, I am an idiot. He had seen my wrists._

“Echizen.” Atobe walks forth and his eyes are narrowed. Ryoma forces himself not to take a step back. “Stop being ridiculous. Your legs are shaking. Michael, help me get—“

“Why,” Ryoma starts, and his voice is far away and foreign to him; Atobe stops in his tracks, “are you helping me? You don’t have to,” Ryoma adds, and he feels his lips curve. James’s smile, his terrible, easy smile, and Atobe looks at him. His irk is replaced by confused and wariness. “You weren’t there. You didn’t have to find or rescue me. You didn’t even want to.” The last words are thrown very carelessly into the cold wind and waved off. Yes; he could feel his legs shaking and his wrists still ached, but it was a good thing. Pain was always good.

“I don’t know if it escaped your notice,” Atobe says slowly, but the earlier annoyance was gone and replaced with careful, measured tones, “But I happen to be the captain of the tennis team that you’re on. Of course I would help you. As you so cruelly put it.”
“I don’t need your help,” Ryoma says clearly, and regains his footing.

Atobe studies him. The sun is darkening and the last rays of light touch Atobe’s brown hair, making his head into a halo form. His eyes are empty and vast and his hands are still by his sides. What is he thinking? What is anyone in this goddamn school thinking about?

They will laugh at him, surely. With their smug smiles and tug of hand, whispers and flurries behind hands, I heard that the Echizen boy was locked up in the tiny shed the other night. Kazuhi put him there to teach him a lesson.

Eh? That doesn’t sound so bad. Weather’s warmed up, hadn’t it?

Yes, of course it has, a gleeful voice meanders, but the boy. He fainted.

No!

Yes. And what’s more, our captain had to drag him out. He was frothing in the mouth.

What a little shithead.

Those voices are common to him; people have always talked behind his back, and this would not be the first time. But to see Atobe like this, in his clean face wiped off any emotions he might be feeling towards him, well, it insulted him. He wanted Atobe to give him blatant displays of dislike and hostility. At least he must have earned that, if nothing else. Didn’t he deserve honesty?

“You think you don’t,” Atobe finally says slowly; he is pondering over his words, rolling them inside his mouth. Ryoma imagines he is tasting each syllable and relishing the face Ryoma would make, “And that just proves how far you have to grow. Really, it’s not a good idea to place me as your enemy. Nor do I want to be one of yours.”

“Who said anything about being enemies?” Ryoma sneers, “I just want you to leave me alone.”

Atobe opens his mouth and seems to think of something else. He presses his lips thin. Whatever he had been about to say vanishes. “I talked to Kazuhi,” he eventually offered up, “I’m looking to have him expelled.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched.”

At this, Atobe’s face transforms into a pained one. Ryoma isn’t sure how to read into that.

“Of course it isn’t,” Atobe says evenly, but Ryoma knows that Atobe wants to say something quite else entirely. “It was never in Hyotei’s policy to malignly handle their fellow classmates. Or be a sore loser in the first place. Also, I should have known he would have acted like this. Some of this falls unto me, of course,” he adds, and this side of Atobe, this cool and logical, matter-of-fact Atobe is so foreign to Ryoma that he can only hear him, a bit astonished. The words send him wheeling.

“Don’t be ridiculous, monkey king,” he says, when he finally finds his voice. “Of course this has nothing to do with you.”

Atobe looks at him. He does not rebuke him for the nickname, nor does he look at Ryoma in dislike or dismissal. Atobe looks tired and worn.

The look is quickly erased, and Ryoma could only later think it is the trick of the last rays of the sunset. Atobe chuckles a little and shakes his head. “Don’t wander off during practice anymore,”
he says, his normal voice of arrogance and amusement intact, “Next time you’re bored, come find me, and we might play a match.”

Ryoma rolls his eyes. “Che,” he sneers, lifting his head a little. “I’d beat you, you know.”

Strangely, Atobe does not answer to this. He merely smirks and turns back, gesturing Ryoma to follow him.

That lack of answer unnerves Ryoma enough to silently obey his orders.

They do not speak for the rest of the car ride. Ryoma does not ask how Atobe even knows his address.
That night, he dreams.

He is standing in the middle of a chessboard. He is standing in the knight position, waiting for orders to fall. Something picks him up and he hovers in the air, his eyes looking below the white and black under him. He sees James; the man looks up and smiles. Waves.

The story that contains James is banal and complicated. Molestation is not a strange topic, and James did not do anything so crude as to blatantly fondle him. That was the story he had repeated, first indignantly, then later, wearily.

I defended you, Ryoma thinks, glaring down at the serenely smiling James. I defended you, you didn't have to die.

You were so weak and you detested weakness.

He wakes up.

In the hospital his father gaped openly for the first few days, then he stayed silent. Later, he did not look at his younger son, and Ryoma thought that Nanjiroh was not affected by this, that it would be okay. They could pretend and cover such trifles, and he would go on to meet for the match. The final had been postponed due to James's arrest, and he was bored, staying in the hospital, seething about how Tezuka must be training, even while he was lying down in bed.

But his father had forfeited him and a year later, he had place Ryoga into the championships.

He sits up and looks outside his window.

The egg was the world, he read. I must break free of the egg.

He still did not know what that meant, what world he must demolish.

Did James kill himself in that hotel room alone to break free of his own world?

You must understand rage to win, Ryoma.

James had whispered this when he first pressed a razor knife into his hand. At that time, Ryoma stared at those foreign eyes and did not understand James's words. He merely allowed James to guide the razor towards his wrist, and with a gentle push, press the blade into his skin.

No, James did not kill himself to break free of this world. He wanted to destroy it.

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The next day, Mukahi comes to his classroom.

Mukahi is looking at him aggressively, his chest puffing out, as he motions to him. Ryoma gets up from his seat and walks slowly towards the older boy, his gaze carefully composed. They stand at
"Erm," Ryoma says, because it seems like the most reasonable thing to say when he doesn't want to be impolite. Already, he is causing a scene; his classmates are all silent and watchful.

He is so tired of this; this entire game of politics—\textit{whose side are you on}, they ask him with their eyes, \textit{and if you're not on our side, then good luck to you, we will crush your sorry existence}—and he just wishes that he could walk along the corridors unnoticed and silent. He wishes very much that the entire Hyotei team would leave him fucking alone to graduate in peace. Fucking fuck.

He can't say all those things, of course. He only looks at his senpai without the annoyance he is feeling and waits for the older boy to say his piece of mind. Holler and be gone, he chants.

Surprisingly, Mukahi flounders at his silence and deflates. He shifts his feet against the floor for a bit, looks around before coughing a fake cough. "So. You know," he says, a little vehemently, "It's lunchtime. And clearly, Echizen, you can't seem to follow up on Atobe's orders on anything. So. That's why I'm here. So we can get lunch together like all the other regulars are doing right now. Like what we normally do."

Oh. Ryoma tries to find an excuse, any excuse, really, to get out of this. He rolls his eyes inwardly, thinking if he should say that he has library duties, teacher errands—nothing comes to mind. Mukahi is glaring at him as if he knows all his usual excuses. "I have Kabaji for back-up," he says, a little threateningly.

And suddenly he's disgusted. Everything they do—everything Atobe did, really—was very homely when the regulars were anything but, group bonding when they were all a bunch of stuck-up assholes. They were playing too hard to install teamwork into a team that Ryoma felt no love towards, no affinity or desire to fight for. He was completely sick of it all. He knows that some of his thoughts had seeped into his words when he replies flatly, "I think your captain is deluded sometimes. I said that I didn't feel like eating with anyone. Not today or not ever."

He can feel the utter silence surrounding him, and he feels staged. \textit{This is not a fucking theater,} he thinks, sharper words forming into his mind, \textit{fuck it, do they think I'm the hunted rabbit? I once beat their fucking captain years ago and shaved off his head. Are they forgetting that?}

He goes on before Mukahi can lose his cool and yell at him. "Also, we're a tennis team, not a group of doubles. We don't need to synchronize our thoughts or anything."

Surprisingly, Mukahi doesn't lunge at him. He goes a bit red, as if he was physically holding off his anger, but he doesn't shout at him, or tackle him down to the ground. He stays silent for a brief moment before he mumbles, "Wasn't Atobe's idea."

Ryoma frowns. "Sorry?"

"I said—!" And Mukahi's head snaps up, his face still red, "It wasn't Atobe's idea, you dumbass! It was mine! I was asking you if you wanted to eat with us!" He points an accusing finger at Ryoma, barely touching his chest. "You don't eat enough," he says, with all the full hostility he is used to seeing on the older boy, "Don't think that I haven't noticed. You need to eat if you're going to keep your cool façade or whatever, you know. Apathy needs energy." He gives a forceful nod.

Ryoma blinks, still a frown adorning his face. "I…I don't want to," he repeats slowly, but now he is a little confused, "I just said—"

"I know what you said, don't take your senpais for an idiot, Echizen," Mukahi grumbles, and
without warning, he grabs Ryoma's elbow (with a very resolute look at one of his wrists, long enough for Ryoma to figure out that yes, Mukahi knew) to tug him along the line of students heading off for lunch. Warily, they all part to let them through.

Caught off-balance, Ryoma stumbles along a few steps before he can splutter. Mukahi was shorter than him, how he was managing to drag him so forcefully was a humiliating experience. "Mukahi-senpai!" he snaps, "Let go of my arm!"

"No," Mukahi replies back just as viciously, "You'll eat with us, you'll make fun of Hiyoshi with me, and you'll accept my apology in front of everyone and that—" he whirls around and points another finger at Ryoma, now quite baffled. "—That was an order. It's a senpai order, got that?"

"I—" Ryoma starts, but already Mukahi had turned his back and was marching his way to the student hall. Ryoma sighs inwardly and straightens up, walking resolutely behind the redhead.

"I don't like Western food," he finally offers.

Mukahi snorts and doesn't even spare Ryoma a look. "Yeah, as if Atobe didn't already figure that out," he says snidely, but, Ryoma is somewhat surprised to note, not unkindly, "You really underestimate Atobe sometimes, you know."

Ryoma remembers Atobe's eyes the other night; he does not comment.

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Everyone else is having veal and steamed potatoes on the side, with asparagus and vegetables as their course menu. Ryoma is the only one who has a steaming white rice choked full of grilled eel and miso soup.

"Oh." Ryoma blinks and looks down at his bowl and his bento styled lunch: toasted seaweed with rice balls, sweet radish, sour cabbages and small flecks of white fish, some raw salmon. He is sitting between Oshitari and Hiyoshi and across from him Ootori is giving him a kind look that Ryoma is not sure how to register.

"Do you feel better, Echizen-kun?" he asks, and Ryoma averts his eyes at his perfectly styled lunch to see the silver-haired boy peering at him with (real) concern in his eyes. "Mukahi-senpai was very worried about you."

"I was not," Mukahi snaps from the other side, his face turning red, "And! If I was, Ootori, that doesn't mean I was worried, like, ha! Why would I be worried! Worrying is for—"

"Gakuto, you're not making any sense," Shishido interrupts, shoving a mouthful of potatoes and raising an eyebrow at Ryoma's choice of lunch that the butler had put forth. "Maybe shut up if you're going to act stupid?"

Mukahi sputters. "Why you——"

"Now, now. Children." Oshitari draws, and adjusts his glasses. Unnecessary action, Ryoma thinks, but he doesn't have time to voice that out snidely, because Oshitari is soon fixing his attention to Ryoma. He smiles, which wasn't as creepy as Ryoma expected it to be. "You don't like meat, Echizen?" he inquires.

Ryoma stares at him. He wonders what kind of question that was. "Meat?" he repeats, and he looks
at everyone's plate with their sauce and plating, and shakes his head a little. "No, not really."

"Ah." And with a fugitive glance at Atobe, who was ignoring the entire situation, Oshitari's smile grows wider. "I guess nothing escapes our captain's notice."

"Oshitari," Atobe intones without even looking in their direction. "Don't flatter yourself and do shut up. Everyone," he adds, a little exasperated, "Shut up."

Atobe without a sunset in the background to make him surreal is a regular boy in Hyotei: completely neat and sharp with his stiff collar and ironed blazer, absentmindedly picking up his fork and looking vaguely irritated and tired at everything around him. The blue eyes do not scare him or mesmerize him as much, with the bright sunlight filtering inside the room and with the host of the team yapping about.

Atobe catches Ryoma looking at him and frowns. "Yes?" he inquires.

The room's sounds seem to muffle out. Mukahi, at least, has stopped bickering to Shishido and is throwing Atobe a sharp look.

Ryoma blinks. He wasn't aware that he had been studying the older boy. He shakes his head slowly. "I—nothing."

"You're in a trance," Atobe says, but again, Ryoma is surprised to note, without any irritation or exasperation, "It's because you're skipping meals. Eat."

Ryoma almost, almost scowls fiercely at this, but a little frown suffices. He looks down at his food. "I," he says clearly, just so everyone could actually get the damn message, "Don't skip meals. I just don't eat with people."

"Lies," Atobe dismisses, "I have people telling me you scurry off to the school rooftops with your headphones. Don't try to argue," he adds in again, when Ryoma is about to open his mouth. "And just—eat, Echizen."

Ryoma scowls. He brings up a spoonful of rice and takes it into his lips. The rice is warm and the soy sauce salty and sweet. He chews slowly. Atobe does not take his eyes off him. When he swallows, he glares at his captain defiantly and waits for a remark. Atobe only lifts his eyebrows and sighs a little.

"Good boy," Atobe mutters, and Ryoma chooses to ignore the sarcasm. It sends a strange chill down the back of his spine.

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After practice, Echizen is about to pack up his racket and enter the normal clubhouse, but Mukahi grabs his arm just in time. Keigo sees all this without comment, as Mukahi maneuvers a struggling Echizen to the regulars' one. He follows inside.

Echizen's thin form is an anomaly in the Hyotei locker room. Echizen finds his locker with disdain and takes off his shirt without further complaints. His torso is littered with faint bruises, and there lacks the muscles that any tennis player would have at this age. Mukahi openly gapes, Shishido looks away resolutely and even Ootori cannot help but hesitate before heading off to a grab a towel near Echizen's side of the room. His form unnerves them. Echizen, of course, is oblivious to the entire disarray his presence is causing, not that Keigo expected otherwise. Only Jiroh is his usual
bubbly self, and wide awake as he jumps back and forth as Echizen shrugs off his shirt below his jersey. He begins to talk of the balls that Echizen threw during practice.

"That," Jiroh gushes wildly, his hands in the air, "That serve you did! It was awesome! It was sooooo cool!"

Echizen does not look bemused at this display of sudden worship but nor does he smirk and laud over his tennis skills. He shrugs. "I practiced," he mutters, and adds, to somewhat Keigo's surprise, "It still needs a lot of work though."

Jiroh shakes his head vehemently, but looks more excited. "No it doesn't! It's a great split curve ball! It just goes—" Jiroh makes a whooshing hit with the palm of his hand "—off the edge of the court, and then it touches the baseline like *swwwosh*. I don't think even Atobe can return it!"

Here all eyes (save Jiroh's) turn simultaneously to Keigo, and Keigo is forced to look disinterested at the entire conversation. Echizen's lips curve up at Jiroh's remark.

"Heh," he says causally, "Maybe. How about it, buchou?"

It's the first time that Echizen calls him that. It's strange, that the boy should suddenly slip up the title so casually and easily, when just yesterday, Echizen had bared his fangs at him and told him to get lost. But one look in Echizen's eyes told him that this was not a concession; it was a challenge, Keigo thought, meeting those blank eyes. He is testing me.

He had always thought of Echizen as young. He could be a tennis prodigy, he could be one of the kind in their generation, but in the end it stood out that Echizen was not a full predator, not like the more powerful players in the nationals league. He had never considered Echizen a nationals player, not even when Echizen began to win his tournament matches across the ocean. Whenever he heard of that familiar name, he thought about how young he was, and how his games would be a fluke.

But seeing the boy now, a few years later after their matches, he sees the sharpness in Echizen's eyes. Those were the eyes of a hungry predator striking for the kill.

It was then, peculiar, that this observation did not faze him. On the contrary, he feels his lips curve.

It seems he is not the only one that was affected. Oshitari smiles a little and Shishido sags his shoulders. They were worrying, Keigo realizes with surprise. At Echizen's mention of his title, his team loosens up and the unresolved tension inside the locker room somewhat dissolves. It's a start, but Keigo is amused at how erratic his teammates could be, and yet how fiercely attached they are to the team in all the wrong places. I made them into soldiers, he thinks wonderingly.

He raises an eyebrow. "Don't think so highly of yourself," he says offhandedly.

Echizen's eyes are still flat, and they lack warmth (it is too soon for that), but he does offer a smirk towards Keigo's direction and Keigo is for a moment reminded of Echizen's tennis, his cocky nature, his curve balls, his fierce serves.

"We could settle it sometime," he says lightly.

Keigo can't help it; he mirrors Echizen's smirk and jesting tone, and tilts his head regally. He should let Echizen wait, he knows. Let him stew and make him work for favors and prizes. He should, like Tezuka, give the boy an incentive to play higher and aim for a goal. But he is too
selfish to deny Echizen this. He displays his own desires unabashedly.

(Besides, a voice whispers inside him, didn't Tezuka fail? The boy comes back to Japan years later, more battered and weary than ever. He has a knife hidden inside his bag. He barely eats. He plays like a madman possessed. He does not think, mayhap I will teach him better.)

"When we play nationals," Keigo says, "We can decides our Singles position then."

Echizen's eyes—they light up as Echizen looks at him, his smirk morphing into a surprised grin.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As this story is reaching its halfway mark (I hope...) I wanted to talk about where I'm going with this story, what I wanted to say through this disastrous plot of mine.

This story is about rage and how it is easier to overcome our demons (superficially) when we are younger and believe nothing in the world can stop us. In my earlier stories, "but we do not know love" and subsequent follow-ups, I made Ryoma older—that is, he is in his twenties and 'young,' but old enough to understand that there would not be a world beyond his fallouts and despairs. That Ryoma was incapable of growing up sometimes, and he accepted those limitations warily and was sometimes docile and tired. This Ryoma is not that—he plays the distanced boy because he has so much anger bottled inside of him and he must control them at bay. On the other hand, because he has this rage, it is easier for him to scream to the world and eventually walk away from the past that he did not keep sheltered up. Youth allowed him this—to grow up—this is why I sent him to Hyotei and towards Keigo, who has his own problems but is old enough to hold Ryoma's hand throughout the ordeal.

It is hard to write up molestation and the motives of manipulation. Why do people do it? Are they all monsters? Of course they are—but to make them into one-dimensional villains would be to dismiss the rational behind those actions. James Browing is a villain, but he is also a man that Ryoma could not get his revenge on, because Browing had his own ghosts to deal with. That does not excuse him of his sins, but to Ryoma, it was an absolution that he wanted because Browing eventually died. You cannot re-kill a dead man. Or at least, that is what he thought—but the ghost of the dead man lived on inside his head. This ghost was someone who completed Ryoma's disastrous tennis—something that Ryoma aspired to be. Because, even though I write
many versions of Ryoma without his tennis and he gives up midway, I truly do not think Ryoma has a world beyond what his father had created—the legacy of tennis. Without it he is nothing, and with Browning's help, he becomes invincible. What I wanted to answer was, but was it worth it? Does talent absolve you of your crimes and your demons?

Keigo is obsessed with Tezuka the shadow—because Tezuka is someone he can accept as an equal: good background, good manners, cultured and refined. He thinks that he and Tezuka has more in common than he and Ryoma would ever have. To him, Ryoma is not only younger, but more vulgar and simpler, because Ryoma would not know the simplest German words or know his favorite Bach pieces (would he even know who Bach is)? But this is Keigo growing up as well—on the surface, Tezuka would seem to have a lot of things in common with Keigo, but the baser instincts of ambition and rage that one must become the best, the top, all or nothing, those emotions, Keigo shares with Ryoma completely. Ryoma is somewhat Keigo's ugly id, his rage and ambition. Keigo spent a childhood in England after all, trying to prove to a bunch of racists that he was better than them. Tezuka did not do anything to his upperclassman after they broke his arm; Keigo plummeted his enemies at first opportunity. That is where they part; this is where he and Ryoma would overlap. This story was about a Keigo that had accepted this and began to love a boy who is both brilliant and tortured.

So they learn to grow up—and this was the story I thought of years ago, when Ryoma was coming to Hyotei. He must have a reason, of course—why else would he come to his enemy school? And I'm afraid that they don't fall in love and snark at first glance—and so this was a story more about growing up and then later learning to fall in love and acceptance. One must respect one another before they even begin to start falling in everlasting love, I thought.

End Notes

A/N: And YES, this is THE fic that I've been plotting inside my head for god knows how long. I think this (along with 'and your flesh shall be my eulogy' and 'we adorn our graves with dead men') will be my last contributions for this fandom, just because I've run out of ideas and how to make their lives realistic and miserable. But hopefully my Hyotei! Ryoma will meet all of your expectations before I call it quits :P Reviews and feedback are always welcome!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!