# baby, don't forget my name

*Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/7168064](http://archiveofourown.org/works/7168064).*

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<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2016-06-11 Updated: 2019-06-06 Chapters: 44/70 Words: 151075</td>
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## baby, don't forget my name

*by kolbietheninja*

### Summary

Ever wondered what it might have been like had Haizaki been a member of the Generation of Miracles? Well, so has he, and now he has the chance to find out.

**OR:** that Haizaki redemption fic you didn't know you needed

[Updates sporadically]

### Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)
Chapter Notes

I'm really excited for this and equally very nervous! This fic is going to be a lot longer than I originally planned. I've got the next two chapters written, and I'll hopefully stick to updating every Wednesday until this is complete. Please enjoy!

The title is from "Bittersweet" by Ellie Goulding.

Warnings: vulgar language and occasional violence (courteous of Haizaki), probable butchering of canon, lots of angst, and so much fluff later on you'll probably miss the angst

Pairing: Nijimura/Haizaki/Kise - meaning this is a poly ship, not a love triangle. Haizaki will end up with both Nijimura and Kise, and Nijimura and Kise will end up together, and this is non-negotiable. If that's not your thing, I completely understand and don't really mind if you hit that back button.

Edit: To be clear, the pairing is Nijimura/Kise/teenage!Haizaki. Adult/Time Traveler!Haizaki will NOT partake in ANY sort of romance with teenage!Nijimura or Kise. The only relationships Adult!Haizaki will have with anyone in this fic are entirely platonic! I do NOT support adult/child relationships, fictional or otherwise! Thank you for your understanding.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I. May 22, 2012 - Tuesday

"Shougo, wake up!" The familiar nagging voice of his mother travels from downstairs. "You're going to be late!"

Shougo instinctively grimaces and shouts back irritably, "I'm up already!"

She huffs something back, but he blocks her out and blearily opens his eyes. His room is as messy as ever. He licks his dry lips and sits up, throwing the covers aside.

He shuffles down the hall and to the bathroom on auto-pilot, entirely too tired to think about anything other than taking a piss and brushing his teeth. The former done, he moves over to the counter and grabs his toothbrush. Lathering it with a generous glob, he begins the routine brushing and glances idly at his reflection in the mirror as he does so.

He promptly chokes on his own spit. "What the fuck?" He manages, and the face staring back at him looks as disbelieving and confused as he sounds. Only, that face belongs to a little kid, not a fucking twenty-two year old.

He blinks a few times, thinking maybe he's sleepwalking or something, and then, brush still in his mouth, he pokes and prods none too gently at his face and hair. He even tries a good slap, which leaves a red mark, but it's no good. Shougo's still gawking at a baby-faced teenager.
"What the fuck," he says again, but it in no way encompasses the sheer fuckery of what is going on right now.

Belatedly, he glances down at his body and lifts up his shirt. His rippling muscles are gone, as are the various scars he's accumulated from fights over the years. His skin is entirely free of any ink, and since he knows he got his first tattoo in high school, this must be back when he was in middle school.

In a daze, he returns to his room and actually takes it in this time - the familiar-unfamiliar clothes, the dirty sneakers, the old game consoles. It's like stepping back in time- and then Shougo snorts, because no shit, he's fucking gone back in time.

Running a hand through his hair, he frowns and thinks, more seriously, 'I'm a time traveler.' What is he supposed to do with that?

"I'm leaving for work! Make sure you grab your lunch before you leave! Don't cause any trouble, Shougo!" His mom yells tiredly, thoroughly breaking him from his musings.

"Yeah, all right! You'd better come back safe, you old hag!" He finds himself hollering back, the image of his mother collapsing from overwork forever ingrained in his mind.

It happened during his second year of high school, and it's what made him cut back on his fooling around all the time and decide to find a part time job. He got fired a lot in the beginning for running his mouth and starting fights, but he eventually got the hang of it. He had to curb his violent tendencies and revert his hair back to its original fluffy, gray, but he kept his job. The extra money put less strain on his mom, so it had been worth it. He'll never understand her, but he does love the old lady.

That being said, he doesn't plan to let her collapse even once if this time travel thing is legit.

He hears her laugh. "Love you, too!" Then, the door shuts audibly behind her, and he rolls his eyes. That woman does whatever she wants. Drives him nuts.

Now that his temporary distraction is gone, however, he has to- deal with this. Somehow. Curiously, he peeks inside his closet and is not particularly surprised by the white and blue uniform that greets him.

"Teiko, huh?" He mutters, eyeing the unassuming clothing with no small amount of bitterness.

Shougo had thought he was over this, by now, but maybe there's a reason he's a pipsqueak again. There's probably no other time in his life that had affected him so significantly. High school had been a wake-up call, sure, and in some ways, it had brought him closure. His first year, he'd finally been bested by Ryouta, and he'd been privy to Daiki's right hook. (He'll never admit to being relieved someone had stopped him from doing something stupid.)

There had also been Seirin's comeback win against Rakuzan, which had even inspired something within him. However, over the next two years, he'd given up basketball for work and had only occasionally heard about the games between the Miracles. Basketball and high school - it had all come to a rather anticlimactic end for Haizaki Shougo.

He barks a laugh. "What am I, an old geezer?" Because those thoughts had been tinged with a regret Shougo hadn't even known he'd felt.

Sure, junior high had been interesting. The Miracles had all been little babies, only just growing into their potential, but Shougo had been there from the beginning, too. Basketball had just kind of
happened to him. He fell into it, like he fell into video games, and he stuck with it because he was
good at it. Even so, he didn't love basketball; he wasn't Tetsuya or Daiki. But he did like it, and that,
he thinks, is more than enough. Without fail, Nijimura found him and dragged him back and made it
enough. But...

He'd been there from the start, and he'd been good - but not good enough, apparently. Ryouta came
in like a whirlwind in their second year, and Shougo had been promptly booted out, his spot handed
over to the rising star without hesitation. He'd been bitter and angry and hurt, and maybe after all
these years he can understand Seijuro's explanation. Might even believe it. But at the time he'd been
nursing a grudge, licking his wounds, and when even Nijimura hadn't spared him another glance
after that? He'd become a ticking time bomb, ready to explode at the tiniest upset.

He feels tears gathering in his eyes, and he wipes them away disgustedly. "Fuck," he grunts, because
Shougo sucks at lying, especially to himself. He knows exactly why this stupidly impossible thing
has landed him in the worst and best time of his life, and with a sinking feeling, he's becoming more
and more sure of what he's supposed to do.

"You want me to fix this clusterfuck?" He grumbles to no one in particular. He's watched enough
time travel movies to know that, usually, this kind of thing comes down to 'fixing' something -
preventing a death, getting the girl, doing that thing you always regretted not doing.

And for Shougo, that had been being faded out of everything he'd ever felt was of any import -
basketball, friendships with the Miracles and Nijimura, his entire academic life. For all his blustering,
he'd wanted to be included, too, and damn if he isn't blushing at the thought.

He gives the uniform one last glance, and then he resolutely shuts the door. There's no way in hell
he's going back right now.

Since his brother always had the tendency to head to school at ungodly hours of the morning, he
knows the house is empty. A good thing, too, because Shion wouldn't hesitate to rat him out for
skipping, and he doesn't want to deal with a lecture from his mom.

He takes a shower, using up all the hot water and staying in long enough that his hands become
pruney, but when he emerges, he feels a little more like himself. He wears his cockiness like a mask,
yeah, but after all this time, it's more like putting on a comfy blanket rather than a brittle sheet. He
smirks, and it feels like it belongs on his face.

He spares a moment to towel off his hair, and then he throws on a relatively clean t-shirt and some
shorts. Making sure to grab his wallet, phone, and keys, he toes on his shoes and then heads out,
locking the door behind him.

He walks around aimlessly for a while, idly taking stock of the buildings and shops that he vaguely
recalls have either closed down or been replaced. Although some of the old advertisements are
jarring, the people haven't changed a bit, still rushing around busily, like little worker bees. He would
have been one of them had he not inexplicably woken up ten years in the past. As it is, he doesn't
have a destination in mind and only occasionally has to duck around the businesses he knows would
report him for ditching.

Around lunchtime, he grabs a bite to eat at a Maji Burger, and it's only then that he thinks to check
his phone. He has five messages and one missed call, all of them from the same glowing name:
Nijimura.

Shougo feels a foreign thrill run through him before he ruthlessly squashes it and reminds himself that
here, in this time, this is normal. Nijimura had likely noticed his absence from morning practice,
which would explain the two threatening messages from a few hours ago. The next one demands why he hasn't shown up at school at all, and Shougo figures Nijimura must have come looking for him in his classroom. The last two are more threats, promising punishment if Shougo doesn't show up to afternoon practice.

He smiles a little, unbidden, and just to be a little shit, he sends back that he doesn't feel like going. Then, he tucks his phone back in his pocket and proceeds to slurp the last of his chocolate shake. He burps loudly, and an old lady gives him a disapproving sniff. He flips her off, and then he's back on the streets.

Somehow, rather than any of his old haunts, his wandering feet take him to an empty basketball court. A lone ball sits in the corner, and really, is he even surprised by his luck at this point? He accepts whatever force led him here, gives in and goes with it because- suddenly he really wants to play basketball.

He grabs the ball and dribbles it, slowly and almost hesitantly at first, but soon, he's moving all over the court, dodging around phantom opponents and making game-winning shots like he was born to play. Maybe he was. He musters up an old memory of a move he'd stolen once upon a time, and it comes back easily. His body molds itself into the image in his mind, and he makes the impossible throw. It swishes as it sails through the net, and Shougo whoops, delighted.

He spends the next few hours attempting to steal moves from the players in his memories, pushing his body to its limit and beyond and not caring in the slightest. He feels lighter than air, unburdened, and he can't remember when last he felt anything similar. For the first time in forever, Shougo laughs unabashedly and freely, allows himself to do so, and he can finally understand why Tetsu always waxed poetic about this sport.

Eventually, however, the high fades, and the fatigue sets in, the punishing reckless playing of his finally taking its toll. He sinks to the ground, panting hard, and he listlessly rolls over onto his back. His whole body aches, and he's sweating buckets. But. As he stares up at the clear blue sky, he realizes the peace he'd found while playing hasn't gone away, and he suspects it won't. This, too, was something he'd been denying, so much that he'd fallen for it himself.

He loves basketball. He, Haizaki Shougo, fucking loves basketball. That's why he felt like a piece of him was missing after he quit, why his hands always itched to do- something. It's why he was so upset about being replaced, and it's why he tried so desperately to prove he shouldn't have been.

"Damn it," he says under his breath, tears streaming down his face without his permission. "Damn it!" He mutters again, with more force. He really is an idiot. He almost wants Daiki to show up and punch him again, stop him from doing something stupid.

"So you skipped practice to play basketball by yourself?" A bemused voice jerks him out of his reverie.

He sits up, turns away, and scrubs at his face hurriedly. With more irritation than he feels, he retorts, "The hell's it to you?"

There's a beat of silence, and then-

A burst of pain in his head. He clutches it instinctively and hastily moves onto his feet and out of the strike zone. "Oww! Fuck!" He glares at the perpetrator. "Why?!"

Nijimura regards him irritably. "I told you to come to practice, didn't I?" Shougo looks away with a huff, and Nijimura crosses his arms. "So? What's the excuse this time? Got a cold for the third time
this month? Or maybe you got lost on the road of life?"

Shougo snorts. Still rubbing the sore spot, he says scornfully, "I traveled back in time and didn't want to see you dipshits again."

Nijimura punches him. "Fuck- stop! What's your problem?!"

Even as he's getting bruises, Shougo secretly preens under the attention. He really is fucked up, isn't he? Lapping up the attention of this abusive dickwad like a love-struck school girl.

"You're not even wearing your uniform," Nijimura observes. "You didn't plan on going to school at all today, did you?"

Shougo just barely manages to glean the worry behind the bastard's permanent scowl, likely there because he'd rarely ever skipped full days. This, more than anything, is why he'd gotten so attached. Shougo shifts in place awkwardly. "S'not like anything happened. Just didn't feel like going." He turns around and waves a hand lazily. "See ya."

Before he can make his escape, Nijimura's hand shoots out and grabs his collar in an iron-clad grip. "Oh no. You're going with me even if I have to drag you there."

And that's what he ends up doing, much to Shougo's consternation. He tries to bargain and get Nijimura to let him walk instead, but the other boy says he knows Shougo would just try to slip off the moment he let his guard down. He has to concede the point, and so his old senpai literally drags him all the way to Teiko.

It's not his best moment.

It's only about ten minutes later that he realizes they're headed in the wrong direction. The buildings around him are familiar, so he hadn't thought much about it. But they're not buildings he passes on the way to Teiko. He glances up at Nijimura in confusion. "What are you doing? I thought you were taking me to practice."

Nijimura scoffs. "You'd pass out if you tried to keep up with the first string practice now, idiot."

Okay, while that's a good point - not that he'd admit it - it doesn't answer his question. "So you're taking me home?" Because the only destination awaiting them down this particular path is a string of modest housing, including Shougo's.

"Like I'd leave an exhausted baby first year out on the streets for any unsavory person to find," Nijimura says, and Shougo can hear him rolling his eyes. "As your captain, I've got to look after all of you, even stupid kids who are always looking for trouble."

Shougo scowls, "I can take care of myself!" But inside he is secretly pleased.

Nijimura doesn't bother answering.

Once they arrive, Nijimura unceremoniously dumps him on his own doorstep. Shougo glares at him out of a habit that he'd thought he'd grown out of a long time ago. "You'd better be at practice and school tomorrow," Nijimura commands with all the authority of his position.

Shougo breaks eye contact with a frown, still not entirely sure he's ready to face those fucking Miracles, but he eventually huffs, "Yeah, yeah, I'll be there."

Nijimura looks at him for a long moment, enough that Shougo begins to fidget under the attention.
"See you later, then," he says, and then he darts his hand toward Shougo's head without warning. Shougo instinctively closes his eyes and braces for the impact, but it doesn't come. Nijimura ruffles his hair, smirks at his bewildered expression, and then walks away.

"Bastard!" Shougo recovers enough to yell after him, but there's no heat in it. His chest feels light, and he's got a stupid grin on his face. He fumbles with his key, unlocks the door, and then kicks off his shoes and heads straight for the shower. The light feeling stays with him until his mother comes home and - after realizing he'd skipped - lectures him.

Chapter End Notes

Haizaki is my son, and I will protect him. He needs to be showered with love and affection, and if no one else will do it, then it's gotta be me. Seriously, though, let me know what you think!
II. May 23, 2012 - Wednesday

The next day begins pretty much the same way. Maybe he would have remembered, he grumbles to himself later, were it something other than ass-o-clock in the morning. As it is, he wastes about ten minutes reconfirming the sheer stupidity of the situation and realizing that, no, he didn't have a weirdly vivid dream last night, and yes, he is well and truly stuck in the fucking past of all places. (of all times?)

He groans as he struggles to put on his basketball shorts, his muscles protesting, and it's just more undeniable proof that yesterday really happened. Next are his earrings, which are the simple gold ones he'd gotten as a present from his older brother and had lost sometime in the intervening years of school and work. He throws on an old tank top and stuffs his uniform into his bag. After practice, he'll take a shower and change into it in the team locker.

Speaking of the team... He grabs his phone off of his dresser and checks his messages. There are a few from his non-basketball 'friends' which he deletes. He dropped out of contact with them years ago in an attempt to cut all ties with his delinquency, and he's not about to call them up now. He flicks through some spam, and all that's left is a glowing warning from Nijimura: don't be late.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he scoffs to himself. He pockets the device, shoulders his bag, and hops down the stairs two at a time.

"Oh, you're up early," his mom says with some surprise. She's leaning on the counter with a cup of coffee in her hand and looks to be in the midst of making breakfast.

He darts toward her and pecks her cheek. Then, he snags a piece of toast and walks toward the door. "Can't be late. See you later," he explains, bread in his mouth.

"Okay, honey! I love you! Try to stay in school all day!" she calls after him knowingly. She's aware of Nijimura's tendency to beat him up and drag him to school, and the devil woman actually approves of it.

He snorts, puts on his shoes, and leaves, closing the door behind him. He then scarfs down the rest of his toast once he realizes he's acting like a shitty anime protagonist and begins to jog at a steady pace.

On the way there, he puts all thought of basketball and the Miracles out of his head and tries to recall his classes. Had he known he'd somehow travel back in time, he might have kept the schedule he'd been handed on his first day instead of trashing it. He abruptly yawns, enough that his eyes tear up,
and decides to just guess. Worse thing that could happen is some uppity teacher points him to the right room.

He slows down to a walk once the school comes into view, and he feels an unwelcome nostalgia for the damn place. Shaking it off, he heads for the biggest of the three gyms allotted to the basketball team and- hesitates in front of the door, hand reaching out toward the handle as he freezes in place like a moron.

The thing is-

He'd seen Nijimura yesterday, but their relationship had always been easy. They'd bickered from day one and despite it had acknowledged the others' talent. He'd run, and Nijimura would find him. He'd mouth off, and Nijimura would hit him. Simple. (A small part of him scoffs at this, insisting that whatever had been between them had never been simple, at least not from his perspective, but he resolutely ignores it.)

The thing is Seijuro and the others are - irritatingly enough - living, breathing reminders of his inadequacy, and that burns like humiliation and fury in his gut. He's damn good at basketball, but he's only okay at everything else. The thing is- Shougo kind of liked being good at something. Being special. Shit, Nijimura had actually hunted him down and dragged him back because he was so good.

Teiko was - is - all about being the best, about working together to beat the opposition all whilst one-upping each other. He knows that. Hell, Fukuda Sogo had been even worse, no thanks to him. And yet- there had been a sense of friendship between the regulars. Against all odds, they'd been disgustingly close. Shougo had never allowed himself to be apart of it, had never realized he'd wanted to join them until the choice had been snatched away from him, until he'd been kicked out, and something suspiciously like hurt had seeped into his chest.

He breathes out a frustrated breath and - with more than a few muttered curses - swings the doors open.

A basketball hits him in the face. "What the fuck-?!"

"You're late," Nijimura informs him, nonplussed as the ball bounces back into his hands.

Shougo flips him off. A few minutes and a new bruise later, he grudgingly begins stretching under the captain's watchful eye. "I hate you," he grumbles.

Nijimura instantly retorts, "Sure you do."

He rolls his eyes and glances around the gym, and he spots the damn shining star almost immediately in the middle of what looks like a practice game. He snorts despite himself because Daiki is bouncing around the place like an overgrown puppy, no trace of the bitter, angry individual he'll eventually turn into, and it's fuckin' weird. Shougo drags his eyes away from the bizarre spectacle, but against his will, they're drawn towards more Miracles. Near the opposite goal, Shintaro is getting in Atsushi's face, real heated up about something, probably rehashing the same old argument about the giant stealing his shot. Their shouting has put a halt to the practice game.

With a sigh, Nijimura stalks over to them, expression utterly aggrieved. Before either of them spot him, he fucking dead-legs Shintaro, and the shooting guard goes down like a house of cards. A laugh tears out of him at the pure shock on both of their faces, and he hastily continues stretching when Nijimura shoots him an aggravated look.
He can't quite wipe the smile off his face, though.

III. May 23, 2012 - Wednesday

Shougo chews absentmindedly on the end of his pencil, body stuck in the classroom but head firmly somewhere else. It's middle school. Not like the work's hard. Anyway, practice had gone... okay. He'd kind of forgotten after all these years, but Teiko's first string had done its own thing well before kids with ridiculous talents and matching egos walked into the place and took over. That's what he'd liked about it, initially. He hadn't been expected to play nice with the other kiddies. And well, even if he'd secretly wanted to, he had a good reason to throw in the face of anybody who might have brought it up.

That's why no one - save for Nijimura - bothered him this morning. There was no dramatic reunion or awkward attempts to play the fool. No worry of giving the game away. The Miracles just went through their own routines and Shougo, his. It was anticlimactic in the worst way, and- Shougo bites his lip, hard, to distract himself from whatever it was he'd been trying to think.

He slumps down in his seat, expertly ignoring the baldy at the front giving him the stink eye, and drums his fingers on the desk. It was stupid of him to expect anything. The only time Daiki or Ryouta or hell, Tetsuya had really given him any of their attention had been when he'd made himself their enemy, back in high school. But time has a way of altering memories, making you think shitty times were good - hadn't he heard that somewhere before?

For the umpteenth time since he ended up here, Shougo wonders why it - this - happened to him of all people. He's violent and rude and selfish, and yeah, maybe he's got some unresolved issues the size of Mt. Fuji. But so does everybody else. Shougo learned early on that everybody's got problems, and his aren't all that special. This time travel thing is fucking up his world view, and it unsettles him more than he'd like to admit.

He sighs in frustration, decides fuck it, and stands up. "Gotta use the bathroom," he announces to no one in particular and takes off down the hall before anyone can call him back. It only takes about ten minutes to walk up the three flights of stairs and out onto the roof, and he spares a moment to wonder why the janitor never bothers to lock the door before dismissing the errant thought and flopping down on his back in the middle of the floor. He stares at the clouds for a while, thoughts circling uselessly and eventually drifts off.

Pain. "The fuck!" He abruptly sits up, shocked into full wakefulness, and rubs his side. He glares daggers at Nijimura because of course it's him. "Did you just fuckin' kick me, asshole?"

"It's time for practice," the asswipe informs him, apparently ignoring his accusation. Suddenly, his eyes narrow into dangerous slits, and Shougo feels a trickle of fear - for like a second, okay? A second. Nijimura says, and it's not really a question, "You skipped class again, didn't you."

"The hell's it to you?" falls out of Shougo's mouth without his consent, and he braves the furrowed brows it gets him with a defiant scowl.

He's not used to people giving a shit - about him, what he's doing, any of that. There was Nijimura then - now - but he left Shougo, walked away without so much as a goodbye or an explanation. And that hurt. He found out about Nijimura's dad from fucking Seijuro, had to swallow his pride and ask, and even if it had been a good reason, they could have stayed in touch. He would have done it for Nijimura, would have called and texted and kept him up to date on the Miracles' bullshit, could have talked to him about his mom when she fainted in the middle of a conversation and scared the shit out of him. Maybe they could have helped each other.
But Nijimura disappeared, Shougo got kicked out, and life went on.

Agitated, he runs his hand through his hair, and avoiding Nijimura's searching look, he mutters, "Whatever. Let's go already."

When his captain only continues to stare at him probingly despite the fact that it's making them late to practice, Shougo begins to fidget, unwillingly hot and bothered under that intense gaze, the probably still twelve year old in him fucking preening under the attention, and angry all over again, he snaps, "Lose something over here?"

It pulls Nijimura out of whatever daze he'd fallen into, and he flicks Shougo on the forehead and then shoves him toward the door before he can retaliate. "Stop talking back to your betters, idjit," he says.

Shougo scoffs even as he obediently trots alongside his captain, glad that weird, tense moment is over. "Ain't nothing about you better than me, Shittymura."

"Little brat." Nijimura shoves him again, and he makes this noise - a puff of breath but not quite. Had he just laughed?

His chest stretches strangely, knots in pleasure at the thought, and Shougo kind of hates himself for it.

IV. May 27, 2012 - Sunday

Sunday finds Shougo back at that same street court, still empty save for him, and he's grateful for the reprieve - from Nijimura, from the Miracles, from always feeling like he'll never be enough. Basketball has suddenly and unexpectedly become his safety blanket, the one thing he's sure of, and even practice isn't so bad when he's not thinking about anything.

He strafes left, curling the ball to his stomach as he slides around the imaginary opponent and smoothly breaks free, and then there's nothing but net.

Not thinking about stuff isn't going to fix anything, though. That much he learned first hand. He needs a plan. 'Fixing his mistakes' is all well and good, but it's a pretty meaningless statement. How's he going to manage not to fuck everything up again is the real question, and Shougo's not sure he's got an answer for it. Be better than Ryouta? Already tried. Didn't work. Cement himself as important to the team? They're all trying to do that anyway. It's Teiko; nobody's spot is guaranteed.

He misses the next shot, and irritated, he scoops the ball up and dribbles back to half court. He's beating around the bush, and he tells himself to stop being a coward and admit it already.

He wants to be a part of the Generation of Miracles, wants not just the fame or awe but the friendship of those morons. It's embarrassing as all hell, and his face burns just contemplating it, but for just a moment, he imagines it. Imagines himself amidst the joking and teasing and roughhousing, imagines himself standing tall with them on the court as friends, imagines hanging out after school as if it's the most natural thing in the world. He wants it, wants it like he's never wanted anything before, and it rankles just as much as it entices him.

"Fuck," he groans pitifully - because he's got a plan now, but it's still not going to be easy. Befriend the Miracles. He's going to have to suck up his pride and ask to be friends with them. "Fuck," he says again.

He puts the ball to his forehead and wallows in his own pity like the twelve year old he's supposed to be. Something's building in his chest, though, and it bubbles into laughter. Genuine, mirthful laughter. He has a plan. He can fix things. It's a heady thought, and caution forgotten, he begins
playing again, full-throttle like his first day here, pulling out all the stops. He jukes an opponent and spins around another, fakes a shot, and then sprints to the net and jumps, dunking a buzzer beater.

He laughs again, childlike and happy. Then, he hears enthusiastic clapping from behind him. Startled, he twists around, and what he sees wipes the smile right off his face. Ryouta.

"That was amazing!" He gushes, grinning as he makes his way over to a frozen Shougo. "The way you moved- and that little spin thing you did- and that jump! It was so cool!"

Shougo's eyes widen at the sincere praise, and he resists the oncoming embarrassment by getting angry instead. "Thanks," he says brusquely, tucking the ball into the crook of his arm and shoving past the other first year. He's not ready to deal with any of this right now, whatever his convictions a few minutes ago.

"Seriously, it was awesome," Ryouta insists, apparently ignoring Shougo's brush off as he walks with him. "You looked so cool. It kind of made me want to play basketball, too," he admits.

"Ry-Kise," Shougo growls, half-heartedly, "why are you following me?"

Ryouta looks at him in surprise, and Shougo wonders what he did wrong. "Eh? How do you know my name?" he asks, curiously.

Oh, shit. Grasping for some kind of excuse, he finally settles on, "I've seen you with your fan girls" and hopes he actually had them before joining the first string.

"Oh," Ryouta says, awkwardly. He chuckles, abashed. "Yeah, they're... not exactly subtle, are they?"

Relieved, Shougo snorts but otherwise doesn't say anything. Maybe Ryouta will get bored and leave him alone. It's wishful thinking, but this whole time travel thing reeks of wish fulfillment. Maybe it'll work.

"So what's your name? You go to Teiko, too, right? Since you know me?" Ryouta asks cheerfully, easily keeping up with Shougo's fast pace.

He glances at the other, who actually looks bright eyed and interested, and warily, he divulges, "Haizaki Shougo, first year." It's not like it's a secret, and Ryouta would eventually find out anyway.

"Me, too." Ryouta goes on, completely missing his tone yet again, "So are you on the basketball team, Haizaki?"

"Why are you following me?" he sneers, weirded out by this friendly approach - by someone he used to hate, no less - and defaulting to rudeness to cover it.

Ryouta blinks once, twice. His smiles grows a little wider, a little more amused. "You're interesting?" he offers, wryly.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?!" he splutters, and for some godforsaken reason, the fucker chuckles at him. Clamping down hard on the urge to punch him, Shougo grits his teeth. "What do you want." They've both stopped walking.

"To play basketball with you," Ryouta says after a long moment, eyes gone serious and intent.

It's the same eyes he has on the court when he's about to pull off something insane, something that makes you rearrange everything you ever thought you knew, and Shougo feels his blood singing,
longing to play with this kid again. He stomps it out with a vengeance.

Shougo looks away first, frowning, and after battling with himself and mentally running through every expletive in his repertoire, he scoffs and stalks ahead. Without turning around, he says, "Then try out for the club, dumbass."

He forces himself to face forward, and he breaks into a run when he rounds the corner of a building, safely out of sight. He stops a few blocks away, near a busier side of town, nowhere near his own home, and only then does he allow himself to chance a look over his shoulder. No flash of bright blond hair catches his eye, and surely it would be visible in this droll crowd of brown and black. Ryouta hasn't followed him.

He breathes a sigh of relief and then suddenly drops to a crouch, tucking his face into his knees and wrapping his arms around his head, heedless of the various bystanders. Stupid, stupid. What the hell had he been thinking?

Making 'friends' with the Miracles? He couldn't even keep his cool around one of them. And shit, he had been trying to seem cool, hadn't he? Damn, that's lame. And 'try out for the club'? What was he promising, exactly? That he'd play Ryouta only if the other boy joined the team?

A sudden dread seizes his heart brought on by something he hadn't even considered, not so soon - but what if? What if he causes Ryouta to join now and that speeds up the events that led to Shougo being booted out the first time?

Before the panic can properly take hold, he takes a deep breath and then exhales it slowly. It's something his mother had instructed him to do whenever he felt overwhelmed. And Shougo had felt off-balance almost constantly after she'd collapsed. In a way, work had given him that stability back, made him feel less helpless, like he was in control - when fighting on the streets had done nothing but exacerbate the problem.

He eventually calms down - after two mortifying instances of shooing away concerned onlookers - and picks up the forgotten basketball as he returns a little shakily to his feet. He vacates the scene of his freak out pretty quickly, strongly regretting his decision to get out of bed this morning and at the same time attempting to erase the entire incident from his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Haizaki doesn't make things easy for himself, does he? Ryouta is surprisingly fun to write. I'm looking forward to tackling the other Miracles.
delinquents are no match for fangirls

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks! I realize this is kind of a niche story what with Haizaki as the main character, NijiHaiKise as the pairing, and this time travel business, so I'm glad people are actually enjoying it!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

EDIT: Forgot to say, but this is up to chapter six on FFnet! I didn't want to post all the chapters at once initially, but now that I've got people interested, should I just post the next three now? Let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

V. May 28, 2012 - Monday

Shougo may have successfully scorched yesterday's fiasco from his mind, but he realizes belatedly - as he gapes unattractively at the newcomer trotting toward him with a goofy grin on his face - that that doesn't necessarily mean Ryouta has forgotten. Apparently.

"Haizakicchi~!" Ryouta greets him smugly, and Shougo feels his skin crawl.

"Don't call me that," he hisses, glaring daggers at the other.

Ryouta laughs, not the least bit intimidated. "But it suits you," he says knowledgeably, and Shougo tries to remind himself getting into a fight in school would ruin everything. It's unsurprisingly difficult to listen to that voice of reason.

"What are you doing here?" he grumbles, eyeing the other boy balefully as he seats himself next to Shougo as if they do this every day. He deliberately scoots away to put more space between them.

Ryouta raises an amused eyebrow. "Shouldn't that be obvious?" Shougo narrows his eyes, patience perilously close to snapping.

Maybe sensing this, Ryouta finally explains, "Well, I took your advice and tried to sign up for the basketball club this morning, but..." Here, he scowls, petulant, before going on, "They're not accepting new members until the season's over. So!" He shoots Shougo a persuasive grin, leaning forward a bit. "So you have to take responsibility!"

Shougo chokes on the juice he'd been drinking. Wiping his mouth, he growls, "Don't say it like that, dumbass! And I don't owe you anything. S'not my fault you can't join." Inwardly, he's torn between relief (because his spot is safe, at least for now) and dismay (because he'd been secretly looking forward to playing him.)

Voice little more than a whine, Ryouta pouts, "You promised you'd play me, Haizakiiichi!"

He's on the verge of telling the other boy to go fuck himself when an idea suddenly forms in his mind. "There's a guy on the team who's better than me who'd probably love to play you," he divulges casually, stuffing the remains of his store bought bread into his mouth.
He can practically see the dog ears perking up on the idiot's head. "Really?"

"Yeah. Aomine Daiki. He's a first year, too. If you ask around, you'll find him. Hard to miss him. He's always trailing after this hot pink haired chick, Momoi Satsuki," Shougo says a little too quickly.

Ryouta smiles, clearly excited, as he begins eating his own lunch. Shougo side-eyes him for a moment, in disbelief that it could be that easy, but he eventually shrugs and doesn't question his good fortune.

VI. May 28, 2012 - Monday

"What are you doing," Shougo demands without heat. Practice had been particularly harsh today, and he can't muster up the energy to get angry just yet. He suspects that will not hold true for the rest of this encounter.

Ryouta stands up from where he'd been leaning against the wall outside the gym, sending him another one of those easy smiles. "Waiting for you, Haizakiichi," is his nonsensical answer.

Shougo trudges past him, in no mood to deal with this again. Ryouta falls into step with him for some reason, and they walk out of the school in surprisingly companionable silence. The fuck.

He glances at Ryouta out of the corner of his eye, internally debating. With a sigh, he asks, "I thought you were gonna bug Aomine?" It takes effort not to use his given name, even though he's hardly spoken one word to the guy since he got here. It's just a habit, a bad one, but he's not about to treat the bastards formally after all he's been through because of them. It's too personal for that.

Ryouta hums noncommittally, and before Shougo can do something he might regret (like see if his right hook is still any good), the other boy speaks up, "You're different during practice."

Blinking at the non-sequitur, Shougo mulls over it and what the statement entails. "You snuck into watch me practice?" he asks, dubiously.

"I wanted to see Aomine-kun, too," he admits, and Shougo can accept that answer. Anything else would be too weird. "And you're different with them. When I saw you the other day, you were amazing! You looked so happy that it made me happy. I wanted to do anything I could to feel that way about something."

Shougo can't quite help the flush that works its way across his cheeks at those words, nor the feeling of surprise that widens his eyes as he takes them in. He'd never really considered the fact that the Miracles had had problems, too, or rather, he hadn't wanted to. It'd been easy to see that their talent had driven a wedge between them and the rest of society by the time they'd fully grown into their skills and that though some of them had taken it better than others, they'd all been tainted by it in some way or another. It had taken Tetsuya toppling all of them from their thrones for them to come back down to Earth, so to speak. Their problems didn't crop up out of the blue, though, and Shougo supposes he's seeing the beginnings of that conflict right now.

Still, it's none of his business. Maybe if it had been one of them stuck in their twelve year old bodies and fumbling around in the past, they'd be desperately trying to salvage whatever shitty relationships they'd had in middle school, but he's not them. Haizaki Shougo has always been a selfish bastard, and he's never been particularly bothered by that fact. Surely the Powers that Be that dropped his ass here were aware of that, at the very least.

What is bothering him is that this dumbass saw him when his guard was down, making him the
second person in only a few days. Which, okay, fuck, that shit's embarrassing enough as it is. The fucker doesn't have to bring it up, though. He glares ahead resolutely, heedless of his burning face.

"You're upset," Ryouta observes, thoughtful.

"No shit," Shougo huffs, not about to deny it when it's so obvious.

There's a tense moment in which Shougo mentally prepares himself for an argument. He's not fucking 'happy' or whatever bullshit Ryouta called him during practice for a reason, and hell if he's letting this idiot beside him in on it, especially when most of it's his - or will be his - fault. He knew this weird peace between them would break eventually, and he's not sad to see it go.

And then, circumventing his expectations completely, Ryouta changes the subject. "Aw, crap. They found me," he says mournfully.

"What?" Shougo glances behind them at Ryouta's not so subtle gesturing, and he spots the problem immediately. "Shit," he curses, eyeing the swiftly approaching horde of girls with no small amount of fear. He turns on his heel, but before he can take a step, a hand closes around his wrist and yanks him back.

"Haizakiichi," Ryouta says through a painted on smile, grasping tighter as Shougo attempts to pull free. "You wouldn't leave me behind, would you?"

Shougo can practically feel the moment the girls spot Ryouta's hand on him, and he sweats under the combined force of their jealous glares. He curses again, grabs Ryouta's arm, and runs for it. The other boy easily keeps pace with him, and they stay well ahead of the fucking stampede behind them, even with the awkward grip they've got on one another.

Shougo shakes him off and growls, "They're after you! It doesn't have anything to do with me!"

"True," Ryouta admits after a long moment, and Shougo seriously considers tripping the fucker and saving himself. "But I really don't want to know what they'd do to either of us now that we're running away from them."

And damn it, but that's a scary image. He's sure he could take them out, even if he's a little rusty and they outnumber him, but women are fucking terrifying. They'd probably get him back in other ways, like getting him kicked off the team or suspended from school. It's the same kind of petty shit he'd be tempted to do, and they're likely ruthless and capable enough to go through with it. He doesn't want any part of that.

He glances around a little desperately, and his eyes zero in on a familiar alleyway. He hadn't even realized they'd gone this far out of the way, but fuck if he's not gonna take advantage of it.

"This way, hurry!" He tugs on Ryouta's jacket, and the boy complies, just as concerned about being overwhelmed as he is.

They run down to the end of it, which is closed off by a fence - just what he was hoping for. Shougo wastes no time scaling it, and he's halfway to the top when Ryouta finally gets his ass in gear and starts after him. Once he's over, he shimmies a little further down and then jumps the rest of the way. Ryouta soon joins him on the ground, and they slip off to the side and out of sight as the girls peer into the apparently empty alley. Shougo breathes a sigh of relief when they eventually leave, slumping back against the dirty brick wall and panting.

"I can't believe I just hopped a fence," Ryouta exclaims a little breathlessly. "Or that we just got out
of that alive." He leans on the building opposite Shougo, grinning wickedly.

Shougo snorts. "S'what you get for hanging out with a delinquent," he says, not without some bitterness. He ignores the weird expression on Ryouta's face and starts walking. "Let's go. We can get back to the street through a gap in the buildings over here."

Once they're home free, no pissed off fan in sight, Shougo points to the right, "That way'll take you back to the school. I'm sure you can find your way home from there."

His good deed for the day - for his life, probably - done, he heads for the opposite direction. There should be an old arcade connected to a shit hole of a restaurant two blocks over, and they both probably should have been torn down years ago. It's run by a pretty cool old dude, though, and Shougo could do with some company that doesn't strain his already weak ass self control.

"Wait!" Ryouta calls after him, and he stops without turning around, suppressing a groan as the blond catches up with him. "You dropped this."

A familiar blue object is dangled in front of his face, and irritated, he snatches it back. "Thanks," he grunts insincerely, tucking his phone in his back pocket. He glances over at a beaming Ryouta.

"You're welcome!" He pats Shougo on the shoulder like he's a fucking dog and offers him an amused grin. "I'll see you later, Haizakiichi!" He then ambles away, way too smug for Shougo's liking.

"Don't fucking call me that!" He shouts belatedly.

"Sure, sure," the fucker waves unconcernedly over his shoulder.

Shougo growls to no one in particular and stalks off. Screw making friends with these assholes. He's gonna fucking murder 'em.

VII. May 29, 2012 - Tuesday

He wakes to his phone's blaring ringtone, and he blearily feels around for it on the dresser pushed up next to his bed. Once he finds it, he flips it open and croaks out an irritated, "What?!"

"Mou, it's not good to be so angry so early in the morning," a cheerful voice answers, way too chipper for whatever godforsaken time of the morning this is. "You shouldn't eat before bed if it's going to affect you like this, Haizakiichi~!"

Sitting up amidst the tangled comforter and sheets, Shougo pinches the bridge of his nose and struggles to understand what he did to deserve this. "How did you get my number," he manages to get out.

"Hmm?" That airy voice hums. He's gonna fucking punch him the next time he sees Ryouta's stupid, perfect face. Or knee him in the groin. Maybe even kick him while he's down. Heedless of his increasingly violent thoughts, Ryouta explains nonchalantly, "I might have added my number to your phone and sent a message to my phone yesterday. And then I might have saved your contact information under the name 'Haizakiichi' with a frowning emoji."

"You didn't say anything about saving my number when I had that strange moment with you yesterday!" His anger has cooled, but he's still furious. "I feel like there was something... I don't know... about you yesterday. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No. Nothing. I was just being friendly, Haizakiichi~!"

Shougo grinds his teeth as a specific memory resurfaces. "And did you maybe lift my phone from my pocket and then pretend I dropped it?" Because there was a strange moment yesterday where Ryouta surprised him with a hug, and he could have sworn he'd felt something touch his ass. Something like a hand reaching for his phone. In all the commotion afterwards, he'd forgotten about it, but he's sure that's what happened.
Ryouta sniffs. "I can't believe you'd think so lowly of me, Haizakiichi."

"Stop with the damn nickname," he grumbles through a yawn and ignores the laugh that gets him. He cranes his head around to peer at his alarm clock and curses at the glowing numbers he finds there. "Fuck me."

"At least invite me over for dinner first," Ryouta teases.

"Fuck off," Shougo yells, red to the tips of his ears. He hangs up abruptly and only just manages not to toss his phone at the wall in his embarrassment-induced rage.

He's not some fucking innocent flower, and he can make stupid dick jokes with the best of them. But innuendos somehow always fluster him, and fuck foreplay, honestly. He doesn't need dirty talk to get the job done, and why is he thinking about this right now, fucking hell. Damn Miracles are a pain in the ass even before they become Miracles.

There's a trill alerting him about a message, and warily, he glances at it. And immediately grimaces because Ryouta saved his name with a winking emoji and some hearts. Ugh. He thumbs open the message anyway, and somehow the contents are even worse.

[Don't be late for school~! I'll be bringing a surprise for you at lunch, so you have to come! If you don't come, I'll be really sad!]

Shougo is absolutely certain that request could have been worded better. He's equally certain Ryouta sent it that way on purpose. He sends back a threat to strangle Ryouta with his own intestines and then as an afterthought warns him to stop with the damn emojis, and the bastard takes it as a confirmation. Fuck, it might as well be. Nijimura and his mom have breathing down his neck about skipping, and since he's trying to stay in both of their favors, he can't go off on anymore angst-induced pity parties. The thought sobers him.

He glances at the time again, and realizing he would have gotten up in an hour or so anyway, he reluctantly decides to go ahead and take a shower. As he relaxes under the much needed hot water, the errant thoughts he's been ignoring finally push their way into the forefront of his mind.

He's being childish. The irony that he is currently physically a child is not lost on him, but whatever. It's the truth. He's twenty-two mentally, and while he's aware that even at that age he's hardly expected to be the pinnacle of maturity, the point remains. He's not going to allow his emotions to keep getting the better of him like he did when he was thirteen. Wasn't that part of the problem? Thirteen year old Shougo had had far too much pride to admit Ryouta was better than him (or that he had the potential to be), and he'd been too hotheaded and envious to seek out the company of the other Miracles. To top it all off, one of them had tentatively offered him friendship, and what had he done? Spat in the face of it. Tetsuya really is a bleeding heart.

He leans his forehead against the wall, a severe frown marring his face. It's taken him a while - years - to admit it, but he'd been antagonistic and cruel before the shit show that was middle school. Honestly, if it hadn't been for his mother, he likely would have spiraled even further down some darker path. He'd been willingly injuring other people without remorse, including teammates and former friends, and he can't really blame anyone for the wariness and isolation. Hell, he wouldn't want to hang out with himself either.

He got better, though. He's better, so... He thinks back to Nijimura, who has never shied away from him, and Ryouta, who has for some unknown reason attached himself to Shougo's side, and he wonders. Maybe things can be different this time around.
God, he's such a fucking sap. He turns off the steady spray and steps out, utterly mortified at his own fucking musing.

"Shougo, s'at you? Hurry up! I'm about to piss myself," the disgruntled voice of his older brother shouts from beyond the locked door.

He throws on some boxers he'd nabbed earlier and begins toweling off his hair as he opens the door. "It's all yours," he grunts.

Shion rushes in after him, muttering a quick, "Thanks." He almost forgets to close the door in his haste, and Shougo snorts.

"Dumbass."

Shion doesn't miss a beat, even through the closed door. "Ass clown!"

He shakes his head and returns to his room to get ready for what he suspects is going to be a long day. What he fails to understand, then, is why he's a little excited for it.

Chapter End Notes

To be honest, I thought about leaving out the fan girl bit, but somehow the scene wrote itself, and I really like how it came out. I especially like the idea of Haizaki doing parkour and knowing his way around the city.
Chapter Notes

The FFnet version of this is three chapters ahead, so I finally decided to just catch up to it. Make sure to start reading the new update here!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

VIII. May 30, 2012 - Wednesday

Shougo meant it when he said he'd stop acting childish yesterday. He really did. So... this must be Fate or whoever's way of fucking with him, right? Because he's not a Saint, you know? He's barely reigning his violent and less than friendly urges in as it is, you see? He's been a good boy. No fights or anything, even when that one kid mouthed off to him a few days ago or when that teacher with a stick up his ass turned his nose up at Shougo for no reason other than that he was just standing there. Old Shougo - twelve year old Shougo - would have sucker punched the bitch ass kid and at the very least flipped off the asshole. But he didn't, yeah? He's been a model student.

So surely he doesn't deserve this.

Ryouta waves the offending object around a little, still smiling that mega-watt smile and waiting for Shougo's reaction. "Well?” He prompts after a few more moments of Shougo simply staring dispassionately at him. "I got this because of you! So we could play together!"

Shougo sighs, pushing the basketball away from his face. He leans against the tree, letting his bag fall to the ground and looking aimlessly around the courtyard. He supposes he should have expected this. Even back then, when they were both in the club, and Shougo was nothing but a dick to him, Ryouta had still pestered him to play together. Now that they're on semi-good terms, there's really nothing stopping the kid from bothering him. Shougo considers snapping at him, starting a fight or something, going back to how things used to be, but he really, really doesn't want to. He doesn't want to examine just why that is, either.

Ryouta tucks the ball into the crook of his arm and regards Shougo with curiosity. "Is there a reason you're so against it?” He finally asks, seriously. "You don't have to tell me if there is, but..."

"It's not-“ Shougo scowls, then runs a hand through his hair, frustrated. He wants to change. He has changed, and he needs to- get over himself. Act like it. He's not a fucking coward, right? So. He looks over to Ryouta, who while uncertain and confused, isn't running away from him, even though Shougo really hasn't given him a reason to stay. Who wants to be friends with him, even though Shougo has done nothing but brush him off at every turn. He doesn't know anything, though. Doesn't know Shougo's fucked up. Maybe if he did...?

"Basketball isn’t just a game to me,” he manages, voice rough. It burns in his throat, this small confession, but he keeps going. "It's more than that. I have no intention of playing around, so if you-"

"Me either!” Ryouta blurts out, and surprised, Shougo meets his gaze, bewildered by the determination and longing he finds there. "I- I'm not bragging when I say I'm really good at everything I do. I've tried so many things - tennis, volleyball, swimming! And after a little while, I
surpassed everyone in the club, no matter what it was." He explains, expression miserable, "I've always been able to master everything I try, and it's so boring. I don't feel anything when I win or when girls fawn over me, so I've been thinking lately, 'Why do I try anything at all? There's no point. I should just quit.' Things like that."

His gloomy face suddenly brightens as he grins at Shougo, more genuine than Shougo's ever seen him. "But then I found you. I want to love basketball as much as you do, Haizakiichi, and I want to play it with-"

Shougo lurches forward, covering Ryouta's mouth with his hand and throwing his other arm up to cover his burning face. "STOP!" He groans. How can one person be so fucking embarrassing?! Shougo is going to die right here and now if Ryouta says another damn thing. Ugh. The worst part is that he's actually really pleased by this idiot's words, so much so that his chest is kinda fluttery and shit. What the fuck. "Flashy bastard..."

Ryouta's laugh tickles his hand, and he pulls it away, irritated. "You're so red, Haizakiichi~!" He coos, poking Shougo's cheek, way too fucking smug.

Shougo kicks him, and he lets out a pained grunt, dropping the basketball to grasp his leg. "Shut the fuck up," Shougo huffs, stepping on the ball and willing the stupid blush away.

"Sorry, sorry," Ryouta says, not sounding sorry at all. He stands back up and shoots Shougo a small smile. "But I meant what I said. Every word."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," he grunts, wanting more than anything for this fucking shoujo manga moment to be over. "I'll do it."

He fidgets under Ryouta's searching stare, grumbling, "Unless you don't want to?"

"No!" is Ryouta's instant denial. "I definitely want to. Let's meet up this Sunday!" He glomps Shougo without warning, nuzzling their faces together as he chatters excitedly about how much fun they're going to have. Shougo endures it with as much dignity as he can. Which is not much. He shoves the bastard away and rolls his eyes.

For some reason, he's smiling.

**IX. June 3, 2012 - Sunday**

Sunday gets here way too quickly, and so Shougo finds himself awake early on his day off and dreading his own plans. It's not like he thinks Ryouta's magically going to be better than him the second they step on a basketball court or that the coach - or fuck, Seijuro - will find out about Ryouta and give him Shougo's spot on the team. Things are different this time, and somehow, it's because of Shougo - not Daiki - that Ryouta wants to play at all. Some cosmic joke or something, probably.

Still, the point remains. Ryouta's his friend now, however tenuous that connection might be, and the other boy doesn't have any hidden agenda beyond wanting to fall in love with the sport. Shougo can get behind that, even if he's fucking terrified of the consequences - because, well, Ryouta's going to end up playing anyway. Might as well be him who kicks it off, right? And he wants to do this for himself, too. He hasn't played a Miracle since his first year of high school, and even then, he was so consumed with resentment and jealousy that he couldn't enjoy it or play at his best. He's got the chance now to push those negative feelings aside and just- have fun. He snorts, certain that things with him could never be that easy, shuffling into the kitchen on his socked feet.

"Oh, Shougo," his mom greets him as he comes into view, setting aside the newspaper she was
reading. She smiles, raising an eyebrow. "Good morning. Why are you up so early? I didn't think I'd see you until noon."

"Morning." He returns the grin, warmed all over at the sight of his mother so young and healthy. She's got less wrinkles and less gray in her hair, which is black unlike Shion's dark and Shougo's light gray hair, and her demeanor is much more chipper. He wishes she could always be like this, that she didn't have to worry, that she didn't have to raise and support two kids by herself, especially when one of them is as much of a screwup as Shougo is. More than anything, he wants to protect her and keep her safe.

He clenches fists. He doesn't ever want to see her in pain again.

With that thought comes too vivid memories: of his mom, crumpled up on the floor, face pale and barely breathing. Of Shion, scared and trying not to show it, gripping his hand so hard it hurts, whispering assurances to Shougo. Of her stuck in a hospital bed, comforting the two of them even though she was the one who was sick, hugging them so gently and lovingly. Of his own fear and desperation and guilt and self-hatred.

He's pulled out of his thoughts by soft hands cupping his face, and he's met with his mother's concerned gaze. She wipes away his tears with her thumbs, and that's when he realizes he's crying. "Mom," he croaks, throat tight.

"Shh," she says, and he stares at her imploringly, wanting her to see what he can't bring himself to say. 'I'm sorry. It's my fault. If I were a better son, it would never have happened.'

She must find something of what he means in his eyes because her expression grows resolved, and she murmurs, "I will always love you, Sho-chan, no matter where you go or what you do." She rests her forehead against his, and he brings his hands up to clutch at her, crying harder now. She wraps her arms around him, making soothing noises, and after a while, he thinks that eventually... Maybe, after this- he'll be able to forgive himself.

So long as he makes sure she never collapses at all.

**X. June 3, 2012 - Sunday**

Ryouta is practically buzzing with excitement when Shougo gets there - there being that same street court where they first met and the agreed upon meeting place today. He's idly bouncing a ball, probably the one he was showing off the other day, and he hasn't noticed Shougo approaching yet.

Shougo capitalizes on the opportunity and tosses his own basketball at the idiot's unassuming back. It hits its target, and Shougo smirks at the pained yelp it gets him. "Yo," he says, amused.

Ryouta glares at him, agitated, rubbing his back. "What was that for?!"

He laughs. "Felt like it." He sets his bag - filled with a change of clothes, a towel, and some water bottles - on the nearest bench and scoops up his ball near a shocked Ryouta. "What?" He raises an eyebrow.

"You're in a good mood," Ryouta observes. "Did something happen?"

Shougo rolls his eyes. "What, I can't just be happy?"

"Nope," is the cheery reply. "Actually, I was pretty sure you were going to be crabby since I kinda forced you to be here."
"Forced, my ass. I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be." Shougo starts dribbling the ball, switching between hands. "I want to play against you, too, idiot."

"Then let's get started!" Ryouta abandons his own ball and walks over to Shougo, so obviously eager to play it's almost embarrassing. God, is this what Daiki had to deal with? And then he thinks about it. Actually, the Daiki now would probably soak up this attention. He'd be fucking delighted to have a protege or whatever.

Shougo snorts. "We need to warm up first, dumbass." He drops the ball and smoothly goes through the first exercise.

"Haizakiichi, why are you so mean to me~?" He whines, even as he moves to copy Shougo.

"It's repayment for your wrongdoings in a past life," he says dryly, and Ryouta laughs.

XI. June 3, 2012 - Sunday

"I've never been here before," Ryouta admits, glancing around the Maji Burger with interest and then back to Shougo. Correctly reading Shougo's expression, he clarifies, "My mom thinks fast food isn't good for my skin- or my figure. She's trying to set up a career for me as a model."

Oh. Guess there had to be a time Ryouta wasn't moderately famous. His mother apparently does get him that career; though he can't exactly reassure Ryouta of that. Awkwardly, Shougo asks, "So you want to be a model?"

Ryouta takes a sip of his drink before answering, expression sardonic, "Not really. I told you, remember? There's nothing that I actually want to do." He smiles, adding, "Well, until now."

Startled, Shougo coughs, almost choking on his burger. He clears his throat and grunts, "Yeah, well, good for you."

They fall into a companionable silence as they eat, each left to their own thoughts. Shougo can't help but think back to a little while ago, still kind of shocked by how unexpectedly fun it had been to play basketball with Ryouta.

The other boy picked up the basics pretty quick, having played it before in P.E. Then came Ryouta's instinctive style of play, which is perfectly copying others', and while he had forced Shougo to up the difficulty a bit, Ryouta had not been anywhere near Shougo's level, much less the rest of the Miracles as they are now. Shougo had been almost floored by the realization - because it'd laid waste to a whole host of his fears. Ryouta will have to work for his future self's skills, just as Shougo did, and it's probably such an obvious thing to overlook, a silly thing to be worried about in the first place, but Shougo is so damn relieved that he doesn't care how fucking stupid it sounds.

Because years ago, after a humiliating loss- no, even later than that, after his mom was hospitalized and Shougo took a long, hard look at himself, he came to a simple, devastating conclusion: Haizaki Shougo is not and will never be on the same level as the Generation of Miracles. They were born with crazy talents, and the rest of the normal population just can't keep up with them. It had stung like a bitch, and he hadn't wanted to accept it. But. It was the truth, wasn't it?

Except maybe it wasn't- isn't. Today it was proven that the Miracles weren't always shit-your-pants terrifyingly good at basketball, and it is possible to beat them. To be just as good. He knew that objectively, of course, but seeing and experiencing it with his own eyes is an entirely different thing. And because of that, because he hadn't had the looming fear of being completely outclassed by this fucking dork, basketball had been fun. With Ryouta's prodding, he'd even showed off a little, pulling
out some moves he's stolen that he'd never show in practice.

So maybe, in the end, this whole outing was a good idea. He'd never admit it to the flashy bastard across from, though.

"Hey, I was wondering," Ryouta pipes up as Shougo stuffs a handful of fries in his mouth. At Shougo's grunt, he goes on, "What are the other first year regulars like? I asked around, and apparently, you and four other guys made the cut on the first day. That's crazy."

Shougo chases his fries with a sip of his drink, grimacing a bit at this topic. Damn, just his luck, a future Miracle asking about the other ones. What the hell is he supposed to say? Even now, he sticks to Nijimura during practice more than he probably should, and he's only spoken a handful of sentences to Daiki and Seijuro when they inevitably end up on the same teams in practice games. His little 'making friends' plan stalled at the starting line, and he's only made progress with Ryouta because the blond is too curious for his own good and stubborn enough to cling to what he's found, despite Shougo not being very good company. Shougo doesn't know them beyond their abilities - which they don't have yet, so he's at a loss here.

In the end, he goes for what he's heard and deduced for himself. "I already told you about Aomine Daiki. He's a fucking puppy, always eager to play and joke around. There's Akashi Seijuro, who's fucking terrifying. Stay away from him. Midorima Shintaro looks really stoic and graceful, but I think he's just awkward. And Murasakibara Atsushi is a giant with a thing for candy and sweets." He mentally reviews what he just said and then nods to himself. Sounds about right.

"What the heck? What's up with those descriptions?"

"They're all a bunch of fucking weirdoes, and in his expert opinion, Ryouta is just as strange as they are. Someone oughta tell 'em. He chugs the last of his soda and then checks the time. "Hey, don't you have something to do later?"

Ryouta pulls out his phone and then blanches. "Ugh, yeah. A modeling job, actually." He stands up with his tray, and Shougo walks with him to throw away their trash and then out the door. "I'll see you tomorrow, Haizakicchi! Thanks for today!" He chirps, throwing his arm around Shougo before he can dodge and mussing up his hair. He deftly dodges Shougo's retaliation and starts down the sidewalk with a laugh.

"Stop calling me that!" He calls after Ryouta for the umpteenth time, and like every other time, he's jauntily ignored. Scowling, he attempts to fix his hair and begins making his way home, grumbling about flashy bastards and their groping hands.

XII. June 3, 2012 - Sunday

"I'm home!" Shougo announces as he toes off his shoes in the entryway.

"Welcome back!" Shion and his mom's voices chime from somewhere, likely the living room.

He's surprised his mom is home so early. Didn't she have a shift at her second job? He wants to ask about it, but Shougo drops his stuff off in his room and then heads straight for the shower, feeling utterly gross after sitting his own sweat for hours.

About fifteen minutes later, he heads back down toward his family, refreshed and clean. He finds them sat around the table, flipping through- Are those photo albums? "What are you guys doing?"

He asks, nudging Shion to scoot over with his foot.
"Oi," Shion grunts, reluctantly moving but shoving Shougo back as soon as he plops down beside him. "We're- ugh, looking at old pictures- ow! Dumbass," He manages to answer between jostling elbows with Shougo.

"You lookin' in a mirror?" Shougo snarks, addressing that last remark, and his mom rolls her eyes at them, more than used to their bickering. Holding Shion back with one hand and ignoring his rude rebuttal, Shougo peers at the assortment of images interestedly.

The closest one is of he and his brother. They're about seven and nine, decked out in puffy jackets and mittens and boots, and it's clearly winter what with all the snow. A crudely made snowman stands behind them, sporting a frayed scarf around his neck and a celery stick in place of a carrot for his nose. Shion and Shougo are holding hands and cheesing proudly up at the camera, and Shougo smiles, unbidden.

"Oh, I remember that day," his mom murmurs, carefully extracting the photo from the haphazard pile. "Shion promised you that he'd build the biggest snowman in the whole neighborhood after Natsuki-chan next door bragged about the one his father made with him." Her gentle smile grows unbelievably fond.

Shion looks over Shougo's shoulder and grins. Ruffling Shougo's hair, he says, "Hah, yeah. You were crying and getting snot everywhere, so as your amazing, wonderful, honorable-"

"And humble," Shougo cuts in, equally irritated and amused, as he knocks him away.

"-big brother, I told you'd make an even cooler snowman!" Shion goes on, heedless of the interruption. Shougo snorts, and the hazy memory of that day comes back with a little prodding.

"It got destroyed," Shougo points out, smirking, "when you got into a fight with Natsuki, and you both fell on it while you were brawling."

"I seem to remember you egging them on, Sho-chan," his mom teases, eyebrow arching pointedly. "Before you jumped into the fray."

"Bastard deserved it," Shougo declares, stubbornly.

Shion asks, incredulous, "You don't even remember what we were fighting about, do you?"

"Well, no," Shougo admits, "but-"

Shion barks out a laugh, clutching his stomach, and Shougo joins in helplessly, falling to his side on the floor, and then his mom is giggling beside them, and Shougo has never before in his life felt so content. So happy.

Chapter End Notes

Kise is more open than he was in canon because he hasn't had an entire year to stew in his own apathy. Haizaki never allowed himself to break down in front of his mother in the future, so everything came bursting out here in this time.
You've got to be shitting me,' Shougo can't help but think, royally pissed off and- well, also kind of sheepish. Because he really should have seen this coming. Nevertheless, he scowls and makes no effort to hide it.

"Your grades in mathematics are abysmal, Haizaki-kun," Anami-sensei states reproachfully, unfazed by his open displeasure. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you weren't even trying." To prove her point, she waves around a few of his tests, which are all covered in angry red marks and scores no higher than thirty.

He barely refrains from rolling his eyes, well aware his homeroom teacher would happily hand him a detention, which would lead to his coach being told why he's in trouble, and if there's one thing Shougo abso-fucking-lutely does not need, it's Coach sitting him down for a fucking Talk. "I'll try to do better next time," he says instead - because it's what she wants to hear and not because of any real need of his to improve.

She arches a thin brow, utterly unimpressed. "I'm sure you will," she agrees, dryly, before dropping a bomb on him, "because as of today, you're going to be tutored."

"What?!" He blurts, too shocked to keep it to himself. "I don't need a tutor! I can-"

"My decision is final," she cuts in smoothly, and he shuts up, sensing she's actually serious. Stifling a smile, she sets aside his tests and picks up a sheet of paper from the edge of her desk. "You'll be meeting with your tutor every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, as well as two Sundays a month until your grades reach a satisfactory level."

Immediately, Shougo frowns, reminding her, "I've got basketball before and after school."

"I am aware. You'll have to find time and work out a schedule with your tutor, Haizaki-kun," she replies, unconcerned. "Your grades are just as important as basketball. Our school motto extends to everything we do here, not just club performance."

Frustrated, he bites his lip to keep himself from saying something he'll regret. Anami has always been a hardass, something he's not sad to admit he forgot about after moving on to high school. She's probably not actually a bad person, but she's way too fucking strict. And like most of the other shitty teachers at this shitty school, she's got a pole shoved so far up her ass he's surprised it's not sticking out of her mouth.

Sighing, he asks, "Who's my tutor then?" He hopes it's not someone he knows. Shit, with the way his luck's been going lately, it'll likely end up being a damn Miracle. Ffffffufuck, he's not sure he can handle that. He sends up a silent prayer that it's not either Shintaro or Seijuro as Anami looks over
"It's a second year student from Class 2B," she reads aloud, and Shougo breathes out a sigh of relief. It morphs into a puff of horrified surprise as she reveals, "Nijimura Shuuzou."

Damn. Shitfuck. His fucking captain? Seijuro would have been the worst, undoubtedly, with Shintaro as a horribly awkward second, but Nijimura brings forth his own problems. Because. Ugh, fuck, because Shougo may or may not have some weird, inexplicable feelings toward Nijimura, and those feelings may or may not have grown a whole lot stronger ever since he found his ass dumped in the past. It's not his fault, damn it! Nijimura's just really fucking cool, okay? And his face isn't terrible, and he's always looked out for Shougo even though he doesn't really have to.

He doesn't like to think about it. There's nothing to think about. Nijimura made it very clear how he felt about Shougo when he cut all ties with him without a second thought. Even if that all happened in his past. It's whatever. He dealt with it, and Shougo was fine with never seeing the bastard again. Until now. They see each other almost everyday, and ten years hasn't made him think any less of his old captain. He fucking hates how much he likes the guy. He inwardly groans.

"Does it have to be him?" He asks, trying not to sound like the petulant teenager he physically is and probably failing.

Anami's smile sharpens, like she's taking pleasure in Shougo's torment, and he suppresses the urge to smirk right back at her, all teeth and threatening. "He's the only student available, I'm afraid. You should be grateful. Nijimura-kun consistently scores high marks in your worst subject."

Heh. Grateful, she says. Shougo's feeling a lot of things about this fucking tutoring bullshit, and 'grateful' is most definitely not one of them. "Thanks," he grunts, sarcastically, and she dismisses him with a careless wave. God, he hates her.

"Get your grades up, and then you can thank me," she tells him, turning back to whatever it is she was working on before Shougo stepped in here.

He stalks out, not bothering to answer her, and when Ryouta questions him about it later - because he was called into the faculty office during lunch - he makes up some vague explanation about his grades and working harder. Because like fuck he's gonna go around announcing the fact that he's such a dumbshit that he needs a second year to tutor him in middle school math.

He's twenty-two, damn it! Sure, he's barely been paying attention in most of his classes, especially kill-me-now math, but then again, he already went through all of this once! He's a time-traveler, for fuck's sake! He shouldn't have to worry about equations and theorems and shit.

...And, yeah, okay, he's kind of more than a little mortified that it's actually come to this. Nijimura already thinks he's a no-good delinquent with rage issues barely hanging onto a shred of decency as it is. But after this? He'll probably write Shougo off as a fucking dumbass hard-pressed to add two plus two - not someone anyone would want to date, much less be friends with.

(No wonder everyone always leaves him.)

XIV. June 4, 2012 - Monday

"Hold it," a stern voice calls out to him, and he grimaces at being caught escaping, reluctantly turning around to face his captain.

Nijimura frowns at him, arms crossed and leaning against the locker room door like some kind of wannabe yakuza. "We need to figure out where and when we're going to meet," he says, pushing off
the wall and walking closer to Shougo when he just stands there like a dumbass.

"What, no snide comment about my intelligence?" Shougo snarks, anxiety and anger bubbling up within him, making him want to pick a fight, act stupid. He's usually pretty good at blocking out that little voice in the back of his head that eggs him on when he's in a mood and tears him down whenever he starts feeling good about himself. But today. Well, today, it's a little louder than usual, and Shougo's in enough of a snit to listen.

Nijimura sighs, and it's the kind of sigh his teachers make when Shougo's being needlessly difficult, the kind his boss at his first job made when she found Shougo huddled up behind a dumpster, bruised and bleeding from a fight with an asshole of a customer. It's tired and resigned, and the urge to fucking deck Nijimura rears up in him like an ocean tide, overriding all thought and common sense.

"You fucking-!" He snarls, swinging his fist wildly, aiming for the bastard's face but missing by a mile. It's been a long time since Shougo fought anyone.

Nijimura grabs his wrist and then clamps a hand down on the other one when Shougo tries to hit him with his left fist. "Hey, idiot-" He grunts as Shougo's knee grazes his stomach. "Just- Can you-?"

Apparently fed up, Nijimura fucking- He actually headbutts Shougo. He reels back, clutching his forehead and cursing up a storm. "What the fucking fuck?!"

"Just listen to me, okay? Damn."

Nijimura gingerly rubs his own head, scowling irritably. "We both know you're not stupid. Anami-sensei even told me it's because you just don't pay attention or because you skip class." He levels Shougo with a searing glare, effectively stopping him from arguing, so Shougo settles for what even he would be hard-pressed not to call a pout.

Nijimura rolls his eyes. "This? Starting fights in school, getting worked up over a little tutoring. That is what makes you a moron. Not your grades, which would probably be fine if you actually tried."

He reaches out a hand, and Shougo instinctively braces for a hit. Nijimura's fist just softly 'bops' his head, though, and when Shougo glances at him, he's smirking. "You're so troublesome," he says, but that's affection in his tone and body language, not anger or exasperation, and Shougo-

Blanks out. What the fuck. Is he on drugs or something? Since fucking when has Nijimura I-was-a-delinquent-in-my-first-year, Nijimura I'll-kick-your-ass-if-you-back-talk-me, scary ass, hardass Nijimura ever looked at Haizaki Shougo with anything other than tolerant amusement or irritation?

Nijimura snorts, apparently amused at Shougo's wide-eyed silence, and the closed fist opens to ruffle Shougo's hair. The causal touch is what finally breaks him from his stupor, and he knocks Nijimura's hand away, grumbling, "Troublesome, my ass."

Nijimura's smirk grows. "That's more like it," he comments, and ignoring Shougo's confusion, he goes on, as if the last few minutes had never happened. "Since we've got practice games with other schools lined up, we'll meet up at that time every morning in the library instead."

A flash of anger-embarrassment flares up at the reminder of their tutoring sessions, but Nijimura's words earlier snuff it out easily. It's pathetic and sad, but he's just glad Nijimura doesn't think any less of him for this shit. And- well, he even went to the trouble of fucking comforting Shougo about it, you know? Even an idiot would be happy about that.
Ugh. But hitting the books so early in the morning? He can barely function in practice sometimes as it is, and he actually enjoys that. This is going to be torture. "Does it have to be so early?" He groans.

"I'm not letting you skip practice to study if that's what you're thinking," Nijimura shuts him down instantly and without remorse. "After practice would be too late. Suck it up. It's your fault I have to give up sleeping in, too. Study hard, and you won't need me to tutor you."

Shougo groans again, even as Nijimura ushers him out of the locker room. "Yeah, yeah. I'll see you tomorrow. Don't be late."

XV. June 17, 2012 - Sunday

Spending three mornings a week with Nijimura in close proximity has been... both easier and more difficult than expected. It's easier because bickering with his captain over algebra is no different than arguing over practice, and Nijimura's actually a damn good teacher. The only problem with this arrangement is that Shougo is in close proximity with his fucking captain three mornings a week!

He's never interacted much with Nijimura outside of the gym, and even then, when he'd hunt Shougo down and drag him back, there were always other people around. Not to mention, as captain and player, there's an invisible boundary between them, one of respect and authority, and so there's never been an opportunity for any sort of tension or whatever to develop.

Now, though, it's just Nijimura and Shougo sitting right next to each other in a library with no court or social etiquette between them. Nijimura's apparently a fucking golden boy in the eyes of the staff, so the librarian just gave him a key to let them in until she arrives at eight to take over. Shougo's pretty sure they'd laugh in his face if he asked for a key to anything in this shitty school.

There's not even the worry or annoyance of an adult shooting him disdainful looks to distract him from just how much he enjoys listening to Nijimura's voice. It's such a stupid fucking thing to like about somebody, but Nijimura's voice is deep and smooth, and when he growls something in irritation or laughs, a trill of pleasure or some shit runs down his spine.

So basically, he's been alternating between looking forward to meeting up with Nijimura and dreading it, and that leads him to his current predicament: Nijimura is coming over to Shougo's house today for one of the required two Sundays this month, and he's been getting his ass kicked against a virtual opponent in Mortal Kombat as he anxiously awaits his captain's arrival.

"Sho-chan," his mom calls for him, and he pauses his game. "Your friend is here!"

"Okay!" He shouts back, turning the TV off and putting away his controller. He fidgets from his place on the floor and then tries to not look like he's fidgeting, and in the end, he probably looks like a dumbass.

There's a knock, and then his door is pushed open. "Hey, 'Sho-chan'," Nijimura teases, smirking as he steps inside, but all Shougo can focus on is the fact that he's now alone with Nijimura in his bedroom.

"Your Mom doesn't know you're being tutored, does she?" Nijimura asks idly, as he digs out a textbook and some pencils and worksheets.
That snags his attention. "No, and don't get any ideas about telling her. She's stressing enough as it is. I don't want to add to it," Shougo whispers harshly, glaring.

Nijimura doesn't bother responding to the implied threat, instead smiling at him, fond (now that Shougo knows to look for it.) "Who knew self-proclaimed badass Haizaki Shougo was a momma's boy?"

"Shut up," Shougo snarls, half-heartedly. "What are you torturing me with today?" He attempts to change the subject.

Snorting, Nijimura obligingly pulls out a worksheet and hands it over. "Last week, you guys went over this, and I want to make sure you've actually got it. So just do the front side, and I'll go over it with you after you finish."

Sighing, Shougo picks up a pencil and starts working. Maybe the mind-numbing boredom of mathematics will successfully kill the low hum of pleasant energy he's feeling from the barest touching of their thighs.

XVI. July 20, 2012 - Wednesday

Shougo yawns mid-bite, eyes watering, and he rubs the impending tears away impatiently.

"That's the third time you've yawned in the past five minutes," Ryouta points out with a laugh. "Why are you so tired?"

Half-asleep and his guard down, Shougo unwittingly answers honestly. "It's Nijimura's damn fault. He's been drilling me all fucking week," he grumbles, irritably.

A silence falls over them, but he barely notices, dozing off again. He jolts awake a moment later, and that's when he realizes Ryouta's staring at him with a gobsmacked look on his face.

"What?" He grunts, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

Ryouta's shock slowly morphs into unrestrained glee, and Shougo actually begins to dread the ensuing conversation. "Ehhhh? I didn't know you were the type to kiss and tell, Haizakicchi," Ryouta coos, lips curling up deviously.

"The fuck are you talkin' about?" Shougo growls, stamping down any dredges of embarrassment trying to surface.

Ryouta feigns confusion. "Oh? Didn't you just brag about Nijimura-senpai 'drilling you' all week?"

There are no words to describe the rush of embarrassment-fury-hope-fear that floods his entire body at the notion, the overwhelming sensation that fills up his head and heart just as surely as color stains the tips of his ears all the way to the curl of his toes. "Sh-Shut up, bastard! It's not like that at all!" He practically shouts. "Nijimura's tutoring me in math!"

The fucker just laughs at him, and Shougo insists fervently, "We're not- He's just my captain!"

"Oh my god, you're so easy to tease, Haizakicchi," he manages between chuckles. "You're... Aren't you... Isn't the word 'tsundere' a perfect fit for you?"

"Like hell it is," Shougo snarls, calming down as the fog of emotions fades and leaves his usual simmering agitation in its wake. "I think you're actually a fucking pervert."
"You don't mean that," the bastard says with a strange certainty. "Anyway, why didn't you tell me you were being tutored?" He whines. "I always have to find these things out accidentally!"

Shougo huffs, digging into what's left of his rice. "S'not any of your business, asshole."

"Where are you meeting? And when?" Ryouta asks, apparently not understanding or choosing not to understand Shougo's dismissal. "How'd you get your captain to agree to it?"

"Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning in the main library at seven," he dutifully gives out the details and then frowns. "He was assigned to me. Nijimura's best subject is math, so..." He downs the rest of his grape juice before asking, "Why do you care?"

"Hehe, that's a secret," Ryouta winks at him, and Shougo will swear to anyone who fucking doubts him that an honest to god heart floats over to him. He hastily dodges the thing, disgusted and flabbergasted, and Ryouta wears a secretive grin right up to and even after they part ways.

"I'll see you later~!" He waves cheerily. "Don't miss me too much, Haizakicchi~!"

"Who would miss you?!"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to mountainmoon for the idea to have Nijimura as a tutor! Being tutored for any reason is nothing to be ashamed about, by the way! Even if you're mentally nine years older. I've been on both sides, yo.

I'm not sorry about the innuendos. I don't know why Kise is the one who keeps spouting them, but it's probably my dislike of the idea that he's a sweet, innocent flower showing through. Teenage boys have awful senses of humor, and that doesn't really change in their twenties. IRL experience talking here.
"Why the hell are you here?!!" Shougo demands, sleep-deprived and grumpy. And then he recalls Ryouta's shiftiness Wednesday and suddenly feels like a fucking idiot. "Never mind. Go the fuck away."

"Well, good morning to you, too, Haizakicchi~!" Undeterred (and honestly, Shougo hadn't expected anything else), Ryouta simply grins at him, even as he blinks sleep out of his eyes.

Huh. Shougo's never seen Ryouta as anything less than perfectly awake and aware, not a hair out of place and clothes prim and proper. Now though, he's kind of got a bed-head, and his face is more relaxed and unguarded. He's never really realized it before, but Ryouta's actually really cute—and fucking shit, he's not pondering that train of thought any further! Next thing you know, during practice, he'll start waxing poetic about Daiki's glistening sweat or some shit. Ugh. He imagines a chibi Shougo crossing his arms in an 'X' defiantly, before shooing away that cloud of nonsense.

"Why are you always following me around?" He snarls, resuming his trek toward the building to the left of the main entrance where the biggest library is located.

Falling into step with him, Ryouta's tired grin becomes edged with mirth. "Is it so wrong to want to hang out with my friend?"

Shougo's next step falters, but he catches himself, eyes wide and heart beat picking up speed. Why is this flashy bastard so fucking embarrassing?! He's pissed about how happy that word makes him, and if that conundrum isn't an apt metaphor for Shougo's fucking life, he's not sure what is. He shakes his head, disgusted with himself, and he levels a glare at a snickering Ryouta. "How can you say that shit so easily?" He growls.

"Your reactions are worth it every time, Haizakicchi," Ryouta practically chirps, and Shougo promptly elbows him in the side.

He grunts, nursing the wounded area, but his smile never falters. What a fucking weirdo. "Friends don't hurt friends," he whines.

Shougo snorts, remembering Ryouta's captain at Kaijo and practically every other team jostling and wrestling with each other on the sidelines - all except Fukuda Sogou. "Guess we're not friends then," he says faux breezily.

He surreptitiously gauges Ryouta's reaction, ignoring his own bubble of insecurity, and the blond immediately replies, "You're right!"

Before Shougo can digest that, he jumps on Shougo's back, almost knocking him over as he clings like a fucking koala. "What- the fuck?!"
"We're best friends," he laughs into Shougo's ear, stubbornly hanging on despite all attempts to shove him off.

"Ugh, you're like a fucking Sunday morning cartoon special," Shougo grunts, grudgingly getting a better grip and trudging forward with his extra weight. He's brimming with pleasure, though, and he makes damn sure Ryouta can't see the expression on his face.

It's probably sappy as all hell.

**XVIII. June 22, 2012 - Friday**

"Don't you say a damn word," Shougo warns as soon as Nijimura catches sight of them, and his captain's mouth drops open a little in his shock.

Ryouta huffs a laugh, nuzzling Shougo's neck, and with an irritated click of his tongue, he drops the freeloader without a shred of remorse. "Lazy bastard."

"Ow," Ryouta winces, and then he pouts at Shougo. "Why are you always so rough, Haizakicchi?! You should match that cute face of yours and be gentle!"

"What the-?! Who's cute, you fucker?!" He yanks Ryouta up by the collar of his shirt with a snarl. "Say it again! I dare you."

Ryouta, practically fucking beaming, actually - actually, he fucking leans forward and kisses him on the nose. "You're so forward, Haizakiichi~!"

Indignant fury clouds his head, and he begins to see white. Before he can fucking strangle the fucker, though, Nijimura forcefully pulls them apart and glares down at them like a leering, angry parent.

"Don't start brawling in the damn library, idiot," he says, frowning so severely it's fucking terrifying. "And you," he addresses Ryouta with a jerk of his head, "I know it's fun to rile him up, but make sure he can't kick your ass first, okay?"

Looking just as cowed as Shougo feels, Ryouta swiftly nods his agreement, and Nijimura lets them go, closing his eyes and sighing. "What's your name?" He eventually prompts, sounding slightly less pissed off.

Ryouta straightens subconsciously, answering louder than necessary, "Kise Ryouta! First year!"

Reluctantly amused, Nijimura's lip quirks up at the corner. "Nijimura Shuuzou, second year," he offers. Pointing rather rudely at Shougo, he asks, "How'd you get to be friends with this difficult guy?"

"Oi!" Shougo grunts, but Nijimura just plants a hand on his head and keeps his ass on the floor.

Looking just as cowed as Shougo feels, Ryouta swiftly nods his agreement, and Nijimura lets them go, closing his eyes and sighing. "What's your name?" He eventually prompts, sounding slightly less pissed off.

Ryouta straightens subconsciously, answering louder than necessary, "Kise Ryouta! First year!"

Reluctantly amused, Nijimura's lip quirks up at the corner. "Nijimura Shuuzou, second year," he offers. Pointing rather rudely at Shougo, he asks, "How'd you get to be friends with this difficult guy?"

"Oo!" Shougo grunts, but Nijimura just plants a hand on his head and keeps his ass on the floor. S'this shit even clean? He makes an effort not to touch it.

Ryouta brightens, apparently finding a kindred spirit in Nijimura - in that they share his life's mission to annoy the shit out of Shougo. "A few weeks ago, I was on my way home, and I happened to spot him playing basketball! He was laughing and smiling really big, like basketball was the only thing he ever wanted to play! He was so coo-!"

Shougo lunges forward to shut him up, ending up practically sprawled in Ryouta's lap as he clamps his hands over the bastard's mouth. Blushing - and shit, why does he seem to do nothing but fucking blush lately - he hastily denies everything.
"Bullshit! This creep was spying on me, and then he came up to me all like, 'Let's be friends! I want to play too!'") He makes a stupid, high-pitched voice in imitation of Ryouta. "So I told him to fuck off, but he won't leave me alone!"

Ryouta tries to speak, but it comes out muffled, and Shougo whispers, harshly, "Shut up, you!"

They're interrupted by a foreign sound - at least, to Shougo. Mystified, he and Ryouta turn to regard their third party in unison. Nijimura is chucking quietly, expression unmistakably amused, mouth curled into a real, genuine smile. Shougo stares at it in wonder. He's only vaguely aware of Ryouta removing his hands and dislodging him from the blond's lap as he sits up.

"Never mind," Nijimura says, curbing some of his mirth and apparently retracting his question. "You guys are like a two-man comedy act."

Shougo shakes off his daze enough to glare, pointing out, "Like practice is any different! Midorima and Murasakibara get into a fight almost every day."

Not to mention, Daiki jumps into the fray anytime someone misses the opportunity to pass to him. Shougo actually got into a 'scuffle' with him last Friday when Daiki accused him of hogging the ball. He so fucking was not, by the way. The whole team's a fucking mess, and he really, really doesn't envy Nijimura - and later, Seijuro - the job of corralling these dumbasses.

Nijimura snorts, knowing all too well the fights he's always breaking up. "Let's get to work. We've already wasted enough time, and we still have at least two chapters to cover." He extends his hands to both of them.

Ryouta is the first to accept, and Shougo reluctantly allows himself to be pulled to his feet. "Thanks."

Shougo sets his bag on the table Nijimura was sitting at earlier, rifling through it for his textbook.

Bouncing in place, Ryouta peers at Nijimura pleadingly. "Can I join your tutoring sessions, Senpai? I'm also having a little trouble in math, and I think it'd be better for Haizakicchi to have a classmate help him with this stuff too!" He flashes a winning smile, and fucking sparkles and shit float around him.

Is this a shoujo manga?! Please tell him it isn't a shoujo manga.

"Sure," Nijimura replies, dryly. "So long as you keep this idiot in line, I don't mind."

"I don't need a fucking babysitter!" Shougo immediately crows, scowling.

Ryouta pays him no mind, assuring Nijimura, "It's a deal!"

Someone up there must hate him.

XIX. June 24, 2012 - Sunday

"What? No dirty magazines?" Ryouta mutters in disappointment, apparently finding nothing of interest beneath Shougo's bed. The idiot actually poked around in his closet and behind his shelves, too. "But Haizakicchi definitely seems like the type of guy who'd own some!"

"Oi," Shougo grunts, not even bothering to look up from his homework. He's actually becoming accustomed to this dipshit fluttering about the like world's most perverted butterfly.

"Exactly what kind of image do you have of him?" Nijimura queries curiously, clearly enjoying
Shougo's suffering like the sadistic bastard he is. What does he like about him again?

Ryouta tilts his head to the side thoughtfully before explaining, "You know, the kind of guy who picks fights all the time and gets piercings and dyes his hair in order to keep his 'badass' image!"

"The fuck," he sneers at Ryouta, irritated. He hasn't even dyed his hair in this timeline!

Nijimura snorts, "Yeah, that sounds like him." He stretches, arching his back, probably cramping up from sitting in the same position for the last hour, but the important part is that his shirt lifts up to reveal some of his stomach, including the abs his clothes do a very good job of hiding. Shougo pulls his attention away from them with some effort.

"Right?" Ryouta nods, still on this stupid fucking topic, and then he says, knowledgeably, "A guy like that would definitely buy porn mags!"

As if. Shion makes an effort to scour through his room for any 'goods' ever since he stumbled upon a magazine of busty maids under Shougo's pillow a few months ago. Even then, he hadn't bought it! All the guys were passing it around in Shougo's class, and he'd just been unlucky enough to have been caught with it.

Besides, he's never needed any. He was born with a handsome face, and he keeps his body in good condition, so he's always been able to find a girlfriend to satisfy any needs. Fuck if he's about to tell these two fuckers any of that, though.

He's so damn sick of everyone's judgement. Fucking hell, he was getting wary and disapproving looks even before he got his ears pierced and well before he ever got into a fight. He was accepted into Teiko because he passed the entrance exams, just like everyone else, but still the shitty teachers here treat him like the shit on the bottom of their shoes. Fuck them, and fuck anyone else who wants talk shit about him.

"I don't need to maintain an image. Assholes pick fights with me, and I'm not about to just let them hit me. I've got piercings because I like them; I don't need a fucking reason," he snarls, gripping his pencil a little too hard. "But people take one look at me and think I'm a delinquent. Who the hell am I to say any different?"

He grits his teeth and stubbornly returns to his worksheet, ignoring any weird looks the other two might be giving him. If they've got shit to say, well, he's heard it all before. There's a silence, and then-

"You're so gloomy, Haizakicchi~!" Ryouta drapes himself over Shougo, arms dangling, chin propped on Shougo's shoulder, his chest a warm heat against every inch of Shougo's back. He murmurs, soft yet firm, "But I don't mind. I like you just the way you are."

Shougo grimaces, only allowing the idiot to stay there because he knows from experience it'd be even more annoying attempting to shake him off. "Ugh, why are you so touchy-feely?" He groans half-heartedly, the bliss of that simple statement ("I like you just the way you are") washing over him pleasantly.

...Honestly, he's not really used to being touched so gently and affectionately by anyone but his mom and brother, and he can admit - only to himself! - that it's kind of nice. S'fucking mortifying, though.

Nijimura smirks across from him, speaking up when Shougo lifts his head to meet his gaze. "He's right, you know. You may be troublesome sometimes, but you're a good kid. I like you too." He shares an amused look with Kise. "At least there's never a dull moment with you around."
Nijimura leans over the table and ruffles Shougo's hair, and Ryouta's still hugging him, and his heart is so full it's about to burst. He lowers his head, trying to hide his burning face in his bangs, and his throat is tight with emotion. Tears are prickling his eyes, but he doesn't cry.

"Shit, you guys are so lame," he grunts, and they both laugh.

**XX. June 24, 2012 - Sunday**

"Hey, so when are you and Nijimura-senpai gonna get together?" Ryouta asks him out of the blue.

Shougo chokes on his Popsicle, spitting blue chunks of ice everywhere. Bristling, he hisses, "We're not! He's just my-"

"Captain, yeah, I know!" The blond bastard cuts of him off with a roll of his eyes. "But this is right out of manga! The lonely, misunderstood kouhai looks up to the cool, confident captain, the captain dotes on his kouhai, crushes are developed, things happen, and next thing you know, you're dating!"

He finishes his explanation with a flourish, grinning like the damn Cheshire Cat.

"What do you mean 'things happen'?!" Shougo splutters, flustered despite himself. "A-anyway! It doesn't matter! We're just friends! And stop talking about it before he comes back out, or I'll kick your ass!"

Furtively, he glances through the giant glass window and almost wilts with relief when he spots Nijimura just stepping out of the bathroom, well away from the doors and out of earshot of this fucking moron.

"Ehh? But you guys would be so cute together!" He says emphatically, once again only choosing to hear a select few words from Shougo's mouth. It's about number three on the list of stupid shit this guy does that pisses him off.

"Bullshit," Shougo instantly denies, more because he doesn't want to even ponder the possibility of them being together - which is a whopping zero percent - than because he doesn't believe it.

Stubborn, Ryouta pulls out his phone and begins searching through it. "Aha!" He grins triumphantly, shoving the device in Shougo's face. "This! This is undeniable evidence!"

'This' is a photo Ryouta must have taken earlier at Shougo's house. It's got him and Nijimura in it, and that wouldn't be weird on its own. No, the mortifying bit is Shougo's fucking expression. His face is soft and happy and adoring as he stares at Nijimura, who is smiling right back at him, fond and a little devious. It's the kind of sappy shit couples post on social media sites to brag about how in love they are with each other, and Shougo kind of wants to gag and also maybe ask Ryouta to send it to him.

He gets angry as a compromise. "The fuck?! Delete that! Delete it now!" He reaches for it, but Ryouta hastily moves it behind his back. "I'm serious!"

"What? No! It's mine!" Ryouta manages, dodging all of Shougo's attempts to snatch his phone. "You're just mad I have a photo of your crush!"

"Wrong! I'm pissed you're secretly taking pictures of me and keeping them like a perv! Pervert!" Shougo yells.

"Am not! I'm just-!" Ryouta jerks to the side, Shougo's hand missing his phone by inches. "Being supportive!"
"Then support me and delete the fucking picture!"

"That's not how it works!"

"I can't leave you two alone for five minutes," a new voice interjects, prying the two of them apart expertly. He grabs handfuls of their hair and yanks a little, exciting twin yelps of pain. "Stop bickering, damn. What's the fight about this time?" He asks, lone eyebrow raised and twitching in agitation.

Shougo grimaces, and he doesn't miss Ryouta's gulp. At least he's not the only one fucking terrified of this bastard. "It's nothing," he mumbles, glaring at Ryouta, daring him to dispute it.

Smiling a little uneasily, Ryouta agrees, "Um, yeah, I don't even remember what it was about."

Nijimura stares hard at both of them, obviously not believing a single word, but neither of them crack under the pressure. After a few moments of quietly judging them, he releases them with a sigh and rubs his temples with a frown. "You two are unbelievable. I didn't sign up to be a captain off the court, you know."

"No one asked you to be," Shougo huffs, gingery patting the newly tender spot on his head. Fucking violent bastard. Exactly who's the kid?

"Here," Nijimura shoves an envelope into his hands, and Shougo blinks in surprise. "It's a reward for passing your test Friday. You can share it with Idiot Number Two." Before Shougo can open it, Nijimura says, "I've got to head home. Promised my younger siblings I'd be back before dinner. See you two tomorrow."

He pauses and then steps forward to give both of them a hair ruffle. Shougo tries not to feel jealous, and it's not really hard when he catches the utterly startled look on Ryouta's face before the blond covers it up. As much as he promotes skin-ship, he's probably never been on the receiving end of any of the affectionate touches he gives out so freely. The Miracles are all of them a standoffish bunch, so it's not that far out of the realm of possibility. Something twinges painfully within Shougo at the thought.

...Maybe he'll let the bastard get away with a little more touchy-feely shit from now. Just a little, though!

They both watch Nijimura disappear around the corner, and then Ryouta turns to him with an apologetic smile. "I've got to get going, too. I promise I'll think of you all night, though!" He winks, and luckily, nothing flies out of him this time.

What a weird fucking thing to say, Shougo barely keeps himself from commenting. "Please don't," he says instead.

Laughing, Ryouta pulls him into a tight hug, and against Shougo's better judgement and the alarm bells going off in his head (don't show weakness this guy will take it the wrong way this isn't you), he hesitantly lifts an arm and returns it, patting Ryouta on the back once, twice.

He hears a sharp intake of breath and imagines that same shocked, pleased expression on Ryouta's face now, and his mouth involuntarily curls into a smile.

Ryouta steps back, ecstatic, grinning from ear to ear. "You're learning, Haizakicchi!"

"Shut up," he huffs, as Ryouta waves cheekily and then turns around to walk properly down the other street.
Then he remembers the gift in his hand. Curious, he tears it open and finds a coupon for two hundred yen at the nearest Maji Burger. "Cheap bastard," he mutters, irritably. These shitty coupons come free in the fucking mail. Ugh.

Later that night, he gets a 'you're welcome!' text from Ryouta alongside a winking emoji and an attachment. It's the sappy ass picture they fought over. He scowls, tells Ryouta to shut the fuck up, and then grudgingly saves the image as his phone's wallpaper.

Chapter End Notes

We've got Trash Son, Innuendo Guy, and Disappointed Dad. Review now and collect the whole set! Sardonic Son is coming soon to a fic near you! (But you probably won't notice him)

I'm so happy clingy/overly-affectionate!Kise is canon. Add to that an affection starved Haizaki, and you've got way too much platonic cuddling.
you activated his friendship quest, you dumbass

Chapter Notes

I'm a little worried about the lack of comments, but thanks for the kudos and bookmarks! ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

XXI. July 1, 2012 - Sunday

It's been about a week since Ryouta joined their tutoring sessions and only about two weeks since they first started, and yet Shougo's already gotten used to the three of them interacting with one another. He hates to admit it, but Ryouta has been a buffer between Shougo's teenage libido (which still apparently fucking affects him) and the object of his affections/lust/whatever, Nijimura. No longer have things been supercharged with an underlying tension - because Ryouta's special ability is sensing the mood and doing his utmost to make it lighthearted.

It only works when he's actually fucking here, however. Ryouta can't make it because of a modeling gig, and now Shougo is alone with his captain and back to being hyper aware of every little fucking thing, from Nijimura's damn eyelashes to the sharp collarbones his t-shirt does nothing to hide. It's annoying as all hell and distracting enough that Nijimura suggests they take a break only fifteen minutes in.

"Sure," he says, unenthusiastic. He slumps forward on the table and pillows his head in his arms. Damn. Who'd have thought he'd actually fucking miss that flashy bastard - even if it's just his usefulness that he's missing? Ugh. He tilts his head to the side and accidentally catches the other boy's eye.

"You've changed," Nijimura comments idly, leaning his chin on his open palm and regarding Shougo with intense scrutiny. It does weird things to his chest, and he does his best to ignore it.

A brief flash of panic subsides when Shougo reminds himself that literally no one's first - or even second or third thought - is going to be time travel, and there's not a chance in hell his captain has somehow caught on. So it's just about Shougo being different from the twelve year old punk Nijimura got to know in the two months before twenty-two year old Shougo ended up here, and well, it's probably a good thing he's different? He used to be an asshole, no argument there, and now he's at least a little better.

In that case, he doesn't clam up defensively or get angry. He shrugs and says, "So?"

"So you're wildly different now," Nijimura presses, oddly intent on this subject. "There's no real malice in your glares, and you're actually making friends. I mean, I'm glad you're happier, don't get me wrong, but I've got to ask: what happened?"

Okay, he might be getting a little offended now. "The fuck you mean?!" He growls, the pink dusting his cheeks thankfully somewhat hidden by the crook of his elbow. "I ain't a fucking pansy, if that's what you're getting at. I'll fucking fight you right now."
Nijimura smirks at him, and it only throws gasoline on the ever-burning flames of rage writhing beneath the surface. Unafraid, the fucker says, "You didn't deny you were making friends."

Face fully aflame now, Shougo's voice actually fucking cracks when he squawks, "I'M NOT." Never mind the fact that that's exactly what he's trying to do. No one's supposed to fucking know about it! Shit, he's pissed and mortified and he's itching to pound into something - AND he does not need a voice that sounds disgustingly like Ryouta to leer at the unintended innuendo!

He grits his teeth, and Nijimura snorts, as always amused at someone else's pain. Damn sadist. "Shut the fuck up, fuckwit," he snarls, sitting up and ready to pounce.

Nijimura thumps his forehead hard enough to leave a mark, effectively halting the advance. "Do you have any other settings besides 'fight me' and 'ball of anger'?" He asks, eyebrow raised and judging.

Rubbing the sore spot, Shougo huffs mockingly, "Do you have any other settings besides 'pain in my ass' and 'mother hen'?"

"What was that, brat?" Nijimura settles a hand on his head and grips entirely too damn tightly. "Huh? Who's a pain in the ass?"

Shougo struggles to remove the offending appendage, but Nijimura's got the strength of fucking body builder or some shit. He's not budging. "You- ugh! You are, asshole," he grunts.

"Pot calling the kettle black, kid," Nijimura snarks, finally letting go of him. The other boy settles back against the bed, crossing his arms and pinning Shougo with a hard stare. He glares right back, absently fixing his mussed up hair.

After what feels like forever, Nijimura shakes his head with a puff of breath and then smiles lopsidedly at Shougo. "Whatever. You don't have to tell me. I'm just glad you seem to be in a better place, Haizaki."

Fuck. His heart actually skips a fucking beat, and his face is crimson for the millionth fucking time. Ugh. He's just not- used to comfort from anyone, especially not his hardass of a captain (even though it's happened three times now), and god, how fucking pathetic is that? Poor Shougo, boo fucking hoo. And then he belated realizes Nijimura actually called him by his name. His surname, sure, but ever since they met it's been 'kid' or 'idiot' or 'you' - and well, okay, Nijimura talks like that to basically everyone, so it's not just him - and to his hear his name on Nijimura's lips, in Nijimura's voice, well, it makes him a little giddy.

A smile blossoms on his damn face, and he tries to curb it as much as he can. He knows he's not successful when Nijimura's grin grows bigger, and he can't really bring himself to care. "Thanks," he says, gruffly.

"Don't mention it."

XXII. July 3, 2012 - Tuesday

"I can't believe he actually gave you such a crappy gift!" Ryouta guffaws, apparently finding the shitty 200 yen coupon as ridiculous as Shougo does. "Wait, wait - do you think he actually thought it was a good gift? Or or maybe he just realized he should get you something and grabbed the first thing he could find?" He laughs again, and Shougo merely sighs.

"You didn't have to come with me," he grumbles, not about to question Nijimura's intentions and instead glancing around at the various pedestrians the two of the pass by as they walk. "S'not like I'm paying for your food."
Ryouta grins, "That's fine! Sunday's photo shoot went really well! I even got paid upfront!" He throws an arm around Shougo's neck and leans in with a wink. "I can pay for the both of us." He snorts, adding, "Unless that coupon's gonna cover it."

"Fine," Shougo huffs, shaking him off. The familiar doors of Maji Burger come into view, and Shougo speeds up a little, fucking ravenous after practice today and looking forward to a good cheeseburger.

He steps inside and is instantly hit with the heavenly scent of greasy food. Ryouta joins him in line, and true to his word, he pays for their meal when the measly 200 yen doesn't cover it. Shougo ignores the ribbing and is just content that he didn't waste any money on this venture.

Trays in hand, they nab an empty booth near the window. With an enthusiastic "Thanks for the food," Shougo unwraps his burger and dives right in. Across from him, Ryouta isn't nearly so impatient. He pulls out his phone and snaps a picture of Shougo, who grunts warningly at him around a mouth full of food.

"Sorry, sorry," Ryouta says carelessly, grinning. "I'm just sending Nijimura-senpai a photo of you enjoying your reward."

"The fuck," Shougo mutters, eyeing the device irritably. Ryouta's been shamelessly texting and sending selfies and random photos of Shougo and Nijimura to each other - in some nefarious plot to get them together or something - and it has long since started to annoy. "Stop it."

"Don't worry about it," Ryouta tells him, and Shougo resists the urge to say that only worries him more. "Nijimura-senpai doesn't mind!"

"He definitely fucking does," Shougo retorts after slurping a good portion of his grape soda. "He doesn't even know how you got his number." Glaring suspiciously, Shougo demands, "Did you steal his phone?"

Ryouta rolls his eyes, waving around a French fry as he explains, "No! I just got his number from yours."

"That's not any better, asshole!" Shougo snarks, checking both his pockets for his phone and thankfully finding it. "Stop doing that!"

"Stop taking pictures of me, stop using my phone without my permission, stop being president of a NijiHai fan club and selling fan books," Ryouta mocks, frowning exaggeratedly. "You're no fun, Haizakicchi! Lighten up a little!"

"Wait, what was that last one-?!"

Ryouta interrupts him, loudly, "But alright! I'll cut it out!" He smirks at Shougo, leaning forward and forcing Shougo to move backwards in response. "That is, only if you promise to come with me to my next photo shoot."

"Hell no."

"Then the candid photos continue!"

Shougo scowls, debates the pros and the cons for a moment - an end to the irritating selfies by just sitting on the sidelines while Ryouta poses? - and then decides fuck it. "Fine."

"Yes!" Ryouta beams, practically leaping across the table to grab at him. "Thank you thank you
"Thank you!"

"Fucking-! Get off!" He tries to hold the eager blond off with one hand and save the rest of his food with the other, but Ryouta's wiggling is doing a good job of shaking the damn table.

"Excuse me, but could you please stop squishing me?" A quiet voice pipes up, freezing the two of them in place.

Almost in sync, he and Ryouta slowly turn towards the source of the complaint, and what they find is... unexpected. Shougo reels back in shock, cursing up a storm, and Ryouta screams, scrambling out onto the floor and staring wildly up at the seat he'd just vacated with wide eyes.

Kuroko Tetsuya stares placidly back at them, sipping his vanilla shake and acting as he hasn't just scared ten years off Shougo's life. "Thank you," he says.

Shit. Out of all of the damn Miracles, Tetsuya is probably the one he'd have happily met last, and yet here he is. Seriously, just who did piss he off in a past life?!

As Shougo attempts to compose himself, Ryouta exclaims, "W-where did you come from?! Why are you in our booth?!"

Tetsuya regards him with no small amount of exasperation, even though his face is kind of naturally expressionless. "I was here before either of you, so technically, it is my booth. You sat down next to me without even noticing."

Ryouta gapes a little, bewildered, and Shougo decides to save him out of pity.

"Kuroko," Shougo acknowledges him, only just remembering to use his last name, and the other boy blinks in surprise. He looks to be struggling with something internally, but Shougo is a little thrown that he can read Tetsuya so easily. He'd forgotten it had been Seijuro whom had coached the boy into perfecting his poker face. Now, he kinda looks like... a rabbit. A tiny, nervous rabbit.

It's Ryouta who voices Tetsuya's unspoken question, effectively breaking Shougo from any further weird musings. "Eh? You know each other?" He stands up and dusts off his pants as he glances between the two of them questioningly.

Tetsuya corrects him, bemused, "Haizaki-kun is one of the only first years to make first string. I have not met him personally, nor were we introduced to one another." He peers at Shougo with veiled curiosity. "How did you know my name?"

Shougo blinks. And then he realizes. Fffffffuck! Tetsuya's still on the third string! He can't remember exactly when the other boy moved up, but it was definitely not so early in the year. Shit. He should have known better, especially since he hasn't seen Tetsuya at any of their practices or trotting along beside Daiki and Satsuki. Ugh.

Well, Daiki has definitely already taken a shine to Tetsuya, according to a few excited whispered conversations with Satsuki. It'll have to do. Shougo withholds a grimace and lies through his teeth, "Heard Aomine mention you the other day. A tiny little third stringer with barely any presence."

Tetsuya seems to preen a little at the thought that Daiki would bring him up, and then he wilts almost unnoticeably at the less than favorable description. He simply nods in understanding, however, and Shougo feels a trickle of relief. It's soon squashed by annoyance.

Ryouta nudges him over with his hip, and Shougo grudgingly makes room on his side of the booth. Grinning now, Ryouta points a thumb at himself and says, "My name's Kise Ryouta! Nice to meet
you!

He elbows Shougo when he doesn't immediately offer anything, and with an inaudible sigh, Shougo says, "Haizaki Shougo. Nice to meet ya."

"My name is Kuroko Tetsuya. It's nice to meet you, Kise-kun, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya replies with what might be considered a smile.

Shougo cringes, and without thinking about it, he says, "Ugh, drop the honorific. Just call me Haizaki."

Ryouta squawks indignantly, "You're letting Kurokochii call you so familiarly already?! You haven't said anything like that to me!"

Shougo grimaces in disgust, not bothering to answer. Tetsuya points out, deadpan, "Kise-kun, you are being hypocritical." After a moment, he adds, "And dramatic."

Ryouta slumps at the harsh truth, and Shougo laughs at his pain. Bastard deserves it.

He recovers quickly enough. "Hey, so you're on the basketball team, too?" Ryouta prompts Tetsuya as he pulls his tray back over to their side and begins eating. "Third string?"

Tetsuya nods, clarifying, "My goal is to move up to first string as soon as possible."

Shougo tosses his trash on his own tray and settles back in his seat. "That's why you're practicing late everyday with Aomine," he surmises, trying to make it sound like this isn't old news to him.

Ryouta's smile grows a little solemn, a little envious. "Must be nice to have such a lofty goal," he says, and Shougo side-eyes him, not exactly concerned but maybe understanding.

Ryouta catches the look and shoots him a small grin before beaming at Tetsuya in a way Shougo is intimately familiar with and doesn't like at all. "Why don't you ask Haizaki-kun for help, too? With two first stringers coaching you, you'd be guaranteed a spot!"

What. There are absolutely no words to describe how much Shougo does fucking not want to step into the shit show that is Tetsuya's and Daiki's relationship or whatever it is, and besides... Tetsuya. Ugh, damn it, Tetsuya's too good for him. Too good for all of them really, but whereas the Miracles are a bunch of arrogant, entitled assholes, Shougo is the shitty, violent fuck who wasn't even good enough to keep his spot on the team. Tetsuya never gave up on them, after all, even after they gave up on themselves. He valued their friendships and knocked sense into each and every one of them when they became full of themselves.

Shougo wasn't even worth a footnote, wasn't worthy of being redeemed even by the strong-willed boy with a heart of fucking gold who found it in himself to forgive the Miracles. He's bitter and jealous and angry, and at the same time, he can't help but agree. Why waste time on the boy who didn't realize how far his head was up on his own ass until his mom collapsed right in front of him? He doesn't know why Ryouta sticks by him or why Nijimura tolerates him, any version of him. Despite the fact that he's changed, that this Tetsuya doesn't know any of that, he still doesn't think he deserves Tetsuya's trust or friendship or whatever.

Lost in his thoughts, Shougo misses his opportunity to object when Tetsuya turns hopeful, surprised blue eyes on him, and Ryouta smiles knowingly at him. Conflicted but caving under the twin fucking puppy-dog eyes, he grunts, "Alright."
"Great! And now that you're teaching Kurokocchi, you might as well give me some pointers too!"
Ryouta slings an arm over his shoulder and nuzzles their faces together, and Shougo pushes him away without even glancing at him.

"Hell no," he says again, inwardly wondering why the hell this fucker keeps managing to make him do shit he doesn't want to do.

"Aww, but why? You're so stingy, Haizakicchi!" Ryouta whines, clinging to him like a damn octopus despite the hand on his face.

Shougo scowls, "Like hell! You're way too damn demanding! And stop fucking volunteering me for shit!"

Tetsuya interrupts their argument slash fight with a pointed cough. "Could you please not be so disruptive Kise-kun? The other customers are staring at us."

Shougo whips his head around and confirms this fact, and irritated, he flips them off and glares darkly at anyone who keeps looking at them. "Shitty fan girls," he mutters, staring down the girls in Teiko uniforms across the room who are giggling and whispering about them - or more specifically, Ryouta.

The blond fucker notices them and gives them a cheeky wave. Ever since he's been hanging around Shougo, his little fan club has been either too damn scared or intimidated to come close enough to bother them, and the flashy bastard has taken full advantage of it. If it weren't for the fact that Ryouta bugs him all the damn time - and when no fans are in sight - Shougo might have figured he was only friends with Shougo for that one benefit.

"Let's just go," he says, sliding out of the booth and on to his feet. He glances over at Tetsuya, considering.

He doesn't want to do this, but it's just the once, right? He can get rid of his guilty conscience and get Ryouta off his back at least a little if he just goes along with this for now. So. He says, "Gimme your number."

Obediently, Tetsuya does, and Shougo saves it into his phone. Pocketing it, he picks up his tray and frowns down at the other boy. "Sunday. After twelve. I'll tell you when I'm free, and we can meet up."

Tetsuya nods. "I will be there. Thank you both for your help. I appreciate it."

Embarrassed, Shougo turns around and grumbles, "Whatever." Ugh. Why the hell is he so polite? It makes it hard to be angry at him.

Ryouta, who has been wearing a shit-eating grin since Shougo exchanged numbers, chirps, "You're welcome, Kurokocchi~! We'll see you Sunday~!"

He grabs his own tray and follows Shougo to the garbage bins. Shougo grunts, "Who the hell said you were invited?" They dump the it trash, replace the trays, and head for the exits.

Ryouta hums innocently. "Eh? I thought it was an unspoken invitation."

"Unspoken, my ass," Shougo rolls his eyes, pushing the door open and stepping outside. Ryouta laughs.
I honestly believe it's hard to dislike Kuroko, so yeah, Kise liked him enough to give him a nickname right away. Here's that Nijimura confrontation someone asked for. Nijimura is the most difficult character to write, so hopefully that went okay! Also, I'm super excited to include Kuroko's sarcastic dialogue. The boy has a sharp tongue, and I'm not afraid to use it!

Meeting Kuroko at Maji Burger + Kise screaming was suggested by Fye, and RemainingAngel suggested Haizaki give him pointers. Thanks, guys!
"I'm not comfortable with this," Shougo grumbles, stomach tied in knots and scrambled and full of butterflies and whatever the fuck might actually describe the nervousness and anticipation buzzing beneath his skin, making him tremble.

"No need to be nervous!" Ryouta assures him, grabbing his hand and intertwining their fingers. What the fuck. He does not feel reassured. "Your hand is so clammy, Haizakiichi! It's just Nijimura-senpai we're meeting!"

"Yeah," Shougo says, trying to pull his hand free, but Ryouta's got a damn death grip on it. "At his fucking house."

It's one thing to cram all three boys into his own bedroom. It's his, and no amount of weird dreams or thoughts are going to make him fully unsettled in the comfort and safety of his own space. Nijimura's room, though. Fucking Nijimura's room is foreign territory. Hell, Shougo's never been to any boy's room besides his brother's. He's been in plenty of girls' rooms, but- it's different.

"Hmm, well, it can't be helped, yeah? He's got to look after his younger siblings." Ryouta swings their hands between them as they walk, humming softly, and Shougo gives up on getting his back. He grunts noncommittally, and Ryouta goes on, thoughtful, "You know, Nijimura-senpai definitely gives off that big brother vibe. Guess it makes sense now."

And wasn't that a surprise? Okay, so Shougo had sort of already known Nijimura had a little brother and sister, but he'd never expected to actually meet them. Somehow, the image of hardass Nijimura doting on them, taking care of them... isn't a bad one. Still. Shougo should have just canceled the tutoring this Sunday, made up some lie to get out of it because this? It's too much. He's meeting the family of his shitty crush! It's not even like that, but Shougo can't help the fluttery feeling insisting that it is.

"Oh, we're here!" Ryouta chimes, pulling Shougo along excitedly, and he reluctantly speeds up too, spotting the pretty nice house Nijimura had described and wondering idly if his family is well off. Must be, considering they were able to afford sending Nijimura's dad to America for treatment.

Ryouta rings the doorbell, and not a minute later, they hear what sounds like a stampede heading straight for the door. It swings open to reveal two little kids peering up at them curiously, and Shougo's first thought is that there's no way those cute, round faces and happy smiles could be in any way related to his terrifying and violent captain.
"Hi!" "Hey!" The two of them exclaim simultaneously, and it doesn't take a genius to realize they're twins. Shougo guesses they must be about eight or nine.

The boy doesn't wait for a greeting in return. "Shuu-nii said some of his friends were coming over! Is that you guys?"

"Yep, that's us!" Ryouta grins, bending down a little to their height and finally fucking releasing his hand. "Where is - ah, Shuu-nii?"

"I'll go get him!" The boy announces, running off and leaving his sister behind with them.

Gah, Shougo's really not good with kids. Wasn't even when he actually was a kid. He stands there awkwardly and mentally urges Nijimura hurries the fuck up.

The girl shuffles forward, eyes huge and adorable and expression enamored upon Ryouta. "You're so pretty, Nii-chan! Like my mom!"

Shougo barks a laugh and is even more amused at Ryouta's surprised, "Eh?"

He drops smoothly into a squat and smirks deviously at Ryouta. "You know what? I can see it too. You're definitely pretty like a girl, Kise."

Instead of vehemently denying the claim or becoming annoyed at Shougo for teasing him (all things he himself has done), Ryouta's face colors a bright red, and he doesn't say anything, just looks super flustered as he stares down at the floor - and maybe a little pleased? And that succeeds in making Shougo embarrassed, and he feels his own fucking blush coming on second-hand.

"Wha- what the-?!" He cuts off the curse at the last second, mindful of their impressionable audience despite being so frazzled. "Why're you so quiet?! Say something, stupid!"

Ryouta's hands fly up to cover his cheeks, and he squawks, "Wha-what am I supposed to say?! I didn't expect you to- to compliment me!" He squirms, hiding more of his face and looking anywhere but at Shougo.

"It wasn't a compliment! I didn't mean it! Stop making it weird!" Shougo says, practically yelling at this point, voice high pitched and squeaky.

"You guys are funny," the girl decides, giggling at the two idiots arguing at her front door. He doesn't blame her. "Come on in! I'm not supposed to leave the door open."

So they step inside and trade their shoes for guest slippers. She then leads them into the living room where they sit down, Ryouta and Shougo on the couch and the girl at the table on the floor.

"Ah- um- what's your name?" Ryouta asks her, desperately attempting to change the subject, and Shougo lets it go with no small amount of relief.

"Nijimura Takara," she chirps, apparently delighted to be asked. She leans forward, eyes glittering, and divulges, "It means 'treasure!'"

"Wow," Ryouta breathes, indulgently. "What a cute name! A cute name for a cute little girl."

She beams at him. "You may call me Taka-chan," she says importantly. "What's your name?"

"I'm Kise Ryouta. You can call me Ryou-nii!" He tells her and then points at him. "This is Haizaki Shougo. You can call him Sh-"
Panicked, Shougo stomps on Ryouta's foot, eliciting a pained yelp and cutting him off before he makes things even weirder by saying Shougo's given name. He glares at the blond who blinks at him and then corrects himself, "Call him Haizaki-nii."

Ugh. It's better than 'Shou-nii' or whatever Ryouta had been about to suggest, but it's still too familiar, even for a couple of brats. Shion doesn't even call him 'nii-' anything anymore.

"Taka, what did I say about opening the door for strangers?" Nijimura's voice reprimands from behind him, and he cranes his head around to see his captain walking into the room, brother perched on his hip.

Taka-chan pouts at him, insisting, "Aww! But Nii-san, they're not strangers. They're your friends!"

Snorting and setting his brother down, Nijimura says, "They're strange alright." Ignoring Shougo's immediate "Oi!", he regards Taka-chan sternly, "Don't let it happen again, okay? Come get me as soon as someone's at the door - before you open it." He adds the last part when the boy's mouth opens to protest.

"Okay," the twins agree in unison, chastised.

Sharp, silver eyes turn on them, and Shougo fights the urge to straighten up - and instead slouches even more. Nijimura's lip quirks up. "Have you guys introduced yourselves?"

The boy shakes his head. He steps forward and smiles at them. "My name is Nijimura Tatsuo! My first name means 'dragon man!' I'm nine years old!"

Taka-chan pipes up from beside him, "I'm nine too! We're twins! But I'm three minutes older than Tat-chan!"

Tatsuo purses his lips at her and then crosses his arms. "Well I'm taller!"

She gasps, offended. "No way! I'm taller!"

Next to him, Ryouta snickers, and Shougo rolls his eyes, somewhat amused by the childish argument. Nijimura breaks it up efficiently, chiding, "We'll check your height later. Go on up to your room. We'll be right behind you."

"Okay!" They chime, running out of the room and racing each other upstairs, heedless of Nijimura's warning to be careful.

"You're such a good big brother, Nijimuracchi~!" Ryouta coos, and both Shougo and Nijimura are a little taken aback by the sudden nickname.

Bemused, Nijimura says, "Not really. They're just good kids." He smiles softly, explaining, "They just learned what their names mean, and they make sure to tell everyone they meet. They think it's the 'coolest thing ever.'" Shougo can hear the quotation marks.

Their names? Shougo thinks back. Dragon man and treasure? Heh. Their parents sure did have a sense of humor.

"Anyway, let's go. We have to go over what you'll both be seeing on your finals." He heads through the doorway, and Shougo and Ryouta hop up to follow along behind him.
On the second floor, they pass by a closed door, and Nijimura pushes it open, reminding his siblings, "Leave this open. I need to be able to keep an eye on you guys in case you get hurt, okay?"

At their agreement, he moves on and stops before what must be his bedroom. Shit. Shougo's nerves had calmed down while he'd been distracted by Ryouta and the twins, but now he's back to feeling like a slight breeze might knock him down. He scowls, thoroughly irritated with himself and shoves his hands in his pockets.

It's... pretty normal. Cleaner than Shougo's room. It's got a bed in the corner under a window, and there's a desk with a laptop and a small bookshelf on it. Posters with various basketball players and a few bands he doesn't recognize decorate the walls, and there's a small table with a math textbook and some notes splayed on top of it.

Ryouta dives onto Nijimura's bed and latches onto the giant sushi pillow in the middle, gushing as he rolls around, "It's so soft! And so big!"

"Cut it out," Nijimura grouches, plopping down on a cushion near the table. He glances up at Shougo, who is hovering in the doorway like a dumbass. "What're you doing? Come over here."

"Don't tell me what to do," he grumbles, even as does what he's told, sitting across from Nijimura and setting his bag down.

Suddenly, arms wrap around his neck and pull him back against the bed. Blond hair tickles his cheek as Ryouta nuzzles his face into Shougo's neck, and he starts in surprise when long fingers begin to tread through his own hair.

"Why," Shougo mutters, looking away from Nijimura's amused gaze and wondering if he should shake the clingy idiot off.

Ryouta laughs, and his breath ghosts across Shougo's skin, making him shudder. He coughs to hide it. "Your hair is really soft, Haizakicchi~!"

He digs further into Shougo's head, almost scratching but not quite, and weirdly, it feels really, really good.

"Please stop groping Haizaki where the twins can see you," Nijimura drawls.

Shougo immediately shoves Ryouta away from him, face burning and fucking scowling at the smirking son of a bitch across from him. "Shut up," he growls, still mindful of the brats not ten feet away from them.


"Can you start the da- the tutoring already?" Shougo demands, ignoring Ryouta's whining.

"Sure, sure," Nijimura says, flipping open a packet and sliding it over to Shougo. "Start here and stop on page 15."

He tosses the other packet to Ryouta, who fumbles with the large stack of papers before getting a proper hold on it. "You too."

Shougo begins working, stubbornly shoving down any lingering mortification.

XXIV. July 8, 2012 - Sunday
Tetsuya isn't there when Shougo and - unfortunately - Ryouta arrive at the public court, but he's not about to fall for the same trick twice.

"Yo, Kuroko," he says fairly loudly, eyes roving over the entire enclosure for a mop of blue hair. Seriously, how is he so damn hard to find when his hair is as obnoxiously bright as the rest of the damn Miracles? It's fucking ridiculous.

"I'm right here, Haizaki-kun," a voice pipes up from behind him.

Ryouta screams, stumbling to the left with little grace and clutching his chest.

"Fucking-!" Shougo whirls around and glares down at Tetsuya. "Don't fucking do that!"

Tetsuya hardly wilts from his sneering and merely responds mildly, "I've been walking beside you for the last five minutes, Haizaki-kun."

...oh. He glares off to the side, grimacing. "Well, speak up next time, damn it!"

Tetsuya blinks at him. "I called your name three times before you noticed me."

"Gahh!" Shougo facepalms, groaning and deciding to just drop it. He's not sure whether Tetsuya has begun to mess with people just yet, and he doesn't have the patience to find out. "Whatever! Let's just get this over with!"

"Kurokocchi!" Ryouta throws an arm around his shoulders, and Tetsuya glances at him a little uncertainly. Shougo's just glad it's not him. "How do you sneak up on people like that? It's amazing! You're like a ninja!"

Ignoring Tetsuya's protest about not sneaking anywhere, Shougo explains, "He's got low presence. People don't see him until he's right in their faces, and they forget he's there. Right?" He asks, belatedly. He's not some fucking Phantom expert or whatever, but he was privy to Tetsuya's training while they were both on the first string.

"That is correct," Tetsuya says, discomfited expression becoming pronounced the longer Ryouta clings to him. Shougo almost feels bad for him.

"Eh? That's-" Ryouta begins, cutting himself off when Shougo kicks him. He releases Tetsuya and grasps his leg, whining, "Oww! Why are you so violent, Haizakicchi?!"

Smirking, Shougo says, "It's because you're such an easy target." He turns back to Tetsuya heedless of Ryouta's squawk and props the basketball on his hip.

He has a few ideas, stuff that Seijuro probably told Tetsuya to work on, but first, he's got to see where the third stringer is in terms of overall skill.

For now... Shougo says, "Let's have a practice game, one on one. You and Kise. I'll observe."

"Ooh! Sounds like fun," Ryouta chirps, apparently having recovered from the earlier blow.

Tetsuya merely nods, but he's visibly excited. Ugh, it's almost endearing how easy it is to read him.

They get into place, Shougo tosses the ball into the air, and the game begins.

**XXV. July 8, 2012 - Sunday**

"Use your lack of presence as a weapon," Shougo advises him, feeling weirdly like he's taking a test
he knows all the answers to. It's almost nice that something's going as expected for once. "Specialize in passing. Ever heard of misdirection? That's how you make first string."

Eyes widening slightly in shock or maybe realization, Tetsuya is slow to nod his understanding. "I'll do my best. Thank you for the advice, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya tells him happily.

"Don't mention it," Shougo says, uncomfortable with such sincere gratitude being directed towards him. He's used to disappointment and anger, so this is new.

He leaves with a quiet goodbye, and Shougo frowns, conflicted.

Ryouta appears next to him, guzzling down some water and then he says, "Aww, don't be embarrassed, Haizakicchi~!"

"I'm not," he denies instantly, throwing up a hand to stave off the hug he sees coming a mile away. "Shut the fuck up."

"Who knew Haizakicchi had a heart of gold beneath that thorny exterior?" Ryouta wonders aloud, grinning like a little shit. "Going out of your way to help your fellow students! What a saint!"

"I'm gonna fucking strangle you," Shougo snarls, clenching his fists and barely restraining himself.

The fucker wiggles his eyebrows at him. "Kinky."

"Ryouta," Shougo bites out warningly.

Ryouta's mouth drops open in shock, and even in the special place Shougo goes when he's seething and the anger takes over, he finds that odd. So he goes back over what he said and- realizes.

Fuck.

"Oh shit!" Shougo curses with feeling, eyeing Ryouta's bubbling glee with trepidation. "I didn't- it was an accident! Just- forget it! Fucking forget it! I didn't say anything!"

"You said my name," the fucker exclaims, fucking sparkling, calm whereas Shougo is undoubtedly panicking. "You said my given name! We're on a first name basis now!" He laughs, ambling toward Shougo who is clumsily backing away. "Shougo," he fucking purrs.

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Shougo~!"

"Stop! Kise! We're not that close!"

"Shougo~!"

"Fucking stop it, or I swear I'll-!" His back hits the chain-link fence, and Ryouta pounces, trapping him in a disgusting one-sided hug, still smelling good somehow despite playing earlier. Shougo fucking hates him.

"I hate you," he says aloud, the words muffled by the almost six feet of ridiculously affectionate teenage boy glued to every inch of him.

Ryouta laughs. "No, you don't," he counters confidently, and despite Shougo's best efforts and common sense, no, he really doesn't.
I have spent an unreasonable amount of time figuring out the ages of these boys according to their canon ages in high school and Japanese school years, and I've finally got a chart I'm satisfied with. For reference, going from the beginning of this fic: Haizaki is twelve, Kise was twelve and is now thirteen, and Nijimura was thirteen and is now fourteen. I unknowingly skipped their birthdays, but oh well! It's a plot point now. OTL

I'll reply to all comments tomorrow! I am so tired! Hopefully this isn't awful!
XXVI. July 9, 2012 - Monday

Oh no. Shougo spares a moment to glare at the sky - because surely this is too much to just be a coincidence? Someone's definitely fucking with him up there - and then he turns it on Ryouta, who is grinning like the cat that ate the canary, looking way too pleased with himself as he drags a clearly reluctant Tetsuya to Shougo's table in the middle of the courtyard.

"Look who I bumped into on my way here!" The fucker exclaims, every bit the proud parent presenting his son to a damn marriage candidate or something.

Not buying that for a second, Shougo looks to Tetsuya, and seeming rather put upon, the boy clarifies, "Kise-kun tracked me down and dragged me here despite my protests."

"Hey!" Ryouta squawks, feigning hurt. "You make it sound like I kidnapped you."

"Didn't you?" Shougo chimes in, torn between exasperation and agitation. He was - apparently foolishly - hoping yesterday would be the last he'd see of Tetsuya, at least until the other boy makes first string. Should have known Ryouta would screw up his plans yet again. He lets out a sigh.

Wearing an outrageous pout, Ryouta claims the seat across from him and sets down his store bought bread and milk. "I just wanted Kuroko-kun to hang out with us," he mumbles indignantly as he fiddles with his wrapper.

Shougo grimaces, disgusted and then opens his bento to begin eating as well - until he notices Tetsuya is still standing next to them, awkwardly. Rolling his eyes, he gestures to his right with his thumb, "Sit down already. I can't eat with you looming over me."

Startled (at being addressed, maybe?), Tetsuya glances at him and then to Ryouta, who is no longer sulking but watching them eagerly, and his lips curl into a small smile. "Alright," he allows, sliding in beside Shougo with his own bento.
"So," Ryouta begins, leaning forward conspiratorially. "What's Aomine-kun really like? Haizakicchi says he's the best player on the team but won't tell me anything else about him."

At the last part, he shoots Shougo a Look, which he happily returns with a glare. The hell's he supposed to say, anyway? He rarely talks to Daiki despite them being around each other so much during practice and games, and he's not sure how to jump that particular hurdle. He's hit a wall in his sappy ass friendship plan, and it's got 'you're a socially inept loser' plastered across it in bright neon letters. He's not fucking equipped for this, and it's more than a little irritating that Ryouta can do what he can't - even in this! - so easily.

He swallows down his sudden (and yet not exactly newfound) envy with difficulty and does his best to focus all his attention on Tetsuya's reply.

"Aomine-kun is amazing," Tetsuya says with quiet conviction, his whole demeanor visibly brighter. "I've never met anyone who loves anything as much as he loves basketball." Warming up to the topic, he goes on, enthused in his own Tetsuya way, "He didn't hesitate to help me achieve my goal despite only just meeting me, and he stays late with me every day to practice."

"That's... pretty cool." Ryouta matches Tetsuya's sincerity with his own, a deep sort of longing coming off him in waves despite his grin, and Shougo wonders, absentmindedly, if this is the horrifying new beginning of Daiki's own fan club. He shoves the thought away with a shudder.

"Like I said," Shougo interrupts their little happy moment gruffly, "he's a giant puppy."

Amused, Tetsuya agrees, wryly, "That is not an inaccurate description of Aomine-kun."

Ryouta huffs a laugh, and Shougo snorts. Tetsuya maintains his little smile, and the rest of the break isn't quite as terrible as Shougo had sort of half-dreaded it would be.

XXVII. July 11, 2012 - Wednesday

"There's another one?" Nijimura blurts out upon spotting Shougo, Ryouta, and Tetsuya sequestered around a table and pouring over three open textbooks in the library.

Not even bothering to look up, Shougo points at Ryouta immediately with a bland, "It's his fault."

"Wha-?!" The blond splutters, probably being pinned by sharp grey eyes. "I- I can explain!" He offers feebly, and Shougo snorts, tuning the rest of the conversation out as he fills in the last of his homework.

His math grade has gone up - something he'd be pleased about except it's middle school math - but history has always given him trouble, and even with future knowledge, it's kicking his ass. Luckily, Ryouta managed to con Tetsuya into joining their tutoring sessions, and Shougo is taking shameless advantage of the phantom player's weirdly thorough grasp of Japanese history. In return, he's helping Tetsuya with English, which is Shougo's best subject.

Ryouta is surprisingly awful at everything - meaning the little shit was actually telling the truth about needing help and wasn't just trying to be a nuisance as usual - and one would think this would be fucking hilarious to Shougo, Ryouta's usual victim, but he's been tasked with the job of helping the moron, courtesy of his own hardass tutor.

'You're the one who brought him here, brat. You teach him.' - the cold, cruel words of his sadistic captain. As if Shougo wanted Ryouta here! Ugh. At least Ryouta is a willing enough student. This would be doubly annoying if he didn't pay attention and listen to Shougo's explanations.
He could do without all the touching, though.

He writes down a rather lackluster account of Oda Nobunaga’s death in answer to the last question, and then he peers over Tetsuya’s shoulder to check on his work. "Oh, you picked it up pretty quick. Good job."

"It's because you're a good teacher, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya says, his expression giving off a happy vibe despite being mostly blank.

"Ugh," Shougo groans, half-heartedly. "Didn't I tell you to drop the -kun?"

"You did. I simply chose not to listen," Tetsuya responds mildly, inclining his head with an almost smile, and Shougo grins despite himself.

"You little shit," he says, and it's amused more than anything. God, it's almost terrifying how easy it is to like this kid. He lures you in with his good manners and humor, and next thing you know, you're making long, impassioned speeches about friendship and teamwork. He saw it happen to the Generation of Douchebags when they were at their worst, and now he's being sucked in too. It's worrying that part of him doesn't even mind.

Nijimura takes up the space on the other side of Ryouta, regarding Tetsuya thoughtfully. "What's your name, Blue?" He asks, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

"My name is Kuroko Tetsuya," he says, a little nervously, likely unsettled at being given the third degree by his captain.

"He's on the third string," Shougo pipes up, shifting the attention away from a shaky Tetsuya to himself. He withholds a laugh at the other boy's obvious relief. "I'm... helping him work his way up to first string," he says, surprising everyone at the table, including himself. Just when the hell did he decide he was going to continue coaching Tetsuya?! That was supposed to be a one time thing! Shit. ...But as Tetsuya turns shocked, hopeful eyes on him, and Ryouta beams proudly at him, he realizes that, okay, yeah, things had been heading this way since he first bumped into Tetsuya, since he decided things were going to be different this time, damn the consequences. Maybe even since a tiny slip of a boy got his soul crushed by his so-called friends and then spent an entire year beating sense into their talented asses only for Shougo of all people to be the one sent back in time.

Nijimura scrutinizes all three of them, considering, before leveling Shougo with an unreadable stare. Uncertain, Shougo scowls, "What?"

"No one's ever done it before," he points out, addressing both of them, and it's not condescending so much as stating a fact.

Spotting the determination written all over Tetsuya's face, Shougo snorts, smirking. "So? He'll be the first."

It's easy to be certain when he knows that it's possible, knows that Tetsuya has done the impossible over and over again, and unlike with Ryouta, there's no deeply hidden (almost forgotten) resentment or envy. And maybe the others can sense his sincerity because Tetsuya's smile grows and his back straightens, and Nijimura's eyebrow quirks up before he smiles too, shaking his head.

"Good luck," is all he says, and then they turn their attention to the reason they're all at school at this godforsaken time of the morning.
"Shoooooougo~!" The purr sounds ominously from down the hallway and is only growing louder.

Confused, Shougo looks over his shoulder just in time for a warm body to collide with his, sending him sprawling to the floor and on his ass - with a lap full of a blond idiot. "The fuck?!" He grunts, instantly pissed. "Get off."

He's tempted to complain about the use of his first name, but he barely managed to get the idiot to agree to only use it when they were alone - which, okay, arguably makes the whole thing more intimate, but! It's better than the alternative. Even so, every uttered 'Shougo' sends a thrum of- something through him, something not entirely unpleasant, so he does his best to ignore it entirely.

Ryouta pulls back a little, just enough to look him in the eye. He's grinning smugly, and Shougo only just resists the urge to shove him off. "I'm so impressed, Shougo! I mean, I already knew you were gooey and soft on the inside, but I thought I'd have to push more before you would agree to help Kurokocchi! What made you-?"

"Shut up shut up shut up!" Shougo presses his hands to his ears, closing his eyes and drowning out the embarrassing words of this flashy bastard with his mantra. He's not fucking soft! He's an asshole! A selfish asshole! He's violent and rude and is only doing all this for his own ends! He mentally repeats this to himself several times, and it's a small comfort.

After a moment, he stops talking, and when silence greets him, he cautiously opens an eye. Ryouta is way, way too close to his face. Before he can reel back, the fucker darts forward and plants a kiss on his nose - for the second fucking time! What the fuck!

He shoves a smirking Ryouta away irritably, snarling, "Kiss me again, and I'll end you."

Not even pretending to be intimidated, Ryouta crosses his legs and watches Shougo scrub his face with amusement. "How would you go about 'ending me,' I have to wonder?"

Glaring, Shougo scoots away from him and mutters scathingly, "I'd break that cocky face of yours, for starters."

"Eh? But you even said yourself that this face was beautiful! How could you even joke about hurting it?" Ryouta whines, but he's still smiling.

"Fuck off. I said it was 'pretty,'" he hurriedly talks over Ryouta when the other boy opens his mouth, probably about to spout more bullshit, "and it was a fucking joke! But whatever! You're obviously good looking! Otherwise, you wouldn't be a model."

"Shougo thinks I'm pretty. I can die happily now," he swoons, cupping his face and generally being a fucking annoyance.

"Whatever! We're missing lunch because of this," he grousches, pushing himself to his feet, and Ryouta obligingly follows, graciously shutting the fuck up.

They head toward the end of the hallway, which was Shougo's original destination before he was tackled to the fucking ground.

"Kurokocchi was pretty excited, you know," the other boy says out of nowhere. He smiles, and Shougo decides to hold his tongue and allow him to continue. "He told me why he wants to be on first string so badly, and well, I'd like to help him out, too - if I can."
What, he had reason? "Other than just wanting to play in games?" He asks, actually bewildered.

Ryouta shoots him a secretive grin. "Mou, you'll just have to find out from him yourself!"

He rolls his eyes, and Ryouta changes the subject. But he can't stop thinking about it. Because, well, he honestly doesn't know? It's strange, but he'd sort of assumed he knew everything there was to know, everything he needed to know about this disaster of a team. This is just a much needed reminder that Shougo was not as close to the fall out - to the team - as he would like to think, and that though he had been there from the beginning, he'd never actually spent much time with his teammates.

It's a similar situation to now, actually, because here Shougo is, still awkward and stubborn and dawdling, unable to make friends on his own and unwilling to even try, too afraid to step out of his comfort zone and actually make a change. It's... pretty pathetic.

He doesn't have much of an appetite after this revelation, and he spends the entire break distracted, despite Ryouta's and a few of Tetsuya's attempts to make conversation.

XXIX. July 11, 2012 - Wednesday

"You look constipated," a chipper voice observes from his bedroom door.

Shougo, limbs sprawled out around him on the bed, turns his head to give his brother the glare that comment deserves. "Get out," he grumbles, without heat.

Shion smirks and comes into the room anyway, plopping down on the edge of the bed like he owns the damn place. "What's up? You've been moping around since you got home, and while I'm not one to judge you for your edgey teen phase, you haven't been like this in weeks."

"Shut up," he growls, but the words strike him as a surprise - although, they really shouldn't. If Nijimura, who has only known him - the other him - for two months, could tell something was different with him, then surely his family would have noticed. Still, the fuck is he supposed to tell him? 'I'm actually from the future, and I'm angsting over my inability to do anything right?' As if.

Shion watches him for a moment, and Shougo struggles for something to say. Finally, Shion prompts, "Is this about your boyfriends?"

Shougo freezes, every thought and possible response he could have uttered stalling at the asinine statement.

"I mean, your friends," Shion says belatedly, and Shougo feels like he can breathe again. "Although honestly, with the way they both look at you, I wouldn't be surprised if-"

"Okay, okay! I'll tell you! Just shut the fuck up!" Shougo yells, ears burning and heart thundering in his chest. From rage, probably. Not that he would acknowledge or allow for anything else.

"Knew you'd see it my way, Shou-chan," Shion says, wearing that smug ass smirk that always makes Shougo want to fucking deck him. And the fucker knows it, too. "So what's the problem?" He asks, seriously.

Shougo glances away from Shion's genuine concern, uncomfortably reminded of the way Shion and their mother had both worried after Shougo had been kicked off the team in his second year, when he was even more violent and angry but with no real outlet, so he stayed out late and skipped school and turned his own basketball into a shitty joke of a style. He doesn't like to think about it.
He hates the kid he used to be, but is he really any better now? Ugh. "What would you do-?" he blurs out, irritated with his own weakness and uncertainty, but that's not quite right. "How do you...?" He tries again, but that's not it either. Frustrated, he snarls, "What if I fuck everything up?!"

And... Shit, that's not what he meant to say - even though that's what's really bothering him. He chances a glance at his brother, mortified, but Shion is only staring steadily back at him, neither mocking nor judgmental.

"What do you mean?" He asks and then adds, "Like, a potentially life changing fuck up or this next year is gonna be really awkward kind of fuck up?"

Biting the inside of his cheek, Shougo sits up and shimmies over to sit closer to Shion. Despite Shougo being much older mentally, his big brother is still a solid source of comfort and likely always will be, no matter their ages. "I wanna say the first one, but it's probably the second one."

Scratching his cheek, his brother chews on that for a minute or so before advising him, cheerfully, "Then don't fuck it up."

"What?" He growls, immediately backtracking on all the good things he was thinking about his brother. "The fuck?"

"You heard me." Shion smiles at him, brimming with certainty. Where the hell is that confidence coming from?!

"That's useless! That doesn't help me at all!" Shougo says, incredulous.

Shaking his head - as if Shougo is the one who's being unreasonable! - Shion assures him, "If it's such a big deal, then make sure you don't fuck it up. Of course, I'm assuming this is related to you making friends - which, for the record, Mom and I are super proud of you for - and if you're actually freaking out about it, then you must be doing something right, yeah?"

He nudges Shougo with his shoulder, smiling softly, "You're not completely terrible, Shougo. Don't worry so much."

"Thanks," Shougo manages after a while, somehow feeling reassured despite all of the rambling. Maybe... it is that simple. How can he change anything if he doesn't even try, after all? And well, he might be a lot things, but Shougo's no coward. He returns the small smile. "That actually helps."

"Of course it does." Shion's own grin grows mischievous as he says, "I'd say you're gonna give yourself gray hairs if you keep stressing so much, but - you know." He gestures to their hair.

Shougo snorts, ruthlessly pushing Shion off the bed for the stupid joke, and he goes down with a high-pitched yelp. From there, a pillow fight ensues until Shougo accidentally breaks the lamp in his room, and they both swear each other to secrecy on the matter before their mom gets home.

That night, he goes to sleep feeling both lighter and more determined.

Chapter End Notes

To be honest, I'm dying to write a few key scenes (probably even some you guys have suggested!), but since we're following along a real calendar here, I also don't want to skip a whole week just to do stuff on the weekend! Like the photo shoot and such. So
do you guys have any suggestions for just little stuff that these boys can do before, after, and/or during school? I'd love to hear it!

Also: Any Haizaki head canons? Or ideas for some of the Miracles' families? Fye (on ff.net) made a great point about their families being something I could play around with, so if anyone has head canons about them, please let me know! Fye is also the reason I had Shion refer to Nijimura and Kise as Haizaki's boyfriends, so thank you for that. ovo
naps are for children & stressed out teenagers

Chapter Notes

Obviously, I can no longer promise morning updates, but as long as I make Friday at all, I'm content. Thanks as always for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks! I can't say it enough, but I absolutely appreciate all the love and support you guys give me chapter after chapter! You make writing this fun and so, so worth it, so thank you so much!

Warning! In Part XXXI, there is mention of blood and an allusion to non-consensual something, and if you want to skip that, then that's fine! Just stop at "It's only fair." (the end of some dialogue) and then start again at 'Someone is beside him.' (the beginning of a new paragraph)

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXX. July 12, 2012 - Thursday

Shougo yawns and then wipes at his suddenly wet eyes irritably. He'd had trouble sleeping last night after his conversation with Shion had finally forced him to make a decision, too keyed up and nervous to really settle down, and it's biting him in the ass. He's almost dozed off more than once in class today, and it's long since started to annoy.

Without warning, hot breath ghosts on the shell of his ear, and he practically jumps out of his fucking skin - to the clear amusement of the blond fuckwit laughing at him. "The fuck," he grumbles, trying to calm the hell down. "Don't fucking do that, asshole."

"Sorry, sorry," Ryouta says breezily. He leans forward, grinning, "Why don't you take a nap? I'll even let you use my lap, free of charge!"

"Hell no," Shougo replies, instantly. "You'd probably try to, I don't know, do something to me while I'm asleep."

Ryouta snorts. "I wouldn't!" And then he thinks about it, adding, "Well, maybe..."

Tetsuya frowns at Ryouta disapprovingly. "That would be sexual harassment, Kise-san."

Moping, Ryouta implores the both of them, "I'm just kidding! You can totally trust me!" He bats innocent eyes at them.

Shougo shares a disgusted look with Tetsuya, the same disbelief and exasperation passing between them, and then he yawns again, and Tetsuya's expression grows a little concerned.

"What?" he grunts, rubbing his eye with more anger than is probably necessary.

"...I'll keep Kise-kun in line," Tetsuya promises him, apparently switching sides. Damn traitor.

"Yes!" Ryouta throws an arm around Tetsuya's shoulders and smushes their cheeks together, eyes glittering. "Knew you'd see it my way, Kurokocchi!"
"Please control yourself, Kise-kun," Tetsuya says with some dismay, as he has every time Ryouta's used him like a human body pillow. "You're disproving my point."

"Oh." Sheepishly, Ryouta backs off of him, out logic'd by their phantom player yet again. Shougo is almost envious. "Hehe, sorry."

"I never agreed to this," Shougo points out defiantly, pushing himself up in an attempt to get on his feet.

A hand clamps around his head in mid motion, pulling him back down onto Ryouta's awaiting lap with the strong grip Shougo's come to fucking despise.

Fucking face heating up, he glares mutinously up at Ryouta's cheeky grin. "Bastard," he snarls, but the fucker just laughs.

"Get some rest," Tetsuya advises, serenely eating some miso soup across from them.

"I hate both of you," Shougo tells them, but they don't take him seriously.

"Love you too," Ryouta chirps.

Shougo scowls at him and then glances warningly at Tetsuya. "You'd better not let anything happen."

"I will protect you, Haizaki-kun," the little shit has the fucking gall to say with a straight face. Ryouta laughs above him.

Turning away from that smug ass smirk, Shougo gets comfortable and closes his eyes, sleep immediately creeping up on him - as if it had been waiting for him to let his guard down. Before he goes completely under, he feels fingers carefully running through his hair, warm and familiar.

He wakes with a burst of pain, and groggily, irritably, he clutches his head as he opens his eyes, barely noticing the other cry of bewilderment. Squinting, he realizes three things in quick succession.

One: From their close proximity and clear drowsiness, it's obvious Ryouta and Tetsuya must have joined him in taking a nap, Ryouta leaning against the wall behind them, Shougo's head in his lap, and Tetsuya's face pressed into Shougo's stomach.

Two: Lunch is over and has been for a while - if the sun's high position in the sky is any indicator. The question is - did the other two actively decide to skip, or did they accidentally lose track of time? He's willing to bet the latter because-

Three: Nijimura is looming over them, a frighteningly stern expression on his face and the one who so fucking graciously woke them with his fists rather than shaking them awake like a normal fucking person.

"Skipping again, Haizaki?" Nijimura says, crossing his arms and frowning. "This is the fifth time this year. Not that I care, but as captain, I've got some responsibility for my players, and you should know better by now. So... Fifty laps before practice."

Scowling, Shougo sits up and argues, indignantly, "It wasn't my fault this time!"

"Doesn't matter," Nijimura shuts him down harshly. "Any other player would have already been punished, so don't start whining now, idiot." He slides his sharp, reproachful gaze over to a strangely silent Ryouta. "And you. I can't give you laps, but don't think you're getting off the hook. Skip again,
and I'll make sure you get detention."

"I understand." Ryouta says, chastised. "It won't happen again, Senpai."

"Good," Nijimura glares down at them for a few more seconds, and then he sighs, dragging a hand over his face in exasperation. "What am I going to do with you guys?" He asks somewhat jokingly, effectively breaking the tense atmosphere.

"You could stop acting like our mother," Shougo mutters and then scowls, looking off to the side when Nijimura raises an eyebrow at him. Louder, he says, "What are you doing here anyway?" He gets to his feet with the help of the wall, sort of glad they'd had lunch on the roof today and as a result were only caught by his captain.

Nijimura frowns again. "Obviously I came looking for you. Anami-sensei asked me to find you after you missed her class. Didn't expect to find this dope up here with you." Ryouta's face scrunches up, offended, but neither of them pay him any mind. "Come on, school isn't over yet. You can still make your last few classes."

"Wait, where's Te- Kuroko?" Shougo demands, only just realizing the other boy hasn't been a part of the shitty lecture from the beginning - and almost slipping up with his name, damn it. "He was here too."

Nijimura's eyes widen in surprise, and Ryouta's light up with realization as he glances around the roof for their missing first year. "Kurokocchi was just here!" And then he gasps, unnecessarily dramatic, "Is he using his powers for evil?! No fair!"

"I've been here the whole time," Tetsuya pipes up quite calmly as the rest of them flinch back in shock. At least Ryouta's screams are more like yelps now.

"Ow," he says, monotone, when Nijimura slaps the back of his head.

"Speak up next time, damn it," Nijimura tells him, irritably.

"Yes, Senpai." Tetsuya replies, even though he clearly wants to argue. Probably with his lame 'you didn't hear me' defense.

"And don't you skip anymore either," Nijimura adds.

"Yes, Senpai."

"Don't let these two corrupt you."

"Yes, Senpai."

"And put a bell around your neck or something."

"That would be demeaning, Senpai."

Nijimura clamps a hand on Tetsuya's head, fighting a smile. "Don't sass me, first year."

"I would never, Senpai."

"Yeah, I bet." Nijimura gives in and ruffles Tetsuya's hair, and when he steps back, the sight is actually pretty damn hilarious. Tetsuya's hair is sticking up at odd angles, and the displeased expression on his face makes it even better.
"That was mean," Tetsuya says, almost pouting, making the second year huff a laugh even as he apologizes.

Ryouta tries to muffle a laugh of his own behind his hand, grinning like the awful person he is. "That was so cute."

Rolling his eyes, Shougo glances at his phone pointedly. "Class has already started, you know."

Nijimura curses and then begins herding the three of them towards the door, grumbling about troublesome first years.

XXXI. July 13, 2012 - Friday

The next morning, Shougo stakes out the gym that the third string practices in and hopes Tetsuya spots him because like fuck he's gonna be able to do it. First string has the mornings free now that they're halfway through inter-high, but third string doesn't really have anything to do but practice. Okay, so most of them have given up playing in an actual game and are only fooling around, but even then, there are still drills and practice games.

Knowing how hardworking and determined Kuroko is, he's definitely going to be here anyway.

"Haizaki-kun," a mild voice calls out to him, proving him right and also scaring ten years off his life.

"Gah, stop that," he growls, and then he clicks his tongue when Tetsuya only looks even more amused. "You're a damn menace."

"Why are you here?" Tetsuya asks, ignoring his very valid complaint. "First string doesn't have morning practice."

Here's the fucking hard part. Fidgeting - just a bit! - Shougo manages to get out, "Kise said you had a reason for wanting to be on first string."

"I do," Tetsuya agrees, pleasantly surprised. He tilts his head to regard Shougo thoughtfully, but he doesn't say anything else.

Impatient, Shougo shoves his hands in his pockets and barks, "Well? What is it?" Belatedly, lamely, he adds, "...Not that I care. I'm just- curious." He grimaces, and Tetsuya's smile edges annoyingly toward a smirk without him ever moving a muscle.

"My childhood friend and I made a promise that we'd play against each other in an official match," Tetsuya explains, fond and with that fire in his eyes that always surfaces when he's talking about basketball. "I intend to keep it."

"Oh..." Something about this sparks a memory, and despite the bad feeling it's giving him, he asks, "What school does he go to?"

Unaware of Shougo's concerns, Tetsuya tells him easily enough, "Meiko Junior High."

Shougo feels dread pooling in his stomach as the pieces finally fall into place. The Teiko-Meiko game in their third year... Despite his bitterness and anger toward the Miracles - or maybe as some twisted form of punishment - he'd forced himself to attend most of their games, sitting as far away from the court as possible and leaving as soon as the games ended, and then. Well, it became a sick source of entertainment, the way they trampled all over their opponents, knocking them down physically and mentally, carelessly cruel in the way children tend to be.
It had been satisfying because their pretend friendships had been so obviously in tatters, and their skills and talent - the very reason Shougo's spot had been taken - had only succeeded in alienating them from each other and making them miserable.

(Shougo will fully admit that he was worst sort of jackass back then, and he's never been more glad for the fact that he's not that person anymore.

Not glad for the catalyst, never, but then people usually don't get to choose what changes them - only how. And he chose to be better.)

Third year was easily the year they did the most damage, and now that he's actively thinking about it, Shougo remembers that joke of a game clearly. Teiko was leagues better than every other team, and everyone knew it. But that game was different because Tetsuya didn't play at all - had been injured in the previous match - and the Miracles rigged the game, made the score 111 - 11 in true asshole-ish fashion.

But what he's getting at, the thing that's making his gut twist unpleasantly is what happened after. Tetsuya running out onto the court, realizing what his douche-y friends did, and dropping to his knees as he cried his eyes out. The Miracles walking away, everyone in the stands gossiping or tutting in concern but not fucking doing anything, and Tetsuya slumped over like the world had just fallen at his feet.

Even Shougo, who - at the time - had been a grade a asshole, had hesitated upon witnessing that train wreck, more so because he'd never seen Tetsuya look so small than any kind of latent compassion. He'd hesitated, genuinely considered going down there and- doing something, but in the end, he'd just stalked out, not once glancing behind him as he left. He'd thought it had been awful without knowing anything, but with this new information, the guilt squirming in his chest is threatening to eat him alive.

"Haizaki-kun?" Tetsuya tries to get his attention, concern lacing his words. "Are you alright?"

No, he thinks, shaking. "Yeah," he says, distantly surprised his voice comes out even. "Yeah, I-Tutoring," he grunts, only just recalling the fact that - even if Tetsuya can't make it - he's still meeting the others in the library this morning. "I'll see you later."

"See you, Haizaki-kun, and good luck," Tetsuya smiles at him, turning to head toward the gym doors as Shougo steps around him to head the other way.

He nods his thanks and walks away as quickly as he can without making it seem like he's running, and he has absolutely no intention to go to tutoring with this weighing so heavily on his mind. He rounds the nearest corner and then leans back against the wall, sliding to the floor when his legs threaten to give out and burying his face in his knees.

Fuck. He groans.

It's not just that something so awful happened to someone he now - however reluctantly - considers a friend. He can console himself with the fact that it hasn't happened yet, that he hasn't let this Tetsuya down, and that makes it better.

But this- it's the tipping point, right? Tetsuya quit the team after that game, and it's no coincidence. Shougo doesn't have anything beyond a vague idea when Daiki cracked and even vaguer guesses about the rest of the team, but he can pinpoint the cause of Tetsuya's redemption warpath, what made him finally realize those arrogant fucks weren't going to go back to how they used to be without some world toppling. Or maybe that came later, and what came first was betrayal and heartbreak,
Giving up on them entirely.

Fucking regardless, what all of this means, what it's making him think... is stupid and fucking ridiculous. Miracle levels of arrogance. Impossible, probably, with his luck. Because he had the errant thought, for a moment, that he could stop that from happening. It's a dangerous thought because this whole changing things business is a slippery damn slope, and he's fallen right into every damn time travel story's bullshit trope - thinking he can actually make a difference.

When has he ever not just made everything worse? He's like a fucking disease, or maybe Tetsuya's power of friendship shit has infected him, made him want to do stupid shit. Didn't he already decide he wasn't going to fix anyone else's problems? He's got his own damn to do list, and it's taking up all of his time all on its own. He can't be a damn therapist or whatever to these messed up kids, especially when he's barely got his own shit together.

It's a horrible, terrible idea, and even despite all of his musing, he's still thinking about doing it.

He spends another few minutes going in circles before deciding judiciously to shove the problem under a mental rug to be dealt with later. It's not his fucking problem right now, so fuck it.

He pulls out his phone, which has been vibrating obnoxiously since he sat down, and ignores the call before sending a message to Ryouta. Can't make it today. Overslept.

With only fifteen minutes until school officially opens to welcome students, Shougo gets comfortable against the brick wall, resting his arms on his knees as he opens Neko Atsume to tend to his cats.

XXXII. July 13, 2012 - Friday

Bemused, Shougo leaves the gym ahead of everyone else, newly showered and dressed in his uniform again, and as he'd expected, Ryouta and Tetsuya are just outside waiting for him, both smiling when they catch sight of him.

"Haizakiichi," Ryouta chirps, apparently overjoyed to take up even more of their time today. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," he grunts, shouldering his bag and falling into step with them as they leave the school. He glances at Tetsuya, confused by this turn of events but not willing to ask about it.

At lunch earlier, Ryouta had made a big deal about not seeing Shougo and Tetsuya at tutoring and had whined about how scary and intimidating Nijimura had been without his - in the idiot's words - favorite player there, and though Shougo had told him to suck it up, Tetsuya had uncharacteristically suggested the three of them hang out after practice to make up for it. (Shougo had just been shocked Tetsuya hadn't ratted him out.)

Ryouta had fucking jumped at the chance, and Shougo had immediately turned it down, especially since practice has been ending as late as five thirty these days. But under the combined force of their damn pitiful faces (and still guilty from today's revelation), he'd caved embarrassingly quickly.

His one stipulation had been that Daiki and Momoi not tag along or even know about it, and Tetsuya had agreed without comment. Shougo's got a plan involving those two - well, just Daiki, but you get one, you get the other, yeah? - and that does not involve impromptu outings for ice cream.

Practically buzzing, Ryouta admits, "I've never done this before!"

Snorting, Shougo asks, "What, gotten ice cream?"
"No! Okay, well, obviously I have, but never with friends! This is exciting!" Ryouta exclaims, and Shougo can almost see the exclamation points fluttering around him.

"I've come here with Aomine-kun and Momoi-san a few times," Tetsuya reveals, also weirdly happy as the convenience store comes into view.

They turn to look at him expectantly, and he bristles. "I have too, ya jerks."

Not with what he would call friends but- acquaintances. People to fuck around with doing stupid shit, like under aged drinking and then going off to clubs when they were of age.

Ryouta laughs. "No need to be offended, Haizakicchi!" He pats Shougo's cheek affectionately, and Shougo slaps it away, rolling his eyes. "Guess this is just new to me then!"

The doors open when they get close enough, and they step inside the fucking freezer of a building, get the cheap ice cream, and then get out in just under ten minutes. Shougo's got a chocolate cone, Ryouta's tearing open a basketball-themed Popsicle, and Tetsuya's is rocket-shaped and watermelon-flavored.

They're walking aimlessly down the sidewalk, listening with great amusement to Ryouta's account of his harrowing experience with Nijimura as they enjoy their treats, and that's when it happens.

"-not lying! He was glaring holes into my head the whole time! Oomph," Ryouta grunts, accidentally bumping into some guy who was standing just around the corner. "Oh, sorry about that."

Ryouta moves to go around the guy, and Shougo, who was already watching him closely, tugs him out of the way when the fuckwit takes a swing at him. "Whoa!"

"Back off," he snarls, and there's nothing playful or harmless in his body language now. He keeps Ryouta and Tetsuya behind him, eyeing the three other guys who have noticed this little exchange and are coming over.

"Ohoho, look who it is," the ring leader says, leering at Shougo unpleasantly. "You're the fucking brat who put Toshi outta commission a while back, ain't cha?"

"I don't get the names of all the dumbasses stupid enough to pick a fight with me," Shougo bites back, pushing Ryouta behind him again when the idiot tries to step forward. He doesn't know any 'Toshi', and he hasn't fought anyone since he came back. Must have been his younger self. "You gotta be more specific."

"Yeah, it's you, alright. Grey hair, ugly mug. Fucking middle schooler," the asshole puffs up, and his cronies crowd around him, around them. "I got to pay you back for what you did to him, you know? It's only fair." And then his creepy ass gaze moves past Shougo. "Or maybe this pretty little thing can do something for us."

He chuckles, and his buddies join him, and Shougo sees fucking red. The mere idea-! The fucking audacity-! Like he would allow-!

With a wordless snarl of rage, Shougo lunges forward, jabbing the guy in the throat, and when he drops to his knees, choking, Shougo smashes his face with his own knee, and the guy goes down.

After that, the other fucks finally get their asses in gear, but it's too late. Shougo's already punching fuckface number two and then mercilessly kicking him in the dick.

After that, the fight is a blur. Someone gets him in the face at one point and busts his lip, and there's definitely going to be bruises on his side, maybe on his arms. He only really comes back to his senses
when the gross fucking douchebags are long gone, running away with their tails between their legs, and he's kneeling on the ground, blood dripping from his mouth and boiling beneath his skin.

He digs his fingers into the cement, head bowed and breathing harsh, and then there's a cautious call of his name.

"Haizaki?" Ryouta or Tetsuya or maybe both, more than once.

He doesn't answer, still trying to calm down, and there's shame now too - because he's violent and rude and still the same no matter what he likes to think. And he'd do it again. And again and again. Fuck that guy, fuck all of them. Daring to even- to even imply that they would- He exhales, inhales, and he's shaking again.

Someone is beside him, close, arms closing around his body, warmly, comfortingly. Another body, behind him, more arms circling around. Soothing murmurs and encouragements.

"I'm okay," he grumbles and means it. He's fine. They're fine anyway, so he did what he meant to do. Protect them. "Let's go home," he says, tiredly.

Tetsuya and Ryouta share a look above him - he can feel it - and they must agree on something because Tetsuya says, firmly, "We're going home with you."

"Yeah, it'll be like a sleepover!" Ryouta chimes in, forcing cheerfulness into his voice. "I've never been to one of those either."

"Okay," Shougo says, not having the energy to argue - and kind of relieved.

They help him to his feet, and then they slowly make their way to his home, somehow keeping up fairly lighthearted chatter all the way there. His mom takes it all in stride - since this isn't the first time Shougo's dragged himself home after being roughed up - and is more than happy to have his friends stay over.

Dinner is lively and fun, and Shougo sleeps soundly between Tetsuya and Ryouta that night, despite the fact that they had futons laid out for them and Shougo was on his bed.

Chapter End Notes

No chapter will ever be this long again, so enjoy it! dragonwings307 asked for "bad boy haizaki in action," and hopefully, I have delivered! Fights scenes are awful. 0/10 would not recommend.

I've been wanting to write that nap scene for ages! Somehow Niji was walking in the halls (maybe on his way to gym?) when Anami-sensei saw him, shh.

Also, Fye suggested they go for ice cream, which was wonderful. Thanks for everyone else's suggestions as well! I cannot wait to use them! ;D
XXXIII. July 14, 2012 - Saturday

Shougo wakes slowly, warm and relaxed, and it takes more than a minute for him to realize he's not alone in his bed. His head is nestled snugly in the crook of someone's neck, the rest of his body is pressed against the owner of that neck, and there's what is unmistakably a person wrapped around him from behind. What the actual fuck.

He blinks open his eyes, bewildered, and leaning back a little, he finds that it's Ryouta's shoulder he was sleeping so comfortably on, meaning that's Tetsuya's arm thrown over his waist and what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.

He tries to move, to get out of this weird cuddling clusterfuck, but Ryouta grumbles a little in his sleep and pulls him back, and Tetsuya moves closer, grabbing a handful of Shougo's shirt in the process.

Why is this his life? Why the hell are they are up here anyway? He'd glance over at the (clearly abandoned) futons, but Ryouta's chin is atop his head, pinning him down. Ugh. Shit. This is so fucking embarrassing. If his brother walks in-! No, if his mom walks in on them like this, she'll take a picture and add it to a family album, and every one of her work friends will know, and every time someone comes over, she'll show it to them, and even worse than that, she'll hold it over his head for the rest of his natural fucking life!

Shougo pulls away decisively this time, successfully dislodging their hold on him, but immediately he runs into the problem of untangling their fucking legs. Ryouta's got some sort of fucking leg lock on him. He's a pain in the ass even in his fucking sleep. Damn flashy bastard.

As if awakened by Shougo's increasingly violent thoughts about him (or as is more likely, by Shougo kicking him), Ryouta suddenly yawns and looks up at him through too long eyelashes. "Shougo?"

"Shut the fuck up," Shougo whispers harshly, head tilted toward Tetsuya pointedly. "Move your fucking legs, asshole. I'm trying to get up."

Eyes dancing with mirth, Ryouta says, "In the same bed as your friends? How dirty." He very noticeably doesn't move.

Disgusted, Shougo says, "Now you're just stretching it." And then he curses as Ryouta looks
absolutely delighted at the awful, awful setup.

"Proper preparation is key," he has the balls to say, and then he fucking winks.

Face on fire, Shougo snarls, "You're thirteen! What the fuck?! How do you even know-?!" He cuts himself off, grimacing. "Never mind. I don't want to know. Keep that shit to yourself, bastard."

Laughing, Ryouta reaches out and drags him back to the bed with one smooth movement, and then he squeezes Shougo to his chest and rubs his face in Shougo's hair, heedless of the profanities and Shougo's struggling. "You're so adorable, Haizakicchi! You blush all the way to the tips of your ears, and it's so endearing."

"Shut your fucking trap, asshole. I'm gonna kick your ass," he growls, ears hot and chest tight with mortification. Him, Haizaki Shougo, adorable? Maybe when he was a toddler, but he's certainly not cute now. Good-looking is an infinitely better term for it, but he's sure Ryouta would make that unnecessarily gross too.

"Haizaki-kun, Kise-kun, please stop flirting so early in the morning," Tetsuya says groggily, hair a mess and blinking sleep out of his eyes. "You'll wake the whole house."

"We're not-!" Shougo squawks, vehemently, pushing Ryouta away from him and sitting up.

At the same time, Ryouta chirps, "Sorry, Kurokocchi." When Shougo cuts himself off, shocked at what might as well have been a confirmation, he continues merrily, "He's just such an easy target, you know?"

The fuck?!

"The fuck'd you just say?" Shougo says out loud, scowling at the bastard's stupid smiling face as he sits up too.

As if he hadn't heard him, Tetsuya replies, reproachfully, "You shouldn't tease him so much. Haizaki-kun has a delicate heart."

Shougo's jaw drops open, utterly floored at the betrayal. Ryouta, whom had been just as surprised as he was at the jab, takes one look at his face and laughs so hard he falls over. Shougo kicks him and then glares at a smirking Tetsuya.

"I don't know why Nijimura thinks you're so innocent," he huffs, reluctantly amused but not willing to show it. "You're both assholes."

"Aww, you know you- you love us," Ryouta manages to get out between chuckles.

"I think you mean 'hate' or 'loathe."

"'Tolerate' maybe."

"It's not good to lie to yourself, Haizaki-kun," is Tetsuya's helpful addition.

He crawls to the edge of the bed and gets to his feet, scoffing. "The delusional ones are you guys." He runs a hand through his hair, puts both arms above his head to stretch, and then he walks to the door, calling out without looking behind him, "I'll be right back. Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone."

He hears Ryouta return a cheery, "No promises!" as he closes the door behind him, and he finally allows the smile to form on his face even as he rolls his eyes. Bunch of idiots.
To his surprise, his mom is at the table when he comes downstairs, nursing a cup of coffee and watching a movie on her laptop. She looks up when he gets closer and smiles. "Good morning, Shougo. You boys are having fun, I see?" She quirks an eyebrow at him, mischievously, and he realizes she must have heard some of the chaos from his room.

He grimaces, pulling out a chair to sit beside her. "Sorry about that. Those two are obnoxious." As far as he's concerned, one is just as bad as the other. He's not sure why he ever thought otherwise, but it's probably because Tetsuya seems so nice and polite on the surface. Who knew he was actually such a little shit?

His mom laughs, always a pretty sound, and he grins. Over the rim of her cup, she says, "Oh? I could have sworn it was your voice that carried down here to the kitchen."

"Yeah, well," he grumbles, not having anything to say to that. "They're good at pushing my buttons," he admits, sheepishly. He fiddles with a leaf that had fallen from the flowers in the middle of the table but looks up when his mother hums thoughtfully.

Expression soft, she reaches out a hand to cup his cheek and begins rubbing her thumb over it absently. "They're good for you," she observes, warmly, so obviously happy for him that he ducks his head, a little overwhelmed by her loving gaze and still so, so guilty - for things that haven't even happened yet, but that's no excuse.

"Gah, your boyfriends are so noisy, Shougo," the very familiar voice of his brother grouches from behind him. He takes the chair next to Shougo and props his chin up with his hand. "Oops, I meant 'friends.'"

Shougo glares at him, and with a snort, his mom pulls away from him and settles back in her own chair, all too used to their arguments turned fights and cleverly getting out of range.

Shion's got bed head and some drool dried to his face, and Shougo very spitefully keeps this information to himself. Scowling, he says instead, "That wasn't even funny the first time."

"Says you," his brother retorts like a five year old. "Besides, with the things I hear that blond kid say-

"He's just an idiot with no concept of personal boundaries, and he says stupid shit all the time, so I don't take anything he says seriously," Shougo says loudly, talking over him. "Stop eavesdropping, asshole."

"Language," his mother says automatically, but she's not even really paying any attention to them as she browses some site on her laptop.

"It's not eavesdropping when the other people are yelling, dumbass," Shion says, rolling his eyes. He gets up to make a bowl of cereal, but that doesn't stop him from spouting bullshit. "You woke me up before ten on a Saturday. You should thank me for not kicking your ass."

Shougo scoffs, "Like you could."

"Wanna bet?" Shion challenges him, returning to his seat with food in hand and a glint in his eyes.

"Shougo, you have guests. Go check on them, ask them if they're hungry. Shion, stop antagonizing your brother," his mom cuts in smoothly, brows raised expectantly.

"Yes, Mom," they reply obediently in unison.
Shougo still yanks on Shion's hair as he moves past him, and his brother instantly retaliates by scooting his chair back and forcing Shougo to walk straight into it, leaving a blossoming pain behind.

"Dick," he grunts, irritably, rubbing his side as he rounds the corner and starts up the stairs.

"Assface!"

"Boys."

XXXIV. July 14, 2012 - Saturday

"Ayano-san, thank you for letting us stay in your beautiful home," Ryouta says, bowing and then sparkling at her.

"We apologize again for showing up so unexpectedly," Tetsuya adds, copying Ryouta without all the fan fare.

Mom smiles back at them, and it's almost funny the way she towers over even Ryouta, who is only a few inches under six feet. "Don't worry about it. You're welcome here anytime."

Ryouta winks, perfectly forming his fake ass charming smile instantly. "I'll definitely come back just to see you, Ayano-san."

Without batting an eye, she says dryly, "Don't bother." As Ryouta's grin falters, a laugh threatening to slip out, his mom goes on, nudging Shougo towards them, "But you can drop by to see Shougo as much as you want."

"Don't do that either," Shougo huffs, feeling vaguely like his mother is throwing him to the wolves.

"I absolutely will!" Ryouta promises, grabbing Shougo's hand from its default position and pulling him forward. "See you later, Ayano-san!"

Shougo doesn't hear what Tetsuya says because Ryouta has already dragged him outside, but the other boy joins them a moment later.

"I can't make it today," Tetsuya tells them belatedly.

Ryouta whirls around, pouting, and Shougo snatches his hand back while he's distracted. "Aww, but why?"

"You're not seriously leaving me with him," Shougo says, groaning.

Lips curling up in amusement, Tetsuya says, "Sorry. I have plans with my grandmother. We're tending to her garden."

That's so ridiculously sweet it's almost sickening. Shougo grimaces. "Okay, well," he turns to Ryouta, who's hugging Tetsuya and whining. "I can't make it either, so-"

"No, no, no," Ryouta releases Tetsuya immediately, lunging for Shougo's arm and holding it in a tight grip. "You promised me!"

He tugs his arm, but as usual, it does nothing but make Ryouta squeeze harder. He groans. "Ugh, okay, fine."

"Great!" He beams at Tetsuya. "We'll see you tomorrow then! Have fun with your grandma!"
"Bye," Tetsuya smiles, watching Shougo being manhandled down the sidewalk with no little amusement. "Don't get into trouble."

"This idiot's trouble all on his own," Shougo shouts back, giving up getting his arm back and settling for walking so close to this clingy moron. "See ya," he calls over his shoulder, and he sees Tetsuya nod before turning around and heading - presumably - home.

XXXV. July 14, 2012 - Saturday

"So you're the one who's gotten Ryouta so excited lately," Yoshie - one of Ryouta's sisters - says, considering.

She's just as pretty as her brother with none of the flirtatious flamboyance and obnoxious cheer. She's confident and elegant, muscular and feminine, and she could probably fucking deadlift him with her pinky or reduce his self-esteem to zero with a few well chosen words. Dangerous. Strong. Queen. That's the kind of feeling he gets from her, and it's only been like ten minutes since he officially met her. Ryouta went upstairs to change, leaving the two of them to converse in the living room, and now he has to respond to what is clearly the beginning of an interrogation.

"...Yeah," he says cautiously, after a too long silence.

Yoshie looks amused at he effect she's having on him, but still there's none of the fragility or uncertainty in her body language that Shougo's used to spotting in Ryouta. It's unexpectedly unsettling to face her, and he fully realizes that Ryouta's presence is somehow more comforting.

"He hasn't been this happy in a long time," she divulges, watching him like a hawk. He certainly feels like prey under that intense gaze. "If you're just using him for his fan club or his connections as a model-"

Pissed at the insinuation, Shougo interrupts her, scowling, "Fuck that. I'm not- using him for anything. He's my friend. I wouldn't do something like that. I don't care if you don't know me or can't trust me. I wouldn't." He clenches his fists on his lap, irritatingly fucking hurt even though worse has been said - and thought - about him. "He's- We're friends," he insists, lamely, now sure how else to make his point.

She doesn't say anything for a few moments, just silently scrutinizes, and he doesn't fidget or falter, still angry. She must find something she likes because she smirks (which is honestly better than that predatory smile) and leans back, crossing her legs.

"I can see why Ryouta likes you," she tells him, and for the first time, there's no sugary sweet venom underlying the words. "You're honest."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he dares to ask, not even a little bit ashamed to admit he's kind of scared of her.

She tilts her head, blond curls spilling over one shoulder. "So quick to anger. I bet he gets a kick out of teasing you."

He chooses not to answer that, agitated, but her expression is knowing. Two is already too many times to wish Ryouta would be beside him as a buffer, and yet here Shougo is doing it anyway. As if in answer to his thoughts, they suddenly hear footsteps getting closer as Ryouta goes down the stairs. Shougo lets out an inaudible sigh of relief.

Just before Ryouta rounds the corner and comes into sight, Yoshie leans forward and promises quietly, "If you break his heart, I'll break you."
And then she gracefully stands up and meets Ryouta at the bottom step. Shougo frowns down at the floor, now angry and worried. How the fuck does someone like Ryouta have such an intimidating older sister? Honestly, he'd expected sparkles and rainbows from the Kise household, and instead he gets the friend version of the boyfriend talk from his scary ass sister. Fucking hell.

"C'mon, Haizkaicchi! Let's go!" Ryouta says, leaning down over him from his spot on the couch.

"Alright already," he grouches, hurrying to the front door and exchanging his guest slippers for his shoes. He steps out without saying anything else to Yoshie, conscious of her burning gaze on him until Ryouta shuts the door behind them.

"What did she say?" Ryouta asks him, resigned. "She didn't have enough time to pull out the baby pictures, so it must have been an embarrassing story, right?"

"How could you possibly have any? Everything you do is embarrassing," Shougo snorts, stuffing his hands in his pockets and much less unnerved in the company of the youngest Kise. "We didn't talk much," he lies, absently tapping his phone.

"Hmm," Ryouta makes a soft sound, and it's clear he doesn't believe Shougo. But he doesn't push. "Well, Yoshie is the one who got me that first modeling job," he reveals, and Shougo turns to look at him, interested. "Mom wasn't getting anywhere, so Yoshie asked one of her friends whose dad actually works for a modeling agency, and they got me the audition." He smiles ruefully. "Mom was stressed out, and I was pretty close to quitting, so Yoshie really helped us out."

"That... was nice of her," Shougo says awkwardly. What is he supposed to say exactly? His first impression of her is obviously going to be muddled considering she basically accused him of using her brother and then casually threatened him.

"Yeah," Ryouta agrees and leaves it at that.

A few moments of silence, and then: "So what does she do?" Shougo can't help but ask, even though he's hardly a nosy person. But those muscles weren't for show. She must play a sport or something - and with real dedication.

"Oh? She's a rugby player," Ryouta says, and there's pride in his grin now. "Her middle school team was pretty good, and she said the one this year is good enough to make nationals."

From there, the conversation derails into talk about sports in general, and about fifteen minutes later, they finally come upon the karaoke place Ryouta had begged him to go to over breakfast and that Tetsuya had so easily weaseled out of.

They rent a room for an hour with Ryouta's money, which was his answer to Shougo's complaint about wasting his own, and then they're settled in a booth, just the two of them with glasses of soda and snacks between them.

"I'll go first!" Ryouta chirps, buzzing as he skips over to the mic. He picks a song fairly quickly and begins singing enthusiastically to some upbeat pop song Shougo vaguely recalls being really popular.

He's not that bad of a singer, honestly, but he keeps winking and dancing awfully and singing the cheesy pick up lines at Shougo, which ruins the whole thing. Shougo spends most of it grimacing and laughing in turns, and Ryouta looks absolutely delighted at every elicited chuckle.

The song ends, and Ryouta gleefully hands over the mic. "Your turn~!"

Reluctantly - because he's never really cared for doing this type of thing - Shougo takes his place on
the stage and flips through the playlist for a song he recognizes and that won't be too annoying to sing.

He settles for a rock song, and he fights down his embarrassment when he notices Ryouta's laser focus on him. It's worse than a group because they're literally the only two people in here. Ugh. He should have told Tetsuya to reschedule with his grandma or made up a better excuse of his own for missing this.

But he sings anyway - minus the antics - and Ryouta claps and cheers for him like a damn groupie when Shougo actually kind of gets into it. His face is hot when he finishes, and he dodges the lunge slash hug Ryouta aims for him when he returns to the booth.

"That was so good! I didn't know you could sing!" Ryouta says, picking himself up without missing a beat.

"I'm okay," he grumbles and then takes a sip of his drink. He glances up at a grinning Ryouta and admits, "You're not as bad as I thought you'd be."

"Oh, mean!" Ryouta snorts. "I'm an amazing singer, Haizakicchi, and I'll show you."

He gets back on the stage and finds another song, and when the first words pop up, Shougo realizes just what a ridiculously obnoxious love song it is. Ugh. Why did he agree to this again?

"Kiss, kiss, fall in love~!"

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure you were all expecting the modeling scene to be this chapter, but as soon as I found out Ryouta liked karaoke, I was itching to write it. Also apologies for leaving Kuroko out, but I love the idea that he's close with his grandmother and wanted to showcase it. Anyway, hope you guys liked Yoshie! There was a head-canon that both sisters were queens, and I tried my best to live up to that! Might have copped out by only featuring one, but shhh.
XXXVI. July 15, 2012 - Sunday

The alarm clock wakes him up at nine on the dot, and as he groans pitifully, rubbing a hand over his face, Shougo wistfully recalls a time when he last spent a weekend without anyone demanding his attention or shoving knowledge down his throat or - the fucking worst of the offenses - forcing him to be conscious so early in the morning. He's so ridiculously close to just cancelling the whole thing and making up some lie about being sick, and then - well, it dawns on him that he very much can do that. Why the hell not, right?

Not stopping to think about the repercussions, Shougo snatches his phone up from the bedside table, thumbs in his passcode, and then sends a group message to his friends stating very bluntly that he's sick and that no one should come over today. Satisfied, he tosses it on the table, lays back down, and drifts off to sleep rather quickly.

Fortunately - or perhaps unfortunately - he doesn't see or hear the barrage of messages lighting up his phone in response.

_Flashy Bastard_

9:04 - what?! r u ok?

9:04 - haizakicchi! （」゜ロ゜）」

_phantom pain in my ass_

9:05 - Although I am suspicious, I won't question the dubious nature of your illness. Best wishes.

_Flashy Bastard_

9:05 - u were fine last nite!

9:05 - that's what she said lol (*ω`)o
9:06 - u there? dnt die on me! \( \( \_\_ \_ \_ \_ \_\_ \) /

9:08 - i'm comin over!

**Nijimura**

9:10 - I swear to god if you're pretending...

9:12 - Don't make me kick your ass, moron

9:15 - I'll be over there later. You better be sick, idiot

**Flashy Bastard**

9:22 - i'm bringing medicine!

9:22 - I'll nurse u bck 2 health! (●●●)

9:23 - wait

9:23 - wat do u have? is it a cold? a fever? diarrhea?

9:23 - i dnt know wat 2 bring u! (´д`)ツ

9:24 - nm! I'll just bring everything!

9:24 - ill be there in an hr!

**phantom pain in my ass**

9:25 - Kise-kun, please don't spam the group with messages addressed solely to one person.

**Flashy Bastard**

9:25 - oh! srry kurokocchi! (⌣_⌣)

**XXXVII. July 15, 2012 - Sunday**

He startles awake, eyes shooting open and heart racing - only to find Ryouta straddling his waist, hands pinning his wrists to the bed and face entirely too close to Shougo's. Blood almost instantly rushes to his head, staining his neck all the way up to his ears.

"What are you doing?" He means to growl, but it comes out as a whisper. Ryouta is way too close.

Ryouta merely smirks, and then he slowly leans down, eyes searing, breath ghosting over Shougo's face, way, way too close- and he presses their noses together with a cheery, "Boop!"

He laughs at the flabbergasted expression on Shougo's face as he rolls over to sit beside him on the bed, and that's when the anger overtakes the mortification, and Shougo tackles Ryouta with a snarl.

"You fucker!" Shougo half-shouts, pissed that Ryouta would pull this stupid shit again and absolutely fucking furious that he- that he almost- that he wanted- He puts the fucker in an armlock and pushes his face down against the bed. "You asshat! What the fuck!"

Despite the painful position, Ryouta is still managing to laugh. "Ow, ow, ow! Stop, please, I'm sorry!" He doesn't seem even a little bit apologetic, and his struggling is halfhearted at best.
"If you were sorry, you wouldn't have done it at all!" Shougo scowls, not letting him up but reducing the amount force he's using. "And you wouldn't be laughing, asshole," he adds, rolling his eyes.

"No, no, really!" He insists, trying to stifle his smile. "It wasn't." A laugh slips out before he continues, "-wasn't funny at all. I definitely regret my actions!"

Shougo sighs, swiftly moving from blazing anger to exasperation. "Yeah, yeah." He releases the grinning idiot and moves to the edge of the bed, swinging his legs over the side.

He glances at him over his shoulder, brows furrowed. "Why are you here anyway? I canceled."

"I came to see you because you were 'sick,'" Ryouta tells him, and Shougo can hear the quotation marks over that last word. "Lying to your friends, Shougo? How mean!" He whines, but his eyes are fucking twinkling.

"I am sick," Shougo says, dryly. "Sick of you."

"Ah!" Ryouta gasps dramatically, clutching his chest. "That hurt me right here!"

Shougo chooses not to respond to that. Instead, he asks, "Wait, why would you bother coming over if I was sick?"

"To take care of you, of course!" Ryouta chirps, running a hand through his thoroughly mussed hair. He gestures to a plastic bag near the door, explaining, "I even brought medicine!"

"I was excited to nurse you back to health! I even bought a nurse outfit," Ryouta is saying with a pout, but Shougo is still stuck on that first sentence - because what the hell?

Who even?- Is that a normal thing that friends do? It's... frustrating that he doesn't even know where Ryouta's eccentricities begin and simple friendship ends. Future knowledge is practically useless when it comes to this kind of thing, which is fucking great.

Regardless, there's a pleasant warmth flooding his body at the fact that Ryouta would risk catching his (imaginary) illness just to take care of him. Just to make sure he's okay. Fond and pleased and utterly happy, Shougo's not really sure what to do with himself, so... So he just smiles at Ryouta and says, "Thanks."

For some reason, Ryouta's face goes slack, and his eyes widen, and honestly, he looks like a startled animal. He makes a choked sort of noise, and then he pounces, knocking into Shougo and pushing them both onto the floor in a tangled heap. How many times must this happen?!

"Ow," Shougo grimaces. Ryouta's elbow jabbed his stomach upon impact, and now there's a knee wedged between his thighs. "The fuck'd you do that for?" He groans, glaring down at Ryouta, who is hiding his face in Shougo's neck.

Ryouta mumbles something, but he can't make it out. "What?" Shougo grunts, stretching out one of his legs and removing his arm from between their chests.

Ryouta says, petulantly, a little louder this time, "That was unfair, Haizakicchi."

"What?" Shougo asks again, confused and a little irritated. "What are you talking about?"

"You can't just- do that to me," Ryouta whines, lips brushing against his skin every time he speaks and making it buzz. "I wasn't prepared!"
"You're not making sense," Shougo says, squirming away from Ryouta, but he's all over him. "Get off." Ryouta squeaks, and Shougo growls, "If you make a dirty joke now-"

He struggles to sit up, a voice in his head pointing out - rather accusingly - just how often they end up draped over one another, and he ends up dragging Ryouta along since he's clinging pretty tightly to Shougo's neck.

"Would you let go?" He demands, trying not to be distracted by how weirdly amazing this flashy bastard smells. Who the hell wears cologne over to a friend's house?

When Ryouta only makes a noncommittal noise, Shougo peers down at him, and- "Are you blushing?" He asks, incredulous.

"No!" Ryouta denies instantly, but rather tellingly, he doesn't show his face.

"You are," Shougo says, and damn it, why is he getting all embarrassed too? Fucking-! "I'm not doing this right now." He removes Ryouta's arms from his neck, stands up without looking at him, and then leaves with a flat, "I'm taking a shower."

Nope, nope, nope.

XXXVIII. July 15, 2012 - Sunday

When he steps out of the shower, Shougo realizes with a quiet dread that he forgot to grab a change of clothes. Shit.

He stalls for a few minutes by brushing his teeth, but despite some very good arguments for doing so, he can't stay in this bathroom forever. He secures the towel around his waist and cracks open the door, and when he doesn't see anyone - namely, Ryouta - he hurries to his bedroom and closes the door behind him.

It's empty. He sighs in relief, immediately grabbing some clothes and beginning to change. He drops the towel and slips on his boxers first, hurriedly. Next are his sweatpants, and it's as he's pulling them up that his door slams open. He barely made it.

...Why on earth didn't he lock it? Stupid. Ugh. He ignores Ryouta, who quickly turns around upon spotting Shougo, and pulls his shirt over his head. After changing so many times in team lockers, he's not exactly body conscious. He's just sure Ryouta would find a way to make it weird.

"Putting on a show for me, Haizakicchi?" Ryouta teases, but his voice sounds kind of strained. See? It's weird.

"In your dreams," is his offhanded response, but then he thinks about it and adds, "Actually, not there either. Don't even think about it."

Ryouta laughs, spinning around to face him. "You can't police my dreams, Haizakicchi!" Then he blows a kiss.

"Ugh," Shougo grimaces, dodging the freaky anime heart. "Let's stop talking about this."

Belatedly, he wanders over to pick up his phone, and he grimaces again at all of the missed messages. Resigned, he opens the messaging app and scrolls to the beginning of the one-sided conversation, and he feels a throbbing in his temple as he reaches the irritating end.

*Flashy Bastard*
10:34 - *i'm here!* σ(≥ε≤ο)

10:42 - whoops! he's super sick guys! (Disallow – ζ)

10:42 - u def shouldn't come over!

**Nijimura**

10:43 - Really

10:43 - Because I find that hard to believe

**Flashy Bastard**

10:44 - he's totes sick! super duper sick! ♡*(σ(_ω_σ))*/🌱*σ

**phantom pain in my ass**

10:46 - Truly, your kaomojis display the seriousness of Haizaki-kun's condition.

**Flashy Bastard**

10:46 - u kno it!

10:48 - so sick! (ﾞ˘ω˘)

10:48 - but no worries, u guys! nurse kise is on the case! ⑨(¬‿¬)⑨ okmm

Attached to that cocky proclamation is a photo of Ryouta making a faux-serous expression with a nurse cap on, and taking up the entirety of the background is Shougo's sleeping body, covers kicked off, his shirt bunched up enough to show most of his stomach, and his face relaxed and vulnerable. It's the most mortifying thing he's ever fucking seen, and he sees Ryouta's ugly mug almost every day.

His eye is twitching, and he's gripping his phone a little too tightly as he continues reading.

**Nijimura**

10:50 - That idiot's just sleeping!

10:50 - and where the hell did you get that hat? Why are you wearing it?

**Flashy Bastard**

10:51 - that's not true!

10:51 - he's love sick!

10:51 - i'm a nurse so u cn trust me! (˘ω˘)ゝ

**Nijimura**

10:52 - You're a moron

10:52 - and you didn’t answer my question
Flashy Bastard

10:52 - mean! (°˘̥ eget| ₁)♡
10:52 - i'm a nurse! it's part of my uniform!

Nijimura

10:53 - Yeah, okay
10:53 - You do realize he's gonna flip his shit when he sees that picture

Flashy Bastard

10:57 - i kno! might as well take another 1! (・・○-)

Again, there's an image attached. This one is somehow even worse. Ryouta is right next to his face, cheesing the camera, and there's Shougo, still asleep and looking stupid. But the problem is that it looks like they're in bed together. Shit. This is awful. Fuck. He keeps scrolling.

phantom pain in my ass

11:00 - Kise-kun, Haizaki-kun definitely won't like that you took pictures of him without his permission or that you sent them to us.
11:00 - At the very least, you should not have done so in the group chat, which he has access to.
11:00 - As you can see, I had no part in this, Haizaki-kun.

Flashy Bastard

11:01 - kurokocchi! r u sucking up 2 haizakicchi? (■ □ ●)
11:01 - don't listen to him!
11:01 - he convinced ur mom 2 show him baby pictures of u!

phantom pain in my ass

11:02 - That was you, Kise-kun.

Flashy Bastard

11:02 - oh yeah
11:03 - well! he copied ur answers 2 his English hw!

phantom pain in my ass

11:03 - ...

11:03 - That was also you, Kise-kun.

Flashy Bastard

11:04 - oh ( °Д° )
phantom pain in my ass

11:04 Since it's difficult to relay through tone alone, I'd like you to know that I'm silently judging you, Kise-kun.

Flashy Bastard

11:05 - mean!

Nijimura

11:05 - I'm judging both of you. Stop blowing up my phone with stupid shit

phantom pain in my ass

11:06 - I apologize, Nijimura-san.

Flashy Bastard

11:06 - my bad

The conversation ends there. Shougo glances up at Ryouta, seething. "You took selfies with me while I was asleep?!" He growls, tucking his phone in his pocket before he throws it at the idiot. "Bastard."

"Uhhhhhhh," Ryouta says, slowly backing away and towards the open door as Shougo glares him down. "About that..." He reaches the doorway, and with a rushed, "I'm sorry!" he turns tail and runs.

Shougo gives chase. "What the fuck, Kise?!

Ryouta doesn't pause or look back. "I'm sorry! But I had to do it! There was no other choice!"

"Wha-? Why?!" Shougo barks, reaching the top of the stairs just as Ryouta makes it about halfway down.

"You were asleep and couldn't stop me!" He answers cheerfully, hopping over the last step and running straight for the front door.

"Fucking asshole!" Shougo shouts back, almost stumbling as he leaps over about three steps and lands hard on his feet. "I'm gonna fucking strangle you!"

"Some other time!" Ryouta responds, kicking off his guest slippers, dipping down to grab his shoes, and yanking open the door.

He closes it just in time, slamming it right in Shougo's face. "Coward!" He says through the door, and he hears fading laughter. "Ugh," he groans, rubbing his hands over his burning face.

"So that happened," Shion says, grinning as he pokes his head out of the kitchen. "Boyfriend trouble?"

"Shut up," Shougo almost whines, sounding strangely like Ryouta.

He cringes at the thought, pushing past his brother as he walks into the kitchen. This whole morning has been so fucking weird.

XXXIX. July 15, 2012 - Sunday
Somehow this day has gotten even fucking weirder. Shougo stops gaping at his captain and collects himself enough to demand, "What are you doing here?"

Nijimura smirks down at him, but that doesn't really mean anything. That's like his default expression. Either way, as always, Shougo glares right back at him. "I'm picking you up. Let's go," Nijimura tells him casually.

"Wha-? Wait, why? Where are we going?" Shougo asks, frowning in puzzlement.

"Stop asking so many questions, and just do it," Nijimura scowls.

"Don't tell me what do," is his instinctive reply.

Snorting, Nijimura kneads his damn knuckles into Shougo's skull. "Why are you so damn difficult? Listen to your captain, damn it!"

"Okay, okay, I'll do it!" Shougo grousches, gingerly patting the spots of pain blooming on his head when Nijimura releases him. "Ass," he grumbles under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Shougo says, plopping down in the entryway in order to put on his shoes.

"That's what I thought." Nijimura rolls his eyes, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorframe while he waits on Shougo.

A few minutes later, they're walking to some unknown destination (to Shougo), snarking back and forth like usual. Despite the strangeness of going anywhere with Nijimura outside of a school setting or in their roles as captain and player, Shougo feels at ease. Must be because of their close proximity during tutoring these last few weeks. It's gotten him familiar enough with Nijimura that being alone with him is no longer cause for panic.

Still, he is curious. "Where are you taking me?" Shougo tries again, peering up at his captain.

Nijimura is clad in a grey jacket, a white shirt, and dark pants, and he looks good like this. Stylish. Cool. Confident. That's what Shougo likes most about him - how he always seems to be in control and how he never lets anything crack his composure. Even when his dad was in such a bad condition, he never let on that anything was out of the ordinary with him. Shougo's envious of that unflappability, and maybe that's what drew his attention to Nijimura in the first place. You know, besides his admittedly handsome face.

Nijimura spares him an amused glance before growing serious. "I didn't bother saying anything before because you guys looked like you were having a lot of fun, but Anami-sensei actually told me you could quit tutoring at anytime." He gauges Shougo's reaction before nodding. "Yeah, I didn't think you'd be surprised. You're above average in all of your classes."

His eyebrow is raised in askance, so Shougo shrugs, kind of uncomfortable at this sudden questioning. "I just- I didn't think there was any point in... trying," he admits.

It's not technically a lie, which is why it's not really anything he wants to talk about. Back in school - before this time travel shit - he'd been disillusioned with so many things, and succeeding academically for him had always, always been followed up with pure shock at the mere notion that someone who looked and acted like Haizaki Shougo could possibly be anything more than a dumb delinquent.
"It doesn't matter," he says stubbornly.

"Okay," Nijimura says, thankfully dropping it. "We're here."

'Here' is a ramen shop, and once inside, they snag a seat at the bar. ...This isn't a date, right? No, obviously not.

"And we're here... Why?" Shougo asks warily, leaning forward on his forearms.

Nijimura glances around the room, taking in the busy workers and happy customers and deliberately not looking at Shougo. "To be honest, I expected you to bitch at me about the coupon, and as the generous Senpai I am, I would have taken you somewhere better than Maji Burger," he says idly. "Like a ramen shop."

He adds, almost like an afterthought, "Didn't expect you to take someone else."

While Shougo processes whatever that's supposed to mean, the chef comes over to take their order.

"Miso Ramen for me," Nijimura says, turning to Shougo expectantly.

"Oh, uh, I want Tonkotsu Ramen," Shougo fumbles to say, and the guy walks off.

'Didn't expect you to take someone else.' Did that-? Should he read into that? Or is this another friendship thing Shougo is painfully unaware of? Ugh.

"So congrats on bringing your grades up," Nijimura says, smiling a half-smile. "Knew you could do it."

"Uh, thanks," Shougo replies, off-balance because of this whole situation. "It's- I wouldn't have done it without you."

"You, being modest?" Nijimura huffs a laugh. "Never thought I'd see it."

"Shut it, bastard," Shougo scowls, and this- this is familiar. "You'd better pay for this too. That shitty coupon didn't even cover my whole meal."

"Yeah, yeah," he smirks, and Shougo finds himself mirroring the expression. "Cheeky brat."

Shougo laughs, and their food arrives, steaming. It's delicious, and the rest of the not-date is fun and interspersed with lots of insults and teasing. Afterward, Nijimura walks him home - despite much protesting - and all the way up to Shougo's front door.

"Thanks for the free meal," Shougo says, smugly. "Your company wasn't as shitty as I thought it'd be."

"Same to you, brat," Nijimura responds, smirking. "See you tomorrow."

"See ya," Shougo says, but Nijimura is still there, watching him intently.

Nijimura steps forward, lifting his hand and resting it atop Shougo's head, likely preluding an entirely unnecessary hair ruffling. Shougo scowls, opening his mouth to complain, but suddenly, the hand on his head slides to cup his cheek and turn his head to gently to the side, allowing Nijimura to leave a chaste kiss on his cheek.

Shougo freezes, scarcely even breathing, and Nijimura pulls away after a moment, still smirking but now definitely seeming satisfied. Shougo's whole body is on fire, and his heart is beating a mile a
minute. And he is so, so confused.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Nijimura says again, releasing Shougo and walking away, hands in his pockets and body language relaxed.

In contrast, Shougo is a taut string, shoulders tense and legs weak. Numbly, he touches a hand to his cheek, and his only coherent thought is a word that describes a good portion of the shit that happens to him:

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

I've got nothing to say. I'm just as surprised as you are. Now I have to shuffle around the plot again.

It's late, and I've only just finished writing this! So I'll reply to all comments from last chapter and any from this new one tomorrow! :D
this whole avoiding thing never works lmao but good try

Chapter Notes

As if to prove once again what a completely amazing and wonderful human being they are, Fye has made more gorgeous fan art for me! It's the picture Nurse Kise sent of himself and a sleeping Haizaki in the last chapter, so you should definitely go check it out here and leave Fye some love!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XL. July 15, 2012 - Sunday

Nijimura kissed him.

Nijimura kissed him.

Nijimura, his captain, his tutor, the guy he has a major fucking crush on that somehow hasn't faded these last ten years - that guy kissed him. Just, just leaned down and kissed him, kissed Shougo, and, and-

Shougo hasn't really progressed past that one thought. Because, well, how the hell is he supposed to actually comprehend that? The hell. What kind of mind fuckery-? Nijimura kissed him! On the cheek, but still! He can't even brush it off as an accident or a joke, which is another thing his brain is stuck on.

He hadn't noticed it before, but - that had been intent on Nijimura's face. Intent to kiss Shougo, apparently, and fuck if that makes any sense at all. He covers his burning face with his hands - despite the fact that he's the only one in his room - and clutches some of the hair dangling over the sides a little tightly. Just enough to hurt, but it's no distraction from the almost painful thumping inside his chest and the ball of lead in his gut.

Shougo - he has a handsome face, and after so many weeks doing Teiko's Spartan training, he's well on his way to having the muscular body he's used to. So yeah, he's good-looking, but it's not like Nijimura kissed him the first time around! Which means he made this happen somehow, and God, but doesn't that sting? Because apparently the real twelve year old Shougo wasn't enough to snag Nijimura's attention, but the twenty-two year old version of him bumbling around this timeline like a dumbass is. It shouldn't hurt, honestly, because that Shougo had been well on his way to becoming a dick, but still it's a raw kind of bitterness gnawing at his insides. His chest throbs, painfully, and he clenches his jaw.

He needs to calm down.

He lets go of his hair, carelessly dropping his arms on the bed around him, and just- breathes. In and out, in and out, on repeat until he's a little in control of himself again. He stares listlessly up at the ceiling, unseeing, the memory of Nijimura hovering over him, there even when he closes his eyes, imposing itself upon Shougo again and again until it's permanently imprinted upon his brain, until it's all he can think about.

Nijimura's quiet intensity, the determined curl of his mouth, the warm weight of his hand on
Shougo's neck. Then, sharper, clearer - the press of his lips against Shougo's cheek, warm, a little rough. The way his eyes never left Shougo's, searching, wondering. The huff of breath against Shougo's skin as he pulled away and the pleased, utterly satisfied aura he'd practically radiated upon seeing the blushing, bewildered mess he'd turned Shougo into. The confident, smug lilt of his voice when he'd spoken and then turned around.

Fuck. There's no way this can end well.

What is he supposed to do now? Because he can't. He can't, and he won't-! He's twenty-fucking-two, for God's sake, and Nijimura is so much younger than him. It's- He's disgusted with himself, and he's fucking petrified at the thought of going to school and, and acting normal around him. Because Nijimura apparently wants or expects something to happen with Shougo, and he just can't deal with that right now.

He burrows further under his covers and resolves to just- stop thinking about it. Future Shougo can deal with this shit. This Shougo has nothing to worry about and is going to sleep. Despite his convictions, it takes entirely too long before sleep claims him, but at least he doesn't have any weird dreams.

**XLI. July 16, 2012 - Monday**

He wakes well before his alarm clock thoughts circling uselessly and no solution forthcoming, and frustrated, he takes a shower. But there's no inner peace found there, and he doesn't feel particularly clean afterward. He takes a shower. But there's no inner peace found there, and he doesn't feel particularly clean afterward. He gets fired up and angry. Angry at himself for letting it come to this and angry at Nijimura for being such a confusing bastard and starting this whole shitfest.

By the time he towels off his hair and steps into his room, it's clear he's not going to school today. Can't because he's not sure what Nijimura will do - or what Shougo just might allow him to do. It's fucking stupid, and he knows avoiding the problem won't fix anything. He knows, okay? But it might buy him some time to think, which he desperately needs. He's not getting answers just standing here, so he throws on some clothes, grabs his bag, and sneaks downstairs, unsurprised by the silence that greets him. His mom won't be up for at least another hour, Shion even longer, and that's just fine with him.

He totes on his shoes and slips out of the house, a familiar itch under his skin, buzzing and insistent, and so he picks a direction and jogs, languidly going wherever his wandering feet take him. He already feels better, breathing in the fresh air, steadily picking up speed until he's running, bag bumping against him with every step, and maybe it's silly, but everything, the festering pile of shit he'll have to deal with later, his confusing mess of emotions - it all seems so distant in this moment, as if as long as he's moving, it can't touch him.

He runs until his side aches and his throat grows dry, and then he settles for walking around and eventually finds what he's searching for: a street court. It's not one he's been to before, and it's nowhere near the school, which is perfect. The last fucking thing he needs is Nijimura tracking him down, and with that line of thought comes the end of the bubble of contentment his run had achieved. Antsy and irritated, he drops his bag next to the chain-link fence, squats next to it, and frees his basketball before standing back up.

These last few weeks, he's spent a few of his Sundays coaching both Tetsuya and Ryouta, but it's not the same as just playing for himself. He has to keep an eye on them as well as reign in the reckless impulse to use moves he's stolen, and although it's admittedly fun, it's like playing with training wheels. He can't go all out, and he's not going to truly improve without pushing himself to his limit and then past it.
Because he does want to improve, wants to be on the same level as his teammates, wants to surpass
them before they leave him in the dust. He'd... forgotten, caught up in his new friends and suddenly
busting social life, but down to his very core, this is something he has to do. No, it's something he
will do. He can no longer be half-assed, has no time for maybes or what ifs. This is down to his
determination and his will, and now that he's no longer blinded by his own bitterness and resentment,
he won't be held back.

He dives into the one-sided game with more fervor than usual, and it manages to drag a smile out of
him for the first time this morning. His imaginary opponent is faceless, switching between play styles
as quickly as Shougo does, and he works up a good, satisfying sweat after a while. And one thing
becomes breathtakingly clear: He's getting better. He laughs, almost buzzing from excitement, and
tries a free throw. It spins twice around the goal before sinking into the net, and Shougo's smiling so
hard his cheeks hurt.

"Hey, hey, you!" A voice calls out, and bewildered, Shougo turns around - he's the only one here,
but why would anyone call out to him?

And then his jaw drops open, eyes going wide even as he mentally, dryly curses his luck. Because
what are the fucking chances that he would meet him here and now? It's been awhile, but there's no
mistaking that red hair or those eyebrows.

"...What?" He asks belatedly, gripping the ball a little too tightly and trying not to glare as the other
boy walks up to him.

The boy grins, feral and challenging, and literally none of Shougo's interactions with this guy have
ever been remotely good, what the fuck. "My name's Kagami Taiga," he says eagerly. "Hey, you
wanna play a game, one-on-one?"

Shougo frowns. "What are you doing here?"

Isn't he supposed to be in America right now? Or at least, far, far away from Shougo and the
Miracles, surely? He racks his brain but can't recall Kagami ever being mentioned before he teamed
up with Tetsuya in high school. Oh shit. Is this another thing he fucked up just by being here? He
bites his cheek, agitated.

"Huh?" Kagami blinks, maybe thrown that Shougo hadn't immediately taken him up on his offer.
His eyes light up in realization. "Oh, I forgot. Kids are still in school here. I live in America. I'm just
here with my dad on a business trip." He tilts his head, looking oddly like a bird. "Hey, wait, what
are you doing here?"

"Skipping, obviously." The words slip out carelessly, and before the offense on Kagami's face can
take root, Shougo says, quickly, "Okay, I'll play with you."

The change is instantaneous. Kagami grins again, wild and uncontrolled, clearly just as much of a
basketball nut as he was in the future. It's almost endearing. "Awesome!"

Shougo attempts to smile back, but there's guilt writhing in his chest, guilt and shame - because he
remembers his first meeting with Kagami, remembers callously, coldly choking that blond woman
and beating the shit out of Himuro. And perhaps tellingly, he doesn't even remember why. He's not
that person anymore and hasn't been for years, and there's no way in fucking hell it'll ever happen
again. But that doesn't erase what he did.

There's no erasing any of his crimes, but at least now he can do something good. Something helpful.
Kagami and Tetsuya had been pretty close. You'd have to be a special kind of stupid not to have
seen it, and well, he owes so, so much to Tetsuya. He can do at least this much, right?

Decision made, he pushes all thoughts of anything but basketball out of his head and focuses on the game and the boy in front of him.

"I'm Haizaki Shougo," he says, a smirk settling on his lips as they get into place. "You any good?"

Another grin and a huff of laughter. "Yeah. The best!" He crows, an unspoken challenge in every line of his body. 'Can you beat me?'

Despite himself, Shougo chuckles, amused. "That's funny. So am I." 'I can take you.'

They jump into action at the same time, Kagami reaching for the ball and Shougo twisting sideways to block it from him. The familiar rush of adrenaline and exhilaration thrumming through him at the prospect of a good match, Shougo bares his teeth in what might be called a smile, and Kagami matches it, canine for canine. This... is gonna be interesting.

XLII. July 16, 2012 - Monday

They play four games before they're both too exhausted to stay standing, and unsurprisingly, Shougo wins every one of them. But... He glances at Kagami out of the corner of his eye. That kid... is terrifying. He'd known that objectively since Kagami and Tetsuya eventually beat the rest of the Miracles after only playing them once or twice, but still - isn't this kind of potential ridiculous?

He actually came kind of close to beating Shougo in that last game. There was only a ten point difference! To be fair, Shougo doesn't have the height or power he's used to, he'd been practicing for an hour or so before Kagami got here, and they're hardly simulating a real game. But to improve that much that quickly... Shougo runs a hand through his sweat-soaked hair, doing his best to ignore the envy that surges up at the thought.

Despite everything, he'd had fun. Kagami has no way of knowing whether Shougo has changed or knows things - moves - he shouldn't, so he was able to let loose for the first time against a real opponent since - well, since the last time he'd been in middle school maybe. His violent, ruthless style of playing in high school certainly didn't count. Even watching the gap in skill between them close with every game hadn't dampened his spirits.

Suddenly, Kagami sits up and turns to regard him with blazing determination. "You're good, but I'll win next time for sure!" There's no bitterness in his expression, just the simple joy of finding a strong opponent, and Shougo kind of sees what had drawn Tetsuya to this kid.

"Next time?" He asks, pushing himself upright and quirking an eyebrow.

Kagami nods, grinning again. "I'll be here for the next two weeks! So we'll have to play again."

Huh. Shougo is almost shocked by how much he wants to, but he's careful not to let it show on his face. He's barely spent any time thinking about how he's going to deal with Nijimura, has even turned his phone off to avoid Ryouta and Tetsuya, and honestly, ignoring all of that and hanging out with someone else is pretty damn tempting.

"...Okay," Shougo says, smiling even as he makes a horrible decision. He's never been very good at resisting temptation. "But I'm just gonna kick your ass again."

Kagami barks a laugh. "Yeah, right. I almost beat you that last time." He punches Shougo's shoulder playfully.
"In your dreams," he snorts, acting childish and not really caring.

The two of them begin bickering amicably, keeping it up even as Kagami complains of hunger and Shougo suggests getting a bite to eat - making sure to steer them away from Maji Burger and towards another fast food place.

Chapter End Notes

SilverWhiteDragon asked for Kagami to show up earlier than canon, and I really liked the idea. Honestly, probably more than anything else, I want Haizaki/Kagami friendship, so yeah, that last part was ridiculously self-indulgent - but then again, so is the rest of the fic. OTL
big brothers make the best listeners

Chapter Notes

I'm so, so sorry for missing the last two Fridays. I accidentally destroyed my phone, which is my primary writing tool and source of most of my WIP, and it took much longer than initially anticipated to get a replacement. I'm updating today since I'm already off schedule anyway, and I'm sure you guys won't mind. If I can, I'll try to do a double update next Friday.

Thanks for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks! I reached 100 reviews on FF.net and 57 comments on here, so I want to do something to celebrate. Also, thanks for the concern, and sorry again for worrying you guys! Fortunately, the delay had nothing to do with me burning out or anything.

But enough of that! Enjoy the new chapter. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

XLIII. July 18, 2012 - Wednesday

Shougo has been hiding from Nijimura - and subsequently, Ryouta and Tetsuya since they're way too good at weeding information out of him and he's sure one or both of them would rat him out to Nijimura - for the last three days.

He dawdles just long enough to be late to homeroom, so they can't ambush him in the morning. He sneaks out to eat lunch with Kagami, who doesn't mind meeting him near the school and who makes the most ridiculously amazing food. He keeps himself busy during practice despite Nijimura burning holes into the back of his head, and so far, he's been able to slip away and head home while everyone else is changing.

Unfortunately, he's cutting it a little close today. He spots distinctive blond hair in his peripheral as he turns a corner, and in the half-second it takes to process that information, he slides right past fear straight into panic, especially when he hears Ryouta's surprised, "Shougo!"

Without stopping to think about it, he bolts, glancing around frantically until he spots an open window. He has one foot on the ledge when Ryouta shouts from behind him, as close to furious as Shougo's ever heard him in this time, "Oh my god, Shougo, don't you dare!"

He dares. It's only on the second floor, and Shougo has fallen from greater heights. One of the perks of being a delinquent with a penchant for pissing people off is that he's had to make a quick getaway more than once and has learned how to scale or jump off of buildings when necessary. This definitely qualifies.

He makes sure to roll on the landing since he's not too fond of breaking bones. It hurts, and there are definitely going to be bruises, but he can live it. He gets to his feet easily enough, ignoring Ryouta's rebukes and the pain in his shoulder, and high-tails it out of there. School's almost over anyway, and he's got a bad feeling about practice.

So he heads home, only to find that the door is locked, and his key is in the bag he left at school.
Fucking figures. He sighs and plops down on his ass, leaning back against the door with only a mild twinge of pain and glaring at nothing in particular.

He's so fucking stupid. Why is he doing this? This shit never ends well, and okay, Shougo's damn trademark is his ability to make monumentally dumb decisions - but this is different. This is entirely avoidable, but oh yeah, that's exactly what he's doing! Avoiding his problems. Like a fucking dumbass. Like the world's most socially stunted moron.

Like the pre-teen he isn't, which is the crux of the problem.

What a fucking hokey ass soap opera he's landed himself in. He just wants to make friends! It's embarrassing and lame as far as goals go, but fuck it, it's what he wants. Friendship. Even though it's got a whole host of issues and reasons behind it, his goal is fairly innocent.

And yet, while bumbling about trying to achieve this goal, he's somehow gained Nijimura's attention. It's so... frustrating. He bites his cheek, irritated.

Nijimura never looked at him Before, at least not in the way Shougo had wanted him to. He never interacted with him more than need be, never stepped outside of his role as captain, never even tried to contact Shougo once he graduated. He basically dropped off the face of the earth, disappeared from Shougo's life without a word, and in doing so, he unknowingly trampled all over Shougo's feelings and then burned what was left for good measure.

Now, it's like he's kicking up the ashes. And maybe there are embers, still burning, still feeling something for Nijimura, but-

Ugh. He's thinking in fucking metaphors. He rubs his hand down his face and then rests his arm on his knee, letting his head thunk back against the door. The sky isn't any more enlightening than the house across the street had been, and he closes his eyes, breathing calmly through his nose.

He's spent years building walls and blocking people out and mocking everything he's always secretly wanted, spent entirely too long hating the world in general and the Miracles in particular, and he's tired of it. Tired of resentment, tired of envy, tired of regrets. Tired of being so angry all the time.

Tired of pining after Nijimura, who had never actually seen him.

He laughs, and it's not a nice sound, full of bitterness and dark humor. Because it's kind of funny, isn't it? He crushes on Nijimura, Nijimura doesn't notice or doesn't care, Nijimura leaves. Now it's the other way around, and it's still painful. Except Nijimura made sure Shougo wasn't oblivious. Except Shougo has never forgotten his first love even though he's desperately wanted to. Except Shougo is always the one being left behind, and that hasn't changed.

There's no happy ending here simply because the feelings are requited, however. His life has never been that easy. Nijimura is a minor, a child, and Shougo is an adult almost a decade older than him. He may not often act his actual age, but the fact of the matter is that he is a twenty-two year old man and not the twelve year old boy he appears to be. Shougo has done a lot of fucked up things in his life, but he'd never date - or do anything similarly inappropriate with - a child.

But that's not the problem. There was never a question regarding whether or not he would accept the unspoken confession. No, what he's having trouble with is how to reject Nijimura without making things weirder than they already are. He still wants to be friends with Nijimura. He doesn't want things to change. Most of all, he doesn't want to lose him, not again.
Tears prickle his eyes, and he wipes them angrily, so unbelievably frustrated - with himself for being so weak and pathetic and with Nijimura for being so damn unpredictable. He's conflicted and pissed and sad, but he doesn't let himself whine about the unfairness of it all.

Life isn't fair, and you have to deal with whatever hand you're dealt. Time travel doesn't fix everything, and with a screw-up like Shougo at the wheel, it's a wonder things haven't gone to shit sooner.

**XLIV. July 18, 2012 - Wednesday**

"Oh no, again?" Shion mock-groans upon spotting Shougo's sullen form on their doorstep. "I wonder if I was ever this moody at your age," He says idly as he takes up the space next to Shougo, his body a welcome warmth on this unexpectedly cool afternoon.

"Shut it," Shougo growls half-heartedly, but he lays his head on his brother's shoulder, glad for the company, and Shion wordlessly lets him, curling his own arm around Shougo and pulling him closer.

Shion has always been a pillar of support and a source of strength when Shougo finds it hard to stand on his own, much like their mom is to the both of them, and despite the shit storm Shougo's managed to get himself into this time, he's still comforted.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Shion asks after a few minutes of comfortable silence. There's no expectation or implication in his tone, no demand for an explanation, and that's what makes Shougo talk. His brother has always been the type to listen without judgement, and Shougo loves him for it.

"Nijimura kissed me," Shougo reveals, still somewhat in disbelief even after a few days. He hesitates, not sure how to put his problem into words that won't make him sound like a lunatic.

Shion hums, and Shougo imagines he raises an eyebrow. "What, so he sucked at it?"

"No," Shougo instantly denies, startled into laughter. "The fuck?"

"It's a valid question," Shion tells him, valiantly trying to conceal his amusement. "Did you suck at it?"

"No," Shougo says again, rolling his eyes. "Shut up. It was on the cheek."

Shion snorts, "Hey, I'd be sulking too if the person I liked told me I was a bad kisser. At least the other way around, you could teach them."

Feeling braver, Shougo says, quietly, "I don't like him the way that he likes me."

It's not a lie exactly since Shougo doesn't, not really. He'd pushed teen Shougo's feelings onto this Nijimura, had allowed himself to reminisce and fall back into old patterns because it was familiar and easy, but it was never supposed to go anywhere or amount to anything. There's a very clearly defined line Shougo absolutely refuses to cross, and it brokers no argument.

"And you're worried rejecting him will ruin your friendship," Shion surmises, resting his chin on top of Shougo's head and bringing a hand up to run his fingers through Shougo's hair. Another reassuring gesture, and Shougo soaks it in.

"Yeah." He fiddles with a loose string on his pants leg, anxious.

"Well, avoiding him isn't gonna solve anything," Shion says wryly, and Shougo pulls away to look...
at him, surprised. His brother admits, not quite sheepish, "Mom got a call from the school saying that you'd skipped again. It wasn't too hard to put the pieces together." He then smiles, teasing in only the way older siblings know how to be when their younger siblings are in trouble. "She's not happy, by the way. Wanted me to tell you you're grounded from TV and video games."

"Oh," is all Shougo says. His mom probably tried to contact him first, but Shougo's had his phone on silent since The Incident. Even so, the punishment could have been much worse.

Shougo grins knowingly at him. "She should have banned you from playing basketball. God knows you're practically married to the sport." Shougo snorts but doesn't deny it, and Shion goes on, "Anyway, I think you're worrying too much, little bro. You always get inside your own head and think about things so much that small problems become these gigantic, insurmountable tasks."

"But." Shougo tries, indignant.

"**But** they're not." Shion shakes his head a bit, regarding Shougo with fondness and exasperation in equal measures. "Nijimura is your captain and your friend, and I know it sucks that you have to reject him because it'll make things awkward or whatever. But it's not the end of the world, and I think you're giving that guy too little credit. Sure, maybe he'll be pissed you don't like him and maybe he'll never talk to you again, but so what? You have other friends, Shougo, and if he does do whatever you're afraid of, then he doesn't deserve you or your friendship anyway."

"Deserve?" Shougo breathes out without meaning to, startled.

Shion's eyes grow sharp and serious, even as his smile stays firmly in place. "Yeah, deserve. Mom and I, we're lucky to have you and so are those friends of yours." He shoves Shougo playfully, insisting, "*You're* lucky to have such an awesome big brother. I don't get this mushy with just anybody, you know."

There's warmth unfolding in his chest, and it doesn't have anything to do with body heat. Shougo grins back, can't help it, not when he's this happy and feeling so loved. It's one thing to know it instinctively, but to have his brother spell it out for him without hesitation? It's enough to finally edge out the latent insecurity and guilt he's been harboring since he ended up here.

"I am," Shougo agrees, and then he pushes Shion off into the grass beside the small steps, laughing at the shocked yelp and declaration of war it gets him. That never gets old.

About an hour later, their mom comes home to find them at the kitchen table arguing heatedly over whether or not Shougo had cheated at their game of Go Fish. She just laughs and then makes them start over both to end the debate and so she can join in.

**XLV. July 19, 2012 - Thursday**

His plan is fairly simple. Wait until after practice to talk to Nijimura. It lets him put it off for a few hours, and he has time to think about what he's going to say. Whenever his anxiety rears its ugly head, Shion's words wash over him, and he manages to shake it. Whatever happens, he'll get through it. He survived without Nijimura before, and he can do it again.

Still, that doesn't help him when it comes to figuring out how to word his rejection. Shougo's never struggled to find words to wound someone or to push them away, so this is a pretty surreal experience. Usually, he just opens his smart mouth, and they leave all on their own. The novelty of having friends who actually want to be around him has yet to wear off, and that's probably a major reason for his uncharacteristic hesitance.
Fucking hell. He groans, attracting the attention of some nearby students, and stands from where he'd been squatting under a window outside the hallway housing first year classrooms. Kagami's spending the day with his dad, so Shougo ducked out here to eat lunch in peace. There's no peace to be had with all this overthinking, though, so he gives up and circles around to the double doors leading inside.

There's a harsh tug on his shoulder, turning him around and slamming his back against the wall. An arm traps him on the left, and suddenly, Shougo finds himself face to face with a pissed off Nijimura. He glances to the side, unable to keep that intent gaze.

"You've been avoiding me," Nijimura says, quietly. "Why?"

Shougo considers shrugging or feigning indifference - because he is so not fucking ready for this - but that would probably just make it worse. Instead, still not looking at him, Shougo tells him honestly, "I didn't know what to say to you."

"And now?" Nijimura prompts him when he doesn't say anything else.

Shougo frowns, brows furrowing. His heart is thundering in his chest, and his hands are sweaty. He ignores all of it. "...I don't return your feelings."

"That's a lie," Nijimura says immediately, and Shougo finally glances at him, indignant. But Nijimura just goes on, unwavering, "I wouldn't have made a move if I wasn't sure. You like me, and I like you. What's the problem?"

Cheeks flushing, Shougo snaps, "Don't be so full of yourself, asshole." He ducks under Nijimura's arm and stalks toward the - thankfully closed - doors, but Nijimura snags his wrist and holds him there. Glaring over his shoulder, Shougo demands, "Let go."

"Not until you tell me what's wrong," The asshole says, sharp grey eyes searching. "Why are you running away?" He taunts, and Shougo rises to the bait, fuming.

"Fuck you," he spits, whirling around. He knew this was going to explode, knew this was going to be awful. Why the fuck did he let his brother convince him that things would turn out okay? Things never work out for Shougo, and he should be used to disappointment by now, shouldn't he?

He growls, "I'm not running away, but I can't-" He cuts himself off, certain that wouldn't go over well.

Nijimura hones in on it anyway. "You can't what? Can't date me? Can't date a guy?" There's a flash of what might be hurt at that last part, and it makes him flinch. That's probably the worst conclusion he could have come to.

"That's not the problem," Shougo says, suddenly tired, his quiet tone a sharp contrast to their almost yelling. He sags a little, realizing he's going to have to share some of the truth - or at least some version of it - if he wants to get this over with. Sighing, he says, "I keep having these... dreams." He grimaces, and Nijimura grows skeptical, quirking an eyebrow.

"Dreams?" His captain parrots, a signal to continue.

Shougo nods, figuring he might as well go through with it now that he's started down this path. "Dreams about the future. And because of that, well, I feel a lot older than I actually am. So..." He trails off, glancing uncertainly at Nijimura.

His captain picks up on what he's not saying. "So you think it'd be unethical to date me because you
"feel... older?" Nijimura finishes for him, tone flat.

"Yes," Shougo answers.

"And this is because you dream... about the future?"

"Yeah."

Nijimura just stares at him, expression as unreadable as always, and Shougo tries not to fidget. The ensuing silence is thick with tension, and eventually, Shougo has to break it or he'll go fucking insane.

"I didn't expect you to believe me. It's a crazy fucking story, but it's true. I've got like nine years of future me's life in my head, and even though I like you and for some fucking reason, you like me, there's no way we can be together because it would feel gross and inappropriate - because you're only fourteen." Shougo knows he's babbling, but he can't bring himself to stop. He feels like a nervous wreck, and Nijimura's lack of reaction isn't helping any. "I don't know how or why it's happening, but this shit is my life now, and of fucking course, I'm screwing it up spectacularly. If there's one thing I'm good for, it's-"

"Haizaki," Nijimura's calm, cool voice cuts through his rant, fortunately. "I believe you."

"Wait, what?" Shougo blurts out, something dangerously like hope exploding in his chest. "Why?"

"You started dreaming all that stuff in May, right? That's when your personality did a one-eighty," Nijimura says, quirking a smile. "I've been wondering what could have caused it, and even if it sounds impossible, well, it fits. Plus, you're an awful liar. That little freak out of yours - that convinced me, too. It was way too genuine to be fake."

Shougo gapes at his captain, fucking bewildered by this easy acceptance. There's no way Shougo would have believed some weirdo spouting the same story, even if it was one of his friends, but Nijimura doesn't even blink. What the fuck. What the fuck. "What the fuck," he says out loud.

Nijimura smirks at him. "You're cute when you're flustered."

Fuck, here comes the blush. Shougo glares, closing his mouth, but it's not with any real heat. Nijimura actually believes him. Wow. The sheer relief leaves him feeling lighter than he has all week, but... There's still an issue that hasn't been resolved.

"So you get why...?" He gestures between the two of them, unwilling to voice it.

"Honestly, I still like you." Nijimura shrugs, casually pointing out, "I just need to wait until I'm older, right? I'm patient. I can handle it." He smirks again, "If nothing else, I can try to convince you to change your mind."

"...You? What?" Shougo has officially broken. All functions offline. Nothing makes sense anymore.

A hand settles on his hair and ruffles it, and Shougo hides his burning face behind his bangs, his throat tight and head a fucking mess. This boy is going to be the death of him.

Chapter End Notes
Nijimura believes that Haizaki believes what he's saying, and I just think in a world where people can glow and become invisible, this isn't too far out of the realm of possibility. Not everything's been resolved, though, and Haizaki seems to have forgotten something pretty important.

Guest 2 asked for more parkour! Haizaki, and jumping out of windows is such a cliche delinquent thing that I had to do it. Guest 2 also asked for Nijimura pulling a kabe-don on Haizaki, which was amazing and will appear again.

For the special chapter, I was thinking two things that you guys could vote on: an interview with the characters [only ones I've written!] where you ask the questions or a chapter entirely in Kuroko's point of view. Let me know! If no one's interested, that is also fine! ;D
good friends won't let you suffer alone

Chapter Notes

As always, thanks for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks! And thanks for voting!
Based on the lovely response and those of you who expressed interest in both or
couldn't decide between the two, I've decided to give in gracefully. (Also, I'm super
excited to do both, but shhh)

The voting will decide the order, so Kuroko's chapter will be up soon. Probably chapter
seventeen. Info on submitting questions for the interview can be found in the end notes.
It's just a few guidelines to make things easier for me. ;D

EDIT: CHAPTER 16 WILL BE UP SATURDAY! HOPEFULLY EARLY!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XLVI. July 20, 2012 - Friday

'I just have to wait until I'm older, right?'

Ugh. Shougo bites his cheek, thoroughly fucking irritated about how weak at the knees that one
statement makes him - and even more pissed that he can't stop thinking about it. The difficult part is
supposed to be over, damn it!

Why does Nijimura have to be so damn cool anyway?! It's ridiculous! No one can be that calm and
collected all the time, but his fucking captain's made into an art form.

He growls, furiously kicking the brick wall of the library, which is the closest kick-able object
nearby. He's too worked up this early in the morning! And Shion's - admittedly playful but still damn
annoying - comments this morning certainly hadn't helped any.

"That wall do something to offend you?" Nijimura says from behind him, clearly amused.

"Your face did something to offend me," Shougo snarks back instantly. Which. Yeah, it's not his
best comeback, but whatever. It's too early for this shit!

An arm wraps around his neck and the other on top of his head, trapping him in a headlock. "What'd
you say, you little shit?" Nijimura asks, not budging even as Shougo struggles. "Huh?"

Shougo snorts, but when Nijimura squeezes harder, he hastily croaks, "I said you're a very merciful
and kind senpai!"

Nijimura huffs a laugh and thankfully lets him go. Shougo rubs his neck and glares up at that stupid
smug face. "You'd better get in there. Your friends are plotting murder, and I'm not sure if it's yours
or mine," Nijimura smirks, pointing a thumb at the library.

Oh shit. Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit. He'd completely forgotten about Ryouta and Tetsuya - and
the fact that they wouldn't be happy that he'd basically ditched them when he'd been avoiding
"You forgot about them, didn't you?" Nijimura surmises, probably from the horrified expression on Shougo's face. He chuckles again, unbelievably fond. "Sometimes, you're really predictable, you know." His tone turns teasing as he says, "Guess your head was full of nothing but me, huh?"

Shougo's neck grows hot, and he whirls around and stalks away, so embarrassed he's fucking pissed. "Shut the fuck up, asshole! You think too highly of yourself!" He practically yells without looking back.

Too late does he realize what would be awaiting him in the building. He freezes, something like fear clawing at his insides and making his heart leap into his throat - because what if? A thousand awful scenarios come to mind - but before he can chicken out or make any sort of decision at all, it's taken out of his hands.

Nijimura grabs his shoulder and manhandles him over to the two boys working so seriously at the closest table. "Look what I found. A stray little first year," Nijimura announces cheerfully, shoving Shougo forward without an ounce of sympathy or compassion. Damn sadist.

"Haizakiichi!" Ryouta shouts, shooting up from his chair and pouncing on Shougo. He grunts as they inevitably collapse in a heap of limbs on the floor, but Ryouta pays him no heed, clinging tightly to every part of Shougo he can reach.

"Uh, hi," he says awkwardly, shifting a little to get comfortable. He pats Ryouta on the back a little stiltedly, grimacing.

Tetsuya crouches beside them, expression blank as usual but somehow radiating his disapproval. "Why have you been avoiding us, Haizaki-kun?" Damn. Straightforward as always.

"Well, that's my cue to leave," Nijimura pipes up, breaking some of the tension in the room. Shougo shoots him a dirty look over his shoulder, but Nijimura goes on, unaffected, "I've already been interrogated by the terrible twosome, and I have something I need to take care of, so I'll see you guys later."

With that, he tosses them a careless wave and leaves Shougo to his fate. Coward! Then his words sink in. ...What the hell?

Shougo glances at Ryouta and then Tetsuya, and asks a little incredulously, "Wait, you guys interrogated Nijimura?"

Ryouta pouts, leaning back but still basically sitting in Shougo's lap. He actually missed this casual affection - and god, what is his life? Ryouta sounds agitated as he reveals, "We tried, but he gave us different answers every time we asked!" After a moment, he admits, grudgingly, "Some of them were pretty hilarious."

"What's hilarious is that Kise-kun believed some of them," Tetsuya chimes in with a half smile.

"Wha-? I did not!" Ryouta immediately denies, and Shougo wonders what Nijimura could possibly have said. He hears something about Nijimura and a bridal carry in relation to him and decides he doesn't want to know.

He scoffs, "Yeah, well, I'm not gonna tell you anything either." It's way too fucking embarrassing, for one; and he's definitely not divulging any more secrets so soon.

The both of them turn surprisingly stern expressions on him, and he can't help but flinch. And
inevitably, anger bubbles up, his default emotion in confrontations or basically anything he doesn't know how to handle. Sure, he shouldn't have avoided his friends, but he's back now. So what's the problem? He snaps, defensive, "What?"

They share a glance, and Ryouta frowns, all traces of childishness gone. "Whatever secretive stuff you were doing with Nijimura is your business, fine - but why didn't you just say that? We wouldn't have made you tell us anything. You didn't have to hide and run whenever we tried to talk to you."

Uncomfortable - with excessive emotions and always being the one at fault, always the one to hurt people, Shougo scowls, "Why do you even care? It's not like I'm all that special, and you got along fine before you met me."

And okay, maybe he's reaching here, desperately trying to find something that will finally make these two realize what a fucking mess he is and what an awful, awful mistake it was to befriend Shougo of all people. He's waiting - has been since the beginning - for the other shoe to drop. For them to up and leave him like everyone has always done, like their older selves already did. It's a constant fear, usually quelled by Shougo's bluster and false confidence that he could be worth something, but it's at the forefront of his mind today, dragged out into the open forcibly under this intense scrutiny.

Ryouta blinks, stymied, probably wondering how their conversation turned to this, but it's Tetsuya who asks, painfully genuine, "We're friends, aren't we?"

Something in Shougo breaks at that, at Tetsuya's imploring blue eyes and Ryouta's encouraging gold. "We are," he admits, like it's cost to him to say it, like it's one of the numerous mysteries of the world. Like it's a betrayal - maybe to his angry, bitter past self who would have gouged out his eyes before ever admitting such a lame ass thing. He swallows, heart heavy, and manages, "But I don't know why-" you put up with me, he leaves unsaid and doesn't know where to go from there.

Ryouta makes a sound of protest, expression becoming fierce and determined. "We're your friends because we like you," he says with certainty. "I don't care how many times I have to say it before it sinks in, but Haizakiichi, I like you. We like you. You're kind and funny and smart and a damn good basketball player, and I'm glad I met you."

Shougo gapes, reeling with shock at the unexpected - unasked for - declaration, and Tetsuya nods, mouth set and stubborn and eyes blazing. "Kise-kun is right. My life has greatly improved upon meeting you, Haizaki-kun, and I am grateful for your friendship." He looks Shougo square in the eye, and Shougo's drawn in again, always, by the understanding and unconditional acceptance he finds there, the unmistakable sincerity. "It's something I treasure."

Blood rushes to his cheeks, and his heart thuds loudly in his ears. Tears threaten to spill over, but he pays them no heed, too overwhelmed and caught off guard. After Nijimura, maybe he should have expected this. After seeing the Miracles gravitate towards each other despite being the ones to tear themselves apart, after seeing them rebuild bonds and come back together stronger than before, maybe he should have known. Because he's a part of this circle of friends no matter how accidental and new, despite the fact that he's himself, despite the fact that they shouldn't - couldn't possibly have become attached to him so quickly. Or at all.

He feels a swell of affection for these two boys, fondness and friendliness and emotions he doesn't have a name for. "Okay," he says, voice hoarse. He clears his throat and tries again, "Okay, you can stop. I believe you." There's a flare of amusement at echoing Nijimura's words, but he dismisses the thought before it can fully form.

Ryouta beams at him, pleased, and Tetsuya favors him with a sweet, small smile. "Knew we could get through to you," Ryouta chirps.
"Yeah, yeah," Shougo grumbles, wiping his eyes with his arm. Belatedly, he adds, smiling helplessly, "...Thanks. I- I feel the same... about you guys..." He grows quieter as he speaks, so unbelievably embarrassed. How can these guys say that shit so easily?

Ryouta squeals, diving forward to hug him again, gushing, "You're so adorable, Haizakiichi~!" He rubs their cheeks together, laughing, and as usual, he smells amazing. Weird that this was also something Shougo had missed.

He shoves Ryouta away, ignoring the flush on his face, and... wonders. Knowing that he'd been wrong about them hammers in his ever present guilt, but... But he's happy, too. They actually wouldn't have forced him to talk if he wasn't comfortable with it, and even if he'd told them, they wouldn't have gone to Nijimura with it. This trust, this casual honesty - it's the same kind Shion inspires in him, the reason he inevitably spills his secrets to his brother when they're important.

He thinks about Ryouta's staunch - if teasing - support of he and Nijimura (however imaginary their relationship) and Tetsuya's heartfelt "You two look good together" before Shougo managed to convince him that Ryouta was a dirty liar and there was nothing going on between him and their captain. Maybe that's sort of a lie in hindsight, but surely, he can tell these two at least some of the truth? Not as much as he revealed to Nijimura but enough to assuage their curiosity, give a good reason for doing what he did.

"Haizaki-kun?" Tetsuya calls his name, probably noticing his shift in mood.

Ryouta pulls back again, and really, Shougo needs to push the kid off of him, especially for this awkward ass conversation. But he's just as touch-starved as Ryouta seems to be, so he doesn't really mind.

"You wanted to know why I was avoiding you, right?" He says, and they perk up in interest instantly. He rolls his eyes but goes on anyway, "Nijimura... confessed to me."

Now that he's not the one gaping in surprise, he can recognize the humor in the reaction. Tetsuya's eyes widen, and Ryouta seems to be frozen in place. He snorts.

"Congratulations, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya says warmly.

Shougo grins ruefully. Yeah, if only. "Thanks, but I turned him down."

"Oh," Ryouta manages, his lips twitching up like he's trying not to laugh. "That's too bad. I'm sorry."

Shougo scowls, "Find something funny, Bastard?"

"No, no," Ryouta denies, covering his mouth and failing to hide his twitchy smile. "I'm sorry it didn't work out."

"Yeah, right," Shougo snaps, but it's difficult to summon up his usual burning anger when he's so content. He'll puzzle out Ryouta's weirdness later.

Tetsuya asks, shrewdly, "Are you okay, Haizaki-kun?"

Shougo frowns, biting his cheek, and Ryouta sobers. He runs a hand through his hair, then scoffs. "Yeah, I'm okay." He's... He'd expected the worst when he'd finally been confronted by Nijimura, but it went well. Honestly, it couldn't have gone better, so yeah, he's more than okay.

This, too - this heart to heart or whatever went way better than he'd ever dared to hope for, and he's actually starting to believe them when they say such cheesy shit. It might take a few more lectures,
and he'll definitely freak out again - because, fuck, his insecurities have insecurities - but as of this moment, right now, his life is the best it's ever been. And he couldn't be happier.

He smiles again, hooks an arm around Tetsuya's neck and another around Ryouta's, and pulls them in for a cheesy ass hug to add to the heaps of it that's infesting this damn library. He laughs at Ryouta's shocked yelp and Tetsuya's gasp, glad to be the one tripping everyone else up for a change. Tetsuya is the first to return the embrace, and after a moment, Ryouta joins in, huffing a laugh of his own.

They spend a few minutes like that, wrapped around each other and smiling like fools, a sappy ass tangle of limbs and grins, and the silence is comfortable. So of course it's broken by Ryouta groping his ass.

He squeaks, the noise startled out of him, and the blush comes back in full force even as he scowls irritably. "Fucking pervert," he snarls, trapping the air headed bastard in a headlock.

Ryouta laughs, though it sounds strained. "It was just a friendly gesture!"

"Like hell!" Shougo snaps, squeezing a little harder. "You groped my ass." Why is this even a thing he has to deal with?! What is his life?!

"I was just looking for your phone!" He tries again, wiggling uselessly.

Shougo growls, "That's not any better, asshat!"

"Yamada-san will be here any moment," Tetsuya reminds them mildly, ever the sensible one - when he's not also being a sarcastic little shit.

"You got lucky," Shougo grunts, reluctantly releasing him.

Ryouta moves to a safe distance before winking and actually fucking saying, "I certainly did. So firm!"

"I'm gonna break that pretty face of yours," Shougo promises, sneering, but it just gets him another easy laugh.

"You wouldn't," Ryouta says, and Shougo's not sure where the confidence comes from. "You love me."

Ugh. He groans, disgusted, and when he turns to Tetsuya for support, the phantom player merely smiles knowingly at him. "For once, Kise-kun is correct."

"What do you mean 'for once'? Why are you so mean to me, Kurokocchi~?" Ryouta whines, leaning down to dramatically drape himself over Tetsuya's shoulders.

At the last second, Tetsuya darts out of the way, and Ryouta almost overbalances before he catches himself. He shoots Tetsuya a wounded look, but Tetsuya doesn't even glance at him, addressing Shougo, "We should start packing up our things."

Ryouta pouts, "Hey, hey, don't ignore me."

Utterly amused - both at Tetsuya's heartless behavior and Ryouta's pitiful reaction to it - Shougo says, "I'll help."

Tetsuya spares him another small smile, his amusement at his friend's plight dancing in his eyes.
"Thank you."

"You can leave that to me," Ryouta tells him, smiling despite his obvious irritation.

Shougo doesn't acknowledge him, just moves around him and begins closing and stacking the books in separate piles - one to leave on the cart Yamada-san has lent them for tutoring and the other two assigned to Ryouta and Tetsuya.

"Haizakiichi," Ryouta breathes out, indignant.

Shougo turns a laugh into a cough. He glances at Tetsuya, who is gathering up all the worksheets and pencils. "Did you hear something?"

Expression blank, Tetsuya says seriously, "A gnat."

"Uh!"

Pfft. He can't help it. He breaks down laughing at Ryouta's offended huff, and Tetsuya's quiet chuckles aren't long behind him.

"Mean." Ryouta glares at them, crossing his arms, but his mouth quirks into a smile against his will.

"There it is again," comes from Tetsuya, the words dry. It sets both of them off again, and after another cry of "so mean!" Ryouta rolls his eyes and joins them.

That's how Yamada-san finds them, giggling uncontrollably in her library - not one of their brightest ideas. She shushes them, pointedly reminds them where they are, and then kicks them out. It's a pretty damn good start to the day.

**XLVII. July 20, 2012 - Friday**

Ryouta captures his hand as soon as they meet up after practice and doesn't look like he's going to give it back any time soon. Shougo grudgingly allows himself to be pulled along, boneless and tired after that torture disguised as training and in no state to pick a fight. He just wants to head home and sleep, preferably for a decade or two, but these guys aren't having it.

"Come on, Haizakiichi, we're almost there," Ryouta chirps, like he's not the actual spawn of Satan.

"Shut up." Shougo tries to glare, but he can only manage something that feels disturbingly like a pout. Ryouta snickers at him, and Shougo grumbles, "Why do I do have to be here?"

From his right, Tetsuya points out, dryly, "At lunch, you agreed to receiving punishment for abandoning us. Kise-kun and I decided to begin the punishment by forcing you to eat dinner with us after practice." He smiles at Shougo, no trace of mischief or vengeance in the lines of his face, but Shougo knows he's a vindictive little shit.

Ryouta tugs him forward again, and Shougo groans as his muscles protest. Fucking hell. He's starting to realize 'friend' is synonymous with 'worst enemy' - except he can't kick their asses to the applause of thankful civilians. Hell, he'd probably get painted as the villain because Ryouta and Tetsuya would charm everyone into thinking they're pure, innocent souls. Same thing's happened at their school for at least one of them.

"You're so slow, Haizakiichi," Ryouta complains.

"I'm in pain, you inconsiderate dick," Shougo snarls, and then he sags. He's too damn tired to be
anything more than mildly irritated.

Ryouta laughs. "Sorry, sorry."

"It's unfortunate the first string practice was so demanding today," Tetsuya says, not sounding like it's unfortunate at all, and Shougo wants to punch him.

Luckily, Maji Burger looms just ahead, and Shougo doesn't have to strain himself by acting on his violent thoughts.

He tells them his order and books it to a booth near the window, feeling way better now that he's sitting. It's not long before Tetsuya and Ryouta join him with trays of food and drinks.

He's stretched out over the whole bench, so they take the other seat across from him. Shougo rips off the wrapper on his burger and dives in, ravenous. Ryouta and Tetsuya are talking about something that happened in one of their classes, and Shougo lets the idle chatter wash over him as he eats.

He's nodding off against the window, long since finished with his meal, when Ryouta suggests, "Hey, why don't you guys come to my house tomorrow? I've got some multiplayer games, and my sister stress-baked a bunch of desserts the other day that we could put a dent in."

Suddenly awake, Shougo says, awkwardly, "I've got plans. Sorry."

He's hanging out with Kagami tomorrow, and even though he's planning on introducing him to Tetsuya and Ryouta eventually, well - just for another day, he wants to keep this to himself. His friendship with Kagami is blessedly uncomplicated and easy, and he selfishly wants to keep it that way. Just one more day.

Ryouta frowns, and Tetsuya asks, " Plans?" But Shougo knows what they really want to ask.

"I'm not avoiding you guys anymore," he says, rolling his eyes. "But I've got stuff to do. We can hang out later."

"Stuff like what?" Ryouta squints at him, suspicious.

"Stuff," Shougo repeats, stubbornly, and then he changes the subject. They drop it thankfully, and they don't bring it up the rest of the time they're together. Before they part, Ryouta hugs him and then pulls Tetsuya into it - something maybe Shougo shouldn't have started, but what the hell - and he and Tetsuya share a bemused glance before they're released and head their separate ways.

At home, Shougo all but collapses into bed, barely remembering to climb under the covers, and he falls asleep almost instantly. He dreams of the present rather than the future, and it brings a content smile to his face.

Chapter End Notes

Gah, that first part would never end. There was so much to say and never a good place to end it. ugh.

But good news! It's now summer break, so please give me some good, cliche summer-y things for these guys to do. More delinquent cliches would also be appreciated!
Interview Guidelines:

- The deadline for submitting questions is September 16th.

- You can ask up to six questions. Less is fine but no more than six.

- Make sure to address the character or characters you're asking the question to.

- The characters you can interview are: Haizaki, Shion, Ayano (Haizaki's mother), Nijimura, Tatsuo & Takara (Niji's twin siblings), Kise, Kuroko, and Yoshie (Kise's sister)

- Feel free to ask spoiler-y questions. I wouldn't admit to anything, but the characters could possibly have revealing reactions or let something slip. Who knows? ;D
Sorry for the delay! I was busy again, and it spilled over into the weekend. In more bad news, I might not be able to update this Friday either. My schedule is still a bit hectic, and I need a few days between writing chapters, or I'll burn out. I'll try to aim for Friday or Saturday, though.

As always, thanks for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks, and thanks to those who gave me such lovely suggestions! I love you guys and the fact that you make writing this such a fun, enjoyable experience. ;D

In good news, all of the questions I've gotten so far are great, so keep them coming! I'm extending the max amount to twelve questions, and the characters you can interview are as follows: Haizaki, Shion, Ayano (Haizaki’s mother), Nijimura, Tatsuo & Takara (Niji's twin siblings), Kise, Yoshie (Kise's sister), Kuroko, and the new addition, Kagami.

The deadline for submitting questions is September 20th.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

XLVIII. July 21, 2012 - Saturday

"Yo," Shougo calls out when he catches sight of Kagami dribbling restlessly in the court they'd designated as their meeting place.

Kagami lights up when he sees Shougo, baring his teeth in a grin. "Took you long enough," he says, but there's no bite to his words.

Shougo rolls his eyes, setting his bag down on a bench and then walking over to the middle of the court where the other boy is eagerly waiting. "It's too early, basketball nut," he grumbles - entirely justified in both the complaint and the moniker.

Even though Ryouta and Tetsuya bug him about playing together or coaching them, it's hardly the only thing they do together or the only thing on their minds, period. No wonder this kid eventually helped Tetsuya topple the other Miracles from their thrones. He fucking lives and breathes basketball.

Kagami snorts, idly rolling the ball between his hands. "Like you're any better than me. The first time I saw you you'd skipped school to play basketball."

...Yeah, okay. Shougo huffs a laugh. "You got me there." Maybe they're both basketball nuts. His easy smile turns challenging as he taunts, "We gonna play, or what?"

Eyes blazing with anticipation, Kagami's grin matches his own, fierce and wild. "Let's play."

XLIX. July 21, 2012 - Saturday
"I can't believe you fucking won," Shougo says, gulping in air between words. He's sweaty and tired and splayed out on the ground where he collapsed after their fifth and final match. "You're like a fucking kangaroo, jumping all over the damn place."

He'd seen a few of Seirin's games, had observed the passing team that was Kagami and Tetsuya obliterate their opponents, but playing against them is entirely different. Neither are of them are on the same level as their future selves, obviously, but whereas Tetsuya is a few years away from beating Shougo one on one maybe, Kagami has done just that already.

Once again, Shougo has to concede the point - this kid is fucking terrifying.

Kagami laughs, and it's gratifying that he's even more worn out than Shougo. He sunk to his knees, panting harshly after that last game-winning shot and then flopped over on his back like a dead fish. "Finally!" He weakly fist-pumps the air, and Shougo rolls his eyes.

Honestly, he's surprised that he's not more upset. He fucking lost! And it wasn't even against a Miracle! But - well, he lost to Kagami. The guy who helped Tetsuya kick the Miracles' asses in Shougo's future-past. It doesn't sting or rub salt into an open wound. Because if he could beat them - all of them - then it just stands to reason he could beat Shougo too.

Plus, it's hard to get genuinely angry with Kagami. Shougo's known him what, a week? And already he can tell Kagami is refreshingly straightforward and honest in everything he does. He's probably a horrible liar, too. He's friendly with no strings attached, and Shougo can see why things turned out the way they did in high school.

Kagami is even enthusiastic about losing because it means he's found a strong opponent, and there's nothing more exciting than a challenge. That's the kind of thinking Shougo can get behind. Without all the baggage and bitterness he'd both had and witnessed in other players. Just pure, simple love for a sport and joy while playing it.

Another large part of the reason for his levity is definitely due to his reconciliation with his friends yesterday and Nijimura the day before. His usual anger is no longer simmering just under the surface, ready to explode at the slightest provocation. It's sappy as all hell - and why is that now the common theme for his thoughts - but he's too happy for any of that. It's... good. Great, even.

"Have you been practising this whole week?" Shougo asks, throwing an arm over his eyes to block out the searing sunlight. "No fair, asshole."

Because he'd been noticeably better than when they'd played Monday, and it certainly seems like something the kid would do.

"I was so pumped up I had to do something," Kagami defends, sitting up and stretching his arms above his head. "I can't sit still when there's a strong player I wanna beat."

Appeased by the unintended compliment (he's sure Kagami doesn't even notice it), Shougo lets the topic go with only a grumble. "Whatever. Don't think you'll win the same way twice."

With a groan, he pushes himself to his feet, brushing off the dirt and gravel clinging to his skin and clothes. He walks over and extends a hand to Kagami, who immediately takes it.

"I'm up for another game if you are," Kagami challenges, grinning once they're both standing - and instantly vanishing a fear Shougo hadn't even had the chance to contemplate.

And god, but does Shougo want to play again. The urge to hurt and maim, to commit violence and tear down his opponents is nowhere to be found, stifled fully and completely underneath the sheer
glee washing over him, that warm contentment he's wearing like a second skin, and he thinks - without sarcasm or irony - *yeah, I could get used to this."

Shougo smiles back, genuine and *real*, blood pounding with anticipation. "Anytime."

Kagami blinks, probably taken aback at just how much Shougo means it, and then he laughs, excited.

The moment is ruined when Kagami's stomach lets out a loud rumble. He looks faintly embarrassed but like he's trying to hide it, strange brows furrowing, and Shougo huffs a laugh.

"Let's get something to eat," he suggests, amused. "Before you keel over."

Kagami scowls, "I wouldn't." His stomach makes another noise, and he punches Shougo in playful annoyance when he snorts. "Let's go already," he orders, packing up his stuff, basketball included.

Shougo obediently follows suit - but not without retaliation. He shoves past Kagami on his way out, causing the boy to teeter on one leg before regaining his balance and shooting Shougo a sour look.

**L. July 21, 2012 - Saturday**

"The fuck," Shougo grunts when he and Kagami round a corner, and five dudes step out of the shadows, armed with baseball bats and broken pipes. How fucking cliche can you get? "What do you fuckwits want?" He asks, though he can make a pretty good guess.

Generic bad guy number one sneers, tapping the bat against his open palm almost idly, "You two are steppin' on our turf. Why don't you tell us what the hell you're doin', huh?"

Narrowing his eyes, Shougo frowns and then glances at Kagami worriedly. These aren't the same dicks from before, and it's broad daylight on a fairly open street. Why are these fucks bothering with them? And then, as Kagami tenses beside him, glaring, he realizes.

Kagami looks like one mean motherfucker. If Shougo hadn't already known who he was (and was prone to jumping to conclusions like these dumbasses), he'd probably have mistaken Kagami for a delinquent too when they met the other day.

And well, it's the same for him. Almost everyone he meets labels him a punk kid from appearance alone. His take-no-shit attitude doesn't really help matters.

These guys probably took one look at the two of them and figured they were there to cause trouble or fuck shit up or something. And this is a show of force, a move to protect their territory and probably make an example out of them.

Well, fuck that.

"We're just taking a stroll," Shougo says flippantly, smirking. "Right, Kagami?" He loosens up his shoulders and leaves his hands free, ready to act or react.

"Right," Kagami answers, frowning severely. "We were just leaving." He shifts, keeping the two guys on the right in his line of sight, watching them more closely than idle observation would call for.

Good. Kagami's been in fights before. Shougo could definitely use the back up. Five guys isn't exactly easy, but it's doable. *Maybe.* Five guys with weapons, though? He's glad for the help, even if he'd rather neither of them had to fight at all.
But, well - he's used to this by now. Most of the fights he's been in happened because other people tried to start shit with him, and Shougo didn't let them. He's never been one to back down or retreat, and this time is no different.

Not - he thinks wryly, taking in the anticipation of violence and spike of tension in the delinquents surrounding them - that these guys have any intention of letting them leave. Probably not even if they asked nicely.

"I don't suppose you could let us go?" He tries anyway, curious.

(He's starting to sound like a broken record, but since yesterday... He's in a good place. Mentally, emotionally, whatever. And it's obvious in this one interaction.

Normally, he'd be bristling with anger, bitterness clouding his every thought, resentment and rage bubbling up in equal measure. Because once again, he's being singled out just for the way he looks. Because he's got 'delinquent' printed in bold across his back, a bulls-eye in red for every wannabe thug to hone in on, and it grates.

Look at me, he wants to shout, not at these guys but at his teachers, his classmates, everyone who doesn't see him, who don't even try. Look at me. I'm not trash, I'm not a punk, I'm not worthless.

I'm just me, he wants to scream, loudly and desperately, until it finally fucking sinks in, until his throat is raw and his voice gives out. You can't see one side of me, take one glance, and categorize me in a simple, little box. Delinquent, no good, won't ever amount to anything-

It's still there, and it still stings. Shougo will never get over the sheer idiocy of people, always judging, always making assumptions. Labeling kids one thing, alienating them, treating them differently based on those assumptions. Then when the kids act out or misbehave, they pat themselves on the back and shake their heads, satisfied, glad they were right.

[You made me, he wants to say, quietly, seriously, intently. You made me.]

He's still pissed about it and likely always will be, but. But he's got people who accept him now. People who have seen past Shougo's prickly, asshole exterior to the less-of-an-asshole on the inside. People who want to hang out with him despite all the issues he's got and dumb shit he says and does.

People who like him despite the fact that no matter what he does or thinks or wants to be, some part of him will always be a delinquent with a smart mouth and hair-trigger temper, just as likely to throw a punch as he is to insult or offend.

And that? That soothes the hurt he's harbored for as long as he can remember, makes him feel content and warm and happy in a way he's never experienced before, and with all of that sappy shit going on inside him, it's no wonder his usual negativity can't drag him down.)

"No," Number One says, creeping forward. "Like we're gonna believe you guys're innocent," He scoffs, confirming every one of Shougo's suspicions about why they're in this mess.

"Thought so," Shougo grunts, swallowing back his ire with only a little difficulty. He catches Kagami's eye and says, "I take left, you take right. Whoever finishes first gets the extra guy?"

Scowl tinged with wry humor, Kagami snorts. "Winner buys lunch," is all he says in response, and Shougo huffs a laugh.

He leaps forward to tackle the closest douche to the ground, knocking the pipe out of his hands, and behind him, Kagami kicks a guy in the gut and snatches the bat from him.
Yeah, it feels good to have back up. Feels even better to have friends.

(...He'll remember to be embarrassed about the cheesy line of his thoughts later.)

LI. July 21, 2012 - Saturday

"You okay?" Kagami asks from where he's looming over the moaning and unconscious bodies of their foes. He's got bruises already blossoming from where one of the fuckers got him on his forearm, and he's a little wobbly on his feet. But otherwise, he seems fine.

Shougo, leaning against the wall and clutching his side, is a little less fine, but he'll manage. He's seriously considering going over and kicking the bastard who hit him with the pipe - not once but fucking twice, but that would require more energy than he has at the moment.

"Yeah," he says, taking in a deep breath before standing upright. His side flares in pain, and he grits his teeth but doesn't make a sound. "Let's go before these guys' friends show up," he suggests.

"I'm starving," Kagami complains as they walk - limp - idly towards the shopping district and away from the gray area in between it and the residential district - where some wannabe yakuza have apparently set up a territory.

Shougo snorts. That's a fucking understatement. After a few hours of basketball and then a brawl with some assholes, he's tired, sweaty, and fucking ravenous. "Me too. Ramen?"

"Nah, I want a burger," Kagami says, eyes trained on the recognizable glowing sign of Maji Burger ahead of them.

Unfortunately for their empty stomachs, once again, they're delayed in their quest for food. And unfortunately for Shougo, who despite being a (not entirely self-proclaimed) badass, would rather have avoided this situation - if only because it's horribly fucking awkward.

"Haizakiichi?" Ryouta calls out, and for like half a second, Shougo wants to pretend he didn't hear him. Wants to limp away with some dignity, eat some damn burgers with Kagami, and not have this confrontation right now. Or ever.

But he's not avoiding his friends anymore, and doing so now would disprove that. So he sucks it up and turns around, easily spotting Ryouta's sunshine hair and bright gold eyes and probably missing Tetsuya who's got to be around somewhere. "Kise," he grunts, so fucking awkward, god. "Kuroko with you?"

"Here, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya answers mildly from his spot right next to Ryouta. Neither of them are looking at Shougo, though.

Kagami shouts, backing up in surprise, and tension broken, Shougo chuckles. "Where did you come from?" He demands, bewildered.

A flicker of amusement crosses Tetsuya's face before it's swiftly buried behind his usual blank expression, but before he can make a lame ass excuse, Shougo cuts in, "These are my friends. That's Kuroko and the one with the dumb look on his face is Kise." He ignores Ryouta's offense, continuing the introductions, "Guys, this is Kagami. He's on vacation here from America."

"You had plans with Kagami-san today," Tetsuya surmises, always quick on the uptake.

Anxiously tapping the phone in his pocket, Shougo nods. "Yeah."
"Never mind that," Ryouta butts in, frantic with concern. "What happened to you? You look like you were-" He cuts himself off with dawning realization.

Shougo manages a smirk. "Like I kicked ass? We were just fucking jumped. But don't worry. We made 'em regret it." Nonetheless, both of them are clearly worried, expressions pained and probably about to ferret Shougo away to both chide and dote on him.

Not wanting to deal with these two and their mother-henning (even if he secretly enjoys it), he turns to Kagami, mocking, "It's because of your ugly mug, you know."

Kagami scowls, but his eyes are amused. "Shut up. They took one look at your scary ass face and thought the grim reaper had come to drag them to hell."

"Asshole." Startled into laughter, Shougo tries to maintain his frown. "They saw you and thought a corpse had come back to life to eat them."

Kagami valiantly tries to hold onto his offense, but he caves into his own amusement, laughing, and Shougo is only a beat behind him, adrenaline and the stupidity of their situation - they just fucking got into a fight and decided the first thing they should do is eat burgers - making the dumb taunts a lot funnier than they were.

"I see why you guys are friends," Ryouta comments, bemused, when they calm down.

Shougo grins at him, and Ryouta visibly loses his last bit of disapproval, huffing and moving over to lace their fingers together with his own smile.

"You know you love me," slips out of Shougo's mouth without any conscious thought.

Ryouta lights up, obviously pleased. "Haizakiichi, are you flirting with me?" He bats his eyes with a teasing grin.

Heat blooms on his face and all the way up to his ears, and Shougo regrets. He so regrets. "Like I would, fucking pervert!" He denies way too loudly, and Ryouta's hand is warm, too warm, but he doesn't shake him off.

Ryouta laughs. "So adorable~!"

Shougo snarls in rage.

"My name is Kuroko Tetsuya. It is nice to meet you, Kagami-san," Tetsuya properly introduces himself off to the side, expertly ignoring Ryouta's pleas for help as Shougo tries to strangle him.

Kagami, confused but not willing to step in either, says distractedly, "Kagami Taiga. Nice to meet you too." He tilts his head, swiftly moving towards humor. "Are they always like that?"

Tetsuya smiles, slightly. "I'm afraid so, Kagami-san. Kise-kun can be a bit... much when it comes to Haizaki-kun."

Kagami nods, and then apparently plays back their conversation. "Drop the suffix or switch to 'kun,'" he orders, disgruntled by the formality.

"As you wish, Kagami-kun."

"Hey, do you play basketball?" Kagami asks, eyeing Tetsuya with consideration, dubious as his tone is.
Shougo abruptly releases Ryouta, answering for Tetsuya again, "All of us do, but I'm tired and hungry. Let's go fucking eat already."

Chapter End Notes

I'm convinced Kagami has gotten into fights before because of his scary face - despite being a sunshine child - and no one can make me think otherwise. Don't know if it's canon. haplessgrapefrut implanted the idea in my mind, and although I went in a different direction than what they suggested, I hope it was enjoyable! I still intend to add your suggestion somewhere - just maybe not in the way you think. ;D

Ignore the medical/health side of things, please. I'm not too interested in being realistic when the anime/manga hardly is either. Not much else to say. Oh! Kuroko's POV should be next chapter, so look forward to that.
LII. July 21, 2012 - Saturday

"Haizakiichi and I'll get a booth, so you guys can order!" Kise announces merrily, dragging Haizaki away by the shoulders as soon as they step inside. "I want a number three, and he wants a number five!"

...Way to be subtle, Kise-kun. Tetsuya doesn't roll his eyes, but he certainly wants to.

Haizaki scowls, "Stop pushing. I can fucking walk." He noticeably doesn't step away from Kise or shrug him off, and his complaint sounds half-hearted at best. "And how do you even know what I want anyway?"

Kise's reply is too quiet for him to hear, but he can guess it was flirtatious in nature by the way Haizaki flushes and curses. Tetsuya's become quite adept at reading body language and tells to better his playing style, especially those of his friends, but even a stranger could read the indignant anger and profanity in Haizaki's expressions and violent gestures.

That can't be good for his injuries. He's doing an admirable job of downplaying them or directing their attention elsewhere, but again, anyone can see the signs. It's unfortunate that Haizaki doesn't yet realize he can safely discuss these things with them.

Thankfully, Kise manages to calm him down, enough that Haizaki is even willing to sit next to him despite the danger of roaming hands. Almost immediately, Kise slips an arm around Haizaki's shoulders, and Haizaki lets it stay with only a sharp look.

Tetsuya stifles a smile.

He has to wonder if Haizaki even notices how much he gives in to Kise now - and so easily too. It never ceases to amuse him.

He turns back to face the front of the line, and his eyes stray to the hulking form of Haizaki's new
friend. The boy is practically bouncing on his heels, eager to sate his hunger, and he's wounded as well. There are purpling bruises across his forearms amongst various scrapes and cuts. The fight must have been more difficult than either of them had let on.

Tetsuya brushes aside the worry. Haizaki is very obviously uncomfortable talking about his fighting, and he'll respect that. Even if he thinks Haizaki is a moron for not relying on them more.

He and Kise had discussed it during the few days Haizaki had avoided them. Tetsuya is the only one of the three of them who has a childhood friend he can lean on for support. Kise has never had a real friend before Haizaki, and they both suspect that to be true of Haizaki as well.

His friendship with Ogiwara is precious to him, and he feels a pang of sorrow when he thinks that neither of his new friends had a bond like that before this year. Even Aomine has Momoi. So he sets aside his concerns and focuses on tackling each and every one of Haizaki's and Kise's insecurities and doubts when they surface and reassuring them as best as he can.

They're both incompetent when it comes to these things, so as usual, Tetsuya will have to be the voice of reason. He finds that he doesn't really mind.

"Hey, we're up," Kagami says, and Tetsuya joins him at the counter. Kagami spares the menu barely a glance before he orders, "I'll take fifteen cheeseburgers with a side of fries and a drink."

Tetsuya's face goes a little slack in surprise, but the slip is unnoticeable to anyone who doesn't know him. "I don't think all of us can eat that many burgers, Kagami-kun."

Kagami throws him an aggravated look. "It's for me," he explains with the tone of a man who is used to explaining his food choices to others. He addresses the cashier again, "Also a number three and a number five, and..."

At the expectant silence, Tetsuya fills in, "A vanilla milkshake, please."

Kagami frowns down at him. "What, that's it? You're not gonna eat anything?"

Bemused, Tetsuya says, "I am not hungry." Kagami's frown deepens with incredulity.

The cashier watches them a little impatiently, but before Tetsuya can apologize or tell her they're done ordering, Kagami butts in gruffly, "Add another cheeseburger."

She does so. "Okay, will that be all?"

Kagami nods, and after they've paid (with a lot of grumbling from Kagami about the others not leaving them any money), Tetsuya regards Kagami with puzzlement.

"You didn't have to do that, Kagami-kun," he says.

"Whatever. It's way too hot out to have just a milkshake in your stomach. You trying to get sick?" Kagami huffs disapprovingly, crossing his arms and leaning against a wall as they wait for their food.

And just like that, Tetsuya understands. Smiling, he declares matter-of-factly, "Ah, so Kagami-kun is a mother-hen."

Kagami's jaw drops, and he sputters furiously, "What the hell? I am not!" His brows are furrowed in indignation, and his mouth looks more like one of Kise's pouts than the scowl he is likely going for.

Tetsuya's smile widens, tinged with a mischief that is entirely the fault of his new friends. "I
apologize. It was rude of me to point it out so candidly." He very carefully doesn't apologize for the observation, nor does he take it back. It's true, after all.

Kagami eyes him suspiciously, and then his face dawns with realization. "Ugh, you're the sarcastic little shit Haizaki was talking about, aren't you? He said you're quiet and polite, so no one notices when you insult them."

Tetsuya blinks, somewhat surprised and a little touched to find that Haizaki has spoken of him and to someone the boy had only just met, and then he grows utterly amused at the less than favorable description. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Kagami-kun," he lies easily.

"Yeah, I bet you don't," Kagami grumbles, but then he visibly perks up when their food is ready. "Finally."

Kagami grabs the largest tray, which is the one with an enormous pile of burgers on it, and Tetsuya is left with the other considerably lighter tray as they rejoin their friends.

Haizaki looks ready to explode with embarrassment when they reach the booth, which is not in itself unusual. No, the strange part is what he's so vehemently denying.

"-s'not my secret boyfriend," Haizaki practically hisses. "He's a friend who plays basketball, and I-"

Kise butts in, petulant, "Well, then, why didn't you introduce us? We could have played together!"

Guilt flashes over Haizaki's face almost too fast to see, but he quickly shoves it down. "Oi! You never get pissed when Kuroko blows us off to hang out with Aomine!"

Kise's mouth purses in a way that Tetsuya knows means he's suppressing the urge to scream. "You're missing the point, idiot!"

"What," Haizaki grunts, irritated and confused.

Tetsuya does roll his eyes this time, exasperated. Haizaki is so... He's fairly observant about most things - generally things involving basketball - but when it comes to how much he means to the people around him, he's stubbornly ignorant.

It's enough to make any normal person want to shake him by his shoulders. Tetsuya settles for a pointed cough and a judgmental stare.

The two of them seem to notice Tetsuya and Kagami at the same time. They stop talking immediately, likely since the cause of their argument is standing right next to them, and an uncomfortable silence descends over them as a result.

Unconcerned with the awkward atmosphere, Kagami slides into the booth, and Tetsuya takes a seat next to him.

"You guys owe me," Kagami tells them, nonchalantly picking a burger from the stack and unwrapping it.

Kuroko passes out everyone else's food and drinks, but Kise's attention is stuck firmly on Kagami, who tears through his one burger in three large bites.

"Wait, wait, wait," Kise says, disbelief coloring his tone and eyes wide. "Are you gonna eat all of that? By yourself? Right now?"
Kagami sighs heavily, like they're the ones being unreasonable. "Yeah."

"But how-?" Kise asks.

Haizaki says dismissively around a bite of his chicken sandwich, "Don't worry about it. Dude's like a black hole." He swallows and then continues, "The lunches he made were ridiculously fucking huge. I could never finish them."

Kise chokes on a fry but manages to get it down with his drink and demand, "He what? He made you lunches? And you say he's not-"

"Kise, I swear to god," Haizaki talks over him, instantly worked up again. "If you don't stop with that shit-"

"So are you two together?" Kagami's idle question cuts through their argument like a knife through butter.

Tetsuya doesn't often use this term as it's not particularly polite, but the reactions Kagami's innocent inquiry get are absolutely hilarious.

Haizaki flushes a tomato red, a blush that covers the entirety of his face and ears and dips below sight underneath his collar, and his mouth gapes open in utter shock and horror.

Kise, on the other hand, has light pink dusting his cheeks, and he looks like a startled deer. His hands fly up to cover his face before Tetsuya can discern more. It's obvious Kise keeps glancing at Haizaki between his fingers, though.

Kagami doesn't rescind his question, gaze roving over Haizaki and Kise thoughtfully as he chews, and neither of them seem capable of forming words at the moment.

Tetsuya takes pity on them and says mildly, "They're not dating, Kagami-kun. Kise-kun is simply jealous Haizaki-kun ditched us to hang out with you."

"Huh." Kagami shoves a handful of fries in his mouth.

Somewhat composed now, Kise huffs, "Hey!"

Tetsuya shrugs. It's not a lie. He sips his milkshake serenely.

Kise smiles, but he still whines, "Kurokocchi is so mean to me!"

"What's with the -cchi?" Kagami asks, and Tetsuya almost does a double take when he realizes that Kagami has already rid the tray of half its contents. ...A black hole, indeed.

Kise answers cheerfully, "It's an affectionate term of endearment."

"More like an annoying ass nickname," Haizaki adds in, apparently having recovered. He scowls when Kise pouts at him. "Nobody asked you to call us that, dumbass," he says, obstinate.

Kise droops, and then he visibly brightens, a devious smile forming on his face. "Oh~?" He says lightly, and Haizaki stiffens, wary. Kise continues gleefully, "I guess that means you want me to call you Shougo~!"

Tetsuya grabs his cup, and just as hastily, Kagami lifts his tray. They share a glance that perfectly conveys their exasperation and understanding of the situation, and not a moment later, Haizaki lets out an inhuman snarl of rage and tackles Kise out of the booth, jostling the table and almost knocking
over their drinks.

"You little bastard!" Haizaki growls, struggling to pin Kise to the floor. "I told you not to call me that!"

Kise can't get a word out since he's laughing so hard, and of course, that only incenses Haizaki further. The staff are all watching them with disbelief and disapproval.

Tetsuya sighs inaudibly. Kise's increasingly transparent attempts to receive Haizaki's undivided attention are eventually going to get them kicked out of here. Tetsuya's lack of presence might actually work in his favor outside of basketball should that occur. He's not giving up his vanilla milkshakes just because his friends are incapable of behaving like normal human beings.

Suddenly, a burger enters his line of vision, and he glances up to find Kagami's already finished eating and is looking at him with an expression that brokers no argument.

Tetsuya has too much control over himself to actually pout, but the feeling is there. He reluctantly accepts the food and opens it and takes a bite. He raises an eyebrow at Kagami as if to say, "Happy now?"

Kagami smirks at him, satisfied. Then his gaze moves over to the floor where Kise has trapped Haizaki in a bear hug... for some reason. Tetsuya looks as well, and as Haizaki collapses against Kise with muffled curses even though he could easily break free, something clicks.

Ah. Somehow it makes perfect sense that Haizaki - who hides his soft heart beneath anger and a seemingly permanent frown - would befriend another boy who seems gruff and standoffish at first glance but is actually caring and kind.

"You know, Kagami-kun," Tetsuya begins, a gleam in his eye, "I believe you are what is known as the Mom Friend."

Kagami spits out his drink and rounds on him with a glare, but Tetsuya is constantly exposed to Nijimura's and Haizaki's sharp, heated glares, so the effect is lost on him.

He smiles in return, and Kagami rolls his eyes, grumbling, "Tetsuya would love this." At Tetsuya's questioning look, he clarifies, "My brother back in America."

Suddenly, Haizaki stands up, collects all of their trash on a tray, and stalks off without a word, glowering.

Also on his feet, Kise smiles happily at them and explains, "Haizakicchi agreed to the sleepover, Kurokocchi!"

Tetsuya smiles wider, almost sad he missed Kise coercing Haizaki into agreeing but really excited to have friends over to his house. "That's a relief."

Haizaki stomps back to the table and declares, "I'm not doing this shit unless he has to too." His dramatic pointing leaves no doubts as to who he's referring to.

Kagami looks a little miffed. "What? Also, asshole, you owe me for lunch. I'm not made of money."

"Ooh, I'll pay for both of us, Haizakicchi!" Kise offers graciously, handing over the requested amount with a grin on his face.

Haizaki regards him with suspicion, and his skepticism is validated when Kise says, "Haha, it's like
we're on a date~!

Wisely - in his opinion - Tetsuya takes a step back to avoid the confrontation.

"Yeah, no. I'm sick of watching you two flirt. I'm tired and sore, and I don't have the patience for this."

Kagami has other ideas. He shoves Haizaki forward with a kick and herds them all outside before yet another fight breaks out. He also ignores any and all complaining his words elicit with ease.

Tetsuya walks beside him, amused to find Kise trying to worm back into Haizaki's good graces ahead of them. "There's a well-stocked first aid kit in my home. We could treat your injuries, and you could spend the night while you're there," Tetsuya suggests casually.

Kagami sends him a sidelong glance and then rubs his neck. "Ugh, fine. My dad would probably freak out if he knew I got into another fight anyway. I'll just have to ask him." He pulls out his phone to do so, presumably.

"Thank you," Tetsuya says with a smile. It's smaller than his usual ones but also more genuine. He's never had so many friends over, and he's sure his grandmother will be thrilled for him.

Kagami grins back.

Haizaki turns around and begins walking backwards, his hands secured behind his head. "My mom won't care, but I don't want to worry her either. 'Course once she knows I'm going to a sleepover, she'll demand pictures." He grimaces at the thought. "Hey, where do you live anyway?"

"We're almost there," Tetsuya tells him. He's not going to call ahead and ask. His parents are out of the country working again, and they wouldn't mind even if they were here.

"Junko wants pictures too," Kise announces, tongue poking out as he types on his phone at an inhuman rate. "Uh, that's my sister," he adds for Kagami's benefit.

"Fuck that," Haizaki spits out. "I don't want either of your psycho sisters to own a photo of me."

Kise whines, "Eh? Mean! They're not psychos, Haizakicchi! Plus, Junko wants cute photos of all of us! Not just you."

Haizaki scoffs, "Yeah, and I bet neither of them will use 'em as blackmail against me if I make you cry or something."

After having met both of Kise's sisters, Tetsuya can definitely see that being something they'd do. Junko-san had gushed over him, but hidden in her sweet words had been many implied threats. And Yoshie-san had bluntly told him she'd make him regret it if he hurt Kise in any way. He'd been a little intimidated but also glad Kise has such a protective family.

He says none of this. "We're here," he tells them, and all three of them startle - but none more so than Kagami, who jumps about a foot in the air.

"Gah! Would you quit that!?" Kagami groans, scowling.

Haizaki pats him on the shoulder sympathetically. "You'll never get used to it."

Kagami grimaces. "Great."

"This is where you live, Kurokocchi?!" Kise's stunned voice draws everyone's attention to the home
they're arguing in front of. "It's huge!"

"The fuck?" Haizaki yells, gapping. "You never said you were fucking loaded, Kuroko."

Oh. Tetsuya shrugs. "It never came up."

Kagami deadpans, "We're staying at your house."

He stifles a laugh, managing to keep a straight face under the disbelief and indignant expressions being thrown his way. "It must have slipped my mind."

In truth, he's never felt the need to talk about his wealth. He's fortunate, and speaking so casually about it feels uncomfortably like bragging. He's grateful for his parents' hard work, even when it takes them to foreign countries, but it also usually means Tetsuya is left by himself in a home that always seems empty and lonely and entirely too large for one person to inhabit alone.

"Oh god, I bet it's ridiculously fucking fancy inside. Shit, I'm a fucking mess. Your family is totally gonna judge me. I did not sign up for this. I'm going home," Haizaki says all in a rush, clearly panicking, and then he turns on his heel to flee.

Kagami clamps a hand on his shoulder, frowning. "Oh no, you're the one who dragged me into this, so I'm not letting you chicken out."

He sends an unreadable look at Tetsuya, who hurriedly puts on a blank face once he realizes his slip. Ah. Did Kagami catch some of his distress? That's... unfortunate.

"My parents are out of the country. It's just me here, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya says, and now all three of them are sending him unhappy expressions. This is not the outcome he wanted, but he should have expected it.

"It's just you? In this huge ass house?" Haizaki asks, mouth a thin line. Tetsuya nods, and he says bluntly, "That fucking sucks, Kuroko."

Tetsuya smiles, weakly. "It's fine. I'm used to it."

Yet another tense silence drapes over them, and Tetsuya sighs inwardly. His parents love him very much, but they're adventurous and prone to wander. They get restless when they're in one place too long, and even having a son isn't enough to make them stay. He's made his peace with it, and he has his friends and his grandmother.

He isn't certain how to explain himself, though.

"Well," Kise says abruptly, grinning widely, "we'll just have to fill it up with memories of us! When you get lonely, you'll remember the fun we had here, and you'll feel better!" He slings an arm over Tetsuya's shoulder and rubs his cheek in Tetsuya's hair affectionately.

"Or he could just call us." Haizaki steps up on his other side, expression sour, but his eyes are soft when he glances at Tetsuya. "Come on, you gotta show me your fancy ass mansion." He punches Tetsuya's shoulder playfully.

A hand separates Kise from him and another thumps the back of Tetsuya's head. Kagami ignores Kise's offense and Tetsuya's montone "Ow" and says, "I want to use your kitchen at least once. It has to be huge with a house this big."

Haizaki lights up next to him, practically sparkling. It's an odd sight. "Ooh, yeah, you have to cook,
dude. I've been craving your chicken karaage since I ate it the first time."

The three of them keep up the idle conversation as they usher Tetsuya into his own home, and his heart swells with affection and fondness for all of them.

How is he supposed to feel lonely when he's got friends like these?

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, I hope that lived up to the hype. I struggled for like three days trying to figure out just what I was going to cover with Kuroko, and then I said screw it and just started writing where I left off last chapter. I'm sure some of you will be pleased the 'confrontation'/Kagami meeting was extended. I'll be happy to write Haizaki again next week. Trash son is soooo easy to write.

Of course Kuroko's chapter was going to take place in a Maji Burger.

Uhh, I originally had Kuroko use honorifics even when he wasn't speaking, but it didn't read all that smoothly. It might be fanon that Kuroko is loaded and that his parents aren't around much, but I like the idea. /also i'm probably gonna have ogiwara show up at some point 'cause i wanna write him. ovo
Chapter Notes

It's still Friday in my heart. OTL.

Thanks for all of the comments, kudos, and bookmarks! I'm still really behind on replies, but I will make sure to catch up at some point - hopefully tomorrow. I usually spend my free time writing, and I want to reply with more than a "thank you" if I can. Suppose we'll just have to see.

The lovely thegoatjoke has drawn me beautiful, amazing fan art of Yoshie, and you should all definitely check it out here!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LIII. July 21, 2012 - Saturday

"Damn, Kuroko." Shougo lets out an appreciative whistle as his eyes take in all the obviously expensive art and decor littering the walls and various podiums and tables. The floors are all hard wood, too.

He can't help feeling out of place here, especially with all the cuts and bruises on his skin and the tears in and blood smeared on his clothing, but more than that, there's a feeling of... cleanliness. Like the place is sterile and vacant of any inhabitants, and that? Well, that tugs at something in his chest, makes it hard to breathe.

Because Tetsuya already thinks of himself as a shadow or a phantom, and this massive, empty house likely doesn't help him shake the image. What must it be like to wander these huge halls and rooms? Like a ghost haunting an abandoned residence? Shougo kind of wants to punch both of Tetsuya's parents in the face, damn the consequences.

What kind of parents leave their kid to go traipsing around out of the damn country? Tetsuya could be hurt or sick or hell just lonely, and they'd never know (because he doubts Tetsuya would tell them) and they'd never get here in time to do anything about it.

Ugh. Damn it. Just the thought of Tetsuya all alone in his own home is enough to make his blood boil. Shougo's had his fair share of problems, but his family being there for him - physically, emotionally, in all the ways that matter - has never been an issue. He's suddenly fiercely grateful for his mom and his brother, for the way they stuck with him whether he was a grade a asshole or not, for the ways they show they care.

It's never occurred to him before, and maybe now he's only really realizing it because his friends and family have patched up the holes in his heart enough that his own injustices are no longer blinding him, but - He's stupidly, ridiculously, incredibly lucky to have them, as a support system or simply just good company, and he'll probably never be able to put it - this swelling affection and sheer wonder and tightness in his throat - into words properly, never be able to get across just how important they are to him, but maybe-
Well, maybe he can try.

"My bedroom is up there," Tetsuya tells them, head tilted towards the stairs. "As are two bathrooms. Haizaki-kun and Kagami-kun can clean up, and then we'll treat your injuries when you return."

Shougo grins, walking up the stairs and rolling his shoulders. "I could definitely use a shower." He's gotten used to it by now, but he's sure he smells awful. Sweat and blood do not a good aroma make. He wrinkles his nose.

"Me too." Kagami is only a step behind him, clearly just as happy as Shougo to get rid of the filth from the last few hours.

"I'll have clean clothes set outside your doors for you to change into," Tetsuya offers, and both of them toss him their thanks.

"Hey, hey, show me around, Kurokocchi~! I want a house tour."

Ryouta's voice travels to the top of the stairs, just as cheerful as ever, but Shougo knows he'd been just as pissed about Tetsuya's situation as the rest of them. Shougo had caught a flash of fury on his face, which had surprised him since he's only ever seen Ryouta that angry on the court, but it had been a pleasant surprise. He's glad Ryouta had felt the same way as Shougo, that he cares just as much about Tetsuya as Shougo does. Another thing he hadn't been aware was a fear until it was disproven - that the three of them weren't equally concerned about each other.

Speaking of surprises... He glances at Kagami, contemplative.

"Probably should have asked for directions," Kagami mutters as they stumble upon a fourth bedroom in their search for a bathroom.

Shougo snorts. "Little shit probably thought it'd be funny. Us looking around forever."

Kagami laughs, and Shougo's mind goes back to the other boy's subtle and not-so-subtle protectiveness of Tetsuya earlier. He'd expected them to be friends - considering they'd been close in the future, obvious even to an outsider like him - but he hadn't expected them to get along so well and so quickly. It's... He's glad he introduced them - even if the 'when' was taken out of his hands. It's something purely good, probably the only selfless thing he's done since he got here, and the fact that it's for Tetsuya just makes it even better.

If anyone deserves kindness, it's the boy who has it in spades.

They finally find a bathroom. "You take this one. I'll keep looking," Shougo says, already ambling away.

"Thanks." Kagami wastes no time stepping inside, and Shougo keeps searching.

The other bathroom is right at the end of the hall, and Shougo happily discards his dirty clothes and gets under the soothing hot water.

He takes the time to assess his physical state. As he'd assumed, his side is one big, nasty bruise, taking up the entirety of the space between his left hip and armpit, and it's dark against his skin.

It's not the worst he's ever had, not by a long shot, but still, it fucking hurts. He's had to be pretty careful not to let on just how badly in front of the others because he doesn't want them to worry, and it's taxing. Honestly, fuck that guy.
The water stings a little on his various cuts, but after a while, it just feels good. He uses the shampoo and conditioner provided, both of them strawberry flavored, and it's cathartic washing away all the dirt and grime. Showers always calm him down, and it gives him time to think. And think he does.

He's still pissed at Tetsuya's parents, and he's not sure anything will endear them to him any time soon. What's bothering him now is that Tetsuya never mentioned it. Those two go on and on about him talking about his problems and letting them know how he feels and other sappy shit, but neither of them do it. He hasn't once heard Tetsuya spill his secrets, and okay, so Ryouta sort of told him something personal when Shougo was still trying to shake him, but it hardly counts! That was ages ago. Shougo's had like three crises in that time, and he's spoken about at least some of them.

He doesn't like always being the one comforted. He doesn't want that kind of one-sided friendship. It's not a friendship at all. They should be able to come to him with their worries and give him the chance to tell them they're being stupid. It's not- It's not right for it to be so unbalanced.

Unfortunately, he understands enough about this whole shebang to know that he'll have to bring it up with them before anything is done about it. Otherwise, they'll be working through Shougo's ten million issues forever without ever addressing their own. If he wants a change, he's going to have to make it himself.

He turns off the water and actually gets a good look at the place. Shit, this bathroom is way too fancy. How big does it need to be? It's probably the size of his bedroom, and the shower alone takes up about half of it.

Shoving down his discomfort, Shougo grabs a towel that is also probably really expensive and dries off. Outside the door are the promised clothes - a t-shirt, some sweatpants, and boxers, and he slips them on easily enough. They fit him, and he wonders idly if they're even Tetsuya's. He's about a head or two taller than the boy, after all.

He tosses the towel in the hamper and piles his dirty clothes in his arms before exiting the room. Luckily, finding Tetsuya's room is easy. He just has to follow the voices. With the rest of the house eerily quiet, the only noise seems loud and almost jarring in comparison. Plus, well, the door is open.

"Haizakicchi~!" Ryouta spots him first and waves him over.

They're all sitting in a circle on the floor in the middle of the room. Kagami is across from Ryouta, and Tetsuya is probably to the left of him. That leaves the right for Shougo since that's where Ryouta's gesturing, and he takes it warily, setting his ball of clothes aside as he does so.

Seeing his confusion, Tetsuya explains (startling the hell out of him), "Kise-kun was very adamant that we play Truth or Dare. Apparently, it is a rule to do so at sleepovers." Tetsuya's tone expresses his doubts as to the validity of that statement, but he's not going to call Ryouta out on it either.

"I don't think I've ever played," Kagami says. He scratches his cheek, and that's when Shougo notices the bandages.

Apparently reading his mind, Ryouta says, "Come here, Haizakicchi~! Let me patch you up. Nurse Ki-"

"If you start that shit again, I'm gonna deck you," Shougo cuts him off as he plops down next to him.

Grinning, Ryouta pulls out a bottle of peroxide, antibiotic ointment, and band-aids. "You know you love it." He winks, and Shougo pretends to grimace.

"Why are you like this," Shougo grumbles. He still offers his arm to Ryouta.
Ryouta laughs. He dabs the cut with peroxide, dries it, places a glob of ointment on it, and finally, sticks a band-aid on it. He’s surprisingly gentle and methodical in his movements. Too bad his mouth ruins any cool, collected image he might have had.

"Yeah, yeah." Shougo grumbles.

It doesn't take long for Ryouta to finish, but Shougo still thinks his bedside manner could use some work. Less teasing and back-talk, for instance. It'd make the patient less likely to want to strangle him.

"Okay, let's get started!" Ryouta leans forward eagerly, eyes glittering as they rest on Shougo. "I'll go first. Haizakicchi, truth or dare?"

Shougo groans, rubbing his face. Why did he agree to this, again? He makes the mistake of glancing at Tetsuya, who is visibly excited about playing this shitty game, and even Kagami is looking on in interest. Ugh.

"Dare." Whatever. Why the hell not. It's not like he's got a say in this anyway.

Ryouta immediately pulls out a grey headband that has cat ears on it and holds it out to Shougo. "I dare you to wear this the whole time we're in Kurokocchi's house."

"The fuck? No," Shougo scoffs, glaring at the offending object. "Why the hell do you even have that thing?" He asks, suspicious. This whole thing smells fishy. The headband is even the same color as his hair. The fuck.

Ryouta pouts, looking like a kid who had his candy stolen. "What? But you have to!"

"Who says?" He snaps.

"Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya speaks up, and Shougo winces at the disappointment the boy is wearing like a cloak. The fact that the little shit is doing it on purpose doesn't make it any less effective. "Please."

Valiantly, he holds out for a few seconds before caving. "Fuck, fine. Gimme those stupid things." He snatches the headband out of Ryouta's hands and grudgingly puts it on. "Happy now?" He grunts, irritably.

Beaming, Ryouta says, "Very."

"Yes. Thank you." Tetsuya favors him with a small smile.

Kagami laughs and ignores the dark look it gets him.

Rolling his eyes, Shougo says, "Whatever. Kise, truth or dare?"

"Truth!"

"Have you ever kissed anyone?" Shougo asks, both curious to hear the answer and with the intention of embarrassing him a little.

Ryouta makes a garbled noise, face turning scarlet. "Eh? Why would you ask me that?" He whines, covering his face.

"Oi," Shougo says, smirking. "You have to answer." He points a thumb at Tetsuya, and
involuntarily, Ryouta makes the same mistake as him. No one can resist those puppy-dog eyes. Damn kid's made it an art form.

He lets out another weird noise, but he eventually says, though the words are muffled through his hands, "No...!"

Oh. Huh. "Woulda thought you'd have at least kissed one of your fans." He's not sure how he feels about that. Mildly puzzled, maybe? Ryouta's good-looking, and there's definitely plenty of guys and girls who would love to kiss him. Hmm.

Ryouta just shakes his head, but suddenly, something occurs to Shougo. He sputters, "Whoa, whoa, wait- So you're telling me the guy who can't go one conversation without making a dirty joke hasn't even kissed anybody yet? What the fuck? You kidding me?"

Ryouta groans. Probably wanting to quickly change the subject, he asks, "Kagami, truth or dare?"

Amused, Kagami plays along. "Dare."

"Uhh, I dare you to touch every wall in this room in ten seconds," Ryouta says after a moment.

"Alright."

Kagami hops up, and when Ryouta gives the word, he rushes to every wall as Ryouta counts the seconds aloud. He does it just in time and almost trips over a chair in the process, eliciting a snort from Shougo.

"Good job." Tetsuya smiles at him as he returns to his spot.

"Thanks. Truth or dare?"

It's clear he means Tetsuya, so the boy deliberates for a moment before replying. "Truth."

Kagami settles back on his hands. "Okay. What's up with you?"

Tetsuya blinks in surprise. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"How do you play basketball if people forget you're there?" He asks, blunt, and Shougo laughs at Tetsuya's sheer bemusement.

"Haizaki-kun advised me to use misdirection and to become a passing specialist. My lack of presence allows me to move as I please and to steal and pass the ball with my opponents none the wiser," Tetsuya explains, his excitement and love of the game showing even through these brief sentences.

"Huh. Let's play sometime. I'd like to see it," Kagami suggests, eyes showing a hint of fire. *Basketball nut.*

"Let's," Tetsuya agrees, smiling wider. He's just as bad. He turns to address the boy on his right. "Kise-kun?"

"Dare," Ryouta says decisively, likely to prevent any more embarrassing questions.

Tetsuya's smile grows mischievous, and Ryouta gulps. "I dare you to keep your hands off of Haizaki-kun for the rest of the night."

Fuck. Double hit. Shougo chokes, mortified, and Ryouta protests, "What? No fair!"
Tetsuya doesn't budge, though, and Ryouta sinks to the floor in despair. Shougo scowls at him. "Stop moping. The fuck. It shouldn't be a problem anyway."

Kagami snorts, and Shougo shoves him. "Shut up, bastard."

"I didn't say anything, asshole." He thumps Shougo on the arm.

"Ow!" He rubs the red mark left behind, glaring at a smirking Kagami. "It's your turn, Kise."

There's a foreboding silence, and then: "Haizakicchi, have you ever kissed Nijimuracchi?" Ryouta manages to get out between his sulking and whining on the ground.

Fuck. Fuck. His whole body grows hot, and his heart picks up speed, thudding painfully against his rib cage. Words get caught in his throat, but he's not sure what he would say anyway. The fuck kinda question is that?

His reaction is answer enough, however. Ryouta straightens, eyes zeroing in on Shougo with laser focus. "No way. You have?" He says, breathless.

Shougo grimaces. "I don't want to talk about it." He still feels vaguely disgusted with himself for allowing it to happen, even though he hardly could have expected it. The fact that part of him - what he suspects is the actual twelve year old in him - is over the moon about it is even worse.


Bewildered, Shougo says, "I did. That's how he confessed. He just kissed me out of nowhere." He leaves out the fact that Nijimura had taken him out on a date beforehand. It's not like he knew that at the time, and Ryouta's freaking out enough as it is. For some reason? "It was on the cheek, though."

"Oh." Ryouta lets out a sigh - of relief? "Okay then."

He's glad Ryouta got something out of that. Shougo is still really fucking confused. "Why-?"

Tetsuya interrupts him, "I believe it's your turn, Haizaki-kun."

Shougo glances at him, and he looks the same as usual. Ryouta is back to normal too, grinning at him. ...Maybe he should just drop it? He runs a hand through his hair and then sighs when he's stopped by the stupid fucking headband.

"Kagami, truth or dare?" Might as well get on with it.

"Truth." His eyes are on Ryouta, expression thoughtful.

Shougo grins as a question occurs to him. "So did you style your eyebrows like that, or were you just born that way?" He laughs at the offense that gets him - laughs harder when Ryouta breaks out into a full fit next to him and even Tetsuya lets out a chuckle.

"Dick." Kagami punches his shoulder lightly, but he's smiling. "I was born with 'em, bunch of assholes."

**LIV. July 21, 2012 - Saturday**

After truth or dare, Tetsuya brings out board and card games, and they spend the rest of the afternoon and most of the night playing them. It's... eventful.
Shougo flips the table when he loses at Monopoly for the third time, sure down to his bones that Ryouta is cheating. There's no way he just so happens to roll the exact number he needs every time. It was fucking rigged, and he refuses to apologize.

All three of them are wary and suspicious of Tetsuya, who obliterates them in every card game they play. His poker face isn't for show, and his knack for misdirection means the little shit probably snags all the best cards while he directs their attention somewhere else. It's damn lucky they aren't playing for money.

Kagami is weirdly good at Uno, and Shougo lords his wins at Othello over them. They're all equally terrible at Pictionary, and Life is about as unpredictable as the real thing. Shougo wins two out of five games, and he feels exactly no satisfaction because he keeps ending up with more kids than his little plastic car can carry. What the fuck.

Anyway, around midnight, they call it quits and then immediately run into the problem of where they're going to sleep. More specifically, who will sleep next to each other. Even more specifically, the problem of Ryouta wanting to sleep next to Shougo, and Shougo wanting literally anything but that.

Tetsuya silently judges them as usual, and Kagami could not care less, as long wherever he sleeps is comfortable. They decide the issue with a game of rock, paper, scissors, which Shougo loses.

That leaves them here. Tetsuya on the bed with Kagami and Shougo and Ryouta in futons on the floor next to them.

Shougo lies there for an eternity, thoughts whirring and mind restless, the conclusion he'd come to in the shower earlier bugging him relentlessly.

"Hey, you awake?" Shougo eventually whispers.

Ryouta yawns mid-sentence, but he gets the words out, voice just as hushed. "Yeah. Why?" He fidgets, and Shougo feels his body heat even with the few inches of space between them.

Shougo resists the urge to turn around and instead frowns at the wall. He licks his lips, and the sound is almost too loud for the quiet stillness of the night.

"What you told me..." He stops there, not knowing how to broach the subject and feeling the familiar sting of embarrassment coiling in his gut.

Ryouta shuffles around to face him, and his breath ghosts over Shougo's neck, despite the distance. "What I told you...?"

He doesn't say anything, and Ryouta moves even closer, poking him in the back. "Hey, what is it?"

Shougo sighs, already regretting this, but- Well, he meant what he said - thought, whatever - earlier. He's not okay with only being on the receiving end of their kindness and concern and advice. He wants to give back, help them in some way, and if that means he has to reach out first, well, it's not anything they haven't already done for him.

He says, slow and measured, "A while back, you said you were miserable. Because you were good at everything, and you didn't think there was any point in trying anymore." He waits a beat and then continues, "I just wanted to ask: Are you still miserable?"

Ryouta sucks in a surprised breath behind him. There's a stilted silence, and then: A huff of a laugh, strained. "Of course not, Haizakicchi."
Frustrated, Shougo rolls over and glares heatedly at him, the action leaving them so close their noses are almost touching. "Don't lie to me, Ryouta. Not after the sappy shit you fed me about friends relying on each other."

Ryouta watches him, wide-eyed, and Shougo adds, hesitant, "...You did mean it, didn't you?"

Another tense few moments pass before Ryouta swallows audibly and flashes a genuine smile. "Yeah, I meant it."

Shougo almost sags in relief. "Asshole, what was the pause for?" He moves back a little, propping his head up on his hand, and frowns. "So? Are you?"

Ryouta glances away for a moment, but when he looks back at Shougo, the uncertainty is replaced with affection. "I'm happy. More often than not, I promise. Things are getting better - because of you and Kurokocchi and even Nijimuracchi. I'm... I think I'm starting to see why you guys are in love with basketball, but that's not all. It's hard to be miserable when I'm spending all my time with friends."

The smile he gives Shougo is breathtaking, utterly joyful and happy, beautiful in its sincerity, and it loosens the tight knot in his chest, warms him down to his core.

"Good. I'm- I'm glad." He returns it with one of his own, nowhere as amazing but still real, and he's so content in that moment that when Ryouta laces their fingers together, he doesn't mention the dare from earlier, even teasingly.

He falls asleep like that, the only point of contact being their hands, but when an amused Tetsuya wakes them hours later, they're wrapped around each other, Ryouta's hair tickling his cheek and his arm thrown over Ryouta's side and a myriad other limbs tangled together in a cozy mess.

He groans, but he doesn't bother moving until Tetsuya talks about taking a picture. Like hell he's giving them more embarrassing photos of himself. He's still scheming to steal Ryouta's phone, so he can delete those damn pictures of him with cat ears.

(Unfortunately, he's too late. Like most of Ryouta's photos of him, they're already up on his social media accounts and being cooed over and shared by Ryouta's adoring fans - of which there are many.)

Chapter End Notes

This feels like a filler chapter? But important things happen? Idk. I'm tired and posting this without proofreading. Hope you guys enjoyed! Please let me know what you think. ;D
I tried to help & ended up crying on you, sorry

Chapter Notes

Someone said they'd been expecting gut-wrenching feels a few chapters ago. Well... Here you go. This was a difficult chapter to write, which is partly why it took so long to post. Please forgive me! OTL

The next chapter will be at the beach! And if it's not up Friday, then expect it Saturday or Sunday. Updating late always throws me off.

Thanks for the comments, bookmarks, and kudos! You guys don't know how much I love and appreciate all the kind feedback you give me. I read and reread comments days afterward with a goofy smile on my face, and it makes writing so much easier when I know you guys will reward me with praise~! ;D

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I.V. July 22, 2012 - Sunday

"I'll see you guys tomorrow!" Ryouta grins, dragging both Shougo and Tetsuya into a hug. "Don't have too much fun without me, okay? No parties either! I forbid it!"

Shougo snorts, even as he obligingly returns the embrace. "Like we could promise that." Or like they'd even need to. He can't even imagine Tetsuya being comfortable at the parties Shougo's used to, and the people they'd want to party with are all right here regardless.

Tetsuya's a bit more amenable. "It's not a party without you, Kise-kun," he says, tone and expression blank.

Shougo reads it as sarcasm, but Ryouta clearly takes it differently. He laughs, hugging them tighter. "I'm gonna miss you guys!"

"It's just a day, damn," Kagami grumbles from beside them, not nearly as grumpy as he's trying to seem. He yawns and then complains, "C'mon, you're the one who wanted to walk back together."

Laughing again, Ryouta pulls away and says cheerfully, "Sorry, sorry. I'm just happy to have Haizakicchi back and for all of us to be together."

"Yeah, yeah," Shougo says, trying and failing to hide a smile of his own. "Go hang out with your families. Me and Kuroko got stuff to do."

Ryouta has a day full of shopping ahead of him, something he apparently does with his sisters whenever they all have a free weekend. Not Shougo's idea of fun, especially since it involves being in the presence of said sisters for an extended amount of time. The weirdo enjoys it, though, so whatever.

Kagami, on the other hand, has plans with his parents. His mom was finally able to fly over here, and he's going with his dad to pick her up at the airport. When she goes back to America, she's taking
Kagami and his dad with her. Luckily, that won't be for another week, so they'll be able to hang out with him for a little while longer.

But anyway, all of that leaves Tetsuya on his own, and it doesn't sit right with Shougo. Doesn't sit right with any of them, actually. Both Ryouta and Kagami had been reluctant to leave, and he'd had to shoo them away with promises of not letting Tetsuya out of his sight.

Not that it actually worked or anything. Ryouta is damn persistent when he wants to be. Shougo idly wonders what the moron's fan girls would think seeing their idol so attached to Shougo's hip and just in general being really gross.

The correct conclusion would be that he's insane.

"You're sure-" Ryouta starts again, and behind him, Shougo can see Kagami questioning all of his life choices. Shougo feels for him. Not enough to save him from Ryouta, but that's just self-preservation.

"Yes, oh my god. Just go." Shougo's sorely tempted to hit him, but the whining would make him dawdle even longer.

Ryouta rolls his eyes. "Okay, okay. We're going. See you later!"

When Ryouta looks close to lunging for them again, Kagami huffs, snags his collar, and walks off with a flailing Ryouta protesting behind him.

"Finally," Shougo grumbles, exasperated. If he'd known avoiding him would make Ryouta ten times more clingy, he wouldn't have done it. ...Or actually, he likely still would have, chicken shit that he is, but he'd have had the good sense to make the avoiding thing permanent.

Tetsuya shoots a glance at him, amused. "I don't recall inviting you to stay, Haizaki-kun," he points out wryly.

"That's because you didn't. But I don't have anything better to do, and there's no way you're getting rid of me, so..." He shrugs, unconcerned.

Smiling, Tetsuya says, "You're channeling Kise-kun."

He grimaces. "That's the meanest thing you've ever said to me."

"Ah." Tetsuya makes a faux-surprised expression. "Kise-kun, is that you?"

Shougo shoves him, smirking, and steps back inside. "Knock it off. Keep saying his name like that, and you'll summon him."

Then he frowns, turning to Tetsuya as he shuts the door them. "And if anybody's like that dope, it's you. Why the hell didn't you say anything, huh?"

He's been itching to get this off his chest since yesterday, but he's had at least enough sense to wait until they're alone. Tetsuya and Ryouta might have succeeded in double teaming him for answers, but that only worked because Shougo needed reassurance from both of them. It was a friendship thing.

This? It's more personal, and he doesn't think it'd be wise to drag it all out in front of everybody, even if Ryouta and Kagami are invested in Tetsuya's well-being too. It would unnecessarily trouble someone who - Shougo is damn sure - doesn't want to bother other people with his problems.
Funny that this is the kid who used basketball tournaments to beat sense into his ex-friends. Also, really sad.

*Who was gonna save you?* He can't help but wonder sometimes.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Tetsuya tells him, tone perfectly level, as he leads them towards the living room.

Shougo scoffs. "Don't play dumb. It doesn't suit you."

Tetsuya remains silent.

Shougo bites his cheek, faint stirrings of uncertainty taking hold now that he's on the other side. He's used to confrontations ending in bruises and split lips, broken bones at most, but this kind of thing could cause a whole host of unpleasant scenarios, not least of which is Tetsuya - quite justifiably - demanding just why Shougo thinks he has any right to stick his nose in Tetsuya's business.

...He wouldn't be wrong to say so, even if it's sort of hypocritical, but damn if that wouldn't hurt.

He follows the other boy's lead and takes a seat on the couch in the living room. There's already a game system set up - Ryouta's idea, as well as his console and games - still paused from where they'd all left off to eat breakfast, which was cooked by Kagami.

Teenage boys are pretty simple and will eat almost anything, and Shougo had gotten used to ramen and take-out once he started living on his own, broke as he was. Even so, he'd almost cried after one taste of Kagami's food. It's been a few days since he last ate it, and he's never had it fresh. Who knew it could taste even better?

Judging by their starry-eyed expressions and the way they practically drooled over the food, it was obvious Ryouta and Tetsuya felt the same.

A very heartfelt offer for Kagami's hand in marriage had been made by Shougo afterward, but Tetsuya and Ryouta had both scrambled to fight him for it, each of them arguing their own attributes and why Kagami should pick them over the other guys. It was honestly ridiculous, but no way was Shougo about to back down from a challenge, imaginary though the prize might have been.

Kagami had sat through most of it visibly embarrassed but pleased. That is, until he grew annoyed. A threat to never cook for them again was what it took to finally shut them up.

Not a shining moment for a twenty-two year old to be scolded by a teenager, but eh, he's hardly known for his maturity whatever his age.

"...It never occurred to me to mention it," Tetsuya says, not ten minutes into their game. Shougo watches from the corner of his eye but otherwise maintains the illusion of not paying attention to anything but the screen.

"My parents love me very much, Haizaki-kun, and I return the sentiment. However, and I say this with love, they're carefree people, prone to wanderlust." He smiles, wryly. "My grandmother says they've always been this way. My mother met my father in the airport, interestingly enough, and that set the tone for the rest of their engagements."

Shougo's cart runs off the track for the fourth time, and Tetsuya rolls his eyes when Shougo starts cursing up a storm.

"...What about when they had you?" He ventures, casually, as he makes his way back back to first
They settled down for a while after I was born, and I don't think they resent it. They were happy to be parents. Regardless, once I was old enough to take care of myself, they began travelling again for both work and pleasure, and the time between trips gradually lengthened as I grew older." Tetsuya is still and quiet as he speaks, voice monotone and face unreadable. He's getting too damn good at that poker face.

Shougo growls as the bastard behind him hits him with a shell, and he loses his lead once again. After he regains control of his cart and his temper, he asks, "So? When was the last time you saw them - in person?"

He'd been watching for it, some sign Tetsuya is more affected by this than he's letting on, and he manages to catch it. Tetsuya's fingers still before pressing a button, just long enough to be a tell.

You wouldn't get that from that his voice, though. "About three and a half months ago," Tetsuya says nonchalance, his cart crossing the finish line as Shougo's runs into a palm tree, but Shougo's too preoccupied to care.

"That's bullshit," he blurts out, upset at the very idea, even though the conversation leading up to this had hinted as much. "Tetsuya, you know that's not okay, right?"

Another uncomfortable silence descends on them, and Shougo curls his hands into fists, frustrated. He doesn't know how to do this. Haizaki Shougo is not gentle. He is not kind or caring, and he certainly doesn't pull his punches. This - trying to both interrogate and comfort a friend is about as foreign to him as the concept of having friends, and he's equally as awful at both. It's obvious in the line of tension in Tetsuya's shoulders, the way the boy won't quite look at him. The way words keep failing him.

For a moment, he wishes fervently that Ryouta was here. Clingy or not, Ryouta is undeniably skilled at lifting the mood and getting to the heart of the matter. But no. Asking him to deal with this is just running away from his problems again.

...He's really sick of running.

"Aren't you bothered by this?" Shougo tries again, as softly as he can manage. His gruff, growl-y voice is not meant for soft-spoken reassurances. "That they would just- abandon you?"

A sharp pain, swift and fleeting. A faint memory. He ignores it.

"Haizaki-kun, I must ask that you listen to me. I assure you that I am fine on my own, and I know that my parents are not... neglectful on purpose. It is simply in their nature, and it does not bother me. In fact, I'm happy they're able to do something they both enjoy. Please, do not think badly of them," Tetsuya says, firmly. "And please, do not worry about me."

He pauses the game and turns too honest, understanding eyes on Shougo, and somehow that hurts even more. How can one kid be so forgiving? Fuck, Shougo knows the world's not fair, but really, how much shit can it dump on this one kid before it decides it's enough? If anyone deserves it, it's-

Shougo frowns, unhappy but conceding. "I'll... I can't promise to like them, but I'll believe you when you say you're... fine." Not that 'fine' even means anything except that you don't want people to worry about you.

Tetsuya stares at him for a long moment before nodding. "Thank you, Haizaki-kun." Gone is the unreadable look and in its place is a brilliant, sweet smile. "I appreciate your concern."
He's too dissatisfied to be properly embarrassed by the praise, so he settles for a grunt of affirmation. That sharp, stinging pain is back, and there's a niggling thought, just on the precipice—

Tetsuya asks, "...Was there something else you wanted to discuss? Excluding the topic of my parents."

And it hits him. Like a fucking freight train.

...Ah. So that's what's been fueling this undercurrent of loathing, cool and heavy and hard, sitting on his chest and weighing him down like a physical thing. It's dark and ugly, festering as it is beneath his skin, and he doesn't realize he's clenching his fists hard enough to leave crescent-shaped marks in his palms, can't think clearly enough to care because—

"-zaki-kun! Haizaki-kun, are you okay?" Tetsuya's worried voice pulls him out the downward spiral of his thoughts.

"What? Oh. Yeah, I'm fine." He bristles at the dubious look that gets him, indignant. "That's the same thing you said to me! Which was also obviously untrue, by the way." He hunches forward, leaning on his elbows, unsettled after that unwelcome reminder.

He can feel eyes on him, but he resolutely keeps his own on the paused screen.

After a tense moment: "...Is it that important to you that I speak about my own feelings?" Tetsuya asks, considering.

At Shougo's nod, he suggests with a sigh, "I am willing to share my honest feelings with you if you share what is on your mind in return."

Shougo whips around to face him, surprised. "Wha-? Really?"

That gets him a small smile tinged with sadness. "I... understand your desire to help me as I felt the same way just moments ago about you. That expression on your face..." His smile gains a determined edge. "It is not one I'd like to see again. I think... If I can keep smiles on the faces of my friends, then I will be happy."

Shougo gapes at him, blindsided again by this boy who is so kind and- and amazing. Who the hell talks like that, like it's as natural as breathing? It almost makes him feel small and insignificant in comparison, but the fact that all that 'friendship is magic' shit - shit that shouldn't sound so enticing and believable in real life, what the hell - is aimed at him makes him feel important. Special.

His cheeks flush, and he brings a hand up to cover his face. He laughs, helplessly. "I just can't win against you, can I?"

Some of the mischief from earlier shows in Tetsuya's blue eyes. "I'm afraid not."

He laughs again, disbelieving, but he sobered quickly. This isn't a fun topic, after all. "I don't even know how to..." He smirks, bitterly, as he says, "You've noticed, right? You've been to my house enough to notice." He hunches forward even more, unwilling to maintain eye contact for this revelation. "...That my dad's not around."

"Yes." It's spoken simply, quietly. Like it doesn't matter whether Shougo elaborates or not, even though by Shougo's behavior, it can hardly be anything good.

That lack of questioning is what prompts him to continue. "I've never met him. Or well, I guess I just wasn't old enough to remember. Suppose I should consider myself lucky. Fucker skipped out on us
when I was three or four, and he's never tried to contact us since." He snarls, angrily, "I don't give a rat's ass about that deadbeat fuck. But-

He exhales heavily through his nose, and he's pissed at the burning behind his eyelids. Even fucking thinking about this makes him feel like he's wading through chest-high piles of broken glass. No matter where he goes or how he moves, he'll end up cutting himself on something, leaving him with more gashes and scars on his heart than before.

It's a painful and useless endeavor, but Shougo's always been the type to poke at his own wounds. He's always had the natural ability to make things worse. Heh, that makes him exactly like-

"I don't care what people say about me. I'll either fucking fight 'em, or I won't. Doesn't really matter." He lifts his shoulder in a half-shrug before continuing furiously, "But what they fucking say about my mom...! When people learn she's a single mom, they get all fucking condescending and judgemental. Like she's not a grown woman who can take care of herself and her family. Like she's somehow less because that fucking loser dipped out on her."

His voice has gone low and intent, and he finally looks at Tetsuya, makes sure he gets it. "My mom is the strongest person I've ever known. And it's so fucking frustrating that people make assumptions about her and- and make her life harder because they can't see that."

He takes a deep breath, shakily admits something he's been thinking for a long time but never had the guts to say aloud, "And me? Well, I don't make things easier for her being a fucking screw up too. I'm just like-"

"You're not!" Tetsuya's resolute voice interrupts him, and Shougo - who must have looked away at some point - startles and meets his gaze, vision blurry. "You're not a screw up, and you're not like him. I haven't met your father, but I can say with certainty you are a much better person than he will ever be."

Shougo twists around in his seat, opening his mouth to protest, "But-!"

"Haizaki-kun is undoubtedly the strongest person I've ever known. He has been given many reasons to turn his back on others, to become a person who actively hurts other people, and instead, he is kind. He is considerate. He is making friends and helping others and expecting nothing in return. He cares so much and thinks so highly of everyone around him, but he is so oblivious to his impact on those same people that it's amazing. You are amazing, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya tells him fiercely, not once breaking eye contact or wavering in his own conviction.

Shougo can only stare at him, wide-eyed.

Smiling, Tetsuya reaches out and cups his cheeks, heedless of the tears running down his face, and says, "You are an amazing person and an amazing friend. I'm incredibly happy and lucky to have you in my life. I promise that is the truth." He leans their foreheads together, and Shougo grasps his hands, crying silently and unable to stop.

Maybe one day his doubts and self-hatred will wash away as easily as these tears. For now, he holds tightly to Tetsuya and tries to believe him.
That was painful, and it hurt, and I need to go recover before I cry all over my keyboard. I wasn't going to bring up his father in this chapter until lost in details brought him up in their (lovely, lovely, lovely) review, and then this happened. I had already had his relationship with his dad planned out, and you hit the nail on the head, haha. Hopefully it wasn't too hammy; although this is shounen we're talking about here.
kuroko deserves better tbh

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK, BABY. Got no excuse other than RL swooping in and mercilessly snatching up all my free time. There was the gas leak outside my bedroom window (which is not as bad as it sounds) and my younger brother's surgery (he's the one who broke a bone in his foot), but mostly, I was simply busy.

when will my regular friday updates return from the war? I'm honestly not sure. I couldn't even wait 'til this Friday to post. If I do end up changing the schedule, though, I'll make a note here and in the summary. For now, just expect an update next Friday.

Anyway, thank you guys so, so much for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks! And a special thanks to m_is_for_mochi for your delightfully long comments/thoughts. I will make time to reply to them in full!

I'm looking forward to all of you guys' lovely, lovely feedback once again. I think you'll enjoy this chapter quite a bit! :D

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

LVI. July 22, 2012 - Sunday

Shougo leans back, using the collar of his shirt to roughly wipe away all evidence of his tears, more disgusted by the snot and gross wetness than anything else. The relief and reassurance from Tetsuya's words are too all-encompassing to allow for any mortification.

Shougo's been struggling with embarrassment almost daily since Ryouta slotted himself firmly into his life anyway, so it would hardly be effective against the weight of Tetsuya's honesty.

Speaking of honesty... Shougo looks expectantly at Tetsuya, even as he pulls his knees to his chest and props his head on his folded arms. "Your turn," he says when Tetsuya doesn't immediately start talking.

Quirking a lip in amusement at Shougo's impatience, Tetsuya returns his look with a Look and then stares down at his lap, expression turning pensive. His hands clasp each knee, "...I will admit that I am not entirely happy with my parents' extended absence. I know I am loved, but more time together with my parents..."

His nose scrunches in frustration, likely because he's having trouble finding the right words. Shougo can relate.

"So you miss them," Shougo surmises, and it's not really a surprise. But he doubts Tetsuya would acknowledge the feeling otherwise.

Tetsuya nods. "Very much."

"And you'd like it if they didn't travel so much."
Another nod, more hesitant this time.

Shougo frowns, biting his cheek, sort of getting it but not really. He's always been honest with his mom when it matters, even when it'd probably be better if he kept his trap shut, but he can see why selfless, obstinate Tetsuya would suffer in silence too. "So why don't you tell them?"

His brows furrow, and there's an unhappy tilt to his mouth, but Tetsuya doesn't say anything.

He presses. "Tetsuya, why don't you just tell 'em?"

Tetsuya leans forward, bangs shadowing his eyes, the grip he has on his knees tightening to the point of pain. "...I don't want to be a burden." The words are hushed and spoken quickly, like a confession. Shougo supposes it is.

It's also the stupidest damn thing he's ever heard.

"What?" slips out without his consent, tone as incredulous as Shougo feels. "The fuck?"

Tetsuya finally raises his head, eyes sad and scared and resigned, and Shougo's heart breaks the same moment his temper boils over. He gets on his feet and glares down at Tetsuya - more like in his general direction since the bastards he wants to glare at aren't around, but fucking whatever; that's the whole problem - scowling fiercely and furiously.

"What the fuck, Tetsuya. You- How can you actually-? I mean-!" Shougo groans, irritated and helpless and hating it. All he knows is that he wants more than anything to get rid of the sadness and insecurity that's slumping Tetsuya's shoulders and making his hands shake, but fuck if he knows how. "Look, I'm not like you. I can't whip out an inspirational speech off the top of my head or make you believe in anything I say. That's your thing. What I am good at is telling people when they're being dumbasses."

Tetsuya is staring at him wide-eyed now, as vulnerable as Shougo's ever seen him, and it fuels his next words.

"You're being a dumbass. Aren't you supposed to be the smart one? Have you even met yourself? Like. Fuck. You think I'm amazing? Really? 'Cause where I'm standing, that word fits you a lot better. You're so... good and stubborn and funny, and you never give up - not on dreams or people, so why the hell are you giving up on yourself, huh? Fucking fight for what you want, Tetsu. You deserve way more than this. You deserve better. The fucking least your parents can do is stop by more often."

He snorts derisively, adding, "They're fucking stupid for missing out on you anyway. They hit the fucking jackpot when it comes to kids, and if they can't see that, then fuck 'em."

He scowls, biting off the end of his sentence, frustrated and buzzing unpleasantly with all the things he can't say.

He wants to tell Tetsuya that he's the damn miracle, not a bunch of spoiled, arrogant teenagers. Wants to tell him he's special in a way that no one on Earth could ever possibly hope to match and that it's hardly his fault the people around him are fucking blind.

He wants to say that Tetsuya could never be a burden to anybody, not when he takes on the whole damn world for those precious to him without a word of complaint. Not when he shoulders everyone else's burdens and still manages to stand tall and unwavering and smile. Wants to say that they'd be damn lucky that he'd trust them enough to lean on them for help.
He wants to blurt out a shit ton of things, but instead he bottles it up and fumes and stands there and hopes what he did manage to say will be enough.

Shougo had glanced away sometime during his rant, uncomfortable with the intensity of Tetsuya's stare, and when he looks now, everything is a thousand times worse, what the fuck.

"Oh fuck, I didn't mean to make you cry. Uh, shit, sorry. But I meant what I said, and I'm not taking it back. You're awesome, and your parents are dicks. Shit. That's not helping. Uh. Are you okay?" Shougo babbles nervously, hands reaching out halfway, hovering over Tetsuya's trembling form uselessly.

He is not equipped to deal with this. Why the hell had he thought this was a good idea? Dragging out demons better left buried, poking at half-healed wounds? God, how did even think for half a fucking second that he could help anybody? He can't even help himself.

Tetsuya makes a noise from beneath his fringe, and Shougo grimaces. This isn't about him. He has to stop breaking down and attacking himself any time any little thing goes wrong. It's definitely not healthy.

...Although making his friend cry is hardly a little thing. S'more like an asshole thing, something he's a certified expert at being. Ugh.

Another sound, and fuck, he needs to focus. "...Tetsuya? Hey, man, you okay?"

Tetsuya looks up at him, and abruptly, Shougo realizes that those strange sounds were actually laughter. Tetsuya smiles, bright and wide and beaming, so sincere and gentle that Shougo can't bring himself to look away, and he realizes that maybe he hasn't completely fucked this up.

Shougo visibly relaxes, mouth twitching up into an answering smile, and he huffs, "Shit, man, don't fucking scare me like that." He lets out a breath of relief, flopping back down onto the sofa gracelessly and allowing his head to lie back against the cushion.

Laughing again, quiet and amused and undeniably Tetsuya, his friend says, "I apologize for worrying you."

He doesn't sound apologetic at all. Shougo's head lolls to the side, and he sends Tetsuya his best 'are you shitting me' expression.

That gets him a cheeky grin - as much as Tetsuya's face will allow for one anyway, but it melts into his genuine, sweet smile for his next words. "Your image of me is... Thank you, Haizaki-kun. I am not certain I agree with everything you said, but I realize Kise-kun and I put you in much the same position with our own perceptions of you. I will take your words to heart, and..." His smile falters, just a little, before it gains that determined edge Shougo is more than used to and glad to see. "I will speak with my parents. I... think this will be for the better."

"You're damn right it will," Shougo smirks, shoving Tetsuya playfully. "And if things go to shit, you can always stay over at my place. You know my mom adores you. Hell, she probably likes you better than me," he adds, feigning his annoyance.

"Naturally," Tetsuya says, so nonchalantly Shougo has to take a moment to realize he's just been insulted.

"Smartass." He laughs, delighted. Honestly, how had he gone so many years without knowing what a little shit this guy is? How has no one else noticed? Oh yeah, because his face and tiny stature practically scream innocence. "Why am I even friends with you?"
"Because you are not quite as terrible or heartless as you seem to think you are." Tetsuya wastes no time lodging an arrow in his gut.

Shougo scoffs. "Oh yeah? Because I remember Kise strong-arming me into coaching both of you."

He smiles. "If that is what you'd like to believe." Shougo's eye twitches, and he contemplates violence as Tetsuya continues, "Kise-kun is quite adamant that you are- What is the word?"

Shougo grimaces, "Don't you fucking say-"

"Ah, I believe it was 'tsundere,'" he bulldozes over Shougo's protests expertly, and Shougo can't help his full body shudder of disgust.

"I'm not a fucking- that word," he hisses, not about to fall into another trap by saying it. "Do I look like a fucking anime character to you? That wasn't a genuine question, asshole," he snarls when Tetsuya opens his mouth with that damn glint in his eye.

Forget good. This kid is evil down to his core. A real fucking demon. The miracle is that no one but Shougo can fucking see it.

Whatever smartass quip following that is interrupted by Tetsuya's phone vibrating.

He picks it up and reads the message, a smile pulling at his face at whatever he finds.

"It seems Kise-kun has messaged you, and he is frantic about your lack of a response," Tetsuya informs him. He doesn't have to sound so amused by it.

"Ugh."

Shougo whips out his phone, rolling his eyes at the myriad messages - all from Ryouta - cluttering up his lock screen. He unlocks it and opens the messaging app, scrolling to the top and reading from there.

**Flashy Bastard**

9:03 - I miss you, haizakicchi~! σ(≧ε≦Ω)

Attached is a selfie of Ryouta giving the camera a sad, pathetic expression.

9:12 - the least u could do is send me a pic of urself!

9:12 - u kno, 2 combat the loneliness!

9:16 - (´;Д;´)

9:16 - just 1 pic! pretty plz?

9:17 - i see how it is (;/¬_¬)

9:29 - how do i look?
Below that is a photo of Ryouta in stylish clothes (presumably; Shougo’s tastes are apparently in question), posing for the camera. He has a bright grin on his face, and he's clearly mid-laugh. He's probably talking to one of his sisters, and Shougo can actually hear the damn distinctive sound in his head.

...Clearly he spends too much time with this dork.

10:04 - u have ur phone on silent again dont u?
10:04 - ur so bad about that!
10:05 - i need my haizakicchi fix~! (ﾉ≧∇≦)ﾉ
10:06 - oh no! what if i forget wat u look like? (‘‘Д’’)
10:06 - quick! send me a pic of ur face before i forget!

Shougo rolls his eyes again hard, exasperated by this clingy mess of a teenage boy. Why is this his life. Why are these his friends.

To Flashy Bastard

10:18 - you have like a million pics of me you dick

Flashy Bastard

10:18 - its not a million silly
10:18 - and even then a million wouldnt be enough!
10:19 - gasp! u finally responded!
10:19 - i was so lonely! (´з`) Ø

To Flashy Bastard

10:20 - shut the fuck up
10:20 - i had to or you'd never stop whining

Flashy Bastard

10:21 - i am truly #blessed (■□■)جو
10:21 - now about that selfie...

To Flashy Bastard

10:22 - like I would ever willingly send you a picture of my face
10:22 - who knows what you'd do with it you pervert

Flashy Bastard

10:23 - gasp. i cant believe my integrity is being called into question!
10:23 - i can promise u only wholesome things will be done to ur face!
10:23 - i mean ur pic haha (/ 'з')/

To Flashy Bastard

10:24 - you're not helping your case
10:24 - I think I'm more suspicious now
10:24 - what do you even mean by "wholesome things"?

Flashy Bastard

10:25 - no need 2 worry about that haizakicchi! d(,,*ε´-,,)_<

Attached is another selfie, only this one is much closer. Ryouta takes up the whole screen, and his expression and pose elicit helpless laughter from Shougo.

The moron is winking, and he's flashing a peace sign sideways and palm facing outward over the closed eye. As usual, he's grinning, tongue poking out one side of his mouth, but with the pose, he looks ridiculous, like a magical girl or something.

Shougo hears a tell-tell click of a camera, and he blinks at Tetsuya in confusion. The boy pays him no mind and does nothing to hide the fact that he just took a picture of Shougo for no apparent reason.

"What was that...?"

Wordlessly, Tetsuya turns his phone around to show Shougo the screen, but wisely, he doesn't hand it over.

On the screen is the same messaging app Shougo was using, only this one is a private conversation between Tetsuya and Ryouta. Amusingly enough, Ryouta's contact name is The Blond One.
The conversation is much less amusing.

**The Blond One**

10:26 - omg kurokocchi this is perfect! hes so adorable omg look at his lil smile im gonna die! (╯✧∇✧)╯

10:26 - hes laughing 2 thats so precious i cant (■>3< ■)

10:27 - if u take another 1 ill double the offer!

Suspicious, Shougo looks up and spots the image that had prompted Ryouta's gushing, and all the (admittedly pretty obvious) pieces come together.

... It's a good photo of him. His attention is focused on his phone, and his expression is fond and happy, a smile lighting his face and absolutely ruining whatever badass image he might have possibly had of himself.

...Fucking hell, he knew the fluffy hair made him look soft, but coupled with that smile, he looks fucking harmless. Like Tetsuya. What the fuck.

And then, mechanically, he rereads the following two messages, and slowly (because denial denial denial) he comes to some damning conclusions.

One: Tetsuya has apparently made a deal with Ryouta that involves trading photos of Shougo (what the fuck) for something, and he is not particularly concerned about Shougo knowing. Which well - it's Tetsuya, enough said.

Two: Ryouta actually wants photos of Shougo (what the f u c k) and is willing to trade for them. He's actually made a deal with the devil for pictures of Shougo.

Three: That gushing... That was about him. Is about him. Ryouta is gushing... about him. Ryouta thinks he's adorable? (whatthefuck)

... Shougo gapes in horror as comprehension dawns on him, his whole damn body flushing in embarrassment and his heart beating a fast, hectic tempo in his chest. "What the fuck...?"

Anger is doing little to combat his sheer mortification, and the only thing that manages to pull him out of his stupor is another click of Tetsuya's camera.

"The fuck, Tetsuya?!" He yelps, feeling distinctly off balance or like he missed a step somewhere. Tetsuya shrugs. "I was promised free milkshakes."

"I'm gonna kill you," he snarls, lunging for the small boy.

He dodges nimbly, and as Shougo falls onto the other side of the couch and in the newly vacated space, Tetsuya makes for the door. "I'll put some tea on while you tamp down your murderous
"You little shit!" Shougo yells after him, and then he turns his ire to the other fucker plaguing his life and generally being a fucking nuisance.

To Flashy Bastard

10:39 - I know about your little deal with Tetsuya bastard
10:39 - fucking call me adorable again and I'll make you regret it

Flashy Bastard

10:40 - NIIJIMURACCHI IS IN ON IT TOO

"WHAT THE FUCK."

10:40 - but i cant help it haizakicchi!
10:40 - ur really cute! (≥∀≤)ﾉ
10:41 - and u called me pretty so were even!

To Flashy Bastard

10:41 - I called you pretty to your face asshole! It's not even the same thing
10:41 - I'm not cute I swear to fucking god

Flashy Bastard

10:42 - its non-negotiable!
10:42 - wait
10:42 - DID U CALL KUROKOCCHI BY HIS FIRST NAME?
10:43 - U EVEN TYPED IT OUT ( ;Д- )
10:43 - THIS WAS NO ACCIDENT ( ■■■■ )
10:44 - hello?
10:44 - I WOULD LIKE AN EXPLANATION
To Flashy Bastard

10:44 - obviously, Tetsuya and I have become closer friends since you left this morning

Flashy Bastard

10:45 - REJECTED

To Flashy Bastard

10:45 - what?

Flashy Bastard

10:45 - I REJECT THIS NEW CLOSENESS
10:45 - unless u call me ryouta!
10:45 - its only fair!

To Flashy Bastard

10:46 - no

Flashy Bastard

10:46 - whyyyyy?

To Flashy Bastard

10:47 - because Tetsuya doesn't give a shit what I call him
10:47 - and because it annoys you

Tetsuya sets down a steaming cup of tea on the table in front of him, and he only jumps out of his skin a little bit. "Fuck," he groans, glaring at the other boy as he sits down. "You get way too much enjoyment out of this."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Haizaki-kun," Tetsuya responds mildly. "I could never find the irritation of others entertaining. Perish the thought."
He snorts, bringing the cup to his face and blowing on it to cool it somewhat. He's not sure it actually helps, but it's practically an ingrained reaction at this point.

"...Is Nijimura in on it too?" He eventually asks, stomach roiling at the thought. He wouldn't put it past Ryouta to throw Nijimura under the bus even if he wasn't, but...

Tetsuya sips at his drink. "I am not liberty to discuss such things."

"So that's a definite yes then." Ughhh.

Whatever! It doesn't have anything to do with him! Well, except for the photos. Of him. That both Ryouta and Nijimura now have on their phones. For the express purpose of looking at him. Presumably.

...For the sake of his own sanity, he's going to drop it. He hardly needs more reasons to avoid being alone with Nijimura or to think Ryouta's a weirdo. He's just going to ignore or deny all of it until it goes away or blows up in his face. Fortunately, denial is something he's very, very good at.

"Why is Kise-kun accusing me of stealing you away from him?"

...Sweet, sweet denial.

Chapter End Notes

So! That Kuroko/Haizaki bit was ridiculously difficult to get through, but hopefully I managed it believably! I was admittedly relieved to get back to the lighthearted banter, but oh ho~ What is this? Secrets revealed? Hmm, maybe!

Kise is a treasure, and Kuroko is precious, and my trash son is trying his best! Niji is just a mention for now, but I promise he will have more screen time. As will my girl Momoi once she pops up. I'm really excited to write her specifically.

Haizaki is definitely going to continue calling Kuroko by his first name out of spite for both Kuroko and Kise. 'Cause he's awful that way. [kuroko is amused by this turn of events but also exasperated bc kise.]
Apologies for another belated update. I don't even have a good excuse, really. I've just been spending every free minute playing Final Fantasy XV and Digimon: Cyber Sleuth (the latter of which I recently completed!)

That being said, please feel free to badger/guilt me into writing! As long as you're not super negative (not like I think any of you would be!), I don't mind at all. Might be just what's needed to get my butt in gear.

Anyway, I'm glad to be back and excited to read your feedback!! ;D

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

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LVII. July 23, 2012 - Monday

Noise. Loud and aggravating. It bursts into Shougo's slumber with little care, and it rouses not only his consciousness but a fuck ton of ire.

"Fuck off," he grumbles, stubbornly keeping his eyes closed and desperately reaching for the receding tendrils of sleep.

Someone makes an irritated sound next to him, and then they crawl over him to get out of bed, accidentally kneeing him in the gut as they do so.

Shougo grunts, and a monotone voice mutters, "Sorry."

Ugh. Tetsuya. Considering who it was, that was definitely on purpose.

Shougo flips him off, turning over and shuffling further under the cover. Whatever business of Tetsuya's is none of his concern, and it's certainly not more important than going back to sleep.

He manages a light doze for a while, and it's only broken by another loud, aggravating noise.

"Good morning, Haizakicchi~!" Ryouta sings, leaning over him like he has any right to be in Shougo's personal space or to bother him when it's ass-o-clock in the morning.

"Go 'way," Shougo demands, hoping rather futilely that the clingiest person he's ever met will somehow listen to reason for once and leave him be.

He's right to worry.

" Fucking-!" Shougo curses, flailing about madly at the sudden lump of teenage boy snuggling up to him like a damn overgrown puppy.

His arms are trapped in the blanket, and Ryouta only laughs at Shougo's attempts to buck him off.

---
"We have plans today, Haizakicchi~! Can't let you sleep the day away~!"

"You're not gonna have any plans fucking ever if you don't get the fuck off me right now," Shougo growls, meaning it a whole lot more than usual.

Literally no one is safe from his rage when he's just woken up. Even his mom and brother know to only bother him from the doorway. This fucker is about to learn that lesson the hard way.

"You sure are saying the word 'fuck' a lot when we're in such a compromising position, Haizakicchi~!"

The threat doesn't register with Ryouta, and it takes Tetsuya stepping in and ticking Ryouta into submission for the flashy bastard to release him.

"S-stop, Kuro- kocchi! I- I give, I give!" He manages to say between gasping breaths and giggles.

He keeps wiggling around and batting Tetsuya's hands away, and he scream-laughs when Shougo joins in, intent on getting revenge.

Ryouta is - impossibly - ticklish everywhere, and his two hands do little stop the combined force of Shougo and Tetsuya.

By the time they do stop, Ryouta is curled up on the bed, hair mussed and face wet with tear tracks, trying to catch his breath.

"You - guys - are the - worst!" He groans, pouting.

Tetsuya shrugs, unconcerned. "I couldn't allow Haizaki-kun to murder you."

Ryouta grins, perking up. "Really?"

"Yes. It would be difficult to remove your blood from the sheets," Tetsuya explains, smiling as Ryouta deflates with another groan.

Shougo snorts. "Saw that coming." He's also sort of pleased Tetsuya kind of admitted Shougo could kick Ryouta's ass with no trouble. Obviously he knows it, but it's nice to have validation.

He shakes his head and gets back on track, eying Ryouta questioningly. "Why are you here anyway?"

Apparently recovered, Ryouta sits up and beams at him, revealing, "Oh? Didn't I say? We have plans today!"

"What plans?" Shougo asks, frowning. He never likes it when Ryouta gets that look on his face, and he doesn't remember making any plans today - other than chilling with Tetsuya - either.

"The beach," Tetsuya chimes in, and Shougo turns to look at him. "Each of our parents spoke on the phone and planned a day trip to the beach."

"What? Why?"

Nothing like this had happened before. Hell, he's not sure his mom ever contacted any other parents - unless it was to apologize on Shougo's behalf or to ask after damages and what they might cost. She was always cleaning up after him, and he never knew until Shion exploded at him one day (when their mom was so stressed she wasn't eating, and Shougo was staying out late every night picking fights), and the information just spilled out.
Reason number three thousand and seventy-two that Shougo is a dick.

But anyway, he's never done anything like this, and the only thing can come close is perhaps their school camping trips. It's weirdly nerve-wracking, straying so far from his original life-timeline-whatever, but it's... good, too. He should be doing new shit and trying new things. Clearly, the way he went about it the first time didn't go well.

This might just be a sign of progress, so despite the nerves, he's kind of excited.

He tunes back into the conversation and only just catches the tail end of Ryouta's explanation.

"...for our families to meet each other! Since we're so close, you know?" Ryouta says, winking at him. Shougo responds with a grimace.

"Whatever. When do we need to leave?" Shougo asks, standing up and stretching out the kinks in his back.

Ryouta stands up too, answering cheerily, "Five minutes ago. Nijimura's waiting for us at the station, and we're going to meet up with Kagami on the way there."

"Fuck," Shougo mutters. Nijimura's going? Ugh, just what he needed. A legit reason to be half-naked and wet around the guy who admitted to trying to... 'woo' him.

Ryouta grins, misinterpreting his troubled expression. "Yeah, so you might want to get dressed! Wouldn't want to keep them waiting, ne~?"

"I'm ready to go," Tetsuya says, appearing out of nowhere and scaring the shit out of them. He merely smiles a little smugly at their twin flinches.

Shougo rolls his eyes and starts searching for his clothes.

LVIII. July 23, 2012 - Monday

As promised, Nijimura is already there when they arrive at the crowded train station, leaning against the wall as they walk up to him, arms loaded with various beach-related items.

His eyes immediately stray to the new face in the group, and Kagami returns the assessing stare, not intimidated in the least. They'd spoken briefly about Nijimura to him, and Ryouta had supposedly mentioned Kagami to Nijimura on the phone, but this is the first time they're meeting in person.

Nijimura speaks up first. "Kagami, right? Heard you've been keeping these morons out of trouble. Thanks."

"The fuck-" / "Mean!"

Kagami smirks, adjusting the chair on his shoulder. "I heard you're the captain of two of these morons. That sucks, man."

"Hey!" / "Ouch."

"Heh." Nijimura huffs a laugh, lips curling up in amusement. "You have no idea." He then addresses the rest of them, pointing toward Kagami. "I like this one."

Shougo exhales heavily through his nose, and Ryouta snorts into his hand.

...Somehow, he's not even surprised.
"This spot looks good," Ryouta tells them, glancing speculatively around a particular area like it's somehow better than the rest of this sandy hell or any of the other spots Shougo had argued were 'fucking good enough.'

The only difference is that it's a little closer to the water and further away from that one guy fishing over there. Which, he grudgingly has to admit, is an improvement. Like hell Shougo's swimming where a dude is gonna attract a fucking shark or something.

Still. Fucking finally.

Shougo promptly drops the umbrella and kicks his sandals off, and he slips free of his shirt in one smooth movement, heedless of the others around him setting up chairs and laying down towels and shit.

"You can put the- aaAAHHHH!" Ryouta fucking shouts once he turns toward Shougo, startling both him and Kagami, who whips his head around mid-step and stubs his toe on the cooler by accident.

Ignoring Kagami's muttered curses, Tetsuya's subsequent monotone concern, and Nijimura's amused snort, Shougo frowns at Ryouta, bewildered. "The hell, flashy bastard?"

He smiles nervously and rubs the back of his neck. "Hahaha, I uh- stepped on a crab, haha! Really surprised me," is Ryouta's lame ass explanation.

Shougo wonders if he should call him out on it, but he settles for simply eyeing him like the weirdo he is and then dismissing the strange moment with a shake of his head. "Whatever. Where's the sunscreen?"

"Here," Tetsuya pipes up, digging the bottle out of a bag and tossing it to him.

Shougo catches it with one hand, giving Tetsuya a nod in thanks, and then he starts methodically spraying it all over his exposed skin and rubbing it in.

The main factor in the hate bit of his love-hate relationship with the beach is the damn sunburn he somehow always gets - usually because he travels in and out of the water without ever remembering to add more lotion to replace the first layer.

Not this time, he promises himself, and then he immediately runs into a problem with the plan when he gets to his back. Shougo's pretty damn skilled, but even he can't spray his own back - not effectively anyway. He usually just has his mom or brother do it for him, but they're not here yet and won't be for another hour.

He glances back at the present company, considering.

Tetsuya is watching Kagami struggle to keep the umbrella from falling over, interjecting thinly veiled snide remarks here and there which Kagami returns with equal vigor.

Ryouta is off to the side, his back to Shougo as he fiddles uselessly with a chair, reclining it back and forth for whatever reason. Shougo can't be sure, but it looks like his ears are tinted red. ...Surely he can't be burning already?

And lastly, there's-
"Need help?" Nijimura asks, making Shougo jump out of his skin.

He yelps. "What the fuck, bastard?! You trying to emulate Tetsuya, you shitty captain?" Shougo shouts and rounds on the smirking teen with a scowl.

["I resent that," Tetsuya says and then pokes the umbrella Kagami has finally gotten to stand up by itself.

It promptly falls over, and Kagami and Tetsuya share a Look before Kagami lunges forward to tackle him in a fit of rage, only just missing when Tetsuya abuses his misdirection ability and steps to the side.

Kagami lands face-first on the ground, gracelessly, and Tetsuya squats down to poke him, telling him disapprovingly, "Even if you love the beach, you shouldn't eat sand, Kagami-kun."

"I hate you," Kagami groans, lying there and accepting his fate.

All of this goes unnoticed by a bickering Shougo and Nijimura and a despondent Ryouta muttering to himself about how he 'wasn't ready' over by his chair.]

"Says the shitty kouhai," Nijimura snarks, thumping Shougo on the forehead and probably leaving a red mark, the ass.

"Agh!" He rubs the sore spot, glaring, but as usual, it has absolutely no effect on this guy. "What do you want?"

Nijimura holds out a hand. "The sunscreen. I need to use it, but you're not done, right? Let me do it."

Shougo squints at him, suspicious. "Why?"

("Honestly, I still like you.")

The remembered words hit him like a punch to the gut, and he flushes, feeling suddenly exposed. "No thanks," he says tersely. Resisting the urge cover up, he looks over towards the others and calls out, "Hey, Tetsu-"

Suddenly, the bottle is snatched out of his hand, and he's being turned around before he can even think to react. The unbelievably cold spray on his back makes him jolt, but he obediently stays still, frowning resignedly.

...It's not like it's that big of a deal.

("I can try to convince you to change your mind.")

Shougo bites his lip and waits impatiently for Nijimura to finish, focusing on the unpleasant mix of cold and hot and the bits of sand already clinging to him like a fucking disease.

When a warm hand touches his shoulder blade, however, he ducks under it and whirls around with a sour expression.

"Didn't you need Kuroko for something?" is all that gets him. Nijimura hardly looks cowed. Smug, more than anything, making Shougo huff in irritation and look away.

"Whatever, bastard. Don't fucking touch me," Shougo orders, stretching around to rub his shoulders and what parts of his back he can reach without pulling something. He's deadly fucking serious about avoiding a fucking sunburn.
"Heh. You're awfully worked up, Haizaki. Might give someone the wrong impression," Nijimura muses idly, sharp, grey eyes focused on Shougo unerringly.

Might make someone think it's because of me, he doesn't say.

Shougo tenses, flustered and fucking agitated, torn between stifling the rising heat in his face and glaring bloody murder at Nijimura for the implication. In the end, he probably looks constipated, but he still hisses out through gritted teeth, "Shut the fuck up."

Nijimura chuckles, so at ease in this situation that it's insulting. It does nothing to cool his temper.

Two seconds before Shougo implodes from sheer emotion, Nijimura drops all indifference and condescension from his expression and instead smiles (what), nudging Shougo's suddenly slack face with the bottle of lotion.

"Make sure you put it on your face, too. Don't need my cute, little kouhai complaining about a sunburn during practice." His smile grows sharper, threatening, as he adds in a light tone, "And don't think you can use it as an excuse for skipping, either."

Shougo spends a long moment staring at his captain in consternation (fucking what) before he rolls his eyes and snorts, grabbing the damn sunscreen and grumbling, "Hard ass. Like I would."

He generously allows Nijimura to get away with the 'cute' comment, mostly because it's already been shoved under the metaphorical rug along with all the other things he doesn't want to question or think about ever. (Like how he got here, but no, no, he's not going there.)

He hastily does his face, too, and then he throws the bottle at Nijimura and stalks off towards the water - literally the only good part about the beach - before one of these idiots can mess him up even more. He's not supposed to be this easy to fuck with, damn it!

The water is fucking freezing, but then again, it always is. At least one thing's fucking constant. He drops down until his whole body is under, and he curses vehemently when he comes back up, futilely rubbing his arms and trying to work up some heat.

Stupid fucking wind. Stupid fucking beach. Hurry and warm up already, the fuck.

He keeps all but his head in the water, floating there and glaring at nothing like some wannabe crocodile, and he only barely turns to glance at the others joining him.

"Shit, it's cold," Kagami complains, wading out to Shougo with a grimace, the water only coming up to his waist.

Tetsuya, on the other hand, is shaking like a leaf and almost being swallowed by each wave. He looks longingly back at the shore. "M-maybe I should wait on the-"

"N-no, Kurokocchi! Y-you have to- have to stay with us!" Ryouta demands, teeth chattering and looking just as cold as he latches on to Tetsuya's arm.

"Somebody keep an eye on 'im. He'll probably try to sneak out when we're not looking." Nijimura is at the back of the group, seemingly not affected - but his wince at a particularly strong gust of wind gives him away.

None of them have looked his way, too busy bantering. A smirk pulls at Shougo's lips as an idea comes to him.
"I would never," Tetsuya lies through his teeth, and all present give him the look that deserves - thus, creating an opening.

While they're distracted, Shougo sinks below the water and swims over to a specific person, eyes stinging a little when he peeks to make sure he's close, and then he strikes, hooking his arms around both legs and pulling them up out of the water with him.

Nijimura makes a startled noise as he unceremoniously plummets backwards, eyes wide and surprised as he goes down with a humongous splash.

The rest of them are no better.

Ryouta gapes, and Tetsuya's poker face slips, the both of them awed and horrified (most likely thinking of the repercussions) and understandably speechless.

Kagami chuckles once he gets over his shock, and Shougo joins in, laughing the laugh of a man with nothing to lose - and a man who is entirely satisfied with his crime.

Nijimura resurfaces murderous and instantly launches himself at Shougo, coming up out of the water like a fucking torpedo, and he knocks Shougo full-body into the water in retribution.

Shougo sputters, gulping down air when he comes back up, and Ryouta is already at his side, patting his back sympathetically even as he grins.

He shakes off Ryouta and glares at Nijimura when he gets his bearings straight, miffed but still also completely unrepentant. It was totally fucking worth it.

"Don't give me that look. Shouldn't have dunked me first, you little brat." Nijimura rolls his eyes, brushing his wet hair back with a hand. "You forget I'm the one who decides your punishments?"

Shougo scoffs and crosses his arms. "You're letting the power go to your head, asshole."

Nijimura leans over and tugs at his hair, smirking with the promise of pain in his eyes. "Oh yeah? Maybe I should give you a real reason to think so. How about laps? Huh? Suicides, maybe? Wanna clean the locker room?" He gives another little tug to punctuate each word.

Shougo grits his teeth, clutching Nijimura's larger hand with both of his and glaring up at him defiantly. "You don't own me, bitch."

Kagami breaks into another fit of laughter, Nijimura's expression grows dark, and Shougo maybe sort of regrets that last remark. However, before Nijimura can kick his ass, a savior comes to his rescue.

A giant wave of water hits Nijimura from the side, completely soaking him again, and they both whirl around and regard the perpetrator with disbelief.

Ryouta smiles at them - although it looks more like a grimace - skin pale and hands raised non-threateningly. He laughs weakly. "Uh, I can explain?"

"Try me." Nijimura arches a challenging brow in a non-verbal 'you ain't got shit,' his lips twitching at the corners the only tell betraying his amusement.

Gulping audibly, Ryouta says, "I... didn't mean to?"

"Try again."
"I... knew you were a kind, forgiving soul who wouldn't murder me for it?"

Nijimura smirks, inching toward his prey like a damn predator. "Nope."

Panicking, Ryouta dodges behind the solid wall of muscle that is Kagami, yelling, "I was just trying to help Haizakicchi! Don't hurt me! I'm too good-looking to die! Take Kagamicchi instead!"

"Oi!" Kagami protests, scowling and trying to prevent Ryouta from using his body as a shield. "Bastard, he'd be doing the world a favor if he got rid of you!"

"I knew there was a reason I liked you," Nijimura says to Kagami as they both try to catch Ryouta, eliciting a smirk from their resident red head.

"Mean!" The idiot pouts, finally maneuvering around Kagami and Nijimura, but he bumps into an invisible wall (thus knocking said wall into the water) and is immediately apprehended by their esteemed captain.

He cries out as his head is mercilessly noogie'd. Kagami takes his revenge by jabbing Ryouta in the side while he's defenseless.

"Ow," the wall says, staring dispassionately at the sky as he floats on his back. His hair is sticking up wildly, despite him not even touching it.

Shougo takes it all in, unexpected rescue to deadly alliance to Tetsuya's monotone, very belated complaint, and then he laughs so hard he cries.

Every time he calms down, he remembers Ryouta's frightened face or Kagami's offense or Tetsuya's everything or Nijimura's utter shock when he fell, and it sets him off again.

*What the fuck*, he thinks through his tears, body shaking with each chuckle. *What the fuck just happened.*

When did his angsty redemption novel become a gag manga?

After an eternity - or a minute, probably - he regains his composure and straightens his back, gaze returning to his friends for the first time since he lost it.

They're still in the positions he last saw them, frozen in place.

Nijimura has his hand buried in Ryouta's hair and an arm around his neck, and subsequently, Ryouta is clearly still trapped.

Kagami's expression is surprisingly unreadable, and Tetsuya is merely sparing him a small smile.

All of them are fucking quiet and staring, though, which makes embarrassment coil in his gut.

"...What?" He asks, brows furrowing. S'not like he's never laughed before - in front of these guys, especially. He crosses his arms.

Ryouta blinks like a spell has just been broken, and he lights up like the fucking sun as he leaps out of Nijimura's arms and into Shougo's.

"You laugh with your whole body, Haizakicchi! That's so adorable~!" Ryouta tells him, using the buoyancy the water gives him to wrap his legs around Shougo's waist in a whole new level of strange clingingness.
Shougo scowls, futilely trying to pry Ryouta from his person before giving up with a long, exasperated sigh. "Why do you have to make everything weird," he groans.

"It's entirely your fault," Ryouta says seriously. "If you weren't so cute and huggable-"

That's as far as he gets before Shougo tries to commit murder for the umpteenth time that day. He pushes the fucker down beneath the water and only stops when he's pulled off of Ryouta against his will.

What the fuck. What the fuck.

"Haha... Haizakicchi is adorable even when he's trying to drown me..." Ryouta declares way too happily, safe over by Tetsuya.

Nijimura and Kagami keep a strong hold on each arm, and Shougo snarls furiously, cheeks burning for reasons entirely unconnected to the hot sun.

"You asshole!"


"Please stop antagonizing him, Kise-kun."

"Stay out of this, Tetsuya!"

"Haizaki, calm down."

Reluctantly, Shougo does calm down, but it has nothing to do with Nijimura using his Captain Voice and everything to do with the fact that he simply felt like it.

Ugh. Sure. And maybe Shougo actually is the twelve year old he's supposed to be, and all this time travel shit's in his head.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was supposed to be super important and plotty, but instead here's stupid boys on the beach part 1.

NEW THING. here. have some trivia: [this and more can be found on my side-blog: trash-son-needs-love]

- Shion is the Japanese name for a type of flower [Aster tarticus], and the flower means "I won't forget you" or "remembrance"

- Yoshie means "good grace"

- Junko means "pure child"
LX. July 23, 2012 - Monday

Shougo flops down on the towel with a groan, trying and failing to ignore the sand molesting his damn body from head to toe. His fiery hatred of the stuff could rival the fucking sun.

"Just fucking kill me," he demands of the group at large, voice muffled. Then he won't have to deal with the sunburn on his face and shoulders or the sand that refuses to be washed off. His family will be sad at first, but they'll get over it. It's for the best.

Ryouta laughs somewhere to the left of him, but it's Tetsuya who says, rather logically, "It would be troublesome to dispose of your corpse."

"A true friend wouldn't care."

"Would a true friend murder you?" Nijimura asks curiously as he walks up, and Shougo flinches when stray water drops hit his back.

"I think that's assisted suicide," Ryouta chimes in, tone way too cheerful for the morbid topic. Then again, he's always been a cheerful asshole, so Shougo is hardly surprised. "But either way, we love you too much to get rid of you, Haizakicchi!"

Kagami snorts. "Speak for yourself." He nudges Shougo's side and adds, "Stop advertising your criminal plots. I don't wanna be implicated in your death."

"Too late. You're all in on it. Sucks to be you," Shougo groused, hoping that maybe if he wishes
hard enough, he'll die right here. Or maybe he'll suddenly repel sand like a fucking magnet. Time travel is apparently real, so why the fuck not.

"Murder plots aside," Nijimura begins, amused, "it looks like our families are here. They need help bringing their shit over here, so come on, get up."

A fucking captain to the core, he manages to get all of them up and out to the parking lot despite all the grumbling and complaints. He even keeps his hand firmly planted on Tetsuya's head to keep the little shit from dipping out.

"You're hurting me, Senpai," Tetsuya tells him in a monotone.

Nijimura rolls his eyes. "Well it hurts me when you abuse that ability of yours, so I guess we're both gonna have to deal, huh?"

Shougo and Kagami both snort at that, and Ryouta bites his lip to keep from smiling.

"Ah," Tetsuya says, bopping his fist on his open palm with a look of realization, "I didn't know you were into BDSM, Senpai."

Shougo chokes on his spit, startled, but devolves into laughter soon enough, Ryouta looks weirdly proud, and Kagami smirks down at Tetsuya, utterly entertained.

"What the hell," Nijimura mutters, mussing up Tetsuya's hair in retaliation. "You guys have corrupted him with your shitty senses of humor," he accuses, ignoring or choosing not hear his victim's quiet, "Ow. Stop. Why."

Shougo squawks, offended. "It was that fucker, not me!" He drags Ryouta over by the arm, harshly. "Have you heard some of the gross, sexual shit that comes out of this guy's mouth?!"

"Kurokocchi was always like that!" Ryouta insists, hastily. "He just gets away with it because he's so small and polite!"

At this declaration, Shougo looks at Ryouta in a whole new light. Not just as a reluctant acquaintance turned begrudging close friend... but as a comrade, an ally.

"Wait, you think so too? No one ever believes me when I tell them Tetsuya's a snarky little shit!" Shougo says, disbelievingly.

Ryouta nods vigorously. "The things he says are hilarious, and it's like no one ever hears it! And when he shows up late-"

"-and pretends he was there the whole time! I know, I know! It's ridiculous," Shougo huffs, exasperated.

"These are false allegations," Tetsuya says, eyes actually betraying some of his amusement for a moment before it's neatly tucked away. "I won't stand for it."

He and Ryouta a share a Look, and a Bond solidifies between them. He can almost hear the quirky background music and visualiaze the box of text that says as much.

[...Wait, no, he isn't imagining that, what the fuck.]

He waves it all away, irritably.

This ain't a fucking video game.]
"I feel so attacked right now," Tetsuya announces with a straight face. "I thought you were my friends."

Shougo smirks, even more amused by the wild hair Tetsuya's sporting from a combination of it drying weirdly and Nijimura's tender loving care. "If you'd done me in like I asked, none of this would have happened."

"Murder is not the solution to every problem," Nijimura says, face doing a good job of communicating his being absolutely done with all of them. "However, if you keep bringing it up, I'll gladly test that theory."

Shougo's tempted to point out that that would be exactly what he'd wanted, but Nijimura's sudden shadowed eyes make him think twice. No matter the age difference between them, Nijimura's still intimidating as fuck. Must be a damn requirement for being captain.

You can't hack it unless you can quell your players with one fucking look, apparently.

Shougo shudders and moves over to walk closer to Ryouta, who shoots him a knowing glance. "Shut up," he mutters, sullenly.

Ryouta laughs, seamlessly linking their hands together in a loose hold. It feels weird because of the sand and prune-y skin, but he merely grimaces (seriously, fuck sand) and rolls with it.

"I've never been to the beach with friends before," Ryouta tells him, cheerfully.

"Me neither," Shougo admits, and it's sort of nice that that's changed. That he's making an effort to change and that so far it's paying off. He feels warm and full, and it has little to do with where he is and everything to do with who he's with.

"It's fun," Ryouta continues, squeezing Shougo's hand briefly, "Just a few months ago, I didn't think I could be this happy ever again, as dramatic as that sounds. I'm..." He laughs, a little bashful. "Well, grateful, I guess? It's hard to put into words."

Shougo nods, expression neutral (because he might just break into a smile, otherwise) and silently marveling at the fact that Ryouta is opening up to him again so soon and without any prompting. It feels like a victory and a precious gift all at once.

"I just wanted you to know that no matter what, your friendship is important to me," Ryouta tells him, seriously. "I'm in this for the long haul. You joke about how clingy I am, but I will grasp onto you and stick around for as long as you'll let me."

Shougo hastily covers his mouth to hide his wobbly smile, and he sort of wants to cry and laugh at the same time. Possibly both. Definitely neither. After a few moments, he manages to say, gruffly, "Guess it's good I don't ever want to get rid of you, then."

He expects a surprised gasp, a dramatic "you're so adorable, Haizakicchi" (much as he loathes the words), and a bone-breaking hug.

He does not expect Ryouta's calm, quiet surety.

"You mean that," he says, with a tinge of humor, a callback to past exchanges between them.

And as before, as always, he knows without Shougo's verbal confirmation that he absolutely does mean it, this time.
He squeezes Shougo's hand again and then releases it, a reassurance or maybe a thank you, and it suprises both of them when Shougo automatically grabs Ryouta's hand again before he can fully let go.

Ryouta blinks at him, owlishly, and Shougo stares down at his own hand in astonishment and betrayal, and neither of them say anything for a long moment.

"I didn't-"

"Did you just-"

"Ahh~! That's so cute, oh my god!" An unfamiliar voice squees, and suddenly Shougo and Ryouta are both engulfed in a three-way embrace. "You said he was adorable, Ryou, but this is-!"

"Gross?" Shougo's dick of a brother chimes in, wryly, as he drops the cooler he was carrying and plops down on it.

The girl whips her head around, releasing Ryouta and pulling Shougo closer, protectively. Thankfully, she's only a little taller than him, so his face isn't smushed in her chest and is merely squished against her neck and shoulder. But god, why?

"Too precious for words," she corrects, decisively, and while Shion snorts, he doesn't argue with her.

Shougo, for his part, is really fucking confused.

"Um," he starts and then doesn't know how to progress.

"I think you've broken him, Sis," Ryouta laughs, peering around the girl and into Shougo's field of view.

"Oh!" She lets go, and Shougo immediately backpedals a safe distance.

She merely smiles at him, warm and kind, and now that he isn't being crushed against his will (and even without Ryouta's 'sis'), her identity is obvious.

She has long, blond hair that drapes over her shoulders in curls and bangs that feather her brow. Green eyes have a familiar sparkle, and her smile is one he's seen on another face a million times. She's pretty, ridiculously so, and the only two people he's ever known to match that level of otherworldly attractiveness are Ryouta and his oldest sister.

"You're..." Shougo says, trailing off expectantly.

She smiles a little wider. "I'm Junko, Ryou's sister." She tucks a long lock of hair behind her ear, glancing teasingly at her brother before continuing, "I'm glad I finally get to meet the boy Ryou won't stop talking about. He's very fond of you, you know? It's sweet."

"Junko, please," Ryouta whines, cheeks dusted pink and looking like the perfect picture of the long-suffering younger brother. "Stop."

She giggles, and that too is a sound he knows intimately, albeit higher pitched and less theatrical. Just how many things did get from his sister, anyway?

"You're too shy, Ryou!" She tells him, booping his nose. "Let me have my fun, will you? You never get this excited about friends. Or anything! It's my right as your older sister."

Ryouta groans, "You're awful. You know that? Why does everyone think you're sunshine and
rainbows? That's what I want to know."

She pats his head, expression amused now. "It's because they're absolutely right."

"Haizakichi," Ryouta turns to him, apparently giving up his sister as a lost cause, beseeching, "don't listen to anything she says. It's all lies!"

With another cute giggle, Junko grabs him by his shoulders and rests her chin on his head, and so close together, the resemblance between them is uncanny. She's got rounder cheeks, and she's thinner in the waist and less broad in the shoulders. But they're clearly siblings.

Shougo's mind is trying to focus on literally anything other than the truths Junko is revealing - because fuck, it's embarrassing him too, which is completely un-fucking-fair.

"Ryou got up extra early this morning to see you," she stage whispers.

"Lies! Slander!" Ryouta cries, not so subtly trying to wiggle out of her hold.

"He said he wanted to wake you up-"

Ryouta's panicked words do little to cover hers, "She's a compulsive liar. Don't believe anything-"

"-he wanted to be the first thing you saw! Isn't my little bro the most adorable thing-?"

"It's a real problem. But we're working on it! This is the first time she's been let out in public in weeks!" Ryouta is close to shouting when he finishes.

Junko has trouble getting her words out, she's laughing so hard. "You- you're so flustered, Ryou~!" She covers her mouth, but does little to halt her giggles.

Tomato red, Ryouta pouts outrageously, "And whose fault is that? Ugh, see? This is why I didn't want you guys to come! I knew you would do this."

"It's only because we love you, squirt," Yoshie says with a smirk as she walks up. Ignoring Ryouta's squawk, she addresses Shougo, "Hey. You remember what we talked about, correct?"

"Wait, what?" Ryouta asks, looking between the two of them. "What talk?"

"Hard to forget," Shougo mutters, trying not to feel like he's in the cross hairs. When she merely quirks a brow, he answers louder, grudgingly, "Yeah, I remember."

Her lips curl into a pleased smile, and Shougo struggles not to shudder. Yoshie is intimidating in an entirely different - and way more terrifying - manner than Nijimura, and he's grateful Ryouta takes after Junko rather than her.

The image of Ryouta staring down at him like a tiger might stare down a particularly appetizing deer is wrong on many, many levels, and he dismisses it with a grimace and a mental shake of his head.

Outwardly, he glares up at Yoshie, and she watches him with idle amusement, and not much registers with Shougo outside of this.

Suddenly, an arm rests on his head, jostling him and forcing him to duck down and break eye contact.

"The fuck-" he snarls, but he's cut off.
"Maa," Shion says, casually, "If anyone's gonna have talks with younger brothers, it should be me, yeah?"

Shougo manages to throw him off, but that same arm just wraps around his shoulders and refuses to budge. "Will you fucking -"

Shion goes on, unconcerned, smiling at Yoshie much too cheerfully to be genuine, "I mean, my bro here is pretty oblivious, you know? Practically clueless when it comes to these things. So maybe, just guessing here, but maybe words should be had with those who know exactly what they're doing."

"Uh," Shougo says, stumped for the umpteenth time today.

"My brother is fragile," Yoshie rebuts, bluntly, and Ryouta groans quietly.

"Yeah? Seems like mine's doing a good job of fixing that."

"It means little to build him up if he intends to tear him down."

"He intends to make friends and have fun. No demolition plans as of yet."

"If there's a chance, even a small one, I'm prepared to take certain preventative measures." Yoshie's eyes grow darker, shadowed, cooler.

Shion matches her cold steel with tempered flames. "There's no way one of them won't get hurt, they're just kids, but I know they'll make up and try again. They're stronger than that. Your brother is stronger than that."

A silence, a look, loaded with tension, and then:

Yoshie smiles, seemingly satisfied. "Indeed he is." Her frostiness melts, and in its place is a glimpse of the same warmth and love Junko radiates like the sun. "Even so."

"My bro's an idiot sometimes and often clueless, but he's not cruel. You don't have to worry," Shion assures her, matching her protectiveness stroke for stroke.

She laughs, a striking little thing, and promises, "Ryouta's harmless."

Shion smiles again, and this one is real. "So we have an understanding!"

"That we do," Yoshie agrees, and Shougo's not sure, but he thinks they just became friends. Somehow.

Shion releases him, and Shougo stalks away to- anywhere else.

"I'm so confused," Ryouta whines, falling into step with him. "And a little horrified. I don't know."


He doesn't know either.

"Your brother is kind of terrifying," Ryouta says, frantic. "Any time he brought me up - and what was that about anyway? - I was like 'please don't look over here, oh my god, why,' and then Yoshie would make it worse - honestly what was that about? - and I'd sort of wish I could sink into the ground and die or something." He takes a deep breath, exhales, and then rambles some more, "But I think they were okay there at the end? Yoshie stopped doing that thing where she bares her teeth,
you know the scary smirk thing, and your brother actually smiled a smile that didn't freak me out, so uh, yeah, that was something, huh?"

"You done?" Shougo rolls his eyes, and upon realizing they'd made it to a nearby food stand, which luckily has tables and seats (and more importantly is away from everyone else), he picks a chair and sags down in it.

"Yeah, sorry." Ryouta chuckles, abashed, as he sits across from him. "I just- maybe we should forget it? You know? It was pretty weird."

Shougo frowns, looking out over the open ocean, thinking. A lot was revealed in a short time, and now that he's not weirded out by the sudden... showdown, understanding is coming fast and unforgiving. "She said- Yoshie was trying to protect you, I get that. Shion was doing the same for me. They're our siblings, that's fine. But what I don't get," he says, brows furrowing, "is why she's so sure I'm gonna 'hurt' you."

"Oh. So we're talking about this?" Ryouta asks, unenthusiastic. At Shougo's dark expression, he says, "I guess we're talking about this. Um, Yoshie is just- like that? She's always been very mom-like. You know. Watching out for me and Junko and stuff." He shrugs one shoulder.

Shougo scoffs, "So she puts everyone through the third degree? It's not just me?"

He nods. "Yes! ...Well, it might be a little different... with you. But it doesn't matter! Because you're not gonna hurt me, and she doesn't have to worry, and everything's fine."

Everything is not fine. There's way too many half-answers and implications to puzzle through for him to be satisfied.

"But why is she so sure I'm a threat? Just me, specifically?" He remembers Shion's words and says, "My brother called me oblivious, but what the fuck am I missing?"

He watches Ryouta closely, his nervousness and fidgeting and insistence on dropping the topic, and quite suddenly, he feels that if he goes any further, presses any harder, he won't be able to turn back. This - whatever this is - won't be that simple.

There's a part of him, a large part telling him 'stop, this isn't worth it, you don't want to know,' but he's dealt with denial and secret desires and turning away from truths for years, and quite frankly, he's fucking tired of it.

He already said it, didn't he? He's tired of running, of always running. He doesn't want to run anymore.

He does not run.

He takes the plunge into the unknown.

"Ryouta, what am I missing?" He asks, seriously, intent, with no room for hesitation or uncertainty.

Ryouta jumps a little at the use of his given name, and when he gets a good look at Shougo's face, he grimaces. "Okay, um."

Licking his lips, he says, shakily, "That's probably- I mean, I'm pretty sure what you're missing is- well, my... feelings... for you."

...?
...!

Oh no.

Chapter End Notes

whoop, there it is. -that was physically painful, i'm sorry. ANYway, I like to call this chapter 'don't talk to me or my bro ever again.' Or alternately, 'dumb boys at the beach part 2.'

-o-

Trivia:

- Shion is afraid of hamsters because one bit him when he was ten, and he's never gotten over it.

- Yoshie has a girlfriend! Her name is Nakamoto Hitomi, and she's been friends with Yoshie since their first year of middle school. They've been dating since last year.

- Junko is the president of the fashion club at her school. She adores all of her members (most of whom joined because of her) and dotes on them and dresses them up.
but you slipped through the cracks, and now we're trapped

Chapter Notes

Happy (Belated) Valentine's Day, everyone! Hope you had a good one. ( *´▽` * )

My tale of woe: treated myself to Persona 5 last Friday as an early gift only to realize immediately after that the release date had been delayed to April, ughhhh. I've been alternately complaining and consoling myself ever since, lol. At least there's always chocolate. ( `_^` )

Next Update: March 3, 2017 [probably obvious, but i'm updating every other Friday]

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

LXI. July 23, 2012 - Monday

"A-actually, I was planning to tell you soon, but uh, who knew it would turn out like this?"

He feels nauseous, and his heart is thumping so loudly that it drowns out absolutely everything else except his thoughts, which are thoroughly and mercilessly flying through every interaction, every hitch of breath and strange flush and feathery touch, every confusing statement and flirtatious undertone and longing glance.

"Heh, wow, this is really nerve-wracking, haha, but I guess I should say it properly! Since uh, you are kinda slow at noticing these things. No offense!"

The jealousy, the shyness, the pleasure. The abrupt end to teasing remarks about Shougo's and Nijimura's non-existent relationship. The endless photos and gushing.

He'd never questioned it.

"Um, Haizakicchi... I like you. Romantically. Not in a friend way - although I definitely like you as a friend too."

...In hindsight, it was obvious. He can see that now. He'd dismissed every occurrence as just another one of Ryouta's eccentricities. Tossed it up to friend stuff his socially awkward ass just hadn't known about. Because Ryouta is clingy and flirty and friendly by nature. Shougo's seen him with the others and knows that much.

"I understand if you don't feel the same way. Honestly, I'm pretty sure you don't. But uh, well, I couldn't help but hope, you know?"

But he's been more open with Shougo since the beginning. More honest. He's shared secrets and trivial details and shortcomings with Shougo, things he's never mentioned to anyone else. He's tested boundaries and prodded for reactions, and now Shougo knows what he was looking for -

"Um, anyway, you look pretty spooked, but don't worry! I'm not expecting anything. I'm really just hoping nothing will change between us. Your friendship means much more to me than a- a silly
crush."

Reciprocation. The one thing Shougo can't give him, and fuck, but this is somehow more difficult to deal with than Nijimura's confession - and that was a fucking nightmare.

"So uh, yeah, that's it! I like you, but I hope we can move past that and stay friends. ...Please."

Why does this shit always happen to him?! Where was this cliche love drama the first time around?! Is his older self such a hot fucking commodity that teenage boys everywhere want to tap that?

None of this makes any fucking sense!

"...Haizakicchi?"

Ugh, shit, he needs to get his scrambled thoughts back in order. He pulls up a mental list and works through it, keenly aware of Ryouta fidgeting in silence (when did he stop his nervous babbling?) and anxious anticipation across from him.

In no particular order:

1. Ryouta is his friend. Unquestionably. Whatever might come of this, there's a tight squeezing in his chest that feels a lot like fear born from the just the thought of losing his friendship with Ryouta, so that's a fucking no-go. (Not that it had even been a viable option in the first place.)

2. Same problem he ran into with Nijimura. Shougo is twenty-fucking-two, and while it's flattering on some level that he's somehow attracting a fucking harem, having small teenagers confess their love to him is the equivalent of a four year old declaring they're going to marry their parents. It's cute, but no one takes it seriously, and nothing's going to come from it.

Plus, it'd be gross and inappropriate - not to mention a fucking crime.

3. Following the above train of thought, Shougo has no romantic feelings for Ryouta whatsoever, being that he's more than a decade older, and Ryouta's just a kid. And even back then, as a teenager for real, he'd never been interested in Ryouta as anything other than a rival. (Too much bitterness and resentment and later, envy for anything of the sort.)

With Nijimura, there was precedence, Shougo letting his twelve year old self get carried away with an old crush, a fantasy, but there's nothing like even that with Ryouta.

And...

4. Shougo is shit at feelings in general, and as previously established, he does not do gentle. He's all sharp edges and mismatched pieces, crumbling walls and broken glass. He's a clusterfuck of insecurities and complexes, and it's going to take more than a few months to change all of that, all of him, for the better.

Even though these precious few have managed to ignore the warning signs and wounds and snuck through the cracks in his defenses...

Even though they're willing to overlook and accept Shougo as he is, asshole-ish tendencies and all, with no hesitation and no regrets...

Well, he knows himself better than anyone, knows how truly awful he can be. Just how far he can fall. And what a slippery slope it is.
Never again, he promised at his mother's sick bed, watery eyes glaring down at his white knuckles, unable to even lift his head and see the strongest person he's ever known look so weak.

Never again, he promises himself now, somber mood contrasting harshly against the relaxed atmosphere shrouding the beach-side restaurant and its carefree customers, heart aching for the boy across from him, his friend who has gone and gotten feelings for someone who can never return them.

What shitty fucking luck.

He fights to keep his face neutral as he looks up at Ryouta again, but he fails spectacularly when he sees what a nervous wreck his lack of reaction has turned him into.

"...Calm down," he orders and is surprised at how steady his voice is in comparison to the rest of him, which is freaking the fuck out.

Ryouta startles at the first words Shougo's spoken since the confession, bright, golden eyes wide and worried. "Um, sorry," he mumbles, wiping his hands on his pants. Is he sweating?

"Don't be," Shougo sighs, frustrated, clenching and unclenching his fists. This is so fucking hard. "...That's not what I meant to say."

Dazzling smile nowhere in sight (and god, he already fucking misses it), Ryouta asks, quietly, "Then what did you mean to say?" Shougo groans, and after a beat, Ryouta adds, "I'm trying to be patient, Haizakicchi, but this is- not easy for me. Can you just-?" He cuts himself off, biting his lip, probably to keep himself from actually asking for a rejection.

Shougo wants to snap, 'this isn't easy for me either!' Wants to snarl, 'who gave you the fucking right to develop feelings for me?' Wants to bitch and whine and moan. 'Cause life's not fair, and it's always shitting on him, right?

He's always been prone to pity parties and temper tantrums. But- he outgrew them, outgrew that toxic behavior, and anyway, Ryouta deserves better.

He deserves much, much better than Shougo - as a boyfriend or otherwise, but as he'd so eloquently stated earlier, they're stuck with each other.

...Even when it hurts.

"I'm sorry," Shougo says, as gently as he's capable, "but I don't return your feelings." Ryouta's face falls (and fuck, Shougo's heart fucking sinks with it), and he hastily reassures, "I told you I didn't want to get rid of you, and I meant it. This... won't change that. Promise."

There's an endless moment where Ryouta just stares at him, visibly fucking wrecked, and Shougo stares right back, his own self-hatred - a vicious, writhing, living thing - close to smothering him, a million useless platitudes on his tongue bitten down and discarded, and then -

Ryouta breaks eye contact.

"Ahhh~! That's a relief!" He breathes out, and he sounds it, slumping over onto his folded arms, the new angle conveniently hiding his face. "I mean, with Nijimuracchi- You guys are still close, so I hoped- Well, guess it worked out!" He laughs, a little strained, and goes on, "Man, how do girls do that? That was the worst. No offense, Haizakicchi, but you almost killed me with suspense! Be a little more considerate next time, won't you?"
His voice grows shakier with each word, and his shoulders begin to tremble noticeably, but that doesn't stop him from rambling. "You're gonna end up making some poor girl cry with your brutish nature, and then she'll spread her tale of woe around the school, and I'll end up having to explain to my fans that you're not a bad guy. It'll just create more work for me."

Shougo reaches out a hand and ruffles Ryouta's hair, eliciting a hitch of breath and the end of the increasingly weak reprimands. "You're so troublesome," he says, sighing again. "Cry if you want to cry. Latch onto me like I know you want to. I don't mind, okay, dummy? Just-do what you always do. Who cares?"

Ryouta peeks up at him through thick, wet lashes, hesitant, eyes searching. Shougo meets his gaze steadily as he runs his fingers through Ryouta's hair in soothing motions.

He must find what he's looking for because in the next moment, he joins Shougo's side of the bench and throws himself into Shougo's awaiting arms. He buries his tear-streaked, blotchy face into Shougo's neck, arms snaking around his waist and clinging tightly.

"Idiot," Shougo snorts, unbelievably fond, returning the embrace. "You've always done whatever you wanted anyway."

"Mean," Ryouta whines, without conviction. "I don't even know why I like you."

'Neither do I,' Shougo thinks, but now isn't the time.

"Yeah, yeah," he says instead, valiantly ignoring their gritty, sand covered bodies and the cold splash of tears against his skin.

Eventually, Ryouta pulls back and sits properly on the bench, rubbing his face with one hand while his other finds Shougo's and intertwines their fingers.

This closeness should probably feel strange after what just happened, and yeah, objectively, it is.

But after weeks of wearing him down, holding hands with this guy feels like the most natural thing in the world.

Another factor, undoubtedly, is that the act itself is entirely platonic. Shougo is far from the only one in their little group of friends who has experienced such free affection from Ryouta. Just a few weeks back, he'd been brave - or stupid - enough to lay his head in Nijimura's lap while they were studying, and Nijimura had let him with little more than an eye roll.

Shougo and Tetsuya had both been so surprised by the lack of bloodshed that it had taken Nijimura snapping at them to get back to work for them to stop silently staring at the unusual scene in awe.

Ryouta had been especially gleeful the rest of that day.

"We should probably start heading back," Shougo suggests, regretfully, and the hand in his squeezes harder for a moment. "We don't want them sending out a search party."

Ryouta lets out a deep breath, just as reluctant. "I don't know if I'm ready to face everyone just yet. Especially my sisters."

"Oh shit," Shougo hisses, with feeling, and the slowly creeping dread of the last ten minutes becomes full-blown horror. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit."

Why had they slunk away in the first place?! It was because their siblings got all overprotective and
threatening over this exact fucking scenario! Shougo had fucking proven them right.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Your sisters are gonna fucking flay me alive," Shougo moans, and then gestures to Ryouta's puffy, red face frantically, "They're gonna know something's up, oh fuck. I'm gonna die half-naked and covered in sand, and fucking seagulls are gonna feast on my rotting corpse!"

"...They're not that bad," Ryouta tries and fails to sound reassuring.

Shougo slaps his free hand over his face, thinks of Yoshie specifically, and groans. "If she was fucking terrifying before, she's gonna be downright murderous now."

Ryouta tries again. "Well, I can just not tell them?"

"Dude, they'll know," Shougo insists. "Older siblings have a fucking radar for this kinda shit. Shion hones in on me anytime I'm upset like it's his fucking superpower or something. You tellin' me your sisters aren't like that?"

That elicits a helpless half-smile even as he deflates. "Okay, yeah, you're right. You're screwed."

Ryouta awkwardly pats him on the shoulder.

"...Unless," Shougo says, eye catching on an ad pinned to the wall, an idea bursting forth through the despair. "Unless we distract them with something else!"

Curious, Ryouta turns and spots the flyer, letting out a gasp as Shougo's plan sinks in. "That's..." He laughs, delighted, "That's so stupid. I love it."

"Let's go." Shougo shares a devious look with Ryouta, anticipation on both of their faces, and the icy terror in his chest thaws rapidly under Ryouta's sun-like grin.

(After all, things must be okay between them if Ryouta can still look at him like that.)

LXII . July 23, 2012 - Monday

"Good. They haven't gone back in the water yet," Shougo notes, quietly, crouching behind an unattended umbrella.

"Good, he says. You know they're gonna kill us for this, right?" Ryouta points out, not sounding worried in the least. "You just had to drag me down with you, huh, Haizakicchi?" He teases.

Shougo smirks at him, brandishing their secret weapon. "Don't pretend like you're not excited to do this, you dolt. Or what, you wanna back out now?"

"Nope! Let's die together, Haizakicchi. It's more romantic that way." Shougo sputters, not at all expecting him to joke about That so soon, and Ryouta grins cheekily at him but doesn't comment. "Ready?"

Shougo rolls his eyes but nevertheless nods. "I'm ready."

At an unspoken signal, they dart out from behind the barrier and dash towards their victims.

One such victim notices them and starts to say something, but then he spots what they're both carrying, and alarm flashes over his expression as he cries out, "Watch ou-

It's too late.
Shion dodges to the side, but the cold jet of water intended for him hits Tetsuya right in the face. Tetsuya lets out a monotone yell, which - how the fuck? Is he so damn used to repressing shit that even his innate reactions are monotone? This guy is so fucking ridiculous.

Ryouta's shot gets Kagami's back, and his scream is much more rewarding.

"What the hell!" Kagami whirls around, and a second squirt gets him in the chest. "Damn, that's cold!"

"You little ass!" Shion lunges for him, but Shougo's aim is true this time, and he's stopped by a freezing stream of water. "So c-old, you dick! Get back here!"

Shougo laughs vindictively, and only makes his brother more irate by hitting him again. "How's that feel, asshole?"

Meanwhile, Kagami has face-planted for the second time today, caught up by the sand in his haste. "I hate all of you," he mutters to the ground.

"Haha, that's for ganging up on me earlier, Kagamicchi!" Ryouta tells him, dancing away from Tetsuya's lackluster attempt to grab him with a cackle.

Shougo gets Shion again, but as he backs away, he runs into a wall. Suddenly, he's tugged backwards, and strong arms wrap around him from behind.

"Got you," Nijimura breathes next to his ear, way, way too fucking close for comfort.

"The fuck-!"

Thoroughly distracted, he doesn't react in time to stop Nijimura from snatching the water gun out of his hands.

"Hey-!" He yelps when, predictably, a jet of water hits him right between his shoulder blades. "Ahh-!"

He slaps a hand over his mouth, completely forgetting his ire as mortification takes over.

What the fuck was that sound he just made?!

Nijimura snorts - and then laughs, like real, actual laughter. It's unexpectedly endearing, even through his embarrassment. Shougo flushes, scowling darkly.

"You're so-" Nijimura just shakes his head, smirking, and doesn't elaborate.

"What?" Shougo snaps, wary.

"Adorable," he admits with a shrug, and Shougo wants to fucking deck him.

"Shut the fuck up," he snarls, lunging for the bastard, but all that gets him is another splash of freezing water.

"Ah ah ah," Nijimura tilts his head, expression undeniably sadistic. "Bad Haizaki. No violence."

"I'm not a fucking dog!" Shougo growls, bristling. "Shitty captain."

"Shitty kouhai," Nijimura counters. "You're more like a vicious kitten, anyway."
"I'll show you vicious, asshole," Shougo promises, but he's suddenly pulled into someone's arms again.

"Stop flirting, you damn traitor," Shion grumbles as he puts Shougo in an unforgiving headlock. "You even went for me first! Your own blood!"

"I regret nothing!" Shougo grunts, trying to wriggle free. "I'd do it again!"

"Wrong answer, you little gremlin." Shion tightens his hold. "Why do I ever try to protect your dumb ass?"

"Because you have a brother complex!"

"You have a brother complex! Every time you have a problem, you come running to big bro Shion, and I so graciously help you. And what do I get for my efforts? Betrayal."

"Shut the fuck up! You always nose your way into my business and then give me shitty advice! How's that helpful?"

"So ungrateful."

"There's nothin' to be grateful for!"

"I'd be grateful if you both shut up," Nijimura says, spraying Shougo again.

Shion ducks behind him like a coward. "Even your boyfriend is mean to me," he complains.

"He's not my fucking-" Shougo snaps, only to be interrupted mid-yell with another fucking jet of water. "Ah, fuck! Fucking stop it, asshole!"

"Oops. My hand slipped." Despite that bullshit statement, Nijimura doesn't even try to wipe the smirk off his face.

"Like hell it did," Shougo mutters, fuse burning out, leaving exasperation in its wake.

Squeals and laughter break through the sudden silence, and all three boys look to its source.

Kagami's holding down a wriggling, giggling Ryouta as a terrifying, smiling Tetsuya mercilessly drenches him with his own water gun.

"No, stop, it's so- so cold- Ah!" Ryouta shouts, but it's futile. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I regret it! I repent! I repent!"

"Nothing can save you now," Tetsuya tells him, tone appropriately solemn, hand steady and finger on the trigger. "Not after what you did."

"...I understand," he smiles, sadly. "Do what you must, but do it quickly."

Tetsuya shoots, and Ryouta gasps, coughing weakly. "...Please, just tell my mother... that I love her."

"I will," Tetsuya promises, and Ryouta closes his eyes, body suddenly limp.

...Why the hell is this so dramatic, they're such fucking dorks, god.

"Why did I agree to this?" Kagami mutters with a grimace, dropping Ryouta like a sack of bricks.
"You guys are a riot," Shion snorts.

"More like a bunch of idiots," Shougo corrects, crossing his arms.

Kagami flips him off. "I don't want to hear that from you."

"Play nice, kids," Nijimura says, smirking and squirting both Shougo and Kagami in quick succession, eliciting twin yelps.

"Fuck, I might as well get in the water," Shougo groans, looking out there and spotting Ryouta's sisters and Nijimura's twin siblings. "...Never mind."

He doesn't have a death wish. Going out there now would be the same as knowingly swimming in shark infested waters. They'd fucking smell the blood on him and strike.

He shudders and then rejoins the dumb banter, shoving aside his problems for later, as usual. Not like it's gonna come back and bite him in the ass, right?

Right.

Chapter End Notes

no better way to celebrate valentine's than posting a chapter about rejecting a confession! (°ε°)

anyway, hope i handled that okay! i base a lot of these interactions on things i've experienced myself. like crying and pouring my heart out one moment and then laughing about stupid stuff the next. when people get uncomfortable, they tend to change the subject, and making dumb jokes is my go to method.

sorry for the lack of yoshie/junko/etc. juggling a big group of characters is tough, man. why did i do this to myself, lmao.
The Official Haizaki Shougo Fan Club Q&A

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Official Haizaki Shougo Fan Club

Originally Posted July 22, 2012 at 9:43 AM

Hi, everyone, and welcome to the Haizaki Shougo Fan Club's fan page! This is doki-doki-love23 - better known as simply Mari - the prez/admin of this lovely community!

I know you've all been dying to find out how the Interview Haizaki Shougo's Closest Friends & Family Project has turned out, but before I divulge anything, let me just say it has been a real pleasure working with all of you to make this project a reality.  O(≧∇≦)O

Meeting all of you and coming together to make this dumb little idea of ours come true has just been absolutely an amazing experience, and I look forward to the projects we'll work on in the future!  ( *´▽`*)

Haizaki-kun's friends and family have all been kind enough to answer our questions and deal with our fangirl-ing, so a big thank you to them as well! We have some juicy stuff on our tsundere celebrity, and it's only thanks to their patience and good humor that we got any info at all!

Please remember not to bother or badger any of them. Doing so will result in immediate expulsion from the group! We are not joking about this.

Now, onto the good stuff! σ(≧ε≦o)

-o-

Interviewer (Me!): Please state your name and your relationship with Haizaki Shougo.

Kise Ryouta: Uh... Well, my name is Kise Ryouta, and Haizakicchi is one of my best friends.

Interviewer: Our questions have been sent in from various fans to our main blog. This question is from username Fye. Kise-kun, what do you think of Haizaki-kun getting cornrows?

Kise Ryouta: Pfft! Bwahahaha! Like he's trying really hard to look cool. Hahaha. Was the fluffy, adorable look not working? *more laughter; words no longer legible*

[We took a short break, so Kise-kun could compose himself. His laughter was really adorable, guys!]

Interviewer: Sorry about that! *cough*

Kise Ryouta: Ahaha, another easy question! Haizakiichi is really pretty! Have you seen him smile? He doesn't even realize it. *shakes his head with another laugh* He's adorable.

[We then had to take a short break, so I could compose myself. How could I not?! I mean, how cute is that?! HaiKise is real, guys!]

Interviewer: Okay, next question, from username I: Do you think Haizaki-kun is pretty? (Lol)

Kise Ryouta: Ahaha, another easy question! Haizakiichi is really pretty! Have you seen him smile? He doesn't even realize it. *shakes his head with another laugh* He's adorable.

[We then had to take a short break, so I could compose myself. How could I not?! I mean, how cute is that?! HaiKise is real, guys!]

Interviewer: Sorry about that! *cough*
Kise Ryouta: No worries! But, uh... Haizakicchi- ...He's not gonna see this, right?

Interviewer: Probably not!

Kise Ryouta: Um-

Interviewer: Next question! From SakuraLuck: Kise-kun, what would you do if you made Haizaki-kun cry? Please don't say you would enjoy it because he looks adorable like that.

Kise Ryouta: What? There's no way I'd enjoy it! *cute indignant look* I'm really not good with crying people in general, but if it was Haizakiiichi, well... I'd probably panic. Just a little! He's so strong, and I don't want to think about what it would take to make him cry. Oh! But happy tears are a different story! I wouldn't mind those at all. *cue dazzling, sparkly smile*

[...We took another short break.]

Interviewer: Another one from SakuraLuck: Kise-kun, if you had the chance, would you make Haizaki-kun cross dress?

Kise Ryouta: Absolutely. ;)

Interviewer: *fanning self* Looks like that's all the questions we have for you. Thanks for humoring us, Kise-kun! You probably had better things to do.

Kise Ryouta: Heh, it was fun! I'm glad Haizakicchi has fans who aren't scared away by his reputation.

Interviewer: Of course! We know Haizaki-kun is more than his reputation or his scary looks!

Kise Ryouta: *laughs* Good, good. He'd be happy to hear that.

-o-

Interviewer: Please state your name and your relationship with Haizaki Shougo.

Nijimura Shuuzou: Nijimura Shuuzou. I'm his basketball captain. And part-time minder to his little squad of friends.

Interviewer: *laughs* Our questions have been sent in from fans to our main blog. This question is from username Fye. Nijimura-san, important question, but where did you get that sushi plushie? The world needs to know.

Nijimura Shuuzou: That old thing? I sprained my wrist when I was ten, and the twins - my little siblings - picked that out for me as a get well present. I think it was a character on one of their favorite shows at the time. I've kept it ever since. *quirks an eyebrow* I'd ask how you know about that, but I know Kise overshares everything online. *exasperated sigh*

Interviewer: That's where I saw it, at least. This one is from 1- oh, and it's really personal. You don't have to answer if you don't want to.

Nijimura Shuuzou: *smirks* Try me.

Interviewer: *takes deep breath* Okay, it says: What do you think of Haizaki-kun's confession
about why he can't accept you?

**Nijimura Shuuzou:** How do you even know about that? ...Never mind. Haizaki has his reasons, and I respect them. I'm not one to dismiss something just because it's considered impossible, and it answers some questions I've had for a while. *shrugs, unconcerned* If it fits, it fits.

**Interviewer:** Uhh, next question is from **SakuraLuck**. ...It's even more personal, *oh my god*, guys. Why are you making me ask these things?! This is straight up breaking the fourth wall! *somewhat hysterical*

**Nijimura Shuuzou:** *amused* Just ask it. It's fine.

**Interviewer:** Okay, um, Nijimura-san, how do you feel about the thought of someone taking Haizaki-kun's virginity in those 'future dreams' of his? Especially when it obviously wasn't you.

**Nijimura Shuuzou:** ...No comment.

[...Took a break because the face Nijimura-san was making was really scary! I kept dropping the cards with the questions on them, ugh. How can he be so attractive and yet terrifying at the same time?!]

**Interviewer:** Next question! It's from **SakuraLuck** again. *under breath* Oh god, why? *speaking normally again* Nijimura-san, how do you feel about the many... men in Haizaki-kun's life right now?

**Nijimura Shuuzou:** That question could not have been phrased more strangely. *huffs a laugh* I know what you're implying, but I'm still gonna answer. I'm glad he's got friends now.

**Interviewer:** That's really sweet! Hehe, okay, well that's it for questions addressed to you. Thank you for indulging us, Nijimura-san! You didn't have to, but we appreciate it.

**Nijimura Shuuzou:** *shrugs* Anything to embarrass my cute, little kouhai. Send me the link to this interview, and I'll make sure he reads it. *smirk*  

-o-

**Interviewer:** Please state your name and your relationship with Haizaki Shougo.

**Haizaki Shion:** Haizaki Shion. You can call me Shion-san to avoid confusion. *wink* He's my little brother.

**Interviewer:** Thank you, Shion-san. The questions we have for you were sent to us by members of our fan club. The first one is from user **Fye**, and they want to know: Valor, Mystic, or Instinct? 8)

**Haizaki Shion:** Instinct. *dabs* *adorably laughs at his own joke* Haha, I thought this was about Shougo?

**Interviewer:** *smiles* Some of our members are fans of yours as well. Like this next one, for example. User _ asks: What do you think of your brother? (p.s. you are sibling goals tbh ily)

**Haizaki Shion:** Thanks. I love you too! Glad someone appreciates my awesomeness. *another wink*

Uh, well, what is there to say? Shougo's a brat, but he's a total softie too. Poor kid doesn't know that
he's developing a harem, and it's hilarious. Um, he thinks and worries way too much, but I think he can handle anything thrown at him. He's my brother, and he's a little shit, and I love him anyway. For some reason. Not sure what else to say, to be honest. *laugh*

**Interviewer:** *crying* That's fine.

[We took a break while I composed myself, and Shion unintentionally made things worse by being really nice and trying to console me. He's so cute and sweet and kind, guys, ahhh! I was converted into a Shion fan today!]

**Haizaki Shion:** Sure you're okay to go on?

**Interviewer:** *valiantly holding back emotions* Yes, I'm fine! Thank you.

**Haizaki Shion:** *sends me a blinding smile* No problem!

**Interviewer:** *hoarsely* Next question! This one is from **SakuraLuck**. It says: Shion-san, do you have a brother complex?

**Haizaki Shion:** *sputtering* What? No! What happened to brother goals, huh? Sheesh.

**Interviewer:** I think they might have been teasing.

**Haizaki Shion:** Ugh, I hope so. ...Wait, Shougo's not gonna read this, is he?

**Interviewer:** Okay, that's all for your questions! Thank you for humoring us, Shion-san! It was fun, and we learned a lot.

**Haizaki Shion:** No problem. *smile*

-o-

**Interviewer:** Please state your name and your relationship with Haizaki Shougo.

**Haizaki Ayano:** Name's Haizaki Ayano. The brat's mine.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for agreeing to talk with us about your son, Ayano-san! We know it's a little silly.

**Haizaki Ayano:** Are you kidding? How could a mom not be proud that her son has a fan club? *smirks & laughs* That he doesn't even know about. *laughs again*.

**Interviewer:** We're still a small group, and we don't have the confidence to introduce ourselves to him just yet, but we all think your son is really kind and considerate! *giggles sheepishly* I'm actually pretty honored to meet the mother he respects so deeply.

**Haizaki Ayano:** He said that? *smiles a really pretty smile* Well, he's always been a good kid. Anyway, didn't you have questions for me?

**Interviewer:** Oh! Um, yes, from various fans. This first question is from user **1**. Ayano-san, was Haizaki-kun originally a tsundere, or did something happen to him?

**Haizaki Ayano:** *snorts* That kid's always been stubborn. But he didn't start actively pushing people away until he started attending school. I blame puberty. *smirks* Please tell me you'll call
him a tsundere to his face when you do meet him. *laughs*

**Interviewer:** *nervously* Haha, maybe I will! The next question is from **SakuraLuck**. Ayano-san, can you tell some adorable Haizaki-kun baby-toddler stories?

**Haizaki Ayano:** Heh, I have a few. Alright. When Shou was three or four, he took his pants off, stuck them on his head, and ran around the house asking - and he was very concerned - asking, "Shou, where are you?" "Shou, where are you?" Eventually, he forgot what he was doing and came to check on his mom, who was laughing so hard she was shaking. *laughs* I have a picture of that one at home.

**Interviewer:** *tearing up* That's so cute.

**Haizaki Ayano:** I've got more. There was the time he and Shion got the bright idea to give each other hair cuts. I leave them alone one minute, and then I come back, and they've both got chunks of their bangs missing, and Shion's holding safety scissors. *shakes her head, snorting* Just about gave me a heart attack.

**Interviewer:** *covering up grin* I can imagine! So they were trouble-makers?

**Haizaki Ayano:** You have no idea. Once I left them with the neighbor, who was supposed to watch them, but Shion managed to convince her that he could look after Shou-chan himself, and that if they needed anything, they'd come get her next door. He's always been a smooth-talker, that one. *rolls her eyes* I come home, and I find Shougo sitting in our trash can, which was suddenly filled with water, and Shion next to him with the hose. Both of them were wet.

**Interviewer:** But why?

**Haizaki Ayano:** *deep sigh* Apparently, they wanted to swim in a pool, and the trash can was the next best thing. Shion even tried to justify himself. "But I washed it out before we got in it!" *face-palms* That is the reason parents age so quickly. Dumb kids who are smart enough to do their dumb shit behind our backs.

**Interviewer:** *giggling* I'm so sorry, Ayano-san.

**Haizaki Ayano:** *smiling* Don't be. They certainly make sure life is never boring.

**Interviewer:** *trying my best to hold in a squeal* Last question! It's from me! Will you be my mom?

**Haizaki Ayano:** *laughs* As long as you're less troublesome than my two, ridiculous sons.

[Short break where I hug the life out of Ayano-san, and she lets me. She's my mom now, and I will never let anyone hurt her!]

**Interviewer:** Okay, that's it for the questions. Thank you for being so cool about this, Ayano-san! We really appreciate it.

**Haizaki Ayano:** You're welcome. Just make sure you tell my son just how much you love and appreciate him. *smirks*

**Interviewer:** We definitely will!

-o-
Important Note! Nijimura-san's siblings saw us interviewing him and asked to be interviewed too. We got permission from Nijimura-san, who stayed in the room with us as we asked our questions - questions which were hastily sent out, and a few of you were awesome enough to ask! Do not approach these children under any circumstances, and do not take photos or videos of them. This was just a fun thing we did because the kids wanted to! ;D

-o-

Interviewer: Please state your name and your relationship with Haizaki Shougo. Oh, um, like is he your friend or?

Nijimura Takara: I'm Nijimura Takara! Uh... Zaki-nii is big brother's friend!

Nijimura Tatsuo: I'm Nijimura Tatsuo! What she said.

Interviewer: Alrighty! This question is from user 1: What would you think of your older brother dating Haizaki-kun?

Nijimura Tatsuo: Shuu-nii says Zaki-nii is really nice, even if he looks mean, so! I guess it's okay!

Nijimura Takara: Zaki-nii is funny! But I don't want him to take Shuu-nii away from us. So um! He can only date him if he takes us with them!

Nijimura Tatsuo: *nods seriously* Yeah! And takes us for ice cream.

Nijimura Takara: And dango!

[The rest of the conversation consists of different foods Haizaki-kun owes them for dating Nijimura-san. It was really adorable, but I'm not going to list all of that here, lol.]

Interviewer: Next question is from SakuraLuck. Oh, it's two questions. *shrugs* That's fine! So did you guys already know about your brother's feelings toward Haizaki-kun, and did you tease him about it when he finally confessed?

Nijimura Takara: Shuu-nii talked to himself 'bout Zaki-nii a lot! And his smile got real big when he heard his name! So I knew he liked him!

Nijimura Tatsuo: Taka-chan told me. Then we asked Shuu-nii, and he said he did!

Nijimura Takara: We had cupcakes after Shuu-nii confessed! They were really good. Then we had more after Zaki-nii said no.

Nijimura Tatsuo: I told nii-san I'd beat him up, but he said it was comp- compu-

Nijimura Takara: - complicated!

Nijimura Tatsuo: and that we would understand when we were older. Blegh. *makes funny face*

[Nijimura-san looked scary again, so I hastily ended the session! And before anyone complains, these questions are really personal, and he is not obligated to let us ask them of him or his siblings! Which is why I want to move on from uncomfortable topics.]

Interviewer: Looks like those are all the questions! Thank you Takara-chan and Tatsuo-chan for helping me out!
Nijimura Tatsuo: It's no big deal!

Nijimura Takara: Aww, that's it? Well, you're welcome, nee-chan!

-o-

*Another thing to note! The reason this project took so long was really because we had a hard time finding and interviewing Kuroko-san. That low presence of his is no joke!*

-o-

**Interviewer:** Please state your name and your relationship with Haizaki Shougo.

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** My name is Kuroko Tetsuya, and Haizaki-kun is a close friend of mine.

**Interviewer:** I'm sorry we kept missing you, Kuroko-kun. *coughs, embarrassed* We didn't forget about you, really!

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** It's not a problem, Sasagawa-san. I'm used to it.

**Interviewer:** Yes, well... *coughs again* A-anyway, these questions are from some fans who submitted to our main blog. The first one is from user 1. What do you think about all the drama happening around you?

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** It is incredibly entertaining when it is not also exasperating.

**Interviewer:** Can you elaborate?

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** Haizaki-kun is oblivious to many things.

**Interviewer:** Okay, this next one is from SakurLuck. When you saw Haizaki-kun playing basketball, what were your thoughts?

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** *tiny, barely there smile which is THE most adorable thing* I thought: Haizaki-kun really loves basketball. I am happy to have found another person besides Ogiwara-kun and Aomine-kun who has such high regard for the sport. It's really great to have friends to play with, as well.

**Interviewer:** *choking back tears* That's beautiful.

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** Thank you.

**Interviewer:** This next question was sent anonymously. Between the trash son and clique - They mean Haizaki-kun and his friends - and Aomine-kun, who do you find yourself enjoying your time with the most?

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** Ah. How mean. There's no good answer to that question, Anon-san. Honestly, I enjoy any time spent with my friends, and I'd like for all of us to hang out together at the same time.

*[...Had to take a short break to compose myself. This boy is way too sweet. I can't even handle it! Plus, he's adorable. It's just too much for this fan girl to take!]*

**Interviewer:** ...Sorry about that! I'm fine now. Onto the next question! This one is also anonymous, and it follows the last question. Kuroko-kun, do you have nefarious plots to get them to meet and be
friends?

Kuroko Tetsuya: *another smile MY GOD this one is scary!* Now that would be telling, Anon-san.

Interviewer: *laughs nervously* Okay, those are all the questions we have! Thank you for humoring us, Kuroko-kun.

Kuroko Tetsuya: You're welcome, Sasagawa-san. Thank you for including me.

-o-

And last but definitely not least, we worked up the courage to approach Haizaki-kun himself! You guys better praise and adore the hell out of me for this! It was nerve-wracking! But Haizaki-kun was super adorable up close, and when I told him who we were and why we wanted to talk to him, he got really red and flustered! Wish we'd taken a picture of it ;)

-o-

Interviewer: *super nervous!* Um, Haizaki-kun, this is the question all of our members wanted me to ask. We voted and discussed it and everything. You don't have to answer if you don't want to! *shaky breath* Okay, here it is, originally suggested by SakuraLuck: Are you happy now?

Haizaki Shougo: What a sappy ass question. Is that really something you want to know? Ugh. *sigh*...Yeah, I am. I never thought I would be or that I deserved to be, but now... Well, I'm working on the second part. But yeah, I'm really damn happy. We done?

Interviewer: *crying* Yes, we're done. Thank you so much. And for the record, I'm really glad you are.

Haizaki Shougo: *really cute blush + scowl* Whatever.

-o-

And that's the end! This was a very enlightening experience, and I'm super pleased I got to meet and speak with all of the people in this interview. It was a joy, and I hope all of you guys are satisfied with the answers you got! Sorry that we couldn't get photos, but none of them wanted pics taken, and we respected that.

Just check Kise-kun's ten thousand social media accounts [links in the FAQ page] if you're craving cute photos of the boys! ;D

Until next time! Your still reeling, super happy prez is signing out. (・艸・)✧

Comments (285)

Chapter End Notes

so anyone remember that interview with the characters I promised a while back?? totally didn't forget it about it until just now ;)

Comments (285)
Edit: A while back, we hit 100 reviews on FFnet, so I decided to celebrate with either a
chapter from another character's POV (which is Chapter 17, Kuroko's POV) or an
interview with the characters. A lot of people wanted both, so I went with it. Only I
completely forgot about it until yesterday.

The "fans" asking the questions are actual reviewers who sent them in months ago. I just
thought this "Haizaki Fan Club" set up was pretty cute and wrote it up just last night,
but the questions themselves were answered a long time ago and were just sitting in my
docs.

And don't worry, this will not affect the next real update! Expect a new chapter March
Whoops! Sorry if you guys stayed up for an update! I actually went to bed early and woke up late.

Anyway, thank you guys so, so much for your kind comments! I love hearing what you have to say, what your favorite quotes or parts are, if my little fic somehow cheers you up - it makes my day to read it. ( " ^-^")

On that note, I'm pretty nervous about this chapter. o(´д `o) Did something a little different as an early birthday gift to myself (I'm turning 21!), and I hope you guys like it!

Next Update: March 17, 2017

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rugby Champ: She's so gorgeous. I'm dying.

Bubblegum Princess: hehe, so the date's going well, hmm?

Rugby Champ: Yes! She loves the scarf you made her, by the way. She hasn't taken it off since I gave it to her.

Bubblegum Princess: i'm glad! send me a pic, i bet she's even more adorable with it on!

Smiling, Ryouta closes Gab and then turns off the display screen before pocketing his phone. There's no way he's about to whine for attention when his sisters are in such high spirits - not to mention the fact that Yoshie's on a date.

It's the same old complaint, anyway, and at this point, he's not sure there's anything they can do to help.

Although being babied and consoled for a while would be nice...

He shakes his head, rolling his eyes at the childish thought, and kicks a pebble sitting innocuously on the sidewalk.

It bounces a few times, and when Ryouta follows its rocky path toward a nearby building, he suddenly hears what is unmistakably laughter and the telltale thud of some sort of ball.

Curious (and reluctant to return home so soon when he knows he'd just sulk uselessly for a few hours), he now follows the sounds, and they lead him to a public court where a boy his age is playing basketball alone.

The lack of other players isn't stopping him at all, though.

Ryouta stands there, mesmerized, as this boy pulls off crazy, difficult moves, dodging around
phantom players and smiling so happily, so gleefully that it takes his breath away. He's laughing and happy and content, like he'd never rather be anywhere else, and in that moment, Ryouta wants more than anything in the world to be him, to smile and laugh and feel like that.

Not even just once, but always.

Which is why, impulsively, after a particularly amazing shot, he starts clapping, painting on a grin that's actually mostly genuine as he walks up to the mystery boy.

The boy whirls around, startled, and Ryouta says, "That was amazing! The way you moved- and that little spin thing you did- and that jump! It was so cool!"

His eyes widen, clearly surprised by the praise (not used to compliments, then?), but he quickly scowls and mutters, "Thanks" before stalking off, apparently not interested in any further conversation.

Ryouta grins, not about to be brushed off so easily. He catches up with the boy and insists, "Seriously, it was awesome. You looked so cool." He hesitates and then reveals, "It kind of made me want to play basketball, too."

"Ry-Kise, why are you following me?" He corrects himself with little more than a hitch, but Ryouta notices all the same. Had he been about to call him by his first name?

But how does he know it in the first place?

"Eh? How do you know my name?" he asks, even more intrigued when the boy clearly kicks himself for slipping up.

"I've seen you with your fan girls," he explains, and immediately Ryouta feels a little awkward.

"Oh." He chuckles, abashed, thinking resignedly of the overzealous girls who flock him at school. "Yeah, they're... not exactly subtle, are they?"

They follow him from club to club and then pop up whenever he tries to head home, always in groups and always rowdy.

He's found that if he charms them enough, they become too dazed to prevent him from leaving, but it's a hassle that he has to do it in the first place. Yoshie's volunteered to scare them off, but she can be a little... excessive. He doesn't want to scar any of them for life, and besides, he knows that they're just easily excitable children.

That's what his mom says anyway, and Ryouta is hard-pressed to argue with her. He's hard-pressed to argue much of anything, when it comes to her.

He carefully tucks away the bitterness as he refocuses on the boy beside him, amused at the fast pace he's setting. Just how much does he not want to talk? "So what's your name? You go to Teiko, too, right? Since you know me?"

With a considering glance at Ryouta, he cautiously reveals, "Haizaki Shougo, first year."

"Me, too." Which is pretty lucky since Ryouta doesn't plan to let things end here. He carefully conceals his joy and probes further, "So are you on the basketball team, Haizaki?"

"Why are you following me?" Haizaki demands, apparently at the end of his patience.
At this, Ryouta lets some of his amusement and interest leak into his expression, sensing that sincerity will work better here, and offers, "You're interesting?"

Prickly and frown-y when confronted with praise, but all smiles and laughter when playing basketball alone. He looks like he'd respond to any annoyance with violence, but so far, he's only been growl-y and standoffish. He's even fielding Ryouta's questions when it would be easier if he just told him to go away. (Not that that would work, but he hasn't even tried it.)

Interesting is a pretty good description of him.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?!" he splutters, caught off guard, and it's so over the top that Ryouta can't help but laugh. Haizaki doesn't take it too well, and though he looks one more teasing comment away from throwing a punch, he asks, "What do you want?"

He stops in the middle of the sidewalk, expectant. Ryouta does as well.

What does he want? Heh. He wants to feel- something. Wants to feel breathless with wonder, wants to feel victorious when he finally learns a difficult move or bests an opponent, wants the fiery rush of competition and the painful sting of loss. He wants anything, anything but- this. This apathy, this frustration, this disappointment in everyone but himself.

He can already feel the creeping, insidious thoughts spreading like poison. Why aren't they trying harder? Why can't they learn as quickly as me? Why are they so jealous when I'm the one who wants trade places with them? Why aren't they better?

It's wrong. He knows that. He was born with a brain that's wired to pick things up so easily, and his own determination to master the things he learns is a huge factor.

Even so. It's hard to think any other way when the gap between them only grows wider, and besting anyone doesn't feel like anything at all anymore.

Haizaki's waiting for an answer, though, and Ryouta can hardly share so much of himself with a near stranger.

He thinks back to just a little while ago - stumbling upon Haizaki smiling and laughing and playing a sport he clearly loves, himself breathless and wide-eyed and hopeful - and says, simply, "To play basketball with you."

Haizaki must sense at least some of what he isn't saying because his eyes flash through a variety of emotions - ending on understanding - before he turns away and resumes walking without another word.

Ryouta considers trying his luck and calling after him again, but just before he turns a corner, Haizaki suggests offhandedly, "Then try out for the club, dumbass."

And then he's gone, leaving Ryouta to stare after him with a triumphant grin.

His phone buzzes incessantly, so he pulls it out and answers, "Hello?"

"Where are you?" Junko's soft, concerned voice reminds him that it's getting late, and he should be heading home.

He unglues himself from the pavement, eyes lingering on the abandoned court for just a little too long as he turns and announces to the cool afternoon and his inquisitive sister, "Hey, I think... I'm gonna try basketball next."
Discovering information about Haizaki is as easy as idly asking his fans if they know of him and listening as they fire off random facts and tidbits - much of it things Ryouta had no intention of asking about but amused to know, such as his favorite food, his best school subjects, and his favored type of girl - and it's why he knows the general opinion of Haizaki is mixed, at best.

He's not really surprised. At first glance, Haizaki seems like a typical delinquent, and his rough, aggressive personality doesn't do much to dissuade that assumption. Any normal person would have backed off at Haizaki's obvious disinclination to chat, but Ryouta is far from normal.

On the other hand, Haizaki is admittedly adorable. Fluffy gray hair, cute pout-y face. He bets Haizaki is prone to blushing and easily embarrassed too, and the thought makes him even more excited for their second meeting. He loves easy targets.

Anyway, his fans' ever faithful network of gossip has lead him to the roof where he's been assured Haizaki has taken to eating his lunch.

His mouth keeps twitching into a smile, and that's more than enough to convince him that pursuing Haizaki is a good idea.

(It's a hundred times more preferable than big, fake grins and cold, calm apathy.)

He pushes the door open, and instantly, he spots Haizaki sitting legs crossed as he digs into his lunch, brows furrowed as if lost in thought and (as he'd remembered) adorable.

Ryouta shuts the door as the grin overtakes his face, and without hesitation, he calls out, "Haizakicchi~!"

The gym where the first string practices is open to anyone so long as they don't disturb the players, and this is where Ryouta runs into a little problem.

Namely, his fans, who are about as quiet and unassuming as a freight train.

Simply asking them to leave him alone only results in tears and them trying to follow him anyway, which means he has to get creative.

"Oh no," Ryouta groans pathetically.

"What is it, Kise-kun?!" Kobayakawa asks, frantically, and she's echoed by at least three other girls.

He sniffs, gesturing to a ridiculous amount of boxes filled with files, "I have to take all these to the staff room, but my mom's waiting for me at home. It's her one day off work, and I never get to see her, but now I'm gonna be late, and-" He breaks off, tearing up.

"That's okay, Kise-kun!" Masato says, hastily. "We'll take care of it for you!"

Yamada chimes in earnestly. "Yeah, we don't mind, right?" She looks to the other girls, all of whom eagerly agree.

Ryouta sniffs again, hesitant. "...Are you sure? It might take a while."

Masato smiles, "Very sure! You go and spend time with your mom, Kise-kun! Leave this to us."
That gets another round of nods, and though Ryouta feels a twinge of guilt for deceiving them, it's far overshadowed by his relief at ditching them.

"Thanks, everyone! I appreciate it~!" He puts on his best Sparkly Smile, eliciting more than one blush and longing sigh, and then high tails it out of there.

Once at the gym, a manager points him toward a spot where he can observe the whole court from above, and after promising to be quiet and unobtrusive, he's left alone.

His gaze trails over all the players, and immediately, a select few stand out - and not just because of their vibrant hair colors. They're all very show-y and impressive.

Among them is Haizaki, who... is completely different from the grinning, happy boy he first laid eyes on. Ryouta had figured that Haizaki was only gruff and unapproachable off the court, but he's much the same here. He's even playing differently - more controlled and less flashy.

Even so, Ryouta can still clearly see his love of the sport shining in his eyes. Maybe he's holding back? But why?

Hmm. Haizaki Shougo continues to be a mystery. Ryouta finds himself grinning at the thought.

-o-

"Why the hell are you here?!!" Haizaki scowls upon spotting Ryouta at the entrance gates. "Never mind. Go the fuck away."

A smile blooms on his face, happy just to see his friend, and he returns the sour greeting cheerfully, "Well, good morning to you, too, Haizakicchi~!"

He'd purposely kept his intention to join the studying group a secret not only because Haizaki would vehemently protest but because he knew the result would be hilarious.

He wasn't wrong.

Haizaki squints disdainfully at him (looking adorably sleep-ruffled) before internally giving in. He has to keep up appearances, though, so when he starts walking again, he asks half-heartedly, "Why are you always following me around?"

Ryouta joins him, amused at the charade but willing to play along. "Is it so wrong to want to hang out with my friend?"

Haizaki falters mid-step, a lovely blush creeping up his neck, before shaking his head in disgust. At Ryouta's subsequent laughter, he glares and growls, "How can you say that shit so easily?"

"Your reactions are worth it every time, Haizakicchi," Ryouta informs him, and Haizaki elbows him in the side. He rubs the wounded spot, unable to conceal his grin even as he whines, "Friends don't hurt friends."

Haizaki snorts and then feigns nonchalance as he says, "Guess we're not friends then."

Ryouta finds himself smiling fondly, absolutely endeared by this boy who is desperately holding onto bonds and is entirely unused to (and unable to comprehend) someone else clutching to him just as desperately.

They're both a little new to this, but that's okay - he's more than willing to master this thing called
'friendship' too. For the both of them.

"You're right!" Ryouta agrees, and Haizaki's immediate disappointment is obvious and flattering, despite the sting of guilt. He throws himself at Haizaki's back and clings on tightly before he's shaken off.

"What- the fuck?"

Laughing, Ryouta tells him, "We're best friends!" And hopes the statement actually sticks.

When Haizaki only grumbles and gets a better grip on him before resuming his walk, Ryouta hides his surprise and alternates between internally cooing and basking in the fluffy warmth building in his chest.

-o-

@kise_ryouta_official Look! Haizakicchi fell asleep on my lap! Shh, don't wake him up. ;)
@yourgirlanko Ahh! That's so sweet!
@sinnamon_roll46 im dead an this pic is the killer #sofreakingcute #haikise
@u-rlly-think-so OK BUT I SHIP THIS SO HARD #haikiseisreal #imnotcryingyourecrying
@thememequeen291 hey, @official-haizaki-fan-club you guys seen this yet?
@turtlesnstuff I don't ship it, but they're both cute! :)
@official-haizaki-fan-club WE HAVE, AND IT'S GLORIOUS. #somebodyfanme #imso #blessed
@oikawa-tooru-is-bae this guy goes to my school? And he's never struck me as the cuddly type? @hajime-is-my-bf can you believe it?
@hajime-is-my-bf WHAT. what the heck happened to haizaki & who is this imposter? they're not even doin a good job smh
@oikawa-tooru-is-bae no but maybe he's always been this way? & we just never knew?
@hajime-is-my-bf the 1 time i tried to talk to him on the 1st day, he told me to piss off! srsly who is this guy
@kanekididnothingwrong im in the same class as him! he told me id get more 'action' if i got the stick out of my butt! the nerve of that guy!
@hideyoshideservesbetter um he was nice to me? i dropped my books when i bumped into him & he apologized & helped pick em up. was rlly gruff but sweet
@not-awake-enough-4-this Our teacher had me ask him for help on a problem, and he was irritated, but he was also patient and explained it really well. :)
"He jumped out a freaking window!" Ryouta practically shouts, horrified and angry and a little hurt. "A window! We were on the second floor!"

Kuroko glances up at him, quirks a brow, and then returns to his book. "And?"

"How are you not freaking out? It was the second floor! He could have broken something!" Ryouta says, heatedly, bemused by Kuroko's lack of concern.

"Haizaki-kun clearly knew what he was doing. He's dense emotionally, but he's not actually stupid," Kuroko reminds him, turning a page.

Ryouta is not reassured. "He clearly isn't thinking because otherwise he wouldn't be avoiding us!" He drops onto the grass next to Kuroko, like a puppet whose strings have been cut. "...Haizakicchi is an idiot," he murmurs into the crook of his arm.

"I agree," Kuroko says just as quietly. "But it looks like Nijimura-senpai will be cornering him soon, so we can guilt him as much as we want after."

He laughs. "Gonna use the puppy dog eyes?" He turns his head just enough to catch Kuroko's smile - which could be misconstrued as sweet to anyone who didn't know him.

"Haizaki-kun is weakest to blunt sincerity and declarations of friendship," he says, making Ryouta laugh again.

"You make him sound like a character from a video game." He smirks, "Heh, so we just have to ambush him with our oodles of platonic love!"

Kuroko spares him a Glance but settles for nodding when Ryouta pretends not to notice.

He flops down on the couch, one leg stretched out on the cushions and the other dangling just above the floor, heedless of its original occupant.

Junko lets him use her lap as a pillow with an amused huff, and he grins cheekily at her before turning his attention to his phone.

After a swipe to unlock it, he opens his gallery and hones in on an album that alone takes up a huge chunk of his phone's memory. He taps it and then scrolls through the dozens of photos until he finds his favorite - one of Haizaki's rare smiles that he'd been unbelievably proud of himself for capturing on film.

"I think I'm in love," Ryouta whispers, with feeling. His thumb traces the curve of Haizaki's jaw, and his face grows a little pink just looking at it.

Above him, Junko giggles. "I think you're infatuated," she says wryly, booping his nose.

He wrinkles it, but otherwise lets the offense go. "Either way," he says, because it doesn't matter. Not like his chances are all that great whatever the label he puts on his feelings. "Haizakicchi is way too cute," he laments, using his thumb and forefinger to zoom in.
"So I've heard," she hums, amused, mostly focused on the design she's sketching on her tablet but well used to humoring him.

Ryouta flicks through the reel for another favorite - Haizaki grudgingly taking a selfie with him, cheeks red and scowl ruined by one corner of his lip quirking up, betraying his good mood.

"He doesn't even know," Ryouta whines, and he could mean Haizaki's continued obliviousness towards his own cuteness or Ryouta's huge crush on him.

Why not both?

"There, there," Junko soothes, absently. "I'm sure he'll get it, eventually."

Ryouta grins sardonically, "He definitely won't."

Haizaki is smart and good at lots of things, but his own self-worth is dismally low, meaning he won't realize that people actually care about him until they spell it out for him - multiple times. And even then, it's a toss up as to whether Haizaki will ever believe he deserves to have people care about him.

Romantic feelings definitely won't get through his thick, oblivious skull, not until Ryouta tells him bluntly and without room for misinterpretation.

He feels himself flush, just thinking about it, and determines sadly that he will not be doing that anytime soon. He's selfish and possessive, and the off chance that things will change between them for the worse is enough to convince him to keep these feelings to himself.

...The only thing that soothes his heart ache on that front is the knowledge that cool, badass, good-looking Nijimura can't have him either. An admittedly petty way to feel, especially when he genuinely likes his senpai, but Ryouta has never shied away from the darker parts of himself, and this is no exception.

Suddenly, he gets a text, and when he sees it's from Haizaki, he grins a little guiltily. Doesn't stop him from happily opening the text.

Haizakicchi❤

10:32 - It's still too fuckng early for a morning text. Fucking send one after 12

To Haizakicchi❤

10:32 - but then its not morning! □ □

Haizakicchi❤

10:33 - Send it after 12 or don't send one at all

10:33 - Not like I even need you to greet me every fucking day
To Haizakicchi❤

10:34 - u kno u love it! (研讨会)___

Haizakicchi❤

10:34 - What I love is sleeping in on my days off

To Haizakicchi❤

10:35 - wahh! so cold! (≧問い合わせ≦)
10:35 - those txts r v important 2 me ill have u kno!
10:36 - but... if u send me a selfie ill think about it! (■■彡)

He almost drops his phone when Haizaki actually does send a picture.

It's a little dark, probably because he never opens his curtains, and Haizaki is still in bed, hair mussed and an adorable sleepy frown on his face. It's so, so cute, and he saves it to his gallery immediately.

It takes a few minutes for him to tear his eyes away, but when he does, he snorts at the text accompanying the photo.

Haizakicchi❤

10:34 - fucking happy now? Stop waking me up before noon

To Haizakicchi❤

10:36 - hmm

Haizakicchi❤

10:36 - That better be agreement.

To Haizakicchi❤

10:36 - hmmmmmmmm
Haizakicchi❤

10:37 - Kise istg I sent you the fucking selfie. You better fucking agree.

To Haizakicchi❤

10:37 - ryouta

Haizakicchi❤

10:37 - What?

To Haizakicchi❤

10:38 - call me ryouta & ill def DEF stop waking u up! (دائما) ᗪ))[十°^

He smirks, helplessly, imagining Haizaki turning red and flustered at the request, and the few minutes it takes him to reply just exacerbate the image.

Haizakicchi❤

10:42 - You're a fuckin menace, Ryouta.

He squeals, delighted, and Junko asks, smiling, "What's got you so happy?"

"I'm in love!" He declares again, and she rolls her eyes, fond. "You just wouldn't understand," he says, faux-haughty.

She looks up from her tablet, wry, and agrees, "You're right. I wouldn't."

And okay, he has to concede the point. Junko has never felt romantic feelings for or been attracted to anyone, as far as either of them know. She's never yearned for anything more than friendship, and she's been very adamant with their mother that she likely won't, ever.

Ryouta sort of gets it, except he's been attracted to lots of people, and he's been willing to date just about anyone who asks, provided they're not super awful. He's never wanted to kiss any of those people, though. Wanting to with Haizaki is a very new, very exciting thing.

And now his heart is racing. He laughs, pleased. Ever since he met Haizaki, he's been feeling so many things, and life has been so chaotic. He's felt mischievous, flustered, fond, triumphant, worried, sad, excited, nervous - and even more recently, warm and happy.

The numbness that has had a grip on his heart since elementary at the earliest has thawed so much as to be non-existent, all thanks to Haizakicchi and Kurokocchi and Nijimuracchi.
He grins and replies.

To Haizakiechi❤

10:45 - & ur a tsundere, shougo~ (≧≦)

He cackles when his inbox fills up with curses and threats, so hard that Junko rolls him onto the floor for distracting her.

-o-

As soon as Haizaki is sufficiently distracted, Ryouta slips away to the bathroom and locks the door.

He just- needs a minute.

When he steps outside again, he feels a little better, but he supposes this is something that's going to take time to properly heal.

He sighs.

"You confessed, didn't you?"

He yelps, whirling around to see Nijimura leaning against the wall next to the bathroom door. Was Nijimura waiting for him?

Then the question sinks in.

He flushes and ducks his head, hiding beneath his bangs, unable to meet that piercing gaze. He swallows, with difficulty. "Um... yeah." Nijimura doesn't ask, but he adds, mournfully, "He uh- he rejected me too."

There's a long, painful silence, and then he feels a familiar weight on his head.

"That guy... He isn't dating anybody, right now," Nijimura explains. "He's got reasons. S'not my place to tell you." He's not looking, but he can feel Nijimura shrug. "It'll feel shitty regardless."

"It hurts," Ryouta admits, quietly.

"I know." Nijimura ruffles his hair, and it's comforting, this free affection, especially since he isn't the one who initiates it, for once.

"He was really shocked. Had no idea that I liked him."

Nijimura snorts. "He's an idiot."

Ryouta laughs, and it's wet. He's crying again. "I don't know if I can get over this so easily."

"Heh. I told him I wasn't gonna give up. What about you?" He asks, and it sounds like a challenge.

Biting his lip, he thinks briefly of Haizaki - of his smile, his hidden kindness, his selfish selflessness, his love of basketball, that first glimpse of him smiling and laughing and utterly, unabashedly happy - and despite the sheer hurt and disappointment in his heart, he says, full of conviction, "...I'm not
either."
"Good."

Chapter End Notes

Writing Kuroko's POV was a challenge, but Kise's was fun. He's my favorite character
(largely because of this fic lol), and I've planned to do this for a while anyway. I'm only
nervous because a lot of you really like the limited POV, and maybe you'd rather not
know how Kise felt about certain things. But don't worry! This fic will only have a few
chapters like this and only when the POV won't spoil anything. ;D

I imagine Kise's thought process is pretty similar to Aomine's, but keep in mind that
Aomine loves basketball, and his problems stemmed from being unable to truly enjoy it
anymore. He was devastated because he loves it so much. Kise is sort of opposite in that
he hasn't found anything to cherish so wholeheartedly and is afraid he never will. And
when he does, well, things fall apart pretty quickly.

Gab is a fancy messaging app, the section in the middle there is basically twitter, and at
the end, they were using plain old texting. Thought it'd be fun to explore different social
media/ways of communicating with Kise, who has tons of accounts.

Oh! And the 'fans' shipping these guys are all in the 12-14 age range, so it's not like
there are adults gushing over two kids. Kise's a celebrity (however minor rn), and he
doesn't shy away from posting pictures, so I can imagine some harmless shipping. I did
much the same thing to like Disney teen celebs at that age, lol.
low on self-esteem, so you run on gasoline

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I severely overestimated just how well I'd be able to function after my party on Thursday. I'd initially planned to write up the rest of this chapter Friday and then proofread and post, but I ended up sleeping just about the whole day. OTL

Thanks for the kind feedback, as always! It really makes me so excited to write when I've got such lovely comments to read and reread for motivation! ;D Oh and thanks for the birthday wishes! I had a good one.

Also, this chapter was painful to write, so I imagine it's pretty painful to read. Just a head's up.

Chapter title is a line from "Gasoline" by Halsey.

Next Update: March 31, 2017

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LXIII. July 23, 2012 - Monday

They pack up and head back home when it starts getting late, their families splitting up and heading for their vehicles while they go to the station, and somehow, Shougo finds himself sandwiched between Nijimura and Ryouta on the train. More specifically, he's in between two of the people he's recently rejected, and he's never felt more awkward in his damn life.

"Could you fuckers go sit anywhere fucking else?" Shougo demands, glaring at both of them in turns. "Better yet, I'll-" He makes to stand up when two different hands grab him by the shoulders and force him back down. "The fuck-"

"Ne, Haizakicchi, you shouldn't stand while the train is in motion! It's not safe," Ryouta scolds him with a smile. It might actually seem innocent were it not for the death grip he's still got on Shougo's shoulder.

He snarls, "Like I give a fuck."

"Can it, hothead. The signs all say the same thing," Nijimura says sharply, glancing at him. "If you want to shake the image of a delinquent so badly, don't go breaking rules, dumbass."

Ouch. "Low fucking blow, asshole," he mutters, but he obediently relaxes on the seat and crosses his arms, glaring out the window now.

Satisfied he's not about to bolt, they release him, and he resists the urge to rub the spots they'd probably fucking bruised. Dicks.

He doesn't realize they were both fucking bullshitting until he's nodding off (on trains, everyone stands up all the fucking time!), and then he can't be bothered to summon the energy to call them out
He blinks awake, feeling warmth and weight on his side, and the only thing he can truly muster up, tired as he is, is resignation.

"Finally awake?" Nijimura asks, amused.

Shougo glares up at him - as much as he can without dislodging a still snoozing Ryouta from his shoulder - but doesn't otherwise move. "...Shut up," he hisses, not liking that expression on Nijimura's face one fucking bit.

That gets him a quiet snort.

"Why didn't you just shove me off," he grouses, irritated that Nijimura's side is so comfortable.

He yawns, and across from him, Tetsuya mirrors the action, blinking sleep from his eyes. Next to him, Kagami is likely asleep, eyes closed and his head resting back against the window.

"I don't mind," Nijimura admits, shrugging his free shoulder. He adds, smirking, "My cute, little first years needed me, after all."

Shougo makes a face, disgusted. "I'm not cute or little, fucker."

"From where I'm sitting, you're both," he retorts. "Besides, I meant him too." He tilts his head toward Ryouta, who better not be fucking drooling on him.

Shougo glances at him and concedes the point - because Ryouta is cute and little right now; an adorable teenager - but says, suddenly and abruptly bitter, thoughts he tries to keep tightly locked up oozing out and coating everything like a miasma, "M'not like him."

He doesn't know much about his former teammates once they hit high school, only happened to catch a few games here and there because he was busy with his own team then and didn't have the same amount of free time as his club-less middle school self. But inevitably, games between the Generation of Miracles were recorded and posted all over social media, and despite himself, Shougo still watched them and felt sick satisfaction at each loss and tear-streaked face and broken spirit. He is - was - an asshole like that.

Things started changing, though, and pretty rapidly.

It wasn't hard to put together that Tetsuya was gunning for the other Miracles with a goal in mind, and even Shougo had known vengeance wasn't it. Although he thinks of the vindictive little shit he's befriended here and now and admits that revenge was definitely a factor.

But clearly whatever he had planned worked because those guys went from distant and cold to friendly and fired up, much the same as they were in middle school before everything went to shit.

(Shougo had watched and wondered and waited...

...but their story had never included him and never would.)

Ryouta had been the first to convert, to regret what he'd done and to repent, and Shougo had been fucking furious when he'd found out. The golden boy had (finally) sunk to his level, but a hand had reached down and pulled him out.
Sometimes it feels like the whole world is only trying to suck him in deeper.

He'd chosen to stay in that dark hell, though, had known no other way of being, and what a bitter pill it was to swallow that fucking Tetsuya had swooped in to save those assholes from themselves when they'd all been pretty fucking content to leave *him* there, to dismiss him as a lost cause.

Guess they were better. Were worth it.

When he'd faced Ryouta on the court and seen that light in his eyes and realized what had happened... It had been just another hurt, just another disappointment in a long line of them. A punch to the fucking gut, and is it any wonder he lashed out, got resentful and hateful and angry?

He can't excuse any of what he did then. Can't condone it, can't wave it away or shove it under the rug like it never happened. It was shitty and cruel and ugly - and what a good description of Haizaki Shougo in general - and he's not about to forget it or forgive himself, even if he's the only one who remembers.

But it wasn't senseless violence. Heh. Or maybe it was. Because the one he'd wanted to maim and wreck and hurt was *himself*, and he'd wanted- no, *needed* to drag the Miracle fucks back down with him, make them dirty their hands, make them fucking *look* at him, even if it was in rage or disapproval.

Because at least they were looking his way, for the first time since he quit, for the first time in years.

*I'm still here.* He'd wanted to scream, to get in their faces and remind them, desperately. *I'm still fucking here.*

*Don't forget about me.* He'd threatened, without words, with his mocking, in a choked whisper after his utter humiliation on and off the court. *Don't you fucking dare.*]

They'd looked for a moment. Just a moment before Shougo faded into obscurity again. Just another opponent on the court. Another meaningless victory, an obstacle to overcome, a mere stepping stone to the cup. Not like they used to be teammates, right? Not as if they had history.

Not as if Haizaki Shougo had *ever* fucking mattered to the great and mighty Generation of Miracles.

How pathetic, right? The angry, violent fuck wanted his old teammates to miraculously give a shit about him, despite giving them no reason to! What a fucking riot!

He frowns, glaring at his dirty sneakers, and suddenly, the warm weight on either side feels fucking suffocating, Tetsuya's sleepy silence harsh and judgmental, the small, packed train caging him in on all sides.

...He's nothing like Ryouta or Daiki or any of the others. Tetsuya made that real fucking clear. All of them did.

They got their damn redemption, and Shougo willingly became the villain, and then, well- he wasn't anything at all anymore.

Now, now he's here, twelve years old again, and things are different, he's different, but even so, he keeps falling right back in that black hole, over and over and over again.

Maybe he's not actively hurting anybody else, but that just means he turns on himself. He rips and shreds and breaks, tries his very best to disappear the pieces of himself that he hates, the ugly, awful parts of him that no amount of time or distance can ever manage to hide or wipe away, and it's never
He doesn't want to be like this. He doesn't want to hate himself. He doesn't want to always, always ruin his good mood with dark thoughts, always seeping in and messing everything up, but he can't stop it, doesn't know how, and at this point, he's not sure there is a way.

He thinks back to today, to that fucking revelation, and that insidious voice sinks its teeth into this new vulnerability with vigor, sensing weakness and insecurity and pouncing.

Ryouta likes him? And he's supposed to believe that. Supposed to just 'get' it. As if it were obvious. As if he should just know and reasonably expect it.

Maybe if he'd seen Ryouta acting that way towards anyone else, he'd have realized. Maybe then he'd have known and understood without having to force a confrontation.

But Ryouta likes him, out of everyone, and there is no part of Shougo, twelve years old or twenty-two, that would have looked at him, at the situation and thought, 'He has a crush on me.'

It's fucking stupid, he knows. Possibly really sad and pathetic. But Shougo has never had a real, genuine romantic relationship with anyone. There have been flings and fuck buddies and one night stands. He's had the occasional thought that maybe he'd like to know someone better. But he never cared enough about anyone to seriously consider the idea, and no one has ever tried to get to know him so intimately.

It's his fault, entirely. He's cruel, sadistic, gruff, vulgar. Far from the ideal candidate for a boyfriend. He's good in bed, loves to have sex, and that's probably the only thing he and his partners have ever been interested in. The thought of dating someone hasn't crossed his mind since middle school, and being back here again, with all these young versions of his former teammates, hasn't exactly changed that.

He feels incredibly old, sometimes, and others as if he's actually a child. His teenage hormones don't help, and he's pretty fucking sure his younger self is still influencing him in some ways.

Ryouta likes this version of him, for some reason. Likes him enough to stay friends or to go further, and he can't possibly accept such a thing so easily. He's still trying to come to terms with it.

Ryouta had called it a silly crush, but it's easy even for Shougo to see that it means more than that to him. He'd been hopeful and terrified and then sad and resigned.

Why? Why did things deviate so much from what happened before? Why is he having to deal with topics like crushes and dating? What is there to like?

He knows intellectually that he's matured and that he's grown and developed into a different person entirely, that he'd been a jackass as a kid and is apparently more tolerable now, but is that really all it took for someone to like him on such a deep, intimate level? To not only tolerate him but want to actively be near him? Enough that the idea of losing him turned Ryouta into such a nervous wreck?

It's too much too soon. Too unbelievable and fantastical a concept when even he doesn't like himself very much. How could he expect anything else from others?

He thinks he could probably chew on this all his life and not ever truly understand it.

"You're doing it again," a quiet voice breaks through his heavy thoughts, but it's not enough.

It's like he's been given this precious gift, this miraculous chance to change things for the better, but
every time things go well, he can't help but question it.

Because although he hit the lottery when it comes to family, every other aspect of his life has always been a never ending shitfest. He's fucked up every good thing that's come his way.

Shouldn't it follow then that he's just going to spectacularly fuck this up too?

"Hey, Shittyzaki," Nijimura says, louder, thumping Shougo on the forehead for good measure.

And just like that, he's back, spell broken.

"What the fuck," he grumbles, rubbing the throbbing spot with a scowl and glaring at a weirdly serious Nijimura. "The fuck was that for, fuckface?"

He frowns. "...Whatever you were doing, stop it."

"What, being quiet?" He scoffs, "Figured you'd appreciate the break from your annoying, shitty kouhai."

"Beating yourself up. I could feel the self-loathing coming off you in waves. And don't fucking talk about yourself like that, either. I'll kick your ass if I hear anything like that again." His frown grows more severe as he goes on, "You won't let anyone else talk shit about you, so don't fucking do it to yourself, got it?"

Indignant fury rears up in him, but he's too tired mentally and emotionally to maintain such a powerful emotion for more than a few seconds.

"Why do you care?" He asks instead, raw and wretched, tone very thinly covered by agitation. "Why the fuck does it matter to you what I-?"

He's cut off very abruptly as Nijimura grabs a handful of his hair and drags him up and close to his face, too painful and swift for him to do much more than go along with it.

Nijimura's angry eyes bore right into him, expression utterly pissed as he says, "I like you, you fucking oblivious, hardheaded asshole. We all like you, as you are, shitty attitude and all, and if you don't get that, I'll keep fucking reminding you until it sinks in."

Shougo gapes at him, utterly at a loss, unable to understand, but he can see very clearly that Nijimura is completely serious, and despite the ruthless, callous part of him denying everything and desperately clinging to what he knows as truth, he allows himself to think that maybe... it is okay. That he's fine the way he is.

(He's reached this conclusion before, but...)

what if?)

Because even if he is awful and selfish and all those other things... his friends like him anyway. Maybe that's just how it is.

There doesn't have to be an overarching explanation for everything, and he knows all too well that emotions are tricky, whimsical things, independent from logic and reason.

(What if it's all a lie?)

He knows how they feel about him. Knows they feel it very strongly, but believing it is another matter entirely. Connecting those words and emotions to him, to his face and voice and actions, is
difficult, but this too is something he has to work on.

It's getting a little easier each time he hears those impossibly sincere words, fierce and strong and undeniably directed at him.

(It would break him.)

Nijimura's waiting for his response, so he viciously shoves down all the things he doesn't want to hear and allows the declarations of his friends to wash over him, warm and steady and real.

He'd sucked in a sharp breath at Nijimura's declaration, and he lets it out now, slow and controlled. He looks back into his captain's - his friend's - stormy and intent eyes and tells him, voice rough, "...I get it."

(...and he's not sure he'd be able to recover, this time.)

Nijimura watches him for a moment longer, likely making sure Shougo isn't just saying that, and then he lets him go with a heavy sigh.

"Good," he huffs, settling back in his seat and glaring at the curious onlookers Shougo is stubbornly ignoring and making them flinch and look away.

(He's not sure he'd want to.)

Shougo rubs his head, sore from the rough treatment, and he only winces a little when a hand slips into his and intertwines their fingers.

Of course the heated argument had woken Ryouta.

"...Sorry," he murmurs, guiltily.

"It's okay," Ryouta returns, cheerful for all that he's just as quiet. "You can make it up to me, though."

Cocking a brow, he turns and asks, "What?"

Ryouta smiles, kindly, as he takes their clasped hands, raises them upward, and maintaining eye contact, kisses the back of Shougo's hand, a momentary press of lips against skin, warm and full of intent.

He pulls back, smile blindingly bright and entirely unrepentant, and only watches in amusement as Shougo tries and fails to comprehend what the fuck just happened.

Had he just-?

On his hand-?

Why?

"Don't forget - I like you too. And I'll gladly remind you of that, Haizakicchi," he says. He shares a Look with Nijimura over Shougo's head, impish and smug but not mean-spirited, and adds, "As friends, of course."

He finally releases Shougo and turns to grin at Tetsuya, and Shougo flushes, neck hot, that spot on his hand burning, and fuck, all that shit has been pushed right out of his head, replaced easily by the horror-stricken realization that he's just been kissed - by two fucking middle schoolers now, fucking
hell!

 Fuck, fuck, fuck.

 *Fucking why?!*

 Luckily the train chooses that moment to stop at their station, and Shougo fucking bolts, pushing rudely through the other passengers in his rush to get out, to get away.

 What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck-

 He stumbles out into the station, earning a huff from an older dude, and then he's full out running, uncaring that he's leaving his friends behind as he makes it outside and just keeps going, block after block, all the way to the intersection at his street.

 He stops then, side aching and out of breath, face still way too red, and heart thundering away in his chest. He's not attracted to the Nijimura or Ryouta of this time, that's gross, but his stupid fucking mind keeps imagining their older selves, the versions his age in their place, and that's fucking fueling the heady, mortifying electricity beneath his skin.

 He bets both of them are really fucking hot. And isn't that a really gross fucking thing to think when he's stuck with their baby-faced, teen-aged selves? Shougo did not fucking ask to be some creepy adult waiting for teenagers to be old enough to date, and he's *not going to be*. He cannot stress this enough, but he's *not interested in them romantically*, and he probably *won't ever be*. Fuck's sake. He just wants to save his mom, make friends, and play basketball! Is that too fucking much to ask for?!

 He groans, so fucking done with- with *everything*, this whole day, his whole life, *himself*.

 ...But he can't deny the effectiveness of their words, even if he doesn't approve of the romantic spin they put on it. Despite himself, Shougo does believe them.

 They like him, and even if it's just for now... just until the shit show that is their second year, just until they eventually get over it, well, he can live with that.

 It's more than he ever had before, after all.

 He smiles, a tiny, fleeting thing, and then he's jogging to his house and heading inside where his brother is loudly complaining about his sunburn, and his mom is laughing and reminding him that she warned him multiple times to redo the first layer-

 And the pleased, grateful smile grows into a smirk as he pokes Shion's exposed, red back.

 "Ahhh! The fuck, you little-!"

 He laughs and darts out of the way. "Couldn't resist, sorry!"

 "You don't sound like it, ass-clown. Do that again, and I'll-!"

 "Shougo, come here and put on this aloe. Shion, don't bully your brother."

 "Yes, mom."

 "I wasn't!"

 Chapter End Notes
Let's ignore the fact that the train would likely be super crowded, and the boys would probably be standing squished together instead of sitting. Yay for plot convenience!

Ugh, and sorry if Shougo's thoughts are all over the place. It's sort of supposed to be that way since he's not really trying to think of anything specific and can't help but agonize over things. But uh this is what I meant when I said he had reasons for his obliviousness. \_//(ツ)_/\n
Someone suggested I do an omake/extra for a scene a while back, and I think I'd like to start doing that. So if any of you have ideas for some extra scenes in this 'verse that you'd like to see, then let me know. Maybe stuff that could have happened in-between chapters. Alternate scenes are fine, but I probably won't write any that involve characters that haven't shown up yet (i.e. the other Miracles, kids from their high school teams, etc.)
you are not alone

Chapter Notes

Not an April Fool's joke. Sorry about the delay, again! It's embarrassing to admit, but I actually forgot I hadn't already written the chapter, and by the time I remembered, it was Friday, and I was scrambling to get one out. A little after midnight, I gave up the ghost and decided to finish and post today. Uh, so if there are any mistakes, it's because I'm in a rush.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

Next Update: April 14, 2017 (for real this time!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

LXIV. July 24, 2012 - Tuesday

Despite the fact that he is by no means a morning person, the next day, Shougo wakes early and heads to the kitchen, sneaking past his mother's room as quietly as possible. He doesn't know if it's a mom thing or what, but she always seems to sense when he's hovering outside her door, hesitant to bother her for something as minor as a nightmare or monsters in his closet.

Nowadays, his concerns are much bigger, and he's still reluctant to share them with her - not because she'd make light of them but because she's already got so much on her plate. He doesn't want to add to that.

Not that any of that has anything to do with his self-imposed mission. He just needs her asleep for it.

The kitchen is bigger than he remembers it being, the counters taller and the cabinets higher. He knows it's just because he's shorter now at twelve years old, but though he's mostly used to it, it's still a bit jarring.

He has to stand on his toes to reach the top shelf of the counter where the box of pancake mix resides, and shit, he really misses being the tallest guy in the room.

The other materials are thankfully within easy reach, and it's not long before he has a pile of pancakes ready to serve.

Living on his own, he got sick of take-out and convenience store dinners real fucking quick, so he taught himself how to make his favorite dishes and anything else that was easy enough with the ingredients on hand. He's not much of a chef, but anybody can follow the directions of a recipe online.

That being said, cooking takes time and attention, and he knows from experience that after a long day of work, standing in the kitchen making shit for any longer than a few minutes takes a whole lot of energy. Energy his mother shouldn't have to waste, in his personal, completely unbiased opinion. Since his mother is adamant they all sit around the table and eat their meals together, however, he figures a good way to repay her at least a little is helping out with it more.

Thus, his surprise breakfast.
"Oh god, it's not Mother's Day, is it?" Shion asks from behind him, sounding quietly horrified. "Because if it is, then my internal calendar is off by an alarming few months."

When Shougo throws him an unimpressed look, he defends, "Hey, I sleep like the dead. Not completely unreasonable to assume I slipped into hibernation." He yawns and adds, "Figures even after months of sleep, I'd still be tired."

"I'm tired of listening to you," Shougo snorts, depositing the last pancake on the teetering stack of its brethren. "S'not Mother's Day, idiot."

"Then why?" He gestures vaguely towards Shougo, who is now setting the pan in the sink, but his meaning is obvious. "Wait, shit, it's not her birthday-?"

Shougo cuts him off, amused by his brother's sudden panic. "No, it's not her damn birthday. It's fucking July, dumbass. I'm just- Look, I just wanted to do something nice for you guys, okay? Fuck."

"...Okay," Shion says, expression faintly confused but luckily no longer suspicious. "Need any help, little bro?"

Relaxing now that his motives aren't being questioned, he nods with a smile. "Yeah, can you help me set the table?"

"Sure thing."

Their mom walks in on them in the middle of it, as they're bickering about how to properly place the plates, clearly still tired from their late night. "I'm not sure what I'm more surprised by," she says, cocking a brow. "The fact that there's food I didn't make or that you two are up and functioning this early."

Shion laughs, slinging an arm over Shougo's shoulders and pulling him in close. "Seems our little Shou-chan finally realized just how much we mean to him and so decided to show his love and appreciation through pancakes."

Her brow, if possible, arches higher. "Is that so?"

Ducking his head a little, he grunts, "Basically, yeah."

He can feel Shion still in shock at the easy admission, but he recovers quickly enough. "Ha, wow, is one of us dying? Is it me? Oh god, it's me, isn't it?"

"Why would you think it's you?" Shougo asks, utterly unable comprehend his brother's (dumbass) train of thought.

"So someone is dying," Shion says, as if he's just gotten confirmation for his stupid theory.

"Nobody's dying. Could you shut the fuck up for a fucking second?" Shougo snarls, shoving a laughing Shion away.

His mom crosses her arms, leaning against the kitchen doorway. "You can't blame him for being curious, Shougo. I am as well," she says, a very knowing slant to her smile that utterly betrays her words.

Shion mirrors her, right down to that irritating expectant gleam in his eye, and Shougo fucking gives up. It's not like he really thought they'd let him get away with wordlessly thanking them. They're
both smug little shits that way.

"I just- I just figured I'd fucking do this to say thanks because I fucking suck at talking about this shit." He avoids his mom's fond expression, looking off to the right as he explains, stiltedly, in stops and starts, "Things could be a lot fucking worse, okay? But it's- you're not. You're both really good. You're good to me, even when I'm being an ass. Even when I probably don't deserve it. So. So, okay?" He huffs, suddenly turning to look both of them eye, "Can we just- fucking sit down and eat the damn pancakes? Fuck."

He's flushing (because of course he is) and disgustingly vulnerable, and he doesn't fight it when his brother abruptly hooks an arm around Shougo and their mom and drags them closer with an eager yell of "group hug!" He just soaks in the warmth and affection and love, wraps it all around him and commits the moment to memory.

"These aren't half bad," Shion says around a mouthful of pancake, and Shougo grimaces at the gross display. "I was expecting these to taste like cardboard, and then, as the amazingly wonderful older brother I am, I would have choked them down anyway and told you they weren't half bad."

Shougo scowls, stabbing his food with more force than necessary. "Isn't that what you just did."

He waves his utensil dismissively. "No, weren't you listening? If they sucked, I wouldn't have mentioned my saintly behavior at all."

"Funny, I don't see a halo," Mom chimes in, laughing when Shion gives her a wounded look.

"My own mother! Turned against me!" He shakes his head sadly, mouth pulled into a mournful downward curve. "It must be the food. Shougo's buttered you up, gained your favor. These pancakes are tearing this family apart!"

"That's right. Shougo's my one good kid. The other one slipped away yesterday and hit on some girl in the middle of our conversation," she says, quite mercilessly, and Shion winces. "Conveniently leaving me to carry our things to the car."

"What?!" Shougo growls, turning on Shion with a sharp scowl. "You shitty serial flirt!"

Shion puts his hands up defensively, yelping, "Hey, hey, hey! I didn't- Well, okay, I may have stepped away for, like, a second-" Their mother snorts, and he hastily amends, "Ugh, mom! She was really cute! And you said it was okay! I already apologized too!"

Laughing again and looking quite amused, their mom says, "So, what? I'm supposed to be okay with being abandoned by my own kid?"

"Fucking layabout bastard," Shougo mutters, realizing their mom's just teasing, but he's already lived through a world where she collapsed from overwork. If she ever, again- Well, he just won't let it happen. "What if she hurt herself lifting all that shit? Just so you could fucking get in some girl's pants."

"Shougo." His mom says, warning.

He goes on, stubbornly, "She's already working so hard. For us. Don't fucking make it worse, dipshit. We're all she has. We have to fucking take care of her, got it?"

"I- I'm sorry?" Shion deflates, appropriately chastised and a little bewildered before growing serious. "I'm sorry. I didn't think about that, but you're right." He laughs, weakly. "Thanks, little bro. Good looking out." He turns to their mother, who is regarding both of them with a mixture of irritation,
love, and sadness and says, "Sorry about that, mom! You can count on me next time. Even if there's a pretty girl nearby."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm not so old I need my prepubescent sons looking after me. You can barely take care of yourselves."

"Hey!" Shion sniffs, offended. "I'll have you know I'm mid-pubescent at least."

"Gross." Shougo makes a face. "I don't want to know anything about your new feelings or your growing body. Keep that shit to yourself."

"Seconded," their mom agrees, prompting Shougo to laugh.

"Like I would tell you guys anyway!" Shion squawks, a hilarious expression on his face. "Ugh, let's move on to embarrassing Shougo now, please. He's the one with the harem!"

Mom almost chokes on her laughter while Shougo sputters, caught off-guard.

"Oh? This sounds interesting," she says, smirking.

Shougo groans pathetically, "Why?!"

"Ah, I was wondering the same thing, myself, and I've come to a conclusion." He smiles eerily at Shougo and says, "How could an uncouth, vulgar man such as my brother attract such a flock of good-looking guys? You see, I believe after years spent under my wing, admiring me, learning my ways, aspiring to be as magnificent as myself, dear Shougo here has finally managed to exude some of the Haizaki family charisma." He wipes away a fake tear. "It's truly a wondrous thing."

Shougo can feel his eye twitching. "You ever get tired of spewing bullshit?" He asks, thoroughly done.

Shion grins, admitting, "Not particularly."

"Your breath must really fucking stink," he mutters, sparking twin laughs.

"Oh, shit, it's already seven," their mom suddenly curses, standing up from her chair and bringing her plate with her. "I've got to get going." She leans over and kisses each of them on the top of their heads. "Thanks for the breakfast, Shougo, Shion. I loved it. I'll see you two in a few hours, okay? Bye. I love you!" She grabs her things and rushes out the door.

"Bye, love you," they call after her.

Shougo stands up then too and begins to clean up. When Shion moves to help him, and Shougo gives him a questioning look, his brother shrugs and tells him, "Move over. You wash. I'll dry."

He grunts in affirmation, and the two of them fall into a comfortable silence while they work.

Left to his own thoughts, however, Shougo begins to ruminate, and he cringes a little internally at his behavior earlier. It's not like there was anything inherently wrong with Shion leaving their mom to pack up their beach crap. Haizaki Ayano is strong in body and spirit, and it was only a little under two decades of working multiple jobs and not sleeping well that pushed her body to its limits. The doctor had said as much. Plus, well, it was only a few bags.

He'd just been overcome with irrational fear at the thought that through their carelessness, they could cause events to speed up and their mom to collapse even sooner. And that? Would be entirely his
fault. It would be because he's here in the past fucking shit up and making things worse.

He lets out a frustrated breath and tries to banish the awful imagery, the bad memories. His mom is perfectly fine, after all. She's fine. He has plenty of time to change things.

Speaking of...

"You look like you're thinking heavy thoughts," Shion observes. "Wanna share?"

Shougo frowns. "Yeah, I... Um, I was thinking about getting a part time job," he reveals hesitantly, handing over a clean plate.

"What? Why? Aren't you busy with basketball?" His brother asks, drying said plate and setting it aside, turning his full attention on Shougo now that they're done.

He shrugs, uncomfortable. "Not over the summer. Other than our training camp, we're only getting together to train every other day."

"Yeah, and you're gonna be sore and dead tired those days," Shion points out. "Why the sudden need for a job? You want money or somethin'?"

"Not for me," he says, watching his brother out of the corner of his eye. He can spot the moment Shion gets it.

"For mom? You... You're really worried about her, huh." It's not a question, but he nods anyway.

Contemplative, Shion takes a seat on the counter, and Shougo sits next to him, staring down at his dangling feet and thinking idly that he probably needs some new sneakers.

"Any reason why?" Shion asks, picking up the thread of conversation as if a few minutes hadn't passed.

Shougo shrugs again, but he can sense Shion isn't going to just leave it at that. He scrambles for a plausible explanation, one that isn't 'I'm trying to prevent a possible future event,' and then, like a metaphorical light bulb has turned on above his head, he finds it.

"Someone I know," he starts, awkwardly, unsure how to go about this. "Their dad overworked himself and got really sick. Like, they had to leave the country to seek treatment sick." He hesitates, feeling a little guilty about using Nijimura's shitty situation for his own gain, but he charges ahead anyway - because he is and always will be a selfish bastard. "Mom's- She could end up the same way, y'know? She's working so hard for us, and it's not like we can get her to stop. So. So I just wanna help. A little extra money won't hurt, right?" He looks beseechingly to Shion, willing him to understand. He's serious about this and refuses to budge.

After a long moment, Shion smiles, and it's rueful and sad and proud. "Heh, you're such a momma's boy, Shou." He shakes his head. "You wanna know why we stick by you, even when you're being a little shit? It's 'cause you're a big ol' softy, and we know that better than anybody. Well, I'd love you anyway, even if you weren't," he admits, casually. "But still, you're really somethin' else."

Shougo sucks in a sharp breath, startled, always by such frank statements about him.

Shion reaches over and drags Shougo close, pulls him into a one-armed hug, and says, "I'm not gonna let you waste your summer working. You're just a little kid." Before Shougo can protest, he goes on, "My buddy Waya offered me a job working at his family's restaurant. I turned him down, but I don't think he'd mind if I called him up. Besides, his parents love me."
Pulling back, Shougo stares up at his brother, shocked. "What? But, no, you don't have to-

"Well, yeah, I don't have to," he rolls his eyes, explaining, "but you're clearly worried about this, and I don't want anything bad to happen to Mom either." He grins, gently punching Shougo's shoulder. "I'm the big brother. I'm supposed to look after you and chase away your demons. This is just another way to do it."

Impossibly overwhelmed, Shougo turns away and blinks his suddenly wet eyes, unresistant when Shion tugs him back against his side.

He... He really never thought for even a second about asking his brother - or anyone - for help. He was prepared to dodge questions and stubbornly do what he needed to anyway, and maybe that's where Shougo fails the most.

Because when he was left reeling and angry and hurt after quitting the team in middle school, he never went to his family for advice or comfort, didn't want to burden them with something so stupid even if it was crushing to Shougo, and those awful, toxic feelings only festered and bubbled over and became worse.

Even still, they treated him no differently, and Shougo pretended nothing was wrong, and he continued to spiral out of control without seeking any support. They could tell things had changed with him, but interrogation or intervention only led to him stone-walling them, denying absolutely everything until they eventually stopped pushing.

He distanced himself from both of them, stayed out and came home later, avoided the house as much as he could, ashamed and furious and hurting and terrified of what they would think if they knew about the ugly darkness inside of him and the things he did to appease it.

His mom collapsing was simultaneously the worst and best thing that happened to them - because she was sick and in pain, but it finally made Shougo realize that he couldn't keep on like he'd been doing. That he would burn himself out or else combust and possibly take everyone he loved with him.

After that, Shougo quit his club and began staying at home more, hovering over his mother until she grew tired of his constant presence. Then he started working, and he eventually found a job that he was good at, one he'd kept up until his trip to the past.

He grew closer to them, as close as they are now, and if there's anything he regrets as much as being a major cause in his mother's bad health, it's pushing his family away when he needed them the most.

He's failed so horribly at so many things, made so many dumbass decisions, but now that he's got a chance to take a different path, he's hopefully going to avoid some of his bigger mistakes.

Like not relying on the people he cares about and who care about him return.

He can almost see a giant stick with the words You are not alone bashing him over the head repeatedly. Maybe it's time the words actually sunk in.

"...Thanks," he grumbles, almost too quiet to hear.

"No problem, little bro."

Chapter End Notes
Finally a Haizaki family-centric chapter! So many of you wanted more of them, so here you go. Shion kind of took over, but he's one of my favorites, so that's no surprise. Hope you guys enjoyed!

Answers to (Somewhat) Frequently Asked Questions:

- We will be adding another Miracle to the group and soon. Probably within in the next couple of chapters.

- Eventually Nijimura will have a chapter in his point of view. It's super spoiler-y, though, so it's going to be a while.

- This fic will cover at the very least all of Teiko. Things are slow-going now, but I will eventually skip forward in time to cover the major changes. That being said, this fic will likely be longer than 60 chapters.

- I'm open to including side pairings, such as KagaKuro or MidoTaka, if you guys want, but since Haizaki is our narrator, he might not notice right away.
So sorry! Genuinely thought I'd make it in time, and then well, I got even busier. Still very very vaguely resentful about that, but I'll spare you the details. You're here for the fic. I do need to finally admit that I might not make the Friday updates for the next month or so, but I will certainly try. And if I do miss them, you can expect the update in the next couple of days, hopefully.

Maybe the content of this chapter will make up for it?

Thanks for all of your feedback and support! You'll never know just how much it means to me to hear that you like my fic. I don't always have time to reply to comments, but I read every one of them and am so very grateful for them - and for you. Just. Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Next Update: April 28, 2017 [but again, might be a few days late. don't panic if I miss it!]

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

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LXV. July 25, 2012 - Wednesday

He should have known something was up when Tetsuya suggested they hang out. Usually, Ryouta is the one asking after schedules and trying to plan things, bringing everyone together, and the rest of them (not so) reluctantly go along with it.

He's grateful if only for the fact that Shougo doesn't have to attempt the mortifying task of actually asking these people to spend time with him. He enjoys their company, and they definitely know he does, but he can do without the teasing he'd undoubtedly receive for even implying as much. He has his pride.

This time, though, it's Tetsuya who suggests they all meet up and play basketball, and he even picks the time and place - nine in the morning at a court close to the school.

Shougo doesn't think anything of it, mostly because it's basketball-related. The biggest basketball nut of them all is probably going through withdrawals since the third-stringers don't have as much practice over the summer.

Honestly, he figures Tetsuya would goad or subtly manipulate him into coaching him if he didn't already have Ryouta to cheerfully coax Shougo into doing his bidding. It's just straight up unfair when they team up.

Anyway, it's at Tetsuya's insistence that Shougo finds himself strolling into a public court that morning, and as he stops and stares (somehow entirely unsurprised) at the sight of Aomine Daiki chatting away with Momoi Satsuki, he realizes exactly what the little shit had been up to.

"Yo, Haizaki," Daiki greets him - with a smile that will never stop being fucking weird. "Tetsu said
you're the other one who's been helping him train! Ha, man, I had you all wrong. I didn't even believe him when he told me. I thought you were the type who wouldn't help anyone but yourself, but turns out, you're pretty cool," Daiki tells him, casually and as if he hadn't just rudely insulted and then sort of complimented Shougo, maybe.

Satsuki rolls her eyes, smacking his arm. "You can't just say that to people! Be more considerate, you oaf."

"Ow!" He rubs his arm, frowning at her. "I was being nice! I just told him he's not the jerk I thought he was!"

"And I'm telling you thinking that at all isn't nice," She counters, thoroughly exasperated. "Much less saying it to his face."

He scrunches his nose up. "Well, I'm not gonna talk shit about him behind his back."

"That's not what I-"

Shougo coughs, gaining their attention. Neither of them have the decency to look apologetic, just a little sheepish, and it makes him snort, despite himself.

"Thanks, I think," he says. "So what are you guys doing here? Tetsuya trying to set up a play date?"

Daiki snickers, possibly at the mental image of Tetsuya treating them like he's their mother and they his unruly kids. "Something like that."

"More like this guy got wind of strong players not on the team and begged Tetsu-kun to set up a game," Satsuki rats him out, mercilessly.

Her childhood friend gives her a Look and reveals, "Like you weren't practically drooling at the thought of gathering more data."

She puffs her cheeks up, looking very put upon. "I... refuse to comment." She lets the air out in a whoosh and turns her face haughtily to the side.

Daiki snickers again.

Shougo opens his mouth to ask Daiki for a one-on-one game - something he rarely gets to experience in practice - when a familiar arm slings itself over his shoulder, and he finds himself tugged close to a warm body smelling of expensive cologne.

"Gooooood morning, Haizakicchi~!" Ryouta practically sings in his ear, as usual way too fucking chipper this early. No teenage boy should that be that happy before noon at the earliest. "And who are your friends?"

Rolling his eyes, he shoves Ryouta away and goes through introductions.

"Oh! You're Kurokocchi's friends," Ryouta says, as if just realizing. He laughs. "Is he trying to merge our two groups? Like one, big, giant group of friends? Are we gonna form Voltron together? Because if so, I wanna be the head."

That gets smiles and chuckles all around, more because of Ryouta's bubbly nature and enthusiasm than his dumb joke. Shougo can see he's endearing himself to them already and is only slightly jealous at his unnatural ability to do so.
"If anything, you'd be the leg," Shougo tells him, smirking. "There's no way you're not the yellow one, blondie."

"You're trying to insult me, but all I hear is the cute nickname you gave me," Ryouta chirps, grinning.

Shougo grimaces, beseeching Satsuki, the only other sane one. "Do you see what I have to deal with?"

She smiles, amused, but it twitches into a half-frown when Daiki says, "Hey, aren't you the guy who did that shoot with Sayo-chan? You know, black hair, great tits, sings that one 'nya nya nya' song?"

Satsuki slaps the back of his head, eliciting a yelp and an "Ow, woman!" The look she gives Shougo then says she perfectly understands his position and sympathizes with it.

He doesn't think he's ever come to like someone so quickly.

"I remember her," Ryouta assures him, after badly hiding a laugh. "She was really kind and helped me relax just before we started shooting."

Daiki nods and then asks, with great importance, "So was she hotter in person?"

"Uh..." Ryouta hedges, glancing hesitantly between the scary smile on Satsuki's face and Daiki's utterly focused stare. "I could let you know when we have another shoot together and have you find out yourself?" He offers, like a child hoping he got the right answer to a difficult question.

"Sweet!" Daiki shouts, moving to throw an arm over Ryouta's shoulders, prompting a startled, panicked look to appear and then disappear, carefully masked. "Heh, you're pretty cool too, Kise. Man, why'd Tetsu wait so long to introduce us?"

Shougo hides a wince, but it hardly matters because only a moment later a monotone, quiet voice divulges, "Haizaki-kun is a skittish, antisocial creature, and it took me some time to tame him enough for human interaction."

He completely ignores the varying screams of surprise at his sudden arrival and even allows Satsuki (with actual, real fucking hearts in her eyes) to hug the life out of him.

"My love~!"

"Good morning, Momoi-san, everyone."

"Shut the fuck up, Tetsuya," Shougo grumbles. "You didn't tame shit." At the looks that gets him, he snarls, "And I ain't a skittish or antisocial creature, fuck do I have to say it."

"Unfortunately, we're still working on his social skills," Tetsuya admits, feigning disappointment.

Shougo flips him off.

"Ah," Daiki says, something visibly dawning on him. "You're like Midorima."

Knowing exactly where this is going, Shougo growls, "I'm not a fucking-"

"Tsundere," Daiki and Tetsuya say at the same time with matching grins - Tetsuya's barely there but just as bright.

Why must it always come to this?!
"I hate all of you," Shougo informs them, irritably. "And not in a cute, don't-mean-it kind of way. I actually, genuinely hate you." He swivels around, throwing twin vulgar gestures behind him as he walks away. "I'm going home. Fuck you."

Of fucking course, Ryouta then chooses to wrap his arms around Shougo from behind, nuzzling his face against Shougo's cheek like a damn cat.

"Maa, don't leave, Haizakicchi! You're not a tsundere, okay? You don't pretend to dislike us but secretly love us, and you definitely don't like hanging out with us. You just put up with us for what I'm sure is a very real, very legit reason that isn't because we're friends. Right?" He says, and he couldn't keep the laughter out of his voice even if he tried - which he doesn't, ever. "So c'mon, let's have fun! Or whatever you think the things we do are in your totally not a tsundere way. Ne?"

"I'm gonna kick your ass," Shougo tells him, tilting his face away from Ryouta's, as much as he can in such a tight hold. "But fuck it, I'll play. I didn't get out of bed this fucking early for no goddamn reason."

Ryouta laughs. "But fuck it'? You make it too easy sometimes, Haizakicchi."

Flushling, Shougo breaks out of the hold and turns on a laughing Ryouta, messing up his picture perfect hair in retaliation.

"Nooo! Stop it, haha, why?"

"Because you're the worst," Shougo responds immediately, smiling and laughing too. Ryouta's cheerfulness is fucking infectious.

"Sorry I'm late," Kagami's deep, sort of gravel-y voice carries across the court and grabs everyone's attention.

His eyes zero in on Daiki almost instantly, and Shougo can see the moment Kagami recognizes him as a strong player. It's some weird ass thing he says he can do: smell strong players. Personally, Shougo calls bullshit, but it's not like he of all people can go around putting down supposedly impossible powers.

"Aomine, right," Kagami calls out to him, all but skipping over in his excitement. "You're the strongest player on their team?"

Daiki, maybe also sensing Kagami's skill, focuses on him unerringly. "Yeah. And you're the guy from America. Kagami?"

He nods, eagerly, and suggests, "Let's do one-on-one, you and me. I want to see for myself."

Smirking, Daiki says, "Sounds good to me."

As one, they turn to Satsuki, who rolls her eyes again, fondly, and accepts the unspoken request. "You're the strongest player on their team?"

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Smirking, Daiki says, "Sounds good to me."

As one, they turn to Satsuki, who rolls her eyes again, fondly, and accepts the unspoken request. "I'll referee. First to ten points wins. We'll start on three. One, two, three!"

She tosses the ball into the air, and they both jump for it, marking the beginning of a very, very important game.

It's the first time Aomine Daiki plays against Kagami Taiga, and it's years ahead of schedule.

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"Where have you been?" Daiki demands, almost desperately, as soon as the game's over.

The final score is 9-10, Daiki's win, and Shougo doesn't think he's ever seen a closer game between this Daiki and anyone else, not even the other Miracles. He can sort of understand Daiki's complicated expression and Satsuki's watery eyes as a result.

"In America?" Kagami reminds him, a little testily in response to Daiki's tone, but he's clearly brimming with satisfaction at finding such a strong opponent.

The corner of Daiki's mouth tugs down, and his brows furrow, disappointment in every line of his face. "What a waste," he says, and it's almost startling to see the future Daiki in this one, that same darkness and hopelessness. It's miles away - this one is still mostly a puppy, after all - but it doesn't bode well.

"There's way more strong guys over there than in Japan," Kagami defends. He grins, and it's wolfish. "I'm really lucky I found even this many." His eyes rove over the entire group before landing on Daiki decisively.

Almost reluctantly, Daiki smirks back. "Yeah, well, I'm not over there, and I'm the best."

"Bastard, we'll see. I've got a few more days before I leave. I'll crush you before then," Kagami challenges, utterly confident.

That gets him a laugh. "I'll wipe that cocky look off your face anytime you want," Daiki tells him. "Gimme your number."

"Don't boss me around, asshole," Kagami mutters, but he dutifully trades contact info with Daiki and then Satsuki.

Beneath the bluster, it's obvious they're both giddy at the chance to face each other again, to have found a rival in one another, and mentally, Shougo can't help but wonder who the real tsundere is here.

"I've never seen Aomine-kun glow like that," Tetsuya comments from beside him, a small, content smile on his face.

Shougo smiles too. "Yeah, well, you gave him hope." He leans over and props his arm on fluffy, blue hair, ignoring the polite request to get off. "You did good. The kids are getting along, Mother."

Tetsuya's rebuttal is swift and horrifying. "It's all thanks to you introducing the rest of us, Father."

He blanches. "Ugh, never fucking call me that again. Ever. Please."

Tetsuya chuckles.

So fucking gross.

But even Tetsuya's (weird ass) words aren't enough to ruin the light, happy feeling Shougo's reveling in, watching Kagami and Daiki joke around and argue in front of him, an interaction he's sure never happened before high school. Probably not until after Seiren defeated Tōō.

He... did this. Did something good. And okay, it was all planned behind his back by Tetsuya, but it's undoubtedly an effect of Shougo's being here, changing things. This connection would not have been possible without Shougo's direct involvement somewhere down the line, and that more than anything is what's making him grin like an idiot.
It's easy to tell when he's fucked things up, after all. He's got a damn radar for such times. But seeing that's he changing things for the better? He's never sure, and it's a relief to finally have some confirmation.

Seiren's entire team is responsible for their victories over the Miracles, but it's not a stretch to say that the team up of Kagami and Tetsuya was the driving force behind said wins. No offense to the other players, but he doubts they would have gotten as far without them.

So it can be said that Kagami and Tetsuya were the ones to finally drag Daiki out of his despair kicking and screaming and to force him to revert back to his original personality, for the most part.

In that case, having Daiki meet Kagami before he changes in the first place must be something like a solution, yeah?

He damn well hopes so. For Tetsuya's sake, if nothing else.

"Stop bickering, and let's play already," Shougo orders, scooping up the forgotten ball and balancing it against his hip. "I came to here to play basketball, not to watch you two flirt."

Shougo fucking delights in putting that offended, embarrassed look on someone else's face for a change.

"We're not-!" / "Who's flirting?!"

Ryouta grins wickedly next to him, always up for teasing absolutely anyone. "I ship it," he declares, and Daiki's skin darkens further, visibly flustered, whereas Kagami glows as red as his hair.

Satsuki hums. "You know, I've always thought Dai-chan would fit best with someone who can match him in basketball," She muses, giving Kagami a considering once-over. "He's cute, too."

Kagami buries his burning face in his hands with a groan.

"Satsuki, what the hell?!" Daiki yelps, betrayed. "You know I'm only into girls with big breasts! Like Mayumi-chan!"

"Sure, sure," she replies, breezily. "But Kagami-kun has some well-defined pecs, wouldn't you say?"

The boy in question makes a noise like a dying cat.

Daiki squawks, affronted. "That's not the same thing at all! Breasts are soft and curvy. Those are all muscle!" He points dramatically at the pecs in question.

Apparently curious, Tetsuya reaches up and pokes Kagami's chest, eliciting a curse and his hand being slapped away.

"It's actually very soft, Aomine-kun," Tetsuya enlightens him. He gives him a double thumbs up and adds, "I approve."

"Not you too, Tetsu," Daiki despairs. He shakes his head and then runs a hand through his sweat-matted hair, frazzled. "Look, it ain't happening right now, so let's just drop it, okay?"

"...Right now?" Kagami parrots, finally looking at Daiki for the first time since Shougo threw him under the bus.

Daiki chokes, and as she pats his back soothingly, Satsuki offers, "We can do two teams of two and switch out a player each game?"
"I call Haizakicchi!" Ryouta announces, linking their arms.

Shougo smirks, readjusting the ball at his side. "Fine by me."

Kagami chimes in, flopping down on the bench and snagging a bottle of water, "I'll sit this one out."

Tetsuya turns to a grinning Daiki and says, with a small smile of his own, "I'm glad for this chance to play with you, Aomine-kun."

Daiki laughs, holding out a fist. "Me too. Let's crush 'em, Tetsu."

They fist bump, and Shougo sees a weird, overlapping image of an older Tetsuya, supported by an equally older and exhausted Kagami, fist bumping an older Daiki after a win. It's only like half a second, and then the image fades, and Shougo shakes off the insistent buzz and nagging sensation the little moment evokes.

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Afterwards, they're all starving and gross, but food comes first. So they head to the nearest Maji Burger and put together as many tables and chairs as needed to fit all six people and then pile around it, three to each side.

Shougo takes the end seat on one side, and funnily enough, Kagami snags the chair next to him, the very same chair Ryouta had just pulled out to sit in himself.

"Thanks," Kagami grunts, setting his mountain of burgers down and not sparing Ryouta's shocked expression a single glance. Either not noticing or not caring.

Shougo laughs hard enough to tear up, egged on even more when Satsuki steals the seat in front of him with a wink, leaving Ryouta no option to be near Shougo without an obstacle between them.

"So mean," Ryouta whines, but he can't help smiling at Shougo's blatant amusement.

"So clingy," Shougo mocks in the same whiny tone.

Ryouta snorts and then very dramatically and unnecessarily plops down in the chair on Kagami's other side, prompting a small smile from Tetsuya across from him.

"Damn, Kagami, you got a black hole for a stomach?" Daiki asks, eying the boy in question as he nonchalantly plows through so much food. He's directly in front of him, so he's got a good view.

"Shaddup," Kagami probably says. It's a little hard to tell with his mouth full. He then glances over to Tetsuya, who predictably only ordered a vanilla shake, and tosses him a burger.

Tetsuya barely manages to catch it. He opens his mouth to protest, also predictably, but Kagami growls, irritably, "Eat it," and he dutifully closes his mouth and begins to unwrap the burger.

Daiki snickers, though he looks approving, and Shougo catches Satsuki smiling warmly at Kagami. Mother hens, the lot of them.

He feels his own smile forming as he takes in the whole group, his chest strangely full of warmth and fondness and so very light. For once, he almost feels as if his demons don't exist, as if he's just a normal boy with normal friends enjoying his normal life. The illusion shatters when Kagami elbows him accidentally, the truth of his situation hitting him very abruptly, but the happiness and contentment stay, firmly rooted in place, no more fake than his own beating heart.
Did I say a couple of chapters? I meant the very next one. ;) Lol, definitely wasn't Midorima.

I haven't actually watched KNB in a while, so Aomine and Momoi are written solely based on my memory and what I gleaned from their wiki pages. Plus, well, this is Aomine before he becomes a douche canoe. So we get smiles and joking around - and excitement about basketball. Aomine and Momoi will get their own alone time with Shougo, as everyone has, no worries.

About pairings: I blame m_is_for_mochi entirely for that AoKagaKuro segment (though with less Kuro, sorry.) You put the idea in my head, and this is what happens. Haizaki was very happy to tease someone else for once, lol.

Seems like everyone's okay with side pairings.
I've got so many feels about this fic and about you guys, and I just really, really want to make it clear that I'm 1000% writing this for you. For myself, too, but I never would have gotten this far without your constant, unending support, your lovely suggestions, and your wonderful, insightful comments. You're the reason I try my best to keep to an update schedule, and you're the reason I've written over 90k words about this trash boy and his road to redemption.

I appreciate every comment, every bookmark, every kudos, every fan art. I have so many graphs and charts and notes about his fic. I've poured so much of myself into these characters and this story, and I've mixed in as many of your ideas as I could fit, the bulk of which I've got planned for second or third year (in case anyone was worried their idea hasn't been used yet.) This fic is my baby, and I'm very happy to share it with such kind, creative, amazing people.

I just. Have a lot to say. And it's not even chapter 30 yet, wow, but I wanted to say it, and it's my fic. So whatever! Thank you for everything. I'm really excited to keep writing and receiving your feedback.

lol Anyway, I suppose if I want that, I should stop babbling and let you read. ;)

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket or One Piece.

Next Update: May 12, 2017

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**LXIX. July 27, 2012 - Friday**

He manages to beat Shion to the shower this morning, so he's in such a good mood that he only wastes about fifteen minutes soaking in the hot water before he gets out.

"Ugh, you're such an asshole," Shion mutters when Shougo steps out of the bathroom, skin almost red from the heat.

"You probably have some hot water left," Shougo smirks, tossing the damp towel he was drying his hair with at his grumpy sibling.

"Dick." Shion catches it, smacks him with it, and then shuffles inside before firmly shutting the door.

The pain on his arm is completely worth it. There's nothing like a scalding hot shower and pissing off his brother first thing in morning. Both are very beautiful, very necessary things.

When he gets back to his room, his phone is ringing irritably. He scoops it up and sees what was setting it off: a reminder from his calendar that says, 'movie is out today!'

He scrunches his nose in confusion, having absolutely no idea what his phone is trying to tell him (besides the obvious.) Although, it does sort of ring a bell.
The words offer no more information, so he closes the reminder and pulls up his phone's browser, curious enough to waste what little data he has to figure this out.

It doesn't take him long to find out what movie younger Shougo had been so eager to see. It's one of the first results. He remembers now, though. One of his favorite anime has a movie in theaters today, and he'd made sure to mark it in his calendar as soon as the announcement had been made. That was probably months ago.

Man, twelve year old Shougo had been kind of cute.

He'd really enjoyed that movie, too, and he hasn't seen it since. He bites his lip, eyes lingering on the tiny, digital movie poster.

...Well, it's not like he's got anything better to do today, and just how many chances does one get to re-watch movies in an actual theater years later?

Okay, he's convinced himself. Now that he has, he's kind of excited. He's forgotten enough of the movie that this might as well be his first time watching it.

He checks the times and decides to go for the one at eleven. That way, he has plenty of time to stop somewhere and get an early lunch first.

While he's at it, he responds to the barrage of messages on his phone.

**Flashy Bastard:**

7:37 - good morning, Haizakicchi~! ( *^゚^ *)

7:39 - bet ur still asleep lol

7:40 - no worries! its a cute character trait! ( '▽' )b

8:26 - u kno kurokocchi sends me gm texts bk

8:26 - not implyin anything just sayin (▅ε▅)

8:49 - omg nijimuracchi finally replied ✧ ( ^皿^ )✧

8:50 - he basically said "wow so ur a morning person huh" & that was it

8:50 - do u think he was being sarcastic or nah

8:51 - cuz its rly hard 2 tell w him sometimes

9:53 - r u up yet? ( • ◯ • ) ?

9:55 - where is my cute tsundere haizakicchi?

9:56 - woudnt

9:56 - woudnt it be hilarious if u said "idiot!" whilw blushing (／皿ω＼)/

9:57 - but inside ur heart u thought "i like him!!" (／ω＼)

9:57 - like in the cartoons
Me:

9:58 - Blocked

Flashy Bastard:

9:58 - there u r!!
9:58 - pls dont!!
9:59 - ull miss me!!agrams against me (° ♂ ♂ )°°°

Me:

9:59 - new phone who dis

Flashy Bastard:

9:59 - i cant beLIEVE ur using memes against me (■□□)
10:00 - u dont even appreci8 them!!

Me:

10:00 - Ugh.
10:00 - What do you want. I'm busy.

Flashy Bastard:

10:00 - ur love & attention
10:00 - wait! wat r u doin?
10:01 - its summer how r u busy??

Me:

10:01 - Going to the movies.

Flashy Bastard:
Me:
10:02 - I'm going alone.
10:02 - That's NOT an invitation.

Flashy Bastard:
10:02 - wat a coincidence! i am also goin 2 the movies 2day!!
10:03 - we might as well go 2gether!

Me:
10:03 - How did I know you were gonna say that.

Flashy Bastard:
10:03 - silly haizakicchi (◕◡◕✿)
10:03 - u wouldnt hav told me if u didnt want me 2 go!!! (◡‿◡✿)

Me:
10:04 - I changed my mind. I'm staying home.

Flashy Bastard:
10:06 - r we gonna see the 1 that came out 2day??
10:06 - cuz its probably packed
10:06 - im gonna buy us both tics online k

Me:
10:07 - ...Fine
10:07 - I'll pay you back when we meet up.
Flasy Bastard:

10:09 - the only 1 available is at 12:30
10:09 - no need!
10:09 - were friends right??! (❁´◡´❁)
10:12 - bought em! we got a few hours u wanna hang out??

Me:

10:12 - I was planning on eating lunch first anyway.

Flashy Bastard:

10:12 - k! lets meet up at that rlly good bbq place
10:13 - dont tell kurokocchi or kagamicchi but im a lil sick of maji burger! (°' ❗ °)

Shougo snorts, imagining Tetsuya's disappointed not-pout and Kagami's angry/confused 'hah?!' and then tosses his phone on the bed in order to get ready.

He throws on some shorts and shoes, decides it's okay to wear his sleeveless shirt since it's hot as balls out, and runs a hand through his hair in a half-hearted attempt at brushing it. He then grabs his wallet, keys, and phone and heads for the front door as he types a quick message to Ryouta.

Me:

10:16 - I'm heading out now.

Flashy Bastard:

10:16 - k! i might be a little late!
10:17 - it takes a lot of love & care to look this gd haizakicchi

Me:

10:17 - Really? Cause it's hard to tell.

Flashy Bastard:
10:17 - i kno in my heart that u dont mean that

10:18 - & u def think im adorable dont lie to me ■ _■

10:18 - these eyes see all!! (●OpaqueBlackCircle Sphere ●)

**Me:**

10:18 - It's adorable that you think that.

**Flasy Bastard:**

10:19 - wat is w this clapback 2day??

10:19 - i didnt raise u like this

Feeling cheekier than usual, Shougo - of his own volition! - takes a selfie of the smirk tugging at his lips and sends it with the caption:

10:21 - I think I'd remember if you were my mom, man.

He doesn't get a response right away. While waiting, he makes it to the restaurant district. The BBQ place - family run and home-y - is at the far end, sandwiched between an ice cream shop and a ramen stand.

It's close to the entertainment district, too, which is a bonus. They won't have to walk far or rush their meals to make it in time for the movie.

A cheery ding sounds from his pocket, alerting him to the fact that Ryouta has finally deigned to respond.

It's too rude even for someone like him to just stop in the middle of a busy sidewalk to open a text (and he's not going to chance someone bumping into him and making him drop his phone), so he ducks inside the restaurant and asks for a table for two.

The hostess gives him a knowing smile, and he resists the urge to tell her he's not meeting someone for a date. He has a feeling his denial would just make it worse.

That's usually how these things go for him.

She leads him to a booth near the back before returning to the entrance. Two point five seconds later, a waitress appears and introduces herself as Yamada Haru.

He decides to go ahead and order a drink.

She writes it down and then asks, expectantly, "So where's your mother, kid?"

He looks up from the menu in genuine confusion. The hell does his mother have to do with anything?
"You're like thirteen or something, right? Are you here without a parent?" Yamada presses, suspicious.

Shougo blanches, suddenly forcibly reminded that he's actually physically twelve. Ugh. Still, he's not unused to lying through his teeth when caught; he used to sneak into places he was too young for all the time.

He puts on his best haughty expression and in a bratty voice explains, "Mom's in the store across the street. I'm not a kid anymore, and I told her I just wanted to hang out with my friend today, and we didn't need her watching us." He rolls his eyes, like every utterly aggrieved child when their parent is being overprotective, and goes on, "But she wouldn't listen, so she compromised by just hanging around nearby, doing her shopping while keeping an eye on us."

He finishes with a theatrical huff, and Yamada smirks, amused. "She's just looking out for you, kid. All moms are like that." She sort of looks like she wants to ruffle his hair or something, but luckily, workplace regulations prevent her from doing it. "Anyway, I'll go put your order in. I'll drop by again when your friend gets here. If you need me, just wave me down," she tells him.

He nods, and when she walks off, he pulls out his phone and reads his new messages.

**Flashy Bastard:**

10:30 - i ccant believe u

10:30 - giv me a warnign nex time geez

10:31 - a mans heart cna only take so much!

10:33 - i will counter your selfie w a selife of my own!

10:35 - [image received]

10:35 - thats me lookin at u in disapproval 4 ambushin me like that

10:37 - [image received]

10:37 - & this is me smilin softly in understanding bcuz i forgive u,,, we all make mistakes

10:40 - btw im almost there!!!

10:40 - c u soon! (*/^`)

Shougo rolls his eyes again - in real exasperation this time - and closes the messaging app to open Neko Atsume. He has cats to tend to.

Ryouta slides into the booth in front of him a few minutes later, and he grudgingly stops perusing the shop for a better toy in favor of socializing.

"Haizakicchi, you're looking happy to be alive, as always," Ryouta observes, propping his head on his hand with a dopey little smile.

"There's just so much to be grateful for," he agrees, dryly. "Like the guy who bulldozed his way into
Ryouta laughs. "So prickly!" Shougo snorts, and he adds, "I was supposed to go to a photo shoot today, actually, but it got moved to next Friday."

"Yeah? Do you know why?"

"Nope! The text I got from my manager only said that it was moved, not why." He shrugs. "Not that it matters. I mean, because I couldn't go to that, I get to be here with you," he says, and shit, Shougo was not ready for that.

He flushes, flipping Ryouta off when he just keeps looking at him all happily. It's creeping him out. "Ugh, I'm gonna need a few hours before we start making sappy declarations of friendship to each other."

That gets him another bright laugh.

"Speaking of friendship," Ryouta starts, sly, "did you know Kurokocchi and Kagamicchi are spending the day with Aominecchi? Honestly, they hit it off so well that I'm a little jealous."

"That's ridiculous," Shougo immediately retorts. "Also, what's with the new nicknames? What did he do to get one?" He asks.

"Oh? What's this?" Ryouta coos, smugly. "You've never asked why I give nicknames before. Heh, could it be that you're jea~lous?"

Shougo closes his eyes and asks for patience. "I. Am not jealous. Of anybody," he says, slowly, once he realizes that's never worked before. "You don't have to tell me. I don't even care. What the fuck."

"Heh, I don't mind telling you if just admit-"

"Drop it," he cuts in, rolling his eyes. "Why're you jealous of the puppy? He's really not as cool as he thinks he is. I don't understand why you- uh, I mean, why anyone would ever idolize that guy." He curses mentally for that little slip up and hopes Ryouta didn't notice. Or if he did that he won't think much of it.

Ryouta laughs but quickly schools his expression into one of worry. "I haven't gotten Kagamicchi to smile half as many times as Aominecchi has with just a few words! It's just unfair!" He cries. "We met him first! And as the group's cheerleader, it's my job to cheer everyone up! It's just- not right that Aominecchi can do that so easily, even if he is amazing at basketball!"

"Oh," Shougo says, utterly underwhelmed. "So it's not, like... an actual problem."

"How mean!" Ryouta pouts, "It's a serious issue!"

He snorts. "Like hell it is."

His friend opens his mouth to spout more bullshit, but fortunately, Yamada chooses that moment to return.

"Hi, my name is Yamada Haru, and I'll be your waitress this evening. What can I get you to drink? Are you two ready to order?" She asks, brisk and efficient, after setting down Shougo's soda.

They are. She adds the new info to her notepad and then takes their orders to the kitchen, sweeping
away just as quickly as she'd arrived.

It doesn't take long for the food to arrive, and they start grilling right away. Shougo is absolutely fucking starving by this point.

"So you like One Piece, huh?" Ryouta asks, over the sizzling of their steaks. "Enough to go see it on opening day, even."

Shougo keeps his eyes trained on the grill. "Yeah. So what?"

Ryouta waves his utensil defensively. "Not judging! I like it too." He laughs a little, explaining, "I guess I just keep unconsciously making assumptions about you, and you never seem to fit them." At Shougo's Look, he clarifies, "Again, not a bad thing. I like being surprised. Keeps things from getting dull!"

He winks, and Shougo shakes his head. Sometimes, this kid avoids answering things like a fucking politician, and other times, he overshares like it's no big deal at all. He's the surprising one.

He is right about one thing, though. Things are never dull with him around.

LXX. July 27, 2012 - Friday

After printing their tickets and waiting in a long ass line, they finally make it into their designated viewing room.

There are some people awkwardly waiting in a line as other people climb the stairs and look for seats, but Shougo has wasted just about every last bit of his patience already today.

He rudely ignores proper etiquette by pushing past people and plopping his ass in a good seat - both high up and in the middle of the row. Ryouta follows along behind him dutifully, visibly amused even as he smiles apologetically to those with ruffled feathers.

"Not gonna scold me?" Shougo asks, stuffing popcorn in his mouth.

"I think we established earlier that I'm not actually your mom," Ryouta reminds him, taking the chair to his left and putting their drinks in the cup-holders on either side.

"Well, you're both really pretty," Shougo blurts out as he thinks it and then immediately regrets absolutely everything he's ever done in his life to get to this point, up to and including time travel.

Ryouta squeaks, clapping a hand over his face and turning away, but his blush covers his neck all the way up to his ears, making the motion pointless.

Shougo coughs, just as mortified, and then shoves more popcorn in his stupid fucking mouth in an effort to stop anything else from escaping.

Maybe he'll get lucky and choke on it.

"...You can't just- say things like that to me," Ryouta murmurs, barely audible over the pre-preview ads and other conversations around them. "It makes me think- well, you know?" He gestures vaguely with his free hand, but Shougo gets it.

He hasn't thought much about Ryouta's confession beyond being glad that it hadn't ended their friendship, and fuck, that's really fucking shitty and inconsiderate of him. Obviously, Ryouta wouldn't have gotten over him that fast (even if Shougo still can't quite understand why he likes him
in the first place.) It's literally only been like a week.

Suddenly, this friendly outing seems a little... mean. Or unfair.

"Sorry," he says, just as quietly. "I didn't- Just, sorry."

Ryouta takes a deep breath and then removes his hand and gives him a small smile. "It's okay, Haizakicchi! I know my good looks can be quite distracting! I think I can find it in my heart to forgive you for this grave transgression."

"Thanks," he replies, tentative. "Hey, do you-? Should we not do this? I don't want to- to hurt you."
He stumbles over the wording, awkward and out of his element, but this isn't about him.

Ryouta blinks in surprise before his expression goes soft and fond and definitely happy. "Thanks, but I'm a-okay. We're friends, ne? You're the best friend I've ever had, and I'm not gonna avoid you or push you away, not for anything."

He grabs Shougo's hand and intertwines their fingers, giving Shougo - who is staring at him, wide-eyed and breathless - a comforting squeeze that Shougo returns after a moment.

Apparently satisfied, Ryouta turns his attention to the quiz on the screen. Shougo bites his lip, eyes glued to their linked hands resting comfortably between them.

"Me too," he suddenly admits, and he can feel Ryouta's eyes on him. "You- Tetsuya has Aomine, had him before we even met, but you... You're mine." He looks up and meets Ryouta's bright, golden gaze steadily, adding, "And I'm yours. No matter what."

They share wide, sappy ass grins, and though they have to stop occasionally for things like going to the bathroom or getting a refill, they hold hands the entire time.

It's sappy and gross and not anything he'd ever have done at this age or any other without Ryouta's influence - without Ryouta. He finds himself thinking over and over again, in intervals and all at once, that he's damn glad he got a second chance just so he could meet and befriend this kid.

Chapter End Notes

kise bby earned this not-date ok?

haizaki likes one piece 'cause pirates can wreck shit and do whatever they want, and even the good guys are seen as 'bad guys' by pretty much everyone at first. boy can relate. ok it wasn't that deep when i chose it. i just looked up anime movies that came out in 2012, but it's a good enough reason, yeah?

also thank you to Fye for suggesting they go to the movies!

uh also also i changed up the text format a lil. it now says 'me' instead of 'to [contact]' ,,will go back and edit earlier chapters eventually.
LXXI. July 28, 2012 - Saturday

"'ttoo hot," Shougo mumbles, pressing his melting ice pop - still in its wrapper - against his face and quietly praying either for a quick death or a miraculous drop in temperature.

Propped against the open back door in the hopes of possibly being hit by a non-existent breeze, Kagami grunts in affirmative. "My hotel room is air-conditioned," he laments. "Why did I bother leaving it just to hang out with you losers?"

Tetsuya pipes up then, solemn. "Friends suffer together, Kagami-kun." He's sat right in front of the only fan, so he has no fucking room to talk.

Nijimura snorts. "Dunno if I like your definition of friendship." He's right next to Tetsuya, having declared Senpai Privileges, so he gets hit with a full blast every time the thing rotates his way. No one had been ballsy enough to challenge him for the spot.

"It's too hot to cuddle," Ryouta whines. He makes a half-hearted grabby motion toward Shougo from his sprawled out position on the couch but ends up dropping his arm in defeat. "I'm going through Haizakicchi withdrawals."

Shougo groans, not at all inclined to indulge Ryouta's clinginess today. "You're ridiculous."

He was smart enough to wear a headband to keep his hair away from his face, but it only helps so much. He spends a minute contemplating shaving all of it off before deciding he definitely wouldn't look good bald and wiping his sweaty forehead with an irritated huff.

"Man, your grandma is tough," Ryouta is saying, and Shougo realizes he's been blocking out the conversation around him when that statement seems to come out of nowhere.

He moves the ice pop to his neck and tries to stay focused on what they're talking about.

Tetsuya shrugs. "It's not good for her to be outside working during the summer. Yesterday, I spent
twenty minutes arguing with her until she promised to only tend her garden when I'm helping her and only during the morning when it's not so hot." He actually looks a little concerned, and Shougo figures the heat must be really sapping Tetsuya's energy if he's actually projecting his emotions. And speaking so much at one time.

"Then she'll be fine," Nijimura tells him, as ever confident and unbothered. "From what you've told me, it doesn't sound like she's the type to break a promise. Especially not when her grandson is so obviously worried about her."

Tetsuya's surprised by the reassurance, but he smiles soon enough, grateful and relieved. "Thank you, Senpai."

Nijimura smiles back, hair fluttering from the fan as it slowly turns his way. "No problem."

"How sweet!" Ryouta chimes in, immediately drawing exasperated expressions from those two. "I knew you were a captain on the court, but who knew you were also captain of matters of the heart?"

He rests his hand delicately upon his cheek and flutters his lashes. "Won't you also relieve my heavy, heavy heart, Captain?"

"Absolutely not," is Nijimura's swift rebuttal.

Ryouta feigns heartbreak, clutching his chest. "Such merciless rejection! How will I go on? Oh, I know! Haizakicchi-"

"Fuck off," Shougo stops him before he can even get started. "It's too hard to even think right now, much less fight off your advances, you lech."

Summoning energy from the depths of hell he fucking crawled out of, Ryouta sits up and smirks at him, smug as a cat as he purrs, "Oh? It's too hard, huh? I can help with that."

"...I fucking hate you," Shougo growls, body somehow able to grow even hotter as a blush takes over his entire fucking face. "I hate you so much. Go die in a fucking fire, you perverted asshole."

Ryouta laughs, bright and amused. "You're sounding especially tetchy today, Haizakicchi. Hope it's not too hard to come... up with insults." The emphasis on that word and the pause inbetween - it's so fucking stupid. Why is he friends with this guy. "Maybe you'd feel better if you didn't keep everything pent up. You should let it all out."

"Maybe you're right," Shougo says, smiling an unkind smile. "Maybe I'll feel better if I stop holding back my urges. Just really let go. Like, oh I don't know- the urge to kick your ass? It'd probably cheer me right up."

Ryouta laughs nervously, but Nijimura is the one to respond. "Start a fight, and I'll kick both your asses."

"I'd like to see that," Kagami says, cracking open an eye to watch for the possible confrontation.

"No need for that!" Ryouta squeaks, cheeks suspiciously flushed.

Nijimura arches a brow at him in question, and Ryouta glances away with a laugh. Shougo got nothing out of that. Though Nijimura seems to get it if the considering expression on his face is anything to go by.

Kagami stands up and announces, "I'm gettin' another water. Try not to kill each other 'til I get back."
"Grab me an ice pop, please!" Ryouta requests. "Haizakicchi's got me craving one now, even if he's not eating it like a weirdo."

Shougo flips him off, and he huffs a laugh.

"I'd like a water, too, lackey- Ah, I mean, Kagami-kun." Tetsuya cracks a smile when Kagami scoffs at the intentional slip-up.

"Fine," Kagami agrees, resigned. He glances expectantly at the rest of them. "Anything else?"

"A huge ass fan," Shougo suggests. "Don't bother coming back unless you bring one."

Kagami scoffs again and then makes sure to step on Shougo when he gets close enough, eliciting a pained grunt. "Shut up, asshole. How 'bout you get your ass up and go buy one?"

There's an idea.

Shougo perks up and looks over to Ryouta, the only one of them with a job, but when the other boy catches his eye, he grins sheepishly and reveals, "Sorry, I'm broke. Mom puts most of my pay in savings, and I'm down to pocket change after the last one."

He deflates again. Kagami rolls his eyes and continues out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen.

Two seconds later, irritability fucking sky-rocketing after his hopes of a fan were dashed, Shougo gets fed up with his stupid fucking shirt sticking to him like fucking glue, so he sits up, takes it off, and tosses it across the room.

The relief is only mild, especially since he was wearing a thin undershirt in the first place, but it's better than fucking nothing.

When he sat up, the ice pop fell to the floor, and the plastic burst open on one end, thankfully not spilling any of the melted ice. He picks it up and pulls the abused treat out and sticks it in his mouth.

The effect this time is much better, instantly making him feel a bit cooler. The fact that it's cherry, his favorite flavor, is just icing on the cake.

He startles when some of it drips on his chest, the frigid, cold ice and the muggy heat of the day so different it's shocking. Without thinking much of it, he scoops up the stray cherry-flavored drop on a finger and wipes it on his shorts.

Someone makes a noise of protest.

He looks up and notices two pairs of eyes on him, shamelessly ogling - of all things! What the fuck! - and pinpoints the source of the noise.

Ryouta, looking miffed, demands, "All that set up, and you didn't even lick your fingers seductively?"

"What the actual fuck?" Shougo blurts out, uncertain whether he should be pissed, embarrassed, or defiant. "This ain't one of your shitty pornos, bastard."

"This is exactly like one of my pornos, Haizakicchi!" Ryouta counters, frowning. "You even did a strip tease and everything."

Shougo literally cannot process this moron's stupidity. If there were a hierarchy for such things,
surely Ryouta would be King Dumbass, ruler of the kingdom of perverts and pretty but tragically stupid people. It would destroy itself with its own dumbass-ery and foolishness, and everyone the world over would work to forget its existence but be unable to completely erase the awful atrocity that once was.

...Even his thoughts are being infected by it.

"I didn't fucking do a strip tease, oh my fucking god!" Shougo practically shouts back. "I took my shirt off 'cause it's hot, and I was annoyed, and I took it off like a normal fucking person. What is wrong with you?!

Ryouta covers his face and groans, "It's the heat! I can't think straight!"

"Obviously," Nijimura says, and Shougo does not appreciate his palpable amusement - nor the pun.

"You being half-naked does not help, Haizakicchi!" Ryouta continues, ignoring him. "And you're covered in sweat and eating an ice pop like a porn star!"

"I'm just sitting here! You don't have to look at me, you fucking dork!"

"The dork is right," Nijimura cuts in again, smirking, and Ryouta squawks. "Half the people in this room like seeing you without a shirt, so either put it back on or stop bitching."

Letting out a wordless growl, Shougo pounces on Nijimura, intent on beating that smug ass face of his in, but Nijimura is ready for him and unfortunately stronger.

Not a minute later, Shougo is sulking as he puts his shirt back on, cheek bruised and ego battered. He's sick of being twelve, damn it.

"Damn, you made me move, and now I'm even more hot," Nijimura complains, tugging on the collar of his shirt.

"So sorry," he mutters but not quite loud enough to draw ire, insincere. He flops down on the couch beside Ryouta, tucking himself in the corner.

Almost immediately, Ryouta captures his hand. He intertwines their fingers with a little smile. "You okay?"

"No thanks to you," Shougo retorts without heat. (Ha, he's making stupid puns in his head now.)

Kagami comes back then and tosses the ice pop at Ryouta. It hits him in the face. Shougo laughs, and Ryouta pouts at an unapologetic Kagami.

"Sorry I took so long," he says, reclaiming his spot against the doorway. "Got a call from my mom. She's leaving the airport now."

"She coming to get you?" Shougo asks, around a mouthful of mushy, flavored ice.

"Nah, she's gonna take a nap and sleep off the jet lag. She told me she'd see me when I got back. I miss her, but she's tired, so," he shrugs.

"I wonder what the mother of a mother hen is like," Tetsuya muses, scaring the shit out of them.

Ryouta accidentally swallows a chunk of ice and spends a few moments coughing as Shougo awkwardly pats his back.
"I thought I told you to stop doing that, you little shit," Nijimura accuses, driving his knuckles into Tetsuya's head mercilessly.

"Ow," Tetsuya says, half-heartedly trying to stop Nijimura from drilling a hole in his skull. "It's not my fault everyone forgot I was here," he points out, stoically.

"...Fair enough," Nijimura allows, releasing him. "That's why I said you should wear a bell."

"That would only add to the stories about me, Senpai. Only this time, people will fear there's a ghost car haunting them. It will be even more troublesome for me," he explains, sounding quite reasonable for a person whose existence inspires ghost stories.

"That would be hilarious," Ryouta says, gleeful. "You should wear one the next time you hang out with Aominecchi!"

Tetsuya smiles a scary smile, but before he can comment, Shougo asks, suspicious, "Were you actually here the whole time Kagami was gone?"

Because he couldn't have been. There's no way he wouldn't have jumped at the chance to fuck with Shougo considering the embarrassing shit that went down, but the only ones to tease him were the former delinquent and the pretty boy.

"I wasn't," Tetsuya admits easily. "The three of you were having a Moment, so none of you heard me when I said I was going to check on Kagami-kun."

"...That sounded like 'moment' with a capital letter, how the hell?" Shougo mutters, bewildered.

"You really think we were having a Moment, Kurokocchi?" Ryouta asks, starry eyed.

"You did it too. What the fuck." Then the actual meaning of the word registers, and he says, vehemently, "We didn't have a fucking Moment. I was being unfairly accosted by two of my so-called friends, and you bailed because you're a *dick*.

Fuck. He did it too. How the hell?

"I wasn't even in the same room, but even I know you guys were having a Moment. You have Moments every day. You can't *stop* having Moments," Kagami adds, totally unheeded and unhelpfully.

"You shut up. You're so fucking wrong it's not even funny." Shougo scowls at him. "And all of you, stop fucking capitalizing words like that. You have to be breaking some kind of universal rule or something, and I don't wanna be a part of it."

Ryouta laughs. "Classic Tsundere move, denying everything and trying to distance yourself from your loved ones."

"Don't fucking make me-!" Shougo threatens, or tries to.

The doorbell chimes, signalling new arrivals and interrupting him. Shougo feels all his irritation drain away at the sight of the pink-haired goddess that is his new best friend.

"Momoi, thank fuck," Shougo says, shoving Ryouta bodily to the side to make room for her. "You're the only I like. Please save me from these fuckers. They're all awful."

She giggles, taking the offered seat with a nod of thanks. "Only if you'll offer up Kagamin to Dai-
He's been insufferable since he found a worthy opponent." She flips her ponytail over her shoulder, rolling her eyes. "He's good, and I'm glad Dai-chan's got a rival, but there's a limit to how many times I can field the question, 'Do you think I can kidnap Kagami to keep him here?' without wanting to snap."

Shougo can't help but laugh, even though he knows Daiki is semi-serious about the kidnapping thing. He's already asked Kagami like a hundred times why he can't just live here rather than America. It's sort of cute? And sad at the same time. Kind of like when your puppy becomes friends with another dog at a park and then gets upset when the owners have to separate them to go home.

...He's making himself blanch at his own metaphors.

"Satsuki, what the hell?!" Daiki squawks, flushing. "We haven't even been here a minute, and you've already blabbed on me!"

She smiles sweetly in a way that also promises murder. He can see why she likes Tetsuya so much. "Oh, was your pining for Kagamin a secret, Dai-chan? I'm sorry. Maybe write it in your diary next time rather than spend two hours of my life outlining your plot to get your parents to adopt him."

"I don't have a diary!" He denies, voice an octave higher than it should be.

"That's the part you focus on?" Nijimura asks, smirking as his underling visibly flounders. Nice to know he doesn't just enjoy fucking with Shougo. Apparently his sadism extends to everyone under him.

"Aomine-kun, kidnapping is a crime," Tetsuya tells him, and it might sound earnest were it anyone else.

Daiki slaps a hand over his face. "I know that, Tetsu."

"You would definitely get caught, and you don't have what it takes to survive prison," Tetsuya goes on, for sure bullshitting now. "However, if I were to assist you-"

"No one's kidnapping me, period!" Kagami interjects, red as his hair. "Why are we discussing this?!"

Daiki points an accusing finger at Satsuki. "Because Satsuki doesn't know the meaning of 'bros before hoes!'"

"I'm not your bro," she snipes back, grimacing.

"Who the hell is the hoe?" Kagami asks at the same time, fuzzy brows furrowed.

There's an awkward silence for a beat, and then it's broken when Ryouta bursts into laughter, apparently unable to contain it anymore. Shougo joins in, finding Ryouta's joy to be infectious as always, and then it spreads around until everyone is laughing.

This... could probably be called a Moment.

Through his tear-filled eyes, he tries his best to memorize everyone's faces when they're at their most joyful, giggling and crying from happiness. They're all young and unburdened and worlds away from their other selves, and Shougo is again abruptly glad and grateful he got the chance to be here and witness this. To make this happen.

He doesn't think he'll ever get used to things in his life being so good. He doesn't really want to, either.
Eventually, the laughter dies out, save for the occasional chuckle.

During the giggle-fest, Daiki collapsed next to Tetsuya, and it's there he lays now, spread out on the floor, catching his breath.

" Fucking... Satsuki... Can't... believe," he gasps out, before giving up for a bit. "Can't believe you said you weren't my bro!" He finally manages to say. "We're bros for life!"

She snorts. "If anything, we're childhood friends. Don't give me such a crass name!"

"Fuck, am I the hoe?" Kagami suddenly questions, disbelieving, and that sets off another bout of laughter, fucking hell.

"Sh- shut the fuck up, Kagami!" Shougo orders, clutching his stomach, which now hurts from laughing too much. "I can't- It hurts, fucking stop it."

"He- he sounded so- so bewildered," Ryouta crows, wiping his tear-streaked face ineffectually. "'Am I the hoe?' He mimics, unnecessarily high-pitched and squeaky, laughing again.

Kagami has had his face in his hands since the beginning, so his words are muffled slightly when he groans, "Fuck off. I can't fucking wait to ditch you assholes for Tatsuya."

"Don't remind me," Daiki says, in a similar tone, throwing an arm over his eyes.

Satsuki makes an irritated noise in the back of her throat. "Stop sulking, you big baby, and just enjoy the time you have with him!" She advises, extremely fed up. "Why don't you guys go play basketball right now?"

"It's too hot," Kagami protests, dropping his hands to his lap.

Daiki, though, sits up and stares at him excitedly. "Who cares?! You're leaving in eight days! You think you can actually beat me before you leave?" His tone grows taunting, and he smirks as he says, "Or what, were you planning to put it off because you know you can't? Gonna escape to America with your tail between your legs?"

That definitely sparks something within Kagami because he glares back, his own smirk surfacing as he scoffs. "Like I actually need eight days to beat you. I'll crush you in half that."

"You can try," Daiki retorts, but the genuine smile on his face ruins any effect it might have had. "C'mon, let's go! Me and Satsuki passed a court on the way here."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Ryouta chimes in, hopping to his feet. "If you guys're playing, then I wanna play too."

Tetsuya stands, adding, "With Nijimura-senpai here, we have enough for two teams."

"So you're just volunteering me, huh?" He's no longer sitting, though, so he was obviously about to do so himself. "Guess I'll go. I am interested in seeing how this turns out."

Shougo rolls his eyes. "Don't pretend like you're not as much of a basketball nut as these freaks."

"Yeah? That goes double for you then, tsundere."

"I call whatever team this fucker isn't on," Shougo announces, glaring.

Ryouta says, "Ooh! Then I wanna be on whatever team is against Aominecchi!"
"That's mine," Kagami tells him, walking over to their little circle.

"Then I want Captain and Tetsu!" Daiki says, grinning.

"What am I, the leftover?" Shougo grouches, allowing Ryouta to hug him for like half a second before the heat builds up, and he shoves him off.

Satsuki, having pulled a clipboard and pen from who-knows-fucking-where, is furiously writing shit down on it. "I'll referee," she informs them with a pretty smile.

She gets six smiles of varying intensity in return, and with that, they set off from Ryouta's house for the nearest public court.

The only hiccup is when they realize that none of them had brought any basketballs, and Ryouta has to run back inside and grab his.

...And then Satsuki reminds them to bring towels and waters, prompting a second return trip.

The important part is that they eventually make it there and spend the afternoon playing the sport they all love.

All in all, it's a damn good day.

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OMAKE

1. KagaKuro (suggested by: ima_person) - takes place between chapters 18 & 19/the sleepover

He wakes with Kuroko wrapped around him and their blankets piled half atop their legs and the other half spilling onto the floor.

Even without them, it wouldn't be so bad, but Kuroko's entire body is fucking freezing cold. Which. How? Everywhere they're touching feels like a lethal case of frostbite, and despite himself, Taiga's a little concerned.

He runs hot, always has, but he's never heard of the opposite being true.

With more effort than he'd like, he manages to get the covers back over both of them, and then he throws an arm over Kuroko's waist and pulls the boy to his chest in the hopes of warming him up.

He falls asleep that way, and though he's not particularly worried about Kuroko giving him shit for it - guy can be scary, but Taiga's not afraid of anybody - he finds out pretty quickly that the whole lot of them are cuddly fucks.

One look at Haizaki and Kise curled up together on the floor, and he resigns himself to these weirdos.

For his part, Kuroko just blinks at him before politely requesting that Taiga release him. He does, and when he sees Kuroko's untamable bedhead for the first time, he's genuinely surprised he doesn't wake the others up with how hard he laughs.

"It's not nice to laugh at people, Kagami-kun," Kuroko rebukes him.
He snorts. "Yeah, well, I'm not exactly nice."

Kuroko actually smiles a bit at that, almost unnoticeable were they not sitting so close together. "It's not nice to lie either, Kagami-kun."

Kagami gives him the look that deserves, but it hasn't worked on a single one of these morons even once, and it doesn't now. It's rare he meets people who aren't intimidated by him, especially in this country where everyone is so short and polite compared to Americans, and he's still not sure whether it's a good or a bad thing.

A bad thing, definitely, because Kuroko shit talks him, and Kise tries his best to use him as a human ladder.

A good thing because he's got friends to spend time with now, friends to play basketball with, and he's actually excited to tell Tatsuya all about them. He knows his brother was worried he'd be lonely here.

"You're thinking about your brother again," Kuroko observes in that monotone Taiga's still not used to.

He stretches, yawning as he asks, "How'd you know?"

Though Kuroko's expression doesn't change one bit, Taiga still suddenly gets the feeling he's being teased as Kuroko tells him, "Kagami-kun gets a very dope-y, affectionate look on his face whenever he's talking about Himuro-kun."

He hunches his shoulders, embarrassed - especially because he's probably right. "I do not!" He jabs a finger at Kuroko and adds, "And stop talking about me in third person! It's not cute!"

"That hurts, Kagami-kun."

"And don't try to emulate that guy either! It's even creepier when you do it!"

"Rude."

Taiga slaps a hand over his face, utterly done. He stands up abruptly and announces, "I am going to make breakfast. You can wake Clingy and Clueless."

"Yes, yes, mom."

"I'm not your mom, damn it."


Nijimura:

7:45 - why is your friend texting me

7:45 - did you give him MY number

Me:

7:56 - I didn't even give him MY number. He's a crafty little shit.

Nijimura:
7:59 - the fact that you knew who I was talking about right away is amusing

Me:

8:00 - Fuck off

Nijimura:

8:01 - by the way he's sent me 10 pics of you in the last five minutes

8:01 - and then he sent me a winky face

8:01 - not that I don't enjoy your ugly mug, but why

Me:

8:02 - Ugh i dont fucking know ill talk to him

8:02 - Also fuck you

-o-

Me:

8:02 - Idc why you're doing it but stop

Flashy Bastard

8:03 - i refuse 2 be treated like this

8:03 - ill never be ashamed of my passions haizakicchi!

Me:

8:03 - I'm ashamed of them for you.

Flashy Bastard:

8:04 - after running ur words thru my haizakicchi translator i can tell ur v supportive & want me 2 keep doing it

Me:

8:04 - What the fuck

Flashy Bastard:

8:04 - a classic characteristic of a tsundere is never saying wat they mean!

8:05 - so i translate ur mean words & reveal the hidden meanings!

Me:

8:05 - I repeat: what the fuck

8:05 - I'm not a fucking tsundere you dick
8:05 - ALSO QUIT SENDING PICS OF ME TO NIJIMURA ASSHOLE

Flashy Bastard:

8:06 - u dont have 2 shout

Chapter End Notes

End Notes: sorry, i promised nijihai and then sort of realized that kagami was leaving soon. can't leave my boy out! and ofc there's our new additions to The Squad. keep forgetting they've been added tbh.

uhh anyway, couple things:

- if anyone has suggestions for stuff involving kagami before he leaves, let me know! i'll try to use if it can.

- what would momoi's nickname for haizaki be? was thinking hai-chan (cuz dai-chan) or maybe hai-kun? [feel like u told me already mochi friend but i don't remember what chapter that comment was on OTL]

- she glomped kuroko at the door when he went to answer it; haizaki didn't see that part

- i'm only adding omake/extras if i finish a chapter before the deadline. i did this time, so there you go ;)
LXXII. July 30, 2012 - Monday

Shougo has never really believed in luck. Especially not bad luck. Sure, he's had some shitty things happen to him and those he cares about, but he can always pinpoint the causes.

That deadbeat fucking father of his abandoning their family - and more importantly, his mother? Easy. It's because the man is and always will be a piece of shit. He's the fucking scum of the earth. Nothing his mother did had brought that on, and Shougo's not inclined to go blaming intangible concepts when the real culprit deserves all of his scorn and much more.

Shougo being kicked off the team at Teiko and subsequently dropped like a live grenade - as if he'd never meant absolutely anything to his teammates? Though he's still bitter and the memory doesn't sting any less, more than anyone, Shougo knows just how much of an asshole he is - was. He had to be dragged to matches and practices kicking and screaming, he kept getting into fights, he hadn't yet acknowledged his love of basketball then so was condescending and derisive of those who openly proclaimed theirs, and he repeatedly disrespected Seijuro despite his status as captain.

Those are just a few reasons the Miracles (excluding Tetsuya) might have had for their utter indifference to Shougo's abrupt departure, and honestly, he doesn't blame them for it. It was only logical.

(...Logic has little to do with emotions, though, which is why he gets an ugly, painful twisting in his chest any time he thinks back to those days.)

Bad luck doesn't factor in at all there, either.

His mother overworking herself to the point of collapse? If Shougo had been a better fucking son- If he'd ever thought about anyone but himself- Maybe if he'd paid even a little more attention-

He'd kept the awful things he said and did from his family, protected them from the darkness festering in his heart, but it hadn't been enough. His mom isn't stupid. She saw him hurting and got stressed and worried, especially when he came home more beat up and withdrawn every day, and she began taking on more and more work. Maybe to keep herself busy. Maybe to make their lives
easier. Maybe it was even to escape the suffocating tension building in their home. She never told him, and he never asked, too guilty and ashamed to broach the topic and not in any hurry to add more flame to the fire.

Then, she collapsed.

When she woke up in that hospital bed and looked at him, and he really looked at her for the first time in forever, she said, not unkindly, "There's my little boy. I missed you."

And he knew.

He fucking knew.

Bad luck could not possibly account for the damage Shougo has caused to everyone around him. No. That would be too easy. Too much like shifting blame and shirking responsibility. No luck of any kind had ever fucked him over as much as he's fucked himself. He realizes that, and on this at least, the tumultuous, overwhelming tidal wave of emotion agrees with him. No one could possibly hate Shougo more than he hates himself.

And the good things that happen to him? Not much of that before the time travel, honestly, and as for after he got here... Well, he chalks that up to the strange willingness of his friends to befriend an asshole like him and his family for being awesome like always.

With all that's happened recently, Shougo can (likely) safely conclude that everyone around him would be better off without him. Good things are only happening now because Shougo is no longer actively fighting just about everything - people, bonds, himself, his love of basketball and his need for friends.

Maybe if he never existed, things would be even better. Probably not for the Miracles - he hardly influenced them after all - but his mom and brother would definitely have an easier time of things without a ticking time bomb of a family member. Surely, surely the lack of stress alone would make a substantial difference. A good one.

He's smart enough not to mention these thoughts to anyone, of course, knowing and only sort of understanding the distraught, horrified, and/or pissed reactions he would get in response. But that doesn't stop him from wondering.

He can't help wondering, too, whether he's actually a trouble magnet or something, and that leads him back to his belief in luck. With the situation he's in now, despite everything he spent precious moments going over in his shock, Shougo is seriously starting to consider the fact that he might actually have bad luck.

Because what else do you call this shitty timing?

Since almost day one back in the past, Shougo has been surrounded by people - people who, he's damn sure, would have his back in any sort of altercation.

Nijimura is stronger than him and well versed in fighting. Ryouta has probably fucking cheated and copied some martial arts shit or something. Tetsuya could and would gut a bitch, and Kagami is on the about same skill level as Shougo. Daiki is fast and strong even off the court, and Shougo knows for a fact Satsuki's studied some vicious ass fighting style she refuses to name.

He'd feel comfortable - cocky, even - if any one of them happened to be with him when he was ambushed in some vacant lot on his trek back home.
Fact is, however, Shougo had decided to venture out into the city by himself to sell some of his old games.

He's supposed to meet up with Satsuki and Tetsuya later to 'watch a movie' at Tetsuya's house. In actuality, it will be the first meeting of the Only Sane People - or O.S.P. - which is essentially just a griping session between the three of them about everyone else and the dumb shit they do. (Honestly, Shougo's not sure terrifying, will-tell-you-politely-to-go-fuck-yourself-and-then-give-a-passionate-speech-about-friendship Tetsuya actually counts as sane, but he wasn't going to win that argument.)

That's later, though. Now, he's alone, technically, if you don't count the fifteen guys with makeshift weapons like poles and bats and brass knuckles surrounding him. Which he doesn't. 'Cause, you know, they're clearly not allies.

"...Why," he demands, gruffly, easily picking out the leader of these thugs by his smarmy ass expression and the way the men all look to him for direction.

"Boss ain't too pleased you beat up some of his men, kid," the guy tells him, smiling in a way that is just- wrong.

Shougo's eyes flicker over the assembled men, but he doesn't recognize any of them or the man in charge. These guys know him, though, which is alarming. Tense, wary, he nonetheless jokes, "Only some?"

A few of the thugs give him nasty looks for that, but the man just chuckles. Even that is utterly wrong and unnatural. He doesn't know why, but it's fucking creepy.

"Lackeys like these are everywhere," the guy tells him, waving a hand at said men dismissively. None of them even seem to care they were just so casually labeled as disposable. "But Toshi was one of our best, and he had a very important job your little spat interrupted. He wasn't able to close the deal, and now our close benefactors are questioning our strength and usefulness." He smiles wider and admits, "It's fucking annoying. Boss is too busy cracking down on them to worry about the fucker who caused this whole mess, so that leaves little, old me. And these guys."

Shougo tenses even more somehow and mentally fucking screams. This Toshi asshole again? Why does he not remember any of this happening the first time around? Has he changed things so much that he's attracted the attention of some fucking upstart gang?

And they have to be new because the big timers all have identifiable markers like colored bandanas tied around their arms or proudly displayed tattoos. The old man at Shougo's favorite shithole of an arcade/diner had luckily explained it all to him, and Shougo had figured even back then that Yamada was part of at least one of them. No regular civilian would know such things. Hell, the police don't even know, or else money is changing hands to keep them quiet about it.

Ten years in the past or not, Shougo would have recognized them. As that asshole said, these guys could be any random thug on the street except for the fact that they're clearly working for someone. So they must be relatively new. Perhaps a gang that was crushed by or absorbed into one of the big groups at some point in the future.

That thought does nothing to help settle his nerves because whether or not they 'disappear' in the future, right now they're fine and dandy - and pissed at Shougo.

"Suppose I can't just apologize?" Shougo asks, stalling, trying to think of a way out of this. But he's surrounded, and these fucks have longer reach than him with those weapons. If he tries to run, they'll just take a swing, likely for his legs, and then he'll be screwed.
The guy chuckles again, and when Shougo turns his attention on him, he suddenly realizes just why this guy is unnerving him.

He's wearing Ryouta's grin and laughs just as cheerfully, but it's wrong, twisted. Ryouta has never looked so nonchalantly bloodthirsty, so callously amused. Ryouta's grin has never looked so out of place on his own face, even when he faked it.

"You can, but it won't help you." He nods, and the guys charge forward.

Shougo curses out loud, ducks under a bat, shoots up again at an angle and headbutts the unprotected underside of someone's chin. He whirls around and grabs the dented pipe aiming for his back and kicks the fucker into another one.

New weapon in hand, Shougo turns it against the others, taking potshots wherever he can, kneeing groins and aiming for kidneys, yanking hair and even biting when an arm gets too close to his face.

Eventually, it comes down to four of them. Shougo snarls like a wild animal, vicious in the way that animals get when cornered and wounded, and the last three are smart to be wary of him.

"...Jirou, Renji, let's go," their leader commands, smarmy grin still firmly in place, but his eyes are narrowed and considering.

"But Yujin-sama!" Renji or Jirou protests, watching Shougo like one would a rabid dog.

"We can take him. He's severely weakened and on his last legs," the other one points out, unperturbed even as Shougo growls again.

Yujin says, "I simply wanted to cause a little trouble for the brat that set us back a few weeks. We've done that. You gave me an entertaining show, so I'll let you go this time." He addresses that last part to Shougo, who frowns at him, bewildered. "Stop pickin' fights, though. Ain't like this city needs more delinquents. Makes the actual criminals look bad."

"...Fine," Shougo agrees, despite his misgivings. Anything to get him out of fighting the rest of them. He really is running on fumes here.

Yujin smiles at him and then ambles away. His men reluctantly follow after him, shooting dark looks at Shougo until they turn a corner and lose sight of him.

Once Shougo can no longer hear or see them, he slumps, giving himself a moment to rest. His heart is still thundering away in his chest, and his body aches and throbs all over, especially on his thigh (where some fucker kicked him) and arms (which bore the brunt of the attacks when he couldn't dodge them.)

Just a moment, though. These fucks could wake at any time, and Shougo plans to well out of the area by then.

He manages to make it back to a more populated area, content in the knowledge that for once his image as a delinquent will keep anyone from bothering him, before carefully leaning against a wall and pulling out his phone.

He thought about it as he hobbled along, and going straight home would be a bad idea. His family wouldn't freak, but he can't stand that pained grimace they give him when he comes home roughed up. In that vein, Ryouta would be just as bad, only more clingy and tearful, and Tetsuya would...
probably simultaneously judge him and radiate concern, which he really doesn't need.

Nijimura is a no because he's an asshole, and honestly, Shougo doesn't want to deal with whatever his reaction would be. Scolding or teasing or pampering are all equally bad. And somehow, he can imagine his captain doing all three. Which. Just no.

He doesn't know Daiki well enough (yet) to ask for help, and Satsuki seems the type to be absolutely terrifying in her mother-henning. He doesn't want to bring that on himself.

That just leaves...

"Hey, Kagami, I need your help."

**LXXIII. July 30, 2012 - Monday**

He hisses, and Kagami rolls his eyes. "Stop whining. It's a shallow cut," he says, annoyance not even close to covering his concern.

"Yeah, well, that shit fuckin' hurts," Shougo counters, just to be contrary.

When he got here (here being Kagami's hotel room), he was ordered to strip down to his boxers so Kagami could effectively assess his injuries and treat some of the minor ones, and he'd been fucking horrified when a small voice had urged him to make some joke about Kagami wanting to see him with his clothes off.

He shivers. Ryouta's humor is spreading like a fucking disease.

"Tough shit," Kagami says - but nonetheless, he's more gentle when cleaning out the next cut.

Luckily, no one had had a knife in that fight, but several of the pipes had had sharp edges where they'd been dented. And they nicked Shougo a few times, even tearing a hole in his jeans and cutting a sharp line above his left eye. (He'd barely flung himself back in time. He's damn lucky he got a little cut and not beamed in the head.)

"So?" Kagami prompts, moving to his other arm.

"So what?"

That gets him a Look. "So what happened?"

Shougo shrugs. "Apparently some guy I beat up a while ago was important, and his damn shitty gang has been hounding me ever since. Fucking surrounded me in a back lot behind some buildings on the way home."

"...That's not good, Haizaki," Kagami tells him, frowning.

"I think... I'm okay now. The asshole in charge of the dudes today called 'em off and said he'd gotten what he wanted. Guess he just wanted rough me up a bit. Said I was entertaining," he explains, masking his own suspicion that things were hardly going to be that easy.

Kagami doesn't exactly relax as he'd been hoping, but he does accept the answer. "Okay. Just be careful."

"That's the plan," Shougo agrees, and he means it. He's been avoiding fights lately, including all the out of the way spots fuckers might get the drop on him. But he'd been lost in thought after leaving the store, and his feet had automatically taken him through that winding path. By the time he'd
realized, it was already too late.

"You gonna tell the others?" Kagami asks, standing up and stretching.

Shougo shakes his head. "I don't want to them to worry. They're better off not knowing." He gets up too, mindful of his battered body, and carefully slips on the clothes Kagami lent him. It would defeat the purpose of coming here if he were to head home in his dirty clothes, which had clear signs of his fight.

"Hey," Kagami says, and Shougo turns to look at him, instantly wary of the too serious expression on the other boy's face. "You... Why do you have such a different skill level when you're playing against me alone versus when any of the others are around?" And Shougo fucking freezes, breath catching in his throat, completely fucking blindsided by the weighted question. "It's been bugging me. No one else even seems to notice, or maybe they just don't want to say anything. But the sheer difference between the two playing styles..." Kagami pins him with sharp eyes. "It's like you're hiding it."

He was careless.

Fuck. Fuck.

He'd just wanted to actually test himself against someone, someone good, and he hadn't fucking thought it through. God, he'd even planned to introduce Kagami and Tetsuya beforehand, and not even for a moment did it occur to him that that might come back to bite him in the ass.

Fuck.

And shit, but this isn't the only time, is it? He's pretty sure Nijimura didn't see anything that first day, but what about Ryouta? Isn't that how they fucking met? Ryouta caught sight of Shougo playing without holding back, and he'd been excited by what he'd witnessed.

Ryouta hasn't brought it up, but there's no doubt he's noticed. The kid's best skill is observation, even if his cheerfulness and dumb jokes make it hard to remember.

Shougo hasn't slipped in front of Tetsuya or Daiki and Satsuki, thankfully, but that's hardly a record to be proud of.

Ugh. Kagami's clearly waiting for an answer, and Shougo... doesn't want to lie. When has lying ever helped him, really? Even the half-truth he told Nijimura would be better, but... Well, it's Kagami, you know? Heart of gold, world's worst mother hen, conveniently going to leave the country in a few days Kagami.

Shougo hasn't much thought about revealing his biggest secret to anyone, but it's mostly out of selfishness. Besides the fact that people might not believe him, he's afraid of what his friends might think of him should they learn about all the awful shit he's done.

Because if asked, he'll spill. Already the shame and guilt are eating at him, reminding him that he has no right to take and take and take in these friendships without giving anything back.

Shougo has never fully opened himself up to anyone, though, and the thought fills him with a bone-chilling terror. Leaving himself so exposed and vulnerable, a ready target for jeers and criticism and well-deserved contempt - it's much more frightening than any incident like today (where all pain is merely physical and sure to heal) could ever hope to be.

Still. There's a part of him - a large part - insisting that it's fine, it's Kagami, just do it.
So. So he takes a deep breath, exhales slowly, and then manages a small, brittle smile as he says, "You probably won't believe me, but I've got memories of the next ten years in here." He taps his head and then drops his arm and waits for the inevitable denial, eyes locked onto a spot on the wall.

There's an agonizing silence following his declaration, and he spares a thought to feel guilty for treating Ryouta to one last week if this what he felt like before his own anxiety and fear take over again.

"That's fucking crazy," Kagami finally says, causing Shougo to flinch, "and what's even more fucking crazy is that I believe you." Shougo's gaze shoots over to him, wide-eyed, and Kagami's sincere, bewildered crimson eyes meet his squarely. "You're more freaked out than I've ever seen you, and it's not because you're joking. You're legitimately worried, and that has to be because it's the truth." He rubs the back of his neck, a little unsure. "At least, that's what I think."

...Just like Nijimura. Shougo laughs, ironically a little disbelieving, and mutters, "Am I that easy to read?"

"Right now? Yeah," Kagami confirms.

Shougo lets out a relieved breath, suddenly immensely grateful for his friends for the thousandth time. "Thank you, Kagami."

Kagami smiles, but he grows serious again, asking, "So ten years, huh?"

He nods, understanding the implication. "I... only played basketball until my first year of high school, but even then, I was pretty good. Better than when I was in middle school anyway." Ignoring the violent, hateful parts of his playing style, he was still an above average player. He didn't need to 'steal' moves to use them, after all. He was just a dick.

"No one else knows," Kagami surmises. "That's why you hide your skills."

"No one but you," Shougo agrees and then adds, "I told Nijimura I had dreams rather than actual memories, though."

Kagami looks like he wants an explanation for that, but he doesn't press. "Alright."

Shougo blinks at him. "You're not gonna ask about your future? Or mine? Or anything?"

The other boy shrugs. "I don't really care. That Kagami isn't me, and your future is none of my business." Shougo gapes, flabbergasted by such simple reasoning. If this situation were reversed, he'd be fucking dying of curiosity. Kagami pauses and says, "Oh, there is one thing I want to know."

Mollified, Shougo prompts, "Yeah? What is it?"

Kagami grins, baring his teeth, and asks, "Do I face a lot of strong opponents in the future?"

Shougo rolls his eyes, fully relaxing for the first time since Kagami started this whole thing. Of course the basketball nut would ask about that. Shougo is even a little pleased Kagami automatically assumed they knew each other in the future.

"Yes. Ridiculously strong opponents," Shougo tells him, smiling for real this time. "Basketball freak."

Kagami whoops, satisfied, but remembers to retort, "Old man" in response.
Shougo sputters, "I'm technically younger than you!"

"Technically, you're an old man."

"I'll kill you!"

"Careful, you might break a hip."

"I was twenty-fucking-two, not eighty, you asshole!"

Chapter End Notes

Haizaki revealing the truth to Kagami was entirely colbulb's idea, and I fell in love with it the moment it was suggested to me. Thank you so much for the awesome idea! Hope I did it justice. Also, SakuraLuck suggested Haizaki and Kagami bonding, so I kind of squished your ideas together lol.

Thanks to everyone for help with the nickname and for your suggestions! I'll try to include as many as I can in future chapters.

Things I keep forgetting to say:

- as of chapter 28, we're officially in our second story arc [the lines between them are kind of nebulous, but they're there]

- does anyone have headcanons for shion? i'm kind of curious

- if i said i'd use your suggestion but it hasn't happened yet, then don't worry! i've probably planned to use it during their second or third year. it might take a while, but it'll be used.
Sorry! My schedule is unpredictable right now, so writing is a little difficult. The stress of yet another deadline isn't exactly helpful, either, no matter how much I love this fic. But uh, anyway, here a few things that are pretty important:

- New policy is that if I miss a deadline, then the update moves to the following Friday. A little inconvenient, but it gives you guys an actual date and me a little more time to write a proper chapter.

- Think you guys understood this, but just in case: there will be no romance between Haizaki and anyone for a good long while. If you'd like an exact estimate or point in the fic, message me, and I'll spoil it for you, provided that's what you want.

- I'm still so ridiculously happy you guys are so kind and supportive and understanding. You're the reason I even attempt to keep an update schedule. Also, because otherwise I'd probably never get anything done, but it's definitely your feedback that's encouraging me to keep at it. So thank you again. I'll thank you over and over again until this fic is complete because I think it deserves repeating. You guys are awesome! ;)

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

Next Update: July 7, 2017

LXXIV. July 31, 2012 - Tuesday

"No," Shougo says, with the kind of desperation of a man who knows he's about to lose but who keeps fighting anyway. "Abso-fucking-lutely not."

Tetsuya is giving him a kind of creepy, singularly unhelpful, oh-you-poor-dumb-thing expression, and Shougo wants to punch him.

"You can't fucking make me," he points out, glaring heatedly at Nijimura, who snorts in amusement. "I refuse!"

Ryouta only grins at him. "I've always wanted to see Haizakicchi in a yukata~!" He says, ridiculously gleeful.

"'Always', my ass!" Shougo scowls. "I've only known you for like two months!"

"And yet, it feels like I've known you forever," Ryouta counters, not at all deterred by things like logic or common sense. "Hey! Do you think we could be soulmates?" He asks, hopefully.

Shougo screams internally. "Fuck no!" He screams aloud.

"Keep it down," Kagami scolds, hitting him upside the back of his head. "You're being childish."
"Shut the fuck up! I'm twelve!" Shougo growls, equal parts irritated and grateful Kagami is treating his biggest secret so casually. It's a weird fucking feeling.

Even weirder is the overwhelming relief he feels at having someone else know. He hadn't realized it had been weighing him down quite so heavily until he spilled his guts - and with it, the sheer burden.

He'd panicked a bit at the time, but he's... glad he listened to his instincts and trusted Kagami. Glad Kagami is so good and kind and awesome that he accepted Shougo's crazy ass story and returned that trust tenfold.

...Not that he would ever admit that to the boy himself.

"Stop whining, would you?" Satsuki says, amused. She has her pretty, pink hair pulled up in an intricate braided bun thing, and she's wearing a flower-y red yukata. "I picked it out myself. It'll look good on you."

Shougo, feeling inexplicably betrayed, tells her, "That's really not something I'm worried about."

"Just listen to the She-Witch." Daiki, clad in a black yukata and expression just as unhappy, huffs, "If I have to wear one of these things, then so do you."

Without missing a beat, Satsuki jabs him in the side and ignores his irritated yelp. "You're both being big babies. This is a festival! You're supposed to dress up!"

Shougo shares an aggravated Look with Daiki, despite their prior disagreement. Satsuki is a tyrant.

"It's supposed to be fun," Shougo mutters, not quite loud enough to draw Satsuki's ire.

She jabs him too. "I heard that." Then she shoves a bundle of clothes in his hands and expertly shoos him out into the hallway. This is the skill of a manager. "Just go put it on before I dress you myself," she threatens.

Shougo can see the conviction in her eyes and decides not to test her. He gets dressed.

Once in the bathroom, he examines himself in the mirror, his young, chubby cheeks puffed up in his irritation and wide, round eyes narrowed in a glare.

Fuck, no wonder no one takes him seriously! He looks like a little kid pouting! ...Which is exactly what he is, mental age aside.

He consoles himself with the knowledge that in a few years, he'll be back to being suitably scary. Just because he loathes people labeling him a delinquent without actually knowing him doesn't mean he wants people to think they can walk all over him. His permanent snarl does wonders in scaring off morons, even if it sometimes attracts even bigger ones.

Like the ones yesterday. Good thing Satsuki didn't make good on her threat to undress him - for more than just the mental scarring. He wants to keep his injuries under wraps for as long as possible, preferably forever. He just doesn't have high hopes of that because he's friends with freakishly observant, nosy people, and he's already been called out on his biggest secrets already.

Ugh, but seriously, he hates formal clothing. Suits, yukata, whatever - it's all fancy shit he wants nothing to do with. He didn't even own one until now, and that's only because his so-called friends went behind his back and collaborated with his mother.

At least it's a nice color - a plain dark blue with no ugly designs or anything, and it doesn't clash
horribly with his gray hair. Not that he's particularly worried about his appearance, but no one wants to look bad.

He adjusts his sash one more time and then heads back to Tetsuya's living room.

"See? That wasn't so bad," Satsuki says when she catches sight of him.

He scoffs, tugging on his too long sleeves. "Easy for you to say."

She rolls her eyes and turns to berate Daiki for something. Looks like he snuck an idol magazine in, even though she forbid him from talking about or even looking at any after he accidentally spilled his drink on her yesterday.

He smirks and then looks over at the others, who are suspiciously quiet. Tetsuya is trying (and failing) to convince Kagami he ate plenty today, so that's them occupied. Ryouta and Nijimura, however, are just staring at him unabashedly.

"What?" He growls, suddenly self-conscious. Not like he even wanted to wear this stupid fucking yukata to begin with. Hardly his fault if he looks dumb in it.

Nijimura smirks, as if reading his thoughts. "You look good," he says, easy as breathing.

Before Shougo can snap at him, Ryouta grabs his arm and yanks him forward, making him stumble into Ryouta's chest.

"Ahh~! I knew you would look adorable!" Ryouta coos, wrapping his arms around Shougo and squeezing tightly. Shougo barely muffles his pained gasp. "You're so cute!" He gushes, nuzzling his nose in Shougo's hair.

Shougo scowls against Ryouta's shoulder, which is thankfully hiding his wince and burning red face. "Should have known you'd be fucking weird about it," he grumbles and tries to ignore his pleasure at the compliments.

Ryouta laughs, wickedly. "The only thing I'd like to be fucking is yo-"

Two hands clamp down on their heads and break them apart. "And that's enough of that," Nijimura says with finality, tugging their hair a little too harshly. "No one's fucking anybody. You're thirteen," he adds, exasperated. "Kuroko, cover your ears."

Tetsuya's "I resent the implication, Senpai" is drowned out by two other voices shouting at the same time, indignant:

"Kurokocchi taught me most of my dirty jokes!"

"That kid hasn't been innocent a day in his life!"

Nijimura rolls his eyes. "He's better at hiding his 'dark' side than any of you, then. Learn from his example, and stop with the damn innuendos," he orders, releasing Shougo to noogie a resisting, laughing Ryouta, for whom those last words had undoubtedly been meant.

"Never!" He cries, between the laughs. "It's a defining character trait!"

"You mean 'flaw,'" Kagami chimes in, decidedly unimpressed with their resident self-proclaimed cheerleader. Daiki snickers and high-fives him.

Shougo has to add, incredulous, "Is no one at all concerned he said it was his defining trait?"
"Kise-kun is admirably self-aware," Tetsuya states with amusement.

Satsuki giggles. "What's admirable is that his poor fan girls are in utter denial about Ki-chan's quirks. They must have quite a lot of willpower to ignore that side of him so completely."

Ryouta tries to pout but keeps laughing, ruining whatever image he's going for. Shougo can never really tell. "Whatever. You know you all love me!" He declares.

Nijimura snorts, letting a thoroughly mussed Ryouta go free. "I'll admit you've grown on me," he says, and Ryouta's face lights up smugly, "Like a tumor."

He slumps, defeated. "So harsh!"

Daiki scoffs. "Have you seen what he's like in practice? Some of the second years have started calling him Demon-taicho. Compared to that, he's nice. What?"

Shougo stomps on his foot to get him to shut up, but it's too late. Self-preservation instincts finally kick in as Daiki makes an 'oh shit!' face and slowly turns to look at their captain.

Nijimura's smiling. It's not a nice smile. "What was that, you damn brat?" He asks, scarily calm.

Daiki gulps and begins to back away. "N-nothing, Taicho! Everybody thinks you're a great captain, ahaa!" He laughs nervously, takes another step back-

Then, he whirs around and tries to run.

He tries. Quick as a whip, Nijimura snags him by the arm and pulls him back. Daiki yelps in a decidedly embarrassing fashion, Nijimura pins him to the floor in some kind of wrestling move, and Satsuki cackles and gets out her phone to take photos.

Tetsuya begins commentating in a monotone voice, which is fucking hilarious. "Aomine-kun tries to wiggle out of the hold, but oh, Nijimura-senpai shifts his weight and puts an end to that. Good try, Aomine-kun, I was really rooting for you. Ah, Nijimura-senpai, it looks like he might kick yo-"

"Thanks."

"Agh! Tetsu, you traitor!"

"I don't take sides, Aomine-kun. It's against my contract."

"What contract?! And you just said-!"

Ryouta cheers Daiki on, likely because he was just a victim to Nijimura's ire. "You can do it, Aominecchi! Probably! I mean, your chances aren't looking good, but-"

"I really don't think that's helping," Kagami tells him.

"Smile on the count of three!" Satsuki says, and Nijimura gives her a big one. Daiki chooses to continue struggling rather than participate. She takes it without actually counting and then examines the result. "Oh, that's a good one."

"Ooh, send it to me, Momocchi!"

"You're all such fucking weirdos," Shougo tells them, forgetting about his discomfort with yukata somewhere in the resulting chaos. "...Send it to me, too."
Daiki groans and tries to buck Nijimura off of him again. It's just as successful as his first attempt.

"You guys suck!"

LXXV. July 31, 2012 - Tuesday

The festival is already packed with people and stands, and most of them clear the way for their little group. Guess it's not so little anymore, though - not with seven people.

"We need to split up," he suggests, scowling at a man who bumps into him and then walks off without apologizing.

"Good idea," Satsuki says. She smiles at Tetsuya, who gives a small smile in return and offers his arm. She's trained him well. "Thank you, Tet-chan."

He inclines his head in acknowledgement. "You're quite welcome, Momoi-san. Where would you like to go first?"

She practically sparkles as she tells him, "I wanted to check out a sweet stand Ruri-chan told me about. It's this way!"

She then leads him away, talking animatedly about something, probably the sweets she's thinking about getting, and Shougo's struck by the sudden thought that she had a crush on Tetsuya in his future-past.

...He doesn't think that's the case anymore. Satsuki isn't very subtle about her affections, and she only treats Tetsuya like a dear friend in this timeline. Could that be because of him?

As he ponders that, Daiki slaps a hand on Kagami's back and says, clearly excited, "Look! There's a basketball booth over there! Think we can get some cool prizes?"

Kagami's mouth grows into that grin that's all teeth. "Bet I can win more prizes than you," he challenges.

As always, Daiki matches him. "You wish."

Without another word, the two of them race to the booth, laughing and pushing and shoving each other on the way, despite the disapproving looks they're getting. You'd think they'd known each other for years rather than just a week or so.

Shit. Wait. That just leaves-

"I've got friends meeting me here. I'll see you guys later," Nijimura tells them, ruffling their hair before walking off. "Don't forget," he says, giving Ryouta an intent look.

Ryouta calls after him, cheerfully, "I won't!"

Nijimura throws up a hand and waves, and Ryouta turns to Shougo, stars in his eyes. "Let's go, Haizakicchi! It's time for our totally-not-a-date date!"

That said, he grabs Shougo's hand and starts walking.

"...It's not a date," he emphasizes, brain still trying understand how he just got stuck in this situation. Now that he thinks about it, it was pretty damn convenient that everyone split up without any arguing or cajoling, and they did it so casually he had no chance - or real reason - to object. Fuck.
Ryouta hums happily. "Right. A not-date date."

Shougo eyes him warily. "You keep saying 'date' twice. It's not a not-date date either." Whatever the hell that is.

"That's what I said. A not-not-date date."

He fucking gives up. "Ugh. Whatever! Where are we going?" He changes the subject to something that hopefully won't infuriate him or melt his brain. Considering this is Ryouta he's talking about, he doesn't have high hopes.

"Let's try to catch a goldfish!" He suggests, dragging Shougo over to the crowded booth. Then again, the whole street is crowded. That's a festival in Tokyo for you, though.

"I suck at this," Shougo tells him as they wait for their turn. He's not patient enough to actually wait for one to swim into his net. He usually ends up chasing the fish around with it and breaking the damn thing. Stupid paper net.

The girl in front of them trying to win one for her girlfriend must have the same problem because she tries three times before giving up with an irritated huff. Her girlfriend just laughs, kisses her cheek, and then leads her to the nearby restaurant to placate her.

"This is my one true skill," Ryouta says, squatting down and staring at the water with intense concentration. "My only purpose in life!"

Shougo snorts. "What, catching goldfish?"

"Someone's gotta do it."

"Literally no one's gotta do it." The guy at the stand looks a little offended at that. Shougo awkwardly looks away.

"Someone has to!" Ryouta laughs, victorious, as the vendor takes the fish from him to put it in a bag. He grins at Shougo and throws up a 'V' for victory.

Shougo rolls his eyes, though he can't help being a tiny bit impressed Ryouta was able to actually catch one on his first try. "Your Perfect Copy is straight up cheating," he ends up saying, and he's genuinely surprised there's no bitterness lacing his words.

...Has he really stopped resenting this guy for what happened back then?

"Perfect Copy?" Ryouta repeats, quizzically. "Wait, did you think up a name for my ability?" He asks, excitedly.

Shougo frowns at him. "What? No, I-"

He doesn't get further than that before Ryouta tackles him. Experience has him planting his feet and gaining a hold of the other boy, so they don't fall over.

"You were thinking about me!" Ryouta exclaims, giddy. "Perfect Copy! That's so awesome! Haha, I've got a Move!"

Finally realizing that his memory has tripped him up here, Shougo just sighs, accepting the gushing. There's no way he's going to convince Ryouta he didn't come up with the name when this is the first time it's even been brought up to him. Ugh.
"Yeah, yeah." He looks down when Ryouta grows quiet and can't help his brow twitching at what he sees. "Are you really telling those guys about this shit?" He asks, embarrassed and irritated.

Ryouta smiles brightly but doesn't glance away from his phone. "It's my duty to tell the whole world when Haizakicchi does something especially cute!"

"You're fucking posting this shit to your fans too?! What the hell, Kise?!"

"It's Ryouta," the other boy corrects him, growing more serious as they make eye contact. "You promised. We're alone, so it's first name basis... Shougocchi."

Shougo's eyes widen, actually surprised. This is the first time Ryouta's brought it up since they made the deal. It's been, what, two or three weeks? He'd honestly figured Ryouta would have whined or complained before now, not bring it up so seriously in... this kind of setting.

He lays a hand over his red face and says, grudgingly, "Fine... Ryouta."

The grin he gets in return is bright enough to compete with the paper lanterns lighting up the streets.

**LXXVI. July 31, 2012 - Tuesday**

They check out a few more booths, and while doing so, Ryouta finds a way to stick Shougo's new nickname at the end of every sentence. Shougo finds new ways not to strangle his friend. It's good.

They're eating takoyaki when Ryouta's phone buzzes.

"Oh, crap!" He says, and Shougo catches Nijimura's name but not the text he sent. "C'mon, Nijimuracchi is scary when he's angry."

Shougo lets Ryouta guide him along, but a feeling of dread washes over him at those words. "Why would he be angry? We're at a damn festival."

"I maybe was supposed to hand you over to him about five minutes ago?" He admits, sweating. "We were busy eating. I forgot!"

"You also forgot to explain why you're passing me around like the damn flu." Shougo glares at Ryouta but also keeps an eye out for an irate, impatient captain.

Ryouta waves a hand dismissively. "We talked about it back at Kurokocchi's. I get an hour, and Nijimuracchi gets an hour. Then we all get together to watch the fireworks. My mom already reserved a spot for us!"

"An hour of what?" Shougo demands, though he can guess.

Ryouta doesn't answer because he finally spots Nijimura. "Hey, Senpai! Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to cut into your time!" He apologizes, one eye closed, mouth in an 'i-messed-up-but-i'm-cute-forgive-me!' grin, and hands clasped in front of him pleadingly.

Nijimura is hardly fazed by things like that, though. He bonks Ryouta's head with a fist and rolls his eyes. "I'm sure you're real torn up about it."

"So mean!" Ryouta whines, clutching the protruding bump on his head.

...Is this a fucking cartoon?

"The basket-idiot duo is over that way," Nijimura tells Ryouta, pointing vaguely to the left. "Go and
referee. One of 'em's on my team, and I don't want any complaints getting back to me."

Ryouta salutes and shouts, "Yes, sir!" before taking off. "Have fun on your date~!" He calls over his shoulder, laughing.

"What," Shougo says, more than asks, mortified. "This isn't a fucking date," he hisses.

Nijimura smiles at him, calmly and casually, and shit, but Shougo forgets this guy actually can do something other than smirk like a demon. "Never said it was."

Shougo looks away and huffs. "What did you want, then?"

"We're friends, right?" He says, still smiling so easily, even as Shougo reluctantly nods. "Let's go try the ring toss. I'll win you something." That said, he starts walking.

Shougo falls into step with him and scowls up at him. "You implyin' I can't win my own shitty prize?" He demands.

There's that smirk. He was almost unnerved by its absence. "Heh. Maybe." He pokes Shougo's forehead and asks, "What're you gonna do about it?"

"I'll fucking show you," Shougo says, slapping his hand away. "Bet you can't even win one."

"How about this, then? Whoever wins one first gets a favor from the loser," Nijimura offers, looking so smug and sure of his own win that it raises Shougo's hackles.

"Deal." No way he's gonna lose to this guy.

He loses.

"This thing is fucking rigged!" He resists the urge to kick the stand and stares angrily as the vendor hands Nijimura the huge pink bear from the back shelf.

"Probably." Nijimura looks way too amused as he says, "But I still won."

Shougo groans. "Fucking fine. What do you want?"

"Hmm," Nijimura draws the sound out, like an asshole. "...How 'bout a kiss?"

"How's that a fucking favor, pervert!?" Shougo snarls, hating his face for heating up at just the suggestion.

The asshole just looks at him expectantly.

Under that intense stare, Shougo caves spectacularly. He's already been kissed by this guy fucking twice, and he doesn't want this shit hanging over his head later. Nijimura is just the kind of sadistic bastard Shougo wants to owe exactly zero favors to. "...Just get it over with."

He watches, agitated, as Nijimura leans down and slowly moves closer and closer. Once his captain becomes a blur, he closes his eyes and waits for the unmistakable pressure, heart thudding way too loudly and nose scrunched up in displeasure.

Something touches him, but it's not lips. He opens his eyes to find Nijimura still way too close, but his hand is covering Shougo's mouth.

"The fuck," he tries to say, but it's muffled.
Nijimura laughs. "The look on your face. I was just kidding. I'm not gonna waste my precious favor on this."

He removes his hand, and Shougo glares, fed up and bright red. "Fucking asshole. Don't fuck with me."

Nijimura laughs again and ruffles his hair, letting his hand linger, a warm weight against the night air. "You're too serious, brat. Loosen up a bit. You've got people to share your burdens with now, you know. You don't have to carry the weight of the world all by yourself. You're way too scrawny for that."

"Ugh, I know," he says, sounding every bit the aggrieved child he isn't. "I know, okay?"

Nijimura makes an amused sound above him before removing his hand. "Here. This is yours." He shoves the disgustingly cute teddy bear at Shougo, and reflex makes him catch it before it drops.

Shougo eyes the monstrosity like it's a diseased thing. "Don't want it."

"Too bad. It's a gift from your favorite upperclassmen. You better cherish it."

"You're not my favorite. The fuck? Who even has a favorite shitty Senpai?" Shougo scoffs and looks at the bear. He swears the fucking thing sparkles at him. "And I'm not keeping this fucking abomination." He spots and trashcan and considers throwing it away.

Suddenly, the air grows oppressive, and he feels a chill go down his spine. Nijimura's eyes have gone shadowed, and his grin has turned unforgiving. "You throw that away, and you'll regret it," he promises.

Shougo gulps. "...W-why would I? Heh, I l-love it." He hugs the bear to hide his shaking in terror.

Just like that, things are normal, and he can breathe again. Nijimura smiles at him. "Good! I'm glad. Come on, let's try some more games. I promised the twins I'd win them something."

Shougo bites back the instinctive "Give her this shitty bear" and instead offers, "I'll get 'em somethin' too." The twin terrors have grown on him in the few times they've studied at Nijimura's. The fact that it would hopefully stem his captain's ire is merely a plus.

Nijimura pats his head in gratitude. "You're a good kid," he says.

Shougo ducks his head and smiles. "Yeah, well, someone should pay 'em back for having to deal with a shitty older brother like you."

The resulting pain is completely worth it.

Chapter End Notes

nijimura why must you be so mysterious all the time? this guy is the hardest to write, hands down! ugh.

anyway, coming up next: more group shenanigans, nijihai moments, nijihaiikise moments, and well,, you'll see. ;)
fireworks and friends and fun - oh my!

Chapter Notes

Look, I know said I'd only update on Fridays from now on... but I finished the chapter early... and I'm weak, okay? I'm weak. Please enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

Next Update: July 28, 2017 (probably? i'm trying!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

LXXVII - July 31, 2012

"Oh God," Shougo groans upon spotting a certain asshole behind a booth chatting amiably like he isn't the biggest jerk in the world. He forgot that guy would be here. It hadn't been a problem since he'd had no plans of attending the festival, but now...

Nijimura glances at him in question, but a cheerful voice calls out to him before he can explain and possibly hide.

"Hey, it's my li'l bro!" Shion waves them over gleefully. "Come on over. Don't be shy!"

Shougo groans again, embarrassed just looking at him. "Ugh, let's just stop by for a second. If we don't, he'll probably make an even bigger scene."

"I can't wait for Taka and Tatsuo to get old enough to be embarrassed by me," Nijimura says as they walk, delighted by the prospect.

"That doesn't surprise me at all." Shougo rolls his eyes.

Shion must have overheard them because he laughs wickedly. "It never gets old," he informs Nijimura. He turns to the girl next to him and says, "Haru, this here's my kid brother. Didn't I tell you he was cute?"

"The fuck."

Shion grins, throwing an arm around her shoulders. "This here is Okita Haru. She's a close friend of mine. Haru, the capable looking fellow next to my brother is Nijimura Shuuzou."

She and Nijimura exchange greetings, but Shougo's still stuck on the wording.

"The fuck do you mean he's 'capable?' This asshole is just as fucked up as the rest of us. He's just got
a smart-looking face!" Shougo can't help but object to the notion Nijimura might be a normal person. He's clearly a fucking sadist. Nothing normal about that.

"So you think I look smart, huh?" Nijimura asks, smugly, as usual only hearing what he wants to hear.

"...Of course that's what you take away from it," Shion grumbles, as always put out by this guy's unflappability. Even when he does react, he's usually only irritated on the surface. Why is this fucking fourteen year old better at managing his emotions than him?

"What?! The Haizaki brother has actually made an appearance?" Some guy demands dramatically, suddenly appearing at Shion's other side. He peers at Shougo before laughing and shoving Shion’s shoulder. "Damn, I can tell just by lookin' at 'im!"

Shion shoves him back. "This annoying guy is Fukawa Natsu," he introduces. "Another 'friend' of mine."

Fukawa smiles mischievously at Shougo and stage-whispers, "Your brother is a total bro-con, did you know? Ever since I met him in middle school, he's gushed about you like some doting grandmother."

As Shion squawks in denial, Okita leans forward conspiratorially and affirms, "It's true. Honestly, I know more about you than my own little brother. Including the fact that apparently, you're a regular on your basketball team as a first year. Congrats, by the way."

"Uh, thanks," Shion says, unsure whether he should be amused by his brother's plight or completely mortified by the thought that he's been gossiping about Shougo to these people for years.

"Haru! Natsu!" Shion gasps, betrayed. "What kind of friends are you?!

Okita pushes her glasses back into place, the glare hiding her eyes. "The very best kind," she says, and Shion immediately refutes the statement.

"You know," Nijimura muses, watching the three older kids argue and flail about, "I always thought Kise was your biggest fan, but it looks like your older brother has that in the bag."

"...Should I be happy about that...?" Shougo asks, deadpan.

Nijimura seems to consider that for a moment. "Nah, I think you should be horrified."

Shougo slaps a hand over his face. "Why me?" He asks of the universe.

The universe doesn't deign to answer, but then again it never does.

Regardless, Shougo has never met or heard of a Fukawa Natsu or Okita Haru until now, and since he's from over ten years in the future, that... means something, doesn't it? He's always known his brother has had lots of friends, but Shion has never brought any of them home or introduced them to Shougo.

Elementary doesn't count. Even Shougo had had kids he'd played with more than others then.

Another thing of note is that Shion trusts them enough to talk so much about Shougo. The people he befriends might share information about themselves freely (because Shion listens and doesn't judge and would never betray their trust), but his brother is careful to never reveal too much without making it seem like he's withholding anything.
His... love for Shougo is one thing, but actual details? Shion must really trust these guys.

Shion trusts them, but Shougo has never met them.

*Is this my fault, too?* He wonders, eying Shion guiltily. *Did you stop talking about me completely? Did you feel ashamed? Did you feel responsible?*

*Did you blame me?*

He takes a deep breath and dismisses that line of thought, aware he's being ridiculous. Shion *could* have had errant thoughts such as those, but he had - and would - never turn his back on family.

Shougo can accuse himself as much as he wants, but he won't ever compare Shion to their father. Not ever.

He tunes back in just as Shion shakes off his friends.

"Alright already!" Shion huffs, crossing his arms. "I'm a proud older brother! I'm allowed to be! And I'm not ashamed of it!" He declares grandly.

Fukawa snorts, shaking his head. "Yeah, but Shion, my dude, my buddy, my bro - we're sayin' you should be."

Okita chimes in, "Maybe you should find, you know, an actual hobby. Or like, get a celebrity crush or something. Replace your fixation on your brother with someone else."

"Eww." Was he just compared to a celebrity crush?

"Celebrities are unattainable goals, Haru. I'm a realist! Plus, you know I've got a part-time job now. That's why I'm running this booth with you guys," Shion refutes. "I'm a busy man."

"Not too busy to talk my ear off about your brother," Fukawa says, dryly.

"Be quiet, you!"

"You're impossible," Okita concludes, exasperated.

"You're all turning against me, but luckily, I've still got Sho-chan on my side!" He turns to Shougo for support.

Shougo takes a very deliberate step back. "Fuck that. I've been against you from the start. And don't fucking call me that, asshole."

Next to him, Nijimura laughs into his hand. Okita and Fukawa seem just as entertained.

"You little shit," Shion accuses, though he's still smiling. "What happened to family solidarity?"

Shougo's nose scrunches in his disgust. "What the hell happened to you as a baby to make you like this?"

"Damn, li'l Haizaki has bite," Fukawa snickers, ignoring Shion's and Shougo's twin sour looks. "Hey, man, anyone who doesn't fall for this guy's charm is alright in my book. I was despairing the fact that I'm the only one who doesn't think Shion here shits rainbows and butterflies," he adds, smirking over at Shougo.

That Shougo completely understands. His brother jokes about the 'Haizaki family charisma,' but
really, it's just Shion who can fool almost anyone into liking him. Something about his easy-going personality and optimism draws people in - and makes them ignore his glaring faults.

In comparison, Shougo and their mom are really picky about their friends and not so quick to open up. They've both been burned before, after all, and neither of them are willing to go through that again. It makes them seem closed off and antisocial - or so Shion complains when he tries to teach them How to Be an Approachable Person.

Anyway, Shion's probably got the whole school twisted around his pretty little finger. He likes meeting new people and actually remembers the random shit they tell him, so people think he's a nice person and make the effort to remember him. And then it spreads like a fucking disease.

The whole thing repulses him, even as he's a little envious. So he absolutely empathizes with the chagrin on Fukawa's face.

"You're not," he says with relish. "Shion's anything but a fucking saint. I don't get why it's not obvious."

"This is slander!" Shion exclaims. "Defamation of character!"

Fukawa rolls his eyes. "It's witchcraft!" He insists, answering Shougo. "Some sorta voodoo shit. Are you even sure you're actually brothers? He could have snatched you from some poor family and brainwashed you! I mean, just think about-"

"Okay, that's enough of that," Okita cuts in, flicking Fukawa on the nose. He yelps in pain and clutches it tearfully, but she goes on, heedless, "Don't drag innocent people into your occult obsession, you weirdo."

"How many times do I have to tell you it's not an obsession, Haru?!" He looks into the distance, trying for mysterious... and failing. "It's a way of life."

"For weirdos."

Fukawa throws his hands up in frustration. "Just because you're into a boring club like kendo doesn't mean-"

"Boring?! I'll show you boring!"

"Wait, Haru, no!"

Okita swings a shinai (where the actual fuck was she hiding that thing?) at Fukawa, who dodges to the side and then dashes away, terror in his eyes. Okita follows after with a rather unsettling scowl, leaving the three of them behind in a stunned silence.

"...The hell was that?" Shougo asks, bewildered.

Shion heaves a sigh. "They're supposed to be helping me." He shakes his head and then smiles at Shougo. "Don't worry. This happens a lot. So where's the rest of the harem?"

Nijimura chokes on air, and Shougo slaps both hands over his face, utterly done. "My friends are here somewhere, too. We split up a while ago, but we're all gonna watch the fireworks together," he explains through his fingers, testily.

He doesn't hear Nijimura mutter, somewhat bemused, "Shit, I am part of a harem."
"Okay," Shion accepts easily enough. "So are you guys-?"

Having anticipated this, Shougo interrupts him with a brusque, "This is not a date."

Looking way too amused, Shion puts his hands up peaceably to ward off Shougo's ire. "I was going to ask if you guys are gonna buy anything. Figured I might as well drum up some business while you're here," he clarifies.

Shougo's face grows red, but he refuses to acknowledge it. "...I'll have a snow cone," he says with a glare, daring either of them to say anything.

"Me too," Nijimura joins in.

Shion beams at them. "Comin' right up!"

LXXVIII - July 31, 2012

"Haizakicchi! Nijimuracchi!" Ryouta calls out, squeezing in between them and linking their arms. "We're all set over here. C'mon." That said, he begins leading them over to a vacant spot in the crowded street.

"Someone's excited," Nijimura comments, putting up no resistance.

Ryouta grins at him, giddy. "Fireworks, Nijimuracchi! I've never watched them with a group of friends before!"

"Not every activity is more exciting with friends, you know," Haizaki points out, dryly, as he adjusts his grip on the ugly ass bear under his free arm.

It seems like that's Ryouta's excuse to be enthusiastic about anything.

"I've never played video games with a friend before!"

"I've never stayed up late with a friend before!"

"I've never had breakfast with a friend before!"

It's ridiculous. Also sort of endearing - when it's not exhausting.

Ryouta merely laughs. "I won't know that 'til I try it, will I?"

Having no answer to that, Shougo just rolls his eyes, turning his attention to the others as Ryouta releases them.

Kagami is leaning against the fence, and next to his feet is a stuffed animal. Shougo can't help laughing when he identifies it as a really ugly tiger.

Noticing his reaction and what caused it, Kagami scowls at him. "Shut up. At least mine's not an eyesore."

Remembering his own stuffed animal sours his mood again. "Ugh."

"He loves it," Nijimura assures, cuffing Shougo lightly on the back of the head.

"...Sure do," he agrees unconvincingly, holding the 'gift' at arm's length.
Daiki turns and catches sight of the revolting thing (and likely Shougo's repulsed expression) and bursts into laughter. "Is- is that thing fucking sparkling?" He manages to ask.

Ryouta peers at it curiously before looking away and blinking rapidly. "Its image is burned into my brain!"

"It doesn't pull off pink like you do, Momoi-san," is Tetsuya's assessment. His voice startles the hell out of Shougo and Nijimura, who hadn't realized he was there.

Satsuki smiles faintly. "I don't know if I want to be compared to that... thing, Tet-chan, but thank you."

Shougo agrees wholeheartedly with all of them, which is why he narrows his eyes at Nijimura and demands, "What the hell? They can talk shit about your shitty gift, but I can't?"

"You guys are being incredibly uppity, aren't you?" Nijimura remarks in a dangerous voice (never mind the obvious laughter in his eyes), and everyone except Shougo freezes, faces rapidly losing color. "I think the bear is cute. Don't you?"

Scrambling to evade a violent rebuke, Ryouta amends, "I- I meant that I could stare at it forever and never get bored! Haha! So it would naturally imprint upon my brain, Senpai!"

"I personally think that I could never compare to your lovely gift, Captain," Satsuki recovers smoothly. "That's all."

"What the bear lacks in color it makes up for in design," Tetsuya explains, monotone. "I would never disparage one of your presents, Senpai."

Kagami shrugs. "He laughed at mine first."

"Mine wasn't even an insult!" Daiki sputters, indignant, when they turn to him expectantly. "...But uh, only something pure and good would sparkle like that. I'm sure of it!" He hastily adds when faced with Nijimura's dark smile.

There's a moment of tense silence (only broken by the background noise of the crowds and city in general), and then Nijimura laughs hard, clutching his stomach when it begins to hurt.

The others share relieved looks before they join in, helplessly, amused by the sheer absurdity of the situation and the panicked expressions they'd all had just moments ago.

As if waiting for this, beams of light shoot upwards and illuminate the night sky in a dazzling display of colors and shapes, the accompanying booms and cheering of the crowds wistful and nostalgic.

Normally, it's hard to see them in a city such as Tokyo, but the spot they reserved gives them a clear view of the fireworks. Shougo smiles, just as excited as Ryouta about this and only now willing to show it - when no one's watching.

He's never seen fireworks with friends before, either. He spares a moment to glance at the others around him before returning his eyes to the spectacle.

Little by little, his lonely and bitter memories are being replaced with ones he never wants to forget.

**LXXIX - July 31, 2012**

"Why didn't you say it was your birthday soon?" Satsuki asks, distressed.
The topic had come up when Kagami revealed he wouldn't be able to spend the night at Tetsuya's along with the rest of them. Apparently, his parents are spending the day tomorrow celebrating.

Kagami scratches the back of his neck, uncomfortable at the sudden interrogation. "I didn't think about it? Why?"

"Boys." She heaves an aggrieved sigh before stalking forward and then whirling around to face the whole group with a determined expression. "We've already missed Nijimura-senpai's and Ki-chan's birthdays, so we're not missing this one! As your excellent manager, I'll take over managing the party."

"We could celebrate all of their birthdays at the same time," Tetsuya suggests with a small smile of his own. He lives for this friendship crap, so Shougo's not surprised.

"Sounds good to me," Nijimura says, crossing his arms now they've stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

Ryouta grows visibly excited at the prospect. "I'm totally down for this!"

"I don't care either way," is Kagami's input, though he seems happy.

"As long as you make time for us to play a few games, I'm in," Daiki says, eliciting an eye roll and fond smile from Satsuki.

"Like I would even try to keep you dorks away from the court." She turns her nose up at Daiki. "Not that I couldn't. Don't you underestimate me, Dai-chan!"

"I, for one, would love to see you keep these guys from playing," Nijimura throws out, smirking.

Tetsuya peers up at him innocently. "Nijimura-senpai has a sadistic streak."

Kagami snorts. "I don't think you have room to talk."

Ryouta turns to Shougo, who hadn't felt the need to say anything sappy (he's obviously going, willingly or not) and tells him, "No need to buy me a gift, Haizakicchi! All I need is your love and support!"

"Too bad I have no intention of giving you either of those things."

"Mean!"

"No, I'm just-"

His phone vibrates in the pocket of his shorts (that he'd stubbornly worn under the yukata), and curious, he pulls it out, sees that it's Shion calling him, and answers, "What is it?"

"Shougo." His brother's voice sounds rough and raw, like he's just barely holding himself together. Shougo feels dread seize his heart, can hardly breathe because-

He's heard Shion sound like this just once before.

Suddenly, he doesn't want to hear what Shion has to say, doesn't want to hear any more bad news, doesn't think he can handle his world toppling over again.

But he doesn't say anything, and he doesn't hang up, just holds the phone in a white-knuckled grip, oblivious to the questions and concerned faces of his friends, unaware of anything but the person on
the other end of the line, even his own heartbeat drowned out by the ominous silence.

Eventually, Shion speaks again-

"It's mom. She's in the hospital."

-and the phone slips through the fingers of his suddenly limp hand.

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OMAKE

1. AoKagaKuro - could be canon

Ahomine:

11:38 - ive got another idea

Momoi:

11:38 - istg if u keep me awake w ur bs

Ahomine:

11:39 - no hear me out!

11:39 - we dress real fancy ok

Momoi:

11:39 - this already sounds like an awful plan

Ahomine:

11:39 - then we show up where taiga's dad works right

Momoi:

11:40 - oh so it's taiga now is it?

11:40 - hmm

Ahomine:

11:41 - what i meant kagami

11:41 - it was a typo

Momoi:

11:42 - yeah ok

11:42 - im v sure u typed in kagami and got his first name somehow

11:43 - what a coincidence that that would be what ur phone changed it to
Ahomine:
11:43 - satsuki

Momoi:
11:43 - how crazy that that happened
11:44 - i should add kagamin to the chat so i can show him this amazing coincidence

Ahomine:
11:44 - satsuki no!

Momoi:
11:44 - satsuki YES
11:45 - hi kagamin can u scroll up and get caught up? ty

Me:
11:47 - ...

Ahomine:
11:47 - its not what it looks like!

Momoi:
11:48 - lemmme add tet-chan too

Ahomine:
11:49 - ur so evil i hate u

Momoi:
11:49 - *cackles* ;)

Kuroko:
11:51 - How very forward of you, Aomine-kun

Ahomine:
11:52 - god what happend to u tetsu?
11:52 - u used to be so sweet n innocent

Kuroko:
11:53 - This is my final form

Ahomine:
11:53 - who ARE u

Kuroko:

11:53 - I'm not the one suddenly flirting with Kagami-kun through Momoi-san so late at night
11:54 - I do it during the day with grace and style - no help needed

Ahomine:

11:55 - uve been CORRUPTED
11:55 - ur MEAN now

Kuroko:

11:55 - I've never done anything wrong in my life ever

Momoi:

11:56 - we know this and we love u

Ahomine:

11:56 - and i hardly need satsuki's help to FLIRT of all things!

Me:

11:57 - go to SLEEP
11:57 - also I'm going to graciously ignore all of this talk about flirting with me
11:58 - if any of you were any good at it, I'd have noticed by now

Momoi:

11:58 - and kagamin comes in for the kill
11:58 - rip

Chapter End Notes

i'd apologize, but i'm not sorry at all.

Guest 2 over on ffnet said their Shion headcanon was: "even though he's uber flirty everyone knows he isn't looking for a girlfriend because he's too busy looking after shougo (and they call him a bro-con)" which lined up with what I had in mind for Shion, but the use of the word "bro-con" is 100% bc of them and why that part at the top happened lol
haizaki does NOT handle things well

Chapter Notes

Surprise! I'm updating a whole week early to make up for the cliffhanger last week. ;)

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basuke.

Next Update: August 4, 2017

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LXXX. July 31, 2012 - Tuesday

"It's mom. She's in the hospital."

His chest hurts, and his eyes are blurry with tears, and he can't- he can't breathe, can't think, can't- can't do anything right. God, why is he here? Why is this happening now?

Why Ayano? Why is it always her? Why- why now?

He's taking in too much air, big gulping breaths between sobs, but he can't control it, can't care, can't stop.

Not her, not again. Not his mom, please no.

Not again, not again.

"-zaki, calm down! Just breathe, okay? Please, please, Haizaki, breathe. Just breathe, slowly. Listen to me - good, good."

He doesn't know who's pleading him to follow such firm, insistent instructions, but he latches onto their voice like a lifeline, scrambles to get away from his own clawing panic, tries to calm down and take slow, even breaths that don't make his lungs ache and his head dizzy, but it's hard.

"That's it, just like that," the voice says, male, comforting in its familiarity, even if Shougo is too frazzled to put a name to it. "Good, good. You're doing good."

A minute or an eternity later, he gets his breathing under control and only then realizes that the voice belongs to Nijimura - and that he's rubbing soothing circles on Shougo's back.

Somehow, he's on the ground on his knees, and Nijimura is kneeling next to him, expression concerned and eyes narrowed as he scrutinizes Shougo for the reason he suddenly broke down.

"...Where's my phone?" Shougo asks, roughly wiping his red eyes with the sleeve of his yukata, cursing himself for losing it when his family needs him. When he's not even the one who's been- who's been-!

His phone appears in his vision, but at first glance, he can tell it's useless now: the screen has cracks running through it, and it's no longer glowing at all. His phone is broken, possibly beyond repair.

Fucking stupid! Why did he go and break it without getting all the details first?!
Wait, calm down. Calm down. Fucking think this through! Something happened to- to Mom. He doesn't know what. Shion didn't get the chance to tell him because he stupidly- No, it doesn't matter. He doesn't know what happened and can't call back to find out.

He doesn't know Shion's or his mom's phone numbers from this time. It's been over ten years, and they've all changed numbers at least once or twice. He's gonna fucking burn the numbers into his brain after this.

Until then, what can he do? He... Hospital. Mom's in the hospital. Where was she before she got there? Work. Her second job. When- whatever happened happened, it must have happened there, and luckily, he knows the closest hospital to her workplace.

Shion must already be there or on his way. Shougo will just have to meet up with him and get his answers there. It's all he has to go on now, so he gets back on his feet, tugs at the cloth around his legs so it hangs loosely and won't get in the way, and then takes off running without a word to his flustered companions.

"Wha- Hey!"

"Haizaki!"

"Where are you going?!"

"Haizakicchi!"

"Dammit, get back here!"

He faintly registers the sounds of more feet hitting the pavement behind him, of people calling his name, but absolutely nothing is as important as making sure his mom is okay. Plus, he's barely keeping his hysteria at bay as is. He doesn't have brain power for much else.

He loses track of time as he runs, only vaguely aware he's getting closer to his goal, his surroundings otherwise a blur - so it's a shock when he hears a loud, blaring horn beeping angrily somewhere to his left and more so when he's suddenly yanked back by one of his long sleeves, only narrowly avoiding a speeding truck as it passes by.

And quite abruptly, he's aware of the world again. The sounds of traffic, the whispering crowds, his own panting. The pain in his legs, the sweat on his brow, the heat of the night. It all comes back in a rush, leaving him a more than a little overwhelmed.

He... almost got hit by a truck, didn't he?

"You idiot!" Nijimura rages, a handful of Shougo's sleeve still curled tightly in his fingers, as if he's afraid to let him go. "What were you thinking?!"

Ryouta rushes past him and frantically checks over Shougo, obviously worried. The serious expression on his face is... off-putting. "Haizakicchi, are you okay?" He asks, tone quiet and controlled, the calm before the storm.

"...Yeah," he answers numbly, thoroughly submitting under the combined weight of their stares. "Didn't get hurt or nothin'."

Ryouta lets out a sigh of relief before crushing him in a hug. Shougo lets him, listless and tired in just about every way one can be tired. "I'm so glad!"
Kagami claps him on the shoulder, face pale. "Me too."

"That was fuckin' scary," Daiki says, looking just as spooked as his words. "Shit, I thought you were a goner, man."

Ryouta squeezes him tighter at that, making Shougo hiss a pained breath as he flinches back. Being so close, Ryouta feels and hears his reaction. He pulls back, looking Shougo over again with a frown.

"You said you weren't hurt," he scolds, batting Shougo's hands aside as he pulls open the folds of the yukata. Once he gets them out of the way, his eyes narrow, and his lips form a thin line, displeased at what he finds.

Everyone else moves in closer and discovers the same thing: his torso littered with bruises and bandages and various cuts too small for either. His injuries from the ambush.

"What the hell happened?" Nijimura demands, eyes shadowed and menacing.

"Another fight?" Ryouta surmises, equally pissed. "Must have been a bad one for you to get hurt like this."

"Why didn't you say anything, idiot?" Nijimura reaches forward to brush his fingers over a mostly healed scar, and that's the last straw.

Shougo pushes both of them away and hastily covers everything back up again. "Fuck off. It doesn't matter! I'm not the one you should be worried about!" He snarls, unable to comprehend the fact that his mother's in the hospital, and yet they want to bother him about shit like this. "Who- who gives a shit about me right now?! It's not important!"

He's wasting precious time!

"We're coming back around to that," Nijimura warns him and then thankfully moves on, "but what happened? What's got you so worked up?"

"I'd- hah, like to know- know that as well," Tetsuya manages to get out between pants, he and Satsuki having just caught up with them.

The guilt twisting in Shougo's chest writhes even more upon spotting him. Tetsuya looks like a slight breeze might knock him over.

"Is... is it your family?" Satsuki ventures, tentatively.

Unbidden, his eyes water up again, and he bites down on his lip hard enough to reopen the cut on the inside. The pain is enough to settle him, at least for now.

"My- my mom," he chokes out, the admission almost too much to bear. "I- I don't know why, but she's- she's in the hospital, and I broke my fucking phone before Shion could fucking tell me if- if she's alright or- or-"

The alternative is awful, too awful to actually speak aloud, so he swallows it back down. The others get the gist, though, their faces radiating horror and concern.

Ryouta sweeps him up into another hug, more gently this time but no less emotionally charged. "Oh Haizakicchi, I'm so sorry!"
Shougo hugs him back just as desperately, sorely needing the comfort it provides.

"So you were heading to the hospital," Nijimura says, running a hand through his hair, expression unreadable. After a moment, he nods his head decisively. "Alright. I'll go with you. Without a phone and in your state, I'd be stupid to let you out of my sight."

"As long as you don't stop me from going, I don't care," Shougo replies, voice muffled by Ryouta's shoulder. He doesn't care very much about anything right now - nothing but his mother's condition.

"Why don't we all go?" Satsuki suggests, walking over to put a hand on his back, just about the only part she can reach. "We're all worried about Ayano-san, and we're already almost there anyway."

Everyone agrees, and that's how Shougo finds himself huddled in the middle of the group as they walk, his friends hovering around him protectively the rest of the way to the hospital - as if sheltering him from further pain.

The whole thing has him equal parts unspeakably grateful and unbelievably guilty. He's not sure he deserves their love and protection, not if this is his fault, but nonetheless, he holds tight to Ryouta's hand and keeps his eyes on Nijimura's tall and unwavering back and tries very hard not to think of anything at all.

LXXXI. July 31, 2012 - Tuesday

"Hello, how can I help you?" The nurse at the desk asks, looking over their group with a practiced smile.

Shougo is in no fucking state to calmly talk to anyone, so Nijimura steps up and explains the situation, gesturing to him when need be. It doesn't take long for him to return.

"She says your mom's down the hall in the last room on the left," Nijimura informs him. "Your brother's already in there with her. You can go see them for a few minutes, but as the oldest, only Shion-san can actually stay in the room." He ruffles Shougo's hair, smiling soothingly. "Go and check up on her, okay? We'll be here when you get back."

Shougo ducks his head, nodding, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

He gets one last look at all of them, impossibly comforted by the knowledge that this time he won't have to sit in the waiting room alone, and then he makes his way to the indicated room, the journey at once far too short and not short enough.

Once in front of the door, however, his worries from earlier slam into him with all the force of a freight train, and he's knocking before he even realizes it.

The door is suddenly opened from inside, and there's a heart-stopping moment where Shion and Shougo just stare at each other, surprised.

Then Shion's pulling him into hug and babbling, like he always does when worried, and Shougo soaks in the love and attention desperately. "Shit, Shougo, I was so worried! You just hung up on me and wouldn't answer no matter how many times I called! I didn't know where you were, or if you ran off to do something stupid or- or if something happened to you too! Tonight is bad enough, you know?"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry!" Shougo says in return, horribly guilty for this, too- he'd forgotten to account for Shion's feelings, too wrapped in his own emotions, like always. Just one more thing that's his fault.
Shion sighs, patting his back. "No, it's okay. I'm just glad you're alright."

"...How's mom?" Shougo asks, fearfully - but needing to know. He can't see past Shion's shoulder, hasn't even tried to lift his head to look, too afraid at what he might find.

His brother sighs again, this time sounding entirely too old for his fifteen years. It's a familiar sound and one Shougo had hoped he'd seen the last of years ago - in another timeline. "She's fine now. They're just running some tests to make absolutely sure, and they want to watch her for a few hours. But why don't you see for yourself?"

He doesn't move to let go of Shougo, just lets him get ready to face her on his own, as always understanding him without him actually saying anything. Shougo really, really doesn't deserve such an awesome older brother, but like hell he'd ever give him up for anything.

After another long moment, gathering strength from Shion's sure and steady hold, he untangles himself from his brother and steps into the room.

He gradually drags his eyes up from the floor, first spotting the bed, then the sheets, the outline of a body underneath them, and then finally -

"Mom?" He croaks.

She looks... exhausted. Tired down to her bones. Enough that she should be asleep and not smiling so gently at her worthless son like- like she can see all the ugliness inside him and is choosing to wash it all away with her smile alone.

He can feel himself crying again. His mom laughs softly (as if laughing louder would take too much energy) and opens her arms invitingly. He doesn't think. He just rushes over and throws himself at her, uncaring that he's acting like a child, heedless of his audience.

Right now, age doesn't matter. He's just a son worried out of his mind about his mother. He's too emotional, too relieved to be embarrassed about something so trivial. This isn't something anyone in this room would be cruel enough to tease him about later, anyway.

"Shh, shh, I'm okay," she murmurs, carding her fingers through his hair lovingly. "You think... a little heat... is enough to take me out?" He shakes his head, inadvertently wiping his tears and snot against her, and she laughs again, a wispy little thing but no less genuine. "That's... what I thought."

"...Heat?" Shougo asks, belatedly.

He can feel the bed dipping on the other side as - presumably - Shion sits on the edge. He's proven right when Shion speaks right next to him.

"Mom's still a little lightheaded. She doesn't feel up to talking, so I'll explain what I know, alrighty? He doesn't wait for a response before continuing, seemingly determined to be upbeat, "Mom fainted at work, so one of her coworkers called an ambulance. They diagnosed it as heatstroke. It looked like it might be bad, so they brought her here to get checked over for real. They've been doing tests, and they're gonna keep her at least until morning, so they can monitor her condition."

Shougo leans back but doesn't move away from the bed. He wipes his face for the umpteenth time that night and grabs his mom's hand, reluctant to let her go for even a moment. "That's not 'fine,'" he accuses, frowning.

It's not what he'd feared - that he'd moved up the timeline and made his mother collapse from overwork a whole four years early - but fuck, heatstroke is still awful.
And this never happened last time. He would have remembered. That can only mean-

(It's his fault.)

Mom rolls her eyes. "I don't... want to hear that... from you," she says pointedly, and it doesn't take a genius to realize she's referencing all the times he's gotten injured and insisted the same thing.

Shion snickers, copying him and taking up their mother's other hand. "She's got you there, kiddo."

He opens his mouth to refute the accusation, but he abruptly remembers he is at that very moment injured and unconcerned by said injuries, so he shuts his mouth and pouts- uh, scowls. Because he's not Kise fucking Ryouta, and he doesn't pout.

Both of them look way too amused for his comfort.

"Whatever," he huffs. "If anything, I get it from you."

Rather than being offended, she simply looks at both of them fondly. "Yup. Both of you heathens... are just like me... and I wouldn't change... a single thing about you."

He and Shion share an embarasssed, pleased look. Shougo feels warm down to his toes. Warm and wanted and full of love.

"Yeah, well, you're the greatest mother in the world, so I guess that's okay," Shougo tells her, feigning nonchalance.

"Thank you," she says, expression impossibly soft and adoring.

Shion pokes him in the cheek. "Some~body's trying to become Mom's new fav~orite," he sings.

"If you're implying you're her favorite now, then maybe you need to get checked in here. You must have hit your head pretty hard to think something so dumb," Shougo retorts, falling into the old routine easily, relaxing for the first time since he got that horrid phone call.

Shion laughs, but he doesn't get to reply because a nurse pokes her head in the room and interrupts them, smile apologetic. "Haizaki-kun, you'll have to return to the waiting room now. Time's up."

Already? He frowns, and his mom squeezes his hand encouragingly. "Are your friends... with you?"

She asks. He nods, and she says, "Then go... and hang out... with them."

Shion leans over and slings an arm around his shoulder. "It's pretty boring in here, dude. Uh, no offense, mom. But yeah, you might as well go and have fun with them. Nobody said a hospital can't be an ideal spot for a sleepover!"

"...They shouldn't have to."

His brother waves a hand dismissively. "Just go relax, okay? I'll come and check on you every now and then, but we're totally okay here. So don't worry 'bout a thing, alright?"

"Alright," he agrees - because arguing will get him nowhere, and he is hoping his friends will make that lonely, gloomy place more bearable. God, he fucking hates waiting rooms. And hospitals in general. His worst memories take place here, after all.

Before he can be swept away in said memories, he throws an arm around Shion and pulls them both down to hug their mother.
"I love you," he tells them, voice rough with emotion.

"I love you guys, too," Shion says back, happily.

Mom slides her arms around them and pulls them in even closer, pressing a kiss to each head. "I love you both more than anything in the world," she breathes, like a promise feverishly kept, or else a fact, proven and true.

Shougo clings to them tightly, their bodies and their warm, sincere declarations, and he keeps that devotion and security with him as he exits the room and steps back out into that dreaded hallway.

"Everything alright?" Nijimura asks, and Shougo turns and finds him leaning against the wall, arms crossed. His gray eyes study Shougo intensely.

He can't even begin to wonder what Nijimura's taking away from him. He's not even sure how he feels, except utterly worn out.

"It was heatstroke," he reveals and then goes on to explain everything else.

Nijimura takes it all in with that same calm look on his face. Somehow, Nijimura's lack of reaction - of a bad reaction - is just as soothing as his family's reassurances. Surely even Nijimura's ever present calm would crack were the situation dire?

"That... sucks," Nijimura sums up eloquently.

Shougo sighs. "Yeah."

"Well, come on then," he says, jerking his chin toward the waiting room around the corner. "They're all fluttering about anxiously. Go and tell them what you told me before they combust out of sheer worry."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Shougo retorts reflexively, rolling his eyes. He dodges Nijimura's swipe with a chuckle.

"Little shit," Nijimura says, sharing his smile. "I am your captain, so quit disrespecting me, you brat."

Shougo sticks his tongue out and then with another laugh walks over to join the rest of his friends, his heavy, heavy heart just a little lighter, determined not to think about why and how this could have happened until he's sure his mother is in the clear.

(It's his fault.)

Chapter End Notes

there you go! not overwork. heatstroke is still really bad and can lead to death, but it seems like if there are no underlying causes, the person should be fine after a week or so. overwork can lead to a stroke or heart attack because of stress and exhaustion, mentally and physically, and it takes more time and work to deal with it effectively. at least that's what i'm getting from the articles i've been skimming online.

if i'm wrong, i'd appreciate it if you guys could correct me.
also! i got my info about how things would work in the hospital from my mom (it's been years since i've had to visit someone in the er), but if anything is off there, then that's on me! for anything else, well, i am writing this like it's an anime. so anime logic applies for certain things!

fun fact: i fainted from heatstroke last summer. my family called an ambulance and everything. luckily, they knew to get me inside where it was cool and had me drink some water, so by the time the ambulance got there, i was basically fine. i decided not to go to the hospital, and they let me be since i insisted i didn't need to. have had no problems since - although i definitely make sure to drink plenty of water before working outside!
Chapter Notes

Thank you for the lovely feedback and support, everyone! I really appreciate it.

Speaking of, I'm quite pleased to say that I've had not one but two people write fic for baby, don't forget my name! If you're interested, I encourage you to go read them and review. They're both awesome! ;)

On FFnet: Unbreakable by Mewnekoice123 [Haizaki sings karaoke to The Squad]
Link: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12550615/1/Unbreakable

Here & FFnet: Flickers of time by TheLadyMuse [Haizaki in a band, guys!]
Link: http://archiveofourown.org/works/11664351
Link2: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12594821/1/Flickers-of-time

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

Next Update: August 18, 2017

LXXXII. July 31, 2012 - Tuesday

Shougo is used to waiting, wondering, and hoping desperately that the person he's waiting for will eventually get well enough that he doesn't have to wait anymore. He did not miss it.

Fucking waiting rooms are gloomy, ominous places where others like him are forced to sit and hope and wonder and wait, and he hates them, hates this whole damn place.

But he can only be so angry, so worried and anxious before he's just... not. At some point, the emotions fade or else get pushed back, become much less overwhelming and all-consuming. No one can be so emotional constantly. Such a state is far too draining, especially for his twelve year old physique.

Which means, after the initial panic (and after he carefully shuts down all thoughts laden with guilt), Shougo is left with nothing.

Well, maybe exhaustion. Flickers of amusement, too, at some of his friends' quips or especially funny reactions. Irritation at the dumbass show airing on the one TV in the room. (He doesn't remember it and hopes viciously - distantly - that it was cancelled after its first season.)

Mostly, though, he's lethargic and tired but hyper-aware in the way that he knows mean he won't get any sleep. Not that he wants to. He just... doesn't care, can't care, not anymore.

(Because caring? That gets you hurt. It opens you up to pain and misery, paints a big ass target over your heart for anyone to find, leaves you vulnerable and defenseless.

And the worst part is that it's all your fault.
You tear down your own walls to let people in, lead them to your treasures, share with them everything of yourself, heart and soul, and then hope desperately that they won't wreck everything and mess you up inside afterwards.

Because all you can do is hope.

Hope you made the right choice. Hope you come out of it alive when you make the wrong one. Hope the walls and gates and locks you rebuild over the ruins are enough to protect you this time.

Hoping for shit never did anything for you, though, and now you're paying the price for your own stupidity.

But- you- don't- care.)

There's only the quiet inside his own head and the damnable waiting.

[Outside his bubble of solitude, his friends huddle together and converse in hushed tones, shooting worried looks at him all the while.

Finally, they come to an agreement. They play a quick game of rock-paper-scissors, and half of them look put out at the outcome. The others, almost relieved.

Aomine Daiki merely sighs, squares his shoulders, and walks over to Haizaki, who is curled up in one of the chairs, expression unreadable and shoulders slumped as if sinking under the weight of the world, and claims the seat next to him.

He knows what he has to do.

"Before Tetsu got us to talk to each other, I didn't think much of you," Daiki says out of nowhere.

Shougo turns his head slightly to look at him, wondering when he got here and what he's talking about. And when did they end up alone? "...Yeah?"

Daiki nods, staring straight ahead, leaned back in the chair and arms crossed, a determined tilt to his mouth. "Far as I could tell, you were always looking for a fight and didn't really care who took you up on it. Plus, you skipped practice and acted like you couldn't care less about basketball. Even did shit that could've got you kicked off the team. Dunno. I just thought you were ungrateful and annoying and not worth my time." He shrugs, not sorry about his harsh description but not vicious about it either. "When Tetsu told me he was hanging out with you and that you were actually coaching him, well, I was suspicious."

Shougo has had far worse accusations flung at him, most of them from himself, so he's not bothered by that or the less than favorable first impression. Besides, Daiki's not wrong. Shougo tells him so. He clicks his tongue, irritated. "What I'm sayin' is I was wrong. I dunno if you somehow did a personality flip since school started or if you were putting on a front, but that shit ain't all you are, man." Shougo blinks at him owlishly, blindsided by the heated defense from this- from him. Daiki goes on, keeping his tone even, "You're an alright dude. No, don't argue with me. I'm not Tetsu. I ain't gonna put up with it. Either believe me, or keep quiet." He bulldozes over any attempt at a protest, apparently not having any of it.

Reluctantly, Shougo shuts his mouth.

Daiki huffs, rolling his eyes at Shougo's disgruntled expression. He grows serious soon enough, though, and Shougo is struck by the thought of how weird it is to see him like this. This Daiki has
hardly been genuinely serious since Shougo's known him, so to see it now is strange. Almost unsettling.

Unaware of his musing, Daiki explains, seemingly going off subject, "I figured out something else, too. I'm pretty awful at recognizing my own shit, so I didn't even realize that the stronger I got in basketball, the more I worried about my future opponents. It was like a small part of me knew that eventually, I'd get good enough that nobody could beat me." Here, he grits his teeth, the grips he has on his arms becoming painfully tight. "What a fucking shitty outcome, right? Arrogant, too. I thought, 'There's no way.' So I ignored that part of me and kept getting stronger, and though I was fucking ecstatic when I won, I was also disappointed. It was one step closer to the inevitable. One more obstacle overcome."

He laughs derisively, tilting his head to look at Shougo, eyes dark and pained. "But Haizaki, what happens when you 'overcome' all the obstacles? What happens when the last obstacle is yourself?" He asks, almost begging, tone and desolate expression alarmingly similar to that of his future self. "I've been thinking about that a lot lately. I don't know what I'd do if I got to the end of that road only to find nobody next to me. Maybe it is presumptuous and cocky, but... If that happened, I think it'd kill me."

"It did, Shougo almost wants to say. It destroyed you. And you pulled everyone else down into hell with you."

"So what changed?" Shougo asks instead, sort of knowing the answer but wanting - needing - to hear everything Daiki's got to say.

"I met Kagami," he admits, a whole host of emotions packed into those three words. "I met him and played against him, and Haizaki... I was so fucking relieved. He's good and getting better, and somehow, I know he can keep up with me. I know that even if do reach the top, he'll be right there with me, ready to knock me back down again." He laughs again, only it's light and happy this time, and though tinged with the earlier pain, his grin is back in full force. "He saved me. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I can do my best and love the game and not have to worry anymore. That's everything to me, you know?" He looks beseechingly at Shougo, who nods, understanding at last.

He'd been able to piece together some of it having been on the same team for a while before quitting. Daiki had always been miles above everyone else in overall skill, and where others would find their limits and stop growing, Daiki's strength and potential had always seemed limitless, making him untouchable.

(Another reason Shougo had never tried to be friends with this guy. The envy alone would have fueled his resentment like nothing else.

And the envy is still there, even knowing how things turned out last time.

After all, in the end, Daiki regained almost everything he'd lost because he had a friend with an impossible will and an endlessly forgiving soul who utterly refused to give up on him.

Shougo had had no such friend and likely hadn't deserved one, anyway.)

It makes sense he'd recognize Kagami's potential. This Daiki isn't hopeless and despairing. He hasn't given up or cut ties. Maybe the other Daiki sensed the same thing but was too far gone to actually believe it. Too bitter and angry and betrayed to dare to hope.

This Daiki's reached the same conclusion in less time, and he's latched onto Kagami like a lifeline, like a light in the dark.
Having witnessed the other Daiki's self-destruction, Shougo can't blame him.

He's reminded that the jokes about kidnapping have all had a grain of truth in them, some level of seriousness, and Shougo is hardly the only one to pick up on it. It's why none of them really complain when Daiki drags them all to the court time and again, even after having practice that morning. He only has a few more days to play against Kagami before he leaves, after all.

None of them are looking forward to it, but Daiki is undoubtedly the one most dreading Kagami's departure, and now Shougo fully understands why.

"In that case... I'm really happy for you, man," Shougo eventually says, actually meaning it when the other Shougo would never. They're both growing and changing, becoming better versions of themselves, proving their fates aren't set in stone, and he can see the results and the paths that led them here.

It's a comforting thought. Things don't have to stay the same. Events and people - they're all changing in ways he can't predict, and while that's scary, it's also a relief.

In that case...

Maybe...

That gets him another laugh. Daiki looks at him then, intent and sincere and leaving no room for doubt, says, "It's because of you. You found him, and because of that, we found each other. I dunno about a lot of things. Like Satsuki says - I'm an idiot about anything but basketball. So I dunno if we would've met without you, or why you're feeling guilty over this, and you don't have to tell me. Just-I wanted you to know. You and Kagami - I can smile and play the sport I love with nothing holding me back because of you guys. So thank you."

Stunned, Shougo can only stare at him. He's- This whole time, he's wanted to believe his being in the past and changing stuff was a good thing. Wanted to believe it so desperately that he grasped for any bit of evidence to prove it to himself.

Too often, his presence only causes harm. His whole life is a tapestry of mistakes and bad decisions and- and hurting people. His loved ones and strangers and teammates. He's never once thought he was good for anything, despite well-meaning family and friends telling him otherwise.

But here it is. An unmistakable, undeniable admission that he's helped someone. It's not a pitiful attempt to reassure himself or a faint hope. But fact. Truth.

Daiki believes it, and so Shougo does too.

He can't even put into words how that makes him feel. Doesn't even know if there's enough words in the world to describe the healing-hurt-guilt-loathing-joy-pain-relief swirling inside his suddenly too small head and heart and body, but it's there and growing and gushing out in full force.

Daiki grows distinctly more embarrassed under Shougo's wide-eyed stare, dark skin growing even darker until he snaps, "Cut it out, will you?"

Shougo lets out a weak chuckle, chest fuzzy and warm and hurting and hot, a glowing feeling of accomplishment blanketing him, eyes burning.

"Sorry," he croaks, but the word is lost to a sob, tears leaking out in hot streaks despite his best efforts, refusing to be contained any longer. "Sorry," he tries again, so damn happy and relieved and grateful and sad that he can't help but cry.
"Shit!" Daiki curses, panicking, hands hovering over him uselessly. "I didn't mean to make you cry. If the others see this, they'll kill me and make it look like an accident!"

Shougo laughs/sobs, blinking wet globs from his eyelashes, and sniffling when snot threatens to dribble out. "I'm okay," he promises, and for once, he means it. For once, he actually is.

Daiki doesn't look the least bit convinced. "...If you say so," he says, searching the mostly empty room for their absent friends - likely in case they come back and draw the wrong conclusion from Shougo's waterworks.

Apparently in the clear, Daiki reclines back against the chair and huffs, "This is why I don't talk about feelings and shit. I'm not good at it. Probably made it worse!"

"No," Shougo says, roughly wiping his face against the sleeve of his once-clean yukata. He's sure his eyes are red and his face puffy and gross, but he doesn't really care right now. "You made me feel better," he admits and watches as Daiki turns to him in surprise. "A lot fucking better."

Daiki's faint frown morphs into a pleased little smile, and he rubs his finger under his nose, eyes focused anywhere but Shougo's face. "Yeah? Well... Good, then."

"Guess basketball's not the only thing you're good at," Shougo quips, feeling up to some humor after everything. "You've got inspirational speeches down pat."

He snorts, shaking his head. "Nah, that's Tetsu's thing. I'll stick to kicking your collective asses on the court." Daiki glances at him again and asks, "You sure you're good?"

"Yeah."

"Alright. I'm gonna go find the others. You stay here. Somebody else'll be coming to replace me."

Shougo quirks a brow. "What, you're taking turns?"

Daiki laughs, already backing away. "Didn't want to crowd you. Or so says Satsuki." He rolls his eyes and whirs around to walk properly, disappearing into the hall beyond - opposite the one with rooms of patients, leaving Shougo alone.

Well, except for the other 'visitors,' but half of them are sleeping, and the others are either watching TV or listening to music or something - nowhere near him. Thus, he can go over everything in his head in peace.

He did good. He sort of feels like a dog, wagging its tail and happy out of its fucking mind to be called a "good boy." But who gives a fuck? He is happy, and he's not about to put himself down for it. Fuck off with that shit, damn shitty brain.

... This is an unexpected development, just like his mom getting heatstroke. Only Daiki meeting Kagami is a much better outcome, obviously.

So. So one good thing, one bad thing. Both not expected, neither happening last time. And it's because of him. There's no doubt about it. The butterfly effect or some shit like that.

He ended up here, so things are changing, whether he likes it or not. There's no way of knowing just how his mere presence is affecting things, nor how his choices shape the future.
And- maybe he just has to live with that. Because he's not going to stop changing shit. He's already changed so much, after all. He's still dead-fucking-set on preventing his mom's deteriorating health, and- well now that he has friends and is invested in their health and well-being, he wants to stop their fall out, too.

He tilts his head back against the wall and lets out a heavy sigh. That's the first time he's said - thought - it so readily, so seriously. Apparently, he wants to help the Miracles and actually intends to do it, somehow.

Huh.

He still feels guilty as all hell for his mom having to go through this. That's not going to go away so easily. But he can't let it drag him down, can't let it dissuade him from his self-imposed mission. He's going to save her, damn it, and no one's gonna stop him.

Not even himself.

After Daiki comes Tetsuya, who takes one look at him and says, not quite annoyed, "I had a speech planned and everything."

Shougo laughs pretty hard at that, especially in light of what he and Daiki had discussed just before he left. Tetsuya wears a satisfied smile as he waits for Shougo to calm down.

"Hey, if you still want to say it..." Shougo offers, grinning.

"I think I'll save it for the next crisis," Tetsuya deadpans.

"What, is it one size fits all?" He asks.

"My secret is that I use one speech for every occasion. It's a simple case of fill in the blank."

Shougo considers that. "Huh. I never noticed."

Tetsuya smiles a little wider. "I'm just that good, Haizaki-kun."

Next is Kagami, who asks, "Future shit?"

"Future shit," Shougo confirms.

Kagami furrows his fuzzy brows. "Damn."

Shrugging, Shougo says, "I was just surprised. This didn't happen last time. So I thought-"

"That it was your fault?" Kagami interrupts him, disbelieving.

"I know, I know," he says, sighing. "It was dumb. I'm a dumbass. I'm over it." At Kagami's dubious look, he amends, "Mostly. I think."

"You better be. This is some freaky shit, but it doesn't make you omnipotent. You can't beat yourself up over shit you have no control over," Kagami warns.

"I know," he says again, touched by the concern everyone is showing someone like him. "I... I won't."

Kagami accepts his answer with a grunt. Satsuki replaces him, clearly worried even though the others must have relayed his getting better to her.
"Dai-chan told me what you two talked about," she tells him after squeezing the life out of him with a surprise hug. "I didn't know anything was wrong, that he was suffering like that - not until he told me a few days ago. I'm his closest friend, and I didn't notice. Just thinking about how that could have affected him!"

Her eyes fill with tears as she speaks, but none of them fall.

"I'm so, so glad he has a rival now, that he can wear those big, dopey grins of his and play as much as he wants. That some far off possibility won't take that away." She smiles warmly at him and says, "Thank you, Hai-chan. Thank you so much. Even if it was unintentional, you gave us our bright future back, and I'm not sure we could ever repay you for that."

"You- You don't know how much hearing that means to me," Shougo manages to get out past the lump in his throat. Fuck, he is not tearing up again! "I- Thank you for telling me," he settles on, once again thinking there's no good way to describe the vortex of emotion whirling inside his chest, as all-encompassing as a hurricane.

She laughs, not unkindly, as she reaches over to wipe a stray tear beneath his eye. "You're so welcome, Hai-chan."

His next companion throws himself at Shougo in a whirlwind of long limbs and blond hair and whining, and Shougo resignedly catches him and returns the embrace.

"I'm so, so sorry this happened, and I'm really glad your mom's okay! You don't have to worry anymore 'cause I'm here, and I'll comfort you, Haizakicchi!" Ryouta tells him passionately, and Shougo rolls his eyes and slaps at the hand inching towards his ass.

"I don't want that kind of comfort, dumbass," Shougo huffs.

"Whoops, sorry," he says, but Shougo can feel Ryouta's unrepentant smile against his neck. "I'll just stick to oral."

Shougo groans and shoves the laughing bastard off of him, glaring balefully down at him on the floor. "You are literally garbage."

"That just means you should take me out!"

"Yeah, to the fucking curb."

"Hmm? Is that where the kids are doing it nowadays?"

"I will set you on fire," Shougo threatens, clamping down on the grin trying to form on his face.

Ryouta wiggles his eyebrows. "That smolder's already got me all hot and bothered."

"Maybe I should toss you in the damn ocean then."

"Now you're trying to get me wet?"

He loses the battle against his own shitty sense of humor and laughs. Ryouta lights up, visibly pleased as he joins in.

Shougo smiles, softened by the revelations before this, happiness settling over him like a second skin, love for his friends spilling over and drenching everything. "You're the worst," he says and doesn't even try to hide the fondness and affection in his tone.
Ryouta pinks, eyes widening, before reciprocating with his own soft smile. "You're the best," he replies, and Shougo can't mistake it as anything other than genuine.

Ryouta parts from him with great reluctance, but he insists that "Nijimuracchi is scary!" and leaves anyway, inadvertently revealing his last visitor, the only one who it could have been anyway.

When Nijimura storms over to him with an intent, expectant look on his face, one which reads *I've been patient so far, but I want you to tell me everything,* now, 'Shougo realizes he can no longer get away with his half-assed explanation from what seems like so long ago and just might have to reveal the truth for the second time in as many days.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

three cliffhangers in a row? tri-tri-tri-triple kill!

- haizaki has no chill

- if you're skeptical about daiki realizing so soon, i just figured- kid has good instincts, and i think he could gauge his own potential. compared to everyone else (save the miragen), he's rapidly improving, enough that it probably feels like they're growing at a snail's pace. and i don't see him not being able to tell, just him denying, ignoring, and dismissing it. anything but actually acknowledging it. because why would he want to be right?

the rest of my reasoning makes up a good chunk of the dialogue up there lol

- "he rubs his finger under his nose" classic anime gesture but really weird to describe

- haizaki has had moments in the fic where he thought "i did good!" but this is the first time someone's actually said it to him and in a way he can't deny. that's why it's so important.

- haizaki is a Crier. this is a Thing.

- tried to make the heart-to-hearts sincere w/o being too cheesy, but i think we earned some cheese after these last few chapters!

- "that future bullshit again?" kagami whenever anything happens

- a few people noticed haizaki felt guilty (and all of them wondered why he reacted so badly) & shared that with the others. then they argued over who would be best to comfort/confront him about it and couldn't agree lol hence all of them trying

- momo&ao didn't know what the problem was, so they thought they'd cheer him up/possibly distract him from his own problems/get the 'thank you' out of the way

- guys,, if you wanna send me innuendos for kise to use, feel free. i think,,, mine are getting worse lmao

- i'm always up for suggestions about plot stuff, omake, or some silly or self-indulgent
thing you'd like to see. if i can work it in, i will!! ;)}
I.

"Haizaki's not here again," Shuuou mutters after another sweep of the gym, irritated but not surprised. This has happened a few times since club activities started, and it's not even been a month.

It's the very reason Shuuou bullied the guy into giving him his phone number. Not that threatening his delinquent ass from a distance does any good. The only time Haizaki deigns to listen to him is when he gets violent.

His short temper and Haizaki's belligerence are really not a good mix.

He sighs, lifting a hand to rub impatiently at his temples in a futile effort to ward off a headache.

The little shit's been a hassle ever since he joined. Shuuou doesn't understand why Haizaki bothered to join the team when he doesn't seem to even like basketball.

Then again, it's obvious he enjoys 'stealing' the moves of other players and proving himself to be better than even the first stringers. Haizaki's bad personality has already ruined any chance of goodwill between him and literally the entire team - but especially the other regulars.

Honestly, it's a pain in the ass dealing with him. If it were up to him, Haizaki would have been kicked off the team the first time he screwed over his teammates (and subsequently made the team weaker.)

Maybe the third - or possibly even first - time he skipped (because he's blatantly advertising his disrespect and lack of dedication.) Shuuou's no babysitter, and he's getting sick of having to track the bastard down and drag him back.

It's not up to him, though.

Teiko's motto ("Ever victorious") isn't one he really buys into - after all, you learn more from losing, and losing doesn't automatically make you worth less - but it's led to a school known for its success in sports. And Shuuou was drawn to Teiko for the sole reason of getting stronger and playing with a strong team. He practically thrives in the competitive environment; though not everyone does.

Case in point: he became captain in only his second year.

Unfortunately, that same unforgiving, 'always win' environment has also led to this predicament.
Haizaki is *good*, and he can help win games. Thus, he stays. If he steals the moves of other players and f*cks with their heads, well, they should just work harder to overcome him, or else get demoted and let someone else take their place.

So annoying. Even if he understands the intent.

Shuuzou sighs again, louder this time, and makes the players next to him flinch back in fear - though he doesn't notice. He's just caught sight of Aomine and Midorima going at each other in the middle of a game. Again.

"Oi! Idiots! Stop bickering like toddlers, or I'll kick your asses!" He warns, raising his voice to be heard over said bickering and the noise of ongoing practice.

"It's his fault!" Aomine immediately shouts back, pointing a finger accusingly at Midorima.

"I'm doing no such thing!" Midorima tells him, indignant, bristling like a cat.

"Hah?!

Making captain at thirteen was certainly a great accomplishment.

*But was it worth it...?*

He growls and stalks over to the two of them, fingers itching to hit flesh, and thinks, *'Only about half the time.'*

-o-

His ire only grows when Haizaki fails to show up entirely - ire and slight concern. Haizaki's never missed both morning and afternoon practice before, after all, and according to his classmates, he never even showed up to class.

Haizaki's an ass, but he's at least smart enough not to push his boundaries too much. Or he was until today. Something must have happened, and knowing the brat, it probably has to do with all the fights he's been getting into.

He was bound to piss off the wrong person at some point, and Shuuzou wouldn't put it past him to try to fight even if he were clearly outmatched, cocky shit that he is.

On the other hand, it's possible he skipped for an asinine reason, like sleeping in and deciding he might as well stay home. Or just enjoying a day out.

Either seems likely. Haizaki's mid-day text ("I don't feel like going") - the only one he sends despite numerous threats on Shuuzou's end - doesn't necessarily point toward a definite answer.

Shuuzou has him pegged for a guy who would be a smartass 'til his last breath. Sassing Shuuzou while injured fits what he's gleaned so far from the kid.

...Which is admittedly not that much. He tends to clam up around Shuuzou - and for good reason. Just about every time Shuuzou overhears one of his conversations, Haizaki's pissing off another teammate.

And Shuuzou always steps in, even though he usually wouldn't bother. With anyone else, he'd let them sort out their own issues. Like he's said before, he's not the type of captain to hold hands and force friendships, and Teiko's not that kind of a team.
Haizaki just rubs him the wrong way, though, and his words and mannerisms and expressions are so attention-grabbing and aggravating that Shuuzou can hardly ignore him - or the impulse to throttle him until he behaves like a normal person. Or at least, a decent one.

Half an hour into practice after school, Shuuzou gets pissed enough to go out and search for the idiot - again.

Haizaki isn't stupid enough to be caught in the same place twice, but Shuuzou was a delinquent himself until this year. He knows the usual haunts and has people all over the city who don't mind passing on information. Usually with half-joking laments that he's "changed" and that they'd be willing to look the other way if he ever went around kicking ass again.

He can't help but roll his eyes when they bring it up. They just want their entertainment back. Apparently, the way he used to make cocky newbies shit their pants with just a look was downright hilarious.

Well, he can't really blame them. He'd found it just as amusing.

He's got the twins to look after, however, and though he rarely allowed himself to get hit, he came home battered and bruised enough times that Taka and Tatsuo got scared. For him. Which was just unacceptable. Older brothers aren't supposed to make their younger siblings worry about them.

There was also basketball and his new responsibilities as captain to consider. So he gave it up willingly and has hardly missed it since. He gets enough trouble just trying to manage over a hundred kids with their own problems, even with the help of a manager, vice captain, and coaches.

(Haizaki's unwillingness to even pretend to play nice with the team is a major contributing factor to Shuuzou's dislike of him.)

Hina-chan - a former yankee in her twenties who refuses to answer to anything else - recognizes Haizaki from description alone, and she points Shuuzou toward his general location with minimal teasing. He bears it gracefully, not one to get flustered or embarrassed easily, and then practically jogs in his haste to catch the little shit making both of them miss practice.

Shuuzou's gonna make him regret it.

II.

His first instinct is to interrupt the bastard who actually had the gall to skip practice at school to fuck around in some random court, furious he'd worried and that Haizaki had made him seek him out for nothing.

Then, well, he hears a sound he's never heard before, and it stops him in his tracks. Laughter. Not Haizaki's usual mocking chuckle or derisive scoff, but something more real, more unguarded.

Haizaki can hardly be considered anything but rough around the edges, and yet- Shuuzou slowly moves closer, entranced, and gets a good look at his face.

Soft.

Haizaki's face, his laugh, his whole demeanor is soft and... vulnerable. In a way Shuuzou wasn't even sure Haizaki could be, not with his carefully maintained walls, covered with spikes and traps meant to harm and wound.

This Haizaki is easy to read, face an open book. Unaware of his audience, he's like any other kid
playing the sport he loves.

The sport he loves.

Who knew?

Shuuzou can't help frowning, utterly thrown at this sudden new side of Haizaki and unsure how to take it. Without anyone else to impress or else piss off, apparently Haizaki can play with a bright, happy smile - one, to his growing horror, that Shuuzou actually finds rather cute.

He dismisses that thought with a grimace, unwilling to consider it, especially when he's so wrong-footed. Instead, he again focuses on the boy in front of him - ignoring the cute-not-cute smile - and is bewildered by the level of skill on display.

Had Haizaki been holding back all this time? He watches Haizaki execute an incredibly complicated move, likely stolen, that he hasn't ever shown before and reluctantly concludes that that must be the case.

But why? He's the type of person who wouldn't hesitate to crush his opponents, who lives for showing off just how much better he is. His smugness after a win is one of the main reasons so many of the team dislike him.

Shuuzou continues observing unnoticed, musing heavily before he - thinks he has an answer. Perhaps Haizaki's public basketball skills are similar to his public persona - in that they're both wildly different behind closed doors.

When Shuuzou is playing at his best, he can hardly help his own happiness and satisfaction leaking out, especially when winning. It makes sense in a warped way that Haizaki would want to prevent that, would want to hide all perceived weaknesses that don't fit the uncaring, arrogant asshole personality he's crafted.

That explanation doesn't sit quite right with him, but until he has all the facts, it's the best he's got.

Shuuzou is broken from his musings when Haizaki sprawls out on his back on the ground, panting, apparently worn out from the intense practice. Having only seen the end of it, which was a workout by itself, Shuuzou can hardly blame him.

Shoving his concerns aside for now (but not dismissing them because he's determined to figure out the reason behind all this), he walks over to Haizaki, who still hasn't spotted him, debating on what to say, how he might get the answers he wants.

Intimidation? Blunt honesty?

He's startled when Haizaki lets out a weak, croaked, "Damn it." A flood of tears follow the outburst, and holy hell, Shuuzou is not equipped to deal with this.

One look at Haizaki's wet, crumpled, ridiculously vulnerable face, another, louder "Damn it!" which sounds horribly sad and self-deprecating and hurt, and Shuuzou's big brother instincts take over in an instant, drowning out any protests he might have had with its very loud, very insistent help him already!

"So you skipped practice to play basketball by yourself?" Shuuzou makes himself ask, letting exactly how he feels - felt - about that shine through in his tone.

Haizaki bolts up and turns away to crudely wipe his face, and the act is both childish and somehow
"The hell's it to you?" Haizaki demands, and like this, when Haizaki won't even look at him, Shuuzou can easily tell the ire is faked.

He pauses, weighing his choices, whether or not he should use this moment to find out what he wants to know, but in the end, he decides to let Haizaki have this.

He brings a fist down on Haizaki's bowed head, exactly as hard as usual. Haizaki makes a pained sound, hops to his feet, and whirls around to glare at him. "Oww! Fuck! Why?!"

Shuuzou pretends he doesn't see the puffiness of his eyes, nor the wetness, and falls back on his genuine irritation. "I told you to come to practice, didn't I?" Haizaki huffs, looking away again, and Shuuzou crosses his arms, rapidly becoming more and more annoyed that Haizaki's so obviously avoiding meeting his eyes. "So? What's the excuse this time? Got a cold for third time this month? Or maybe you got lost on the road of life?" He asks, not really expecting Haizaki to give a real answer.

True to form, while rubbing what's likely already a sore spot on his head, he snorts and says scornfully, "I traveled back in time and didn't want to see you dipshits again."

Ignoring the obvious lie, there's a grain of truth in his words. 'You dipshits'? Not just him, but the team? Or... a few people specifically? What would cause him to purposely avoid any chance of bumping into... whoever they are?

Almost absently, he punches him again and watches closely Haizaki's cursing and flailing in return, cataloging his responses.

Maybe it's because Shuuzou caught him by surprise at a time where his emotions were high, but... Haizaki hasn't lunged at him once. His glare isn't even full of the same resentment and burning, hateful anger Shuuzou's used to having directed at him.

It's like everything's toned down - or maybe he's too drained physically and mentally (from both practice and whatever it was that drove Haizaki to tears) to keep up a front. Even if Shuuzou's sure most of his negativity is very real.

He withholds a sigh, suddenly certain that all of this is more trouble than it's worth.

He looks down at Haizaki, lingering on his faintly trembling fingers, the redness under his eyes, his mouth that can't seem to decide between a frown or a small smile and doesn't comment on any of it.

"...You're not wearing your uniform," he points out, again pushing aside his curiosity for Haizaki's sake. Now's not the time. "You didn't plan on going to school at all today, did you?" He accuses, much less angrily than he would have liked and- more worried than he wants to feel.

He grows awkward at Shuuzou's audible concern, shifting in place as he says, "S'not like anything happened." Lie. "Just didn't feel like going." Truth. Haizaki then turns around and waves a hand lazily. "See ya," he calls, with forced nonchalance.

Without hesitation, he grabs a handful of Haizaki's collar and yanks him back, unwilling to let Haizaki go when he's clearly... off. All sorts of warning bells are firing off in his brain at the idea of letting Haizaki leave in this state.

"Oh no. You're going with me even if I have to drag you there," Shuuzou informs him, intentionally omitting the fact that he's taking him home and not back to school.
Haizaki puts up a token effort to escape, but he's not really struggling, which worries Shuuzou more than anything else. Or perhaps it's just one more thing in a growing pile of odd, inexplicable things Haizaki's done and said since Shuuzou sought him out today. He saw the guy cry, for fuck's sake. He's actually starting to feel fucking protective of this brat.

Once they reach Haizaki's house, Shuuzou drops him like a hot rock, enjoying the way Haizaki glares at him in return.

Shit. Rather than the irritating sneer Haizaki usually sports, right now, it just seems like he's pouting. And Shuuzou despairs because Haizaki is cute like this, cheeks puffed out and grey eyes narrowed. Remove the provocation and genuine ire in his expression, and you get an adorable kid.

"You'd better be at practice and school tomorrow," Shuuzou warns him, using his Captain Voice, careful not to let his thoughts show on his face.

That same regretful, disgruntled, sad expression from earlier resurfaces, and Haizaki breaks eye contact, huffing, "Yeah, yeah. I'll be there."

Shuuzou stares at him for a long moment, surprised at just how much he wants to wipe that awful look off Haizaki's face, no longer sure he can blame it on curiosity or big brother instincts.

Giving into the impulse, he reaches over and ruffles Haizaki's hair (which is as soft as it looks) and is pleased when that look gives way to bewilderment instead.

That done, he walks away, smirk growing when Haizaki calls out a belated "Bastard" from behind him.

If this is what Haizaki is really like - bright, happy smiles, casual, playful banter, and adorable pouts - underneath all the mocking and smugness and asshole-ry, well... Shuuzou wouldn't mind seeing this side of him again and finds himself idly wondering what it would take to draw it out of him.

III.

Except he doesn't have to.

This new, grouchy, anti-social but not antagonizing, not actively instigating Haizaki persists days afterward. He keeps his skill level hidden, but now it seems he's given up his daily taunting and sneering at absolutely everyone.

Shuuzou isn't the only one to notice. The regulars, who deal with Haizaki far more often than anyone else, take the sudden change in wary, uneasy silence, as if they're waiting for the other shoe to drop - but not overly concerned with someone they don't even like.

The others, though? After the first day, he has various members coming up to him in groups and alone, who ask after Haizaki's behavior, bewildered and also wary and nosy enough to bother him for details.

He sends them away without answering (not knowing himself; not that he would share if he did), tells them pointedly to worry more about themselves, and of course, that does little to stem the wave of rumors that arise.

Most of them believe Shuuzou threatened and/or beat him into submission - his reputation as a delinquent is well known - or that Haizaki skipped a whole day because a family member died or something equally awful, and he's depressed or in mourning. And there's plenty more where those
came from, ranging from the somewhat plausible to the wildly unbelievable.

Really, you'd think his damn teammates were a bunch of gossiping old ladies the way they carry on.

That being said, Shuuzou is disgustingly, irritatively just as curious. Because the old Haizaki was rage-inducing on a good day, but this one - he goes about practice like any other dedicated player, stays out of squabbles, doesn't cause said squabbles, and more importantly, he no longer closes himself off from Shuuzou.

Shuuzou can freely read Haizaki's emotions now and pick up on things he couldn't before.

Like the fact that Haizaki respects him.

*That* Haizaki, the one who gives him the most hell (or used to), who never listens to a word he says or takes his threats seriously- that guy respects Shuuzou, and it's- well, it's a heady thing, knowing that. Because Haizaki doesn't respect anybody. Not the coaches, not the upperclassmen, and certainly not the teachers.

No, that right is reserved for Shuuuzou, and he has no idea how he came to be regarded so highly by this guy. Especially when their relationship 'til now consisted of constant arguing and insults. Still does, even if it's friendly now.

Knowing that, when he thinks back on just how much he didn't like nor want anything to do with Haizaki before, he can't help but cringe.

He doesn't waste time on guilt, prefers to resolve things in as straightforward a manner as possible, and he does so by returning that respect. By judging Haizaki for his actions henceforth and not those taken this last month or so. Haizaki's decided to change (or else simply drop the asshole persona), and Shuuzou can accept that.

Haizaki sees something in him to admire, has apparently one-sidedly connected with him on some level, and Shuuzou is willing to reach back, to make things even. As a helpful Senpai or Captain or whatever comes of this.

He isn't obligated to. He *wants* to. And that's all there is to it.

The fact that Haizaki is unexpectedly fun to tease is just a bonus.

**IV.**

With June comes his homeroom teacher, Tsuda-sensei, forcing him to take up tutoring. Not like he's got a whole slew of other responsibilities. Why not add one more to the pile?

When he says all of this - very sarcastically - to Tsuda, he just gets an irritating, obliviously cheerful smile and a warm, "I know you can handle it, Nijimura-kun."

Yeah, what follows is a pretty heated argument (on his part.)

Eventually, he gets the man to agree to a few terms. Foremost of which is that Shuuzou can refuse any students for any reason so long as he accepts at least one.

Their schedule and what they cover are all up to him as well.

After that, he gets a few files to leaf through, but only one actually catches his eye.

Haizaki Shougo, first year.
The corners of his lips quirk up in anticipation.

Since that day three weeks ago, Shuuzou's kept a close eye on Haizaki and as a result has somehow gotten attached. His feelings now are a stark comparison to what they were before - from genuine dislike to like, from irritation to fondness, from watching Haizaki only to prevent fights to simply wanting to look at him.

He likes Haizaki, likes being around him and teasing him, likes drawing out the smiles and laughter Haizaki guards with fierce protectiveness - especially when Shuuzou is the only who can manage to do so.

He gets an intense rush of satisfaction knowing that Haizaki lowers his guard around him, that he trusts Shuuzou enough to share pieces of himself, and that he believes Shuuzou won't betray that trust.

He feels flattered, too, that Haizaki has a crush on him. Shuuzou has little experience with romance, his reputation and 'scary face' turning off any who might approach him and confess, and he's never been interested enough to change that. This is the first time he's dealt with such infatuation, both as the receiver and in general.

He doesn't feel the same way, but- he thinks that he could.

Maybe most guys would be disgusted that another guy would harbor feelings for them, but Shuuzou had decided from an early age that people in general were stupid and quick to judge- and that he wouldn't be like them, would actually take the time to observe and form his own opinions, and he's tried to stick by that mindset ever since.

For him, things like love can't be so easily defined anyway.

So he'll continue to observe Haizaki and his own reactions and feelings until he's sure.

Tutoring the guy is a pretty convenient way to do so, and Shuuzou is hardly one to turn down opportunities when they're so nicely presented to him.

V.

He's probably a horrible person.

No, he definitely is. He's the worst.

But he can't seem to stop.

Haizaki is so nervous and antsy around him in his own bedroom. Shit, it's like. Really cute. If Shuuzou didn't already know Haizaki has a crush on him, he'd certainly have figured it out not five minutes into one of these tutoring sessions.

At this point, it's even more adorable that Haizaki thinks he's successfully hiding it.

They're currently seated at a table next to Haizaki's bed, books and worksheets and stuff laid out before them.

When they got here, Haizaki sat down on one side, and a little impulsively, Shuuzou took the spot right next to him, close enough for their legs to brush together.

Almost immediately, Haizaki whirled around in shock, a bright blush painted across his face before
scowling and grumbling for Shuuzou to 'get the fuck away.'

Shuuzou ignored him, and Haizaki eventually relaxed as they got to work, though not without complaining.

Allowing that closeness is likely something Haizaki really regrets right now.

As he waits for Haizaki to finish a math problem, Shuuzou purposely twirls a pencil in his finger and pretends to lose control of it, making it land on Haizaki's other side.

"Oops," he says, leaning over Haizaki's lap to retrieve it. The sharp intake of breath he hears makes him smile.

Haizaki shoves him roughly away. "I could've given it back to you myself, asshole," he gripes, and Shuuzou feels extremely pleased by the flush on his pale cheeks.

He's made Haizaki blush six times in the last half hour, and he's very thoroughly enjoyed watching him get used to Shuuzou's presence and then become hyper-aware of him again.

At this point, Shuuzou can safely say that he's attracted to Haizaki, if nothing else. His happy, little smiles when Shuuzou compliments him and his flustered, grumpy faces when Shuuzou intentionally gets too close - no uninterested person would keep track of them, nor would they keep doing the things that got them those reactions in the first place.

He shouldn't keep provoking him like this, especially when he knows how Haizaki feels. But. It's fun and adorable and impossibly endearing that just him being near is making Haizaki react so strongly.

It makes something in his chest go weird and warm and gooey.

"Here. I'm done," Haizaki announces, sliding the paper over in front of Shuuzou. He watches expectantly as Shuuzou dutifully checks it over.

"Heh, you picked that up pretty quick," Shuuzou tells him, and he means it, just as he's meant every compliment he's given Haizaki. He's not willing to stoop to lying to get what he wants.

That honesty gets him another happy, pleased grin before Haizaki forces it into a frown, embarassed. "Of course I did, bastard."

"Then I guess we can move onto to the next lesson, and I'll leave all those problems to you," Shuuzou suggests, arching a brow.

Haizaki glares at him, aware Shuuzou is messing with him. "...Not yet," he says grudgingly, and even that is cute. "I still need you to make sure I'm doing it right," he admits, like it pains him.

"I guess I can hold off on the new material, then," Shuuzou replies, graciously. "Just until you're ready."

"You're such a dick," Haizaki complains under his breath, and Shuuzou snorts, smacking him on the back of the head in retaliation.

"I don't know why I put up with you," he says with more fondness than he knows what to do with. 'It's because I like you, too,' he realizes with a quiet certainty he didn't have until just a moment ago.

Huh.
End Notes: and here's the long-awaited niji pov. be warned that this is only part one of two. got too long, so i had to cut it in half. i'm going to sleep. hope you liked it. ;)

- it's always been my intention that niji didn't really like haizaki at all at first. he only gradually came to like him (in both canon & the fic)

- with this, i wanted to make it clear that niji isn't actually as cool and unflappable as haizaki makes him seem. he's just a lot better at hiding his emotions.

...which i guess does make him cool?

- was rereading chapters to help write this one and rediscovered one of my fave lines. "He's gotten used to this guy fluttering about like the world's most perverted butterfly." - in reference to kise. dunno why but the image is hilarious to me.

if you have fave lines, i'd love to know what they are! ;)

Chapter End Notes
Apologies for the super long wait. It's been a rough couple of weeks - not just for me personally, of course - and I was too busy and emotionally drained to write much. Nonetheless, I was able to finish this chapter, and I hope you guys enjoy it.

There's a coming out scene in this chapter, and I'm a little worried how it might be perceived. I based it off of my own coming out experience (with details changed as necessary), and I do realize it's different for everyone. So please keep that in mind! I'll have more to say in the end notes.

Next Update: really don't know right now, but make sure to check in two weeks just in case

VI.

Shuuzou isn't really a cautious person (he's too short-tempered and prideful for that), but it doesn't seem wise to suddenly shout his feelings off of rooftops, or to make a big deal of things.

He's not conflicted, but he's also not eager to say aloud words he's only just admitted to himself inside the quiet and safety of his own mind.

Thing is- Shuuzou's never willingly put himself in such a precarious situation. He's never felt so vulnerable. He's used to being in control, and though he's about ninety-nine percent certain Haizaki will blush and sputter and accept his confession with bewildered happiness...

There's still that one percent of doubt. Haizaki has been different lately, after all. Unpredictable. Sometimes, it's like looking at a different person entirely. And maybe Haizaki will happily accept Shuuzou's feelings, and they'll begin dating.

On the other hand, maybe Haizaki will surprise him, reject him outright. Maybe Shuuzou is seeing what he wants to see. Maybe Haizaki is just nervous around people he considers friends, or his admiration for Shuuzou is just ridiculously high. Maybe it's all of the above.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. He can't help these anxious thoughts any more than he can help the way his heart beats faster when Haizaki smiles at him.

Still, he can't just do nothing. He's never been afraid to go after what he wants before, and he doesn't think this should be any different.

All that remains now is to decide how he should go about it. A few possibilities come to mind, and he dismisses them all immediately.

Leaving a love letter in Haizaki's locker, or calling him out of class to meet under a cherry tree or some shit? Hell no. Way too fucking embarrassing, for one. And way too fucking cheesy. He shudders just thinking about it - and is only mildly cheered up by the thought of Haizaki's reaction to either.
A casual admission runs the risk of Haizaki thinking it's a joke and refusing to listen, even though Shuuzou would prefer something so low-key. Then again, has anything regarding Haizaki ever been low-key?

That's a resounding "no." Something else, then.

He mulls over it for the next two days, rather unsuccessfully, and it's only when his mom idly offers him a coupon for Maji Burger as she looks over the mail that he comes up with a plan.

A stupidly simple plan, but it should work.

He's excited to put it into action as he impatiently waits for Haizaki to show up for their tutoring session, but all thoughts of confessing come to a grinding halt when Haizaki shows up with a beaming, pretty, blond boy on his back, especially as it's immediately obvious he and Haizaki are close. Close enough for playful bantering and casual, easy affection Shuuzou hasn't seen Haizaki share with anybody.

No one but him. Until now.

Shuuzou has never before experienced the kind of jealousy that routinely ruins lives on TV or breaks up relationships in real life, and- well, he still hasn't. He can't deny that he feels a surge of something unpleasant when this new guy - Kise Ryouta - makes Haizaki smile or laugh or when he so easily touches Haizaki and only gets mild irritation in return, though.

It's dark and painful and fortunately faint enough that he can ignore it.

(He can kind of understand where all those protagonists are coming from, even if he thinks it a poor excuse for all the stupid shit it 'drives' them to do.)

It's not hard to push it aside when Kise is so bright and charming and brimming with good humor. He's just too damn likeable. Smart, too, even if not book smart.

He actually deduces the situation between Haizaki and Shuuzou after only witnessing them together once - which could be because they're obvious, but Shuuzou believes Kise is just that perceptive - and he doesn't let it stop him from using both of them as human pillows whenever he feels like it. Nor are they spared his relentless flirting.

Maybe some people would be annoyed Kise doesn't back off after finding out, but Shuuzou is actually reassured (and reluctantly impressed) that Kise isn't scared off by him. It means he'll be good for Haizaki, who needs more friends than just Shuuzou, and... he's admittedly fond of Kise, enough that he returns the affection occasionally when it becomes obvious Kise craves the contact.

He doesn't let the jealousy affect his interactions with either of them, which is why he can't believe his own mouth betrays him and says something so stupid.

"You can share it with Idiot Number Two," he says, like it doesn't matter. Like this isn't the precursor to a date. Like his gift really is a shitty coupon for a fast food place. Like he's expecting Haizaki to somehow pick up on the fact that Shuuzou wants him to- what, ditch Kise and go out with him? He's not even sure what he wants, except to escape the conversation as quickly as possible and to hopefully forget this whole thing ever happened.

After that utter disaster, he goes home and screams into his giant sushi pillow, so embarrassed he could die.

He must stay like that for a while because eventually someone comes to check on him.
"Are you okay?" Takara asks, poking his side like one would poke a strange creature with a stick.

"No," he says, and though the word is muffled by the pillow, she still seems to understand him.

She pokes him again. "What's wrong?"

He settles for an agonized groan, unwilling to talk about this with his baby sister. Or anyone at all, actually. Ever.

"...Is this one of those older kid things Mama talked about?" She tries, after a moment of intense contemplation.

He grunts, and she apparently loses interest and wanders off, thankfully leaving him to suffer in silence.

But a few minutes later, he hears his door open again.

"Shuuzou?" His dad calls, making the bed dip a bit as he sits beside him. He places a hand on Shuuzou's shoulder and asks, "Are you alright, son?"

He makes an inarticulate noise of despair in lieu of an answer, and his dad chuckles.

"Girl trouble?" He asks, knowingly, and Shuuzou feels his stomach twist itself into knots, suddenly nauseous, body tensing involuntarily under his father's hand.

He hasn't told his parents. He doesn't even know the term for what he is. Gay? Bisexual? He's never felt compelled to date anyone before no matter the gender. Is there a word for suddenly realizing you have a crush on your friend? He doesn't know and is afraid to ask, even if his parents have never spoken ill of other sexualities before.

"Shuuzou?" His dad prompts, concerned.

...Maybe it's the humiliating failure to confess to Haizaki egging him on, some lame attempt to salvage whatever's left of his courage, to get some of these overwhelming feelings off his chest.

Or maybe it's that he knows he can trust his dad with absolutely anything.

Whatever it is, he takes a shaky, fortifying breath and lets it out, forcing himself to relax as he comes to a decision. "...What if I said it was boy trouble?" He asks, hesitantly, words almost getting tangled in his throat before making it out if his mouth in a frenzied rush.

He waits anxiously, terrified regardless of his feeble attempts at reassurance, and an eternity later, he startles as he feels the warm weight of his father's hand on his back, rubbing soothing circles in a familiar loving gesture that goes a long way to calming his fears.

"I'd say..." His dad begins, trailing off, choosing his words carefully, "that I only had one girlfriend before your mother, and both times, they asked me out. But I do remember having a crush on my vice-captain in high school."

Slowly, Shuuzou turns his head to face his father and is greeted by the sight of that same warm, loving expression as always. "You went to an all boys' school," Shuuzou says aloud, voice almost sluggish in his realization. "Dad, are you...?"

"Your mother is always saying you're just like me," he says, gently amused. "I sometimes forget how scarily accurate her intuition is," he jokes.
Shuuzou practically melts with relief - he knew there was no reason to worry - and curiosity bubbles up in place of his fear. "What happened?"

"Well, I never told him, and I never saw him again after he graduated. I was too afraid to say anything. I can't say I regret it, though." He rubs the back of his neck, sheepish but happy and explains, "I met the love of my life that summer, and well, you know the story. She asked me out, and three years later, she proposed. And after we were married, she made me a father." He looks a little wonderingly at Shuuzou as he says it, so awed and loving and grateful that Shuuzou can't help smiling even as he rolls his eyes.

Mom always jokes that he was born to be a dad, and Shuuzou has long since understood why she thought so. His dad somehow always makes him feel like his being born was a precious, miraculous gift he doesn't know what he's done to deserve - but is happy and thankful for nonetheless.

That's why his worry about not being straight never quite managed to take hold. Shuuzou knows just how lucky he is to have parents like his.

Thankfully before either of them get too sappy, his dad goes on, "I can't believe I don't have any advice for you when it comes to boys." He looks ridiculously put out by that, like someone has done him a serious crime by not imparting him the necessary experience to help Shuuzou with his boy troubles.

"...Yeah, how terrible," Shuuzou comments, dryly.

His dad harrumphs. "I'll have you know my advice is priceless."

"You mean worthless."

"Why, you-!" His dad reaches over and begins tickling him mercilessly, a tactic that never fails to get Shuuzou squirming and laughing helplessly. His dad's a damn cheater who knows all his weak spots.

"Hey, stop!" he tries, to no avail, uselessly batting his dad's hands away.

"Maybe next time you'll rethink poking fun at your old man!"

"Never!"

"And here I thought we were bi-buddies," Dad pouts, finally pulling away.

He cringes with his entire body. "Dad, that's the worst thing you've ever said to me."

"Son, you're bi-reaking my heart."

"Ugh, gross. That wasn't even a pun!"

His dad wipes away a fake tear. "My own son has rejected me! I can't go on. Good-bi cruel world."

He covers his ears and yells, drowning out the horrible things coming out of his father's mouth. They don't deserve to be called words. "This is cruel and unusual punishment!"

He can barely make out the sound of his dad's laughter over his own voice. What did he do to deserve a parent like this?

(Something incredible, probably.)

VII.
His mom seeks him out later, well after the point Shuuzou had actually needed someone to rescue him, but he can hardly hold it against her. She's had to put up with his dad and his horrible humor for far longer than him, after all.

"Boys? Really?" She asks, and when she pauses pointedly, they can both clearly hear Dad singing a pop song loudly and off-key all the way from the kitchen - likely accompanied by awful old people dancing. He's witnessed it before. Never again.

He snorts. "Not like I chose this," he points out. More like his feelings rammed into him like a damn rampaging bull.

She smiles. "Just tell me he's not like your dad. I don't think I could take two of 'em."

He thinks back to Haizaki, prickly, quick to anger, and a mouth like a sailor- and has to laugh at the thought of comparing him to his dad. "...He's more like you, actually," he says, just now realizing. She even used to lead a gang. What the hell?!

The look of horror on his face makes his mom burst into laughter. She ruffles his hair and says, smirking and smug, "Good taste, Shuuzou. You should definitely get someone like me."

He groans theatrically, and she rolls her eyes and shoves him. "Ungrateful shit," she huffs, feigning anger.

"Love you, too, Mom."

"Sure you do."

**VIII.**

As expected, Haizaki doesn't magically gain the ability to read minds or somehow realize Shuuzou's intentions with the stupid coupon, so Shuuzou doesn't get his date and doesn't feel confident enough to try again any time soon.

Funnily enough, his failed ploy actually reels in a different first year, and no, he doesn't particularly care for the irony. At least Kuroko Tetsuya is quiet and polite (...mostly) and not prone to giving Shuuzou headaches, which is more than he can say for the other two assholes.

Needless to say, Kuroko is his favorite.

His jealousy is ignored for the most part - because Nijimura isn't naive enough to listen to the insistent, greedy voice in his head a second time. He's too sensible, too level-headed. He can recognize the absurdity of the feeling and dismiss the urges.

That doesn't mean he doesn't feel it. The fact that Kise has the gall to tease him about it just makes it worse. Well, okay, not worse - because he can tell Kise is genuinely rooting for him, and it's harmless teasing besides - but it's mildly annoying all the same.

It starts with pictures. Kise blows up his phone with pictures of Haizaki doing the cutest shit. Asleep and drooling a little. Unaware of a piece of rice stuck to the corner of his mouth as he argues with Kuroko. Shots of him smiling and blushing and smirking and even glaring at the camera.

The worst offenders are the ones of him and Haizaki together. Kise manages to capture way too many photos of Haizaki reacting adorably to just about anything Shuuzou says or does- or maybe it's just that Haizaki is entirely too obvious. Honestly, Haizaki's lack of self-awareness is on par with the most oblivious of shoujo protagonists, and it's as endearing as it is frustrating.
Then again, Shuuzou finds himself reacting to Kise's teasing just as often, so maybe they're both just a couple of morons. Takes a moron to like a moron, probably.

Next comes borderline romantic gestures right in front of him, like playing with Haizaki's hair or draping his whole body over him right after Haizaki shakes off Shuuzou - all with a wink and a mischievous grin on his face.

And like always when it comes to Haizaki, Shuuzou butts in when he otherwise wouldn't and breaks up all the PDA as Kise watches on with laughter in his eyes.

Haizaki never catches on, and Shuuzou is grateful for that at least. Who knows what the little shit would say if he knew Shuuzou reacted so badly to stuff like that? He's already got one too cocky first year pushing his buttons. No need for another.

Why did he give up delinquency, again?

There's no third thing until there is. Kise develops a crush on Haizaki, and all that other stuff comes to a grinding halt.

It's not really a surprise, and maybe that's why the jealousy has persisted since the beginning. Shuuzou's instincts are rarely ever wrong, after all.

Suddenly, Kise is shooting him guilty looks when he flirts with Haizaki or holds his hand (because there's Meaning to it now), and he ramps up the cuddling with Shuuzou and Kuroko to make up for it.

It'd be funny if it weren't so sad. Because Kise doesn't want to ruin their friendship and is very clearly desperately trying to hang onto it despite their warring interest, and Shuuzou? Well...

"Are you okay with this, Senpai?" Kuroko asks him without inflection, implying he wouldn't judge either way. Good kid.

Shuuzou smiles, turning his attention back to Haizaki valiantly attempting to drown Kise with a water bottle. "I've always liked competition," he eventually says, and it's true. He lives for it.

And maybe he would never have imagined he'd be in a situation where he actually has a rival in love of all things, but that's life, isn't it? It's his life anyway, and Shuuzou's never been one to bow out, even when the competition is tough. Even when the competition is a friend.

"I was hoping there'd be a duel," Kuroko laments, lips twitching at Kise's flailing and shrieking. "One where you'd declare passionately 'Haizaki is mine, you fool!' and then battle Kise-kun with a sword as Haizaki-kun swoons in the background."

Shuuzou snorts. "Not a basketball duel?" He asks, quirking a brow.

Kuroko shakes his head, proclaiming sagely, "Swords are more dramatic."

"And we'd want it to be super dramatic," he agrees dryly. He then adds, "You know I'd kick his ass, right?"

What is undoubtedly a smirk forms on Kuroko's otherwise blank face. "I would be an impartial judge, Nijimura-senpai." After a moment: "But yes, obviously."

He can't help laughing at that. There's a reason Kuroko is his favorite. "Haizaki had better swoon when I win his hand," he says, laughing again at the image.
"I would imagine that simply discovering Senpai and Kise-kun like him romantically would cause some minor swooning."


Kuroko hums and doesn't answer.

It's just as well because at that moment, Kise escapes Haizaki's clutches and runs over to them to find refuge behind Shuuzou's back.

"Save me, Nijimuracchi!" He cries, hands fisting in Shuuzou's windbreaker.

Haizaki stomps over, trying and failing to look intimidating. "Give it up, asshole, and accept your fate!"

"What, my life?!" Kise ducks behind Shuuzou's shoulder and out of range. "Haizakicchi is too cruel!"

"Oi, when did I agree to become your meat-shield?" Shuuzou demands, glancing back at the cowering, sopping wet first year.

"I'm too pretty to die!" Kise exclaims, which doesn't have anything to do with what he asked but is probably true. He bats his eyelashes at Shuuzou. "Please protect me, Taichou!"

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not even your captain," he grumbles but dutifully turns to Haizaki and crosses his arms. "What's your beef with him this time, brat?"

"You didn't have to add that last bit, asshole!" Haizaki scowls. Under Shuuzou's expectant stare, he flushes and reveals, embarassed, "He fucking called me cute." He wrinkles his nose (cute!) at the word, disgusted.

"You are!" floats up from behind him, defiant. Kise's sticking to his guns, apparently.

"Shut it, dick! No one asked you!"

Shuuzou smirks at Haizaki, loving the way it causes him to flush deeper and says, "You are cute. The most adorable first year I've ever seen. He's just stating the obvious, so there's no need to argue about it, idiot."

Wow. Who knew a human being could look so much like a tomato?

"Argh!" The tomato yells and lunges.

Shuuzou laughs and catches both of his wrists, enjoying even this small amount of skin-on-skin contact. "So easy to rile."

"Shut up!" Haizaki snarls, his gray eyes glaring daggers at Shuuzou, mouth turned down into a pout, and fluffy hair framing his face flatteringly.

He really is a cute little shit, isn't he?

If nothing else, at least Kise has good taste.

Chapter End Notes
ugh, yes, there will be a part 3. this is already getting out of hand, but next chapter will be the last in niji's pov. sorry to anyone eager to get back to haizaki and the plot.

- Niji is demiromantic, which is why he developed feelings for Haizaki after they became friends. He just doesn't know the term for it. His dad is bisexual/biromantic. (I want to include more sexualities and romantic orientations than just gay or straight.)

- I thought about Niji's dad (Nijimura Hiroto) a lot, and in the end, it made sense to me that Niji would be close to him. Admittedly, I kinda based him on the kind of dad I think Namikaze Minato (from Naruto) would have had he been given the chance - a ditzy, doting, loving and happy dad. Who is also super in love with his awesome wife. (Nijimura Mei)

- yes the lines "she made me a father" and "you should get someone like me" are paraphrased lines from naruto, shhh

- I know that coming out can be and is a very painful, terrifying, or even life-threatening experience for a lot of people, especially if you're surrounded by bigots and those bigots include your family, and I mean no disrespect to anyone by writing such an easy acceptance. As I said above, I based it on my own experience, which was only so because I'm very fortunate to have parents who support me - even if they don't fully understand me - and because it fit with the characters I created and the story I'm trying to tell.

But I want to be clear: this is not me perpetuating the idea that anyone has to come out at all. You don't owe anyone an explanation, and you're not keeping secrets or lying by omission. It's your business, no one else’s. You should only share something so personal if that’s what you want to do and if it poses no threat to your safety or emotional and mental well-being, not because you think you should or have to. Hope I explained that well enough.
Thank you all so much for the love and support! I appreciate every single comment, bookmark, and kudos I get, and I'm so incredibly happy you guys are enjoying this story. I had some trouble with this chapter, evidenced by the scenes ending sometimes abruptly and the long wait, and I'm excited to get back to Haizaki next chapter. Sorry Niji, but my trash son needs me!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kuroko no Basket.

Next Update: December 15, 2017

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IX.

"I'm gonna kill him."

His dad laughs, despite Shuuzou's very real, very murderous rage (envy), and turns down the TV to ask, "Which one of your friends is it this time?"

"The soon-to-be-dead one," he mutters, glaring down at his phone like he's trying to destroy it with his gaze alone. He certainly feels vexed enough to try.

"Very helpful. Thank you, Shuuzou," Dad retorts, enjoying Shuuzou's suffering just a little too much. "What did this boy do?"

He grimaces, and the image of Kise (in a damn nurse hat!) and Haizaki alone in his room flashes through his mind mockingly.

"He's taunting me," Shuuzou reveals, shooting his father a sharp glance to nip any smart remarks in the bud. Wisely, his dad just smiles and nods, prompting Shuuzou to continue, "We like the same person, and he's basically saying, your move." Shuuzou grips his phone harder. "Pisses me off, cocky little shit."

"In that case," Dad says, in a tone Shuuzou hates because he knows exactly what his dad's gonna say, "what's your next move?"

He knew it. Shuuzou groans and drops his head onto the table with a loud thud, narrowly missing his phone and glass of tea. "I don't know."

"You're overthinking this," he says, the fucking hypocrite. "Just go and ask the boy you like out on a date."

Shuuzou turns his head just enough to give his dad the look that deserves. "I don't want to hear that from you."

He has the grace to smile sheepishly, at least, but he doesn't take it back. "I'm just telling you what your mom did. You don't just look like her, kiddo. You've got your mom's fearlessness and her
bullheaded stubbornness." Here, he smiles, bright and adoring and proud and says, "Even if you doubt yourself, I never will. And whatever you decide to do, I'll cheer you on, okay?"

Warmed to his very core, Shuuzou turns away, hiding his smile. "There's no way you're real," he says, finding it difficult to stay mad - as is his dad's intention. 'Cheer you on?' What is he, a Shoujo protagonist? "No one can spout such sappy lines and mean them. What the hell, Dad."

That gets more laughter. "You sound like your mother." He mimics her, scowling, "What fucking fairy tale world did you fall out of, Hiro?"

Shuuzou snorts, rolling his eyes as he sits up and leans back against the couch, happy to change the subject even for a little while. "I'll never understand how you and Mom ended up together. I mean, she lead a gang, and you were just some regular high school-er."

At this, Dad grows fucking starry-eyed and begins to reminisce, "It all started when Mae saved me from some other school's gang at the beginning of my third year. I was starstruck the moment I laid eyes on her. Your mother was - and still is - radiant and powerful, and-"

Shuuzou waves his hand dismissively, hastily getting rid of the slightly faded cut scenes that had begun to appear alongside familiar music. "I don't need a flashback arc! You've already told me a million times."

He wiggles his eyebrows, ugh. "Then you already know what you need to do."

"Like hell I do. Ow!" Shuuzou yelps, clamping a hand over the back of his head as he whirls around to glare at his mother, who had apparently just gotten home- and decided the first thing she had to do was antagonize her oldest son. "What was that for?"

She smirks down at him. "Stop bullying your dad, runt."

"My savior," his dad says, somehow meaning it, delighted to see her, as usual. "You always show up just in time, love."

"And I always will." That said, she walks around the couch to flop down beside Dad, propping her head on his lap and stretching her legs out over the cushions. She then grabs his collar and and pulls him down all too willingly for a kiss.

Shuuzou slaps a hand over his eyes and makes a noise in protest, disgusted as always by their brazen lovey-dovey shit. "Why," he complains. "You're too old for this crap!"

They both laugh, his dad's soft and his mom's rough around the edges, and Shuuzou rolls his eyes again, exasperated.

"This is the kinda stuff you want to do with that boy of yours, right?" Mom asks, blunt. "Take note, Shuu."

He groans louder, praying to any deity that might be listening in the hopes they'll save him from this nightmare.

"I think we're embarrassing him, Mae."

"Nah, that's just how teenagers communicate."

An amused exhale. "Ah, yes, the classic caveman grunting phase. I can't say I ever experienced it myself."
"That's 'cause your pansy ass only ever had archery on your mind. The rest of us normal people were too busy drooling over our classmates to have brain space for anything else."

Sheepish chuckle. "You got me there."

Shuuzou closes his eyes and tips his head back. "If I can't see them, they're not really there," he mutters.

"He's so dramatic," his mom comments.

"He gets that from you, dear."

"Say that again, you-!"

"It's a compliment! You know I love everything about you."

"I'm sure you'll love this fist up your-"

"Haha, forgive me!"

"That's more like it."

Shuuzou abruptly stands, grabbing his tea and downing the last of it. "If you guys don't have anything helpful to say, I'm gonna go angst in my room in peace," he says, wiping his mouth and then pocketing his phone.

"What's your deal?" His mom asks, quirking a brow at him.

He frowns, not wanting to say it out loud a second time (he's not usually this prone to idiotic situations, damn it), but luckily, his dad senses his hesitation and summarizes, "Shuuzou wants to ask his crush out but doesn't know how."

"Why did you have to say it like that?" He hisses, making his father laugh.

"And you can't just ask him because?" She asks, expectantly, and Shuuzou can't help the messed up mix of emotions that well up under that expectation.

"I'm not you," he says, quietly, frustrated. "And Haizaki's not Dad, and this isn't as easy-" He cuts himself off with a sigh, not liking the pained expression that takes over his dad's face. Not like it's his fault Shuuzou's gone and gotten involved in a stupid love triangle. "Never mind. I'm going to bed early."

Before he can make his escape, his mom calls out, "Get dressed, Shuu. We're going out."

He wants to tell her no, but she's using That Voice, the one that brokers no arguments, the very same one Shuuzou is learning to use as captain, and he's helpless to do anything but listen. With a huff, he quickly gets dressed and then meets his mother by the front door.

"You got your phone?" She asks, eying him, considering.

Trying not to be petulant, he manages to keep his tone neutral when he answers, "Yes."

"And your wallet? You got money?"

"Yes, to both," he says, wondering where she's going with this.
She smiles. "Good." Then she opens the door and shoves him outside. He stumbles forward but manages to right himself. When he turns around to ask what that was all about, she beats him to the punch. "Ask that boy out. Take him to that ramen place you like."

Feeling inexplicably betrayed (he only told his dad about his original plan), Shuuzou demands, "He told you?"

"Hiro tells me everything. You know how he is." She rolls her eyes, exactly the same way Shuuzou does. It's always irritating having it aimed at him. "Quit being a chickenshit. Or don't. Either way, I'm not letting you back in until eight." That said, she shuts the door, and even from outside, he can hear the lock clicking into place.

Just like that, Shuuzou's been kicked out, albeit temporarily.

"I hate you guys," he groans, storming off in the general direction of Haizaki's house. Now that it's come to this, he has to do something, even if it would be satisfying to do the opposite of what his mom wants him to do. Unfortunately, he's not capable of being that petty, and she's right about him chickening out.

He's sick of it.

X.

He has time to think (stew) on his way over.

Kise was probably legitimately concerned about Haizaki being sick, but he wouldn't rule out the sneaky shit using this as an opportunity to get closer to Haizaki, either. Kise is good at multi-tasking that way. He's always half-sincere, half-bullshitting, or some other mix of the two, and that's why it's hard to get mad- or, actually stay mad at him.

And he uses that ability to his full advantage because he's a cunning little shit.

Shuuzou sighs, but his mood lifts considerably when Haizaki finally opens the door.

...Only it's not Haizaki. Or well, it's not his Haizaki.

"Huh," Haizaki Shion says, unsurprised and unimpressed. "Figures you'd show up after that other kid cozied up to my brother all day."

Caught, Shuuzou can only stare at him in irritation coupled with embarrassment.

The older Haizaki sighs, although a corner of his mouth quirks up in amusement. "Don't give me that look. You're not slick."

He leans against the doorway and crosses his arms, and Shuuzou keeps his face neutral, having expected some sort of talk with this guy eventually. He can't help tensing up, though, and trust the brother of Haizaki to notice.

"Relax. I'm not gonna give you the third degree. I know you're a good kid, and it's not like Shougo would appreciate it. Anyway-" he points a thumb behind him, "I should be the one apologizing to you. Chances are my dumb lil' bro's gonna be the one breaking your heart. He's not the brightest crayon in the box, if you get my meaning. Even now, he doesn't know how you guys feel. Honestly, you're probably better off not even trying."

"With all due respect," Shuuzou cuts in, fiercely indignant, "even if he sucks at recognizing people's
feelings, or if he *never* gets it, he's *worth* it. If I didn't already think so, I wouldn't be standing here listening to you."

He considers just shoving past Shion or calling for Haizaki to come down himself for maybe half a second- until Shion chuckles, and Shuuzou realizes Shion's regarding him with *approval.*

Bastard.

"...You're not slick," he parrots, irritated he was tricked so easily. Twice in one day, even. "Not giving a talk, my ass."

Shion shrugs, unrepentant. "I had to make sure." He smiles and says, "Even so, I knew you were a good kid. Take care of him for me, okay?" He lays a hand on Shuuzou's shoulder and squeezes just a little too hard, still smiling as he warns, cheerfully, "Hurt him, and I'll make you regret it, understand?"

Ignoring the chill that may or may not run down his spine at those ominous words, Shuuzou nods, adding resolutely, "Of course."

"Good." Shion lets go, and when he turns around, Shuuzou reaches up to rub at his shoulder. "Shou-chan! You have a visitor!" He yells. "Better get down here before I start telling them humiliating stuff about you!" He waits a beat and then adds, "Oops. Too late!"

"You asshole!" Haizaki yells back, making his brother snort.

He glances at Shuuzou and says, "He'll be down in a sec. See ya." With another creepy smile, he shuts the door and presumably walks off to antagonize the younger Haizaki.

Shuuzou smiles a little at the arguing he hears right before the door opens again, and his Haizaki spots him waiting on the doorstep.

"What are you doing here?" He demands, gaping.

Shuuzou feels a smirk pull at the corners of his mouth, one that only grows when Haizaki takes it as a challenge and glares at him. So predictable. "I'm picking you up. Let's go."

Puzzled, Haizaki asks, "Wha-? Wait, why? Where are we going?"

There's no way in hell he's explaining that. How do people in movies ask each other out? It's fucking nerve-wracking, god. "Stop asking so many questions, and just do it."

"Don't tell me what to do," he snaps.

Why can't this guy ever be obedient?

He digs his knuckles in Haizaki's thick skull, scowling. "Why are you so damn difficult? Listen to your captain, damn it!" He orders, never afraid to pull rank. He earned the position. Might as well use it.

Eventually, Haizaki gives in and goes back inside to grab his stuff and put on his shoes, and Shuuzou lets himself feel excited at the date they're about to go on- inwardly. Wouldn't do to weird Haizaki out anymore than he already has, no matter how tempting it is.

He wants this date to go smoothly, after all.

XI.
He did it. He took Haizaki on a date, and he confessed!

Well, he couldn't bring himself to actually say the words, but he got his feelings across.

He even kissed Haizaki.

He feels his face heat up, just remembering the act itself -

gently turning his head, lips pressed against warm and soft skin-

Haizaki's little gasp of air, his red, tomato-like expression as Shuuzou pulled away, smirking-
cuter than Shuuzou's ever seen him, so flustered and confused but realization dawning like the sun-

He covers his face with a hand, glad there's practically no one around to see him blushing like a- like exactly what he is, really. A teenager who got to kiss his crush.

"Ahh," he says, quiet but with feeling. "I'm so happy."

There are nerves, of course, a voice in his head pointing out all the things that could go wrong like it's got nothing better to do, but Shuuzou rarely gives said voice any attention, never really entertains the dumb stuff it tries to make him believe, and now it's even easier when his mind's filled to the brim with Haizaki, Haizaki, Haizaki.

Good things, and not just how adorable he is. Things he likes about Haizaki, things he's sure the boy himself doesn't see or realize.

Haizaki's picky about who he befriends and constantly wonders why, exactly, they want to befriend him, but to people in that exclusive group, he's surprisingly kind.

He doesn't have to coach Kuroko, has absolutely no obligation to help a second-stringer when doing so could either turn out to be fruitless or jeopardize his own spot on the team. No one else would bother (aside from Aomine Daiki, apparently, who is special in his own way), and that Haizaki is, that he's spending so much time training Kuroko, that he really believes Kuroko can make it to first string - it's something, you know?

And then there's his relationship with Kise, which is still platonic, despite Kise's best efforts. Haizaki gives Kise so much leeway, it's bordering on ridiculous. All the touching and teasing and hand-holding and whining and smiles. It's all stuff he doesn't let anyone else get away with, but with Kise, it's different. He doesn't mind if it's Kise.

And on the other hand-

Kise doesn't care about people. Or, okay, he only cares about a few specific people, and to him, anyone not in that inner circle doesn't really matter at all. They might as well not exist. Shuuzou has personally witnessed Kise go from coolly chatting with a classmate with painted on expressions (and clearly wondering when said person will leave him alone already) to thawing and warmly, cheerfully greeting Haizaki or Kuroko when he spots them. Has seen it more than once, because much like Kuroko, Shuuzou can be quiet and unobtrusive when he wants to be.

It's like watching him come alive. Or maybe observing an excellent actor tuck away his uglier self neatly out of sight.

Regardless, the point is- Haizaki instinctively understands that Kise needs to always be touching or dramatically bemoaning his spilled tea or something - because otherwise it would be false smiles and
careful distance and hidden everything, which is unhealthy on *so many levels* - and he listens and argues and scowls when Kise slings an arm around his shoulders, but he bears with it, with all of it, and doesn't once *actually* complain or ask him to stop.

Shuuzou has a gut feeling that Kise has been asked to stop - to not be himself - entirely too many times. To have someone accept him wholeheartedly, well, it's no wonder Kise has latched on and refused to let go.

He doesn't have to do any of that, but he does. Even if Shuuzou can't understand why, even if he's sure there's some ulterior motive behind it, he can't help but find it admirable. Can't help but *like* this kind side of him, can't help but like his obliviousness, his weakness to dirty jokes and Kise in general, his fumbling attempts to reassure and reach out, his awkwardness.

His new favorite thing concerning Haizaki, however, is definitely how easy it is to make him flustered.

Shuuzou smirks, imagining that last glimpse of Haizaki's red, embarrassed face as he opens the thankfully unlocked door and steps into his home, pointedly ignoring the amused and knowing looks his parents send him as he walks past them and heads straight for his room. Once there, he considers sending Kise a gloating text, maybe even just a kissing or winking emoji to get back at him for the unsubtle bragging, but in the end, he decides not to.

Something this special he'd like to keep to himself, at least for a little while. He touches his lips again, feeling his own wide smile, and thinks to himself that this night wasn't bad at all.

There's no way he saying as much to his mom, though.

(The next morning, he makes her coffee the way she likes it and leaves it on the counter with a note that reads, simply: thanks.

She sends him a text that says, bluntly: not bad squirt.

He's not sure if she means the coffee or his date, but he rather suspects it's both.)

**XII.**

Haizaki is avoiding him.

He watches, unimpressed, as said boy practically races out the door in his haste to escape the gym and more specifically, Shuuzou. Watches and doesn't try to stop him- because Haizaki deserves time to think and to come up with an answer, even if every day he carefully turns away from Shuuzou and ignores his very presence makes him want to break something.

Shuuzou is incredibly impatient for some kind of resolution, yes, but he's also vaguely aware that his tendency to intimidate others into doing what he wants would not work well in this scenario. He's not the love rival in a crappy teen movie, okay? He can wait, even if not graciously.

Then three days go by, in which Haizaki doesn't even contact his friends and has the gall to skip practice, even going so far as to *jump out a window-* and Shuuzou's patience snaps, and he corners Haizaki during lunch on the fourth day, entirely unsympathetic to the momentary panic on his face and honestly just irritated now.

"You've been avoiding me. Why?" He asks, quietly, staring intently - at Haizaki's profile because Haizaki won't look at him - and willing him to answer even though Shuuzou can guess. He wants Haizaki to be the one to say it.
Distinctly uncomfortable, Haizaki nonetheless says, "I didn't know what to say to you."

He waits for elaboration, but he should have known better. Trying to get a straight answer out of Haizaki is like pulling teeth.

"And now?" Shuuzou prompts, watching Haizaki's face for anything that might give away what he's feeling, easy to do when he's got Haizaki squarely between his arms.

He finds it hard to enjoy being so close to Haizaki considering the heavy conversation they're having (and what the outcome could mean for them and him and these thoughts), but even so, his dumb teenage brain takes the time to appreciate the view. Haizaki really is good-looking once you get past the bad attitude and constant scowling. Not Kise pretty, but handsome. Cute. Utterly adorable.

Unaware of Shuuouzou's internal struggle, Haizaki frowns, brow furrowing, his expression akin to a doctor delivering bad news to a patient, and sure enough, his next words are: "I don't return your feelings."

That... really fucking stings. He- really, really didn't expect that. Ha.

Somehow, he's not surprised things only get worse from there.

XIII.

"Are you moping again?" Takara asks, sounding less than impressed.

Shuuzou frowns at her, only becoming more annoyed when she and Tatsuo share a Look in response. "I just got my heart broken. I'm allowed to mope," he says, eyebrow twitching.

If anything, their twin expressions grow even more dubious. Tatsuo counters with, "Aren't you too old for that, Nii-san?"

"Aren't you too young to be questioning me, brat?" He snarks back, fondly remembering the days his precious, little siblings looked up to him and admired him- days that have apparently long since passed. He quirks a brow at them. "Since when did you two get so uppity, anyway?"

Smirking - an expression they learned from him, the shits - Takara says, "Since our dumb older brother fell in love with Zaki-nii and has been acting like those dumb, old ladies in Papa's favorite movies!"

Each word lodges an arrow in his chest, hitting the mark with brutal accuracy, making gasp in pain.

"Nii-san used to be so cool," Tatsuo tells him with a disappointed shake of his head, landing the final, fatal blow.

Defeated, Shuuuzou can only weakly grasp at them, narrowly missing the two as they step out of range. "You little hellions! I can't believe anyone thinks you're well-behaved!" He shouts.

They put on a good act for strangers and family friends, but he knows all too well it's bullshit. Tatsuo and Takara learned pretty quickly that pretending to be cutey, little angels would endear them to people and probably net them money and sweets and stuff. The fact that it works and no one realizes they're actually spawns of Satan just goes to show that life really isn't fair.

On cue, they both pull down an eyelid and stick their tongues out at him. "Nyeh~!"

"Monstrous, little-!"
Before he can get up and deal out just desserts, they wise up, Takara grabbing Tatsuo's hand and hightailing it out of there, mocking laughter trailing behind them.

"This isn't over!" He yells after them, flopping back against his bed.

"Like we're scared of you," Tatsuo taunts - from behind the safety of the closed door. He can hear their giggles disappear along with their footsteps as they run away.

Shuuzou rolls his eyes, snorting, before letting his head roll back to stare at the ceiling.

They're not wrong. It's kind of pathetic to still be moping hours after Haizaki rejected him. It's not in his personality to stay hung up on something for so long, as his initial feelings usually dwindle quickly after they appear. It's hard to stay so angry or upset all the time; not even Haizaki, who so likes to pretend, can keep that up constantly.

Even so, this kind of thing probably merits a grace period or something, right? He really likes Haizaki, and it hurts, damn it.

He throws an arm over his eyes, sighing. Then again, he's just stuck on this because there's something more pressing to consider, and he really, really doesn't want to contemplate it. Or even acknowledge it. Better to pretend nothing was ever said, right?

Another deep sigh.

...He's not going to be able to get over this until he does give it some thought, though. Ugh.

So.

So Haizaki thinks he's some sort of... psychic. More accurately, he claims he can see the Future (which absolutely deserves to be capitalized in this situation), and because of that... he can't date Shuuzou.

Well, okay, there was some mention of him feeling like he's too old... for Shuuzou... because of the dreams he has... of the Future. And because of that, they can't date.

Shuuzou rubs his temples, his head aching just trying to process such a ludicrous notion - and how Haizaki even came to think such a thing.

The worst part isn't even that Haizaki believes what he said or that something as silly as dreams of the Future are why he decided he can't date Shuuzou.

No, the absolute worst part of all of this is that Shuuzou believes it- all of it. He knows it ridiculous and impossible and insane. He knows that.

Honestly, most of him is screaming, 'He's obviously crazy! What the hell is there to think about?!'

Ever sensible, ever grounded, something like a- a super power is almost too much to believe, almost too much to take.

...Almost.

That same reasonable voice in his head that very calmly deduced Shuuzou's feelings for Haizaki has already put together all of the little things that didn't really make sense about him, all the mood swings and the sudden shift in behavior and the insistence on helping people with no discernible personal benefit. Has put it together, side by side, compared it to what he knows now, and... it makes
sense, okay?

And-

When Haizaki explained everything, Shuuzou was at first shocked, confused, and more than a little dubious, but that was real fear in Haizaki's eyes. Real fear, real desperation to be believed, real resignation that he would not be-and very real relief and surprise when Shuuzou went against every expectation (including his own) and didn't immediately denounce him as a liar or a lunatic.

When Shuuzou said, "I believe you," he meant it, and even with all of this time to go back on his decision, to rethink it, he hasn't changed his mind.

Shuuzou believes Haizaki can see the Future some-fucking-how, and he'll stand by that, even when common sense dictates otherwise.

Huh.

He smiles, glad to have sorted that out. It's a huge weight off his mind. And now that he's sure it's the truth (or some form of it; he can't help but feel Haizaki wasn't totally forthcoming), he can revel in the fact that Haizaki willingly shared something so personal with him. A secret he's certain Haizaki hasn't shared with anyone but him.

Even after being rejected, he can find satisfaction in that. Besides, he thinks, smirking, was it really a rejection?

Shuuzou had been prepared to back off utterly on the off chance he was wrong and Haizaki didn't harbor any feelings for him, but that's not the case now, is it? He threw Shuuzou for a loop with the dreams, so he wasn't really able to question it, but-

Haizaki's twelve - soon to be thirteen - and no amount of visions or Future knowledge will suddenly make him older. Maybe he's matured a bit, but Haizaki's reasoning is stupid, and Shuuzou refuses to accept it.

He'll just have to woo him over or something, make him realize that himself, and then Shuuzou can finally have his cliche-ass love story.

He laughs, happy to have a plan, and gets up to enact his revenge on the little monsters he calls his siblings now that he's no longer moping.

(Soon, childish screams of terror accompanied by maniacal laughter can be heard emanating from the Nijimura household. Unfortunately for the victims, none of the neighbors bat an eye, all too used to such an occurrence.)

Chapter End Notes

i wasn't able to cover everything i wanted to, but i think it's high time we get back to the main story. maybe i'll write up some extra scenes and post them to the blog i made for this fic? if i do, i'll let you guys know.

- tatsuo and takara act exactly as i did as a child. sweet & polite to everyone but my brothers. ;)
- nijimura is horribly wrong in his assessment up there since haizaki is mentally an adult. ofc haizaki will have no romantic relationships until niji & kise are actually of age.

- wanted to write niji's pov of the date, but i think it works better from haizaki's.

- niji & his mom have a weird dynamic where they either argue vehemently or get along like a house on fire. there is no in between. niji & his dad never really argue bc hiro is impossible to get mad at. don't let his and mae's 'bickering' up there fool you. they play-fight, but it's never serious.

- as for niji believing haizaki, well, he is a kid & i think kids find it easier to believe fantastical stuff than adults. plus, the alternative is that haizaki is actually insane & it's not like niji would want to believe that.

- someone asked for shion giving the shovel talk a while back. there you go. ;)

- someone also asked for flustered niji which you sort of got with him blushing & gushing over the kiss?
LXXXIII. July 31, 2012 - Tuesday

"I've thought this for a while now," Nijimura begins, choosing to loom over him rather than sit down, brows furrowed and corners of his mouth turned down, "but there's something you're not telling me, isn't there? I just accepted the future dreams thing - even though it's impossible - because you really seemed like you believed it, and the other alternative is that you've actually lost your mind. Even now, I'm not inclined to call you crazy because despite the impossibility of you being some sort of psychic, you're obviously sane."

He runs a hand through his hair with a sigh and admits, "Well, I'm no expert, but that's what I believe. I believe you, okay? And this- whatever happened back there, with you having a breakdown before even learning just why your mom was admitted to the hospital, and running off in a blind panic into fucking traffic-" He says very pointedly, very exasperatedly, and Shougo wilts a little more with each word. "-and then, getting ridiculously guilty over something you couldn't possibly have predicted or prevented, well, my first goddamn thought was, 'This must have something to do with his dreams.'"

He doesn't outright say it, but his tone and expression do a pretty good job of communicating his utter disbelief and resignation that such an outrageous conclusion is his go-to answer for Shougo's weird behavior.

Shougo doesn't blame him. If he were any less grateful for this second chance or any more inclined to question his good fortune rather than leaving well enough alone (aside from occasional complaints and anxious, angry griping when things don't go his way, he has yet to actually spend any time at all wondering the how and why of his peculiar situation), he'd probably have had a harder time coming to terms with things. Any normal person might have spent their first day - probably a few days - in the past in denial and/or thinking they must be dreaming or delusional.

But where would that leave them, him? If he's dreaming, it's a damn long one and way too detailed to be anything his brain created, but if he is, he'll eventually wake up and have lost nothing for his efforts. Pain hasn't worked and neither has sleeping, so he'd just have to live his life and wait to wake up naturally.

If he's delusional, then he's left with the same options. It's worse for his family, certainly, but he won't waste time worrying about that because he doesn't know for sure. He'd just have to deal and hope he gets better or- well, hopefully he'd just get better.
Maybe it was just twelve year old Shougo influencing him, or hell, maybe it was the childish part of him that still wanted to believe in magic and fairy tales and wishes coming true, the part he buried along with everything else that could have hurt him (from mocking and jeers or else his own disappointment when he foolishly got his hopes up only to have them crushed by an uncaring, unrelenting reality.)

Whatever it was, Shougo skipped all the steps in between and went straight to acceptance. He's been changing his own future ever since.

He was, of course, not surprised by his own possibly stupid decision. There was only ever one option for him, and that was the one that involved him saving his mother. There was, frankly, nothing else to consider.

Nijimura and Kagami buying his future bullshit - even if it's true, it's still bullshit - just like that? Just because Shougo 'looked like he believed it?' With no real proof or evidence?

Yeah, that's what's crazy. Super fucking crazy. He wouldn't believe anyone trying to sell the same story. He would listen and take it as someone fucking with him and would probably instigate a fight if said someone kept insisting it was true even after Shougo called them on it.

It'd be the same whether he was twenty-two or twelve, changed man or not, and perhaps that says something about him - or something about Nijimura and Kagami.

Like that they're fucking nuts. Then again, out of all of them, who isn't?

Regardless, he can't fault Nijimura for any of it, can't even feel a little indignant or miffed that he's being cornered here and now, even if he's inclined to be. Because even when confronting him for answers, Nijimura isn't dismissing him or his crazy ass story, isn't using the holes in it to call bullshit or anything, is actually reassuring Shougo at the same time as he's asking for more information, and that's-

Well, it's stupid and naive and kind, and riding off his high, positive emotions from the previous few heart-to-hearts, he can't even work up so much as a scowl.

"So it is," Nijimura observes, seeing something of an answer in Shougo's expression or possibly his silence. "Just- be honest with me, alright? What aren't you telling me?"

"Be honest, huh?" He says, smiling slightly, unable to help it, though it's bittersweet. "Feel like that's all I've been doing lately." Seriously, he's bared his soul to everyone in this group at least once, something they all reciprocated, and Shougo can't tell if they're all stupid and naive too, even if he's still so, so flattered and pleased or if maybe they're privy to parts of him even he doesn't know.

"I can do that, I guess," he acquiesces, lifting his head and looking right into Nijimura's startled slate eyes. "I lied to you, sorta. I don't dream about the future. I lived it. And then one day, I woke up in the past, here in my old body, and I've been changing stuff ever since."

Eyes narrowed, Nijimura says, after a long moment, "So that's why." Which could mean a million different things, so Shougo doesn't try to guess. "Huh. So in the future, your mom...?" He trails off meaningfully, gently and Shougo mentally shudders at the implication there.

"She collapsed. From overwork," he reveals quickly, not wanting to even briefly entertain the thought of his mother anything but alive and breathing. "It was my fault," he says next, tone allowing no argument. Nijimura frowns, looking frustrated, but he doesn't try to refute it. Good.

"But this was from heatstroke," he says instead, apparently drawing his own conclusions. "You're
worried this happened because you're changing things?"

He shrugs. "I know that's stupid, alright? Kagami already got onto me for thinking like that."

"Kagami?" Nijimura repeats, sharply, and Shougo immediately realizes he fucked up. "He knows?"

He actually feels his brain stutter and stall out. "Uhhhhh-

"What- Why would you-? He's not even-! Ugh," he groans, slapping a hand over his face in exasperation - whether at himself or Shougo, he's not sure. "That's not important right now." He asks, visibly changing tracks to pursue this line of conversation, "So are there any other things you want to stop from happening?"

His mind goes straight to the Miracles - specifically Daiki, who just confessed that Shougo helped him, albeit indirectly, Ryouta, who is only interested in basketball because of him rather than Daiki, and Tetsuya, who likely won't have to go through losing either of them as friends, at least not because of Daiki and basketball - and Kagami, who is friends with half the MiraGen three years early and who has changed things just from his very presence.

To his brother, who as promised, is working at a restaurant part-time and giving their mom as much money as she'll grudgingly accept, the stubborn woman insisting that Shion is the kid and should spending his paycheck on himself.

To Nijimura, who stepped down as captain and disappeared off to America because - like Shougo's mom - his dad became ill, and it was so serious he had to leave the damn country.

"Shit. Shit," he says, eyes wide as he looks over at Nijimura urgently. "Your dad!"

"What? What is it?" Nijimura demands, suddenly even more concerned, understandably.

"In my second year, you stepped down as captain because your dad got really sick, and you didn't wanna have to choose between the team and him, especially since you would have chosen him," Shougo explains, frantic, kicking himself for forgetting to mention this earlier. "Eventually, he had to have treatment in America, and I think your family moved over there to be with him."

Nijimura digests that, face pale and shaken at the very real possibility of the same thing happening again. Shougo lets him, all too aware of the terror and despair that comes from even the thought of loved ones being in pain or possibly dying. He's sitting in the waiting room of a hospital, just a few feet from his own ailing mother, after all.

She's going to be fine, and he feels better now, but the sheer depth of emotion he'd felt just ten or twenty minutes ago- he won't forget it easily, just as he's never forgotten his horror and helplessness when he witnessed his mother collapse right in front of him.

"What- You said he was sick, but what was his illness? And how did he get sick in the first place?" Nijimura asks once composed.

Guiltily, he can only offer, "I don't know. You- It's not like we were close, ya know? In my time? That's not something you'd have told me. So. Sorry." He shrugs, uncomfortably.

"Then, how did know that much?" Nijimura knows himself, apparently, and knows he wouldn't have volunteered any of that info to anyone he wasn't close friends with.

Ugh. Embarrassed now, he shrugs again and says, "I uh, I bugged Akashi until he told me all that."
"But why did you care?" he presses.

Blushing now - and hating his pale ass skin for the nth time - Shougo reluctantly admits, "After graduation, you disappeared. Didn't say anything to anybody. Or well, not to me. I'm sure Akashi knew everything, but he was- well, he was different by then, and I didn't wanna push my luck." He ducks his head under Nijimura's searching look and says, "You didn't fuckin, like- keep in touch or anything, with anybody. I know that must 'cause if you had, a lot of bad shit could've been avoided, probably. I don't fuckin' know."

"I'm sorry," Nijimura says, and Shougo whips his head back up and blinks at him, surprised. Nijimura finally sits down next to him and seems to sink into the chair, a little. "I was probably- Well, I can't speak for Future Me, but I know even now that I'd drop everything for my dad."

Glancing over at Shougo, he smiles slightly and reassures, "If that does happen, I won't disappear again, okay? I'll keep in touch. That's all I can promise."

Relieved more than he can say, Shougo nods. He hadn't realized he was still dreading that same outcome until Nijimura had put that fear to rest with just a few words and a smile.

"In exchange," Nijimura continues suddenly, intent and serious again, "I want you to promise to tell me stuff like this, alright? It doesn't have to be the whole story or all the details. I just want to know stuff you want to avoid or that might make you react badly, like what happened today, so I'm not caught off guard. I want you to let me help you, Haizaki. Please."

"Um, okay," he agrees, internally reeling at the idea that Nijimura would want to help him, even if it has nothing to do with him personally. He lets out a chuckle, more an exhalation of air than anything, and feels his lips quirk up in blatant happiness. "You're being weirdly nice, shitty captain," he says, with no heat.

Nijimura smirks. "I can be on occasion, shitty kouhai." His smirk eases into another smile, and he adds, "Thanks for warning me about my dad, Haizaki. I'm grateful."

Grimacing, Shougo says, uncertain but willing to admit his wrongdoings, a far cry from just a few years ago, "Sorry I didn't tell you before. It's no excuse, but I've only thought about helping my mom this whole time."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you told me now." He turns away and stares into the space in front of him, contemplating. "I'm gonna try to figure out whatever it was that caused my dad to have to get treatment in an entirely different country. Don't know if that's possible, but I'm gonna try."

Shougo immediately volunteers, "I'll help. Between the two of us, we should be able to find out, right?" It's the least he can do, considering him forgetting to mention this shit before means Nijimura's lost a month or so of time he could have already dedicated to research.

That gets him a thankful, pleased smile, one he reciprocates, unabashed.

He's really beginning to get addicted to the bursting, wonderful, happy feeling he gets when he successfully helps people. He can sort of get why so many people strive to be kind, now. He'd do pretty much anything to feel like this again.

LXXXIV. August 1st, 2012 - Wednesday

Anything except listen to any more of this.

"How 'bout Haizaki, Kagami, and Akashi?" Daiki asks, entirely too happy to throw his own friends under the bus in this dumb ass game they're playing to kill time.
Tetsuya doesn't even hesitate to answer, "Too easy. Fuck Haizaki-kun, marry Kagami-kun, and kill Akashi-kun."

Kagami snorts. "Hell no. You just want me for my cooking."

"That's not true. I also want to see Kagami-kun mother our kids."

Daiki laughs so hard he falls backwards, and Tetsuya looks way too pleased with himself at getting such a reaction.

Kagami groans, disgusted. "I hate you."

"Don't say that. Think of the children," Tetsuya chides.

"We don't have any! And we never will!"

"Not with that attitude we won't." Tetsuya frowns at him, though there's amusement dancing in his eyes.

Daiki, still snickering, manages to ask, "Well, what about the others? Why'd you fuck Haizaki?"

He'd willfully fucking blocked it out when his name had been thrown in and Tetsuya didn't even have the decency to kill him, but he can only ignore so much. "Please no," he begs.

Unfortunately for him, Tetsuya's a merciless motherfucker. "He's good in bed."

Shougo fucking recoils. "Don't say it like that! Like I've already done it with you or something!" He snarls.

"Apologies. I meant to say that Haizaki-kun looks like he would be good in bed."

"That's not any better!"

Daiki looks at Shougo and considers it. "Yeah, I can see that," he agrees.

And of course, Satsuki chimes in, "Do you think he'd be rough because of his rough and tumble delinquent past? Or perhaps slow and gentle, like his virgin heart?"

"I'm not a virgin!" He snaps, offended. He's fucking excellent at sex. He takes pride in it, damn it.

...Then he realizes everyone is staring at him in surprise, and he freezes and turns a vibrant red once he gets why.

Ryouta is the first to break the silence, unsurprisingly. "Whaaaaaat? You're like twelve! Literally!" He exclaims, apparently too shocked to throw in that stupid nickname.

Tetsuya asks, very seriously, "Are you trying to tell me you're no longer pure and innocent, Virgin-kun?"

He chokes. "DON'T CALL ME THAT!"

Satsuki grins, sensing weakness and pouncing. "You don't have to to lie to impress us, Virgin-kun."

"I'LL KILL YOU!"

Ryouta uses the arm that was casually slung around Shougo's neck to hold him back from lunging at
Satsuki. She sticks her tongue out at him and laughs as Shougo struggles ineffectually. Paying no heed to any of this, Ryouta says, puzzled, "That reminds me. Why would you kill Akashi-kun? He's so nice?"

Daiki, instantly: "Bullshit. He's Taicho's little minion. There's no way someone who looks up to him is actually nice. He's probably secretly sadistic or something."

"Holy shit, Aomine, you're actually talking sense." Shougo looks at him in a new light, now that he knows Daiki isn't completely stupid.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?" Daiki grumbles.

"Yeah, what is that supposed to mean, Virgin-kun?" Nijimura asks, smirking.

Shougo glares at him. "Fuck. You."

If anything, the smirk grows wider. "No thanks. Then we'd have to change your nickname."

Shougo once again tries to fight a bitch, growling unintelligibly as he attempts to climb over Ryouta to get to Nijimura.

Frowning, Satsuki declares, "Akashi-kun is a sweetheart, and I won't tolerate this disrespect."

Daiki insists, "He's creepy."

"He's misunderstood," Tetsuya defends.

Daiki quirks a brow. "Oh? Then why'd you kill him WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT, HUH, TETSU?"

Undeterred, Tetsuya explains, "Look, it would be hard, but I'd be able to do it in the end. For Haizaki-kun's innocent cherry and for the world's greatest house-spouse."

"FUCK YOU! WE'RE NO LONGER FRIENDS!"

"WHY DO YOU HAVE TO DRAG ME EVERY TIME?!"

Wiping a fake tear, Tetsuya says, "Virgin-kun finally admitted we were friends."

"I HATE YOU!"

"You're lashing out, and that's okay. I'll support you anyway. You can do it!"

Full of rage, for a third damn time, Shougo is ready to shut someone up with his fists, incoherent gibberish (that sounds a lot like DIE DIE DIE) to onlisteners tumbling from his lips while Ryouta valiantly (stupidly) stops Shougo from omitting a murder.

Worried, Satsuki says, "I think you broke him."

Heedless of the bruises he's no doubt acquiring from his thankless task, Ryouta says, feigning reluctance, "Oh no. Guess I'll have to perform mouth to mout-"

"WHY IS THAT THE FIRST PLACE YOUR MIND GOES?"

"Oh, trust me. It wasn't the first place," he says, wiggling his eyebrows.
Shougo is literally speechless.

"He might really be down this time, guys," Satsuki points out, as if she were a commentator and not his so-called friend.

Nijimura smirks. "...Oh no. Guess I'll have to perform mouth to mout-"

Shougo is this close to homicide. "Don't copy him! It didn't even work the first time!"

Ryouta interjects, "That's because third time's the charm!"

Further away from the escalating argument, Tetsuya forms a huddle with Satsuki, Kagami, and Daiki. "I think we need to form a Haizaki-kun Protection Squad."

Satsuki nods, thoughtfully. "You're right. Sooner or later, his purity will be in danger. If not from those two, then from others."

Daiki sweat-drops. "...Why did you include me in this discussion?"

Equally Done, Kagami adds, "Or me?"

Satsuki tells them, cheerfully, "For some reason, people think you two are scary, so we'll use that to our advantage."

Kagami visibly slumps. "I don't know if I should be I insulted or- No wait, I'm definitely insulted."

"Well, I'm not. As long as I don't actually have to do anything," Daiki says, shrugging.

Smiling a little, Tetsuya explains, "You just have to stand around looking constipated, like you normally do."

"Meanwhile, the two of us will circle around and shank a bitch," Satsuki finishes, smugly, high-fiving an equally smug Tetsuya.

Daiki snorts. "You're both the worst kind of people."

Satsuki prompts, "But...?"

"I'm in."

Kagami regards him with a scowl. "You're too easy."

"Oh, okay. This coming from 'Am I the hoe?'"

"..."

Satsuki giggles. "Savage."

Tetsuya says, "Oh no. Guess I'll have to perform mouth to mout-"

Kagami interrupts him, "Why are you like this?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Satsuki hugs him to her chest, holding him protectively, something he allows with a hurt look on his face. It might work better if he wasn't so awful at it. "Tet-chan is a beautiful cinnamon roll. How dare you?"
"By cinnamon roll, do you mean full of sin?" Kagami demands, indignant.

Snickering, Daiki says, "Saw that one coming. Also, he's totally right."

Tetsuya shakes his head in disappointment and says, "I want a divorce."

Enraged, Kagami whisper-shouts, "We were never married in the first place!"

Sniffing, Tetsuya says, "Oh, I see. You're just going to pretend like there was nothing between us, huh? Just going to sweep it all under the rug, huh? Act like it was nothing special, huh?" Like with his expressions, his tone might be more believable if it weren't monotone.

"Yes, because there was nothing between us, and it wasn't!"

"Okay. Okay. Just don't come crying to me when you realize the life you missed out on or when you wake up one day, years from now, and whilst choking back tears and holding a wrinkled, faded photograph of me, think to yourself, 'am I the hoe?'"

Kagami's eye deaden, and his face loses all expression, as if the life has been drained out of him. "I... am cutting all ties with you, right here and now. Oi. Haizaki! You had the right idea. Let's ditch these weirdos and escape to America."

Fed up with just about everyone in this room, Shougo answers enthusiastically, "I will gladly go with you! Kagami, you're truly my friend. No, my bro."

"Don't mention it. Really, don't. Don't ever call me that again."

Gasping, Satsuki chides, "Look what you did! You made Dai-chan sad! He's cultivating mushrooms in that corner!"

They all look where she's pointing, and sure enough, there Daiki is, curled up in a ball in a corner and poking one of the mushrooms that's suddenly grown from his depression.

What... the fuck.

Tentatively, Ryouta broaches the subject. "Um. Is this about Kagamicchi going back to America?"

Daiki wilts even further, and more mushrooms pop into existence. A literal cloud of doom forms above him, completing the sad and pathetic picture.

Tetsuya turns to Kagami and says very seriously, "House-spouse-kun, you can never leave."

Kagami explodes at the new nickname, which is apparently the last straw. "I'm sERIOUSLY THIS CLOSE TO PACKING MY BAGS."

As if revived by the thought of Kagami leaving sooner, Daiki storms over and yells, "Let's play a game, asshole! If I win, you have to stay!"

"I'm gonna hide in my room until it's time to leave."

"YOU COWARD. YOU FOOL."

"IT'S SELF-PRESERVATION, DICK."

Tetsuya chimes in, "You cowardly fool."
Kagami rounds on him. "STAY OUT OF THIS, YOU."

Watching the chaos from a safe distance, Satsuki suggests, "Maybe it's actually Kagamin who needs a protection squad...?"

"From Aominecchi or Kurokocchi?" Ryouta asks, amused.

Shougo scoffs. "Both, definitely. They're both terrifying in different ways."

Nijimura rolls his eyes. "You're exaggerating. Kuroko can do no wrong."

As if summoned by a rare compliment, Tetsuya pops up by them and says, "Thank you, Senpai."

Shougo sputters, outraged. "What the hell? He's the worst one!"

Nijimura is not to be swayed. "He's the only good one."

Satsuki coughs pointedly.

"Besides Momoi," he adds without missing a beat.

Ryouta also coughs pointedly.

"Just Kuroko and Momoi."

Ryouta pouts. "You're mean!"

Shougo growls, "And willfully fucking blind."

Nijimura cups a hand around one ear and asks, "What was that? Thought I heard a virgin talking."

"I'M GONNA KICK YOUR ASS."

"Funny you thought I was talking about you."

Shougo is seething. "You clearly were, you asshole."

Ryouta pats him on the shoulder, smiling brightly. "That's okay, Haizakicchi. We can be pure hearted souls together!"

Shougo shrugs his hand off and says, "If there was ever anything pure about you, it was stomped out very, very quickly by actual, literal evil."

He clutches his chest and bemoans, "You hurt my pure, pure heart, Haizakicchi, but because I am so pure, I'll forgive you."

"I can't believe you don't choke on all the bullshit that comes out of your mouth."

"Speaking of choking," Daiki says, "you still haven't beaten me, Kagami!"

"I could beat you with a hand tied behind my back!"

"Then prove it! Unless you wanna run back to America with your tail between your springy ass legs!"

"The only thing I'd be running from is your creepy ass!"
With an offended gasp, Daiki exclaims, "My ass is perky, you dick."

"That's obviously not what I meant," Kagami tells him, exasperated.

Completely unnecessarily, Tetsuya assures, "It is very perky, Aomine-kun. Ten out of ten."
Satsuki also says, "The perkiest ass on the team, and you know I would know."

"I liked Aominecchi's ass before I liked him as a person."

Daiki gestures at them. "See?"

Kagami demands, "What is this sudden support? Ahomine's nice ass was never in question; his sanity was."

Tetsuya concedes, "That's fair."

Daiki, however, looks touched. "Dude, you think my ass is nice?"

"I really think you're focusing on the wrong thing here, but sure, yeah, it's nice."

Satsuki coos, "That's really sweet, Kagamin!"

"Thanks, man. Yours is nice, too," Daiki says, seeming oddly flustered.

Kagami deadpans, "I don't even know what to say to that."

Nijimura offers, "Thank you usually works."

Kagami lets out a deep sigh, laced with heavy, heavy regret. Shougo can 100% relate.

Out of nowhere, Daiki says, "And that's another thing you'll miss once you leave."

"Don't act like this is an ongoing discussion. There's not even other things on this nonexistent list," Kagami points out, fuzzy brow twitching.

Satsuki joins in, "Sure there is! Basketball with Dai-chan, basketball with Hai-chan, basketball with Tet-chan-"

He interrupts, "If that's all you've got, then I think I'll survive."

Ryouta suggests, "Aomimecchi's nice ass?"

"You already said that!"

He shrugs. "It should be on there twice."

Daiki says, "Oh and your best bro Haizaki won't be there. Write that down."

Shougo blanks, embarassed by his earlier admission. "Who ever said- what-"

Kagami has no such issue. "I definitely already said not to mention that to me ever again."

 Barely containing a smile, Satsuki asks, "Is it. Is it because of the saying 'bros before hoes?' Is that it, Kagamin?"

"No, that is not why!"
She promises, "You can be a bro and a hoe, Kagamin. We won't judge."

"You can all kindly fuck off."

Tetsuya asks, affecting an innocent expression, "Even me, Kagami-kun?"

"Especially you."

Two seconds later, Tetsuya's on hands and knees on the floor, and Satsuki is beside him, rubbing his back and murmuring soothing words.

Shougo isn't the only one looking on in disbelief.

"I swear Tetsu wasn't like this when I first got him," Daiki says, dryly. "He was a sweet, innocent boy. Until you came along," he accuses, pointing at Shougo.

"Don't blame me! He was born that way!" Shougo retorts, defensively. "Kuroko's always been like this! You were just fooled by his polite, little kid act!"

"Wait, did you say Kuroko?" Someone asks from behind them, and he and Daiki whirl around to find a kid around their (physical) age with brown hair and eyes regarding them curiously. "Like, Kuroko Tetsuya?"

Shougo narrows his eyes, feeling faintly like he knows this guy but not from where. "What about him?" He asks, suspiciously, and next to him, Daiki seems to be sizing the guy up, too.

Smiling sheepishly, he rubs the back of his neck and reveals apologetically, "Kuroko's my childhood friend, so I got a little curious."

Eyes wide, Shougo can't help but gape, suddenly remembering the last time he saw this kid and what exactly he means to Tetsuya. He doesn't even twitch when Tetsuya appears next to him and greets, as cheerfully as his monotone allows, "Ogiwara-kun!"

Chapter End Notes

sorry if you were expecting frown town! but things kinda worked out this way? uhh yay, ogiwara! i promised like 20 chapters back that he'd show up, so here you go! there's a reasonable explanation for it too! you know me, bby, i'm good for it! ;)

- i couldn't find any info on what niji's dad actually has? if you know, please tell me! or if you have a suggestion, i'd love to hear it!

- more group memes! am i the hoe? and now virgin-kun lmao

- daiki calls kagami bro but it's casual, like dude or man. haizaki's bro is heartfelt & both he & kagami were embarrassed by it lol

- lol at niji trying to reign in his jealousy about kagami knowing

- at this point, akashi is still nice & kind & helpful hence the fierce defense up there
he's as bright as the sun [and so are you]

Chapter Notes

Hope everyone had a good New Year's! And that this year has been and continues to be kind to you! I've been busy and not sleeping well (I'm, a mess of a person) and every time I tried to write for this fic, I ended up writing/doing other stuff I've been putting off forever. I think I was just nervous about writing Ogiwara, and I'm still worried he might be OOC. But sometimes you've just gotta push on anyway, and I quite like this chapter regardless.

That being said, though, I'm no longer going to be updating on a set schedule. Updates will be whenever I finish a chapter and am able to post, so if you're still interested in reading this, bookmarking, fave-ing, and/or following if you haven't already might be a good idea. Don't know if this change will be permanent, but I thought I'd try it out.

Thank you for all of the comments, kudos, and bookmarks!! I really appreciate it!! Your feedback is definitely what keeps me writing!! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LXXXV. August 1st, 2012 - Wednesday

Somehow, he feels like the protagonist of a shitty fanfic. Like, what are the odds Tetsuya's childhood best friend/rival would just so happen to find him here and now? When Shougo is sure this never happened last time? Astro-fucking-nomical, probably.

He side-eyes Tetsuya, who looks so happy it should be illegal (especially considering this kid was enacting some dramatic two-person play with Satsuki regarding feigned heartbreak just a second ago) and sighs, giving in to the universe's whims. Who the hell cares, right?

Ryouta gasps in realization behind him. "Ogiwara-kun? The one from Kurokocchi's backstory which explains his motivation and ultimate goal of making first string just so they can play one another again, like they used to? Only this time as rivals and equals? That Ogiwara-kun?"

Nijimura slaps him upside the head. "Stop spouting exposition."

"I was just providing background information for those who didn't know!" Ryouta defends, indignant and rubbing the lump on his head with a pout.

"We all saw the flashback when he was introduced," Nijimura says, rolling his eyes. "You're ruining their reunion, so can it."

Ogiwara laughs, drawing their attention back to him, and they notice him watching them curiously. "Your friends are interesting, Kuroko," he says, smiling.

"Your friends are interesting, Kuroko," he says, smiling.

Tetsuya returns it with his usual small one. "You can say 'strange,' Ogiwara-kun. They don't have feelings you can hurt," he replies, making his buddy laugh again. His expression softens, and he says, "It's good to see you, Ogiwara-kun. It's been a while."

Grin brightening (and shit, no wonder this guy is best friends with Tetsuya. They've both got the
anime shoujo sparkles thing down pat), Ogiwara says, "Yeah, you too! It's just not the same over letters, you know?"

"Oh, you write letters to each other?" Satsuki chimes in, excitedly. "That's kind of romantic, don't you think?"

"It's a man's romance!" Ogiwara declares proudly, bumping a fist against his chest and completely missing the fact that she's only teasing.

"How sweet!" Satsuki presses a hand to her cheek, hearts in her eyes - and deliberately misunderstanding if Shougo knows her at all. "You two really are good together!"

Ogiwara rubs the back of his neck, sheepish but pleased. "Yeah, I think so too."

"...He always like that?" Shougo deadpans, sweat-dropping as Satsuki continues to gush and Ogiwara continues to Not Get It.

Tetsuya nods, amused. "Ogiwara-kun is a bit of an airhead." He says it with the same fond exasperation a person would have for their dumb yet lovable pet.

"Anyway," Ogiwara says, turning away from Satsuki who has extracted all of his contact info and various pictures from him and is pouring over the latter with Daiki, "Kuroko has told me all about you guys in his letters!" Confidently, he points to Kagami and says, "You're Kagami-kun! The guy from America who is the perfect housewife because of your god tier cooking and the way you mother everybody."

"The fuck!"

"And you're Kise-kun! The whiny model guy who clings to everyone like a koala and is part of a harem!" Ogiwara goes on, not noticing the sputtering reactions caused by his awful - but accurate - descriptions.

"Whiny?!

"Nijimura-san. I already knew of you since you're the best small forward in our age group, but apparently you're also an awesome captain and senpai," he explains, causing Nijimura's already highly entertained expression to grow irritatingly smug.

"Who- This shitty guy?" Shougo asks, incredulously, gesturing to Nijimura - and wincing when Nijimura punches him in the arm.

Ogiwara nods. "Kuroko was very clear that Nijimura-san is amazing." Then his eyes brighten, and he says, pointing them out as he goes, "So are Aomine-kun - basketball fanatic and Kuroko's first friend here - and Momoi-san - very crafty, super intelligent, and his partner in crime."

Daiki and Satsuki both look super pleased by this, while Kagami and Ryouta continue to be (probably rightfully) indignant about their own dumb character assessments.

"Hell yeah," Satsuki cheers, fist bumping Tetsuya and trading grins with Daiki.

Tetsuya shrugs. "I only speak the truth."

"Bullshit!" / "Lies!"

Shougo snickers. "You guys totally deserve that." They have a right to be indignant, and Shougo has
every right to laugh at their pain.

Ogiwara then sets his sights on Shougo, peering at him thoughtfully before declaring, "Ah. It's Haizaki-kun, the tsundere."

... 

"I am fucking not!" He snarls, pissed. This running gag would have stopped being funny eons ago, but wait- it was never funny. "Tetsuya! What the hell are you doing blabbing about me to this guy anyway?"

"I was merely describing my new friends to an old one," Tetsuya defends, playing up the innocent act by making his eyes real big and turning up the angelic sparkles to 100%.

Too fucking bad that shit's never worked on him in the first place. "Like hell we're friends!" He hisses, keenly aware of his hypocrisy and not giving one single fuck.

Tetsuya shoots Ogiwara a quirked brow and an expression that clearly says 'See what I mean?'

Ogiwara laughs, obviously having no sense of self-preservation just like his dumbass best friend. The similarities are just piling up. "I've never seen one in real life before," he admits.

"And you'll never get the chance to," he threatens, rolling up his floppy ass sleeve and fully prepared to fight Tetsuya's number one buddy, future events and Tetsuya's sad ass backstory be damned.

"Will you stop trying to fight people?" He asks, exasperated. "Haizakicchi, we're in a hospital!"

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all things adorable!" He declares.

Shougo gives up, glad for the comfort (he's doing a good job of not thinking about it, but- his mom's just down the hall, you know?) and honestly just too used to this. "Then shouldn't you be cuddling the others?" He deadpans, because his mouth never stops running.

Ryouta stills. "...You think they're adorable? All of them?" He asks.

"You're- we're all like, thirteen or something. Of course you're adorable. Don't make it weird," he begs, knowing it's futile.

"You think I'm adorable?"

The cuddling intensifies, and Shougo does his best to ignore it and actually listen to the conversation.

"...a small forward, too," Ogiwara is saying.

Nijimura hums and eyes him, considering. "So what, you're aiming for my title?" He asks, challenging.

Eyes burning with anticipation and excitement, Ogiwara nods decisively. "I'm no slouch either, ya know?"

There's approval in Nijimura's eyes, and it's not surprising. Who doesn't want a rival, someone to make you grow stronger and better, to measure your progress against, to rise to their challenge out there on the court? Even Shougo felt it back then, though it was smothered under resentment and bitterness and cruelty, and he only got better by trampling over everyone in his way to the top.

Even now, he steals moves and makes enemies of those he's stolen from. He doesn't taunt or mock them anymore, but his two months here before the time travel has pretty much cemented his reputation as an asshole. He doesn't blame them and hasn't tried to change their minds. Not when they're right to hate him.

And okay, okay- before the voices in his head that sound creepily like his friends can descend on him with "that's not true!" and "stop putting yourself down!", he doesn't mean that - as he is now - he should be hated or scorned. It's just- he hasn't apologized or tried to make it up to the people he's already wronged, you know?

He hasn't done anything like that, and he doesn't intend to. He feels bad about it and won't actively make things worse, but he's no Saint. He's not Tetsuya. He's not going to go around and make amends and be buddy-buddy with everybody. He has a plan, and he has a small (...) circle of people he cares about, and their opinions are the only ones that matter.

[As for his stealing moves, well, it's definitely not helping his image, but- it's his. It's his special skill that sets him apart from others, and he's proud of it. Maybe it's dirty and unfair, but it's not illegal, and as the Miracles have shown time and again, it's not unbeatable either.

There are still moves he can't steal no matter how hard he tries, and one possibly good thing is that it forces his friends and teammates to develop different moves entirely, usually on the fly. Which is a little amazing to watch- and watch he does, as he tries to steal them too.]

"I'll look for you on the court then," Nijimura says, and Ogiwara looks positively delighted.

Ogiwara opens his mouth to reply, but he's interrupted by the tell-tale sound of a vibrating phone. Frantically, he pulls it out of his pocket and answers, "Is Auntie okay? Is the baby okay? What's-
Oh! Okay, okay, I'm coming back now!" He hangs up and addresses his expectant audience, "Looks like little Hana is finally being born."

Satsuki has stars in her eyes, as excited as if it were her own cousin being born. "Tell your Auntie congratulations for me, okay? Oh and you have to send me pictures and let me know everything turns out alright, okay, Ogiwara-kun?"

"'Course," he answers. "I'll get some really cute ones!" He turns to his friend and says, "See ya later, Kuroko." He taps his shoulder with a fist, and they share a smile. "It was nice meeting you guys, too! It's nice to know I'm leaving Kuroko in good hands! Please keep taking care of him!" He asks of them, so genuinely and brightly it's ridiculous.

And with that, absolutely everyone - okay, except Nijimura - gets a little flustered and pleased at the praise and sheer faith and unmistakable sincerity in Ogiwara's words and expression.

"It's nothing, hehe. Kurokocchi's not any trouble!"

"S'not like it's hard to look after him..."

"Oh, Ogiwara-kun, stop~! Tet-chan's a good friend, you know?"

"Tetsu's got my back too, so it's whatever."

"Kuroko's less trouble than the rest of these idiots," Shougo admits, secretly preening but as stupidly transparently happy as the rest of them.

Amused, Tetsuya smiles more widely and visibly that usual, likely also ecstatic to have all of his friends in the same room and getting along. "I'm glad I was able to see you, Ogiwara-kun." His fond, happy smile doesn't change one bit as he abruptly suggests, "Haizaki-kun, why don't you escort Ogiwara-kun to the elevators? He gets lost easily, so I would really appreciate it."

"Wait, what?" He asks, caught off guard, and so he can do nothing as Ogiwara agrees that that's a great idea and leads him out of the waiting room and down the other hallway.

When he regains his bearing a few moments later, he asks again, bewildered, "What?"

Ogiwara laughs, dropping his hand from Shougo's back and stopping in the middle of quiet, empty (save for them) hallway. "You look so confused," he points out, and Shougo scowls at him. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't get you alone just so I could tease you."

"Then why did you?" Shougo asks, cursing the fact that so much time spent with those idiots back there has made him soft. He's not even annoyed at being cornered by this guy, just curious and a little uncomfortable.

Perhaps sensing this, Ogiwara erases all teasing from his expression, leaving behind the innate kindness and understanding that must have drawn Tetsuya to him like a moth to a flame. "I wanted to meet you," he admits easily. "Kuroko has talked a lot about Aomine-kun and Momoi-san in his letters, especially since Aomine-kun is the first friend he made here. But they've only ever talked about their dreams for basketball. Kuroko's parents have never come up," he explains, and suddenly Shougo thinks he knows where this is going.

Ogiwara notices his dawning realization and smiles again. "I've never been able to get him to talk about it, and we've been friends for a few years now. Kuroko doesn't like focusing on his own problems because he doesn't think they're as important as everyone else's. Heck, if we didn't make a pact to face each other in an official game, I'm sure Kuroko would have been fine staying third string..."
forever."

That's... probably not a wrong assumption. It's not that Tetsuya doesn't like winning or playing with a team- from what Shougo's seen, he gets just as elated and pumped about it as everyone else. But to Tetsuya, playing and winning together is the most important thing. Losing is disheartening to him too, but it's not because he didn't beat the other team and prove his superiority. It's because he and his teammates worked hard, gave it their all, and still lost. It's his teammates' hard work not being rewarded or acknowledged.

And for that future Tetsuya, it was as much about beating sense into his former teammates as it was helping his new teammates attain a hard won victory.

(He doesn't know any of that for a fact. It's just speculation, based on what he witnessed as an outsider back then and what he knows of Tetsuya now. Ogiwara would know better than him at any rate, so he doesn't try to argue the point.)

Without his promise to Ogiwara, without that goal to strive for, maybe Tetsuya wouldn't work so hard to get on first string. Maybe he would let the disparaging remarks and third string's bad reputation get to him. Maybe he wouldn't fight so hard with only his own dream on the line - because like Ogiwara said, Tetsuya doesn't put himself or his own problems above other peoples'. Maybe there wouldn't be a sixth member of the Generation of Miracles.

Somehow, the idea that Tetsuya would give up for good, that he would never get any recognition for his skills or his strong heart or crazy determination- somehow, it's both unbearably sad and entirely unacceptable. He's not sure he'd want to live in a world where Kuroko Tetsuya doesn't make first string or inspire others or win the Winter Cup. Shougo wants to change a lot of things that happened last time, but- not any of that. Never any of that.

"He told me he was able to open up to you, though, and it made me really happy to hear that," Ogiwara tells him, again blindingly bright, entire existence ridiculously pure for a teenage boy. "You're a good guy, Haizaki-kun, and I'm glad he met you."

Fuck. Shit. He's not about to cry again, damn it. He's not really a preteen, and anyway, it's not really something to cry over-

(How many times has someone said that to him? Just today? How could they look at him and mean it? He knows they're not lying. Is the thing. He knows.

His mom is in the hospital, and he's the one being comforted over and over again, and maybe that's not the way it's supposed to be. But- his mom would never begrudge him this, and Shougo- he isn't going to let that bother him either.

So he just. Stops. Just stops questioning and denying and thinking 'but what if?' and 'surely not me.' Stops perpetually doubting his friends- because that's not fair to them either.

He's still working shit out, and he's got a lot to make up for. He's not good, like Tetsuya is, like Ogiwara seems to be, like Kagami and Daiki and Ryouta and Satsuki and Nijimura are. But he's trying to be. He's doing his best.

And god but maybe that's okay. Maybe that's enough. Maybe Shougo is enough. Maybe he should stop doubting himself, too.)

He's jolted out of his thoughts by an unexpected hug, and only then does he remember where he is and who he was talking to- and he recognizes the wetness on his cheeks with an internal moan of
despair.

Fuck, he is crying again. And he's being hugged by a total stranger.

"Sorry, but you were like, silently crying and looked really happy and then got really sad, and my arms moved on their own," Ogiwara explains, not panicked like Daiki had been earlier nor teasing and nonchalant like Ryouta's usual clinging. Just bubbly and understanding. "I know what you're thinking, but we're not actually strangers! You're my best friend's friend, so we're friends by osmosis. Or something. I don't actually know what that word means, but I'm just talking a lot, so you don't freak out and punch me."

"...I wouldn't punch you," Shougo mumbles, making no move to get away but also not reciprocating. He doesn't even know what to do with this unasked, unlooked for kindness. "Kuroko would shank me and then dump my cold corpse in some random ally."

Ogiwara laughs, and it's equally as warm as his impromptu hug. "More like he'd make sure no one would ever find it. And he'd probably pin the blame on someone else who's wronged him. Kuroko's scary like that," he adds, sounding far too fond about Shougo's hypothetical murder.

Shougo snorts, pulling away and wiping his face with his sleeve for like the tenth time tonight. "You're definitely his friend."

"And proud of it," Ogiwara says, and he looks it. He softens and asks, "You okay? 'Cause Kuroko wouldn't spare me just because we're childhood friends. He'd probably be more disappointed than anything, and that's way worse than him being mad!"

Shougo shivers just imagining it. Just look at the lengths he went to in the future for the Miracles. He crushed all of them and taught each of them life lessons and turned them back to his side while he was at it. He never wants to be in Tetsuya's warpath, ever. If there was ever a reason to stop being a jackass, then that's it.

"I know what you mean," he agrees, and they share a moment of total understanding. "I'm fine though. It's just- been a long night, is all." A fucking understatement, but nonetheless true.

"Good. Well, I gotta go. Hana's waiting for her Shigehiro-nii-chan, after all," Ogiwara explains, waving goodbye as he walks off. "You can count on it!" And revels in the pleased approval and expectation in Ogiwara's grin before he turns down a corner and out of sight with one last little wave.

Rolling his eyes, Shougo walks back into the waiting room and ignores the stilted conversation and unnatural poses the morons he calls friends are all in as they try (and fail, horribly) to pretend they weren't eavesdropping.

He stops next to Tetsuya (after scanning the room; it gets a little easier to find him over time) and asks, quietly, "It wasn't just a coincidence, was it?"

Tetsuya's smug expression is answer enough. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Haizaki-kun," he says anyway, perfectly shameless.

Shougo rolls his eyes again but can't help smiling. "Well, even if it wasn't, thanks. I can see why
you're working so hard for him. He's... something.

"Ogiwara-kun is as bright as the sun," Tetsuya agrees, smiling too, and Shougo wonders if he knows he shines just as brightly, lack of presence or no.

He probably doesn't, and Shougo doesn't know how to tell him. So he just holds out a fist, steady and full of meaning he can't articulate, and after a startled moment, Tetsuya bumps it with his own fist, joy lighting up his sky blue eyes, and Shougo thinks Tetsuya gets it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

- look, all I know about Ogiwara is that he's bubbly and friendly and an airhead and that he never blamed Kuroko for that awful match in middle school. i love him, but writing him? ...wasn't horrible, but i definitely need you guys' assurance that i wrote him okay! i need that sweet, sweet validation.

- kuroko & ogiwara planned to meet up at the fireworks festival bc ogiwara & his fam were down there anyway for his aunt. she just went into labor a day earlier than expected, so ogiwara would have missed them if it weren't for haizaki's mom ending up in the same hospital.

- as for breaking the fourth wall up there,, no, kise & niji are not able to. haizaki makes a lot of jokes like that (in case you hadn't noticed) & this was a case of friends emulating another friend's weird sense of humor.

- has haizaki mellowed out or what? took a hug from a friend's friend like a champ. & wasn't even all that embarrassed by it!

- on haizaki and stealing,, i honestly wasn't sure how to handle it. if you guys have a better idea for his skills or how to change things up, i'm all ears! ’cause i'm at a total loss here.
I. August 1st, 2012 - Wednesday

Shougo is drifting off against Satsuki's shoulder when he's abruptly jerked awake by Ryouta's shouted, "Oh, no! It's past midnight!"

"And?" Shougo asks, irritated. He was so close to sweet, sweet sleep. Ugh.

Ryouta turns to him, expression panicked, and says, much quieter, "And it's August 1st! Kagamicchi's birthday!"

Oh. Next to him, Satsuki is mirroring his dawning realization, and as one, they turn to look at Kagami, who was goaded into an arm wrestling match by Daiki - which is currently a tie. He's here, in this waiting room with Shougo and the others and not in bed, resting up before a day out with his family, where he should be-

No, no, there's no need for guilt. They all chose to stay with him and his family, and he didn't make them. He has a hard time making his friends do anything they don't want to do, so he's stopping that train of thought before it can even begin.

"We should get him something," Shougo suggests, and Ryouta and Satsuki smile at him, pleasantly surprised. By the suggestion or because he didn't express any dismay over Kagami having to stay here with him, he doesn't know. But- well, it's probably both.
Ryouta's eyes light up, and he exclaims, "I know exactly what to get him!" He hops to his feet and pulls Shougo up and along with him, excitedly, and entirely used to this by now, Shougo lets him without a fight.

He does roll his eyes at Satsuki, though, who laughs and winks at him, terribly unsympathetic. Shougo is starting to suspect that the only Nice One in the group is the kid who technically isn't - Ogiwara, who had been a damn delight the whole time he was here, calling him a tsundere included. Pretty much everyone else has done worse, so. Might be a low bar, but he is desperate.

"Where are we going?" He finally asks, once they're in the elevator and Ryouta still hasn't elaborated. He hasn't let go of Shougo's arm either, but well- it's Ryouta, enough said.

Ryouta beams at him. "The gift shop! I know it's mostly stuff that says 'Get Well Soon' or something, but it should have candy, right?" When Shougo agrees, he adds, "If not, the vending machine was right there, so he would have seen us, and it wouldn't have been a surprise. There'll be some on the first floor, though, so we can get him a bunch of chips and stuff."

Shougo eyes him oddly. "You really thought this through."

"Hm?" Ryouta tilts his head to the side but ultimately shrugs. "Oh, well, I was actually thinking about it earlier, but it slipped my mind. A lot of stuff has happened tonight, you know?"

Shougo grimaces, nodding. 'A lot' might even be an understatement. Ryouta squeezes his hand once, trying to comfort, and Shougo offers him a grateful smile. "You know, you're really nice," he says, a statement of fact and feels no embarrassment over it, not even when Ryouta flushes and flusters. "I didn't expect that."

"Haha, thanks?" He says, and it sounds like a question. "Did you think I'd be a huge jerk or something?"

"No, I thought you'd be air-headed and vain."

"Urk!" Ryouta puts a hand over the arrow in his stomach and groans, expression haggard. "Tell me how you really feel," he says, defeated.

"Also annoying and clingy and rude-"

With every word, Ryouta flinches, shot by arrows of harsh truth.

"-and self-centered and a ball hog and stuck up-"

He coughs up blood, a walking corpse, unable to beg for mercy in anything but a wheezing gasp.

"But I was wrong," Shougo finally says, idly wiping blood off of his cheek, and Ryouta looks at him in surprise. Shougo smirks. "Don't get me wrong. You're definitely most of those things." The largest arrow yet lodges in his chest mercilessly- "but as a friend, you're pretty cool."

And suddenly, it's as if nothing ever happened. Smiling brilliantly, Ryouta recovers and says happily, apparently to himself, "Haizakicchi thinks I'm cool!"

"That's not what I meant-" Shougo tries to correct him, sensing this will lead nowhere good, but it's no use.

"Yes! Take that, Nijimuracchi!" He crows, pumping a fist in the air. "You're not the only cool one!"
"Neither of you are-" he tries again, but Ryouta just tugs on his arm and speeds up, looking determined.

"C'mon, Haizakicchi, let's find the gift store. We've got a very important mission to complete. Operation: Birthday!" he says confidently, the last two words in horribly butchered English, shooting Shougo an exaggerated wink.

Shougo grimaces. "I take it back. That was super lame."

"No take backs!" Ryouta declares. "As their friend, who is super cool and also extremely good-looking and nice-"

"I'm gonna barf."

"-I can't let our other friends down by not seeing this through! And as my trusty partner-in-crime-"

"Gross."

"-you have to help me!" he finishes, not at all perturbed by Shougo's reluctance.

Sighing, Shougo relents. "Fine. Not like you're gonna let me go," he grumbles, even though both of them know full well that Shougo could take his arm back at any time. Ryouta's grip is firm but hardly tight.

Ryouta beams. "That's the spirit!"

II. August 1st, 2012 - Wednesday

"We come bearing gifts~!" Ryouta sings merrily, arms full of various crap from the vending machine downstairs. Turns out the gift shop was closed. "Happy Birthday, Kagamicchi!"

"What he said," Shougo says, as they both unload their snacks on an unsuspecting Kagami. Most of them land in his lap, but a few fall to the floor. Oh well.

"My birthday is actually tomorrow," Kagami tells them, awkwardly, and Shougo face palms.

Ryouta whirls on Satsuki, mouth open to demand why she didn't correct them, but she beats him to it. "You guys were so excited about it! I didn't want to ruin it for you.'

And Ryouta subsides with a huff. "Well, happy early birthday then!" he says, stubbornly, ignoring the snickers at his expense.

"You didn't have to," Kagami says gruffly, but he looks over the haul appreciatively.

Ryouta laughs, apparently recovered. "'You didn't have to,' he says. In that case, I'll take them-"

"Like hell! Wait for your own birthday, idiot!" Kagami denies him instantly, now holding the snacks to his chest protectively.

"My birthday passed by without one word of acknowledgement, you know!" Ryouta squawks, half serious, but mostly indignant about being denied so callously when this whole plan was his to begin with.

"Oh yeah," Shougo says. Satsuki mentioned that earlier, didn't she? "Happy belated birthday, I guess," he adds, when Ryouta turns those sunshine bright puppy dog eyes on him.
"Thank you! I'll let it slide since you didn't know, but later, you can make it up to me with a-"

"NOT a date-" Shougo interrupts vehemently.

"-day out," he finishes smoothly. "Come on. It's the least you can do!"

"...Fine," he gives in, knowing Ryouta won't drop it and not having the energy to argue. That's what he's going with anyway. It definitely doesn't have anything to do with the fact that he doesn't really mind.

"So did mine," Nijimura pipes up expectantly. "Right before his."

And Shougo grimaces, knowing he's just been set up. "What, you want the same thing? Just take Tetsuya. Since he's your favorite and all-"

"No thank you. I have plans," says the devious little shit.

Shougo snaps, "We haven't even set a date!"

The look Tetsuya gives him is nothing less than utterly condescending. "I'm a busy person, Haizaki-kun."

"Busy spouting bullshit, I'm sure," Shougo growls.

"Now, now," Satsuki intervenes, patting Shougo on the head like some well-behaved mutt - which he fucking is because with anyone else, he'd break their damn hand. Why is this his life? Heedless of his internal struggle, she continues, "As much as I like to see Hai-chan's adorably flustered face, I'll have to decline your plans on his behalf. I'm planning all birthday events from here on out, and I won't take no for an answer."

"Yes ma'am!" Ryouta chirps, saluting with a peace sign and another lame ass wink. And another cartoon heart, what the fuck- Shougo watches in horrified anticipation as the thing floats closer and closer to Satsuki, who has already looked away and hasn't noticed her inevitable heart-shaped doom.

Right before it hits her, Tetsuya reaches out and slaps it back towards its creator, eye twitching momentarily in disgust as he wipes his hand on Daiki's shirt.

["Tetsu, what the-?"

"There was lint on your shirt, but I got it off."

"Oh, thanks."]

"Kise, what the fuck? " Shougo asks shrilly, dodging to the side and out of its way.

"So mean, Kurokocchi!" he whines, glumly accepting his heart back. He cradles it in his hand, the thing looking worse for wear after being passed by Tetsuya's fucking cannon arm. He sighs, defeated, and tucks the thing in his pocket.

I didn't see anything, Shougo decides, pushing this whole fucking scene out of his mind. Ryouta does not have the ability to make shoujo hearts by fucking winking, and he didn't just stuff the fucking thing in his pocket because my life is not an anime.

Denial is good. Denial is his friend. Denial won't send him teetering on the brink of despair.
"It's too bad we couldn't go out and do anything for yours on the day of, Kagamin, but we definitely will next time you're in Japan!" Satsuki tells him, ignoring the way Daiki wilts at the reminder of his imminent departure.

Kagami shrugs, tossing an empty wrapper onto a pile of similarly discarded trash on the table. How the hell did he eat all that so quickly?! "'S'fine. I appreciate the food, and I'm technically celebrating it twice anyway. Tomorrow with my parents and with my brother back in America."

"Still," Satsuki insists, stubbornly, and Kagami relents with a snort. Happy she got her way, she claps her hands together and suggests, "Now, why don't we all share our favorite memories with Kagamin as a little bonding experience? We get to embarrass the birthday boy and fondly reminisce; two birds with one stone!"

"God no," Kagami protests, but no one's listening.

"Hell yeah!" Ryouta cheers, dragging Shougo down with him next to Kagami on the floor. "I wanna go first!" he declares, waving his arm around like an idiot.

On Kagami's other side, Daiki says, "Mine are just every time we play against each other. I don't have a favorite." He ignores Ryouta's outrage with the ease of experience.

"'Am I the hoe?" Tetsuya chimes in, scaring the shit out of everyone, except maybe Satsuki, who he's pretty sure has some sort of Tetsuya radar. "What? It was a classic moment," he defends, pretending their glaring/staring isn't because his lack of presence is giving them all gray hairs.

...At least he doesn't have to worry about that.

"That it was, Tet-chan," Satsuki agrees, snagging the spot next to him and looking supremely entertained.

Ryouta pouts. "That's what I was gonna say," he whines.

Kagami rolls his eyes. "I hate you all."

"I was going to take pity on you, but for that, I'll say my favorite memory is when I found out Kagami wears a pink apron with a tiger cub on it when he cooks," Nijimura says, smirking when Kagami gives him the stink eye.

"That's adorable, Kagamicchi!" Ryouta chirps.

"Is this what they call gap moe?" Tetsuya asks, grunting when Kagami leans over and jabs him in his side. "Ow, Kagami-kun. Violence is not the answer."

"Neither is your dumbass commentary, but here we are."

"What about you, Haizakicchi?" Ryouta prompts, nudging him with an elbow.

Shougo sighs. "When I first met him and was avoiding you assholes. Best few days of my life."

"So mean!" Ryouta cries, shaking Shougo back and forth by his shoulder.

"Whatever! What's yours?" he asks, putting his hand over Ryouta's face and holding him at arm's length.

"Ah…" Ryouta says, like he forgot. "...That time Kagamicchi screamed like a cat that had its tail stepped on?"
Daiki snickers. "Which time?" Kagami elbows him in the gut. "Oof! What the hell, Kagabro?"

"Thought I saw a fly."

"Yeah right!"

"Wait, sorry, actually, I saw an idiot."

Daiki growls, lunging for Kagami and trapping him in a headlock. "Say that again, asshole!"

"With pleasure!" he snaps, struggling to break free and managing to headbutt Daiki's chin.

"Ow, shit, fuck," Daiki mutters a litany of curses, immediately letting go and ineffectually rubbing his chin, as if that might make the pain disappear.

Kagami rolls his eyes. "Serves you right."

Nijimura adds, "That was a weak ass headlock, Aomine. You think you'd have learned how to do a better job considering the amount of times you've been caught in one yourself."

"I was more focused on trying to break free all those times," Daiki hisses. "Sorry I didn't study your technique!"

"You are now, aren't you?" Nijimura retorts, smug, and Daiki gives up, flopping onto his back with a frustrated groan.

Satsuki looks up from examining her freshly painted nails. Exactly when had she had the time to do that? "You boys done flirting yet?"

"I'm not sure they know how to turn it off," Tetsuya tells her solemnly, screwing on the lid of a bottle of nail polish. Did he paint them? Why? Where the hell had that polish come from anyway?

...Is this a fucking skit?

Amid a flurry of protests and flushed faces (and one thoroughly bewildered/incredulous one), she shares a look with Tetsuya and says, "Tragic."

III. August 1st, 2012 - Wednesday

Kuroko Tetsuya added Aomine Daiki, Haizaki Shougo, Kagami Taiga, Kise Ryouta, Momoi Satsuki, and Nijimura Shuuzou to the group chat.

Kuroko Tetsuya changed the chat name to Haizaki's Harem.

Haizaki Shougo: Kuroko what the fuck

Kuroko Tetsuya: I only speak the truth.

Aomine Daiki: yo since when have I been part of his harem?

Kuroko Tetsuya: It happens to the best of us, Aomine-kun.

Kuroko Tetsuya: Can't resist that tsundere charm.

Haizaki Shougo: I fucking hate you
**Kuroko Tetsuya:** That means you love me in tsundere terms. Thank you for this honor, Haizaki-kun.

**Haizaki Shougo:** You're the fucking worst

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** You're making me blush.

**Kise Ryouta:** heyyyyy!

**Kise Ryouta:** the only 1 who cn make haizakicchi all flustered is me!

**Kise Ryouta:** ( ´ε´ )

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** As a founding member of Haizaki's Harem (unrelated to this group chat), I reserve the right to fluster Haizaki-kun to my heart's content.

**Haizaki Shougo:** Ugh

**Momoi Satsuki:** you get em, Tetchan!

**Kise Ryouta:** so this how our friendship dies

**Kise Ryouta:** to thunderous applause

**Kagami Taiga** has left the group chat.

**Kuroko Tetsuya** added **Kagami Taiga** to the group chat.

**Kuroko Tetsuya:** That wasn't nice, Kagami-kun.

**Kagami Taiga:** I don't have to subject myself to this torture

**Aomine Daiki:** wimp

**Kagami Taiga:** Says the guy who calmly accepted the fact that he's part of a harem

**Aomine Daiki:** haizaki's a bro

**Aomine Daiki:** & im scared of what the rest of his harem would do to me if i don't jump on the haizaki love train

**Aomine Daiki:** my instincts are tellin me it wouldnt be anything good

**Kise Ryouta:** wow aominecchi's instincts are on point, as usual!

**Kise Ryouta:** it also wouldnt be good if u were actually competition tho

**Kise Ryouta:** (・`ω´・)

**Aomine Daiki:** well thats not terrifying at all

**Haizaki Shougo** left the group chat.

**Kuroko Tetsuya** added **Haizaki Shougo** to the group chat.
Haizaki Shougo: Fuck
Kise Ryouta: me?

*Haizaki Shougo* left the group chat.

*Kuroko Tetsuya*: Please refrain from antagonizing Haizaki-kun too much, Kise-kun.

*Kuroko Tetsuya*: He's delicate, like a flower.

*Kuroko Tetsuya* added *Haizaki Shougo* to the group chat.

*Kise Ryouta*: cmon haizakicchi were just joking!

*Haizaki Shougo*: Right

*Haizaki Shougo*: And fuck you, Tetsuya, you little shit

*Kuroko Tetsuya*: ;)

Momoi Satsuki: hows your mom?

*Haizaki Shougo*: She's fine.

*Haizaki Shougo*: Well she keeps saying she is & that she doesn't need to be babied by her own kids

*Haizaki Shougo*: She fucking FAINTED. From HEATSTROKE

Momoi Satsuki: Ayano-san is a badass

Momoi Satsuki: anything that can take her out even for a few hours is terrifying tbh

*Haizaki Shougo*: I KNOW

*Kise Ryouta*: i hope she gets better soon!

*Kise Ryouta*: also pls tell Ayano-san i would die for her

*Haizaki Shougo*: How bout you just die?

*Kise Ryouta*: wat is w this hostility?

*Haizaki Shougo*: Don't hit on my mom you flashy bastard

*Kise Ryouta*: omg is that wat u think flirting is?

*Kise Ryouta*: THAT? ?(o´·д·)?

*Kise Ryouta*: haizakicchi pls respond im gonna cry

*Haizaki Shougo*: It sounds creepy. What do you want me to say?

*Kise Ryouta*: i
Kise Ryouta: im cryinf

Haizaki Shougo: What the fuck. Why?

Kise Ryouta: 。。゜゜(´ O` )゜゜。

Kise Ryouta: thats so sad ur sad ur makin ME sad

Haizaki Shougo: You're making no fucking sense as usual

Kise Ryouta: Nijimura u need to see this

Haizaki Shougo: Don't fucking summon that bastard

Kise Ryouta: this makes sooooo much sense it almost hurts

Kise Ryouta: no wait it does hurt

Momoi Satsuki: there there ( ౪´ω`)/(╥ω╥)

Kise Ryouta: thank you Momocchi ily

Momoi Satsuki: np

Momoi Satsuki: altho if you WERE hitting on Ayano-san, i can see why

Kise Ryouta: do u hav a crush on her momocchi?

Momoi Satsuki: i have a healthy appreciation for badass women & Ayano-san is very beautiful

Haizaki Shougo: The only thing more horrifying than Kise hitting on my mom is YOU hitting on her

Momoi Satsuki: :>;

Haizaki Shougo: Ugh

Kuroko Tetsuya: Ah. It seems Nijimura-san muted this chat.

Haizaki Shougo: Wtf. You JUST made it

Kuroko Tetsuya: Our dear captain moves fast.

Kagami Taiga: He's also the only smart one

Momoi Satsuki: no one else is allowed to mute on pain of death! D:<

Kagami Taiga: SIGH

Kise Ryouta: so scary! (´Д´ ; )≠

Aomine Daiki: so…

Aomine Daiki: ogiwa, right?
Momoi Satsuki: Ogiwarakun! <3

Kuroko Tetsuya: Yes?

Kise Ryouta: THAT BOY IS MADE OF SUNSHINE, KUROKOCCHI

Kise Ryouta: i couldnt eveb look at im he was 2 bright!

Kise Ryouta: (*.ω/)

Aomine Daiki: he smiled at me & my heart fucking skipped a beat

Aomine Daiki: what the fuck

Momoi Satsuki: he's so pretty too! you got yourself a great catch, Tetchan!

Kuroko Tetsuya: Thank you, Momoi-san.

Kagami Taiga: He's not like Kuroko, is he?

Haizaki Shougo: I can confirm that that is definitely not the case. Ogiwara is pure inside and out

Haizaki Shougo: Unlike literally any of you

Momoi Satsuki: i'd be offended, but I 100% agree

Kise Ryouta: same

Kise Ryouta: i AM kinda mad that haizakicchi is the only 1 who got to hug him!

Momoi Satsuki: me too! why does Haichan always get all the cuddles?

Haizaki Shougo: So you fucks aren't even gonna pretend you weren't eavesdropping, huh?

Kise Ryouta: i bet his hugs feel like sunlight!

Aomine Daiki: shit now im kinda curious

Momoi Satsuki: Haichan, describe the way you felt with Ogiwarakun's arms around you. In detail

Haizaki Shougo: It was like any other fucking hug, okay

Haizaki Shougo: Except I didn't need to worry about Kise groping me or you assholes being assholes about it

Momoi Satsuki: so what im getting from this is that you really liked it

Kise Ryouta: im jealous, but like,,, in 2 different ways? do i have to compete w ogiwaru too & also i want him 2 hug me?

Kise Ryouta: ( >﹏< )

Momoi Satsuki: the real question is, who's the real sunshine child? Kagamin or Ogiwarakun
Kagami Taiga: Don't fuckin call me a sunshine child wtf

Kuroko Tetsuya: You make a good point, Momoi-san. When Kagami-kun is playing basketball, his grin could light up a room.

Aomine Daiki: damn how i am supposed to choose? kaga's my bro, but ogiwara…

Aomine Daiki: hes pure?

Kagami Taiga: I can't even tell if I'm supposed to be insulted anymore

Haizaki Shougo: If these assholes are involved, it's a good bet that they're insulting you

Haizaki Shougo: But yeah, Ogiwara wins hands down

Kagami Taiga: [rude gesture emoji]

Kuroko Tetsuya: Perhaps they could both be sunshine boys?

Momoi Satsuki: why not?

Kise Ryouta: fine by me!

Aomine Daiki: oh good, i couldnt pick

Kagami Taiga: [rude gesture emoji x9]

Kuroko Tetsuya: Then, it's settled.

Kise Ryouta: wait if theyre the sunshine boys then what r we?

Haizaki Shougo: You're innuendo guy, you fuckin perv

Kise Ryouta: my unique sense of humor does not define me haizakicchi!

Aomine Daiki: lol

Kise Ryouta: ...but since its a nickname from u, ill take it

Haizaki Shougo: Gross

Kise Ryouta: ur so mean to me!

Haizaki Shougo: Because you deserve it

Kise Ryouta: *gasp* haizakicchi, could it be….?

Kise Ryouta: ur into bdsm? [eyes emoji]

Haizaki Shougo left the group chat.

Kise Ryouta added Haizaki Shougo to the group chat.

Kise Ryouta: im sorry!
Haizaki Shougo: I bet you fucking are
Momoi Satsuki: personally i think innuendo guy is perfect
Momoi Satsuki: whats my nickname? ;D
Aomine Daiki: is it just me or is that fuckin ominous
Haizaki Shougo: It's not just you
Kise Ryouta: well i think ur name should be light of my life!
Momoi Satsuki: aww thanks Kichan!
Kise Ryouta: or pink haired goddess!
Kagami Taiga: I can't picture you as anything but Manager
Momoi Satsuki: well~~~ I am super good at my job!
Kuroko Tetsuya: Mom-ager
Momoi Satsuki: :O thats cute!
Aomine Daiki: wait if satsukis the mom then whos the dad?
Haizaki Shougo: Shittymura
Kuroko Tetsuya: Nijimura-san.
Kagami Taiga: Nijimura
Aomine Daiki: lmao so hes just dad?
Haizaki Shougo: Shittydadamura
Kise Ryouta: he def has the dad thing down at least
Kise Ryouta: cant u imagine him sayin "im not angry just disappointed"?
Kise Ryouta: □ □
Kuroko Tetsuya: The Disappointed Dad to Momoi-san's Momager.
Momoi Satsuki: i love it! XD XD XD
Momoi Satsuki: following the family theme dont you guys think Tetchan would be the son?
Kise Ryouta: sardonic son 4 sure!
Kise Ryouta: innuendo guy, disappointed dad, momager, sardonic son, sunshine boys, and….
Haizaki Shougo: I stfg
Momoi Satsuki: trash son

Kise Ryouta: trash son!

Kuroko Tetsuya: Trash Son.

Haizaki Shougo: So you think I'm fucking trash huh?

Kise Ryouta: its not an insult!

Kise Ryouta: u just hav the garbage boy vibe!

Momoi Satsuki: hes right! its v loving and affectionate Haichan, promise!

Haizaki Shougo: I guess it's better than fucking Virgin-kun

Haizaki Shougo: But anyway, you all have a lot of faith in Tetsuya, don't you?

Kise Ryouta: ?

Haizaki Shougo: You don't think that merciless motherfucker won't add his best buddy to the group chat and let him read your embarrassing shit up there?

Kise Ryouta: Σ(°□°)

Aomine Daiki: oh shit

Kagami Taiga: …

Momoi Satsuki: bold of you to assume i have any shame

Kuroko Tetsuya: I can't believe you would accuse me of such a vile, underhanded-

Kuroko Tetsuya added Ogiwara Shigehiro to the group chat.

Kuroko Tetsuya: Oh, never mind. Lol.

Aomine Daiki: TETSU YOU JERK

Kise Ryouta: ITS NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE OGIWARA I SWEAR

Momoi Satsuki: hi Ogiwarakun!

Haizaki Shougo: Fucking told you

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Hey guys!

Kise Ryouta: DONT SCROLL UP PLS

Kise Ryouta: NOTHING INTERESTING UP THERE NOPE

Kise Ryouta: DEF NOTHING ABOUT YOU

Aomine Daiki: shut up kise your makin it worse
Ogiwara Shigehiro: Sorry, i got curious ^w^

Ogiwara Shigehiro: But if anybody wants a hug from me, they just have to ask ;)

Kise Ryouta left the group chat.

Aomine Daiki left the group chat.

Momoi Satsuki: wimps

Haizaki Shougo: That's nothing new

Momoi Satsuki: also thx for the offer Ogiwarakun! I will gladly take you up on it next time!

Ogiwara Shigehiro: I'll look forward to it Momoi-san!

Momoi Satsuki: oh and be sure to hug Tetchan, too, okay?

Kuroko Tetsuya: Momoi-san.

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Of course!

Momoi Satsuki: lots and lots!

Kuroko Tetsuya: Momoi-san, why.

Momoi Satsuki: someone needs to be your wingman & you cant trust any of these useless men

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Oh is kuroko actually interested in someone?

Kuroko Tetsuya: …

Momoi Satsuki: you need it.

Momoi Satsuki: jk jk Ogiwarakun you know Tetchan would tell you, his actual favorite human being, if he were! ;)

Ogiwara Shigehiro: That's true!

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Kuroko's my favorite human being too!

Haizaki Shougo: …

Kuroko Tetsuya: …

Momoi Satsuki: B)

Haizaki Shougo: So quick question, Ogiwara, but what do you like better: cats or dogs?

Ogiwara Shigehiro: That's a tough one, but I'd have to say dogs!

Haizaki Shougo: Golden Retrievers?

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Love em!
Haizaki Shougo: Shiba Inu?

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Yes!

Ogiwara Shigehiro: There's no such thing as an unlovable dog Haizaki-kun!

Haizaki Shougo: Huh

Kuroko Tetsuya: You're absolutely right, Ogiwara-kun.

Kagami Taiga left the group chat.

Momoi Satsuki: XD XD XD

Haizaki Shougo: ?

Kuroko Tetsuya added Kagami Taiga to the group chat.

Kagami Taiga: I stop reading this damn chat for TWO SECONDS and you fuckers start talking about THOSE THINGS

Momoi Satsuki: XD XD XD XD XD XD XD XD

Kagami Taiga: I don't even want to know how you know Momoi but fuck you

Kuroko Tetsuya: What is the problem, Kagami-kun?

Kagami Taiga: IM NO T TYPING THAT CURSED WORD

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Dogs?

Kagami Taiga left the group chat.

Haizaki Shougo: Is he fuckin scared of dogs or somethin

Momoi Satsuki: isnt it hilarious?

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Aww now i feel bad

Kuroko Tetsuya: No need to. Kagami-kun needed to have a humorous weakness like dogs. It makes him a relatable character for the readers.

Ogiwara Shigehiro: Readers?

Momoi Satsuki: dont you worry your pretty little head about it, Ogiwarakun!

Haizaki Shougo: This is great. Next time he pisses me off, I'm sending him pics of dogs.

Kuroko Tetsuya: I'm adopting a dog immediately.

Ogiwara Shigehiro: (*”⊙”*)

Momoi Satsuki: this is amusing but lets not terrorize the poor boy into fleeing the country
Haizaki Shougo: Aomine's doing a fine job of that all on his own

Momoi Satsuki: even so!

Haizaki Shougo: Alright alright

Kuroko Tetsuya changed the chat name to *No one in this chat is afraid of dogs, probably.*

*Kuroko Tetsuya* added *Aomine Daiki, Kise Ryouta,* and *Kagami Taiga* to the group chat.

Kagami Taiga: Oh fuck you too

Aomine Daiki: ?

Kise Ryouta: hav we moved on2 embarrassing some1 else?

Kagami Taiga: That's it. You assholes are gettin muted

*Kuroko Tetsuya*: He actually did it. Unfortunate.

Momoi Satsuki: lol

IV. August 2nd, 2012 - Thursday

Shougo had never cared to notice, but every person in his family is ridiculously stubborn. Obstinate to a fault - their family motto. Normally, he might be proud of such a thing, but in this case...

"You're supposed to be resting!" Shougo reminds his mother for the hundredth time, beyond exasperated and sliding right into annoyed - or he would be if his worry didn't overshadow it entirely.

She huffs, just as annoyed; though hers is tempered by understanding. "It was just heatstroke. Not even a life-threatening case." She makes to grab the sponge from him again, but he quickly moves it out of her reach. "Shougo," she warns, eyes narrowing.

"Mom," he says, matching her tone and expression. He learned most of his intimidation tactics from her, so it's easy.

She sighs. "I'm not going to drop dead, Shougo."

Ignoring the shiver of foreboding that elicits, Shougo just gives her his best unimpressed expression, one which perfectly conveys how Done he is with this conversation and his mom's cavalier attitude towards her own health. "You did drop unconscious, though. Sit down. I've got this," he says, shooing her away.

Rolling her eyes in reluctant amusement, she opens her mouth to say something when Shion enters the kitchen clad in a frilly apron and armed with a broom and smiling cheerfully at them.

"Shion, are you actually sweeping?" She asks, looking as if she wants to check to see if he has a fever or something.

Catching that same look, Shion pouts. "I can sweep! Shougo's just so good at it that I couldn't possibly take his place!"

"Like hell," Shougo says, indignant. "You pull the older brother card and give me all the chores you
"All the more reason you should treasure this unexpected goodwill," Shion shoots back, smirking. "It won't last forever."

Ignoring their byplay, Mom puts her hands on her hips and frowns sternly. "How many times do I have to say this? I'm the mom. You're my kids. It's not your job to look after me, and anyway, I can take care of myself."

Shougo doesn't try to contradict her because he's not stupid, nor does he lack a sense of self-preservation as some people might believe. (Plus, well, she's not wrong.) Shion doesn't either - barely.

He waves a hand dismissively and says, "You can take care of yourself perfectly fine. We get that! But we can do nice things for you for no reason, right?" That said, he goes back to sweeping, and Shougo continues doing the dishes.

Mom's eyebrow twitches. "So this has nothing to do with the heatstroke, huh?" He asks, her flat voice showing just what she thinks of that.

Shougo nods vigorously, and without missing a beat, Shion chirps, "Completely unrelated. Move aside, please. I need to sweep there."

Mom does move, eying the two of them like she can't decide whether she's irritated by their mothering or pleased by their concern. She settles on irritation when Shion herds her into sitting in a chair at the kitchen table under the guise of cleaning.

"Shion-" She starts to say, gearing up for another argument only to be interrupted by knocking.

"I'll get it!" Shion volunteers, setting the broom aside and skirting around their mother on his way out of the kitchen.

Mom snorts. "I haven't seen your brother move that fast since that time his favorite restaurant was doing an all you can eat special." Shougo shares a smirk with her. She leans back in the chair, crossing her arms, and says, "Fine. If you're so dead set on taking over, then you can get started on lunch."

"Fine," Shougo says, as flatly as he can manage because his mom is expecting him to complain (so of course he won't), and besides, cooking isn't even that hard. It's just following directions, and anybody can do that. "But in exchange, you have to rest. Stay off your feet. Maybe take a nap. You know, like the certified professional told you to."

She rolls her eyes, still reluctantly amused but agreeable enough, so long as he holds up his part of the deal. "I don't remember you being this much of a mother hen, Shougo," she says rather than arguing.

"I think it's adorable," a feminine voice says- one that decidedly isn't his mother's.

"Fuck off," Shougo says reflexively, looking at her from the corner of his eye. Satsuki smiles innocently at him.

His mother kicks him. "Don't be such a shit." She only arches a brow when he scowls at her.

"Aww, you don't have to be embarrassed, Hai-chan!" Satsuki coos sweetly, stealing the chair across from his mom. "It's sweet."
"Yeah, Hai-chan, you should embrace your maternal tendencies. Really, it's a shame this side of you is so often buried by your porcupine personality," his asshole of a brother chimes in, laughing at Shougo's reflexive rude gesture and dodging the follow up swipe once he gets close enough.

Irritated, Shougo splashes soapy water at him and laughs when Shion yelps, "Not cool, jerk!"

"Oh? But I was just embracing my maternal side by cleaning that stain," Shougo tells him sweetly.

"There was no stain!" Shion rebuffs, grabbing a towel and attempting to dry his shirt with little success.

Shougo smirks. "Guess it was just your face, then. Sorry, hard to tell the difference."

"Asshole!" Shion grumbles, trying not to smile.

"Never claimed to be anything else," Shougo says, turning back to his dishes. "Now finish sweeping already! I'm not letting you get out of it by picking a fight with me like you always do."

Shion huffs. "Fine. But only because you sound like Mom bossing me around like that, and it's hilarious." He laughs, ducking around said mother to sweep on her other side.

"Boys," she reprimands, beyond exasperated.

"Just like that! See? Sounds just like you!" Shion snickers, and Shougo's patience snaps with an audible crack.

"Fuck it! Come here, you fucking dickweed!" Shougo yells, abandoning his chore to teach his older brother his place. Someone has to.

["Why do I even try?" Ayano asks herself, rolling her eyes as she watches Shougo tackle a cackling Shion to the ground and attempt to pin him in place.

Satsuki commiserates with her. "Boys are stupid."

Ayano lets out a startled laugh. "That they are." She gives Satsuki a curious look. "What brings you here without your shadow?"

"Speaking of stupid boys..." Satsuki says, looking a weird mix between exasperated and annoyed. "Dai-chan was moping more than usual today because Kagamin is out with his parents for his birthday, so I had Ki-chan and Tet-chan drag him off to a court to distract him with basketball."

"Sounds rough." And she would know. She knows all about mopey teenage boys.

Satsuki smiles at her. "Pardon my language, Ayano-san, but if I have to hear my best friend talk about the virtues of Kagamin's drool worthy calves and how America isn't worthy of them one more time, I'm going to pull his head out of his ass and force him to confess his undying love to Kagamin."

Ayano laughs. "Does the kid like him like that?" she asks. She's wondered, especially considering the things she's heard from Shougo, but.

"Honestly? I don't know. Could be a crush, or some strange bromance thing. I don't think he knows. As my mom so often tells me, we're at 'that' age where hormones make a mess of things." She shrugs and then smiles an unkind smile. "But if Dai-chan doesn't stop using me as his personal therapist, I'm going to do something drastic, even if that means foisting him onto Kagamin, so I don't have to deal with all the sulking and muttering and whining anymore."
"You'd send him to another country?" Ayano wants to know, amused.

Satsuki looks her in the eye and says, "Without hesitation."

Laughing again, Ayano tells her, "This is why you're my favorite, Sa-chan."

She's rewarded with an utterly pleased smile, edged with satisfaction. "I wear the title with pride, Ayano-san."

Chapter End Notes

the important info: i rewrote a couple chapters bc i was uncomfortable with them. someone pointed out I was romanticizing forced kisses, which was definitely not my intention, but intentions don't always matter when it comes to things like this. therefore, the nijihai kiss in chapter 12 was changed to a kiss on the cheek (still kind of iffy but much more innocuous, i hope) and the train nijihai kise kisses in chapter 26 were changed to just a kiss on the hand from kise (also hopefully better.) i scoured thru subsequent chapters to change the scenes that mentioned the kisses, but if i missed any, please let me know!

- not too pleased with this chapter bc it wanted to be too many things - tying up the hospital visit, focusing on kagami's birthday, which i also thought was the 1st, hence that whole section up there, but eh, not rewriting it, and focusing on the haizaki fam in general - but sometimes you've just gotta suck it up and post what you've got in order to move forward. hope you guys liked it anyway!

- the chat part is so long bc it was an easy, fun way to get back into writing for this, and as usual when it comes to this fic, it grew a mind of its own. don't worry, this isn't going to turn into a chat fic. might have it show up occasionally like the texts, but it won't take over again.

- meant to focus more on kagami since he's leaving soon, but satsuki wanted a lil more screen time, & what satsuki wants, she gets. (will focus on kagami next ch!) also she's super done with dumb boys & their dumb feelings

- idk about you but my friends & i often joked about us dating each other, esp. if it got an amusing reaction. it was hardly ever serious. so if you're worried about other pairings, don't be. i'm just teasing stuff bc you guys asked for it.

- where was niji? spending time w his dad, who he just learned will get super sick soon & also grilling his parents about their health history & researching what he can. also p much as soon as he was added to the group & saw the name, he rolled his eyes & muted it lmao

- who doesn't have a crush on ayano tbh?

- ogiwara continues to be a delightful human being. i'm really happy you guys liked him so much last chapter! kurogi is highkey a fave pairing of mine, so even if i didn't intend to hint at it, i'm not surprised it slipped in lol
I. August 3rd, 2012 - Friday

Haizaki Shougo wakes up.

He wakes up, and… Nothing.

He wakes, and familiar insecurities do not immediately pounce on his sleep-worn consciousness, his self-hatred doesn’t instantly sink its claws into him and drag much regretted memories into the fore as if it needed to remind him of the reason for its continued existence, his bone-deep terror of a cut off sentence and a marionette suddenly without strings and a moment in space and time when the world fell at his feet doesn’t rear its ugly head the second Shougo slips between dreams and reality.

Shougo wakes, and he thinks instead mom is recovering well i’ll pick up groceries tonight and wrangle shion into helping me make dinner and kagami is leaving soon that sucks but i’ll definitely make him keep in touch and i doubt i’ll be the only one and i didn’t get to play basketball yesterday my fingers are itching i wonder if i can casually set up a game without sounding like i’m as much of a basketball idiot as the rest of them.

He wakes, and he doesn't really notice the disparity until he's brushing his teeth (why is it always when he's doing such an inane activity?) and the silence in his own mind is somehow louder than the sounds of the Haizaki household preparing for the day.

Tentatively, he prods at what he envisions is a cordoned off area in his brain, covered in police tape and warning signs and braces himself for the inevitable onslaught of fearpainhate.
An onslaught that never comes.

(it's my fault she already forgave you i pushed everyone away they were happy to have you back i said and did such terrible things you're trying to make up for that, aren't you?)

What? Incredulous, Shougo tries again, heedless of the consequences, almost unable to comprehend what's happening, what he's hearing.

(i'm a piece of shit your friends don't think so they don't know the things i've done not unless you tell them, no even if they did they'd hate me maybe but you don't know that for sure i haven't changed at all if you hadn't you wouldn't be so worried or remorseful im selfish i only want to save my mom right because that's such a terribly selfish thing)

The harsh thoughts haven't disappeared. They're still there, lying in wait, ready to ambush him at a low point as they've always done. But...

(i knew about nijimura's dad the whole time and i still kept the truth to myself because you forgot and who the hell would have believed you anyway i said i would fix things for my friends but i haven't even tried so start trying it's not too late ...i don't know how to help and the idea that their future happiness relies on my decisions is terrifying stop trying to make yourself sound like a fairy tale protagonist not everything is about you their future is in their own hands)

But they're no longer overwhelming him or his ability to listen to reason. Now when those ugly thoughts pop up, another voice immediately rises up to counter it. And the most surprising part?

That voice is his. Calmly, reasonably, with a hint of exasperation, it banishes Shougo's demons with a wave of warm light and an easy confidence he'd almost forgotten he was capable of.

If ever there were a scenario where he imagined something like this happening (not that he ever did), he would have assumed the voice would belong to Nijimura, who is perhaps the most vocal when it comes to supporting him, or Ryouta, whose affection and skinship speaks for itself, or even Tetsuya, who is good and kind and undoubtedly gives the best, most shounen-like pep talks despite his hilariously unimpassioned monotone.

But it's not any of them. But it's him, all him. There's a part of Shougo that isn't drowning under the weight of his fears and hurt and regrets, a part that's steady and strong and (he can't stress this enough) reasonable, and it in turn steadies him, strengthens him, allows him to actually take a minute and think rather than get caught up in a tsunami of emotions and bad memories.

He takes a breath, and it's heady, full of relief and gratitude and a million other things he can't name because Shougo hasn't felt so peaceful, so at peace with himself in a long, long time. Not since before Teiko, surely, not since Shougo was too young to really understand the whispered conversations and wary looks and why mothers told their children, "I don't want you playing with that boy, okay?!" where he could fucking hear them.

"What the hell," he mutters under his breath, but it's wondering. Twelve year old Shougo stares back at him, just as disbelieving, and for the first time since that morning Shougo woke up over a decade in the past and felt the faint stirrings of hope, now he looks at his reflection and feels like he can actually do this, that this is really and truly a new start, that he doesn't need to hope anymore because he's taking action, and already things are changing for the better.

It's a quiet revelation on a quiet morning, and so Shougo keeps quiet about it. His friends would be happy to hear it, especially the two who know, but... This is something he wants to keep to himself, at least for a little while. He wants to bask in this newfound (recently rediscovered) self-assurance, let
it sink in fully before he draws attention to it.

Things are looking up, somehow, despite everything, and Shougo wants to hold tight to the thought that things will stay this way.

II. August 3rd, 2012 - Friday

"Yo, Kagami," Shougo calls out upon spotting said boy leaning against the gate outside. "Thanks for waiting."

Kagami shrugs, pocketing his phone and tucking the basketball more firmly against his side as he stands. "Didn't wait long. You ready?" he asks.

Shougo nods, settling his bag on his shoulder and pulling the door closed behind him, making sure he hears the click of the lock. He lets a smirk steel over his face and challenge leak into his tone as he says, "Ready to kick your ass."

"Like I'd let you," is his immediate retort, but there's a fire in his eyes, ignited as always by the promise of worthwhile competition. Kagami never disappoints in that regard.

Shougo snorts and gives him a light shove, which turns into actually laughing when Kagami responds by shoving him back hard enough to make him stumble.

Kagami eyes him, bemused. "You're in a good mood."

Ryouta said the same thing once, and his amusement grows as one thought flows into another, and suddenly, he's imagining Kagami pouting childishly and then throwing himself onto the nearest person like a human koala.

"If you ever feel like hugging me for no reason, please warn me first," Shougo asks of him, words trembling with his humor.

Now eying him with no little exasperation, Kagami says, "And if you feel like making sense, you just let me know."

"I am in a good mood," Shougo allows, smiling uncontrollably, and he can't help the bubbly feeling in his chest at the way Kagami unconsciously mirrors his smile, thoroughly confused but apparently happy for him in his own way.

"Any particular reason?" he asks, and with anyone else, it might be carefully casual, wary of disturbing him and this instance of good fortune. Kagami says it bluntly, forthright as always, and that too brings a smile to his face, or maybe keeps it there because Kagami has never treated him like he's different, like he's fragile, even knowing his strange ass secret, even after seeing him break down. And for that, Shougo will be eternally grateful. It's this frank honesty and expectation that Shougo can handle whatever he dishes out that Shougo will dearly miss once Kagami goes back overseas.

"Just- realized some things, that's all," Shougo answers, because it's as much of the truth as he's willing to share right now and because he knows it will be enough for Kagami.

True to his prediction, Kagami accepts the explanation with hardly a blink, and the conversation smoothly transitions to other topics, like what the others are doing (summer homework, which Shougo had sped through yesterday so he wouldn't have to join them and Kagami apparently doesn't have; American schools are weird), how Kagami's birthday had gone (halfway through lunch, Daiki had invited himself along, ignoring Ryouta's pleas and probably encouraged by Tetsuya's silence,
and it had inevitably turned into Kagami's parents, who were thoroughly amused, excusing an embarrassed/irritated Kagami from the rest of their plans so that he could go play with his friends), and how on earth they'd managed to carve out time alone to play when Daiki is apparently attached to Kagami's hip (Nijimura is terrifying, and an irate Satsuki genuinely scares all of them; Daiki was no match for the two of them working together).

By the time they reach the court, dawdling as they were because they both kept laughing so hard that walking became a challenge, Shougo feels his resolve settle into his bones. It's a new weight but a good one, nothing like the crushing, oppressive force of angerfearhelplessnesswhy-can't-i-do-anything-right. Even the ball in his hands feels lighter without that baggage, and Shougo imagines the hopedeterminationconfidencei-won't-fail-again in his chest feels just the same.

And just like that, a decision Shougo hadn't even known he was contemplating is made.

"Kagami," Shougo says, voice calm and gray eyes steady as they meet wild crimson, "in a few years, you'll move back here on your own. And when you do…” Images fill his mind, passing by so quickly they might as well be flickers of thought, half-formed and hazy, but even so, he has no trouble deciphering them. Not these memories, no.

-nijimura leaving, being kicked off the team, miracles crowned, miracles breaking apart like shattered glass, ogiwara and kuroko and utter devastation, shougo's sick satisfaction mixed up in hurt and betrayal and anger, violence becoming second nature, and then an endless moment filled with regret and heartbreak and horror-

"When you do, we'll welcome you back, all of us," the words come out of their own volition, fierce and unwavering and a promise, I promise. "Everything will be how you left it."

I won't let things change.

He'd shied away from the idea of helping the other Miracles, even though he wanted to, because he felt like he was barely capable of helping his own mother. How was he supposed to stop the shit storm that was a culmination of a fuckton of other things spiraling out of control? Knowing what he does now about Ryouta, Tetsuya, and Daiki, he has a better idea of how things progressed so badly for them, but what of Seijuro, Atsushi, and Shintarou? The six of them all affected each other whether they meant to or not, and that in turn meant that when one thing went to shit, it caused a domino effect. When one Miracle became a condescending asshole, the rest followed suit, like some twisted game of follow the leader.

He doesn't know the whole story, so there's a chance he could make things worse, which is unacceptable. So here's what he does know:

- Seijuro has some kind of mental break and develops a split personality which manifests by changing his eye color (Not touching how that could fucking happen with a ten foot pole)

- Shintarou becomes focused on perfecting his skills to the exclusion of all else (Nothing new there)

- Atsushi gets real uppity and challenges Seijuro, leading to the split personality (Definitely need to fucking prevent!)

That's the shit that happened while he was still there, anyway, and he can only imagine things getting worse without anyone who was, you know, not a fucking prodigy (that was placed on a damn pedestal by even their own coaches to the point they were left completely unchecked and allowed to run roughshod over their own teammates so long as they kept winning) to step in and smack some sense into them. And well, obviously, it did get worse.
The irony that Shougo, of all people, has to be the one step in and smack sense into these assholes when he was originally the worst of the lot is not lost on him, and no, he doesn't find it funny. What's worse is that in order for him to get them to listen to him and to find out more about how shit went down last time he has to befriend them, and okay, that was his plan from the start, but there's a reason he hasn't made any progress on that front.

That reason is Akashi Seijuro.

He's still rainbows and butterflies personified right now, but Shougo vividly remembers how he was after the other personality took over. Cold, calculating, and absolutely fucking insane. He threatened people with scissors, for fuck's sake, and he apparently regularly threatened to gouge his own eyes out. And people believed that he would. His teammates believed that he would. He was fucking nuts.

Not to mention, he was in charge of the other fucked up prodigies for two years, and he undoubtedly encouraged them to look down on their opponents and to constantly belittle them. It was likely his influence that led to Ryouta specifically taking part in the malice and contempt when Shougo now knows that Ryouta would never intentionally do so, not unless he had some beef with that person or their team.

Seijuro comes with so many fucking problems, and Shougo has no idea how to help him with any of them. Surely being captain of the MiraGen couldn't have been the only contributing factor to the split personality. Surely there was some other problem - or maybe more than one. Probably something in his home life, and how the hell is Shougo supposed to change anything there? He fucking loathes Seijuro's high and mighty attitude later on, but it's not totally wrong to say that Shougo would be a peasant to Seijuro's emperor, financially speaking.

He can't fuck with a family that could potentially fuck his own family over, and who's to say Seijuro would even want his help, anyway? Who's to say overtures of friendship won't be denied, or that once the other personality takes over he won't get the boot sooner because Seijuro will realize so much sooner that there's no place for two people with similar talents on the same team?

He hasn't forgotten that it was Seijuro who got rid of him the moment a more suitable candidate appeared, and even though he knows this Seijuro is not that one, he can't help nursing a grudge the size of Mount Fuji. Can't help the instinctive fury and betrayal he feels every time he so much as looks at him. It doesn't matter that technically there was nothing to betray because Shougo was never one of them, but he feels it anyway, like a lingering poison.

Because of that, he's not even sure how sincere his overtures would be. How can they be when a part of him wants Seijuro to suffer in some way?

Gah! It's beyond fucked up that the guy who was tossed away like trash has to be the one to keep them from falling apart, and maybe he's repeating himself too much, but that's only because he really, really doesn't want to do this. He's stalling, like he has been for a while, but he can't keep doing that.

Things are only going to get better if he makes them, and to do that, he's got to put his big boy pants on and get shit done.

...Maybe he'll start with someone easier, though. Like Atsushi. Anyone is better than Seijuro at this point, really, but he wouldn't even know where to begin with befriending Shintarou either. At least sweets are a safe bet with their resident giant no matter the circumstances.

Okay, so. He's got a plan, sort of. Yay?
A long silence falls over them after Shougo's sudden declaration, during which Shougo lets his thoughts fly and Kagami regards him with some surprise before contemplation takes over.

Finally, scratching the back of his neck, Kagami breaks the silence (and effectively pulls Shougo from his musing) by saying, "...Good. I'll hold you to that." No doubt colors his tone, only calm expectation, a surety that Shougo will keep his word.

And the smile Shougo gives him in response makes a flush settle over Kagami's ears.

III. August 4th, 2012 - Saturday

"Are you crying?" Kagami asks, exasperated and also as though he hadn't expected anything else.

"Of course I am! Kagabaka!" Ryouta snaps, glaring at him through snot and tears.

"Why?"

"I'm going to miss you! Obviously! Bakagami!"

"Okay, okay! Just stop calling me weird names!" Kagami says, embarrassed by the blunt admission.

Ryouta pouts, expression expectant. "And?"

Kagami rolls his eyes. "And I'm gonna miss you, too. Though I don't know why."

"Rude!" Ryouta calls him out, but he laughs.

Satsuki nudges Daiki and says, "I'm surprised you're not crying, Dai-chan, especially considering you were so against Kagamin leaving."

Daiki grunts in annoyance. "I'm not happy about it, but it's not worth crying over. Besides, do you really think I want any part of that?" he asks, gesturing at the hilarious sight of Ryouta hugging the life out of Kagami, who endures the clinging admirably.

Satsuki laughs. "I figured you were just waiting your turn."

"Nah," he denies easily. "I know this isn't the last time we're going to see each other." He raises his voice to be heard over Ryouta's wailing, smugly explaining, "Kagabro's gonna come crawling back once he realizes the only competition worth playing against is here in Japan."

Kagami flips him off. "Like hell. And quit acting like I have any say on where I live, Ahomine!"

"You didn't even try any of my ideas so you could stay here, asshole!"

"Because they were crazy! Leave the thinking to Momoi because the only thing you're good at is basketball, dumbass!"

"Which is why you should have tried harder to stay!"

"I already said-"

"Annnnd that's enough," Nijimura says, a hand on each head, which he then uses to smash their foreheads together. Amidst cries of pain, he tells them, "This is the hundredth time you've had this same argument just this morning! I'm this close to suspending you from practice, shitty kouhai!"

Daiki yelps, eyes wide, "Wha-? No! You can't do that!"
Nijimura stares him down. "Can't I?"

Seemingly realizing that Nijimura, as captain, can, in fact, do that, Daiki subsides with little grace. "Fine!"

Wisely, Kagami had only taken a few steps out of striking range upon the first hit and keeps his mouth closed on any protests of his own. Kagami is the smart one of the baskebaka duo, as evidenced, and it's a damn shame he's the one getting carted off to another country.

Satisfied by their compliance (for now), Nijimura turns to Kagami and says, sternly, "Don't wander away from your parents once you guys get going. I don't care how many fights you've been in. Airports can be especially dangerous for kids like you. Stay safe."

Once Kagami agrees with the appropriate seriousness, Nijimura cracks a smile and ruffles his hair, fond. "Good. Don't go crazy in practice without us there to keep an eye on you, either. I know you love it, but playing without breaks or days off will do you more harm than good. Don't make me cross an entire ocean just to kick your ass."

"I won't," he promises, disgruntled and prompting a laugh from Nijimura.

"Kagami-kun, make sure to Skype us as soon as you get home," Tetsuya reminds him, solemnly.

After jumping in surprise, he smiles, a little. "'Course."

"After you get settled in and only if the jetlag isn't too bad," Satsuki chimes in. "But don't put it off and forget about it either! Dai-chan and Ki-chan aren't the only ones who are going to miss you, you know."

"I know," Kagami replies, torn between amusement and chagrin at the constant mothering. Amusement wins out when Satsuki arches a delicate pink brow, and Kagami grudgingly admits, "I'll call you as soon as I can! It's not like I don't want to stay in contact with you guys."

Satsuki beams, pleased. "Good! Because then I'd cross the ocean to kick your ass."

Kagami grunts his agreement, eying her warily. Such a sweet smile and words said so cheerfully shouldn't be so damn ominous, but there you go.

"Momoi-san, you're being particularly scary today," Tetsuya points out with his own tiny smile. He looks approving.

"Just doing what I have to to keep us together, Tet-chan," she replies happily.

Shougo snorts but doesn't comment. He's learned his lesson where those two are concerned. The biggest monsters are usually found in the ones you'd least suspect, after all. Just look at the trail of defeated enemies Tetsuya left in his wake on his way to the top.

Weak, his ass.

"Ah!" Satsuki exclaims, glancing at the time. "You'd better get going, Kagamin. Your parents said they'd meet you at the airport, right?"

Kagami nods, checking his own phone, presumably a text from his parents concerning their flight. "Yeah, it's leaving in an hour, but we're supposed to be there early."

Ryouta lets a cry, dismayed, but Nijimura wraps an arm around his neck and pulls him into a half
hug before he can tackle Kagami again. "Well, have a safe flight," he offers.

"Thanks."

"...Kagamicchi! You'd better visit again, okay?"

"I'll try."

"Be careful, Kagamin!"

"I will."

"Don't let your skills get rusty over there, alright?! I'm expecting you to get stronger, so maybe next time, you'll actually beat me!"

"I did beat you, dick!"

"I'll miss your aggressive mother-henning, Kagami-kun. And especially your wife bentos."

"I won't miss your snark, you shit."

Aggrieved, Kagami rolls his eyes at the last minute farewells and threats/advice/sass, and then he turns to Shougo.

"...What they said," Shougo tells him, because they already hashed out everything they needed to yesterday. Anything else is unnecessary.

Kagami must feel the same because he just nods, smile gentle and accepting. Before he walks off, though, he can't resist one last, "See ya, old man."

The sputtering Shougo devolves into pulls a deep, belly laugh from him, and with that, he runs off and doesn't look back.

(After all, this isn't the end for them. He already can't wait until the next time he sees them again.)

Chapter End Notes

kagabro is gone, & i already miss him lmao. he won't be back for a while, so enjoy this while you can! (an alt. title was kagabro kagascapes lmao)

- no? angst? what? ok a lil. but haizaki has made progress as a person & i wasn't about to arbitrarily go back on that. this won't be all fluff & humor from here on, so angst fans do not worry! i have plenty of ways to make you cry. ;)

- juggling so many characters in one scene is still difficult & annoying & i'm only gonna add more., WHY do i torment myself so? ...bc it's what the ppl want! apparently!

- haizaki has finally committed to befriending our last three miragen members!

- speaking of, if i'm wrong about anything up there, please correct me! it's been a while since ya girl has watched the show & if i looked at the wiki every time i wrote, even LESS writing would get done, i assure you. something about research when it's not for school just instantly drains all energy & motivation out of me ugh
- do keep in mind haizaki is guessing a lot. he doesn't know exactly what happened, so some of it is just him making assumptions & it doesn't mean that's how it actually is or how i'm gonna go about writing it. even his impressions of their personalities could be off. ;)

ALSO! there is a blog dedicated to this fic called phantom-pain-in-my-ass where i will try to keep you guys updated on my progress for each chapter & another blog solely for writing called kolbiethewriter where you can find excerpts and plotbunnies for stories not posted anywhere else.
maybe the real character development was (because of) the friends we made along the way

Chapter Notes

It's been way too long! So without further ado, enjoy the chapter!

Next Update: I've got the next chapter ready to go, and I'll be posting it next Thursday, June 6. After that, tho, updates will continue to be sporadic. Check my tumblr phantom-pain-in-my-ass for frequent updates on my progress/word count for each chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

II. August 5th, 2012 - Monday

Another long sigh. The mushrooms are multiplying at an alarming rate, and the cloud of doom covers the ceiling.

Poking a particularly overgrown mushroom with a pencil, Shougo meets Satsuki’s eyes across the room, communicating perfectly their exasperation with the situation.

“There, there,” she hums, giving Daiki’s shoulder a few good pats. “Kagamin hasn’t forgotten about you. His plane only just landed, after all, and it’s like 8 or 9 over there. I’m sure he’s going straight home and into bed. No need to sulk.”

Daiki huffs, lifting his head to glare at her. “I ain’t sulking, woman! I’m pissed! Where am I gonna find a good rival now, huh- Ow!” He whips around, hand automatically rubbing the spot on his side that Tetsuya just jabbed. “Tetsu, what the hell?”

Unrepentant, Tetsuya stares blankly at him, not even bothering to lower the offending hand, fingers still at the ready. “Aomine-kun was being arrogant again.”

Ryouta throws an arm around Tetsuya and leans close, hand held against his face as if to cover his mouth. A useless action because he doesn’t even lower his voice when he says, in a cheerful, menacing tone, “You can’t say that, Kurokocchi! We’re supposed to use words like ‘confident’ and ‘proactive.’ Even if Aominecchi is saying things that are making all the basketball players here want to crush him!”
“Ah.” Tetsuya responds, as if getting the point. “In that case, Kise-kun shouldn’t use terms like ‘crush him.’ ‘Annihilate’ would work better.”

Ryouta adopts a contemplative expression. “How about ‘make him eat his words?’”

“Perhaps ‘shred his self-confidence into a million pieces and then make him regret ever being born’?”

“Ooh! ‘Set fire to his hopes and dreams and then dance on the ashes’!”

“Grind his bones to dust—”

“OKAY!” Daiki yells, diving on top of them and knocking them over into a groaning pile of tangled limbs and teenage boys. “I get it! I’m sorry! Stop saying creepy shit, alright!”

“Only if Aomine-kun stops moping,” Tetsuya pipes up immediately, looking quite content about his place in the puppy pile. Probably because Ryouta is the one who took the brunt of the fall and got a knee to the gut.

Ryouta blows a raspberry. “Aww, but I was having fun!”

“Careful. Your dark side is showing,” Nijimura warns, lips upturned at the corners.

He only gets a pout in return. “All my sides are good, Nijimuracchi! I’m an angel, I’ll have you know!”

Nijimura snorts. “A fallen angel, maybe.”

Ryouta gasps, “So mean!”

“It’s what you deserve.”
Crocodile tears gushing, Ryouta throws himself at Shougo, who isn't quick enough to dodge and ends up falling on his ass with a lapful of teen boy because of it. "At least Haizakicchi loves me for who I am!"

"So you're not even denying your shit personality anymore, huh?" Rolling his eyes, he shifts until he's in a more comfortable position, and Ryouta hums, nuzzling contentedly against his neck.

Above them, Nijimura clicks his tongue, watching them like he's not sure whether to be impressed or irritated. "Doesn't have a dark side my ass," he accuses, and Shougo can feel Ryouta smirking against his skin. Smug asshole.

Able to tell this about him when the evidence is all but shoved in his face, he rolls his eyes again hard and shoves Ryouta off of him with absolutely no remorse. "Go bug Aomine. You two can be dramatic and sad together."

"My pain is real, damn it!" Daiki cries, but no one pays him any attention. He slumps, pointlessly drawing a circle on the ground with a finger, muttering sullenly, "My bromance was all too real..."

Golden eyes beseeching, Ryouta protests, "But! But I want to be comforted by Haizakicchi's loving arms! I want to be invigorated by his sweet smile! I want Haizakicchi to soothe my troubled heart with his tenderness and his kind words! I want-!"

Face burning, Shougo clamps a hand over this idiot's mouth, glaring at the cheeky look it gets him. "Shut the hell up. Who the hell cares what you want!"

"It truly is amazing how often Haizaki-kun and Kise-kun touch one another," Tetsuya muses, as if fucking anybody asked for his opinion.

Shougo shoots him a dark look, too. "Don't say it like that, damn it!"

Feigning innocence, Tetsuya says, "But you're touching him right now, Haizaki-kun."

Pulling away as if burned, Shougo huffs, "Agh! The way you say it is so damn creepy! Makes my skin crawl!"
“Ooh, does Tet-chan’s monotone voice give you shivers?” Satsuki joins in, giggling when Shougo rounds on her, betrayed.

“Fucking why?” he begs the heavens, but the gods have no mercy, and neither do his so-called friends.

Tetsuya has the fucking gall to look at him contemplatively and say, “I never did officially join Haizaki-kun’s harem, did I?” like he’s considering joining it now.

Before Shougo can convince himself that murder is bad, and yes, jail would be that awful, Ryouta practically leaps into his lap again, arms crossed in front of him in an X shape and explains, cheerfully but forcefully, “Sorry, but the positions have all been filled! Please try your luck with Aominecchi and Kagamicchi. I hear good things about them!”

“What the FUCK.”

Tetsuya assumes a thoughtful expression.

“How can there even be a harem when the other guy is in a whole other country?” Daiki scoffs, mostly to himself.

Aggrieved, Nijimura holds a hand to his forehead and murmurs, “I don’t know how to feel about the fact that I agree with Sparkly over there or that Aomine basically agreed that he’s part of a harem.”

“Dai-chan’s never been shy about that kind of thing,” Satsuki reveals with a fond smile. She turns an amused look on Nijimura and adds, “And neither are you, Senpai.”

Sending Shougo an annoying ass smirk, he says, “That’s true.”

“I propose that we are all a part of Haizaki-kun’s harem,” Tetsuya finally announces, after apparently thinking it over. “Kagami-kun included. Which means that the couple comprised of Kagamine-kun, Aomine-kun, and myself is only a small piece of an existing whole. A harem within a harem, if you will.”
“Can you do that?” Ryouta asks, skeptical. And he’s still sprawled all over Shougo like a possessive idiot.

“Haizaki-kun is just that special,” Tetsuya says knowingly. As if this smug dumbass knows anything.

“I’m nope-ing out of this conversation,” Shougo tells them, shoving Ryouta off for the nth time. “You’re all conspiring against me, and I refuse to give you any satisfaction.”

Ryouta beams at him and says, earnestly, “That’s okay, Haizakicchi! You can just satisfy me later in the bedroom!”

Shougo is not moved. “That didn’t even faze me. You see what you’ve done? I don’t even care anymore. This is your fault, you damned pervert.”

“I’ll just have to take responsibility then!”

"I'll just have to kick your ass then!" Shougo says, in the exact same chirpy, irritating way Ryouta says just about everything.

Satsuki interjects, "Hold off on the asskicking, guys. Kagamin's Skyping me."

Daiki perks up, leaning over Satsuki’s shoulder to get a glimpse of the screen. "Fucking finally."

"Hi, Kagamin!" She greets, ignoring him but also not shaking him off when Daiki lays his chin on her shoulder.

Everyone crowds around her to see him, but Shougo hears his voice before those fuzzy brows come into view.

"Momoi," he says in return, sounding tired. He looks it, too. "And the rest of you."

"Lazy ass just didn't want to have to say everyone's names," Shougo says, smirking.
"Not lazy, just jetlagged," he rebuffs, stifling a yawn. "I called you. Can I go to bed now?"

Daiki's emphatic "No, you can't," is cut off by Satsuki's, "Of course! Sleep well, Kagamin! Call us back tomorrow, okay? We'll be expecting you."

Following that, there's a chorus of "good night"s and well wishes, as well as thinly veiled threats if Kagami doesn't call tomorrow. He hangs up, and they all stare at Satsuki's blank screen, forlorn, the atmosphere so low one might think somebody had died.

"I call Satsuki as my teammate," Shougo suddenly says, standing up and moving out of the weird little huddle they'd made.

"What? Hey, c'mon, I wanted to team up with you!" Ryouta doesn't disappoint, hopping up to hang off of him with a ridiculous pout.

Shougo rolls his eyes. "You can have Sulky over there." He points a thumb at Daiki, who had gone right on back to moping.

"I don't want to lose," Ryouta whines, and Daiki's ear twitches.

"You're the loser, pretty boy!" He says, irritated. "You haven't beaten me once."

Ryouta snorts. "Yet. Besides, there's no point in bragging when basketball's the only thing you're good at."

"I'm good at everything, you asshole. Gimme that stupid controller!"

"You are good at being an asshole."

"Aaaagh! Don't twist my words around!"
"Full offense, Ki-chan, but *I'm* the only one allowed to roast Dai-chan here, okay?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Which is why I can agree that he is useless at everything else, including Mario Kart. You can buy me ice cream when you lose, Dai-chan."

"Satsuki, did you even *read* the bro code, or was that a lie too?!"

Shougo snorts, rolls his eyes, and starts up the game. He misses Kagami already, but things are still lively and chaotic over here without him.

He looks around, catches Nijimura's eye. Nijimura inclines his head toward Daiki and Ryouta's dumb fight - which has devolved into a lame brawl - and shakes his head. Shougo laughs, shoots him an amused smile, and shrugs, as if saying *What can you do? We signed up for this shit voluntarily.*

He keeps the fact that he doesn't regret it one bit to himself, but he's sure Nijimura already knows. Bastard's canny like that.

**II. August 5th, 2012 - Monday**

Later that night, Nijimura insists on walking him home. Ryouta paired up with Tetsuya (after much coaxing and side-eyeing of Nijimura), and Satsuki's sleeping over at Daiki's (whose house they were at previously). That just leaves Nijimura with him since they live closer to each other.

Normally Shougo would protest this, *heavily*. Even the *real* thirteen year old Shougo would have been firmly against it. However, he'd noticed that Nijimura had something to talk about with him, and it apparently was something the others couldn't overhear. Nijimura's feelings for Shougo are no secret to the group, so it could only have been about one thing.

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Time travel shit. Considering the last bombshell Shougo dropped on Nijimura in particular, he assumes it must have something to do with his dad.

Nijimura drops all pretenses as soon as they're out of both eyesight and earshot of the others, proving
“I asked my dad about our family medical history, but there wasn’t anything helpful. Apparently his side of the family is just ridiculously healthy, and any illness or conditions that *did* befall any of his relatives aren’t hereditary.” Nijimura says, raking a hand through his hair.

“You’d think that alone would rule out a lot, but I looked it up, and sometimes these things are dormant for generations and only pop up when certain conditions are met. This gene mixes with that one, and boom, heart disease. I’m glad you told me what you knew, and it’s not your fault you don’t know much, but still. There’s...not a lot to go on, here.”

“He recovers,” Shougo offers up, not knowing what else to say. Like Nijimura said, it isn’t his fault that he doesn’t know more. The other Nijimura dropped all contact with him, so he wasn’t privy to any info on his dad, and Seijuro sure as hell wasn’t going to tell him. It was like pulling teeth finding out even this much.

He only knows that Nijimura’s dad recovered because he got word that Nijimura had moved back to Japan. Not from the man himself, but gossip about the Generation of Miracles never really ran out considering some of them went pro or else became famous via modeling (Ryouta) or single handedly taking over their father’s company (Seijuro). News of Nijimura, who someone had recognized as their old captain from their Teiko days, meeting up with them had spread around enough that even Shougo had caught wind of it despite being far removed from basketball at the time.

He’s still bitter, but it’s mostly contained by his understanding of his place back then. Shougo wasn’t someone anyone would have wanted to reunite with, as the Miracles surely contested.

This Nijimura doesn’t know any of that, though, and Shougo has no plans to tell him.

“At least there’s that,” Nijimura agrees, letting out a heavy sigh. “I managed to convince him to go get a checkup just in case. Luckily, Dad’s the type to take me seriously even if he doesn’t necessarily understand why I wanted him to.”

Relieved, Shougo says, “That’s good.” Speaking of, he’s never met Nijimura’s dad, so he can’t help being curious. “What’s he like?” slips out before he can reel it back in.

Nijimura looks over at him, quirking a brow. “You never met him?”
Shit. Why did he have to fucking jinx himself?!

“...No,” Shougo says and hopes to leave it at that. The eyebrow stays raised, though, and Nijimura doesn’t let up. Even his damn silence is demanding. “What?” he bites out, defensive.

The other brow goes up. “You never told me about the future me,” Nijimura eventually says, eyes boring holes into Shougo’s face. “Or his relationship with you.”

He doesn’t want to have this talk. Now or ever. If Nijimura wants to pry this out of him, he’s not going to make it easy for the bastard. “And?”

“And I’d like to know.”

Heaving an angry breath, Shougo snaps, “Well I’d like to fucking know, too, but too bad! You cut me out of your life like a fucking tumor, so I wasn’t exactly up to date on the latest Nijimura news.”

It hurts to say, hurts to think about, like picking at a newly healed scab over and over. The fucking worst part is Nijimura doesn’t even look surprised.

“I thought it might be something like that,” the asshole says, unaffected.

“You knew?” Shougo asks, voice low and dangerous. He makes an ugly sound. “Of course you did. Did you get the idea a couple months ago? Before I replaced him? Did you think ‘hey, maybe I’ll latch onto this dumbass, force him to pay attention to me, make him grow attached, and then I’ll fucking dump his ass after middle school’?”

Silence descends upon them after his outburst, heavy, weighted. Shame swiftly follows because he’s being unreasonable, he knows that, lashing out at an actual child because he feels hunted, backed into a corner - made to remember things he’d rather forget and couldn’t possibly justify, even though there’s a defensive, impulsive need to.

He’s ashamed and guilty and looking for something, anything that could alleviate it, that could downplay the awful things he did, that could give him reason to be angry and hurt by Nijimura abandoning him when in reality there’s no such thing.
He deflates, his own turbulent emotions leaving him wrung out and empty. "...Sorry," he says, bowing his head. "Obviously there's some stuff that happened back then that I'm...still dealing with, but that doesn't have anything to do with you." He takes a breath, then says in a rush, "It's not the other Nijimura's fault, either."

A long, long pause, in which Shougo doesn't dare glance at Nijimura.

"Seems like some of it is," he finally says, and Shougo feels the weight of his hand on the top of his head. It's so, so gentle. "I won't apologize for something I haven't done, but I accept yours. And-

Suddenly, said hand moves down to the back of his head and pulls Shougo forward with surprising strength. Before he can quite process that, the other arm wraps around his waist and pulls him in even tighter.

"For what it's worth, I can promise I won't abandon you. You gave me a chance to save my dad, even though you didn't have to, even though it had nothing to do with you. I don't care what kind of person you were before. The person you are now is the kind I won't let go of so easily." As if to prove that, he hugs Shougo even more tightly, tight enough to hurt, and Shougo hugs him back just as tightly, clutching fistfuls of his shirt and pressing his face into the crook of Nijimura's neck, shaken by the conviction in his words and the fact that he believes them.

Another hurt bared to the world. Another balm to soothe it. And Shougo is left ripped and raw and shaking in the aftermath, once again.

Why is it that this shitty captain of his always knows exactly what to say to cut right down to the core of him? Why does he always manage to confidently spew lines Shougo has always wanted to hear, and from this person in particular?

Why does hearing this solemn promise now make him ache for the thirteen year old Shougo he replaced?

Shougo sobs, overwrought, overwhelmed, and unable to do anything but lean his weight on Nijimura and entrust himself to Nijimura's warm embrace.

"Heh, who knew you'd grow up to be a such a crybaby," he teases. "That's okay, though. You can cling to me and cry as much as you want. I won't even take advantage or rub it in that sparkly brat's face. Captain's honor."
Shougo laughs, wet and muffled against shirt and skin. "What good is a shitty captain's honor?"

"About as good as a shitty kouhai's."

"So worthless then."

"You were cuter when you were just sniffling quietly."

"You were more intimidating when I was actually thirteen."

Nijimura barks a laugh, then digs his pointy ass chin into Shougo's tender noggin. "Shut up and accept my affection, you little shit."

"This ain't affection, you jerk!"

But he does, and he lets Nijimura escort him home afterward, and he doesn't even protest when his mom strong-arms Nijimura into staying the night. The wide, yawning space between them filled with secrets and old hurts has diminished a little with the revelation of another truth, and Shougo feels he can finally accept that Nijimura is his friend, too, with all the things that entails.

They're friends, and… he believes it's a bond that won't break. He won't let it. If Nijimura tries to pull the same disappearing act this time, Shougo will just have to hunt him down and knock sense into him. He doubts he'll be the only one, either. Nijimura's not his only friend, after all, and neither is he Nijimura's.

He'll have help this time, and that's as much a reassurance as Nijimura's promise.

Chapter End Notes

i adore this fic & these characters, but i'll be glad to be done with it lol
kagaboi is Tired & so am i rip
do i know anything about illnesses/heart disease?? no. do i care about being accurate?? also no (but if im completely wrong & it bugs you, feel free to correct me)

hope nobody got emotional whiplash from the nijihai convo; have personally had many otherwise normal convos become uncomfortable/tense real quick once someone stumbles across someone else's "button" & doesn't just mercifully change the subject

but hey, more dependable cap/friend niji is always a good thing right?

niji doesn't know what happened but he can guess why the other niji cut off contact; he's just telling haizaki that things are different now, so that won't happen again

if you follow the bdfmn blog, then you'll know i teased a new miracle; dw it's in the next chapter, already written & everything

sorry for the long wait!! this ch was super hard & im still not satisfied w it, but i needed to get past this lol
Chapter Notes

Thanks for the warm welcome! That's probably my favorite part about updating, especially if it's been a while. I love recognizing usernames and seeing everyone so happy to read a new chapter. I'm really grateful for the love and support!

Next Update: Nothing concrete. However, you can always check my sideblog for this fic, phantom-pain-in-my-ass, for info regarding updates and my word count/progress for each chapter.

Title comes from "What You Know" by Two Door Cinema Club, which resonated strongly with me while writing this chapter. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I. August 20th, 2012 - Monday

"Why do I have to go," Shougo whines, (and he fully admits that's what he's doing.)

Ryouta tugs him along like a toddler on a leash. "You promised~" he sings, entirely too chipper for this time of day. It's barely five. It should be a criminal offense to drag people out of their warm beds to go do anything at five in the damn morning.

"When? I want proof."

He laughs. "So grumpy!" He grins at Shougo, practically blinding, and it only grows wider when Shougo glares at him. "This side of Haizakicchi is cute, too~"

"I hate you."

"Yes, yes, you're very scary."

Shougo groans, wishing he hadn't stopped himself from instinctively decking this dumbass when he woke him this morning. Too bad he's gotten used to the unwanted wake up calls.
Nevertheless, he obediently follows, only occasionally griping. Ryouta looks way too happy about such a small thing, so Shougo can't really bring himself to mind.

Anyway, after a crowded ass train ride where Shougo is unwillingly cuddled by Ryouta and sandwiched against other randoms, they make it to their destination: the beach.

"You modeling swimsuits?" Shougo asks, looking around the shoot at all the equipment and bustling crewmembers.

Ryouta makes a noise of agreement. "It's for an ice cream ad. The original model suddenly wasn't available, so they called me in. That's why I kind of sprung it on you today." His last sentence is somewhat apologetic, so Shougo waves him off.

"It's fine. Not like I had anything else to do," he says. Except sleep, but hey, he did promise. And he's trying to become the kind of person who doesn't break them, this time around.

A somewhat harried lady seems to spot Ryouta and call out to him. Ryouta waves back and begins heading over. "That's my mom. I told you she's my manager, right?" Shougo nods, but doesn't get a chance to say anything before the woman - his mom - swoops upon them.

"Ryouta, you're cutting it kind of close," she says, not quite disapproving. "Sanjo-san is ready to begin shooting, so go ahead and change. The dressing room is over there." She then seems to notice Shougo. "Who's this?"

Ryouta explains, "This is my friend. I asked him to come watch me today. Is that okay?"

You're only getting permission, now? Shougo wants to ask, but Ryouta's mom is already speaking.

"That's fine. He can stay with me. You go on and get ready." That said, she shoos him away. Ryouta goes, but he shoots Shougo another apologetic yet grateful smile. Shougo waves him off again, and he smiles brighter, relieved, before disappearing inside the tent turned dressing room.

Before things can get awkward, Ryouta's mom looks at him and says, briskly, "The Haizaki boy, right? You may call me Kise-san while at work, but any other time, Hina-san will suffice. It's nice to
"It's nice to meet you too," Shougo says, shocked into being overly polite.

Hina-san nods, satisfied. "Keep close to me, and don't disturb anyone." And that, apparently, is that. She goes back to work, hunting down a myriad of different people to get information and network, and Shougo trails behind her, mutely observing all the while.

Hina-san is, in a word, efficient. She says what needs to be said and nothing more, making her really blunt. But it also cuts down on unnecessary chit chat or idling about. Nothing like Ryouta at all, who uses a rambling paragraph to say something for which a few words would suffice. He's also silly, easily distracted whereas his mom is all business.

She's also...fast? She walks quickly, talks quickly. He gets swept up in her pace and doesn't really recover until the shooting actually begins, and there's nothing left for either of them to do except watch on from the side.

Then Shougo is too busy flat out staring, utterly awed.

He'd never really considered the fact that it took actual skill to model. Obviously it did. Not every good-looking person can model, even if they otherwise fit the criteria. They have to be able to pose well, to be able to sell the product and not overshadow it.

Ryouta is able to do those things, and he does it well. The photographer is clearly excited by this, as he's been exclaiming praise and admiration between directions since the start. Shougo hasn't been able to look away since the start either, entranced by the dazzling and skillful display.

"Amazing, isn't he?" Hina says from beside him. Haizaki tears his eyes away enough to look at her and the visibly proud smile on her face. "Ryouta excels at many things, but this- He's a natural model. The camera loves him."

Shougo feels himself smiling, too. "I didn't know," he says, disappointed in himself. That he never asked about it or thought much of it, not compared to basketball. But Ryouta chose modeling in the end, didn't he? It's important to him.

"He wanted to show you," she says, fond. "And he wanted to show you off to me." Shougo blinks,
surprised, and Hina finally looks at him, an amused tilt to her lips. "That boy never does anything without some motive behind it. Keep that in mind the next time he pulls you into some scheme, Haizaki-kun. Ryouta is a stubborn, cunning child, entirely too used to batting his eyes and getting whatever he wants. You'd do well to keep your guard up."

Bewildered, Shougo nods, and the conversation ends there. Shougo goes back to watching Ryouta, but he's contemplative this time. He understands why Ryouta would want to show off to Shougo. He's a cocky little shit, after all, and loves the attention.

But why would he want to show off Shougo to his mom?

He's not being deliberately obtuse. The obvious reason is that Ryouta has a crush on him, and he wanted to show off Shougo as his crush. But...he got the feeling Hina-san meant something else. Something she wasn't willing to share with some kid she just met.

What could it be?

After everything's over and done for the day, Ryouta bounds up to him, eyes sparkling as he awaits praise.

Embarrassed but determined to say it, Shougo barely manages to tell him, "You were really cool" before Ryouta lets out an excited squeal and tackle-hugs him.

"Thanks, Haizakicchi!!! I was trying extra super hard just for you!! Haha!!" He laughs happily, spinning Shougo around, heedless of the people all around them. "Mom!!! Haizakicchi thinks I'm cool!!"

Hina-san shakes her head, fondly exasperated, then shoos them off again. From what Shougo can tell, it's a motion she's more than accustomed to. "That's great, Ryouta. You can take him out to celebrate. Now get out of here."

He laughs again. "Thanks, Mom! We'll get out of your hair!" He then hooks an arm through Shougo's and pulls him away from the set. "Come on, Haizakicchi, all that posing with ice cream and not being able to actually eat it made me hungry."

He'd been thinking earlier that Ryouta doesn't resemble his mom at all, beyond the blonde hair and
eyes, but as Shougo gets unwillingly pulled into Ryouta's pace for the nth time, he realizes they're more alike than he thought.

"Fine, but you're paying," he says, amused by the little details he keeps learning about the Kise family. These are things he never got to notice before, precious facts and observations he can't help hoarding away like treasure.

Just one more reason to be grateful for this second chance.

II. September 1st, 2012 - Saturday

With the end of summer comes the end of excuses not to continue his self-imposed mission.

Befriend Atsushi. Easier said than done, he can’t help but think, and it’s not even all that easy to say.

Much easier to stick to what he knows, which is driving off absolutely everyone around him, even if that skill seems to have gotten lost somewhere in the transition between time and space that got him here. How else would he be surrounded by a gaggle of prodigious - and frankly, really fucking weird - teenagers day in and day out?

He’s happy about it, but he doesn’t think it’ll ever lose its novelty. Not because he’s not worth befriending but because the group of people he’s befriended is amazing and wonderful and unique. As individuals, as a whole. He lived a life as their enemy once, as an insignificant existence, and he hated it but for all the wrong reasons. Now that he’s gotten to know them, spent time with them, been teased and comforted and amused and frustrated and embarrassed by them, now that he knows exactly what he missed out on and how much poorer his life was as a result… He can’t imagine doing so again.

As he told Ryouta a few days ago, they’re his, and now that he has them, he’s never letting go. He’s always been a possessive bastard, selfish and stingy and unable to share even inconsequential things. But precious things, those things closest to his heart? Even when he was at his worst, even when it was only hurting them, even when the guilt was almost too much to bear, he never even for a moment considering cutting ties with his family. Because even blackhearted and hateful, Shougo valued family.

As he is now, none of them stand a chance. Not even the Miracles who haven’t been assimilated into the group yet, though he’s wary and honestly a little afraid of them.
“Just talk to him,” is Kagami’s patently unhelpful advice once Shougo explains the situation to him.

“And what do I say? ‘Hey, wanna be my friend?’ That’s stupid,” Shougo fires back, frustrated.

Kagami, of course, fires back, “Something like that. Maybe a little less pissy.”

“I am not pissy!”

“Yeah, okay.” Kagami’s lucky he’s all the way in America right now. Heedless of his thoughts, Kagami suggests, “Why don’t you just sic one of the others on him? Like Kise or Kuroko.”

Bad idea. For one, both of them would demand to know why Shougo was asking them to pull Atsushi into the group, and it was humiliating enough having told Kagami. Little shits would tease him for it, he just knows it, or worse, Ryouta would make a spectacle about him going for “another man” or some stupid shit like that. There’s no way he’s purposely signing himself up for that nonsense.

Secondly, Atsushi and Tetsuya got on like cats and dogs. Their views on basketball are different, yeah, but they always ended up bickering over dumb shit too. Not like he can prevent that from happening once he actually does befriend Atsushi, but he’d like to put it off for a little while longer. This friend group has enough bickering as it is.

Thirdly, and most importantly, he has to do this himself, or there’s no meaning to it.

Out loud, he just says, “Hell no. I wouldn’t even do that to my enemies.”

Kagami laughs. “Then stop whining and go do it yourself, old man.”

“I’m not old, you bastard!”

"Says the elder."
"Don't think I won't fly over there to kick your ass. Or worse, I'll convince Ahomine that you're giving up basketball. He'll be on his way over within the hour."

Finally, a hint of real fear breaks through his smug ass grin. "You wouldn't."

Now, Shougo's grinning. "Bet."

"Momoi would find out," he warns, and that summons a chill down his spine.

Ever since befriending her, he's come to learn that Satsuki is...resourceful. Scarily so. To the degree that Shougo wouldn't be surprised if she were behind some of the incidents where he got fired. People who had beef with him (which was, admittedly, a lot) always seemed to find him when he was working wherever he worked, even if he'd only been there a few days. Not to mention the amount of times random customers would start shit. Customers are just Like That, yeah, but they always started shit with him specifically.

He can't know for sure (and he deserved it anyway), but still. That he believes her capable is proof enough of how terrifying she is and emphasizes the need to not get on her bad side. Sending her Idiot™ off to a foreign country in a harebrained scheme to reignite Kagami's (not) deflated love of basketball would be a surefire way of doing so.

"...Let's not," he eventually says, after glancing over his shoulder about three or four times to ensure word of his plan hadn't somehow gotten out.

Apparently well aware that he would also be implicated in such a crime, Kagami stiffly agrees. "Already forgotten."

A series of knocks breaks the tense silence. Shion's voice follows as he opens the door without waiting for a response. Jerk. "Yo, lil bro, I'm going to pick up groceries. Wanna come with?"

Then his eyes stray over to Kagami looking out at him from Shougo's laptop. "Oops, sorry, didn't mean to interrupt your date."

Shougo and Kagami make identical expressions of disgust, not that they realize it. "Fuck off, you know it's not."
Kagami adds, dryly, "Yeah, with that, I'm leaving."

Shougo turns back to him, aggrieved. "I don't blame you. Talk to you later."

Kagami grunts, and his screen goes black as he disconnects. Shougo turns off his laptop and whirls back around to face his dumbass brother. "Why are you like this."

Shion snickers. "It's all in the big bro manual. Says right there on page one: torment younger siblings at every opportunity. I'd show you, but it's against the big bro code."

"I'm against you calling yourself 'big bro.' Literally no one else calls you that. Stop being gross."

"Is it gross to take pride - and dare I say, delight - in being a big brother?"

"Without question."

"Hmm, the big bro manual also covers this kind of situation. Lil' bro, might you perhaps be, a tsunde- Oof!" He doubles over, clutching his stomach where Shougo punched him.

Unconcerned, Shougo strolls past him and says, "Come on, I've got plans later, and I don't want to be late."

Shion wobbles after him, stretching out an arm to grab at him, but he nimbly dodges. "This isn't what they mean by tough love, Shougo," he grumbles.

Shougo shoots him a sweet smile. "If you want love, try not being a dick, big bro." He then marches down the stairs and doesn't look back.

Shion sheds a sad, lonely tear. *His bro is so harsh...* He snorts at his own dumb dramatics, straightens up, and races to catch up with Shougo before the little shit can leave him behind.
"Don't think using a venomous tone to say it in any way diminishes my happiness upon hearing you call me big bro!"

"Ugh."

III. September 1st, 2012 - Saturday

He confirms the address and the name of the cafe once more in the group chat before sighing and putting away his phone. He'd been hoping he was wrong, but-

He gives it another once over and comes to the same conclusion. This place is too damn fancy, especially for someone like him, who somehow always looks one wrong word away from breaking into a fight. That's not necessarily an incorrect assumption, but hey, that just hammers in the fact that he doesn't belong in a place like this.

Why would they pick such a fancy ass place? If they're only studying, as was apparently the plan, they could have gone to someone's house or even Maji Burger, as they've been doing.

Unable to get rid of the unease that's cropped up since the abrupt change in plans, he sucks it up and enters the cafe, immediately feeling a little annoyed when he finds it crowded. Nevertheless, he pushes through the crowd until he gets near the back where his friends are already holed up at a table.

Not even halfway across the surprisingly large building, he stops. And stares.

Shougo had briefly considered the effects of letting people in on his secret, but he'd mostly worried about convincing them of the truth of it rather than what said people might do with that information. Even the spare bits of brain power he'd devoted to the idea had only touched upon vague shit, though. Kagami making sure to come back, and Nijimura looking for a way to help his dad, for example. Absolutely nothing could have prepared him for the sight that awaited him inside the cafe, however.

What the fuck are Seijuro, Atsushi, and Shintaro doing here?!

He has to clamp down on his instinctive reaction - demanding answers via angry yelling - and his next impulse to turn around and then come back to see if the scene before him might be different.
Instead, he just stands there, mouth open and eyes wide, taking in the weirdness wordlessly and trying desperately to make sense of it.

It looks like one of their usual tutoring sessions, books and notebooks spread out everywhere. They’ve commandeered three tables plus chairs and pushed them together, so all eight of them can sit around it without squishing each other or knocking elbows. On one side, there’s Satsuki, Daiki, Tetsuya, and Ryouta. Across from them are Seijuro, Shintaro, and Atsushi, and at the head of the table, with Daiki and Seijuro on either side is Nijimura.

All of them have books open in front of them and are skimming or flipping through at a good pace, and perhaps most shockingly of all, they’re getting along. Well, Seijuro only occasionally makes a comment to either Nijimura or Shintaro, who reciprocate, and Atsushi’s too occupied with eating to talk, but- The Generation of Miracles are together, all of them, and they’re not arguing or roughhousing or even making snide comments. They’re just- Talking, smiling, utterly relaxed.

There’s none of the discord that had become so rampant in that other time. No, they all look…

They look like they did in the beginning. Like they did when they were friends. Now, here, they truly look like the Generation of Miracles, the team that dominated every tournament in junior high and made it look effortless. Back when they weren’t just a team in name. Back when Shougo was there, not truly apart of it despite being a regular, back when he could only look on from afar and want, and it’s-

God, it’s fucking gutting.

He takes a step back, unable to help himself, unable to convince himself that he’s overreacting, that this isn’t what it looks like, that things haven’t suddenly gone back to the way they were. Something in his chest cracks, just a little, and he can feel his eyes start to burn, unbidden and unwanted. His throat closes up, and he chokes on the words he wants to say. Doesn’t know what he would have said anyway. He takes another step back and another, a wounded animal retreating, and at that thought, a strangled noise finally escapes him-

But no one even looks his way.

Hurt, inexplicably, and feeling like he’s drowning, grasping hands pulling him down into a murky abyss, Shougo whirls around, bumps into someone, stumbles, catches himself on a nearby table, ignores the concerned question of a stranger, finds his footing, and keeps going. After an eternity, he makes it to the door and outside, and he doesn’t dare look back, not when he knows what he’ll see.

He doesn’t run, can barely breathe through what felt like a physical blow, merely puts one foot in
front of the other, not caring where he’s going, only wanting to get away.

He clutches a hand to his chest, as if that might stem the bleeding, but the pain is purely emotional, and Shougo has never been able to stop his emotions from leaking out and completely overtaking him. Now is no different.

Distantly, he notices his hands are trembling, but he can’t focus on it, can’t care, too intent on getting his thoughts in order, to better understand what the hell just happened, what the hell is happening because he’s still going through it.

He was over this, wasn’t he? He is over this… Isn’t he?

Heh. Clearly not.

He's freaking out. And over something so simple. He knows it's not a big deal. Nijimura is looking for information to help his dad, but he's got fuck all to go on, so he's abusing his captain privileges to make his regulars help. It makes sense. Shintaro comes from a family of doctors - rich fucking doctors - and Seijuro's family owns a hospital or two, he's sure. Regardless, he's got ways of gaining information they'd never be able to attain on their own. And even if it doesn't seem like it, Atsushi's really fucking smart.

It makes sense that Nijimura would enlist their help when it concerns something so important, even though he's the type of person who likes to keep personal matters to himself. In fact, that proves how seriously he's taking the whole thing - and how seriously he believes in Shougo, which he should be happy about.

He is.

He is.

But-

The image in his mind is stuck in his head, burned into his brain. Overlapping it is countless images just like it, the common points between being them all together and Shougo on the outside looking in.
He'd forgotten what it felt like, being separate, being *other*, which he hadn't thought possible. But *oh*, he remembers now. The familiar anger, the inferiority, the hurt, and most painful of all, the *loneliness*. He hasn't had a chance to feel lonely since returning to the past. He's been surrounded by people since day one, unable to get a moment of peace.

He's alone now, but the feelings inside him are anything but peaceful.

He stops in the middle of the sidewalk and tilts his head up to look at the sky. He can't see the stars, despite knowing they're there. He can't reach them. The distance is too great, the differences between them too numerous.

In the same way, he has always felt an insurmountable distance between himself and the Miracles. A yawning, terrible divide. Invincible, unbeatable, great and powerful. All words used to describe them, to create a gap between them and other people so vast and incomprehensible that it makes one feel just as tiny and worthless as does a real star. He can't even see them, after all, and they've *never* seen him.

A star doesn't know or care about the insignificant creature reaching out to it from afar. It only continues burning brightly, illuminating everything around it until it eventually burns itself up.

*(So, too, did the Miracles fall.)*

Both stars and dreams die. But stars at least go out with a bang. Dreams die quietly, with nary a sound. It may be foolish. It's certainly arrogant, but Shougo does not want his own to fizzle out so easily.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, interrupting his musings. He pulls it out and answers it. "Hello?" His voice is remarkably calm, if rough with barely restrained emotion. It's the best he can do.

"Where are you? You're late," Nijimura accuses him, voice conveying the same irritation and worry Shougo's heard a thousand times before.

In the background, he can vaguely hear the others. Ryouta's "Is that Haizakicchi? Let me talk to him!" is particularly clear, likely because he's invading Nijimura's personal space again.
Shougo lets out a shaky breath, hand gripping the phone too tightly. "Something came up," he says, robotically, torn between hoping Nijimura notices something's wrong and hoping he won't.

"You said you were on your way fifteen minutes ago," he points out, suspicious. Then he moves away from the phone to mediate a muffled dispute. He comes back, "Where are you? What happened?"

For a moment, he's overcome with the urge to tell him. The words are on the tip of his tongue. He wants Nijimura to come and drag him back, to save him from himself, from this crippling loneliness. He wants to be surrounded by his friends. He wants it so badly that he can hardly stand it.

He opens his mouth-

"I think I found something, Captain." Seijuro's smooth, gentle voice breaks through the silence, cutting off what he'd been about to say and stabbing into him like those damn scissors he was so fond of.

It thoroughly distracts Nijimura. "Show me," he says, and Shougo listens with half an ear as Seijuro reads out the descriptions of an illness that might fit Nijimura's dad. Someone else speaks, and it sparks an unintelligible discussion. Nijimura says something, but that too is muffled, as if he put the phone down at some point.

A full minute later, forgotten, Shougo hangs up, feeling cold in a way that has nothing to do with the weather. He smiles a sad smile, self-deprecating and humorless. "You really expected someone to drop everything and come and save you," he says, with a mocking laugh.

After a moment, he slides his phone back into his pocket and keeps walking.

He doesn't need someone to save him, anyway. He knows he's overreacting. He'll get over it. Isn't he sick of getting all emotional and making people comfort him all the time? Isn't he tired of making things about him every damn time? It's better this way. He'll go home, get his shit together, and…

And he'll be ready to face the full MiraGen next time. He will.

He has to be.
(His hands are still trembling.)

(He shoves them inside his pockets, too.)

Above him, the starless sky stretches forever on.

Chapter End Notes

there was time skip of a few weeks between last chapter & between sections I & II/III

finally!! the modeling scene i promised ages ago!! all credit goes to mountainmoon for the idea. hope it was what you wanted. ;)

-kise hina is a Good Mom, with three children, Trying Her Best; i love her & hope you do too

-kagabro can't get a break even in another country

-someone said Shion channelled Kise in this ch which is Horrifying, God No, why would you bring that to my attention

-haizaki isn't regressing here; just, he hasn't really confronted his complicated feelings regarding the entire MiraGen, as a group, always skirting around it, & he figured he'd have slowly gotten used to it while he collected each one anyway; unfortunately it was taken out of his hands & he wasn't ready for it, thus^^^^

-also he didn't say anything to anybody bc they're all together, helping niji & his dad, & he knows if he asked one for help, all of them would drop everything to come & he doesn't want that; he knows he can Deal, & he will; haizaki's a tough muffin guys

(Alright, this is me, you know there will be comforting later don't look at me like that it's scary ;w;)

-remember when i said this ch was difficult to write a while back? that last part is why; it took a Lot out of me emotionally to write. so for once, i hope i make you cry lol i certainly did

End Notes

The absolutely amazing and kind Fye - known as fefyefofum on tumblr - drew some fan art for me! It's honestly so gorgeous and well done and beautiful, and you guys should definitely
all go take a look at it here and leave Fye some love!

As if to prove once again what a completely amazing and wonderful human being they are, Fye has made more gorgeous fan art for me! It's the picture Nurse Kise sent of himself and a sleeping Haizaki, so you should definitely go check it out here and leave Fye some love!

The wonderful, kind, and very lovely thegoatjoke has drawn me beautiful, amazing fan art of Yoshie, and you should all definitely check it out here! It certainly deserves love and appreciation - and so does thegoatjoke. ;D

Works inspired by this one: Flickers of time by TheLadyMuse, Remnants of an unknown age by TheLadyMuse

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!