The Black Pattern

by Ragga

Summary

Once is a chance, twice is a coincidence and three times is a pattern.

Suddenly the team can see black-clad men everywhere. Why is the Karasuno Volleyball Club being followed? No one seems to know but, despite their wishes, they just are not left alone.

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Excerpt:
“The sun versus the moon. A shadow greater the brighter the light is, however small. The scariest of them all is the reflection.”

“And what a reflection it will be.”

Notes

Hullo!

This is my test drive on writing fiction again and trying out things I haven't before (aka. writing using multiple POVs, like, the entire Karasuno team). There will be mistakes and everything since, as said, test drive. Comments and constructive criticism are accepted and
considered. I have been taking a break from writing for several years and, while I have been lurking around, I haven't taken the time to write anything I could post. Or rather, I haven't had the energy to write and now, I've decided I wanted to get my groove back. My plans are a bit hazy at the moment since I know what I want to write but the how is still missing, so we'll see where we'll end up at.

I am not tagging things here but there might be things and themes some may find triggering, like violence, blood, guns, etc., although it probably won't be explicit. That's something I'm not really into myself. Basically, things will be described through a person's POV and how they find a situation. My main goal is to try to keep up the air of mystery and suspense, so, cliffhangers are probably going to be utilised a lot. Cheap tricks, I know. Sorry in advance. Also, unreliable narrator. That deserves a warning in itself if you want to try to figure things out before the ending.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy the story.

-R
Prologue

It was a nice day. The beginning of May was warm and sunny enough to remind people of summer but without the heat that came with it. It was spring at its best but not all were enjoying the end of the Golden Week and its beautiful weather outside.

“Yahoo! Nice job!” Nishinoya and Tanaka cheered as Hinata spiked the ball to the opposing side’s floor. His eyes shone bright as the sun, exhilaration filled his mind. Hinata clenched his hand. He loved this feeling. He loved the feeling of being successful, the feeling of his hand touching the ball. Hinata turned to Kageyama.

“Nice toss!” he grinned.

Kageyama nodded. His expression was not as severe as it could have been. Hinata grinned even wider.

“The game is still on, don’t get cocky.”

“Yes, Captain! Nice serve, Tsukishima!”

Shimizu Kiyoko smiled to herself and made a note on her papers.

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The third practice match of the day, just like the others, ended with Karasuno losing against the opposing side. It was a tough game but the losing team took it with grace and determined smiles. It was disappointing but what else could be expected? The so-called ‘Flightless Crows’ were just beginning to find their wings, starting to spread them and fly instead of just flapping on the ground and gazing longingly towards the sky.

Thankfully, the cats of Nekoma were not as bloodthirsty as to eat alive the still flightless birds. They were just the best kind of playful.

“Thank you so much!” both teams bowed. They were all sweaty and tired, some more than others, but the dream for the Battle of the Garbage Heap was rekindled.

“We’ll win next time!” Tanaka promised with a laugh. Hinata quickly nodded along with Nishinoya and they both yelled encouragements for their future revenge.

“No way!” a Nekoma player, their ace, quickly denied. “You’re a hundred years too early to even think about that! No, a THOUSAND!”

“Oh yeah?!”

“Yeah!”

The resulting scuffle was over quickly, but somehow, Tanaka had lost his shirt and Yamamoto was in progress to be in a similar condition. The captains of the teams just sighed and shared a longsuffering look before dragging the players away from the court. The rest of the players followed in varying states of amusement. There were a couple of exceptions though. Tsukishima looked more bored than anything else and Kozume Kenma, Nekoma’s setter, tried to hide himself behind Hinata which didn’t really work well for him. The hairs on his neck were raised. Kageyama’s stare was too intense and bothersome. Kenma itched for a game so he could immerse himself into it and pretend
that Karasuno’s setter did not exist.

“Hey,” Kuroo said as he fell suddenly quiet. “Who is that man in black on the stands?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Daichi as he turned to stare behind him. Sugawara quickly grabbed him and pointed.

“There, on the left.” Daichi followed Suga’s cue and blinked. The players nearest to them turned to the same direction while the rest curiously stopped before also turning. There, on the stands, really stood a man in completely black. He was quite far from them, almost invisible in the shadows, but now that he had been pointed out, he stood out.

The man, and it probably was a man as he was so tall, wore a black suit. From what could be seen he also had sunglasses and dark hair. He seemed to carry a sort of a case with him, just as dark as the rest of him. He looked really ominous. He sent shivers down Hinata’s back.

“Is he also part of your crew?” Kuroo asked. Daichi shook his head.

“No.” Suga said and his eyes narrowed. “He’s not part of Nekoma either?”

“Not that I know of and I am the captain.”

The man didn’t seem to mind that he was found out. He just continued to stare towards the group. It was getting really creepy. Nekoma’s coach finally noticed the strange silence and his expression darkened as he also looked at the unknown man.

“Who are you and what do you want with us?” The man said nothing even though the yell echoed in the hall and as such he had to have heard it. He just raised his hand, made a sign of some sort, and turned to leave with his case in tow.

“Hey, we were talking to you!” Ukai barked.

The man didn’t stop and left the hall. Ukai spared a glance at Takeda-sensei, who nodded, before he dashed out of the door, presumably after the strange man.

“Who was that?” Hinata asked from Kenma, who shook his head.

“I have no idea…”

“Well, whoever he was, he had no business being here. Let’s hope your coach will get something out of him,” Kuroo said. “Hey! All of you! Go to shower and change! We don’t want you to become sick. There’s only a month before preliminaries and I want all of you in practice tomorrow!”

“Karasuno too! We’re leaving in twenty minutes!”

“Yes, captain!”

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“I wonder who that man was.” Hinata yawned as they left the court. “I mean, it was weird of him to just stare at us.”

“Yeah, even after we noticed him! He just continued!” Noya-san said.

“Coach, did you catch him?” Suga asked.
“No,” Ukai said. “I couldn’t get close to him. When I found him, I just saw him getting to a car and driving off. I didn’t even have a chance to look at his licence plate.”

“Suspicious.”

“Very.”

It was a lovely evening though. The sun was about to set and the colours in the sky were a beautiful arrangement of red and orange with a dash of pink thrown in. The dark was just about to chase the colours out of the sky but not yet. They were still there, hanging on top of the Karasuno volleyball team.

“Do you think they might have been following us?” Yamaguchi asked. He walked next to Tsukishima and kept looking around as if to see if more black-clad men were waiting for them around the corners.

“Us as in us or Nekoma or all of us?” Asahi said. He seemed just as nervous as Yamaguchi even though his appearance looked twice as tough to outsiders. He evaded a rowdy Tanaka, who after his tearful goodbye to Yamamoto, had been able to keep his shirt on, to the relief of Karasuno’s manager. She noticed a few stars appearing on the sky in front of her. Her smile was small but powerful enough to almost make Nishinoya crash on the street in awe.

“I don’t know, all? Us?”

“Why would they want something to do with us?” Hinata asked.

“Maybe it’s the yakuza and they’ve lost their leader. What do you say, King, are you looking to change your Court?”

“Shut up, Tsukishima!”

“He could have been scouting?” Takeda-sensei said but even from his voice the team could hear he didn’t really believe his words either. He tried to not look worried but failed quite obviously.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ukai said. “He was probably after Nekoma anyway. We’re not well-known enough to warrant any special interest. Yet.” He added when Nishinoya and Takana seemed to take offence at his words.

“We’ll continue our practice tomorrow. We have less than a month for the preliminaries, so go home, sleep and get up early!”

Hinata grinned, all thoughts on the mysterious man wiped from his mind as the excitement bubbled inside him again. Beside him Kageyama’s glower intensified as the rest of the team cheered.

“Yosh! Karasuno, fight!”

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The month before the Interhigh tournament went fast. The team was in a good mood thorough the weeks. They practiced, hard, to get ready for the tournament and getting into the nationals. Nekoma was waiting for them, after all, and the Battle of the Garbage Heap. Still, even after their win of Tokonami and Datekou, it was not enough for the team to win Aobajousai. What began as a typical match did not end as such

In the middle of the match, both teams taking a break, Karasuno heard a comment that chilled their
backs.

“Quite rare to see a man dressed in all black watching a high school volleyball game.”

Hinata almost sprained his neck as his head turned towards the rival team and saw the ace pointing towards the Karasuno stands.

“Hoo, I doubt he knows what he’s doing there.” Oikawa’s annoying voice could be heard jeering. “Otherwise he would be standing on the winner’s stands.” He waved to the Aobajousai’s cheering crowd who gave the loudest cheer to be heard yet.

There, on a row high enough to not be easily noticed, stood a man similar to the one who had watched the practice match between Nekoma and Karasuno.

“I think I’ve seen him once before.”

“Hmm? Where, Iwa-chan?”

“At the practice match we played against Karasuno.”

A nervous sweat broke down Hinata’s back. He could hear Yamaguchi gulp and feel how the whole team tensed. The man kept staring straight at the murder of crows without flinching as the whistle ended the break.

Once is a chance, twice is a coincidence and three times is a pattern.

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The man left only when the Karasuno team left the court and disappeared into the masses.
Part I: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

I got this done surprisingly quickly.

...Don't expect it to happen again.

The Karasuno team sat quietly inside the bus. The disappointment of losing the game to Aobajousai was thick in the air. You could almost physically touch it, it was so dense. None of them were satisfied with the results. They were eyeing the nationals, Nekoma and the Battle of the Garbage Heap.

And they almost had it…!

33-31.

Those were the numbers of the biggest let-down of their lives. Not to even mention…

“The men in black. They… They weren’t after Nekoma?” Yamaguchi whispered, his eyes darting around. He had failed the team. He had failed so bad, but his nerves, his nerves! During the entire match he hadn’t been able to not see the man from the corner of his eye. There was always a dark shadow there looking terrifying.

I am watching you. I am watching you.

“It could have been a coincidence?” Asahi said. Desperation coloured his voice. He was shivering. He hadn’t been able to forget the man during the match either. When the ball wasn’t moving, he had felt his knees wobbling. He could hear the jeering from the rival team.

(Is that their ace?)

(What a shame.)

(What a disappointment.)

"Once is a chance…”

“What did you say, Tsukkii?”

“I think I’ve heard that phrase somewhere before,” Suga said. Even his almost ever present smile was lost to the negativity holding captive his team. “Once is a chance, twice is a coincidence…”

“And three times is a pattern.” Daichi ended the sentence.

The whole team was quiet.

“That… sounds so ominous,” Hinata whispered. He was sitting next to Kageyama again, as they usually were. He stared at his hands. His hands had brought the defeat upon them. His spike. No one else’s. He had been too predictable, too dependent, too…”
Hinata was a disappointment.

He clenched and unclenched his fists. He could no longer feel the sting of the ball. Had he ever truly been able to touch it? He turned his head slightly to look at Kageyama. His knuckles were white as he kept squeezing his knees. It had to hurt. Hinata looked up at Kageyama’s face. He had a real scary expression. Kageyama’s eyes were narrowed to almost slits, his eyes the colour of a stormy sky and as full of anger.

Anger at himself? Anger at the Grand King? Anger at the situation?

Hinata didn’t know anymore. He tried not to notice the sadness in the middle of the storm. He closed his eyes, trying to erase the image from his mind, and turned to stare out the window.

Hinata was a disappointment. He had disappointed his betters – his setter. He had let the Grand King win.

*(Don’t you dare apologize for tossing to me…!)*

“Can we be sure that it was a third time today?” Nishinoya asked suddenly. He and Tanaka sat in the back with Hinata and Kageyama, both unsurprisingly subdued.

“Would Aobajousai have any reason to lie to us?” Suga asked.

“Oikawa-san would… But Iwaizumi-san would not,” Kageyama said. His voice was quiet and harsh as if he had been crying, but his eyes were dry.

“He could’ve changed in the two years you haven’t seen him,” Noya-san said. Hinata felt more than saw the headshake Kageyama gave.

“No, I don’t think so. Iwaizumi-san is the sense to Oikawa-san’s madness. He has a firm idea of right and wrong. He wouldn’t go along with that.”

“Besides, he couldn’t have known we heard them talking. Or that we had seen the man during the practice match against Nekoma,” Daichi said. The captain had been quiet after his encouragement speech after the match. He felt like a failure of a captain. Before they hadn’t had a chance to win their way to the nationals but now, now, they had had! And he had ruined it for his team. He was even a third year. This was his last year.

Was this how he wanted his high school volleyball career to end?

“How come we haven’t seen them before?” Yamaguchi said, his voice getting louder with each word. “Have long have they been watching us? Why? What did we ever do to them!?”

"Yamaguchi, calm down!” Tanaka yelled and silenced his hysterics. The bus was quiet for a moment.

“Well…” Ukai said. “That was something I never would have expected Tanaka to say.”

A few fleeting smiles passed the features of the Karasuno team but no one laughed. Ukai sighed.

“I have no idea what is happening either. To our knowledge, if we can trust Aobajousai’s ace…”

“We can,” Kageyama interrupted.

“…If we can,” Ukai emphasized. “The man has been watching us three times. Enough for a pattern but we have no idea what is the design they are weaving. And while I trust your instincts,
Kageyama, it’s not enough.”

“We should all calm down.” Takeda-sensei said from behind the wheel. “Our emotions are in turmoil after the match. Which was great,” he added almost like an afterthought to try to cheer his depressed team.

“We should keep our eyes open. It might be that the man was observing our team for someone else. Maybe they heard that Karasuno’s crows weren’t so wingless anymore?” he smiled at the thought.

“Well, no one should think that anymore after the match with Aobajousai. You gave them as good as they gave you!”

“We can, and we will, get better for the spring tournament. By the way, sensei, turn from here. The restaurant is just down this street…”

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Hinata walked next to Kageyama as they left the restaurant. Both of their eyes were red from crying the tears of frustration. They would get better. Hinata would get better. Kageyama was already so good, he was a prodigy. Hinata had to get better so that he wouldn’t drag Kageyama or his team down with him.

His team. This was his team. His first real team. Daichi-san, Suga-san, Asahi-san, Shimizu-san, Tanaka-san, Noya-san, Ennoshita-san, Narita-san, Kinoshita-san, Yamaguchi, Tsukishima… Kageyama.

Hinata didn’t want to disappoint them anymore.

“You’re quiet.”

Hinata started out of his thoughts. His head snapped towards Kageyama but he was staring straight ahead instead of at Hinata. He turned to stare in front of him too. It was already dark outside.

“Yeah,” he sighed and almost tripped over his bike. Kageyama’s eyes flicked quickly on him before leaving again.

“Thinking about the match today?”

Hinata bit his lip. He wouldn’t cry again, he wouldn’t cry again, he promised to himself he wouldn’t cry again.

Tears started to build up in his eyes.

Darn it.

Darn it all.

“Yeah.” Hinata’s voice broke.

“We’ll win next time.”

Hinata could hear Kageyama grind his teeth together. Every word sounded like it was forced out of his mouth. But there was determination there. The voice was intense and sure of itself even in the eyes of today’s defeat.

Kageyama turned left and quickly walked away. Hinata just then noticed that they had arrived at
their usual point of separation.

He wiped his eyes and jumped on his bike, venting out his frustration on fast-paced riding.

“YEAH!” he screamed and his yell echoed into the night.

Only shadows kept him company as he drowned his thoughts in his effort to get home.

He didn’t look back.

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Next day came too fast. Hinata was tired. He didn’t want to get up. He wanted to get up. He didn’t want to get up. Today they should’ve had their match against Shiratorizawa. It was supposed to be them against Karasuno, not Aobajousai. He burrowed under his blankets.

(Kageyama wouldn’t stay down this long.)

He got up. He brushed his teeth and washed his face. He ate breakfast. He patted Natsu’s head. He left for school.

Hinata could barely focus on his lessons. He couldn’t bear to think about studying when he should’ve been playing in the Interhigh. Wasn’t that what they had promised?

Kenma must be disappointed.

Kage-

The school bell rang. Lunch.

Lunch.

Hinata ignored his classmates and ran out of there. Practice hall. He had to get to the practice hall. He thought he could hear balls hitting the floor. No, he did hear balls hitting the floor! There was someone there, someone was in there…

Hinata burst in.

Kageyama. Of course.

He stared as his teammate (friend? rival? what are they to each other? since when did his desire to beat him down with volleyball grow into something more?) hit the ball with more force than necessary. Kageyama turned his gaze towards him and they stared at each other for a moment. Suddenly, Kageyama threw a ball to Hinata who instinctively hit it back towards him. It was then set for him. It was a beautiful set. It was a magnificent set.

Hinata missed.

“Your balance is off.”

“…Yeah.”

Frustration build up.

“The final round is going to start soon… the winners are going on to the nationals and will play lots of games,” Hinata whispered.
“…Yeah.”

Hinata’s anger and self-loathing peaked.

“ARGH!” he started to run around, unloading all his pent-up energy. A moment later, Kageyama followed him. Hinata didn’t know how long they ran around and hit balls from one side of the hall to another. He thought he ran on the walls at some point.

When they eventually slowed down and fell on the floor, he whispered, quiet and determined but still so desperate he couldn’t stand it:

“I want to win.”

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Yamaguchi couldn’t stand it.

He had finally gotten to play in a match. He had wanted to join Tsukki for a long time but couldn’t. He wasn’t a genius like Kageyama. He wasn’t an unnatural beast like Hinata. He wasn’t as experienced as the third years or specialized as the second years. He admired them, he really did, but they were something else. They weren’t ordinary like him. They weren’t like Ennoshita, Narita and Kinoshita, and Yamaguchi, who weren’t regulars. He was just a middle blocker but so were Tsukki and Hinata. He was the only first year not made a regular.

Yamaguchi had tried to be the something that the team lacked.

A pinch server.

He failed.

His body didn’t move the way he wanted to. He couldn’t hit the ball like he should have. He knew he had his work cut out for him. He knew that. Shimada-san had offered words of encouragement for him too. He was happy about that. He was happy that he was getting the help to improve, to stand on the same court as everyone else. He wanted to stand on the same court as Tsukki.

But then there were the black-clad men.

Yamaguchi didn’t know if they even were men or just a man but he didn’t care. It was creepy. If someone was scouting or watching a team for another team, they wouldn’t be dressed like that no matter what Takeda-sensei said. He couldn’t just let it go like Ukai-san said they should.

Who was he? Who were they?

Yamaguchi didn’t know if he wanted to know or not. He just wanted to be left alone and play volleyball with Tsukki. He wanted to laugh at Tsukki’s mean comments. He just wanted to be himself without the need to worry.

Maybe he was just overthinking. He definitely overthought a lot of things but this… He didn’t know.

If he wasn’t, if he was worried for a reason, he didn’t want to know what would happen.

He just wanted to play.

“Tsukki! Let’s have lunch!” he yelled, trying to shake himself out of his thoughts. He was at school. He was safe. He would study hard and practice hard. He would.
“You’re too loud, Yamaguchi.” Tsukki’s voice was almost bored, just like usual, but lacked the snide side that was added when he was talking to almost everyone else. It was never aimed at Yamaguchi anymore. It was in the beginning, maybe, but not anymore.

Yamaguchi grinned, a bit too widely.

He was safe, and so was Tsukki.

“Sorry!”

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Are you going to retire?

Do you want to retire?

The questions were burned into Daichi’s head. He didn’t know. He felt that he should but he also felt that he shouldn’t. He didn’t want to retire but what did he have to give for the team? He was just a captain who couldn’t lead his team into victory when they actually had a chance.

He had seen how energetic the second years and first years had been. He, and other third years, could leave the club into good hands. They could focus on the upcoming university entrance exams and be general guides and be there cheering when a more successful captain would lead the team into the nationals…

He voiced these thoughts to Suga and Asahi.

He got his doubts thrown into his face.

Does he want to retire?

Simple answer is no, but he should. *He should.*

Suga and Asahi were not going to retire. They would continue, even without his captaincy. They would do well under Suga and a new vice-captain.

Daichi grimaced.

“I still want to keep playing volleyball with you guys!”

He didn’t want to let go.

This was his team. They were his dream. They were going to the nationals in the spring tournament, come hell or high water.

No one would stop them.

No one, he swore silently.

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After Kiyoko let Kageyama and Hinata go, she turned back around and froze.

All she saw was black.
Part I: Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Suddenly, a chapter as long as the two previous together has appeared! Woo...

Takeda sat with Sawamura, Sugawara and Azumane. They were all waiting for Shimizu, who still had not appeared. He had wanted to talk to the four about their future in the volleyball club. The third years had university entrance exams to think about. He just hoped they wouldn’t regret whichever option they chose for themselves. They were all passionate about volleyball, even Shimizu, but sometimes an adult had to bring up questions no one wanted to think about, especially now that the students were thinking about getting revenge in the spring tournament.

He admired their passion. He recalled Hinata ambushing him earlier that day and his enthusiastic devotion. But as Takeda had been reminded by his colleague, passion was not always enough. He wondered which result they would regret the least in five or ten years.

He exhaled, and then smiled to himself.

Takeda would bet his savings that they would all choose to continue in the club. His students were just like that. They would never leave their job unfinished.

The door opened to show a tired-looking Shimizu. She was panting, as if she had ran for a while, but Takeda put it on her lateness’ slate. She probably hadn’t heard that he was looking for them until just now. It was a bit weird though that she sat down after greeting and didn’t meet anyone’s eyes.

Takeda made a note to ask if she was feeling well later.

“Now that you’re all here…”

***

The team sat in front of Ukai when they heard that Aobajousai had lost the game against Shiratorizawa. It hit Kageyama hard. Oikawa-san was talented. He aspired to surpass him, to be as great – no, greater – than him. At the same time, he knew that Oikawa had never defeated Ushijima. At middle school he had seen Oikawa seethe after each defeat. Kageyama had seen the frustration. He was pretty sure that Oikawa could’ve gotten into Shiratorizawa if he wanted.

Oikawa-san had the looks, the grades and a talent for setting and serving that made Kageyama itch to get back to practice. It made him kind of mad that Oikawa had not gone to the top school of the prefecture when he had the chance. At the same time, he understood. While Oikawa had probably avoided Shiratorizawa because of Ushijima, he himself had avoided Seijou because of Oikawa and his former teammates. He had tried for Shiratorizawa himself but wasn’t that surprised that he hadn’t gotten in. He had been disappointed, sure, but not truly surprised.

Right now, he didn’t know if he would have been as happy if he had gotten into Shiratorizawa. Would he still be the King of the Court or would he only toss to Ushijima? Neither option sat fine with him.

“Our next goal is the spring high.”
The spring tournament. None of the third years had retired which made Kageyama kind of happy. He appreciated the team. They were good players and... good people. He would learn a lot in this team.

He thought he already had.

He thought he wasn’t a King of the Court anymore no matter what people called him.

“We’re going back there again,” Daichi said. He had a determined look on his face. He spoke out loud the desire everyone on the team had. “To Tokyo and the orange court.”

“Heck YEAH!” the Karasuno team cheered, Kageyama included. He paused, almost as if thunderstruck, but then smirked.

Yes, he had changed. And he would keep changing until he beat Oikawa-san and Ushijima. And then Nekoma. And then everyone else until he, no, they, had won the nationals. Not alone, not again.

Together.

He would fulfil that goal, and with this team, he thought it was possible.

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Karasuno could join Nekoma and other Kanto groups in their joined practice matches. Noya could hardly wait. This sounded so awesome! This time he would really come through on the defence. Nekoma’s libero was pure awesome, but he would show them! Yeah!

He high fived Tanaka.

So so so exciting!

“City boy…”

“Alliance…”

Tsukishima and Yamaguchi snickered. Noya had noticed that Yamaguchi seemed a bit subdued but perhaps he was still a bit down from yesterday. He was too but this would not be the end of him. Or them, the team! He high fived Tanaka again just because. And jumped on his back.

Exciting!

“He’s sure got his hands full,” Asahi said as he watched Takeda-sensei ran out of the gym. Ukai said he had to make a call and left the team on its own.

“Yup!” Suga grinned and looked at Kiyoko. “Shimizu, too. This’ll be our first time playing away, after all!”

Kiyoko didn’t meet Suga’s eyes. Noya frowned. Kiyoko-san was shy – beautiful and smart and everything wonderful about life, but shy. Yet, this wasn’t her usual kind of shyness. She was pale as if she had seen a ghost. Her hands were even trembling.

“…Yeah,” she finally said. Noya’s frown deepened and he tugged at Tanaka’s sleeve.

“Hey, does Kiyoko-san seem a bit weird to you?” he asked.
“Huh?” was Tanaka’s intelligent reply but he fell quiet and observed their manager. “…She’s not herself, is she.”

It wasn’t a question.

Noya and Tanaka shared a concerned glance before they flagged down Daichi. The captain jogged to them after putting the rest of the team working out.

“What is it?”

“Why is Kiyoko-san so weird today?” Tanaka burst out before Noya could say a thing. Well, he probably wouldn’t have said anything different anyway.

Daichi sighed. “…We don’t know,” he said. “We had a meeting with Takeda-sensei before we came here. He wanted to offer us the possibility of retiring, which we did not take.” Daichi added when they probably looked a bit miffed. “We were waiting for her. She was late. At first we thought that she just hadn’t gotten Takeda-sensei’s message but when she arrived she was even paler than she is now.”

The three of them looked over at Kiyoko in concern. She was spaced out near the balls, pen in hand and writing pad in front of her. From the way how Asahi, Suga and most of the other team glanced towards her, they had noticed her weird behaviour too.

“She didn’t say a word during the meeting. She was normal before lunch-,” Daichi suddenly stopped. “Lunch. What happened at lunch?”

“Shimizu!” he called. The girl started and dropped her pen, just managing to not drop anything else. Something was definitely wrong.

Alright, everyone, stop what you’re doing.” The order was pointless though as everyone had already stopped to stare at the scene. “Come, gather around. Shimizu, you too. Set everything down and just come here.” He didn’t speak again until the whole group sat in a circle.

“Now, Shimizu, we’ve all seen how jumpy you’re right now. What happened?” Karasuno’s manager stayed silent and stared at her lap.

“I don’t want to pressure you,” Daichi continued. “I know you don’t like the attention. But we’re a team. You belong in that team, and the team shares its concerns.”

Noya nodded. Even though Kiyoko was shy and reserved, she had to know that she could talk to them about anything. Right?

Kiyoko twisted her hands and sighed. Noya could feel how the team was waiting for her to say something, anything. Personally, he was ready to go beat up anyone who had made her like this. He was sure that Tanaka would help him. Yosh, okay, just stay quiet and then go beat up whoever she names. Stay calm, stay quiet.

“I saw him.”

They waited for her to continue but she didn’t. She just twisted her hands even more before Suga took her hands into his own.

“Who did you see?”
“Him. The man who has been watching us,” she whispered, at first reluctantly, but then continued as if that admission had broken the dam. “He was outside the gym when I left here at lunch. He was standing near the corner of the school building. I only saw his back. He was talking to someone. I think-, I think he was talking to a girl. I saw a uniform like mine.”

“Did you see anything else?” Suga asked gently. Kiyoko shook her head.

“I didn’t see them that well. But, but this is the first time he has been here when we haven’t had a practice match, isn’t it? I thought that maybe Ukai-san was right, or Takeda-sensei. That he was just analysing us. But now that I saw him here, I-…” she stopped and took a breath. Everyone was quiet. No one had ever heard her speak this much at one go, ever.

She bowed her head and gripped Suga’s hands that were still holding hers.

“I don’t want to be a downer.” The team looked at Tsukishima who had spoken out. “But there are plenty of people who wear black suits, even some of the teachers do. I’m not so convinced what she saw was the man from yesterday.”

“Are you calling her a liar?!” Tanaka rose as if Tsukishima had issued a challenge for him. Anyone could see he was fuming.

“No, I am saying that she said that she only saw him from the back, talking to a student. The area might be questionable but he might’ve been that girl’s relative or someone she knew. There’s no real reason to think that it was the man we all saw. It’s no use to think that every man dressed in a dark suit is after us. If he even is after us at all,” Tsukishima explained calmly.

Noya tugged at Tanaka to sit back down. After giving one last glare, he did, but Noya could see how he wasn’t mollified a bit.

“Y- You’re probably right,” Kiyoko said. She took a deep breath and exhaled and unwound her hands from Suga’s. “I just- I guess I’m just a bit riled up from yesterday too. Everyone worked h-hard. And it still wasn’t enough.”

“We’ll make it in the spring tournament!” Noya said and he swore his heart stopped for a moment as Kiyoko turned her head towards him with a small smile on her lips.

“Yes. I- I’ll work hard, too.” She rose from the circle and the others watched as she went over to her writing equipment, erasing something she had written and focusing on the paper with a concentrated look. Daichi looked at the team, staring, and bellowed.

“Alright, time for running! We’ll never make it if we don’t start practicing now!”

“Yes, captain!” “

And,” he continued quietly. “Keep your eyes open. If it was indeed the man we saw, then this might be a new pattern we haven’t seen yet. We’re aware of only three games they’ve watched us. There are probably more. Aobajousai wasn’t our first match at Interhigh.”

Noya saw the serious expressions on his teammates’ faces.

“Yes, captain,” he echoed and watched from the corner of his eye as Kiyoko stumbled. He hid his concern for later. It would not help anyone right now.
“Tsukki.”

Tsukishima turned to stare at Yamaguchi. They were walking home from the practice. Asahi had promised to walk home Shimizu since they lived close enough to each other. Tanaka had protested, probably wishing that he could have accompanied and protected her, but Nishinoya had surprisingly stood by Asahi which had left Tanaka with no support. He had stormed out soon after, with Nishinoya close at his heels, who had only had a second to throw a bit-too-bright-to-be-natural ‘bye’ over his shoulder as he disappeared from the view. As if by order, the rest of the team had also divided into pairs or threes when they left. Some of them were used to walking with someone, like Tsukishima and Yamaguchi and Kageyama and Hinata, but the rest of them usually dispersed on their own quite soon after leaving the gym.

He waited for Yamaguchi to continue but when he didn’t, he sighed.

“What?”

“Do you think who Shimizu-san saw was the man?” Yamaguchi burst out nervously. Tsukishima had noticed that Yamaguchi had not been himself during the day despite his efforts to appear so. He had wondered when he would fall apart. He had thought it would have happened during lunch when Yamaguchi had almost bit his lips bloody but surprisingly he had held himself together.

“Why do you wonder?”

“Because-!” Yamaguchi bit his lip, again. Tsukishima sighed. Again.

“Do you feel unsafe?”

Yamaguchi nodded. Trust Tsukishima to hit on the heart of the problem straight as always.

“Even if it was the man, I doubt he means danger,” Tsukishima said. “The only time we have evidence he has appeared is when there have been too many people there for him to do anything. I doubt he would appear just to talk to a high school girl outside our gym where any one of us could have seen him if we had been there like Shimizu-san was.”

“But… But he appeared to not care that we had seen him during the matches. Why should he care if we see him at school?”

Tsukishima paused. That was surprisingly on point question from Yamaguchi.

“I don’t know. He probably doesn’t. I just don’t think he necessarily means danger. Besides, anyone who will start at every black suit or uniform from today onwards will go mad. Our school uniform is black after all.”

“So you say that since Shimizu-san didn’t see what happened that well, it could have been another student?”

Tsukishima shrugged. Yamaguchi pursed his lips.

“Let’s say that your theory is valid. They appear when we have matches with another school. Do you think we should accept the training camp invitation from Nekoma? What if they are dangerous, despite the current pattern? What if we put other teams in danger?” he insisted. Tsukishima felt like sighing again.

“What if he is?” he asked. “What can we do about that? In Kanto, we’ll have plenty of adults around day and night. Every team will be practicing all day long and will probably be too tired afterwards to
do anything stupid from what we heard. We can even warn them so they know what they are getting into. We’ll then be known as the paranoid team scared of shadows.

“But do you really think the team wants do give up just because of someone dressed in black watches our matches? Do you want to give up going to the nationals? I honestly don’t care either way but the little beast and his King would probably blow a fuse if you suggested them to stop now. Possibly the third and second years too.”

“Tsukki…”

“If you’re scared, what stops you from quitting?” he ended. “We’re here.”

Yamaguchi blinked rapidly as if he hadn’t noticed they had arrived at his home. He looked longingly inside where there were lights on but there was indecision in his gaze. Tsukishima rolled his eyes.

“Don’t worry about me, I live just a street over. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He walked forwards, leaving Yamaguchi either standing or going inside. He didn’t care. This whole thing was stupid. Was this team really so easily scared? Or was Yamaguchi a special case? It could be either but he leaned more on the latter option. He had known Yamaguchi for years after all and he had been the same for as long as he had known him.

He heard a door close and concluded that Yamaguchi had gone inside. Good for him. This was all too troublesome.

***

“Did anyone see anything out of ordinary yesterday?” Suga asked the next day. Tanaka and the others shook their heads in denial. Well, he probably wouldn’t have noticed anything anyway. He had been too ticked off at Tsukishima to even consider his surroundings. Seeing Noya shake his head though gave him reassurance that he hadn’t missed anything. They lived close enough to each other that, when they usually parted ways, neither had more than a ten minute jog home.

“We can probably conclude then that they are not following us home,” he continued. “We should keep our eyes open, though. If anything changes, please inform the rest of the team. I think we all prefer if we are kept in the loop just in case.”

Tanaka noticed Tsukishima scoffing but Yamaguchi looked appreciative. To this day he wondered how those two ended up friends. They were so different from each other. Although, he mused, if compared to Hinata and Kageyama, they looked like twins. Hinata and Kageyama both may be volleyball idiots but so were many others, like he himself. Otherwise they didn’t seem to share that much in common.

“Maybe opposites attract,” he thought out loud and then snickered. Noya quirked his brows at him but he just shook his head and looked back at Suga and Daichi. He saw Kiyoko looking more relaxed than she had yesterday and felt relieved. She was too good to be worrying about strange men, which was an unfortunately common problem for her. There was a reason he and Noya tried act as buffers for her.

“Oh great, you’re all here!” Takeda-sensei smiled as he entered with Ukai. Tanaka didn’t really know why they were keeping this all from the adults – or were they? – but they hadn’t taken the matter as seriously as Tanaka felt they should have. Weren’t they concerned at all that a strange, creepy man had stared at the team at least three times? It made him mad. Takeda-sensei probably felt
his stare since he shifted, looking uncomfortable, as he fumbled with his papers.

“Er, ahem. I have our upcoming schedule for the time being. I’ll print them out for you when the plans are finalized…”

He listed what they had incoming, including a practice match with Hinoyama high school, and the Interhigh preliminaries of the other schools participating in their Tokyo excursion. When he got to mentioning the final exams they had next month, just before the trip, Tanaka couldn’t muster any despair over them. He could, and would, worry about them later. He always managed just well enough to pass his subjects. He worked best under pressure anyway.

But that practice match against Hinoyama the weekend after the next… That was something he was waiting for. If the black-clad men kept to the pattern, then they would surely appear then. And Tanaka had every intention to give them a piece of his mind. For Kiyoko-san, for the scaredy-cat Yamaguchi and for the rest of the team.

He was going to make sure they knew who they were messing around with.

***

Ukai stared at his team as they despaired over the future exams. He hadn’t been a good student when he was in high school. Heck, he didn’t even go to university or college and worked on his family’s store and fields! He couldn’t help but grin at their antics though. If he was younger, he would be running for the hills too.

He did see how the kids’ whole hearts weren’t in the interaction. Ennoshita kept his hold on Nishinoya but Ukai would have thought Tanaka to be in his grip too. Instead, he was still sitting on the floor with fire in his eyes that Ukai hadn’t seen outside a match before. He seemed ready to beat someone to a pulp like the delinquent he looked like. Hinata and Kageyama were as depressed as could be expected though he had to admit he hadn’t known Kageyama was as bad as he apparently was. He seemed so analytical and sharp on the court that Ukai almost expected it to transfer to other parts of school life too. He probably should have counted how blunt and simple Kageyama was in reality and added that to the equation. Hinata he hadn’t had any expectations on. That boy was as airheaded as they came and a volleyball idiot to boot.

He thanked any powers that may be that there were people who could be counted as he saw the team making plans on studying together and forcing the more reluctant members, such as Tsukishima, to help out.

Takeda wasn’t looking too good though. He had a worried expression on his face as he looked at the kids running around. Ukai sighed.

“They’ll be ok, you know that right, sensei?” he asked. “Even if one of them failed, I bet that they would still somehow manage to get to Tokyo.”

Takeda nodded. “I’m not that worried about their grades.”

Ukai could see the lie but let it go.

“It’s just… I heard them talk before you arrived and we came in. They are really worried about that mystery man.”

“Still?”

“Yeah… I don’t know all the details but apparently they have even started keeping their eyes open
when they leave practice to go home.”

Ukai turned to watch the pandemonium. It made sense now, how they were a bit subdued and not as boisterous. There was a sense of carefulness he hadn’t seen in them before. Now that he looked closer, Sugawara’s eyes flicked on the doors once in a while and Daichi didn’t keep his back completely to the only exit outside.

“Do you think we should confront them?” Takeda asked. Ukai pondered this for a second but then shook his head.

“No, not yet. They’ll come to us if they need us. Besides, we have a practice match in less than two weeks. If the black-clad men appear, they appear then. If they do, we’ll catch them and question them… and then inform the teams participating in the excursion, regardless of what they say or do not say.”

Takeda nodded. Ukai knew it wasn’t fair for them to hold their silence but if they started talking about this now with the team and then dismissing it again, it could be that they would no longer trust them on the issue. What are adults that can’t be trusted? Useless, that’s what. On the other hand, similar results could be achieved if they did keep their silence like he suggested. Would the kids still trust them to act if needed?

The results of the gamble depended on the next practice match, then.

He stood up.

They needed to step up their game, in more ways than one, if they wanted to solve this before it became a serious problem.

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Part I: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Surprisingly, Tsukishima agreed to help them out without a fuss. Hinata just had to ask. Beside him, Kageyama just looked sour but he didn’t even have to beg for Tsukishima to sigh and agree. Sure, he was stingy as always but he had agreed! Hinata was glad, no, he was ecstatic! Maybe they had a chance of passing the final exams now that they had help from the whole club!

Of course, Kageyama didn’t seem to like having to ask for help but he was getting better. Hinata smiled. The club was good for him. For everyone, really.

Hinata was in a good mood when he arrived at the morning practice the next day. There had been no one suspicious yesterday evening or today yet, so everything was all good in his books. He had even won the race against Kageyama that morning! Although he was still one point behind but he’s catch up soon enough.

He noticed a stack of papers on the bench in the gym and jogged to take a look. They were… flyers about finding a new manager for the volleyball team? Did Shimizu-senpai want to quit? No, that couldn’t be. Although she had been down the past couple of days, she was just as invested in the club as everyone else. Maybe she needed the help? Was managing a team hard work? It had to be if she was looking for help.

He took a sneaky glance at the team before taking some of the papers with him.

He’d help Shimizu out. With everything going on, she needed it.

***

Kiyoko didn’t know what to do anymore. She admitted that she had overreacted a few days ago. Like Tsukishima said, it probably was nothing. Nothing had happened since then. No one had been followed, and the only men suited in all black she had seen were some of the teachers in the school, and then there was the boy’s black uniform. Everything was completely ordinary.

Why did she feel that this wasn’t over yet, that the man would be back? It was and wasn’t logical at the same time. She had dealt with scary men since she had been in middle school. At some point she had grown up enough for them to notice her, which had made her the target of both her classmates and men she didn’t know.

(Hello, beautiful.)

(Give me your number.)

(I can show you a good time, girl.)

She was observant which is why she wondered why she also hadn’t noticed the black-clad man watching Karasuno’s volleyball matches. Had she been so keen on the games that she hadn’t paid enough attention to her surroundings? It was a scary thought. If she became too focused on something to lose the idea of what was happening around her, it could possibly become dangerous for her. What if it happened when she was walking home after practice? Who knows what dangers lurked in the darkness?
Kiyoko had heard of enough tales of unfortunate girls to know that avoiding walking alone in the dark was the smartest thing she could ever do.

…Which is probably why she was so hesitant to accept any easy answer to the situation, she thought. It would be so easy to lull herself into thinking that everything was okay before it would inevitably come back to bite them.

“Shimizu-senpai!”

She started. Suddenly her view was full of bright shades of orange and a bright smile. She automatically answered it with a small one of her own. She left her seat to walk up to Hinata who was standing outside her classroom’s door.

“Yes, Hinata-kun?”

“Shimizu-senpai, um, you were looking for a new manager for the volleyball club, right?” he stood on his heels and rocked on them, his grin reducing itself into a more manageable and a bit hesitant smile.

“I-, yes. How did you know?” Kiyoko asked. How had he known? She had the flyers back at home where she hadn’t moved them for a few days. She had been planning on finding a second manager for the team because of her inevitable resignation in the spring but at this time, she wasn’t sure she wanted to bring anyone new into the club. The only one she had told this had been Takeda-sensei and they had been alone when everyone else was practicing.

What if the danger was real? Especially if the new manager was also a girl like her, she could be a target just like Kiyoko.

“I saw the flyers at the morning practice some days ago and I thought I could help you with them. I mean, you looked so tired and not yourself with everything, I mean, not that you weren’t yourself but, uhh…”

Kiyoko could feel her smile freeze on her face.

“Hinata-kun?”

“Uh, here!” he bowed and held a paper in front of her. “I took some of the papers and spread them around and asked the other first years if there were anyone who weren’t at any clubs already! Here are the names I collected, I hope you’re okay with me butting my way into your business, I mean, not that way, I-, uhh…”

She took the paper into her slightly trembling hands. The list wasn’t long, there were only five names, but she felt like that was five too much. Would this list mean that one of her kouhai could be in danger if she took him or her in?

The bell rang.

“Oh, the lessons are starting again, I’m sorry, I’ll see you at the practice!” and then he was gone, running down the hallway, dangerously close to colliding with others in her year. She looked down at the paper again.

Abe Yahiko, class 1-4.

Kagami Kohaku, class 1-3.
Kawahara Eri, class 1-2.

Matsumoto Sakura, class 1-4.

Yachi Hitoka, class 1-5.

She needed to talk to someone. Maybe Takeda-sensei could help her decide what she should do. She went back into her classroom and sat down. At lunch she would track him down and ask. She couldn’t do this on her own. It wasn’t her place to possibly put someone into danger although as a manager to the team, finding a successor to her was her duty.

Kiyoko couldn’t help but resent Hinata for a moment which made her feel extremely guilty immediately. He had only tried his best to help when he should have been worrying about the exams instead of worrying about her.

She didn’t want this kind of responsibility.

***

Ennoshita wasn’t the best of players. He was a coward who had run away from his team because of his fear of Ukai’s grandfather and hard work. He no longer was a regular either. He didn’t grudge his team members because of that though. They had more talent than he did. He did want to get better nowadays but wasn’t really sure how. What should he even work on? There were so many holes in his defence and he was useless as a wing spiker, his primary position, compared to Tanaka and Asahi. He was level-headed, sure, and could keep his calm and hold over his rowdier fellow second years but that was about how useful he was.

There was even this weird drama going on that he didn’t quite understand. He had been with the team the whole time it happened but, as it often was, was slightly sidelined and left to watch everything unfold from the bench. Black-clad men? Right. He could see why some of the team was being riled up or even scared but it wasn’t what really hit him. It was how the team was almost divided into different parts.

There were the scared ones, like Shimizu and Yamaguchi. Then there were the ones who wanted retribution, like Tanaka and probably Nishinoya too. Maybe even Hinata but he seemed less likely to punch first and ask questions later… In this matter anyway. Ennoshita didn’t know him well enough to judge. There were of course the irrelevant ones, where he, Narita and Kinoshita belonged, but they didn’t matter. Then there were those who worried over the team, like Suga, Daichi and Asahi, as if it was their responsibility that the team was safe and sound. And lastly, there were Kageyama and Tsukishima who just didn’t seem to care, with Hinata probably belonging in that category as well. Kageyama and Hinata were much too focused on volleyball to care, probably, but Tsukishima’s attitude annoyed Ennoshita a lot. Didn’t he care for the team at all?

It wasn’t okay in his books. What was wrong with him? That kind of bored and snide life didn’t seem any fun to him but he drew the line in…

No, he shouldn’t be thinking about this. The team, while separated into these categories, was a close one. They were slowly moulding themselves into puzzle pieces that fit together. They just needed something to kick start the process, to make it faster. Otherwise, they would miss out on the spring high preliminaries, and then it would be over for the team. Who cares if there are some weirdos watching them if they did nothing? That is, of course, the key word. If.

Ah, but did this turn him into one of the people in the ‘doesn’t care’ category? No, he probably was more part of the worries than others.
He heard the door to the gym open and craned his neck to see Shimizu standing there with a… girl? Why would there be a girl there? He could see the others being as confused as he was.

The new girl was pretty cute, he guessed. Not his type but cute nonetheless. He hid a smile when he saw Yamaguchi gape. She had short blond hair and, if his eyes didn’t lie, brown eyes. She was quite short and didn’t seem that athletic. And was he just imagining, but did her movements seem a bit… weird? Was she imitating a robot or why did she look so out of place? He saw her eyes flicker on Kageyama and Tsukishima before settling her – scared? – gaze to the whole team, who seemed ready to – pounce on her?

Ennoshita felt like smacking someone. He wasn’t the tallest of people himself but he had to admit that Tsukishima and Kageyama had some fearsome height. In addition, he knew that Tanaka and Nishinoya could accidentally kill someone in their enthusiasm. Even Suga could be scary when he tried to be friendly. He sometimes used his ‘I’ll find you later and kill you’ smile instead of ‘I’ll adopt you’, which thankfully wasn’t the case this time. He would have his hands full with others, so Ennoshita slowly moved towards Tanaka and Nishinoya. Maybe he could smack some sense into them before they scarred the poor girl for life.

***

Asahi almost didn’t see the person behind Kiyoko at first. She was so tiny, even smaller than Noya. He quickly erased the thought from his mind just in case Noya had become telepathic between the morning and afternoon practice. He didn’t want to be yelled at.

“You found someone!” Hinata suddenly yelled and gathered the attention of the whole team. Had Kiyoko been looking for someone? Apparently, since she nodded but she did look a bit uneasy. She seemed better than the girl behind her though.

“She’ll be a temporary member to our club, who’ll serve as a manager with me.”

The girl, their new manager, unfroze. “I- I’m Yachi Hitoka!” she said loudly, voice filled with nerves. The team started to come closer now that they knew who she was.

Asahi tried to give her his best welcoming smile. “Are you a first year?”

He probably failed since she yelped her agreement and tried to hide behind Kiyoko again. Daichi told him to back off which he did, although reluctantly. Why did he seem to scare people? It wasn’t like he meant to!

He saw Ennoshita grab Tanaka and Noya before they could do anything other than stare at Yachi but it seemed like that was enough to frazzle her nerves even more. Daichi and Suga tried to placate her so she wouldn’t be scared of them. Kiyoko looked worried and, immediately, Asahi grasped why.

Kiyoko had been the most affected by their possible stalker. He knew this since he was the one who had been walking her home since the preliminaries. She had to be worried about bringing someone new into the club, especially one who looked like a wind could sweep her up and a hoot of an owl could make her scream.

“It- it’s just temporary…! And she’s just showing her face today, nothing more,” Kiyoko said and Yachi nodded, still looking a bit unsure. She glanced at the team again before Kiyoko ushered her out. Asahi looked as she walked her to the school building as Daichi yelled for them all to start running laps. He quickly pointed at himself and towards Kiyoko, who still stood outside, this time alone. Had Yachi left already? Daichi nodded and Asahi jogged outside.
“You were looking for a new manager?” he asked when he stepped next to her. She hesitated but then nodded.

“In a way.”

“You… don’t sound very enthusiastic, having found one.”

“I figured I wouldn’t have enough time to do it properly in April, so I had thought I’d find one sooner. I made flyers and everything but then the match against Aobajousai happened and… I wasn’t sure I wanted to add anyone to this mess before it was solved.”

Asahi nodded. That sounded like Kiyoko, so caring about everyone.

“But then apparently I had forgotten the papers lying around and Hinata-kun found them… and he thought he would do me a favour by helping out.” He chuckled. That sounded like Hinata.

“I went to ask Takeda-sensei what he thought about this. He gave me a go ahead, if I wanted. He even suggested making it a temporary position in case I was worried. I could’ve just left it until after the winter break but… it would’ve been impolite to not at least go through Hinata’s list now that he had done some much for me. Yachi-san was the last one there. I thought no one would agree.”

“But she did,” Asahi ended it for her. She nodded.

“We’ll make sure nothing happens to her,” he reassured Kiyoko. “And as a temporal member, a new member, it’s not like the men would be interested in her. They followed us before, so they shouldn’t be keen on her.”

“What if…”

Asahi touched her shoulder and she started.

“We’ll keep her safe. Together, as a team, with you looking after her in the side lines.”

Kiyoko nodded and some of the tenseness left her. Asahi smiled as brightly as he could and he could feel her muscles relax.

“Come on, let’s get back to practice.”

***

Hitoka bit her lip. She was nervous. This was the first practice match she was going to see as a manager, albeit a temporary one. It was so soon, she wasn’t ready! Well, the players were ready and that was what really was important but she wasn’t but Shimizu-senpai was too but she wasn’t. Apparently this was a really last minute match. The school, it started with an O… Ou- Ougima? Ouginishi! That was it. Ougini- Ouginishi had requested a practice match, and according to Shimizu, it was because people had seen how well Karasuno had done in the Interhigh preliminaries! It was brilliant!

She had heard someone quietly say that perhaps they wouldn’t have any audience since it was a last minute practice match but she didn’t get the reference.

If only she could do that. Hitoka had never been particularly sporty. She knew how to study, and she was in the college prep class, but she wasn’t sports-smart, if one could say that. She didn’t have a passion towards anything really. In a way, she was kind of jealous of Hinata, who was so into volleyball that nothing else seemed to matter. Kageyama was similar although not quite. She had
gotten to know the two better when she tutored them in English. It seemed that their participation in an upcoming excursion to Tokyo depended on passing the class which seemed like a huge obstacle to them.

Hitoka nervously took a look at the balls the team was using to practice before the match. She had had one coming to her face and she swore it was faster than a bullet!

“Hitoka-chan, could you set eight of those folding chairs on that side of the court?” Shimizu-senpai asked. Hitoka felt herself jerk violently and she prayed she didn't look like she was having a seizure.

“Uh, sure!” she dashed to grab a few while carefully watching out for the life-threatening volleyballs. She could do this. Managing a team couldn’t be that hard! She could manage her own life! … Maybe.

“Hey, do you need any help?” she heard Hinata ask but it took a couple of seconds for her to register he was talking to her.

“Ah, no, I can manage!” she assured him. As she set the chairs down she saw him cheerfully claim how they were going to win. “…Why do you try so hard for a practice match?” she wondered out loud before slapping a hand over her mouth. Was that rude to ask?!

Hinata had a bewildered look on his face. “Because… I want to get stronger? And win?”

“I see,” Hitoka nodded as if she understood. She didn’t. “You must have all sorts of reasons for that.”

“For what? Winning?” she nodded again. Hinata’s confusion switched into something really intense. Shivers went down Hitoka’s back.

“Do you need a reason to not want to lose?”

(Do you need a reason to want to live?)

She gulped.

No, she thought. You really don’t need a reason for that.

“Excuse us!” The other team arrived, and finally Karasuno started to get ready for the match too.

This time it was she who looked bewildered. The team looked so… goofy. Where was the seriousness Hinata had shown when he claimed that they were going to win? Almost as soon as she had finished the thought the atmosphere… changed. All the jokes, all the snide comments and weird bonding just… stopped. The minute the team turned to the court their spirit turned from an unruly flock to a murder of crows.

“Karasuno, fight!” Daichi called.

“Yeah!” the team cheered loudly.

Then the game started and her breath was taken away.

The reflexes the players had, the timing, the strength! It was amazing, something, that she had never seen before in her life. She could see the passion Hinata had shown reflecting in the eyes of all Karasuno players. She was even sure that one of Asahi’s… spikes?... would break her arm if she tried to catch (receive?) it. Or maybe even hack it off completely!

And then Hinata jumped and she forgot to breath. Kageyama’s setting was on point, it had been all
match, but that was just beautiful.

She was so glad she could see this. Becoming the team’s manager would be worth a fortune if she could continue to see matches like this.

Hitoka felt eyes on her and turned to see Shimizu looking at her. She smiled and, for some reason, Shimizu relaxed and smiled back. She started to explain the game to her, sitting close, and pointing the intricacies for her. Hitoka felt like she belonged.

Distantly, she thought she heard a person or two crying something about “Kiyoko’s voice” or “Kiyoko’s smile” before two bodies collapsed on the floor but when she looked back to their side of the game, all she could see was focused players after the ball in mid-air. She probably imagined the whole thing, she thought. She saw a man dressed in all black watch the game on the upper level and smiled at him.

She waved.

He waved back.

Hitoka turned back to the match.

It was a really good game.

Although Hitoka didn’t notice it, beside her, Shimizu froze and signalled Takeda-sensei, who in turn told Ukai. When they won the first round a couple of minutes later, Hitoka noticed that both Takeda-sensei and Ukai-san were patrolling the upper level. Tanaka had run out the minute the match ended with Nishinoya and Asahi at his heels.

They all returned when Sugawara had gone looking for them for the second round. Nishinoya looked ready to spit fire while Asahi had a dark look on his face. Tanaka, on the other hand, was actually cursing and seemed to want to start a fight with anyone who looked at him wrong. Suddenly, it seemed as if the team was more tense than she had ever seen them before. When she turned to ask Shimizu about it, she immediately decided not to. She was looking really pale. Was she sick?

She asked if she was feeling under the weather but Shimizu just shook her head and took one of Hitoka’s hands on her own. She blushed but didn’t really mind. Unlike her pale disposition, Shimizu’s hand was really warm.

Takeda-sensei and Ukai didn’t leave the upper level the whole match while some second years Hitoka didn’t remember the names of yet stood next to the gym’s closed main doors.

The man watching the game didn’t return.

Chapter End Notes

So, now all of Karasuno’s actors are on stage! Give them a round of applause!

Next time, I can promise you a real treat. Karasuno’s going to Tokyo and they have a confrontation with their stalker! Not necessarily in that order, or perhaps... ;}
Part I: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The match against Ouginishi ended in Karasuno’s victory but the mood was low for the winning team. This made the Ouginishi players shoot some strange looks at them, had even during the game, but they just couldn’t remove the newfound tenseness. Suga was worried. The team was… not good. They had spirit but it was beginning to sour. Something was caging their wings to the ground they tried to fly away from. Chains? Their own wings? Or something else? Or rather, someone else?

They bid farewell to Ouginishi and closed the door behind them as the other team left Karasuno’s gym.

“This is bad…” Ukai sighed out loud and Suga had to agree. The team looked bad. Tanaka was spitting fire, kicking and hitting balls around the hall the second the doors had fallen close. Nishinoya was doing his best at receiving them and trying to lift the mood even though he himself had a dark look on his face. Asahi had sat down next to Kiyoko in a sense of solidarity and trying to keep her talking. Yachi seemed extremely confused by everything although she kept the conversation going with the two others sitting next to her.

Hinata was demanding balls after balls from Kageyama in a louder and louder voice. Kageyama’s brows were pinched as severely, or even more so, as they had been since the match against Seijou and he set the volleyballs to Hinata in a faster and faster pace. Daichi just arrived with Ennoshita from the backrooms with empty hands. Yamaguchi didn’t look so good either. He was pale and clutching at Tsukishima’s shirt, who in turn had an air of feigned boredom around him but the way he let Yamaguchi keep holding his shirt hostage told tales.

And then he himself. He stood next to Ukai and Takeda-sensei and couldn’t hold his disappointment to himself either. The past week had been… depressing, to say the least. As hard as they were striving to go forward, it wasn’t easy since something was always trying to push them back. Most of the time it was even they themselves and their fears and insecurities over things they had no control over. Someone was following them on their own turf. Why? What did he have to gain from this?

The black-clad man’s appearance today made the pattern even more sinister than it had been before. Before today, it was just weird and creepy. Even knowing that he had watched them in their gym wasn’t the same as noticing it and being able to do nothing about it. They had been able to stop it but… Had they? What if he watched them from somewhere outside? Suga had seen that Ukai and Takeda had had some sort of plan together. He was relieved to know that the teachers hadn’t just dismissed them and their concerns, although, Suga also wondered how they had known they had been worried. The team had tried to deal with it on their own after all but perhaps they should have trusted the adults.

They should at least hear them out.

“Oh, team, knock it off,” Ukai yelled. He gained some contemptuous glances but he glared back with as much irritation as he could muster. “We’re going to deal with this matter, now, before you destroy the gym and we have no place to go and we’ll have to forfeit the spring tournament altogether.”

“Yes, coach,” came the answer but it was with clenched teeth and too much disrespect. Hinata looked horrified at the thought of not being able to compete in the spring high.
“Now,” Ukai emphasized as he glared Tanaka into submission. Tanaka had been about to ignore him and continue hitting the balls around but, wisely, seemed to refrain. Suga noticed with slight amusement that it was more because of Ennoshita who walked past and grabbed him with him than anything else but anything that didn’t create a civil war was alright in his books right now.

Suga tried to express calmness as he sat down but the anxiety in the air was too strong to soothe with a smile. Daichi patted his shoulder as if to soothe him. Had he seemed so unsure himself?

“Shit happens,” Ukai said. “We didn’t catch the man. We tried to, but we failed.”

“Yes, because you didn’t let us leave the game!” Tanaka fumed. Suga almost grimaced but managed to keep his smile on his face. It hadn’t been pretty. Tanaka had noticed Kiyoko’s signal and seen the man and tried to get himself switched out from the game. Ukai, however, hadn’t even pretended to not see his flailing and straight up denied permission. Only Daichi’s hand on his shoulder had kept him not storming after the black-clad man. The man had calmly left the moment Ukai and Takeda-sensei had climbed up to the second level. He hadn’t not run, just walked away as if he had been disinterested in the match than worried about getting caught.

“Because that wouldn’t have raised anyone’s suspicion,” Ukai snorted. “Do you want the whole volleyball league and everyone else and their grandmothers talking about this? “Well, I didn’t at least, for a few reasons. One, in case Takeda-sensei and I failed to catch the man, we could next time. With everyone together. That means the whole team, Tanaka,” he added in his benefit. Tanaka wasn’t mollified but seemed less reluctant to listen to their coach. “Two, since it seems now that we are working separately, we will be able to catch him, like I said, together. We just have to form a plan to carry out next match. Did you see him leave when you ran out?”

“We didn’t,” Noya said. He had disappointed look on his face.

“He came out from the back, probably through the window there,” Daichi said. “It was closed but there’s no other way he could’ve gotten out from the back. The backdoor was locked from the outside. Did you see anything unusual?”

“We didn’t,” Noya repeated. “We split up to cover the school grounds. There was no car, no tracks even at the back, nothing.”

“Umm…”

The whole team turned towards the hesitant voice. It was Yachi. She blinked and flushed at the attention, but persevered. “What are you talking about? Who are you hunting?” she looked honestly baffled.

No one knew how to answer the questions without scaring her off.

Suga sighed and rose.

“Yachi-san, how about you come with me and I’ll give you the bullet points? Let’s leave the others to the discussion.”

She still seemed very confused but nodded and stood up. Suga noticed that Kiyoko still held her hand and rose as well.

“I’m coming with you.”

They walked to the other side of the court and sat down again. Suga could hear the argument going on with Tanaka and Ukai’s voices being loud enough to hear even at their side. Surprisingly, he
could also hear Daichi and… was that Kageyama? Kind of uncharacteristic of him but Suga could see from the corner of his eye that Tsukishima was facing him, probably trying to get a rise out of him, so maybe not so uncharacteristic after all.

He turned to Yachi. Maybe honesty was the best approach here.

“Alright, I’ll be blunt. The situation is like this. There is a man dressed in all black, who has been following our team around. We don’t know how long, or what he wants. All we really know is that he has been around at least since our first practice match against Seijou’s Aobajousai soon after the new school year started. Since then, he has been watching our matches,” Suga explained. Kiyoko had a small frown on her face, as if she disapproved his method, but seeing that Yachi wasn’t running for the hills, she said nothing.

“We want to know why he follows us. That is what the others are planning on doing, trying to get him to tell us. They tried to catch him today, but failed. We didn’t really confide in Takeda-sensei and Ukai-san, so we didn’t work together.”

“We don’t know if he’s danger or not,” Kiyoko admitted. “He has just watched us but we can’t just ignore him or let him be since he has actively tried to evade us now.”

“We think that if they had something to do with other volleyball teams, they would have either announced themselves or hidden from the view. He hasn’t done either, so…”

Yachi was quiet as she listened. Suga couldn’t really read her, but perhaps Kiyoko could, since she took Yachi’s hand again. She blinked and her blank look fell.

“Oh… I just thought he wanted to see the game.”

“You don’t need to worry, we’ll keep you safe,” Kiyoko promised while her eyes flickered quickly over to Asahi and back. Yachi’s eyes widened.

“Oh, I’m not worried. I’m sure we’re all safe,” she assured them in turn which surprised both Suga and Kiyoko. “I mean, the whole team is still here, right? You guys are all huge and ‘grr’ and, um, I mean…”

“No, I mean, yes. We’re all safe,” Suga nodded, a sheepish smile touching his lips. Her faith in them was surprising but heart-warming. “We were just a bit amazed how well you took this.”

“Should I have taken it some other way…?”

“No, you’re all good.” Kiyoko patted the hand she held. Yachi blushed and took her hand back in embarrassment as if she hadn’t even noticed where it had rested. Suga was glad that it was Yachi who Kiyoko had found as their new manager. She was a good fit for the team.

“Come on, let’s join the others. We’ll need to hear the plan too. The practice match against Hinoyama is next weekend.”

***

Hinoyama high school was a school with mediocre volleyball team. It didn’t mean that some of their tactics didn’t give Karasuno a run for their money but it might be because Karasuno didn’t play all their regulars. Kageyama was there, as was Hinata, as they were the more noticeable freaky duo of the team and Daichi was sure that if they were missing from the game, there would be questions. In addition, they were first years, and Daichi had wanted them to stay out of the operation. That was why Yamaguchi and Tsukishima were also playing. There was no reason for them to be involved
than they already were as part of their team. Nishinoya was playing too, despite his earlier grumbling, as were the non-regular second years. Daichi himself, however, and Asahi, Suga and Tanaka stayed out of the game. The four of them and their coach had a plan to fulfil.

As those with the best chance of catching anyone, Asahi and Tanaka stayed near the front doors, ready to run out at a moment’s notice. Daichi stood next to the reserve players on the right side, while Suga, who had the best eye sight out of them, waited in the upper level left from the main doors. Ukai was hiding in the team’s changing rooms where the man would have to run past if he wanted to get to the backroom. This time, they were ready. They were positioned so that every direction would be covered… and that the team could force the man where they wanted him to go.

Then they waited for Suga’s signal.

The game went slowly. It wasn’t all that exciting, as unfair as that was to say to anyone playing volleyball. At any other day Daichi would have given a talking to anyone suggesting that but, today, he had other things in his mind. They just needed to find out who that man was and… No, scratch that. He didn’t care who the man was. He wanted to know what he wanted from them. It wasn’t alright to stress them out like this.

He watched as Yamaguchi tried a serve and failed. The poor boy was at his limits. Noya, who stood near him, just nudged him to get the ball across the net, that he could receive it. Yamaguchi nodded and the serve when over. Nishinoya kept his promise. He received and let Hinata score a point by slamming Kageyama’s set to the floor. The two were trying to keep the game going even at a time like this. Daichi could now appreciate their stubbornness. They were truly lifting the spirit of the team and keeping them together. Even Yachi cheered from the sidelines which seemed to give Yamaguchi a boost big enough for him to hit another past the net without trouble.

Daichi felt proud and even a small smile found its way to his lips. They had a good team.

They were on the second round when he noticed Suga standing up and stretching. He stiffened and craned his neck upwards.

There, behind him on his upper right. He signalled at Asahi and Tanaka who immediately left the gym and the doors to Kinoshita, who left the square for reserve players to guard the door. Daichi went to climb up. It was his turn to steer their target right where they wanted him.

A captain’s duty is to run ahead of his troupes, give his all to them and lead them to victory.

When he got up, he could see Suga running down the upper level on the other side of the hall and then he saw him. The black-clad man was already moving away, hiding something – his phone? – into his pocket. Daichi sped after him just as he disappeared from view. He ran, faster than he had ever sprinted save for the last game against Aobajousai. He could hear the match going on below him and surprised exclams that were glossed over by their playing members.

(The seniors are just bitter that they are giving space for more talented players. Like the King here.)

(Stop calling me that!)

(As your Majesty ‘commands’.)

Thanks, Tsukishima.

He ran down and past the changing rooms with a door ajar. Ukai had already burst out after the man and he could see him in front of him. He slowed down when he saw Ukai stopping with the man backed against the locked backdoor.
They had him.

“Let’s not beat around the bush,” Ukai said, a serious tone colouring his tone. He had a tennis racket in his hands that he was brandishing towards the man. It would have been comical if not for the lesson Daichi’s father had given him when he was young.

*(If you don’t know what the other guy has, have something either heavy or longer than your hand available just in case. Fists rarely work against sharp objects or guns.)*

“Who are you and why are you following our team?”

The man remained silent, his features neutral and blank behind his sunglasses and beneath his hat. Daichi thought he could see a few light hairs against all the black but it could have been the lighting just as well. His hands were hidden behind him but his posture was relaxed and non-threatening.

In the light of the hallway Daichi could see the man had about ten centimetres on them both and he filled his suit which was well-tailored. It didn’t reek expensive but the linings were neat and it was clear that it was fitted just for the man.

Whoever the man was, he wasn’t an everyday shopper at the mall or he was here on business… or both.

“We asked you a question.”

They held a silent staring match with the man towering over them. Daichi couldn’t see his eyes but he would swear that he felt him looking them over. He was pulling them apart and putting them back together as he inspected them like they were beneath a microscope.

Something crashed outside. Muffled sounds were heard. *Tanaka and Asahi.* As soon as Daichi felt slight relief for having backup, the man shrugged and the intensity dropped. It was so bizarre change of pace that Daichi had to keep from stumbling.

If the smirk the man was now sprouting meant anything, he didn't miss a thing. He could see how unnerved they were.

“You have something of ours.”

Daichi and Ukai blinked.

…What?

“What do you mean ‘something of yours’?” Daichi asked carefully. The man shrugged again almost lazily.

“That’s classified information.”

“Look here-“

“Classified.”

“Who-“

“Classified.”

“Will you-“
“Shut up!” Ukai barked. His grip was white on the racket. The man’s smirk widened. Daichi suddenly felt like they were being baited. The black-clad man seemed almost careless now, a daredevil, although Daichi noticed he still hadn’t removed his hands behind his back. He glanced at Ukai who tensely kept sending his own glances at the man’s hidden hands. Good, he wasn’t the only one then.

They couldn’t get a good read on the man, and they were off-balance.

They didn't like it.

“What are you going to do about the fact that ‘we have something of yours’?” Ukai asked, and Daichi could hear the quotation marks.

The man opened his mouth-

-and the door crashed open behind him. Daichi had to close his eyes because of the sudden brightness and in that second the man was no longer in front of them, and he himself was on the ground groaning and holding his stomach. The tennis racket lay broken next to him and Ukai was pressed against the wall.

“Just keep it secret, keep it safe,” he whispered teasingly. Then the man turned serious and Daichi could see the whites of Ukai’s wide eyes. “There are monsters worse than us around and we’d hate if something were to happen to you if what is ours was hurt. A prized possession of ours that is, and we do not plan on losing our treasure to others.

“Ignorance is bliss, my dear Keishin-san.”

The man stepped back and Ukai fell down as the man let him go. He walked past Daichi without giving him another look.

“Don’t shoot the kids,” Daichi heard the man say and tensed. He looked out and saw another man dressed in all black pointing a gun at Asahi and Tanaka, who were looking pale and scared, and were clenching their teeth and glaring, respectively. Tanaka was also holding his arm protectively.

“Yes, sir,” the gun man said and hid it behind his back. Daichi’s eyes fell to the back of the man they had cornered (or had they ever?) and thought he saw an outline of something there. He felt sick.

A whistle sounded in the distance.

“I think your match just ended. We should get going now, so, listen closely, Keishin-san and the peanut gallery. Just pretend we don’t exist and we’ll leave you alone. Mostly.”

Daichi just watched as the two men walked away and parted with just one last word, the simplest yet the most ominous goodbye he had ever heard:

“Maybe.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, I didn't manage to fit Tokyo here because it's becoming a bit long and I like the
pace I have. They'll get to Tokyo next chapter, though!

Who are these men, and what do you think they want?
Part I: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weeks before the exams were tense for many reasons. Takeda saw the tried keep it together, sometimes with clenched teeth but mostly through showing sheer strength of character. What could have been a disaster had not broken the team.

And by disaster, Takeda meant the confrontation that could have gone terribly wrong.

They all understood the implications. The men, now plural, had guns with them. They didn’t hurt them aside from bruises, and a twisted wrist for Tanaka, but if things had gone differently… Takeda didn’t want to think about it. He had wanted to go to the police but he had been stopped by Sawamura, who had just shaken his head and said:

“We have no proof.”

Takeda had felt like he had been biting a lemon. It was true. It was just their word they had. The only descriptions they had were that they wore all black. If they went to the police, they could just as easily change their clothing which meant they would never know if they were watching. They had also said that they should forget them, according to Ukai, which could mean that making a fuss would be taken… badly.

(Keep it secret. Keep it safe.)

The team had no idea what they wanted although the black-clad men had said that one of them had something of theirs. But then, they weren’t taking it back? It would be so easy to steal whatever they had. Was it information? No one had seen them before! Was it an item? Again, stealing it shouldn’t prove difficult at all. A person? Takeda grimaced. He didn’t like the idea that they would be after one of their team members. Still, again, no one had seen them before so they literally had no clues which to go on about.

He didn’t think anyone of them was lying. It would be uncharacteristic for them all to keep them in suspense and doubt. While some of them had some difficulties expressing themselves, Takeda felt that the team was almost a family first and foremost. They had the quirky and annoying cousins, cool older brothers, adorable younger siblings, and adults such as Takeda and Ukai trying to keep up with them all. There were times that Takeda really felt his age. He was no teenager anymore.

Still, the team kept going despite the confrontation. There were no signs of the black-clad men after that, and they kept watch. No one walked home alone, and Hinata, who had the longest way home, had to text one of them at regular intervals until he got home. It was usually to Kageyama. Boy, it was like they were twins gone horribly wrong at times.

Somehow, the practices also got more intense. Maybe it was the frustration they were venting but these past two weeks the team improved, a lot. Their drive to not lose was kick-started like there was no tomorrow. Tsukishima was the only one not enthusiastic about the change of pace but he kept up too, to a point. Takeda wasn’t sure if it was because he wanted to or because he didn’t want to lose his spot as a regular. He hoped they could motivate him as well to do his best like everyone else.

Takeda had also lamented about their lack of funding for Ukai once or twice but that had changed too. Apparently Yachi had overheard them and taken advantage of her skills as a designer which she
had learnt from her mother. She had blushed and admitted, basically glowing, that she had gotten some tips from her too. Takeda got the feeling they loved each other very much but didn’t get to see each other often.

There were posters now around the town, depicting Hinata slamming a spike. He had wondered why Kageyama wasn’t part of the picture, since he was the setter and a rather well-known too, but Yachi had just said that the focus should be on ‘the upcoming Small Giant’ since people remembered the success of the previous one. It worked. They now had enough money to cover the Tokyo trip but also more than enough for future too. He was actually surprised by how much they had gotten from the anonymous donators.

He wanted to give Yachi a full membership of the club but Shimizu had vetoed it for the moment. She said that they should ask her after the Tokyo trip if she wanted it. A lot was going on and she wanted Yachi to make sure she wanted in. She promised to speak to her after the exams so she would have time to think about it.

And now, today, the exams started. They had done their best to study and help others on the team but it would remain to be seen if it was enough. He was especially worried about Nishinoya, Tanaka, Hinata and Kageyama. Their grades made him want to cringe but they had improved from what he had last seen them. They could do it. They could do it.

His team was amazing. They could do it.

Takeda knew he would repeat this same mantra until the end of the exams. He sighed. He needed more coffee. And a good book. What he wouldn’t do for a good book. Maybe even about volleyball.

His face hit the desk and scared the other teachers in the room.

He really needed that coffee.

***

Hinata groaned as he hit the shotgun of Tanaka’s sister’s car. Kageyama climbed in the back and then they were off. To Tokyo! He was excited but the week had been hell. Both Kageyama and he had failed the English exam the first time and to actually manage an almost perfect score from the retake was exhausting. He could only thank everyone to have the opportunity to come to Tokyo. The studying had been awful but worth it.

…Kageyama had scored better than he had both times. Gosh darn it! He was losing now! He couldn’t quite remember the exact score but he was losing!

No, that’s not the point. The point is that they are going to Tokyo and enjoy it!

…Hopefully without any extra people, possibly, maybe, definitely, dressed in black.

_They. Were. Going. To. Enjoy. It._

Period.

“Long day, huh?” Tanaka Saeko asked. Hinata could only nod. “Ryuu did say that you had to retake an exam. Which one was it?”

“English.”

“Ha! What do Japanese people need English with?!’’ she laughed loudly, starting an already dozing
Kageyama. He blinked to clear the sleep off from his gaze. Hinata snickered.

“Shut up, dumbass…” Kageyama yawned. Saeko looked at him through the mirror.

“Well, you look even more tired than the shrimp. Long night?”

Kageyama nodded.

“Chill, then. I’ll get you to Tokyo safe and sound. Well, mostly anyway. Hahaha!” she pressed on gas and Hinata clutched at his seat. They were going way past the speed limit!

“Sure,” Kageyama just yawned again and closed his eyes. He was asleep in a second. Hinata could only stare at him in disbelief. Did he have no fear?!

“What about you, shrimp? Are you going to take a nap too?” his head snapped forward again.

“Ah, no. I’m too fired up. Tokyo, Tokyo!” he cheered while staring at the cars they were speeding past. This was going to be the ride of his life. Literally.

“It’s going to be at least two hours yet so just sit tight! Hahaha!”

It was a four hour trip from their city to Tokyo.

Hinata smiled weakly.

“Yes, ma’am.”

He could barely see any landscapes since they were travelling the speed of bullet train so he fell into his thoughts, trying to block out the quiet snores from the backseat and the loud singing from the driver’s seat. Tanaka’s sister was… nice. He could definitely see the family resemblance.

His mind wandered into the meeting Kageyama and he had had with Shiratorizawa’s Ushijima. He was one scary guy. Hinata and Kageyama had been studying at Yachi’s place and they had suddenly met him. He was so tall, about equal to Tsukishima, but a lot more muscly and buff and wow. Hinata could sense the potential and skill in him. For some reason, though, he hadn’t felt as intimidated as he had felt when he met with other powerhouses. There was something that made him… almost angry when he thought about him. When he met him, he was just so... So...

His attitude just rubbed wrong at Hinata. ‘This school has no need for a setter who can’t devote himself to me, the ace.’ Who was he kidding? And how could he say that to Kageyama? He was worth more than that. He was-

Hinata paused.

Kageyama was his friend. He couldn’t say they were best friends, not yet, but there was a connection there. On court, Hinata had been able to trust him from the beginning. There just was something… trustworthy, special, in Kageyama. It was something that he hadn’t been able to spot in the Grand King no matter how he thought about it. The Grand King had been great, no doubt about that, and his skills and team spirit were admirable but… Kageyama.

He was Hinata’s setter. His setter. Not Kitagawa Daiichi’s who had left him behind nor Ushijima’s who couldn’t appreciate him.

Kageyama was Hinata’s. He was Karasuno’s.

While he had laughed about Kageyama having no air of ‘devotion’ to the team, it wasn’t true.
Kageyama was pure devotion and passion. Hinata actually envied him. He just… seemed to have everything so clear to him. He was so talented that Hinata couldn’t be able to catch up to him no matter what, not yet. Kageyama was always helping him out and rectifying his mistakes.

*(Don’t you dare apologize for tossing to me…!)*

He’d make this trip count. He wouldn’t be left behind. He couldn’t. He didn’t want to lose anymore. He wanted to be the new Small Giant.

And he wanted to make Ushijima eat the concrete Hinata was growing from. He would no longer look down on them – on him, on Kageyama, on the whole Karasuno. They would win against Seijou and then beat Shiratorizawa.

Yosh!

He was getting all fired up! He couldn’t wait to get to Tokyo and play in a practice match against the strong teams there! He would jump, watch, learn.

He would.

“Say, that one car is amazing!” Hinata was brought out of his thoughts by Saeko’s bright and amused voice.

“Huh?”

“This one car has been able to follow us! I don’t know how long it’s been at it but wow. I’ll have to tell Ryuu when we get to Tokyo. And he’s calling me crazy!”

Hinata looked out the back window, past the sleeping Kageyama, and froze.

A black car with tinted windows was following them.

*They were following them to Tokyo.*

***

Nishinoya panted. It was tough losing so many times! But because he was learning, it was also kind of fun… Annoying but fun. Karasuno’s opponents didn’t seem to know what to think about them, though. Probably because they had heard about the ‘incredible first years’ or something. Ha, the incredible ball of sugar rush and the glare of doom. He wondered if they were going to arrive soon. They had passed, since Shimizu had gotten the text from Hinata. That was a bit over two hours ago. If he knew Saeko-nee-san, and he did, she should be here any minute n-…

The gym door slammed open and everyone turned towards the noise. There stood a young bottle-blond woman in a tank top who distinctly reminded Noya of his best friend. He grinned.

“Neesan!” he shouted a greeting and waved. She gave him a sharp grin back. “Hey, team Karasuno, you on a break? Can you meet your dearies outside?”

Noya saw Daichi looking at the coaches, where Ukai gave them a thumbs-up. Takeda-sensei was nowhere to be seen.

“Yosh, Karasuno, break! Let’s go greet our late comrades!”

The other teams looked curiously after them but resumed their matches soon enough. Daichi quickly flagged down Nekoma’s captain, though, before jogging after them. Noya jumped outside, pumped
up from the practice matches. What he saw, though, were determined but grim expressions on Kageyama and Hinata’s faces and a surprisingly pensive one on Saeko’s.

“Did something happen?” Suga asked.

“First, have you seen anyone weird here or on the way here?” Kageyama asked.

“We’ve kept watch but haven’t spotted anyone. Well, at least here we have. We pretty much slept on the way here. They have kept out of sight if they are here. Why?” Daichi said.

Hinata bit his lip and clenched his hands. Noya looked at him and sighed, resigned.

“You saw them, didn’t you?”

“A black car followed us until the last block. They kept up with me, me!” Saeko said. She seemed almost indignant. Noya would have laughed but he had been on a car with Saeko driving. It was no small feat to keep up with her.

“They followed us from school. I think,” Hinata said. “I’m not actually sure because I didn’t notice the car at all before Saeko-neesan pointed it out and we had been driving for a while already. Kageyama was sleeping.”

“Sleeping? While she drove? The heck does he take to be able to do that?” Noya heard Tanaka mumble to himself. He wanted to snicker but wasn’t able to garner the humour for it.

“-so I woke him up and he thought the same as me. It was them, I swear it.”

“Black car, tinted windows. No doubt,” Kageyama nodded.

The team was quiet.

“It’s possible that we were tailed too. We drove within speed limits so if they knew our destination, they could have driven further away from us to avoid detection,” Suga said. “A minibus is hard to lose in traffic, and black cars are not rare.”

“Not even tinted windows,” Daichi sighed. “And they are even more common in black cars.”

“I have to get going, but Ryuu, I’m going to need an explanation. And soon,” Saeko said, and Tanaka nodded. “Promise me.”

“I’ll tell you everything when I get home.”

“You better. Take care of yourself, little brother.” With one last glance at Tanaka, she left. They watched. No car followed her.

“They are here then, huh. I was hoping they wouldn’t dare to come since there were so many teams here and less hiding places,” Daichi said.

“Really? Even after they followed us in the preliminaries?” Noya asked. Daichi let out a small bark of a laugh. It wasn’t out of amusement.

“Hope is different from expectations, I guess.”

Noya hummed. He looked around but didn’t see anything out of ordinary. Tokyo was, however, a busy place and very different from Miyagi. What was normal here probably wasn’t back home. He saw Yachi holding Shimizu’s hand, or more like, Shimizu gripping her hand tightly. She looked
fierce and protective. The other members of the team looked resigned and grim but also irritated and very determined.

They would not break, Noya decided. They were the murder of crows, not some weird men in black and murder-y weapons. They were stronger together, and now they were. The whole team was there.

And they were not alone.

“We should get back,” Suga said. “And I think we should tell the other teams. At least Nekoma. They’ve seen them before, so they are in ‘the secret’.” Noya could hear the quotation marks Suga used to emphasize the word ‘secret’. It was a ridiculous demand but probably necessary for their safety.

*(Keep it secret, keep it safe.)*

“I agree. I’ll talk to Kuroo tonight,” Daichi said. “We have a match waiting for us but keep your eyes open. Don’t do anything stupid if you see them. We’re here to get to the nationals, and this will not be the end of us.”

“Yes, captain!” Noya echoed the assent of the team. They had a strong captain.

A strong captain and a strong team.

Even with this drama, Noya was glad he had come to Karasuno. This team was like another family.

***

“So… You’re the ones he haunted.”

“Yeah… Sorry, Kenma, that I didn’t tell you before. It was kind of…” Hinata scratched the back of his head. He had wanted to tell Kenma about the whole thing but… It concerned their team, not Nekoma. It wouldn’t have been fair.

They were walking outside on the streets close to where they were staying. While most of the teams had already gone to bed, Hinata had just been a bit too energetic to sleep just yet. Kenma had claimed that he hadn’t been tired yet either and that he would keep him company.

“No, no. I understand. I wouldn’t have said anything either, Shouyou,” Kenma reassured him. Hinata smiled at him. He was a really good friend.

“You’re a good friend,” he said. He watched as Kenma quickly looked down and busied himself with his phone. There was a slight flush on his cheeks. Hinata turned to look up at the sky. He couldn’t see the stars. He had heard that one couldn’t see them in Tokyo, or any big city, but he was so used to seeing them.

“It’s because of all the lights,” Kenma said. Hinata blinked. Oh, was he so obvious? “The lights are all so bright and close to us that we just can’t see the natural lights, just the artificial ones.

“Or the moon,” he continued and pointed to the big roundish sphere on the sky.

“It looks smaller than volleyball from here.”

Kenma snorted and Hinata giggled. It was a bit silly but it really did.

“I think the moon looks a bit bigger from Miyagi. Or it might be that I can compare the stars to it.”
“It could be,” Kenma hummed and looked down again. He frowned. They walked in silence for a moment.

“Shouyou…”

“Hmm?”

“Are you safe?”

Hinata was quiet.

“We are not sure. Daichi-san said that the man claimed that we have something of theirs. They never specified what that something was.”

“And they had guns.”

Hinata nodded. “Yeah.”

“…It sounds dangerous.”

“Yeah.”

“…Be careful.”

“I have everyone in our team beside me. Don’t worry!” Hinata smiled. “But I will. I promise.”

“Good.” Kenma busied himself again with his phone. Hinata was just about to turn back towards their lodgings but stopped. His eyes widened. He quickly grabbed Kenma and pulled him behind a nearby rubbish bin. It was big enough to hide them both but only just. The corner it was located beside helped.

“W-wh-“

“Shh!” Hinata shushed him. He carefully peeked from behind the bin.

It was the man. Or one of the men. He could see the black suit and hat. His grip on Kenma tightened.

“What is it?” Kenma whispered. Hinata turned to him.

“It’s one of them. I think.”

Kenma’s eyes widened. He carefully peeked too.

“…He looks like the man from our match.”

His eyes suddenly narrowed.

“He’s not alone.”

“Is there another man with him?”

“I can’t really see… but there’s someone else there.” Hinata looked at the black-clad man. If there was someone else there, he couldn’t see from behind him.

“Can you see anything? Anything to distinguish him? Another man in black? Yes? No?”

Kenma was quiet. His eyes narrowed even more as he tried to see in the dark.
“I- I think…” he licked his lips. “I think the other person… is wearing a tracksuit.”

Hinata’s blood froze.

“Are you sure?” Kenma slowly nodded.

“I think… they are arguing about something.” Suddenly he ducked for cover. A sound like something broke filled the air.

Then it was quiet for a long while. Hinata almost thought the two had left but then one of them spoke. He almost started but Kenma’s grip on him kept him still. He looked down at their hands. They were holding each other so tightly their knuckles almost glowed in the dark.

That would have been bad, he thought absently.

“*Just keep the target safe. No hair is to be harmed on their head,*” a cross voice bit out at last. “*We’ll be watching, just in case. Call if you need help.*”

“The man is leaving…” Kenma whispered. He had looked out again. “And so is the other person.” Hinata peeked again. There was no one on the street anymore. He could only see the ordinary houses he could imagine families with children live in. The stores were all closed but the store behind them, not close enough to see anything happening. And it was dark. The light on the streets were broken. It was probably the best place for a clandestine meeting. Unassuming and welcoming but enough to be hidden from the view… No one would think twice if two people met and spoke to each other for a moment.

“Shouyou…” Hinata turned towards Kenma. He had a really anxious expression on his face.

“Hey, you’re safe, I’m safe. It’s alright,” he said. Kenma just shook his head.

“No, it’s not that. I think…” he took a breath and blurted out.

“I think, from the back of the other person’s tracksuit, I could read Karasuno.”

***

Hinata rushed back to where his team was. He opened the door and, despite the muffled groans and protests, flicked the light on.

No one was missing.

He shut the lights again and fell on his futon. His thoughts were flying around even worse than before. He bitterly hoped he hadn’t gone out that night.

*What was he supposed to do now?*

Chapter End Notes

So, the target was a person. Surprise? But who was the man talking to? And more importantly...

Who is the target?
(By the way, I'm going away this weekend, so the rest of the Tokyo trip will have to wait until next week. See you then!)
Kageyama frowned. Hinata hadn’t been acting like himself today. He wasn’t his usual ball of eternal fluff and sunshine – Nishinoya’s words, not his, definitely not his no matter what Tsukishima wanted to imply – and he had been staring the team with extreme suspicion. He looked like a very disgruntled cat whose trust had been betrayed and fish taken away, Kageyama thought.

He had been very friendly with Nekoma’s setter, Ko-, Ke-… Kozume? Kozume, that’s it, since the very first day they met and Kageyama had heard Nekoma’s captain marvel how open Kozume had been in Hinata’s company. As if he ever gave anyone a choice. He glared as Kozume and Hinata whispered to each other and glanced meaningfully at Karasuno players.

He shouldn’t be making friends or telling team secrets to other teams, the dumbass.

“Hey, dumbass, are you going to play volleyball today or will I find someone else to toss?” he yelled. Hinata started and came quickly over after a quick word to Kozume.

This was starting to piss him off. Kageyama glared as Hinata, not that discreetly, stared at his teammates. It had been going on the whole day and it was beginning to throw the team off. Even Tsukishima was affected and that meant something. Apparently, it also meant something that he had noticed that something was off about Hinata.

He wasn’t oblivious, thank you very much. He just… didn’t have time to spare for any unnecessary drama. Unfortunately, this wasn’t such thing. This was Hinata being stupid about something. Again.

He cuff ed him and yelled for him to focus. Someone behind them snickered and whispered something about ‘tough love’.

Kageyama sent a nasty look behind him. A few players actually looked a bit guilty but he couldn’t find the culprit. He decided to insult Hinata a bit more. Maybe he would concentrate now that he was fired up enough to yell back.

…No such luck. The match against Nekoma was a bust. It had even gotten bad enough for Ukai to switch Hinata out in the middle of the game. They had lost miserably, even though they had been going point for point for once in the beginning, even though Nekoma had that new center of theirs, that half-Russian or something with the weirdly long limbs and they had to do their best to be able to counter him and Nekoma, which was the more experienced team compared to Karasuno. Even he could admit it. Then Hinata had actually tried to hit a toss Kageyama had set for Asahi with a wild look on his face. He had apologized but it had set a tension not unlike the one they had in the practice match against Hinoyama a couple of weeks back. And then Hinata started to miss Kageyama’s tosses because he had been too busy staring at Asahi’s face with a constipated expression, making Asahi sweat nervously under the intensity and fumble with his own spikes but also glare back and play aggressively against Hinata on the court.
Kageyama was seriously starting to think he should start making new tosses. He had been playing around with making something for each teammate but perhaps this was the time to actually start if Hinata started to malfunction this much.

He hadn’t even quit his weird staring when he had been benched. That idiot dumbass. Kageyama was ready to strangle him. He caught Kozume’s eyes but his opponent turned his head away to avoid him. His annoyance spiked.

That’s it. He was going to strangle them both after this. Maybe he could add that half-something to his hit list since he was so annoying. He could at least cut a foot or something off his limbs. He noticed that Tanaka was badly concealing his temper too. Nishinoya was biting his teeth together and even Sugawara looked strained to keep smiling while standing next to Hinata.

Keep your cool. Keep your cool…

Kageyama took a deep breath. It was his turn to serve and he would gain at least one point for them before the second set was over. If he couldn’t rely on his team, then he…

He froze.

No, he thought wildly. No, he was no that person anymore. He would be gaining a point for the team and not himself. He was no King. He couldn’t believe he was getting this rattled up again. Hinata, dumbass…

Keep your cool.

He took another breath and threw the ball up in the air.

One point for the team, coming up.

***

Yamaguchi liked his team. They were good people and he had fun with them. While there had been rough times, lately things had gotten better. Together, they were strong. Separately, they were weak. That was something he had picked up from Tsukki. Well, Tsukki had never actually said that but alone, Yamaguchi had been weak and a target for bullies. With Tsukki, he had been able to share his strength. He thought he had also been able to help him too. Yamaguchi was a lot more sociable than Tsukki, so he had been able to smooth things over plenty of times when otherwise there might have been a fight or more.

But now… He watched worriedly as the team seemingly fell apart. Hinata was lost to whatever was going in his head, and that had, in the end, thrown the team off-course. It was scary. They were so tense that the atmosphere could be cut with a knife. What had Hinata been thinking when he had tried to catch Asahi’s set? It- it just wasn’t like him. His expression had been really intense, had been all day, but that had been almost hungry and… desperate.

What could he have to be so desperate about?

When Hinata was called off the court, Yamaguchi was the one to replace him. The feeling of stepping inside the court was not what he wanted to feel. He felt almost as unwelcome as he had felt in the game against Aobajousai. That time had been his own fault but this tension was all on the team. It was as if Hinata had awakened something inside them.

Yamaguchi watched as Asahi hit the balls more recklessly than he had before, and with more force. Nishinoya reached further than before. Tanaka jumped higher than ever. Daichi was focused like this
was the last game of the nationals. Kageyama was throwing weird sets that even Yamaguchi could hit. He felt… He wanted. Only Tsukki, when he was on the court, had an air of indifference so like him that surprisingly both calmed and irritated Yamaguchi.

Did nothing move him? Nothing at all? Tsukki was really sensitive to changes around him, had always been. He was observant even when he acted like he wasn’t.

Did he care at all about the team?

The game ended in their loss. They did their mandatory diving exercise after which Ukai had called for a team meeting.

They went outside, all of them. As they walked past the other teams Yamaguchi could feel the stares of the other teams in the back of his neck. It was somehow clear that they were different from them. They didn’t belong there in the same way as the others did. He clenched his shirt. He wanted to belong there. So badly.

When they had all settled far enough from the doors that they couldn’t be eavesdropped, and Takeda-sensei had closed the doors just in case, Ukai cleared his throat. He had an uneasy expression on his face like he didn’t know how to say whatever he wanted to say or that he didn’t like what he had to say. It could be both.

It was probably both.

Suddenly, Hinata bowed. “I’m sorry! I got too into the game and just tried to get the ball!” he practically yelled. Yamaguchi blinked. Well… That was one way to bring it up.

Asahi’s disposition faltered and he nodded in response. He flushed when he realised that Hinata wouldn’t see it and hastily gave his forgiveness. It still didn’t unwind the muscles in his shoulders. Neither did the tension lessen but a bit.

“While that was good for you to acknowledge,” Ukai said. “What I really want to know is why you have been so weird this whole morning.”

Yamaguchi could feel the displeased air floating around Hinata.

“…I don’t want to say,” he mumbled. He was whacked on his head by an angry Kageyama.

“Well, no one cares what you want or don’t want!” he yelled. “You destroyed us on the court worse than our opponents have ever done. You missed my toss!”

“Do you think I don’t know that?!” Hinata yelled back. He grabbed Kageyama’s shirt. His face was red, but whether it was from anger or something else, Yamaguchi couldn’t tell.

“Then why were you acting like a dumbass, dumbass?!”

“I said I didn’t want to say!”

“And I said that no one cares about what you want!”

Hinata’s eyes sharpened.

“Was it you?!”

“Was who what?!”
“The one with the black-clad man yesterday!”

Kageyama’s mouth shut with a clack. Yamaguchi could only blink. What did he just…?

“What are you implying, Hinata?” Suga asked softly. Hinata’s eyes were blazing but his lip was wobbling. His anger had left him as quickly as it had sprung up.

“I— I…” he took in a deep but shaking breath. “Yesterday, I was walking with Kenma in the evening after all of you had gone to bed and…”

“You saw the men in black, didn’t you,” Tsukishima said flatly. Although worded like a question, it wasn’t one.

Hinata nodded.

“I saw one of them and took cover with Kenma. He saw him talking to someone, something about the target and keeping an eye on them and he…” he clenched his fists. Yamaguchi could see him steeling himself. But for what? What could be so bad that…?

“The person the man was talking to had a tracksuit on. On the back, he could see the team’s name.

“It was Karasuno.”

Yamaguchi felt the bottom of his stomach fall off. He grabbed Tsukishima’s shirt, trying to absorb any strength he could to stop himself from shaking.

“Is Kozume sure that it was really Karasuno he read?” Kageyama asked. Hinata turned to him and glared.

“Are you calling Kenma a liar?!”

“Hinata-kun, it’s, um, it’s a valid question,” Yachi said quietly. Hinata deflated as he turned a hurt look on her. She withered under his gaze. “I mean, um, it was dark. Probably. At least it was when it I fell asleep. And I was so tired I can’t remember my head hitting the pillow so it must have been before you returned from your walk and…”

“What Hitoka-chan wants to say, is that he might have been mistaken, right?” Shimizu interrupted and Yachi quickly nodded in response.

Hinata shook his head stubbornly. “I believe Kenma if he said he saw Karasuno on the back.”

“He does have keen eyesight,” Ukai mused. “But anyone could’ve taken a spare uniform from somewhere or gone to bathroom while others slept. I doubt anyone can confirm they were hundred percent present anywhere either.” He sighed and dragged his hand over his face.

“Well, at least this explains why you’ve been on the edge the whole darn day,” he said when he looked up again. “Does anyone else have something to add?”

“…I guess I have,” Takeda-sensei said sheepishly. Ukai gave a despairing look at him. “Yesterday evening, I left to check the minibus I loaned for the trip and found a tracking device underneath it.”

“So we were being tailed too, not just Kageyama and Hinata,” Ennoshita said.

“I would assume so. I didn’t think to check for anything like this when we left, so…”

“This is like from a frigging spy film,” Tanaka spat out.
“What did you do with it?”

“I dropped it when I realized what it was and it shattered.”

Nishinoya snorted. He seemed amused to Yamaguchi despite the serious implications.

“In this case, I want to confess something too,” Tsukishima raised his hand. Yamaguchi turned to look at his best friend. Not him too!

“More? What do you have to add to this madness?” Ukai sounded tired.

“I’m pretty sure I and Yamaguchi were tailed yesterday evening.”

Yamaguchi’s heart almost stopped for the second time today. They had been what? Why didn’t he see anything?!

“Tsukki…” he said. “How sure is ‘pretty sure’?” Tsukishima glanced at him before turning back to Ukai.

“I cannot confirm who the culprit was but someone was definitely following us around. Every time I turned to look back I saw nothing but I could spot someone from the corner of my eye.”

He decidedly didn’t look at Yamaguchi, or anyone else, again which made him frown. It was like…

It was like when he had done something nice and didn’t want to acknowledge it.

Had he not mentioned it because he knew it would scare him?

“So, to recap, Hinata thinks one of us is an ally to the men in black, we were all followed by them to Tokyo according to Takeda-sensei and Tsukishima thought he and Yamaguchi were followed by someone. Anyone else?”

No one said anything.

“I call bullshit,” Ukai said bluntly. “I will readily accept that we were followed to Tokyo and someone could even be following our conversation at this moment. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit. Those people had guns on them, so why not something else less dangerous too. I will also buy that one of us could be informing the strange men of our schedules. There has been just one too many coincidences, like the surprise practice match against Ouginishi. I’m pretty sure I haven’t been the only one thinking about this.”

Some, like Suga and Ennoshita were nodding in response while some of the others, like Tanaka and Hinata, were looking disturbed. Yamaguchi himself felt like he had been punched once too many times on the stomach. He felt sick.

But he also felt angry. Actually, he was probably angrier than anything else. Yes, he was scared. Nowadays, it was probably his default state. But he was starting to be fed up with everything. He wanted a change to this clusterfuck of a situation.

“So I say that who the fuck should care and let’s move the fuck on. We can continue to argue and point fingers at possible guilty parties but we cannot know for sure. It will mess with our team more than ignoring them would. And yes, this might mean letting them walk all over us and letting this so-called ‘target’ be watched. The men said we should keep the ‘target’ safe and secret.

“Of course they would watch us, have watched us, so why not through an inside man too? Does that
change anything about this team to you?"

Yamaguchi wanted to say no but he wasn’t so sure. If someone was responsible for the men coming after them…

No, he decided. He couldn’t see anyone from this team deliberately putting them in danger. Something dangerous could possibly happen but what else could they do? Ukai was right on that front. The team was on shaky ground at the moment. They had been going back and forth one too many times now. He had been going back and forth too many times. He wouldn’t be able to handle much more of that.

“I think we should do as Ukai-san said,” Yamaguchi said out loud, surprising both himself and the rest of his team. He almost didn’t continue but seeing as he had all of their attention, he pushed on. He wouldn’t be cowed again, not on court or outside it. “We are a team. If one of us is one of the men, then one of us is. We have no evidence of that except for one eye witness. Sorry, Hinata,” he added. Hinata didn’t seem to like him undermining Kozume’s words but he didn’t interrupt him.

“It’s a delicate situation… but we should be pushing forward no matter what. I’m disappointed in myself. I failed everyone in our match against Seijou and Aobajousai. No, I really did,” he raised a hand to stop any contradictions to his words. He hears rather than saw Daichi’s mouth click shut. “I’m sure everyone feels the same way. We are aiming for the nationals. We have no time for trying to reach stability…

“We should be aiming for evolution.”

He suddenly realized how passionate his words had been and flushed bright red. He started to stammer an explanation or denial or something to fill the sudden silence and stares but stopped when Daichi barked a laugh.

“He still didn’t meet Yamaguchi’s eyes.

“We are hungry,” Daichi said, his smile still on his face. “We are tired of being down. We are going up and nothing will stop us. We’ll stop thinking about ‘what ifs’. We are the crows that have found their wings. Let’s not let them clip them again!”

The team cheered.

“Said like a true leader,” Tsukishima said. He still didn’t meet Yamaguchi’s eyes.

“We are hungry,” Daichi said, his smile still on his face. “We are tired of being down. We are going up and nothing will stop us. We’ll stop thinking about ‘what ifs’. We are the crows that have found their wings. Let’s not let them clip them again!”

The team cheered.

“This is a murder I can get behind of,” Suga said, amused. His comment started a laugh out of Asahi and Yachi who looked surprised at having done so. They wore sheepish expressions while Shimizu smiled kindly at them. Nishinoya snickered.

“We are going to evolve. We have to evolve. This is something that we have seen here in Tokyo. If we want to be able to beat Seijou and Shiratorizawa, we have to be on the same level as the teams here. Which we are not,” Daichi continued and some of the previous levity left his voice. Yamaguchi was amazed at how intensely he and the others were listening to him.

Was this a turning point that they were waiting for?

“Everyone has their place on the team. Some of us develop their skills faster than others,” his eyes flickered on Kageyama and Hinata. “While some of us go slower but steady.” Daichi looked straight at Yamaguchi who felt the heat rising again to his cheeks.
“But all of us are necessary. Each one of us. Our throne will be built only from our effort. Past is past, no matter whose.”

Yamaguchi saw Kageyama hide his face but also saw Ennoshita, Narita and Kinoshita too look slightly ashamed. Those words were for the whole team, he realized, not just for the possible leaker.

“Are you with me?!”

“Yes, captain!”

Daichi grinned widely and Yamaguchi felt himself answering. He saw some of the others do the same, as helpless as he was to stop it.

“Karasuno…”

“…Fight!”

It wouldn’t be easy, Yamaguchi thought as he jogged back towards the gym. They would have trouble letting go of the doubts and distrust. Pretty words wouldn’t fix what was cracked. Time would tell if they could truly do it but, for some reason, he felt like it was possible.

They needed to evolve in more than one way, and glue their shards together differently than they were before.

Trust. Skill. Will.

Thirst for victory.

That was something that their rivals rarely seemed to understand. How did Karasuno actually manage as well as they did when they were the fallen champions just a year before? Yamaguchi didn’t really know the answer either but he knew this:

They would do it, through tears and sweat, and failure, and eventual success.

He looked at Tsukki, who jogged beside him.

He would stand at the same court as he did, and he would succeed. Soon.

Yamaguchi smiled and entered the gym.

***

It was decided that Hinata stayed on the bench for the rest of the day. He seemed mad about that but surprisingly didn’t complain. In fact, he was very quiet and intense. It wasn’t the same intensity as before. No, he seemed to have been able to rest easy with his demons from last night. This intensity was hungrier, there's no better word to describe it, than anything else. Asahi felt bad for being glad about Hinata being benched but…

That set had been his.

He knew he had to do something before Hinata – the really hardworking, talented Hinata – would surpass him and leave him jobless. It was scary how fast he was improving. Asahi had never been the most assertive or skilful player, he admitted that, but he would not give up without a fight. He would be the ace to inspire others to come, someone for Hinata to look up to. He could sense the
same stubbornness from his teammates. He knew that Nishinoya was on his side. He didn’t really
know how or why he had won his admiration, it was embarrassing, but he had. Noya was a really
talented libero whose reach would only continue to grow despite his size. Tanaka would train his
spikes, Daichi his defence… and Suga would not be left behind either, same with the rest of the
second years. They all wanted to stand on the court.

They would just have to find the right way for them to grow stronger.

It actually scared him a bit to see how the first years would improve. Hinata was scary in his
determination but Kageyama was even more frightening. He was no longer the King of the Court,
but he was something alright. He had started to listen to the team and he had learnt from his mistakes.
He would beat Oikawa, there was no doubt about that in Asahi’s mind. He would evolve and make
Shiratorizawa regret ever denying him access. Yamaguchi was also going to do his everything to
improve. He had tasted that failure that they all had. It would only continue to rot in their mind until
they accepted it and moved forward. Yamaguchi had done that. He would be a reckoning someday,
Asahi thought.

Who he was the most worried about, though, was Tsukishima. He couldn’t sense a passion or joy for
volleyball in him. He even seemed to actively dislike being on the court at times. He didn’t seem to
want to improve like the other first years. Asahi could see that he hadn’t yet reached the end of his
talent like he could see that he was still growing outwardly too.

He really hoped that Tsukishima would find that something in volleyball. He hoped that something
would hit him in the face like Hinata’s attempt at stealing his set had done to him.

They played the matches against the teams but only managed to win one or two. They lost the most
out of them all but they were all thirsting for more. Asahi saw the disbelieving expressions of some
of the players when Karasuno did their penalties with more fire than they had probably seen anyone
else do.

He shared a smirk with Daichi. They would surprise, and surpass, them all.

Where they were weak, they had room to grow.

They ended the Tokyo trip with a match lost but it was alright in the end. They were packing their
stuff away to Takeda-sensei’s minibus, when Hinata finally dropped the bomb he had been probably
holding the whole afternoon.

“Kageyama…”

He turned to look at Hinata just like Asahi and the rest of the team did. There was something in his
voice that made them all look. Hinata had a very determined, even maybe wistful, expression on his
face.

“I’m going to stop closing my eyes.”

Asahi blinked. Did Hinata just say he was…?

Kageyama stared down Hinata but he didn’t back down. “So you’re going to break down the only
thing that worked for you.”

Asahi saw Hinata flinch at Kageyama’s words but he only pursed his lips, stared at him, before
nodding in response.

“I am. And I’m going to improve and evolve so that I won’t be a burden anymore. I want to fight on
my own on the air, down to the very last second. I want to fight with you, instead of making you and everyone else do the hard work.”

Kageyama was quiet for a moment. He seemed like he was actually considering Hinata’s words.

“…In the match with Seijou, I started to understand that the setter is the one who draws out the spikers’ power. A setter cannot play on his own. That quick is your greatest weapon. Will you break something that isn’t broken?” he asked.

Hinata didn’t look down. “I will. Then, after that, I will forge them together into something they will all cower before.”

Asahi understood Hinata’s drive. Kageyama was talented, a true prodigy, but he had tried to shoulder more of the team than he should have, and they had let him. He exchanged glances with Suga. There was a grim look in his eyes. That was one aspect the team had failed and would rectify, and soon.

“A slight gap will become a fatal one.”

“Then let’s destroy that gap between us, and become lethal ourselves.”

“I’ll only toss to people who are essential to achieving victory.”

“Then I’ll become the only thing you’ll see on the court.”

Asahi was sure that neither of them had even blinked during their exchange. He was sure that he was not the only one who had forgotten to breathe. The combined obstinacy of theirs was off the charts.

“Then we have an accord,” Kageyama said and walked inside the bus. Hinata went in after him but sat on the other side of the bus from him. The rest of the team and Asahi finished packing up and started their journey home. He was almost surprised that they hadn’t erupted worse than a volcano. But… Hinata and Kageyama, they were both more actions than words. This was probably the best outcome they could have had.

The travel back home was almost… peaceful. It was certainly quiet. Hinata and Kageyama didn’t speak to each other nor look at the other’s direction the whole trip home. Asahi didn’t know if that was good or bad but it was just how they rolled, he supposed. They would hopefully be able work it through later. Or did they have anything to work things through about?

Those two were really confusing sometimes.

Sitting in the back of the minibus, Asahi looked out the back window. They had looked through the car for any tracking devices but couldn’t find any. He could see why, now.

There were two black vehicles tailing them.

He turned to look back forward.

They might try to not be affected by the black-clad men but Asahi would still walk Kiyoko home.

Just in case.

Chapter End Notes
A lot of action didn't really happen in this chapter but plenty of important development did. What KageHina fight?! There's a reason it didn't happen, although I had actually planned it. I blame Yamaguchi. It's like... I know what will ultimately happen, probably, but the characters just do what they want at times. As a writer, this is very interesting.

It was also probably unfair of me to ask if you knew who was what and things last chapter but I couldn't help myself. Thank you for your comments and ideas on what's going on, although I won't be able to confirm or deny anything, yet. In addition, I want to thank all of you who have read, given kudos, commented and bookmarked this fic. It means the world to me that I'm able to entertain you with my writing.
Pretty words mean nothing if you cannot back them up.

That’s something Tanaka had learnt years ago. It wasn’t that he had had a rough childhood. Just because others thought he looked like a delinquent didn’t mean he was one. Sure, he was loud and boisterous, probably annoying to most people, but so were so many others. He shaved his head because he didn’t like the idea of someone grabbing his hair. During tussles with Saeko when they were kids it was the only way for her to gain the upper hand. Well, that, and the fact that she had her growth spurt before him. But after he had caught up, she had already mostly grown out of play fighting with her younger brother.

Then he had been alone a few years at the elementary school. He was wild and untamed but still respectful to his betters – a combination that mystified some of his peers. He got into plenty of fights and always, always, they took hold of his hair and made him eat dirt.

Tanaka didn’t want to feel the dust and sand in his mouth. He shaved his head, and kicked butt. Saeko mourned that she no longer could pet his head the same way as before. He could admit that sometimes he missed the feeling of her nails raking his hair but this was still better. No one could push him down with his hair anymore.

Shaving his head symbolized that he would accept bullshit from no one.

He wasn’t close to his family, not really. His father worked in Tokyo, so he only came back during the weekends if then. He was one of those businessmen that stayed in those capsule hotels during the week. That’s the way things had been for years. Some days Tanaka probably wouldn’t have even remembered what his father looked like if they didn’t have pictures of him around the house. His mother had died when Tanaka had been young. Her early passing was part of the reason why his father was always away – he had to bring bread to the table somehow and support the remaining family. Their parents had been only children whose parents had passed away just before Tanaka had been born so there had been no one to turn to.

Something about an accident on a family holiday – a tragedy that didn’t really touch Tanaka.

He hadn’t known them, and even Saeko’s memories were hazy. With their father mostly away, it was up to the siblings to watch after each other with neighbours helping out looking after them.

(Next year I’ll grab that promotion and ask for a relocation closer to home.)

(We’ll have a family holiday, wouldn’t that be nice?)

(I’ll come to watch your game.)

(I’m proud of you, son.)
Pretty words mean nothing if you cannot back them up. His father was like a broken record. He would do this and that but nothing ever changed. He had actually gotten that promotion and had relocated… further away from home in search of another promotion.

He had never come to see a match of Tanaka’s.

He didn’t blame his father, not really. It had been probably hard for him after Tanaka’s mother died and now he didn’t really know how to handle the children now that they had grown up on their own. They were strangers, kind of, that met with each other a few times a month.

It was all Saeko, though, that he hadn’t acted out more. She was the one who always came to his games, always cooked for him when she had learnt from a neighbour and, most importantly, she was always there. He was there for her too when she almost fell into wrong crowds. She had a habit of making friends with so-called ‘bad guys’ but that was just her, and Tanaka’s, more unrefined personality. Still, she didn’t have the time, or will, to actually commit to their causes because she had Tanaka. She never backed down from a challenge but she wasn’t stupid about it. She was savvy when others weren’t. She was a survivor.

Her words weren’t pretty. They were always true.

Daichi’s words were pretty and encouraging without actually meaning anything. The team was important, and it was actually Tanaka’s life. Volleyball had been where he spent all his daily suppressed energy. Of course they were hungry for more success, especially now that they had a clear chance. They had been before and would always be. He had nothing against Daichi, though. He was the quintessential captain, always there to push them forward. He could back them up because he was a player too. He understood them and that was enough for Tanaka. It was more than he could really ask from a guy only a year his senior. He wasn’t their parent – he was their equal and leader, a defender.

Who he had a problem with was Ukai.

He admired him. Ukai was a good coach. He knew his stuff. Yet, he wasn’t truly a member of the team the same way as the high school students were. He didn’t live the same life. He didn’t see them in hallways, didn’t fight on court with them. Tanaka valued his advice and training and insight. But he was still an adult, a decade older than them.

He couldn’t truly understand them.

He couldn’t truly understand Tanaka.

He was going to fight with all he had both their opponents on court and outside it. Sometimes they would be his teammates, sometimes they would be strangers on the street. Maybe they would be the black-clad men. He was taught to never back down because backing down meant not moving forward.

He would let others paint the sky blue if it made them happy to see it that way.

Tanaka would wait for his move. He would aim for evolution too, like everyone else, but he was not going to hide his head in the ground at the same time.

Something was rotting and he would see what that was.

***

Kageyama walked around aimlessly. He couldn’t practice in the school gym because it was off-limits
for now. There was some sort of maintenance going on for today and the club activities had been cancelled because of that. His hands itched to touch a volleyball. He wanted to jump and serve, to run after a ball, to set a perfect set for a spiker to slam down…

But what was a perfect set?

Was it a well-calculated throw that people could hit with their eyes shut?

Was it one that was personally tailored for the player?

Was it a set that trusted that the person could hit it no matter what?

Perhaps it was something that continued to elude him.

Over the course of the past few months he had begun to truly know his teammates. He knew their quirks on court and off court. Naturally, he knew there would be tons of things to discover – how could he not, when he hadn’t truly known his teammates of three years in Kitagawa Daiichi? – but somehow he felt like he knew more than enough to be able to give them the best he could in a game.

He just had to find out what that best was for each of them. Maybe a perfect set was everything at once, not just one side of a toss. He would have to discuss the preferences of each member. He knew the basics from what he had observed them but he hadn’t truly asked them what they truly wanted. Perhaps the greatest toss would be the one which was easy for a spiker to hit.

Well, he knew what his teammates wanted as he did himself. He wanted to be left alone to play volleyball in peace. The men in black could go to hell all he cared. He just wanted to be himself and that’s it. They had no place in the volleyball court in his opinion.

Also, what was with those secretive messages? ‘Keep it secret, keep it safe’? ‘There are worse monsters around than us’? Not reassuring at all. The team didn’t need this on top of everything. Their rival teams didn’t need that extra baggage that now came with Karasuno. Kageyama wasn’t particularly scared but he was annoyed. They were drawing extra attention to Karasuno and not the good kind, and now the team was possibly making things unsafe for people just by existing.

They were adjusting to the situation but he didn’t want to be banned from the spring tournament if something were to happen. And he had a bad feeling that something would happen.

He was so into his thoughts that he almost walked over someone. Or rather, someone ran into him and he almost stepped over the person. Kageyama blinked and looked down. It was a child. He had a cropped head and clothing that Kageyama immediately thought was fit for playing volleyball even though the clothes were very generic: a t-shirt, shorts, nothing special. They looked easy to move though and that was the most important. One needed to be able to twist around in order to receive a ball or jump or do whatever they could for a ball to not hit the ground.

He just needed pads for his knees and elbows and he would be all set.

“Takeru! I told you not to run!” a shout came from the direction Kageyama was walking towards. It was incredibly familiar and he wasn’t sure if he really wanted to meet the person the voice belonged to. The boy, Takeru, turned his head and yelled back: “But you were so slow! And I didn’t need to hear all the moms coo over you.”

“It was just polite to listen to… Geh.”

Kageyama sighed inwardly and braced himself. He looked up at the person he had admired for years but that had actually the worst personality he had ever seen… and he knew Tsukishima.
“Oikawa-san,” he bowed his head politely. He could see Oikawa’s eye twitch and he wished he had taken a turn somewhere, anywhere, or that the school gym had been closed any other day.

“Tobio-chan,” he heard the answer that had a poisonous edge on it. Oikawa was the reason he preferred people to call him by his last name. Before that he hadn’t really cared what name people used for him but there was just something by how Oikawa used his given name that made him want to deny it belonging to him at all.

“You two know each other?” Takeru asked. He looked from Kageyama to Oikawa. He probably felt the tension between them too. Oikawa nodded and a nasty grin found its way on his lips.

Kageyama felt like sighing again.

“Tobio-chan was my underclassman in junior high school. He plays setter too but is far from my level,” Oikawa sneered. Takeru pondered this for a second.

“Oh, so he’s the one you were afraid that would surpass you behind your back.”

Kageyama blinked. What…?

“Where did you hear those lies from?!” shrieked Oikawa. Takeru shrugged.

“Iwaizumi-san.”

“Well, Iwa-chan doesn’t really know his stuff so don’t pay any attention to what he says, hmm?”

Takeru shrugged again but promised nothing. Kageyama felt incredibly awkward.

“I think I should-, uh, it was nice to meet you but I should be going now,” he said and bowed before moving past the two to continue on his way. Anything to get away from Oikawa right now was alright in his books.

“Why in such a hurry, Tobio-chan?”

No such luck. Usually Oikawa couldn’t wait for Kageyama to disappear from his sight. Why was today different?

“I have places to be,” he said and winced. Good going, this was the most convincing excuse ever. He could feel Oikawa’s brows rise as he stared into Kageyama’s back.

“I’m sure. Which is why you’re here and not at practice.”

“You’re not there either!”

“We always take Mondays off.”

“Isn’t that such a waste?!” Kageyama blurted out and turned around in shock. Oikawa smirked.

“‘Resting’ and ‘skipping’ are completely different,” he said, “Which is a concept you probably do not understand. So, dear Tobio-chan, what are you doing closer to Seijou than Karasuno?”

Kageyama turned to look at the closest street sign. Shoot, he really was far from home… How had he walked here without even realizing?

“That’s… actually none of your business,” he said sulkily. There was just something about Oikawa that pushed his buttons. Perhaps the constant rejections he had suffered in junior high school and the
resent defeat were taking their tolls finally. “I’ll just be on my way. I won’t bother you today, so have a nice day.”

Before Oikawa could say anything to that he left. It was better this way, anyway. The less contact he had with other teams and their members, even Seijou and Oikawa, the better… Or, perhaps, especially Seijou and Oikawa. The extended exposure might attract attention to anyone Karasuno had contact to. He wasn’t convinced that no one followed them outside the court. The situation was so bizarre that Kageyama had no idea what to do with it, and Oikawa could be like a dog with a bone.

He would know for he could be the same.

As he walked away, he could still hear Takeru – what was his relation to Oikawa anyway? – speak behind his back.

“That was some weird guy.”

“Mmm…”

“You have that weird expression again that Iwaizumi-san says means you’re about to do something stupid.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Takeru. I’m just… intrigued that my stupid and admiring Tobio-chan is not himself today. Usually he’s all ‘teach me how to jump serve!’ to me. I’m so disappointed I couldn’t deny his wishes again today,” Oikawa chirped meanly. Kageyama imagined him having a full blown smile on his face, of the more of a fake kind. He hadn’t always known Oikawa to be such a pretentious person but nowadays he could spot the difference between the smile he had been given as a first year in Kitagawa Daiichi and now compared to the one that Oikawa gave to Iwaizumi-san and his Seijou teammates.

The change in them was subtle but staggering, and he wondered how it had taken him until high school to see the difference. Maybe he just had always been blind to Oikawa.

It wasn’t a comforting thought for what else could he have been blind to?

“No wonder he wanted nothing to do with you.”

Kageyama could feel Oikawa’s piercing stare at the back of his head. He turned around the corner and heard one last low remark. The tone was wondering but also dripping with maliciousness. It was the exact same tone Oikawa had used when he was locating every weakness in his opponents before destroying them on court.

“I think… I will find out what’s going on.”

Kageyama’s eyes widened.

No, please no.

He went back to yell at Oikawa to leave Karasuno alone, perhaps unwisely, but he couldn’t see a hair of either of them anymore. He turned his head around but, other than knowing that he was close to Seijou, he had no idea how to navigate around here.

Shit.

(Keep it secret. Keep it safe.)
Hitoka was happy. She had been promoted from a temporary manager to a fulltime one after they had returned from Tokyo. Kiyoko had made her promise to think of it overnight but there had been only one answer she could have given: a resounding yes. She was now able to watch over the team like Kiyoko, and although she wouldn’t be able to sit with her and the adults during the official games, she didn’t mind it too much. She could cheer twice as hard as any of their opponent.

The two weeks before the summer holiday went surprisingly fast. The team was practicing every morning and evening after the gym’s maintenance was over. The teachers weren’t that hard on them either since the exams were behind them and the holiday was coming soon so they all had even more time to focus on the training. She got busy by running around throwing balls for them and fetching them water, helping any way she could.

Hitoka hadn’t seen much of Hinata out of team practice but Ukai had assured her that he was alright and actually training with his grandfather. She couldn’t help but wonder what kind of person Ukai’s grandfather was. She had heard terrifying tales from the second years, Narita and Kinoshita, but no one was willing to discuss him further. From what Ennoshita had said, it was either trauma or respect that prevented them from saying much.

She didn’t really understand but if Hinata was in safe hands and happy, she was alright with it.

She was worried, however, about the fact that she hadn’t seen Hinata or Kageyama really interact at all during the past weeks. After the Tokyo trip they had just… vanished from each other’s radars. It was weird because they had been inseparable in volleyball practice as well as out of them, it seemed to her. Every time she had been looking for them, she pretty much could find one with the other. It didn’t seem to matter to anyone really, funnily enough, not least with Hinata and Kageyama. Hinata had assured her that they were just fine but… they weren’t speaking? How did that translate as fine? Was it a guy thing? Maybe. Or maybe it was just a Hinata and Kageyama thing.

Kageyama was practicing those weird tosses that seemed to die in the middle of a toss. She had been mostly focusing on helping him with those ever since everyone else seemed to disappear after team practice to try to find new tricks to insert into their plays too. Nishinoya was practicing tosses of all things. Azumane was doing jump serves, and he looked scarier than ever. His size seemed to double when he was, well, almost flying. There was also a group of the upperclassmen looking into something they called a ‘synchronized attack’ Hitoka had seen some people do in Tokyo. Yamaguchi was practicing hard too although for some reason he seemed really embarrassed to speak about his efforts with her. He always got a bit red in the face when she approached. It made his freckles more noticeable. She wasn’t sure what Tsukishima was doing but she was sure that he was doing something too.

Hitoka had gushed about the team with Kiyoko and Takeda-sensei when they had observed them practicing both together and separately. She really was excited for them. The way they were succeeding made them look really happy and satisfied with their efforts.

And now, they were going back to Tokyo. They would probably still be worse off than the other teams, but it was the experience that counted, Kiyoko had told her. She said that the worst thing for them had been the inexperience. While some of them, like Nishinoya and Kageyama, had been competing before high school, not all of them were and it had showed. She also said that observing their betters would serve them well. Hitoka could agree on that. She had learnt designing by watching her mother who was a lot better than she was with years and years of experience and honing her talent. It was probably the same thing with sports and volleyball. She wouldn’t personally
know as she wasn’t into sports as a player, or sporty overall.

What had also been noticed by the team was that the black-clad men had started to appear even when there were no matches going on. Something had changed the pattern and no one had any idea what that thing was. A couple of days before their second Tokyo trip Sugawara, Kiyoko and Nishinoya had reported seeing suspicious people dressed in all black on their way home. After that they all had started to watch around more carefully and seen glimpses of dodgy people but not close enough to identify if they were their darling stalkers.

Even now Tanaka, who was sitting in the back with Nishinoya, had reported that a black vehicle was following them. The team had collectively sighed and returned to their conversation. There really was nothing they could do about that.

Hitoka started when her phone started ringing. She scrambled to find it only for the tone to end as soon as she got hold of it. A ping was heard as a message arrived and she read it before tapping an answer. Kiyoko was sitting beside her, and stared at her curiously.

“You have a very cute ringtone,” she said. Hitoka blushed. It was the anime opening song of her favourite childhood show.

“Thank you,” she replied and put her phone back to her pocket.

“Did someone miss you?”

“My mother. She was telling me that my cousin had forgotten his spare glasses to our place. He was visiting us before our trip,” Hitoka said. “I told her that I would tell him.”

“Doesn’t she have his number?”

“I’m closer to him, so it’s alright. My mom’s very busy.”

“Hmm? You have a cousin, Yachi-chan?” Azuma-, no, Asahi asked, smiling. She nodded.

“Yeah, he’s my age. My father is his uncle.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard you mention your father before.”

She smiled a bit wistfully. “He’s not around a lot. He and my mother are very career-oriented, which is why they divorced when I was really young. They had no time for each other although they try to have time for me. I still love him very much and see him as often as I can.”

“What does he do for a living?” Suga asked. Hitoka giggled in embarrassment.

“You know, I’m not actually sure,” she said. “He’s working in the family business. I think they’re in investment or something like that but I cannot say for sure.”

“Wow, you have some big shot parents,” Nishinoya marvelled from the back of the bus. She blushed, not having known that they all heard her talk.

“W- what about you guys? What sort of families do you come from?” she asked. She wanted to divert the attention away from her! She was so not used to being the sole attention of a huge group of people. Thankfully, Hinata took pity on her as he answered her question.

“I live with my mom and dad! And my little sister, she’s so cute! Her name’s Natsu, and she is in elementary school right now.” Hinata was grinning. To Yachi, it seemed like he really adored his
sister. She wished she had a brother like that who would dote on her.

“I live with my sister, and occasionally my dad. He’s also very busy at work,” Tanaka said but didn’t elaborate.

“I’ve got a younger sister and a younger brother,” Nishinoya said beside him. “They are twins and they’re ten years my junior. They came as a surprise to my parents, but a welcome one!”

Suddenly, everyone was exchanging stories about their families which left Hitoka trying to keep up with who was whose sibling or other relative. Yamaguchi mentioned that he was an only child but laughed that Tsukishima seemed more like one despite having an older brother. Kageyama was an only child as well but as he was also dozing on and off so he didn’t participate in the discussion much. Narita had a lot of younger siblings – Hitoka never really was clear on how many exactly – while Kinoshita had two older brothers. Ennoshita had a twin, which surprised everyone, but he said that she got a sports’ scholarship elsewhere so she wasn’t going to Karasuno. Apparently she played some brilliant basketball which he said caused semi-playful fights between them about which sports was better. Asahi had an older sister who had just married and had a child on the way. Suga and Daichi were both from divorced families but while Suga said that his mother and father had reconnected since then - he seemed to have some reservations about his mother for some reason - Daichi told them that his parents were actually neighbours and still best friends. Kiyoko had just said that she was from an ordinary family and left it at that.

Hitoka itched to write it all down but managed to not grab a pen and paper or her phone. It was just… nice to learn so much about them. None of them felt awkward to share about their families or anything. Even she told a story about going to self-defence classes with her cousin when they were young, thanks to her overprotective parents, but she had to admit that she was pretty terrible unlike he-who-must-not-be-named. She said that very snottily which gathered a few laughs from the guys.

They arrived in a merry mood and greeted the other teams that were already there. Hitoka was glad to see the other managers again and showed proudly off her Karasuno uniform. She flushed from all the praise he got for looking cute in it. From the corner of her eyes she saw Hinata almost tackling a Nekoma player – she thought his name started with a K – while Tanaka seemed to be starting a fight with another. She did see Daichi and Suga talking with Nekoma’s captain with a more serious expression. They were all facing towards the direction Karasuno had arrived from, so they were probably talking about the recent developments of the situation with the men following them.

She was whisked away soon, though, and didn’t see anyone until the next morning. She had barely managed to yell a good night for the team before Kiyoko and other managers grouped in their room to share gossip and sweets.

It was the most fun she had had in a while, and that was saying something. Hitoka was always having fun with the team, after all.

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The next morning came with sunshine and a cloudless sky. The birds were singing and it was a typically beautiful summer day. A rather perfect day for volleyball, one could say. Hinata found himself energized for the day’s matches, and so it seemed that everyone else did too.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last.

When the teams were arriving for breakfast, trickling a few players at a time, they found a person there, in the cafeteria, all purple and blue and beaten up.
On his chest they found a letter which said only one thing:

*Keep it safe.*

Chapter End Notes

One day I'll read this whole thing through and correct my mistakes but that day is not today. I'm tired and want this chapter out before I need to leave to guide an exchange student to her new home for the year. Being an international tutor can be inconvenient when people arrive after midnight... Let me just say, YAWN, haha
Ennoshita wasn’t sure what the commotion was. He yawned when he walked towards the cafeteria in search for breakfast before the matches could start. He was trying to catch the early worm so to say, or at least early breakfast before Nishinoya and his bottomless stomach, with Narita and Kinoshita. He knew that they would probably be on the bench mostly but they had had more and more time on court as well during practice. They tried their best to improve too although it was more on the slow and steady side than the fast-paced run the others seemed to have.

He was aware that, unlike his sister, he was not a shining star of a sports talent. It was fine with him although it did bother him when she pulled out the ‘I’m more successful twin’ card that his parents sometimes adhered to too. Just because his success wasn’t as noticeable as hers didn’t mean he wasn’t. He did better in school than she did in comparison. Out of the two of them, he was more likely to get into a good university without a sport to cover for flaws. He was no ace but he was a good enough wing spiker and only getting better.

He yawned. Why were so many people blocking the way to the cafeteria?

“Hey, Narita, can you see what’s happening?” he asked. He wasn’t short but he couldn’t see past the heads while standing on tiptoes. Narita tried peering past the heads.

“No, sorry. It seems that the attention is at something on the floor though.”


“Hmm? What’s going on?” a voice came from behind them. Ennoshita glanced beside him where one of Nekoma’s tallest players stood. It was that first year… The half-Russian. H- Haiba something. Haiba Leaf?

“Something’s blocking the way in probably. We can’t see what,” he said. Haiba rose to his tiptoes, at really enviable height, and his eyes widened as shock settled in them. Ennoshita felt chilled.

“Yamamoto!” he yelled and pushed through the crowd. Ennoshita quickly took advance of this and went in his wake. What he saw horrified him.

Yamamoto Taketora was lying on the ground, unconscious. Nekoma’s coach was sitting next to him, holding his head on his lap, while Ukai was on the phone, calling probably for an ambulance or something. Yamamoto looked bad. His stomach had a purplish hue on it and he had a black eye, possibly two. Ennoshita couldn’t see more from his angle. His arms and legs were bruised too but considerably less so than his belly. Some chairs were also in disarray a bit further away from him but nothing else seemed misplaced.

What the heck had happened?

Ukai seemed to have ended his call as he put his phone back into his pocket. “The ambulance will be here in ten minutes. We can have a few people going with him. Who would you suggest?” he said, confirming Ennoshita’s guess.

“I’m going,” Nekoma’s coach said. Ennoshita inwardly cursed for forgetting his name. “While he’s bruised and unconscious, it doesn’t seem like he was deliberately attacked and beaten up. Shibayama
can go with him, he’s level-headed enough, and…” he pondered for a moment. A first year Ennoshita hadn’t really noticed before stepped up from the crowd.

“I can send someone from my team with you. That way not too many of you will miss the matches,” Ukai offered. Nekoma’s coach nodded in response.

“That would be acceptable. Unfortunately I would rather not send more than one of my players because then they all would want to go.” This made the Nekoma players in the cafeteria protest, Haiba the loudest, but he silenced them with just a serious glance. Ennoshita was impressed even though the situation was awful.

“I understand. Nekoma seems to be as close as Karasuno as a team,” Ukai said. He scanned the crowd and ended at him. “Ennoshita, would you go with them?”

“Yes, coach,” he agreed and went to stand next to Shibayama who was staring at Yamamoto with wide eyes. He looked so young but she still seemed determined to help anyway he could.

“He’ll be alright, you know?” he said. Shibayama started but when he recognized Ennoshita – which made him feel bad for not having really recognized him in turn automatically – he gave him a small smile.

“It’s Yamamoto, he’d survive a bullet to the head.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Ennoshita said and shivered. That was a little too close to what he was beginning to expect to happen one day to someone. Of course he couldn’t be sure that Yamamoto was roughed up by the black-clad men but he seriously doubted it had been any of the volleyball players.

Shibayama nodded and turned back to stare at his teammate. “Okay, enough of all the staring!” Ukai called. “There’s nothing you can do but continue the morning routine.”

“But we can’t just-,” Nekoma’s ball of Hinata fluff, Inuoka?, was starting to protest.

“You can and you will,” Nekoma’s coach cut him off. “Do you think Yamamoto would want all of you miss the matches on his behalf?”

With some more grumbling, the players were appeased. At a distance, Ennoshita could hear the loud noise of ambulance getting louder

“Move out of the way and eat your breakfast!” Ukai barked. “We need space.”

As the ambulance arrived and Yamamoto was being carried in, Ennoshita gave a quick rundown to Daichi and Suga who had just arrived with most of the team before he followed Nekoma’s coach – he really needed to ask his name – and Shibayama into the ambulance. He sat down and watched as the nurses tested for Yamamoto’s vitals and if he had anything broken.

From the looks of it, it seemed like there was nothing to be worried about. Ennoshita was glad. This was awful to see happening to anyone, no less to a bright player like Yamamoto.

They arrived to the hospital pretty soon, and went wait in the waiting room as Yamamoto was carried into the emergency. They were assured that no surgery would need to take place but they would need to take an MRI just in case.

“I’m going to be very mad at whoever was responsible for this,” Nekoma’s coach said. Shibayama nodded in response. Ennoshita nodded too, and took out his phone. He quickly searched for
Nekoma’s volleyball team, which was apparently led by Nekomata Yasufumi.

He thanked whoever invented the search engines for letting him not embarrass himself in front of them.

“Nekomata-san,” he said and gained his attention. “What happened to Yamamoto? I only arrived when Ukai was ending his call.”

“We don’t know. Inuoka and Shibayama found him, and they came to get me. I met Ukai on the way there,” he answered.

“Yamamoto wasn’t conscious when we found him,” Shibayama added. “I stayed with him while I sent Inuoka to get coach. He was a bit panicky and I couldn’t leave him alone with Yamamoto in good conscious.”

“It was a good call,” Nekomata praised. Shibayama looked away but looked pleased nonetheless. “Nothing really happened. Some players from Fukurodani and Ubugawa had arrived when I got there with Ukai but they were a good sport about it. Well, they let us through and handle the situation anyhow.”

Ennoshita nodded. It seemed like they had to wait for Yamamoto to wake up for more information. He asked Shibayama about their matches in the Interhigh which he answered gladly. It seemed like he needed the change of topic.

Within the hour they were told that Yamamoto only had bruises, possibly from a hard kick to his stomach and the rest from a bad landing. While he continued to be unconscious, he had no concussion, thankfully. The nurses had put him into a room to rest and one of them led the group there. The room was very generic for a hospital: light green curtains and bedding, white sheets and walls. Ennoshita decided to stand while letting Nekomata and Shibayama sit. It was the right thing to do, he thought. He took out his phone and texted Ukai and Daichi that everything was alright. He watched as Shibayama did the same to his team.

They waited for another hour or two before Yamamoto started showing signs of wake. Shibayama quickly left to find a nurse or a doctor and who arrived by the time the patient had woken up although he was slightly out of it. He did answer all questions properly although the date was lost to him.

Ennoshita saw Nekomata sigh in relief. Yamamoto was really fine. Bruised, yes, but fine with an addition of just one black eye.

The doctor said that they would keep him at least until the evening and see if he could be dismissed then. Otherwise, he would stay overnight and be dismissed in the morning. Ennoshita checked the time. It was closer to midday. He wondered how the day was going for the team. Were the matches going well? He hoped they were but he knew they would still be having a wide losing streak compared to the other teams. They would still have fun, he thought. They always were when they were facing a challenge. Even the match against Seijou and Aobajousai had been fun even though the defeat had hurt bitterly.

The doctor finally left after saying that lunch would be served soon and she expected Yamamoto to eat everything on his plate. He looked down on his lap and seemed to be pouting to Ennoshita. He knew he would too try to avoid Nekomata’s stare. It was really piercing and he would hate to be on the receiving end of it.

“You know what I’m going to ask, Yamamoto,” Nekomata said. His eyebrows were forming an
impressive frown. Yamamoto cringed but folded immediately.

“I was looking around for the weird men that are following Karasuno around.”

Ennoshita blinked. What?

“Taketora.”

Yamamoto looked like someone had hit him with the heaviest rock they could lift.

“I know!” he said quickly. The was oozing guilt. “But I was talking to Tanaka and he said he was going to take a quick look around before going to bed and he looked tired so I thought I would offer to help because I wasn’t and we could look through the building and the surrounding areas quickly enough to go to bed soon so…” his voice got progressively quieter as he went on, ending in mumbles. Nekomata’s eyebrows were frowning even more. He looked really imposing but Ennoshita was almost seething himself.

Tanaka.

“Anything else?”

“I didn’t even know I had found anything at first,” Yamamoto admitted. “I had just opened the door to the cafeteria and was looking around when I was hit on the stomach. It was really dark. I fell on something because it hurt. I didn’t lose my consciousness, so I heard one of them scolding the other. He sounded really angry. There was some talk about an ‘opportunity’. I don’t know for what, they spoke in very hushed tones, and then… Someone walked up to me and that was it.”

“They probably hit you on the back of your neck or something,” Shibayama said. “I mean, it’s the perfect spot to hit someone unconscious without damaging them too much if the hitter knows his or her strength.”

Ennoshita didn’t even care how Shibayama knew that. He just tapped a message to Daichi to not let Tanaka go until he got back from the hospital. There would be words.

“Very likely,” Nekomata agreed. He looked down on Yamamoto. “I hope you know how disappointed I am with you.” Yamamoto nodded. He looked miserable. “It was very stupid of you to go with Tanaka’s idea. At the very least you should have looked around together for situations such as these. I am very surprised that Tanaka didn’t come to look for you.”

“We actually searched together but I was hungry and decided to take another look at the cafeteria when we finished…” Yamamoto was clearly waiting for yelling to start. Nekoma’s coach just sighed.

“I suppose no one was expecting that.”

Ennoshita stood up straighter from where he was leaning on the wall. Yamamoto actually seemed to be surprised as if he hadn’t seen him there. He probably hadn’t.

“Thank you for the enlightening visit. I think I’m heading back now that we know everything is okay and have our own chat with our resident ‘delinquent’,” he smiled. Yamamoto seemed to twitch like he wanted to run away.

Nekomata nodded. “Thank you for coming. I suppose you’re planning to tell everything to your team?”
“Yes, but I’m unsure if we should share the whole tale to everyone else.”

“I would advise you not to.”

“Why? Not that I don’t agree with you, but…”

Nekomata took out a paper which he gave to Ennoshita. “This was found on this idiot,” he said and pointed at Yamamoto. The so-called ‘idiot’ seemed cowed and said nothing to deny the insult.

(Keep it secret.)

“…They really don’t like us involving anyone else, do they?” Ennoshita said.

“It seems like it. Involving more people seems unwise. You really should talk to the police before it all escalates.”

“Doesn’t that contradict on what you just said, coach?” Shibayama asked.

“I’ll… take it up with the team. But whatever we do, I doubt we’ll tell Fukurodani and others. I would not wish Yamamoto’s fate on anyone else. It almost seems like he was a warning despite him surprising the men.”

“You… could say it was a burglar,” Shibayama suggested. This time Nekomata quirked an eyebrow at his student’s criminalistics tendencies and suggestions. He blushed.

“I just like detective series…” he mumbled.

“That’s an idea,” Ennoshita said, and bowed a goodbye.

As Ennoshita left the room, he wondered if this might be the start of a new pattern. This was clearly an unplanned, chance encounter. Although Yamamoto didn’t see anyone, it was clear to Ennoshita that it was the work of the black-clad men. Who else could it even be? A chance…

He just hoped it didn’t escalate into an ‘accident’.

***

Suga was panting from the match and the penalty afterwards. It was rough to mostly lose all day. Everyone was focusing as best as they could but they could see that Nekoma was distracted with one player down. They did compensate by trying their hardest but Kozume was faltering at times, clearly trying to toss to someone that wasn’t there, and sometimes they ran to a spot usually covered by Yamamoto because they automatically thought it had been covered already.

Karasuno wasn’t playing their best either but for different reasons.

They were so out of sync it was almost funny. Suga supposed it was because of so much personal training they had done. Kageyama’s missing tosses were hilarious because they could see how much they bothered him. Tsukishima had thrown some casual quips about him ‘dropping their level’ but, surprisingly, Kageyama hadn’t even noted them. He was just… huffy. Hinata was also jumping all over the place, colliding into people and falling down like a toddler. He was always laughing, though, a complete contrast to how Kageyama was handling himself.

They still hadn’t said a word to each other but they were giving weirded out glances towards one another. Suga supposed that progress was made on that battlefront.

Asahi was practising his jumping serves which were really beautifully executed and powerful…
although a bit too powerful still. He still lacked the finesse to keep the balls inside the court. He seemed to be staring at Ubugawa’s serves and conversing with Kageyama, trying to find a good balance for himself. Then there was Yamaguchi whose serves were getting a lot better although he still hit the net most of the time. Suga, Asahi, Tanaka and others had their combination attacks that were more of combined disasters at the moment. Kinoshita and Narita were trying their best too although they seemed to wish Ennoshita was there with them. It was almost as if their duo wasn’t complete without him forming a trip with them.

In addition, there was the matter of Tsukishima… but Suga wasn’t sure if they should do anything about it. Daichi certainly looked like he would do nothing and just see where that would lead them. Suga did see, however, how Hinata seemed to overshadow Tsukishima, how Asahi seemed somehow taller even though he certainly wasn’t, how Tanaka was blocking better than ever and how Yamaguchi had sent worried glances Tsukishima’s way too. Still, it was Kageyama who took Suga mostly by surprise. He seemed almost mad that Tsukishima didn’t seem interested in improving his skills. At least he kept glaring at his way when he wasn’t glaring at his own hands. Now that Hinata was improving, he seemed to have taken a new target for his endless scowl. Suga snickered behind his hand. Poor Tsukishima.

The day was still fun, all things considered.

It was getting closer to mid-afternoon when Ennoshita came back. He nodded a greeting at all his teammates running penalties but first stopped by Ukai and Takeda-sensei, probably to personally inform what had happened in the hospital. Nekoma players had also called a time out of their own match and run to him, demanding information. At first it seemed like Ennoshita was overwhelmed but he quickly composed his self. Suga shared an amused glance with Daichi.

Yes, he definitely would make a good captain candidate for next year.

Nekoma seemed to calm down and they laughed good-naturedly at whatever someone said. The whistle was blown and they quickly ran back to the court. Ennoshita started to walk towards the team with Ukai and Takeda-sensei following him while Shimizu and Yachi were also running after them. He had a blank expression on his face as he walked past Suga and Daichi until he was in front on Tanaka and…

Cuffed him on the head, hard.

“What the…?!?” Tanaka yelped, scowling at Ennoshita who now just looked very exasperated.

“Why on earth would you try to go looking for trouble?” he asked. Tanaka looked away. “Why would you go looking for the black-clad men without telling anyone?”

“You did what?” Daichi blurted out. Tanaka scowled.

“I wasn’t alone!”

“And how did that go for Yamamoto?”

Tanaka’s expression hardened.

“This is why we shouldn’t ignore the problem. It doesn’t go away!” he insisted. “I understand the logic, don’t claim I don’t, but we’re just setting ourselves for getting hurt. We need to take initiative and not wait until it’s too late!”

“And you should decide what we should do? Over everyone else, without discussion?” Ennoshita demanded. “This could’ve gone horribly wrong. What if they had done something worse than just
given Yamamoto a bruise or two? What if they had shot him and you? You told no one! That was very irresponsible and don’t think I won’t be telling Saeko-san all about that!”

Tanaka gave him a very mulish glare.

“Now, I want you to promise you will not go after anything suspicious without proper back up. I know I won’t be able to get you promise to stop so I need you to promise to never go anywhere alone looking for trouble. Understood?”

Tanaka was quiet. Ennoshita cuffed him again.

“I asked, am I understood?”

“Yes, I understand!” Tanaka yelped. Ennoshita gave him one last suspicious glance before nodding imperiously.

“And you better keep that promise too.”

“Yes, sir…”

Suga shared another look with Daichi. Captain-material indeed…

“So, what was the verdict?” Daichi asked.

“Just a few bruises, mostly around his stomach. He was kicked or hit on it and landed on probably the cafeteria chairs. He surprised some people, probably the black-clad men, who then made him lose consciousness. Shibayama suggested someone hit him on his neck. It seemed like it was unplanned because one of the men scolded the other before coming for Yamamoto.

“I suspect a message was meant by him getting beaten up.” Ennoshita dug a paper out of his pocked and gave it to Daichi.

“’Keep it secret’, huh…” he read it out loud. He turned to Tanaka. “I enforce Ennoshita’s order for the moment: no going anywhere alone, but also, no mentioning this to the people who are not in the know already. This is for everyone, not just Tanaka,” he added. “This also means that only we and Nekoma should be even talking about the matter, but hopefully only we. We don’t want to drag anyone into this if possible.”

“Yes, captain,” the team chorused.

“Did Nekomata-san say anything else?” Ukai asked.

Ennoshita nodded. “He suggested that we tell the police but also contradicted by saying that we shouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Police, huh…” Ukai mused. He turned to the whole team. “This is our problem. What do you want to do? Who wants us to tell the police? Discuss and vote.”

On the one hand, the letter and the men had been clear: tell no one. On the other, the police might now take them seriously. They had a letter and a victim suffering from the men. They had also been stalked so someone should have noticed them before. They were slowly building a case for the police.

But what did the team want?

Suga looked around. Some of them looked indecisive and some seemed like they knew exactly what
they wanted to do. Suga looked at the blue sky above them. What would the decision be?

“Who wants to tell the police, raise your hand up now.”

Hinata, Asahi, Ennoshita, Shimizu and Takeda-sensei raised their hands. Yachi and Nishinoya looked like they didn’t know what to do, hands hovering somewhere in the middle. Yamaguchi looked indecisive but didn’t raise his hand in the end.

Suga stared at his own hand. What was the right decision for the team? What was the right decision for him?

“You, who did not raise your hands, your reasoning, please,” Ukai said.

“It’s stupid if we go to the police,” Tanaka huffed.

“We are sitting ducks and nothing would change that at the moment. More than likely we would get even more crap on us than before if we went and got more people involved,” Tsukishima said. Ennoshita seemed to think of that for a moment and dropped his hand.

“I was actually thinking that before,” he said. “In the hospital, I mean. Like… Maybe the pattern is now changing because Nekoma’s in the know and we tried to actively do something about this?” he raised his hand again and then dropped it. “I have to abstain. I’m too confused. I know that telling the police is the right thing to do but… what if by doing that we get more people hurt? I don’t want another Yamamoto.”

Kinoshita voiced his agreements on that, Yamaguchi as well. Suga was a bit surprised he hadn’t advocated for them going for the police but he supposed Yamaguchi had been pushing for them to go forward as a team and was on the majority’s side.

“That’s why I didn’t raise my hand,” Narita said, and then clarified. “I have my family to think about. I don’t want anyone going after my little brothers and sisters.”

“What he said,” Kageyama said. Hinata scowled.

“You don’t even have siblings! Think about Natsu!” he growled. Kageyama frowned back.

“No, I don’t, but I think about all the people who are already trying to look into this. The less people getting hurt, the better.”

Of course, the first words they shared were part of an argument. Brilliant, Suga thought.

“And the more people in the know brings safety, is what you think, right?” Ukai asked from the ‘yes’ crowd. They nodded in agreement. He turned to Yachi and Nishinoya who looked at each other and decided to abstain like Ennoshita. Ukai turned back to the whole team.

“It seems that, for the moment, we will not be telling anyone. I want all of you to promise to discuss any further move with the rest of the team. We’ll trust each other. We are all we have. For the moment, we’ll go with the flow. We will have a new discussion every time something new comes up or someone has a pressing concern. Alright?”

“Yes, coach,” the team said, some more mutinously than others.

“Good,” Ukai nodded. “Then what was the excuse for Yamamoto if not the men in black?”

They all turned to Ennoshita who looked surprised to be put on the spotlight again.
“…Er, a burglar?”

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Narita was walking with Kinoshita. It was the evening of their first day of Tokyo and they were tired. It had been an emotionally tasking day. The team’s unity was again questioned but it seemed like it was not broken. More than likely, it had been reinforced despite their argument. The team was a democracy. Everyone had a voice. Ukai was the president that had no real power. Daichi was the prime minister who held the true keys to the city. The other team members could probably also be put into a minister box but, really, there was no point in continuing that thought.

Well, Suga was probably the minister of finance or something like that. The shadow leader who could strangle them behind the scenes if he so wanted.

Narita shivered. That smile was nightmare material.

“Hey,” he said to distract himself from that thought path. “Why didn’t you vote for going to the police?”

Kinoshita looked ill at ease.

“I-, um, I kind of already have. You know, gone to the police.”

What?

“What?” Narita was stunned. He had no idea Kinoshita would go behind their backs like that.

“I didn’t mean to!” Kinoshita said quickly. “It’s just… You know my oldest brother? Well, he’s in the force and he caught me after the match we confronted the men. I was in a bad mood, no surprise there, so I just couldn’t keep my mouth shut. Unfortunately. And that was it.”

“Why haven’t you told anyone?”

“It was kind of… implied not to say anything. Also, we had no proof as was mentioned and we didn’t know anything about them. I begged my brother not to do anything but… He’s kind of intense. He’s a typical older brother with a complex towards his cute eight years younger brother.” Kinoshita was quiet for a moment. “I haven’t told him anything after that and he hasn’t mentioned it but… I’m scared something will happen if he tries something. And if we go to the police, well, he’s working in our local department. It would be him we’d contact. I don’t want that.”

Narita nodded. He didn’t want his siblings to have any part in this either.

“…earth do you think you can be so special that you wouldn’t have to train like everyone else?!”

“S- Stop that! Take it easy you two! Hinata, help me!”

“O- Okay!”

Narita exchanged a confused look with Kinoshita. Together they sprinted towards the voices, but stayed hidden to observe the situation. Karasuno’s first years were standing behind the gym. It seemed like a heated discussion had been going on for a while. Hinata and Yamaguchi were standing between Kageyama and Tsukishima who were staring at each other, one with blazing eyes and the other with a frosty expression.

“What does that matter to you, King? Do you think it’s your duty to order us low lives around until
we satisfy your whims?”

“I-, no! And don’t call me that!”

Tsukishima scoffed. “Then you shouldn’t act to imperviously. You give worse vibes than you probably did in middle school.”


“That was uncalled for!” Hinata exclaimed loudly. “And you know that Kageyama has a point! You’re the only one who hasn’t bothered to do anything for the team!”

“And why should I? It’s not like this is anything but a club. Even if we somehow miraculously won against Seijou and Aobajousai, we’d be trampled by Shiratorizawa immediately afterwards. I see no point in wasting my time with something like this.”

“Wasting…! It’s you who is wasting our time!” Kageyama seethed. “Why are you even on the team if you clearly do not care for volleyball at all?! If it’s so pathetic.”

“Kageyama!” Yamaguchi glared but was once again ignored. Hinata glanced between them, seemingly unsure if he could stop anyone if it happened to break into a fight.

Narita frowned. He motioned at Kinoshita to get his attention.

“Should we interfere?” he whispered. Kinoshita looked back towards the fight.

“If it breaks into violence… Then yes. Daichi thought they should be left alone to work things through, so…”

“I doubt he meant for this to happen,” Narita mumbled but turned his attention back to the first years.

“…have no idea what is even at stakes here!”

“Well, why don’t you explain then? So that I, the lowly servant, can understand your noble quest,” Tsukishima sneered. Kageyama took a deep, shaky breath, clearly in order to calm himself down somewhat.

“This… This is the last year we can win.” Kageyama’s voice was filled with barely contained rage. “This is the year we can go to the nationals. Together.”

“It’s the third years’ last year,” Hinata said quietly. “And Oikawa’s too. Right?”

Kageyama turned his gaze at him, the ire in his eyes not directed at Hinata, and nodded.

“And that should concern me, how?” Tsukishima scoffed. He turned to leave but couldn’t when Yamaguchi grabbed his shirt.

“Tsukki…” he said. “I- I’ve always been jealous of you. You’ve always been smart and cool but lately… Lately, you’ve been really pathetic!” The volume of Yamaguchi’s voice was low but Narita could still hear it clearly from his hiding place.

Tsukishima turned back to Yamaguchi.

“What did you just call me?” he asked with the false-politeness in his tone clearly visible. Yamaguchi didn’t back down.
“I called you pathetic,” he said in sudden calmness. He pointed at Hinata. “He might be surpassing you at the moment but I know you. You have a lot more talent for volleyball and probably anything else than he does…”

“Hey!”

“…so why can’t you use your height, brains and intuition to see that the only ‘impossible’ in front of you is what you imagine there to be!” Yamaguchi continued over Hinata’s annoyed exclaim. “Kageyama’s right! This is our chance to win! To go to the highest possible stage we can reach! I know that we also seem pathetic right now but we’re just putting the puzzle pieces together! You can’t judge before you see the whole picture!”

“So what if I put my all into becoming the best player in Karasuno?” Tsukishima challenged as he stood tall, taller than any of them.

“Dream on,” Hinata bit out.

“Then what? Say we make it into the nationals. There’s always something bigger against you – a player, an accident, hell, the men in black! There’s never the chance of becoming the best. You’ll fall short somewhere! Maybe even with your head,” Tsukishima glared.

“Well, that was morbid…” Kinoshita mumbled.

“What more motivation could you need than pride?!” Yamaguchi yelled, seemingly fed up with the fight and Tsukishima. “Sure, ‘pride before the fall’! That’s probably what you were going for next, right?! What else do we have? We have the pride in our work, in our team, in ourselves! We can do it! I believe in that!”

“Yamaguchi’s right!” Hinata said. “You may think that things are impossible to overcome but look at who you’re losing to right now. Me! I envy your height; I wish I could have that, because clearly, you do not deserve it or your place on the team.”

Tsukishima was clearly biting his teeth together in order not to lash out. Narita switched from one foot to the other, ready to sprint if the situation so degreed.

“If this is where you stop…” Kageyama said. He had been quiet for a while and he had visibly calmed down. His eyes were still blazing with heat that Narita did not want directed at himself. It was something that sent chills down his back. “Then I am disappointed. But at least then you’ll stop wasting our time and we can move on.

“Without you.”

He turned on his heels and walked off. Hinata glanced between Yamaguchi and Tsukishima before taking off after Kageyama. They disappeared behind the corner just as Yamaguchi turned back to Tsukishima.

“I don’t want to play without you on the court with me. It’s always been my dream to play with you. In a practice match, the preliminaries, the nationals. Everywhere and at any stage possible. I want to win with you the highest title there is.”

Tsukishima was quiet, his face turned away from him. Yamaguchi gave him a sad smile.

“I wish you could see beyond the net. There is so much we could do if you just let yourself enjoy yourself and not take things so seriously.”
“Since when have you had that kind of attitude?” Tsukishima asked. Yamaguchi shrugged.

“I don’t know. Maybe this whole thing with the black-clad men finally made me realize that I should just... be. I should just focus on things I can do something about. Volleyball is that for me. I will be the best pinch server I can. I will probably never be the best, like you said, but... I will be proud of myself. That’s what matters to me.

“Can you say the same for yourself?”

Neither of them spoke for a long while. Tsukishima avoided looking anywhere near Yamaguchi who just stared up towards the darkening sky. In the end, it was the latter that broke the silence.

“Let’s go back. We shouldn’t be alone because of the threat and I’m ready to head in.”

Without another word, they moved towards the direction Kageyama and Hinata had disappeared. Narita and Kinoshita waited for a moment before letting out a long and heavy sigh.

“That... was intense,” Kinoshita said. Narita nodded. It was also clearly something they hadn’t been meant to witness, this fight between the first years.

“Let’s go for a short walk, just five or ten minutes before we head back. I don’t want to see the aftermath just yet.”

“Or feel the heavy atmosphere,” Kinoshita added. “While this was probably meant to clear the air... It doesn’t seem to have worked that well.”

“Yeah,” Narita sighed. He was only a year older than them but he felt like there was a lot more between them. Maybe this was how Ukai felt when watching them at times. Or Takeda-sensei.

They shared one last worried glance before trotting off.

Here’s to hoping that they still had their best middle blocker on the roster come morning, Narita thought.

Those shoes of Tsukishima were just something that none of them could fill in time for the preliminaries.

Chapter End Notes

Woops. Almost 6k worth of text, and I wasn't able to fit more than one day of Tokyo there. Well, it was necessary... and I couldn't stop. I feel like I'm improving, though. Writing does seem to come easier now than when I started this a few weeks ago. Also, the chapters are getting longer, haha. Hopefully I'm not jinxing myself.

I wonder though... Will Yamamoto's chance turn into someone's accident? And if so...

Whose?
Part I: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

So, it's been almost a week! I can blame real life since I am acting as an international tutor and have been touring, advising and helping with anything new foreign students in my university. Busy, but a lovely job!

Without further ado, here's the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tsukishima glowered at the ceiling. He had retired early, ignoring the presence of his teammates, and turned his back on them. No one, not even Yamaguchi, had tried to talk to him or get him out of his funk. In the morning when he woke up, earlier than anyone else, he left the room alone despite Daichi’s orders on previous day. See if he cared. The rule was idiotic to start with. Fine, it probably soothed the nerves of people like Yamaguchi, which was a good thing, but darn if it didn’t annoy to be followed to the bathroom.


He encountered no one as he stomped over to the gym they were using, deciding to skip cafeteria in case someone was already awake and looking for breakfast. His luck would be to find another beaten up person, maybe this time from Fukurodani. See if he cared.

(I will probably never be the best, like you said, but… I will be proud of myself. That’s what matters to me. Can you say the same for yourself?)

Tsukishima scowled harshly as he blasted a ball across the court. He didn’t even bother raising a net before spiking balls and hitting walls. What was Yamaguchi’s problem? Of course he was proud of himself. A Tsukishima was always proud to be a Tsukishima.

Even if they had minor… setbacks along the way.

Like his brother.

Why is the team supposed to be so important to his pride? It wasn’t like it would matter when he eventually graduated from high school. It hadn’t, in the end, mattered to Akiteru. Of course he had been disappointed in not being noticed and being sidelined by the Small Giant – like Hinata would ever get to his level, Tsukishima snorted – but he had been even more disappointed in Tsukishima seeing that failure on his part, to unravel his lies.

This was not a team like Akiteru’s but they would eventually fail like everyone else’s did. What he did would have no consequence in the end. They would all leave, leave this all behind, and continue on their lives.

There was nothing to get excited about.

Tsukishima frowned as he stared at the balls around the court, lying on the floor in disarray. Yes, there was nothing to get excited about.
He ground his teeth, and kicked the nearest ball to a wall with enough force that it might have cracked, or even completely broken, a window if it had hit one. Who was the King to decide he could be disappointed in Tsukishima’s decision?

Tsukishima glowered. Or who was he to say he’s the one wasting their time? Kageyama was a talented setter, sure, he could acknowledge that… but he was the King. Changing that could not happen, not yet and not now. And moving on without Tsukishima? Not possible.

It just was not possible.

“Umm… Tsukishima-kun?” a quiet, slightly nervous, voice called behind him. Tsukishima fixed his glasses on his nose and turned around. He was sure that his face was frozen in a look of complete loathing but that did not make the recipient of his glare run away. On the contrary, Yachi seemed even more determined to stay. She stepped in and closed the gym door. The morning light that had been just about to reach its rays inside was forcibly left behind the door.

“Are you alright?” she inquired. Tsukishima scoffed.

“Why, I am just perfect,” he replied snidely before turning to collect the balls around the court. If Yachi was awake and here, then he could be sure that others weren’t far behind. At least no one could yell at him for breaking the ‘buddy rule’ if she was with him, he inwardly snorted.

“Oh… I thought you looked mad,” Yachi said as she bent to help him fetch the balls. Tsukishima involuntarily twitched as he itched to make a sarcastic remark. Why was he even trying to restrain himself? It was only Yachi.

“Your observation skills astonish me,” he said in his best condescending voice.

“Thank you,” she beamed at him. Tsukishima gave her an annoyed side glance. Was she deliberately being obtuse? Couldn’t she just leave him alone?

“I heard about your fight with Kageyama, Hinata and Yamaguchi.”

“So?”

“So… What did you fight about?” she asked. She dropped the balls she had collected to the basket before jogging to the other side of the room to fetch the rest.

Tsukishima scowled deeper. “So…” he mocked. “You heard about the fight but not what it was about?” Yachi shrugged in response.

“Maybe I wanted to hear that from you.”

“Maybe I don’t want to tell you about it.”

“Maybe… But I think you need to speak to someone about it. Clean the air,” she smiled as she looked at him. “I’m here if you want me to be.”

Tsukishima said nothing and dropped the balls to the basket. Yachi followed and suddenly, the court was clean again. He felt undone, like his temper tantrum was only in his head and inconsequential. It wasn’t, it mattered.
His reasons weren’t so forgettable.

He sat down, back to Yachi, and looked at the ceiling. It was an ordinary gym ceiling, nothing special. It pissed him off. Nothing about the gym was special. Nothing about volleyball was special. He wanted to desecrate the whole place again. He almost started when he heard a thump and a weight was, all of a sudden, added to his back like someone was leaning against it. Warmth seeped through his shirt into his skin and he realised just how cold he had been before. There was no heating in the gym in summer and the night had been a bit chilly.

“I’m glad to be on this team,” Yachi said. She sounded like she was smiling again. “There’s a kind of sense of belonging I’m getting from it that I haven’t felt since… ever, I guess. The family isn’t that close, so this is… special, I guess.”

“I think your ‘close’ cousin must be disappointed to hear that.”

“Then my cousin must be an idiot, likely a family trait,” she quipped back. Tsukishima couldn’t help letting out a snort. “I’m sure he’ll live, though. But being close to one or two people isn’t the same as the family vibe I’m getting from the whole team.”

He thought of that for a moment.

“I’m… not completely disregarding that,” he said. Tsukishima had noticed how well he had fit in the team in the end. He had a sort of rivalry going on with Hinata which the shorty is never going to win. Yamaguchi is nice company. Suga and Daichi were there for the whole team, always, while the second years and Asahi were the weird and annoying clingers one could never get rid of but didn’t mind too much at the end of the day. Shimizu, Takeda-sensei and Ukai were alright too and Kageyama… Well, he was the King.

(Disappointed.)

Yachi was clearly waiting for him to speak up again. He raked his hand through his hair and sighed deep.

“My problem is that we’re setting us up for a disappointment. Nothing of what we are doing now matters in the end,” he said but didn’t really know how to continue. It all came back to Akiteru and his failure. Why should he devote himself to something that would never be the thing for him? It didn’t end up well for his brother. It wouldn’t end up well for him.

He didn’t want to feel that disappointment and inadequacy that had circled Akiteru. All that hard work would only make them, make him, suffer later.

(Can you say the same for yourself?)

“I have to disagree.”

Tsukishima felt a head touch the back of his shoulder blades as Yachi leaned even more towards him.

“I think, I think you’re more afraid of letting yourself go,” she said quietly. “You don’t want to care because losing everything would hurt more than never letting anything close. Maybe that’s true, maybe it’s not. I think you’re at the same point where Kageyama-kun was just a few months ago, and is now breaking free from – leaving even you behind. But… He has realised something that you still haven’t admitted yourself. The way you’re now, Tsukishima-kun… Kei-kun~”

Tsukishima bit his lip at hearing his first name. He hated it. He was no firefly; there was no one he
could emit true light to. He clenched his fists. He made an aborted movement to rise and run away but a hand grabbed his and wasn’t breaking its hold on him. He looked away from the brown eyes that were staring at him, a much too knowing expression on her face to his comfort. He was frozen, yelling inwardly, inefficient in the face of a threat.

He didn’t want to hear it, he didn’t want to be here for this, let him go, let him leave, don’t say another word-

“That’s a sad way to live.”

(Do you need a reason to want to live?)

***

Kiyoko collected the data diligently as she watched over her boys. They were the worst team there, no doubt about that, but their potential was staggering. As a former athlete herself, she could see and recognize that. She was glad that they were coming out of their shells. Together, they would be beautiful. Since their first trip to Tokyo, everyone had been filled with a level of motivation they had been lacking – until now. The extent of that was even a bit frightening.

They were flying.

Even when they crashed, they would pick themselves and their pieces up, and soar towards the sky again. Kiyoko smiled. They would be fine.

Yamamoto was fine too. He had appeared in the morning of the second day with coach Nekomata brighter than ever, laughing in embarrassment about for once being there to prevent a crime but having the most uncool exit from the stage ever. Nekoma’s players were happy to welcome him back although he was only let in the matches a few times and never for long. He was still under a tight watch of everyone, much to his annoyance.

What she was surprised to find out was that after the first day, Tsukishima had been sighted practicing with Nekoma’s Kuroo and Fukurodani’s Bokuto and Akaashi. She wasn’t sure what had motivated him to try more but she was a bit afraid to ask in fear of breaking the spell on him. She had seen the looks shared between other Karasuno players and Ukai and Takeda-sensei but no one called Tsukishima out. Even Yamaguchi seemed clueless to what the change of his heart was about. They were all perplexed, even Daichi, who had claimed before that he hadn’t been that worried about him, that Tsukishima would get out of whatever funk he was in. Well, not all, she thought as she watched Hitoka beam at Tsukishima. She wondered if she had done something. Kiyoko didn’t ask. She didn’t want to jinx anything.

“The sun versus the moon,” Hitoka giggled and hummed to herself. “A shadow greater the brighter the light is, however small. The scariest of them all is the reflection.”

Kiyoko cast another look at her.

She made a note, and turned back to the game.

On the third day, something happened between Hinata and Kageyama, she noted down. They had been together after the buddy rule, not speaking, but together: on the court, in the cafeteria, outside matches. Only after the matches that day, Kageyama had said he would not be practicing with Hinata anymore. Hinata had protested but apparently it wasn’t enough. She didn’t know the specifics but after whatever had gone down, it was Hitoka who was keeping company to Kageyama and Hinata had moved to Nekoma’s setter, Kozume, and surprisingly Tsukishima. Well, maybe not as surprising
since he was leeching techniques from more experienced players.

Kiyoko smiled behind her writing-tablet.

Good job.

Day four and five passed a similar pace. No one was alone a moment of a day. The doors were locked during the night. A watch was kept for strangers. It was strangely peaceful – like nothing had happened.

Yet, just looking at Yamamoto’s fading black eye would remind them all that something had happened.

Still they were doing their best. On the last day, Kageyama and Hinata even managed their freak quick. Kiyoko even heard Akaashi, Fukurodani’s setter, comment how Kageyama’s halting his toss for other players was beyond his level. She hid a grin as she watched Kaori’s disbelief over Karasuno’s players. She had heard about Fukurodani’s excellence all week – now was her turn to be smug. She looked away quickly when Kaori was turning to her direction, and focused on writing notes.

Don’t look smug, don’t loo smug, she giggled inwardly. She continued holding her smile as she watched Hinata compliment Kageyama who didn’t seem to know how to react to such honest praise. Her boys were great, she thought, as she looked around at all her teammates, both old and new.

They really were.

The day ended with the barbeque that let them just have fun without care. The atmosphere was brilliant and light. They were all tired when they climbed into the minibus to go home. It would be a long trip and they would probably sleep through at least half of it, at least the guys who had ran around like steam trains the whole day – seriously, what had Nishinoya, Tanaka and Yamamoto done to be so tired? They were almost always in the corner of her eye but every time she turned to them, they were just… standing there, whistling.

Her boys were great, yes, but confusing too.

She sat behind Ukai with Yachi near the front of the bus. Others clambered to the back of it, spreading out so that they all had enough space to crash. Even Yachi seemed ready to nod off any moment now. She looked so cute when she closed her eyes while she yawned. Kiyoko’s fingers itched to pet the girl and her mussed hair. Was this how it felt to have a younger sibling?

“Alright, guys and girls, buckle up! We’re leaving!” Takeda-sensei called cheerfully. Kiyoko smiled. He just couldn’t be down for long any given day. It was a talent she rather envied. She was a realist, not an optimist like him. She yawned.

She was probably just as tired as they all were.

Kiyoko didn’t even know when she fell asleep. She only realized she had as only that she woke up. It was dark and as she roused she noticed that the car slowed down and eventually stopped. She rubbed her eyes and fixed her askew glasses. What, were they home already…?

The bus doors opened, and a man walked in.

A man dressed in all black.

Suddenly Kiyoko was awake. She started, waking up Yachi who was sitting next to the bus corridor.
She was close to the man. Kiyoko snatched a hold of her arm and brought her as close as she could and glared over the top of Yachi’s head at the man. He didn’t look too interested in them, though, as his gaze followed the awaking moments of the team. Slowly, everyone woke up, some naturally and some by others from a hit between the ribs. She heard Nishinoya complain before suddenly shutting up.

Kiyoko looked at the silhouette of Ukai. His back was ramrod straight and eyes fixed on the man in front of him. They waited. The man waited. She saw Takeda-sensei fiddling with his hands and look like he very much wanted to do something but didn’t know what.

“Good evening, team Karasuno.”

Her eyes snapped back at the man and her grip tightened on Yachi. She relaxed against her, and tried to smile in reassurance at her but Kiyoko would not let herself be assured. She was the senior here, and she would be the one to keep Yachi safe. It was, after all, her who had brought her into the team.

“I have some things I would like to say, as well as some things to return to you,” the man said. His voice was calm and his whole appearance screamed tranquil. There was something there, though, an edge of something. What was he doing here, deliberately? They had done nothing!

“First, let me give this back. Now, who is the closest to that Nekoma player, what’s his name…” he wondered out loud. The whole bus tensed up.

“Ah! The setter!” he said brightly, as if just remembering his position.

“What did you do to Kenma, you bastard?!” Hinata yelled from somewhere behind her. There were some sounds of struggle, like people were restraining him to where he was and not launch an attack on the man. That was probably accurate, though. She remembered them being good friends.

“Ah, Kenma, was it? Are you his friend, perhaps?” the man asked. “Well, now that you ask…” The sounds of struggle got louder.

“Alas, I did nothing to him,” the man shrugged as he admitted the fact.

“But someone else did?” Daichi asked, noticing what was left unsaid. She could hear his struggle to keep calm. There was that something in his voice whenever he was close to grinding his teeth.

It was as if the man beamed.

“I didn’t say so!” he said. “Relax, he’s fine. Probably. I left him with my partner when I got what I wanted.” The man dug a hand into his pocket and Kiyoko tensed. She noticed that Ukai was also readying himself to launching forward. The man took something out of his pocket and it was a… phone?

“This, my dear team, is Kenma’s phone. He was being very naughty by trying to take pictures of us at your barbecue,” the black-clad man admonished. “Naturally, we had to confiscate his phone from him to delete all the data. Now, the phone might be purged, but he can still use it. You seem to know him well, boy with the bright hair. Catch!”

He threw the phone to Hinata. A fumbling slap was heard as he caught it mid-air.

“Nice catch!” the man congratulated him. “You can return it to him when you next see him. Or don’t, I don’t care. He might, though.”
“Was there something else you wanted?” Ukai asked tightly. The man sighed.

“Fine, I’ll go straight to business. You know that guy who ended up in hospital a few days ago? Another Nekoma player, what a coincidence! So, this Yamagata…”

“Yamamoto,” Ukai interrupted. He sounded really annoyed and close to snapping. Kiyoko could see how the man rolled his eyes with his whole body. His head even rolled towards the bus ceiling. How dare he.

“Yamamoto, Yamagata, Yamayama, it’s all the same to me,” he said. Ukai twitched.

“Well, it’s not ‘the same’ to us since you beat him up into hospital.”

“That’s the thing, dear coach… We didn’t.”

Silence filled the bus.

“…What?” Kiyoko asked weakly, slapping a hand over her mouth. She couldn’t help herself, but she knew that she voiced the thought in every single of her teammates’ minds.

What indeed.

“Yes, I have to admit, you really think the worst of us, don’t you,” the man commented. “Maybe unfortunately, but the ones who beat your friend up were none of us… which means that you have not kept what we asked as close as you should have. We are, you could say, quite unhappy with you. You had one job.

“What happened to ‘keep it secret, keep it safe’?”

“What, no, we-,” Ukai tried to say but was silenced by a hand dangerously close to his neck. Kiyoko could hear him gulping. She was sure that even the people in the back of the bus could.

“We found your friend in the condition he was in and left the note just so that you wouldn’t fuck this up even worse,” he said flatly. There was no emotion in his voice anymore. It was just empty, stating a fact, and that made cold shivers run down Kiyoko’s back worse than ever before.

“They now know that the object of our interest is here, and we are unable to at the moment do anything about that which puts not only us but you also in a very vulnerable position. Whereas we did not mean to do anything but keep a watch on you guys, mostly anyways, the game has now changed.

“I hope you are prepared because they will not hold back - and neither will we.”

That said the man left with a lingering glance at somewhere (someone?) behind Kiyoko’s back. She heard more than saw multiple cars starting and moving. They had boxed them in, and forced them to stop, she realized.

The cars waited for Takeda-sensei to start the minibus and drive before following them again in something akin to a weird (protective? threatening?) formation.

No one slept on the way home. No one spoke either.

Kiyoko didn’t let he grip loosen a bit on Yachi during the whole drive. She wasn't even sure whose benefit it even was anymore.

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A man in police uniform looked at some files in front of him. There were no photographs, only a few digitally manipulated pictures to resemble people dressed in all black.

“Kinoshita, it’s time for patrol!”

“Ah, yes, just a second!” the man called back before placing the files beneath the papers on the drawer of his desk. He locked it for good measure before running out of the door.

“What have you been doing during these past weeks? Every time there’s time for coffee, we never see you in the breakroom anymore!”

The man gave his partner a smile.

“Just a small side project for my brother.”

***

“Kenma, you look white as a sheet! Did you happen to see a ghost or what?”

“Yes, Kuroo… A black one.”

***

There was something about his former underclassman that just didn’t fit the bill. He was weirdly defensive, avoiding when he was supposed to be, well, maybe defensive but not avoiding. Something had happened and he didn’t like not knowing what that was. It was his job to make him uncomfortable. It was his job to shoot him down, to trample on him, to make him eat the same dirt he would make Ushiwaka eat at the upcoming tournament.

It was his job to make him miserable so why, when he had not seen him since their match, had Tobio-chan not been the same Tobio-chan he remembered and hated?

Oikawa frowned as he looked at the roster on his board. He tapped the names of each player and member of the team that was making his think this hard. He pinned the notes he had written, few as they still were, next to the pictures provided.

He would have to ask a few people around for some much needed information about Karasuno.

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“Target acquired.”

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The spring high tournament preliminaries were there.

Chapter End Notes

...Part I, end. Part II, commence!

I would love to hear what you think about this chapter, or what is going to happen now. In any case, I hope you enjoyed the chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it!
Hi all! Thank you for the kind response, and all kudos, bookmarks, comments, anything and everything! In addition, I'm changing the rating to M for the future chapters. Darker times are ahead.

Anyway, I hope you'll enjoy this chapter! Down the rabbit hole, we go!

“Alright, guys and girls… This is happening,” Ukai said as he sat down with his team. The week before the preliminaries was filled with determined preparations and anxious looks. The men in black were no longer being subtle. There was always someone around that the team could see, somehow hidden in plain sight and not alerting the school staff and other students. They seemed to know how to mingle and hide in the crowds. Ukai had heard the tales from his team and couldn’t help but wonder if they had somehow managed to infiltrate the school staff.

He had always thought that the vice principal was suspicious, even during his time at the high school, although that could have been the wig. Still, a career vice principal… Suspicious.

He shook his head. Focus.

“If we win twice in tomorrow’s preliminaries, we can advance to the representative playoffs in October,” Takeda-sensei said and gave them a wide, enthusiastic grin. “We can definitely do it, so let’s do what we always do!”

“Yeah!” the team yelled. Ukai glanced at the stands where one black-clad man stood. He had seen another waiting outside when he had come in. They always came in twos. The man waved at him and he scowled. It was often even that very annoying one that they had previously interacted with. He understood the logic. He was familiar and they had already heard his voice as well as had seen some of his traits and possibly even his appearance at least a bit, especially now that they had had prolonged contact with him. Blond ends under his hat, the tips of his fingers paler than the rest of them, strong but still light voice, height over six feet. If they ever could try to identify one of them, it would be that man.

It made sense but he didn’t have to like it.

“Ukai-san?”

He blinked and looked around. Takeda was looking at him as if he was waiting for something. So was the team, as a matter of fact. He cleared his throat. Right, he was probably meant to end the speech somehow.

“We have been through a lot,” Ukai said. “And we are probably going to be going through a lot more before these matches are over and we are even at the nationals. The games will be tough and so will the circumstances. We are the underdogs in more ways than one. This is not going to change until we are at the top and have beaten all the odds laid against us.”

He would not sugar-coat his words. That was not the kind of person he was. He could be
encouraging but he often left that for Takeda who had a natural and tenacious talent for optimism and believing in the best of everyone. He, on the other hand, was a man of facts.

“But,” he continued, “I do not believe for a second that we couldn’t do that. This is our year, in both good and bad. Let’s make the most of it and leave everyone in the dust. Go out there, and take a victory that counteracts the frustration you’ve felt so far. The crows will soar once again.

“Fly, Karasuno, fly.”

He stared down all his team members from Takeda to the girls and then to the boys. He saw the seriousness and stubbornness, the determination and pig-headed desire for greatness.

Ukai raised his fist and the others followed behind him.

“Fly, Karasuno, fly,” they chorused.

It must have been his imagination, Ukai thought, but he could have sworn that the black-clad man watching them had repeated the words with them.

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Noya felt extremely motivated. Everything was going well. Sure, they were followed. There had been a couple of men in black following them to the gym where the matches were held and they stayed in the stands during the games. Sure, there was the uncertainty. What did the men mean? Who were after them? How would everything play out in the end? Sure, things were probably going to bite their behinds sooner rather than later if they were examining the past months.

But how could he not be so very excited since they had advanced to the next round of preliminaries? In the match against Ougiminami, Asahi had served the ball with the opposing team being able to do nothing to stop them, and that had only been the beginning. They had beaten even Kakugawa who had some terrifyingly tall and good players. Noya was rather proud of his own achievements in that match. The whole team was at their top. Tanaka with his spikes, Tsukishima with his blocks, Hinata and Kageyama with their insane quicks… He didn’t even need to list them all. They had all improved. They were all incredible, and Nishinoya was so very glad he could be part of it all, despite the black-clad men and everything. Their dreams could be becoming reality at any moment and at all moments.

Noya snorted, gaining a few amused looks from his friends. Well, the only one whose dreams were being crushed was Hinata and his quest to become taller… or at least to fuse with a lucifer dogfish. He imagined Hinata with a small shark growing out of his head (maybe a shark made of hair?) and out right laughed out loud. He gasped and grabbed Tanaka to share his mental image and soon the both of them were giggling like little girls. He was not embarrassed to even admit it.

Little girls were tough as heck. They could kick anyone’s behind with their innocent smiles and wicked streaks. Just look at how whipped Narita was, and you wish you’ll never have little sisters. Well, not that he was any different, Noya smiled. His little sister and brother were adorable pair of sunshine and lightning storms, with his brother being the quiet one following his more rambunctious sister. Boy, he had his hands full with them whenever he was watching over them.

They were totally worth it, though.

He wondered if he had run circles around his parents when he was young. He couldn’t remember much of anything before elementary school but a few shadowy images and a mischievous feeling. He must have been a handful. There weren’t many pictures of him either from before his entering
school but his parents had been rather poor before that. A camera had been impossible for them to buy and own at the time. They had made up for the lack of photographs by having abundance of them so much that the paint was hidden. It was crazy; it was home.

He grinned. He couldn’t wait going home and seeing his siblings and telling them everything about today. They were at school and his parents were at work so they couldn’t be watching but they promised to be there if they got into the nationals, maybe even in the last qualifying match if, when, they got that far. A match against Shiratorizawa! Noya jumped up and down, all hyped up.

“Kiyoko-san!” Tanaka exclaimed loudly, and Noya whipped his head around to see her standing close. “Let me carry your bags!”

“No need,” she said. “I’ve already taken care of most of them.”

“Are you going to check you didn’t forget anything?” Suga asked. She nodded. “Well, let me come with you. Hey, Daichi!” he yelled. Daichi looked over.

“I’m going with Shimizu to make sure we have everything.”

“Alright, but hurry. We are leaving soon.”

“Sure, just go ahead without us. We’ll be there soon.” With a nod, he and Kiyoko walked away. Noya could hear them start a conversation today’s matches and the data she had gathered. He was helpless against following her with his eyes. Kiyoko was just so beautiful and smart and so out of his league that it hurt. It was a good kind of hurt, though. He had no illusions about his chances and he was happy as the things were. To him, it was most important that she was happy. Besides, he could spend time with her every day. It was more than enough.

“Oh no!” Noya was snapped from his thoughts by a loud shout. He blinked rapidly while twirling around, taking account of everyone in case something had happened. Tanaka looked aghast for some reason while Ennoshita stared him down and Yachi had a startled look on her face. It had been Hinata who had yelled, and she had stood right beside him.

“I forgot my lunchbox!” he said loudly, turning around and running back without another word. Noya stared at his retreating form for a second before dashing after him.

“I’ll look after him!” he exclaimed as he ran after Hinata. For someone who hadn’t had much of a head start, Noya took a minute to catch up to him. He was the faster of the two but only barely – they were about the same size and their speed was their trump card after all. Noya could pretty much outrun anyone on the team, especially those with heavier builds. He didn’t know how well he would do against someone such as Kageyama who looked nimble enough with his long legs. He was quite sure he could beat him, though, if it became a contest. Still, Kageyama really did have an ideal body build for a runner or for most sports. He had to have honed his body for years and without big breaks in between, even… Even after his third year at Kitagawa Daiichi. Noya wondered how he decided that it was volleyball he would dedicate his life to.

“Did you forget the buddy rule, Hinata?” he asked when he caught up to him. Hinata’s eyes widened comically.

“I’m sorry!” he yelled, without slowing down for a second, and Noya’s ears rang. He was sure that Daichi could hear it from few floors down.

“It’s alright,” he winced. “Inside voice, Hinata, inside voice!”
“I’m sor- I’m sorry!” Hinata started as loudly as ever before toning it down until Noya couldn’t even hear the last syllable. Trust him to have no between. It’s like in volleyball, either he is the brightest player on court or the one no one notices – until it is too late.

Perhaps being Hinata worked pretty well for Hinata.

“C’mon, it’s just a phone number!”

Nishinoya stiffened. He had heard that phrase too many times to count and rarely any good came out of it. People were tenacious, after all, when they wanted something and often people not as strong as others were at a disadvantage. There were people like Kiyoko, which was why Noya and Tanaka had become her self-appointed guards at high school, a time after puberty hit and before any real responsibility was learnt.

He was mad.

He barely registered Hinata reacting to his body language by setting himself ready for a fight or flight according to the situation and how Noya decided to handle it. It was almost like animal instincts, him deferring automatically to a member of the pack who was on a higher rank than he was.

Noya could care less at the moment. He was just glad to have back up when the situation would eventually go south.

“There are people waiting for me, so if you could…” Kiyoko said calmly, trying to excuse herself and leave the guys surrounding her. Suga was standing next to her, trying to keep calm but his expression was straining and annoyed. Noya glowered at the way Kiyoko’s back was both literally and figuratively against the wall. She was supposed to be standing, if not above, then at least beside them, her team, and not covering before anyone else.

The guy leaned towards her and she shifted away, or tried to. Suga’s expression darkened even more. There was nowhere to go anymore.

“Sure,” he said. Noya imagined him having a slimy smile on his face and a tongue of two feet inside his mouth, small eyes, and a nose like a pug’s with pimples all over his face. For harassing Kiyoko, he deserved to look nothing less. “Just give us your number.”

“Hey!” Noya stepped in front of Kiyoko, startling the people around her. Hinata wiggled beside him and together they stood as a wall before her. It was a small, short one, sure, but effective nonetheless. “Leave our manager alone!”

“Your manager? You’re grade schoolers, junior high at most! Well, except for you with the old man hair,” the guy on the left with brown hair laughed. Hinata was nudging Kiyoko to leave but the guys weren’t distracted for long. The guy on the right, an undercut, stepped in front of them, ignoring Noya which infuriated him even more.

“Do you have a smart phone?” he asked, leaning against the wall. “Or do you maybe prefer an older model? It’s cute either way but it’d be even more perfect with my name in it.”

“I said leave our manager alone!” Noya pushed Kiyoko back gently, staring at Undercut with blazing eyes. “She is not interested, we are not interested, it was not nice to meet you and goodbye, have fun with your life elsewhere.”

“You go, Noya-san,” he heard Suga say, amusement lighting his tone slightly.

“Shorty, please, I know you’re attached to your big sister but you shouldn’t try so hard. It’s
unbecoming,” Brown mocked.

“Oh yeah? Well, I thought it was unbecoming to harass girls but I guess your upbringing was lacking for you to think differently,” Noya bit out. Undercut looked shocked for a moment but Brown’s expression darkened.

“What did you just say?”

“I said,” Noya started, noticing how Hinata started dragging Kiyoko away forcefully, ignoring her protests. Suga looked after them just in case the guys noticed, standing just in the way to hide the retreat. They were in luck as neither of the guys noticed with their focus was completely on Noya. Redirection, success. “Or, rather, I meant that you must have your parents to thank for your attitude. It is absolutely inspiring… to not be followed.”

He gave them a smile that screamed innocence too much to be real. It was one he had learnt from his sister. His brother’s smile was always too genuine to be a fake. His brother was too genuine to be a fake, period. At least he had his twin to bust him in and out of trouble. Noya had Tanaka, usually.

Yet, he was not here now. But he had Suga, which was all the better.

“You know, boy, what you said was not nice at all. Are you sure you shouldn’t be taking it back?” Brown asked, trying to intimidate Noya with his height. Noya just looked at him calmly. Tsukishima was taller, heck, the first year wing spiker in Kakugawa was taller than him and Noya had not been scared of either of them. They would have to do better than that.

“I like to think that backing down from a bully would be bad manners,” Suga said sweetly instead before Noya could even open his mouth. His tone was filled with poison. “And you should definitely listen to your elders, since you are clearly so interested in elevating me above you.”

“Hey, I think we should just go,” Undercut said, finally, glancing around. They were starting to attract a crowd. There were only a few people watching further away but there was bound to be more the longer the confrontation went on. Noya was counting on that. While he was pretty sure he would be able to take them on if it came to that, he had been taking self-defence classes since elementary school, he didn’t fancy doing it when it could get him disqualified from the matches. He was Karasuno’s libero, and they were counting on him.

Besides, Suga wouldn’t let him. While he was disapproving the behaviour of the guys before them, he liked violence even less.

Brown glowered but backed off, muttering curses under his breath. Undercut clapped his hand over his shoulder in a friendly manner. “Don’t think this is over,” Undercut said cheerfully, eyes dark, and Noya didn’t relax until they were both retreating away from him. As the situation was over, interest in them dropped and people started walking to their destinations again. When Undercut and Brown turned from the corner, Noya glanced at the nearby clock before quietly following the two, motioning for Suga to stand guard. Suga nodded. The guys had stopped nearby, just enough to be private but not far enough for Noya to be unable to hear them. They were speaking so loudly.

“Hey, calm down,” Undercut said. “That brat and the old man were not worth it.”

“Yeah,” Brown sighed and combed his hair in frustration. “I know. I don’t know, I was a bit on the edge. I have no idea why. The girl was not worth possibly getting thrown out of the competition this early, or at all, really.”

“You know it, Boba. I have to say I was pretty annoyed too. Man, we got our arses handed to us by
Undercut hummed. “Well, that brat definitely didn’t have a build of a middle blocker. He was leaner and seemed fast, you saw him dash before the girl too, so a libero is a possibility. They always have a saving complex. Think of Arata, always running after every kitten and puppy!” he laughed.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Undercut continued, grinning in a menacing but cheerful manner. “If he or the old man come across us again, let’s just have fun and beat them and their team up, teach them a lesson. Nothing a good taste of dirt doesn’t fix!”

Brown rolled his eyes. “Don’t get too excited. This could be the last we ever see them.”

“Well, we’ll have to beat Karasuno first. That should be so much fun!”

“Terushima, you always sound so bloodthirsty when you get excited, like a dog who doesn’t know his limits. Don’t get caught up in the moment and get us into trouble. You forget your common sense the minute you fixate on something.”

“Nah, man, like, if those guys came up to us and started posturing again, I would be tempted but, like, what are the chances?” Undercut laughed. Noya stepped away from his hiding place, nodded at Suga, and dashed through the corridor to the direction Hinata and Shimizu had disappeared to. They would be their opponents in the next match, apparently. He had to tell Tanaka.

Karasuno would show them how they would fly over them and leave them watching them soar.

“Guys and girls, come around for a second.”

Kinoshita looked up from the practice with a frown. Takeda-sensei sounded more serious than he had been in a while. It was nearing October, so they still had time to practice. Soon they would have their practice match against Nekoma, again, which they would probably lose, again, but at least they would see how they had improved since the Tokyo training trip. All good in a day’s work as they say. It wasn’t easy to accept, but in the end, they would triumph. They just had to catch up.

“What happened?” Ukai asked as they all gathered around. Takeda-sensei had a grim expression on his face. Kinoshita felt worried.

“It’s not easy to say this but… We are moving up on the roster at the tournament. Jouzenji withdrew from the competition.”

“What?” Hinata burst out, looking extremely shocked. Others looked very perplexed and confused too, demand for explanation put on their faces.

“Yes, it’s… I don’t want to ask you but has anyone of you had any contact with the school and their team? Anything at all?”

A few of them shook their heads but, surprisingly, Noya and Suga nodded.
“Yeah, two of them were harassing Shimizu after the first round of preliminaries,” Suga said.

“Do you remember who they were?”

“Undercut and Brown,” Noya answered promptly but then pondered for a moment. “I’m not really sure what their real names are if I’m honest. They probably mentioned them but… It’s been a while since we met them.”

“Those names are, unfortunately, enough,” Takeda-sensei said bleakly. “The captain of team Jouzenji, Terushima Yuuji, and the vice-captain, Bobata Kazuma, were found two weeks ago in need of a surgery. One of them had a broken leg and another bad inner bleeding. There were found brown strands all over the place like one of them had their hair gripped far too harshly or even ripped off. We don’t know details but they are clearly not able to compete and the whole team withdrew in their honour.

“There was no evidence of the culprits.”

There was a horrified silence in the gym as everyone seemed too horror-struck to say anything. Kinoshita felt sick. This was… This was awful. What the hell was happening?!

“Was it you, bastards?!” Daichi roared, turning directly to look at the stands where one of the black-clad men was standing and watching them, listening to them, and noting every little thing they were doing. “What the hell had they done to deserve this?!”

“We-“

“Nothing entitles anyone to take these sorts of liberties!” Tanaka screamed, adding fuel to the rage growing in them. “Absolutely nothing, do you hear me, you fucker?!”

“Listen-“

“This is the sickest things I have ever heard, this destruction of others! Tell us what you are really after and leave the hell alone everyone else that have nothing to do with us!” Daichi glared, ready to fight anyone, anything, right now. Kinoshita looked around, feeling the strain in the air. Tanaka and Noya were glaring and clenching their fists, clearly ready to assist Daichi if he decided that it was time to act. Narita was holding Ennoshita, who was retching outside the gym doors. Shimizu was holding on Yachi who didn’t seem to even comprehend what was happening. Her eyes were wide and lost and searching for answers that were not there. Yamaguchi was shaking, looking ready collapse at any moment. Hinata, who stood beside him, looked ready to join Ennoshita by the doors. Tsukishima had a harsh grip on Kageyama’s shoulder, as if he was keeping himself still only by anchoring himself. Kageyama looked pale under his slightly tanned skin and seemed to need Tsukishima’s hold to restraint himself too. They leaned towards each other, all previous irritation seemingly forgotten now, at this moment.

“We did not do this!” the man yelled back, and gripped the railing. This was the most emotion Kinoshita had seen him expend than ever before. “I swear to you, this was not on us!”

“Why should we believe you? It’s not like anything good has come from you, only trouble and grief,” Ukai asked, eyes dark and fists ready to find a victim, preferably dressed in black.

“Do I look like I have answers to you?” the man laughed, a bit cold, and Kinoshita looked as Yamaguchi jumped. He sent a weird look at the man, eyes narrowing in consideration. “There is nothing we can do to convince you.”

“You could tell us your fucking objective!” Tanaka yelled.
“Without endangering it, no, we cannot.”

“Then we’ll withdraw too,” Daichi said, and looked around. No one clearly wanted to do that but they solemnly showed their captain their support. If it was… If it saved others…

“That’s a useless notion. This has gone too far already,” the man said and pinched the bridge of his nose. When Tanaka had opened his mouth to yell, he raised his hand to demand silence.

“Look, I know how this must look. We have had you followed for months but this was already coming. As soon as our objective was lining with your team, it was bound to attract unwanted attention.”

“Start talking without all the riddles, you black fuckers!” Narita blurted out, and Kinoshita blinked. With all his younger siblings, Narita rarely if ever cursed. Ennoshita was leaning against the wall, ready to just sit down and let the day be over. He looked so very, very tired.

“And I told you, I can’t,” the man burst out. “Do you think I enjoy seeing you all desperate and hearing about other people being hurt, perhaps inadvertently because of us? No, I fucking do not. None of us do, for…” he cursed and hit the railing with his fist.

“There are other people that would like to see us gone from the world. What we can do, the only thing we can do, is to try to keep you all safe until the storm is over. If we disappear now, or if you do, that storm will only turn into a hurricane. It would be an open war without the public’s eyes on you. I’m sorry to say but you are now the only thing keeping everything held together.

“Leaving now would only mean for everyone else to have a target painted on their chests.”

The man refused to say anymore, despite the badgering and demanding Ukai and Daichi gave him and, in the end, left the gym only for his partner to take his place and keep on the silence. Ukai had even climbed up to yell at his face but he had not even winced once. Kinoshita bit his lip, and looked at the defeated expressions on his teammates faces. They had gotten someone hurt, so hurt, that they would not be able to play volleyball for a while at least. The damage to their team’s psyche was considerable.

They could not even leave this web that had been woven around them.

“Right now, we are at a no win situation however we act if that man is to be believed. That is the fact. We just have to wait for a moment. We’ll wait for the perfect moment, and then we’ll perform a counterattack,” Daichi said as he turned to his team. Kinoshita stared at his captain. He had tear-stained cheeks and frustration written on his face. The skin on his hands was red for he had punched the wall a few times in anger. He lowered his voice. “Attract no attention. Abstain from fights. Keep up the act of normalcy, so if you’re already practicing with someone, do not give anyone an idea that anything is wrong. Generally stay low but stay ready. We are going to be on our guard, and when we see the opportunity, we’ll take it. We are going to bring them all down, without exceptions. Any info you gain is to be shared with others. We are going to fucking fly. Are you with me?”

Kinoshita hardened his expression.

“Yes, captain,” he said, his voice echoing others, and in his mind, he promised himself on one thing. When he got home, he would tell everything to his brother. They would need the support when the time came. He would not ask for any permissions but he did not think he would be denied. Not anymore. Telling other teams would be bad for a variety of reasons, still, but the police…

They would have to trust someone at some point and the black-clad men were not people that they
could. That had been already demonstrated by far too many times. They only cared about their objective.

Yamamoto was the chance.

This was the accident.

There would not be a pattern if Kinoshita could help it.

“Captain, I have something to say.”

Everyone turned to look at the one who had spoken. It was Yamaguchi.

“What is it?” Yamaguchi’s eyes flickered at the man who had replaced the one that usually followed them on the stands before lowering his voice until Kinoshita had to strain to hear what he had to say.

“I think I have heard the man’s voice before. Not the one that is up there now but the one before him. No, I’m sure of it, I recognized his laugh and I think… I think I know that man.”
Kageyama sighed deeply as he was walking away from the school after practice. He was just ready to fall down to his bed and forgetting he had homework to complete for the next day. Did it even matter if he finished them? There was other much more important stuff to even think about than homework. He wouldn’t need to analyse any sort of literature in the future; that was not where he was heading. Maths was important, yes, but sometimes he felt like the teachers were trying to make it as headache inducing as they possibly could, possibly as revenge from all the hours they had had to spend in their maths caves or wherever. Neither of those could help him, them, in any way at the moment anyway.

Couldn’t he just play volleyball? Was that so wrong, to just want to… play, without any kinds of ulterior motives? Without wanting to give up before he had reached the top? He just wanted to be himself, play volleyball with… with friends.

They were friends, right? Kageyama hadn’t really had friends before since he didn’t think he could count Kitagawa Daichi as a friendly place. He was kind of awkward and socially inept, he could admit that. Getting to know people or having a conversation just didn’t come easy to him. When did they cross the line between strangers to teammates to friends? Did they ever?

“Hey, Hinata…”

“What?” Hinata asked from his side, where he was leading his bike. Kageyama stared down at him, his blue eyes intense. If someone knew, it had to be Hinata. That stupid ball of fluff was always making friends with everyone, it was ridiculous. Hinata stared back at him, brown eyes lighting up in the street lights, burning like the sun. They were ridiculous too.

“Are we friends or not?” he blurted out, and inwardly winced. So much for having tact. He could hear his mother chiding him, telling him to think before opening his mouth. It was alright to be quiet, to now say much, he remembered her words, but say what you need to with purpose and tact. He could hear his father laughing at him, saying that he had somehow inherited his grandfather’s nature despite him rarely ever seeing him. He would become terrifying, his father would say, whenever he opened his mouth, and you have gained his gift. They would both smile, however, and tell him to just wait for the right people who could hear what he wanted to say, that there would be people who could understand him without him saying a word.

He would just have to be patient.

Kageyama was patient. Well, he was admittedly hot-tempered but he could wait for however long in order to achieve his goals.

Hinata was looking at him strangely, as if Kageyama was a puzzle he was trying to solve. He felt uneasy. He opened his mouth to say something, probably just as tactless as before, but Hinata beat him to it.

“Are you stupid or something?” Hinata asked. Kageyama bristled but Hinata seemed so completely mystified that he could see him being sincere with his question. Kageyama deflated, and nodded. Hinata continued to stare at him before he just…
He just threw his head back and laughed loudly into the night.

“What?!” Kageyama barked in embarrassment. He wanted to fasten his pace, to leave Hinata alone, but he wasn’t willing to leave without getting an answer either.

Hinata snorted. He raised a hand to wipe out a few stray tears from his eyes. “You are pretty stupid, aren’t you, Kageyama? Your grades suck, your people skills suck. The only thing that you don’t suck at is volleyball. I hope you don’t plan on doing anything else professionally because you would fail so, so bad!”

“Like you’re the one to talk! You have worse grades than I do!” Kageyama protested. Hinata giggled again.

“Maybe, but at least people don’t run away when they see my face!” he said. “Anyway, what do you think? Are we friends?”

“How should I know?” Kageyama asked, annoyed. “I haven’t had any.”

Hinata blinked. “Not ever?”

He was quiet for a moment. Should he tell him? It was Hinata, but also… It was Hinata. Yes, right, he could trust Hinata. “It’s… my parents, they are busy people so while they did raise me, I was more often handled by a housekeeper than anyone else. I was actually home schooled before junior high, you know?” Kageyama said. Hinata was shocked.

“I thought you went to Akiyama Elementary! You told me that… at some point!”

This time it was Kageyama’s turn to blink, dumbfounded. “You remember that?”

“Duh.”

“I did go there for a while, at least long enough to discover volleyball. My grandfather had an accident, a very bad one, when I was in third grade and, in the end, it was just easier to home school me until we got everything in order. My grandfather is… rich,” he said haltingly. He hated admitting the fact to anyone. The boys he had met before junior high had taken it as their mission to try to make him pay for everything they did after they had noticed. Needless to say, he did not mention it to anyone once he started at Kitagawa Daiichi. “It took a while to settle his things since he couldn’t run his business anymore as efficiently. My father had to step in but he was never really interested in what grandfather did so my mother tried her best. In the end, they decided to merge with some others but by that time I had already ready for junior high.”

“Whoa… So you didn’t really have any friends as a kid? What about juni-, no, never mind,” Hinata interrupted himself hastily. He gave him a small smile. It wasn’t a pitying one, Kageyama noticed, but it wasn’t happy either. It was… reassuring?

“Kageyama… I can honestly say that, congratulations, you have achieved friends in high school. We should give you a medal or something,” Hinata said. “I think I can say that on behalf of everyone, maybe except Tsukishima although he has been a bit mellower lately I think. We, I, consider you a friend. You are our setter. It wouldn’t be the same with Suga-san. You’re my setter. We have that insane quick, right? Do you think we could achieve that without trust, and friendship?”

Kageyama considered that. “Didn’t you swear that you would beat me one day?” Hinata shrugged.

“Who said you couldn’t be friends with your rival? And I will beat you one day!” he declared with a grin. “Look forward to eat the dust I’ll leave you in.”
Kageyama ducked his head, a small but gentle smile spreading onto his face. It was a fleeting one, but more honest than he had given in ages.

“Like you have a snowball’s chance in hell!” he said. Hinata made a face at him before yelling some nonsense about catching up to his kingly ways. Kageyama snarked back, and then they were off to a screaming match filled with profanities. It was a familiar pattern. The way they just could understand what the other meant by throwing insults at the other was something he had not really experienced before, not like this. It was almost… light-hearted. He was filled with a warm feeling.

…Huh.

So this was how it was like to have a friend.

“Aww, isn’t this a warm sight? I think my heart is just bursting from all the joy and glee in the air!” a voice called from in front of them. Both Hinata and Kageyama stopped and turned their head towards it in unison. Kageyama glowered while Hinata openly gaped.

“Grand King!”

“The one and only!” Oikawa sarcastically bowed. He was standing there in ordinary clothes and not in a sport outfit. Black slacks, a blazer over a button-up, hair styled flatter than usual, some over his face, with more gel than there was in a hair salon… Kageyama felt immediately threatened. There was just something too casual about Oikawa today. He looked like someone from a magazine but…

That’s it, he realized as he struggled to control his facial expression. He was like straight from a magazine and that was all others would see. He was noticed but only as another pretty face. In sports clothes or school uniform, he would be recognized. Like this, he was no longer Oikawa but just someone to giggle over or ignore completely in jealousy. There was more of a chance of attention being drawn on the person next to him as the object of interest. It was reverse psychology, kind of, like he was screaming for them to look at him but then diverting the attention to others.

“What do you want?” he asked harshly, tensing as Oikawa sent him an unsettling look. It was not alright to attempt to bring attention to Karasuno more than they already had.

Go away, he willed, but of course Oikawa never listened to him.

“I just wanted to see how my darling little Tobio-chan and his unnecessary companion were doing. Is that so bad?” Oikawa asked back, grin never faltering. Hinata growled beside him but said nothing when Kageyama rested a hand over his shoulder. Oikawa’s eyes flickered on his hand in amusement. “Oh, so he’s been upgraded to a guard dog? How nice of you, Tobio-chan.”

“Let’s just go, Hinata. Evidently, he has nothing important to say,” Kageyama said, his intent on walking past Oikawa without further words clear in his stride. Hinata hurried to catch up, eyes suspiciously kept on Oikawa. They did manage to walk past him but as soon as they had their backs against him, Oikawa spoke again.

“Game changer.” Kageyama froze. Next to him, Hinata also stopped in confusion.

“That is what they are looking for. The game changer,” Oikawa said, a smug and disdainful undertone in his voice. “There are men following you, looking for one of you… A person, who changes the rules of the court.”

“What are you talking about?” Kageyama grit his teeth. As he had feared Oikawa had started digging around and, perhaps, actually found something. He closed his eyes. Great. Another person he had dragged into this.
The men in black, after you, stalking you as their prey,” Oikawa said. Hinata bristled. Kageyama clenched his fists in his shirt in effort to stay still. He was pretty sure Oikawa could see that but he didn’t want to see his face.

“Are you done?” he asked but Oikawa only gave a short, nasty laugh in response. Kageyama pressed his lips together tight enough that no colour was left in them.

“Was this so important for you to actually come here, Oikawa-san?” Hinata asked, turning around. Kageyama blinked.

“Oh?” he heard Oikawa utter an amused sound. “No Grand King anymore? Did I hit a nerve?”

Hinata scoffed. Hinata. “You are saying those things as if they were something to be anxious about or something we didn’t already know. So, I ask again, Oikawa-san, was telling us about the men following us so important you had to come here yourself? By yourself?”

“What?”

“We already knew all that,” Hinata continued as if he hadn’t heard him. “And I bet we know more than you about it than you anyway. We’ve known about them for months. We are still here. What does this say about you, trying to scare us into submission, maybe?

“Don’t worry, we’ll beat you in the tournament, don’t worry about that. See you in October.”

Hinata turned back around and strode forward purposefully. Kageyama stared after him in bemusement. What was that about?

“Kageyama,” Oikawa said and he started. What…? “Be careful. Those men are dangerous. Don’t give them an inch or their take the whole foot.”

“…Yes,” he said, not knowing what else to say. Oikawa stared at him solemnly.

“One of you is working for the men, but if Shorty is to be believed, you knew that already?”

Kageyama haltingly nodded. “You’re in too deep already, aren’t you?”

It wasn’t really a question. Kageyama remained silent. Oikawa studied him before nodding.

“I don’t know who the target really is except for that name I heard around, or the person already watching you. I’m going to be on the lookout, though.”

“Why?” he couldn’t help asking which Oikawa only shrugged as a response to.

“It’s in my blood,” he only answered. Kageyama frowned, and then sighed.

“…You do know that there are two different groups following us, don’t you?”

This time, it was Oikawa who froze. The look in his eyes intensified. “What did you say?”
Kageyama just turned around and walked towards where Hinata was already waiting for him. It was only fair if Oikawa was truly trying to warn them for him to warn him too. Besides, it was really dangerous to be walking around alone anymore, especially if he persists in trying to meddle. Unfortunately, persistence is one of the things he had in spades. He should know because he admired Oikawa for his perseverance his entire junior high career.

“What did the Grand King want?” Hinata asked when Kageyama reached him.

“Nothing,” he answered. “Nothing that we didn’t really know already.”

It was a nice night. Something flashed in the sky and Kageyama uncharacteristically thought it looked like a shooting star for a moment.

He wished he wouldn’t lose the warm feeling he had gained before all this was over but inwardly sighed. A wish like that… they were always doomed from the start, weren’t they?

Always.

***

Oikawa stared as Kageyama and Hinata disappeared from his sight before dialling a number from his memory.

(Never write it down anywhere, Tooru.)

The call connected but no one spoke.

“There is another group in the game, confirmed by a member of the crows.”

“Anything else?”

“They were aware of there being a threat. I'm assuming they have made some sort of precautions. The conclusion is based on the conversation.”

“Good work. Keep us posted.”

The call disconnected.

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Hinata lay down on his bed. He had just had dinner with his parents and sister, finally all four together. He usually himself arrived late enough that at least his father and little sister had eaten dinner already. His mom had an irregular schedule as a nurse, so she wasn’t always at home. They had it pretty good, Hinata thought. They were an ordinary family. His little sister had just started elementary school close by, his father was a vet and his mom was a nurse. He was really grateful that they didn’t expect him to turn into a medical genius because he was not one. He barely managed to pass his classes as it was and physical education was pretty much the only one he was getting all A’s. Not that Kageyama was much better, he quickly thought, and then grinned.

Kageyama was finally opening up to him. They were getting better in volleyball with their practice with Ukai’s grandfather and otherwise too. Just a few days ago he had told him about his family and Hinata had seen how difficult it had been for him. Kageyama was his best friend and best rival even if they played different positions. Playing with him was the most freeing experience Hinata had ever had but also the most inspiring. Kageyama was just so good with setting and controlling the game,
Hinata wanted to be the one he would send all his sets.

He licked his lips. Yes, all of them. He then scowled as he in turn remembered the Grand King’s entrance. Kageyama had informed the team about Oikawa’s digging and none of them were happy about it. Even the black-clad men had seemed none too happy but who cares what they thought, really. Stupid people made everything bad happen. Hinata didn’t care that they had claimed that some other group had been responsible for Yamamoto and Jouzenji. So what if they hadn’t done the deeds themselves? They were still responsible in his mind because they had followed Karasuno, thus creating this whole mess. And now they weren’t even subtle about it! He knew he wasn’t the brightest pen but even he had seen them following them around. Spitefully he wished that they had followed Oikawa but then winced. No, he really didn’t.

He wasn’t the only one with these thoughts. Tanaka was too still suspicious about the black-clad men. He claimed nothing good came from them and had tried more than once pick up a fight one way or another, especially after Yamaguchi had said he believed he knew of the men. Hinata stared at his ceiling. Nothing really came from that either. Yamaguchi had also admitted that he didn’t exactly remember where he recalled the man from but he would continue to observe, he said, and immediately tell them when he did. He had seemed really annoyed at not being able to place the man so Hinata felt inclined to believe him. Yamaguchi had claimed, though, that he didn’t believe he was a danger to them which Tanaka had contested immediately. The others didn’t seem to want to argue about that which had pretty much killed the argument before it really could even begin as there was another, more daunting possibility now.

A very real possibility of two groups after them instead of just one, with even more suspicious motives behind them. Who were they? What did they want? And another – was one of them on their side or not? That was actually raised by Yamaguchi, endorsed hesitantly by Suga. They both believed that the man had been sincere with his words spat out thoughtlessly. Tanaka, and surprisingly Asahi, had seemed more suspicious but nothing came from it. The next day Kinoshita had started the day with claiming he had told everything to his brother, the police, without asking for permission. It gave birth to another argument but a hushed one. It had been too late to do anything about that anymore anyway.

They wouldn’t be having any practice matches with other schools before October, Ukai had said, despite Takeda-sensei wanting to try to get them some. The people could continue practicing with the people they had arrangements with but they would go nowhere as a whole team. He didn’t want another Yamamoto or Jouzenji. Even Nekoma was, at the moment, on their banned list so Hinata had to resign into not seeing Kenma for a while. They were too busy and lived too far away to see each other without the excuse of volleyball.

He had complained to Yachi but after hearing him out she had only pat him on the head and asked if he knew where she could find Kageyama and Tsukishima. She apparently had a message for them from Takeda-sensei and that’s why she truly had sought Hinata out. She had paled and apologized for sounding very rude. Hinata had pouted but, nevertheless, had pointed her in the right direction. He had followed her until she found Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. He had to hide his grin when he saw Yamaguchi blush at her. He had a crush! As soon as Yachi and Tsukishima had left the hearing range he had teased the heck out of him.

Yamaguchi was still avoiding him but it had been worth it to see him brighter red than a tomato.

His phone flashed and he saw an incoming message.

Kenma!

Hinata quickly tapped his phone and opened the message.
‘I heard you aren’t coming here in October.’

‘Yeah,’ Hinata typed. ‘We are strictly banned from matches with others who are not already part of our training.’

‘To avoid another Yamamoto?’

‘Yeah. Also Jouzenji.’

‘I heard about that. So it really is connected.’

‘That’s what we think,’ he wrote. ‘It makes no sense otherwise.’

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t really know. Noya-san, Suga-san, Shimizu-san and I met two of the players. They were interested in getting Shimizu-san’s number but I got her out when their attention was on Noya-san and Suga-san. The next thing we know is that we are being moved up a match.’

‘What makes you think it’s about you, then?’

Hinata stared at the screen. Should he…? But Kenma was already involved, so he didn’t count. Plus, after Kinoshita, this was nothing.

‘It was implied by the men in black. Apparently there are two groups now.’

‘Wow.’

‘I know, right?’

‘I was contacted by an officer a couple of days ago. He was asking for help.’

‘Was his name Kinoshita?’

‘I think it was.’

‘He’s the older brother of one of my teammates,’ Hinata told him. ‘We are getting the police involved.’

There was a pause in messages for a bit but just as Hinata had put the phone down, it flashed again.

‘I lied.’

‘About what?’

‘Kinoshita-san contacted me a while ago. It was because of him I tried to take a photo of the men and got my phone taken.’

Hinata blinked, taken aback. ‘Kenma, don’t do things like that! Kuroo will lock you in a cage in a basement somewhere!’

‘He won’t. I got the pictures on his phone with his permission. They are with the police, have been since the training camp.’

‘WHAT?!’ Hinata wrote in shock. ‘The police knew already?!’

‘I think there’s some involvement, yes. I don’t know what or who but I’ve been looking into things
with Kuroo. We are in contact with Kinoshita-san.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me????’

‘I was asked not to. You would’ve told your team.’

Hinata paused. Yes, he would have but it wasn’t supposed to be Kenma’s decision. It should’ve been his. His phone flashed.

‘For the record, I’m sorry. Kinoshita-san thought he would keep things on the low. He thinks there’s something strange going on with the force.’

‘With the police?’

‘Yeah. He wrote yesterday that his superior wasn’t as surprised as he thought he should’ve been when he presented his case. The force may be compromised.’ Another message arrived before Hinata could answer. ‘That’s Kuroo’s idea. Kinoshita-san said nothing about that.’

‘Wow.’

‘Kuroo’s here. Just in case, delete these messages. It won’t do much if they hack your phone but if someone just takes your phone, they cannot at least read them. Be careful.’

Hinata sighed and stood up, intending to find his sister. He needed a really good Natsu-hug. Everything was all too complicated but anything could be made better by Natsu and her magical hugs. He hadn’t needed to worry about telling anything to Kenma. He already knew things, probably even more than he did. Or another side, at least. Kenma was smart, and Kuroo was even smarter.

Hinata wished he could see them. Tsukishima was doing some training with Bokuto and possibly with Kuroo too but he couldn’t ask him about anything. He would only give him a snide remarks or ignore him completely. Hinata scowled. He really didn’t deserve his height.

‘Done. You too,’ he wrote, and then added almost as an afterthought, ‘Send me the pictures? We could use them to identify the men.’

From an unknown number he was shared almost instantly two pictures, one grainier than the other, but the men were nearly recognizable. The images didn’t look like photos, not really, but more like digitally manipulated pictures. To him they didn’t look any different from usual – and how sad was that there was a ‘usual’? – but Hinata still downloaded them before adding the number under ‘Kuroo’ and deleting the messages. Maybe they would help Yamaguchi to jog his memory. He would have to remember to show them to him. Hinata tossed his phone on his bed and then left the room.

He had to see a sister about a hug.

***

Asahi smiled as all members of the team turned towards Yachi and screamed ‘Happy birthday!’ when she entered the gym. They were lying low, despite the words from the black-clad man claiming it was useless, but today, on the 4th of September, they wouldn’t. Besides, all sides probably knew where to find them anyway and that they wouldn’t be going anywhere before October and the preliminaries so ‘lying low’ probably wasn’t the correct term anyway. Asahi banished the thoughts from his head. Not today. Today was all about Yachi. She did seem flabbergasted but after she got over her shock she turned into a delighted mess all over the gym.

The team had brought some sodas and juice boxes and some snacks for everyone to enjoy. It was not
every day one of them turned sixteen and they all knew that. Well, that Shimizu knew and decided to share. Asahi did agree that they needed some happiness amidst all the weirdness and chaos.

They had gotten her a few presents as well. Nothing big, just some trinkets and sweets. Yachi had been over the moon, however, and claimed it was the best birthday ever.

“Usually I have a joint birthday with my cousin that the whole family joins. We are about a month apart so it’s easier that way. This time, though, I have a birthday all of my own! I’m so happy!” she had grinned but then flushed as if ashamed. “Not that I don’t like spending time with my cousin or sharing the attention but it’s just… This is just for me.”

Asahi had laughed with others at her horribly embarrassed expression and even Tsukishima had patted her head in what looked like consolation while Noya and Hinata had bounced around her, trying to cheer her up. She had brightened after that, ashamed red giving way to an excited flush. The team was chattering about anything and everything. Yachi had sat down between Tsukishima and Kageyama, somehow dragging the two down with her when they had seemed about to start a fight. Hinata, Noya and Yamaguchi were sitting in front of them and Noya was showing them all card tricks. Tanaka was laughing with Ennoshita and Narita. Kinoshita had to leave early that day but had given his small package for them to give to Yachi. It had held a small hair pin with a bell on it which chimed as Yachi walked. She had insisted on putting it on her immediately. Asahi had looked at his own small bag of seashells he had collected earlier for her by the sea but Yachi had looked just as delighted with them as she had with the pin. Others had given her sweets or something like that but Kageyama had given her an envelope and demanded that she only opened it at home. Hinata had looked strangely knowing and only laughed when Tanaka and Noya badgered Kageyama to tell them what he had gotten her. It made Asahi think he might know more about it than anyone else, perhaps even what the present was. It wasn’t really a surprise. Hinata was probably the closest person on the team to Kageyama.

He returned to present when Suga and Daichi laughed at something the other had said next to him. Even Shimizu was giggling. He felt as if he had missed something and said just that. His friends just laughed at him and let him in on the joke. Takeda-sensei and Ukai were sitting at the door, enjoying the sunny weather. No one else was present.

Asahi looked around. No one, indeed.

He smiled. It was really a nice day.

(He sneaked around to look at the envelope and told everyone that Kageyama had gotten Yachi a day at the nearby luxury spa. The ensuing chaos was hilarious.)

(He laughed harder than in a long time watching Yamaguchi and Shimizu’s nearly jealous, although probably for different reasons, expressions and the way Noya, Tanaka and Hinata teased Kageyama about his generous present which left him an interesting shade of red and purple. It ended with him trying to chase them down the gym.)

A couple of days later Takeda-sensei presented them with a photograph taken from the party. He had made copies for all of them, and Kinoshita lamented not having been able to be there. Yachi poked at her pin and it chimed as bright as her smile was.

“But you were with us.”

And that was that.
Chapter End Notes

Next time, it's time for the preliminaries and the match against Seijou! I wonder what that might bring us...

Thanks a bunch, everyone!
Part II: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I'm trying my hardest to maintain my "at least once a week" schedule. I'm starting to work on my Master's thesis in a week or so, so we'll see how that'll go. This story was supposed to be about 15 chapters maximum and finished by this time but then it blew up on my face like NOPE, SORRY GIRL.

In addition, we'll soon diverge from canon. That's going to be fun ;)

Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were ready. It was the end of October, and they were ready for the preliminaries. It would be tough. First, they had to win against Wakunan and then have a rematch against Seijou. After their win – and they would win – they would have a match against Shiratorizawa and then it was the nationals.

They would make it, Daichi thought as he walked to the gym that held the tournament with his team. They had sworn it, and they would. No team was as yearning for the slot in the nationals than Karasuno. The Battle of the Garbage Heap was waiting for them. The crappiest but the best year was behind them, probably also ahead of them but that was a whole another lament, and they deserved every good thing that could come to them. They would take what they deserved. They were the crows, kings of the garbage and concrete jungle.

(The birds of death, a sign of war.)

They were coming.

"Winter is coming," Suga chuckled next to him. Daichi blinked in confusion.

"It's only October?" he said, which made Suga laugh louder.

"But it's still true, isn't it? Also, it was a reference which you didn't get, you uncultured dummy," he answered, amusement rolling off of him in waves. "You were also mumbling out loud."

Daichi blushed. "Sorry."

"Don't be. We are coming for them and none of them will see us before it's too late," Suga said. His eyes were bright with conviction. Daichi grinned. With Suga as his vice-captain and the rest of the team behind him, he was sure they would be able to take anything and anyone, no matter what tried to hamper their way. They were strong. September had been a good month for them. Despite not being able to have practice matches against other schools, the memories of summer and its teams that totally outmatched them had made an unforgettable impact on them. Each one of them had pushed past their limits, together as a team and separately as a player, and they were ready to face the preliminaries. After that, they would be able to train even harder to be able to match the top of the whole Japan.

None could say they weren't ambitious or hungry for victory on the battlefield that was the volleyball
They had a lot to prove, though. They had skipped a match which had made a lot of other players very unhappy with them despite it not being their fault. Technically. Or at least as far as the outsiders knew. As far as Daichi was concerned too. He refused to believe Jouzenji’s withdrawal was Karasuno’s fault. They were victims of the circumstance as well. At first, yeah, he had to admit he had felt guilty. Their involvement had put three people in hospital. Yet, there was nothing they could do about it. Something or someone, possibly even in plural, was after one of them, a member of their family. However, Daichi had also seen despair and anger, confusion and fear, written on every team member’s face after they received the news. There was no faking it. Whoever was the target did not want to be, if they even knew they were the one. Whoever was keeping an eye on them didn’t seem happy about the situation either. It would be up to all of them to protect that person as well as everyone else in their little murder of crows.

A game changer. What an awful codename that gave nothing away. Hinata had filled them on the night Oikawa had caught up to him and Kageyama. What was a game changer? A setter, who controlled the court? A middle blocker, who could turn around spike after spike until the rival team’s spirit broke? A wing spiker, who could break through the walls and flip the board on their favour? A libero, who could save a game and keep the ball in the air, letting them try again and again? A pin server that could tide them over from near defeat? A manager, who kept up with the team and helped make strategies? A coach who brought them up from the concrete and gave them all wings? A teacher who was there to bring them up whenever they felt like giving up?

They were all game changers in volleyball. That’s why it was a team sport. Did that moniker perhaps have a different meaning that they didn’t know? Was it mocking them? Was it meant to be admiring?

Another horrifying thought was the idea of Oikawa and Kinoshita’s brother digging deeper into this mess of theirs. Hinata had also admitted that Kenma and Kuroo were also keeping up with the police and he showed the pictures Kenma had given him. Daichi had thought them fake but Yachi had noted that they were just digitally enhanced, probably taken from too far to be useful and later modified to be more of use. Daichi had thought they just looked the same as ever with their black clothes and hidden features but Yamaguchi had asked for Hinata to send them to him. He had then spent a lot of time staring at his phone whenever they had a break and flicking his eyes at the men watching their practice.

(Do you see them? They got a free ticket to their next match.)
(I doubt they would have made it if they had gone against Jouzenji.)
(Wakunan will crush them.)
(Didn’t they go toe to toe against Seijou?)
(I heard they had a pair of freaks as first years.)
(Probably all rumours.)
(They’ll drop out soon, mark my words.)
(Just look at them, trying to be all cool… Like they deserve to be here.)
(They should’ve just stayed away.)

The whispers followed Karasuno as they walked past the corridors towards their match. Daichi kept a smile plastered on his face even though he itched to strike back. His shoulders were tense under his
jersey and his stride was stiff. He could feel Suga next to him, all coiled and ready to attack at the slightest of threat. He was talking out loud, seemingly ignoring the people around them, looking at them past their noses, but his voice had a cloying edge that hid poison. Daichi had no doubt that the rest of them were in similar states although he didn’t bother checking.

They had a lot to prove, and they would start on Wakutani South.

The whispers and sneers didn’t end even when they did their warm-ups in the gym. People kept staring at them and Daichi could hear a jeer or two although they were clearly not meant for them to hear. Jouzenji was a kind of a favourite because of their attitude towards volleyball. They weren’t the best and weren’t the favourite to bet on going to the nationals, those slots belonged to Seijou and Shiratorizawa, but they were expected to make it until they eventually lost against either of them. Jouzenji made volleyball look like fun and not a competition, someone spoke loudly in the stands, and Daichi frowned.

It was a sad day if someone needed to see another team play to think volleyball was fun.

Why were they even playing then? Wakunan, bless them, didn’t seem inclined to start a fight or look down on them. They clearly expected to win, naturally, but they weren’t going to take anything granted. Daichi skimmed over the team. They seemed strong and had clearly firm bonds of trust. What they didn’t know, though, was that Karasuno had a lot more going on than anyone else. Theirs was a bond that was built on sweat and tears as well as heartbreak. No doubt there would be even more of those in the future but they would emerge victorious.

Their first set started strong. Kageyama and Hinata started off with their new freak quicks that gained them a lead of few points immediately. Tsukishima was efficiently blocking and intimidating players with his height. He had laughed at Hinata, claiming he had grown even taller from the last time they compared heights which left Hinata ticking with jealous rage and howling for the unfairness. Whenever a spike got through, Nishinoya and Daichi were there to receive it and Takana and Asahi to spike it back to where it came from. They were moving like a well-oiled machine and, Daichi noted, the whispers had changed from mean to incredulous.

(Did you see that freaky number 10? He was even faster than before!)

(Yes, but did you see those receives?! They were perfect!)

(Those tosses… Those tosses…!)

Of course, when they were nearing the end, Daichi got hit by a Wakunan player’s spike gone wrong. It hit his head on full power and he could feel his teeth clack painfully together. He could taste blood. Something felt loose in his mouth and he spat out a tooth. He was ushered out even though he wanted to keep going. Then again, he had to keep his head high. He gave the reigns to Ennoshita, who had the guts if not experience to take his place. He promised them all he would be back before Yachi dragged him out. He noted how a man dressed in black kept staring at Wakunan – and how weird was it that he could spot him from the crowd this easily? – and thought it strange.

He couldn’t help but feel like he should still be inside the court. What use was he outside it? What use was he as a captain if he couldn’t be there for his team?

(What if they managed to be even more successful there without him? Where would that leave him?)

At the time he was being looked at, Daichi could hear the whistle indicating the end of the first set. It had taken longer than he would’ve liked but at least it didn’t sound like they had lost the set. Yachi confirmed their win of 25-20. She was texting Takeda-sensei for play by play, Daichi suspected.
Apparently Wakunan had gained on them at the end of the match. Something about Ennoshita being nervous and not being able to find his place on the court? Daichi clenched his fists. He believed in his team, in Ennoshita who was the best candidate to replace him as the captain next year, but he wished he could’ve been able to be there – for himself and for the team.

“Kageyama-kun and Hinata-kun were taken off court.”

Daichi blinked.

“Why?” he asked, waiting for the doctor’s degree anxiously. Yachi kept staring at her phone that kept pinging quietly, classical notes filling the room.

“Sugawara-san and Ukai-san apparently decided it would be better for Ennoshita-san, who probably agreed. Sugawara-san and Narita-san replaced them on court.”

Daichi pondered that for a moment. Yes, that was a wise move. Ennoshita was more familiar with them than with the first years that could be intimidating in their fierce strength. Ennoshita had not been able to train with them for long as they had practiced to fix their issues and he had helped forming the synchronized attacks and fixing his own issues.

“He will play nicely with Suga and Narita. When Ennoshita gets used to being on court, they’ll switch Hinata and Kageyama back in. Synchronized attacks are all well and good but they won’t help us win the match. Not at this stage,” Daichi said. Yachi nodded and quickly tapped her phone. It pinged that soft little melody again, only now with a little techno colouring it.

“Ukai-san agrees with you. He also says that Sugawara-san is amazing the whole team with his unpredictability.”

Once again, Daichi hoped the doctor would hurry up. He had waited to see Suga’s strategies play out and now he’s not able to be there for them?

Not too long after the second set was over in Karasuno’s loss, Daichi was let out. He rushed inside the gym, Yachi barely keeping up with him, only to see that the third set had already started.

What a set it was.

Kageyama and Hinata were back on court, doing what they did best – dominating the court. Suga and Narita looked proud and determined even though they were back in the sidelines. Daichi could hear Yamaguchi gush about Suga’s sets and how he totally changed the game for Karasuno even though they still had lost 26-28. Apparently some of their difficulties had lied with Ennoshita, as well as their own unrefined and untested skills, but he had collected himself under the team and Suga’s care until they had actually forced the match into a deuce. And now…

They were perfect. Well, almost. There was fumbling and missed tosses but there was a kind of lightness that wasn’t there before. Daichi’s experienced eyes could see Suga all over the court even as he yelled encouragements from outside the court. The counterattack, and attack was the right word for it, was quick and decisive.

Karasuno won the third set 25 to Wakunan’s 18.

Daichi smiled, his expression slightly bitter. They were great even without him. He felt useless.

Yet, when he entered the fray, his team mates took to him like ducklings to their parent. Hinata was gushing, eyes bright. Yamaguchi was pointing at Suga, still, who in turn hadn’t turned back from embarrassed red. Nishinoya had jumped on Tanaka and blabbering about how it had been hard
receiving without Daichi. Soon, the entire team was telling him how he had been missed and how worried they had been about him. Tanaka had grinned and said something about being jealous. Daichi had gained the first ‘battle scar’ but that it had been his perk as the captain. Later, privately, Ennoshita had admitted that it had been scary, trying to control the rowdy team, especially the first years. He didn’t yet know how to handle them and stated that he would need guidance. Daichi could see he hadn’t fully embraced the future captaincy they would drop on his shoulders – they had given him hints and Ennoshita wasn’t stupid to not have seen them – but he was coming along nicely. He could admit his faults, which he also groused about under his breath although Daichi wasn’t sure if he was meant to hear them, and rise above them and, more importantly, help the team rise above theirs.

Although he still felt he should’ve been able to do more for them all, Daichi was glad that they had been able to win anyhow. He was glad that they were able to deal with a situation that demanded a quick change by being able to lean on others. It was the kind of team he wanted. It was the kind of team they were.

Daichi grinned so wide the people in the United States could probably see the tooth gap in his mouth.

***

“You were amazing earlier!” Yamaguchi sighed as they stretched, waiting for the match against Seijou and Aobajousai to start. Suga, the person he was talking to, flushed.

“It was a team effort,” he tried but Yamaguchi just shook his head.

“The serves… I wish I could serve as well. I mean, I’m trying but I still kind of suck. Especially during the Wakunan match, I really let us down at one point, I know I need to improve, and…” he looked around and lowered his voice. “I wasn’t sure if Ennoshita could’ve risen without you. He was so frustrated earlier during the game…”

Suga stared at Yamaguchi and he had to look away from the gaze. It was penetrating and kind of scary. Yamaguchi had to admit that if there was one person on the team he didn’t want to piss off, it was Sugawara.

“You’re still a first year, Yamaguchi, and just starting to find your place. I have faith in you that you’ll definitely beat me when you’re in my position,” Suga said, suddenly amused by something.

Yamaguchi blinked. He felt like he had missed something, especially since he was a wing spiker and not a setter, but Suga had already left his side to speak in lower tones to Daichi. Yamaguchi strained his hearing but could only catch two words: ‘vice’ and ‘captain’. He shook his head and changed his stance to stretch his arms this time. It was not important right now, whatever it was.

This match against Aobajousai, however, was. His eyes wandered around, flickering from teammate to teammate until they finally settled onto a black-clad figure on their side of the stand. His eyes narrowed as he took in the man. He still wore the black suit, still wore the hat and sunglasses inside the gym, gathering a few weirded out looks from the people close to him but nothing too major. He even noticed someone starting to chat with the man but he rebuffed the efforts, crossing his arms in clear dismissal.

Something about that man screamed that Yamaguchi knew him. There was something familiar in his mannerism, his appearance, even though he kept himself as impassive as ever. Something…*Something…*

“-guchi, Yamaguchi?” he blinked and swerved around to meet Tsukki’s cool eyes. “We’re starting.”
He gulped and turned his gaze towards the rival team. They seemed really calm and self-assured. Well, to be fair, Seijou had won the match against Datekou 2-0. They were a really strong team and they had won against Karasuno before although only just.

Yamaguchi scowled, suddenly determined.

Seijou would not win today.

“Yamaguchi.”

He started and laughed sheepishly, seeing the exasperated look on Tsukishima’s face. His arms were crossed, hips slightly unevenly lined as he leaned heavier on one foot over the other, head cocked on one side. Typical Tsukki, looking out for him.

“Sure, sure!” Yamaguchi chirped as he began following Suga towards the area non-regular players waited. He could almost feel the headshake Tsukki was probably doing, blond hair swinging from one side to another. Yamaguchi looked around and tried to remember his opponents’ names, not just their numbers and positions. Iwaizumi was easy to remember as the ace. He was standing close to the first years, Kin-Kindaichi? Kindaichi and Kunimi. They were chatting and laughing together. While Iwaizumi and Kindaichi seemed energetic and ready to battle, Kunimi looked almost disinterested and he kept glancing at the stands, almost as if he wanted to be anywhere else, Yamaguchi noted. He, for the life of his, couldn’t remember the third year middle blocker or wing spiker’s names. They stood together with the libero, Watari? The other setter on Seijou was standing next to a new player Yamaguchi hadn’t seen before. He looked like a mad dog that could give him rabies if he bit. Yamaguchi hoped his bark would be worse than his bite.

He spotted the captain of Seijou last, weirdly enough, since he had been a bit flamboyant every time Yamaguchi had seen him. He could see Oikawa trying to catch Kageyama’s eyes but he was stubbornly refusing to even look at Oikawa’s way which in turn seemed to make Oikawa even more determined to make eye contact. It was a strange sort of dance and, if they weren’t Kageyama and Oikawa, Yamaguchi would’ve thought it similar to some obscure courting rituals he had read on a Wikipedia marathon a couple of days ago when he hadn’t been able to sleep.

Yet, they were Kageyama and Oikawa, so it had to be about the weird conversation they had had. If only Oikawa could leave things alone…

The whistle was blown and the captains shook hands. The players lined up and bowed. Determined words were exchanged on both sides of the court.

The match started.

Yamaguchi gaped as the first point went to Karasuno after a lovely toss by Nishinoya of all people and a powerful spike from Asahi. He then grinned when he heard Oikawa’s groan. That’ll teach him to focus on his game and not Kageyama, who he had continued to stare even through the preparations of his first serve.

He continued to watch the game but he also kept looking at the stands. There was something in the air, he thought. The black-clad man was tenser than normal. He kept glancing at the match but, for some reason, most of his attention was elsewhere. Where, Yamaguchi couldn’t guess. His head seemed to be turning all over the place.

The first set, surprisingly, went for Karasuno. The new player, Kyoutani, was truly a beast on the court. Even Oikawa called him ‘mad dog’. It was pure luck they gained the last point. It had been a truly tight set, and the second was even more so. Yamaguchi bit his lip as Seijou kept its lead a few
points over Karasuno, who just couldn’t break through. And then, then they subbed in Sugawara. Yamaguchi waited in anticipation.

He was not disappointed.

Sugawara’s serves were on point, beautiful and hard to hit. He also kept targeting Kyoutani who was a weak link. And then Suga-san and Kageyama changed positions and Kageyama got a spike in!

“Nice spike, Kageyama!” he cheered. “Nice toss, Sugawara-san!” Suga-san flashed a smile his way while Hinata’s grudging compliments drew the attention of Kageyama. They were only one point behind now.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last.

Seijou gained a huge lead on Karasuno in quick succession. It seemed like a wall they just couldn’t break through. Yamaguchi inhaled deep and let his breath loose. He closed his eyes for a moment, recalling every bit of advice he had been given.

A whistle was blown. It was his turn, a pinch server’s turn.

Yamaguchi could admit he was nervous as he twirled the ball in his hands, but it was different from before. He had failed before, true. In the match against Wakunan he had let the team down. They were all more impressive than he was. While everyone else had had their moment to shine, he still hadn’t. He took a deep breath and threw the ball in the air.

This would be his.

They gained a point. The team was ecstatic. He was ecstatic.

“I’m not really surprised, you know,” Tsukki said, which, at first, gained a few ire looks from the other players. He ignored them, turning his back, and continued: “You practiced serving more than anyone else over these past five months.”

Yamaguchi stared at the tall, broad back of Tsukishima and grinned.

Tsukki had noticed. He had also complimented him, as backhanded as he always did. Tsukishima caught his eyes from over his back.

(Those who run away are undeniably weighted down by it afterward.)

Yamaguchi threw another ball in the air. Another point.

And another. And another.

They tied.

And another.

This time, however, Seijou gained a point and ended Yamaguchi’s streak. It grated on him but there was nothing he could do. It was Oikawa’s turn to serve… and serve he did. The second set went to Aobajousai, despite Yamaguchi’s serves.

Takeda-sensei patted him on the shoulder and smiled.

“Don’t mind. You are still the hero of the match. You will be remembered for a long time for the five points you won for us.”
“He’s right, you know,” Ukai-san said and grinned meanly as he tossed his head towards the rival team’s coach. “I heard his jealous comments. He wished for a pinch server with a potential like yours.”

Yamaguchi beamed despite his disappointment.

He hadn’t run.

He… He was proud of himself. He could be proud of himself. He hadn’t let anyone down.

A tear ran down his cheek but he quickly rubbed it off and dried his eyes. This was no time for that. They had a match to win.

Obviously Hinata, who had been switched out when Yamaguchi had been called to serve, would go back in. Yamaguchi stared at the players who would start the third set and wished hard he could be one of them. One day he would be strong enough to stand there next to Tsukki and they would win matches together side by side. He wouldn’t just be a pinch server but someone they could rely on in every match. Yamaguchi was not there yet but he would be come next year.

He promised that to himself as he watched Seijou celebrate their win of the set. Especially Oikawa’s smirk that was sent towards Kageyama annoyed him more than anything else. He had nothing against Aobajousai. They were great players and probably great people too… but something about Oikawa rubbed him wrong.

…it could also be jealousy talking, he pondered to himself. Oikawa was a great server and on a completely different level from him. No wonder Kageyama had idolized him in junior high school. If Yamaguchi had met a player like Oikawa earlier, he probably would’ve had a similar reaction. He clenched his fists. That power, if only he had that much power. Maybe then he wouldn’t have failed his team…

“If only I was that tall,” someone next to him said. Yamaguchi turned to Hinata, who gave him a quick grin. “We can only do our best to achieve what other people have. I have my jumps to fill the void that my height brings. You have your weird noodle serves!” he said enthusiastically before rushing towards Tanaka who was yelling something towards the stands where his sister was screaming back. Yamaguchi wished there was someone watching for him too. His eyes stayed to Yachi, who clung to the railing and waved eagerly at the team. He felt himself flush and quickly looked away.

Maybe being with the team was enough.

They managed to keep the third set pretty neck and neck. The most trouble they were given were when Oikawa was serving. However, at one point, Tsukishima had managed to outmanoeuvre Kyoutani and thus end Oikawa’s turn before it even had managed to start. It was a gorgeous block that left Yamaguchi both gape and cheer for his best friend. He could see Tsukishima smirk in satisfaction like a cat that finally got the canary. He couldn’t help but smile. It seemed that Tsukki had finally found a way to enjoy volleyball to the fullest.

Yamaguchi shared an amused look with Ennoshita and Sugawara who stood beside him. Tanaka seemed to enjoy himself too if the way he was provoking Seijou’s ‘mad dog’ said anything.

He turned his gaze to the audience, past Yachi and their cheering crowd, small as it was, to the man dressed in black… who no longer was there. Yamaguchi blinked and turned his head around, trying to find him. He could see another man behind them but it wasn’t the one he had been trying to identify these past few days. That man had seemingly just… disappeared.
Where was he? He had never left them behind intentionally, not really. That was something they could actually count on, as weird as that sounded, to be able to count on their stalkers. There was something rotten in the air, Yamaguchi thought and hid a shiver.

“…As long as I’m here, you’re invincible!” Hinata proclaimed loudly which snapped Yamaguchi back to reality. His eyes found Hinata facing Kageyama who in turn had a strangely touched expression that meshed badly with his constipated game face. He blurted out something rude about Hinata’s spikes which started another petty fight between them. Yamaguchi hid a snicker and wished he had a camera. Although a corny statement, it was also heart-warming and kind of cool. It was so very Hinata-like too. His eyes also found Seijou’s players who had a mix of confusion and amusement on their faces… Except for Oikawa, who was frowning and not even looking at them anymore, preferring to look at the stands instead. What was his problem?!

And then there was the match point.

We won’t lose.

***

They won. They won. They won. They won.

Yamaguchi screamed louder than ever before. They had won the match against Aobajousai. They had done it. They were exhausted but oh so very happy. He ran to the nearest player, who happened to be Kageyama, and hugged him tight. It was a sweaty and manly hug or, well, at least sweaty. Yamaguchi felt himself tearing up a little. Kageyama even seemed to tolerate the hug which was unusual for him. Still, he immediately started squirming when Suga-san also ran to take the opportunity to force prolonged physical contact upon Kageyama’s person. He probably looked very uncomfortable between them, Yamaguchi snickered and he tightened his hold on him. He also shared a grin with Nishinoya who seemed to consider jumping on top of them all. He was rather surprised Hinata hadn’t done so yet.

“Kei, move!”

Suddenly, Yamaguchi could feel himself falling towards the floor in almost slow motion. There was also a loud noise directly afterwards. Kageyama connected with the floor first with Yamaguchi and Sugawara falling on top of him. It sounded rather uncomfortable, Yamaguchi stupidly thought as Kageyama let out a pained grunt. Another body fell next to them, and Yamaguchi only needed to see a few stray blond hairs to know it was Tsukishima. Nishinoya had skittered to a halt almost on top of them, suddenly pale and wide-eyed. He looked afraid to move. Something else also hit the floor near the place where the trio had stood with force and a pang, just missing Nishinoya’s feet.

A small metallic object rolled next to Yamaguchi’s head.

It was a bullet.

Something else also cleared on his mind as he lay on the ground, hearing nothing specific any longer as pure pandemonium broke out. His eyes were focused on the bullet before he slowly turned his head to the direction where he had heard the man yell. The voice, the black-clad man’s mannerism, the way he seemed almost too familiar… There was a very simple explanation which he didn’t want to accept. He thought he saw the man ran out after someone else but that could have just been someone in the audience trying to escape. All the doors were blocked with people.

Yamaguchi closed his eyes. Everything else was quiet as blood rushed in his ears and suddenly it was all as clear as crystal.
He knew who the man was, and now he couldn’t help but wish he didn’t.

The voice of the man who had stalked them, yelled at them, given them so much grief…

It had belonged to one Tsukishima Akiteru.

Chapter End Notes

*gasp* *giggle* *wink*

Did anyone guess this?
Part II: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hey! I hope you've managed to stay alive since the last update :) I was also blown away by the response, so... Thank you all! It really made my week to read and answer all those comments!

Here's the next chapter, and even before Sunday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Asahi stared at the scene in horror. People were fleeing the gym, screaming and shouting. The few guards that were employed by the owners tried to keep order but it was no use. Someone had probably called the police but they would take at least ten minutes to arrive if there were no patrols around. Plenty of time for the shooter to escape. Had anyone even seen what the person looked like? Was it one of the men in black, finally trying to off them?

He shook his head and stepped forward, quickly catching Nishinoya just when his knees buckled. Noya was shaking. There was a mark on the ground near him. Asahi’s eyes followed the bullet’s trail and heard Kageyama groan under Suga and Yamaguchi. The latter looked as numb as Asahi felt. Tsukishima was also lying between Noya and the pile. He was cursing under his breath and holding his arm but his head was held up even when his body was not.


“Huh?” Tsukishima uttered distractedly, narrowed eyes flicking around the gym. Asahi steadied Nishinoya who seemed to find some strength left in him to stand on his own.

“Are you okay?” he repeated. Tsukishima nodded, gaze never meeting Asahi’s.

“Yeah.”

“You’re holding your arm,” he pointed out as he stepped to help Suga up from the floor. He was also shaking, Asahi noted as Suga drew in a slow breath to calm himself, and wild-eyed. Asahi couldn’t help but wonder why he himself wasn’t frozen. He was a scaredy-cat, he knew that. He didn’t even like horror films and they weren’t real. This was. They had just been shot at. They had been stalked, threatened and now shot. It was a real life horror film.

And Asahi was still moving. He didn’t understand how he was doing it but his body was just focusing on making sure that everyone was alright. He felt like he was moving on an autopilot.

“The bastard just grazed it. It’s nothing,” Tsukishima said and stood up to his full height. His head was held high as he spun around, trying to see the whole scene. Asahi looked around too as he helped Yamaguchi off Kageyama. The gym was almost empty now. Karasuno was still there, no one had left the court. Ukai and Takeda-sensei were looking over the other players. Yachi had found herself down from the stands, keeping a hand on Hinata’s back as he seemed to almost hyperventilate. Her eyes, however, were locked where Asahi and the others were, worry evident in her brown eyes.
Asahi noted absently that Seijou was still there, looking horrified at the Karasuno’s side of the court. One of the players whose name Asahi didn’t remember caught his eye as he stared at them intensely. There was something almost weirdly fascinated in his eyes. Asahi felt sick. Who on earth wanted to see someone shot? There was also Oikawa who seemed ready to run over but Iwaizumi was keeping him still with a grip so white it almost shone.

“Tsukki…” Yamaguchi spoke softly. Tsukishima grimaced and tensed even more. Asahi didn’t think it was possible. He also helped Kageyama up with Suga who had gathered himself too. He thought he heard some cracking as Kageyama stretched his back. He must have fallen badly.

“Not now, Yamaguchi,” Tsukishima said harshly. Yamaguchi flinched but determination filled his eyes.

“No, Tsukki. Now is exactly the right time,” he declared. Tsukishima’s eyes flicked over at Seijou and then to Yamaguchi. He opened his mouth.

“Why on earth are you still out in the open?!” an angry shout came from behind them. Asahi started and turned his head to see who had spoken.

It was the black-clad man.

Asahi tensed, ready to act on any perceived threat but the man seemed to dismiss him with just one quick look. His focus was mostly on Tsukishima although his eyes also flew around wildly almost as if waiting for someone to start shooting them again. As pretty much the only other people there, he seemed to give most of his remaining attention to Seijou who had started to assemble themselves.

“Get the fuck out of the fucking court,” the man snarled and when he reached them, pushed them towards the changing rooms. “You’re big fucking targets here. All nice and slow, so easy to hit.”

“Listen here…” Ukai started towards them but the man just pointed at the door heading away from there.

“We’ll talk when you’re all safe. Now, move.” The order given was so authoritative that Asahi automatically began walking towards the direction of the changing rooms, dragging Kageyama and Sugawara with him whom he had not yet let go off. He was half-way across the court when he realized what he had done and turned back but the man was there, ushering them on.

“Move. Hurry.”

Asahi obeyed. He wasn’t the only one. The whole team was leaving the court, almost as if now just realizing they could just do that. Ukai looked disgruntled but couldn’t refuse in the face of logic. They were safer away from the open gym. He felt eyes burning in the back of his head. He wanted to stop and go back, however, when they reached the changing rooms and there was another man dressed in all black waiting for them outside. Yet, he couldn’t when the man behind him kept pushing him forward and inside the room reserved for them. The man nodded at the other man, who seemingly took a position in front of the door.

The man closed it behind them.

“Kei, show me your arm,” he demanded and grabbed at Tsukishima who only glared in return.

“It’s just a graze!” Tsukishima argued, trying to get the man to let go of his arm to no use. It seemed to Asahi that, although the man was shorter than Tsukishima, he was slightly more muscular and clearly stronger. He stared intently at the wound which was, as Tsukishima had said, just a scratch.
“So it is,” he said and finally released Tsukishima’s arm. “Clean it the first chance you have. We don’t want it to fester, do we?” The man turned back to the team who was, just like Asahi, watching at the scene in disbelief. The man sighed.

“Alright, so you were just shot at. Congratulations. You have levelled up from being threatened to having been assaulted. The police will be here any minute now and they will want your statement. I don’t care what you say but try to keep our presence out of it as much as you can. Obviously, it may be hard but try.”

“Why on earth would we do that?!” Tanaka demanded. His face was flushed in anger.

“It’s better for everyone that way,” the man stated, clearly not wanting to elaborate more.

“Well, too bad for you,” Tanaka bit out. “Because the police are already in the know.”

“What?” the man asked, voice lowering dangerously.

“It’s true,” Tsukishima said, nodding at Kinoshita, who flinched when the man’s full attention went to him. “His brother’s a cop.”

"And of course you tell him everything.”

“You should know, right?” Yamaguchi piped up, grimacing as the attention turned to him but not backing down. “After all, your brother apparently tells everything about us to you.”

The man froze, as did the rest of the team. Asahi stared at Yamaguchi. Did he know…?

“I just realized where I knew you. I recognized your voice earlier but couldn’t place it.” Yamaguchi looked at the man, and then Tsukishima. Asahi noted that both wore wary expressions as far as he could see. The similarity was uncanny. “It’s only fair that we know who you are too, isn’t it?”

“Fuck,” the man breathed out and with one quick move removed his hat, which was already slightly askew, and sunglasses. He had blond hair and brown eyes, and now that there was nothing in the way Asahi could see the displeased and serious expression on his face.

Wait a minute…

“Tsukishima Akiteru, at your service,” he drawled, bowing with exaggerated flair. The unhappy air around him didn’t retreat. “Glad to be acquainted with you all, finally.”

Asahi could see where Tsukishima got his sometimes nasty attitude from.

“Tsuki-,” Tanaka spluttered, turning his blazing eyes at Tsukishima. “You traitor!”

“Now, you shouldn’t call my brother nasty names,” Tsuki-, Akiteru, said. “He was just following orders.”

“Orders from what?” Daichi said, crossing his arms. He had just as discontented expression on his face as Akiteru.

“That’s confidential,” Akiteru bit out. “Look, I know this looks bad-,”“ Ukai snorted but Akiteru continued as if nothing had happened, “-but we don’t really have time or inclination to spread the whole story around. Just know that right now, Kei saved one of your lives. The shot was aimed to kill and if I hadn’t been close enough to the shooter, the second shot would have hit someone hard enough to seriously hurt or even kill.”
Asahi flinched. Hinata, who was next to him, let out a small wounded sound. Asahi grabbed at him and let him burrow into his side. He felt him take hold of his shirt in search of support.

“Yeah, unpleasant thought, isn’t it?” Akiteru asked, clearly not expecting an answer when he immediately continued. “Sure, it hurts that you weren’t told. I get that. But if I know Kei, he probably never outright lied to you.” At Tanaka’s outrageous look, he snorted, interrupting whatever comeback there might have been. “Omitted a lot, probably, but no big fat lies.”

“That doesn’t make it any better,” Suga said dryly. Akiteru shrugged.

“If you say so. Depends on the point of view, I guess. Maybe you should’ve focused on what wasn’t said than what was. The first lesson you learn in this trade.”

“And what is that trade?” Daichi immediately asked, only getting a headshake as his answer. The door was knocked.

“Alright, time’s up. The cops are here and I need to go,” Akiteru said and quickly put on his hat and sunglasses. “You probably have a lot of questions and want to question Kei about everything. Don’t. He won’t tell you anything, or at least anything crucial. Most is need-to-know and, unfortunately for you, that doesn’t extend to you. Sure, you’re involved, I’m not denying that. Sure, there’s something in this team that we are following; that we are protecting. The police won’t be able to do shit but get in our way. But Kei here is here to play volleyball, the same as you. He might have a small side job but who cares about that if it keeps you alive?”

He opened the door.

“I’ll call you tonight.”

Tsukishima nodded in reply but Akiteru didn’t even turn around to see it before he was out and leaving like a shadow. He sighed deep before turning his head to meet the distrustful eyes of his team. He didn’t even tremble once nor did he shrink from the attention. Asahi couldn’t help but admire his composure even when he was just as displeased as anyone else.

“As Akiteru said, I won’t be answering any demands or questions even if you threaten or do throw me out of the team,” he said coldly. “I don’t care what you think but we are here to look after the target. Our methods may be unorthodox but they’re ours. The second group, which you know is after the target too, is malicious enough to kill to get at it. We are trying to prevent that from happening. The police are just small fry in their way.” His eyes flickered at Kinoshita. “That’s why we didn’t want the police involved.”

“Tsukishima…” Takeda-sensei just looked sad. “Why didn’t you just… leave with the target then? Does the target even know if he or she is who you are after?”

“At the moment, you’re all targets, now that you have drawn the attention to yourselves. If we leave, they’ll either attempt to use you as leverage or, if not that, then possibly even kill you as an example. ‘By accident.’ It’s not the first time they’ve done it and gotten away with it.” Tsukishima used air quotations as he spoke. Asahi shivered. “Their usual methods don’t involve civilians because of how messy it might get. They care nothing about agreements but at least there’s that. Also, you’re much better targets than any uninvolved family or friends you have.”

“This is… also an opportunity, isn’t it?” Yamaguchi asked quietly. Tsukishima glanced at him but Yamaguchi avoided his gaze. He nodded shortly.

“This is also an opportunity to get rid of the threat once and for all.” He turned to look at the whole
team again. “It’s unfortunate that this happened to you, but it did. We could play the blame game whole day or even year but to what use? It already happened. And if it didn’t happen to you, it might’ve happened to others. It probably doesn’t help any but that’s the truth.”

Someone knocked on the door again, trying to open it. It was locked. Akiteru must have locked it when he left. “This is the police. Open up!”

“Tell them nothing,” Tsukishima ordered, similar authority seeping into his voice that Asahi had detected in Akiteru’s. “Or you’ll see exactly why not doing so was a bad idea.”

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Kinoshita looked at the officer in front of him. He was a bit on the stocky side with a short beard that didn’t really fit his face if he was completely honest. He seemed pretty tired and there were dark bags under his eyes. Although his uniform wasn’t rumpled, he didn’t really raise confidence in Kinoshita. Not after today.

“Kinoshita-kun, are you sure you saw nothing?” the officer whose name Kinoshita didn’t bother to remember asked again. He had implored him for details but Kinoshita had none to tell. He had even brought his brother up as a way to get him to say anything but that had made him even more determined to stay quiet. He would talk to his brother, later, when there were no overhearing strangers around. He shook his head.

“I’m sorry. I only saw Sugawara, Yamaguchi, Kageyama and Tsukishima fall after the shot, nothing else. I didn’t even at first realize what had happened and when I did it was too late to even think about finding out who had done it.”

The officer nodded.

“Then we are finished,” he said and rose. He shook Kinoshita’s hand and showed him the way back to where his team waited. The officers were interviewing them one at a time. He wondered if they tried to imply someone giving more details than others to get things out of them but dismissed the thought. The police had no reason to think they had something to do with it. The shot had apparently come from Seijou’s side of the stands and, from what he had been able to garner, they thought a disappointed fan had shot them as revenge.

“Are you alright?” Daichi asked when Kinoshita sat down. He nodded.

“Yeah,” he said and left it at that. He wondered if the police picked up the weird dynamics their team had at the moment. Most of them were giving Tsukishima a wide berth and, when they thought he wasn’t looking, wary glances. Even Yamaguchi was sitting away from Tsukishima and next to Sugawara, seemingly finding comfort from being near him. Kinoshita was pretty sure Tsukishima knew what they were doing but just didn’t care. He was a bit surprised that Yachi didn’t seem to avoid him like most of the team. She had resolutely sat down next to him and started prattling about their previous two matches like nothing had happened. She had even drawn Kageyama and Nishinoya, the two closest to them, into the conversation. While Nishinoya seemed to have his reservations with Tsukishima, Kageyama had just answered Tsukishima’s mean remarks with ones of his own and they had fallen into a discussion and an exchange of barbs like everything was normal.

Kinoshita didn’t know what kinds of nerves Yachi or Kageyama had but he wished he had some of those. He only wished he could be as unflappable or determined to get over them. Even Asahi today had been weirdly calm about everything.
“Thank you all for being here and answering our questions. We understand you had a long day today and this only made it longer but it was necessary,” another police officer, this time thinner and taller than the one who had questioned Kinoshita, said. “We’ll be taking precautions for tomorrow. The matches will go on as normal but the gym will be changed to another one close by and the force will be there to watch over you. You don’t have to worry, we’ll catch the perpetrator.” The man smiled as he spoke, clearly trying to calm their nerves. Kinoshita only levelled him a blank look that showed just how confident he was of their efforts.

Yeah, right.

The way home was a quiet one. They had won over Seijou, which was something to celebrate about, but there just was no mood for it in the bus. They were tired too but Kinoshita noticed that no one felt relaxed enough to sleep. He knew he was too keyed up himself to even consider falling asleep. He glanced over the top of his seat. Tsukishima was sitting at the back, alone. Yachi had tried to follow him there but Shimizu had grabbed her before she could and seated her beside her. Kinoshita shared a look with Ennoshita who sat beside him and turned back forward.

“Tomorrow, we are facing the top school of our block, Shiratorizawa,” Ukai said from the front. He was sitting in the front behind Takeda-sensei, who was driving. His head was angled so that he could see the whole team. “This is not the time to divide. Today was… weird,” he said carefully, and Kinoshita snorted. You could say that again. “But it’s not something to be afraid of. Well, it is, but… Tsukishima.”

Tsukishima raised his head and stared back at Ukai without an ounce of shame.

“Can you swear that whatever group you belong to means no harm to us?”

“Yes, but only if you don’t harm the target,” he said. There was something convincing in his tone and the way he answered without hesitation made Kinoshita want to believe him.

“And that target is…?”

“Classified.”

“And your role in all this is…?”

“To play volleyball,” Tsukishima said, rolling his eyes while at it. “And to ensure the target is safe. I told you that already.”

“What is your group’s name and true purpose?”

Tsukishima gave him a look but remained silent. Ukai sighed.

“We don’t have to worry about you then?” he asked but only gained another eye roll as an answer. “Which is weird, since that’s what we have been doing for months and we could’ve done without it and maybe even been able to lie low if we were told things rather than left to assume,” he stressed but Tsukishima refused to be cowed. Rather, he held his head high and didn’t back down. “Are we protected by your people?” he asked after a short silence.

“We are doing our best,” Tsukishima just said and then turned to stare out of the window, dismissal evident in his every movement. Kinoshita could see a vein pop on Ukai’s forehead but he held his tongue.

“There you have it. As much as I would like to say that nothing has changed, things clearly have. But this team, it hasn’t. We are still the same people we were yesterday and this morning. There are
just some hidden depths we knew existed but now see where the pattern is.”

“I’m just an advisor,” Takeda-sensei interjected. “I’m not a player and I’m not a coach. I’m not even a manager. I am just an adult trying to look over you. As that adult, I feel like I should have something profound to say – something to tell you to feel better. I don’t claim to know everything but… What I’m trying to say…

“I feel like this is just a block we need to surpass. As Ukai-kun said, we already knew there was someone watching over us. Now we know it was Tsukishima-kun. Still, he is still the same Tsukishima-kun he was before, just with something new added to his character. Maybe there’s a reason he omitted details from us.

“But for one second I do not believe he did it with malice in his mind,” Takeda-sensei declared. Kinoshita saw from the corner of his eye that Tsukishima raised his head to stare at Takeda-sensei. There was something in his eyes that almost seemed… touched?

“He could’ve done something to us long time ago if he wanted to…” Noya said softly. Tanaka bristled beside him but Noya just shot a look at him. “You know it’s true. If he wanted to harm us, he could’ve done it and we would be none the wiser. Tsukishima’s sneaky but he’s no bad egg.”

“That’s right,” Suga said after a while, nodding in agreement. “His reasons are his own but he’s been on the team for months. And…”

*And he just found his passion for volleyball.*

Tsukishima stared at the team who were now staring right back at him. Kinoshita felt like something was mending between them, something, that was about to either snap completely or tie them together even tighter.

A red string of fate?

He almost snorted out loud, barely managing to keep it inside.

“Do you need a reason to want to live?” he asked rather rhetorically as if he wasn’t expecting an answer. Kinoshita blinked. It was quite a weird question all of a sudden. But no… He guessed that no one really needed one to want to be alive and experience things, like play volleyball. Kinoshita watched him closely. Tsukishima was calm, had been calm this whole time, but something in him had relaxed just now. This was no calm before the storm, nor the false calm of a person waiting for the worst to happen.

This was trust.

There were secrets between them but Tsukishima’s body language was more open towards them than ever before. It was as if a curtain that existed between them had been lowered and there was no need to act anymore. It made Kinoshita believe that if something dangerous were to happen, Tsukishima would warn them. He could, now, without blowing his cover. Kinoshita saw Yamaguchi tear up and there was twitching in his movements that Kinoshita knew he wanted to move back to Tsukishima’s side but just wasn’t sure of his welcome. Tsukishima only levelled him one look before sniffing, rolling his eyes, and Yamaguchi had launched himself into the seat next to him. Tsukishima just looked outside the window again, embarrassed flush touching his cheeks.

It must have hurt him to distance himself from them all.

“Fly, Karasuno, fly,” Daichi said, echoing words from before.
The last of the crows had finally spread its wings and joined its brothers and sisters.

***

Tanaka sat there on the gym floor, waiting, thinking. If his sister had anything to say about it – and she did, he could hear her yell at him from the stands – she would probably claim he was sick. He wasn’t, not really. Just because he wasn’t the most intelligent person there was didn’t mean he couldn’t think. As a matter of fact, he was a great thinker.

He was just better doer.

Ukai had said that Shiratorizawa was, compared to Seijou’s maturity, the most immature team there was in the Miyagi prefecture. From what Tanaka had seen, he could agree. Whereas Seijou was all about the team and being as strong as its weakest link, Shiratorizawa saw the team being as strong as its strongest player. None were pushovers but they only cared about victory. Something about that left a bad taste in his mouth. The team was everything, Tanaka thought, and anyone who thought otherwise was an idiot. No one player was a god or an absolute ruler of the court. He was confident that the crows of Karasuno could murder anyone standing in their way to nationals.

He grimaced. Bad choice of words. He tried to focus when the cheers were loud in the audience. Not as loud as they could be, though. There was some uneasiness there since there were police officers around, watching over them. The official statement had been a disappointed fan shooting at the winning team. They had heard enough whispers to last a lifetime while they walked through the gym.

(Did you hear, did you hear?)

(Yes, I did. Wow, and they still came!)

(Do you think it’s just a publicity stunt?)

(Maybe they were cheating. Seijou wouldn’t lose to a team like Karasuno.)

(It was a close match in the Interhigh too. I don’t think…)

(Do you think…?)

Tanaka was still pissed off about Tsukishima but he knew that no one chose their family. He would know. Not that he was disappointed in his family, he loved his, but he knew others who had difficult childhoods. And he knew Noya. Not that he had disappointing childhood or family either. But there was something there that Noya had admitted to Tanaka one night when there were just the two of them. He was adopted.

Noya had admitted that he didn’t know the specifics but he had found the papers one day when he had been young and playing hide and seek with his siblings. After that he had observed his parents and noticed that while they looked alike, neither had his exact facial structure. His little brother and sister didn’t resemble him much either. He hadn’t confronted them but kept silent, he had told Tanaka. He had insisted it didn’t matter because his family loved him and he loved them.

Yet, Tanaka could see how Noya’s eyes had clouded when he was in his thoughts, probably wondering if he had been unwanted or a burden. Had he been thrown on the streets or an orphanage? It made Tanaka angry just to think that someone could abandon someone as great as Noya somewhere but it also made him grateful. He probably wouldn’t have met him if things hadn’t gone as they had. He had decided then to be the best friend Noya could ever want and need.
So, yes, Tanaka knew about being loyal to their family. He didn’t grudge Tsukishima about that. He had seen the brotherly worry as Akiteru had fussed over him. No one left alone their true family, blood or not. What he resented him for was for keeping quiet and endangering the family Tanaka had in the team.

But, maybe, this would also mend those wounds into scars and Tsukishima would also become a part of the team family now truly. They would have to see about that. Tanaka would keep his eyes open. He would take one for the team, be the mean guy, if no one else was willing to take up the mantle. He wasn’t about to let a viper into their midst but he was willing to give Tsukishima the benefit of a doubt.

“Tanaka, are you feeling alright?” Noya jumped in front of him, switching from one foot to another like there was no way he could stay still. Tanaka opened his eyes and grinned.

“Yeah, I was just concentrating,” he said and stood up. He cracked his knuckles and smirked when Narita made a face at the sound.

“Yosh!” he yelled. “Let’s beat them all up! No going home as losers!”

“Yosh!” Noya jumped and high fived both of Tanaka’s hands. They shared an ecstatic grin and together ran down the court, jumping on a sick-looking Asahi. They annoyed him, making sure that the nervousness mostly left him before moving on to tease and cheer up others. Tanaka kept close eye on their other regulars. Hinata looked both nervous and ready to fight down a giant which seemed appropriate since they were against Ushijima Wakatoshi. Asahi looked better now and was talking to Daichi. Kageyama was tossing a ball in the air and Tsukishima, who was still playing as their middle blocker regular, kept his eyes on the stands. There were no men dressed in black in the audience from what Tanaka had seen but they probably were there, blending in now that the police was there. Even if the police were as incompetent as Akiteru had implied, they were still enough to catch those acting suspicious.

Speaking of suspicious, Saeko had dragged a suspicious figure next to Karasuno’s comparative small cheering crowd. Tanaka narrowed his eyes. He recognized him.

Akiteru, looking just like any ordinary college student without that weird hat and glasses he had sprouted just a second ago. Next to his sister, and Yachi. He glared daggers at him which was rewarded with a quick smirk when Saeko was no longer looking.

Yeah, he really didn’t like Tsukishima’s older brother.

But also… Tanaka looked around at all the television cameras. Hmm… Interesting.

Would the men also be caught on live television? Or if something happened, the culprit? Would anyone even try? He didn’t know but he really didn’t want to find out. Things were messy to begin with. They had enough to worry about Shiratorizawa. He saw from the corner of his eye how Kageyama was also frowning at the stands and turned to see what he was looking at.

Ah. Oikawa. And the whole Seijou team as his entourage. Yeah, he got why Kageyama was on the edge. Oikawa had been really creepy toward him. Yesterday, he had caught how Kageyama’s phone had flashed after a flash when he was bombed with messages he was ignoring. Apparently Oikawa had dug his number from somewhere and hadn’t left him alone since the match.

They lined up. They shook hands. Tanaka stared down the team that was Miyagi’s strongest.

They would no longer be that after this match.
No, the title of Miyagi’s strongest. It would belong to Karasuno, and no one else.

Yeah, they would show them how a murder arrived to the court.

Suck that, Shiratorizawa.

Chapter End Notes

I thought I would cover the match in this chapter but then realized that, eh, this is as far as I've read and watched the manga and anime myself and basically where the canon divergence will begin, so...

From next chapter on, there may be elements from the manga (possibly some basic frame of events) but, mostly, it will be a whole new world. I guess this may be nothing new since that's what I've been doing this whole time but, eh. Just saying.

See you next time! :D
Hi! I'm really early :D I actually just finished this and I was supposed to, like, wait for a few more days before I uploaded but... This story's now got over a thousand views and I'm happy (my Italian flatmate made some excellent lasagna and chocolate cake and shared them with me and some others), so, yeah. Here's the new chapter!

Enjoy!

Kiyoko watched as the first set went to Shiratorizawa without much struggle. True, they had been a bit nervous but who could blame them? Including yesterday, their nerves were shot and they were starting to fray at the edges. It was tiring to be careful and suspicious day after day while completing school work (how would she manage to graduate this year with good enough grades to get into the university she wanted?) and practicing volleyball or managing the team (she was so, so tired).

She wasn’t a naturally trusting person, had actually been called cold many times by the guys always following after her when they didn’t get what they wanted, so it had been a hard bite to swallow to know Tsukishima’s role in all of this. Kiyoko had been, and still was, a bit unsure whether to believe his and his brother’s story but in a mad way it made sense. They had been threatened, yes, and followed around, but no one had actually hurt them... until yesterday. And even that hurt had been negated by Tsukishima.

Could it all have been an act?

She pondered this while Ushijima spiked yet another ball on Karasuno’s side of the court, garnering yet another point in favour of Shiratorizawa. She absently wrote down a few notes on his technique that Ukai was analysing beside her. Kiyoko had also grudgingly written down observations she had heard from the audience above her where Hitoka and the rest were standing. If they had been in the gym they were yesterday, they would be cheering on the opposite side of the court but today was different. Probably because of the police, Kiyoko reasoned, as she watched several officers mingle with the watchers on the stands opposite from her. Instead, Hitoka, Tanaka’s sister and their a bit larger than before cheering ‘team’ was sitting right above her... with Tsukishima Akiteru in all of his glory, looking rather cosy between Hitoka and Saeko.

She had no idea what to think of him. Akiteru had seemed similar in temperament to Tsukishima but there had also been something very different when she compared him to his brother. He was harder around the edges, maybe, and there was a sort of readiness to act on orders that didn’t really match. While Akiteru seemed a creature of intuition and instinct, Tsukishima was more analytical than what his brother seemed to be and had a backup plan after a backup plan. She should know, she had discussed strategies with him after matches a few times. Kiyoko wrinkled her nose. Had those conversations also been a plan to get closer to them all, to get an understanding of the team and share the details with outsiders?

She then recalled Tsukishima’s expression yesterday when Yamaguchi had clung to him and shook her head. No, she didn’t really believe that. She was just making excuses because she hated the situation and didn’t know enough to make a better analysis. There truly had been something
gentle on his face when he had been accepted into the midst of the crows despite his actions. There was a caring person underneath the snide and arrogant exterior.

Again, she should know. She kept a façade up to discourage unwanted attention too.

Maybe that’s why Kiyoko both had it hard and easy to accept Tsukishima. They were similar in certain aspects that she could understand him possibly better than most but there were also details she didn’t know, some unknown factors, which made it impossible for her to fully embrace him.

“Kei isn’t the type of player to rely solely on intuition.” Kiyoko heard Akiteru speak up behind her and perked up to hear what he had to say. “He doesn’t really have faith in his own strength nor does he believe in the intuition he’s been training. Kei’s calm to the point where it’s a little scary and he, truly, only trusts what he sees in front of him.”

Kiyoko made a mental note on what Akiteru had said and silently agreed. Her gaze found Tsukishima’s back and she traced the number on his back with her eyes.

Trusts only what he sees in front of him… He believed in cold, hard facts that hadn’t just been assumed but had been verified either by him or someone else. That was a good trait to have but something that was surprisingly rare to find despite how it was almost universally admired. It was a trait Kiyoko would herself like to have. She thought she had it, to a point at least. She didn’t believe in rumours or gossip but she couldn’t find herself dismiss them completely either. They still affected her thinking even if she didn’t want them to.

She watched as the first set ended in Karasuno’s defeat.

“Man, how disappointing!” a loud voice exclaimed and she turned her head to see who had spoken. It was one of the Seijou players who had come to watch the game after their loss yesterday. She quietly thrummed with pride for Karasuno. They had beaten Seijou and stopped their progress toward the nationals.

“Kindaichi, don’t be rude… Although, I have to admit, I was expecting more from the King of the Court and his new subjects,” another voice said, distaste evident in his voice.

“Kindaichi, Kunimi, stop it.” Now it was actually someone she recognized, Iwaizumi, who had spoken. Beside him, Oikawa snorted.

“Let them. It’s not like they’re not correct. That was awful to watch.”

“Right?! I mean, with all his and his team’s efforts and pure luck yesterday I would’ve thought they had more to give. This is just a disgrace.” It was Kindaichi again. She remembered Kageyama mentioning that he and another Seijou first year had been his year mates in Kitagawa Daiichi. They were probably him and Kunimi, she mused. Jealousy doesn’t become them.

“It wasn’t luck! It was skill and dedication!” Hitoka suddenly spoke out, giving her best glare at them. It resembled a disgruntled kitten and Kiyoko itched to pat her head. She was just really cute even without trying.

“Hoo, what’s a cute girl like you defending them?” Kindaichi asked, tone slightly flirty but derisive at the same time. Kiyoko bristled.

“She’s Karasuno’s superb manager and you should keep your hands to yourself. We don’t play with the enemies,” Akiteru interrupted, stepping before Hitoka as if to protect her. Kiyoko slightly thawed toward him.
“He was just joking,” Kunimi said, bored again, gaze wandering around the court before stopping back at Akiteru, analysing his every move. “But I guess it’s not as if an old man like you would understand, right?”

“Why you brat…”

“Stop it, seriously,” Iwaizumi said, whacking both Kindaichi and Kunimi at the back of their heads. He turned to Akiteru. “I’m sorry about these two. They were in Kageyama’s class in junior high and it smarts that they were defeated by him. It annoys me too, for my underclassman to beat his upperclassman…” he said, offering a hand. Akiteru shook it.

“No matter, I understand perfectly. My little brother’s on the court right now and while my team back in the day made it to this match too I wasn’t able to play in it.”

“Oh, who’s your brother then?” Oikawa asked, his eyes on Karasuno. Kiyoko followed his gaze and saw it land on somewhere near Hinata, Kageyama and Tsukishima. “Let me guess, tall and blond?”

“You would be right to assume so. Tsukishima Akiteru, at your service.”

“Iwaizumi Hajime, and the rude people next to me are Oikawa Tooru, Kindaichi Yuutarou and Kunimi Akira.” The rest of the Seijou team had wandered a bit further away, taking advance of the fact that Karasuno’s stands were emptier than Shiratorizawa’s.

“I would say pleasure to meet them but I’d be lying,” Akiteru commented dryly. Iwaizumi snorted.

“Hey!” Oikawa pouted. Kiyoko tuned out of the conversation, deciding that she didn’t need to hear the rest. She just couldn’t see how, outside the court, Kageyama could ever have idolized Seijou’s setter. Besides, she had a team to tend to.

The start of the second set was more dramatic since Karasuno had started to get used to Shiratorizawa. Yet, Kiyoko couldn’t help but find the match beautiful to watch. Her team had evolved so far from the Interhigh and the games before the tournament. Nishinoya was receiving Ushijima’s spiked, the only one who truly could keep them in the air. Daichi was doing his best too but it was Nishinoya who was battling against Ushijima. Tanaka, Asahi and Hinata were spiking and Kageyama’s tosses were also beautiful to watch. So were Tsukishima’s blocks, although he kept letting them through. He seemed to get better at them but… Kiyoko grimaced and made a note on how powerful Ushijima’s spikes were. She could see from her seat how red Tsukishima’s hands were from trying to block them all.

Kiyoko smiled when Suga entered the court and she heard Oikawa’s derisive scoff at their double setter plays. The same dismissive noise came when Yamaguchi was called to the court too. It didn’t matter what he thought. No, it really didn’t. Those tactics had beaten Seijou, and they would eventually beat Shiratorizawa. She believed in her boys. She trusted them and they trusted each other.

The trust seemed to extend to Tsukishima. She immediately noticed how Tsukishima seemed to get to be in charge of their three-man blocks and no one even questioned it. She watched as he didn’t betray their trust and guided the ball straight to Nishinoya. As a thank you Kageyama seemed to toss the ball straight to him to spike it down.

And he did.

“They mobbed them!” Hitoka cheered, and Kiyoko smiled. Indeed. Surround the enemy and drive it
You can do it, boys.

The second set went for Karasuno, thanks to Tsukishima. The third went for Shiratorizawa, again, but Karasuno came back and fought tooth and nail their backs against the wall.

Before they could win the fourth set, however, Kiyoko heard it. She heard it very clearly although everyone was cheering as loud as they could. There was no reason for her to have heard it, no logical reason since she was not listening for it and because the noise was so loud but she did.

(I wish… I wish they would all just die.)

She immediately whipped her head around to see who had said it but there was no one there. Her heart pounded. Who had said that?! She noticed how Akiteru’s eyes had widened too but he shook his head when her gaze caught his.

He had heard it too. She hadn’t imagined it.

“Those are all monsters…” Kindaichi said as he watched Karasuno play. Hinata’s wild ran around the court. Yamaguchi entered it.

“They are a bunch of game changers, that’s for sure,” Kunimi said disinterestedly. He yawned. “First that blond middle blocker, then the short one, the King, the libero… a bunch of weirdos.”

“They are managing to battle equally against Shiratorizawa though. They made it further than we did in the Interhigh.”

“Don’t say that!” Oikawa whined. “I don’t want to hear it. Karasuno is not better than us!”

“No, but perhaps they’re more suitable against Shiratorizawa than we were,” Iwaizumi stated, gazing at the court. “You can’t help but admire their dedication.”

“Not really…” Oikawa and Kindaichi said in unison. “Everything about them pisses me off,” Oikawa continued darkly. Kunimi just shook his head and stared at the court again, eyes sharpening under his bored exterior. Kiyoko also turned her attention back to the court after a final glance at Akiteru. She could do nothing.

But he could.

(The only time I’ll ever be in despair is when I become unable to play volleyball. Only then.)

Everyone shared Kageyama’s sentiment. That was one of the reasons Kiyoko thought they hadn’t just quit after everything. They wouldn’t be able to live with themselves if they did. They battled through the deuce into winning the fourth set.

“A truly nice one, your highness…” Tsukishima said. Kageyama let out a rare grin.

“Your save, as well,” he turned to Hinata. “Nice follow up.”

Hinata grinned back, wide and happy.

“We can play one more set.”

And they did.
They won that too.

***

Yamaguchi was crying. They had won. They were going to the nationals. He clutched at Ennoshita, who was teary too, both grinning like idiots. So were others too. He hadn’t seen anyone as happy before as they were now. It was freeing. They had won against all odds. There was the police watching the match. Nothing had happened.

It had been just an ordinary match even though it had been extraordinary for them all.

“What’s up, MVP?” Hinata grinned from where he was being helped to stand. Yamaguchi had seen how extremely tired he had been. Kageyama too, and Daichi and Asahi and Noya-san and Tsukki… Everyone.

Tsukishima just snorted. “Thanks,” he said caustically, almost daring for Hinata to try to do better than him. Yamaguchi sighed but smiled. Tsukishima was the same as ever.

And that was the deal, wasn’t it? He really was the same as ever but… At the same time he wasn’t. At first, Yamaguchi hadn’t known how to deal with it. He had known Tsukishima since elementary school after all. How had he not noticed before that Tsukishima wasn’t everything he said he was? Or was it just a new development? Either way, Yamaguchi couldn’t help but doubt himself. How could he be a good friend if he didn’t notice things like that of his best friend?

That was the main reason he had avoided Tsukishima in the beginning yesterday. He hadn’t minded the implications of Tsukki spying on them. He knew Tsukki and he also knew that no matter what he wouldn’t hurt them. Before when he hadn’t known the culprit, he had been scared but with Tsukki around, Yamaguchi felt like he could breathe easier. He also liked Akiteru, so all of this really wasn’t that big of a deal with him.

What the problem was to him was that he apparently wasn’t as good a friend to Tsukishima as Tsukishima was to him. And it felt awful. He didn’t want to be the friend who only took and gave nothing in return. He thought he had become someone Tsukishima could rely on but…

Was he really?

He bit his lip and watched unsurely as the team crowded Tsukishima, congratulating him and each other, laughing at the most inane things. They had won and they were all happy.

How could Yamaguchi be so elated but so sad at the same time?

Tsukki was so cool… and Yamaguchi decidedly wasn’t.

His gaze must have lowered because the next thing he knew the light punch on his arm that took him by surprise. Tsukishima looked at him, straight and calm, and just held his fist in front of Yamaguchi. He blinked away his tears and bumped his fist against Tsukki’s.

He was forgiven before even asking for it. Did he then ever need to?

Yamaguchi smiled but swore to himself he would make it up for Tsukki. He would follow him to the end of the earth if he so asked him.

Just… Not yet, alright? They had the nationals to win, after all.

***
Hitoka hummed as she walked through the corridor toward the Karasuno gym. It had been a few days since their match against Shiratorizawa and she was still ecstatic. How wonderful a feeling to feel when everything is all sunshine and puppies! She couldn’t help but grin as she saw Hinata looking both happy and depressed in front of her. She jogged to catch up to him.

“Hinaka-kun! How has your day been?” Hitoka asked. Hinata groaned, right arm coming to rest on top of his eyes in exaggerated depression.

“No one believes me when I say I played in the matches! They think I’m just a… a… ball boy or something! And some people that claim they do, in fact, believe me look like they just say it so I wouldn’t feel bad!” he whined. Hitoka patted his head.

“Tell me who they are and I’ll go there to… to… bash their heads with Kiyoko-san’s clipboard and put them straight!” she clenched her fist, eyes all firing up. Hinata looked at her and chuckled.

“It’s alright, I’m used to it. I’m a bit short for a volleyball player so there’ll always be doubters. But I’ll show them all in the nationals! Tokyo metropolitan gymnasium is waiting for us!” he shouted and jumped into the air, all recovered from Sunday’s match again. They had been given a few days to rest and recover, only light training in the evenings. Today they had a meeting at lunch to discuss future practice and what they would do.

Everything was wonderfully normal and these had been the best days Hitoka had seen in a very long time. She had even seen her mother and father on Monday at the same time. They had gone to have a dinner together before she had returned home with her mother. Hitoka hadn’t seen her father in a while. It had been fun to tell them all she had done and how her cousins had been doing too. The specifics, at least, since they knew the basics of how they were doing anyway. Hitoka had made sure of that.

She had even started a new volleyball club poster to gather them more funds! Hitoka hummed and Hinata joined her. They were both a bit off-key but it was still perfect. They shared a grin.

“Just leave me alone already!” someone shouted. Hitoka and Hinata shared a look and Kageyama stormed out of the classroom. She took a quick look but found it empty. So that meant…

“Is someone bothering you, Kageyama?” Hinata asked. He didn’t look worried but there was this steely edge on his tone that made Hitoka smile. She knew that Kageyama and Hinata had gotten even closer during the past few weeks but it warmed her heart just how much they had come around. She still remembered when they wouldn’t even talk to each other. There had been a kind of trusty rivalry there but it was nothing like how they were now. True, they still bickered but it was good-natured, and not mean and meant to hurt.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” Kageyama sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. It didn’t even muss and just fell flat right away. She knew many girls who would be jealous of Kageyama if he had been born a girl with hair like that. They might still be, even now.

Hinata stared at him as all three of them walked toward the gym now. It continued for a couple of minutes, he even ignored a few conversation starters, before Kageyama just rolled his eyes and handed him his phone, unlocking the screen before doing so.

“There. Just look at it yourself.”

Hinata immediate grabbed the device. Hitoka peered at the phone, smiling when she saw a picture of an old man as Kageyama’s background. It was his grandfather. Hinata, though, didn’t seem to register the photo as he quickly opened Kageyama’s mailbox. It kept buzzing and a name was
flashing at the screen.


“I’m not even sure why he’s so fixated on me. Something about this ‘mystery’ we have going probably keeps him from being bored or something. I have no idea. I guess he thinks I’m his main source of information about the concurrent events.”

“I’m so proud of you to know the word ‘concurrent’,” Hinata said absently. Hitoka smiled again when Kageyama didn’t rise to the bait, just lightly thumped Hinata on the head. They were growing on each other.

“Shut up, idiot.”

Kageyama’s phone vibrated with an incoming call. Hinata stared at the caller ID with a frown.

“Do you mind if I answer?”

“Go ahead.” Kageyama waved his hand as permission. They were outside near the gym, so they stopped, and Hinata put the phone on speaker and answered the call.

“Tobio-chan! I’m sure you didn’t mean to hang up on me, so I’ll forgive you this time if you answer this one little question for me…”

“Kageyama’s not telling you anything.” Hinata interrupted. The phone was silent for just a second. Hitoka almost admired how quick Oikawa’s recovery was.

“Shrimpy-chan? Eh, why are you answering on Tobio’s phone? Does he know you even have it?” The cheeriness of his voice had faded for a bit, giving a slight edge on his tone that hadn’t been there when he thought he was talking to Kageyama, Hitoka noted.

“He does,” Hinata informed him shortly. “We heard him yell at you to leave him alone, so why don’t you?”

“Well, Shrimpy, like I said I just wanted him to tell me this one little thing…”

“It seems like you want him to tell you a lot more than just that,” Hitoka piped in.

“Oh, I’m on speaker? Then I assume Tobio’s there too. So, Tobio-chan…”

“…is not talking to you. We are,” Hinata interrupted him again. “Just ask the question and we’ll answer it. Then promise to leave him alone at least for today.”

“I don’t think you’re the one to negotiate anything,” Oikawa said dryly. Hinata shrugged although there was no way for Oikawa to see that.

“We can just go back to ignoring you for the rest of the year.”

“Maybe even block your number!” Hitoka grinned. Hinata gave her a thumbs-up. Kageyama snorted softly in amusement.

“Fine!” Oikawa snapped. “I wanted to ask if you knew anything about Tsukishima Akiteru?”

The trio was quiet for a second.
“…Why?” Hinata asked warily, sharing concerned looks with both Hitoka and Kageyama. There was no way Oikawa would know…

“He was acting really suspicious after the match. Even during the match,” Oikawa explained.
“Also, his dress code was atrocious.”

“His dress code,” Kageyama deadpanned.

“No self-respecting college student would dress in a ball cap if they didn’t have something to hide.”

Hitoka snorted in a rather unladylike manner and looked horrified for a second. She thanked every higher power there was that her mother hadn’t heard that. She would be getting another bout of etiquette lessons if she had. It was bad enough that she had suffered through them with her cousin when they were young but her mother was worse than his. She would put her through them again if she thought she was slipping with her manners.

“A bad hair day, maybe?” Kageyama said, amusement again filling his voice. Hinata snickered.

“That’s more logical than anything else,” he agreed. “What do you mean by ‘acting suspiciously’?”

“Half the time he didn’t even concentrate on the match of his little brother that he had gushed so much about. Also, Kunimi – you remember him right, Tobio-chan? You were such good friends – said he was tracking the police as well as the other watchers the whole time he was there.”

“Maybe he’s just weird like that. Or, maybe, he was worried about Tsukishima. Maybe he was just keeping his eye out so no one would shoot his little brother again,” Hinata rolled his eyes. “Now, we answered your question and we have a team meeting. Remember your promise to leave Kageyama alone for the rest of the day. See you later, Grand King.”

“I’m not…”

Hinata hang up and tossed the phone back to Kageyama. Hitoka started clapping.

“That was amazing,” she cheered.

“Thanks,” Kageyama said awkwardly, pocketing his phone again.

“No problem,” Hinata said. He stretched his arms. “I knew the Grand King was bothering you but I didn’t know just how much. If he ever annoys you again to the point of thinking about throwing your phone at the wall, just come to me.” He grinned. “In junior high, I used to prank call with Izumi and Kouji a lot. I could probably annoy the Grand King to hang up on me.”

“That’s amazing!” Hitoka repeated and high fived Hinata.

“…I’ll keep that in mind,” Kageyama said.

“By the way, why haven’t you blocked his number? You could get rid of his harassment; I guess we can call it that.”

Kageyama looked away. “If… If something happens, I want to be able to tell him to back off. I’m not sure if he’d take the advice but… I don’t want to be guilty of him getting hurt. He is part of this because of me, so…”

Hitoka bit her lip. She hadn’t known Kageyama had felt so guilty about all of this…

Hinata just nodded in reply. The three of them entered the gym, just in time for the meeting to start.
Mid-way through the lunch meeting, the Karasuno team heard screams and shouting outside the gym but far enough that, whoever they were, they were probably still inside the school. There were also rushing steps to get away from something. Takeda-sensei paused from explaining their preparations for the Spring High, and November which was just a day away, and frowned at the open door. The whole team turned to look toward the commotion, confusion clouding their minds. They could see nothing strange, and neither seemed the people outside, before they heard a hauntingly familiar sound from just a few days ago.

Someone shot a gun once.

Twice.

*Three times.*

There was a moment of total silence.

Suddenly, an electronic crackle pierced their ears, making them wince, as the school wide PA system sprung to life.

“*Come out to play, game changer… And be careful… We’re coming for you...*”

Chapter End Notes

See you next time ;)
I'm kind of sorry for all the cliffies in this story. Yet, also not. This was a hard chapter to write. How to reveal things without revealing too much? What is considered too little information and what too much? Ah, the laments of a writer.

Alas, enjoy the new chapter!

Karasuno volleyball team stood there, in the middle of the second gym, frozen on their feet. Noya couldn’t think of anything to say or do. Hell, he couldn’t even move, he could hardly even breathe. Absently he thought it was surprising he was still standing.

(Come out to play, game changer… And be careful… We’re coming for you…)

Shivers ran down Noya’s back. They were here. For them. At their school. And it sounded like they were… hunting them. He felt sick all of a sudden. He had never felt so much like prey before in his life.

“Why are they here?!” Tanaka shouted hoarsely, gaining his movement back sooner than Noya could even think possible. His own head felt like slush. Tanaka turned to Tsukishima who had his normal expressionless, slightly bored, face on. However, when Noya turned to look at him, he could see how Tsukishima’s eyes were slightly wider than usual and suddenly, Noya understood.

He had not anticipated this either. None of them had, even though there was a precedent of them being attacked on public before by the other black men or whoever they were.

Why hadn’t they realized this earlier?

“I don’t know,” Tsukishima said numbly. “This… This is not their usual modus operandi.”

“Modus what?” Hinata asked dumbly. He was shaking, Noya noted, and he was pale under his slight tan and his eyes were blown wide.

“A course of action,” Yachi replied automatically and Noya was immediately reminded how she was still tutoring both Hinata and Kageyama, had been in the middle of all this, even past the exam season.

“They-,” Tsukishima licked his lips but fell silent. Noya wondered if his throat felt dry. He knew his did.

“Tsukishima,” Daichi said, his voice strangely steady. “I want you to answer honestly. Who are after
Tsukishima frowned but didn’t have time to answer before his phone started blasting a weird pop song Noya had never thought Tsukishima would’ve listened to. He answered it quickly. It looked like instinct.

“Kei, tell me you’re not inside the school.” Noya recognized Akiteru’s voice. It had a steely edge on it. Tsukishima had apparently put it on speaker, accidently or on purpose, since they could all hear it echo inside the otherwise quiet gym. The people outside had already ran away, screaming. Noya marvelled how they could move but the team couldn’t. Was their shock (guilt?) this heavy?

“The whole team is in the second gym,” Tsukishima informed him.

“Alright, I can work with that. That should buy us some time. Your school has started evacuating. People are running out but it’s not really safe, not for you. They’re looking for you, not them. Someone alerted the police already so we’re working on a schedule here, trying to fix this before they arrive. I’m coming to you. Stay there until I’m there. I’m coming as soon as I can.”

“Sure,” he answered Akiteru numbly but the call had already ended. He closed his eyes for a second before opening them again. The same steel Akiteru had had was reflected in Tsukishima’s eyes.

“Someone, please, close the door and lock it. We need to go to somewhere we can easily defend or leave if someone breaks in,” he ordered and, surprisingly (or maybe not), Tanaka snapped to attention and ran to fulfil the demand, Kinoshita not far behind him.

“There’s the backroom with the window. It’s close enough to the backdoor and we can probably force it open if it comes to that. It would make a lot noise, though,” Daichi said.

“Good enough. If they’re already in, noise won’t matter anymore.”

“What about your brother?” Suga asked quietly when they started moving away from the main door.

“He knows his way around, and can probably guess where we’ll go,” Tsukishima said.

“Going with that thought, wouldn’t the attackers know that too?” Takeda-sensei asked logically. Tsukishima whipped his head to look at the teacher before groaning.

“They would, of course they would. Shit.” He slapped his forehead. It was uncharacteristic of him, both the action and the curse. On any other day, Noya would tease him about it. Not now, though. It was definitely not the place and time for that.

“Do we have a choice?” Yachi questioned softly. She was holding Kiyoko’s hand, pale but still having more colour on her cheeks than Kiyoko who looked like death warmed over. Noya suddenly felt more awake. They were all rattled but Kiyoko seemed almost too on edge.

Kageyama shifted Yamaguchi to peer at the corridor. It was dark, as was the rest of the gym. Well, as dark as it was with the lights turned off in the middle of the day. Kinoshita had turned them off when they had locked the door with Tanaka. Good thinking, Noya silently congratulated him, still keeping his eyes mainly on Kiyoko.

“It’s narrow, and probably easily defendable,” Kageyama said. He turned to look at Tsukishima. “Right?” he asked, demanding an answer from their resident spy or whatever Tsukishima was. Tsukishima’s eyes sharpened and he nodded.

“Yes, you’re right,” he conceded and looked more self-assured by the moment. This also convinced
Noya that Tsukishima hadn’t known this was a possibility and gave him a weird feeling of peace. He was just as worried as the rest of them and was clearly just as unprepared. “It doesn’t matter if they know it. Open space equals death. The room, we can defend that until my brother arrives,” Tsukishima said almost like he was reciting a list. He probably was, Noya thought.

“Let’s move on then,” Daichi said brusquely and stormed in the corridor. The rest of the team, and Takeda-sensei, followed after him. They all hid in the room. It wasn’t comfortable. The room was too small for them all to fit in well but it was good enough to offer them cover. Asahi and Daichi quickly blocked the window, first by the curtains, then by the mattresses and some heavy equipment they found there. They balanced them carefully to keep them straight and supported so they wouldn’t fall on them. No one would be shooting them from there.

The only way in, and out, was now the door.

“Hey… Are you alright?” Noya asked Kiyoko who was now resting next to him. He hadn’t felt this awkward with her since the first few times he had seen her and couldn’t even open his mouth to speak to her.

“No, I’m not…” she sighed, resting her head on her knees. Yachi was leaning on her other side, offering her silent support for her and taking comfort from Kiyoko’s presence too. “None of us are.”

“I’m sorry if I sound intrusive or something but… You seem even more rattled than us.” Noya watched as others close to them perked up as well, clearly interested in hearing what Kiyoko had to say. Tsukishima was one of the only exceptions, pacing in front of the now locked and blocked door, clearly trying to concoct a plan to get them all out alive. He also held his phone on his hand, waiting for any kind of contact.

Kiyoko sighed.

“I forgot to mention this earlier because we won the match against Shiratorizawa but… I heard someone during the match. I don’t know how, or why, but someone clearly…” she took in a breath. “Someone clearly wished us all dead.”

“And now someone, maybe even that someone, attacked the school,” Suga said softly. He reached to take one of Kiyoko’s hands on his own. “Don’t worry; it’s not your fault this happened because you forgot to tell us that. There’s no one here who thought this was even a possibility.”

“More fool us,” Ennoshita mumbled. Noya flashed a glare at him but he just shrugged. It was an unfortunate truth but the truth nonetheless.

“Indeed, but it doesn’t sound like them,” Tsukishima said, frustration written on his face. He closed his eyes to gather himself. “My brother is going to kill me,” he muttered to himself quietly but it was enough for Noya, and all of the others, to hear in the small space. “To answer your earlier question, captain, this group doesn’t have a name or at least it hasn’t been explicitly disclosed to outsiders of the faction. They have a calling card of a sort, leaving pictures of red suns around their scenes, either on paper or painted on something, so we have taken to calling them just the ‘Sun Group’.”

“Never heard of that,” Daichi said, eyes sharp and intense. Noya couldn’t believe Tsukishima was actually volunteering information but he wasn’t complaining. Akiteru had said that everything was ‘need-to-know’ but apparently Tsukishima didn’t share the sentiment… or thought it was now necessary to tell them. For Tsukishima to possibly think the latter, it was a scary thing indeed.

“We think,” Tsukishima sighed. “We think they ‘call’ themselves that because of our group. They are a rather new faction, only a few years old, which is partly why no one knows much of them or
how and when they exactly emerged. We also started going through some big changes around that
time, so there is that as well.”

“So, they are after you, from our team?” Tanaka asked. His brows were furrowed and judging.

“No. Well, kind of,” Tsukishima looked even more frustrated. “That’s something I cannot divulge.
But the other group, it’s imperative you know how dangerous they truly are. We’ve tried to catch
them for these past years to no use. Someone may be leaking information from our side, perhaps,
since they managed to track us here. To Karasuno. Anyway, that’s only speculation at this point.

“They are at the point they’re starting to not care if they’re hurting others to get at us. I told you
earlier that they could try to use you as leverage, or even kill you. They’re not far enough to target
uninvolved civilians, such as your family. Too messy, and it would bring the cops after them; at the
moment the police don’t have enough to go on of them because they’ve stayed mostly under the
radar.”

Tsukishima stopped, carefully giving out information for them. It was almost like he was on court,
Noya thought, eyes on their blond middle blocker. He was giving just enough to keep them happy
and safe but not a bit more than absolutely necessary. Noya thought it was a time consuming way to
play but he could appreciate the analytical effort to make it happen needed. From how Daichi and
Tanaka looked, however, it was evident that they didn’t share his sentiment, at least outside the
volleyball court.

“But you, you’re free game,” Tsukishima said at last. “To protect us, we would have to cover your
deaths or whatever happened. It would bring even more attention to us. The Sun Group is clever. We
have to give it to them. They are forcing us from the shadows where we belong, and destroying our
way of living.”

“Why attack the school then?” Takeda-sensei asked quietly. Tsukishima shook his head, his mouth
twisted downwards.

“I wonder that too. A cover, maybe? I honestly doubt they’ve hurt anyone seriously when they shot
the gun. It was probably done just to smoke us out.”

“…And it would’ve worked… had we not been here,” Yamaguchi whispered.

“By now, they’ve probably figured out we’re here,” Kageyama said. His eyes were sharp on the
door. They had also locked a cage full of volleyballs, and other heavy equipment they had found and
thrown in it, in front of it just in case. The door opened inside, so it brought them some safety.

“And what is your group’s name?” Suga asked, finally, after a small silence. Tsukishima hesitated
but, with a grimace, answered the question.

“The Dark Moon.”

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Narita blinked. Such a cliché sounding name, he thought. What the heck. It was really like they were
living in a western film. Yet, beside him, Kinoshita froze and his eyes widened.

“I recognize that name…” he whispered and paled. Tsukishima twitched. His scowl deepened until it
looked almost painful to keep on. “The Dark Moon, the Shadowed Moon, Light in the Dark…
You’re one of the underground groups the police and my brother have been hunting down – one of
the most influential ones of the past years.”
An uncomfortable air seized the room.

“The under-, you mean, like, the yakuza?” Hinata asked. His eyes were blown wide and his mouth was hanging open. Tsukishima nodded, visibly steeling himself for the response. Hinata stared at him for a long moment before snorting and starting to giggle uncontrollably.

“Does that mean that… while Tanaka-san looks like a delinquent, it’s really Tsukishima?” he snorted again, and fell against Yamaguchi beside him. The rest of the team exchanged stunned glances before erupting in giggles too. Even Kageyama was smirking in Tsukishima’s direction.

“Can you imagine, Tsukishima with a buzz cut or the weird hairdo from anime?” Suga snickered, hiding his grin behind his hands. It didn’t manage to conceal it at all.

“He needs a bamboo sword, like a good old delinquent! Do you know kendo? You have to know kendo!” Noya howled loudly. Yachi was trying to shush them but with no success. She was giggling herself while sending apologetic looks at Tsukishima at the same time, whose previous frustration had melted into a longsuffering expression.

“…Not well,” he finally admitted and that sent the group into another fit. Narita wiped tears from his eyes. This probably wouldn’t be as funny if it hadn’t happened right then and there. The shock and stress had to unravel somehow. At least it wasn’t through violence.

“So when you were talking about them not following agreements… You mean codes of conduct or agreements between groups?” Kinoshita asked. He probably knew the most about them, through his brother probably, Narita thought.

“Both,” Tsukishima answered, and elaborated. “The modus operandi is often pretty set but the Sun Group has been breaking down barriers and not for good. There have been some ripples and some of the smaller families have even broken up, or disbanded, recently. We suspect it’s because of the Sun’s movements but there has been no proof. Though there has been evidence of them working within areas strictly under a specific faction’s surveillance so they can be viewed as a threat.”

“The drawings of the sun, coloured in red,” Kinoshita mused. Narita stared at him. He had this expression on his face that clearly told he was trying to connect the dots. Kinoshita could be just as persistent and mulish as his older brother.

“How come you’re so chatty now?” Tanaka demanded to know. “Neither you nor your brother seemed to be very inclined to tell us anything less than a week ago!”

“My brother will probably chew me out for this but I needed to emphasize how important it is to be careful. They are everywhere, so, I-,” Tsukishima looked frustrated again. Yamaguchi rose and walked a few steps to stand beside him.

“Tsukki has only best intentions, I’m sure. He wouldn’t lead us wrong on purpose, and…” he gripped Tsukishima’s shoulder and turned towards the team. “Tsukki cares, even though he doesn’t look like it outwards. I know him. He’s always been like that.”

“Yet you didn’t know this side of him,” Tanaka challenged but Yamaguchi held his ground. Narita was slightly impressed. He had to give it to him, the first year had grown some balls during these past months and his loyalty was top notch.

“I can only blame myself for not noticing. I should’ve, if only because I if I was a better friend, I would’ve,” Yamaguchi declared. Tsukishima looked stunned, Narita noticed. He felt a bit perplexed at the logic too himself.
“Yamaguchi, it’s…”

“No, Tsukki. You’re my best friend and you always notice things about me before sometimes even I do,” Yamaguchi interrupted Tsukki which seemed to baffle him even more. He continued and raised his voice just a bit to stress his next point: “So, now that I know, I won’t stand for any slander.” He threw a look just as challenging at Tanaka who just raised his hands as if to indicate defeat. Yamaguchi nodded imperiously before flushing and peeking at Tsukishima from under his lashes. Narita hid a snort.

And there he was; the meek and gentle housecat was back after roaring like a lion. Maybe he should’ve gone to Nekoma instead.

“Am I the only one who thinks it’s been a bit too quiet?” Kageyama asked when no one was speaking any longer, and the tension was back as if it never left. Narita hadn’t even noticed when it had eased before it came back tenfold.

“My brother also hasn’t sent any messages and it’s been fifteen minutes by now.” Tsukishima stared at his phone, fingers tapping on the screen quickly.

“Are you worried?” “Can’t he handle himself?” Yamaguchi and Tanaka asked at the same time, exchanging a heated glance between them.

Tsukishima ignored the questions, and he called his brother’s number. After a moment, they heard a ringtone, slightly dark and gloomy, sound just outside the door. Tsukishima paled as he stared at the door in disbelief. The call was answered.

“Heeey…” an unknown, feminine voice drawled and they could almost hear it as an echo since the person was just outside their door. “I would love to listen to you more but apparently your pep talk time is over now. Mind opening the door for me?”

“Why do you have that phone?” Tsukishima questioned firmly but Narita could see his hands shake momentarily before they relaxed and he tightened his grip on his phone.

“I wonder. You must be the firefly, who comes out at night, aren’t you, Kei?” the voice laughed, the high notes of it straining Narita’s ears.

“Where is my brother?” Tsukishima spoke slowly, words coming out as if they were each a threat.

“I wonder,” the voice repeated, mocking him again. “You can probably guess, can’t you? Now, care to lower these walls for me, darling little light? I have to find myself a game changer.”

***

Takeda felt utterly useless. Here he was a teacher and, more importantly, an adult, hiding with a bunch of school kids, doing absolutely nothing to trying to help them out. Timidly he had just followed children half his age around and trying to find their way out of this situation alive. He inwardly stared himself down. Are you proud of yourself, Ittetsu? The only things you’ve ever done for them have been setting them up for matches and camps, things related to volleyball. And now, the only things you should’ve done were to reassure them and find means to escape to safety. And you have done nothing of the sort.

Takeda could bring no safety for them. He was scrawny and inefficient, often unable to even hurt a fly and not because he didn’t find them annoying or didn’t want them dead. What use was he? Hearing Tsukishima’s explanation (and, oh, how it hurt to know that a child had to be a part of a life
like that), he could finally, truly, understand how miserably unprepared they were for everything.

He was still of the mind that they should’ve gone to the police in the beginning but it was a little too late to think like that. Should’ve, could’ve, would’ve, none of them did them any good. If they had done differently, they may have more protection but they also might have made themselves targets a lot earlier or gotten even more people hurt. In the end, what was the right choice? Had there ever been one?

Takeda watched as Tsukishima stood in front of the door, phone in hand, and back straight and stiff. What does it feel like to know that you’re the only thing standing between them and the danger; to know that your backup, your brother, was unable to help and probably in a bad shape? Takeda felt like shaking Tsukishima’s family. Why would they let a child of only sixteen be in the middle of a situation like this? Why? For what purpose? There was no greater good that excused this.

“Now, little light, you can do it. Just open the door, and I swear, your brother will be alright,” the voice sang sweetly but even to Takeda’s ears, who was ready to believe the good of everyone (he knew his vices), it sounded like empty promises. Tsukishima gripped the hem of his shirt tightly.

“Come on, little light, it’s alright, isn’t it? What we want in exchange for what is yours, hmm?”

“A photo…”

“Hmm?”

“I want to see a photo of my brother, and the shape he is in,” Tsukishima said decisively. He relaxed his stance, and a smirk found its way on his face. “You can do that, right?”

“Little light,” the voice held now a slightly annoyed tone. “You’re not really in a position to argue, are you?”

“Can you even provide a photo? Have you just stolen the phone somehow, or is my brother dead?” he said bluntly. “Because if it’s either case, I can’t think of a reason I should open the door. Both are also cases you wouldn’t send me a picture. Now, ‘sweet lady’,” Tsukishima spoke softly, “Can you, or can you not, provide me a photo of my brother?”

“I can and I will force the door open,” the woman was no longer amused.

“My brother is tough. He wouldn’t be taken down without a ‘bang’, as he likes to say. And I say, lady, I have heard no such thing. I won’t be opening the door, not for you,” Tsukishima spat out. The woman sniffed derisively, attitude taking a total 180.

“Very well.”

Something clicked, and Takeda had barely enough time to register the sound before Tsukishima yelled for them all to just: “Get down!”

Takeda felt himself being pulled down as series of bangs crowded the air. Bullets fell with a clack on the floor and when Takeda looked up, the door was full of holes. The woman, Takeda could see shades shifting from the holes, moved, and tried to open the door.

“Gosh, what do you have in front of this shit?” she muttered. “Some sort of roadblock?”

“It worked for you; it might work for the others too,” Tsukishima said calmly from his coiled position on the floor. He looked ready to attack if anything got through. Takeda checked his team from where they were lying in a messy pile. No one seemed hurt, this time. The door and the block in front of it
seemed to either stop the bullets completely or slow their velocity enough to eliminate most of the danger. He momentarily wondered why the doors weren’t thicker but shook his head almost instantly after the thought even occurred. They weren’t meant to stop anything, not even burglars. That was the job for the main and backdoors, not the sports equipment room door.

“I don’t have to open the door,” the woman declared suddenly, and Takeda was chilled. “I can just shoot you through it. Isn’t that nice? You can all die without me moving none of my muscles. At some point, there’s just enough room for me to aim at the floor, where you are… and where you belong.”

She laughed and opened fire. Takeda shifted to cover most of his team, trying to stretch himself to include them all. If nothing else, he could offer them this. He was a teacher, no, he was their teacher. They had a life ahead of them. They were his.

How did she even have enough bullets to do this?

He watched as the door became more and more filled with gaps. In the hallway, he could see the woman was also dressed in black (what was it with the people following them wearing all black? Did they have an exclusive club that declared it to be so or something? Oh, right, they actually did). The increasing opening seemed more terrifying every second. Someone gasped. Takeda closed his eyes.

Was this it?

Suddenly, a loud crash interrupted the noise of the shots and Takeda’s eyes flashed open. He stared as the door was now open and the block, the ball cage that had been locked on the ground, now lay next to the wall. Tsukishima was nowhere to be seen and the woman had disappeared from his line of sight too.

He quickly scrambled up, almost falling down again, but straightening himself in time to run to the door. There, in the hallway a couple of metres away from it, the woman was in the middle of a fight against Tsukishima. He gasped as their middle blocker switched from what seemed to be from different kinds of martial arts (was that karate? some sort of boxing? what?) to fighting techniques fast enough that Takeda could hardly even see him move. The woman was on the defensive but seemed to be just as good, taking advance of her slighter figure and shorter height. Where Tsukishima had her beat in strength, she was more nimble and less of a target.

“What the hell…” Tanaka said beside him, his jaw seemingly about to hit the floor any moment now. Takeda wasn’t far behind him.

The backdoor banged open and more men tried to step in. Without thinking Takeda ran forward. He had no idea what to do but he had to do something. He hit the closest person miraculously in the face, possibly breaking his fingers as he did so. It hurt. Someone was beside him, jumping on the men, and then all hell broke loose. Takeda was showed away at some point and he hit his head on the wall, disorienting him for good long moments. When his head finally cleared, he didn’t know how much time had passed, there were both members of his team and those with black clothes dancing around. It seemed that the black men (and women?) were more hesitant to shoot than the woman earlier. Someone was even lying on the ground but with all the feet and movement on the way Takeda couldn’t see who it was. It was hard to see with the light against the black men’s backs making the rest of the corridor look darker than it really was.

He could recognize, however, Tanaka and Nishinoya being at the front, advancing on the men. He knew that Tanaka could fight, it was no secret, but Nishinoya had some great skills too. His reach wasn’t great but he could pack a punch. Takeda watched the scene dumbly. Pressure points, maybe?
Shit, this was no time to analyse anything. He moved to stand up (when had he fallen down?) but swayed and immediately fell down again. No, there was no way for him to move to help anyone. He could only watch as in the narrow corridor Tanaka and Nishinoya kept the men from the rest of the team, mostly still hidden in the room thankfully and making themselves less of a target for possible lucky shots, and how Tsukishima…

Tsukishima had fallen down. At some point he and the woman had switched so the woman had her back against them and her gun was kicked quite close to Takeda and the doorway. There was also a Swiss army knife lying around. He wondered if the gun had anything left in it but he didn’t even know how to shoot a gun. Maybe he should’ve followed his mother to the shooting range once upon a time, or taken some self-defence lessons. He didn’t even know how to handle a knife effectively. He wondered also, briefly, if his sister had this sort of action in the army. When they had laughingly called him the white sheep of the family, he had once taken it with pride. Maybe he should’ve followed in his family’s footsteps.

But then again, he wouldn’t be here, would he?

The woman advanced on Tsukishima, who was holding his arm – the same arm, Takeda noted, that had the scratch from the bullet. The arm was darker than his other one. Blood? Takeda paled and tried to rise again but with no use. He couldn’t even speak, nothing left his mouth but a harsh quiver, and his vision was starting to get a little blurry.

A figure ran up close to him and snatched up the gun. He could hear voices protesting, but the person was quick and steady as the gun was levelled at the woman who was readying herself to give a decisive blow on Tsukishima. Something flashed and Takeda realized she held a knife on her hand. Where had she pulled that?!

The gun clicked.

“Step away from my cousin or, I swear, I will shoot you like you tried to shoot us. You bitch.”

Takeda’s eyes widened in shock when he took in the small and fragile but also serious and solemn figure in front of him. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

_Yachi._

Chapter End Notes

I love Yachi. Don't you?
This chapter was starting to feel like it would never end. Over 7k words, thanks to characters that just wouldn't shut up and/or would insert themselves into a scene they weren't supposed to even be in, which then spiraled out of control. Woops.

...Or maybe it's me who has no control. By the way, my dear readers, I adore you. Just so you know.

Anyway, enjoy the chapter!

Tsukishima looked up, his face carefully blank. The woman stood there, almost on top of him, and her knife was raised just high enough to have the maximum force but least effort to strike him down. He had to hand it to her; she knew what she was doing. That said, he hadn’t left her without bruises either. He had managed to knock her into the wall a couple of times and there was some blood caked in her hair. Her nose was also bloody and running and he suspected he had bruised her ribs by her hitching breath. His strength was greater than hers but she was quicker, far faster, than most of his usual sparring partners. She had caught him with a well-placed kick at the back of his knees, forcing him to fall down.

Trying to get up would’ve been a useless effort. Tsukishima was not stupid, and he suspected that his head would’ve met the wall had he tried. He focused on keeping his senses heightened and muscles taut to let him act the moment he saw his chance. But now, the woman was holding a knife. A general combat knife, easy to handle and use, but it was enough to do the job in the hands of a professional.

Tsukishima lowered his head slightly but kept his eyes on the woman. His moment would come. He might not make it unscathed but he would make it.

For the family. For Akiteru. For the target.

For...

He heard a gun click and a familiar voice call out.

“Step away from my cousin or, I swear, I will shoot you like you tried to shoot us. You bitch.”

For his cousin.

The woman halted just for a second but that was enough for Tsukishima to gain momentum. He swiped the legs from under the woman and was up the moment she was falling backwards, frustration and slight shock written on the part of her face he could see. She tried to slash him with the knife but he grabbed her arm and twisted, forcing her to let go of it. He dragged her up, her back to his chest, her knife on her throat by one hand and the other had a painful grip on her waist and arms. It was an advantage to being in taller and bigger than her – her escape would not be easy.

He stared into Hitoka’s focused brown eyes. She had the gun still levelled at the woman. He could see from the corner of his eye how Takeda-sensei was staring at them in incredulousness and how,
behind them, Tanaka and Nishinoya were keeping the Sun Group from advancing further down the corridor. Tsukishima frowned. There was no way those two would be stronger than the others. There was something at play here and he hated not knowing all the pieces.

He focused again on Hitoka. She had revealed their relationship. He grimaced. Fine, it was getting rather tiresome anyway. He just wished she hadn’t done it so explicitly in front of the enemy.

“Hitoka.” She straightened her pose immediately.

“Yes, Kei?”

“Go back to the room.” Move out of the way. She quickly nodded and, without lowering her gun, stepped into the cover of the doorway.

“Tanaka, Nishinoya, fall back!” he barked, as if recalling fighting dogs from the front line. Sensing the change in the air, they obeyed but backed up slowly. Tanaka bent down to pick up Takeda-sensei and dragged him to safety too. They stopped around the doorway, and Hitoka, when they noticed her. She turned her gun from the woman to the men, which seemed to shock both Nishinoya and Tanaka. They probably hadn’t heard her declaration in the midst of the fight.

During all this time, none of the men of the Sun Group moved. Their eyes were trained on both Tsukishima and the woman and the trio in the doorway, Tanaka having pushed Takeda-sensei inside the equipment room. Nishinoya stood in front of them while Tanaka watched Hitoka’s back.

“If you don’t want this woman,” Tsukishima pushed the knife closer to the woman’s throat and lifted her head slightly, “to die, I want you all to back down and leave. Preferably into the arms of the police, who I am very surprised aren’t here already, but I’ll take it if you leave the school and us alone. Now.”

None of them moved.

“They won’t do as you ask,” the woman rasped and laughed. Tsukishima’s grip on her tightened.

“Why? Do they not care for your life?”

He could sense her grin. It answered the question plenty enough although no words left her mouth.

Tsukishima glared at the men who stood there. It was bizarre behaviour. It was like they had no minds of their own. When the woman had stopped fighting, or rather had been forced to stop fighting, they had stopped too. Suddenly, from the back, one of them stepped forward. Not far enough for Hitoka to shoot but enough for Tsukishima to be able to focus his eyes on him. While the sun behind the men hurt his eyes, he wasn’t going to close them now.

“You failed to take out the target.”

He was speaking to the woman as if no one else was around.

“I did,” the woman answered calmly. “Unfortunately.” She didn’t offer any apologies but apparently they weren’t needed.

The man looked up at Tsukishima and held his gaze. “So, I guess you weren’t up for destroying the Shield either.” Tsukishima saw his eyes flicker on Hitoka. “Or even the little miss Moon Flower.”

“Neither did they manage to destroy the Sword,” someone said behind Tsukishima and he felt himself relax minimally. Not enough for the woman to escape but to his surprise she didn’t even try.
Akiteru.

“Ah, the famous Sword. And now, we have finally gotten the names for you. Elusive bunch, you were. Tsukishima Akiteru, Tsukishima Kei, Yachi Hitoka…” the man listed, almost lazily looking at them one at a time. Tsukishima saw how Tanaka shot a confused glance at Hitoka but she, to her credit, didn’t falter while being called out. Her grip was steady as always.

“How unfortunate for us. How about you level the scales? Tell us your names in exchange?” Akiteru asked coldly. The man huffed in amusement.

“So you say you don’t know who we are yet? I am almost appalled how low you have fallen.” Tsukishima gritted his teeth. That man was starting to get on his nerves. No one should try to step on their family’s good name.

Suddenly, it seemed as if the man had lost all interest in them and turned his gaze, no longer listless but now piercing, towards… Nishinoya? The boys in question bristled and hunched his shoulders, ready to jump on the men again if they as much as looked at them the wrong way like a wild cat.

“Yuu.”

Tsukishima froze and his eyes flickered over to Nishinoya. The woman in her grip gasped softly and he quickly looked down at her. She had a strange expression on her face – weirdly open and almost amazed. She stared at Nishinoya as if he was the second coming of Jesus or something.

What the…?

“It’s Nishinoya to you,” Nishinoya hissed. The man huffed again.

“Now, Yuu, don’t be like that.” (Don’t call me Yuu!) “Why are you here, mingling with these mongrels? Shouldn’t you have better things to do?”

Tsukishima was stumped. He had no idea what was going on anymore. He sensed rather than saw that his brother was in a similar state as he was and, he glanced at Hitoka, she was as well. She also didn’t seem to know who she should point the gun at anymore either. She was biting her lip but her head was tilting between Nishinoya and the man. Despite that her gun didn’t waver from the man. Tsukishima approved. Whatever the man wanted, this team had it. He was the true threat.

“I don’t even know you,” Nishinoya spat. “So you have no say on what I do with my life.”

The man sighed. “I told them that letting you be adopted was a mistake in the making.”

The time seemed to halt for a moment.


“Hmm?” the man hummed. “That you’ve been adopted? Shouldn’t it be clear, Yuu?”

He grinned.

“‘The Evening Sun’ belongs with its own, doesn’t it?”

***

Suga distantly noted when Noya and Tanaka ran out, his focus on Kinoshita who had at the last possible second pushed him out of the way of several bullets. He had been almost pressed against the
wall, in clear view of the woman who had been shooting at them. He had seen her aim straight at him, right at the place where his heart was. He had known she wouldn’t miss.

She hadn’t.

But it wasn’t him who she had hit.

Suga desperate pressed his jersey which he had ripped off of himself at the wound on Kinoshita’s chest. Kinoshita was panting in laboriously, sweat pooling on his forehead and his eyes held a panicked but strangely calm look. He gave Suga a small smile which Suga couldn’t believe he was able to do. Was he trying to calm him down? He was serene as the sea and he was not the one who had been shot.

“Shit,” he cursed and tried to press the wound harder. Kinoshita winced but Suga didn’t lessen the pressure. The bullet (meant for him) had hit something very bad. His jersey was already getting soaked with it. “Shit,” he breathed again. Perhaps he wasn’t as calm as he would like to be but no one could blame him.

“Do we have anything here to treat him?” Suga asked. He was vaguely aware that the noise had increased and then stopped altogether. Kageyama had hurried over with a first aid kit he had found. He fumbled to open it but didn’t spill anything on the floor; rather, his grip was surprisingly gentle and firm and the only panic he showed was visible in his eyes.

“We’re not equipped for this,” Kageyama said as he went through the kit.

“We’re not equipped for any of this,” Asahi muttered as he knelt next to them. “Have you taken an emergency class?”

“After my grandfather’s accident, yes. I wanted to be able to help him if something happened to him during his rehabilitation,” Kageyama answered. Asahi nodded.

“So have I. We need to treat the wound. Somehow. I’ll search for the treatment information, you treat him? My hands are filthy.” And his hands were shaking slightly unlike Kageyama’s. Setter’s hands, Suga thought. His own hands were surprisingly steady too in this crazy situation.

“Mine are too. I’ll disinfect them first,” Kageyama said. Suga watched as he tried to keep Kinoshita as still as possible. Asahi, hurry, he urged silently. Suga had also been to a first aid class with Daichi when their parents had made them attend just in case. It wasn’t particularly helpful on their case either. His eyes flickered to Daichi who was standing near the door, ready to act if necessary. With Narita and Ennoshita hovering worriedly near them and Shimizu on a phone (Suga heard her talking quietly to someone, possibly the police, since she kept updating them on whatever was going on). Yamaguchi and Hinata were standing near Daichi, Takeda-sensei was back in, looking worse for wear, and – where was Yachi?

Suga noticed her finally standing in the doorway, partly hidden behind Daichi and Yamaguchi. Her hands were raised and she was… pointing a gun at someone? Kinoshita coughed from his position on Suga’s lap and his attention was immediately directed at him. Whatever was going outside, he could deal with it later. Kinoshita was priority one.

“Suga, keep him still,” Asahi ordered. Suga nodded in response. “And we need to change the jersey into something else. Darn it… Do we have anything to make an occlusive dressing?” he asked. Kageyama quickly looked through the kit again and nodded, to Suga’s relief.

“Yeah, we do.”
“Good. Because we don’t want his lungs to collapse.” Narita whimpered behind Asahi and Ennoshita hugged him close. They clung to each other. Shimizu’s voice took a bit higher tone as she told someone to hurry up. Kageyama just nodded again and started to follow Asahi’s guiding in treating the wound. Kinoshita made some pained noises but seemed fine otherwise. Too fine. He was probably going into shock soon.

Suga exchanged a worried look with Asahi while Kageyama steadily worked through making a makeshift treatment on the wound. “There’s too much blood,” Kageyama muttered. “He may have internal bleeding.”

“Oh hell,” Asahi sighed deeply. “We need to get him out of here and fast. We need a professional.”

“Yeah,” Kageyama agreed. “And soon. There may be some damage on the spinal cord too. We have to keep him very still, just in case.”

“Have you ever thought about becoming a doctor?” Suga asked him, both trying to lighten up the atmosphere and truly curious. Kageyama’s hands had been very steady even on a setter’s scale.

“With my bedside manners and grades?” he asked self-deprecatingly. “I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“You should. I’ll tutor you when we’re out of here,” Suga promised. Kageyama looked surprised but quickly caught on.

We’re all getting out of here, Suga communicated with his eyes. Kageyama and Asahi nodded in assent.

“The police are coming,” Shimizu breathed aloud in relief just as Kageyama finished. Suddenly, a gunshot was heard and they all winced. Kinoshita gasped. Suga quickly turned to look at him. Kinoshita was almost white and his eyes were slightly bulged. Was he going into shock?

“Leave now or I won’t miss next time,” Yachi – really, Yachi – ordered.

“You didn’t miss this one either,” someone hissed from the corridor. Yachi’s voice was cold when she continued.

“You’re still breathing.” So was Kinoshita, actually, but his was fast, too fast. Shit, shit, shit.

“Mark my words, the twilight hour is coming – and you can do nothing to stop that.”

“We’ll see.” Suga recognized that voice. It was Akiteru.

“Yuu, come.” They were calling for Noya? Suga blinked. What the heck had happened?!

“Never,” was Noya’s biting answer. Kageyama had lowered himself to Kinoshita’s level and quickly smashed his mouth on his. Kinoshita’s eyes almost bulged out but, surprisingly, his breathing evened out a little. Kageyama rose up again, and he nodded in satisfaction as Kinoshita seemed to calm down bit by bit until it didn’t appear like his lungs were going to burst out of his chest. He still wasn’t looking good, the blood loss was heavy and whatever-that-was had weakened Kinoshita even more. Suga and Asahi stared at the two.

“You will,” there was some amusement in the parting words before Suga heard footsteps leaving. “And soon.”

Kageyama was barely able to keep Kinoshita from falling unconscious. The attack had eaten most, if not all, energy Kinoshita had had left. Suga heard a thump and low mumbling before heavy steps
were departing in the opposite direction. The echo of the steps had barely even managed to disappear  
before Suga heard the most welcome words of them all.

“This is the police. Make way for the EMT. We have a seriously wounded patient waiting for us!”

***

Ukai paced outside the school, thankfully with the emergency workers rather than the other civilians. He had run there immediately after he had heard about the attack on the Karasuno High School. He had an idea on what had happened. Scratch that thought, no, he had no idea on what had transpired but, rather, who was behind it. It had to be the people who had shot at them on Sunday.

Why now? Why here?

Ukai had badgered the police the instant he had arrived, and was able to convince them he should be able to be on the other side of the yellow tape. He didn’t care if that was just to get him to shut up but he wasn’t going to let his kids alone the moment he saw them.

Unfortunately, the first one he saw was Kinoshita, who was being carefully carried over to the ambulance on a stretcher. Ukai watched as Kinoshita’s brother tagged along, eyes seeing nothing but his unconscious brother. He almost looked worse than his little brother but, not really, since all that blood made Kinoshita look like a corpse or a really unfortunate vampire.

Shit, that was not cool, Keishin.

How were all the others? Ukai tried to look for them but could see no one. No, there they were. His team was being herded over by the police officers and rest of the EMT. Kageyama and Sugawara were both bloody but they seemed alright. Tsukishima looked slightly beaten up, as did Tanaka. Takeda-sensei was beaten up. The rest of them seemed more or less fine if not for the dark looks on their eyes.

He hurried over. They saw him when he reached them but said nothing. Ukai said nothing either. What could even be said in this situation? It’s going to be alright? Yeah, right. He just nodded, hoping to convey that he would be supporting them, no matter what. He could do nothing for Kinoshita (thankfully the ambulance had already left with him, there was no time to spare) but he could be there for his team. He clasped the shoulder of the person closest to him, who was Nishinoya. He actually flinched and guiltily looked away. Ukai frowned.

What had transpired there?

“They’re going to want to interview you,” he said instead. Now, all of them looked alert, tired, but alert. None of them spoke before Yachi raised her hand as if she was in class.

“Can- can we do that tomorrow?” she asked almost timidly. She gained some strange looks from most of the team which was weird. What could’ve Yachi done to deserve those looks?

Ukai didn’t know but they would tell him later. Right now was not the right place and time.

He nodded.

“I’ll do my best,” he said and walked back to where the leading officer was now standing. He squared his shoulders for this would not be an easy battle to win.

He had a team to look after for, and he would do anything, anything, to make them all feel even slightly better after today.
Shit… And they were just kids enjoying volleyball.

***

“I don’t want to go home,” Nishonoya declared as they were sitting together under blankets. Ukai was still arguing for letting them go home and go to the station tomorrow instead to give their statements. Ennoshita winced when Ukai raised his voice and almost yelled about how the kids were in shock and deserved some downtime after today’s events. He also demanded to have a word (or multiple if Ennoshita knew Ukai at all) with their boss. Takeda-sensei didn’t seem to enjoy it either, if his jerk meant anything. He was being patched over by the second ambulance, the last one since he had demanded that the team should be looked over first.

Still, Ennoshita could understand perfectly fine why Noya didn’t want to meet his family right now, even though they had to be distraught with worry. He hadn’t heard the whole story since his focus had been almost completely taken over by Kinoshita but, unlike Narita, he had heard the talk about Noya’s adoption and the insinuations about it.

That must have hurt.

“You can stay the night at my place,” Kageyama said. Ennoshita straightened and turned his bewildered eyes at him. Had he heard correctly?

“Really?” Noya asked, clearly as shocked as Ennoshita felt. Kageyama nodded.

“My parents aren’t home; they’re on a business trip. It’s fine.”

Noya teared up and rushed to hug Kageyama who, in turn, flushed in what had to be embarrassment. “Thank you,” Noya whispered.

“Just… tell your family so they know not to worry. Too much. Ok?” Kageyama muttered and looked away. Noya nodded.

“Thank you,” he said again.

“If Noya’s going, I’m going too!” Tanaka declared, almost daring for Kageyama to deny him. Kageyama just stared at him, his brows furrowed, as if he didn’t seem to understand why he was even being challenged.

“Sure. Anyone else? We have space,” he offered, and Ennoshita was struck by the idea of there being enough space for the whole team. He then realized that Kageyama was probably richer than most of them (he wasn’t sure about where Tsukishima and Yachi landed with these recent disclosures) if his revelations about his family were true. Business people, they truly ruled the world.

“Count me in,” Ennoshita said out loud instead. His parents were away too, although to cheer for his sister’s basketball game in Akita. He would have to inform them he was well so they wouldn’t rush over and get into a car crash. His father was a terrible driver under duress and his mother didn’t even have a licence to drive. They would try, though. No need for them to get into an accident on his behalf.

Seeing Kinoshita bathed in blood was enough for a lifetime. Ennoshita shivered and his mood dropped again. He wondered if Kinoshita had reached hospital already. He had to be, right? He was going to be alright. Kinoshita was a tough cookie from an even tougher family. Survival was in his blood.

No, no more thoughts about blood. Please, and thank you, brain. Ennoshita burrowed deeper into his
The team divided after that for people who took Kageyama’s offer and those who didn’t. Hinata looked like he wanted to come but he had already promised his parents he would be going home. They were going to get him personally. Natsu was apparently beside herself and Hinata didn’t have the heart to leave his little sister alone after the scare of losing her favourite, and only, big brother. Narita was also going home to his little siblings who were as upset as Natsu had seemed to be when her bellows had come through Hinata’s phone. Shimizu was going home too when her parents would come to get her. She kept shooting hurt looks at Yachi. Ennoshita could understand why, though, since she had been the closest to Yachi (besides Tsukishima apparently) and hadn’t even had an inkling about her double identity. It was almost as if her favourite little kitten had grown claws overnight.

However, the rest of them took Kageyama’s offer with more or less fighting against their families. With Tanaka, Noya and Ennoshita already going, so were Suga and Daichi, who had reassured their parents that they were alright. Asahi had had some more convincing to do but he was able to come too. Noya had looked very relieved when he heard that. Yachi was coming too, Ennoshita hoped to explain.

Yamaguchi had wanted to come too but his parents were demanding him to take a taxi and come home immediately. He kept throwing glances at Tsukishima, whom he seemed to want to go with. Tsukishima exchanged a quick look and a nod with Yachi before telling Yamaguchi that he was going with him. Yamaguchi was elated, but confused for why that was.

Tsukishima rolled his eyes again. “No one is to be alone right now,” he said. “Someone is going to guard you anyway, might as well be me. Yachi is going to Kageyama’s; she can keep them safe with some extra help from outside. Yes, and Nishinoya-san and Tanaka-san too,” he gave a longsuffering sigh when Tanaka gave him a disgruntled look. “Some people will be following Hinata, Narita-san and Shimizu-san too.”

No one complained, unsurprisingly.

“It seems like Ukai-san is winning the argument,” Yachi piped in but kept her voice quiet enough so just the team heard. Ennoshita glanced at Ukai who handed the phone back to the police officer who he had argued with earlier, looking extremely satisfied with himself. “We’ll get the story straight at Kageyama-kun’s, and give you the bullet points tomorrow.” She didn’t sound exactly cheerful but she was certainly more upbeat than anyone else. Well, Ennoshita mused, optimistic was her default…

But what a way to remind them that they were going to lie to the police, again. How had Tsukishima called it before? Oh yeah, they were ‘covering their tracks’. They were in a really bad B-class film, evidently.

His gaze found Suga, who had a confused expression on his face. What was so surprising…? Ah, so he hadn’t yet seen this side of Yachi. Well, he had been pretty occupied with Kinoshita, so no wonder there. That would be a nasty surprise later, maybe.

“My brother will probably be there later,” Tsukishima said. “Nishinoya-san’s identity puts everything into a new light.”

Noya winced, and then flopped against Kageyama whom he was still sitting next to, having not moved back to his previous spot. Kageyama looked vaguely uncomfortable.

In the end, they were let go with instructions to be at the local police station at eight o’clock sharp in
the morning. Whatever Ukai had done had worked. The police officers didn’t seem to like it though, and some were even complaining about it being unprofessional. Another surprise was Hinata coming with them, in the end. His parents’ car had broken down when they had tried to leave the house and had called to ask if there was anyone he could stay with where he would be safe. Natsu had been extremely upset but, after Hinata shot a pleading look at Kageyama, Kageyama had promised Hinata could use his computer to skype with her and show that he was alright face to face, sort of.

She took it, even if she wasn’t entirely satisfied with the deal, and Hinata’s parents had thanked Kageyama so loudly that he ended up flushing beet red.

When they arrived at Kageyama’s place, Ennoshita’s jaw did not hit the ground. However, he was still amazed. The house wasn’t the biggest around, and on the outside looked like a relatively normal terraced house, but on the inside, it was totally different. The house was very spacious and quite traditionally decorated… until they saw that, on one corridor, the wall had been destroyed and the other side of the terraced house was decorated in a western fashion.

Kageyama’s family didn’t own just one side of the terraced house – they owned them both!

“My parents sometimes use the house when they meet with clients, and they usually use the side of the house which will put those clients at ease,” Kageyama explained when they had stared at the very different decors. “Traditional for the old-fashioned Japanese and fascinated foreigners, western for the progressive and… the racist,” he continued, face twisting slightly into a grimace.

“But wouldn’t they see the other side too?” Noya asked. Kageyama pointed at the other side of the corridor and the ceiling. Ennoshita recognized the screen that could be moved over to cover the space where the wall had once been. He whistled.

“They tell them it’s a large wall cupboard, and no respectable, or even disrespectful, client would go and check under their eyes,” Kageyama said dryly. Hinata snorted, and Ennoshita smiled slightly too.

Business people, right. Totally in their own world.

They settled down at the living room of the western side since it had the best couches and pillows for those who didn’t manage to snag a seat. Kageyama had also lent a change of clothes for those whose clothes were bloody or dirty – or both. All of them even took quick showers which was easy to organize since Kageyama actually had four showers in the house.

Well, it was meant to be for two per residence but, yeah… It was still a bit insane.

Also, his fridge (both of them, actually) was loaded with food and drinks which they helped themselves. After all, none of them had eaten since breakfast.

Ennoshita glanced at the clock on the wall. It was barely six in the evening. Had it only been six hours since lunch? He had not realized to even look at the time while everything was going on. How long had it all with the, what was it, ‘Sun Group’ even taken? It could’ve been hours, at least it had felt like that to him, but it was probably less than that.

“Before we start,” Suga said. “I’ve got two things. Firstly, Ennoshita, do you know anything about Kinoshita?”

Ennoshita shook his head.

“I texted his brother on our way here, and he promised to send me a message when he knew more. Apparently the doctors took Kinoshita to the operating room the instant he arrived and no one knows
“Alright.” They were all quiet for a moment, thinking about their sorely missed member. “Secondly,” Suga continued after the pause. “Kageyama.”

“Hm?”

“Why… why did you kiss Kinoshita earlier?”

The room was silent again, although for a different reason.

Kageyama faltered. “I didn’t!”

“What else do you call mouth to mouth action when it wasn’t CPR?” Suga questioned.

“I was just- He was…” Kageyama stammered. “He was having a panic attack! I remember reading once about them and how regulating the breathing pattern helps!”

“So you kissed him to shock him into evening his breathing,” Suga deadpanned.

Ennoshita couldn’t help it. He snickered. His laugh released the tension around the room, and soon others were chuckling at Kageyama’s plight too. Kageyama muttered something under his breath, probably nothing nice.

“It wasn’t a kiss.”

“Sure,” Hinata nodded and snickered. Kageyama kicked him from his place of the couch, which made Hinata stumble off his pillow with a squawk.

“Moving on…” Yachi intervened, catching their attention. “We still have to go through the story we’ll tell the cops.”

“Isn’t it time to already be honest?” Asahi asked, seemingly uncomfortable with the idea of lying to the officials again. “We’ve already been attacked twice within the week. Doesn’t that raise the suspicions?”

Yachi gave him a small look. “True,” she said, “but do you really think we want our participation broadcasted to the whole world?” The way she stressed the word ‘our’ immediately made clear she wasn’t talking just about the team but the… ‘family’… too.


“Tsukishima and she are cousins.”

“What?” Suga asked faintly.

“It’s true. Our fathers are brothers, and we’re involved through them,” Yachi admitted. She played with the hair clip she had on her hair. Ennoshita recognized that it was the one Kinoshita had given her on her birthday.

“Are you protecting the target too?” Daichi questioned. Yachi shrugged.

“Kind of, if the situation calls for it. That’s more up to Kei’s alley. Me? I’m just… here,” she finished lamely. “Getting to know the target better.”

“So Tsukishima has known the target longer than you?” Daichi asked sharply.
“He has been on this team longer, hasn’t he?” Yachi said. Well, that was undoubtedly true, Ennoshita thought, but it didn’t sound like the whole truth. “Look, I wasn’t supposed to be involved in this team. It was by chance Kiyoko-san asked me to become a new manager. Otherwise, I was just going to be there and cheering from the sidelines. Kind of like I do anyway, but…”

“Why do you need to know the target better?” Suga still had a perplexed expression on his face from the revelation that Tsukishima and Yachi were related. “Doesn’t it make more sense to keep distance?”

Yachi smiled sadly. “Classified.”

“Of course it is…” Tanaka rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, we don’t need more attention to our group for a reason. We honestly can’t be brought up to light. While there are some public factions, you know them from the news, we depend on being unrecognized. It is bad enough they now know about Kei and Akiteru and I. Other operatives and the target should be kept hidden.”

“And you won’t be able to tell us why,” Daichi rolled his eyes.

Yachi looked apologetic. “I’m sorry. I never wanted this to happen.” She looked down. Kageyama silently left for the kitchen and when he came back, he thrust a fugashi in her hand. Yachi blinked.

“Wha-, how did you…?”

“You often eat those at lunch when you tutor Hinata and me,” he just said and looked away from everyone. Yachi looked at the treat and smiled slightly.

“They’re my favourite… Thank you.”

Kageyama just nodded briskly. Ennoshita smiled. Kageyama really was just a big marshmallow on the inside under all that scowl and frown.

“So… What do you want us to say to the officers tomorrow?” Noya asked softly. He had been a bit subdued since the whole event earlier. No wonder.

“Well, we definitely want to keep it a secret that you have connections to the attackers earlier,” Yachi said as she peeled off the wrapper around her treat.

“What?” Suga asked again, eyes wide.

Oh, so Suga had missed that too.

“So, I’m adopted, okay?” Noya said, clearly showing how much he didn’t want to talk about it. “And apparently, my birth family has something to do with all this. I don’t know if my parents know anything about that or if it’s just bad luck they got me or if they… If they…”

“Hey, hey, hey! Your parents’ adopting you is not a bad thing!” Tanaka declared, jostling Noya next to him. “You got to meet us, didn’t you? And they care. Your siblings care. That’s not a lie, I can tell.”

Noya just leaned against him, thankful for the support.

“Yes, we want to keep that on the low,” Yachi said gently. “There’s no need for anyone to know that and badger Nishinoya-san because of that.”
At least that they could all agree on.

Yachi’s phone pinged with a soft classical melody, and she checked it.

“Akiteru’s on his way. He’ll be here soon.”

Daichi suddenly straightened.


“Ah. Yeah,” she nodded. “He was giving me the match details while checking we were alright.”

“I thought it was Takeda-sensei you texted.”

“He was too into the match to remember his phone,” Yachi admitted. “I tried him first but when he didn’t answer, I texted Akiteru. I didn’t want us to be uninformed about the match. I didn’t mean anything bad by it!” she insisted.

“I doubt you could hurt a fly,” Daichi snorted. Ennoshita saw Yachi look slightly offended by the comment. “That, if anything, convinces me it’s not you we need to watch out for but the other group. What was it, the Sun?”

“Twilight, actually,” Yachi corrected. “Akiteru questioned the woman who attacked us. He took her away before the police could get their hands on her. The faction’s called Twilight.”

“Like the vampire novel? Lame,” Tanaka said.

“Apt, however, if they wish to destroy the night,” Yachi said softly. “It’s a declaration: we are the ones who control the day and night, when they start and when they end.”

“Did Tsukishima’s brother tell you that as well?” Hinata asked.

Yachi nodded mutely.

“This weird symbolism is weird,” Tanaka said, and rolled his eyes. “They should just say what they want to say without dillydallying around.”

“We should probably wait until Akiteru comes around. It’s no use writing a story if we don’t know who the actors are,” Suga said, ever the voice of reason.

Kageyama rose then. “I should go make the beds for you.”

“I’ll help!” Hinata jumped up.

“Let me help too,” Noya said. “I’m the reason we’re all here bothering you after all.” Ennoshita rose as well. It was only polite. Kageyama nodded his consent and started walking towards the Japanese side of the house. Ennoshita heard Daichi, Suga, Asahi, Tanaka and Yachi strike up a conversation, on a whole different topic, before they left the hearing range.

“…It’s not a bother.”

“What?” Noya asked.

“I said,” Kageyama said louder. “It’s not a bother. That you’re here, I mean.”
“Oh,” Noya said softly. “Still, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Hey, Kageyama!” Hinata asked, looking around clearly excited. “How come you never mentioned you lived in a cool house like this?” Kageyama shrugged.

“Does it matter?”

“Well, I guess not but I would’ve insisted on visiting earlier if I had known!”

“Maybe that’s why I didn’t.”

“Mean!”

They stopped by a large closet. Kageyama opened it and started dragging around blankets and sheets, starting to dump them on Hinata, who was the closest. He seemed to get overwhelmed quite quickly with them.

“I’m alright with a futon too,” Ennoshita said, watching Hinata in amusement.

“Good to know. We don’t have enough beds for all of us unless people want to share,” Kageyama responded.

“I doubt that would be a problem either. How did you think we would divide the space?”

“Well, my parents’ rooms are off-limits, naturally. We’ve got two guest bedrooms that fit four people altogether with space for a futon, so that’s space for six, and I’ve got two rooms, so someone can share mine and someone can get the other one. I thought I’d lend one of them to Yachi.”

“I can share with you!” Hinata declared. Kageyama nodded.

“Sure. How do you think we should share the rooms?” he asked from Ennoshita.

“I can share with Suga and Daichi,” he said, glancing at Nishinoya who was helping Hinata handle the pile of blankets. Tanaka wouldn’t probably leave Noya out of his sight for long periods of time for a while and Noya took comfort from Asahi, Karasuno’s gentle giant.

“Right. Then you three can have the guest room on the western side, Yachi my room there, and the rest of us will use the other side.” He stared at the bundles in Hinata and Noya’s arms. He nodded at Noya. “You can take those up the stairs. The second room on the right is the guest bedroom. Hinata, Ennoshita, you can take the rest to the other side. The house is a mirror, so up the stairs and second room on the left is the guestroom.”

Ennoshita saluted, and took a futon from Kageyama before he and Hinata walked back to where the others were and told them about the division. The guest bedroom was nice. It was big and simple, no big declarations of wealth. Actually, the whole house was quite simplistic. Apparently Kageyama’s family wasn’t big on materialism or displaying their fortune.

After setting everything up, he and Hinata went down again and he decided to go see if Kageyama and Noya needed some help. He didn’t see them upstairs and neither in the other guestroom. He did, however, hear some noises from the third room on the left side.

“…and then it just hit me, you know? I knew libero was the coolest position there was. And it wasn’t even because of my height!”
“Setter’s just always been what I wanted to be. I’m a good wing spiker too but setter’s just…”

“I get it, I get it!”

Ennoshita snorted, deciding to wait outside for them. It would be rude to go to Kageyama’s room without invitation. He doubted it would take them long anyway if they were setting Hinata’s futon up.

“Hey, Noya-san.” Ennoshita heard Kageyama ask.

“Hmm?” Nishinoya hummed.

“Why didn’t you go with the men?”

Ennoshita blinked. What?

“What?!” Noya yelped. “What kind of question is that?!?”

“I mean, you’re well… adopted. And if they knew your real parents…”

“I know my real parents already. They’re the ones who raised me. Blood doesn’t define a family,” Noya declared seriously. “Besides, you heard what they did to Jouzenji without provocation. I want no part in whatever they do.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean…” Kageyama trailed off, sounding contrite.

“It’s okay… I can’t say it didn’t cross my mind.” Well, this was news to Ennoshita. “But, like, only for a second. It would be cool to see where I’m coming from but… If that’s the Sun or Twilight or whatever they call themselves, I don’t need to know. You know?”

“Alright.”

“Yeah.”

They were silent for a moment. Ennoshita heard a small thump as if someone had thrown themselves down on something soft. Ennoshita would bet Noya had just fallen on Kageyama’s bed or something.

“Hey, Kageyama…”

“Hmm?”

“Do you… do you think they hurt the two Jouzenji players because of me?”

A pause.

“Why do you ask that?” Kageyama asked. He sounded slightly confused. Ennoshita felt that too.

“Because, well, when Suga-san and I helped Hinata and Kiyoko-san to get away, I went to eavesdrop a bit, right? And they were talking about how they would show us up in the next match that never actually came. Beat us up, you know? Just some general smack talk. What if…” Noya’s voice wavered.

“What if they were heard and taken seriously?” Kageyama finished. Noya was quiet. “Well, I can’t say that it isn’t true. It might be. Who knows? But what I can say is that it wasn’t your fault. Like you said, it was just typical threatening. Everyone does that. It’s not your fault if someone takes it
seriously or likes to hurt people given the slightest provocation. Those are not things you can affect.”

Ennoshita listened in awe how confident Kageyama sounded.

“Are you sure?” Nishinoya asked. “Are you completely, a hundred percent sure?”

Someone shuffled.

“Noya-san, it wasn’t your fault,” Kageyama’s voice was surprisingly gentle, “and anyone of us is willing to tell you that.” There was another short pause.

“Kageyama… Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. You’ve thanked me a lot today.”

“You’ve been very kind today. So. Yeah. Thanks.”

“…Don’t mention it.”

“Aww, are you blushing? You’re blushing! That’s so cute, hey, let me take a picture real quick.”

“What? No! Put that phone away! Noya-san, stop…!”

Ennoshita smiled and left the corridor. They would come down when they were ready. Noya was in good hands.

He was glad.

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When Ennoshita got down, he noticed how no one was speaking. He wandered to where his teammates were supposed to be, thinking they might’ve moved, but no. There they were sitting like they had been before. However, they were no longer alone.

There was Akiteru, who was sitting next to Yachi on a couch. His back was straight and Ennoshita could see his muscles were taut. His, and everyone else’s eyes were directed at the two other newcomers who were standing closer to the doorway outside.

One of the men smiled, and it was both strangely terrifying and familiar.

“Good evening. My name is Oikawa Rin, and this is Iwaizumi Hisashi,” the man introduced himself, making Ennoshita’s jaw drop. He suddenly recognized where he had seen those eyes and that twist of the mouth before. His eyes flashed to the man next to him and saw the same piercing gaze he had seen many times during the matches against Aobajousai.

What the…?

The men pulled something out of their pockets and flipped them open. Two police badges shone in the room’s artificial lighting.

“As detectives of the Japanese Police Special Division, we would like to question all of you on the recent events. If you would be so kind and fetch the rest of your group, we’d be grateful,” Oikawa’s voice was genial enough but there was an edge to the request that told Ennoshita that declining wasn’t an option.

Ennoshita swallowed as he turned back around, feeling the men’s eyes burn at the back of his head
as he left the room to get Kageyama and Nishinoya.

The day was starting to feel like it would never end.
Hinata sat and watched warily at the men in front of him and his friends. Oikawa Rin and Iwaizumi Hisashi, they had claimed themselves to be. Was it true? Were they really from the police? Ukai had said that no police would interview them before tomorrow morning. Was the ‘Special Division’ something different then? What was so special about them?

He was bursting with questions but he kept quiet. He watched as Oikawa and Iwaizumi’s eyes snapped to the opposite side of the room the moment they heard footsteps. Ennoshita returned with Nishinoya and Kageyama who took seats where the rest of the team had made them space. Somehow they had formed a protective formation around them – well, mostly Noya and Yachi. Akiteru, Tanaka and Daichi sat closest to the weird men, Asahi, Suga and Hinata next to them. Ennoshita and Kageyama sat at the back while Noya and Yachi were bundled between them. It was a bit weird to have formed something so automatically. It wasn’t even because they were the most vulnerable members of the team, probably. Hinata couldn’t get the image of Yachi with a gun out of his head, and he had witnessed Noya’s battle prowess. They were tough, no doubt about that.

Yet, at the same time, there was a fragility there that Hinata wanted to hide under a blanket fort. Especially Noya. And Yachi, well, she still was a girl. Hinata was always taught to respect and protect girls from bullies. And it was as if in this situation, the bullies were Oikawa-san and Iwaizumi-san.

Hinata turned back to watch the men’s moves. How unfair of them to arrive so suddenly. He hadn’t even been able to call Natsu yet either!

The men flashed their badges again. “My name is Oikawa Rin, and this is my partner Iwaizumi Hisashi. Nice to meet you again,” Oikawa-san nodded at Kageyama. Hinata narrowed his eyes. Again?

“Oikawa-san,” Kageyama acknowledged. “I hope your son hasn’t been complaining too much about me.” Hinata made a soft noise. This was the Grand King’s father?!

“Toooru has been keeping us in touch with the events. You haven’t made it too easy on him,” Oikawa-san flashed a genial but cold smile. It was the exact same one Hinata had seen grace the Grand King's face during the matches. He hid a shiver that ran down his spine.

“I didn’t mean to hinder the police work,” Kageyama said and shrugged. “Maybe if the questions had been filed under official channels I would’ve answered them more readily rather than enduring Oikawa-san’s pestering.”

Iwaizumi Hisashi barked a short laugh.

“He has your son there; always so willing to follow in your footsteps.”
Oikawa-san snorted. “As if Hajime isn’t the same with you. Both of them are far too interested in joining the force even with all that talk about volleyball.” Iwaizumi just shrugged but didn’t deny it.

“You’ve met them before?” Noya asked. Kageyama nodded.

“A few times. They came to watch some of the matches at Kitagawa Daiichi.”

“Tooru has been raving about their defeat at your hands. I must say, you have to have grown from that pipsqueak you were. I wonder just how much,” the grin on Oikawa-san’s face was nasty. Hinata admired how Kageyama’s face stayed impassive thorough the conversation.

“Rin, you’re not supposed to give Kageyama-san a hard time here,” Iwaizumi-san said dryly.

Oikawa-san sniffed. He was really like an older image of the Grand King. Hinata suppressed another shiver. Oikawa would grow up terrifying.

“Tsukishima-san,” the man continued and turned to address Akiteru. “Why didn’t you inform the Special Division about the Sun Group’s activities? We could’ve helped you.”

Akiteru sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. “The faction’s called Twilight, actually. Just learnt that today.”

“Twilight then.” Iwaizumi-san procured a notebook from his pocket. He tapped his pen against it before writing the name down. Instead of his partner, Oikawa-san continued. “You didn’t answer Hisashi’s question. You’ve been helping the Special Division for years, so why did you stop now?”

“What?!” Tanaka cried out, turning to Akiteru. “I thought you were yakuza!”

“They are,” Iwaizumi-san said.

“This doesn’t really concern you,” Akiteru started but was interrupted.

“Maybe not but now it does since they know,” Oikawa-san said. “So, why don’t you answer, dear Sword? Or are you still stuck in a stone?”

While others were staring at Akiteru, Hinata snuck a look at Oikawa-san. He looked really self-satisfied at having pushing the other man into a corner. Hinata didn’t like it. He seemed to treat people like playthings. No wonder the Grand King was as messed up as he was.

“Our faction has helped the police for a long time,” Akiteru said finally, glowering at Oikawa-san and Iwaizumi-san. “We’re their informants, as such, they let us govern the underground as we wish. They would be nothing without us giving them info, just running around like headless chickens.”

“So… You’re the kings of the underworld?” Ennoshita asked. Akiteru sighed.

“No, that’s not it,” Yachi answered instead. She kept her head held high and sat primly even as the policemen turned their attention to her. “We’re just making sure that the bad eggs are separated from the good ones. Human traffickers, scum that use children to…” she gathered herself. “There are plenty of people who deserve to end up in jail but not all yakuza do. We are not synonymous with evil.”

So that’s why they wanted to keep themselves out of the news, Hinata realized suddenly. It wasn’t because they fear for their lives but because, otherwise, all criminals would run rampant. He thought of Natsu, if she was kidnapped and never to be seen again. He bit his lip.

Never, he swore to himself.
“And who are you, little lady?” Oikawa-san asked, suddenly interested. His eyes flickered at Akiteru. “I thought you didn’t use children to do your dirty deeds.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Akiteru snapped.

“Oh, touchy!”

“Your professional conduct is lacking,” Yachi said dryly. “And you would know me by the moniker Moon Flower. Yachi Hitoka, cousin to Tsukishima Akiteru, at your service.”

“A pleasure,” Iwaizumi-san stated before his partner could open his mouth. “And my apologies. Rin isn’t always the most refined.” Oikawa-san rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything.

“And let me assure you, the Dark Moon isn’t using children to, using your words, ‘do their dirty deeds’. It was an accident I ended up on this team, nothing more,” she said. Hinata noticed she deliberately didn’t mention that she was there to learn more about the target. No one seemed inclined to offer extra information about her either.

In the end, she was theirs, no matter her background. Just like Tsukishima, and Noya.

“As you say,” Iwaizumi-san nodded and left the subject, much to Oikawa-san’s apparent disappointment. Hinata got a feeling that Oikawa-san didn’t seem to like Akiteru that much, or maybe his faction or even yakuza altogether. Whatever it was, he seemed to be looking for reasons to mock them and get them incriminate themselves or something for some reason. Why?

“And to answer your question why we didn’t seek your help, well, we have had a worrying trend of having our moves discovered and gaining too much attention. There was some talk about a… leak being somewhere,” Akiteru said meaningfully.

Oikawa-san smiled dangerously.

“Are you implying something?”

Akiteru smiled back pleasantly. “Would I do that?”

“Stop it, both of you,” Iwaizumi-san sighed. He shook his head. “A leak, you say?”

“How it was leaked that our target was on the Karasuno volleyball team. We had no idea how but we have our suspicions,” Akiteru explained.

“And division is not above that?”

“None are.”

“Understandable,” Iwaizumi-san said. He glanced at his partner. “We don’t have to like it but it’s natural to think like that.”

Oikawa-san rolled his eyes but nodded. “We’ll keep our eyes open. Do you trust us two to do that?”

Akiteru seemed to ponder that for a moment before nodding in assent. “You haven’t led us wrong yet. But only you two.” This surprised Hinata. From what he had gathered, Oikawa-san and Akiteru were rather antagonistic towards each other, and didn’t even seem to like one another.

“We’ll be careful with who we’ll give the information too.”

“You could have help from the regular force too,” Yachi piped up. “There’s a man who would
probably be very interested in helping out.”

Hinata didn’t understand but apparently Ennoshita got it.

“You mean Kinoshita’s-, yeah, he would,” Ennoshita said. His mouth twisted downwards. “As you probably heard, one of our teammates is in the hospital right now in critical condition. His brother is a police officer and somewhat informed about the situation. He’ll be looking for answers; he’s stubborn like that.”

“Kinoshita, you said? What’s his full name?” Iwaizumi-san asked.

“Kinoshita Naoki.” Iwaizumi-san wrote the name down. Oikawa-san clasped his hands together.

“Which leads us to the events today. Now that we have established our working relationship again – which you’ll update to your superiors, I hope – we’d like to hear what we are missing,” he said.

Iwaizumi-san nodded. “We’ll share our information with you too.”

Akiteru’s gaze swept over the people in the room. They, Hinata included, had followed the conversation avidly and didn’t seem inclined to leave. Akiteru nodded.

“Nothing to incriminate our object, the topic is purely Twilight,” he emphasized.

“You mean the topic is purely bullsh- oof, that hurt!” Tanaka whined when Suga dug his elbow into Tanaka’s ribs.

“Don’t dis the art, the fans will attack you,” Daichi teased, grin flashing on his face. Suga just raised his fist, face blank, daring him to continue.

“The Game Changer is your problem,” Iwaizumi-san and Oikawa-san agreed, ignoring the scuffle.

“Now,” Oikawa-san leaned forward. “Let’s set this story straight.”

Sorry Natsu, Hinata thought, you’ll have to wait for that call. Big brother loves you but this… He needs to hear this to be able to protect his team, and you.

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It was nearing midday the next day and Kageyama felt tired already. Less than 24 hours ago they were trapped in the second gym and now they were finally finished with the police. He stretched, yawning wide at the same time.

They, as in the people who had stayed at his place the night before, had met the rest of the team including the adults an hour before their interviews. They had managed to build a believable story to go through the recent events rather smoothly. No one would mention the woman or the men in-depth since they wouldn’t mention knowing anything about them. The attackers were probably be really pissed off fans, which they didn’t believe in and neither did the police, or terrorists, or so they would say. There would be no mention of Noya’s connections, Tsukishima or Yachi’s roles, or Akiteru’s appearance. Basically, the team would know nothing. Deny, deny, deny. It wasn’t ideal, and they probably wouldn’t be believed, but it wasn’t worth getting innocents possibly killed. Oikawa-san and Iwaizumi-san had said they would direct the attention elsewhere from the inside, and let the Special Division take over the case. At least the police would still be on it, if not the regular force. Maybe it was better that way. At any rate, they would have better resources and skills to deal with the Twilight if not the numbers. That’s where the Dark Moon came in.
Oikawa-san and Iwaizumi-san had claimed they would also spare members to protect their family members of possible threats. Akiteru hadn’t been too pleased about that. He had said their clan had already been low-key watching over them and that the Special Division would only be in the way. He had also questioned how they were able to spread the division’s already thin spread force. It had sparked another icy exchange of subtle threats between Akiteru and Oikawa-san with Iwaizumi-san trying to mediate between them. Kageyama thought that ridiculous. Since the Dark Moon had worked with Special Division before, it wouldn’t be a hardship to work with them again, even if it might’ve been different from usual. To Kageyama, it seemed that was all just because Oikawa-san rubbed wrong on Akiteru and vice versa.

“The more the merrier,” Hinata had said, and Akiteru had had to concede the point in the end through gritted teeth. Personally, Kageyama didn’t care if they worked with the Special Division and that, frankly, Hinata was right. He only cared that no one would be hurt again like today. In addition, Kageyama had seen Hinata’s relieved face when he had heard that Natsu would be even better protected than before. The attack had shaken him, even though he didn’t seem to want to show it too much. He had kept a brave front when he had finally had that skype conversation with his family too. Only when they had ended it, Hinata had turned to Kageyama and looked more tired than in a long time.

“I wish there was a way for no one to be hurt,” he had just said. Kageyama had felt a slight pang. He had wished that as well, and he still did. Surprisingly, they were all in a quite good condition, both mentally and physically.

Well, at least when they excluded Kinoshita from the count. Ennoshita had received a message from Kinoshita’s brother that Kinoshita had fallen into a coma. The doctors and surgeons had managed to save his life but he had lost a lot of blood and there had been some complications. Kageyama didn’t know the details and, seeing Ennoshita’s ashen face, he wasn’t about to go asking for them. When Ennoshita gave Narita the news in the morning, he had been very upset; both of them had been. Kageyama had noticed that the trio was very close and to see them hurt without their best friend… It was awful to see. Kageyama didn’t really understand how best friends worked – hell, he barely understood how friends or teammates worked – but if he likened it to losing volleyball or his family… It would hurt, badly. He tried to imagine losing someone like Hinata instead. He quickly dismissed the thought. That hurt too. He didn’t want that.

“Do we have anything planned for today?” Asahi asked. Kageyama watched as Nishinoya almost gravitated towards him. There was something about Asahi that seemed to settle Nishinoya better than anyone else. Kageyama wondered why that was. Not even Tanaka had that effect on him which almost seemed to grate Tanaka a bit. It wasn’t enough to start complaining since it seemed important to him that Nishinoya was alright but Kageyama did once catch him mutter under his breath if he was inadequate somehow.

“No, I don’t think so. The school has been closed down for the rest of the week,” Suga said. Kageyama followed his gaze to see Ukai and Takeda-sensei talk to the police officers, who looked increasingly agitated at having nothing to go on with the investigation. Oikawa-san had let it slip yesterday that no security cameras were able catch much anything to go on, or they had been destroyed. He had thrown accusing looks at Akiteru, as if it was his fault. All Kageyama knew was that it just might’ve been. After all, both sides wanted to stay under the law’s radar.

“Could we go somewhere and practice?” Hinata pleaded.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Daichi shook his head and said.

“Why?” Kageyama asked. They needed to practice to stay on point for the spring tournament. It
might also take their thoughts away from reality for a moment.

“I think our families might want us home for today,” Suga reasoned. There were some murmurs and nods amidst them. Kageyama fell silent.

Oh. Yeah.

Maybe that’s how it worked with a normal family.

Kageyama saw Tsukishima give him a look, so he schooled his face to his usual frown. It wasn’t their fault if his parents were busy for the moment. They had called him last night but deemed him alright enough so they wouldn’t be cutting their business trip just yet.

“What about tomorrow?” Hinata asked.

“I think tomorrow would be fine. Right?” Nishinoya joined in. He seemed slightly miserable at the thought of going home. Asahi clasped a hand on Nishinoya’s shoulder.

“Tomorrow’s fine with me.”

“And me!” Tanaka piped up.

“We can probably use this gym close to us. What do you think, Daichi?” Suga asked. He had melted the second Nishinoya had looked at him pleadingly. Daichi shrugged.

“So, tomorrow then.”

Nishinoya and Hinata cheered. They arranged the details, and some called their parents to come get them. They would stay home the day but continue on after this break. Kageyama shuffled a bit before saying a goodbye while most of them were busy. He didn’t really live anywhere close to them. Even Hinata was being picked up by his parents so they wouldn’t be going home together either. He saw some of his teammates talk about going over to the hospital to pay their respects before going home but he wasn’t sure if he would be welcome. He hadn’t been that close to Kinoshita.

*(If he had been just a bit faster, he might not have lost so much blood… If only he had been able to move instead of… If he…)*

*(What if he made a mistake and Kinoshita was left to pay for it?)*

Kageyama saw Tsukishima and Yachi exchange pointed looks but he ignored them as he turned around and left to go back to the empty house… no, home. He could take a taxi or a bus but he didn’t feel like it. Kageyama looked at the sky. It didn’t seem like it would rain.

He would walk.

Alone.

Although, technically, he wouldn’t be going home on his own. Someone would probably be following him anyway. He had seen shadowy figures move outside his house last night; they had upped the security already. Kageyama twisted his head slowly around to avoid suspicion but he saw no one. He still felt eyes at his back so there had to be someone there. He wasn’t paranoid enough to imagine people where there were none.

His phone pinged. Kageyama checked it and saw Hinata crying about where he had disappeared to.
He quickly sent a message telling him that he was going home and ignored it. It started pinging more, even ringing, but he didn’t take it out anymore. If it was someone important, the ring tone would be different.

He both wanted and didn’t want that tone to ring. It would mean he was needed but it would also mean that he was needed. The last time that had happened he had been uprooted and home-schooled for years, jumping from one place to another.

He had a championship to win with Karasuno. He didn’t want to leave. Not even because of his family, as much as he loved them. Even though middle school had been painful, he had found a new home within this high school and its volleyball team. Uprooting again would be… awful. Last time, there were no real bonds to break. Now…

Now he was scared he was getting too attached. He was friends with Hinata, and the others. Hinata had said so.

*(What are best friends?)*

*(Would they miss him if it had been him instead of Kinoshita?)*

Kageyama shook his head.

It didn’t matter. They had to know Kageyama cared, even if he had difficulties to let himself get closer; expressing himself, to them.

…He wished they knew.

Kageyama stopped by a store to buy a meat bun. It wasn’t as good as the ones he bought with Hinata. Somehow it was almost… tasteless, even if it was just the same texture and the bakery was probably the same.

Weird.

He ate it anyway.

His phone was still ringing. He took a quick look but scoffed, returning it to his pocket. Not worth answering the call. It wasn’t any of his teammates.

Kageyama scowled. The sun was shining. It had shone yesterday too. Stupid sun.

When he finally turned to his street, he stopped. Someone was standing there, in front of his house. Someone he knew, rather too well, as well. The figure also noticed him and grinned at him. Only now Kageyama could see how fake it really was. He had known it, had recognized how a real smile was never really thrown his way, but this cemented it in his mind. He had seen that exact smile yesterday but, unlike now, it had had a grain of authenticity in it.

This one had none of that.

“Tobio-chan!” Oikawa greeted him, and waved. Kageyama sighed and walked forward. What was Oikawa going to do, attack him? Please, the most he would be able to do was try and serve a volleyball at his face, and Kageyama could see no ball.

“Oikawa,” he said back shortly. Oikawa paused, eyes narrowing.

“No –san, eh?”
“That’s your father, isn’t it?” Kageyama said neutrally. Oikawa’s face and stance relaxed.

“He didn’t mention he met you.”

Kageyama shrugged. “He did. Yesterday. After the shooting. He and Iwaizumi-san came to my house where most of my teammates were. It was… an illuminating conversation.”

“Oh?” Oikawa made an aborted movement, as if he wanted to do something with his hands. Kageyama shrugged again.

“I thought you would’ve known. After all, you did keep tabs on us for him, the least he could’ve done is do the same to you, right?”

Oikawa didn’t even twitch.

“Well, it’s his job to keep things quiet, isn’t it?” Oikawa said, face carefully blank. They stared at each other, exchanging nothing more than wary glances.

“Which is why I’m not going to talk to you anymore,” Kageyama said finally. Oikawa’s stared at him head-on. “I was trying to keep you out of all of this because it’s dangerous. I tried to tell you to stay away. You didn’t; you were just trying to dig deeper. You used me. You used my team.

“So, this is me, stopping altogether to get you to stop too.”

He pushed past Oikawa and opened the gate to his yard. He didn’t manage to step forward, however, since a hand grabbed his arm before he could.

“What if I said I was just worried about you?” Oikawa asked behind him. There was a strange note on his tone but Kageyama ignored it. It didn’t matter.

“I wouldn’t believe it. You never cared about me, so I doubt you would choose to start now.”

Oikawa barked a laugh at that. Kageyama didn’t see how this was so hilarious, so he wrenched his arm away from Oikawa’s grip.

“Stop calling me, and leave me and my team alone, Oikawa. You’ll just get in our way, and soon you’ll find yourself in a coma just like Kinoshita – or worse.” He glanced back and saw Oikawa’s face settle into something between shock and something he couldn’t identify. “I bet you didn’t know that, right?” he continued dryly.

Oikawa slowly shook his head.

Kageyama sighed. “Just… stay away. Leave this to your father. I don’t think this will be a stepping stone for you to get into whatever you want to do after high school. You have free time now that you lost the match,” he watched as Oikawa bit his lip and glared at him in response. Kageyama raised his chin and dared Oikawa to say something. He didn’t.

“Use it wisely.”

(I don’t want to feel guilty about dragging you down too.)

Kageyama turned around, and closed the gate. He didn’t look back.

He felt Oikawa’s eyes still at his back when he closed the door to his empty house. Once again there was no sign of anyone else living there. He sighed and crouched to remove his shoes.

“Home sweet home… I guess.”
What Kageyama didn’t know was that Oikawa stood outside his house for a long while, staring at the door he had gone through. There was something strange in his eyes, and his body language was relaxed, although if one looked closely they could see his spine was straight and stiff. Absently, he dug into his pocket and used his speed dial to make a call.

The phone rang.

Someone answered.

“Yes?”

“Iwa-chan… I screwed up.”

Daichi sat in a circle with his teammates. They were talking quietly to one another. Takeda-sensei and Ukai were pointing something to each other, probably talking about strategies. They had decided that they would discontinue their ban on practice matches – what use were they since they could be attacked regardless? Acting normal was the best for all. At least now they had protection and knew they would have to control what they said to players not in the know. No one wanted another Jouzenji. Especially Noya. Daichi looked at him but he looked at ease between Asahi and Tanaka. It was like Noya was a whole different person from yesterday or the day before that. Something had happened, when he had gone home; something Daichi didn’t know. Tanaka seemed to know, however, since even he was more relaxed than he had been yesterday too.

Kageyama was sitting next to Hinata and Yachi. They were talking but Daichi noticed that Kageyama had a darker expression on than usual. He wondered if something happened to him too after he had disappeared from the police station alone. Hinata had been beside himself, although he hadn’t admitted it. Yachi had looked worried too. They were now both pretty happy sitting beside him though. Next to them were also Tsukishima and Yamaguchi. Daichi had thought it strange that Tsukishima had readily left with Yamaguchi the day before yesterday but neither seemed too worked up today at least. Even Yamaguchi was quite calm; for Tsukishima, it was nothing new. He didn’t even look like he had been beaten up. Now that Daichi thought about it, he hadn’t yesterday either. He stared hard at Tsukishima who pretended not to notice. There was no way he didn’t notice, after all. Not with those battle reflexes.

Makeup? Possibly. Daichi snorted to himself. He wouldn’t recognize makeup if it hit him in the face. Well… maybe if it sparkled.

His eyes drifted to Ennoshita and Narita, who sat together, looking like something – or in this case someone – was missing. Daichi stared at the spot where Kinoshita usually sat between the two. They looked lonely like that, slightly drifted apart from each other and the rest of them.

Someone elbowed him, and Daichi turned to look at Suga. Suga and Kiyoko gave him a look that made him smile. They would be alright. Kinoshita would wake up too; he was a true fighter. He wouldn’t give up.

And neither would they.

“Before we start the practice, I’d like to say something,” Daichi said, and the low buzz of conversation faded away. Daichi felt the eyes of every member of his team on him. He felt a smile
slowly creep on his face.

“Lately, we have experienced the worst possible days of our lives as well as the best of them. It’s been a rollercoaster, one could say, from a low to a high to a new low. What we need now is a high we won’t fall down from anymore. We need to find a place we can build on,” Daichi watched as everyone looked at him sharply, “and I believe we have that place.

“We have our team. We have the trust in each of our member. Yes, I believe in every one of you,” he said when he saw Tsukishima and Yachi share a look, and Nishinoya wince. “I don’t care about your past. I care about our future.” Daichi fell silent for a moment. His eyes were bright.

“We need to start fighting back,” he stated while grinning and showing his teeth.

“How?” Kiyoko asked. Her countenance was calm but there was something sharp in her eyes.

“That’s what we need to decide together. We just can’t wait anymore for someone else to make decisions for us, pretend nothing’s happening, or react when it’s all too late,” Daichi said. Even though he was still smiling, everyone could see how serious he was. He then addressed the elephant in the room which made several of them flinch. “Kinoshita was a mistake that shouldn’t have happened. There’s nothing we can do about it but just wait for him to return to us. And he will,” he emphasized.

“Karasuno is strong. Believe in us if you don’t believe in yourself.

“Let’s make a stand. Together.”

The gym was quiet as everyone contemplated the words. Daichi watched them all exchange looks, searching for others’ resolves. It was Tsukishima who finally ended the silence.

“What kind of stand are we talking about?”

“Are you willing to cross your brother and superiors?” Daichi challenged. Tsukishima looked unimpressed.

“It’s only insubordination if someone forbids it. You’re not the only one who’s been thinking about things.” He tilted his head towards the direction where Yachi sat. She nodded.

“No one’s forbidden us from helping. The only thing that held us back was the fear of discovery and possible danger for the target. We can see how well that went,” Yachi said, flashing a sad smile. She fiddled with her hairpin. Daichi recognized it as the one Kinoshita gave her.

“There are things we won’t be able to disclosure or things we plainly don’t know. We are, after all, just two high school students,” Tsukishima stated, and Yachi continued: “Our mission was to protect. Secrecy failed. However, no one said that was the only way to do it.

“Let us help.”

Daichi nodded and he could see from his vantage point how they both sagged slightly from relief. It was just a small movement that if one wasn’t looking straight at them they wouldn’t be able to see it happen.

“In the name of sharing information, I have some too,” Nishinoya said solemnly. Tanaka grasped Noya’s knee in support, Daichi noted. “I talked to my parents. My adoption wasn’t just a coincidence. They have connections to the Twilight clan.”
“What?” Narita gasped. Noya flinched as if it was an accusation.

“Those connections are distant but enough for them to owe a favour to someone. Apparently I’m a son to one of the higher-ups, no idea if illegitimate or legitimate. They don’t even know the reason or circumstances for why I was given up.”

“Do they still keep contact with Twilight?” Tsukishima asked. Noya nodded.

“Not much but some. Mostly they give them enough info about me to keep them happy. They… My family aren’t bad people. They were supposed to, I don’t know, prepare me for my future?” Noya grimaced. “They just… interpreted it differently than they probably were supposed to. On purpose.”

“Do they need extra protection?” Yachi suddenly asked, worry clouding her eyes. Nishinoya shrugged.

“Probably not. I mean, they did prepare me, kind of. I’ve taken a lot of martial arts classes since I was young. They just let me grow up to be myself,” Noya smiled softly. “My mom had this wicked grin on her face when she claimed they could do nothing if I grew up headstrong and had different values.”

“Your mom sounds lovely,” Kiyoko said. Noya immediately brightened.

“She’s fantastic. You’d like her,” he claimed. Tanaka snorted and pushed Noya so he almost toppled over.

“But that means we might be able to send false information through them,” Tsukishima mused. He held a hand up to silence whatever objections there may have been. “I’m just saying it is possible, not that we have to do so.” Yamaguchi bumped their shoulders together, and grinned. Tsukishima looked away.

“What about our families?” Narita asked. He seemed understandably worried, Daichi thought. His best friend was, after all, in the hospital. “What if something happened to them because of us?”

“There’s been increased security. I don’t remember if we mentioned it but our faction and Oikawa-san and Iwaizumi-san’s division promised to watch over them. It’s not fool-proof, nothing is when we know so little about our enemy, but it’s better than before,” Yachi explained. Narita nodded slowly but stayed quiet.

“Well, I’m in,” Tanaka said, eyes dark and gleaming. “I’ve been waiting for us to do something about how the things are. It’s been extremely dissatisfying to see them back us into a corner like prey.”


“I’m in,” Asahi shrugged. Slowly, agreements were heard from most of the team. Daichi watched with pride how they were coming together. Yamaguchi, Suga, Ennoshita, Narita, Kiyoko, Takeda-sensei, Ukai. His eyes finally stopped at Kageyama and Hinata, who were the only two people who hadn’t yet said anything. They stared resolutely back.

“Are we doing this?” Hinata asked, eyes locked in Daichi’s, but it was apparent that the question wasn’t for him. It was for Kageyama. He was offering his support for Kageyama more than the team for some reason.

Kageyama’s expression didn’t change when he answered. There was something else there too that
Daichi saw that he couldn’t identify. Was it regret? No, it was guilt. Why was that there?

“Are we prepared?”

Daichi suddenly realized how it had been Kageyama who had patched Kinoshita well enough that he managed to save his life. Did he really think it was his fault that Kinoshita was in a coma? They hadn’t… Oh. They hadn’t been prepared for something like that. If they had been, Kinoshita would be there with them. They, or Kageyama, wouldn’t have had to try their best to keep a teammate alive.

“We will be.” It was Suga who answered instead of Daichi. He had apparently realized the same thing, probably even faster than Daichi, since he had been with Kageyama and Kinoshita in the room yesterday. Yet, now Suga was sitting there next to him and showing support in Daichi’s decision. “And there won’t be another Kinoshita.”

Daichi saw Kageyama’s fists loosen their grip and his jaw relaxed some.

“Then yes,” Kageyama said. Hinata echoed the answer. Daichi’s chest swelled with pride. That was what a team was. Support in one another, but still questioning, even if majority had already pledged to their cause. Like this, there would be no repeat of the mistakes they had made. He swore that to himself.

They would fly, and they wouldn’t hit the ground again.

Yachi smiled to herself, and whispered, her voice echoing around the gym for everyone to hear.

“The sun versus the moon,” she said, and Daichi felt as if she was repeating words spoken before even if he had no recollection of them. “A shadow greater the brighter the light is, however small. The scariest of them all is the reflection.”

“And what a reflection it will be,” Tsukishima, of all people, said and grinned. It was slightly bloodthirsty.

Daichi answered that smile. They would gain their revenge, drag down those who opposed them and fight their way through the nationals and whatever they needed to.

It was time to strike back.

***

“Are you sure you want to help?” Oikawa-san asked finally. “This is no game.”

“I’m sure,” Kinoshita Naoki said. His eyes held a determined look in them. His hands were clenched into fists and the only thought in his mind was to find the people who had hurt his little brother and gain justice (vengeance).

Oikawa Rin slowly nodded and extended a hand, which Naoki grasped. They shook hands.

“Welcome to the force then.”

Three people watched the proceedings from the side. One of them, Iwaizumi Hisashi, turned to the other two. “Are you sure you want to step in too?”

“…Yes. I-, no, Shouyou’s in danger,” one of the two said quietly, and the other clasped a hand on his shoulder.
“And I never leave Kenma to stand there alone. Count us in, boss,” Kuroo Tetsurou grinned darkly as he dragged Kozume Kenma closer to him. “Bring it on.”

***

“You screwed up real bad, Tooru,” Iwaizumi said. Oikawa groaned loudly.

“I know. It’s just-, Kageyama brings out the worst of me.”

“You could’ve said it wasn’t just that.”

“I tried!” Oikawa yelled through his pent-up frustration. “Hajime, I really tried! It’s just, I just… I do care for others than just myself! Even if I hate his talent, I can admit I envy him so much, I never wanted Kageyama, or his team, to be hurt or in danger!”

“Karasuno’s in danger? Kageyama’s in danger?”

Iwaizumi and Oikawa suddenly looked up to see Kindaichi Yuutarou and Kunimi Akira standing there before them. The former had a disbelieving expression on his face, his mouth wide in surprise, while the other had a steely look in his eyes, lips pursed close. Their reactions were the opposite from one another but they still managed to respond in unison.

“Tell us. Now.”

***

“They are going to be hard to protect, aren’t they?”

Tsukishima Akiteru sighed, dragging a hand across his face. “They will be. Kei and Hitoka will be there, though, watching out for them when we can’t.”

“They’re just as young, just as brash. They care too much. It’s no longer a mission.”

“No,” Akiteru agreed. “It’s not. Not for them, and not for me either.

“It’s already personal.”

***

“They got away! Why, you fucking bastard, why did you let them take mother?!” a girl screamed. She was hit on her face and fell down on the floor. She spat out blood as she glared at the man in front of her.

“Don’t be hysterical. It’s not like I planned it that way. She failed in all her objectives. That’s the way of Twilight. We cannot have failure if we want to succeed.

“Do you understand?”

“I do,” she said mutinously. “But mother…”

“The Dark Moon is soft. They capture, not kill. In addition, your mother is wise enough to keep herself useful.”

The girl’s eyes brightened as understanding flashed in them. “She let herself get caught?”

The man smiled. It was no nice smile by any standards but it resonated something violent inside the
girl. The man offered a hand and pulled the girl up again.

“Now, go inform the others. We have a plan to execute.”

Chapter End Notes

...And that's the second part wrapped up. To be honest, I didn't think I would divide this into parts but so it happened. Part III starts from the next chapter, and it's going to be bringing us towards the climax!

See you next time!
Part III: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Woo-boy, it's again over 7k, closer to 8k. Yikes. When I just think about how all of this was supposed to be just 30k or something... Well... I messed up, haha. If only my plans hadn't turned up bigger than they originally were.

Anyway, have at it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had been quiet two weeks. Too quiet. It was the middle of November and there was no word or sign of Twilight making a move. Yamaguchi sneezed when a particularly chilly breeze caught him unaware. The winter was almost there.

Winter is coming, he thought to himself and snickered.

“Yamaguchi, don’t catch a cold. We’re holding a practice match in a tomorrow. You don’t want to catch a cold, do you?” Suga said, lips twitching into an amused smile. Yamaguchi flushed.

“N- No, I don’t!” he said.

“Then close the door already. It’s not good to stand there and let the cold air in when we’re all sweaty.”

“Yes, Suga-san!” Yamaguchi said, and did as asked. Suga smiled.

“You did have a cute little sneeze, though. Kind of short and high, wasn’t it?”

Yamaguchi felt embarrassment flood his face.

“It was a bit girly, but we’ll forgive you. I’m sure you’re a man down there,” Tanaka slapped Yamaguchi’s back when he jogged past him.

“My sneeze was not girly!” Yamaguchi shrieked.

Nishinoya laughed. “Oh, I don’t know, it was kind of girly. At first I thought it was Yachi sneezing! All high and cute. Just like you just now.”

“It- I- No!”

Tsukki shook his head. “Just let it go. They’ll tease you forever if you give them any leeway.” Yamaguchi grumbled to himself. So what if he doesn’t snort loudly like most guys. It was just not attractive and neither was it manly. It was just a sneeze.

“Although... It was kind of high, like a girl’s,” Tsukki said, eyes glinting behind his glasses. Yamaguchi gaped, all astounded and offended.

“Tsukki!”

“Alright, leave Yamaguchi alone. Practice is still going strong!” Ukai yelled, and the players
scrambled back to the court. Yamaguchi smiled to himself. It was kind of nice to practice without worries. Well, most of the worries, since no enemy activity meant there was nothing to do. It was almost like a month ago during the good old days.

Yamaguchi snorted softly. Yeah, it was weird to think that a month ago things were kind of good even though they really weren’t, not even then.

But they were still doing alright, he thought as he watched his teammates run around the gym. And they were improving surprisingly fast, both on volleyball and… on other extracurricular activities. Like self-defence classes. Tsukki and Nishinoya had taken to giving the rest of the team a crash course in basic self-defence after practice, just in case someone cornered them and they couldn’t get help. Even Tanaka was doing the drills since he was basically self-taught brawler with no finesse. Kageyama had taken to the lessons like a duck to water which Yamaguchi envied. His physical skills just knew no bounds. Hinata, while clumsy, had insane coordination and his height gave him a big advantage to speed past bigger offenders. Yamaguchi felt like he was, again, the only first year that didn’t really belong. He was basically the ordinary height and without much talent or body mass. While he wanted to succeed pretty badly, his drive also had nothing on Ennoshita and Narita’s. Kinoshita still hadn’t woken up but his condition had improved, the doctors had said. He was just healing right now, and past any real danger. It was as if the two were trying their best to be able to protect the third person of their trio. Daichi, Suga and Asahi were also pretty good although they seemed to be more at Yamaguchi’s level than the others’. They weren’t as nimble as the rest. Even Shimizu was practicing, although with Yachi, whose skills were also quite good although not at the level as some of the guys’.

Well, she was Tsukki’s cousin… How weird was that. And Yamaguchi had never seen her before either! There were no pictures of her around Tsukki’s place. Now that he thought about it, there weren’t many there overall but… still, they had really hidden their relationship well. He glanced at Yachi who was bringing water to Kageyama and Hinata, chatting brightly. He blushed.

She was still pretty cute. Cute and dangerous. She had actually suggested that they’d try the shooting range but Tsukki had shot it down, pun not intended. Too dangerous, he had said, and it might tip off the wrong people.

Apparently she was a crack shot. Probably their only crack shot. At least no one had confessed any hidden talents for firing a gun. Yamaguchi briefly wondered if Kageyama would be good at that too since his accuracy with a volleyball was off the charts.

Probably not since firing a gun was a whole different thing from tossing a volleyball.

Yamaguchi threw a ball in the air and served it to the other side of the court. Nishinoya picked it up. Darn it, he still needed to improve his serves. What kind of pinch server was he if he couldn’t even fool a libero?

But they were still getting better. Takeda-sensei had returned to collecting practice matches for them with vigour after the shooting, and they had gotten a lot of invitations for matches! There could be one for every two days if they wanted to. Of course that wasn’t possible but they did have two or even three a week. They had a lot catching up to do if they wanted to win the nationals.

And they wanted to, so much.

Yamaguchi glanced again at Yachi, who was now frowning at her phone. She was their official contact to the police’s Special Division and the Dark Moon. There wasn’t a time when she wasn’t near a phone or even two; she often stole Tsukki’s during practice. She tried her best to keep them up-to-date but some things just weren’t meant to be.
Things were quiet, and Yachi was worried. Truth to be told, they were all worried. They had a few plans made up in case something happened. Shimizu was keeping tabs on them and the team itself. It was really lucky they had two managers. All this wouldn’t be easy on just one person. They had divided the team into groups that would move together if they were ever separated under an attack. It had been Shimizu and Takeda-sensei, with some insight from Tsukki and Ukai, who decided who went with whom, with teams of four preferred.

Yamaguchi himself was with Tanaka, Suga and Tsukishima. Ennoshita and Narita were together, they wouldn’t be separated, and they were with Asahi and Nishinoya. They had tried to separate Hinata from Kageyama but he had clung like a leech on the setter, not willing to let go. Yamaguchi thought it was silly to even try since the duo were together the most during practices and matches. He thought that he might’ve protested too if he hadn’t been with Tsukki. So Hinata, who had originally been in Yamaguchi’s group, had been switched with Suga. Their group now consisted of Hinata, Kageyama, Shimizu and Yachi, with Daichi added as a fifth person to help protect the girls. They were still the most vulnerable of them all. Yamaguchi kind of envied Daichi’s maturity since it was clear he had wanted to be with Suga but hadn’t voiced any protests.

Ukai and Takeda-sensei weren’t divided into any particular group because it was entirely possible they wouldn’t be with the team if something happened. In those cases, they would immediately contact the Division, it had been decided, and work with them. If, however, they were with them, then they would try to find one of the first two groups since they were lacking a fifth person.

It was a good, balanced division, all in all. The plan was, naturally, to separate and regroup later. They had even created code words! It was all like in a film. It was surreal.

Yamaguchi blinked sweat from his eyes.

It was still their reality right now. How strange.

Well, they had to prepare for their practice match that was coming tomorrow. Yamaguchi exhaled deeply before focusing again.

It was, after all, against Aobajousai.

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Hitoka bit her lower lip as she watched Seijou’s players arrive at their small gym. There was some complains about how the space was small and how were they even supposed to fit anywhere like this but they managed. Well, even, so there was no reason to complain, she grumbled to herself. Kiyoko sent her a concerned look but she waved it away with a smile.

Aobajousai just rubbed wrong on her. It was possibly because of the meeting between Oikawa-san and Iwaizumi-san; before that Seijou’s team was just another team playing against Karasuno. Now they were a group with members who had connections to the Special Division and were willing to use Karasuno for their own purposes. Those members, while they were third years that had already lost the only tournament left, had still come to play in the game.

Or not… Hitoka furrowed her brows. Oikawa and Iwaizumi were just there, chatting with their (former?) teammates without their uniforms on. They were giving tips and pointing out Karasuno’s weaknesses to the new regulars, laughing like they had never lost and been left to eat the dust.

Yet they were still there.

Hitoka glanced at Kageyama who had his back turned to Seijou’s players. She looked back at
Aobajousai and watched as Oikawa periodically flicked his gaze at Kageyama. She frowned deeper.

(Hey, Yachi-san! Do you have a moment?)

(Sure! What do you need, Hinata-kan?)

(Tomorrow at the match… Could you keep your eyes on Aobajousai? Especially on Oikawa if he’s there?)

(Eh, why?)

(Well, I pestered Kageyama about him and apparently he had appeared at his house a couple of weeks ago. He basically admitted that the Grand King had tried to use him to advance his own future career or something!)

(What? No! He wouldn’t do that, right?)

(I thought that too before but… Remember how much he annoyed Kageyama before? It was awful, right? I don’t know if he has continued to do so, Kageyama won’t tell me and his phone’s screen is locked so I can’t look at his phone either – don’t look at me like that, I’m just concerned! – but I don’t want him to attack Kageyama in Karasuno. This is, like, a safe haven, kind of ironically since two weeks ago, well anyway, like his home apparently isn’t. We can help him, right?)

Well, whatever Hinata thought, it seemed like he was right at least on Oikawa’s interest in Kageyama. What did he think he would be able to get out of him more than any other member of Karasuno volleyball club? Was it the fact that they had gone to Kitagawa Daiichi together? If anyone looked into their history, they’d think that would be even more of a reason to avoid each other!

Hitoka tried to keep up with the match but her attention was mostly on other matters. Kiyoko would keep her eye on the game anyway since Hitoka was watching out for anything happening outside the gym. She had her phone ready to receive critical information for their safety, the same info their guards of the day would get, but also had Kei’s phone in case she needed to contact someone else. She smiled at the way there were no other numbers on his phone than their teammates’.

(Never write anything incriminating down, Hitoka.)

She glanced up to see one of their guards hiding in the stands. It wasn’t Akiteru. It was rarely Akiteru anymore. She sighed. Hitoka missed her cousin. She loved Kei but he was just so serious most of the time and sarcastic and cynical the rest. Okay, maybe it was closer to half and half but, still, Akiteru was always the more fun cousin who got them into trouble and out of it. He was also the one who always got a laugh out of her. But as the ‘Sword’ it was his job to be the executor of their plans. Kei was more of a guard, and Hitoka… Well, Hitoka was kind of like a control tower if one could call it that: the one who was contacted with knowledge and who sent it forward. At least she would become one when she officially joined the Dark Moon when she graduated from either high school or university, depending on if she wanted a degree or not.

Hitoka didn’t mind that her future was dictated like that. She respected what the Dark Moon was trying to do. Maybe it was because she had grown up knowing about the underworld but she wanted to be one of the people who kept others safe or safer than they would be without them. Besides, being able to know everything before anyone… Hitoka wasn’t particularly good at anything specific but she did have a great memory. It was why she was so good at school. She was also able to grasp on hard concepts pretty quickly.

It was like she was born to do the job.
Her eyes flashed back on Oikawa and Iwaizumi who were standing on the edge of the court, one of them observing the match that Aobajousai was losing – they hadn’t gotten used to the new team yet – and the other yelling encouragements and tips for improvement. Hitoka’s lips curled. Even while yelling, Oikawa was still staring at Karasuno’s side of the court.

(“Twilight, currently, doesn’t seem too big of a clan which gives us a slight advantage,” Iwaizumi-san said. “However, they seem to attract misfits of all kind which may make them hard to control at times. It’s not unusual for a new faction to collect all they can to become more powerful. We’ve seen a few former members of factions that have disbanded or been destroyed some other way. Some of those were even in our database as of the more criminally inclined factions that you’ve helped us to take down.”)

(“In any case”, Oikawa-san continued, “that doesn’t explain why they’re after you as a whole. They must have an agenda of some sort we have no knowledge of.”)

No, it doesn’t make sense, does it, Hitoka agreed as she thought back on the day of the shooting. But it only makes no sense because the Dark Moon that the Special Division knew was in reality a less than a decade old faction. Hitoka suddenly narrowed her eyes as she stared at the wall ahead of her. There could be a history there that she wasn’t aware of. The reason could be because of something that had happened before the Dark Moon had formed. For the police, a decade or so was probably a long time to work with yakuza. Yet, for Hitoka’s clan…

There had been a time before they were the Dark Moon they were now, the only faction to work with the police and the only clan with enough clout to stay on top of the underground despite those ties.

Why hadn't she thought of this before?!

She quickly sent a message to her uncle. In a flash he answered that he would take it up with the leaders. She smiled grimly.

Maybe they could get somewhere with this…

“Is there a problem?” Kiyoko whispered. Hitoka blinked and shook her head, schooling her features to something less scary.

“No, just an update.”

And it was… even if not one for her. Yet.

“Allright,” Kiyoko answered, trusting her answer, and turned back to the game. Hitoka smiled. It was nice that she wasn’t treated any different from how she had been before. Or, rather, there were differences but no one let them get between their bonds.

It was really nice.

The team was a family. A different kind of family from her clan which was a family too but this was family. There was no agenda. There were no restrictions or expectations. There were just… them. Hitoka felt sad that they had brought down the threat against the team but… She was also glad that she had met them all.

Her eyes suddenly snapped at the court. Something was different. No, there was no threat there; she would’ve been informed about that. They would’ve seen it too. Hitoka narrowed her eyes. No big changes on Seijou’s side. Her gaze moved to the side lines. Oikawa was still there. On Karasuno’s court, there were no changes either. No, wait a second…
“Kiyoko-san,” she said calmly, emulating a serenity that wasn’t there. “Where did Kageyama-kun go?”

Sugawara was on the court, acting as the setter.

“To the bathroom. Why? Now that you say that, it’s been a longer than I thought he would take…”

Yeah, Kageyama usually wanted to waste no moment of a match.

“I think I’ll go see what’s taking him so long,” Hitoka said and rose. Kiyoko looked at her, confusion written on her face, but she nodded.

“Alright.”

Hinata glanced at her, saw her moving away from the court, and nodded towards the side lines and Oikawa. Hitoka blinked. Why would he…?

Oh. Oikawa was there.

Iwaizumi wasn’t.

She hurried out. She hoped all was well.

The bathrooms luckily weren’t far so she could see Kageyama standing there with Iwaizumi close to him. She scowled. Hitoka was aware it made her look more like a disgruntled kitten than a threat but this was Kageyama. She was a manager. This was her responsibility.

He was her responsibility.

She stomped over.

“…going to apologize?” Kageyama asked, crossing his arms. Iwaizumi sighed. He looked tired.

“He never apologizes, just... behaves more or less as obnoxiously as usual.”

“And you still think I should give him a chan-, Yachi-san!” Kageyama exclaimed when Hitoka stopped, pushing him behind her. It must look funny to outsiders, for a girl over a head shorter trying to intimidate a boy towering over her. Hitoka didn’t care.

Her responsibility.

“Why are you keeping our setter from the game? Cornering him like this? What’s your purpose?” she demanded. Iwaizumi blinked, looking very disconcerted.

“I- It just happened. I’m not trying to…”

Hitoka crossed her arms and glowered. Iwaizumi seemed to lose all his words.

“Yachi-san, he was at the bathroom before me. He didn’t follow me out,” Kageyama said gently, seemingly understanding her worry. Hitoka peeked at him over her shoulder. He had an oddly touched expression in his eyes even if his overall features were impassive. She turned back to the ‘threat’.

“Still. He’s keeping you from the match.”

“Wait, wait, this is going all wrong,” Iwaizumi sighed and waved his hands. “Please, let me just say
my piece and I’ll leave you alone. I promise.”

Hitoka was about to decline and push Kageyama away but that plan was destroyed when he just said: “Sure. Be quick about it.”

Hitoka pouted.

“Oikawa is… an acquired taste,” Iwaizumi said. “He can exasperate the best of us and I’m the first person to admit that. However, he’s not a bad person underneath all that…”

“That?” Kageyama prompted.

“…Uniqueness.”

Hitoka snorted alongside Kageyama. Iwaizumi sighed.

“Yes, laugh it up. He’s overbearing and the definition of harmless he is not. He has so many unlikeable characteristics that sometimes I wish I could just throw him into the sea and leave him there. Yet, the thing is, he cares. He just has a bad way of showing it.”

Kageyama looked unimpressed. “Are you trying to say he’s extended that care over me now?”

“Just give him a chance, alright?” Iwaizumi huffed. “I’m not saying you should be the best buddies forever or anything. And he has been awful to you, I’m not denying that either. Jealousy doesn’t become him.”

Hitoka heard Kageyama make a small sound at that. She pursed her lips.

“But you haven’t seen him like I have, especially during these couple of weeks. He’s moping so bad I’m really going to chug him into the ocean any day now. He’s not going to come over anymore since he thinks he’s blown his chances. He doesn’t even know I’m here. Just…”

“Give Tooru a chance. Start over, or don’t, just do something. I don’t care what, but at least reach out enough to settle things,” Iwaizumi rolled his shoulders. “There, I said it. I’ll let you be now. Good game, by the way. You’re all tip top form but you got lucky with Shiratorizawa in the end. You need to be more consistent if you want to win the nationals.

“Good luck.”

With that, Iwaizumi pushed past them and walked back into the gym. Hitoka watched as he left with her eyes sharp on his retreating figure.

“Oikawa has a good friend in him…” Kageyama said finally.

“Do you believe him?” Hitoka asked. Kageyama looked unsure.

“I want to say yes but…”

“You don’t know.”

“No, I don’t.”

Hitoka nodded. “Then you should sleep on it. Talk to people, maybe. Don’t make a hasty decision,” she said. Kageyama nodded slowly. She pushed him towards the gym. “Come on, the match is still going on!”
Kageyama’s eyes widened and he sprinted back to the gym as if he just realized the fact. He probably did, Hitoka thought. However, they were on a break between matches and immediately as Kageyama arrived, he was ambushed by two other Seijou players. Hitoka thought their names were Kindaichi and Kunimi, Kageyama’s former teammates from middle school.

She frowned but when she made a move to attach herself back to Kageyama’s side Hinata was already there, looking like a firecracker with an extremely short fuse. She also noticed Kei beckoning her to his side.

Hitoka cast one last glance at the scene, seeing also Nishinoya and Tanaka look at them like they wanted to go over, before jogging over to her cousin.

Kageyama was in good hands. Hinata and the others would make sure of that.

***

Tanaka sighed. Kageyama was invited to the All-Japan Youth Training Camp while Tsukishima had been invited to the Miyagi First-Years Training Camp. Since neither either wanted to decline or weren’t let to decline, it was going to be a nightmare to arrange. He kind of envied them both. He would’ve loved to go to either. Darn those talented first years! They made them all look bad in comparison, somehow even when they looked at the stats they had also just collected.

Yet, they didn’t take a group picture. It didn’t feel right. Maybe they could visit the hospital and take one there with Kinoshita. He would like that when he woke up, to know they cared and visited him. Tanaka did feel better by knowing that, if someone didn’t go and pull the plug, he would wake up just fine.

What a horrifying thought… Tanaka slapped his cheeks hard to banish the thoughts.

Kiyoko was drawing plans on how to divide the team and how to possibly arrange both to have someone there with them. As camps with invitation only policy, men in black or other uninvited people would stand out like a sore thumb. Understandably, they were worried when a member of the team had no one to watch over them, not even yakuza. How weird was that sentence… But, oh, she was beautiful when she was concentrating so hard!

Tsukishima had complained that he didn’t need a babysitter, as had Kageyama, but they had been shot down by every other member of the team. They were now both sulking a small distance away from them, talking or sniping quietly to each other from what Tanaka could see.

Still, he was glad that Noya wouldn’t leave. He was talented enough to get into the All-Japan camp but at the moment he could be in danger if he went. Who knew if the sparkly group was going to the camps too? Tanaka refused to acknowledge the faction’s name. It was just too ridiculous. Sparkly worked just as well. It worked for the weird American series too.

He thanked all higher powers that he was Japanese and therefore able to ignore what happened in the pop culture scene across the ocean if he wanted to. He was also thankful that Saeko wasn’t into those kinds of things even if she was a girl.

Well, that was kind of debatable if one didn’t take into account her…

Tanaka, that’s your sister. Ugh, he felt sick. He slapped his cheeks again, garnering a weirded out look from Asahi.

Kiyoko set her pen down and she frowned at her papers, Tanaka noticed. How bad was it?
“Well, I may have found out a loophole that may let us have one person attend a teammate in the All-Japan camp. The Miyagi one is so new there are no real established rules yet so I’m not sure how they want to do that. It could be possible that someone could… crash the camp if they try hard enough but it’s still only a day camp, not for an overnight one.”

“I volunteer!” Hinata quickly raised his hand. He seemed determined to somehow get into at least one of them, especially since Kageyama was kind of leaving him in the dust again. Tanaka snorted. Well, it had to be a first year and Yamaguchi was not nearly reckless enough to do that, even if he looked like he wanted to follow Tsukishima everywhere. Yamaguchi had mostly attached himself to Tsukishima like a barnacle after the shooting which was a lot considering he had followed him since the beginning of the year.

It was still surprising that Kiyoko of all people would suggest someone to crash a party so to speak. There were so many sides to her, like a diamond, and she was just as precious!

“Well…” Kiyoko shifted, and then straightened. “We can ask if a manager could attend too. Another player would receive an immediate refusal but a manager just might get in. But if we ask that, and we’re allowed, then others could ask for the same right. Otherwise it would be called preference treatment.”

“So we could invite trouble in the worst case or have someone else there and nothing happens in the best,” Suga concluded. Kiyoko nodded.

“I don’t like the idea of any of you in danger,” Takeda-sensei said. He had been quiet since his announcements and had watched them all to take the news pretty much in stride and start planning for other eventualities. Tanaka had seen how a sad bemusement had filled his eyes as Takeda-sensei had gazed at them. This had actually been one of situations Kiyoko and he had drawn up before but two invitations had caused a small change in the plans. “Whatever you decide… I just hope you’ll be careful.”

“What do you say? A manager to back-up Kageyama?” Noya grinned and winked. They were all staring at Yachi, who was probably the best option there was to follow Kageyama. Karasuno would be pretty much protected by the Dark Moon while Tsukishima had demonstrated his skill so while a back-up was non-negotiable, it wasn’t like he would be defenceless. In addition, they knew pretty well the other teams in Miyagi.

All-Japan, however…”

Kageyama was rich and a key member of the team; he was a prime candidate for a kidnapping or worse.

Tanaka was nodding with the others. This was great spy stuff! And Yachi could handle herself in tough situations.

When the members had agreed, Kiyoko nodded and then snapped her papers close.

“It’s decided then. I’ll be the one to accompany Kageyama-kun to the All-Japan training camp in two weeks’ time. I’ll go arrange the details then with Takeda-sensei.” She rose up then and practically
dragged Takeda-sensei with her.

Tanaka gaped and, slowly, felt his wits leave him.

“What?!"

***

Kiyoko hadn’t taken much notice of the protests the team had about her participation on Kageyama’s trip. It made sense, no matter what the rest of them thought. Hitoka was too new to take responsibility of a manager pretending to scout. She didn’t have as good grasp of the game and since others would, no doubt, send their managers there too she would be a suspicious sight, especially since Karasuno had a senior manager in Kiyoko. Kiyoko might not be as good in self-defence or fighting overall but she wasn’t too bad. She would also have her phone with her all the time and with so many people in the camp, it wouldn’t be like the Tokyo training trips without real supervision.

Despite Daichi and Suga agreeing on her points, they still hadn’t been happy. Neither had been Nishinoya or Tanaka. Kageyama, her charge, had just bowed and told he was in her care. His displeased expression was more about someone following him, not Kiyoko following him personally, so she didn’t take it to herself. But the others’ reactions had chafed. Didn’t they trust her? Did they trust in Yachi more, who was in all actuality two years her junior?

Did the years Kiyoko had spent with them mean so little in the end?

Rationally, she knew that they were just worried about her and it wasn’t about trust but it still felt like they didn’t think she could take care of herself. She was the one who would be going to a high-end university, possibly even the prestigious University of Tokyo, when she graduated, no question about that. She might not have contacts in yakuza or a tragic backstory but Kiyoko had been able to survive the year just like the rest of them, and been able to handle harassment for years before.

Kiyoko could handle herself and she could handle another person as well.

She was not helpless.

So, head held high, she left to Tokyo with Kageyama on a chilly December morning. It had been surprisingly easy to get the All-Japan camp organizers to accept Karasuno’s request. They had played up the fact that it was a request from Kageyama’s parents when it in no way was. It had made him look sour for a while but it had made the camp organizers to agree, so Kiyoko really didn’t care about that. She might not have contacts in yakuza or a tragic backstory but Kiyoko had been able to survive the year just like the rest of them, and been able to handle harassment for years before.

Kiyoko also didn’t care that the Dark Moon probably had something to do with the easy acceptable and she didn’t ask. She was in and that was that.

The last couple of weeks had been gruesome training wise. Three matches a week and their own training had taken their toll on the team. In addition to that Kiyoko had been given extra lessons in self-defence by Hitoka when it had been made clear that, no, she wouldn’t be the one going. Hitoka had looked worried but mostly over the fact that the only people allowed in were just the two of them. She had admitted that, without a gun, she was practically just a normal person. Hitoka said that she was good but only because of life-long training and even then her stats weren’t that high.

Apparently Kiyoko was getting almost as good as her in just a short time.

Kiyoko had tried to pretend she wasn’t pleased about the fact but she had wanted to preen a bit. The boys had probably forgotten it but before her career as their manager she had been an athlete too.
Getting a grasp on matches and movements weren’t a new thing to her.

The trip to Tokyo was pretty quiet. Neither Kageyama nor she was big on talking so they mostly just sat in companionable silence. Kageyama had paid for her ticket too, claiming that they would be more comfortable in first class while travelling. Kiyoko had accepted it since it clearly had been his way of apologizing for his gruff behaviour, and that had been true anyway. First class was more comfortable than Takeda-sensei’s minibus or the economy seats. It was kind of cute since she knew it hadn’t been his way of trying to impress her or bring out his family’s wealth. From the way he acted, he probably mostly used economy class too while travelling. It didn’t seem like either of them belonged there but it was a comfortable journey anyway.

When they arrived, Kiyoko took out Takeda-sensei’s instructions and let Kageyama follow her like a duckling follows its mother. The place wasn’t difficult to find, and soon they were there. She could recognize some of the players but she was quite surprised how little there were managers there. Perhaps scouting out the new talents wasn’t that big of a deal when there are recordings of matches available online. She followed them to the side lines when the players, including Kageyama, were called to attention.

“How’ve you been?” Shirofuku Yukie, Fukurodani Academy’s manager, asked as she listlessly watched over the players. “I see your setter’s here. My third years that were here the previous year weren’t invited because they’re already on the team. Bokuto was beside himself when Akaashi wasn’t invited this year. Maybe yours too his place, I wonder?”

“I’ve been doing fine,” Kiyoko said. It was nice to see a familiar face. “It’s a pity but the competition is big. Kageyama-kun deserved his chance. Who are you here with?”

Yukie nodded towards the players. “See that guy on the second row? The one with the boring haircut? He’s actually one of our reserves, probably going to be upped to a regular when the spring tournament is over. By the way, congrats for making it to the nationals.” Kiyoko nodded her thanks. “Anyway, he’s pretty good if lacking in experience, but his father has some serious influence on the volleyball scene so they couldn’t not invite him, you know? So, here I am as his babysitter. I’d have sent Kaori-chan but she’s a firstie and still needs to learn the ropes.”

“That’s why I’m here too,” Kiyoko commented, finding a way to explain her presence too. “Hitokachan wanted to come but she’s a first year and I couldn’t in good conscious give the responsibility to her. She’s integrated well into the team but that’s just not enough. She’ll be ready when I retire, though.”

“Right,” Yukie nodded. “I was a bit surprised no one else managed to snag their attention. Isn’t your libero really good?”

“He is,” Kiyoko smiled when she thought about Nishinoya. He could be annoying sometimes but he had a good heart and no one could deny his talent. “But he doesn’t really fit into the mould.”

“If you say so,” Yukie said. Kiyoko then realized that Bokuto was a personality too and he had been accepted into the camp before making it in the team. It made her a little bit mad that Nishinoya had been snubbed unlike him. “What about the others? I saw the recording of your match against Shiratorizawa. Bokuto insisted we all watch it. Good game. That blond middle blocker was the player of the game, though. Still, there were others that were worth the attention too. Your other setter, Sugawara, and that pinch server were pretty good.”

“Suga-kun and Yamaguchi-kun are both exceptional players in their own way,” Kiyoko agreed. “They can really change the flow of the game. Isn’t Bokuto-san the same way?”
“I suppose,” Yukie sighed. “Although his dramatics are sometimes so exaggerated I wonder how Akaashi and the rest manage.”

Kiyoko giggled. “He was a lot of fun to watch, though.” Yukie snorted.

“Well, that can’t be denied. Anyway, have you met these girls yet? I know most of them, there’s a few from the teams that were in the nationals last year too. Let me introduce you. Say hello to Itachiyama’s manager…”

Kiyoko relaxed and listened to Yukie’s introductions and let herself be pulled into the discussion. It had been a while since she had been able to have a girl talk like this. She was popular but her friends were mainly the guys of the volleyball club and Hitoka. Her classmates were mostly after her popularity than getting to know who she really was. In the volleyball circle, no one cared about trivial things like who’s the prettiest or who goes out with whom. Kiyoko hesitatingly told the girls a bit about the attack on Karasuno when she was asked but it was the heavily censored version they had told the police too. She admitted, though, how terrifying it all had been. It would’ve been easy to get lost in the conversation but she did keep her eyes on Kageyama and their surroundings, and her phone was ready, just in case.

Yukie watched her with a frown on her face, her eyes trying to follow hers to see what Kiyoko was so interested in. Kiyoko pretended she didn’t see it and turned to watch the game the guys had started after their warm ups.

Mentally, she added Yukie to the list to be watched as well as the rest of the girls. Kiyoko felt bad for doing it to her friend but she would not be caught unaware again.

The team was worth more than that.

***

Tsukishima sighed as he watched Hinata run after the balls. The idiot had followed him to the camp, insisting on using the same bus as him and everything. Well, it was for the team, he guessed, but it was also annoying. If it came down to a fight, it would be Tsukishima who would be in the middle of the action and Hinata would just be in the way.

“Not in the mood, huh?” someone asked behind him and he turned around. It was that first year from Shiratorizawa. What was his name again… ah, yes. Goshiki.

“I didn’t really want to come,” Tsukishima said and stretched. He yawned. This was tiresome. He would rather be anywhere else than here. He wouldn’t be able to forgive himself if something happened to the target when he was ‘training’, unable to act.

Goshiki gaped. “What? How come?! Are you too good for Shiratorizawa Academy now that you’ve beaten us once?”

Tsukishima rolled his eyes. “Did I say that? And did this camp somehow turn into a Shiratorizawa special when I wasn’t looking? I see only one of you here, and two of Aobajousai. So if we’re looking at numbers here…”

“Shut up, I didn’t mean it like that,” Goshiki muttered. Tsukishima finished his stretches.

“Whatever.”

“Look, I’m just pissed off that we lost. Ushijima-senpai would’ve deserved the win more than any of you combined.”
“Winners write the history,” Tsukishima just said and left. He didn’t have any patience for jealous morons. He fetched his water bottle and took a long drink, hiding himself outside the gym doors. If he held out a bit he might be able to evade the last minute practice. Ugh, what he wouldn’t give to be away from there…

“…If he’s not here, then he must be there,” he heard someone say. Tsukishima recognized that voice as Aobajousai’s Kindaichi’s.

“Naturally. He always did have more talent than any sense or likeable traits.” That was Kunimi.

“Che. I hoped we would’ve been able to catch him here. I mean, we got nothing out of him during that practice match.”

“If he was here, he wouldn’t be the one dubbed as Oikawa-senpai’s kouhai no matter how we’re too. And do you think he really would tell us anything after middle school?” Kunimi asked. Tsukishima could hear the biting sarcasm in his tone. And tell them what? “He was practically running away the first chance he got, even with that little freak between us.”

“Well, maybe, but…” Kindaichi trailed off.

“But what?”

“I just think he’s changed, you know?” Tsukishima stopped, curious. The King, changed? Kindaichi thought so? This he had to hear. “He actually listens to people nowadays. Heck, he actually seems to have friends!”

“And how does that change anything?” Kunimi asked bluntly. “Middle school still happened.”

“Well, maybe I want to change that!” Tsukishima sneered at the sudden outburst. It was very loud, one could say even too loud.

“No, you don’t,” Kunimi deadpanned. “You’re just curious because of what Oikawa-senpai and Iwaizumi-senpai said.”

“Well, I admit that what they said was worrisome but it’s not all!” Kindaichi insisted. Tsukishima scowled. Oikawa and Iwaizumi told them? He’s going to kill them the next time Tsukishima saw them. This was no business of theirs and their fathers had promised to be careful with the information. It should’ve been crystal clear to add their meddling sons to that list!

Clearly Akiteru had been right. The Special Division couldn’t be really trusted. Cops never acted in the best interest of yakuza, no matter the truce between them.

“Bullshit. Soon you’ll say you wish you’d gone to Karasuno instead.”

“…What if I said I sometimes do?”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t change our team for anything but sometimes… sometimes… and you’ve changed too, Kunimi, especially after our exit from the tournament. Did our loss affect you this much?”

“I’m leaving.”

“What? Kunimi, hey, wait!”

Tsukishima watched as the two passed him, seeing him, but not really registering his presence. He
stared at them as they retreated, their argument too quiet for him to hear anymore. They knew far too much to be safe.

Kindaichi Yuutarou and Kunimi Akira.

He sent a message to Hitoka. He wanted their files on those two.

***

Suga sat at the table with Daichi, their parents sitting opposite them. None of them were talking and neither of the teens knew what to do. Their parents had just suddenly invited them to the Sugawara’s kitchen which was just big enough to accommodate them all. Suga exchanged a concerned look with Daichi. What was going on?

“Koushi, Daichi-kun… We’d like to talk to you about your school and the club,” Suga’s mother said, ending the silence.

“What about them? We’ve kept our promise by keeping up with our grades. You don’t have to worry, we’ll be able to get into a good university,” Daichi reassured them.

“Your grades are fine even though your light seems to be on awfully late,” Daichi’s father said. “No, it’s not that. Just… are you two alright?”

Suga shared another confused glance with Daichi. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“We’ve seen strange men following you around.”

Suga tried to keep his face impassive but wasn’t sure if he managed. Daichi gripped his hand hard under the table.

“You have?” Suga asked mildly. His mother nodded.

“Yes, and when I walked past your school this one day, I saw one of them stalking around your school’s gym! I went to speak with Takeda-sensei but he was just useless!” she huffed. This time it was Suga who gripped on Daichi’s hand. Takeda-sensei was everything but useless. He felt very offended for his sake. The man was a saint and tried to keep them as out of trouble and safe as possible.

Which, of course, they couldn’t – or wouldn’t – tell their parents.

“We even went to your coach, that man whose name I think was Ukai, but he was just the same,” Daichi’s mother said. “He seemed kind of unkempt too.”

“Ukai-san is a great coach,” Daichi defended him. “And Takeda-sensei is a brilliant teacher. They both work very hard for us, giving us more of their time than they are required!”

“I’m sure,” Suga’s mother said. Suga glanced at his father who had kept quiet the whole conversation. While his mother was bubbly and almost noisy, and nosy more often than not, his father was a quiet man of little words. His father caught his eyes and grimaced. Suga pursed his lips. Apparently his mother had steamrolled over his father again, possibly even Daichi’s parents.

“And no need to even talk about your principal, or the vice-principal. Oh, why couldn’t you go to Aobajousai or some other better school?” Suga kept quiet as well. This was an old argument. He had the grades to go to, as his mother would put it, a school of better class, but Suga had wanted to keep playing with Daichi and Asahi, whom the two childhood friends had met one summer in middle
school. They had decided to go to the same high school together to play volleyball which, naturally, disappointed his mother.

His father, on the other hand, had quietly congratulated him when his mother had been busy in the kitchen.

Suga sometimes wished that his parents were a bit more like Daichi’s who had a very balanced relationship even if they were a little old-fashioned.

“So, this is why we would like you to consider this,” Suga’s mother said and Suga suddenly tuned back in. It was a second nature to sometimes zone out on his mother’s rants and he had almost done it again. Not good. He had missed what his mother had said. He quickly glanced at Daichi who had turned very pale. Darn, what had his mother just said?

“We would like you to, no, we want you to resign from the volleyball club. Tomorrow. Effective immediately.”

Suga could hear something crack but there was nothing on the table that was broken. No one else seemed to notice either. They were all busy staring at Suga and Daichi, some with a determined expression and some with a more regretful one.

Something cold spread inside Suga’s chest.

Oh.

It had to have been his heart, then.

***

“Do you have good news?” Akiteru asked. He fiddled with his phone, trying to make sense of Hitoka's cryptic messages. The man bowing behind him nodded although it went unnoticed.

“Yes, sir. The woman finally cracked. We know where their base is.” Akiteru froze before a grin slowly made its way on his face.

“Have you verified the information?”

“Yes, sir. No one is aware of the fact we know of it.”

Akiteru threw his head back and laughed.

“Brilliant. Finish the preparations post-haste, and then inform the men. The attack will commence the day the Shield is back to watch over the target.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

I just want to thank all of you who've been here from since the beginning and everyone new here too. I appreciate all of you. Especially big thanks to you who give me the loveliest reviews. They really make my day and, I'm not kidding, my whole darn week! Sometimes I go and giggle over them like a small dragon over its hoard.
Anyway, thanks all and see you next time!

PS. I have actually introduced a few Twilight agents over the course of this story that will play a major role in later chapters as villains. Some of them aren't even OCs. Do you have guesses on who they are? :)
Nothing happened.

Absolutely nothing happened.

Was their luck real?

Kiyoko didn’t know but, nonetheless, she felt extremely happy about it. Yet, when she and Kageyama arrived back from Tokyo, the team had a strangely tense and charged air surrounding them.

“What happened?” she asked, worry clouding her thoughts. What had gone wrong in their absence?

“Suga and I… we’re, for the moment, staying with Asahi,” Daichi said tightly. Kiyoko blinked and saw how Kageyama looked bemused too.

“Why?” she asked, afraid of the answer.

Suga shared a dark look with Daichi.

“Our parents tried to force us leave the team.” Kiyoko gasped softly. Suga nodded. “So, until the tournament is over or our parents change their minds, we’re not going back home.”

“Do they know it…?”

Suga snorted but his expression was unamused.

“They will when they realise it’s been too quiet in the house and they go looking for us. I’m sure Daichi’s parents will change their minds quickly but the main problem is my mother.”

Kiyoko nodded. Suga had complained about his mother and her controlling ways plenty of times before. Kageyama, however, looked as confused as before. Someone would probably have to talk to him, get him up-to-date. Her eyes found a slightly vibrating Hinata. Yeah, he would do.

“Do you think she’ll try to get you to transfer…?” she asked. There was a sudden hush as if the others hadn’t realized it might even be a possibility. Suga smiled grimly.

“If she tries, I will fight against her. I’ve let her control my doings all my life. This team is the only thing I have chosen for myself.

“I’m not going to let anyone, not even my own mother, take it from me.”

Kiyoko shivered. That sounded like a promise, almost a threat.

Suddenly, Suga smiled so blindingly that Kiyoko had to pinch herself to know she hadn’t fallen asleep on the train and wasn’t dreaming this whole conversation.

“On a happier note, Kinoshita woke up! We’re all going to visit him tomorrow!”
Narita bounced with nervous energy he hadn't been able to get rid of since he and Ennoshita had gotten a message from Kinoshita’s brother that Kinoshita was awake. He was fine, they had been reassured, tired and weak but fine.

And now he was well enough to be able to see visitors.

Narita and Ennoshita walked in the hospital doors. They were the first ones there and, looking at the time, they were early by over fifteen minutes. They looked at each other and laughed weakly.

They were going to see Kinoshita.

Slowly the rest of the team arrived too until all of them were there. Well, Ukai had been called to his grandfather’s side since his health had declined and Takeda-sensei had teacher duties but everyone else was there. Even the last ones, Kageyama and Tsukishima, were five minutes early. Precisely when the clock struck midday, the team was crowding the corridor outside Kinoshita’s room. Narita fidgeted.

Kinoshita was awake and just inside this door. Narita looked around. Who would go in first?

“Just come in!” called a voice from inside the room. It was weak and hoarse from having not been used for a long time but it was still recognizable.

Kinoshita.

“I know you’re all there.”

Ennoshita burst inside suddenly and, without a conscious thought, Narita followed him. There, lying on the bed, slightly prepped up, was Kinoshita. He looked sickly pale and there were large dark circles around his eyes and Narita could see bandages from where they peeked under his clothes but it was clearly him. Alive. And awake.

Narita felt himself tear up.

Kinoshita sent their way a small, amused smile.

“Nice of you to drop by! Make yourselves comfortable. Just not too much, I don’t want to see any of you as my new neighbours,” he said cheerfully, and Narita felt like bawling. He’s alive and awake. Alive and awake. Those words ran through his mind and nothing else compared to the feeling of knowing his best friend was going to be alright and he was there to witness it.

He stumbled over to Kinoshita’s left side and grabbed his hand. He had to reassure himself and, with shaking hands, tried to find Kinoshita’s pulse. It was there, beating steadily and calmly. Narita sighed and it was like all strings were cut from him. He slumped over and clutched Kinoshita’s hand.

Alive and awake.

“How are you feeling?” Narita heard Daichi ask. Kinoshita chuckled softly. Narita felt his body vibrate with it.

“Pretty good, considering.”

*Considering he could’ve died.*

“Are you going to be kept here for long?” Ennoshita asked from somewhere close. Narita raised his head enough to see Ennoshita sitting there, opposite him, holding Kinoshita’s other hand. They
shared a relieved smile.

Alive and awake.

“At least until Christmas. I’ve been asking to be let home for the holidays since it’s not like I’m going
to be doing anything stressful during those,” Kinoshita said. His smile turned wistful. “I’m not going
to be able to play with you guys this year. I don’t even know if I can catch up on school. Maybe
during the holidays. If not, then I’m going to have to repeat the year.”

Narita saw Kinoshita grin at their first year members. “At least I’d have company then. I’d be bound
to end up in one of your classes.”

“You’re welcome in any and all of them,” Yamaguchi reassured him. Narita felt grateful. It wasn’t
ideal but Kinoshita’s health went over anything else, even school. It would be sad not to share a class
with him but it was a small loss to have him there anyway.

Alive and awake.

“So. How’s it been going on at your side of things?” Kinoshita asked after a small, companionable
silence. Narita bit his lips. He really didn’t want to discuss those things with him at the moment.
Apparently Kinoshita sensed at least his reticence since he frowned. “I’ve been missing out a lot
because of this. I was not put in a coma just so you can throw me away when things get tough. I may
not be able to follow you into danger, I understand that, but I need to be kept up-to-date, if only
because of my own safety. Understand?”

“You’ve thought this out,” Suga said, smiling sadly. Kinoshita shrugged, jostling slightly Narita
while doing so.

“I’ve had time for nothing else.”

“He’s right, though,” Kageyama said quietly. He didn’t say anything more but Yachi piped up
before Narita figured out if he wanted to. “I’ve always thought that wilful ignorance is dangerous.”

Narita blinked at Yachi’s comment, and frowned. Had they been, as she called it, ‘wilfully’ ignorant?
No, he thought to himself, not in his opinion. There just hadn’t been enough information before to do
anything.

Kinoshita’s expression gentled when it landed on Kageyama. “Thanks for the save.” Kageyama
instantly evaded his eyes and just nodded.

“Well… to be honest, there hadn’t been much going on lately,” Daichi said.

A sceptical expression made its way on Kinoshita’s face. “Oh really?”

“He’s speaking the truth,” Asahi said while trying to tie his hair back. “The most happened right after
you were carted to the hospital. After that, well… It’s been a quiet month, really.”

Kinoshita took his hands from Narita and Ennoshita’s hold and folded them on his lap.

Narita sighed. Yeah, that’s the Kinoshita family’s stubbornness right there. Suga then took up the
role of the narrator and started telling Kinoshita about everything he had missed. Well, Narita
amended, after Tsukishima had given his okay. He had given the room a quick scan to see if there
were any, can you believe it, listening or recording devices.

Because that was their life now.
Suga’s run down included things like Noya’s heritage, Yachi’s ‘Yachiness’ and her being Tsukishima’s cousin, the Special Division and everything else that happened between the shooting and Kageyama and Tsukishima’s (and Hinata’s! the first year in question had interrupted) training camps.

It took a while but Kinoshita hadn’t interrupted them at all during it. He had just listened and Narita could see how he cut the information into smaller pieces and probably put them into nice little boxes inside his head. Narita smiled fondly. He had missed his friend terribly.

“So… What now? If you’ve decided to act,” Kinoshita finally asked after he had processed the information.

“We have plans,” Shimizu said plainly.

“And there’s an assault planned for the Twilight base happening today,” Tsukishima revealed, a pleased and slightly cruel smile making its way on his face. Narita blinked. That was new information even for him.

“How did he get that piece of information?”

It was Yachi who answered with her tone a bit disapproving.

“From a captive Twilight agent.” Narita shivered. He didn’t want to know what went into trying to get information out of him or her. Tsukishima rolled his eyes.

“The woman who shot me?”

Tsukishima nodded but Kinoshita’s frown didn’t let up. Instead, it deepened until Narita thought those lines would become permanently embedded into Kinoshita’s face.

“It’s been almost exactly a month since that… that. And if she hadn’t really known much, or rather, hadn’t revealed much before that… Doesn’t…” Kinoshita hesitated but soldiered on.

“Doesn’t that seem like a trap to you?”

Tsukishima felt like someone had punched him; like he had been frozen even though his mind went a million miles a minute. He kept his outward calm though. There was no reason for panic, he told himself.

A trap.

It was worrying that someone else had come to that conclusion too. Of course he had thought of it before but the woman hadn’t been in contact with any Twilight members during her isolation and she had no way of knowing time, or anything really, so he had trusted his brother when he had said that everything was in order. He had dismissed the annoying little voice that wanted to do his own
checking.

There was a reason he was the Shield while his brother was the Sword: defence and attack.

“I can’t get in contact with Akiteru. When was this operation supposed to be commenced?” he heard Hitoka ask.

“Midday.” The same time he would be there to protect the target while his brother was eliminating Dark Moon’s enemies.

“It’s already over two in the afternoon.”

Over two hours of no contact. Akiteru was supposed to check in periodically, once an hour. Two times were alright to miss but a third time meant that something had gone awry.

“Akiteru’s strong. We’re waiting for his contact.”

Tsukishima felt Hitoka’s, and everyone else’s, eyes on him.

“What does that mean?” he heard Tanaka ask. Tsukishima took his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt, faking nonchalance.

“It means that, if Akiteru doesn’t contact Hitoka when the clock strikes three, I’m going after him.”

Even if he had to arrange something else for the target. But what if that was their plan, to leave the target vulnerable? But… Akiteru was his brother.

If Akiteru needed back-up, he wanted to be there for him.

Tsukishima refused to talk to anyone despite Hitoka’s prodding and suspicious and worried looks he gained from his teammates. He ignored even Yamaguchi. Slowly, they started a conversation with Kinoshita while the visiting hours were still on. They would be, sooner or later, kicked out. Rather, Tsukishima was quite surprised Kinoshita was able to stay awake as long as he had already. It took strength to recover from what he had experienced.


Something crawled down his spine.

Tsukishima’s thoughts whirled. Something bad had to have happened but what? It might’ve been just that they had a more difficult time to conquer the rival faction but it was unlikely. Akiteru was fast, strong and powerful; an ideal leader for the men. Tsukishima had always known he was lacking in many departments compared to his older brother. Experience, social skills, everything that made his brother so respected. It had to have been a trap. Nothing else could beat Akiteru down.

The noise around him fell to the background and although he registered in the back of his mind that someone, maybe more than one, was calling him, he didn’t, couldn’t, react.

He had to do something. Yet, what could he do? If they had his brother, then they had the better part of the two. Tsukishima would be nothing but a fly trying to avoid a spider’s web. But he had a job too. It was why he was at Karasuno anyway! He couldn’t leave it but he had to save his brother.

The clock was five minutes past three. They may really have Akiteru. It was a real possibility. What should…

“Tsukishima!”
He startled and blinked. The whole team was staring at him, no, some of them were staring at him and the ones who were not were looking at... the King.

“What?” he asked flatly, none of his inner turmoil visible from his voice. Kageyama stared at him for a long moment. Tsukishima actually felt pretty uncomfortable under the scrutinizing look. Kageyama’s lips then twisted to a small sneer that fit well on his face.

“How’s the calm, overanalysing Shield now?”

Tsukishima’s whole body jerked and his eyes widened slightly.

“Kageyama!” Yamaguchi hissed in disapproval but Tsukishima hardly heard it anymore.

Yes, that’s right. Calm. He was panicking just a moment ago, wasn’t he? He was supposed to be the calmer of the Tsukishima brothers, unlike his slightly hot-headed older brother. And why was it that Akiteru hadn’t been asking his input on his plans? Even if the attack was prepared post-haste, it wouldn’t have taken long for him to ask Tsukishima for some constructive criticism.

Because, no, while his brother might be the better liked of the two of them, he wasn’t the smarter one. That title belonged to Tsukishima. He should’ve listened to himself. He had grown far too sedate lately because he wasn’t in the thick of things.

He blinked back to reality and saw Yamaguchi berating Kageyama but the latter only had eyes for Tsukishima. There was a challenge in his eyes that actually made Tsukishima want to rise to answer it.

“It’s alright, Yamaguchi,” Tsukishima said. In fact, he was rather grateful for the wake-up call. “Hitoka, can you get the details of the attack for me?” he addressed his cousin.

“On it,” she answered instantly, already typing on her phone.

With one last glance at Kageyama who looked annoyingly self-satisfied (and didn’t that make him bristle), Tsukishima turned to the rest of the team who were stiff and alert.

“Would you be up for giving some payback to those that deserve it?”

His only answers were the grins that showed too much teeth.

***

Kinoshita waved as his friends and teammates left his room and only when the door closed did his smile drop into a bitter twist. He wouldn’t be going out with them. He wouldn’t be able to help his own brother, who was probably somehow somewhere avenging him, unlike Tsukishima. Naoki was a righteous man and his fury was pure. He would grasp at any chance that would let him.

Kinoshita was enough of a man to admit he was jealous. Seeing his team, his friends, be so tight together even without him hurt. He didn’t begrudge them for it and he was sure he hadn’t been forgotten but he wasn’t part of it anymore, not really.

He had too much physical therapy to go through before he was fit to do anything but pant after a few steps. The complications in his surgery had made it impossible for him to recover quickly, maybe not ever deem him fit enough to play volleyball again. They would see about that. He hadn’t had the heart to tell Narita and Ennoshita that. They had all looked forward to play on the team when the third years retired; had even laughed about it good-naturedly with Asahi, Suga and Daichi.
Kinoshita would be lucky if he was able to play on his third year, whether it was with Narita and Ennoshita, or the now first years.

He sighed but grabbed his mobile from his bedside table. He called his brother but couldn’t get through. He then scrolled down and picked a number he hadn’t called for a while. He only had to wait a few seconds before the line connected.

“Ah, Takeda-sensei? Yes, I’m fine, thank you for asking. About the team…”

Even if Tsukishima and Yachi were their yakuza gurus or something, right now, they were going in blind and, if Kinoshita had gotten the right vibe, quite reluctant in contacting outsiders for help, especially Tsukishima. Kinoshita could swear that they probably wouldn’t even think about informing anyone outside their immediate contacts where they were going.

Kinoshita could do little but wait but he could call everyone he knew now that was involved.

He thanked Takeda-sensei and ended the call. He pondered for a moment and mentally went through his scattered middle school friends he still kept contact with and friends from other teams. Someone had to have Oikawa or Iwaizumi’s number. Those two had contacts with the police and, in case they weren’t informed about the attack, they would be able to help at least somewhat by contacting them.

Kinoshita suddenly realized that one of his friends had gone to Aobajousai to play baseball. He grinned. Not a minute later he was, again, one call closer as he scribbled down Kindaichi’s number.

He wouldn’t let anyone leave him behind, unintentionally or not.

***

Asahi watched nervously as they neared the Twilight headquarters. In the distance it looked like any ordinary high-rise building in the outskirts of the city. Well, of course they didn’t know if that was their main headquarters but Asahi rather doubted that. It didn’t seem too… lair-like if one could say that. Just… a tall building with a basement, probably, that hopefully wasn’t a torture chamber.

Please, let there be no torture chambers.

“Asahi-san, chill. We’ll be fine,” Noya said and grinned. Asahi smiled weakly back.

“We’ll be able to beat them all up!” Tanaka declared.

“Don’t be stupid,” Tsukishima said bluntly. “We’ll be only going in and out as quickly as possible. The men Yachi called from the clan are slipping in as we speak. We’re only looking for Akiteru and then we’re off.”

“But…”

“Unlike before, we’re now attacking them on their turf. That’s a declaration if they see you there. Do you want to be killed?”

No, sir, I do not, Asahi thought. This was a terrible idea. The building looked far too normal to not be anything else than eerie and dangerous. This whole thing was a truly awful idea.

And the plan sucked.

“Why do we have to separate into smaller groups again?” he asked. “Shouldn’t it be safer all of us together?”
“Safer, maybe. That’s debatable. But easier to notice? Definitely,” Tsukishima said. He turned to all of them. “Not all of us should go inside. We need some people here who will be able to be contacted at any time.”

His gaze met Yachi’s who, in turn, spluttered.

“You need me there!”

“You’re a little girl,” Tsukishima said bluntly. “You’ll stand out.”

“So does Hinata!”

“Hey!” Hinata protested, having been put on spotlight. “Noya-san stands out as well!”

“Hey!”

“Enough!” Daichi raised his voice and the bickering stopped immediately. That’s the captain for you, Asahi thought. “We’re going by our groups, aren’t we? In mine, there are five while in others, there are four. So. Unless we’re shuffling them, our options for leaving behind are Hinata, Kageyama, Kiyoko, Yachi or me. Who will it be?”

Tsukishima glared at them all, eyes flickering from one person to another. He sighed.

“If I may,” Kiyoko said calmly. “I doubt any of us are willing to stay behind. Not even me. While we are looking for your brother there, we’re also interested in revenge,” she motioned at Ennoshita, Narita and Tanaka who flushed and looked guilty, “information,” her hand pointed out herself and Suga, “and a variety of other reasons I’m not aware of. If you leave one behind, then he or she will go in alone. That’s why I didn’t leave anyone without a team in my statistics but Takeda-sensei and Ukai-san.”

Tsukishima seemed to glower at Kiyoko as if that was her fault but Asahi couldn’t fault her reasoning. Even though he was scared himself, he couldn’t bear being left behind when he knew he could be of some use.

“Kei…”

“Fine! Then act as the control tower on the field.”

Yachi’s smile was dark and Asahi shivered. He was also close enough to hear her whisper of “That’s why I was taught to use the gun, cousin dear” when she passed Tsukishima and skipped over to her group.

Asahi was glad he had had a normal childhood.

Everything was set. Yachi was programmed on everyone’s hotkey. The plan was simple. Go in, find survivors, help, flee. Don’t attack if you can avoid it and hide.

Asahi was okay with that. What the others seemed to forget in their hot-headedness was that they were all still high school students. He knew he did. During this year, he had felt as if he had aged years past his real age. Maybe he now was mentally as old as he looked, he thought in slight amusement. Well, perhaps not now. They were all dressed in comfortable but easy-to-move dark clothes that Yachi had managed to get them during the time they spent traveling here. Her connections were creepy; or rather, the fact that she had prepared for this and only needed someone to bring the clothes to them was even creepier.
At least they could now somehow match the others who dressed in all black, and hopefully, be less of a target for them. He guessed that was the point, anyway.

In addition, after getting the clothes, there had been the creepiest high five of history between Yachi and Kiyoko. Asahi would spend the rest of his life trying to get the image out of his mind, he was sure.

Those two could take over the world if given incentive, he was pretty sure of that. No one would probably even notice, and if they did, even mind. Asahi shivered.

They had just walked in from the front door after noticing that the cameras were busted and there was no sign of life on the lobby. Daichi’s group, which included Yachi, Kiyoko, Hinata and Kageyama, went to the left, intent on exploring the ground floor and perhaps even lower floors if there were any. There probably were. Suga’s group had Yamaguchi, Tsukishima and Tanaka who immediately headed upstairs towards top floors. This left Asahi, Noya, Narita and Ennoshita to explore those in the middle. He grimaced as he noticed how the three were seemingly following his lead.

They were so going to die.

At least he wasn’t in charge of keeping people up-to-date. That job had fallen on Ennoshita. If he had tried to handle his phone right now, his big fingers probably wouldn’t have been able to write anything else but a total disaster there. They had a group chat between the team members, something Yachi had created on their way there (why hadn’t they made one before?), and berated how some of them didn’t have smartphones yet (maybe that answered the question…).

They stopped at the fifth floor. In total there were fifteen but Suga had texted how they were stopping at ten, so this was nicely in the middle to go up from. Asahi moved slowly and he tried to be quiet, as did the others. There were signs of battle there. It was an office floor but there were chairs thrown and cubicles destroyed.

However, it was eerily quiet.

“Do you think… there walls might be soundproof?” Noya whispered. Even that sounded loud. Narita shook his head.

“Isn’t that such a waste of resources? Especially if this isn’t their main place.”

“And they would’ve had to build this place then, or renovated recently. I think this place is older than us,” Ennoshita agreed.

Asahi looked around and nodded. There was something distinct there that told them the high-rise wasn’t built on this decade. He peeked around a corner. The corridor was empty. “I don’t like this,” he mumbled.

“I don’t either,” Narita said quietly.

“I don’t think any of us do. Do you think this floor’s a bust?” Ennoshita asked, gripping the phone tightly in his hand. Asahi wanted to say yes, just to get to leave the scary silence, but he shook his head instead.

“We’ve barely covered half of it. We need to be thorough.”

“Split up?” Noya asked but Asahi shook his head again.
“We’re stronger together.”

“Nothing but blood and a few bodies on the first floor,” Ennoshita told them quietly. “Two of them Yachi recognized as members of their clan.”

“Darn,” Noya whispered, clenching his hands into fists. Asahi shared a grimace with Narita. They knew they would go into a battlefield but to have it confirmed… They were all over their heads here. He couldn’t help but wonder how Tsukishima let them come. Was the target on his team, so he could keep his eye on the person? It couldn’t be anything else. Were they all others expendable then?

Asahi disliked how his thoughts went off the deep end; how easy it was to start thinking the worst when the situation didn’t go as planned. He, and the team, knew Tsukishima. He wouldn’t do that, and they had all been clamouring for a chance to strike back… even Asahi himself. The rage he felt for the damage they’d done to this team was something unforgivable.

Trust, and be trusted.

In the end they found nothing on the fifth floor. They moved onto the sixth but nothing was there either. Nothing but a few bloody footsteps. On the seventh floor, however, there was life.

Hiding in a bathroom, attacking them with a wild look on his eyes, was Kunimi Akira from Aobajousai.

“Oh shit,” Kunimi panted, lowering his arms as much as he could from the hold Asahi had them on. It had been instinct, Asahi noted in muted surprise. The self-defence lessons had been of some use after all. “I was so sure you were coming for me and my life.”

“What are you doing here?” Asahi asked, and when Kunimi’s feet buckled from under him, he immediately grabbed him to steady him. He glanced inside the bathroom but the flickering yellow light created a forbidding atmosphere there. A good hiding place, although creepy – he couldn’t see much anything there.

“Not my idea,” he answered him bitterly. “Kindaichi got a call from your teammate, Kinoshita, to get Oikawa-senpai’s number. Incidentally, we were out with the whole team so Kindaichi just handed over his phone. He also got into his head that we need to help out too, so after spying on the call, we followed them and ended up here.”

“Where’s Kindaichi then?” Noya asked, biting his lip in worry. Kunimi shook his head.

“I don’t know. We got separated in the chaos one floor up.”

“Gosh. Is he alright?”

“I don’t know,” Kunimi repeated, his face pale. “Oikawa-senpai called his father after, but they were operating on another city today – higher-ups orders or something – and the rest of the force are protecting your families or something so he got into his head that he had to head here. Stupid Kindaichi! Shit, what are you guys into anyway?!”

“Too deep,” Ennoshita muttered and send a message to inform the rest of the team to keep an eye out. Kunimi snorted softly.

“Well, even I could’ve told you that.”

“So you don’t know what’s going on? And you still came?” Asahi questioned. He finally let Kunimi go when he had calmed down enough to stand on his own. He felt pity for the boy who was two
years his junior. He shouldn’t be anywhere near this mess the Karasuno was messed up with. He wondered if he could protect him but, he thought sadly, it might be too late for that. Kunimi had already been burnt by them.

“I was trying to keep Kindaichi out of trouble but look how it turned out. And no; Oikawa-senpai and Iwaizumi-senpai told us nothing.

Asahi nodded. He didn’t like the idea that there were even more teenagers running around without the whole picture. He grimaced. “Well, let’s just say that an evil organization is after us, and we’re trying to see if we can help our side, including gathering some intelligence.”

Kunimi nodded. “Then, this attack wasn’t planned?”

“No, it was, but it may’ve been a trap.”

“Do you know who’re behind it?”

“No, just that the people call themselves members of Twilight.”

“Right…” Kunimi looked thoughtful but shook his head. “Never mind. It’s not really important, is it? We need to get going.” He hesitated. “Could we go back to the eighth floor? I-, I want to see if Kindaichi’s there alright.”

Asahi hesitated and looked at his teammates. Noya gave him a serious look and a thumbs-up, Narita shrugged and Ennoshita was tapping his phone. He looked up a moment later.

“Yachi said it was alright but to be very careful.”

Kunimi perked up. “Yachi? Your manager’s here too?”

“Yeah,” Asahi answered reluctantly. “She and her team are handling the lowest floors, and the rest of us are doing the top floors.”

“I think Oikawa-senpai and Iwaizumi-senpai were heading towards the top floor. Well, at least we didn’t see them anywhere before when we were ambushed on the eighth.” They had started to move, quietly towards the next floor. Just as Kunimi had described, an ambush of some kind had happened there. Bodies were littered around, all wearing black without any distinguishing features.

“This is unreal,” Noya gasped softly but his eyes were sharp. They continued forward but it was just as quiet as before.

It was scary.

“I can’t see Kindaichi,” Kunimi whispered. He walked a bit forward and peeked around the corner. “This is where it happened. He should be here, right?”

“Unless they took him away, alive,” Narita clasped him on the shoulder, jostling Kunimi slightly. Their former rival took a deep breath in before exhaling shakily.

“I guess.”

“We’ll continue searching.”

They tried to do that but, all of a sudden, a loud noise around the corner attracted their attention. A gun was shot and something heavy fell down far too close to their location. Someone was yelling angrily, a few of them in fact, cursing Dark Moon to the deepest pits of hell and Asahi’s stomach
“Back to the seventh floor, now!” he whispered urgently. Follow the plan. It wasn't so stupid anymore. They didn’t have equipment to fight against guns. Even Yachi couldn’t get those to them on a short notice, only a couple bulletproof vests, which had been given unanimously to the girls despite their protests. There were only bodies there, and pieces of office furniture, but those wouldn’t be much use against multiple gun men.

They scrambled back as quietly as they could. Noya tripped but Kunimi caught him before any noise could come out of it, Asahi noted in relief as he turned to usher Ennoshita and Narita down the stairs towards the cleared area, a ‘safe zone’. He pushed them back to the location they had found Kunimi, around the centre of the floor but with some cover just in case. Adrenaline rushed inside his veins and he drew a deep breath to calm himself down.

They were still safe. They had managed to back down without being noticed.

They were alright.

Asahi turned back to ask Noya if he was alright but his breath was caught.

He couldn’t see Noya or Kunimi anywhere.

No.

Asahi shook his head in denial but, seeing Ennoshita and Narita’s terrified expressions, he knew he wasn’t dreaming.

Nonono.

They had somehow lost them.

No.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a bit late, aren't I? This is why I wanted to finish the story in September... Thesis this, thesis that. Oh well. I'll do my best but, you know, priorities.

Do tell me what you think of this! We're building up to the climax :D By the way, I am truly sorry about all the cliffhangers this story has. It seems I'm not able to end the chapters without them. I can't promise to do better either. My bad.
Part III: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first couple of floors were littered with bodies. Surprisingly there were none in the basement which was empty of pretty much everything but dust and footprints. Hinata had sneezed what had at least felt like the hundredth sneeze when they had come up. It was that bad down there.

But the floors from then on… It wasn’t that bad on the ground floor but the first and the second one… Hinata had wanted to vomit and from what he had seen so had they all if their pale features and tight expressions meant anything. Yachi was able to identify her clan members, bless their departed souls, and they had checked if any of them had been alive. Some were, but Hinata wasn’t sure if that was a blessing or not. Kageyama and Shimizu had administered what first aid they knew but that was a lot of blood to lose. The men and women, however, were taking it scarily well. Those content expressions of theirs despite the pain they had to be in scared Hinata almost more than the corpses themselves.

Unfortunately, while Yachi had got some help from her clan, those that had arrived after them weren’t enough to handle all of the wounded. She had looked indecisive, desperate to do something for her people, before Kageyama had pointed at those most hurt and asked for them to be taken to wherever they could get help. She broke from her hesitation then and ordered them moved back to their headquarters, the clan members immediately obeying the command.

That also sent shivers down Hinata’s back, seeing how much clout Yachi had inside the yakuza faction. He knew she had to be somewhere pretty high up in the ranks but to see men and women twice or more her elder just do as she said… Well. It was a lot to see from a sixteen-year-old.

“They were waiting for us,” one of the men said when Shimizu was patching him up. They hadn’t stocked on supplies but they did what they could with what they could find. Hygienic it was not but still better than nothing. “And when we came, they waited until we had mostly split up to drive us into a corner.”

“How much of their force are here?” Yachi asked gently but firmly. Hinata noticed how she had her gun out on one hand and her phone on the other. Her eyes were also flickering around the room. Next to her stood Daichi who was keeping his eye out too while Hinata stood nearer Shimizu and Kageyama, guarding them and the wounded lying there.

“Not… that many. It was an ambush.”

Yachi nodded sharply, her fingers flying on her phone’s screen. “Kei was right all along. Gosh, what a mess,” she mumbled to herself, biting her lower lip nervously.

“Yachi-san,” Kageyama called, and Yachi turned to him. “We’ve done what we can.”

She nodded again in acknowledgement and turned, Hinata noted in surprise, to Daichi. “What do you want to do?” she asked. Daichi seemed a bit bewildered that he was consulted but he quickly caught himself.

“We should continue. Maybe,” he made a face, “look through the bodies for clues.”

Hinata took in a shaky breath. Right. Alright. What he had always wanted to do. He watched as Shimizu stiffened and even Yachi looked uncomfortable yet, despite their disgust, they still looked
determined to do it. Hinata turned to Kageyama who just looked blank but, as Hinata noticed, there was a slight waver there that belied his calm. Hinata automatically stepped closer. He felt sick too. He would leech as much from Kageyama’s calm disposition, fake or not, as he could while, hopefully, also giving support to Kageyama.

Just like on court.

“Well, no time like present?” he said cheerfully, sounding false even to his own ears, but searching through the pockets of the closest body Yachi hadn’t identified as theirs. Just like on court; brave forward even through a storm. They needed information, so they would do it. Another trap like this just wouldn’t do. Hinata saw others drop down too, searching the dozen or so bodies. They were all quiet as they did so.

What they found was almost depressing. No identification, naturally, but there wasn’t much anything else either. Bubble gum wrappers had to be the most exciting thing Hinata had found. Others weren’t much luckier. The people didn’t even have phones with them, and those that did, were prepaid without any numbers or messages saved. Yachi had mumbled a few bad words when they had discovered that fact. She had then spitefully removed every bullet the guns still had and taken them herself after checking their size. Extra ammunition, she called it.

Hinata was just glad she hadn’t wanted any of them to handle a gun.

Nothing more was to be found on the first floor when they traced their steps back. It was in a slightly depressing mood that they continued toward the third floor.

“So, Hinata,” Daichi said lightly from the front of the group, trying to keep the conversation going and focus from what they were really doing, or so Hinata assumed. “You and Kageyama are really good friends now, aren’t you?”

“Where did that come from?” Kageyama asked perplexed. Hinata had to admit he was just as lost as the setter walking behind him.

“It just seems to me that you’ve grown together. Remember the first day? You were at each other’s throats!” Daichi laughed quietly, still making sure that they wouldn’t attract attention.

Hinata shook his head although he knew that Daichi wouldn’t see it. “Kageyama and I—,” he stopped, gathering his thoughts, “we’re friends, yes, but… I don’t think that’s completely the correct way to put it. I don’t think there’s a label to what we are.”

“Setter and his spiker? Best friends? Rivals?” Yachi threw a few suggestions in the air. Hinata shook his head again.

“It’s just… Kageyama gets me. And he gets my volleyball. He’s…” Hinata turned his head away, blushing slightly. “He’s everything that volleyball means to me.”


Ability to fly.

When Hinata turned back to sneak a look at Kageyama, he had his gaze fixed on the opposite direction. Hinata could still see the tips of his ears glow red.

Daichi was quiet for a moment. When he finally spoke, it was with heaviness that hadn’t been there before. “I think I understand what you mean. That’s what Suga is to me. What Ennoshita, Narita and Kinoshita are to each other… and what Asahi is to Nishinoya.”
Hinata blinked.

“Asahi-san is to Nishinoya-san?”

Daichi nodded, shushing them as he looked over the corner. He motioned that they were still alright.

“Noya has always been a bit of a wild card. There’s something untameable about him that is probably in his genes somewhere. You remember how he was suspended in the beginning of the year? Yeah, that was a bigger problem at some point. Tanaka didn’t help that either.

“But Nishinoya looks up to Asahi. Noya doesn’t know that I know, but I overheard him telling Tanaka once that he judges his doings by thinking of what would make Asahi cry,” Daichi snorted. “Well, or at least disappointed. Asahi is sort of his moral compass.”

“That explains a lot,” Shimizu said quietly, but didn’t elaborate.

“That’s… deep,” Hinata said dumbly as he didn’t really know what to say.

“Asahi was actually the real reason Noya even came to our school. Of course our uniform is cool and all, and the girls are pretty,” Daichi winked at Shimizu over his shoulder who just looked unimpressed, “but he had seen Asahi play in middle school and had wanted to be on the same team ever since. Tanaka just came along with it.”

“Wow,” Yachi said, her eyes lighting up. “That’s really great.”

“Yeah,” Daichi said gently. Hinata couldn’t see his face but he thought there would probably linger a small smile there. “It really is.” He also sounded a little wistful.

Hinata wondered…

Yachi cleared her throat. “Ennoshita-san just messaged that they found Kunimi-san from Aobajousai here.”

Kageyama whipped his head around. “Kunimi is here?” he asked in disbelief.

Yachi bit her lip. “Apparently,” she said. “And so is Kindaichi-san but… they were separated?”

“If they’re here, then Oikawa and Iwaizumi-san have to be here too somewhere,” Kageyama deadpanned. Hinata blinked at the missing suffix on Oikawa’s name.

“Mmm,” Yachi nodded absently. Her eyes were glued on the phone in her hand, repeating information to them as she got it and tapping messages back to the senders.

They were in luck. Nothing was found on the third floor. It was even surprisingly intact. No chairs had been thrown, and only a couple of screens had fallen down. Truth to be told, Hinata wasn’t so sure if that was a good thing. He was glad that it wasn’t a repeat of the previous floors but…

He was afraid that it would get even worse the coming floors.

And it did. On the fourth floor they found survivors, still being tortured.

Everything blanked in Hinata’s mind. He could hear the panting, the screaming. None of them could see it but the voices were loud.

Next corridor.
Hinata felt rather than heard the blood rush in his ears; his hearing was reserved for other, terrible things. His breath hitched. He looked for their captain for insight but Daichi seemed as pale and scared as anyone else.

He could almost see the thoughts running in Daichi’s head, for they were the same that ran through Hinata’s.

(I want to help.)

(Can I help?)

(Would I endanger everyone if I did?)

A black shadow ran past Hinata and to the other side of the corridor. Too late to stop him, he realized it was Kageyama. The tortured screams ended but other angry yells filled the space instead. Hinata heard Yachi swear when his own body automatically twisted around to run after his… his.

His volleyball.

Hinata roared and joined the fray just a few seconds behind Kageyama. Kageyama had already knocked one down, using the surprise for his advantage, although Hinata didn’t know if the man was out cold or what; he was just lying there. Kageyama was also following the movement patterns taught to them gracefully as far as Hinata could see before he engaged his own man in black. There weren’t many, only four of them still standing, but the two of them were clearly outnumbered. Kageyama seemed to know that too but there was a grim determination in his eyes while he danced with his opponent.

Hinata barely noticed when a person with long dark hair jumped on another man trying to take Hinata out. Shimizu, his mind belatedly told him, but he had no time to wonder the fluid moves she executed. Hinata thought he saw Daichi too somewhere when he saw a glint of silver from the corner of his eye.

He didn’t have a time to react when two gun shots were heard and a woman in black fell to the ground, another gun slipping from her grip, as blood spurted from the wounds on her arm and leg.

In the ensuing moment of shock Kageyama took down the man he was battling with and Hinata, who had been about to be grabbed by the man he was fighting, crouched down low and swiped the legs from under the man. He saw Daichi struggling but, surprisingly, Shimizu was there to help him. Hinata couldn’t help but watch in awe how smoothly she moved. It was like he didn’t know their manager at all.

Something clicked behind them.

“I see we have rug rats running amok here. I wonder what the bosses would say,” a voice called and Hinata swirled around to see a woman – no, a girl around their age? – pressing a gun against Yachi’s temple. Yachi’s own gun was lying several feet back.

“Let her go,” Kageyama said darkly but the girl just laughed. Hinata saw Shimizu pause before she punched the guy in front of her in the gut and Daichi finished him off by knocking the man out. She turned her disbelieving gaze at the newcomer.

“Yukie?” she whispered. The girl gave her a nasty grin.

“Hi, Kiyoko, fancy seeing you here.”
“Aren’t you-,” Daichi cut himself off, his mouth drawing a tight line on his face. Hinata frowned. The girl looked slightly familiar but he couldn’t place her.

“The manager of Fukurodani? Correct,” the girl smiled. Hinata’s mouth fell open just a tad. She was Bokuto’s manager! “Nice to meet you again and all, but you’re quite a bit out of your way here. Shouldn’t you be somewhere else right now?”

“Should we?” Shimizu asked, regaining her calm quickly. Hinata glanced at her quickly and couldn’t help but admire how her face was turned to stone. He could see no conflicting emotions there. She absently wiped her cheek, smearing the drops of blood there over it. The girl, Yukie, shrugged slightly but the gun in her hand didn’t move an inch.

“I don’t know, maybe. But I’m not here to monologue. Everyone who does always loses in the end.” She pressed the mouth of the gun harder against Yachi’s head. “Now, step away from the bodies. All of you.”

Slowly, Hinata moved away from where he stood, Kageyama, Shimizu and Daichi following him. The people they had run to save were lying on the ground, pretending to be dead or knocked out. Hinata could see their eyes flicker even though their chests moved minimally. From Yukie’s point, she wouldn’t be able to see if they were her men or not; alive or not.

Probably. At least Hinata hoped she didn’t. Otherwise their little bout would’ve been useless.

Yukie watched them critically before she snorted.

“Well, it seems you don’t have the game changer with you. What a pity,” she drawled, apparently couldn’t resist the comment.

Hinata saw Yachi stiffen slightly before relaxing immediately afterwards. Her eyes were wary and her expression was alert. Next to him, he felt the others also react. The air was charged. Almost absently he also realized he had clenched his fists and was gripping his pants tightly.

“You know who the target is?” Daichi asked softly, a clear contrast to how his body was wired. Hinata saw Yukie focus on Daichi. He tried to look around discretely but, before he could do anything, Yukie’s gaze flickered away and, suddenly, her gun was pointing away from Yachi and-

Bam.

Hinata flinched at the noise and paled when he saw blood spurt from the body of one of the men. Yachi gasped. “Minato…” she whispered almost reluctantly while the chokehold she was in tightened.

“Sneaky,” Yukie said when she lowered her arm. “I didn’t realize one of them was still alive. No matter.” Her eyes were cold. Hinata hadn’t realized how cold they truly were before he had seen the remorselessness in them when she had just killed someone in cold blood. “It’s a pity I cannot be the one to bring the game changer to be executed for his crimes but I can deal. At least I can see my mother soon and witness the process together.”

Hinata paled. What did she-

Executed?

Next to him, Kageyama let out a soft sound.

“You’re planning to kill us?” Kiyoko asked in a low, dry voice. Yukie glanced at her
“Not you specifically. No reason to. Well, maybe little miss here but she’s the enemy by blood,” Yukie hissed, her eyes flashing with hate. Then her mouth twitched and a smile spread on her face. Hinata shivered as he watched her. “But I do have to thank you, Kiyoko.

“After all, you gave up the target for us.”

The only sound Shimizu was able to let out was a strangled, “What? I didn’t-”

The softness of the smile of Yukie’s face belied the nastiness of her words. “You didn’t have to, my friend. The subconscious often does it for us. I suspect that’s why the Sword isn’t with you. A pity. I wanted revenge on what he did to my mother.”

Yukie raised her gun again against Yachi who was stiffly held in her grip. “Now, I’m going to back away slowly, taking her with me. If you come after me, it’s an immediate game over.”

Hinata watched helplessly as Yukie started dragging Yachi with her and they disappeared behind the corner. He itched to run after her but he was grabbed by Shimizu. Kageyama seemed to share his thoughts but he was similarly held by Daichi.

“We’re going after them but, for the love of-, just not immedia-“ Daichi was cut off by a bang and a body falling down on the floor close by.

The same direction Yachi was taken to.

Wrenching himself from Shimizu’s grip, Hinata dashed towards the sound. Please let her be alright…

He almost collided into the figure that rounded around the corner, dragging a glaring and tied up Yukie with him. Another figure walked inside the office space, supporting Yachi gently as he moved.

“It seemed like you needed some help,” Iwaizumi said seriously, dropping down Yukie and quickly cuffing her to a radiator nearby. Her gaze on him was pure venom.

“You-, what-,” Hinata gaped. Where had they just come from?!

“Behind the corner,” Oikawa answered dryly, and Hinata realized he must’ve spoken out loud. Oikawa let Yachi go when she nudged him and she was immediately swept into an embrace by Shimizu. “When it didn’t sound like she was going to kill Yachi-chan, we hid and surprised her. It was easier than I thought but, on the other hand, she was alone. Stupid hubris.”

Yukie spat at him but Oikawa just smiled winningly at her.

“Are you alright?” Iwaizumi asked after he had made sure that Yukie was well-secured and wouldn’t be able to cause any more trouble.

“Yeah…” Hinata sighed. Now that the adrenaline had slowly trickled to a stop his legs almost felt like jelly. It was like the Shiratorizawa match all over again. Yachi disentangled herself from Shimizu and she stepped forward to look sorrowfully at the man Yukie had shot.

Kageyama looked conflicted before coming to stand next to her in an offer of support. Yachi leaned against him.

“Did you know him?” Daichi asked softly. Hinata saw Yachi’s head move in a nod.
“Minato was… a friend,” she whispered. Shimizu looked affected by that, a dark look clouding her eyes, and she turned to look at the surviving members of the Dark Moon, patching them up as well as she could like they had a few floors previous.

“He got his just rewards,” Yukie hissed. Hinata whipped his head around and stared at her with his narrowed eyes.

“Oh? Care to elaborate?” Oikawa asked, smiling pleasantly at her. She glared but refused to say another word.

“Why are you here?” Kageyama asked. He didn’t move from where Yachi had burrowed her head on his chest.

“We got a call from your teammate, and when we heard our parents weren’t there to give you guys backup, we decided to come instead. We contacted, well, two players that knew about all this and they hacked into the database and got us the floorplans,” Iwaizumi explained, eyes flickering on Yukie, deciding not to name those people. Oikawa, with his back on the girl, drew a picture of a cat in the air.

Kenma and Kuroo, Hinata realized, they were looking after them too.

“Why?” Kageyama repeated, eyes not leaving Oikawa’s. Oikawa pouted.

“Wasn’t that reason enough?”

Kageyama stared hard at Oikawa who didn’t even flinch this time. He finally tore his eyes away when Yachi nudged him, looking down at her. She gave him a small smile, nodding. Hinata noted how her eyes were red-rimmed and Kageyama’s shirt slightly damp.

Kageyama raised his eyes again to meet Oikawa’s who looked like he was waiting for the final nail to hit his coffin. Kageyama just sighed, and then nodded.

To Hinata’s surprise, Oikawa grinned brightly and shared a surprisingly joyful look with Iwaizumi who nodded in satisfaction.

“Does that mean you’ll teach me how to serve now?”

Oikawa actually stumbled, gaping at Kageyama who, as Hinata noticed, wore a small grin on his face. It looked slightly vindictive. Iwaizumi who stood close to him just snorted.

“You little shit,” Oikawa blurted out before actually laughing. “No way in hell!” There was something light in his denial, and Kageyama didn’t seem to be put off by the reply either. It was like something old was forged into something new, something better.

“Isn’t that heart-warming?” Yukie said condescendingly. “It’s as if friendship triumphs all. Maybe
friendship is actually magic.”

Daichi kneeled down close to her. His expression was serious. “Who are you after here? Who are in danger?”

Yukie grinned nastily. “It doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve kept you here long enough that it doesn’t matter what you’ll do. They’re dead anyway.”

With a gasp Yachi scrambled to find something in her pockets and Hinata watched as she fished out her phone. Her eyes stared at the screen there, fingers tapping to open and close the messages found there.

“Nishinoya-san and Kunimi-san disappeared. Asahi-san and the others can’t find them,” she said in a rush.

“What?!” Daichi barked, moving quickly next to her. Hinata felt his stomach drop.


“Yes, and… wait, they found Kindaichi-san. He was on the seventh floor in a bathroom, all tied up. He said…” she drew a quick breath. “He said Kunimi-san did that to him. Knocked him out, and left him there.”

“What?!” This time, it was Oikawa who exclaimed in shock.

“He, I don’t get what Ennoshita-san is trying to say, but apparently, Kunimi-san had contradicted himself somehow and when Kindaichi-san had pointed it out, he had flipped and taken him out.”

“Tooru,” Iwaizumi said. His tone was so urgent that Hinata turned to look at him. He looked sick under his skin.

“What, Iwa-chan?” Oikawa asked. His voice was tinted with worry.

“How many times have we seen Kunimi around when we’ve been speaking, just the two of us? And I don’t mean just at Aobajousai; I mean since Kitagawa Daiichi.”

Oikawa paled.

“Oh no,” he said. “Has he been spying on us? Have we been tipping him off all these years?” Iwaizumi’s expression darkened.

“It makes sense. We’ve been careful. Even when Kunimi and Kindaichi confronted us we said nothing, derailed them enough for them – or at least Kindaichi – to believe we were talking about the nationals,” Iwaizumi said but then frowned. “The timing though… it was too perfect. He and Kindaichi have been following us for all year…”

“…Especially when we came to play and watch Karasuno, or were talking about our parents,” Oikawa finished. He hit his fist on the wall. “Shit.”

Hinata, while listening to the conversation, was more interested in the way Kageyama had turned a couple of shades paler and looked sick.

“It was Kunimi who named me the King of the Court in middle school,” he whispered. “Kindaichi was the loudest in his complaints but it was Kunimi who turned all my attempts at communication against me. I- I didn’t try to be insulting but when no one listened to anything I said…”
“He must have realized that even Aobajousai had limited spots for Kitagawa Daiichi graduates,” Iwaizumi said. His frown deepened. “He had to have known he wouldn’t have made it if he spent so much time and effort in slandering and destroying others’ chances at getting in. It wasn’t like Kunimi. He didn’t like to show effort in anything, much less was interested in anything like that.”

Oikawa cursed. “All that for spying on us about our fathers. Really?”

“You can’t deny it wasn’t effective,” Daichi said quietly.

“That’s not all,” Yachi said softly. Her voice wavered. “I can’t get contact to Kei or the rest. Sugawara-san’s last message was over twenty minutes ago. I even tried calling but it went straight to voicemail.”

All of their heads flipped on Yukie when she started to laugh.

“You still haven’t gotten it? Kiyoko, darling, who did you point as your game changers at the All-Japan camp?”

Kiyoko looked sick.

Yukie grinned madly.

“That’s right. Your precious Sugawara and Yamaguchi are going to die today, and then the game will be over.”

The only voice that echoed around the room was the mocking laugh of hers as they all started running together towards the last known location of their third team.

The floor fourteen.

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Yamaguchi looked around nervously. The plan had been to go in, find survivors and Akiteru, don’t get noticed, run away. What did they do? Blast through the floors and fight their ways through. At first it was sneaky fighting, like luring enemies away from bigger groups and then finishing them off but later Tanaka, and also Tsukki, had grown more aggressive and just taken them down. Suga and Yamaguchi both had difficulties keeping up with them, really.

Their group had grown bigger too. They had saved some clan members of Tsukki’s, even found some doing better than ever.

Yet, there was no sign of Akiteru.

“I’m so tired,” Suga groaned quietly next to him. Yamaguchi nodded. He was as well. They just weren’t built or trained the same way Tsukki and Tanaka had. Their stamina and strength was insane compared to Yamaguchi’s and even some of the others’.

“Take it easy. You’re just teenagers,” a woman said next to them, giving them a reassuring look. Her eyes were a beautiful green and which had drawn Yamaguchi’s attention the first time he had seen her.

“So are they!” he pointed out but the woman, Miyako, just laughed softly.

“That’s Tsukishima-sama for you. The main house members are always trained since birth.”

“Main house?” Suga asked, eyes widening. “Tsukishima belongs to the Dark Moon’s main house?”
Miyako looked surprised. “You didn’t know?”

“No!” Yamaguchi said. He paused. “Does that mean that Akiteru’s the heir of their clan then?”

Miyako pursed her lips. “If they haven’t spoken about their lineage, then I suppose I shouldn’t be saying anything either.”

“Come on, no one’s telling us anything!” Yamaguchi pleaded. “Please? Pretty please?”

“Fine,” Miyako sighed, looking around from where she was guarding the two teenagers. It had been made clear that half of the found clan members would continue the assault with Tsukishima and Tanaka, while the other half, while also helping out, would be also watching out for the weaker pair of the Karasuno group much to their irritation and reluctant gratitude. All in all, their group was now twelve people strong. “Tsukishima Akiteru-sama was the heir when the Dark Moon was founded.”

Yamaguchi frowned. ‘Was’? Does that mean he no longer is? What? Had something happened to Akiteru? But he had been healthy as a horse as long as he had known him.

Wait a second. Does that mean…?

Tsukki…?

“Come on, we’re moving,” Miyako said, pushing them forward. Yamaguchi noted that Suga quickly typed in that they would be entering the second last floor there was. Akiteru had to be somewhere around there then, or the next one. Yamaguchi gulped.

That also meant that most, or at least the strongest, of the Twilight faction had to be there too.

He gripped tighter on the metal pipe he had taken from a destroyed bathroom, and by destroyed, he really meant destroyed. It had been as if a miniature explosion had happened there. The toilets were broken, and there had been water everywhere, spraying from the broken pipes and sinks. Some of the water had been the colour of rust.

Yamaguchi didn’t want to imagine where the colour had come from.

“Shh!” Tsukishima hushed from the front of the group, holding his hand up in a rather universal sign of ‘stay where you are’. Yamaguchi bit his lip and tried to listen to what they had to be listening.

He could hear nothing but the adrenaline pumping in his veins and blood rushing in his ears. He could, however, see how Tsukki’s back stiffened and how Tanaka’s expression sharpened. Yamaguchi exchanged a grim look with Suga.

They had found Akiteru.

Tsukishima held his arm up, making a few signals Yamaguchi didn’t understand and then counting until five. Five people to take down.

Yamaguchi drew a breath before sighing in relief. They had an upper hand.

They attacked, and it was over immediately.

Yamaguchi had managed to just see Akiteru’s eyes widen in surprise and then in terror before he was hit on the back of his head and he blacked out.

Chapter End Notes
I actually wanted to end this conflict in this chapter but, seeing as how long Hinata's
POV took, I decided to cut the chapter in half and deal with the rest later. Also, I wanted
to give you guys something since I don't know how long it would've taken me
otherwise to update.

By the way, how do you like the character development? Do you think the characters
are in character? By this I mean that their changes and reactions make sense from what
you've seen/know of them and their circumstances both canon and not. E.g. I see Daichi
as the kind of person who sees his people first, the others second; an ideal leader who,
when put in a spot, doesn't hesitate to make tough decisions. Shimizu is the kind of girl
who is fed up with being sidelined but cares about others more than her ego, hence her
willingness to let others mostly take the glory while she tends to the wounded. Etc. I
could go on and on about how I think they've changed during this story but, well.

Who is the target? Dun dun dun...
Chapter Notes

Three weeks of deadlines. Yay. Good news, I don't think I'm going to ever take as long to update again. I've only got one big deadline in two weeks (which I'm half-way through) and then just a smaller one later.

Enough of that! Enjoy! ...even with all my mistakes.

Suga groaned softly. He ached. What had just happened…? They were… they had found Akiteru. Tsukishima and Tanaka had run in to save him. Yamaguchi and he were going to follow…

His eyes flew open.

A trap within a trap. Trapception? Or a trap that looked like a trap for someone but was a trap for someone else.

He stifled another groan when the light hit his eyes.

Someone had to have hit him on the head. He hurt, and his thoughts were going off-tangents. Suga tried to sneak a look around the room with his eyes narrowed to slits. Their escorts were tied up somewhere behind them, he noticed, and Yamaguchi was lying on the ground next to him, probably knocked out. Suga hoped that at least. He couldn’t see his chest move from his angle.

“Well, what do we have here? The two Tsukishima brothers in a neat package,” a voice said, crowed even, and Suga forced himself not to freeze. He slowly craned his neck to look into the direction of the voice. A man stood there, with his weirdly spiky greying hair and hands behind his back. In front of him were both Tsukishima and Akiteru on their knees, hands behind their backs and murderous expressions on their faces.

Suga couldn’t see Tanaka anywhere.

“Almost as if you thought to gift yourselves to us!”

“Well, we’re thoughtful people. Love to think of others. Maybe you should try it too sometimes!”

Suga almost visibly winced as Tsukishima was backhanded. That, however, did not remove the snide and superior look from his face.

“I’d have thought you to be smarter too. Well, some people just can’t have it all.”

He was not, weird enough, slapped again. Instead, the man before them huffed in amusement. Suga stared at his form. There was something familiar about the man. He was certain he had heard his voice before but… where?

“I think that goes for you rather than us.” Suga could almost feel the condescending look dragging all over the brothers and their bound figures. The look in Tsukishima’s eyes turned almost green with venom.
“In addition to that,” the man continued, “we have been told to watch out for a particular player you’ve been protecting. It only made sense that he follows you, Shield, and now they’re here too. Nicely packaged as well.”

Tsukishima narrowed his eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Akiteru asked slowly. He had been surprisingly quiet. There was something that might’ve been a flash of regret in his eyes when Suga looked at him but he couldn’t be sure from afar.

“Why, the game changer, of course!”

The brothers exchanged a look Suga couldn’t decipher.

“What are you talking about?” Tsukishima repeated his brother’s question. The man sighed, disappointed.

“You don’t need to play dumb. It’s over, you know? We’ve got Yuu now, and here we have you and the target. Shouldn’t you want to make your end a little easier?”

Yuu.

Nishinoya.

Suga gaped. Of course. It was the man from the shooting, the one who had tried to entice Noya to leave with them. Wait, what had the man…?

They’d taken Noya?!

“Oh, you’re awake.”

Suga blinked, and paled. Only then he realized he had spoken out loud. The man was now looking at him almost kindly. He froze almost like a deer caught in the headlights. The man looked distinctly… like Noya. The shape of their eyes, the curve of his mouth, the hair even if it was in grey shades, they were all far too similar to their libero’s.

“You’re Noya’s uncle, aren’t you?” he blurted out, and the man looked taken aback for a second before his mouth (Noya’s mouth!) curved into a familiar half-grin.

“That’s right. Although I have to ask, how come you didn’t say father? That’s the first guess I’d have thought people to go for.”

Suga got the feeling that he didn’t have the choice of staying quiet. There was just something in the man’s voice that screamed danger.

“At the gym, you said his adoption was a mistake and you’d told someone that. You wouldn’t have said that if you were his father,” Suga said. The man looked surprised again, then delighted.

“My, what a memory you have. I didn’t even remember that myself!”

Suga felt someone grab him and raise him up. The person, whoever he was, was standing there, keeping Suga’s hands behind his back. He had wondered why he or Yamaguchi weren’t tied up like the rest of them but this was perhaps even more efficient. It had given him hope in the beginning but now… He could hardly move.

“Wake the other one up too.”
Suga heard a slapping noise and a groan and a whine of protest before Yamaguchi was jostled up too. He looked really out of it, a dazed look in his eyes.

“What do you want with them?” Akiteru asked lowly.

“Why, I’m glad you asked,” the man, Noya’s uncle, said. Could Suga believe that even though he was the one who suggested it and the man confirmed it? Yet the way he moved his hands was pure Noya and his dramatics.

“A little bird told us that what your team considers a game changer is, in fact, a pair of players called in for emergencies. I think you can guess which two perfectly fit the bill, don’t you?”

Suga felt sick. He knew it couldn’t be him. He just… He would know, right? So then it had to be…

Oh shoot, oh shit.

This was bad.

“You can’t be serious,” Tsukishima deadpanned. “I have no idea who your ‘little bird’ is but your information is seriously lacking.”

The man cocked his head. “Really? Because to me it looks you someone protests too much. Besides, what kind of Shield would you be if you let your charge out of your eyes, hmm?”

Tsukishima stared at the man incredulously.

“A good one?” he said. “Why on earth would I take, how did you say it, ‘my charge’ into the middle of everything?”

“And to me, you seem just that,” Noya’s uncle said. Suga decided to just call him that in his head. It was just so much easier to differentiate the strangers when you didn’t have to call them black man one, two, hundred and twenty-three. Seriously, wear something other than black for once, he thought slightly hysterically. “After all, you ran in to save your brother without checking first.”

“How do you know it wasn’t the plan?” Tsukishima fired back. Noya’s uncle snorted.

“And get caught? A lot of good that did to you. We’ve got your target right here. You might want to admit which one of them it is and we just might let the other one live.”

They wanted to kill Yamaguchi, Suga thought, horrified. He glanced at the first-year who had managed to wake up during the conversation. He looked alert but just as pale and sick as Suga himself felt. Their eyes met; both were left with the horrifying realization how close to death they were with no rescue in sight.

“Neither,” Tsukishima stated firmly. The man sighed again.

“Well, if you’re going to be difficult…” Noya’s uncle whipped his gun from where it had been hidden under his jacket and pointed it at Yamaguchi’s head. He squeaked and trembled. Suga blanched.

Oh, oooh shit.

Shit shit shit.

This was not good at all.
“I know you follow no code but would you kill an innocent, sixteen-year-old who doesn’t even belong to the yakuza?!” Akiteru shouted, moving forward, but was yanked back by his hair. It looked painful.

“Why, shouldn’t you be familiar with it? Besides, there was no code before you fuckers made it up,” the man hissed, dangerously shaking the gun in his hand so it changed its position from Yamaguchi’s forehead to heart and back.

“Made it up?” Suga piped up. Noya’s uncle gave him an annoyed look but Suga continued despite it. His heart was pounding. “This is the first time I’ve heard that. What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly that,” the man said, his stance relaxing slightly again. Suga figured it was the safest if he could keep the man talking. He seemed to like monologuing, again a similar trait to Noya if he was left to dominate the conversation. Suga felt cold sweat trickle down his spine. What other traits of Noya’s there were that he could use to his advantage? How could he manipulate Noya? Were they even that similar since Noya had been raised differently? But some scientists claim that temperament is hereditary.

He had to figure out something. Yamaguchi’s life depended on it.

Oh gosh, he was such an awful person.

(I’m so sorry, Noya.)

“…and then those two clans decided to merge eight years ago, creating a fucking code that everyone should follow else there were ‘consequences’!” Noya’s uncle ranted, turning back to the Tsukishima brothers. “Who were you to dictate what was right and what was wrong?! No one, I tell you! No one likes you trying to nose at everyone’s business; we all wish you would just die already.”

“I think you’re mistaking of who belong in that ‘we’,” Akiteru said. His eyes were pure steel. “After all, most are more than willing to follow it. It isn’t even a hard code of conduct to understand. Don’t practice child labour, don’t turn up on another’s turf without permission, don’t involve or kill uninvolved people… Japan is a civilized county. We should be able to act like it.”

Before Suga could even really realize it, the man’s gun was suddenly pointing at Akiteru’s face and he fired. Akiteru grunted in pain as the bullet took the lower part of his right earlobe with him. Suga didn’t know so much blood could pour from a fucking earlobe. It immediately stained Akiteru’s clothes, steadily dripping down his neck and chest.

“Next one will hit closer to home,” the man whispered.

“What did they do to you then?” Suga asked again, pushing the sick feeling down. Noya’s uncle looked at him again. “I mean, they must’ve done something.”

“Oh, they did. Years ago, in fact. A decade or so.”

Noya didn’t have any photographs from before he was six.

“But… you just said eight.”

“Which is why instead of just one clan, there needs to be two eliminated,” the man said, again fixing his gun at Yamaguchi. His grin was taking a more deranged twist. Suddenly Suga could no longer find any traits that tied Noya to his uncle.

The expression on his face was pure insanity.
“We’ve got Tsukishima heirs here, neatly in a package… but we’re missing the last one. Since you’re trying to take my attention away, I think it’s this little mouse here.” The man cocked his gun.

Pure terror was etched on Yamaguchi’s face. Suga was sure the same expression was stuck on his own.

Think, Suga! What can you use against him?!

“Shouldn’t we find out if he bleeds as red as anyone else? For science, the code and the good of all?”

***

Ennoshita ran down the stairs, almost falling on his knees. He was dragging Kindaichi with him. It was quite hard when trying to do his best to keep up with Asahi and Narita. Kindaichi wasn’t dead weight exactly but he was dizzy and turning into an interesting shade of green. Ennoshita suspected a slight concussion. Kunimi must have hit him hard on the head.

“I should’ve realized,” Kindaichi moaned, almost tripping on his feet. Ennoshita grit his teeth and pulled them both back before they fell on Narita and Asahi’s backs. “He was colder than usual, almost bitter. It wasn’t like in Kitagawa Daichi; there was no bone to pick, really. However, ever since our loss he was often going off about you.”

“Are you sure it was the loss? We were shot at almost immediately afterwards,” Ennoshita commented. He had been suspicious at first about Kindaichi. It was more than plausible that they’d changed one enemy to another, not that they’d realized it until Kindaichi’s revelations about Kunimi. But there had been something sincere and heartbroken about his expression that tugged Ennoshita’s heartstrings. It was the same look a kicked puppy – or a kicked Hinata, no, Yachi – might’ve given, like the foundation of everything he had known had been taken from him.

(Mm-hm-mm! Wh-, Karasuno? Where’s Kunimi? Have you seen him? I think he’s in danger! He was talking crazy! What? I’m not sure how I ended up there. I-, alright. We were here to help but then he mentioned about someone changing the game and Oikawa-senpai’s weird boner for Kageyama – something about unnecessary protection when the target was someone else – I didn’t understand, I asked about it. He looked at me weird, asked if I remembered Oikawa-senpai and Iwaizumi-senpai’s fathers work as detectives and when I didn’t he went nuts! We were looking for clues, senpai had already left us in the dust – not that they knew we were here – and then… Something hit my head and tied me here. Who? What do you mean Kunimi’s missing? Nishinoya too? Kunimi take Nishinoya? You’re crazy! What, my gag, do I recognize it? Of course, it’s Kunimi’s…! …Wait, it’s Kunimi’s… It was probably him, oh gosh, it was Kunimi all this time. Oh gosh oh gosh oh gosh I’m going to be sick oh gosh I can’t breath!)

“I-, yeah. It might’ve been. We were all so depressed that…”

Yeah, I can imagine, Ennoshita thought. He still remembered the gloom that had taken over them when they had lost to Aobajousai months ago during the summer tournament.

“Why?” he asked brokenly. Ennoshita just shook his head and didn’t answer.

Suddenly a group of people ran in front of them and he braced himself to either an attack or quick retreat before recognizing Hinata’s bright orange hair. They were running the stairs up.

“Suga’s group is in danger!” Daichi yelled as they were passing them.

“We’re getting Noya back!” Asahi yelled back, continuing his way down.
“There’s an enemy there, cuffed to a radiator!”

“I’m not leaving Noya!” Asahi growled, actually growled, and Ennoshita shivered.

“You can leave me on this floor. I- I promise to look after him,” Kindaichi said. Ennoshita didn’t even hesitate and dropped him on the ground. He quickly checked. Fourth floor. Got it.

“There’re our members there too but they’re wounded!” Yachi said when she passed them too. Kindaichi blinked, all confused-looking, but Ennoshita was no longer paying attention and quickly gained on the distance between him and Asahi and Narita. In the end, Kindaichi was not his problem. He would feel bad about it later, even if there were apparently others on the floor too, but Noya was the one in real danger. Twilight had wanted Noya and they’d handed him to them on a silver platter.

Ennoshita wouldn’t ever forgive himself if Noya was hurt because of them.

When they finally got down a few minutes later, it was only to see a black car speeding away. The windows were tinted but Ennoshita could swear that he saw a figure leaning against it – a figure with black hair and a blond streak on it.

The image may have been his imagination but the fact that Noya had to be in the car wasn’t.

“Damn it!” Asahi screamed. Ennoshita gasped for breath and felt his eyes tear up.

“They’d lost Noya.

“What do we do now?” he asked, hating how his voice wavered. No one answered him. He looked at Asahi who was staring at the direction the car had disappeared with a dark glower. It was deep and full of wrath.

Ennoshita had never seen Asahi lose his cool like that before. Never.

“He was my responsibility…” he heard him whisper, and was suddenly struck by how Noya’s one-sided admiration must’ve been reciprocated after all. Noya did have the tendency to grow on people, and his tiny figure and sunny attitude was enough to wake most people’s motherly instincts.

“He was ours too,” Ennoshita said. Asahi shook his head.

“I was the leader. I should’ve known better than take in any familiar people that appeared. This whole building was all a trap! Why did I let my guard down!”

“You couldn’t have…”

“We knew Noya was a target!” Asahi turned to him, and wavered. “I- I should’ve been there for him…”

“Nothing good comes from blaming ourselves,” Narita said brusquely. “I got the registration plate down. Right now, we can do shit for Noya as much as I want to follow them. We’re just too late. None of us know how to handle a car; even if we tried, we would just crash. We’d die before making it even on the road. Ennoshita, text Yachi. Daichi said Suga’s in danger so we’re going to follow them. When we clear up here, we can start on Noya.”

Asahi paled but sobered up almost instantly. Ennoshita nodded, and took a deep breath. They were almost back inside the building when a few cars rounded in front of it. All three of them stiffened, quickly taking cover and then readied their stances.
What now?

An unknown, mousy-looking woman stepped out from the closest car. She was dressed in a classy red dress, looking completely out of place that Ennoshita couldn’t help but blink.

“Tetsu! Are these your strays?!” she barked, suddenly seeming a lot less like a mouse and more like a tigress.

“Y- yes, sister!” a muffled voice came from the car, quickly revealing Takeda-sensei who almost hit the curb on his way out. He beamed at them although his expression was serious. “Help has arrived!” he announced.

“Lame, Tetsu, lame. Out, people! We’re going in!” the woman snapped. “And someone throw me a gun!”

Takeda-sensei hurried over Ennoshita and the others’ side. He could admit he was speechless as he watched the woman bark orders at the men and women exiting the cars like an empress.

“She’s my sister; I was with her when Kinoshita-kun gave me a call,” he explained quickly. Only then did Ennoshita see how different Takeda-sensei looked in a fitted suit. He looked embarrassed and uncomfortable in it. “She demanded to come with and took some of her friends too. We joined forces with the others.”

Ennoshita stared at the group of mismatched people that had assembled there. Ukai was standing there, as was Saeko. Kinoshita’s brother was there too as were over a dozen people who looked admittedly lethal in their gorgeous suits and dresses.

“Who are they?” he whispered. Takeda-sensei looked even more embarrassed.

“My sister’s friends and subordinates… from the army…”

“From what?!”

“Men! We’re moving in!” Takeda-sensei’s sister yelled and took lead in her red dress and high heels.

Ennoshita had never seen anyone look as dangerous.

“To the top floor!”

***

“Well, then, maybe you should practice on the true target and not a decoy?”

Tanaka winced as everyone whipped around to stare at him. He had been tied and left there behind Tsukishima and Akiteru, and had baited his time. He had even managed to get his cuffs off. Suckers, like a pair of those would ever manage to keep him down. He slowly stood up, letting a sneer overtake his face.

“Come on, are you this stupid? I mean, really, Yamaguchi? That guy’s out of it more often than a fucking snowman.”

Tanaka felt more than saw men come up behind him, ready to take him down on a moment’s notice. He didn’t let his sneer fall off; lives literally depended on it.

“The other one’s no better. A true mom character, trying to keep us all together, you can do it team, as if it would have even worked. We’ve been falling apart even before Tsukishima even joined the
“And who are you supposed to be?”

“That bad of a background job too? Shit, this mess is worse than I thought.” The man’s eyes narrowed.

“Answer me.”

“My name is Tanaka Ryuunosuke, from the clan Tanaka,” he announced, looking around in disdain. The Dark Moon agents were tied up behind Suga and Yamaguchi, five alive, three dead. Since he was certain he had gained most of their attention, Tsukishima and his brother should be able to figure out how to free their selves too. If they didn’t, well, Tanaka was dead. He literally had no back up otherwise.

He had to get closer to the loony.

(“Remember this if it ever comes to the point where you’re against someone with a gun”, Tsukishima looked at them seriously before continuing, “It’s only good when it can be aimed.”)

“I have never heard of you,” Noya’s uncle said. Tanaka shrugged.

“Neither have I of clan Nishinoya.”

“You wouldn’t. There is no such clan.”

Tanaka tilted his head, emulating the man still too many feet in front of him. “Really?”

The man looked smug having one-upped Tanaka. He wished he could just knock the guy down a peg or two, just because.

“Does Eikou mean anything to you?”

Tanaka pretended to think about it for a moment. He tried to move forward but his shadows stepped far too close. He forced himself to relax and aborted the movement, trying to show he was just trying to get his blood run on his legs.

“Glory? No. Sorry, were you important somehow? Also, what kind of bullshit name is that? Eikou Yuu? Thank fuck you let him be adopted. Dude would’ve died of blue balls faster than through hypothermia.”

(Sorry, Noya.)

“So?” he continued when no one did anything. He needed some sort of reaction to be able to keep this thing up! “Are you going to fuss about a fake or go to find the real target? Where did you even find that crappy information?”

The man no longer looked amused at his audacity.

“Your manager, actually.”

That almost gave Tanaka a pause. It would have if he hadn’t been in the middle of another sweep
across the room. What had they done to Kiyoko?!

“Ah, the pretty one?” he drawled, spitting as much disrespect into his words he could squeeze, suddenly feeling disgusted at both the situation and himself. “Well, that’s a lovely piece of art I would love to tap.”

“That could be arranged.” Noya’s uncle said. That did give Tanaka a pause. He slowly turned back to the man.

What the hell did he mean by that?! Did they have Kiyoko-san somewhere? Were they daring to touch her perfection no one ever should with their dirty hands?!

Oh, Tanaka was so furious he could barely contain it.

First Noya, and then Kiyoko.

They were really pissing him off.

“Oh?” he just said. He couldn’t muster out anything else. If he had, he probably would’ve outing himself. In the midst of his anger, he felt the little pieces of dread he had tried to lock out slowly come forward.

Please say they were actually buying this and not just humouring him.

The man again raised his gun at Yamaguchi.

“Tsukishima Kei’s childhood acquaintance of about eight years, close acquaintance for seven of those; always together, always in the same class despite Tsukishima Kei’s far more superior test results; enticed Yamaguchi Tadashi to join the volleyball team so they would spend every moment together; been protecting him since the beginning,” Noya’s uncle listed. Tanaka simply waited and tried to keep his incredulousness under control.

There was this thing called friendship, you idiot. It works wonders and miracles even on a sourpuss like Tsukishima.

He saw a slight movement behind the man where two of the Twilight men stood. Tanaka kept himself immobile but for his eyes which focused on the phone that had appeared next to the corner of the corridor. He recognized it.

Only Kageyama had a fancy ass phone like that. Stupid rich kid.

Gosh, he loved him.

Back up, finally.

He focused back on the man, trying to stay calm. Alright, they didn’t know the odds. He had to get a message across to them somehow. Who were in Kageyama’s group again? Oh yeah, Hinata, Daichi, Kiyoko and Yachi.

Kiyoko.

She was safe. She had to be if that was Kageyama’s phone, otherwise they would be running to save her.

Tanaka hadn’t felt this relieved in a while. Now he just had to kick these people’s asses and get Noya back and he was golden.
“…and then-“

“Do you even hear yourself?” Tanaka interrupted. The man’s gun twitched but Tanaka tried not to let it get to him. “That’s a whole lot of circumstantial evidence you have there and nothing else. Haven’t you still gotten that Yamaguchi’s just a plain stupid that doesn’t know when he’s supposed to quit?”

He thought he saw Yamaguchi wince from the corner of his eye. He felt bad but Yamaguchi should know it was all lies that came out of his mouth, right? The first year was a better man than Tanaka could ever hope to be, even if his self-confidence was crap at times. Damn sissy, take one for the team.

“I’m getting quite tired of you,” Noya’s uncle sneered.

“And I of you,” Tanaka said disdainfully. “I thought we might be able to ally ourselves but I guess not then. Don’t you dare touch my hide with your four men behind me or shoot me with the five in front. Even those seven in hiding better keep their hands off my person or the clan will avenge me.”

“The clan nobody has ever heard of?” the man jeered.

“Oh, they have even if you haven’t. Haven’t you heard of our catch phrase?” Tanaka asked, a dark look entering his eyes. Noya’s uncle froze like he was seeing a threat the first time. The gun that had pointed at Yamaguchi was staring straight into Tanaka’s chest.

He didn’t give a flying fuck.

Tanaka stared head on the abyss and the abyss stared back.

“Fucking caw caw, motherfuckers!”

And then he was forced to fall backwards and all hell broke loose.

***

Narita panted as they sprinted up the stairs. He wasn’t about to be left behind but, darn, how can a lady in her thirties, dressed in a dress and heels, run faster than a teenager half her age with sneakers?! Takeda-sensei’s family was something else, even if the man was not. Well, physically anyway. Mentally, he was a total badass, though. Narita could still remember how Takeda-sensei ran forward first when he thought they were going to get killed, even if he would have just been used as a shield for them all.

“Keep running,” Asahi panted next to him. He looked just as winded as Narita felt but the determination was something they shared. Narita had noticed how Asahi had almost been, well… He hadn’t been in a great state of mind. During these two years with Noya, he had noticed how much he looked up to Asahi. Noya followed him around, asked questions, and could recite Asahi’s schedule from memory. It wasn’t stalking per se, just… Noya was thorough. There was some sort of compulsion there to know; it was the same how he was with other libero players although with Asahi, it was more personal.

And Asahi, the giant marshmallow he was, answered the call for his attention. While Narita couldn’t describe their relationship as symbiotic – that was more up for Nishinoya and Tanaka’s alley – there was a connection there that had been born when Noya didn’t leave Asahi alone. Even when Asahi had temporarily left the team, Noya had been there. Truthfully, Narita did actually think that if Noya had followed Asahi and quit volleyball, Asahi wouldn’t have come back even when the first years helped to entice him back.
To lose someone so important to him – even if Asahi seemed to have realized how much only now that Noya had vanished – had hit home hard.

“I wish we could’ve taken the elevator,” Ennoshita panted somewhere behind them. Narita and Asahi groaned in agreement. Unfortunately that would’ve just tipped people off, if the elevators even worked right now.

Narita heard a click as a safety was removed from a gun, other clicks answering it.

They had hit the floor thirteen and could hear a fight go on the floor above.

“We’re busting the place, guys!” Katsuko, as Takeda-sensei had called his sister, yelled. “On three! Three!”

Just like that she sprinted and they all followed.

The scene Narita ran into was strange and horrifying to say the least. He had no idea which side was winning due to all that black but it looked like his teammates were being driven to a corner. He could hear shots but he couldn’t see if they were really hitting anyone. Yachi was lying on the ground, clutching at her shoulder. Yamaguchi was there too with his face too pale for him to be completely alright. Suga and people he didn’t recognize stood in front of them, guarding them. Further than that, it was pure chaos. Narita could see yakuza fighting against yakuza with an odd Karasuno fit into. Shimizu was there, fighting alongside Tanaka and Daichi in a weird combo while Hinata and Kageyama were battling back to back with Tsukishima and his brother. There were even flashes of others… Were those Oikawa and Iwaizumi?! Yet, Narita could hardly remove his eyes from Shimizu; gosh, he hadn’t known how deadly she was under all that quiet, reserved beauty. She had apparently taken like a duck to the water on the fighting lessons.

Geez, all the women he knew were far more dangerous than men.

“Shoot to disarm all who wear black,” Katsuko commanded and opened fire.

It was over soon.

It was over so soon that it was truly anticlimactic.

Later it would be revealed that Katsuko and some of her friends had been part of the sharpshooters when she had been on a campaign. Still, all everyone could do now was to just stare how efficiently they took down all with the surprise on their side.

All those wearing black were on the ground, clutching at their shoulders, legs or arms, unable to fight anymore. No one had been spared. One particular man had still tried but was now bleeding on both his hands, unable to grip on anything without extreme pain. Narita winced. He hurt just looking at him. The only people still standing were the teenagers and Akiteru, although he had been singed too. They were all panting raggedly and looked more exhausted than anything else.

Now that the flurry of movements had stopped, Narita could see the red staining his friends’ features. Hinata had a cut over his eye that looked too much like he had been about to actually lose his eye. He was also limping slightly. Kageyama was also sporting cuts on his clothes but looked miraculously intact compared to others. Tsukishima looked beat up, black eyes and swelling on his cheek, but his brother even more so. That was definitely a broken nose he was sporting. Daichi, who was hurrying towards Suga, proceeded to check him all over with Suga just falling into his arms. Neither looked too bad off on a quick glance. Shimizu was holding Tanaka up as if the last of his energy had finally left him. She also looked relatively fine while Tanaka was holding his arm. He
had been grazed and was bleeding there.

Katsuko marched forward and her subordinates kept their guns out. Some were running after stragglers that Narita hadn’t even noticed, so focused he had been on his teammates.

“Are they all enemies or do we have people here we should not shoot?” she demanded. Akiteru stepped up.

“I’ll point them for you,” he said, and paused. “Thank you for the rescue.”

“Thank me later, pretty boy. Keep up!” she barked. Akiteru quickly started pointing at the black-clad people who, probably, belonged to their clan. It was only a few and Narita couldn’t help but wonder how they had remained as intact as they had. They had been clearly outnumbered.

“They were playing with us,” Yamaguchi whispered beside him. Narita blinked. Had he spoken aloud? Yamaguchi snorted. “No, but I could read your face.” He turned his bland gaze at the scene before them. Narita followed his eyes. They rested on the man who had been shot on his hands.

“That’s Noya’s uncle.”

Narita gaped.

“What?!”

Yamaguchi nodded. He looked sick. “Yeah. He almost killed us. If Suga and Tanaka hadn’t stalled him… He would’ve shot me,” he whispered. “He wanted to shoot me.”

Narita blinked and then paled. Yuki’s words flashed through his mind.

Was Yamaguchi…?

“What’s the damage?” Katsuko demanded loudly, and Narita jumped, thoughts interrupted. “All of you! Stand in a row so we can inspect you!”

Takeda-sensei’s sister was scary. He scurried to obey immediately, taking Yamaguchi with him.

In the end, most of Karasuno were fine. It was quite surprising. Clearly the “avoid, run, avoid” tactics had mostly worked despite the complete mess they had walked into. Bruises and cuts were expected but there were a few more serious wounds too, like Yachi’s shoulder where she had been stabbed.

Or Suga’s leg which was broken.

Narita gaped when he heard the verdict. He had only seen him quickly but he had thought he was fine. Pale, yes, and exhausted but fine.

“Well, my mother should be happy now,” Suga laughed quietly. “I have to retire now from the club.”

The look on his face was painful.

Narita watched as Daichi and Shimizu closed Suga in a huge embrace, hiding him from the room.

He turned away when he heard the first sob.

He watched as Katsuko secured the Twilight agents, unfazed. He wondered what she had to have seen in her army career to make her like that. Narita still felt sick and numb when he saw blood and
bodies.

“Kei, you shouldn’t have come to my rescue!” Akiteru shouted. Narita looked around to see the
Tsukishima brothers glower at each other intensely, uncaring of whether anyone could hear them or
not.

“What else was I supposed to do? Leave you for dead?!”

“Yes!” Narita blinked. Damn, they both had issues. “I screwed up! You were supposed to keep the
target safe and you, what, brought him here with you? And don’t you think I’ve forgotten you either,
Hitoka!” Akiteru pointed an accusing finger at the girl who flushed but stubbornly raised her chin.
Her wound was patched for the moment but it was still heavily bleeding. Narita could see the cloth
slowly turn red, little by little.

“You’re my brother!” Tsukishima finally raised his voice enough to actually scream. It was the first
time Narita had heard him lose his control over his emotions like that. Before he had only gone quiet
or bitten out even more venomous than usual comments but this…

This was a breakdown.

“What do you think I’m supposed to do if you’re dead?!” Tsukishima continued, raising his arms and
actually waving them as he yelled. Yachi came to stand next to him, looking at her cousin just as
darkly as Tsukishima did. Akiteru, on his side, had frozen. “We’re in this together! Just because you
gave up your position as the heir does not mean you’re expendable! So what if you weren’t the right
fit to lead the Dark Moon? You’re doing a perfectly fine job as the Sword!”

“Kei…”

“Akiteru, no,” Yachi interrupted. Akiteru fell silent again. “You’re the Sword to Kei’s Shield. All
this happened because you didn’t confide in him. Well, maybe. We might’ve walked to a trap either
way.

“But Kei’s right. You are not expendable. We cannot afford to lose you too. Think… Think about
the new heir,” she said, stepping forward and placing a hand on Akiteru’s arm. “He has Kei to
protect him but he needs you too. We’re all a team, you know?”

Narita blinked. He gaped.

The target was, what?

What?

“Hitoka…”

Yachi sighed, pulling Akiteru along as she walked backwards. She pushed the two brothers together.
“You morons.”

“Idiot brother,” Tsukishima mumbled from where his face was smashed against Akiteru’s shoulder.
Akiteru looked like he was about to tear up but he only hugged Tsukishima close to him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Never again. You do anything behind my back again and I’ll…”

“I promise.”
“You even did it behind the heir’s back!” Tsukishima straightened again and glared at his brother.
“The heir’s! You may have control over most of our men, courtesy of the leaders, but it doesn’t mean
you have the right to go ahead without his permission. You were assigned to him and you just
walked over him.”


“It’s not me who you should apologise to. Well, actually, you should. You’re going to grovel for so
long, brother. But we lost a tenth of our forces here today; it’s going to look like you don’t trust
him.”

“But that’s why I gave up the position in the first place! He’s going to be so much better than I was,”
Akiteru protested, and then continued so quietly that Narita had to strain his hearing to make out the
rest, “That’s why I didn’t want him to have this burden on him.” Tsukishima frowned.

“Your intentions may’ve been good but they mean nothing in the end. How can the men trust in him
if we, his advisors and closest supporters, do shit like that? You’re no longer the heir but everything
you do still affect us all.”

“The heir is a good person, cousin, and you know it. That’s why you didn’t want him involved? Or
because you thought he wouldn’t approve of your plans?” Yachi asked. Narita had one look at
Akiteru and saw she had hit the heart of the matter. The guilt just increased. Yachi scoffed. “He may
be gentle but he was raised into this just like us. He can handle the hard decisions, and he has us. Let
him have us and trust in him. Your words mean nothing if your actions differ from them.”

“When did you two grow up so much?!” Akiteru threw his arms in the air, exasperation and
amusement battling the exhaustion on his face. “You’re years younger than me! You shouldn’t be
making me look so bad next to you!”

“Maybe because you never grew up and stayed at the elementary school level,” Tsukishima said
dryly. Akiteru gasped as if he was mortally wounded. The trio exchanged looks that Narita couldn’t
interpret. They looked serious, tired and even strangely content at the same time.

“I’m glad that you’ve now figured out where you stand but what about Nishinoya?” Asahi asked
coldly, appearing by Narita’s side. It was like his patience was finally finished. Narita caught the
sight of Suga sitting down with his leg being treated well enough for him to be transported to
wherever he could get better medical care. It was Kageyama who was doing most of the patching up,
with Shimizu helping him out. It was so weird so see the two of them there doing their best to look
after Suga while looking sad and guilty like everything was their fault, like they weren’t fast enough
or shit like that. Although, Narita had to admit he had had similar thoughts today too. If only he had
done things differently, maybe Noya would be bouncing around like Hinata was, chattering, like he
was trying to keep Suga’s mind off the things most terrible even as Daichi was looking over them,
worried.

“Right,” Akiteru nodded. He turned to Yachi. “Contact the headquarters. We need as many men as
possible to look for them. Do you have any information we could use to find them?” he turned back
to Asahi.

“They left using a black SUV,” Narita said, stepping up, and rattled out the registration plate and
details about the car that had Yachi speechless even as her hand never stopped tapping her phone.
Narita let a small smile twist his mouth. He had never been as grateful for his eyesight as he was
now. He also saw Kinoshita’s brother, Naoki, tap down on his phone, probably to send the number
description to someone too.
“Alright. We need to get our men to look into it. There has to be traffic cameras we can hack into,” Akiteru said, looking at Tsukishima who nodded. Yachi continued tapping. “We need teams of…”

“There’s no need. We know where they’re heading.”

Narita whipped his head around when he heard someone interrupt Akiteru. He gaped.

“Father!” Oikawa and Iwaizumi spoke, looking just as surprised as everyone else. Narita heard Saeko ask somewhere behind them, probably still hugging the living daylights from Tanaka like she had ever since the fighting had ended, about who the newcomers were. He didn’t hear the answer when Oikawa continued.

“You said you were busy!” he exclaimed. Oikawa’s father snorted.

“We were. We got a lead on Twilight. While you were running into a trap like good little sheep, we were following them.” Oikawa-san flashed a sneer at Akiteru who glowered darkly. Narita bristled.

It wasn’t fair for the detective to point out the failed mission – not when there were so many lost and injured during it.

*When they hadn’t been here themselves.*

“Father!” “Rin.” Oikawa and Iwaizumi-san snapped at the same time. Narita wondered if that was a common occurrence since Oikawa-san just rolled his eyes.

“They attacked the place where you held your prisoners and got them all out. It was lucky that you didn’t have much staff there. What remained of the place wasn’t pretty.”

Again with the salt on the wound. Iwaizumi-san didn’t look impressed at his partner’s act either, Narita noted.

“But you didn’t even offer to help your allies.” Narita turned to see Takeda Katsuko look darkly at Oikawa and Iwaizumi’s fathers. He wondered again what she had seen in the army to make her so grim.

At that Iwaizumi-san grimaced, and sighed. He only shrugged slightly, offering no apologies. Narita could almost hear the words left unsaid.

*(It was for the greater good.)*

*(You would have done the same to us.)*

Narita couldn’t say if that was true. He would like to say it wasn’t since he liked the Tsukishima brothers despite their flaws and annoying traits as well as Yachi who was just the cutest with her hidden claws. Yet, he couldn’t be sure. Narita was a realist most of all but this hadn’t been his reality for long.

He didn’t know the rules.

Naoki said nothing either, just sent a dark glance at the men. Narita quickly deduced that while Kinoshita’s brother apparently was working with the Special Division, on this mission, he had been moving alone, possibly even getting denied any help.

“So, do you even have their headquarters then?” Katsuko asked. Her glare was frightening.

“We do. Your description of the car will help even more.”
“No need. We have them. They’re speeding towards Tokyo right now,” Naoki said. He held up his phone. “Tetsurou-kun and Kenma-kun are tracking them for me.”

Iwaizumi-san sent a quick grin at Naoki but he only looked unimpressed. Narita watched as his smile withered. Good. He deserved that.

“We’re getting Noya back,” Asahi said, his eyes cold. A bit further away, leaning on Ennoshita, Yamaguchi, pale and shaking after what he had experienced not an hour ago, nodded determinedly. Narita saw how the same darkness burned in everyone else’s eyes too.

We’ve had enough, they said.

This is going to end, they said.

His mouth twitched before spreading into a thirsting grin, matched by others around him.

Karasuno. Their families. The Dark Moon. The Special Division. The frigging army soldiers. All those that supported them from the distance.

These were the rules he knew. These were the odds he liked.

They were getting Noya back.

Three times they had lost.

It was about time they fixed the pattern in their favour.

Chapter End Notes

The end is near. The final climax is starting.

Estimation: 3-4 chapters until epilogue.

...I'm so happy.
Part III: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The aftermath was brutal. Not violent, not really, but to see all the children he had tried to take care of so determined yet beat up… It broke Takeda’s heart. He wasn’t sure if he could ever really piece it back together like it was before everything. Some days he didn’t think it was a bad thing; he truly loved these teenagers, their enthusiasm and how driven they were. Yet, half the time he felt like it was all too much. Sometimes it was like he was only seeing the shadow of the people he once knew. There was a bitter edge to them now that wasn’t there before.

They had experienced loss, being hurt, being used.

Life wasn’t just about volleyball anymore; it hadn’t been for a long time. They had continued to practice religiously, almost as if there was a certain need to be able to play. Something that grounded them perhaps, among all this chaos? Their eyes were set on the spring tournament. Even though it was only a month away, less than that, it seemed like such a faraway goal to strive to.

You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone, Takeda wanted to yell but couldn’t. It wasn’t about proving themselves, it never was, although sometimes it seemed like they were trying to show they were worthy somehow. To whom, Takeda didn’t know. To themselves? To the team? To the volleyball world?

They had grown up far too quickly.

Takeda wished they could have been just children for a while longer.

“Tetsu, you’re being quiet. It’s annoying.”

Takeda blinked, pulled from his thoughts, and then sighed when he registered the person the voice belonged to. His sister, the tact master.

“What are you thinking about so deeply?” Katsuko sat down next to him. She followed his gaze.

“The kids? They’re a pretty good bunch. Managed pretty well alone before we stormed in.”

“They shouldn’t be able to do that well,” Takeda hissed quietly. “They’re just children. This… This is a pure war they’ve been pulled into.”

“So?” Katsuko tossed her short hair, pulling it from the stiff hairdo that she had put it earlier.

“Children are used in a war everywhere. It’s nothing new.”

“But…” Takeda was almost at loss of words. “It’s not fair.”

“Life is not fair, Tetsu. You should know.”

Takeda winced. Born into a family that prided itself in their long line of soldiers that could trace their lineage to the samurai of 16th century if even past that, he alone was the one who had chosen the path he was on, unable to follow his ancestors. He was a teacher, a soldier of another kind. He didn’t need a gun or a sword to prove his worth.

Although at the moment those skills would’ve made his life tons easier.
“Tetsu, just look at them.”

Takeda raised his gaze that he hadn’t realized he had dropped. There in front of him stood the volleyball team he had grown to love so much. They were standing tall, all of them, shoulder to shoulder like comrades that had shared a bond no one could shatter. There were solemn looks but also hints of laugh lines and an ever present cheer even if it was subdued right now.

Katsuko’s voice was surprisingly gentle when she continued, “You see, they’re handling it. They might’ve been doing worse before, I don’t know, but right now they’re just waiting to execute their next move. The kids you once knew are still underneath all that but their exterior is harder, more difficult to break. It is unfortunate that they were chosen for this role, but, see? They are doing fine.”

And they were. Takeda knew that too. He just felt so impotent that he couldn’t ease their burdens like he should. He was their teacher, he was the adult, and he wasn’t able to be there for them.

Katsuko whacked him on the head.

“Now stand up, soldier!” she barked and Takeda scrambled to obey. He was standing before he even realized, and he flushed, embarrassed. Katsuko sent him a quick grin but then turned around, face serious, and strode over to where her men were dragging the man Suga had told them was Nishinoya’s uncle and a girl that looked vaguely familiar. He followed. He might be useless but he could still try to look after them all as well as he could, try to redeem himself. The pair was dropped in the middle of a ring of guards, guns out and aiming at them, daring them to make a single threatening move.

“They’re bug free.”

Some members of Karasuno, like Asahi, Tanaka, Kageyama, Hinata and Daichi were watching the proceedings closely while some were staying in the back, also watching, just holding their distance. Somewhere near them Yachi was holding a crying woman who was staring at the two, murder in her eyes. Takeda wondered if she had lost someone today.

The man and the girl were tied up tighter than necessary for the situation. Well, keeping in mind that they weren’t going anywhere. They probably, definitely, deserved it, but Takeda still felt sick at seeing the girl, most likely a high school student too, treated like that. One of the men who had dragged them there whispered something to Katsuko and Oikawa-san and Iwaizumi-san, while the Tsukishima brothers listened closely too. All five of them shared a rather savage look that entailed nothing good for the prisoners. Takeda shivered.

“So, Eikou Tadao. You have been eluding us quite a while,” Iwaizumi-san said then, stepping up to stand in front of the two. His partner and Katsuko took their places next to him, while Akiteru and Tsukishima moved a bit further away. Ukai was also standing there, just a bit on the side to see everything. Just like in a match, Takeda realized, and he stepped next to him. Ukai glanced at him quickly, nodding once, before focusing at the two again. Takeda grimaced but looked forward too.

What had the world become to force children to fight in the adults’ world?

“I wonder if your brother knows where you are right now,” Iwaizumi-san continued.

“Probably not. I doubt Masaru-chan takes failure too kindly. After all… you did have them all nicely in your grip,” Oikawa-san leered. The man just spat at them, glaring, but didn’t answer. Oikawa-san just quirked his brow and tilted his head to stare at the girl. “And you must be the one they called Shirofuku Yukie. Your mother has also been doing disappearing acts these past five years. Still, she can’t have been that great an assassin if she still got caught and then her protégé did as well. A pity.”
“Mother is better than all of you put together,” Yukie hissed. Takeda recognized her. She was the manager of Fukurodani. How, no, why were they all joining the high school volleyball league? As unfortunate as Kunimi’s story had been, Takeda could understand why someone would choose to spy on Oikawa and Iwaizumi.

(And hadn’t their fathers been angry when they had learnt about it. Takeda had gone to interrupt the yelling that had started after the revelation by yelling back at them. The detectives, particularly Oikawa-san, had looked bewildered by the tiny man in comparison standing back to his son, screaming at them so suddenly. They had backed off, much to Takeda’s pleasure and the bafflement of Oikawa and Iwaizumi. While Takeda thought that some of the anger had to stem from worry, he had seen how tight Oikawa’s fists had been, white all over. He couldn’t help but wonder if part of his drive to best Karasuno and Shiratorizawa somehow stemmed from home.)

But what Takeda couldn’t really understand was why they were haunting Fukurodani. Were there more Twilight members there, or were there possible victims? Or was it just a coincidence? Fukurodani was a prestigious academy; it would make sense if people just wanted best for their kids too.

“Perhaps but she still got caught. Quite miserably too, didn’t she?” Oikawa-san continued, mock pity filling his features. “It must’ve been hard on you, having such a failure as a role model.”

“Mother was never a failure!” Yukie yelled. Tadao rolled his eyes next to her.

“You’re getting baited, shut the hell up. With you screeching like a harpy, no wonder Shirofuku’s reputation is getting lower and lower.” Yukie closed her mouth with a click, a dark glare flashing in her eyes.

“Oh, Tadao-chan knows how to speak after all!”

The man sneered at Oikawa’s direction. “Trying to make me raise to your bait won’t work. I know you and your tricks too well, Rin-chan,” he mocked.

“And here we thought you hadn’t met us yet,” Iwaizumi-san said. Tadao rolled his eyes again. Takeda thought they looked a bit like they were about to fall off his head.

“Obviously. However, since we make it our mission to know the enemy, well…” he shrugged.

Yeah. That was pretty obvious, Takeda admitted inwardly.

“Why even bother trying to interrogate us?” Tadao asked without waiting for anyone to continue. “It’s not like we’re ever going to reveal anything to you.”

“Interest? Boredom?” Oikawa-san stretched languidly. “We’re just waiting for our people to get ready and then we’re off to Tokyo.

“After all, your little kitty here had quite a beautiful voice in the backroom.”

Takeda blinked. What? Was that what the look had meant? They had interrogated them separately before?

“You little idiot,” Tadao hissed. His whole countenance took a turn for the worse. Gone was the calm that Takeda now realized had been fake and in its place was an anger most pure. “What did you tell them?!”

“Nothing!” Yukie protested. “I told them nothing!”
“Shirofuku must be really disappointed that her heir is such a piece of work,” the man continued, appearing as if he hadn’t even heard her. “Adopting you was her greatest mistake!”

“Oh really?!” the girl burst out, bristling, anger taking her just as quickly. Takeda didn’t remember her having a temper like that during the training camps. “It’s not like you did anything better! You lost your turn at killing the target! Even Akira got the brat out of here! It really is a wonder that Eikou-sama left you in charge since you got the rest of the clan killed or behind the bars.”

“Shut up!” Tadao roared. “You know nothing, little girl!”

“Maybe not, but Mother does!”

“Yumi doesn’t know shit. She wasn’t there when the shit went down!”

Yukie adopted a rather nasty look on her face. “Perhaps. Yet the rumours persist, and Mother has been around for a long time. Everyone knows that Eikou is a fucking joke. Twilight is only letting you handle these things until you get offed too. No one cares about your little, bruised pride.”

“You little…!”

“Oh, did I hurt you?” Yukie didn’t even try to hold her sneer back. It was rather ugly on her face. “My bad. Perhaps we should’ve just let you handle it all yourself; would’ve made taking down the Dark Moon a ton easier if you were just gone!”

“Like they’d have the manpower without us! Because of you, they’re going to Tokyo! And-“

“And we can all be happy with knowing that the base we’re going into isn’t going to be the only one left, although a sizable force will be there,” Iwaizumi-san said, writing down in his notebook. “Shirofuku Yumi’s protégé, confirmed; Eikou main house down to two members, and while high on hierarchy, they’re not trusted. Conclusion, we take down the Tokyo base we know of, we cut off Twilight for the time being.”

Takeda watched as he dotted the last i’s and snapped his book shut. Oikawa-san smiled lazily.

“Did we miss anything?”

Tadao’s eyes bulged out. “You-!”

“I don’t think we did,” Katsuko said brusquely, nodding at her men. The two were lifted up and taken towards the stairs, yells growing quieter by the moment.

“…What did you do?” Ukai asked finally. Katsuko shrugged.

“Easiest to interrogate are those with temper and who fill the gaps themselves. You just have to find what ticks them off. That’s what my men were looking for when they were locked in different rooms.”

“We knew Eikou could go from hot to cold easily. We helped put the clan away years ago,” Akiteru explained. “But we didn’t know if we could get the Shirofuku girl to break down. Thankfully, it seems that failing at killing Hitoka was enough to get her temper to rise. Mentioning her mother was a sore spot too, as you could see.”

“So that’s what you told Takasaki to mention,” Katsuko said. Akiteru shrugged.

“If it works, it works.”
“So it was your clan who put them away. Interesting. I thought it had been another one.”

Akiteru looked momentarily uncomfortable but Takeda wasn’t sure if he had been mistaken. The expression, if it even were there, had come and gone in a flash.

“Yeah.”

“Enough talk! We have a base to destroy!” Katsuko commanded. “Those uninvolved will stay away!”

Iwaizumi-san and Oikawa-san looked towards somewhere on the side.

“No, father, we’re going too,” Oikawa quickly said. Takeda watched as he straightened where he was standing next to Kageyama and Hinata. Iwaizumi nodded next to him. Their parents just looked at each other, sighed and then nodded, resigned.

“Can, um, can I come too?” it was another member of Aobajousai – Kindaichi? – that asked. “It’s Kunimi. I-I want some closure.”

“No,” it was Katsuko who answered bluntly. She didn’t even have to raise a hand to stop any protests. “The bratty duo of the police are alright, if only because they are in a relatively good condition,” she said, almost as if describing furniture. Takeda thought Oikawa looked slightly offended. “But you’re not. You look like you’ve got a concussion and you have no experience in fighting from what I’ve seen so I do not trust your words. We’re not taking any liabilities with us. So that also means that you, you and you are out.” Katsuko pointed at Sugawara, Yachi and Akiteru. Akiteru scoffed.

“Like hell. A broken nose doesn’t slow me down.”


Ukai sighed. “Katsuko-san, those two are part of the Dark Moon. They won’t be left behind unless they’re dead or in a coma, and they might even find a way to come even then.”

Katsuko glared back but snorted. “Fine. But the boy with the broken leg stays.”

Sugawara scowled. “Not like I have any choice.” Katsuko then turned to bark orders and people started bustling around but Takeda’s attention was momentarily captured by something else.

“Are you all part of the yakuza?” he heard Kindaichi ask from someone.

“No, just Tsukishima and Yachi,” Hinata answered him. “Well, maybe someone else too, but that’s all.”

“Someone else? No, I don’t care. How come you can go when I can’t?!”

“Because,” Hinata paused, searching for words “unlike you, we’ve been doing this since May. Well, not fighting but mental preparation and we’ve had a crash course in fighting too. Since the school shooting.”

“Was that a targeted attack?!”

“Yes,” Kageyama said quietly. “Yes it was.”

“Kageyama, I-“
“Save it,” Hinata interrupted. “We’ve no time now.” Takeda watched discreetly as Hinata dragged a surprised but also grateful-looking Kageyama away from his former teammate who was actually cringing. Kindaichi slumped and walked to Suga, striking up a conversation.

In the end, there were a few others who weren’t going. Like Takeda. His sister had laughed when he had said he wanted to go with them. No dice. Just… a flat out no.

It hurt.

As if, despite her earlier encouraging words, he hadn’t changed. She was willing to take children with her but not him. No, her words were to look at the kids. Or…

Maybe they were just soldiers to her.

Takeda bit his lip until it bled.

From the team, Sawamura, Azumane, Narita, Ennoshita, Tanaka and the first years were all going. Shimizu and Yachi were too. Some of them were a little worse for wear but they were burning for revenge. Ukai was also going, Saeko too, and Oikawa and Iwaizumi. Then there were the police force, and Akiteru and the people from the Dark Moon, although there was only a few good enough to go from the latter. More would meet them at the destination. And, of course, Katsuko and her people.

Takeda watched, resigned, as they briskly walked away from them and sped away on their cars. He turned to those who were left, all who were staring at those leaving them just as despondently.

“I’ll take you to the hospital.”

***

Noya grimaced as he was dragged from the car. The whole ride had sucked. First of all, he had been unconscious for probably half of it. The other half he had felt awful because his head had been a bit woozy and he was wearing a blindfold. His hands felt like they were zip-tied in front of him and there were people sitting on both sides of him.

The last thing he remembered was falling down stairs when someone had hit him from the behind.

He had no idea of how the others were. Was Asahi alright? What about Narita and Ennoshita? Or Kunimi? Or the rest of the team? They couldn’t be dead. Or, maybe, that was allowed if only because then they would still be alive.

But if they were dead…

Noya clenched his fists. He wanted to bash his capturers on the head already but in that case he swore he would kill them.

They didn’t take an elevator, weirdly enough. Or perhaps not; maybe there wasn’t any there, wherever they were. He was dragged stairs up and down and up again, through corridors to twisty and then they backtracked a bit. Noya had lost his sense of direction ages ago. Maybe that even was the reason, who knew. He just felt annoyed and angry and he was getting more and more pissed off by the second.

Then, suddenly, they stopped. His hands were untied quickly and he was pushed inside a room, doors clicking shut behind him. He immediately went to remove his blindfold and cursed. The lighting in the room wasn’t too bright but after hours of darkness it was enough to hurt his eyes.
“You caught your mother’s genes, I suppose. She was always a bit shorter than average.”

Noya quickly turned towards the voice.

His eyes almost bulged out for a moment before they narrowed into almost slits. He knew the shape of his face, and that nose. Intimately. They belonged to the face he saw in the mirror every morning.

Since the shooting at their school, he had waited in dread that his blood relatives would catch up to him. They did. He did.

“And you’re?” he asked sharply. Whatever. His family wasn’t here. He had no reason to be polite.

“Eikou Masaru,” the man answered, flashing a grin. Noya felt the corners of his lips turn downwards. “Your father.”

“Not so. My mother is a rather fiery lady who should also be home by now.”

There was only amused silence that answered him.

Yeah, Noya really couldn’t relate to this guy.

Hah.

Relate.

“So, you’re a big shot in the enemy rankings, huh?” he said instead, watching the man’s reaction. Masaru didn’t even twitch, Noya was disappointed to see.

“You could say that although the word you should use is ally. We do not have as much clout within Twilight as we used to, unfortunately. Manpower, yes; Eikou is still the biggest clan despite the blood of the main house being on the thin side. There’s only you and me, Yuu.”

Noya frowned. “Just us?”

“There is one other person but… He’s your uncle from your mother’s side too but I rather hope he was offed in that miserable operation he insisted on doing. Bipolar and crazy, those traits ran too deep in your mother’s line. She was the only one to escape it, really. It was too bad she died giving birth to you. Magnificent woman, she was,” Masaru sighed.

Disgusting, Noya thought and fought against letting his thoughts show on his face. He didn’t want to give this man anything to use against him, to understand him.

It was hard. Noya was an open book kind of person and hiding what he felt wasn’t what he was used to do. He was more impulse and consequences, much like Tanaka. That’s probably why they bonded so well when they met.

Change the subject, gosh, what to ask?

“Why did you give me up for adoption?” Noya asked without thinking and he startled himself. And
he was supposed to try avoiding the family subject since that man so clearly valued his. Masaru snorted.

“Despite what Tadao thought of Eikou’s invincibility, I saw that we would fall. We were just far too close to the, how should I put it, dark side. We even had cookies.”

Noya didn’t feel like laughing, or pretend to, so he said nothing.

“That was when that accursed clan came and destroyed us. Tipped the police, ran around circles over the leaders, and suddenly, the only ones left were I, who had seen it all and taken precautions, and Tadao, the idiot who was in the right place in the right time. What a shame since that man has no shred of wisdom in him or skills in leadership, just impulsiveness and taste for blood. So easy to use, though, and he never has any idea either.”

“So you, what? Decided that Twilight was the right answer?”

Masaru shrugged. “It was logical when the Tsukishima clan came into the picture too. I and some other poor unfortunate souls decided that enough was enough. But, you wanted to know about your adoption? Easy enough. I saw Eikou’s destruction and I wanted to keep a wild card, as you say. Who better than the one who had the best of two brilliant people? You, Yuu, are Eikou’s future. This is your destiny.” The man waved his hand in a grand gesture. If he had a cape, it would’ve dramatically flowed in the non-existent wind.

Noya gaped.

He what now?!

“Unfortunately the Nishinoya family didn’t seem to do a very good work with you despite their instructions. Oh well. Casualties happen.”

“Cas- No, I’ll stop you right now!” Noya burst out. “You will not touch my family! None of them, not even one hair of theirs, is to be harmed!”

Masaru looked surprised for a moment before he rolled his eyes.

“This is just what I was talking about. Far too emotional, you are. Those should’ve been weeded out of you before you even finished the second grade. My, they undid all that hard work of ours. Shame.”

Noya had an image of how his life might’ve turned out if he had never been adopted by his parents. He did not like what he saw. He didn’t like it one bit.

He suddenly missed Tanaka a whole lot. And Asahi. And everyone else.

They were probably coming to get him right now. None of them would fall for Twilight, especially his uncle, if Masaru’s description of him was accurate at all but he wouldn't trust the guy as far as he could throw him.

He couldn’t wait to get home.

“They didn’t fail. They didn’t turn me into a mindless machine,” Noya hissed. Masaru had the balls to roll his eyes.

“Not a ‘mindless machine’, Yuu. Gosh, what a nightmare that would’ve made. No, discipline is what I am talking about. You don’t see me running around, screaming my head off every single time
something goes wrong. You won’t see me gloat, or monologue, despite what I am doing now.

“If only your adopted family had done what they were supposed to do, I wouldn’t have to explain these things to you. You would’ve known already. Your situational awareness is awful from what I’ve seen – you didn’t even notice when one of my men came to stand behind you and pointed at you with a gun –,” Noya whipped around but saw no one. He heard a tsk, “and I suspect your skills are subpar on many other fields too. A real pity.

“Well, you can rest assured that this will change now. Your new regime will start tomorrow. And—“


For the first time Masaru looked slightly irritated.

“Yes, you are. Why do you think you were brought here in the first place? It is time for you to step up to your responsibilities. I would have liked to have you graduate from high school first but with the Dark Moon hovering over you, one must do what one must do.”

Noya hadn’t felt this unbalanced in a while. He definitely didn’t like the feeling. 0 out of 10, would not recommend.

“But- No. I’m not staying. I won’t be staying. Fuck Eikou, fuck you. I’m going back home,” he said.

Masaru just stared at him in that mild manner of his and just sighed, shaking his head a bit.

“You’ll learn. I’ll see you soon for your regime. I have your uncle to call.”

The man left the room before Noya could say another word. The doors clicked shut, probably locking, and Noya would bet all his money that there were guards behind them, possibly in this room even. Fuck.

Well.

It was not the first time he had broken out from improbable places.

He might not have any ‘formal’ training in nastiness and evil but he knew his way around, thank you very much. He rolled his sleeves and narrowed his eyes, looking around for the first time really. The shock of meeting his sperm donor had wrong-footed him quite badly.

He had some exploring to do, and an escape to plan. He probably should find a way to contact someone from Karasuno. Probably in that order too.

Noya nodded to himself once, steeled himself, and got to work.

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Suga sighed as he watched the nurse fuss over him. Invalid… that was what he was. He hated the feeling of uselessness that he was forced to swallow. What use was he? Nothing, that’s what. He wanted to be on his way to Tokyo but no, he was stuck in a hospital while Daichi and Asahi and the rest of the team were being useful and going to save Noya.

He wanted to save Noya.

Suga glared at his leg. It was neatly wrapped up, waiting to be plastered. If only that damn man, whoever he was, hadn’t broken his leg in the middle of the fighting. Even if he could swallow not being there for his team (and it was a bitter thing to try to push down), he couldn’t play in January in
the spring tournament. There was just no way. Just like Kinoshita, he was…

Kinoshita.

He raised his head and looked as a familiar head popped next to him. Kinoshita smiled hesitantly. He was sitting in a wheelchair that Takeda-sensei was pushing, parking him beside Suga.

“Hi.”

Suga blinked. A shallow smile twisted his lips.

“Hi.”

“I heard what happened, well, some parts of it from Takeda-sensei,” Kinoshita nodded at the man who grinned weakly. “And I heard about Noya. They’ll get him back, sooner than you might think.”

“It’s not- I don’t doubt that,” Suga answered. “I just… wish I could be there with them.”

Kinoshita sent him a dark, amused look.

“Oh really?”

Suga winced. “Sorry, it’s just…”

“It’s alright, I know,” Kinoshita interrupted him before he could even begin. “But…”

“Yeah…”

“Whatever you boys think, just be glad you’re alive,” Takeda-sensei smiled gently down at them. He kneeled in front of them. “Think about what you would miss if you weren’t here. Think about how much it would hurt the others. A broken leg heals, the muscles lost from disuse can be trained again, but a life cannot be returned where it has left.

“And as Kinoshita here has demonstrated, being bedridden doesn’t mean you can’t be useful. He’s the one that called the cavalry, why we are going to beat Twilight tonight.” Takeda-sensei patted Kinoshita’s knee. “And now, we can be here and wait for them to come back victorious. A team is a compilation of different kinds of strengths, and no one is ever useless. We can prepare for them since they will no doubt be tired and in need of healing…”

“No offence, sensei, but that kind of pep talk doesn’t really help right now. Sorry,” Suga said, grimacing. Takeda-sensei’s smile faltered before dropping. Suga’s stomach plummeted. Shoot, he didn’t mean to…

“I understand,” there was a bitter expression on Takeda-sensei’s face. “You would love to be there, helping, in the middle of action. I do too. But… my sister didn’t. So I understand you very well. Unlike you, however, I am an adult but she was willing to take children half my age with her rather than her brother.” Suga felt guilty at seeing the raw grief on their teacher’s face. It cleared quickly but the shadows lingered.

The smile was back but even weaker than before. “I’ve had years to learn to accept that it just wasn’t meant to be. You’ve only had these recent days or just hours. Just… you can stand as their equal when you heal. Some of us never had the chance.”

Suga was about to apologize again but then he started to hear yelling from somewhere around the lobby. He paled. That sounded like his mother.
He didn’t want to see her.
Not now.

Takeda-sensei took one look at him and stood up.
“I’ll go run interference. Rest while you can.”

Then he was gone, the hospital door shutting behind him. Suga and Kinoshita shared a look.

No matter how cool Takeda-sensei’s sister was… Takeda-sensei was a thousand times better. He had that quiet sort of strength that wasn’t obvious at first glance but that slowly grew in front of you until you couldn’t ignore it anymore. He understood them better than anyone else. He didn’t even seem to recognize his own worth.

Takeda-sensei, if anyone, was a survivor.

Suga reminded himself to thank him when he came back and resolved to make their teacher be more confident in himself.

After all, he was right.

No one was ever useless in a team, and Suga wasn’t about to start being one.

***

Hitoka moaned quietly when the car ran over a speed bump, jostling her shoulder. She ached all over. Her body was probably bruised from head to toe and her wound was killing her. It was lucky the blade had hit her on the left side and not right because that would’ve meant staying behind. They were speeding on the highway, trying to rush to Tokyo before anything could tip Twilight off that something hadn’t gone as planned. After they had left, Miyako had called her and said that Tadao had revealed in his anger that Masaru was waiting for his call this evening. They were living on borrowed time, really. It was already closing on eight. Noya had disappeared from their radar hours ago but they had been able to leave at seven on the dot, gaining some ground. Noya was still probably already in Tokyo, in the Twilight’s clutches.

She closed her eyes. She hated this.

She felt like she had let down the team.

“I think… the base we left, it might’ve been a decoy as well as a trap,” Kei said slowly. Hitoka blinked her eyes open. Kei wasn’t looking at her direction but his lips were in a line and the severity of his expression couldn’t be hidden.

“Why?” she asked. Kei moved his eyes from the window, still not meeting hers.

“We’ve heard from the leader that Eikou is smart but… that man definitely wasn’t. He was easily baited, in the end, and spilled far too much information and the less we say about his temper the better. And the way he just accepted information… and Tanaka’s crazy claims…” he shook his head. “It was insane. He was insane. It wasn’t logical.”

Hitoka was quiet for a moment. She didn’t want to think about that. If the base really had been just a decoy, despite it all…

“Do you…” she licked her lips nervously, “Do you resent Akiteru?”
Kei sighed. He looked more tired than Hitoka had seen him since the night they were shot at after the Aobajousai match.

“I-, No. I don’t resent him. But he doesn’t understand his position. He gave up his title and I don’t resent him for that although I am glad I wasn’t eligible for it and it had to go to, well…”

Hitoka nodded.

“But he still feels like he needs to prove himself, maybe even more now than before. Truthfully, it scares me a bit. If he goes too deep, he might not find his way back. If he becomes too dangerous…”

_They may have to end it for him._

“I don’t want to do that,” Hitoka whispered.

“Me either but he just, he doesn’t listen to me anymore. He doesn’t really listen to him!” Kei huffed. “I want my brother back. He needs to get back in shape and soon. Endangering us and making our people question the higher ups are the fastest way to go down.”

“And we can’t afford that.”

“No, we can’t. Maybe it’s because he’s older than us, more experienced. It’s hard to give up reins to someone years younger.”

Now it was Hitoka who was huffing, “But we are…!”

Kei hushed her, giving a glance towards the front seat. Hitoka snapped her mouth shut, flushing slightly. Right, they weren’t alone.

They sat in an uneasy silence, watching as they sped past other cars, hurrying their way to the capital.

Hitoka bit her lip. It was her nervous gesture but she never could get rid of it.

“I-,” Hitoka was interrupted by her phone ringing. She answered it immediately.

“Moon Flower.”

_Heeey, Yachi-san. We’ve got a small problem here,_” Narita’s voice floated from the phone. Hitoka frowned. She peeked from the back window at the car following them.

“What happened?”

“Well, Hinata was…”

_Nothing’s wrong!_” Hitoka heard Hinata yell from somewhere in the car, and someone, probably Narita, had to shuffle a bit.

“You idiot!” Kageyama yelled. “Dumbass! Stop moving so I can fucking treat your arm, you… you… dumbass!”


_Hinata was cut sometime during the fight earlier but didn’t tell anyone._

_He needs stitches!”_
“No, I don’t! Bakageyama!”

“Yes, you do! Fucking- STAY STILL!”

Hitoka winced. She could imagine how loud the yell was when you were sitting next to him in the small closed space.

“Now, stay still and I’ll stitch you up. It could’ve gotten infected. I swear to…”

“So, yeah,” Narita laughed weakly. “That’s basically it. Hinata’s arm needs stitches. Kageyama’s fixing him. He probably knew that he might’ve been left behind if he had said anything.”

“I want to save Noya! And make sure our only setter left doesn’t kill himself before the nationals!”

“Dumbass!”

Hitoka heard squabbling from the other side and just hang up. She texted Narita to tell her if it was serious or something changed. She looked at Kei.

“Do you think… we should send the car back?”

Kei shook his head.

“The King would kill us, just like Hinata and Narita, and Akiteru. He’s in the car too.”

*Hiding away from his brother and cousin, licking his wounds.*

“Yeah,” Hitoka sighed, her eyes hiding lingering sadness. “Wounds like that can get really serious if left unchecked…”

Kei grimaced. He peered at the front seat where Yamaguchi was actually sleeping.

“Yeah…”

They weren’t just speaking about Hinata anymore.

Kei reached over to turn on the radio. As the first notes filled the air, volume quiet enough so Yamaguchi wouldn’t be disturbed, the two leaned against each other, hoping for something to lighten up the day.

Still an hour left until they arrived to Tokyo.

Chapter End Notes

Wasn't three weeks!

I hope there aren't too many mistakes here since I tried to get this out before Sunday, and I actually did it! I will probably come back to it and try to proofread it again but, yeah, hope you don't mind. At least it's out? Tomorrow, I'm leaving for a mini holiday with my mother, her new boyfriend and his son who is, like, fourteen years younger than me. I feel old. Darn it. But, animals and spa, who am I to turn it all down? Though, slaving to get all my Monday's deadlines done for today was not fun, like, at all.
One chapter closer to the end! I hope you enjoyed ;)

Kageyama frowned as they finally drew to a stop. They stopped a mile or so from the headquarters, just so they wouldn’t draw attention to themselves. Only one other car drew to a halt next to theirs as it had been decided it would be best for everyone to be spread around. They all had the blueprints of the place, though, so it was fine.

They had managed to not die earlier during the day so it should stay fine too.

He hoped, Kageyama thought cynically. Optimism wasn’t really a part of his skill repertoire.

He stepped out of the car and stretched. A long ride in the backseat with two other people to share the space with was awful. He had actually missed the luxury cars his father liked to collect, which he thought he would never do; at least they were spacious for his legs if also pretentious waste of money. His father never even drove them anywhere, just let them collect dust and showed them around to showcase the family’s wealth. Kageyama had always been closer to his grandfather’s temperament than his parents’ and learned temperament from him. Why should he own more than he needed? He had never understood that. It was better to share the wealth than to hoard it like a dragon.

He was cut off from his musings when Narita groaned as well when he breathed in fresh air beside Kageyama. Hinata was jumping up and down, careful with his arm but too full of energy to stay still. Kageyama scowled. Where did that dumbass hide it all? Ugh. He glanced at Akiteru and one of Takeda’s sister’s men from the corner of his eye. Both looked serious and very unwelcoming.

His eyes followed as the doors opened on the other car too and Yamaguchi, Tsukishima and Yachi clambered out of it rather ungraciously. He hid a snort at the putout expression on Tsukishima’s face. He felt rather than saw the glare directed at his way. Kageyama flashed a smirk at him and Tsukishima’s scowl just deepened. Another man stepped out of the car too, and immediately went to greet the adults of the group. He seemed unfamiliar too, so Kageyama pigeonholed him as another one of Katsuko’s groupies.

“We’ll be going in from the west entrance,” Akiteru said as he opened the blueprints on his phone. Kageyama moved closer to see them. “We have three more groups. The rest of the Karasuno team, Ukai-san and Saeko-san and a few of our men are entering from the east side. Katsuko and most of her men as well as the Special Division are crashing from the north, trying to take out the barracks—” Akiteru pointed at the area “—and the rest of ours are going in from the south, the main entrance. They’re… the distraction,” he grimaced.

Kageyama closed his eyes for a moment. A bait… a wave of something - misery? pity? - spread through him before he forced it down. If they managed to take down this brand of Twilight, then… Maybe…

(It could be over.)

He opened his eyes again, determined to memorise the whole map. He had tried to do it during the long car trip but then Hinata had distracted him with his wound.

That dumbass…
He glanced to his right, only to see Hinata stare at him. His mouth was a tight line and his eyes narrowed as if he knew what Kageyama was thinking and disapproved. Kageyama scowled back. He could disapprove all he wanted and Hinata had no say about that. He didn’t have to like how the idiot was going in wounded and a liability.

“Let’s go,” Kageyama said, taking note of which direction they needed to go, and took off. The rest of them followed and Akiteru even outran him to take point, Tsukishima taking the place on Kageyama’s left in the second row. Hinata was running somewhere just behind him. He could hear his breath. It didn’t even take five minutes before they were on the doors. Only Yachi was slightly winded.

“Ready?” Akiteru asked, taking out his gun. Yachi followed his lead as did Katsuko’s men. Kageyama took a quick look at the latter two’s guns. They didn’t look standard but some sort of… specialised ones. They even had scopes.

His eyes widened before he could control his expression as the realisation struck him.

Fucking hell-

“On three.”

Akiteru glanced at them all before placing his hand on the door. It was an old-fashioned door with a lock that didn’t require any electricity. Relatively easy to pick too if Akiteru’s fast unlocking had been any indication. It was a service entrance of a sort but it made Kageyama’s skin crawl to see how easy it had been.

It had been easy to break into the fake headquarters too.

One.

Tsukishima squares his shoulders and Yachi took a deep breath. They shared a twin look that spelled nothing good.

Two.

Hinata eased his muscles, getting ready to pounce. Yamaguchi looked scared yet determined.

Kageyama felt his expression fall into a focused blankness.

Three.

They ran in.

***

Daichi ran. Asahi, Tanaka and Ennoshita followed his lead as did Hyuuga, Takao and Wakamatsu. Ukai, Shimizu and Saeko took the rear. They followed the map to where Noya would most likely be held, to where the luxury quarters were located in the middle of the building – safe from all directions. There were no dungeons there, thankfully. The building was big but also a more traditional design. Tokyo was filled to brim with apartment buildings and offices but this one was just a few floors tall, which Daichi was glad about, although the total area was probably just as large.

What was worse was that since there was no specific floor plan, the place was a maze.

Daichi was really glad that they got the blueprints. This would’ve been impossible otherwise. It
might be hard even now but they had a fighting chance. Their group had taken out a few guards
(Takao had shot them all within seconds in cold blood, leaving the bodies to stain the floors; Daichi
had been horrified and only just managed to keep the rest of his lunch inside. For some reason,
Shimizu had managed to keep a straight face even if she was paler than usual. Daichi both admired
her for that and felt bad that such a change had happened to that gentle soul of hers) but their run had
been relatively clear. When Ennoshita had voiced the thought, Saeko of all people had commented
that the Twilight base was still operating like their previous operation had been a success.
Wakamatsu and Hyuuga had agreed on that, the latter actually sounded slightly impressed at Saeko’s
reasoning.

Tanaka had taken the time to threaten the man not to flirt with his sister unless he wanted him to
punch him. Saeko had snorted in a rather unladylike manner and just said that she could defend
herself if needed.

Tanaka had agreed, and promptly complained again when Saeko threw an exaggerated wink at the
yakuza, bouncing her breasts.

Hyuuga had stayed quiet after that, slight blush touching his face, but Daichi suspected the
conversation wasn’t over yet.

If – when – they managed to make it out alright.

They came to a halt when they reached a corridor that looked fancier than the others they had ran
through on the second floor. At first Daichi had been worried about the security cameras but Yachi
had sent them all a message that Kozume and Kuroo and some of the Iwaizumi-san and Oikawa-
san’s men had broken into the system and placed the cameras on loop. It wouldn’t work indefinitely
but hopefully long enough that they would manage to confuse the Twilight’s men, and for
Karasuno’s side to come on top in the end.

Daichi had heard shooting start behind them about five minutes ago, distant enough that the noise
was probably coming from the first floor. It seemed that the enemy was too distracted to notice them
running towards the leaders’ supposed quarters. Some fighting noises were also coming from
somewhere in front of them too but it was still faint enough that they shouldn’t run into trouble if
they tried to avoid it. For the moment, the distraction seemed to be working.

It was, however, annoying that they had to run stairs up and down to be able to find themselves on
their right track. A few times they even had to backtrack since the map wasn’t the clearest. Really,
what a maze…

Ukai checked the map and told them to keep to right if possible. The second corridor on the left
would take them to the barracks. Tanaka said something under his breath but Daichi couldn’t hear
what. Ennoshita apparently did as he whacked him on the head and started to lecture him quietly.

Daichi glanced at Asahi. He was worryingly silent. Even during the car trip he had said barely a
word. Asahi was a tall wall of stone tonight and Daichi disliked it immensely. It just…

It wasn’t Asahi.

He hoped they’d find Noya soon if only for Asahi to come out of his funk.

They sneaked around the corners, Hyuuga and Takao taking out those they deemed unable to avoid.
Even though Daichi had killed none, his hands felt dirty. There was blood on his hands.

He’d never completely feel and be clean again.
They reached the doors to the room that had been deemed the most probable place for Noya to be. It wasn’t the master rooms but close enough to them, fit for an heir (Asahi had snorted at that but offered no reason why. Daichi understood that, though; Noya was no one’s legacy, the least for people like these. He was just Karasuno’s). They had taken out the guards of which there were surprisingly many. They must be in the right place. Tanaka and Asahi hadn’t killed those they fought, only knocked them out after a brief scuffle, but Wakamatsu hadn’t taken the chance and, despite their pleas, had broken their necks.

Never clean again.

Ukai had come forward then, after he and Saeko had taken out their guards, and picked the lock on the door. Daichi wondered if he also had a somewhat wild youth to have picked up on the skill.

The doors opened.

They burst in.

The rooms were empty.

None of them noticed a flashing red light when the alarm system was triggered.

***

Yamaguchi panted, looking around in fear. They had run into a group of people running from the direction of the barracks. It had turned into a messy situation where no one could see an ally from an enemy as they had been divided into two by the Twilight people. It had turned into a game of ‘grab an ally and run’, just what Yamaguchi had always wanted. A split second was all it had taken to screw up their plan. Before he could even realise it Yamaguchi had been scrambling away with Akiteru, belatedly realising that Narita and Yachi, and Ito and Kenjiro – the two SDs – were following them, leaving Kageyama, Hinata and Tsukki to run in the other direction.

They lost Kenjiro to a stray bullet before they’d managed to get away. Yachi managed to get revenge on his behalf but they were still down a man.

Yet, they still had two more than Tsukki’s group…

They were lucky enough, though, as they managed to lose their tail (for once the maze was useful) which only made Yamaguchi more worried. There were a dozen people or so in the group that separated theirs although Yamaguchi couldn’t be sure, and only four of them followed them which probably left the rest to run after Tsukki. Yamaguchi had faith in Tsukki but… how could they get away from so many people? With Hinata hurt?

He wanted to run after them; so did Akiteru. They both voiced their discontent pretty loudly.

It was Narita who put his foot down in the end.

“We’re here to save Noya,” he said. Yamaguchi noted how he was also pale and shaking but his wave didn’t waver. “We have to move on. We have the location we’re going to be aiming at and so do Tsukishima and the rest. They’re wily; they’ll know to follow the plan.”

Yamaguchi knew that but…

Tsukki.

He felt guilty how Kageyama and Hinata didn’t register at the same level of concern to him as
Tsukki did but he had known him since elementary school. Tsukki had always protected him – well, since he managed to get under his radar and worm his way into becoming his best friend. It was basically the same thing anyway and Yamaguchi felt they were now closer than ever with the Dark Moon having been a chasm between them he hadn’t even known about before. It wasn’t anymore, not really, since Yamaguchi was aware of it. They could deal with it since Yamaguchi could understand Tsukki now.

He could be the best friend Tsukki had always been for him but he couldn’t be that if he wasn’t able to be there for him!

“Nishinoya has never been my priority, and neither has been Karasuno,” Akiteru finally huffed. Yamaguchi halted. What did he just-? He turned to look at Tsukki’s brother whose eyes were cold, far too cold to belong to someone related to Tsukki. “There are only a few people on top of my priority list here, and they’re divided into different groups right now. Kei can’t be on his own, he won’t be able to manage alone, we need to go back,” he pressed. “The mission-”

Yamaguchi gaped. He didn’t recognise this person.

Apparently, neither did Yachi as she slapped Akiteru hard on his arm. He rubbed it, eyes taking a betrayed look in them.

“Our ‘mission’ is to get to Noya,” she glared. “After we’re finished here I’m going to your parents like the tattletale of all the tattletales and make them enforce a long holiday on you. You’re getting out of hand, Akiteru. Kei has managed well without your interference this whole year. Besides, aren’t these your mistakes we’re trying to right here? Get over yourself,” she hissed, and then continued in a lower voice so that Yamaguchi had to strain to hear it, "And the people we need to protect are right here."

Akiteru narrowed his eyes. “Don’t forget which one of us has the higher rank here, cousin.”

“Oh, I’m sure which one of us will have after this mission,” Yachi glared at him, “Karasuno’s made sacrifices to be where they are today. Respect them or face the consequences. After all, he is part of Karasuno too. You were part of Karasuno once. Kei would be so disappointed in you.”

Akiteru flinched slightly. She stared him down before nodding.

“I’m taking control.”

Despite Akiteru’s protests, Yachi took point from then on. She also took his blueprints, although for why Yamaguchi didn’t know. To stop Akiteru from going off on his own? He didn't think Akiteru would do that even if he was angry. Narita quickly followed Yachi’s lead and Yamaguchi did too, after taking one final glance at the furious and betrayed look on Akiteru’s face. Ito looked more doubtful but seemed to be content to watch over them without a comment. He probably knew his opinion wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

Yamaguchi jogged next to Akiteru, side-eyeing him as they ran. He didn’t know this person. Where had the beloved brother he had known for so long disappeared to? The one who cared about everyone and everything? Who had hopes and dreams he wanted to achieve and had spoken of them to a young Yamaguchi when he had tagged along with Tsukki?

Something had to have happened after Akiteru left high school, or maybe during the past months or even today after he had been taken.

Yamaguchi just had no idea what that was.
(Only later he would understand that his own thoughts basically mirrored Akiteru’s, focused on one person alone and putting his own needs above others’. When Yamaguchi saw his reflection on a mirror, he wouldn’t be able to recognise himself in it either.)

(He had changed, and he had no idea how it had sneaked on him and if he liked it.)

(He did know one thing though.)

(He'd do anything for Tsukki.)

(Anything.)

(He'd stare at his hands and he'd know.)

(Even kill.)

(How?)

(Because he had.)

***

Noya was just about to scream in frustration when he heard a small-scale explosion happen somewhere close to him – maybe a floor down? Almost immediately he also heard his guards exchange a few rushed words and for some of them to leave.

This was his chance.

He would get out of there now.

Alright, what did choices did he have?

The air vents were out. As much as Noya loved spy movies, they made too much noise and seemed to go where his guards patrolled. He didn’t know where they went anyway and his with his luck he would drop down in the middle of an enemy mob. Also, he didn’t know if he was being watched from the inside. He’d checked every nook of the rooms and didn’t see a soul but there were cameras in every freaking corner.

He’d tried the windows but they were reinforced somehow. Noya was no expert but he doubted he could swing a chair at them and then they’d magically break.

…Yeah, not going to happen.

It appeared that the only way out was the door he came through. If there were any secret passageways, well, he didn’t have time to look for them. The logical places (under the carpets and behind desks and bookcases, like in the films; okay, sorry for not having much imagination right at this second, he was on a schedule) were empty of anything suspicious.

Okay.

So.

Through the front door.

Noya had no idea how to do it. He hadn’t picked locks before but he knew in theory how it’d work. He tried to see anything that he could use when the doors fucking opened.
He coiled his muscles to sprint past whoever had come in when-

He recognised that person. Noya’s eyes betrayed his shock as he took in the figure who stood in front of him.

“Come. You are to be taken elsewhere.”

Kunimi.

*What the hell?!*

***

Tsukishima glared at the bodies on the floor. It had taken far too long to dispose of the threat. He pressed his hand against his cheek where someone had gotten in a lucky hit. The men weren’t killed, just unconscious mostly, although a couple were bleeding quite heavily. If they didn’t get medical help soon, they could be in a danger.

He wasn’t feeling particularly charitable, though. They’d forced him, Hinata and Kageyama from their group.

Ugh.

What a mess.

He could just *hear* Akiteru throw a fit. He might still be in high school but he could manage himself; he wouldn’t have been chosen as the Shield otherwise. Seriously, what was going on with him? Akiteru used to trust him.

Where had it all gone?

Tsukishima kept guard as Kageyama tended to Hinata. The latter had caught a fist to his face – although with more force than Tsukishima had – and been knocked unconscious at some point during the heat of the fight. It was lucky he hadn’t been trampled.

Seriously.

“He should be up soon,” Kageyama said quietly. “He might have a concussion though.”

“Shit,” Tsukishima mumbled. “We really should’ve just made your car turn back.”

Kageyama sent a glare in Tsukishima’s direction. “Fuck off.”

“I don’t mean you or the rest of the group,” Tsukishima said and rolled his eyes. “Hinata’s a liability right now, you have to admit it. An arm wound barely stitched together, a possible concussion, who knows what else! He needs a real medical person to look after him, not someone who doesn’t have the tools or the skills to treat serious injuries. Panic attacks are not settled with kisses,” he sneered.

Kageyama looked like he had swallowed a lemon, a fierce glower on his face, but nodded. Fair enough.

Tsukishima sighed and checked the corridor from the door. They’d managed to drag the fight into a room of some sort, away from instant detection. There were stains outside from where Tsukishima had dragged a couple of bodies inside but it looked relatively clean.

“I wonder,” he mumbled, watching the security cameras watch them, “are the loops still going on?”
“I don’t know,” Kageyama answered shortly. He slapped Hinata gently a few times to see if he could rouse him. No such luck yet. “I think Kozume or Kuroo would’ve sent some sort of warning if the loops were gone.”

“It might also be that they’ve jammed the connection,” Tsukishima pointed out.

“Wouldn’t that also mean that the cameras would be unusable too?”

“Might be. Hitoka would know.”

“Hitoka’s not here,” Kageyama said, slapping Hinata again. Hinata let out a low moan and opened his eyes slightly.

“Wh-”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Kageyama groaned. He helped Hinata to sit up. “How do you feel?”

“Ma head’s… swimmin’ a bi’,” Hinata mumbled. Tsukishima felt his irritation – he refused to call it worry – grow but tried to quell to his best ability.

“What should we do…?” he asked from no one. They were isolated from their people, no idea where they were at the moment and they were stuck in a room with unconscious enemies (but for how long?) and an almost incapacitated Hinata.

“We survive,” Kageyama answered instead. His eyes found Tsukishima’s and held them as hostage. “We can do nothing less.”

He stared at Kageyama for a moment before nodding sharply.

Fair enough.

While Hinata was trying to catch his bearings again and stand up – he almost fell down a few times and had to take breathers, Tsukishima noted and huffed – because they really didn’t have time to wait for his complete recovery, Tsukishima knocked a few of the Twilight members out again. He then thought to remove their shirts, and shredded them as well as he could and used those to tie them up. They wouldn’t hold indefinitely but enough hopefully that they could get a warning of a possible attack.

It was maybe five minutes after that that they heard noise outside, coming towards them.

Kageyama and Tsukishima stared at each other. They recognised the voice.

Kageyama’s face dropped into an extreme concentration that bordered constipation and dread fell down Tsukishima’s back.

“Don’t you dare,” he hissed but Kageyama didn’t spare him another look. When the voice got close to the door, he pounced. Hinata fell down without his support, a groan escaping his mouth. Tsukishima tried to catch Kageyama but the other boy evaded him and ran straight out of the door.

“Stupid King!” Tsukishima let out, cursing, before running after him on instinct a mere second later, only to see Kageyama run into the alarmed figure of Kunimi Akira.

***

Asahi was past angry. He was mad, completely and utterly mad; so mad he saw red.
They had lost Noya.

He couldn’t focus on Daichi and Ennoshita who were trying to calm him down, or Shimizu or anyone else either. He was seeing red and that all-encompassing fury couldn’t be sated with just few words.

“Azumane!” Ukai barked. “Calm the fuck down!”

Asahi threw him glare and stalked towards the corridor, intent on leaving to search for Noya by himself if it was what it took. Tanaka stepped in front of him, though, as did the three Dark Moon clan members. They were able to force him to stay, although it did take strength as Asahi fought against the hold on him tooth and nail.

He was aware that they were talking and arguing how to proceed but he wasn’t really interested. Distantly he knew this wasn’t him and that he was acting irrationally but something had snapped in him.

(When he later would try to remember whatever had happened, he wouldn’t be able to say a thing. Everything after they found the room Noya had been kept was a blur and nothing could bring those memories back to him. Even when the others described his actions and what had transpired, they were just words to him. He just couldn’t remember. To be honest, he didn’t want to either.)

All Asahi knew was that the doors to the room, still open from after them, were suddenly filled with people. They all froze for a second before someone, some people, had started to rain fire on them and they were scrambling to either find somewhere safe or-

Asahi forced himself free from his restrains and attacked fire with fire.

***

Ukai hesitated. He fucking hesitated when none of the teenagers did. He groaned, and ran to join the fray. He remembered what Takeda had said when he had been there during the school shooting.

(I don’t know what got into me. I just- I wanted to make sure they managed to survive. They have their future ahead of them. To cut them so young… I couldn’t imagine wanting to live in a world where they were dead and I wasn’t and-)

Stupid, idealistic teacher.

Ukai understood him far too well.

He had had his share of fights when he was young but he was no real delinquent. He certainly wasn’t part of a clan. He could, however, understand loyalty and his team had that in spades. Ukai was no exception to that. His loyalty, Takeda’s loyalty, was to these teenagers, to help them survive in this cruel world.

Sidestep.

Asahi was already at someone, screaming and entirely focused on taking down the person. Ukai cringed. Asahi was a gentle soul.

Crouch.

It wasn’t a surprise he would be the first one to snap.
Evade.

These teenagers. Ukai wondered how much therapy they would need when this was over. PTSD was a dangerous ailment. It might never be completely cured either.

Try to not to get hit by a bullet.

He hated them, he hated the Twilight. He would readily admit he hated the Dark Moon too. They were both the same. Ridiculous names, tendencies to cause harm to the people he cared. He wondered briefly who the heir was, who he should blame, but the thoughts left him when he was suddenly in front of someone. He didn’t even bother looking who it was before taking the person down. Luckily, it wasn’t one of their allies.

One less person to shoot at the people he loved.

Ukai raised his hand, flipping a pocket knife to point at the man, no, woman under him. He grimaced.

He might want a therapist after all this too.

He struck down.

***

Hinata stumbled his way up. Everything was woozy. He couldn’t really focus. His head was swimming but he heard sounds of fighting and yelling and he knew he had to be there.

He had to.

Oh gosh, what if something happened to someone when he was out of commission? He would never forgive himself. But, just as the sounds had started, they ended just as quickly.

Hinata hit the wall and used it as a support to make his way to the door. He looked outside.

A figure with a black mop of hair was standing over someone. He recognised the distinctive floppy hair style of Kageyama’s on the one on top. The one against the wall was a bit familiar too but with his head he couldn’t-

Tsukishima was there too, holding up a person, no, taking off something from the person’s hands-

Noya?

Noya!

“Noya-senpai!” Hinata rasped and then he was swimming again. He slid down the wall to be closer to the floor. Floor was nice. Even if it swayed like he was on a ship, it was still nicer than trying to balance on the waves himself.

“Hinata!” he heard Noya call him back and suddenly there was a worried face of his senpai in front of him. Hinata smiled weakly. He kind of-

He kind of felt sick.

He lurched to the side and vomited all over the floor.

He heard Noya bark a short and unamused laugh.
“Well, aren’t you happy to see me!”

Hinata felt hands slide up and down his back and it did help a bit. He heaved a few times but apparently he already puked his guts out. He looked blearily back at Noya’s direction. He was staring at him worriedly.

“I’m fine,” he said and coughed. Yuck, vomit. “Are- Are you…?”

“I’m fine too. No one hurt me, except for monologuing my ears off despite claiming to hate doing so,” Noya assured him. Hinata blinked. He… didn’t understand the reference. “Besides, I’m the great Nishinoya Yuu! I’m indestructible!”

Hinata smiled at the words. That he knew. He still felt green but it was great to see his senpai in such high spirits. Or, well, at least in a good condition.

He winced when someone was slammed against the wall hard and turned to look at Kageyama and Tsukishima’s direction again. The third figure was lying on the floor, unconscious, with his head looking just as banged as Hinata’s probably was.

“Geez, King, now he’s going to be out of commission for a while. We’ll make a Queen out of you yet,” Tsukishima said although he didn’t sound reproachful at all. Rather, he seemed quite admiring of Kageyama’s handiwork. He crouched down and checked behind the person’s head and-

Wait.

“Is that…?”

“Yeah. Kunimi,” Noya grimaced. “Ironically, he took me from you only to bring me back. Talk about karma.”

“But-” Hinata couldn’t understand. “Why would he do that?”

“He didn’t mean to. He was bringing me to…” Noya’s eyes widened. “Oh shit! Tsukishima!”

Tsukishima raised his head from checking Kunimi’s condition. “What?”

“My sperm donor is going to ambush whoever is going to the pretty place I was held at!”

Tsukishima looked bewildered for a moment – Hinata thought he mouthed Noya’s words silently back at him—and exchanged a weird look with Kageyama.

“The fuck?” Kageyama asked, recovering first. “How would they even know we would be going there? I mean, how would they know we knew where to go when we were all working on guess work??”

“Don’t ask me! Kunimi mentioned it when he came to take me elsewhere!”

“Can we trust his word?” Tsukishima asked, his expression severe. “It’s too easy. Again. And I wouldn’t trust anything that came out of his mouth. We might not even be in this mess if it weren’t for him!”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Kageyama said darkly. He glared at Kunimi. “I trusted him too.”

“You still had the good sense not to brain him completely. If it had been me who had gotten my hands on him…”
“Ugh!” Noya threw his arms up, almost hitting Hinata with them. “We don’t have time! We need to do something!”

“Fine!” Tsukishima spat out and then pointed at Hinata. “You! Stay here. Nishinoya-senpai, you too.” Noya moved to protest but Tsukishima cut him off before he could voice anything. “You’re a prime example of hostage material and I am not going on any more rescue missions after this! This was not what I signed for and I’m not going back for anyone after this! Not a soul! Especially you if you get caught on purpose this time.”

Noya’s jaw clicked shut loudly. He nodded sullenly even if he seemed to want to argue so bad he steamed. Tsukishima nodded back, eyes hard.

Kageyama sighed.

“Please, keep an eye on Hinata so his condition doesn’t worsen,” he asked. Hinata wanted to complain but, truthfully, he would convince no one. Even he knew that. Kageyama’s eyes hardened. They looked like Tsukishima’s in a sense. “Also, keep an eye on Kunimi. We don’t want him to get away.”

Noya nodded in agreement. He eyed disdainfully at the slumped figure.

Kageyama and Tsukishima quickly dragged Kunimi to the room where the rest of Twilight men were still tied up, and left him there.

“He has a concussion now but is no worse off than Hinata,” Tsukishima said quickly. “Watch him.”

“Tsukishima!” Kageyama called, hurrying him up. After a quick nod, they disappeared through the door, Kageyama’s back the last thing Hinata saw before the door shut behind them.

Hinata sighed forlornly and his anger spiked.

He hated this feeling of being left behind. Kageyama was always a step ahead of him. The tournament in junior high school, his superior volleyball skills, his innane ability to master everything physical – although Hinata wasn’t far behind him, really! —, the frigging youth camp! Even know he was moving forward while Hinata was forced to stay behind. It was a bit childish to think so but, still-

Never again, he swore to himself.

Never again.

***

Kiyoko panted. She was exhausted. Track had never been this exhausting, and her athletic abilities were a bit rusty despite the recent crash courses. Or maybe she just wasn’t used to running around for hours on end. The adrenaline was slowly leaving her.

She was so, so tired.

She still rose from where she had been knocked down. She glanced quickly around, taking shelter from the firing squad. Ukai had just taken down someone. She couldn’t see what condition he was in but to get so close to them, she doubted he was left unscathed. Asahi was also there as he had rushed in like a bull towards a fighter waving a cloth at him. Daichi was crouching on someone, and Tanaka and Saeko were tag teaming what looked like a set of twins. The three clan members that came with them were shooting at those who were still firing at them. She couldn’t see where Ennoshita was.
It was a mad world out here and she was part of it.

One of the men shooting at them seemed to be sneaking behind a ruined couch. He had something in his hands. From Kiyoko’s point of view, it didn’t look like a gun but…

No, that was a phone.

Was he calling for reinforcements?!

Kiyoko couldn’t let that happen. They were hard pressed here too and more people rushing in would surely mean their death – or worse. She began sneaking towards the couch, biting her lips. She tasted blood.

Oh, if all those people clamouring her looks were here to see her now.

She moved as quietly as she could. She was almost there-

A bullet whistled right by her ear and she ducked, knocked down a table to cover for her. Her heart was pounding.

Oh.

Oh oh oh.

Had that come just a little bit closer, it would’ve hit her head. She would be dead.

Kiyoko drew in a shaky breath before resuming her trek. She could panic later. She had to stay calm. She would. She had to. She was the one who kept her team up for months on end during training. This was nothing.

This should be nothing.

She spoke encouragements to herself, fuelling her will and energy. She could do this.

She reached the couch.

The man there was crouched low. His head was turned in the other direction. He was reloading his gun, phone nowhere to be seen. Oh gosh, what if he already…?! Or had Kiyoko hallucinated? The gun clicked shut and then the man moved, narrowed his eyes and pointed his gun at Tanaka’s unprotected back.

He hadn’t yet noticed Kiyoko.

She couldn’t let this chance go.

Before she could second guess herself, she grabbed the nearest object lying on the ground – which she belatedly realised was a broken antique lamp – and aimed at the man’s head.

***

Narita ran after Yachi and the rest. They were all hoping to find their team members safe and sound – except maybe Akiteru of whom Narita had an increasingly bad opinion. Truth to be told, he had thought Tsukishima’s brother was shady as heck since the beginning. It was hard to trust someone who had stalked them for months even if it was, apparently, to ‘protect them all’.
Yeah, right.

Dark Moon or not, creepy.

Narita would bet his savings that Akiteru cared only about his mission and his fellow clan members and nothing else. He had no ties to the Karasuno as it was now but the heir or whatever.

So, yeah, Narita was pissed off. He still wasn’t above turning Akiteru’s help down, especially when there were his team’s lives at stake. Especially when it was Akiteru’s fault they were here anyway.

Tsuikishima certainly got the better genes of that pool even if Yachi won the pot.

They really lucked out with getting her as their manager. They would take any volleyball tournament by the storm when they finally finished this.

They heard sounds of fighting going on both their left and right side. Yachi glanced at the map, probably calculated their odds, and nodded to herself.

“Left,” she called and they took a sharp turn to the next corridor on the left—and were met with a wall of people going to the same direction as they were, only from another corridor.

They all paused, staring, before Yachi ran forward. She had two people shot down before they woke from their stupor.

Narita followed her lead.

The two groups crashed.

***

After spitting out blood, Ennoshita took a stance and aimed carefully. They had had so many brushes with guns lately that he had taken it to himself to get familiarised with them. Well, if someone counts Youtube’s tutorials during car rides as ‘getting familiarised’. That’s what he did, however. The whole too long journey he had been staring at the way people aimed, took the safety off – or the other way around – and just…

Shot.

He had taken the gun from one of the bodies lying around. He thought it was either Hyuuga or Wakamatsu but he couldn’t be sure. Daichi had been trying to help him out before he bled to death but his gun had been left lying around.

His hands were shaking. Something crashed behind a couch and a cut out yell split the air around them. The men shooting at them froze for a fraction of a second, just as Ennoshita managed to take a good aim.

The safety was off.

He shot.

Ennoshita was pushed back by the force of it and he almost dropped the gun. Darn it, the videos hadn’t been exaggerating about the push back. He watched, almost in slow motion, how his shot met a guy’s chest.
The man dropped like a sack of rocks.

Ennoshita looked on, his face expressionless and his hands steady. He was calm. He was good.

He saw heads turn to his direction.

He took aim.

He shot.

This time, it was evaded but a shot by Takao managed to take that woman down.

He breathed in.

Out.

Aimed.

Shot.

He missed.

In. Out. Aim. Sh-

The gun clicked. The barrel was empty.

Ennoshita dropped his hands, still clutching at the gun. His head felt like it was full of cotton. He sat heavily on the ground, in full view of anyone who wanted to take their lucky shot at him.

He didn’t care.

He had lost the ability to care.

Ennoshita vaguely heard people enter the room and the fight.

He stared ahead, unseeing.

He just killed someone.

He just killed-

He just-

He-

He couldn’t breathe. Someone was shaking him, telling him to calm down, but he couldn’t breathe.

He blacked out.

***

Tanaka felt so relieved when it was Tsukishima and Kageyama who burst in through the door and not anyone else. Or, he wouldn’t have minded if it had been someone else on their side, but the main point was that no more enemies entered the fray. The two worked with brutal efficiency. They had taken the rest of the gun men by surprise and forced them to stop shooting at them. His sister was sporting some sort of wound on her shoulder but she continued despite her grimace. Tanaka himself had a few of close calls but, having been moving around, they had just been grazes.
He was lucky.

He didn’t know how the others were managing. He didn’t have the time to check.

Tanaka saw Kiyoko scramble away from a nearby couch and another man, so big compared to her, send a murderous look at her from his position. He raised something on his hand – was that a lamp? – and aimed it at Kiyoko’s back. Tanaka saw red.

He jumped at the man’s back and knocked him down. The man wasn’t having it, however, and fought back with skill and experience that Tanaka didn’t have. But, Tanaka wasn’t alone. Saeko was there, and so was Tsukishima. Together, the three of them fought tooth and nail against the man but it was hard. The level between their skills was too high. Even Tsukishima was hard pressed against him.

Tanaka panted. He hurt. Oh gosh, how much he hurt. He didn’t know his body could hurt this much.

Time blurred. He had no idea how long they had been fighting. It had probably been only minutes – maybe? – but it felt like hours. They were losing – how were they losing – against just one man. Tanaka couldn’t- Noya- he needed to save Noya-

-and then a radio came from nowhere and smashed against the man’s skull.

Tanaka stood there, watching dumbly, as the man fell forwards towards him and into unconsciousness. He slowly turned towards the direction where the radio had come from.

Kageyama stood there in the most setter-ish stance to ever setter.

Tanaka couldn’t help it.

He burst into a laughter.

His eyes watered.

He felt someone touch his shoulder (Saeko, her favourite perfume, Saeko) but he couldn’t stop.

The sounds of fighting slowly grew to a halt. The doors forcefully hit against the walls when Yamaguchi and Yachi burst in with Narita and Akiteru and were those Oikawa and Iwaizumi with lots of weird dudes?

Oh gosh.

Trust in the volleyball nerds.

They always find a way.

***

While the others were running off to Noya when they heard he was safe, dressing others’ wounds and just plainly catching their breaths, three figures sneaked away in the chaos, dragging a fourth one behind them. They entered a small room – a closet, really – where they unceremoniously dumped the fourth.

The man stopped faking unconsciousness and glared back at them.

Hitoka stood stiffly next to Akiteru and Kei. They were standing side by side in a dark room, closing ranks on Eikou Masaru. The man was bloody and beaten but none of that affected his demeanour.
No, he was still on his knees but his back was straight and he glared at them with his pride intact.

They were all silent, waiting.

The door behind them opened and then closed.

A figure walked in and they opened their ranks enough for the person to come through. Kei stepped forward to be his Shield, Akiteru stood beside him as his Sword and Hitoka took a step back to show deference and watch his back.

Masaru stared at them with his expression dark and his eyes serious. Yet, he still said nothing. He drank in the sight of the newcomer and cursed himself for not being able to off the bastard.

Hitoka spoke. She was, after all, the Voice of the heir. Moon Flower might be the code name chosen by her parents but when she stepped up into an official position, no, that would not be the name she would go with.

She wanted something simpler like her cousins did.

Something that would, one day, elicit fear and respect in their enemies.

Because this?

This was her life she had been raised into and she knew no alternative.

She wasn’t sure she wanted to either.

“I told them that the sun would battle against the moon. The shadow would become greater and darker the brighter the light was. Alone, the shadow might disappear, but shadows are never alone. They follow the light, gather strength and wait for the right moment. And did you know? The reflection is the most powerful weapon of them all.”

Hitoka watched the man draw a breath and smile. She pursed her lips, and continued.

“The more you fight us, the more we fight back. And those with more to lose will always prevail.”

She let her words reverberate around the room and disappear into nothingness. The newcomer stepped forward to stand next to Kei and took the spot in front of Eikou Masaru, a gun steady in his hand pointing at the man. He glanced at Kei, who nodded in reassurance. Akiteru bristled behind them slightly, having been bypassed so easily, but he said nothing.

They were with him.

There was no room left for doubts.

“You have been found wanting, Eikou Masaru, and the judgement has passed. In the name of the Dark Moon, you are sentenced to death to finish what was started years ago,” she stared at the man in front of them.

“Good night.”

A single shot was heard in the dark.

Before they could be missed, the four returned to their comrades, leaving behind the crumbling remains of the Eikou empire for others to find.
Suga waited for the news with Kinoshita and Takeda-sensei. It was grating on their nerves, even more so than his mother had been. He had actually snapped rather badly at her and forced her to retreat from the hospital since he had caused a scene. His father had given him one lingering look before he had left too to see to his wife.

The look had been one Suga couldn’t, and wouldn’t, forget.

(I am proud of you. Take care. You’re ready to face the world and come on top and I will never chain you down.)

It took hours.

It was already dark when Takeda-sensei’s phone rang and he fumbled to answer it in his haste. The second they waited for the person to speak felt longer than the waiting they had already done.

“Karasuno is alive. We are all alive,” Yachi told them softly, voice tired but there was a triumphant tone to it. “We did it.”

Kinoshita collapsed to his wheelchair and sobbed, Takeda-sensei could barely hold to his phone as he shook and Suga…

Suga sat straight and stared outside at the moon. He felt calmer than ever before. The ocean inside him was finally at peace. They had won.

There were tears sliding down his cheeks but he didn’t bother wiping them off. They reminded him he was alive to see this happen.

They had broken the pattern.

Finally.

It was over.

Chapter End Notes

And then there was one left.

I thought about dividing this into two chapters since I could've gotten the other one out earlier (I was working on other projects) but I thought, um, nah. Did it seem like things happened too fast? Too easy? Well, Karasuno are mainly just kids with a specialised mission to save Noya. Katsuko, SD and DM did most of the hard work, haha.

It wasn't really easy. Not at all. A lot happened behind the scenes. Karasuno just cannot know everything since they don't have eyes everywhere.

Last chapter next time, hopefully still in 2k16!
This is as good as it's going to get, my gosh. I've rewritten this chapter five times and I just can't anymore. Ugh. This was probably the hardest chapter to keep the characters, like, in character.

But, anyway, I hope you'll enjoy this final installment!

This chapter is dedicated to all you lovely readers of mine, and especially to the wonderful Arghnon who has stayed with me since the beginning and given me the loveliest of comments the whole ride!

It was over.

The spring tournament was over. Hinata took a deep but shaky breath in before exhaling, tears running down his cheeks. They didn’t manage to win but they came in third which… was actually pretty good. It felt so good but also disappointing but so good.

New year, new life. Definitely.

And they managed to even win the Battle of the Garbage Heap and beat Nekoma.

Hinata wasn’t really sure how that happened either. Their team was really patchy right now. Suga and Kinoshita were in no condition to play so they were down to one setter which brought huge pressure on Kageyama. They tried to train Yamaguchi to manage setting just so Kageyama could get a bit of a break from time to time but it didn’t really work out well. Nishinoya came to help, though, so if Kageyama had to be taken off court for a couple of turns, they managed not to lose miserably. They did once lose a set because of it and no one had been that happy about that, least of all those three.

Although those turns hadn’t been that much fun either for anyone; those on court and those off it. Kageyama had been grinding his teeth and spitting fire while waiting for the tremors on his hands to stop, the same as everyone else. Hinata understood. It was hard to take a break when you knew you were needed and he had to admit he resented it a little when he exchanged places with Noya even if he knew liberos were needed and Noya was more useful at the back of the court than he was. It wasn’t rational, but it still happened.

Thankfully, Suga was there in the stands with Yachi to keep a handle on the things there, yelling encouragements and threats at those acting stupid. Hinata had been on the receiving end for more times than he wanted to count. Suga’s leg was still in a cast and he was no longer an official member of the team – his mother had made sure of it – but he was still a member to them all and no one was going to keep him from coming to the matches and cheering louder than anyone.

And if he was spending time at their practices, well, no one was about to tattletale about it to anyone. Luckily, Suga’s dad was on their side and covered for him when his mother got into her head that Suga wasn’t where he should have been.
Their former reverse setter counted days before he could move out to attend university.

Hinata didn’t really know how Shimizu was doing because they weren’t particularly close but Tanaka was still as superb wing spiker as Daichi was a receiver. Both had managed to become stronger than ever and keep up with everything. They were really one of the saving graces of the team, Hinata thought. He really admired how calm they were, how they were able to support and be there for the whole team.

It was amazing. *They* were amazing.

In addition, Saeko had become a pretty permanent figure at Tanaka’s side after it all went down, and she had been seen dragging some other guy around too. Hinata thought he looked familiar but he wasn’t sure from where. Tanaka didn’t take to it too kindly, though. He could be heard cursing and yelling when Saeko wasn’t there to hear. He wasn’t stupid enough to do so in her presence.

Asahi was also doing pretty, well, okay too, although his performance went from good to bad to back to good really fast. Hinata had to pick up a lot of slack from him and, by this point, it was pretty obvious to onlookers that Asahi no longer was the true ace of the team. It was a shift in power that Hinata hadn’t anticipated and had taken hold of quite reluctantly. Asahi was still dependable and a powerhouse but it was also quite clear that if Noya hadn’t stayed in the team, Asahi probably wouldn’t have either. The past month – or months, really – had been really hard on him. Asahi was almost like a shadow of himself. From what Hinata had heard of Daichi, Asahi had suffered some sort of a breakdown when they were off to rescue Noya, and he hadn’t yet recovered, probably wouldn’t for a while either. He could be found staring at spots that had nothing there or having anger issues he hadn’t had ever before which kept alienating him from the general school populace.

Not that Suga or Daichi, or the team, cared about that but those uninvolved, well… It pretty much looked like a big, scary guy had finally snapped which didn’t help Asahi at all. He was trying to handle it by going to a therapist, recommended by Iwaizumi-san, who had been briefed about the circumstances. Ukai had wanted to send them all to her but was quickly rebuffed. He couldn’t force them, although some of them did do as he suggested.

Like Ennoshita.

Noya was badgered hard too but he refused to cooperate. His exact words were that ‘no police could ever understand what he had gone through, and he would rather talk about it to his family who could’. Noya’s mother had taken time off from her work to just be with him and talk to him about his experience. They had also talked about what they had known about the Eikou clan but Hinata didn’t know much about that, only the small bits he had overheard Tanaka and Noya exchange.

Anyway, like Asahi, Ennoshita wasn’t all there either, both on court but mostly off court. He wasn’t much there in the games either. He had barely been at the practices and only after Christmas, a week before the tournament, had come back even if his contribution was rather lacklustre. Hinata had heard he had actually shot someone. He didn’t know if the person had died or not – he suspected Ennoshita didn’t either – but having no way of knowing if he actually had killed another human being must, well, *suck hard*. Hinata himself had managed to not have done so but…

He could imagine it was an awful, awful feeling.

Ennoshita was there to cheer them on too but he was quite subdued, and preferred to sit on the bench. He wasn’t really up to going on the court. Narita kept him company but after their initial days of recuperation he had come back to the practices and now spent more time on the court than before, taking up the slack. There was also Kinoshita who had wanted to come down to show support but could only manage from time to time, and even then he was more likely to be seen at Suga’s side
than anywhere else. A wheelchair wasn’t really practical down on the court.

When they had got back from Tokyo, Daichi had ordered them all to keep three days of mandatory resting from everything, including school. Somehow, he – or the Dark Moon – had managed to get them all excused for those days and have no homework either. Hinata didn’t know how but he didn’t care. All he had done during those days was to send obnoxious texts to his teammates (and Kageyama, lots of messages to Kageyama, because where would that idiot be without Hinata and he might get a little lonely in that big empty house and Hinata really should have just invited him to his house and might have felt just a little bit guilty of having not thought of it before okay) to check they were alright, and hug the living daylights out of Natsu. His parents had been worried about him but Hinata had somehow managed to reassure them too. He was lucky that he didn’t have wounds that were easily seen and those that were could be pretty easily explained.

He may have left a lot unsaid but it was all over, right? It didn’t matter if they didn’t know, right? That’s what Hinata told himself, even if he wasn’t completely convincing even himself.

Only after coming back from saving Noya had he realised how many times and how close to death he had brushed that day. He was lucky to just get a wound on his arm (which was tender for three weeks but luckily on his nondominant arm so he could still spike although he still had to take it easy) and a concussion which is why he was taken off the practice for four more days after the initial three-day ‘holiday’.

He had stewed during those days so hard.

From the other first years, like Tsukishima and Yachi, well, no one really knew how they were handling things or what was going on with them. They had sworn that everything was over but they were acting kind of strange and detached. There was some sort of distance growing between them and the team and Hinata didn’t know what was causing it. He hadn’t seen Akiteru or any of the Dark Moon around either. It was like they had disappeared from the country. Yachi was still doing her best as their manager and smiling and stuff but her smile had become slowly more and more forced. Tsukishima was also doing his best – which was weird, because he was trying really hard – to be the greatest middle blocker he could. He was even actively answering those tosses Kageyama sent his way. Kageyama seemed pretty down too, and he was frequently found checking on the team in a manner he probably thought was inconspicuous. It really wasn’t, especially when he sometimes barked at them to lift their shirts and everything. That didn’t matter when on court, though, and he was just as dependable as always.

Hinata felt a bit silly at letting Kageyama baby him and bully him because of his arm but he kind of also enjoyed the attention, and rarely left his best friend’s side.

Yamaguchi was dealing with things by shadowing Tsukishima even more than usual but also by doing the exact opposite, avoiding him like there was no tomorrow. The mixed signals were very mixed. Hinata didn’t know if he was going to a therapist since Yamaguchi had just said to Ukai that ‘it was under control’. It was a weird thing to say. Hinata himself had gone there a few times but it just wasn’t for him, really. He didn’t really feel traumatised. He understood that some of them were – especially Asahi and Ennoshita – but he wasn’t really feeling the post-trauma, um, past-trauma, no, the PTSD. It was just that he had some trouble falling asleep, really. No big deal. Nightmares belonged to managing it all, didn’t they?

The therapist had said that it might hit him later, possibly after the tournament. Hinata had haltingly agreed. It was certainly possible. The spring tournament had been a goal that kept them all sane during these months. He strongly suspected that Daichi would take a few days off again to just handle everything with Suga, probably taking Asahi with them. The whole team would probably
take a few days off to just… be.

Hinata didn’t know.

He was still living with the adrenaline that hadn’t yet quite left him.

Even if Yachi had said that things were fine, Hinata felt that it still wasn’t completely over. There was something missing.

Like the heir.

They still didn’t know who the heir was.

They didn’t even know much about the aftermath of the ‘Tokyo trip’. When they had managed to fight off the ambush and get Noya (or rather, the rest of Karasuno had managed to fight off the ambush and get Noya and Hinata) they had been rushed out and away from the place. They didn’t know what happened to Kunimi, or Noya’s father, or anyone really. Takeda-sensei had told them that Katsuko didn’t know much either of how things really went down since she had been busy obliterating the barracks. They had been full of the Twilight clansmen apparently, and they had had their hands full with them the whole time with the Special Division.

Hinata had seen Iwaizumi, Oikawa and Kindaichi around a few times but it seemed that they were kept in the dark as well. Kunimi was an open wound to them and having no knowledge of what was going on with him, well, chafed. They did know that the Special Division didn’t have him so had come around to badger Yachi and Tsukishima but to no avail. Either the two of them didn’t know or weren’t willing to – or couldn’t – tell them. Eventually Kindaichi had stopped coming around, and even Iwaizumi, but Oikawa could be seen coming to bother Kageyama from time to time. It didn’t seem that Kageyama was too annoyed so Hinata let him be but if it turned out Oikawa was still just using him…

Well, all bets were off then.

There were a lot of things Hinata didn’t know or understand but there were two things that he did.

One, things weren’t really over.

Two, they still came in third in the spring tournament.

Take that Ushiwaka.

***

The award ceremony felt pretty great. They had been beaten by the Fukurodani Academy which annoyed Hinata a bit (a lot). Their first-year manager seemed to feel pretty under pressure there without Yukie and the whole team seemed a bit gloomy. From what Hinata heard, the third-year manager had seemingly just disappeared into thin air without a message. He hoped he kept on a sympathetic expression but it had been super hard.

Hinata had no idea what happened to her either. Or Eikou Tadao, or even Eikou Masaru. He suspected they were alive, though, since – according to Tsukishima and Yachi – the Dark Moon’s code of conduct rarely included murder.

The whole tournament felt like a dream. They had been running on fumes but the desire to see it through the end was stronger than any force pulling them down. They had taken the first match by the storm but by the time they had met Fukurodani, they had lost. Nekoma had lost to Itachiyama
too, so Karasuno and Nekoma had battled for the third place and Karasuno had only narrowly come on top.

Hinata had felt Kenma’s eyes on him the whole match. They hadn’t had time to talk to each other since December but Hinata would make sure they would after the tournament. He owed Kenma that much and he really didn’t want their friendship to die out. He had also seen Kuroo keep an eye on Tsukishima but that might’ve been because a lot of the match was about Tsukishima and Kuroo’s blocking battle.

Still, they had won in the end with a perfect spike delivered by Asahi. Hinata felt a bit bitter that Kageyama hadn’t sent it to him but, well, he would have the last spike when the next year came around. And Asahi seemed pretty cheerful about it all, so Hinata was just happy they came in third.

Next year, they would come in first.

Fukurodani won with Itachiyama coming in second. They had all stood in line and they had cried. Hinata had cried a lot. Elation and disappointment waged war inside of him but he decided to just be happy. He wanted to yell at everyone to see how much they had accomplished, how much they had suffered to just be there. They had gained so much shit for being newbies in the tournament, really, and no one had expected them to win their first match, let alone come in third and they had done it after everything.

Hinata felt so fricking proud he could have exploded. He saw Kinoshita’s determination to be there with them and Suga’s sad but proud expression. He heard Asahi’s free laugh and Noya answer it. He saw Tanaka jump in the air and Ennoshita smile brightly. Ukai and Takeda-sensei were crying against each other and Shimizu was hugging Yachi. Tsukishima tried to look bored but with Yamaguchi bawling next to him he just looked uncomfortable. And Hinata hadn’t let Kageyama go since the score had been read. The happiness they both excluded was the highlight of his day.

He had caught up, kind of. Next year, they would both attend the Youth Camp and they would win it all. Hinata raised his fist and Kageyama knocked it with his own.

Yeah, they would do it.

Hinata closed his eyes and smiled.

***

Tokyo, a place they had both fond memories and those they wanted to forget.

The training camps.

The Noya Rescue Mission.

The spring tournament.

It was getting behind them and Hinata couldn’t be happier – or more tired. He clung to the window on his right and watched as it disappeared from the view. The whole team was merry; tired but chipper. Kageyama next to him was actually trying to nap.

“Third place! Third place! Third place!” Tanaka and Nishinoya chanted from the backrow of the minibus Takeda-sensei drove. Hinata could hear the teacher sniffle and blow his nose from where he sat. Ennoshita, Kinoshita and Narita sat in the back too, and they were having a blast. Daichi smiled indulgently and Suga laughed with Asahi. Ukai was snoring while Yamaguchi was trying to entice Tsukishima into a conversation. Shimizu was also discussing things with Yachi, both smiling and
giggling over whatever they were saying.

Hinata’s heart swelled just before he dropped to lean against Kageyama and fell asleep in just a second.

He was just really tired.

***

Hinata yawned. He had been stopped by his way to class so many times. They were the heroes of Karasuno high school! Plus assorted others. They had brought Karasuno back on the map, Miyagi too from under Shiratorizawa’s shadow, and Hinata would bet that, come next year, they would get more people applying for the volleyball club than before. Everyone was going crazy about their victory! Hinata was going crazy about it too but he had to admit he was pretty exhausted. The past months and the tournament had eaten almost all his energy. He tried to stay awake in class which turned out to be a hard task and he had to admit he failed a few times. He didn’t get punished, though, but he was also quite sure it was a special occasion kind of deal.

He was also very surprised that the vice-principal had recognised him – in a good light anyway – and congratulated him. Hinata tried very hard not to mess up because doing things to the vice-principal’s wig – again, even by accident – would have been suicidal despite being a hero of the school. Hinata skipped with tired elation to meet his team during the lunch since they wouldn’t be having practice for the week, enjoying the fruit of their efforts. He felt like whistling.

If only he knew how.

Darn it.

He blew a raspberry instead.

There. Take that.

He hummed and rushed into the gym where he found Daichi clutching at some papers. His face was blank but Hinata could see the strain on it. He exchanged a worried look with Yamaguchi who had arrived just behind him. They were the first ones there aside from Suga, who was the one to notice their arrival.

“Did you know?!” he demanded, hopping towards them with his crutches. Hinata blinked.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Probably not since you had to ask…”

“Hinata the sass master,” Yamaguchi snickered. Daichi snapped out of whatever stupor he was and his brows creased deeper than Hinata had seen in a long while.

“We have some… resignation letters here,” he said, suspiciously delicate. Yamaguchi looked puzzled.

“From you third-years, right? Since you need to focus on your exams and such.”

Suga shook his head. “No, not from us. Asahi and Daichi were going to write theirs but…” Daichi thrusted the papers at Hinata who stumbled not to drop them.

“Read.”

Hinata blinked but did as he was told.
“Resignation form, Tsukishima Kei…” he said aloud. Yamaguchi’s attention snapped to him.


“Go on,” Daichi said tersely.

Hinata looked at the next one. “There’s one from Yachi-san too?” Hinata looked up. “This has something to do with the Dark Moon, doesn’t it?”

Daichi and Suga shared a grim look. “We think so. There’s one more.”

Hinata felt dread crawl down his spine. With shaky hands, he started reading the last paper. His eyes widened.

“Resignation form, Kageyama Tobio.”

***

Hinata ran. He didn’t care that he would miss class, it didn’t fricking matter. Kageyama quit? Kageyama? That couldn’t be true. That just-, it just couldn’t be true. Kageyama, the heir? He couldn’t accept it. He could accept anyone else being the heir but him.

*(What am I without my best friend? My setter?)*

Hinata shook his head and continued to push forward. Yamaguchi was running right next to him, also missing some key details. They were trying to reach Kageyama’s house since it was probably where they could find their missing teammates if they were anywhere to be found. They wanted answers. They *needed* answers.

Why did they quit?

Why now?

*Why?*

Whispers of things Hinata hadn’t noticed before, had willingly looked over, and thought as just Kageyama being Kageyama filled his mind. The little things he said and did, everything he didn’t, they seemed to match the little puzzle that made the setter who he was.

Only now did he recognise the missing piece in the middle.

Hinata gasped and drew to a halt, Yamaguchi falling in step with him. He heaved and forced himself to stand straight. There was someone locking up the Kageyama household which had its curtains drawn and all lights shut off. It looked somehow missing something vital, and Hinata only then realised-

It was life.

The house felt empty because there was no one there.

The person turned around and-

“Akiteru-san!” Yamaguchi called out and ran towards him. The man looked up and there seemed to be quite a few expressions warring on his face. Hinata ignored them in order to follow Yamaguchi. They stopped just in front of the black car on the curb, effectively stopping Akiteru from leaving.
Akiteru leaned against the gate with his arms crossed.

“Shouldn’t you two be at school?”

“Where’s Kageyama?!?” Hinata burst out, ignoring his words, and Akiteru wrinkled his nose in distaste.

“I fail to see how that is any of your business where the King is.”

Yamaguchi froze.

“King?” he asked softly. “You guys call him King?”

Akiteru shrugged.

“King, the game changer, all of that amount to the same thing anyway. It’s not like we could advertise it.”

“I thought the nickname came from being called the King of the Court…”

Akiteru shrugged again, and his stance relaxed. His smile was crooked and slightly amused when he cocked his head. “It didn’t but it certainly didn’t endear it to him. He is the King of our board, though, and definitely the Queen of yours. You’d be nothing without his influence.”

“That’s rude!” Hinata gaped, even if-, “The third years-”

“-would never have gotten the chance to prove their skills without him, you would still be just a midget and the second years would still run drills and maybe even quit,” Akiteru listed meanly. “You don’t have to agree with the sentiment. We just needed to keep him under the wraps and this left people guessing, evident from the fact that it was Yamaguchi here and Sugawara who proved to be a good front.”

Yamaguchi gasped, his expression broken. Hinata bristled.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!”

Akiteru blinked, looked at Yamaguchi, before sighing and rubbing his hand over his eyes.

“I’m sorry. It’s been… a long day.”

Hinata was instantly alert. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing that concerns you anymore. I suppose you’re here because of the resignation letters?”

Hinata nodded, Yamaguchi shadowing his movement. “This is us, washing our hands of you. Nothing against you, you did help out before my impromptu holiday but the situation is what it is.”

“Is it the Twilight again?” Yamaguchi insisted. Akiteru sighed again.

“What part of-, fine, yes. It is. You really want to know? They attacked King’s parents yesterday in broad daylight. They are in a critical condition, and if Twilight has gone off the deep end, well… Because of that, Tobio-sa-, no, King had to return where he belongs. He doesn’t have the time to waste playing juvenile sports and a normal teenager.”

Critic-, what? Play, critical condition, waste, what?

“Wh- cr-, play-?!?”
“Yes, play,” Akiteru interrupted Hinata’s spluttering. “Do you know realise what that attack was? It was a declaration of war. King’s grandfather is in no condition to take the reins anymore, so his parents were holding the position until he was of age but now, well, there is no one else.”

“But, weren’t you-?” Yamaguchi motioned at him.

“I was no good. King will do a better job at it that I did. And that is purely the Dark Moon’s business and not yours. The only reason I’m even giving you this much is because that’s pretty much what King wanted to tell you himself. Here.” Akiteru dug into his pockets and fished out a paper of some kind. A letter. When Hinata was busy grabbing it, Akiteru pushed through him and Yamaguchi to his car.

“Have at it. I was supposed to drop it to his locker but you being here helps me out.”


Akiteru glanced at him, and entered his car.

“What do you think?”

And so Hinata and Yamaguchi were left to stand on the street, alone, with a little piece of paper on them and nothing but heavy hearts keeping them company.

***

They arrived back in school just in time for the final bell to ring the end of the day.

The team was waiting for them in the gym.

“Is it true?” Noya demanded when they entered the building. “Was he really…?”

“Kageyama was the heir,” Yamaguchi said shortly. “Akiteru was there but only him.”

“Why?!” Tanaka yelled in frustration. “Everything was over and done with! Why now?!”

(I hope this letter finds you well.)

“But it wasn’t over,” Hinata whispered. His hands were shaking. “It’s only starting.”

(There are many things I want to say but I’ll try to keep it short.)

“Hinata, what do you know that we don’t?” Suga asked gently.

(A war is coming.)

“It’s-” Hinata licked his lips. They felt so dry. He thought of the letter in his pocket, its contents burning in his mind. “The Twilight. They attacked Kageyama’s parents who were handling things until he was ready. The attack forced his hand.”

(I’m sorry. I never wanted this to happen.)

“He had to leave,” Yamaguchi continued where Hinata left off, “just like Tsukki and Yachi. They didn’t have a choice. A war is coming between Dark Moon and Twilight, dragging in their allies, and they left before we were caught in the middle of it all.”

(There is a storm brewing on the horizon. I’m not trying to be cryptic but… it’s going to be bad. If
“They just wanted to play volleyball,” Hinata said sadly. “Kageyama finally found a team that cared about him.”

(I have never felt more at home than at Karasuno. Thank you.)

Yamaguchi sighed. “Tsukki finally learnt to love volleyball.” He, to the surprise of the team, punched the wall in his anger. “He left me behind. Me! For Kageyama! I—"

(Kei told me to say he’s sorry too. And Hitoka. Don’t blame them, blame me. They wouldn’t have been there without—)

“It’s not Kageyama’s fault!” Hinata snapped. Yamaguchi glared at him but sighed. He looked older than his young years.

(The tradition dictates our moves. It’s not necessary a bad thing, not always. We were raised into this so you should know that we don’t really resent it. It might look bad for outsiders but, well… In this case, only firstborns are considered as heirs and because Akiteru gave up his position—)

“I know, but… He left me.” Yamaguchi looked lost.

(It was a surprise how much the team grew on us. I am speaking for all of us when I say ‘thank you’. Without you, we wouldn’t—)

Hinata felt miserable. “I know.”

(I’m sorry.)

“So, this is Karasuno and its future. Four second years, of which two are wing spikers and one a middle blocker and another a libero – maybe five, if Kinoshita recovers – and two first years, one a wing spiker and the other a middle blocker,” Narita said as he counted and smiled sardonically, “Doesn’t exactly raise confidence for new players to come if they could see us now. How much a day can do to us.”

(You are strong, and will be stronger without us dragging you down. Miraculously, information about your role in the December fiasco wasn’t discovered. You were erased from the records, and most of those who knew are either dead or our prisoners. I suspect Kozume and—)

Hinata deflated.

(Burn this letter when you’ve read it.)

“Then we just need to get them back, don’t we?” Daichi said casually. Suga shrugged, smiling.

(Don’t look for us.)

“We’ve got a bit over three months before the new school year starts. Think it’s enough time to stop a war?”

Hinara blinked. “You mean…?”

“It is as you said. Kageyama finally found a team for himself, Tsukishima finally learnt to enjoy volleyball and… Hitoka-chan finally found friends,” Shimizu smiled determinedly. “We wouldn’t be much of a team if we just let them go without a fight. And I refuse to train another manager. I chose Hitoka-chan and I will have no other to succeed myself.”
“Only the best for Karasuno, right?” Tanaka grinned. “Besides, we got Noya back and Kinoshita would never forgive us if we just forgot about them. We’ve got connections now. How about we use them?”

Ennoshita looked like he had wanted to protest but his mouth clicked shut with the mention of Kinoshita.

Hope started flaring inside of Hinata. “Do you think we could…?”

“I really doubt Oikawa is going to be happy to hear Kageyama disappeared under his watch. He just might mention it to his father,” Noya mused. Asahi was frowning, sending worried looks at their libero, but he kept quiet.

“We could always ask Tanaka’s sister how her date is going on with Hyuuga-san.”

Tanaka looked like he had sucked on a lemon. “Fine!”

“For the greater good!” Noya cheered and winked.

“I can ask Kenma if he knows anything,” Hinata breathed out. His smile was blinding.

It could work.

*They* could work.

*(We wish you well.)*

They had about three months to win a war.

They could do it.

They *had* to do it.

*(Goodbye.)*

Because Hinata refused to leave anyone behind.

“We are coming,” he declared and the others cheered along with him darkly.

They won one war, they could do it again.

Hinata pulled out his phone, punched some of the numbers, and waited for the dial to connect.

No time like the present to create their own pattern.

Chapter End Notes

Beware, wall of text, final thoughts and some explanations.

It has been a long ride. I won't say I'm completely satisfied with everything but it got me into writing again so goal achieved :) I'm probably coming back to this later, fixing mistakes, rewriting stuff, but it was never going to be perfect. Having not written in years anything besides academic texts does that. It was also a challenge to write in,
what, 16 different points of view? Some of them were harder than the others but I think it worked alright. In addition, because I wrote in so many POVs, some details may have stayed too vague since different people notice different things and may only think to inform some, or even none of the team. What I tried was to have every POV mean something, like have a clue on what's going to happen and stuff. Some things were there to mislead, if only because no one is right all the time. Like the Yamaguchi/Suga mistake made by Yukie, which in turn influenced the rest of the Eikou's interpretation. I did try to keep the characters as in character as I could (of course, they evolve, so...) and none of them gave you false information about themselves, only about some things they may have seen. I did also try to write the story so it would have some rereading value, haha, with missing clues and such. I hope I managed.

Things I wanted to clear up but didn't have the chance: Kageyama and Tsukishima families have had similar ideologies for years but they only merged together after K's grandfather had an 'accident'. Safety in numbers, and easier to enforce a code of conduct, right? From the mainlines, Akiteru was the heir because he was older but he fucked up pretty spectacularly and 'resigned'. K, as the next in line, took the mantle as they had no chance of passing it to Tsukishima (second son), much to T's relief. This happened during K, T and Y's junior high school years. The Twilight was created to oppose the Dark Moon after its formation, and it is formed by different clans that were forced to disband by the K and T clans. The DM are not completely good guys; what they are doing is basically policing the underground and deciding where the line is drawn, others be damned, and the Twilight is made from those whose lives they have destroyed.

I left the ending open, like I always intended. Sorry about that. I like this 'verse, so I may come back to it with shorter installments. So, did I leave something unexplained? Was something left too unclear? I can answer questions if you want something clarified. Rereading may, however, answer a lot of those since you can look at the POVs differently now ;)

Tl;dr, I hope you had a nice ride! I had a blast writing this. It reminded me why I loved - and love - writing and how I can never be too busy for a little story time.

Thank you all!
-R

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!