When Opposites Attract

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Summary

They were unplanned from the very beginning to the very end. Neither of them ever regretted it.

Notes

I'm saying it here - THIS THING MAY NEVER BE FINISHED. It's around 53000 words long atm but the next part's slow-going. I've been staring at this fic for a while now though, and people have been nudging me for a peek at what I've already written, so I decided to start posting what I have even if I might not be able to power my way through to the very end.
The first time they meet is when Tetsuya is still attending Teikou. The Nationals are over, Tetsuya can’t look at any of his teammates (lost friends) without wanting to break something, and he has already turned in his resignation.

However, even though he isn’t in the basketball club anymore (and now spends most of his time at school avoiding Momoi – the only one who tries to track him down at all – like the plague when he isn’t in class), Tetsuya isn’t ignorant to all the high school coaches and or managers systematically arriving at Teikou day after day for three weeks straight to scout the Generation of Miracles and make their sales pitch for their respective clubs.

Still, it has nothing to do with Tetsuya anymore, not to mention three-quarters of the basketball circuit – both middle school and high school – don’t believe that the Phantom Sixth Player of the Generation of Miracles exists anyway, and those who do, well, who wants a shadow when players like Aomine and Midorima are up for grabs?

So while this excitement is going on, Tetsuya gives it all a wide berth. He has recovered – somewhat – from the disaster that was the Teikou-Meikou match but there are still occasions when even just looking at a basketball can make him want to run and run and never look back at all the heartache that the sport has given him.

Which is why it really is pure coincidence that Tetsuya just happens to be walking past one of the side entrances of the school – on his way to the roof to eat his lunch in peace – when two students – obviously highschoolers and basketball players to boot judging by their jackets – walk out, the one in front looking highly annoyed while the one with light purple hair trailing a step behind him seems entirely unconcerned if his slouch is anything to go by. He’s blowing bubblegum too.

“-waste of my time,” The black-haired teen is muttering, stuffing his hands into his pockets as the door swings shut behind them.

“We weren’t sure he even existed when we decided to come take a look,” The other student points out lightly. “Now we know that he does but that he’s quit basketball.”
Tetsuya’s feet involuntarily slow before coming to a stop only several feet away, unnoticed per usual as he blinks at the two high school students.

“You weren’t sure, I was,” The first teen – Captain? Coach? – corrects tersely. “The kid’s misdirection would’ve been useful with my Spider Web.” A cruel smirk curves his mouth. “It would’ve been devastating with our playing style. Nobody would ever see it coming until they were already on the floor.”

Tetsuya frowns at this implication but neither student expands on it any further as they come down the steps.

“Well, we’re already here,” The second student’s eyes are hidden from sight but Tetsuya gets the feeling that he’s peering at his friend anyway. “Are you sure you don’t want to check out the other Generation of Miracles?”

The black-haired student scoffs rather derisively. “Why? Because everyone else is fighting over them? They’re useless to me. I don’t need individual plays run by cocky first-years on my team.”

“Calling someone else cocky is kinda hypocritical of you,” The second teen remarks blithely. “Though I guess with what the rumours say their attitudes are like, they’d more likely drive you up the wall than do what you say. I hear most of them don’t even go to practice half the time, and when they do, they just do their own thing. Might be funny to see; are you sure you don’t want to try recruiting one of them?”

This is met with an arched eyebrow over one shoulder and a cool, “Would you like me to double your practice sets tomorrow, Kazuya?”

The purple-haired teen – Kazuya – holds up his hands in a placating gesture, still emanating a trace of amusement but obediently falling silent on the matter. Instead, he muses idly, “Do you think the misdirection kid’s quit basketball for good?”

The black-haired teen’s entire expression softens into something kinder and more sympathetic. Tetsuya doesn’t trust it for a second.

“I’m sure he’ll be alright after a bit of time away to work out whatever’s troubling him,” A heartbeat later, the student’s expression has morphed back into a sneer. “There’s no way I’d say something like that. If I can’t recruit him, he’d better be long gone.”
Absentely, Tetsuya wonders if this guy is bipolar.

As if on cue, said bipolar highschooler’s friend sighs and complains, “How long have we known each other? Do you have to do that with me too? It’s weird.”

He gets a glare for his efforts this time. “Shut up. We’re leaving. I can’t believe I missed classes for nothing.”

“You’re already at the top of the class rankings, Genius-san,” Kazuya reminds him. “You can afford to miss one day.”

They begin crossing the courtyard, walking past Tetsuya, and even though Tetsuya hastily steps to the side to avoid a collision, the black-haired teen’s arm still brushes against Tetsuya’s book bag.

Instantly, black eyes slide sharply downwards, and then the older teen abruptly jerks back, nearly bumping into his friend as Tetsuya suddenly becomes visible.

Startled suspicion crosses the dark-haired highschooler’s face even as the purple-haired teen jumps and exclaims, “Whoa! Where did you come from?”

Tetsuya takes a step back and bows politely, not answering directly as he contributes a quiet, “Sorry about that. I have a weak presence.”

And then he continues on his way, heading for his original destination. He doesn't give either highschooler much more thought since he has already made his decision to attend Seirin after that one time he saw them play. He only caught a few minutes of that game before Momoi ushered him away so that they wouldn't miss their bus, and he can’t even recall what team they were playing against, or even what the score was – but he does remember the camaraderie between Seirin, the way they supported each other, the way they were a team, and Tetsuya knows without a doubt (and with an unhealthy amount of jealousy) that that is what he wants.

So he leaves without further fanfare, slipping away like a ghost, and therefore missing the way the black-haired teen stiffens mere seconds after Tetsuya passes them, and then whirls around, dark eyes narrowing with realization even as they hunt futilely for Tetsuya’s silhouette.
That is their first meeting. It won’t be their last.

The second time they meet is much later, months later, during the Preliminary Final, and also by no design of their own since it is fate that has seen fit to throw Seirin and Kirisaki Daiichi together to see which team would secure the last ticket to the Winter Cup. Tetsuya recognizes their uniforms instantly, and he almost hears more bad things about Kirisaki Daiichi from his senpai than he did about the Generation of Miracles from the stands of spectators after the Teikou-Meikou match.

(Almost, because fans and defeated players alike left that disgraceful slaughter of a game looking disgusted and ready to punch the Miracles’ lights out on Meikou’s behalf, and there is nothing about that comparison that doesn't break Tetsuya’s heart.)

It troubles Tetsuya to know that Kirisaki Daiichi’s captain and coach, the Bad Boy of the Crownless Generals – and he can finally put a name to a face – once wanted to recruit him. What would've happened if circumstances saw Tetsuya going to Kirisaki Daiichi instead? Probably quit basketball altogether if transferring to another school wasn't an option.

Hanamiya Makoto is ruthless and calculating behind a layer of sadism, and with a mercurial temperament to match. Manipulative and high-strung are only two adjectives that come to mind once Tetsuya actually comes face-to-face with the second-year again, and even though Hanamiya doesn't show it, and Tetsuya shows it even less, he knows that the Kirisaki Daiichi captain remembers their last – however brief – encounter.

Still, Hanamiya doesn't pay much attention to Tetsuya at first, mostly focused on taunting Captain and Kiyoshi. It makes Tetsuya’s jaw tighten with suppressed anger when Hanamiya feigns innocence and hints at injuring Kiyoshi even further, and his irritation only builds as their match continues. By the time the second quarter ends, Kiyoshi is still bleeding, the team is half-incensed over this and half-thrilled that they’re keeping up, Hanamiya looks like he’s fuming over being unable to break Kiyoshi, and Tetsuya’s fury hasn't reached its current heights since his time in Teikou.

Contrary to popular belief, Tetsuya does actually have emotions, and he feels just as much as the next person. He just has very, very good self-control as well, and he knows that being overly emotional is not conducive to rational thinking, so when even Kagami starts looking scared of him while they’re taking a breather during halftime in the locker room set aside for Seirin, Tetsuya excuses himself and leaves to calm down, promising that he would be back within five minutes.

Two hallways down, he leans against one wall and takes a deep breath, settling his thoughts and
honning his anger into something dangerous instead of reckless.

In some ways, Hanamiya is a lot worse than the Generation of Miracles ever were to their opponents, yet in others...

The thing is, Tetsuya remembers how the teams they played – toyed with – left their matches not just defeated but shattered, mentally broken to the point where most quit and a few even considered suicide. Tetsuya would know; it almost made him consider suicide when he was visiting his grandmother in the hospital and ended up overhearing two students from Yoneya Junior High’s basketball club – a team Teikou recently slaughtered – murmuring in worried tones about one of their ex-teammates jumping off the school roof. The boy survived but the double surgery needed to get his legs functioning again as well as get him through a transplant of some sort was costly, and his family couldn't afford both.

It could've been entirely unconnected to basketball but Tetsuya wouldn't bet a single yen on it, and that very same night, he located that basketball player’s doctor and all but threw money at the man, stating only that he wished to remain anonymous but asking for all expenses to be downplayed to the family in question, and Tetsuya would pay the bulk of it.

After that, he kept a religious eye on the newspapers for any other attempted suicides at the middle schools with (disbanded) basketball teams after they went up against Teikou, and – partially relieved and partially sickened – there were only three more cases out of the dozens of students quitting basketball in droves. None of them succeeded, one having been talked down just as the ambulance and reporters got there, and two others. Both were Meikou members, one of whom was stumbled upon by Tetsuya himself when he went to find Ogiwara after that fateful match – one stepped into traffic (luckily, the car wasn't going quite fast enough to cause critical damage), and the other overdosed on pills but reaching the hospital in time due to Tetsuya frantically calling an ambulance for the teen.

Tetsuya paid for all of their hospital bills and therapy sessions, anonymously of course; it was selfish of him but this at least alleviated a little of the guilt sitting like lead in his stomach. Who knew how many other cases didn't make it into the newspapers, but Tetsuya did the best he could under the circumstances. It didn't matter that the majority of the matches in his third year saw him sitting on the bench while the other Generation of Miracles competed against each other to reach a quota of twenty, thirty, forty points; he still held some of the blame for not trying harder to stop his teammates.

Hanamiya is like them in that he destroys his opponents, but mostly only in a physical way. He also does it directly though, knowingly, while the Generation of Miracles crushed players’ spirits with the careless cruelty of children, not truly understanding the extent of the damage they were dealing (for the most part; Tetsuya has his suspicions about the current Akashi).
And for the life of him, when he compares the two, Tetsuya can’t decide who is worse. With Kiyoshi in such bad condition even just after the first half, Hanamiya makes him want to send an Ignite Pass straight into the Kirisaki Daiichi captain’s face.

But at the same time, now that he’s not getting a face full of his brother figure’s injuries, Tetsuya can clearly remember the gut-twisting fear he felt as he watched Kise and Aomine and Midorima and Murasakibara and Akashi become twisted versions of their old selves, and the helpless shame clogging his throat as he watched team after team get trampled under the Generation of Miracles’ feet.

Either way however, Hanamiya is the problem right now, and Tetsuya will be damned if he lets the second-year’s dirty tactics crush Seirin’s dreams. All his senpai – Kiyoshi especially – have everything riding on this tournament, and Tetsuya himself... well, he’s got five people he wants – needs – to save, only two of whom are already well on their way (Kise isn’t too much of a surprise but who would have thought proud, taciturn Midorima would let himself open up and rely on his teammates before almost every other Miracle?), plus he promised Kagami to make him number one in Japan, promised himself that he would support his senpai in any way possible, and he has to win the Winter Cup to do all that, so Tetsuya has more riding on this championship than anyone else.

Footsteps reach his ears, echoing off the walls as they draw closer, and Tetsuya looks up in time to see Hanamiya round the far corner and saunter up the hallway. He hasn't spotted Tetsuya yet, and there’s the slightest hint of a crease crinkling his brow as if he’s thinking about something that may pose a problem to him.

Tetsuya doesn’t say anything as he watches Hanamiya walk past him, most likely heading back towards Kirisaki Daiichi’s locker room, but either his misdirection’s shaky from the game, or he’s leaking killing intent or something – whatever it is, Hanamiya stops short before turning around, gaze flitting over Tetsuya once, twice, before finally zeroing in on him.

A sneer curls at Hanamiya’s mouth but he doesn’t say anything. At this point, there is nothing to say, and even a basketball player like Hanamiya knows it. Everything that has to be said will be said on the court. Besides, the second-year should know by now that Tetsuya has too much discipline over his emotions for someone to really manipulate them towards their own ends.

“And angry, huh?” Hanamiya only mutters, assessing Tetsuya with patronizing eyes. “Anger’s not going to do any good, dumbass.”

And then he’s off again, striding away and disappearing around the next corner. Tetsuya stares
after him, more than a little perplexed but not curious enough to think too much on it. He closes his eyes and refocuses his thoughts onto the match. They’re not done yet, Seirin; they’re not done until they’ve climbed, clawed, stormed all the way to the top, and no one – not Crownless General nor Miracle – is going to stand in their way.

Later, after Seirin has trounced Kirisaki Daiichi (and Tetsuya very nearly does send an Ignite Pass into Hanamiya’s face after the captain trash-talks Seirin’s dreams just like the Generation of Miracles did to their opponents back in Teikou; fortunately for everyone involved, he’s not that petty, and the look on the second-year’s face is far more satisfying when the ball soars down the court instead and Kagami dunks it into the net), Tetsuya’s anger is appeased, even after the elbow that nearly caught him in the face in the final quarter.

He wonders though, about Hanamiya’s motives and reasons. Like Kiyoshi said, that last basket, that Teardrop, really was amazing, the form and timing and overall effortless execution all worthy of even Aomine’s shots. And Tetsuya has to wonder why anyone who can play like that, who undoubtedly put hours and hours of work into polishing his basketball to be able to make shots like that, would want to turn to foul play instead.

Tetsuya doesn’t believe Hanamiya will change anytime soon though, especially with how murderous the second-year looked after Kiyoshi’s compliment, as if he thinks his fellow Uncrowned King is mocking him.

However, it’s not that hard to see that the fact that Kirisaki Daiichi is out of the running for the Winter Cup also hits each of its members in some way so Seirin lags behind and gives them a respectful berth, letting them go on ahead even though both teams are taking the same bus route home.

“Something wrong, Kuroko?” Kiyoshi peers down at him, gentle concern practically radiating from his expression.

Tetsuya tears his eyes away from the fading taillights of the bus. He thinks it’s because Hanamiya reminds him of the Generation of Miracles, just a bit, but Tetsuya feels a tinge of worry for the Kirisaki Daiichi captain anyway. Only a little though because he doesn't like Hanamiya to begin with, and the older teen is not his problem, not like the Generation of Miracles are, not to mention the second-year – while arrogant – is also level-headed enough to not become the monsters that Tetsuya’s Teikou teammates grew into.

Overall, he’ll be fine in a way the Generation of Miracles wouldn’t be without an intervention.
Which is why Tetsuya shakes his head in the negative, and assures Kiyoshi, “No, nothing’s wrong.”

Kiyoshi loses his happy-go-lucky demeanour for a moment, features turning thoughtful, but then he smiles and throws an arm around Tetsuya’s shoulders to lead him back to where the rest of their teammates are waiting.

“Oh okay then.” The center accepts cheerfully, limping as they walk. “Let’s go ask the others if they want to grab something to eat. We’re going to the Winter Cup after all! That’s cause for celebration!”

Tetsuya allows a small smile to grace his face (after Teikou, he didn't think he’d ever smile again), and puts Kirisaki Daiichi behind him. In any case, he won’t have to worry about that team again, at least not until next year, and right now, this year is what’s important.

So he dismisses Hanamiya from his mind. Aside from the court, Tetsuya doubts he’ll see the Kirisaki Daiichi captain elsewhere ever again.

He is wrong. This is only their second meeting.

Their third meeting is coincidental once again, but far more significant because it’s the turning point, and it doesn’t take place until after the Winter Cup.

Seirin is high, high, high with the heady success of having triumphed over every single Generation of Miracle. They can now truly call themselves the best in Japan, and Tetsuya is just as ecstatic as his teammates, especially after he sees Akashi’s left eye bleed from gold back to the original red. The Rakuzan captain’s semi-mental breakdown in the middle of the match, and his tears afterwards – as if life’s finally caught up with him and given him a healthy dose of harsh reality – are a small price to pay now that he’s regained his old self at last. With Akashi’s downfall, Seirin has now toppled every Miracle from their pedestal, and like Kise and Midorima and Aomine and Murasakibara, Tetsuya hopes that Akashi too will begin to heal.

Five days after the final match, days that include giddy laughter and happy tears, basketball, a party, basketball, team dinners, and more basketball, Tetsuya is on his way home, his sports bag slung over one shoulder, his leg muscles sore, and still smiling a little to himself after Seirin’s latest scrimmage on a street court. Coach has cancelled practice for the rest of the semester since everyone has end-of-term exams to study for but nobody seems to be able to stay away from the sport anyway, so they meet up when they can, all eager to squeeze in as much basketball as
Lost in thought, Tetsuya is understandably startled when someone grabs him from behind and slams him up against a nearby chain-link fence with one calloused hand wrapped around his throat. All the breath whooshes out of his lungs at the impact, and he’s momentarily stunned as he tries to work his mind around the fact that he’s being mugged, because this is definitely a new experience for him. Most people can’t even see him so he’s never had to watch out for assaults on the street before.

And then, before he can start fighting back, a familiar voice that chills his blood drawls out, “Hey, Tetsuya. It’s been a while.”

Tetsuya freezes, and then slowly tilts his head back to look up at his assailant. “...Haizaki-kun.”

Haizaki grins at him, ominous under the dim glow of a nearby streetlight. “I suppose I should offer my congratulations to you for winning the Winter Cup. You actually managed to knock Akashi down a few pegs. I bet that’s something no one ever saw coming from the weakest member of the Generation of Miracles.”

Tetsuya just stares back, outwardly calm, inwardly wondering if he’s going to get out of this confrontation with his limbs intact.

“Was there something you wanted, Haizaki-kun?” Tetsuya enquires even as his feet dangle at least half a foot off the ground, and his heart pounds a rapid rhythm against his ribcage.

“Well I’d appreciate it if you could deliver Kise to me, but somehow, I can’t see that happening,” Haizaki’s tone is casual, like he’s merely commenting on the weather. He cocks his head, examining Tetsuya.

“You know, this is something I’ve always hated about you.” His hand tightens around Tetsuya’s neck, and Tetsuya wheezes a bit but otherwise doesn't react. Haizaki scoffs. “No reaction, even when your life is in danger. It’s fucking creepy.”

Clinically, Tetsuya reflects on why this should matter to Haizaki. He can’t come up with anything. “Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”
Haizaki snorts. “Of course not.” He hitches Tetsuya a little higher against the fence so that there is maybe a foot of space between his feet and the ground now. Tetsuya is mildly annoyed that he still has to look up to meet Haizaki’s cold glare.

“I haven’t forgotten what you Generation of Miracles did to me,” Haizaki sneers, continuing before Tetsuya can point out that all Akashi ever did was throw Haizaki off the team, officially because he was – and still is – far too violent, and unofficially because the red-haired captain wanted Kise to take Haizaki’s place. It must have hurt, to be replaced just like that, and Tetsuya was sympathetic back then, but he can’t honestly say he was sorry to see Haizaki go either, especially after the way he treated Kise, and was the whole matter really worth such extreme retribution?

“I’m gonna have my revenge one way or the other,” Haizaki snarls, hand constricting around Tetsuya’s windpipe even more. “Aomine’s warned me off Kise. Too bad he forgot about you again, huh?”

Abruptly, the taller teen releases him, and Tetsuya collapses to the ground before his feet can find any purchase. However, before he can do more than gasp for a much-needed breath and push himself into a sitting position, a sharp pain explodes in his chest area as Haizaki delivers a punishing kick to his ribs.

Tetsuya stifles a cry as a second kick slams into him, and he feels something give. Agony blinds him for a moment but he fights it down and tries to scramble to his feet. If he can just duck out of Haizaki’s line of sight for a moment, Tetsuya is certain he can disappear.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Haizaki’s mocking voice comes from somewhere above him, and a third kick sends him onto his back, resulting in his head cracking against hard concrete and his ribs jarring once more. Tetsuya coughs, dizzy with pain, and he can taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth. “We’re nowhere near do- hey, what the-”

Tetsuya manages to crane his head up in time to see a rock – a second one – wing its way out of the growing darkness to bounce off Haizaki’s head before clattering to the ground beside the first. Haizaki spins around, cursing, only to be met with an incoming fist that crashes into his face and sends him staggering backwards.

It takes several seconds for Tetsuya to register his saviour, or rather, savours, though to be fair, he’s pretty sure he has a concussion, and the teens that melt out of the darkness are the last people whom Tetsuya thought would step in to help him.

“Get him,” Hanamiya Makoto orders, nursing his right hand with a disdainful look on his face,
though he needn’t have bothered saying anything because Yamazaki Hiroshi and Seto Kentarou are already stalking forward to pin Haizaki down, with Furuhashi Koujirou not far behind. Haizaki spits swearwords at them, and his fists fly out, but it’s three against one, and Kirisaki Daiichi’s basketball club specializes in sneak attacks, so it doesn't take long before all three are dodging past the Fukuda Sougou player’s punches and overpowering him so that Haizaki can’t do any more damage to anyone.

“Oi, are you dead down there?”

Tetsuya blinks up blearily, and he’s quite certain that Hanamiya should not look like he has a twin, so that really must mean that Tetsuya does have a concussion after all. Fantastic, just what he needs.

He mumbles something – his tongue feels sluggish in his mouth – that he hopes sounds reassuring or maybe grateful, and he attempts to haul himself back onto his feet, but there’s a lancing pain in his chest, and he has a throbbing headache growing behind his eyes, so he’s thankful when firm hands latch around his shoulder and arm, and assist him to his feet. It takes Tetsuya one long glance and several blinks to the side for Hara Kazuya to come into focus.

“Thank you, Hara-san,” Tetsuya automatically rasps out, still impeccably well-mannered even now. He looks up at Hanamiya’s carefully neutral expression. “Thank you, Hanamiya-san.”

Hanamiya grunts noncommittally, features swiftly becoming irritated. “Don’t thank me, dumbass. I’ll be wringing a favour out of your teammates as soon as I see them. Or maybe I’ll hold it over their heads for a while.”

Tetsuya frowns worriedly once his brain has – lethargically – digested the words, but Hara interjects in a low, faintly amused tone of voice after Hanamiya has moved away to loom over Haizaki, “Don’t listen to him; even if he does ask for something, it won’t be that bad. I know we’re rough on the court and all, but not even Hanamiya will stand by while a kid’s getting beaten up.”

Tetsuya nods shakily, and on a good day, he’d protest the use of ‘kid’ by someone only a year older than he is. Today’s not a good day. He feels woozy, black spots dance in front of his eyes, and every breath he takes hurts. He wants nothing more than to lie down, and distantly, he hears Hanamiya instructing someone to call the police and an ambulance.

“I- I don’t need an am- ambulance, Hanamiya-san,” Tetsuya calls out, struggling forward with Hara still supporting him.
He is met with a scornful glower as Hanamiya snaps, “Your ribs are probably cracked, if not broken, and you have a concussion. Unless you're telling me you can magically heal from that, you're going to the hospital.”

Okay, so Hanamiya may have a point. Still...

“There is no need for the police,” Tetsuya says instead, and this time, Hanamiya isn’t the only one who glares at him with more than a little incredulity.

“Brat, this guy was about to mug you!” Yamazaki barks from where he is currently using his entire body weight to prevent Haizaki from getting loose.

“He wasn’t- He wasn't trying to-” Tetsuya has to stop and push back a wave of nausea that threatens to make him black out. “We- We know each other. It was a disagreement.”

Everyone stares in disbelief. Apparently, they aren’t aware of just who Haizaki is, though that isn’t much of a surprise. Haizaki fell through the cracks of Teikou shortly before the Generation of Miracles truly became infamous monsters in the basketball circuit, and Tetsuya doesn’t remember Kirisaki Daiichi watching the match between Kaijou and Fukuda Sougou. Plus, Haizaki looks older than the first-year highschooler that he is, especially sporting those cornrow braids.

Tetsuya ignores them, his entire concentration zeroing in on Haizaki instead. “Haizaki-kun, this-this has to stop. You cannot go around for the rest of your life attacking the Generation of Miracles.”

A frozen sort of hush falls around him, and Haizaki finally stops attempting to throw Yamazaki, Furuhashi, and Seto off. He sneers through a bloodied nose. “And who’s gonna stop me? You can’t even protect yourself, Tetsuya; how the hell are you gonna protect Kise or any of the rest of your Teikou buddies?”

Kise, Kise – Haizaki is obsessed with Kise even more than he is with Akashi who was the one who threw him off the team in the first place. Kise is the one who took Haizaki’s place, and back then, the blond technically was weaker than Haizaki, with no experience in basketball whatsoever despite being talented, and since Teikou’s motto is Ever-Victorious, where only the strongest stands on top, Haizaki by all rights should’ve been the regular even if nobody wanted him there.
But none of that was Kise’s fault, and if Haizaki is determined to get revenge anyway...

“Then,” Tetsuya draws himself up, pulling away from Hara and taking another step towards Haizaki. “If it’s Kise-kun you want, then I will take full responsibility. I was Kise-kun’s trainer in Teikou, I was responsible for him; any grudge you have against him, I will bear it in his stead.” He pauses, takes a steadying breath, blocks out the lance of pain running through his body. “You wanted to injure Kise-kun’s leg during your match, and Aomine-kun told me that you tried to go after him even after it was over. I won’t let you near Kise-kun but if that’s the only way you’ll stop, then you can take it out on me instead. After that,” Tetsuya looks the suddenly wide-eyed Haizaki straight in the eye. “After that, can we call it even?”

Dead silence ensues. Tetsuya has no eyes for anyone other than Haizaki who is staring back like he thinks Tetsuya’s insane. Tetsuya just looks back, composed and pokerfaced even though his ribs feel like they're on fire, and it’s getting harder and harder to focus.

“I really don’t fucking get it,” Haizaki bites out at last. “Why do you keep covering for their asses? They used you, broke you, and threw you away like you were last week’s trash, and here you are, still protecting them. Do they even know half the shit you've done for them behind their backs?”

Tetsuya flinches imperceptibly but a vicious smirk spreads over Haizaki’s face anyway. “You're not the only one who reads the papers, Tetsuya. I kept a close eye on anything relating to those Generation of Miracles just to see if something might kick them off their high horse. I bet that psychopath Akashi knew too, but he never said anything, did he? Tell me, how many suicides did you stop? How much money did you waste on hospital fees?”

His smirk widens maliciously. “How many times did you think about offing yourself after your so-called friends pushed you to the brink again and again and never even noticed, much less cared?”

Tetsuya has to remind himself to breathe. He never realized that someone might have seen at least some of what he put up with back in Teikou, and never Haizaki of all people. Still, he’s past that, and he isn’t about to allow anyone else to dredge it all back up either. So he forces his next exhalation to come out evenly before stating quietly, “Yes or no, Haizaki-kun.”

Haizaki’s expression twists with displeasure at not being able to get past Tetsuya’s emotional barriers, and he shoots back vindictively, “I've got a grudge against the entire Generation of Miracles. You gonna pay for that as well?”

Tetsuya doesn't even have to think about it. For his friends, he’d do anything, suffer anything, and
this is no different. He’ll send the Kirisaki Daiichi players away himself and let Haizaki do as he wishes if that’s what it takes, so his answer comes out sincere and without hesitation. “If it means that you will no longer attempt to harm any of them ever again, then yes.”

Haizaki sneers again, looking angry and derisive at the same time, but his eyes burn with unbridled aggression, and he growls out, “You asked for it.”

And just like that, Haizaki surges up so unexpectedly that he manages to tear himself out of the slackened grip of the three second-years previously holding him down.

Agony explodes in Tetsuya’s chest as Haizaki barrels into him, and suddenly, he is choking, unable to draw breath even as alarmed shouts ring out around him, and hands tear him away from Haizaki (or Haizaki away from him; he can’t tell).

The last thing he hears is someone calling that much needed ambulance, and someone else grumbling half-heartedly, “Seirin’s gonna be pissed. Probably at us.”

Someone retorts, lofty but with an underscore of almost unnoticeable tension in their voice, “They should thank us on bended knee. We didn't have to get involved. I didn't know anyone could be this stupid until I met this kid.”

And then Tetsuya hears no more as darkness drags him under.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
When Tetsuya wakes up again, it’s to a white ceiling and the steady beeping of what he immediately recognizes as a cardiac monitor. He’s heard enough of them from the amounts of time he used to sit vigil at his grandmother’s sickbed.

He blinks once, still feeling muzzy with sleep, and then memories of why he is in the hospital begin rushing back into his head.

Haizaki.

He shifts, and the monitor starts beeping a warning as his heartbeat spikes with agitation. He swallows hard and forces himself to calm down again. No point in making things worse for himself, although he isn’t quite sure what is wrong.

He’s lying on his back under crisp white sheets, but his right side feels numb, and his limbs feel heavy. It takes him another moment to realize that he’s wearing a hospital gown, and there’s something wrapped around his head. Bandages probably. If he remembers correctly, he smacked the back of his head against hard concrete during the attack.

He stirs again, striving to at least raise himself up a bit, only to stop when something solid – the spine of a book – thunks gently against his forehead.

“Would you quit moving around? It’s bad enough I’m stuck watching you. I don’t want the doctor nagging at me again.”

Tetsuya turns his head to the right, and he’s more than a little shocked to find Hanamiya lounging in a plastic chair beside his bed and looking for all the world like the thing isn’t the most uncomfortable piece of furniture in the entire universe (Tetsuya can attest that it is).

“Hanamiya-san?” Tetsuya tries to sit up again, and Hanamiya sighs irritably in response before extending a hand and reaching for something out of sight. A moment later, the back of Tetsuya’s bed begins to rise.
“You have three broken ribs and a punctured lung,” Hanamiya explains without sugar-coating his words, looking completely indifferent. “You’ve got a chest tube between your ribs right now so I would advise against moving unless you want to risk another surgery.”

Tetsuya takes all this in, eyes tracing all the machinery on the other side of his bed, and then he peels back the blankets, inwardly grimacing when he finds both an IV attached to his arm, as well as a patch of his hospital gown cut away to make space for the tube currently inserted between his fourth and fifth ribs. The skin peeking out around the bandages is purple-black, and if not for whatever medicine is running through his body at the moment, he’s certain he would feel it.

Luckily however, it doesn’t hurt, and when Tetsuya hears the heart monitor start making noise again, he shoves down the instinctive panic surging up inside him at seeing a tube stuck through a surgically cut hole in his torso. There’s a clock in the room, and Tetsuya listens to the steady ticking until his heartbeat slows again. It helps that he can avoid looking at the area by tugging his blankets back up.

Once he’s collected himself again, Tetsuya glances over at Hanamiya once more. The second-year is watching him with a cool assessing gaze like he’s cataloguing all of Tetsuya’s reactions and filing them away for further examination at a later time.

It’s a distinctly unsettling regard.

Tetsuya clears his throat, and one of his hands comes up to touch the bandages around his head.


Tetsuya nods stoically, and then asks, “How long have I been here?”

“A day and a half, give or take a few hours,” Hanamiya tells him curtly.

“Oh,” Tetsuya cocks his head in consideration, blinking at the older teen with some bewilderment. “Don’t you have school?”

Hanamiya glowers at him, and his tone is scathing when he speaks. “The doctor insisted on
someone staying with you. I didn't feel like walking all the way to Seirin, I couldn't find your phone, and I don't know any of your teammates' phone numbers. Kentarou sat with you yesterday; the others on my team actually need to attend class or they might flunk out, so here I am.”

Tetsuya stares for a second longer before dipping his head in a shallow bow. “Thank you, Hanamiya-san.”

Hanamiya clicks his tongue with annoyance. “I didn't have much of a choice, you idiot. Now give me someone to call. I don’t want to be here any longer than I have to. I'm surprised your parents haven’t reported you missing or something. The hospital would've been the first place the police checked.”

Tetsuya feels an uncharacteristic desire to snort. Must be the drugs. He beats the urge back down. “My parents are out of the country.”

Hanamiya pauses, another measuring look crossing his face. “…Siblings?”

“I'm an only child,” Tetsuya clarifies blandly, and then hurries on with, “It’s okay, Hanamiya-san. I am awake now. You don’t have to stay anymore. I can take care of myself.”

Hanamiya scoffs skeptically. “Right, that’s why you've been admitted into the hospital.”

He stops and looks like his next words are going to cost him an arm and a leg and possibly his head for good measure. Still, in the end, he forces out, “Kiyoshi?”

Tetsuya frowns a little in confusion. Hanamiya rolls his eyes. “Kiyoshi’s number; you have it, don’t you?”

Tetsuya hesitates because he doesn’t want to bother his team, because if Kiyoshi is notified, all of Seirin will be here within the hour, and while part of that makes Tetsuya want to smile and never stop, another part of him doesn't want his teammates anywhere on Haizaki’s radar.

“Where is Haizaki-kun?” Tetsuya asks instead.
Hanamiya’s lips thin. “Ran off. We didn’t have enough hands to keep him down, call an ambulance, and stop you from injuring yourself even further at the same time.” He sneers. “You’re a fool. You should’ve just turned him over to the police when you had the chance.”

Tetsuya shakes his head. “There was nothing to convict him with, and he’d just be even angrier once he was released.”

Hanamiya releases a harsh bark of sardonic laughter, his dark eyes even darker in this one moment. “A punctured lung can kill you. You already had to go through surgery once. You don’t think attempted murder is enough to convict him?”

Tetsuya’s gaze drops to the blankets covering his worst injury. He doesn’t know it was that serious. “...I meant before now.”

A noise that conveys nothing but disgust comes from the second-year. “Whatever. Kiyoshi?”

Tetsuya holds back for a moment longer before relenting and rattling off the number. He’ll never hear the end of it if he tries to hide it from his team, and they must be worried by now since Tetsuya missed school yesterday and hasn’t attended any morning classes today. It’s bad luck that he forgot his phone at home, although he’s thankful that at least Mitobe’s taken Nigou home with him this week because his younger siblings all adore the dog; it would be terrible if Nigou was stuck in Tetsuya’s house alone for two days.

Hanamiya nods shortly as he stands and leaves the room, presumably off to find an area that allows cell phones. Tetsuya thinks it’s probably smart of the Kirisaki Daichi captain to call Kiyoshi; any other Seirin member would blame Hanamiya first before any specifics can be mentioned.

Tetsuya looks down at his hands. There’s even an oximeter attached to one of his fingers. He probably looks awful, and Coach will be horrified, and Kagami will be out for blood, and...

He wonders if he should tell the other Generation of Miracles. Haizaki more or less agreed to Tetsuya’s offer but he could break his word, and it would be bad if the violent teen went after Kise or one of the others again when they aren’t forewarned.

Perhaps he can just inform Kise, Aomine, and Midorima, Tetsuya decides. Not even Haizaki is stupid enough to go after Murasakibara or Akashi, while Aomine can mostly take care of himself in a fistfight. It’s Kise and Midorima who are the most vulnerable, especially Midorima because at
least Kise’s copied a handful or two of martial arts moves, so if Aomine knows, then Touou’s ace can help keep an eye on the former two.

Then again, if Tetsuya tells even one of them, it’ll only be a matter of time before word gets around to Akashi anyway.

With no one in the room, Tetsuya sinks deeper into his pillows and heaves a weary sigh. It seems, even after the Winter Cup, there are still unresolved issues stemming from the Generation of Miracles’ reign during their Teikou days.

When he woke up two days ago, saving Seirin’s phantom was not even within shooting distance of Makoto’s to-do list, and if the brat was only shoved around and maybe punched in the eye or something, Makoto never would’ve stopped. He doesn't like the first-year, at all; the kid reminds him far too much of Kiyoshi, and Makoto absolutely loathes Kiyoshi. Players – people – like Iron Heart always make him seethe, and if possible, Kuroko Tetsuya may actually be even worse than Seirin’s no longer Uncrowned King.

But even Makoto isn’t so much of a sadistic bastard as to leave a defenceless kid on the ground while some lunatic is kicking the shit out of them, which is the only reason he stepped in.

Makoto’s never laid eyes on Fukuda Sougou’s ace but he’s heard rumours about how violent the first-year is. To actually witness Haizaki beating up someone who didn't have a hope in hell of defending himself all because of some sort of vendetta against the Generation of Miracles was...

Well, Makoto always knew that those so-called Miracles were – and still are – a messed up bunch. Anyone worth anything in the basketball circuit heard about that final match in the Nationals back when the Generation of Miracles were still middle-schoolers, and Makoto himself has taken them on twice, once in his second year of middle school, and again in his third. Needless to say, his school lost both times, except the second time was less a match between two teams and more a competition between the five Teikou regulars over who scored more points. It grated on Makoto’s nerves back then, and it still does if he thinks about it now. So it’s frankly no wonder that there are people out there who despise them, but to take that out on a kid who – as far as Makoto can see – has never been like his self-glorified teammates is utterly ridiculous. Makoto is all for revenge, but it’s pointless and unsatisfying if that revenge isn’t even aimed at the right person.

Even more ridiculous however is that kid’s personality.
Before this year, Makoto’s never played against Kuroko Tetsuya. In his second year of middle school, his team was slated to play Teikou fairly early on in the year, and he’s certain that Kuroko wasn't even a full-time regular yet so it would explain the kid’s lack of attendance. And in third year, his school made it all the way to the semi-finals of the Nationals only to be stonewalled by Teikou once more, but he saw no miracle passes on the court, so either the kid was sick, injured, or simply benched.

Probably benched, considering those arrogant nutjobs.

So until Kirisaki Daiichi’s matchup against Seirin this year, Makoto didn't have a clue that the brat was about as aggravating as Iron Heart in all his ‘basketball is fun!’ glory, and until about two days ago, he also had no idea that Seirin’s little trump card has all the self-preservation of a suicidal bird in a roomful of hungry cats.

Honestly, offering to let someone beat him up just for his little friends? What was stopping Haizaki from breaking his word? And what was that talk of suicides and hospital fees? He’d ask, purely out of morbid curiosity, but he also doesn't want to touch those issues with a ten-foot pole. Makoto knows those first-years have their baggage and then some but it’s really starting to sound like they belong in a psych ward.

Which is why he’s more than a little relieved that he was never caught up in the hype of trying to snag a Generation of Miracle for his school. The problems that come with them far outweigh their value, and he doesn't have nearly enough patience to deal with that shit.

It's pretty lucky he didn't manage to gain their phantom sixth member either – Makoto has no doubt that he never would've been able to change Kuroko into one of his type of players. If Makoto kept him on the team, something would've had to give, someone would've had to back down, and he’s pretty certain backing down isn’t even in that brat’s vocabulary.

“Hello?”

Makoto straightens as someone finally picks up. Kiyoshi sounds distracted and almost anxious. “Kiyoshi. It’s Hanamiya.”

“Eh? Hanamiya? This is a surprise. Er, what can I do for you?”

Now typically, if he phoned Iron Heart for any reason, Makoto would screw with Kiyoshi’s head
just on principle alone, but he’s about had it with white walls and the smell of disinfectant. He lied to Kuroko earlier when he said Kentarou stayed with him for an entire day; Makoto sent his team back right after the kid got out of surgery, and he’s been here ever since (any longer and he really would’ve sent one of his teammates to Seirin, Kagami decking one of them before the situation could be explained be damned). Kentarou only replaced him long enough for Makoto to go home and grab a shower and a change of clothes. Kuroko’s already thanked him twice though, and it’s damn annoying, so Makoto lied to shift some of that absurd gratitude away from his person.

Which is also why he doesn't beat around the bush now that he’s got Kiyoshi on the line, and he divulges tersely, “Your ghost kid; he’s in the hospital.”

Silence. And then-

“...What?” Calm, save for the underscore of warning in that single word.

Makoto scoffs, entirely unfazed by the tone. “He was attacked by Haizaki Shougo. My team found him and brought him to the hospital a day and a half ago. He just woke up and gave me your number. Are you coming or not?”

“Haizaki-? Nevermind; we’re coming. Give us... forty minutes; please don’t leave him alone!”

Kiyoshi doesn't even wait for acknowledgement before hanging up, and Makoto rolls his eyes and ends the call as well. As if he doesn't already know that. The only reason Makoto is still here isn't because the doctor requested it, but because that Haizaki could sneak into the hospital and finish what he started. Makoto doesn't like Kuroko but that doesn't mean he wants him dead.

His job’s almost done though; he can already picture Kiyoshi spreading the news to the rest of his team, and all of them would be hightailing out of class without a single glance back.

How revoltingly sweet.

Makoto shakes away the mental image and pushes off the wall he was leaning on, only to pause when another thought occurs to him. Should he call those Miracle idiots? He doesn't know their numbers or he would've called earlier, but he doesn't want to make two trips either if Kuroko does end up wanting him to drop a word to one of them.
Makoto scowls at his phone. He doesn't know any of their numbers but he *does* know the number of someone who does. He's just been putting it off because talking to Imayoshi is always a headache and a half. Still, he's already here, and as soon as Seirin arrives, Makoto can leave all this behind him and pretend it never happened.

He sighs, opens his phone again, and scrolls through his contacts until he finds the one he wants. For some reason, he never got rid of it.

“*Hanamiya! Now this is a pleasant surprise!*”

Makoto can already feel that headache building. “Shut up, Imayoshi, I'm not in the mood. I'm going to assume you have Aomine Daiki’s phone number.”

“...*I do. Why? Did ya wanna ask him out on a date?*”

Makoto is hard-pressed not to pull his phone away from his ear and stare at it in total disbelief. He knows that Imayoshi is just teasing and isn’t actually this stupid but still. “No, you moron.”

He debates between telling Aomine himself, and getting Imayoshi to do it. He chooses the latter. He doesn't really know Aomine when it comes down to it, and Touou’s ace will probably start shouting the second Makoto mentions that his ‘Tetsu’ is injured.

“Call him and tell him his old partner is in the hospital,” Makoto orders bluntly. “Seirin’s already on their way.”

He stops when he hears a sudden rustle of paper and a thump, like Imayoshi’s accidentally elbowed a stack of it onto the floor. “*Wait, Kuroko is in the hospital? Is he alright?*”

Makoto’s eyebrows rise when he hears the faintest tinge of concern colouring the ex-captain’s voice. Huh. Even the kid’s former opponents worried about him. Just goes to show that the brat’s a trouble magnet through and through.

“He'll be fine,” Makoto says impatiently, and then, because he can’t help himself, adds, “What’s the matter, Imayoshi? Going mother-hen on players from other teams as well now?”
A hum of amusement snakes over the line. It’s not as fun if Makoto isn’t taunting the third-year face-to-face. “Now, now, Hanamiya, no need ta be jealous. Kuroko is friends with Touou’s manager and ace, that’s all. I need ta know the details if I don’t want Aomine yellin’ my ear off. Don’t worry; you’re still my favourite.”

Makoto frowns in annoyance. Damn that bastard. “Just tell him the brat was injured and my team and I brought him to the hospital. Kuroko can explain everything else.”

“Hmm,” Makoto doesn’t need to be there in person to know that Imayoshi’s expression has become shrewd, no doubt going through all the possibilities of why Kuroko has landed in the hospital. “Alright then. I’ll phone him now. Should he be expectin’ ya there?”

“Of course not,” Makoto snaps, glancing over his shoulder. He can see the hospital’s main entrance from here but there are other ways to get in, and it’s unwise to leave the kid unattended for so long. “I'm only staying until Seirin gets here. Now I'm hanging up since you're just wasting my time.”

And without waiting for a goodbye, Makoto does exactly as he says, ending the call and heading back inside.

He’s halfway up the second flight of stairs before it occurs to him that he’s acting... not himself.

*The lack of sleep’s messing with me,* Makoto grousers as he trudges onwards until he reaches Kuroko’s room again. He pauses in the doorway.

The kid’s semi-sitting up with the help of his raised bed, and he’s staring straight ahead at the far wall, face about as expressive as stone, blue eyes like broken glass. There is no universe in which that is normal.

Makoto thinks back to the very first time he ever laid eyes on Kuroko. That day in Teikou, to be told that the kid he was interested in recruiting had quit, only to bump into him outside five minutes later, not even realizing he was there until Makoto accidentally brushed against him. The brat’s eyes were empty then too, far more so than even now. They looked dead back then.

“Hanamiya-san?”
Makoto strolls back into the room, taking a seat again even as he eyes the younger teen. If he’s honest (and he rarely ever is), he doesn’t like the kid, but he does find him rather… interesting. From a logical, objective vantage point, Kuroko Tetsuya should never have been able to advance so far, yet it’s clear to anyone with eyes that Seirin would never have reached the top without him. Hell, Kirisaki Daiichi would’ve beaten Seirin if it wasn’t for those damn passes. Someone so visibly weak ends up being such a vital piece on the board, and that paradox is as intriguing as it is infuriating.

“Your team’s on their way,” Makoto discloses abruptly, picking up his book from the bedside table. “And I called Imayoshi; he’ll call Aomine Daiki.”

Even as he rifles through his book, Makoto subtly examines the way Kuroko tenses ever-so-slightly. “What? You didn't want the Generation of Miracles to know? They're the reason Haizaki Shougo came after you in the first place, wasn't it?”

Kuroko glances at him, impassive as always, but Makoto gets the impression that he’s feeling somewhat uneasy.

“...The Generation of Miracles have always been rather... excessive in their actions,” The first-year frowns. Makoto suspects that on anyone else, it would’ve been an outright glower. “If they find out, they will want retribution.”

Makoto stays silent for a moment before leaning back in his seat with a scoff and focusing on his book again.

“You Miracles are more trouble than you're worth,” He says callously.

He’s surprised when Kuroko doesn't defend his Teikou teammates. The kid’s already shown how stupidly protective he is of his friends.

It’s none of his business though. A part of Makoto would like to take this kid apart piece by piece to see what makes him tick, what makes him fight and fight and never stop fighting even after he’s been stomped into the ground more times than anyone can count, what made him into the crazy idiot who would agree to stand still and let someone smash his face in or break his legs just so they wouldn't go after an egotistical airhead like Kaijou’s ace. But a bigger part of him wants no part in the madness that was Teikou’s former regulars. Makoto’s
seen firsthand the psychological damage that the Generation of Miracles dished out like candy on Halloween to their opponents, damage that even Makoto – even Imayoshi at his worst – would have difficulty replicating. In fact, Makoto’s pretty certain he’s never made someone quit basketball before. Injured them to the point of forcing them to drop out of the game entirely, and watched their anger and hopelessness grow, but he’s never before made an entire basketball club quit the sport. Now *that* takes real dedication.

Makoto can admire that sort of ruthlessness, if not for the fact that they don’t even know they're doing it. It’s a lot like handing a machine gun to an amateur, or to a particularly talented *child*, and then the whole thing just turns ugly as everyone waits for the day they shoot themselves in the foot.

The Generation of Miracles hasn’t shot themselves in the foot so much as one of their own has beaten some sense into them before they got to that point. Saved them, so to speak.

And it’s all this unassuming, forgettable kid’s doing.

It’s impressive and nauseating all at the same time.

Makoto idly flips a page and looks at the brat again. Kuroko’s eyes have closed, and he seems to have dozed off, either too tired or too naive to think much of lowering his guard with Makoto in the room.

Makoto huffs and returns to his book. If this ever gets out, his reputation will be in tatters, and he’s going to have to do quite a bit of damage control. Kazuya aside, his team’s already given him a few odd looks when he agreed to stay with the brat.

But it’s not like he cares about the first-year or anything. Makoto just prefers destroying his opponents himself, and for an opponent whom he can admit to feeling a grudging respect for (taking down all five Miracles is no joke), that just gives him even more incentive to break Kuroko on the court personally.

And he can’t do that if someone else gets to the kid first; it’s as simple as that.

“Thank you, Hanamiya,” Kiyoshi says once more with a thousand prayers’ worth of earnestness.
Makoto could gag. They’re standing outside Kuroko’s hospital room where the majority of Seirin is huddled around the patient’s bed. Kagami Taiga is ranting something about ripping Haizaki’s spine out and feeding it to him.

Still, habit dictates that he nails a smile to his face and bullshits, “You’re very welcome; I’m happy to help.” The smile turns into a sneer, and Makoto snaps, “As if I’d say that, dumbass. I didn't do it for you so stop thanking me! Tell the kid that Aomine Daiki doesn’t know exactly what happened yet. If you want to make up some lie, I suggest you tame your ace. Or buy him a muzzle. That might actually be more effective.” He turns for the nearest exit. “I’m outta here.”

“Of course,” Out of the corner of his eye, Makoto will swear on his grave that flowers and sparkles spring up behind Kiyoshi as the center smiles broadly at him. “Thanks again, Hanamiya. Maybe we can schedule a practice match or two sometime to make it up to you. It'll be fun!”

Makoto reminds himself that murder is a crime and that he’s got better things to do than cool his heels in jail for several years, and then he gets out of there as quickly as possible before he’s tempted any further. God, why do people like Iron Heart exist in this world?

Still, at least it’s over now. Makoto can wash his hands of the entire affair and get back to putting his team through their paces until even they won’t remember this incident.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
Makoto eats his words four weeks later just as he’s calling an end to practice. He gathers his regulars for some last-minute pointers and dismisses all the rest, but just as he’s about to explain one of the new strategies that they’ll be working on at the start of the new year, a flash of pale blue in his peripheral vision draws his attention, and his head automatically snaps around to take a closer look because that colour matches only two things in his book – the sky, or a certain Seirin player, and seeing as how they’re inside a gym and it’s the middle of winter to boot, the sky is ruled out.

“What are you doing here?” Makoto demands, and the words come out more accusing than even he means for them to. All the better.

His regulars all look around as well, and half of them jump a foot in the air when they spot the phantom player sitting quietly on the bleachers nearby. Makoto makes a mental note to train them out of that inclination somehow. It’s unbecoming.

“What the-!” Hiroshi splutters, whirling to face the newcomer. “When did you get here, brat?!?”

Kuroko blinks back at them expressionlessly even as he clambers to his feet. He’s wrapped up in a scarf and at least four different layers, but there’s more colour in his face than the last time Makoto saw him. Still, the kid seems fragile no matter how you look at it.

“Good afternoon,” Kuroko actually bows, the perfect picture of a first-year student showing respect towards his seniors. Makoto spares a second to lament the fact that none of this politeness was rubbed off on Aomine. “I’ve been here for fifteen minutes.”

“Well why didn't you say anything?” Hiroshi growls.

Kuroko cocks his head to the side. “I did. Nobody noticed me.”

The team collectively sweatdrops, and Makoto has to fight down the urge to facepalm. Seriously, how is it possible for anyone to lack that much presence? Makoto has half a mind to accuse the
Now there’s a thought. Maybe Kuroko’s presence really is that weak but Makoto clearly remembers just how furious the kid was during the Kirisaki Daiichi-Seirin match. There’s definitely another – darker – side lurking under that unreadable facade.

How did Aomine Daiki put it?

“It’s not about whether or not I’m underestimating you. There’s no reason. It’s just that you made Tetsu angry. That’s all.”

And Makoto – foolishly – dismissed that warning. On hindsight, no one would know Kuroko better than his former partner, so Makoto really should have taken the Touou ace’s words with a pinch of salt.

Besides, what was that saying again? It’s the quiet ones you should watch out for? Something like that.

“So?” Makoto interjects brusquely before anyone else can say anything. “What do you want?”

Kuroko turns around, stooping down a bit and picking up something from the seat next to him. When he turns back, Makoto arches an eyebrow at the tray of- are those vanilla milkshakes?

“As a thank-you for that night,” The first-year intones, approaching them until he stands only a foot away. At this distance, Makoto can see how the kid’s right arm is pressed carefully against his right side, subconsciously protecting it even now.

“Heh, you think a milkshake makes up for it?” Hiroshi scoffs, crossing his arms.

“Well I’m all for it,” Kazuya saunters forward and plucks one of the drinks out of the tray. “Cheers.”

It’s a good thing Makoto trains his team hard enough that the moron can’t chew gum at the same time unless he wants to risk swallowing it; otherwise, Kazuya would drink the beverage without
“Don’t just give in like that!” Hiroshi rails even as Koujirou shrugs and follows Kazuya’s example, even going so far as to nod at Kuroko before breaking out a straw and taking a long sip. Hiroshi rounds on him. “Not you too!”

“I’m thirsty,” Koujirou counters serenely, conveniently ignoring Hiroshi when the shooting guard jabs a finger at their water bottles. “Practice was tough.”

“Sounds good to me,” Kentarou reaches for one as well. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Hiroshi flounders for a few seconds longer, alternating between scowling at his teammates and glaring at Kuroko. Kuroko stares back at him before enquiring, “Do you not like vanilla milkshakes? If you want, I can get something else.”

“That’s not the point!” Hiroshi exclaims.

Kuroko blinks. “Really? Then you do like vanilla milkshakes?”

“That’s not the point either!”

Kuroko’s brow creases faintly with innocent confusion. “So would you like something else instead?”

Hiroshi throws his hands in the air before snatching up one of the milkshakes, still muttering darkly under his breath. Makoto internally snorts when he catches the miniscule sly smile that tips one corner of the brat’s mouth, there and gone in the span of half a breath. He would bet money that the little shit is laughing his ass off on the inside right this instant.

“I hate sweet things,” Makoto says rudely when Kuroko turns to him. “And you either have pathetic self-esteem or you’re looking down on me if you think your life is only worth a couple milkshakes.”

Kuroko doesn’t look at all insulted, merely putting aside the last drink before surveying Makoto
with blank eyes. “Was there something else you wanted then?”

Makoto smirks calculatingly and motions at the court behind him. “Play a game with us. Three on three.”

It’s a challenge, a dare. It’s been four weeks, and five to six is about how long it should take for ribs to heal, not to mention if the kid isn’t at least close to one hundred percent again, Makoto doubts that Seirin would be willing to let their smallest member out of their sight. Then again, unless the Haizaki issue’s been resolved, Makoto’s surprised that they don’t have this kid handcuffed to one of them or something. He’s tempted to ask out of curiosity, but it’s not like he cares either way, so in the end, he leaves it alone.

And since Kuroko is well enough to come all the way to Kirisaki Daiichi unaccompanied, then he should be alright with playing a short practice match.

So this is a challenge, to see if the kid’s sense of honour outweighs his sense of duty towards his team. After all, Kirisaki Daiichi isn’t lauded for their clean play, and an injury can harm Seirin as a whole. Besides, Kuroko should realize that a milkshake of all things would not satisfy Makoto, and he should’ve had the good sense to stay away. Coming here at all is just inviting Makoto to claim something in return.

But Kuroko doesn't even twitch even though Makoto can pick out the guarded wariness in the way he watches them all. However, the kid simply nods once in acceptance before wandering a few feet away to begin shedding his coat.

Makoto’s eyes narrows. The brat is either very brave or very stupid. He should know by now how Kirisaki Daiichi plays. One word from Makoto, and this little practice match can be used to-

“Hanamiya,” Kazuya’s voice is pitched low enough so that Kuroko can’t hear. Makoto glances at the power forward. A glint of green peers back at him.

“Tch,” Makoto closes his eyes for a moment, already annoyed. Okay, he isn’t really planning on sending the kid back to his team broken, at least not this time. Tempers of Seirin and probably the Generation of Miracles have most likely ascended to new heights after the whole Haizaki fiasco, and Makoto isn’t fool enough to draw all that indignant fury onto himself. He opens his eyes again to find his team staring back expectantly. “I wasn't planning on that, idiot. Put those milkshakes down. Kentarou, Koujiro, and Hiroshi are on one team. Kazuya, you're with me and the kid. Anyone with a single elbow out of place gets to run an extra fifty laps tomorrow.”
As Kuroko meanders back over, adjusting a wristband and looking to Makoto for further instructions, Makoto scoops up a ball and tosses it at the passing specialist.

“It’s just a friendly game,” Makoto smiles pleasantly at the first-year as they all cluster onto the court. “Start any time.”

Even without foul play, he has a different goal in mind. Ever since the phantom player debuted with his newest moves, Makoto’s been itching to get an up-close look at them, and this is the perfect opportunity. They just need to get the kid to relax enough to play freely with them, which is another reason for packing away their rougher style. At the moment, even just bouncing the ball in place, Kuroko is very careful to position himself in a way that keeps the entire Kirisaki Daiichi team in his line of sight.

But then Kuroko moves, breezing past Hiroshi like he’s not even there (Hiroshi swears, loudly) before sending a spiralling pass to Kazuya who catches it, winces minutely much to Makoto’s private surprise, and then jumps and dunks it into the net. Koujirou steps under the hoop, catching the ball neatly, and then the game really begins.

It’s... different.

Makoto already expects this but he’s still taken a little off-guard when he loses track of Kuroko and still finds the ball in his hands every time he’s free so he tries harder at keeping an eye on the phantom player at all times, and he sees Kazuya doing the same, actually sweeping his bangs out of his eyes for once and practically tracking Kuroko’s progress around the court as often as he can.

“Don’t make it so obvious, Kazuya,” Makoto reprimands as he passes the power forward, and then ducks past Kentarou, receives an Ignite Pass from Kuroko that feels almost strong enough to break his hand (a part of him wonders if this isn’t Kuroko’s convoluted, overdue vengeance on him), and launches himself into the air for a Teardrop.

He lands at the same time the ball swishes through the net without so much as touching the rim, and when he turns, he spots Kuroko tracing the shot with something vaguely like admiration.

Makoto smirks rather smugly at this.

The rest of the game is fast-paced (both Kirisaki Daiichi and Seirin are offensive teams) and – dare
he say it – somewhat enjoyable. For Makoto, it’s a new challenge as his mind calculates the movements of the players now that they have a passing specialist with them, as well as the trajectories of the ball now that they’ve got an abundance of invisible passes spinning up and down the court. It’s one thing to use his tactics when someone like Kuroko is an opponent; it’s apparently another matter entirely when he has to incorporate the first-year into his plays by adapting and letting Kuroko call some of the shots.

However, even though it’s a bit choppy at times, the kid is still as compatible with his Spider Web as Makoto first thought a year ago.

As Kuroko intercepts a pass between Hiroshi and Kentarou, Makoto watches the way the first-year sweeps the court with perceptive eyes, taking in everyone’s position in a heartbeat even as he makes his move. He flips the ball over to Kazuya and signals for a cross-court pass before disappearing and reappearing in front of Koujirou just as Kazuya sends the ball across the court. The first-year tap passes it in another direction altogether, sending it down the court as all three of his opponents are caught unawares, but Makoto is already moving into place. The ball flies into his hands with a solid smack, and all Makoto has to do is turn on his heel and make a three.

He glances to the side where Kazuya is slapping Kuroko’s back, a friendly gesture that holds far less strength than when he does it to one of his teammates. It still nearly pitches the kid face-first onto the floor.

Makoto turns away again as an increasingly frustrated Hiroshi grabs the ball and shouts for Koujirou to get clear.

The kid would make a good point guard. He has to, what with how he needs to read the flow of the game, as well as memorize and predict the movements of both his teammates and his opponents to make his passes as effective as they are. It’s a shame Seirin doesn’t realize this; their current point guard – while commendable – could try his hand at a different position just to round out that team some more.

Makoto frowns to himself and dismisses the thought. All the better for him if Seirin’s players only specialize in their designated positions.

From there, the impromptu game lasts only another ten minutes, ending with Makoto snagging the ball before taking it down the court, faking a shot, and then bouncing it under Hiroshi when the shooting guard jumps to block him. Seamlessly, as if they planned it beforehand, Kuroko materializes behind Hiroshi, receiving the pass with the fluidity of water before sliding into that abnormal shooting form, and Makoto doesn't even bother screening Kentarou out as the center hurries forward and attempts to block the shot. The ball simply disappears, phasing through Kentarou’s hand and only reappearing again as it dumps itself into the net.
“Ah, damn it! That’s not fair!” Hiroshi hollers as Kentarou shakes his head, looking utterly mystified.

Makoto just smirks before flicking a hand in the air. “That’s enough; we’re done for the day.”

Everyone blows out a tired breath but they’re still better than Kuroko who is bracing one hand against a knee as his other hand presses against his ribs, and Makoto figures it’s best to stop now before they need to make another trip to the hospital.

“But man, Seirin’s hands must be made of steel,” Kazuya remarks even as he flexes his fingers. His palms are reddened, slightly swollen, and to a lesser degree, so are Makoto’s.

“I apologize, Hara-san,” Kuroko immediately says as he pulls himself upright with some difficulty. “I should have watered my passes down even more.”

“You mean they were already watered down?” Kazuya stares mournfully from his hands to the first-year.

Kuroko nods once, dragging himself over to his bag and digging out a water bottle. “My teammates couldn’t catch my stronger passes at first either, not even Kagami-kun. My Ignite Pass used to be something only the Generation of Miracles could catch without trouble, and it has gotten stronger since then.”

He pauses, and then glances at Makoto. “That was a nice game. I had fun.”

Irritation wells up inside Makoto instantaneously, and whatever good mood he previously possessed is gone in the blink of an eye, but before he can lambaste the kid with a dozen scathing insults, Kazuya swoops in and hooks an arm around Makoto.

“Maa, maa, it’s alright, isn’t it?” The power forward smiles amicably at everyone. “It’s just his opinion, Hanamiya, and besides, it was kind of fun.”

Great. Just great. The kid has somehow charmed Kazuya by throwing Ignite Passes at the guy. Makoto should really learn this method and use it himself. At the very least, it would be a major
incentive for his team to practice even harder.

“Get off me!” He barks crossly, shrugging Kazuya’s arm off before turning a glare on Kuroko. “And you, scram! I’ve gotten what I want so you can leave now. Don’t come interrupting my practices again, and if you’re gonna go and get beaten up by anyone else with a grudge against the Generation of Miracles, make sure it doesn’t happen within a ten-mile radius of Kirisaki Daiichi.”

It’s more than a little frustrating to snap at a kid who doesn’t react to any of the barbs you throw at him whatsoever. Kuroko simply finishes tugging on his jacket and slinging his sports bag over one shoulder before bowing once more, thanking them once more, and then quietly taking his leave.

“That kid’s weird as all hell,” Hiroshi mutters as soon as he’s gone.

“But he’s pretty good,” Koujirou remarks as he rubs a towel over his face. “At basketball.”

Kentarou cracks a yawn before picking up his half-finished milkshake. “That’s a given. Seirin won the Winter Cup after all. We’d have kicked them out of the running in the preliminaries if they didn’t have that brat.” His gaze slides over to Makoto. “Did you get to analyze some of his moves?”

Makoto grunts, not bothering to reply directly as he heads for the showers. He’s pretty certain he knows how to stop the Phantom Shot now (he hears that Kasamatsu of Kaijou has already figured it out, and damn, Makoto should’ve gone to that game), and he’s got a few ideas on how to get around that Vanishing Drive, but... well, all that will be old news by the time the next Interhigh comes around. Those moves will still be used so Makoto will teach his team how to counter them, but there’s no doubt that Kuroko will have come up with something even more troublesome by then.

Of course, if the player himself isn’t in any shape to play, those moves won’t be a problem anyway.

Makoto smirks at the thought, and then his eyes land on the untouched milkshake still sitting in its tray. He pauses mid-step, and then scowls. He detests sweet things, but it’s a waste to just throw it out.

“Someone finish that!” He orders out loud, not bothering to turn around. “And Kazuya, twenty extra laps tomorrow.”
“Eehh? Tomorrow’s the last day before winter break! I don’t want to start it with muscle cramps! Hanamiya!”

Makoto huffs and ignores the complaints that follow him into the locker room. He’s not exactly in a good mood, but he’s got new data to work with, so he can’t say that he’s in an entirely bad mood either.

Still, Kuroko is vexing so Makoto’s glad that he’s probably not going to see that first-year again until at least the Interhigh.

For once however, his prediction is wrong.

Makoto doesn't usually go for fast food but his sister has had him running around Tokyo all day doing some shopping for her since she sprained her ankle. Hanamiya Mayu is the only person on the planet who can boss him around and get away with it, so now he’s weighed down by five different shopping bags and starving to death. Maji Burger is right there so he figures he might as well stop for a meal before heading home.

He deeply regrets his decision ten minutes later when – two bites into his burger – he looks up and finds a familiar blue-haired first-year sitting across for him.

He almost chokes.

“What the fu-” Makoto cuts himself off and settles for glowering darkly at Kuroko Tetsuya. His mind rapidly runs through a list of questions before skipping the first three and picking the fourth. “How long were you here before I sat down?”

Kuroko takes a sip of the hot chocolate in his hands before answering plainly. “Ten minutes.”

Damn. Makoto should’ve noticed. He clicks his tongue in annoyance, surreptitiously scanning the restaurant and finding no free seats elsewhere.
“I don’t mind sharing a table,” Kuroko tells him placidly.

“I do,” Makoto shoots back but doesn't move. It’s not like he can juggle five bags, walk, eat, and carry his cup of coffee around at the same time.

They end up eating in a stony silence save for the buzz of other ongoing conversations around them. Makoto isn’t one to talk nonstop anyway, and Kuroko looks perfectly content to sit and read his book. 

*The Little Prince*, Makoto notes with some surprise. Or *Le Petit Prince*, as the cover says.

Because the kid is reading it in French. Literally.

“You know French?” Makoto asks directly, studying the first-year more closely. For some reason, Kuroko is always making him switch opinions, assessing and reassessing everything Makoto’s learned about him. He already knows that Kuroko would make a good point guard, and he remembers Kuroko mentioning that he used to be Kise Ryouta’s trainer. What did that entail exactly? Does the kid actually have a mind for strategy along with analyzing and teaching game plays?

“Yes,” Kuroko states just as bluntly.

Makoto bites back a long-suffering sigh. Getting information from this brat is like pulling teeth. He eyes him suspiciously. Is Kuroko doing this on purpose? It would be just his luck if the kid has *Imayoshi’s* brand of humour. Makoto’s old captain could talk circles all day and never say anything of value just to screw with you.

“Do you?” Kuroko asks, not so above making conversation after all.

“Of course,” Makoto confirms haughtily. “I need multiple languages for my future career.”

The kid tilts his head, and Makoto is certain that there’s a smile hidden behind that stoic mask. “Not basketball?”
Okay, now Makoto knows the little brat is screwing with him.

“How many times do I have to say it?” He sneers, unable to help himself. “I don’t play basketball for fun. I just like breaking people when they get all their hopes up. There’s no way I’d make a career out of it.”

Kuroko swallows another gulp of his drink before telling him candidly, “You remind me of Murasakibara-kun.”

Makoto’s right eye twitches. “Don’t compare me to any of those idiots.”

Kuroko nods in acquiescence after a long second before coming back with, “What do you want to go into then?”

Makoto doesn’t really know why he answers – *keeps* answering – but he figures it won’t hurt. May even stop the kid from needling him about basketball.

“It’s exasperating, honestly, that that statement – coming from one of the best in the basketball circuit – is actually true. For all that Kuroko is one of the regulars of the team that now stands at the top of Japan, there’s no denying the fact that he’s also weaker than your average high school basketball player.

Makoto reaches for his coffee, a twinge of annoyance prompting him to mock, “Where’s that never-give-up attitude? One would think you would push on regardless.”

Kuroko just shakes his head again. “I love basketball. I don’t need to become a professional to continue playing it even after high school.” He stops and considers Makoto like he’s weighing something. “…I want to teach. Children.”
Makoto smirks, going for the kill without a single second of delay. “You sure about that? The kids will probably forget you exist before your first day of class is over.”

He doesn’t get any obvious reactions to this but he notices the way Kuroko’s fingers tighten momentarily around his mug of hot chocolate – probably the equivalent of a full-body flinch and upset glare on anyone else – so Makoto’s moderately satisfied.

“That could be true for anything I go into,” Kuroko counters after a moment of stilted silence, and then says no more, pointedly returning to his book in a way that says he’s shutting Makoto out. Apparently, a nerve has been touched.

Makoto quirks a sarcastic smile. So even this kid can sulk.

He doesn’t care. He’s found a new chink in Kuroko’s armour, and he stores it away for future reference.

Ten minutes later, Makoto gathers up his tray and dumps his trash away before returning to the table to collect his belongings. He glances up when Kuroko’s book claps shut decisively, and he finds himself at the end of an adamant stare.

“That was mean,” The kid says with straightforward candour. “You should make it up to me.”

Makoto releases a short, disbelieving laugh. “What are you, five? Keep dreaming, brat.”

He falters a little when that blank gaze somehow takes on the appearance of... puppy-dog eyes?

Hastily, he looks away, busying himself with shrugging on his coat. He’s Hanamiya Makoto; there’s no way-

Another quick glance, and Makoto can practically feel his defenses crumbling. Oh this is just not fair. Which idiot out there thinks this brat is a polite all-around good kid? Kuroko clearly excels at emotional manipulation.

He glowers back. “No.” He pauses, and then, out of suspicious curiosity, “What would you want
anyway?”

Kuroko apparently already has his priorities in order. “Your Floating Shot. I want to learn it.”

Makoto is hard-pressed not to smack himself. Of course. It always comes back to basketball with this one.

“Why?” Makoto demands. “You already have your Phantom Shot.”

Kuroko shrugs and doesn't reply, looking expectantly up at Makoto instead.

Makoto scowls. “No.”

And then the little shit has the gall to give him a disappointed look this time, like Makoto’s the one at fault. And he does it without visibly moving a single facial muscle too. If Makoto isn’t so irritated, he’d be impressed.

“Aomine-kun couldn't teach me either,” Kuroko says abruptly, and Makoto stills. “To shoot properly. He ended up having to change my form instead.”

*I'm being played*, Makoto laments even as he slowly turns back to face the younger teen, scanning him up and down judgementally.

“...Are you comparing me to Aomine Daiki?” Makoto isn’t sure whether he should be amused or offended.

Probably offended because now his pride’s not willing to let that go.

Kuroko blinks at him, all Bambi-eyed and deceptively innocent. Makoto grits his teeth and wonders why he ever thought it was a good idea to stop at Maji Burger in the first place.

He sighs testily, checks the time, and then picks up his bags and heads for the door.
“Basketball court,” Makoto bites out, and his lip curls when he hears Kuroko scrambling up to follow him.

So the Generation of Miracles’ ace is a crappy teacher, huh? Well, for an arrogant basketball hothead, it’s not that surprising.

No matter. Makoto’s been a coach for nearly two years. He can do far better.

“You're terrible at this,” Hanamiya says two hours later, and his tone of voice says that he’s torn between scorn and astonishment. Astonishment may actually be winning.

Tetsuya shrugs, catches the ball as it bounces off the rim and back in his direction, and takes no offense at the remark. Everyone who’s ever seen him shoot has said as much.

Hanamiya pinches the bridge of his nose before bracing his hands on his hips and glaring down at Tetsuya. “This is ridiculous. Are you trying at all?”

Tetsuya nods dutifully. Hanamiya glares harder before glancing up at the darkening sky. “Alright, listen – I have to go home. I don’t have any more time to watch you fail today.”

Tetsuya sighs, only to pull up short when Hanamiya continues.

“Meet me back here tomorrow at two,” The point guard orders. “We’ll continue then.”

Some of Tetsuya’s surprise must’ve shown because Hanamiya sneers at him even as he moves towards his belongings.

“I am not as useless as Aomine Daiki,” Hanamiya informs him curtly as he pulls on his jacket and picks up his shopping bags (Tetsuya isn’t quite sure why one of them is stamped with the brand of a store that only sells women’s shoes). “You’ll learn, or you’ll die trying. Don’t be late.”
And with that said, the Kirisaki Daiichi captain strides off without a backwards glance, leaving an inwardly dumbfounded Tetsuya behind.

In all sincerity, Tetsuya’s not really sure why he’s doing this. To be fair though, Hanamiya’s probably not really sure why *either* of them is doing this.

However, Tetsuya wasn't lying earlier when he said that Hanamiya reminded him – just a little – of Murasakibara. The second-year’s words were certainly similar enough, and maybe that was what incited Tetsuya into getting Hanamiya to him.

After all, if Tetsuya could change the Generation of Miracles – change *Akashi Seijuurou* – then Hanamiya Makoto should be a piece of cake.

Still, it was a spur-of-the-moment idea, which isn’t like Tetsuya at all because he’s a detail sort of person, but for someone who hurts people because he enjoys it, who once made Tetsuya so angry, the two of them still had a relatively decent conversation for a few minutes back at the restaurant before the verbal assault began again.

And Tetsuya hasn't forgotten how Hanamiya and his team saved him all those weeks ago. Haizaki is now probably Kagami and Aomine’s least favourite person in the entire world but – upon Tetsuya’s insistence – everyone agreed to leave the violent teen alone. Haizaki would get one more chance, per Tetsuya’s bargain with the Fukuda Sougou ace, but if he attacks any of them ever again, well, Akashi himself promised Tetsuya that there would be no letting the matter go a second time.

When Tetsuya pulled a fast one on his overprotective team one week back to sneak over to Kirisaki Daiichi though, he fully expected Hanamiya to demand something rather harsh in return. The milkshakes were really only an excuse to approach the regulars. Tetsuya’s own conscience wouldn't let it go just like that, plus he didn't want Hanamiya to take it out on Seirin at a later date (no matter what Hara-san said), so it came as something of a shock when Hanamiya only requested a game, and no one so much as elbowed Tetsuya in the ribs.

It was an astounding experience, and not just because of the lack of underhanded fouls, but because it was actually *fun*. Kirisaki Daiichi wouldn't be a bad team at all if they could just leave the rough play out of their style.

And in the end, it’s one of those things or maybe all of them combined that spurred Tetsuya into semi-goading Hanamiya into teaching him the Teardrop. The second-year gave in a little more easily than Tetsuya expected, and Tetsuya hasn't the slightest clue as to why, but he’ll take what he
can get, and it seems that Hanamiya is genuinely planning on taking these lessons seriously, if only so that Tetsuya won’t put him in the same category as Aomine ever again.

The thought is mildly amusing.

The court is quiet now that there are no basketballs bouncing off the asphalt, and Tetsuya quickly packs up and begins heading home. He’s promised his team that he’ll call at least one of them every night once he’s arrived back at his house (it’s better than having everyone follow him around all day, which was what happened for four weeks straight after he left the hospital), and he knows that all of them worry if he doesn't call by eight-thirty at the latest. It’s a bit stifling, but at the same time, Tetsuya’s never had anyone worry about him getting home on time, so it’s a bit of a heartwarming novelty as well.

He wonders, idly, what his friends would say if they find out that Hanamiya of all people is teaching him basketball. They would probably think he’s gone crazy. And that Hanamiya’s up to something. On the other hand, so long as the Kirisaki Daiichi captain has no ulterior motives, Kiyoshi would be cheering them on. That’s just the kind of person he is, especially when it comes to Hanamiya after the whole Haizaki incident.

Tetsuya’s phone buzzes with an incoming text, and he glances down at it, frowning slightly when he sees the babbling message from Kise on the screen. Basically, it’s Kise-speech for ‘Do you want to come buy clothes with me tomorrow, Kurokocchiii?!’, which means it’s not a life-or-death emergency, which means Tetsuya can ignore it.

So he does. He’s already got basketball to look forward to tomorrow anyway, and that’s always infinitely more interesting than shopping.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
“Again. If you can’t even make a basket one-handed, there’s no hope for you.”

They’ve been working at this for a week now, every day for at least four hours each afternoon, and even Tetsuya openly gaped for several heartbeats when – just two days ago – he finally managed to sink a basket from the free throw line using the textbook stance everyone else does. It was nowhere near as elegant as it could be, wobbling along the rim before tipping inward, but it went in. Hanamiya spent ages examining and correcting the way Tetsuya usually positions his hands until he could switch to the proper form at will, and when he finally managed a regular jump shot, the captain looked positively smug. Tetsuya can now consistently sink three out of every ten baskets, which – while not great – is still a vast improvement compared to what he could do before.

Three-pointers are out of the question though, and he still can’t make a basket one-handed.

“Does your coach get you to do any wrist-strengthening exercises?” Hanamiya asks critically after Tetsuya’s shot ends up bouncing off the rim. It’s better than before; at least it actually reaches the net now.

Tetsuya shakes his head even as the second-year plucks at his right wrist, turning it this way and that. Hanamiya makes a disgusted noise at the back of his throat.

“What about a proper dietary plan?” The captain enquires, dropping Tetsuya’s wrist in favour of ambling away to pick up the ball. “You’re too skinny for a high school basketball player.”

Tetsuya shakes his head again, almost turning green at the mere indirect mention of his coach’s cooking. “I’m naturally skinny, Hanamiya-san, and my wrists are already strong enough to support my Ignite Passes. Besides, most of my team’s training consists of footwork and overall muscle-building. The only one who really concentrates on wrist-strengthening exercises is Kiyoshi-senpai.” He pauses. “And my style is too unique so it’s something that only I can develop on my own. Coach gets me to practice with the rest of the team, but any specialized training is up to me. Akashi-kun was the one who helped me develop my style back in Teikou, and Aomine-kun helped me adjust my shooting form, but I created all my techniques by myself.”
Tetsuya falls silent as the ball is passed back to him. Hanamiya is watching him again with that peculiar measuring look that the second-year seems to have invented just for him. It's as if something about Tetsuya honestly puzzles the genius point guard, and Hanamiya is always reminded of that every few days. It’s weird though, because Tetsuya thinks that there’s nothing puzzling about himself at all. Nothing about him stands out; he’s easily overlooked and not at all exceptional when you place him beside truly extraordinary people.

“Well, it’s none of my concern,” Hanamiya mutters at last even as he waves a hand in the general direction of Tesuya’s arms. “But I’d suggest wrist-strengthening exercises, and push-ups while you’re at it. Don’t overdo it or you’ll risk spraining something, but it doesn’t hurt to have a fixed training menu to keep your muscles from deteriorating.” He stops and then tacks on with a sneer as if he’s worried Tetsuya may think he’s going soft, “Like I’d say something like that, idiot. Not my problem if you’re too stupid to know your limits.”

Tetsuya stares for a moment before turning away and hiding a smile. Hanamiya seems to sense it anyway because he throws a moody glare at Tetsuya before stalking another few steps away.

“Teaching you is troublesome; we’re doing something else for a while,” The second-year falls into a ready stance, eyes narrowing. “Play.”

Tetsuya brightens because while he can practice one thing forever until he gets it down, it does get a bit tedious to continue throwing baskets over and over again nonstop. A one-on-one will be a nice break from the monotony.

And it’s a startlingly enjoyable one-on-one too. Tetsuya hones in on the net from the left, and Hanamiya follows him every step of the way, brow pinching when Tetsuya’s Phantom Shot gets through anyway. The second-year pays him back though by seizing the ball and streaking back up the court, and despite Tetsuya’s best efforts, Hanamiya fakes once, twice, spins on his heel to the right so that his back is facing the hoop and blocking Tetsuya from stealing the ball, and then promptly tosses said ball over one shoulder. It soars over Tetsuya’s head and swishes through the net with the easy grace of a shot fired by an Uncrowned King.

Tetsuya quirks a brief smile before racing for the ball and starting another round down the court once more, Hanamiya dogging his every step even after he ghosts past the second-year with a Vanishing Drive. Tetsuya forgets, sometimes, the sheer talent that the Crownless Generals possess.

They sprint back and forth on the court, losing track of time as Tetsuya throws in a handful of normal shots (that mostly don’t go in), and Hanamiya mixes in three-pointers and layups into his arsenal. They don’t keep count of the points (though Hanamiya inevitably pulls ahead), but there’s evident improvement on both sides as their spontaneous match persists, shown when Tetsuya
executes a Phantom Shot, only for Hanamiya to back off immediately, just like Kasamatsu in the Seirin-Kaijou game, and Tetsuya is wide-eyed when the smirking second-year successfully stops the shot.

Likewise however, Tetsuya has been calculating angles and timing and tells since the one-on-one started, and he pounces the moment he gets Hanamiya’s Floaters’ tempo down, leaping up and tipping the ball just as the captain releases it for a Teardrop.

Tetsuya really does smile this time when the point guard clicks his tongue in annoyance upon realizing that his Floaters are now largely useless so long as Tetsuya’s stamina doesn’t start lagging.

Still, Hanamiya can’t stop all his Phantom Shots, especially when Tetsuya begins experimenting with starting in a normal shooting position and drawing his opponent close with it before quickly sliding back into his other form and carrying out a Phantom Shot. The accuracy decreases a bit but the trick is successful, and he can swear he catches a flash of approval flitting across Hanamiya’s face.

Similarly, just because Tetsuya has the rhythm of Hanamiya’s shots down doesn’t mean the second-year is above throwing in something extra. So the next time Hanamiya hits the free throw line and jumps back for a Floater, resulting in Tetsuya following him into the air to stop the shot, the captain rotates his wrist, drops the ball behind him instead of taking the shot, and passes it from his right hand to his left before raising it again with his left hand, and then pulling off a flawless Teardrop just as he begins to descend from the highest point of his jump, leaving Tetsuya too far to one side to stop the shot in time.

Both of them land, and Tetsuya whirls around just as the ball plunges neatly through the net without so much as brushing the metal rim.

Well damn.

Tetsuya turns back, panting as he pushes away the sweat-damp bangs sticking to his forehead. He almost does a double-take when he looks up and meets Hanamiya’s self-satisfied expression. For once, the smirk on the captain’s face looks less like a smirk and more like an honest-to-god grin.

“Did you think I could only shoot with my right hand?” Hanamiya crows with something disturbingly close to exhilaration, only a little breathless as he exhales in a short whoosh. “I’m just as good with my left, idiot.”
Tetsuya smiles faintly as he scoops up the ball. “Yes. That was amazing.”

Hanamiya side-eyes him warily but apparently decides to take the compliment at face value just this once.

“Of course it was,” The captain says instead, something not quite condescension dripping from every syllable even as the two of them walk off the court in an unspoken agreement.

“Your elbow’s still coming up too high when you go for the normal shots,” Hanamiya says offhandedly as he slumps onto the bench where their sports bags are, pulling out a towel and wiping his face.

Tetsuya gulps down several mouthfuls of water before cocking his head questioningly at the point guard. Hanamiya sighs but obligingly gets to his feet again and tugs Tetsuya into position.

“You’re overcompensating,” The captain explains gruffly, moving Tetsuya’s arms up with the basketball cradled in his right hand. “Your right elbow tends to rise two centimeters too high,” Hanamiya arranges his elbow at a certain level. “But it should be down here,” He nudges Tetsuya’s elbow down ever-so-slightly so that his entire stance shifts to something less awkward. “Get it?”

Tetsuya blinks twice, memorizing the slight dissimilarity before nodding slowly. No offense to Aomine but he understands Hanamiya’s instructions far better than his former partner’s ‘like this’ demonstrations.

“Hm,” Hanamiya nods once. “Remember the difference; you-”

Tetsuya glances up when the hand at his elbow convulses before letting go like it’s been burned. In the blink of an eye, Hanamiya’s relaxed features have tensed up again into his typical mask of cruel apathy, and he’s staring at something over Tetsuya’s head. Tetsuya quickly turns to look.

Unbelievably enough, gathered at the far end of the court like spectators at an exciting basketball match stands the entirety of Touou’s Winter Cup starting lineup, including Momoi, as well as half of Kaijou’s regulars, and all of Shuutoku’s. Every single one of them is staring back in a way that says they’ve been standing there for a while now, half of them look dumbstruck, and Tetsuya sighs in resignation.
“Tetsu!” And as if Hanamiya and Tetsuya noticing them is the sign that their audience was waiting for, Aomine is suddenly charging around the metal fence and through the door, looking both confused and angry at the same time. Never a good mix.

“You bastard!” Aomine shouts in Hanamiya’s direction as Kaijou, Shuutoku, and the rest of Touou pile onto the court. “What are you doing with Tetsu?”

“Kurokocchi!!” Kise wails, bounding up and throwing himself on Tetsuya like some sort of demented octopus. “What’s going on?! Did he force you to play with him?! Are you injured?!”

Midorima doesn't say a word. If his expression is anything to go by, he already looks pretty steamed about something, but Hanamiya’s presence makes his eyes narrow even further behind his glasses.

Before Tetsuya can respond, Momoi is also there, knocking Kise out of the way and wrapping Tetsuya in an exasperatingly tight hug herself.

“Tetsu-kun!” Momoi coos, fussing over him like she thinks he’s going to fall to pieces any minute. “Are you okay?” And then, more reasonably, “It looked like you were just playing a game."

“I'm fine, Momoi-san,” Tetsuya assures flatly, trying to squirm out of her hold without making it too obvious. That would be rude. He glances over at Aomine as everyone else congregates around them. “Aomine-kun, please calm down. Hanamiya-san hasn't done anything.”

Aomine looks flabbergasted, and his hands twitch like they're itching to wrap around Hanamiya’s neck. Hanamiya isn’t helping by smirking derisively at Touou’s ace.

“But Tetsu-!” Aomine rallies, stabbing a finger at Hanamiya and looking like he wants to follow the gesture through by grabbing the second-year by his shirt collar.

“Aomine-kun,” Tetsuya’s voice sharpens with the steely edge he used to utilize whenever Aomine
was out of line back in Teikou, back when Aomine still listened to him. To his mild surprise, this Aomine grumbles wordlessly but also stands down. For some reason, Wakamatsu is gawking at both of them from the side.


“I haven’t said a word,” Hanamiya’s smirk widens cunningly as he looks between Tetsuya and Aomine. “We were just playing basketball, right, Tetsuya?”

Tetsuya sighs again in a long-suffering manner as Aomine’s temper spikes once more, and Kise looks jealous and miffed in equal measure.

“We were,” Tetsuya confirms before anything can get out of hand. He considers telling Hanamiya off for referring to him by his first name, but then lets it go. He doubts Hanamiya will stop, not to mention Tetsuya may be just a little annoyed with the interruption. “Hanamiya-san was teaching me how to shoot, and then we took a break with a short game.”

“You already know how to shoot,” Aomine points out the obvious.

“Shoot properly,” Tetsuya clarifies patiently. “So that I can eventually pull off Hanamiya-san’s Teardrop.”

“That’s impossible,” Aomine dismisses so tactlessly that Tetsuya almost bristles. “You can’t shoot properly, Tetsu.”

Surprisingly, it’s Hanamiya who scoffs and interjects silkily, “And you call yourself his partner? You have quite the faith in him there. Though I suppose that’s why it’s now former partner.”

Aomine looks about ready to punch him, momentarily incoherent with reckless fury. Tetsuya doesn't know why Hanamiya persists in pushing the rather short-tempered teen’s buttons. It’s a rather hazardous thing to do when it comes to his continued safety.

“But Kurokocchi,” Kise looks beseechingly at Tetsuya. “If you want to learn how to shoot, you could've come to me! It would be just like old times, except I’d be teaching you instead of the other way around!”
Even Kasamatsu looks somewhat dubious at this, and Tetsuya rejects bluntly, “No thank you, Kise-kun.”

Kise bursts into theatrical waterfalls of tears and everyone edges away from him so as not to get wet.

Tetsuya fights down the urge to smack Kise over the head or something, surveying the others instead. Even Imayoshi and Susa are here, and Tetsuya knows that they retired immediately after losing to Seirin at the Winter Cup. Imayoshi actually looks like Christmas has come early what with the delighted smile he’s aiming at Hanamiya. Hanamiya is steadfastly ignoring the third-year in return.

“Everything is fine,” Tetsuya cuts in with finality just as Aomine is opening his mouth to pick another fight. He’s entirely fed up with all the unnecessary glowers and unspoken throw-downs hovering in the air.

“Aomine-kun, please stop posturing,” Tetsuya doesn't so much as blink when Aomine splutters indignantly, waiting tolerantly until the power forward subsides, slouching sullenly as he backs off a little.


Tetsuya looks at Midorima last, picking out the problem with the ease of long familiarity. Only one of two things can make the shooting guard look that upset (the second of which – loss of a really tough game – doesn't apply in this situation), and it’s always better to solve it sooner rather than later. “Midorima-kun, what happened to your lucky item?”

If possible, Midorima’s countenance grows even more menacing, and beside him, Takao winces and sidles away with a murmur of, “Shin-chan, calm down.”

“Aomine broke it!” The Shuutoku ace accuses without delay, and if Tetsuya isn’t so accustomed to his Teikou teammates’ eccentricities, he’d feel somewhat amused at how much Midorima sounds like a five-year-old tattling on his brother, complete with finger-pointing and all. “He was fooling around after the practice match between our schools, and his basketball knocked my dolphin statue to the ground!”
“Who brings a statue to practice anyway?!” Aomine instantly retaliates. “You should’ve at least left it in your locker! Besides, I already said I was sorry!”

“Sorry doesn’t fix my statue!” Midorima growls back. “And I need my lucky item!”

“It’s already six in the evening! You’ll last six hours without it!”

“What would you know, you heathen? Oha Asa predicted that I would have exceptionally bad luck without my item today; I need it!”

“Oha Asa isn’t God!”

“Midorima-kun,” Tetsuya interrupts before the altercation can get any more ridiculous. “Aomine-kun will pay for another statue.”

“What?! But-” Aomine blanches at the adamant stare Tetsuya fixes on him, but nevertheless, he still gives a token protest. “I need the money for my magazines, Tetsu! If I pay for it, I won’t have enough for the next two weeks! And school starts up again tomorrow! I need the distraction!”

Tetsuya doesn’t budge an inch. “You’ll live, Aomine-kun. Fair’s fair.”

“But-!” Aomine glances helplessly at Momoi who is absolutely pitiless about this, and then looks again at Tetsuya’s unyielding expression before finally deflating like a popped balloon. “Alright, fine. I’ll pay for the damn statue.”

Tetsuya looks back at Midorima. The shooting guard adjusts his glasses and nods once. “That is acceptable,” The first-year says rather loftily, giving Aomine one last dirty look, but he simmers down all the same, and the black aura that was discharging invisible death threats at everyone in the vicinity dissipates at last.

Tetsuya nods as well, quietly pleased. He pauses when he hears Miyaji’s fervent whisper of, “How did he do that? Do you think he’d be willing to teach me? I’ll even pay him!”
Tetsuya mentally frowns in confusion but doesn't pay it much mind. He has to sort out his own situation now.

“Hanamiya-san and I were just playing basketball, nothing more,” Tetsuya reiterates calmly. “I appreciate the concern but it is unnecessary.”

An awkward silence follows before Kasamatsu sighs, sounding aggrieved, and steps forward. “Sorry about the interruption. Kise and I were just passing by when we bumped into them-” He jabs a thumb at Shuutoku and Touou. “-and then we heard you two playing from the road so we made a detour. We caught the tail-end of it so-” Kise yelps as Kasamatsu reaches up and clamps a hand on his head, forcefully making him bow. “-we know perfectly well it was just a game. This idiot’s sorry too for making such a huge scene.”

Tetsuya suppresses a smile at the sight. Kaijou and its captain are good for Kise. Kasamatsu especially doesn’t let the blond run wild.

“Maa, we didn't mean ta interrupt,” Imayoshi finally speaks up as well, smiling away even as he peers at Hanamiya. “Nice Teardrop, Hanamiya. Ya looked like ya were enjoyin’ yourself.”

Hanamiya sneers and begins packing up, any lingering goodwill disappearing like mist at high noon. “Don’t spout your crap at me, Imayoshi.” He slings his bag over one shoulder, picking up his jacket with his free hand even as he glances down at Tetsuya. “We both have school starting tomorrow. I’ll see you next Saturday. Same time.”

And without waiting for an affirmation from Tetsuya, the Kirisaki Daiichi captain sweeps out of the court like royalty leaving his subjects, his steps never faltering even as he returns Aomine’s scowl with a highly disinterested you are so far beneath me you’re not even worthy of licking my shoes look. It just makes Aomine scowl that much harder.

Tetsuya sighs a third time and starts packing up as well. It’s about time he heads home anyway.

“But Kurokocchi,” Kise begins again, a little more tentative this time as if he thinks Tetsuya may stop talking to him for this as well. “Hanamiya is...”

Tetsuya glances back at the blond as he zips up his bag. “Yes, I know, Kise-kun.” He tilts his head contemplatively. “I’ll be careful.”
Kise relaxes, still a little worried but trusting Tetsuya’s judgement as he almost always has, and now that Hanamiya has left, the atmosphere lightens.

“But man, Tetsu, my magazines,” Aomine borderline whines, and Tetsuya almost pinches the bridge of his nose. He turns a cool look on the power forward instead.

“How did you do on your exams, Aomine-kun?” Tetsuya enquires pointedly.

Aomine straightens defensively. “Fine.”

“He barely scraped through,” Momoi reveals almost gleefully at the same time. Aomine shoots her a betrayed look.

“Then don’t you think you should attend class more often instead of reading your magazines or lazing around on the roof all day?” Tetsuya scolds tonelessly.

Aomine makes a face. “Satsuki, what’ve you been telling Tetsu?”

Momoi huffs, delicately curling an arm around the crook of Tetsu’s right elbow. “I don’t have to tell him anything, Ahomine. That’s the exact same thing you did back in middle school unless Tetsu-kun took the time to drag you back to class. God knows you stopped listening to me a long time ago.”

“Indeed,” Midorima agrees disdainfully, apparently not quite over the loss of his original lucky item yet and is now taking any opportunity he can to get Aomine into even more trouble. “Honestly, you would've thought Kuroko was your mother with the amount of time and effort he had to put in to make sure you passed all your classes.”

Aomine looks downright peeved at the onslaught of lectures but not as if he’s going to change his habits anytime soon, so Tetsuya decides to give his old partner a little push. After all, everyone needs motivation.

“It might be a good thing in a way,” Tetsuya muses out loud, and Aomine swings back to him, looking surprised. “Kagami-kun will have even more incentive to do well next time.”
A short silence. And then, “...Kagami did pretty good in his exams then?” Aomine asks nonchalantly.

Hook.

“Yes,” Tetsuya says with a completely straight face. Momoi shakes almost imperceptibly against him as she no doubt holds back laughter. “Kagami-kun always wanted to play basketball rather than study even though his grades aren’t that good, so I mentioned how even Aomine-kun can pass his classes while still playing basketball. Kagami-kun got all fired up at that, and we were all surprised when he did quite well in his exams in the end.” Tetsuya blinks innocently up at Aomine. “I guess Kagami-kun can be smarter than Aomine-kun when he wants to be.”

Aomine twitches, his competitive streak now piqued.

Line.

“Oh,” Tetsuya nods to himself. “I’m certain Kagami-kun will be pleased to hear that his hard work paid off. He says he wants to be able to say that he’s better than you in both basketball and academics, and now I suppose he can.”

Aomine twitches again, far more violently this time, and Tetsuya can all but hear the sound of the power forward’s restraint snapping.

And sinker.

“Let’s go, Midorima!” Aomine lunges, grabs a startled Midorima by the arm, and begins hauling the shooting guard towards entrance of the outdoor court. “We’re gonna go buy your damn item, and then I need to go organize my study schedule. Satsuki, start lending me your notes again this term. That Kagami thinks he can beat me?! I haven’t been trying at all! We’ll see come March which of us is smarter! And beat me in basketball?! Hah! He can keep dreaming! Winter Cup was a fluke!”

Aomine races off with Midorima, a dust cloud billowing behind them as they disappear through a crop of trees, leaving a bemused silence in their wake.

“So,” Momoi tips her head to the side, peeking up at Tetsuya with laughter-filled eyes. “How did
“Kagamin do on his exams?”

“Barely scraped through,” Tetsuya deadpans, and Momoi bursts into giggles. “This method seems effective though. I should use it on Kagami-kun as well. Otherwise, Captain will get me to tie him to a chair in the library again.”

“Kurokocchi is as evil as ever,” Kise chuckles as Momoi’s giggles turn to full-blown laughter. “This will definitely get Aominecchi to work harder though.”

“Yeah? And what will work on you?” Kasamatsu cuts in, already looking annoyed. “Aomine’s not the only one with bad marks.”

“But I passed everything!” Kise chirps brightly.

“Barely!”

Tetsuya glances at him. “You were also in danger of failing, Kise-kun?”

Kise does an about-face and glomps Tetsuya along with Momoi, tears already gathering at the corners of his eyes. “I’ll work harder, Kurokocchi! Don’t be disappointed!”

Tetsuya sighs for the umpteenth time that day before expertly untangling himself from both Kise and Momoi. “I’m sure you will, Kise-kun.” He glances up at the sky. “It’s getting late. I should be going.”

It takes another ten minutes before Tetsuya can extricate himself from Kise’s clutches, Momoi’s hugs, and everyone else’s probing eyes, all of them looking at him with a baffling mix of amazement and curiosity.

“Kuroko!”

Tetsuya stiffens unnoticeably even as he stops and turns, bowing politely as Imayoshi catches up to him. This is so many levels of bizarre that Tetsuya doesn't even know where to begin. He doesn't really know Imayoshi, though Aomine did mention at the hospital that the former Touou captain
was Hanamiya’s senpai in middle school, and that was how Hanamiya indirectly contacted Aomine. Tetsuya can only assume that the worrying smile on Imayoshi’s face has something to do with that.

“Imayoshi-san,” Tetsuya greets courteously. The point guard visited him once when he was still in the hospital, along with the rest of Touou, so it’s not like they’ve jumped from Touou losing to Seirin straight into this conversation. “Was there something you wanted?”

“No, no, nothin’ in particular,” Imayoshi smiles at him, expression as phony as Kise’s publicity face. “My house is in this direction too so I thought we could get to know each other along the way.”

Tetsuya doesn't believe that that’s all there is to it for a second but he doesn't comment, nodding stoically instead as Imayoshi falls into step beside him.

“So,” Imayoshi starts in a casual tone of voice. “How’s Seirin these days? Already trainin’ for the next tournament?”

“Yes,” Tetsuya responds blandly. Unlike most people, Imayoshi doesn't seem too bothered by the monosyllabic answer.

“Ya know, I’ve always wondered,” Imayoshi continues idly. “Why Seirin? I’d heard that ya’d quit after the final match in the Nationals back in your third year in junior high but ya should’ve still had offers. I’m not sayin’ Seirin is a bad school – I can’t really do that anymore, all things considered – but they weren’t very well-known back then.”

Tetsuya looks briefly up at the older teen. “...I saw a few minutes of a game that Seirin played in shortly before I quit the Teikou basketball club. I thought they were an interesting team, so when graduation came around, I picked Seirin for their basketball.”

Even Imayoshi glances at him with something akin to perplexity. “That’s it? Ya saw them play for a few minutes, and then later decided ta join their team?”

Tetsuya smothers a smile. To hear it laid out like that actually makes him sound pretty crazy, but in essence, that was the entire reason Tetsuya gambled on Seirin. “Yes. I had... a good feeling about them.”
Imayoshi’s eyes slit open for a moment before closing once more. When he smiles again, it looks more genuine. “I see. Then ya have incredible instincts.”

Tetsuya shrugs lightly but says nothing. He doesn't think it’s instincts so much as Seirin’s own innate charm – the bonds between its players – that drew him in.

“And they've gotten pretty protective of ya, from what I've seen, and vice-versa,” Imayoshi remarks, and Tetsuya is acutely aware of the turn that this conversation has taken, no matter how subtle the third-year thinks he’s being. Then again, Imayoshi doesn't seem the type to really care whether or not Tetsuya has him figured out as long as he gets what he wants, so the third-year’s probably not trying that hard to hide his intentions. “So I have ta admit, it’s a little surprisin’ ta see ya hangin’ out with Hanamiya, especially after the match between Seirin and Kirisaki Daiichi.”

Tetsuya blinks up at the point guard. He thought it would probably be something along these lines, although he still doesn't know why Imayoshi is so interested.

“Hanamiya-san isn’t that bad,” Tetsuya says carefully. “Kiyoshi-senpai has forgiven him, and he hasn't tried anything yet; we were honestly just playing basketball.”

Imayoshi’s smile widens a touch. “Aa, I saw. He’s good, isn’t he, when he isn’t messin’ around on the court?”

Tetsuya nods. This he can agree with one hundred percent.

“I haven’t seen him play like that in a long time,” Imayoshi tacks on almost absentmindedly before slanting an unreadable look at Tetsuya. “Ya should keep your guard up though. Hanamiya isn’t very kind. He’s not like the players you're used ta.”

The point guard stops after that, already realizing his mistake even as Tetsuya directs a momentary wry smile up at him.

“I'm used to playing monsters, Imayoshi-san,” Tetsuya points out. “With and against.”

“He’s not like Seirin,” Imayoshi amends, inclining his head in concession of Tetsuya’s statement. “Or even the Generation of Miracles who at least abides by the rules. Hanamiya can be much worse than them.”
Tetsuya is silent for a long moment, and when he speaks, the words slip out like they have a will of their own. Perhaps it’s because Imayoshi is an impartial bystander for all intents and purposes. “...That isn’t always true. The Generation of Miracles at their worst destroyed more people than Hanamiya-san ever has, and none of them ever even knew they were doing it.” Tetsuya raises his gaze, impassive as stone as he gauges Imayoshi’s expression. “Who is worse?”

Imayoshi’s smile fades a little, and they walk the next half block in a shroud of pensive silence. Their steps subconsciously slow as they reach an intersection.

“I turn off here, Imayoshi-san,” Tetsuya bows once more. “It was nice seeing you. Good luck with your studies.”

“Aa, thanks; I’ll see ya ’round,” Imayoshi lifts a hand in response, and Tetsuya turns to leave, but he’s called back after taking only five steps away.

“He goes ta practice now,” Imayoshi divulges even as he turns away as well. The light of the sunset makes his glasses flash white. “Aomine. Every single practice. Drives Wakamatsu up the wall every time, but he goes.”

And with a last wave over his shoulder, the third-year picks up his pace and walks away.

You changed him, Imayoshi doesn't say. Whatever happened in the past shouldn't matter anymore.

Tetsuya hears him anyway. It leaves him feeling just a little lighter, but a part of him wonders what the purpose of all this was. He thought Imayoshi would interrogate him more about Hanamiya, yet the third-year was practically warning him off before ending the conversation with a comment on Aomine’s new – old – behaviour.

Tetsuya wonders if maybe Imayoshi wants him to try his hand at changing Hanamiya too.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s been weeks. Months. Two months and three weeks.

Makoto hasn’t the faintest clue why he keeps going back.

The kid’s a quick study, and despite his body’s physical limits, it only takes him a mere month to learn Makoto’s Floater until he reaches a fifty-five percent success rate. Kuroko simply doesn’t give up until he gets it; it’s like he’s never heard of the word impossible before, and from what Makoto’s gathered, Seirin is over the moon with their trump card’s expanding arsenal.

However, that was over a month and a half ago. For some unfathomable reason that Makoto – for all his brilliant intellect – has yet to figure out, he continues meeting up with the brat every Saturday. He likes to pretend it’s because he wants compensation for all the hours he’s put into not just teaching Kuroko how to shoot a Teardrop but also teaching him how to shoot, period.

But Makoto’s already demanded the detailed workings of the Ignite Pass from Kuroko, and even though he still can’t pull it off anywhere near as well as the passing specialist himself, or even that copycat Kise, Makoto can execute a much weaker version of it now, so it doesn’t explain why he keeps going back.

And half the time, it’s not even for basketball anymore.

Like now, for instance.

They're sitting in the public library at the moment, at a corner table for two. The surface is covered with an amalgam of textbooks and notes, half first-year material, half second-year material, and they're both studying for finals.

Contrary to popular belief (mostly Makoto’s teammates), Makoto does need to study despite his high IQ and eidetic memory. He just doesn’t have to do it very often, nor does he have to cram, but he likes reviewing the material before exams just in case he missed something or anything unexpected pops up, and it doesn't hurt to be prepared. He’s getting into Toudai one way or the
other, and come hell or high water, his transcript will be perfect when he graduates.

Kuroko on the other hand does need to study more than Makoto does, but the kid is undoubtedly intelligent. Makoto’s seen the way Kuroko goes through homework with the ease of someone who not only has the material memorized but understands it as well, especially history and geography, and it positively astounds Makoto that Kuroko can tolerate an idiot like Kagami day in and day out without having a mental breakdown.

(Makoto has already vocalized this. Kuroko gave him a blank look and responded by asking him why he tolerates half his team if that were the case. Makoto wasn't certain whether to laugh in disbelief at the deadpan gibe coming from someone so docile-looking or smack the brat for his nerve, but he couldn't exactly bring the issue up again without sounding like a hypocrite.)

So Kuroko’s not genius-level smart but he doesn't give Makoto migraines for being too slow either, which is at least half the reason Makoto endures his company. God knows Hiroshi and Kentarou’s inane bickering makes him want to commit homicide at times (there would be less bickering if Kentarou quits taunting Hiroshi, and Hiroshi isn’t so quick to rise to the bait).

The kid’s quiet too, most of the time. You wouldn't have guessed it with how much he rambled on during the Kirisaki Daiichi-Seirin match, pressing and pressing his ideals like no tomorrow, but off the court, Kuroko’s moderate with his words, and there are Saturdays when neither of them say anything more than a hello when they meet and a goodbye when they part (and that’s mostly just Kuroko and his irreproachable manners; Makoto himself isn’t that fussed about greetings), with all the time in the middle spent doing their respective homework in relative silence or playing one-on-one with nothing between them but the sound of the basketball bouncing off the blacktop and backboard.

This only serves to mystify and annoy Makoto even more when he thinks about it because these meetings are largely redundant, and he’s not in the habit of doing redundant things.

A deliberate flutter of pages being stacked together pulls him out of his musings, and he looks up from his math textbook to find Kuroko staring back at him.

No matter how tolerable, the kid can still be damn creepy. “...What?”

“I’m hungry,” Kuroko monotones.
Makato scoffs and diverts his attention back to his schoolwork. “Don’t care. I don’t think you need me holding your hand just to go get food.”

Kuroko shifts in his seat, hesitating for a second before getting up. “Then, I’ll be back.”

Makoto doesn’t look up again until Kuroko disappears around a bookshelf. And then he raises his head and glances surreptitiously at his surroundings.

That was a little weird, even for the chibi-ghost.

Makoto scans the area, eyes narrowing when he catches a glimpse of red behind a set of anthologies before whoever it is slips away.

Kagami?

No, the colour’s not as dark, and the person’s too short to be Seirin’s power forward anyway.

Akashi Seijuurou is more like it.

Makoto clicks his tongue in disgust. What is wrong with Kuroko that the kid attracts stalkers like bees to honey? Makoto can understand when half of Seirin ‘spied’ on the two of them for three Saturdays straight after the new term started and they found out that Kuroko was meeting up with him every week, but there was also several times when Kise and Aomine crouched in a tree for hours on end outside one of the library windows (Makoto was delighted when Kise fell out of the tree and dragged Aomine down with him), and all those other times when Makoto’s own team hid behind some bushes while Kuroko was showing Makoto his Ignite Pass (Makoto made them run laps in practice on Monday until they collapsed), and also that one other time Kagami decided to butt in and ‘keep an eye on him’, resulting in Makoto insulting the power forward until even Kuroko gave him a faintly cross look before leaving with Kagami.

And there’s no forgetting Haizaki, whom Makoto blames exclusively for dragging him into all this insanity in the first place. Seriously, why are all the first-years at the heart of so much drama this year? High school wasn’t half as absurd last year.

Makoto grumbles to himself and spends the next five minutes languidly slashing down the answers to twenty different logarithm equations in his notebook. He knows they're all correct – he can
solve these in his sleep – but he’s distracted. It’s no good; his concentration is shot. Another ten minutes go by with no sign of Kuroko’s return, and the ticking of the clock on the wall seems extra loud.

At the twenty-minute mark, Makoto gives up, sweeps everything into their respective bags, and then takes off after Kuroko.

He was getting hungry anyway. May as well see what sort of blackmail material he can stumble upon while he’s at it.

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Even now, Akashi makes Tetsuya just a little bit uneasy. Sometimes, during the handful of occasions when the Generation of Miracles have bumped into each other ever since the Winter Cup finals, he still finds himself watching and waiting and dreading the day his former captain’s left eye bleeds gold again.

And Akashi knows that. The first time they talked after the Seirin-Rakuzan match was when Tetsuya was in the hospital, and anyone could sense the tension in the room.

Tetsuya has been naive in a way. He thought that once he defeated the other Generation of Miracles, things would go back to how they were before, and while every one of them have had a lesson or ten on humility beaten into them after their respective losses, things are no longer the same. They've all grown up a bit, not to mention the human heart is apparently not so easily appeased, and while Tetsuya wants to forgive them, has forgiven them, he hasn't forgotten what they – especially Akashi – have cost him.

(Tetsuya still has no idea where Ogiwara is. His childhood friend could be dead in a ditch somewhere and he wouldn't know it.)

He’ll always be there for his Teikou friends if they need him, but something has broken between him and the five of them. Even with Aomine, there’s an unspoken divide yawning between them these days for all that they’re on much better terms now than they were in the latter half of junior high.

Trust, Tetsuya supposes. Trust is what they’ve lost.
“Hello, Tetsuya.”

Tetsuya stops beside a metal railing, having made it all the way out of the library to the attached café. He turns, and a part of him hates the fact that he instinctively tenses upon the sight of his old captain.

And Akashi isn’t one of the most observant people Tetsuya has ever met for nothing; his eyes – redredred – sweep over Tetsuya with a sad sort of discernment before it is tucked away, and a small smile replaces it as he walks forward.

He’s perceptive enough to stop a good four feet away, and Tetsuya hates how either of them thinks that the distance is necessary.

“Akashi-kun,” Tetsuya greets politely. “I didn't know you were in Tokyo.”

“Atsushi wanted to visit his family,” Akashi says by way of explanation. “I decided to accompany him after he called me and complained that Himuro Tatsuya was unavailable this weekend. You know how easily Atsushi can get lost.”

Tetsuya nods mutely.

“I decided to come visit you while I am in Tokyo,” Akashi continues levelly. “I trust there has been no further problems regarding Haizaki?”

Tetsuya shakes his head this time. The silence drags on. It borders on painful. At least in the hospital, there was a multitude of others coming and going, and at least one person from Seirin was always there, refusing to leave his side even when Akashi looked like he wanted to pull out his scissors.

Of course, this Akashi wouldn't really stab someone with them – as opposed to the other one who would gouge out his own eyes to ensure victory, who thought he stood above the world, who thought he couldn't be toppled from his throne, whose very existence was destroyed by a single defeat – but Seirin didn't know that, and even now, the mere memory of it warms Tetsuya’s heart. Not many people would stand up to Akashi Seijuuurou. Even the other Generation of Miracles obeyed his every command.
“I didn't know you had befriended Hanamiya Makoto,” Akashi speaks again, and his voice is a little jarring after the long pause.

Tetsuya blinks. “...Hanamiya-san and I are not friends.”

Akashi arches an eyebrow. “Oh? Do you spend a lot of time in the company of your enemies then?”

Well, I spent a year and a half in the company of friends who rapidly became strangers right in front of me, Tetsuya thinks with uncharacteristic sass in the safe privacy of his own mind. Enemies is a step up in comparison. At least I know my enemies.

He shakes those thoughts away. They're pointless, and he’s never been one to hold a grudge. Not for too long anyway.

“We are acquaintances,” Tetsuya offers instead, because that’s the closest word he can scrounge up to label his rather odd relationship with the Kirisaki Daiichi captain. They’re not friends, but they're not exactly enemies anymore either, at least not when they're not playing against each other in a tournament, and both of them are careful to keep their respective issues out of their Saturday get-togethers.

Besides that, nothing has really changed. Tetsuya still disapproves – vastly – of Hanamiya’s chosen style of basketball, and Hanamiya still has a short fuse whenever Kiyoshi or fair play and team spirit are brought up, so they have a mutual, tacit agreement to stay out of each other’s business, and it works for them. It’s shocking how well they get along when they're not shoving their respective principles down each other’s throats.

“Was there something else, Akashi-kun?” Tetsuya asks, redirecting the conversation. Akashi may be his former captain but he doesn't feel like being interrogated right now.

Akashi looks momentarily conflicted before he settles on, “I only came to see how you were doing. Shintarou, Ryouta, and even Daiki have mentioned that they had some concerns over how much time you were spending with Hanamiya. He can be a rather violent individual, and after what happened with Haizaki, none of us wishes to take any chances.”

Tetsuya presses his lips together. It would be... irrational of him to get annoyed over this. He knows that they're only worried, but still, it’s been months, and the most drastic thing Hanamiya
has done in his presence is storm off in a huff after a run-in with Kiyoshi that concluded with Kuroko jumping in to defend his brother figure against Hanamiya’s acerbic barbs. Isn't calling Akashi all the way to Tokyo something of an overkill?

“I can take care of myself, Akashi-kun,” Tetsuya says patiently. “And Hanamiya-san hasn't done anything to me. He and his team saved me from Haizaki-kun in the first place.”

Akashi frowns a little, waving a dismissive hand. “And I am relieved that they stepped in when they did, but are you certain Hanamiya isn’t attempting to take advantage of that? You understand what he is like on the court—”

“We keep that stuff out,” Tetsuya can’t help interrupting. “We don’t talk about that sort of thing anymore. I don’t criticize his team’s playing style, and he doesn't insult Seirin’s teamwork. It works out. We get along better that way.”

“But why are you meeting up with him at all?” Akashi half-asks, half-demands. “Is he blackmailing you?” His eyes flash dangerously. “If he is, I can convince him that the very idea of carrying out such an act will be detrimental to his continued health and wellbeing.”

Tetsuya almost rolls his eyes, but it’s ill-mannered, so he doesn't. “He isn’t blackmailing me. I already repaid him for saving me. I played a short – clean – match with his team.”

“Then why?” Akashi persists.

Tetsuya stays silent. Truthfully, he doesn't know. Originally, he thought Hanamiya would walk away first, fed up with Tetsuya’s ineptitude at shooting, but a week became two, and two became three, and before Tetsuya knows it, they were meeting up regularly every Saturday. Hanamiya doesn't complain, and Tetsuya sees no problem with it, so he doesn't say a word. He figures that the Kirisaki Daiichi captain will leave on his own when he gets tired of their basketball games and study sessions.

“Tetsuya?” Akashi prompts again.

Does it matter why?

“I.”
“Yo. Fancy seeing the Rakuzan captain all the way here in Tokyo.”

Tetsuya starts a little in surprise as the strap of a bag – his bag – loops over his head, and Hanamiya steps up beside him a second later, features set in friendly lines that fool absolutely no one present.

Akashi’s gaze narrows in on Hanamiya like a homing missile. Hanamiya only smiles back like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, kindness incarnated.

“Tetsuya,” Hanamiya glances down at him, feigning obliviousness to Akashi’s mildly homicidal expression. “I’m a little hungry after all, and since you were taking longer than I expected, I thought we could go pick up some lunch together instead.” He tilts his head in Akashi’s direction. “Unless you have something to discuss with your former captain?”

Tetsuya hesitates, looking over at Akashi. He hasn't seen the redhead in a while, but he also doesn't want to stand around talking about who he spends his time with. Not even Seirin has asked after the initial ‘hurt him and you die’ from Kagami and Captain (to Hanamiya), and ‘if he injures you, I’ll sic the boys on Hanamiya, wait for you to heal, and then put you in the Boston Crab Hold’ from Coach (to Tetsuya himself; Coach’s bedside manner needs some work). They trust him to ask them for help if he needs it.

In the end though, Akashi makes up Tetsuya’s mind for him, taking a step back and schooling his features into something that at least resembles polite neutrality. “By all means, I shouldn't take up anymore of your time, Tetsuya. We can catch up at a later date.”

Tetsuya nods and barely has time to return the farewell before Hanamiya is ushering him down the street, all but dragging him away by the arm. He feels Akashi’s gaze on his back until they turn the next corner.

Hanamiya lets him go as soon as Akashi is out of sight, his face morphing into a small scowl as he hitches the strap of his bag more securely on his shoulder. “Tch, you can’t go anywhere without getting into trouble, can you? If you didn't want to talk to him, you should've just stayed in the library, dumbass.”

Tetsuya straightens his coat before pulling out his phone and showing Hanamiya the text message that Akashi sent.
Hanamiya snorts. “You should’ve ignored it then.”

Tetsuya blinks. “Akashi-kun summoned me.”

The point guard gives him a weird look. “And? What, you have to obey him or something? He’s not even your captain anymore. If Imayoshi ordered me to meet him for anything less than the apocalypse, I’d tell him to go to hell. And even the apocalypse is debateable.”

Tetsuya considers this for a moment. “...No. It’s just habit, I suppose. Akashi-kun ruled Teikou for a reason. Back then, his word was law, and it wasn't just because he was captain. Nobody ever wanted to risk angering him. Even the coach was... wary of him.”

Hanamiya’s expression is inscrutable but his words are a clear enough indication of his feelings on the matter. “You Generation of Miracles are so screwed in the head it’s not even funny. Maybe the six of you should go see a psychiatrist. Separately. I don’t think one psychiatrist could stand handling the six of you together without being forced into early retirement in a mental asylum.”

Tetsuya’s mouth twitches at the sardonic snark, unable to hide an unbidden jolt of amusement, and Hanamiya smirks upon catching his reaction.

“Lunch?” Tetsuya suggests, deciding that it’s best to move conversation to another topic before Hanamiya goes too far, and Tetsuya becomes less amused and more disapproving.

Hanamiya graciously refrains from commenting on the not-so-subtle subject change. “Of course; I just bailed you out. Again. You're paying for my lunch.”

Tetsuya nods in agreement. He supposes that’s only fair.

“The Interhigh’s coming up,” Hanamiya says a prop of nothing one Saturday in May.

Tetsuya nods, licking at his vanilla ice-cream. Hanamiya’s coffee-flavoured one is in a bowl. He
insists that cones are juvenile.

Hanamiya doesn't say anything else until they're both finished their dessert. It’s a nice day today so they're both lounging on a grassy bank with a chessboard between them. Hanamiya’s been teaching him because, apparently, it’s appalling that Tetsuya doesn't even know the rules, let alone how to play well enough to give Hanamiya a challenge.

Tetsuya swallows the last bite of his cone. He doesn't move as Hanamiya begins packing up, leaving the chessboard where it is as he rises to his feet.

“Later,” Hanamiya says shortly and strides off without another word.

Tetsuya doesn't watch the captain go, choosing instead to lean back and pull out a beginner’s guide to chess to muddle through for the rest of the afternoon. He knows Hanamiya well enough by now to realize that they won’t be meeting up again until after the Interhigh is over.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
Makoto wants to kill something. Or someone.

It’s just his luck that Kirisaki Daiichi has been matched up against Seirin once again, but it doesn’t matter in the long run because Makoto still wants revenge for last year. So he and his team play like they always do, fouling left and right behind the clueless referee’s back, and it’s pretty easy to avoid the disappointed blue eyes drilling holes into him so long as Makoto doesn’t look directly at the kid. Half their tactics for stopping the phantom player includes not looking at Kuroko so everything’s fine.

Except-

It’s really not.

Makoto’s already told his team to reserve the elbow jabs for the rest of Seirin, told them to focus their rough play on people like Hyuuga and Izuki and even Kagami instead of wasting time trying to attack a virtual ghost.

(Makoto ignores the voice telling him that the kid will be pissed at his actions after the game anyway. It’s not like he cares one way or the other.)

Except.

Seirin consists of a main core of second- and third-years this year, along with several newly joined first-years (their team is now significantly bigger than the last two years). They’ve begun giving those three second-years who were mostly benchwarmers last year – Furihata, Fukuda, and Kawahara; nothing particularly special at the moment – more minutes in games, no doubt using these tournaments to prepare them for when the third-years graduate come the following Spring, and they would have to take over as part of Seirin’s first-string regulars.

The Seirin coach is testing the waters with them again today, and Makoto takes shameless advantage of their inexperience, directing his own teammates to jostle and shove them around
whenever they can. The three newbies aren’t used to Makoto’s tactics, nor are they as solidly fearless as Seirin’s core group who have never known when to give up even when they’re down and bleeding. The rookies are willing to step out on the court, sickeningly determined to do their best, but they reflexively balk on occasion, flinching away and breaking formation, and leaving Kirisaki Daiichi with a clear path to the basket whenever Seirin’s veteran players aren’t fast enough to cover for them. Even better, Kiyoshi is indefinitely benched what with the surgery he’s gone through recently, so all he can do is frown like a thundercloud and watch from the sidelines.

Except.

For once, Makoto didn’t mean to. He was in the process of catching the ball in the air, and Seirin’s Number 12 was right there in front of him, focused on the ball and leaving himself wide open, so it was only natural for Makoto to bring his elbow down, aiming straight for the second-year’s left eye.

And then Kuroko was suddenly there, pulling his magician act and pushing his teammate aside, and by then, it was too late for Makoto to stop.

Makoto has always been of the opinion that Kuroko is ludicrously fragile for a relatively healthy teenage athlete, and that has never been brought to his attention as acutely as when his elbow slammed into Kuroko’s face in an eerie echo of what almost happened at last year’s Winter Cup Preliminaries, resulting in Kuroko crumpling to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Makoto froze even before the referee blew his whistle, and the entire Seirin team erupted in outrage.

“Foul,” The referee called, but the man doesn't eject Makoto from the game since – for all intents and purposes – the ref only saw the incident as an accident.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!!” Kagami roared, yanking Makoto clean off his feet by the front of his jersey.

“Kagami, not now!” Izuki hissed from where he was kneeling on the floor beside Kuroko. The Seirin coach was there as well, examining the kid’s face. The rest of Seirin stood in a loose half-circle around them. The second-year teen Kuroko saved looked immensely guilty. “Give me a hand here.”
The point guard’s voice was convincingly calm but his eyes glared murder at Makoto. Beside him, Hyuuga looked ready to join Kagami.

Kagami snarled wordlessly, looking like he wanted nothing more than to throw the entire tournament just to turn Makoto into a smear on the floor, but in the end, the power forward roughly let him go before turning back to his partner and helping Izuki lever Kuroko to his feet.

The kid’s back was facing him so Makoto couldn’t see his face.

And now, with timeout being called, Makoto is sitting on the bench with his teammates surrounding him, one ear on the disapproving mutters rippling through the spectators, and another on the hushed conversation over at the Seirin bench. It doesn't help that he’s already picked out at least three members of the Generation of Miracles in the audience. He’s even seen how Touou’s center and shooting guard have had to haul their ace back from jumping the railing.

Makoto really wants to kill something. Or someone. Preferably the brat for doing something so stupid.

“It was an accident,” Kazuya remarks like he’s trying to comfort Makoto, which is absolute bullshit because, what the fuck, Makoto doesn't need comforting.

“Shut up, Kazuya,” Makoto snaps back, pulling out a fresh towel for himself. He obstinately does not look over at the Seirin bench. Kuroko is talking at the moment, and even though Makoto can’t make out the words, at least the kid is conscious, so there can’t be anything too wrong with him.

He shouldn't even be feeling like this. It’s not like the brat’s his friend or something, or even his kouhai.

The referee’s whistle pierces the air, and Makoto watches as Kagami, Hyuuga, Izuki, Mitobe, and Koganei take to the court, probably Seirin’s next strongest lineup when you remove Kiyoshi and Kuroko from the equation.

Kuroko stays benched.

Makoto inwardly seethes. He’s not sure at whom. Most likely at the universe in general for giving him so much crap lately.
“Spider Web formation,” Makoto orders as he and his team treks back onto the court.

No one asks whether or not they should continue with the fouls. None of them do. It wouldn't matter anyway. Makoto knows how to read the tide of a game, and judging by the looks on Seirin’s faces alone, the rest of this match will be a slaughter.

His prediction comes true. Kirisaki Daiichi loses by a humiliating fifteen points.

Not even Hiroshi dares to comment when Makoto ditches them all once they've retired to the locker room.

“You think you can get away with what you did?!” Aomine demands as he lifts Makoto up by the collar of his shirt.

It's to Makoto’s misfortune that he was cornered by half of Teikou’s former regulars before he managed to get five minutes away from the stadium, but he is still hard-pressed not to roll his eyes. Only his sense of self-preservation stops him. He thinks Aomine is an idiot of the highest order but he’s also realistic enough to know which one of them would win in a straight-up fistfight.

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“Unhand me,” He sneers instead with all the arrogance of a king addressing pond scum. “I don’t answer to you, you imbecilic halfwit.”

“Why you-”

“Aomine-kun, stop!” The Touou manager lunges forward and latches on to the arm that Aomine has drawn back, digging in her heels to restrain the power forward. “Tetsu-kun wouldn't want you punching him!”

Yeah, but Tetsu also trusted this dirtbag, and look where that got him!” The second-year’s gaze gleams with a festering wrath.
Makoto smiles back sarcastically and goes for the jugular. “As I recall from that little run-in with Fukuda Sougou’s ace all those months ago, I hear Tetsuya also trusted you, and, oh, look where that got him with his old Miracle teammates – thrown aside like garbage with a target on his head. What I did seems to be about standard fare for him. He should be used to it by now.”

Maybe he doesn't have all that much self-preservation after all.

On the left, Kise hisses like a viper. Farthest away, Midorima’s frown becomes thunderous. Aomine doesn't visibly rear back but a flinch still ripples over his face before rage lights a fire in his eyes, and he tears his arm out of his manager’s grasp. “You bastard-”

“Hey, hey! Calm down now,” Another hand catches Aomine by the wrist half a second before it reaches its destination, and Makoto’s mouth twists with bitterness when he finds Kiyoshi standing there, gaze sombre and his signature easy smile missing. He looks at Makoto like he can see straight through him.

“Best put him down, Aomine,” Kiyoshi advises in mild tones even though his eyes are sharp. “Violence isn’t the answer, you know.”

Aomine glares, but evidently, the combination of Kiyoshi being Kuroko’s senpai as well as having someone from Seirin intervene has defused his temper at least a little. The second-year roughly yanks his wrist out of Kiyoshi’s grip and takes a step away, but he also drops Makoto back to the ground with unceremonious asperity at the same time.

Makoto lands clumsily and mentally curses himself even as he recovers his balance, straightening his clothes and sneering at everyone in the vicinity. Just when he thinks it can’t get worse, Kiyoshi has to show up and play the hero.

Smiling thinly, Makoto hefts the strap of his bag higher on his shoulder and turns away. “If we’re done here, I’ll be going now. I have better things to do than listen to your worthless bluster.”

And with that said, he strides away, suppressing the impulse to keep Aomine within his line of sight even when the power forward spits several choice expletives at his back. It won’t do to show them any further weakness on his part after all.

“Hanamiya,” Kiyoshi calls after him. Makoto doesn't stop, doesn't even slow his footsteps, and Kiyoshi continues like he doesn't expect him to. “An apology goes a long way. Kuroko will
understand.”

It takes everything Makoto has not to whirl around and lash out at the presumptuous fool.

But he won’t give Kiyoshi that satisfaction, so he doesn't.

And he very deliberately does not let Iron Heart’s words get to him.

Once he gets home, it takes Makoto eight hours to hack into Seirin High’s database and retrieve Kuroko’s phone number and address.

Well no, that’s a lie; it only takes him about an hour and some coffee to crack through Seirin High’s firewalls, and he even looks up the other Seirin members’ school information out of sheer boredom (Kagami is failing English; how is that even possible? Didn't the guy transfer over from America?). The other seven hours are spent brooding in his room and ignoring his sister’s nosy questions until she gave up and went to bed.

It’s three in the morning now, and he’s tired, but he still can’t sleep. Unbelievable.

It’s not like he’s done anything wrong. Not really. Kuroko knows the way he plays basketball. The kid should’ve known better than to get in the way.

So if anything, it’s Kuroko’s fault for being such an idiot. Except it’s a bit hard to blame the brat when said brat’s the one who ended up on the floor.

Makoto glowers at his ceiling before grabbing his phone (again) and squinting at the bluish glow of the screen. It’s meaningless texting Kuroko now; kid’s probably asleep.

Like Makoto should be. He has school tomorrow.

He wonders if Kuroko is well enough to go to class. A blow to the face can’t be that bad. It’s not like Makoto pulled a Kiyoshi-injury on the brat. Then again, Seirin withdrew their trump card
from the match so maybe Kuroko hit his head when he went down?

Makoto grimaces. Oh how far he’s fallen. Even just half a year ago, he would've been delighted by this turn of events.

He tosses his phone aside, snarling wordlessly at his own weakness. Who cares if the brat is injured? It’s not like he’s dead or something, and Kuroko went through worse back when Haizaki pummeled the kid. Makoto’s meted out worse to Kiyoshi and several other players.

And Kuroko’s not his friend, nor his teammate, nor his kouhai. Therefore, Makoto shouldn't care. That’s all there is to it.

Mind made up, he rolls onto his front and begins reciting the table of elements in his head, backwards for good measure. Hopefully, that will be enough to put him to sleep.

For once, Tetsuya is glad that he’s so invisible to the rest of the world. He’s not vain by any definition of the word but even after icing it overnight, his left cheek still looks like someone punched him with a vendetta in mind. It’s swollen black and blue, and it doesn't help that he’s always bruised easily.

Examining himself in the mirror now, Tetsuya has to wince. Hanamiya has a sharp elbow, and coupled with both gravity and the point guard’s intent to harm at the time, the blow was probably three times as hard as an accidental jab to the face.

He has half a mind not to go to school today, but then his team will worry (even more), and he doesn't want that. They already whisked him off to the hospital right after the Seirin-Kirisaki Daiichi match and had a doctor look him over to make sure nothing was wrong beyond the bruising. A hairline fracture or something to his cheekbone would be just his luck. It was why Coach had benched him after the incident, not wanting to needlessly risk further injury. Fortunately however, the damage was only superficial.

That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt though, and not just physically either. The injuries he received from Haizaki were far worse than this.

But... somehow, this hurts more.
It’s not like they're friends. And Tetsuya knows that Hanamiya likes injuring other players on the court, but he supposes a part of him that he wasn't even aware of was hoping that – after all the time they've spent together – the third-year may have found it in himself to hold back if not change outright.

Obviously, he was wrong. Tetsuya didn't look at the third-year again after he hit the floor yesterday with a jarring thud that momentarily stunned him. He didn't want to chance seeing the cruel triumph on Hanamiya’s face.

He thinks he should probably apologize to his team. It feels like the right thing to do because – on hindsight – it seems a bit like betrayal now, to know that he’s been spending time with Hanamiya for months, only for the Kirisaki Daiichi captain and his team to rough up Seirin the first chance they got. Nothing more serious than bruises were received, but his teammates – Furihata, Fukuda, and Kawahara especially – still have to nurse the wounds they obtained, and that’s- that is unacceptable. Whether they know it or not, Seirin saved him in a way, and they helped him save his old friends as well. They're like the family he’s never had, and he wants to protect them to the best of his ability.

With a sigh, Tetsuya turns away from the mirror, gathers his bag and coat, and heads for the door with Nigou at his heels.

Maybe it would be best to stop meeting up with Hanamiya even once the Interhigh is over.

Seirin makes it all the way to the finals of the Interhigh, beating Touou in the process while Rakuzan defeats Yousen (and it’s the first time since second year that Tetsuya has ever seen Akashi and Murasakibara truly go head to head; it was as amazing as it was nerve-wracking to watch), but they lose to Rakuzan in the end without Kiyoshi under the net. To be fair, it’s only by a very narrow margin even with Akashi playing on the opposing team, which is pretty impressive considering the fact that Seirin barely won in last year’s Winter Cup, and all of them threw in everything they had in the finals to come out on top.

Either way, Seirin has secured a ticket to the Winter Cup without needing to play in the Preliminaries, and all of them are fairly content with that outcome. They’ll just have to pay Rakuzan back next time.

Things return to normal after that, though Seirin will never be textbook normal by any stretch of
the imagination. Still, they hold practices and go out for meals. Izuki drags them all to the bookstore to help him look for more joke books, and Kagami eats the team’s weight in hamburgers. Captain finally plucks up enough courage to ask Coach out on a date, and the rest of them spend the entire afternoon spying on them and taking pictures. Kiyoshi’s knee brace comes off, and they throw a party to celebrate the possibility of their center’s return by the time Winter Cup rolls around (and after some hellish physiotherapy in the months prior to that of course).

Tetsuya finds himself smiling more and more whenever he’s in the presence of his teammates.

And yet...

“Kuroko,” Kiyoshi says about a week before summer break begins, pulling Tetsuya aside outside the gym once practice is over. “Have you talked to Hanamiya lately?”

Tetsuya blinks before quickly shaking his head, fingers twitching involuntarily with the urge to prod at his cheek. The bruise is nearly gone, looking like he walked into a doorframe now rather than as if someone struck him.

He’s actually tried to put Hanamiya out of his mind. He’s attempted to apologize to his team the day after that match but Coach put him in the Boston Crab Hold, Captain told him not to get above himself, Kagami slapped him over the head, and everyone else assured him that there was absolutely nothing for him to be sorry about. Furihata even apologized to him in private for not moving out of the way fast enough and thereby forcing Tetsuya to cover for him. It took Tetsuya several days before he managed to convince the budding point guard that Tetsuya didn't blame him whatsoever.

“Well,” Kiyoshi peers down at him intently. “You know you can, right? If you want, that is. If you’re still mad at him, then you should go scold him, but don’t hold back because of the team. You two get along, don’t you?”

Tetsuya shakes his head again. “I shouldn't-”

“He’s different with you,” Kiyoshi interrupts. “I don’t think you saw his face after he accidentally hit you.” The third-year smiles, bright and guileless. “Whatever you were doing, I think you should continue doing it.”

Tetsuya stares in bewilderment. “Senpai, I wasn't doing anything. All we did was play basketball
“Then, you should continue doing that,” Kiyoshi grins and ruffles Tetsuya’s hair. “Hanamiya might actually surprise us all one day. He knows you now after all, and people... well, people tend to change around you.”

Kiyoshi leaves it at that, which is unfair because Tetsuya is wholly confused about pretty much everything the center just told him. All he really got from that was that Kiyoshi seems to want him to get in touch with Hanamiya again but Tetsuya doesn't understand why.

Whatever the reason, Tetsuya is still stubborn enough and disappointed enough to not trek all the way over to Kirisaki Daiichi just for Hanamiya. He has his pride too, and between them, he’s not the one in the wrong here, not to mention that Kiyoshi was right – he’s still a little angry with the third-year. The first time around wasn't as personal; for all that Tetsuya was angry on Kiyoshi’s behalf, last year's grudge was between his senpai and Hanamiya. This year is different.

This year, it’s personal.

It’s been a little over two weeks since the end of the Interhigh, and even longer since he’s laid eyes on Hanamiya. He didn't see the point guard in the stands at the finals even though he was pretty sure all the teams would've wanted to attend.

And Hanamiya’s certainly not made any attempt to contact him. It would be easy enough. It isn’t as if Seirin is all that hard to find, and even if Hanamiya wants to avoid bumping into Tetsuya’s teammates, the third-year could always linger at the school gates or head over to Maji Burger or even have caught up with Tetsuya after the Seirin-Rakuzan match.

So Tetsuya decides to stay away as well, no matter what Kiyoshi says. He can’t pretend that he doesn't care about what Kirisaki Daiichi keeps doing on the court because he does, and it doesn't seem like Hanamiya wants to see him anyway. Besides, if they play Kirisaki Daiichi again, and Hanamiya and his team hurt Tetsuya’s friends again, Tetsuya can’t keep hanging out with the point guard like nothing happened. It would just be wrong.

As it turns out though, he doesn't end up with a lot of choice in the matter.
Please leave a review on your way out.
“Again,” Hanamiya growls heartlessly, glaring even harder when his entire team groans. “Keep complaining and I’ll triple it.”

This effectively shuts them all up, and everyone starts another set of suicides once more.

“What the fuck is wrong with Hanamiya these days?” Yamazaki wheezes as he reaches the free throw line and then wheels around and heads back again. He still has the presence of mind to keep his voice down.

“That’s obvious,” Furuhashi almost stumbles as he reaches down to touch the baseline. “It’s the kid.”

“They still haven’t made up yet?” Yamazaki complains. “That brat was willing to let that Haizaki punk go! We didn’t even do that much damage to his team this time! And it’s Hanamiya we’re talking about; he’s not even supposed to care!”

“Well he does,” Seto snaps crossly as they race for the half-court line. “And frankly, I don’t care why he would. I just want this fixed.”

“You and everyone else,” Hara interjects, blinking sweat out of his eyes. “But I doubt Hanamiya is going to go to Kuroko first. You know how proud he is.”

“Yeah? Well then the brat will just have to go to Hanamiya first,” Yamazaki’s gaze burns with grim resolve. “I don’t plan on dying in high school, and that’s exactly what’s gonna happen if Hanamiya doesn’t ease up!”

“Yamazaki, if you have breath to chat, then you’re clearly not running fast enough. You can do another set after this one.”
“Damn it!”

“In fact, the rest of you can join him!”

Even Hara grits his teeth, and he’s usually the most easygoing one.

“We’re going to Seirin after practice is over,” He tells his fellow regulars.

Nobody disagrees with him.

__________________________________________________________________________

“Kuroko! Hey, Kuroko!”

Tetsuya looks around when he hears his name being called, and he stops short when he spots the Kirisaki Daiichi regulars sans Hanamiya running up to him.

“We almost missed you again,” Seto huffs, tucking away what looks to be a pair of binoculars.

Tetsuya inwardly sweatdrops.

Outwardly, he stays pokerfaced. “May I help you?”

“Yes you fucking well can!” Yamazaki barks, eyes alarmingly feverish with desperation. “It’s all your fault anyway so you have to fix it!”

“What Yamazaki means is,” Furuhashi cuts in calmly. “Can you please talk to Hanamiya?”

Tetsuya blinks once. “No. I’m mad at him.”
Half the team practically falls over.

“For the love of god, you have to!” Yamazaki is beginning to look slightly deranged, especially when he grabs at his hair. “He’s gonna kill us, and I mean kill us to death! I can’t stand another practice session like the ones he’s been dishing out ever since our match at the Interhigh! I didn't even know someone could stay pissed off for this long! We’ve been doing nothing but suicides and crunches and exercise drills like they’re going outta style! You have to talk to him!”

Tetsuya’s brow creases. Why would Hanamiya be angry? “Is he upset that your team lost to ours? There’s nothing I can do about that.”

Yamazaki stares in disbelief as Furuhashi sighs and Seto slaps his forehead out of what looks to be sheer exasperation.

“It’s not that,” Hara cuts in, and Tetsuya notices the tired slouch to his shoulders. In fact, all of them look perpetually exhausted. “He’s- This didn't come from me, okay? I don’t feel like getting strangled in my sleep or something. Hanamiya is upset over hurting you. He didn't do it on purpose, and now he’s feeling a bit guilty about it, which makes him kinda angry.” His teammates all give him incredulous looks so Hara amends, “Okay, a lot angry. And he’s taking it out on everyone. Look, I understand why you’d be mad at him. You're probably mad at us too, but we’re still asking – could you talk to him for us? Punch him in the face if you want; we’ll even hide nearby to make sure he doesn’t do anything... drastic in return. We’re desperate here, so—” The power forward shrugs. “-we’re begging. We’ll do anything. We’ll even throw in an apology for your teammates, and it’ll be sincere. Mostly.”

“For what it’s worth,” Seto tacks on gruffly. “You're an okay kid, and I think you actually mellow Hanamiya out a bit, which is a good thing because that means he doesn't have as many mood swings as he usually does. We would’ve been fine with not roughing up your team, but captain’s orders, you know? And we don’t like your teammates nearly enough to disobey Hanamiya.” He pauses. “Hanamiya actually told us not to go after you. He gave us some bullshit excuse about the reason but you’d have to be a moron to have believed it. Of course, we didn't say that to his face.”

It takes a while for Tetsuya to digest all this, mostly because he doesn’t know how to respond. In the end, he settles on, “I would’ve preferred all the foul play to have been focused on me rather than my teammates.”

The third-years all look discomfited by his declaration but not at all surprised. They continue watching him with hopeful and slightly hangdog expressions. Tetsuya sighs and curses his heart. “…When would be a good time to speak to Hanamiya-san?”
Every single one of the seniors in front of him breathes a sigh of heartfelt relief. Hara whips out his phone. “Hanamiya should be home by now so why don’t you just go straight there? He’s the sort of guy you’re gonna have to corner to get a word out of him when he’s like this, and there’s no place like his house where his sister will be watching to confront him. We’ll hide outside in the bushes so just- I don’t know, scream if Hanamiya tries to murder you.”

Tetsuya raises his eyebrows but the four Kirisaki Daiichi players are already ushering him down the street. He’s not in the habit of just dropping by someone’s house, especially when he’s not even all that familiar with them, but it doesn’t seem like he’s going to have much of a say in this matter either.

Well, at least he can spend the trip there thinking up what he’ll be saying to Hanamiya.

“Mako-chan, how much longer are you going to mope?”

Makoto glances up irritably from the book he’s reading. “Don’t call me that, and do I look like I’m moping to you?”

Mayu puts her hands on her hips and arches an eyebrow. “Yes.”

Makoto lifts his reading material. “I’m reading a book.”

“And I’m your sister,” She retorts. “So don’t bullshit me because that hasn't worked since you learned how to do it. Now, are you gonna tell me what’s rattling around in that prodigious head of yours that’s got your knickers in a twist, or am I gonna have to force it out of you?”

Makoto clicks his tongue in annoyance, glowering sullenly down at his book. His sister’s always been like this – blunt and straightforward and honest, always getting to the heart of the matter as fast as possible, and never toying around with words and actions like Makoto does. Makoto used to be just like her once... until he wasn't anymore.

“It’s none of your business,” He gripes, internally wincing at the dangerous look Mayu takes on. He throws out a prayer for an intervention because he knows his sister, and he knows that she always gets what she wants in the end.
And then, to his surprise, he gets one, an intervention ringing the doorbell.

He’s instantly on guard because he’s never been that lucky. Mayu frowns, checks her watch, and then heads for the front door.

Makoto keeps one ear out, picking up the clicking of the lock and the door swinging open.

“Oh hello there. Can I help you?”

Makoto freezes when a familiar voice replies.

“Good evening. My name is Kuroko Tetsuya. I apologize for intruding at such a late hour but I would like to speak to Hana- Makoto-san. Is he available?”

Makoto’s tossing his book aside and vaulting off the couch before he’s consciously aware of his decision to do so, and he’s at the door before Mayu can get out more than, “Oh yes, my little brother is—”

“What are you doing here?” Makoto demands, cutting his sister off. “How do you even know where I live?”

He pretends not to see the frankly alarming speculation in Mayu’s eyes as she looks between him and Kuroko.

Kuroko who is standing on his doorstep, features not giving anything away and—

Makoto’s gaze is immediately drawn to the fading bruise marring pale skin. Unbidden, the urge to maim someone wells up inside him.

“I came to see you; we need to talk,” Kuroko says point-blank without a hint of embarrassment at the context that he’s obliviously implying with Mayu looking on, and Makoto can’t help but think that the kid and his sister will get along like a house on fire, and the universe has evidently gone
insane for ever letting these two meet.

“We have nothing to talk about,” Makoto snaps even though he knows it’s not going to work. “Leave.”

“Mako-chan, don’t be rude,” Mayu interjects, eyes flashing forebodingly before she turns back to Kuroko with a sweet smile. “Why don’t you come in, Kuroko-kun? This sounds like a pretty important conversation that needs happening. Mako-chan can take you up to his room for some privacy.”

It dawns on Makoto that Mayu is reading far too much into this but before he can even make an attempt at damage control, Kuroko is already inside, and Makoto’s sister is half-shoving, half-shepherding them towards their winding staircase.

Muy’s smile is equal parts scheming and deviously gleeful just before Makoto loses sight of her.

God damn his life.

Hanamiya’s house is pretty big. Equal in size to Tetsuya’s house – the third-year’s place consists of a three-floored mansion, a sprawling front lawn, and everything on the inside screams money.

“Alright, what do you want?” Hanamiya says as soon as the third-year’s bedroom swings shut behind them.

Tetsuya actually doesn't know the answer to that, or at the very least, he doesn't know how to put it in words. He wants Hanamiya to stop hurting people and ruining basketball like he does on the court, but that’s a long-standing argument and he knows that even mentioning it will just make Hanamiya shut down and not listen. And he knows that the third-year will just get irritated if Tetsuya brings up the other Kirisaki Daiichi regulars’ complaints, and Hanamiya will be more likely to run them – even more – ragged than anything else. And Tetsuya also knows better than to ask for an apology outright in this situation – that’s a bit too much like giving in on Tetsuya’s part, and Hanamiya will scoff and fling one out if he feels like it but he won’t mean it at all. It’s always best to let Hanamiya go at his own pace when it comes to getting him to do something.

It’s such a chore though, Tetsuya mentally sighs, to predict Hanamiya’s moods and handle his capricious personality like fine china so that Tetsuya won’t unwittingly set the third-year off.
So he goes for the only thing that he’s certain won’t spark Hanamiya’s temper.

The trick to dealing with Hanamiya, Tetsuya thinks as he reaches into his bag for the item he had to stop by his house to grab before heading over here. Is to do something unpredictable and completely out of the blue to throw the point guard off, and then keep at it and not let him turn the tables on you either by intimidating you or distracting you. Luckily, that’s Tetsuya’s forte – he’s never been truly intimidated by anyone in his entire life, and once he has a goal in mind, no matter how big or how small, nothing and no one can distract him from it.

Tetsuya pulls out the chessboard that Hanamiya left in his possession before the Interhigh and deadpans, “We never finished a game.”

Hanamiya blinks, growing displeasure replaced by startled suspicion, and Tetsuya doesn't waste any time sitting down and breaking open the chess set.

“Wait, what-” The third-year just stands there for a long minute, and on anyone else, Tetsuya would say he looks uncertain.

Tetsuya waits him out. If he has the patience to wait out Aomine, Kise, Midorima and Murasakibara when they're whining like children or just generally being difficult, Hanamiya is a cakewalk in comparison.

So he just stares, and stares, and stares some more. He’s learned from experience that his pokerface is good for a lot of things, and this is one of them. For whatever reason, it makes people crack and capitulate if Tetsuya stares at them long enough.

Hanamiya is no different. The older teen bristles defensively and sneers at Tetsuya for all he’s worth, but when Tetsuya doesn't budge, doesn't even blink, the third-year eventually scowls and reluctantly takes a seat across from him.

For the next twenty minutes or so, no words pass between them. Tetsuya doesn't mind; he stays quiet as he waits Hanamiya out, surreptitiously gauging the older teen’s disposition as the seconds tick by.

Hanamiya is still simmering at the twenty-minute mark after he’s checkmated Tetsuya twice, but it’s to a lesser degree now, and he seems more uneasy and something else Tetsuya can’t put a name
“You suck,” Hanamiya accuses without too much heat. He has his head propped up against a loose fist, elbow balanced on one thigh as his gaze remains fixed on the chessboard.

“Yes,” Tetsuya agrees without fanfare.

Hanamiya snorts with derision.

“...How’s your face?” The third-year asks at long last after another tense bout of silence. His eyes don’t shift an inch from the game between them.

“Almost healed,” Tetsuya intones.

Hanamiya’s expression pinches with resentment, and his gaze finally snaps up, slicing a dark, spiteful glare into Tetsuya.

“And I suppose you’ve come crying for an apology?” He bites out like he’s trying to wound and prove something all at once, voice full of acid and cold malice. “Don’t hold your breath. You were the one dumb enough to step in the way. You and the rest of Seirin disgust me, always with your friendship mentality. It would’ve served you right if I’d actually had time to destroy you too like I did Kiyoshi.”

As the outpour of words finally came to a stop, Tetsuya breathes through the sting of the verbal abuse and lets them slide off of him. He’s heard worse, and he’d rather hear this than the fake niceties that are always followed by those ‘as if I’d say that’s from Hanamiya.’

“Are you finished?” Tetsuya asks before he can stop himself, and his voice comes out shakier than he anticipates. He clears his throat as Hanamiya frowns. “I didn't come here for an apology, Hanamiya-san. I wouldn't want it anyway if you don’t mean it.” He stops, wracking his mind, and then ends up asking the same question he did the first time around. “Why do you keep cheating, Hanamiya-san?”

The pawn that Hanamiya was previously holding clatters back onto the table as he straightens with another sneer. “I already told you – it’s more fun than just-”
“But that’s not true,” Tetsuya cuts him off with more earnestness than he planned. “When you play basketball with me, you don’t do any of that stuff, and you still enjoy it. I know you do, and your basketball is breathtaking when you play like that so why-”

“You don’t know anything!” Hanamiya snarls, eyes flashing in a way that’s faintly reminiscent of Akashi’s when something doesn't go his way, and Tetsuya thinks he’s maybe pushed a bit too far. “I just felt sorry for you, not even being able to shoot a proper basket! I don’t even know why you try so hard; you can barely keep up with the rest of your team anyway. It’s no wonder those Generation of Miracles left you behind; they were probably relieved that they wouldn't have to put up with you anymore when you quit!”

The silence in the room is suffocating as Tetsuya flinches minutely at the reminder, and even though he knows it’s not true, knows that even Midorima would most likely deck Hanamiya if the shooting guard ever hears the third-year say something like that to Tetsuya, it’s still-

The scathing words still feel like they’re burning his retinas, and he has to blink rapidly several times and latch onto the ice in his chest to maintain his impassivity.

He’s okay. Back in Teikou, especially during his third year, those words would’ve probably broken him, but he’s had over a year and Seirin and triumph between then and now, so he’s okay.

And Hanamiya probably doesn't even mean it. Tetsuya knows that the third-year is practically a chronic liar, and every syllable that comes out of his mouth should be taken with a pinch or ten of salt.

Besides, Hanamiya’s expression is currently tight and closed off, and he’s watching Tetsuya with cold, blank eyes, like he’s waiting for him to leave, like he expects him to leave. He’s making a valiant effort to look disinterested and detached, but either he’s out of practice (not likely) or Tetsuya’s gotten better at reading him because he can actually take an educated guess and say that Hanamiya is just trying to get rid of him now by using any means necessary.

Which is a pretty stupid tactic because Tetsuya remembers all the months they spent doing nothing grand or significant, and while Hanamiya can be calculating and nasty, he’s also not very patient, and Tetsuya thinks the third-year would've ditched him a long time ago if he really only felt sorry for him.

“Whatever you were doing, I think you should continue doing it.”
“Hanamiya is upset over hurting you. He didn't do it on purpose, and now he’s feeling a bit guilty about it, which makes him kinda angry.”

Well, Kiyoshi’s never led him wrong before, and Hara should know Hanamiya better than Tetsuya does.

Deliberately, Tetsuya recalls memories of Hanamiya bailing him out of an uncomfortable semi-interrogation with Akashi, and the basketball they played when Hanamiya would occasionally smile like he meant it after he pulled off a particularly spectacular shot, and how he sighed and scowled but ultimately relented and bought Tetsuya a vanilla milkshake after a long study session, and even the way he insulted Tetsuya’s intelligence six ways to Sunday after that one time Hanamiya had to yank him back from getting run over by a car (to be fair though, it wasn't exactly Tetsuya’s fault).

Tetsuya recalls all that, takes a deep breath, and then enquires mildly, “Is it really that hard to apologize?”

Apparently it is if Hanamiya prefers chasing him away rather than forcing out two simple words.

The point guard surges to his feet, features twisting into something condescending once more, ready to unleash another barrage of slurs, but before he can get a word in edgewise, Tetsuya gets to his feet as well and says as matter-of-factly as he possibly can, “You've been mean; make it up to me. I want a vanilla milkshake. We can go now; Maji Burger should still be open.”

Hanamiya’s jaw is left hanging open for maybe two seconds, if that, but it’s enough time for Tetsuya to grab the third-year’s team jacket off its hook and head for the door with purpose in every stride.

He leaves the chessboard where it is. Hanamiya can bring it next time they play.

“You brat!” Hanamiya hisses venomously from somewhere behind him like he really wants to dish out some violence right about now, but Tetsuya doesn't let that deter him.

He’s halfway down the stairs before Hanamiya catches up to him and snatches back his jacket from Tetsuya’s grasp. The third-year’s gaze sears into the side of Tetsuya’s head like a brand.
“Resolved your differences yet?” The pretty black-haired, green-eyed woman from earlier—ostensibly Hanamiya’s older sister—chirps from the bottom of the staircase.

There’s a moment of deafening silence in which neither of them answers.

And then-

“We’re going out for dinner,” Hanamiya mutters at last before seizing Tetsuya by the arm and dragging him away, slamming the front door shut behind them harder than strictly necessary, and not before they both hear Hanamiya’s sister giggling after them.

“You’re so fucking stupid I don’t even know where to start,” The captain snipes without looking at Tetsuya.

Tetsuya peers up at him and shrugs. “You can start by not hurting my team again.”

When Hanamiya looks like he wants to mock this suggestion, Tetsuya stops in his tracks, looks squarely up at the older teen, and repeats, unforgiving and obdurate as any ultimatum, “Don’t hurt my team again, Hanamiya-san.”

Hanamiya has stopped as well, about two steps ahead and facing forward. The sunset throws the point guard’s silhouette against the pavement in sharp relief.

Tetsuya’s given him an out. He won’t force an apology out of Hanamiya because Tetsuya can hear the unspoken words behind the audible ones, and some people just can’t apologize the normal way, so in return, he’s willing to make this as simple as he can for the older teen.

It’s easy really; the choice is laid out in black and white, and Hanamiya is smart enough to realize. He won’t ever have to say it out loud.

Forward or back.
Maji Burger or their respective homes.

Yes or no.

“...Stop standing around in the middle of the road. You're not going to get your milkshake if you waste any more time.”

And with that out in the open, Hanamiya begins walking again, hands stuffed in his pockets as he prowls away down the street like some sort of large graceful feline.

Behind him, Tetsuya smiles, shoulders losing their rigidity as he speeds up to draw level with Hanamiya.

He chances a peek up at the third-year out of the corner of his eye.

He’ll count the resigned cast shadowing Hanamiya’s features as a win.

(“He’s a god,” Seto whispers from where he’s skulking behind a fire hydrant after they've trailed Hanamiya and Kuroko all the way to Maji Burger. “Or at least close to it. I can’t believe he actually talked our captain around.”

“I knew he would before we got him to talk to Hanamiya,” Hara says, looking smug.

“Don’t make that face,” Furuhashi instructs coolly. “It makes me want to punch you.”

Hara continues making the face. Furuhashi mercilessly socks him in the shoulder.

“You realize what this means though?” Yamazaki grumbles, for once not in the middle of the ongoing fight in their ranks. “We’re gonna have to go apologize to Seirin.”
“A small price to pay for not dying prematurely,” Seto reminds him dryly.

“Provided Hanamiya never finds out, or we’ll die anyway,” Yamazaki sighs in agreement. “Now let’s get the hell outta here before we’re spotted.”

Two days later, the Kirisaki Daiichi regulars minus Hanamiya slink into Seirin’s gym like mistrustful alley cats, and to the collective (and slightly traumatized) disbelief of the entire team they’re facing, they mumble apologies that are – mostly – sincere, swear that they – probably – won’t play so roughly in games against them anymore, and then beat a hasty retreat while Seirin is still catatonic for the most part.

Kuroko smiles in the background, slow and satisfied like things are going exactly the way he planned them to despite the fact that he wasn’t even the one who came up with this deal in the first place.

“I think the brat’s kinda evil,” Yamazaki comments later.

“He voluntarily puts up with Hanamiya,” Seto points out, and suddenly, everything about the last several months makes a hell of a lot more sense.)

Chapter End Notes

**Please leave a review on your way out.**
Summer holidays begin, and Coach decides to pack them all off to training camp again, except this time, they have a lot more funding from the school after taking the championship last year, so they can splurge a little and book rooms at an actual sports training facility in Hokkaido complete with indoor and outdoor courts, swimming pools, a fitness centre, a beach on one side, and a forest area on the other. Tetsuya sneaks in some extra cash of his own so that even their meals and a few shopping trips into the nearest city are provided for. The team finds out and is literally brought to tears with gratitude. Coach is rather affronted by their reactions but they all promise to continue helping her get better at cooking so that she can cook them a feast at the end of the year.

“Why Hokkaido?” Hanamiya asks idly. Tetsuya still doesn't know how Hanamiya managed to get his phone number, and the captain won’t tell him.

“Coach’s father thinks it’s a good training facility,” Tetsuya says into the phone that’s tucked between his ear and his shoulder as his hands occupy themselves with folding his shirts. “It’s brand-new, only built last year.”

A snort drifts over the line. “There are other good ones that are much closer to Tokyo.”

Tetsuya quirks a smile at the inferred complaint. “Will you be taking your team to one of them? Since you're the Kirisaki Daiichi coach too.”

Hanamiya makes a disgruntled noise on his end. “Not like I have a choice. The school doesn't pay me to slack off.” His voice becomes deviously amused. “Maybe I should take my team up to Hokkaido as well.”

While Tetsuya isn’t entirely opposed to this idea, he can also imagine the utter chaos that will follow in the wake of Kirisaki Daiichi’s arrival within the same vicinity as Seirin. Hanamiya and his team have more or less promised to back off with the rough play against them, but that doesn't mean they get along. At all. Hanamiya’s expression still sours whenever Kiyoshi is so much as alluded to, and Kagami can’t go three days without reminding Tetsuya that he only has to say the word and Kagami will turn Hanamiya into paste for him.
“My team probably wouldn’t like that,” Tetsuya muses distractedly as he frowns at his mostly used up toothpaste, checks the cabinet and finds none, and then heads next door for a new stick. He sneezes when he opens the door to one of the guest bedrooms and walks right into a layer of dust. He should probably do some spring – summer – cleaning when he comes back, but he hates vacuuming and wiping down and scrubbing anything other than his own bedroom, his parents’ room, the main hallways, the main bathrooms, the kitchen, the sitting room, the dining room, and the laundry room (it’s already an arduous list) because it takes forever to clean every single room in the entire mansion.

“Was that supposed to give me less incentive to go?” Hanamiya drawls sardonically, and in the privacy of his house, Tetsuya has the luxury of rolling his eyes skyward.

“Don’t worry; I won’t gatecrash,” Hanamiya assures wryly once Tetsuya has properly digested the potentially apocalyptic occurrence. “I’m thinking of taking my team down to Osaka anyway so we’ll be nowhere near Seirin. Besides, I’ve heard some vexing rumours circulating around recently.”

He draws it out for effect, and Tetsuya sighs and humours him. “What rumours?”

“Hm, well, apparently, Touou and Kaijou are going to Hokkaido as well.”

Tetsuya stops midway through packing his sunscreen. “How do you know?”

“Imayoshi,” Hanamiya says by way of aggravated explanation. “He still keeps in contact with his old team and – unfortunately – me. He mentioned that Touou is doing some sort of joint training trip with Kaijou this year, so they’ll be going to the camp together. The same one Seirin is going to, though I don’t think they know that yet.” Tetsuya can practically hear the sneer in the older teen’s voice. “And I’d rather not spend three weeks sharing sleeping space with half the Generation of Miracles and their teams.”

With the ease of long experience, Tetsuya ignores the last dig and mulls over this new information instead. Coach will have to know, if only so she can plan out how to wrangle Kagami once the redhead discovers that he’ll be sharing courts with Aomine and – to a lesser extent – Kise.

Tetsuya suspects he’ll have to stage an intervention sooner or later. Aomine won’t even have Imayoshi there to reel him in, which means double the strife when two particular basketball idiots meet. Three if you count Kise.
“Thank you for telling me, Hanamiya-san,” Tetsuya remembers to say as he zips up his bag and throws on his coat. “I have to go now.”

“Already? I thought you said your bus wasn't leaving until this afternoon.”

“Yes,” Tetsuya is a bit confused on that point himself. “But Coach and Captain want to go over a few new team plays with me, and discuss some other things too – they want my advice about some training menus they’ve drawn up for the first-years, as well as what I think of them individually and how they’re fitting in with the rest of the team. I guess they want a second opinion.”

“...Oh.” The single word is spoken shrewdly, with dawning comprehension, and Tetsuya knows that Hanamiya has seen something in Coach and Captain’s rather odd requests that Tetsuya hasn't yet.

“What is it?” He asks even though he’s pretty sure Hanamiya isn’t going to tell him.

True to form, the third-year only huffs something close to a chuckle and doesn't answer. “You’ll find out eventually. It isn’t as if anyone else on your team is suitable anyway.”

Tetsuya blinks in befuddlement but before he can press for more, a distant, somewhat muffled female voice sings out from Hanamiya’s end, “Is that your boyfriend again, Mako-chan? You should invite him over for dinner! He’s adorable!”

Before Tetsuya can wrap his mind around that, Hanamiya is already spitting profanities back at his sister. “Shut up and go away! It’s not like that! Why can’t you ever mind your own business?”

“Don’t talk to your sister like that, Mako-chan!”

“Don’t fucking call me that then!”

“Language!”

Tetsuya’s eyebrows steadily rise as he listens to the heated squabble in his ear, and he’s contemplating simply hanging up when Hanamiya – noticeably bad-tempered now – finally comes
“I’ll see you when you get back, Tetsuya. Feed Kiyoshi to a bear for me if you have some spare time.”

Hanamiya hangs up before Tetsuya can bid him farewell, which doesn't really surprise him. The point guard’s probably gone back to quarrelling with his sister once again.

Tetsuya shakes his head with more than a little amusement as he heads for the door, locking everything up and making sure everything’s turned off. Nigou is already by the front door with his own bag of pet supplies that Tetsuya packed earlier, tail wagging enthusiastically for their impending trip.

As they leave the house, Tetsuya thinks back to Hanamiya’s knowing tone.

What in the world is he supposed to take away from that?

“Kuroko-kun, get everyone settled in, alright?” Coach appeals as they finally reach their destination after an eleven-hour long train ride. “Hyuuga-kun and I just need to tell the owner of this place that Seirin’s arrived. Here,” She hands him a clipboard with a list of rooms and spaces beside each. “Just sort out who goes where before you turn in yourself.”

Tetsuya’s somewhat puzzled by this order because this is usually something Kiyoshi or Izuki would handle when Coach and Captain are off doing something else, but then again, most of the team look like they're falling asleep on their feet while Tetsuya is more or less the most alert of the group, so he supposes that’s why Coach wants him to handle it.

“Of course,” He nods dutifully, and Coach smiles at him before hurrying away with Captain.

He turns back to face the rest of his team. Besides their original members, Seirin has acquired five new teammates this year, all first-years, with three of them having played on a team back in middle school, and the other two only for recreation. Still, this gives them an even-
“Four people to each room,” Tetsuya states to all the expectant faces watching him, taking a split second to make up his mind about assigning rooms instead of just letting everyone sort themselves out because he knows that most of the first-years will just end up rooming with each other since half of them are still a bit reticent around their upperclassmen, and that’s not exactly good for integrating them with the rest of Seirin.

“Izuki-senpai, Furihata-kun, and Yuasa-kun will be in Room 20. Captain will join you when he gets back,” Tetsuya lists out, and the tiny knot of slightly self-conscious apprehension over the fact that he’s ordering around his teammates unravels itself when they just smile and nod in acceptance. Relaxing minutely, he glances down at the list he’s holding, mentally arranging everyone according to the observations he’s inadvertently made over the past few months.

“Kiyoshi-senpai, Tsuchida-senpai, Fukuda-kun, and Nakane-kun will be in Room 21, Mitobe-senpai, Koganei-senpai, Kawahara-kun, and Ninomiya-kun will be in 22, and Kagami-kun, Hideaki-kun, and Tsuruya-kun will room with me in 23. Coach gets Room 24 to herself.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kiyoshi agrees cheerfully before they all split up accordingly, none of them having forgotten Coach’s father’s threats of disembowelment and castration if they don’t treat his daughter with the utmost reverence.

Tetsuya lingers just long enough to scribble down everyone’s names beside their respective rooms on the sheet that Coach gave him before hanging that up on the hook tacked on the wall beside Coach’s door.

And then he heads for his own room, only to step right into a warzone.

“I wanna bunk with Kuroko-senpai!” Hideaki whines as he wrestles with Tsuruya, and for a second, Tetsuya can swear Kise has arrived early.

“You’re always following him around like a freakin’ puppy!” Tsuruya accuses as he attempts to kick Hideaki off the top bunk. Tetsuya assumes that they assume that he’ll be taking the bottom bed. “I’m nowhere near as annoying as you so I’ll bunk with Kuroko-senpai!”

It’s bizarre, Tetsuya thinks as he watches his kouhai. In a good way, but still very, very strange. Back in Teikou, nobody besides the Generation of Miracles noticed him, so even when he became a second-year, and then a third-year, none of his underclassmen ever really even said a passing hello to him, much less – as Tsuruya said – followed him around like a puppy, or showed him even the slightest modicum of respect. Heck, some of them weren’t even aware of Tetsuya’s existence on the team.
But here in Seirin, even though Tetsuya still has a weak presence, and he can still make the majority of his team jump, especially the new members, everyone remembers him, likes hanging out with him, listens to him when he speaks, asks his opinion on everything from basketball to music to homework, and when it comes to the first-years and – to a lesser degree – Furihata, Kawahara, and Fukuda, they even look up to him, which is...

Nice.

It’s a nice feeling, if unfamiliar, and it makes Tetsuya inexplicably proud of himself, not to mention it pushes him that much harder to do the best he can in both practices and games so that he won’t ever disappoint any of them. He has to set a good example after all.

“Oi, you two twerps settle down!” Kagami barks from where he’s already stripped out of his shirt beside the bottom bed that he’s commandeered. Both first-years gulp and immediately stop tussling around, not exactly afraid but still a bit cautious of Kagami’s fierce scowl. All their underclassmen are amazed whenever Seirin’s ace is blazing down the court but that doesn’t mean they don’t have a healthy amount of respect for Kagami’s gruffer side.

“Kuroko’s sharing with me,” Kagami says in a voice that brooks no argument. “So stop fanboying over him and hurry up and go grab a shower.”

Tetsuya suppresses a smile even as both first-years splutter in embarrassment. “Kagami-kun is right, Hideaki-kun, Tsuruya-kun. Lights out will be in half an hour so you better hurry. We all need our rest for tomorrow; Coach won’t show any mercy just because you’re tired.”

“Undestood, Senpai!” Hideaki tosses a salute his way before rolling off the top bunk and zooming off for the bathroom. “Ahaha! Too slow, Tsuruya!”

He slams the door shut just in time, and the pillow that Tsuruya chucks after him bounces harmlessly off the wooden surface.

Tetsuya sighs and shares an indulgently amused look with Kagami, who rolls his eyes in a long-suffering manner.

He wonders if this is how Coach and Captain feel all the time.
“Um-”

“The answer is no! Get out and stop disrupting our practice!”

“I- I’m sorry! I’m really sorry! But my captain sent me to get Kuroko-san because Aomine-san is being difficult again. I’m sorry!”

“That’s not our problem! Kuroko isn’t a collar for your damn ace!”

“I’m sorry!”

“And for god’s sakes, stop being sorry!”

“I’m sorry for being sorry!”

“Oh just be quiet!”

“I’m sorry for not being quiet!”

“Can’t you just leave?”

“I’m sorry for not leaving but Wakamatsu-san said-”

“Fine! Fine! But this is the last time, and you tell your captain that your team owes us big! Kuroko! Go work your magic! Return as soon as possible!”

Tetsuya bites back a sigh and turns to give Yuasa and Ninomiya some last-minute instructions about the dribbling exercises that Coach handed out to them earlier before jogging over to where Sakurai is still bowing and apologizing to an increasingly ticked off Hyuuga.
“Go. Just go,” Captain waves them both off as he pinches the bridge of his nose. Apparently, even his clutch personality has been exhausted after dealing with Sakurai.

“Please lead the way, Sakurai-kun,” Tetsuya says for the sake of courtesy. He already knows which gym Touou trains in for the most part since he has had to go drag Kagami back from a one-on-one-on-one against Aomine and Kise several times already.

“I'm sorry for the inconvenience,” Sakurai mumbles fretfully as they head down one hallway. It's kind of amazing how he’s only a brat when he’s on the court in the middle of a game.

Tetsuya hums noncommittally and doesn't answer with words. He’s gleaned – even just from the handful of interactions they've had off the court – that one of the best ways to calm Sakurai down is to stay quiet and avoid pressurizing him. At the very least, the method is far more effective than trying to placate the shooting guard out loud.

As Tetsuya expected, Sakurai subsides after several more seconds of babbling one-sided apologies, and even though he fidgets a bit, his shoulders don’t look as hunched up anymore.

“What has Aomine-kun done this time?” Tetsuya enquires once he’s certain Sakurai isn’t about to implode with anxiety.

“Eh- Uh-” Sakurai’s fidgeting gets worse again for a moment until he notices the way Tetsuya is casually examining their surroundings instead of staring him down for an answer. “Aomine-san doesn't want to do drills because Kise-san is there, and they want to play against each other. Kise-san is reluctant because his captain said no, but...”

Tetsuya nods once. The new captain of Kaijou is Hayakawa Mitsuhiro, and while Tetsuya is sure that Kise respects and listens to him for the most part (hard not to do the latter considering all the enthusiastic yelling that Tetsuya recalls from the times their teams have played each other), the third-year most likely doesn't have as much clout when it comes to the flighty blond as Kasamatsu did when he was captain (and probably still does since Tetsuya is certain that Kise has remained in contact with the Kaijou graduate to this day).

However, without Kasamatsu here to ride herd on Kise, the temptation of playing one-on-one against Aomine must be too much to completely walk away from. As for Aomine, well, everyone would agree that he is relatively better these days, but Aomine has always had a problem with authority, even when he was under the rule of Akashi’s iron fist.
“Hmm,” is the only reply Tetsuya gives before he offers Sakurai a brief, reassuring half-smile. Sakurai blinks in surprise. It seems that people outside of Seirin still has yet to get used to a more emotional Tetsuya.

“I will fix it,” Tetsuya asserts right before he pushes open the doors leading to the gym that Kaijou and Touou are using.

Inside is absolute pandemonium. For all that each team gels like a well-oiled machine when they play in matches, and their respective practice sessions are if not peaceful then at least functional, practices that throw two Miracles together are another matter entirely.

Wakamatsu is bellowing at the top of his lungs in an utterly fruitless attempt at getting Aomine to stop taunting Kise about being too scared to play against him. Momoi is reprimanding Aomine with little success. Hayakawa is also there, and arguably louder than even Wakamatsu, and he’s plainly and vainly trying to coax Kise away from pouting and dithering in front of Aomine. The small forward hasn't yet reaching for the nearest basketball but he doesn't seem inclined to do the mature thing and walk away either.

Everyone else on both teams are scattered about the gymnasium, some trying to calm the five students at the centre of the gym while others stand and watch. All in all, the discordant blend of voices echo off the walls and create a raucous cacophony that’s more reminiscent of a battlefield than a sports gym.

Tetsuya squares his shoulders and strolls towards his former teammates. This is nothing he hasn't handled before. Once upon a time, when Akashi was attending to other duties, and Midorima was sulking too much about one slight or another from their teammates, Tetsuya was the one who played peacemaker.

His weak presence comes in handy now, and before anyone spots him, he has already drifted forward and slotted himself between Kise and Aomine, his back to the latter as he faces the former (because, his mind automatically deduces with all the calculating edge it possesses, Kise has always been starved for attention despite being surrounded by admirers day in and day out, while Aomine can make do with a little less after all the times people kept showering him with praise for being the best and brightest of Teikou’s Miracles, forever invincible compared to those around him).

“Tetsu!”

“Kurokocchi!”
Everybody shuts up, and even though it's a small gesture – him simply standing there – and Tetsuya hasn't even spoken yet, Kise’s petulant expression melts into bright adoration, and the impulsive charged air around Aomine settles down into something less restless at Tetsuya’s back.

It’s a start, and Tetsuya wastes no time pinning Kise with a disapproving stare, simultaneously wondering if this is how parents feel when they're scolding naughty children. Without hesitation, he also reaches behind him, catches the skin of Aomine’s forearm between his thumb and forefinger, and ruthlessly twists.

In unison, Kise cringes at the look Tetsuya is sending him while Aomine doubles over and howls with pain, hissing disjointed curses even after Tetsuya lets go.

“Good morning, Kise-kun, Aomine-kun,” Tetsuya may be the shortest amongst the Generation of Miracles but Kise seems to be shrinking before his very eyes, and he knows without looking that Aomine is doing much the same. He continues evenly without looking away from Kise. “I was busy with guiding some of Seirin’s first-years through a series of exercises only minutes ago. I do not appreciate being called away from my duties. Again.”

He doesn't emphasize any of his words but Kise still recoils a little at the last one, and Tetsuya can hear Aomine shuffling his feet.

“Oi, Ryou, did you have to go tattle on us again?” Aomine gripes just to have someone to scowl at.

“He wouldn’t have to if you would listen to your respective captains,” Tetsuya points out before Sakurai can start apologizing all over again. He finally half-turns so that he can see both Kise and Aomine on either side of him.

“I do!” Aomine protests, looking shifty-eyed anyway. “...Most of the time.”

“Not nearly enough,” Wakamatsu mutters crossly, giving Aomine the evil eye. Aomine glowers but ducks his head a little in deference.

Well, Tetsuya consoles himself. At least Aomine acknowledges Wakamatsu as his captain, even if the ace is still quite unruly. A completely disciplined Aomine would be weird and perturbing anyway.
Seeing that his old partner is now well in hand as Wakamatsu jabs a finger at the rest of Touou and Momoi begins dragging Aomine away, Tetsuya focuses solely on Kise again. He doesn’t even have to say anything; Kise has almost always understood him on a level that rivals Aomine’s intuition when the blond puts his mind to it.

Kise rubs the back of his head sheepishly before turning to Hayakawa and bobbing his head with a boyish grin that makes Nakamura sigh in resignation. “Sorry, Senpai.”

“Back to p~actice!” Hayakawa only barks, words garbled as always. He claps a hand against Kise’s back before glancing over at Wakamatsu. “Maybe you two can have a one-on-one ~ater if you wo~k hard fo~ the next few hou~s.”

Wakamatsu snorts but grudgingly nods his permission all the same, and both Aomine and Kise perk up again.

Tetsuya watches them both with exasperated amusement as they’re each dragged off by their respective captains (with Wakamatsu shouting back a brisk thank-you at him), and then he turns and heads for the doors again, nodding stoically at Sakurai who hastily bows back with a tentative smile.

Tetsuya offers one of his own, small but genuine. He’s halfway down the hallway before it occurs to him that – even just a year ago – he never would have.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
Makoto prods half-heartedly at the markers on the magnetic board. This is... not what he wants to be doing, but it isn’t as if he has a choice.

No wait, he *does* have a choice. Woe betide anyone who thinks they can take the freedom to choose from Hanamiya Makoto. But he doesn't have *much* of one.

He doesn't even know why.

His brain conjures up a memory of disappointed blue eyes without his consent.

Makoto has too much control or he would’ve chucked one of the markers across the room.

“Uh, Hanamiya?” Hiroshi ventures. “Are we gonna get this meeting started anytime soon?”

Makoto shoots him a glare but doesn't bother castigating him. Instead, he shoves the board forward so that it now sits between his regulars.

“We’re going to use this style starting today,” He tells them shortly before launching into a succinct but thorough explanation. He thinks it’s a good style – it still utilizes his and Kentarou’s two-pronged trap for steals, but it also depends more on heightening each of their individual skill so that Makoto’s Spider Web will be strengthened, and that – in turn – will reinforce their team as a whole. They’ll have to train their asses off over the next couple months, even more than usual, but Makoto can see it working out. Some tweaks will have to be made in his own strategies – expanding his Spider Web to span the length of the court, for one, and enhancing its use for more than just stopping steals – but Makoto isn’t a genius for nothing. He’ll make it work, ensnare his opponents with a web that not even Seirin will be able to cut through, control their pass courses himself instead of simply predicting them, and teach his teammates how to set up a strong enough defence that would-

“Hanamiya?” Koujirou interrupts him.
“What?” He glances up tolerantly at his small forward. Koujiro typically waits until Makoto’s finished before asking anything so this has to be important.

Koujiro studies him for a disconcertingly long moment. “…Are we changing our playing style?”

Makoto’s left eyebrow ticks up in annoyance as he raps his knuckles against the board. “Where have you been for the past ten minutes? I’m not explaining it again if you’ve been daydream-”

“I mean – are we getting rid of the foul play?” Koujiro interrupts once again, much more candid this time.

Makoto stares at him, fingers unconsciously curling around the edge of the magnetic board. An unspoken challenge hangs in the air.

“Of course not,” The lie rolls smoothly off his tongue. “But it would be better if we expanded our skill set. More than one style would confuse our opponents, especially since it’ll be one that they’ve never seen before.” His eyes narrow. “Problem?”

Koujiro blinks twice before an amused smile flits at the corners of his mouth. “No, Captain.”

Makoto scoffs before surveying the rest of his regulars. “We have four months to make this work. If you have any complaints, speak up now so I can shoot them down while I still have the patience to do it without assigning laps.”

Everyone shares loaded glances before Kazuya snickers around his gum at some private joke, Hiroshi mutters something about ‘the brat’, and Kentarou sighs out, “Ah, young love.”

Makoto’s right eye twitches.

“Kentarou. Fifty laps.”

“Wha-?! I was joking! Hanamiya!”
Summer storm in Osaka. Tempted to dump these idiots into the ocean.

Tetsuya smiles faintly at the text. It’s a miracle Kirisaki Daiichi has survived this long if they annoy Hanamiya so much on a daily basis. The third-year has been sending erratic text messages since day one about all the various ways he can come up with to kill his teammates.

My practice went well today. Tetsuya texts back dutifully. The first-years don’t look mostly dead at the end of the day anymore.

Pity. Hanamiya sends back after only a few seconds. The captain must be in a good mood despite his earlier text. He usually doesn’t reply so quickly, sometimes not at all.

The response itself isn’t so surprising though. It’s right up Hanamiya’s alley to have something bad to say about everything that crosses his path. Tetsuya knows how to pick his battles, and he’s long since decided to put this down as just another aspect of the third-year’s sardonic sense of humour.

“Hey, who’re you texting?” Kagami asks as he carelessly swings into the seat beside Tetsuya’s, tray topped high with an assortment of food clattering onto the table. He peers sideways with his typical oblivious bypassing of other people’s privacy. “Hanamiya again? What does that bastard want this time?”

Kagami can’t possibly sound any more peeved but it’s a testament to how much he trusts Tetsuya to know what he’s doing that he doesn’t complain about the communication.

Tetsuya tilts the screen of his phone to the side, and Kagami snorts after reading the short conversation.

“Asshole,” Kagami mutters, but there’s no real heat behind it so perhaps the taller second-year also understands that this is one time Hanamiya doesn’t mean any real harm.

“Hanamiya again?” Kiyoshi slides into the seat across from them, enthusiastically digging into his mashed potatoes without needing to fear Coach’s disastrous handiwork in the kitchen. “What’s he
“There’s bad weather in Osaka,” Tetsuya reports. “Hanamiya-san is considering the pros and cons of seizing this opportunity to drown his teammates in the ocean.”

“Under any other circumstances, I’d pick a fight with him just for that,” Hyuuga interjects, arriving at their table as Kiyoshi laughs. “But…” The clutch shooter turns a weary eye to the left where Kawahara and Furihata are monkeying around with a few of the first-years, and Izuki is — terrifyingly enough — teaching an avid Nakane his puns. Hyuuga heaves a long-suffering sigh. “At the moment, that would be pretty hypocritical of me.”

Kagami sniggers around a mouthful of steak, cheeks bulging like a chipmunk, and Kiyoshi laughs again, casting a fond gaze on all their teammates scattered around the dining hall.

“It wouldn’t be our team if we weren’t us,” Kiyoshi declares, clapping Captain on the shoulder. The center shifts his attention back to Tetsuya. “And the first-years are kind of cute, always following you around like they do, Kuroko.”

“Only Tsuruya-kun and Hideaki-kun do that; the latter more than the former,” Tetsuya corrects with a tint of embarrassment as Kagami outright chortles at his expense. “Yuasa-kun is too shy, Ninomiya-kun is the level-headed one of them all, and Nakane-kun—” Tetsuya shoots a vengeful look at his partner. “—worships Kagami-kun.”

Kagami grimaces and glances away with a mortified scowl on his face. Nakane is even more starry-eyed over Kagami than Hideaki is over Tetsuya, always attempting to emulate the red-haired second-year in every way, half the time stalking Kagami everywhere between classes and after school. That’s part of why Tetsuya put them in two separate rooms; he’s fairly certain Kagami would never have forgiven him if he decided to stick Nakane in the same sleeping space as the power forward, and Tetsuya isn’t that cruel. At least for Hideaki and Tsuruya, Tetsuya is stern enough with them to keep them in line and prevent them from going overboard with their antics, which is the only reason he let them room with him.

Captain rolls his eyes, mouth twitching, and Kiyoshi openly grins. There’s a certain intensity in the Iron Heart’s eyes that prompts Tetsuya to straighten when the third-year turns back to look at him.

“You know them pretty well, huh, Kuroko?” Kiyoshi beams, and he exchanges a mysterious look with Hyuuga.
It’s not like they hide it.” Tetsuya points out matter-of-factly even as his eyes flit between them, trying to decipher what their angle is here.

“Okay, quiz time!” Kiyoshi’s gaze includes Kagami this time, and Captain lowers his fork, reluctantly intrigued. “What’s Ninomiya’s favourite food?”

“Uh...” Kagami scratches his head.

“Taiyaki,” Tetsuya contributes, and at the questioning look Kagami throws him, he clarifies, “Whenever the team goes out for lunch at that new sushi restaurant, Ninomiya-kun always stops by the taiyaki stand to buy some. He always has at least one in his schoolbag.”

“Huh,” Kagami shrugs. “I had no idea. Why is this important?”

“It’s just a game,” Kiyoshi chirps brightly. Kagami looks somewhere between wary and alarmed, which is always understandable when it comes to Kiyoshi. “Let’s see... how about – what position on the court is Nakane best in?”

“...Power forward?” Kagami guesses, gaze cutting over to where Nakane is nodding solemnly to something Izuki has just said. “He’s pretty good at that. And the brat’s always bugging me about my techniques. I don’t know why he doesn’t get that I don’t actually have a plan when I pull moves out of my ass in the middle of a match.”

“Not everyone has your instincts, Kagami,” Captain reminds him.

“And Nakane-kun wants to be a power forward like you,” Tetsuya corrects bluntly as his mind dredges up the hours and hours of practices that Seirin has run. “But he’s better suited as a shooting guard, which makes sense since that was what he was in his middle school basketball team. He switched positions only this year.”

“How do you know that?” Kagami demands with some perplexity.

“I read his file,” Tetsuya says, not bothering to mention that he has read all the first-years’ files that Coach compiled. It’s logical, after all – knowing their backgrounds contributes to a more cohesive
team. “Not all of us are only obsessed with playing basketball and eating.”

“Oi!” Tetsuya gets an elbow in the ribs for his deadpanned quip.

“And it’s rude not to know these things about your fan, Kagami-kun,” Tetsuya’s eyes dart over to where Nakane has just wrapped up his chat with Izuki. Mischief guides his tongue.

“Nakane-kun,” He calls out, and the first-year wheels to face him, already heading over with a bounce in his step. “Kagami-kun was just saying how he’d like to show you his lane ups.”

“Kuroko, I'm gonna murder you in your sleep!” is all Kagami has time to hiss before Nakane lets loose a loud whoop, seems to magically teleport over to Kagami’s side, and begins babbling a mile a minute about Kagami’s basketball style. It doesn't take long for Kagami to give up on the rest of his lunch (instead of brushing Nakane off entirely after Tetsuya pins him with a warning look that tells him to be polite or else) and allow the animated first-year to drag him off to the nearest gym. Though not before he shoots Tetsuya a vengeful I will get you for this you bastard look.

Tetsuya watches them go with a shade of a smile behind a spoonful of soup.

Family, he thinks, should be like this. Filled with laughter and banter, arguments and even death threats of course, but also stability and support. All that, and not empty houses, and sporadic phone calls, and missed holidays, and conversations that yawn with the awkward silence of strangers.

He loves them all, Tetsuya readily admits, in a way he couldn't with the Generation of Miracles. There’s a certain give-and-take with Seirin that is selfless and freely offered, something Tetsuya can trust in, whereas with his old teammates, there was always... too much take and not enough give.

When he turns back to his senpai, they're both watching him appreciatively, Kiyoshi smiling softly while an approving glint sparks in Hyuuga’s eyes.

“I think you’ll do just fine,” Captain murmurs at last, and no matter how much Tetsuya stares or subtly prods them, neither third-year expounds any further on that innocuous statement.
Three days later, things take a turn for the worse.

“If you're still with them, I don’t want anything to do with you anymore!”

Tetsuya stops breathing.

“Kurokocchi, w- what’s going on? Who is that?”

Other voices buzz in his ears but he doesn’t really notice anything except the accusing eyes in front of him.

Someone touches his shoulder.

Tetsuya pulls away and runs.

The camp was going so well too.

Tetsuya didn't mean to ruin it.

He should probably head back. His team will be worried, and the first-years won’t have a clue as to what’s happening since they’re only aware of a few details about the whole mess with the Generation of Miracles.

But...

He doesn't think they'll be too angry if he stays out for just a little while longer.
Makoto actually does a double-take when his phone rings and he sees the unknown number on the screen. Well, not unknown. He still remembers it from seven months ago.

He debates over answering it. He has no real desire to talk to Kiyoshi, but at the same time, he’s also vaguely curious about what Iron Heart wants. If it’s just a social call to annoy Makoto, Kiyoshi would've started calling months ago, and Makoto would've had the number blocked.

He waits for a few seconds longer. His phone continues ringing insistently.

He answers it. “What do you want?”

“Hanamiya! It’s Kiyoshi!”

No shit, Makoto thinks caustically, already regretting his decision to accept the call because Kiyoshi sounds three seconds away from a panic attack, and Makoto is two hundred percent certain that the imminent conversation will only go downhill from here.

“Have you seen Kuroko?”

There are times when Makoto honestly wonders how humankind has progressed as far as it has with this sort of dazzling intelligence advancing it.

“I'm in Osaka,” Makoto says with the brand of slow deliberateness that one usually reserves for particularly obtuse children. “Why the hell would I have seen the brat?” He pauses. “You lost him?”

“No, we- There was- Something happened – he met an old… friend – and some things were said before anybody could calm everyone down, and the whole thing made Kuroko run off, and- and he’s been missing for two days now, and we’ve been looking for him but we’ve had no luck so I thought maybe he might’ve gone to you-”
Yup, conversation’s going exactly the way he expected. Makoto doesn’t know whether he should be pissed at Kuroko or Kiyoshi. He picks Kiyoshi because at least the center is available for him to tear into.

“What is wrong with you people?” He growls with more venom than he will ever care to admit. “Why can’t you keep an eye on one measly kid without letting him pull shit like this every single time someone turns around?”

“I know, we know,” Kiyoshi stammers out, and Makoto hates it because Iron Heart isn’t supposed to sound like he’s stressed to the point of falling apart. Not that Makoto particularly cares about that, but it means that whatever has Kiyoshi this riled up must be monumentally bad, and that’s-

“Did you try his phone?” Makoto cuts to the chase seeing as somebody has to ensure these things are done, if only because Seirin probably won’t since their team floats along on sentiment and wishful thinking and not a crumb of common sense. “Did you inform the police?”

“Yes- No- Yes to the first-”

“Pull yourself together!” Makoto snarls, completely out of patience, but at least it works because Kiyoshi sucks in a fortifying breath, and when he speaks again, it’s a lot steadier. The fleeting silence gives Makoto enough time to pick up on what sounds like a lot of muffled yelling in the background on Kiyoshi’s end. It occurs to him that the other third-year is probably one of the main forces keeping three teams’ worth of egos together, three teams that include Aomine, Kise, and Kagami, and that’s probably why he sounds so frazzled. Even Kiyoshi’s resilience has to have a limit.

“He’s not answering his phone. And we haven’t called the police yet. We’re pretty sure Kuroko will eventually come back on his own but we’re still-”

“Then what’s the problem?” Makoto interrupts. “Tetsuya’s about as invisible as anyone can get. No one will be able to see him to mug him or whatever else you’re worried about.”

A memory of Haizaki flickers through his mind. He pushes it aside. “If you’re that concerned, call the damn police anyway, but he’ll probably be fine in the end. Now if we’re finished this pointless phone call, I have more important things to do.”

He hangs up before Kiyoshi can get another word in edgewise. He gets up, grabs a glass of water,
makes himself a sandwich, and goes out for a bit to rag at his team.

And then he returns to his temporary room and dials Kuroko’s number.

Seven times because nobody picks up the first six times.

He’s spitting mad when the line finally connects on the seventh attempt.

“What is wrong with you?!?” Makoto snaps the second he hears soft breathing and the pitter-patter of rain accompanying it. “Running away like a little kid? I didn’t think you were that weak!”

No answer. Colour him surprised. Kuroko is always making his life hard. He supposes he should be grateful that the brat hasn’t hung up yet.

With a tremendous effort, Makoto swallows down his anger. It won’t help here, and it has never been very satisfying to rip strips off someone as in control of their emotions as Kuroko almost always is. Time to be practical. “Alright, where are you?”

Another long, tension-filled silence. Makoto waits it out. He can be tolerant when he has to be.

...Wait a minute.

Makoto strains his ears. Is that- “Are you by the ocean?”

The mental image of Kuroko sitting beside the ocean during a rainstorm is... not pleasant. The ominous rumble of turbulent seas sounds far too close for comfort.

Makoto sighs, rubbing a hand against his forehead. He isn’t- This isn’t something he’s good at. Emotional crap has never been something he’s good at, not when he’s not using those emotions to manipulate people.

Come to think of it, he’s stopped even thinking about manipulating Kuroko a long time ago.
And it bothers him that it doesn't bother him.

Wonderful.

Well, that’s a personal crisis for another time. Right now, he has this to deal with.

The problem with Kuroko, as Makoto has come to realize, is that the kid’s emotional balance is so completely fucked up that one has to wonder how neglectful his parents have had to be to not see it and fix it in time. Maybe it’s because he’s kept them locked up for too long, or maybe he was simply born that way, but whatever it is, there’s no denying that Kuroko feels a lot of things in abundance – overabundance – yet he still locks all that emotion away until he simply can’t contain it anymore. Then it’s like a dam bursting from too much water pushing against it, and the fallout is never pretty for anyone.

It’s gotten better with Seirin’s help of course (even though their first meeting was short enough that some people wouldn't even call it a meeting, Makoto still remembers the shell of a human being that was Kuroko back then), but Makoto suspects that at least part of this habit of hiding his emotions from the world will always stay with Kuroko for the rest of his life.

Not that Makoto is in any position to throw stones; he’s fully aware of his own shortcomings in the feelings department. Still, at least he doesn't hide it all, even if at least half of what he shows the world is-

Now’s not the time to think about that. Focus.

He’s not going to say something as plebeian as ‘do you want to talk about it’. Half the time, that doesn't work anyway. He didn't ask Kiyoshi for details but he can take a shot in the dark and accurately assume that this ‘old friend’ has something to do with those Generation of Miracles, mostly because when it comes to Kuroko’s past, it always has something to do with those freaks.

In Makoto’s humble opinion, Kuroko has outrageously poor taste in friends.

(He refuses to acknowledge the nagging question of whether or not that includes Makoto himself.)
So. First order of business.

“Alright, brat, I hope you realize I'm taking time out of a very busy schedule,” Makoto lies. A little guilt-tripping never hurts anyone. “So listen up because I'm not going to repeat myself – I won’t ask you what happened, because frankly, I don’t care. At the moment, I just want you to get up and go find some shelter.” He stops, and when he hears no change, his voice sharpens into a command, “Now, Tetsuya.”

Another few seconds tick by, and then, miraculously, the distant scuff of shoes – barely audible under the rain and waves – echo over the line. Makoto releases an imperceptible sigh of relief.

He’s good at bluffing in the face of... well, everything, but even he doesn't know what option two would be if Kuroko simply chose to ignore him.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually, the ocean fades to the point where Makoto can no longer hear it, and only the muted drizzle of rain is audible.

“Okay,” Makoto racks his brain for the next step. He has no shame in admitting that he is abysmal at this, which is why he decides to leave it up to Kuroko. “You realize you've been missing for two days, right? Kiyoshi even had the gall to call me.”

The silence is unnerving. True, Kuroko has never been what anyone would call a chatterbox but he’s always responded when people talk to him. At the very least, that eerie politeness of his allowed nothing less.

Makoto sighs and yields just a touch. Time for the softer approach. “...Tetsuya, talk to me. I don’t care about what. Just talk.”

Nothing. Oh, the kid’s obstinacy can be aggravating.

Fine then. He’ll talk.

“Kazuya blew up the microwave yesterday,” Makoto informs him offhandedly. “The idiot’s lucky he didn’t hurt himself. Even luckier that he and Kentarou managed to clean it all up before I got there or else they would've been running laps until dawn. They’re still paying for it themselves. This one’s not going on the school budget.” He pauses, and then flits to another topic. “The
weather’s finally cleared up over here so I’ve had my team training their leg muscles in the ocean. None of them are all that happy about it..."

And that’s how it goes for the next twenty minutes, with Makoto jumping from subject to random subject. Kuroko should consider himself lucky, should be *honoured*; Makoto can’t remember the last time he gave this much leeway to *anyone*, can’t remember the last time he was willing to do something remotely kind purely for someone else’s sake, and okay, talking about nothing to take Kuroko’s mind off whatever’s made him do a runner isn’t a lot, but Makoto doesn't normally do even that much, so his point stands.

“*Ogiwara-kun doesn't want anything to do with me,*” Kuroko says at long last, cutting Makoto off halfway through his disparaging recount of the latest global disaster on the front-page news this morning.

“...Who?” Makoto prompts after a moment. He wasn't lying when he said he didn't care one way or the other about the screw-ups in Kuroko’s past, but at least the kid is finally talking again, even if his voice is raw and brittle and makes Makoto wonder if he’s been crying.

He’s never once seen Kuroko cry before, not when Haizaki put him in the hospital, not when Makoto hit him, not even back during that final match in last year’s Winter Cup when the kid’s old captain was trying to break his spirit and crush his team.

“*My friend,*” Kuroko reveals bleakly. “*Or... he used to be my friend.*”

And then the whole story pours out, and Makoto can’t even pretend to be surprised by what the Generation of Miracles did. It’s not as if that infamous Teikou-Meikou game is much of a secret; everyone in the basketball circuit back then – middle-schoolers and highschoolers alike – at least heard about that match if they didn’t see it for themselves.

But to think it was specifically staged – of *course* it was – by that psychotic redhead whom anyone with half a brain would never have given so much power to, *just because* the ace of Meikou was Kuroko’s childhood friend – Makoto has no idea how Kuroko can even stand to be near Akashi, let alone have enough of a heart to save the bastard from himself. He’s no expert on friendship but he’s fairly certain that one isn’t supposed to continually attempt to destroy the other for no discernible reason whatsoever.

And maybe he’s biased – yeah, he’s definitely biased, so sue him – but this Ogiwara character rubs him the wrong way, makes his more sadistic tendencies rear their heads at the very thought of that guy blaming Kuroko for something out of his control, and Makoto has to force himself to shove
those urges down.

He has to be the pragmatic one here – he doesn't really know how to be anything else in this case – because while Kuroko is usually very level-headed, he certainly isn't right now.

And sometimes, hard truths have to be delivered by somebody else before one can accept them.

“People change,” Makoto says at last after a drawn-out minute once Kuroko has fallen silent again. “And there's never anything you can do about it. You can try to influence them, but you can't force them to change a specific way, and you can't force them to change back to how you remember them to be.”

He pauses, choosing his words carefully, trying to find a line between too harsh and too sentimental. “This... doesn't sound like the same case as the one you had with the Generation of Miracles—” because everyone and their dog more or less knew that last year’s Winter Cup was more a battleground for the six former Teikou stars to hash out their differences than an actual basketball tournament. “—so maybe you should stop treating it like it is.

“Your old teammates actually needed their heads pulled out of their asses, though if it was up to me, I would've just left them to drown,” Makoto’s tone shifts into a measured sort of frankness. “Look, life’s not a fairytale; you don’t always get happy endings, and most of the time, things won’t turn out the way you want them to anyway. People grow apart; it happens, and sometimes, there’s nothing you can do about it except move on. You can’t... fix your childhood friend just because you want to. He has to want it too, and maybe he doesn't anymore, not the way you want him to. Maybe he’s found his own way to cope, who knows. I know you're all about not giving up, Tetsuya, but sometimes, the best thing to do is to just back off and let things be. He knows you want to make amends, right?”

(Which is utter crap in Makoto’s opinion because Kuroko hasn't done anything wrong, but try convincing the stubborn brat of that; you may as well be arguing with a brick wall.)

“He should already know you care,” Makoto sighs, reclining back against the headboard of his bed. “You've given him the chance, and if he won't take it, then that’s his problem. That’s his responsibility. Do you understand, Tetsuya? Any sort of relationship goes two ways. It’s not your job to take on both. You did enough of that with the Generation of Miracles. You can stop now.”

And isn’t it mind-boggling that Makoto’s taken up impromptu counselling. A part of him feels nauseated that he’s spewing this stuff at all, but he knows people, knows how they work, knows what makes them tick, even if he doesn't like the emotions that come with it, and... well, he
supposes he likes Kuroko well enough to at least try to offer a bit of advice.

Whether the kid follows it or not is up to him though.

Makoto sighs again, feeling like he’s talked more in the past ten minutes than he has in the past week.

“You can’t keep running after people for the rest of your life,” He concludes with finality. “In fact, it’s downright unhealthy. You’ve got your own life to live, and you of all people should know that that’s hard enough as it is.”

He pauses again, considering. “...Let this one go, Tetsuya. If this guy still wants to be your friend, then he’ll come to you in his own time. If you push the issue too much, it’ll only make things worse.”

He finally stops talking, idly reaching for his water as he allows Kuroko some time to digest everything. For someone who’s been betrayed the way Kuroko has, it sometimes astounds Makoto to realize just how... innocent the kid can still be. Anyone else would've walked away or lashed out long ago, too jaded, too angry, too bitter to forgive.

(Makoto’s shoulder twinges with old memories.)

“...He was my first friend,” Kuroko murmurs, voice faint. “The first to not forget me even with my weak presence in the way.”

“Not your last though,” Makoto points out calmly.

“No,” Kuroko agrees, and he sounds a little more put-together this time, more alive.

For a while, neither of them speaks again. Makoto downs the rest of his water, puts the phone on speaker, and picks up the book he’s been reading on algorithms and data structures.

“...Thank you, Hanamiya-san,” The polite gratitude is tinged with warmth. Makoto grunts an acknowledgement. “I'm sor-”
“If you apologize, I'm hanging up,” Makoto cuts in coolly.

“...Thank you.” There’s a tired but genuine smile accompanying the two words. Makoto can’t quite stop the rush of smug satisfaction from welling up in his chest. Not even Seirin succeeded where Makoto has.

“Alright then,” No matter the sense of accomplishment, Makoto is still glad to wrap this up. He’s not exactly comfortable with heart-to-hearts. “Now stop acting like a runaway child and go back to your team. You're seventeen, not seven. Give them a ring as soon as you can because I do not want Kiyoshi badgering me again, got it?”

“Yes, Hanamiya-san,” Makoto scoffs when he hears the note of rueful amusement in the second-year’s voice. He hesitates for a second before ordering brusquely, “Call me when you get back to the camp.”

“I will.”

Makoto receives the promised phone call three hours later, followed by a text message from Kiyoshi (after Makoto refuses to pick up the first two calls from the center), thanking him for his assistance.

Makoto deletes the text. It’s not as if he did it for Kiyoshi.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
Tetsuya ends up taking Hanamiya’s advice. It’s hard because ever since they went their separate ways, he’s always harboured a desperate hope that the bond between himself and Ogiwara could be repaired one day, and they would go back to what they used to be. That hope was only fanned by the return of the Generation of Miracles as he once knew them. Yes, they were different, but all five of them also regained the most important aspects of themselves, the parts that were lost in their arrogance and prodigious talent, and that’s all Tetsuya ever wanted.

But Ogiwara is a little different in that he was hurt by the Generation of Miracles, and Tetsuya really should’ve taken into account the fact that perhaps his childhood friend may simply want to move on instead of looking back at the good that was so overshadowed by all the bad. If Ogiwara truly doesn’t want to go back to that, then Hanamiya is right – Tetsuya forcing the issue won’t help at all. It would only be selfishness on his part.

So he backs off.

It was pure coincidence that he bumped into Ogiwara in Sapporo, and Tetsuya doesn't go looking again. He’ll respect Ogiwara’s wishes because while he cares about him, he also cares about his former teammates, and he can’t cut ties with them just like that, not after he fought so hard for them and went through so much with them. They – the Generation of Miracles – they’re still jagged around the edges, puzzle pieces that no longer quite fit now that they’ve each found their home in separate teams, but the bonds are still there, however frayed, and Tetsuya won’t give that up even for Ogiwara’s sake because that will mean giving part of himself up, and that’s impossible, just like it’s impossible for him to ever forget his childhood friend, even though Ogiwara doesn’t want to see him anymore.

But Tetsuya can handle that. Ogiwara knows where to find him, knows that he’s only a phone call away, and while he’s not exactly happy about it, it’s enough. It’ll have to be enough, and the sting of the rejection will fade with time.

“The offer’s still open,” Kagami says as they’re loading their gear onto the bus that will take them to the train station. “Just say the word, and I’ll go beat up Aomine for you. I’ll even throw in a punch for Kise, but more than that and- well, he’s kinda delicate-looking so I don’t wanna accidentally kill him or something, and his fangirls might kill me if I permanently mess up his face.”
Tetsuya laughs, a bit raggedly, and definitely rusty, but the sound makes the first-years look around in amazement and everyone else’s smiles widen so Tetsuya doesn't suppress it.

“Thank you, Kagami-kun,” Tetsuya quirks a smile up at the slightly feral but undeniably pleased grin that Kagami is aiming at him. “I will keep that in mind.”

Kise and Aomine finally found out about Tetsuya’s childhood friend, and both were... well, devastated is only a little bit of an exaggeration, especially after Tetsuya ran off, Kagami – as Tetsuya discovered later – almost broke Aomine’s nose, and the two Miracles finally realized what that final match back in Teikou cost Tetsuya. It’ll only be a matter of time before the others find out as well, and he can’t say he’s looking forward to it. Both Kise and Aomine have been following him around ever since Tetsuya came back, catering to his every whim until Tetsuya got fed up and set Kagami on them.

(Kagami was more than happy to oblige.)

Tetsuya’s not made of glass, and Seirin knows that well enough to only scold him for running off, ask him if he’s sure he’s okay, tell him he can talk to any of them if he wants to, and then treat him just the same as before. They protect him in their own way with a fist-bump after a scrimmage or a request for homework aid in the evening or a pillow fight when they should all be sleeping (they notice him, include him, accept him), but they don’t stifle him.

He loves them all the more for it.

A week after they all return to Tokyo, Tetsuya wakes up one morning, wanders down to the kitchen, looks around, and suddenly realizes that he hasn’t remodelled the house in over two years. The last time was near the beginning of his third year in middle school. After that, he was too busy to bother.

And truth be told, besides the rooms he uses most, everything else is collecting an unsanitary amount of dust, so maybe it’s about time to do some housekeeping before school starts up again because the place is starting to look less like a human residence and more like a morgue.

(Then again, a morgue is a human residence too, except it’s a dead one.)
Now that he thinks about it, he’s fairly certain he hasn't even turned on at least three-quarters of the lights in this house for at least a year and a half.

He sighs as he rifles through his refrigerator for something to eat. He can’t say he’s looking forward to it. Even renovating the place from top to bottom lost its novelty after the first six times.

His gaze lands on his phone as he turns around, hands cradling a few eggs.

Maybe...

His first thought is that he doesn't want to impose, but almost immediately after, voices that sound a lot like Coach, Captain, and Kiyoshi tell him not to be silly.

It may be fun, Tetsuya thinks as he warms up to the idea. He won’t be deciding what he wants his house to look like on his own this time; his team can pitch in as well, and how many teenagers out there can claim that they've had free rein over redecorating an entire mansion?

Still, he wavers. It’s ingrained into him, from the numerous parties that his parents used to parade him through, back when he was still small enough that his cute factor charmed potential clients and drew in rich investors (and then he grew up a little more, and he learned to hide his emotions a little too well, and he became creepy instead of endearing) – to never intrude, never be in the way, never presume what others want, to be seen when his mother said so, to be out of sight when his father tapped a finger against his elbow, and to never, ever, ever be heard unless directly spoken to.

But...

Tetsuya flips open his phone, and his fingers find his last of contacts. His long list of contacts. All of his old teammates from Teikou, all of his current teammates from Seirin, four students from class after they worked on a project together and still spoke from time to time between lessons, Hanamiya and the other regulars from Kirisaki Daiichi (Tetsuya’s pretty sure Hara pickpocketed his phone at some point after Tetsuya forgave Hanamiya but before summer camp began because he doesn't recall ever asking them for their numbers), Wakamatsu from Touou (“Kid, I’ll be needing you to send me every last scrap of blackmail you have on Aomine over the next few months, alright? Here’s my number.”), Tsugawa from Seihou after Seirin beat them again at Interhigh (“DON’T FORGET; YOU’RE MY RIVAL! I’LL BE DEMANDING A REMATCH!”), and even Imayoshi after Hanamiya – beyond fed up with fielding calls from the former captain about the third-year’s odd friendship with Tetsuya – passed the number along so that Tetsuya now has to deal with Imayoshi’s sly enquiries about what they've been up to, voice always holding a hint of laughter like he’s constantly enjoying some cosmic joke that nobody else is privy to.
Tetsuya is acquainted with... a lot of people now. Or perhaps more accurately, a lot of people are acquainted with Tetsuya now. A lot of them are honest-to-god friends of his.

So... maybe in this, it’s okay to take some liberties. Maybe it will even be welcomed. Besides, he’s never had any problems speaking up when he’s on the basketball court and has something to contribute to the team.

(And if he thinks about it, he’s never had a problem borderline demanding Hanamiya to pay for his milkshakes either whenever the third-year says something mean. Perhaps it’s because Hanamiya was neither stranger nor friend even though he’s now – mostly – the latter and – definitely – not the former.)

Tetsuya calls Kagami first.

“Hey, what’s up?”

Tetsuya pushes aside the strange nervousness tugging at him and defaults to his typical straightforward approach. “Kagami-kun, I need to clean my house. Please be here in an hour to help me.”

“...What?”

“I’ll let you pick out all the furniture in one of the guestrooms,” Tetsuya bribes. “And it’ll be your room if you ever decide to sleep over.”

“What?!”

It takes a bit of convincing, but eventually, most of Seirin are onboard with running up Tetsuya’s credit cards (nobody actually says that, and Tetsuya has to assure everyone at least half a dozen times that he can afford it, and that he’s done this before, six times, and he’ll be doing it anyway even without their assistance), and by the time they’ve all gathered in the main living room, everybody is more than a little excited. Unfortunately, the first-years are all off with their families on vacation at the moment so it’s only the original team this time.
“I brought IKEA!” Koganei announces, dumping a stack of catalogues on the coffee table. Everybody grabs a copy and starts flipping through.

“Can we paint the walls ourselves?” Coach gushes eagerly.

“Of course,” Tetsuya sanctions, and his team all resume their perusing with gusto. He smiles a little before dragging Kagami off to show him one of the empty guestrooms that’s been promised to him. Tetsuya more or less told his entire team that they can have their pick of the bedrooms. It isn’t as if anyone ever used them, and the main Kuroko property – as of a decade ago – isn’t even this Tokyo-based one anymore. Tetsuya’s fairly certain that his mother spends most of her time in the manor in France, while his father resides in a spacious upscale studio apartment somewhere in the States. This house here in Tokyo is more or less Tetsuya’s.

An hour later, they've filled out an unholy amount of order forms, with Izuki and Koganei dropping them off at the post office while the rest of them went out for groceries (“I can’t believe this – your kitchen has practically nothing! Do you only live on takeout and milkshakes, Kuroko?!”) before returning to Tetsuya’s house again, where Mitobe and Kagami are then put in charge of cooking dinner for them all.

Everyone else explores. Mitobe and Kagami only join them once they're just waiting for the rice to finish cooking.

“Hey, who’s this, Kuroko-kun?” Coach enquires, and Tetsuya stills when his gaze lands on the small shrine that the third-year is kneeling in front of. He was already expecting this question since the altar is clearly out in the open but the words still get stuck in his throat for a second longer than necessary.

“My grandmother,” Tetsuya says tonelessly. “She raised me.” His eyes soak in the portrait. “...She passed away about a year and a half ago. Cancer.”

“...So that would be... at the end of your third year?” Coach isn’t the only one who looks horrified because all the second- and third-years in the house know how bad third year middle school was for Tetsuya. The first-years – fortunately – aren’t here, plus they only have a rough idea of the struggle against the Generation of Miracles that took place last year anyway.

Tetsuya inclines his head. He feels a little numb. “I visited her at the hospital as much as I could until the end, so that was... But I had basketball still and she didn't want me to give that up, and
then... She passed away a few days after I quit the Teikou team.”

That was a hectic, miserable time for him. For all that they were family, Tetsuya’s father was never particularly close to... well, anyone actually, Tetsuya’s grandmother and mother included, so it was up to Tetsuya to arrange the funeral and handle all the other things that come with deaths when his father had another important business deal that took priority, and even his mother was off who-knew-where.

Tetsuya didn’t even cry at the small memorial service that was held, the one where only Tetsuya and a handful of his grandmother’s friends attended. He isn’t a crier to begin with, and at that point back then, if he started crying, he probably wouldn't have stopped until he’d flung himself off the nearest cliff.

And all that suppressed emotion – maybe that’s why he still feels horrible now, a full year and a half after the event.

He jolts like he’s been electrocuted when arms close around him, and he abruptly finds himself in his Coach’s embrace.

“I'm so, so sorry for your loss,” She murmurs into his ear, chin hooking over his right shoulder as she envelopes him in a hug that’s so much like the ones Tetsuya’s grandmother used to give him when she was still strong enough to give them. That was years ago.

Coach doesn't let go, even though – for a long, long minute – Tetsuya doesn't do anything but stand there, staring straight ahead at a point somewhere between Hyuuga and Kiyoshi. He can’t quite make out their expressions, and it takes a moment to realize that that’s because his vision is blurry.

He tries to push it back, he does, but without his consent, a single tear betrays him and crawls out of the corner of his left eye, and like a chain reaction, his throat clicks with something embarrassingly close to a sob, and his arms twitch at his sides before slowly coming up to wrap clumsily around his coach’s back.

It’s the first hug he’s ever given to anyone other than his grandmother in living memory.

Someone’s hand drops on his head – Kiyoshi’s; only the center’s hands are that big – and someone else curls a protective grip around the back of his neck. He feels the others gather around, pressing in but not in a suffocating way, and while a part of his mind yells at him to pull himself together,
another part just wants to stay like this forever.

Tetsuya doesn't know how long they stand there for, but eventually, he pulls away, and Coach lets him go, her own eyes a little red-rimmed even as she beams at him with a watery smile.

“You hugged me back,” She points out with an almost proud lilt in her tone.

Tetsuya shrugs a little, one hand quickly dashing away any leftover traces of tears even as he clears his throat. “It is only polite, Kantoku.”

Coach grins knowingly, memories of Momoi and Kise’s overly enthusiastic and always one-sided hugs flashing between them, but she doesn't say anything more, or doesn't have time to because Koganei all but tackles him from the side in the next second, hooking an arm around his neck with a cheery cat-like grin on his face that quite effectively breaks the sombre mood.

“Don’t worry, Kuroko!” Koganei assures. “You can practice your hugs on us as much as you want!”

“Yeah, just don’t let Hideaki hear you say that,” Furihata snickers good-naturedly. “Kuroko would never get rid of him again!”

“Idiots,” Hyuuga grumbles at everybody in general with the air of someone long since resigned to his friends’ quirks. “Hideaki goes around tackling Kuroko with hugs anyway. It’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah, he’s like a hyperactive puppy,” Koganei agrees before he frowns in thought. “Hm, maybe he should cut back though. Everyone knows Kuroko’s going out with Hanamiya now, and I don’t think Mr. Weird Eyebrows is the sharing type.”

A long silence prevails, one in which Koganei blinks around in confusion, apparently entirely serious about his last statement.

And then Izuki cracks up from where he’s standing by the couch, followed by the rest of the third-years, half of them falling over in their mirth. Kagami’s face flames red, looking torn between outrage and disbelief, and Tetsuya himself can only stare in bemusement at Koganei.
“Hanamiya-san is only my friend,” Tetsuya clarifies, somewhat mystified as to why ‘everyone’ thinks he’s dating the Kirisaki Daiichi captain. Hanamiya’s sister teases them about it, but Tetsuya is ninety percent sure that it is only that – teasing.

“Oh,” Koganei looks sheepish all of a sudden. “Sorry, Kuroko.”

His expression morphs into one of mirth when Kawahara interjects teasingly, “So are you available then, Kuroko?”

Before Tetsuya can say anything, Kagami makes a long arm and snags Kawahara by the back of his shirt, reeling the startled second-year in.

“That has nothing to do with you,” Kagami growls, still red in the face and looking ready to breathe fire as if Tetsuya is a younger sibling that needs to have all his suitors scared away. “And if that bastard Hanamiya knows what’s good for him, he’ll keep his hands to himself. What is with this line of questioning anyway? If that idiot Hideaki gets wind of this, it’ll definitely become Kise Take Two or something so everybody shut up!”

Kawahara splutters something about only joking and Kagami when did you take the role of Kuroko’s overprotective big brother as he attempts to free himself from the power forward’s clutches, half the room is still laughing, and Tetsuya rocks back on his heels to view his team as a whole before glancing surreptitiously to the side at the portrait of his grandmother, smiling kindly back at him.

She looks like she approves.

Something settles in his heart, soothing a lingering ache that Tetsuya wasn't consciously aware of enduring at all.

“Well don’t you look chipper,” Makoto remarks even as he suppresses the instinctive twitch that always comes with Kuroko’s magical arrival, as is the case now. The second-year is smiling ever-so-slightly, and there’s a light in his eyes that doesn't often show itself to the world.

Kuroko looks up at him, smile tipping up even further, and Makoto has to stomp down hard on the involuntary urge to offer an answering smile in return. The kid is in a disturbingly good mood
today, and apparently, it’s contagious.

“Seirin is helping me paint my house,” He announces like he expects Makoto to call the press over this matter. “And remodel it,” He adds as an afterthought. “The furniture will be arriving the day after tomorrow.”

“Congratulations,” Makoto drawls, glancing briefly to the right when his eye caught the approach of the bus. Oh good, no delays. “Excuse me if I’m not more excited about this.”

An unfamiliar sound makes Makoto glance back down sharply. “...Did you just laugh?”

Kuroko’s smile becomes less visible as the bus pulls up and a few passengers get off, but it doesn’t go away completely even as they shuffle up the steps (Makoto spares a second to look past Tetsuya and glower threateningly at the bus driver when the man – predictably – overlooks Kuroko).

“You ask me that like you think I don’t have the ability to laugh,” Kuroko comments as they take a seat near the back.

“I didn’t think you had the ability to laugh,” Makoto confirms matter-of-factly. “Not so soon after Hokkaido anyway.”

Also, he’s never heard it before but he isn’t about to mention that.

Beside him, Kuroko sobers a little at the reminder. “I don’t like it but I took your advice. Ogiwara-kun knows where to find me.”

Makoto approves. Secretly, he hopes the guy never comes around. It may be rather insensitive of him – to not want some kid swinging by and digging up the past yet again despite Kuroko wanting to forgive and forget – but no one in their right mind will ever accuse Makoto of being particularly sensitive anyway so he has no qualms in thinking spiteful thoughts.

“And then I invited my team over to my house after we returned,” Kuroko recounts, fiddling absentely with the zipper of his bag. “Because I wanted my house to stop looking like a cemetery, and I didn’t want to do it alone.” He pauses. “And then they met my grandmother. Her shrine, I mean. She’s dead.”
It’s a testament to how at ease Makoto now feels around Kuroko that he can just soak that in and roll with it, if only because there is nothing about what Kuroko just said that isn’t downright tragic.

“Hm,” He’s had this suspicion ever since the hospital. It can’t even really be called a suspicion because he’s already ninety-nine percent certain of it. “Tetsuya, your parents – do you even know where they are?”

Kuroko blinks at him. “I think I still have their current respective phone numbers. My father is in the States. My mother is somewhere in Europe.”

Makoto mentally despairs of the human race in general. “I hope you realize that both those places are pretty damn big.”

Kuroko frowns reproachfully at him. “You're swearing.”

Makoto rolls his eyes. “I swear all the time; I just don’t do it out loud most days, or at least not in public.” He narrows his gaze. “Stop trying to distract me. You're not my sister.”

Kuroko tilts his head, and this time, his smile is grateful in a way that makes Makoto’s skin itch.

“I'm used to it,” The second-year says simply. “My grandmother was the one who raised me for the most part. I see my parents every few years, and it’s almost always been like that.”

Something more impish lines his features. “Thank you for caring, Hanamiya-san.”

Makoto scoffs and cuffs the younger teen around the head. The blow isn’t nearly as harsh as it would be for anyone else.

“We get off here,” Makoto huffs, dropping the subject as the bus pulls up to the curb. The mall is already in sight.

“What do we need to buy?” Kuroko enquires, and Makoto pulls out the shopping list Mayu thrust
on him not an hour ago.

He can still hear her: "Take Kuroko-kun with you so that you can invite him over for dinner tonight! And that wasn't a suggestion!"

He just knows that his sister was born for the singular reason of tormenting him. It isn’t even a Saturday, although admittedly, he’s been spending time with Kuroko outside of their scheduled study sessions and one-on-ones for a while now.

“This way first,” Makoto instructs, steering them to the left as he hands the list over to Kuroko.

“Are you having guests?” The second-year asks, gaze flitting down the list as he lets Makoto drag him around by the elbow. “This seems like a lot of food.”

“My sister likes to cook,” Makoto explains as they round into the supermarket. “And you’ll be coming, remember?”

“I don’t eat a lot,” Kuroko says, as if Makoto needs reminding.

“They you’ll be taking a lot of leftovers home with you,” Makoto counters without missing a beat. “And you won’t be able to say no. Nobody says no to my sister.”

He’s graced with another smile for that, though Makoto is quite sure that Kuroko won’t be smiling anymore when Mayu dumps five cartons of food into his arms at the end of the day.

“Not even you?” The words are delivered in Kuroko’s typical deadpan manner but Makoto knows when he’s being teased.

Huh. Kuroko’s learning.

“Especially not me,” Makoto admits shamelessly. He sends a sidelong smirk at the younger teen. “You haven’t met her properly. She’s like a force of nature. Don’t tell her that though; it’ll only encourage her.”
Kuroko huffs out another one of those odd sounds that Makoto is beginning to recognize as the second-year’s version of laughter.

Over the next half hour, they sweep through the mall with an escalating number of grocery bags, not all of which contain their dinner since – for some reason – Mayu also insisted on junk food (which she knows Makoto doesn’t eat) and other odds and ends that aren’t food at all.

“Finally,” Makoto grumbles after they finish paying for the milk and three buckets of ice-cream. “Oi, Tetsuya, carry the mil-”

It takes him a moment to realize that he’s standing alone again, and that Kuroko’s disappeared.

He sighs, grabs the additional bags, and starts inspecting the crowds. At least the brat was generous enough to disappear with his portion of the shopping bags instead of leaving it all with Makoto.

There. A flash of blue standing by a shop window. Makoto shoulders his way through the bustle of all the other shoppers, arching an eyebrow when he spots what Kuroko is looking at.

It’s a stuffed animal that bears an uncannily cute resemblance to Kuroko’s dog.

Makoto glances at the second-year’s face, amused. Kuroko’s expression doesn’t look much different, though there’s a puppyish look around his eyes now that would probably make girls coo over him.

“If you want it, buy it,” Makoto prompts, but that only serves to snag Kuroko’s attention and draw it away from the display.

The second-year shakes his head, taking in the number of bags in Makoto’s hands before reaching for the one holding three gallons of ice-cream. Makoto hands him the milk one instead. It’s lighter, so there’s less chance of Kuroko dropping it.

“You like dogs?” Makoto enquires as they head for the nearest exit. “Or just little animals in general?”
Kuroko looks thoughtful for a moment, and then pronounces lightly, “Dogs are loyal.”

Makoto can see the appeal. Still, it’s ridiculous how even the kid’s choice of animals centers
around the train wreck of his past.

“They’re cute too,” Kuroko adds as if sensing Makoto’s thoughts.

A commotion distracts them just as they reach the bus stop again, and Makoto’s relatively good
mood plummets to twenty below when they both catch sight of-

“Kurokocchi! Kurokocchi!”

“Kise-sama! Kise-sama!”

Makoto clicks his tongue in frustration. Kaijou’s ace is bad enough; does that idiot have to bring a
gaggle of fangirls with him as well?

“Hanamiya-san,” Kuroko’s hand closes around his wrist, tugging insistently. “This way.”

Makoto’s too surprised to protest, not that he would anyway but he figured that Kuroko would
want to talk to Kise.

Nevertheless, Kuroko leads him away at a jog, breezing past other people without drawing
attention at all, and it may just be Makoto’s imagination, but he’s fairly certain that some of the
passersby’s eyes skip right over him as well.

They weave their way down the sidewalk before ducking into an alleyway. Ten seconds later,
Kise comes sprinting past them, followed by his fangirls and wailing about how his ‘Kurokocchi’
ran away from him.

Makoto rolls his eyes. How Kuroko puts up with all five of them, he hasn’t the faintest clue.
“They’re gone,” Makoto confirms after sticking his head out of the alley. “I thought you would’ve wanted to talk to him.”

“You wouldn’t,” Kuroko points out in that naturally blunt way of his. “I am spending the day with you, and you would be upset if we had to make small talk with Kise-kun and fend off his fangirls as well. Besides, I don’t like dealing with him either when he’s like this.”

Makoto stares at him for a long moment. Tetsuya blinks right back, unperturbed.

“Hm,” Makoto says at last, noncommittal. Nothing else comes to mind. “…Let’s get back to the bus stop.”

A smile crinkles at the corners of Kuroko’s eyes but the second-year doesn't say anything else as they trek back to the bus station. They don’t talk again until they reach Makoto’s house, but the silence between them is comfortable.

“Hello, Kuroko-kun!” Mayu greets them with a wide smile after flinging open the door before Makoto gets the chance to pull out his keys. “We weren’t properly introduced last time. I’m Mayu; you can call me Onee-chan if you want.”

Makoto frowns at her while Kuroko just bows, polite as always. “It’s nice to meet you, Mayu-san. Thank you for inviting me over for dinner.”

Mayu pouts at not getting her way but she doesn't push the issue as she ushers them inside. Makoto doesn't know what she’s displeased about. Kuroko doesn't call him by his first name even though Makoto’s been referring to the second-year as ‘Tetsuya’ for months now (though admittedly, he only started that to piss everyone else off; now it’s just habit). At least it’s still ‘Kuroko’ inside his head.

(That may change any day now. Habits are hard to get rid of, and Makoto isn’t even really trying.)

Kuroko offers to help with dinner but Mayu shoos them out of the kitchen and orders Makoto to give the second-year a tour of the house (which Makoto was going to do anyway; he isn’t that bad a host). They’re halfway through the indoor swimming pool when Kuroko side-eyes him pensively and asks, “Are your parents at work?”

Makoto feels less annoyance than he usually does when any aspect of his personal life is mentioned. After all, he’s asked Kuroko a similar question before (twice even). Still, he has to
bite back the knee-jerk retort of ‘mind your own business’.

“Yeah,” He says curtly instead, idly dipping one foot into the pool as they walk past it. “They're probably a bit like yours.”

Kuroko nods and drops the matter without one of those pitying looks that Makoto used to get from teachers and other parents back in elementary school when they realized that he doesn't have a full set when it comes to family.

Makoto relaxes.

Dinner – of course – is humiliating because Mayu won’t stop regaling Kuroko with stories of Makoto’s childhood, and Makoto manages an impressive ten minutes before he begins thinking of all the various ways he can kill his sister with his chopsticks. Or his napkin; he’s not picky.

“-and then there was that time when he and Kazuya-kun snuck into the staff room and glued all the chairs-”

“Nee-san, do you mind?” Makoto grits out at last. He remembers that... prank (yes, prank, so sue him; he was a ten-year-old with a genius-level IQ in a school that nearly bored him to tears on a daily basis). It was the one and only time he was caught, mostly because he got a bit too ambitious and attempted to hack into the mainframe to plant a virus after helping Kazuya measure just the right amount of upgraded superglue needed to stick all the chairs to the walls. He would've succeeded too if he’d had an extra ten minutes before the teachers stormed in.

Mayu pulls a disappointed face fit for a world-class actress. Makoto scowls right back, completely immune.


Makoto’s fork pause halfway to his mouth, his gaze fixed on his food.

“He’s my friend,” Kuroko says plainly from his place across the table. “I don’t need to ‘put up with him’.”
Makoto flicks his gaze up. Mayu is smiling at Kuroko, soft and approving and so relieved that Makoto has to look away. Kuroko seems entirely oblivious, as if his declaration should be wholly obvious to begin with.

On Makoto’s part, he’s just downright mortified when he feels something revoltingly warm unfurl in his chest. It remains there for the rest of the evening.

“Sooolly,” Mayu draws out the second Makoto gets home after walking Kuroko to the bus station (with the way the brat’s luck works, Makoto wouldn’t be surprised if he got accosted by Haizaki again, or run over by a car, or even randomly shot, so it only makes sense for Makoto to at least see Kuroko onto the bus).

“What?” Makoto grounds out as he toes off his shoes.

“He’s a good kid,” His sister says, keeping pace with him as he makes his way towards the stairs. “I’m glad you made friends with him.”

Makoto snorts. “Trust me, it was an accident.”

“A good accident.”

Makoto sneers as heads up to his room. “Hardly.”

“Liar,” Mayu proclaims at once. “You don’t even invite Kazuya-kun over anymore, no matter what I say, and the only times I’ve seen the rest of your teammates are at a restaurant or at your matches. Even Shouichi-kun hasn’t come by since your first year of middle school.”

Makoto doesn't reply. His sister is relentless.

“Makoto,” She persists softly. Makoto stiffens. “He doesn’t seem anything like Akira-ku-”
“Enough,” Makoto hisses, fingers convulsing around the banister as poisonous rage roars to life in his ears. “I never said he did, did I? Leave it!”

“You're still holding him at arm’s length,” Mayu counters, unfazed by his temper. “You're surprisingly open with him, especially after resolving that argument you had with him, which, by the way, what you yelled at him was so not okay-”

“You were *eavesdropping*?!”

“-and I'm shocked he gave you; he must have the heart of a saint-”

“It’s none of your business-”

“-but I can tell you're still holding back like you're waiting for the other shoe to drop-”

“The hell I am-”

“-and if you mess up and lash out at him again like you're prone to doing to *everyone* sooner or later when they get too close, you’ll just chase him away all because you're afraid-”

“I'm trying!” Makoto snarls, cutting his sister off for good. “For god’s sakes, do you have any idea what the hell I’ve been doing for *months* now? My team’s nowhere near as scared of me as they used to be, I've had to put up with *Kiyoshi* and the brat’s team, and even the Generation of Miracles have made it their goddamn business to stalk me almost every Saturday just because they don’t trust me to be within a mile radius of Tetsuya even though *they've* done more harm to him than I ever have! I'm trying, so butt the fuck out!”

Makoto spins and storms the rest of the way to his bedroom. His mood isn’t helped at all when the last glimpse of his sister shows Mayu smiling with triumphant satisfaction, as if Makoto’s angry riposte was exactly what she was waiting for all along.

Meddling sisters.

Makoto’s shoulder throbs.
Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
Chapter Notes

Okay, so this is the last of what I have. I mean, I've still got ~2000 words after this but it's not long enough to be a chapter, so this is it. Sorry folks, fingers crossed for further inspiration in the near future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tetsuya wakes up in the middle of the night. He’s always been a light sleeper but even Rip Van Winkle can’t miss the loud door-pounding and simultaneous doorbell-ringing currently raising hell in the house.

With a groggy yawn, Tetsuya rolls out of bed, glancing at his clock – it reads 2:07AM – before shuffling out of his room. Who could be at the door at a time like this? Who even knows where he lives? As far as he’s aware, the only people who have this address are Seirin and his parents, and there are no reasons for either party to be smashing his door down this early.

Still, he quickens his pace as he heads downstairs. Maybe there’s an emergency of some sort. His parents would call ahead, and Seirin would be stopped at the front gates but Tetsuya won’t put it past the latter to climb over the walls to reach his front door.

Unfortunately, there are no cameras monitoring his front step, only two at the main entrance, so he rewinds and checks those instead, and he heaves a sigh when he recognizes Kise vaulting over the gates like some sort of failed burglar.

It is way too early to deal with this.

With another sigh, Tetsuya heads for the door, seriously weighing the pros (it will stop this racket because otherwise, the blond will not stop, plus it’s rude to simply go back to sleep, uninvited guest or not, and it isn’t every day that Kise hunts him down like this so whatever it is may actually be more important than a fashion crisis) and cons (Tetsuya will have to juggle Kise’s sugar-high personality at two in the morning, enough said) of just ignoring his visitor.

The pros win, but only by a narrow margin.
Tetsuya unlocks the door, opens it, and braces himself for the typical assault.

It doesn't come.

“Um, hi, Kurokocchi,” Kise murmurs, smiling weakly and somehow managing to look pitifully wretched even though it isn’t even raining.

Tetsuya blinks once, inwardly sighs, and then steps back to let Kise in.

Ten minutes later, Kise is curled up on one of Tetsuya’s couches with his hands wrapped around a cup of tea. He still looks miserably dejected.

Tetsuya doesn't push him to talk. Kise is rarely so silent so he’ll give the blond some time to gather his thoughts.

“You have a really big house,” Kise blurts out. At the flat look Tetsuya pins him with, he babbles out, “I know you're probably wondering how I even found my way here. The truth is—”

Whatever the truth is will have to wait, because at that moment, the doorbell rings again. It’s a lot calmer than when Kise was drilling a finger into it – only two brisk presses of the button this time – but it effectively makes both of them look up. Kise seems torn between sulking and looking exorbitantly relieved at the interruption.

When Tetsuya goes to open the door again, he can’t honestly say he’s entirely surprised when he finds Midorima standing there (although the mental image of Midorima scaling the gates is rather humorous if somewhat out of character, and Tetsuya will definitely be reviewing the tapes later just for that).

Midorima looks strangely downcast, and he mumbles a short greeting before falling into an awkward silence, fiddling with the tape wrapped around his left fingers. There are no lucky items anywhere in sight. Without a word, Tetsuya waves him inside. The shooting guard only halts briefly in the doorway leading to the living room when he catches sight of Kise but he doesn't say anything as he takes a seat in an armchair. Oddly enough, Kise doesn't do much either other than nod a half-hearted greeting.
Tetsuya bustles away for more tea, and he’s barely passed another mug to Midorima before the doorbell rings again, accompanied by some very Kise-esque knocking.

Tetsuya will bet money that that’s Aomine at the door, and lo and behold, he wins the jackpot.

“Hey, Tetsu,” Aomine mutters, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders hunched. He can’t quite seem to meet Tetsuya’s gaze.

After settling Aomine in the living room with hot chocolate (because Aomine hates tea), Tetsuya surveys all of them with a critical eye before enquiring astutely, “Should I wait for Murasakibara-kun and Akashi-kun to arrive or will someone tell me what this is about?”

Nobody answers. They just give the impression of squirming in place like children in the timeout corner.

Tetsuya sighs and sits down to wait for the rest of the Generation of Miracles.

As it turns out, they don’t have long to wait. About fifteen minutes of stressful silence later, the doorbell rings again, and Tetsuya sends up a prayer in the hopes that Murasakibara didn't pull down the gates on his way over them. He should've had the foresight to leave the gates open.

Both Murasakibara and Akashi are standing on his front stoop when Tetsuya opens the door. Yousen’s center looks positively morose, and he doesn't have any snacks in hand (or he ate them all on the way here), while Rakuzan’s point guard (Tetsuya is only slightly ashamed of himself when the first thing he does is check that Akashi has two red eyes) steps forward with a terrifyingly humble, “I apologize for the late hour, Tetsuya, but I thought it would be best to see you as soon as possible, and Atsushi agreed.”

This sounds distinctly ominous to Tetsuya’s ears but he doesn't comment on it as he lets the last of his old teammates into the house. Once they're settled as well – tea for Akashi, chocolate for Murasakibara – Tetsuya takes a seat in the remaining armchair stationed across from the other five and gives them all an expectant look.

It occurs to him that this entire situation is bizarrely akin to an inquisition. The bizarre thing about it is that Akashi is normally the one sitting in Tetsuya’s place.
Unlike Akashi however, Tetsuya doesn't demand an immediate response to his unspoken question. He just waits them out.

Unsurprisingly, Kise cracks first, although Akashi looked to be about to talk if only because he was never one to waffle around any issue, no matter how difficult.

“Kagami came to talk to us!” Kise divulges in a rush. “Well, I didn't know it was all of us, but obviously he did, and he came to me, and- we had a talk.”

A minute frown creases Tetsuya’s brow. “About what?”

Kise visibly winces before confessing, “He... He told me- us – about... well, it wasn't actually any one thing. He sort of laid it out for us. Told us we were all blind, that even though we don’t have our heads completely up our asses anymore, we were still idiots for not seeing the whole picture, so he... well, like I said, he laid it out for us. Told us... about you. About what we did to you. We already- We already know about your childhood friend, but he told us about some other stuff, like how you had to go through your grandmother’s death alone, and about- about- about the suicides.”

He ends on a whisper, looking sick to his stomach, and he isn’t the only one. Tetsuya stares at him for a moment, and then at the guilt that’s practically manifesting itself into a physical entity between the five of them. And then he leans back and closes his eyes for a few seconds.

He can’t even be angry with Kagami. If anything, he should've expected his partner to snap like this sooner or later (in fact, he’s surprised it didn't happen sooner), especially after hearing about Tetsuya’s grandmother (which actually didn't have anything to do with the Generation of Miracles; it was just really, really bad timing, metaphorically the straw that broke the camel’s back). Tetsuya supposes he should just be glad that Kagami only went to ‘talk’ using actual words instead of his fists.

“Technically, there were no suicides,” Tetsuya says at last, opening his eyes again. At the very least, no suicides that he knows of. It’s scant comfort but, well, whatever helps him sleep at night. “And it’s in the past~”

“But you still should've told us, Tetsu!” Aomine cuts in, hands white-knuckled around his drink. He looks angry, but all of it is turned inward. “That- It wasn't your problem to deal with! It should've been ours! You didn't do anything to those people! It was all on us! We were the ones who destroyed our opponents for fun. Even if we wouldn't have listened to you back then, even if we wouldn't have cared back then~” Aomine’s features spasm with self-loathing. “-you still should've told us after last year’s Winter Cup!”
“I hold some responsibility as well,” Tetsuya intones, straightening in his seat. “I was part of the team. I should've done more to stop you, spoken up more instead of standing by.” His mouth tips down at the reminder. “Standing by and doing nothing is just as bad as doing the act itself. I should've done more but I didn't, and our opponents paid for it.”

He stops and studies them for a moment, wondering how much Kagami told them of what Tetsuya told Seirin about what Haizaki said to him all those months ago. “...What Haizaki-kun said was wrong. I wasn't covering for you, or at least that wasn't my main goal. Part of the reason was because I wanted to help them, but it was also because I felt guilty.”

He sighs, weary in a way that he only ever feels when he talks about all the things that went wrong during junior high. “I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I continued looking the other way, especially when they tried to take their life right in front of me. It wasn't a selfless act. If anything, it was selfish, because I didn't want to live with that guilt for the rest of my life.”

The silence is deafening after he finishes explaining himself, and he waits for... he doesn't really know what he’s waiting for. This is the first time he and his old teammates have actually sat down to really talk things out.

“Do you believe we will judge you for that, Tetsuya?” It is Akashi who speaks now, voice measured (like always), eyes tired (like never). “We have no right to do so, and if you equate selfishness with not wanting to feel guilty for looking the other way, then I would gladly be that selfish for the rest of my life. I- All of us-” He gestures with one arm, encompassing the other Generation of Miracles. “We are not toddlers. We should have known better. And you were not our keeper. It was not your responsibility to keep us in line. True, we were not adults, and those who were adults around us did little to help guide us in the right direction, but what we did was nothing short of malicious. At the very least, human decency should have prevented us from behaving so poorly. But it did not – for the others, they were far too arrogant and caught up in themselves to see the damage they were inflicting, and for myself, well, I was simply cruel.”

He holds up a hand to stave off a feeble objection from Midorima. “It is true, and we all know it; split personality or no, I am not so cowardly as to deny accountability where it is due. However, while our opponents did pay the price for our actions,” He leans forward, gaze focused intently on Tetsuya as if he is willing Tetsuya to believe him. “It is also true that you were equally hurt as well.”

Tetsuya immediately protests. He doesn't get out more than, “That’s not-”

“Kuro-chin, just listen,” Murasakibara looks frustrated and ready to throw a tantrum but he keeps it
“We are not here to excuse your behaviour,” Midorima interjects firmly, one hand reaching up to adjust his glasses. “If you think you hold some of the blame for what happened, then that is your right, and we won’t dispute that, whether or not we agree with it. However, it is also our obligation to admit to our own mistakes, which include hurting both our former opponents and you. Do not deny it, Kuroko,” Midorima adds when Tetsuya takes a breath to do exactly that. The shooting guard’s cool gaze is softened by regret. “We hurt you. Even Kise isn’t too dense to realize this, especially after Kagami came around to see all of us.”

“Hey!” Kise huffs but it lacks the usual childish indignity at being picked on.

“It isn’t fair that Kuro-chin had to go through everything alone,” Murasakibara picks up, about as serious as Tetsuya has ever seen him. His large hands wring together in his lap. “It isn’t fair that Kuro-chin had to clean up our messes because we would never listen to him. You did try, Kuro-chin. Maybe not at first, but near the end, you did try to stop us. It was our fault for not listening. And out of all of us, you’re the only one who’s tried to make up for everything that happened. And you're the one who saved us from ourselves.”

He hesitates, gaze flicking nervously to the side before zeroing in determinedly on Tetsuya again. “I said a lot of mean things to Kuro-chin during our match, and I never even apologized for them, much less for everything else. So—” He pitches forward almost completely out of his seat, eyes earnest and pleading. “I'm sorry, Kuro-chin. I'm really, really sorry.”

It’s the longest, most heartfelt speech Tetsuya has ever heard Murasakibara dish out (actually, he can’t recall any heartfelt speeches from the large center), and it leaves him flabbergasted for at least five seconds, which is more than enough time for Kise to jump in.

“I'm sorry too, Kurokocchi,” Kise says, and it’s different from his typical dramatic wailing apologies. This one is quiet, moderated, and heavy with sincerity. “I’ve respected you from the moment I met you. Well,” He looks momentarily sheepish when Tetsuya raises an eyebrow at him, and he quickly amends, “Almost from the moment I met you, and I never ever want to hurt you. I never meant to but I did anyway, and I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you if I have to.”

“And me,” Aomine hurries out before Tetsuya can get a word in edgewise. “I was- You were my best friend, my Shadow, and I fucked that up all on my own. I have no one to blame but myself. You tried to talk me down, and so did Satsuki, but it took losing—” He face scrunches up into something pained. “-to finally beat some sense into me. And it shouldn't have. I'm not an idiot.
Shut up Midorima,” He tacks on when Midorima scoffs in reflex. “The point is, I’m sorry. You should’ve kicked my ass after everything I did, but you just wouldn’t give up on me, and that’s- I can’t thank you enough for that.”

There’s a faint tint of red highlighting Aomine’s cheeks when he finishes, and he looks about as discomfited as he can possibly get, but he doesn't look away from Tetsuya even though forcing out such an honest apology must have been wholly embarrassing for him.

“I regret my actions as well,” Midorima speaks up next, stiff and formal and awkward, but there’s a steely glint in his eyes that reminds Tetsuya of the shooting guard when he was facing down Rokuzan with Takao at his side and the rest of his team at his back. Fearless and determined and giving no quarter. It’s a good look on him; Takao is magic for making it happen. “It was foolish of me to believe I could excel forever in a team sport without a team.” He pushed up his classes, studying Tetsuya as he picks his words with meticulous care. “I have you to thank for making me see sense. I will not forget that.”

Tetsuya wants to point out that no, it was mostly Takao’s unrelenting optimism and loyalty that swept Midorima out of his loner shell, but the shooting guard can be stubborn to a fault, so Tetsuya just accepts it wordlessly. Besides, he’s fairly certain that Midorima is properly – privately – grateful for his own Shadow.

And then there’s only Akashi left, Akashi who watches Tetsuya with something painfully close to vulnerability.

“An apology does not seem enough coming from me,” The redhead remarks with a self-deprecating twist of his mouth. “But it is all I can offer.” He tilts his head and leans forward in his seat. “An apology, and my thanks.” A brief grimace crosses his face. “I was too full of myself, too focused on using everyone around me to ensure that I always stood at the top; I forgot what was important. So thank you for reminding me, Tetsuya.”

An apprehensive silence falls, and the longer it drags out, the more anxious the Generation of Miracles all become.

Tetsuya examines them all for a few seconds longer before exhaling shortly. Honestly.

He stands up.
“K- Kurokocchi?” Kise looks as if he expects Tetsuya to chuck them all out the front door within the next moment.

“Are you hungry?” Tetsuya enquires bluntly, and as if on cue, Aomine’s stomach growls. The Touou ace reddens and hastily shakes his head, especially when Akashi pins him with a narrow-eyed stare.

However, like a domino effect, Murasakibara’s stomach also comes alive, and Kise follows half a second behind him, gurgling loudly for all to hear.

“I have dinner leftovers,” Tetsuya declares, moving towards the entrance of the sitting room. He pauses just inside the doorway, and then cranes his head around to give each of them a weighty look. “I already forgave you the moment you started changing back to yourselves again.”

He stops for a second to choose his words carefully. “It will take some time to smooth everything out between us, and I don’t think we’ll ever return to the way we used to be. And I think it would be better if we didn’t,” He adds, glancing at his friends. “We’ve all grown up, and now I think it’s time to move on instead of staying stuck in the past.” He allows a shadow of a smile to curve his lips. “I appreciate all of you coming here though. It means a lot to me.”

There’s another moment of wide-eyed breathless silence, and then, as if Tetsuya’s words were all they were waiting for, a blur of gold suddenly streaks forward and crashes headlong into Tetsuya, sending both of them to the ground with a crash.

“KUROKOCCHIIII!!” Kise wails, clinging onto Tetsuya like some humanoid squid.

“OI, GET OFF HIM, MORON!!” Aomine bellows from somewhere above them before he too dives into the human pile on the floor.

Midorima’s lofty, “Stop acting like toddlers-” is all anyone hears before Aomine manages to snag the shooting guard’s left ankle and drag him down as well. Midorima flails and struggles but ultimately topples over with a curse.

“Atsushi, separate them before they injure Tetsuya,” Akashi instructs with a long-suffering sigh. It’s not a command though, and that makes all the difference, because even through the loud wrestling match going on around him, Tetsuya still spots the uncharacteristic sharpening of Murasakibara’s gaze, and he knows that even the Generation of Miracles’ center – so used to
obeying Akashi without a single thought – will never again mindlessly follow their old captain.

And Akashi knows it too, if the resigned smile tinged with approval that the redhead sends back is anything to go by.

Murasakibara agrees with this request though, and Tetsuya just manages to scramble away right before the large teen picks up the other three from the ground and unceremoniously tosses them onto the couch.

“Damn it, Murasakibara!” Aomine hollers in a muffled voice as Kise and Midorima both land on top of him.

Tetsuya quirks a smile at them all, and then glides away down the hall to fetch the food.

“Dish is rearry good,” Aomine says around a mouthful of chicken breast stuffed with shrimp twenty minutes later. He swallows loudly before talking again after receiving an arched eyebrow from Akashi and disgusted looks from everyone else. “Did you make this, Tetsu?”

Tetsuya shook his head, clutching a plate of salad. “Mayu-san did. Hanamiya-san’s older sister,” He tacks on when everyone looks confused, and then immediately wishes he didn't.

The Generation of Miracles all exchange frowns and uncertain looks. Akashi is the only one who side-eyes Tetsuya for a long minute before offering civilly, “Our compliments to the chef then, the next time you see her.”

Unbidden, Tetsuya inwardly relaxes. He doesn't need Akashi’s acceptance in what he does or doesn't do, not anymore, but it’s still nice to have it.

On the other hand, “You're still hanging around that violent bastard?” Aomine grumbles, now eyeing the food in front of him suspiciously like he thinks it may be poisoned.

Tetsuya stares at him until Aomine winces and glances off to the side.

“Hanamiya-san is my friend,” Tetsuya intones firmly. “He’s not that bad anymore. And Mayu-san
is a good person. She likes bossing Hanamiya-san around a lot. And he lets her. She told him to go shopping for her so he did, although he dragged me along too.”

An unbidden, somewhat exasperated smile curves his lips as he recalls yesterday’s outing with Hanamiya. The shopping trip was fun – Tetsuya got to see Hanamiya manipulating a slew of people into lowering the prices for them – even though it wasn’t really anything special, but he hasn’t eaten over at a friend’s house in a long time, not when it’s their family cooking the meal, and Tetsuya was regaled with childhood tales and interrogated about his own friendship with Hanamiya. Hanamiya himself looked murderous but actually refrained from tossing Tetsuya out on his ear, even grudgingly revealing little anecdotes of when he was younger – and apparently cuter because Mayu managed to wave a photo album under Tetsuya’s nose before Hanamiya almost bowled him over in his attempt to hide it – mostly just to stop his sister from-

“Oh holy fuck, no.”

Tetsuya blinks out of his thoughts and turn a bemused look on Aomine, who is slack-jawed and looks downright horrified, chopsticks halfway to his mouth as he stares back at Tetsuya. Aomine can be rather uncouth when it comes to his language but he usually curbs it a little at least around Akashi, so even Akashi looks mildly taken aback by this non-sequitur. Everyone else is glancing between Tetsuya and Aomine with open curiosity.

“Aomine-kun?” Tetsuya cocks his head. “Is something wrong?”

Aomine’s jaw works silently for a long moment like he’s trying to dredge up the right words but can’t for the life of him find them, and then he jabs his chopsticks in Tetsuya’s direction, horror still splashed across his features, and he ends up just blurting out, “I know that look! I’ve seen it on Satsuki for years! You like him! I mean like like! You like Hanamiya!”

Dead silence reigns for all of two seconds before chaos descends on them all. Midorima sprays his tea all over Kise, Kise is too busy screeching about rivals and abusive boyfriends and losing Kurokocchi to notice, Murasakibara actually stops eating and sits frozen in place, Aomine is still gawking at Tetsuya, and Akashi just sits there, eyebrows raised and a calculating look fixed on his face.

Tetsuya frowns at all of them because this is beginning to enter the no longer funny zone. Mayu’s teased her brother about it, and Seirin’s laughed about it, but it’s not really something Aomine would bring up as a joke. The Touou ace can barely stand Hanamiya on a good day so it’s not something he would think was funny even in jest.
“Ryouta, calm down,” Akashi says, and out of habit, it’s still effective enough to slice over Kise’s wailing and shut him up. The redhead graciously passes him a napkin before turning to peer at Tetsuya with contemplative eyes.

“Hanamiya-san is my friend,” Tetsuya reiterates, and then he stops because – for the first time in his entire life – there’s a... defensive note in his voice. As if there should be a ‘just’ in between ‘is’ and ‘my’. As if Tetsuya is-

But that’s impossible. Tetsuya doesn't... like like anybody, as Aomine so juvenileley put it. He’s just not the type to be into that sort of thing. He’s never had a single crush ever, never been interested in any of those porn magazines that Aomine was – and still is – always drooling over, never even blushed whenever Aomine tried to entice him with them and then – when that didn't work – decided to be a good friend and – with steam practically coming out of his ears – brought magazines filled with male models to school instead one day, just in case Tetsuya swung the other way. Unfortunately, those didn’t do anything for him either, and Aomine ended up throwing in the towel.

Tetsuya cares very much for Momoi, he’s defended her more than once whenever someone made a crass comment about her generous figure, and from an objective point of view, he absolutely agrees with everyone that she’s very pretty, but he’s never liked her the same way she likes him. He’s not stupid; he knows that Momoi has had a crush on him for whatever crazy reason for years, and he’s always done his best to never encourage it (not that he’s been all that successful). Back in Teikou, the handful of people who noticed him long enough to judge him for his passive rejection of the basketball club’s manager all said he was insane for turning ‘that’ down.

So if even Momoi – who is apparently every teenage boy’s ideal girlfriend, not to mention intelligent and already a friend of his to boot – doesn't interest him in that way, then no one else should, which is something Tetsuya has always been peripherally grateful for, if only because... well, who would want to date a shadow? Tolerate not knowing where their boyfriend is three-quarters of the time even when they're in the same room? And Tetsuya knows better than anyone that his emotional restraint has always bordered on robotic. It’s instinct for him at this point, and he knows – from passing observations of various couples – that people like open displays of affection. Even shyer individuals expect some demonstrative gestures from their significant other. Tetsuya can’t even manage a simple hug between friends most of the time, much less anything more.

So he’s long accepted the fact that he may date one day, girl or boy he doesn’t care, but that it won’t ever last. Inevitably, his girlfriend – or boyfriend – will get fed up with dealing with his weak presence, and they’ll end up parting ways. And Tetsuya is fine with that, perhaps because he has a low sex drive or because his hormones still haven’t kicked in yet or even because he’s asexual, who knows, but the entire issue has never bothered him overly much. He’s simply never given it more thought than an initial ‘good, I won’t have to worry about breaking someone’s heart if my parents ever insist on an arranged marriage with the daughter of a rival company’.
Tetsuya likes Hanamiya, true. He wouldn't still be spending so much time with the third-year if he doesn't. Hanamiya is prickly and antagonistic on the surface, never seeming to be able to walk away from any confrontation without at least trying to anger the other party, but with some – a lot – of patience, Tetsuya has also coaxed something more from Hanamiya, glimpses of all the layers underneath the only one that Hanamiya shows to the world, and that alone is enough for Tetsuya to call the two of them friends.

But only friends. He’s never once thought about Hanamiya in a more... romantic or even just sexual capacity. Ever. So Aomine is wrong, Tetsuya has no Look, and this entire joke is getting really, really old.

He takes a short, god-give-me-patience fortifying breath.

“Hanamiya-san is my friend,” Tetsuya says a third time, firm and composed once more. His self-control has always been above reproach. “It’s rude to imply something that doesn't exist, Aomine-kun. Some people might not find it funny.”

Aomine flounders. “What-? I didn't mean it as a joke-”

“I'm sure he meant it as a joke,” Akashi cuts in. His head is tilted a little, and he studies Tetsuya with intent eyes before offering a small, serene smile. “After all, you would know best, Tetsuya.”

And the topic closes just like that. The others are slow to recover, especially Kise and Aomine, but Tetsuya’s too busy not thinking about the entire issue to pay them much attention.

Because honestly, the smile on Akashi’s face is just a little too shrewd for comfort.

Chapter End Notes

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