The Fish Who Swallowed the Sun

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/35827384.

Rating: <u>Mature</u>

Archive Warning: <u>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</u>

Category: M/M
Fandom: Haikyuu!!

Relationships: Hinata Shouyou/Kageyama Tobio, Kozume Kenma/Kuroo Tetsurou,

Akaashi Keiji/Bokuto Koutarou, Iwaizumi Hajime/Oikawa Tooru, Miya Atsumu/Sakusa Kiyoomi, Tsukishima Kei/Yamaguchi Tadashi, Shimizu Kiyoko/Tanaka Ryuunosuke, Kageyama Miwa & Kageyama Tobio, Kageyama Kazuyo & Kageyama Miwa & Kageyama Tobio, Kageyama Kazuyo & Kageyama Tobio, Hinata Natsu & Hinata Shouyou, Hinata

Natsu & Kageyama Miwa, Tendou Satori/Ushijima Wakatoshi

Characters: <u>Kageyama Tobio, Hinata Shoyou, Kageyama Miwa, Kageyama Kazuyo,</u>

Tsukishima Kei, Yamaguchi Tadashi, Yachi Hitoka, Kenma Kozume, Kuroo Tetsurou, Bokuto Koutarou, Akaashi Keiji, Oikawa Tooru, Iwaizumi Hajime, Miya Atsumu, Sakusa Kiyoomi, Kageyama Tobio's Parents, Kageyama Tobio's Family, Ushijima Wakatoshi, Tendou Satori,

Hoshiumi Kourai

Additional Tags: Post-Time Skip, Mentioned MSBY Black Jackals, Schweiden Adlers -

Freeform, Angst, Pining, Mutual Pining, Post-Canon, Yearning, Proposals, Social Media, Texting, Complicated Relationships, Angst with a Happy Ending, Introspection, Character Study, Symbolisms, Long-Distance Relationship, Not exactly relationships, Masturbation, Sex, Smut, Fluff, Flashbacks, Non-Linear Narrative, Family Issues, Kageyama Tobio-centric, Awkward Kageyama Tobio, Pro Volleyball Player Kageyama Tobio, Pro Volleyball Player Hinata Shouyou,

Asexuality Spectrum, Humor, Angst and Humor, everyone else is in the

background except kagehina, Original Character(s)

Language: English

Series: Part 1 of Yesterday, You Were the Defeated. What Have You Become

Today?

Collections: <u>Kagehina Big Bang 2021, BHF, Masterpiece Haikyuu fics that deserves</u>

recognition , Good for the Heart Pills, i'm in love with these

fics, i'm crying, hot and sexy shoyo so true canon actually (truth)

successful shoyo happy shoyo the only shoyo

Stats: Published: 2021-12-20 Completed: 2021-12-22 Words: 104,466

Chapters: 3/3

The Fish Who Swallowed the Sun

by awesomecookies

Summary

It's 2022 leading up to the FIVB World Championship in Palalottomatica Rome. Hinata is in Brazil, while Kageyama is in Rome, waiting to cross paths once again and meet in front of the court. As the days towards one of the promised days draw closer than ever, Kageyama thinks about his relationship with Hinata and considers the path they took to get there as well as what path to take next in the future.

Notes

Shout out to the beautiful art that comes with this piece from the wonderful Sal, and my beta Nicki who helped loads on this project! I'd tag stuff and make the format properly when i get a more stable connection, which might be a month from now, who knows? but for now I wanted to post the thing we all worked hard on!!

• Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: <u>【授权翻译】飞鱼吞日</u> by <u>SinSunrise</u>

Chapter 1

"I am a star, a twinkling star. I'm an infant on the edge of a grave and an old man in a cradle, both a fish in the sky and a bird in the sea. I'm a boy on the outside but a girl on the inside, innocent in body, guilty in soul."

— Fridrik Erlings, Fish in the Sky

"Look Tobio, it's you!"

Somewhere, sometime when Tobio was no older than four and his world revolved around his home where his grandfather often came over to watch over them when his parents weren't around, and the confines of a warm lit gymnasium with the smell of air salonpas and the sound of balls hitting palms and bouncing off the floor, his sister showed him a picture. It was a fish out of the water and flying into the sky from a picture book she borrowed from the library.

Correction — it was jumping out of the water. *Fish don't fly, silly,* Miwa explained to him while laughing. She had this mischievous look in her eye when she talked to Tobio, like she was talking to a child who didn't understand the ways of the world yet even long after Tobio had grown into adulthood, like she spoke of secrets Tobio would never learn, some cosmic joke she couldn't be bothered to share. In a way, she was. There were nine years between them, and sometimes Tobio didn't really understand her. But Tobio liked her, Miwa's coolness and mischief coexisting. Plus, she played volleyball, and little Tobio, barely past four, would understand her then.

Tobio was no older than nine when he learned about the flying fish, Tobiuo (飛魚), which was similar sounding to how his name was pronounced, *Tobio*. The tobiuo jumps from the water to avoid its predators and can stay midair for at least 45 seconds, but they retract their wings when they are in the water. They are also attracted to light, thus making them easy to catch.

Miwa told him once that he was a fish in the sky, and Tobio stood there confused over what it meant.

Kazuyo-san told him it was because he had yet to find a place where he could belong, but that he shouldn't worry because he was going to find that place soon. Tobio didn't say anything, not that he usually did, but he knew one thing: he already knew where he belonged. Tobio belonged on the court, he belonged wherever volleyball was; after all, his grandfather played volleyball and his sister too. These were all that he loved. There had always been him, Kazuyo-san, Miwa, and there had been volleyball.

So he really didn't mind.

Tobio waded into the air instead of the water.

"Kageyamaaaaa-kun, you still there?"

Tobio blinked his eyes open, unwittingly distracted while his mind wandered off somewhere else

He reminded himself where he was, and what he was doing.

He was in Rome, in Italy, playing for Ali Roma and just about to go out for lunch when Hinata called. Hinata, who often called him since he came back to Japan five years ago when the two years of separation were over, and they've maintained contact with each other again ever since. He liked to talk despite the eight-hour difference between them, and at some point, it had become a routine of theirs to talk at least once a week even when Hinata had left Japan two seasons later back to Brazil, somehow ingrained in their habits.

And what was Tobio but a man made up of habits?

"Kageyama, don't space out while I'm talking." The sound of Hinata's disgruntled voice came as a whine through his phone. Tobio was in those rare moments where the locker room was empty, so he had accepted Hinata's call and had put him on loudspeaker while he changed.

"I didn't." He did

"Liar." Hinata clicked his tongue. He was probably sticking his tongue out, Tobio could imagine if he closed his eyes and pretend he was in a different time, maybe six years earlier in an old worn-out gym that had floorboards instead of vulcanized rubber; the novelty of the flooring had worn off — teenage Tobio had once been excited about it—playing on wooden flooring again at this age would be nostalgic. He preferred the rubber courts though for sure.

"I said, the next FIVB World Cup Championship is going to be held in Rome, isn't it?" Hinata was huffing heavier than usual. He must be on his usual morning roadwork. If Tobio listened more carefully, he could hear the sound of waves. He must be on the beach then.

"Yeah, in Palalottomatica." Despite roughly living in the country for three years, the foreign word still felt unfamiliar as it rolled off his tongue. Tobio had played some matches there, though, so there was some kind of familiarity to the place at least. It was big. Hinata would be ecstatic to see it.

"How about I come and drop by for a visit?"

Tobio stopped filing his nails at the words, another ritual of his every after practice. The distant sound of his teammates shuffling in the shower rooms and making small talk made its way to Tobio's ears while he mulled over what Hinata had offered.

"I said— *ah desculpe por isso, sim*—" There was shuffling in the background and more faded Portuguese which Tobio couldn't hope to understand. "Anyway, since the finals are held on your home turf, wouldn't you like it if I came over for a visit after the matches? You do have your own apartment, right?"

"Ah, yes." Tobio thought about his place. It wasn't too untidy, but that meant he would need to clean it up just to be sure. The last thing he wanted was to give Hinata any ammunition to tease him with.

"Great. I'll see you after the match after we crush you." Hinata's laugh was still as loud and lively as when they were in high school. He supposed nothing about him really changed even when placed in a new country. Though it wasn't really new, was it? Brazil was probably a second home to Hinata by now.

"What's with that confidence?" Tobio snickered. "Are you even going to be the starting player when we meet?"

"Oh, I will be. Are you saying you won't?"

"Of course I will be, dumbass."

"Then there shouldn't be a problem. I'll see you later in Rome," Hinata said as if it was fact, like he'd known for sure it would happen. He always declared things with confidence even if they didn't work out the way he said it would, or the way he wanted it to be. There was frustration, yes, some manifesting longer than others but then he would pick himself up and calm down later. He always said things like it was fact, like it was the truth. You couldn't help believing him when he said he'd get something done. He talked like he was always making promises.

Tobio knew first hand he always did keep his promises.

"I saw your last game by the way," Hinata added, and there was more shuffling in the background, a faint sound of a door creaking open. He must be in his gym now, right on time for morning practice. "Six service aces on the third set. Absolutely ridiculous. Disgusting as always. You were trending a little on Twitter."

"Didn't know about that."

"Oh, you did. Every now and then you go trending. There was Rio at first. *The 19-year-old pinch server who let loose service aces after service aces. Kageyama Tobio wins the heart of the masses.*" Hinata snickered. "Then apparently you trended again during the Tokyo Olympics too. Someone found your curry commercial and meme'd the hell out of it. It went viral after a few hours. You're good meme material."

Was he? Tobio didn't do social media. It got in the way of volleyball. His phone was pretty much only used for messages and calls these days—that was what a phone was generally for anyway.

"I don't know why that is."

"It's your face." Hinata laughed from the other side of the call.

"Ha?" he frowned, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Someone made a thread of how terrifying you look on court vs. how much of an airhead you are out of it. I had to retweet that. All our friends did too. Everyone needed to know how much of a dumbass you really are." Hinata sounded like he was grinning; his breathing was labored but he still had the energy to laugh.

"You're the dumbass." Tobio rolled his eyes.

"You're totally rolling your eyes now, aren't you?" Hinata called him out yet again. "Like I'd allow only you to go trending for getting five service aces in a row. You'll see, I'll do ten service aces and then I'll be more famous than you."

"Hm. Love to see you try." Tobio packed his nail clippers and nail file back into his travel-sized bag.

"Just you wait. When we meet on the court, I'll shove those serves of yours up your ass."

Tobio opened his mouth to quip back a retort, but some of his teammates started to file in the room after showering and it was starting to get noisy. Hinata too seemed to have reached his locker rooms and was ready to start his day with practice.

"I shouldn't keep you long," Tobio concluded. His bag was packed and ready, and he needed to get lunch.

"Yeah. I need to shower anyway. And—oh! Hey Lucas!" He yelled something in Portuguese. Tobio thought it must be convenient. "Anyway—so Rome, okay? I'll see you in a few."

"Yeah. See you, dumbass." Tobio ended the call.

Alright. He took a deep sigh. Time to get lunch.

Countdown:

★ EuroVolley: 35 days

★ FIVB World Championship: 116 days

"You're not really good at talking, are you?"

There was some kind of bluntness that existed with kids. Kids weren't assholes per se, they could be quite kind if they were equally treated with kindness, how you treated them was how they were bound to grow up. The words you say may slide off them like water, but some of them stick forever. You never really knew which ones they'll keep to heart and which ones they decided to ignore.

Kids weren't assholes, but they could be rather mean even if they didn't mean to be. That was what little Tobio had thought while he was eating lunch in his school in second grade. His classmates thought it was strange of him not to own any video games, Tobio in turn thought of them as strange for not wanting to play volleyball. He thought them all strange in general, and they probably thought of Tobio to be strange too.

The kid was probably his classmate but he couldn't really remember her name. They had never really interacted before, but somehow she must have caught wind of Tobio and his disinterest in video games. He was an oddball, he heard teachers and adults say when they thought he wasn't listening. He asked Kazuyo-san about it, as he always did when he ran into any sort of trouble. They talked when they did passing drills in their backyard. It was easier for Tobio to talk when he was holding the ball though only in passing.

"Why do you even like volleyball?" the girl said in a tone that sounded like when Tobio was trying to haggle Kazuyo-san so he wouldn't need to eat his green peppers. Tobio didn't like that tone, but he supposed growing up, most kids who talked to him sounded like pushing their plate of green peppers.

"It's fun," Tobio said honestly.

"So are video games and cartoons. So is playing with the other kids," she insisted, and Tobio didn't get why she was being pushy about it. "So is playing baseball or jumping rope."

"I like volleyball. Not videogames." *Or cartoons, or baseball, or jumping rope,* Tobio noted. Did he need a reason to like volleyball?

"You're weird," she said before walking away and leaving Tobio to his own devices, probably off to play with her friends.

Kids weren't assholes, but sometimes Tobio would look at some kids and thought they sure made him feel weird for not wanting the things they like or understanding how they worked. The adults around him said the same things but in a more polite way, more professional. Kageyama Tobio, a resident fish out of water, was unreadable, head always in the sky or somewhere else.

For the first time, Tobio understood what Miwa was telling him years ago. He was a fish that jumped desperately out of water, somehow aiming for the sky. *Fishes couldn't fly, silly*. They didn't belong there. And yet Tobio was a fish in the sky, flying off somewhere other people couldn't reach. He didn't belong above the water, but Tobio had always been an oddball, a *tobiuo*.

"Is it bad to be a fish in the sky?" Tobio asked Miwa one day while she was preparing dinner, their parents home late again, and Kazuyo-san off to an errand. It was their family curry recipe, and Tobio was waiting in anticipation on their dining table of six, though usually only three of those chairs were used.

"What?" Miwa paused, turning to him. Confused.

"You said I was a fish in the sky," Tobio elaborated. Apparently, he needed to elaborate on a lot of things for people to understand him. The 'you're not really good at talking, are you' from one of his classmates struck him again. "Is it bad to be one?"

Miwa hummed. She contemplated her answer, as she always did when she talked to Tobio. There were nine years between them. Tobio was 7 and she was 16. Tobio had barely started Elementary school while she was already in high school. Sometimes Tobio thought she was too old for him to understand. What did 16-year-olds do anyway that was so different from what Tobio did, when he was 7?

Tobio would never know.

"It's not really bad," Miwa settled on. "It is weird to be one, usually."

"Weird," Tobio repeated the word in his mouth. "Am I weird?"

Miwa shook her head. "It's not a problem. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise." With that, she went back to cooking supper. Tobio didn't ask again, he didn't ask for her to elaborate. That was the thing about Tobio, he always kept things close to his heart. When Miwa went back to work, it most likely meant the end of the discussion anyway.

She never denied he was weird.

"Ah."

Tobio stared at his half-eaten soba and fried salmon. There was a nice Japanese restaurant near his training area and surprisingly, it tasted nearly authentic. Most of the food here didn't feel the same despite advertising its authenticity. He hadn't had something like this since the last time he went for a vacation to Japan. That was last year and he only went to Japan because of the Olympics in the first place.

"You're Japanese?"

Tobio saw an old woman in a kappogi apron approach him with a smile, her hair tied in a neat bun, mostly greying. She spoke in their mother tongue, and Tobio thought it was nice to hear Japanese again. He rarely spoke the language unless he was talking to Hinata in their calls, or when Miwa occasionally wanted to check-in. The latter was rare. Tobio figured it was a Kageyama thing to suck at communicating. Or maybe the former was just a Hinata thing to have such a large presence, to not be contained in a single country. Tsukishima and Yamaguchi certainly didn't call him, and Tobio wasn't sure if he would pick up. Yachi was too sleep-deprived to talk most of the time, and she probably still felt awkward with him.

They did video calls once in a while. Birthdays. Holidays. When they won championships. Work achievements. The last time they did was on Yamaguchi's promotion. It was good to catch up on everyone even if Tobio didn't have much to offer on his part. He had done nothing but training after all.

"Yes," Tobio said once he remembered the woman's question. She waited for his answer patiently, still smiling with warmth. He wondered if she recognized him, or if she approached

him just because he looked Japanese. Tobio wasn't sure if there were any other Japanese people in Rome besides them, maybe there were but Tobio wasn't the type to do anything outside but training.

"How nice." She clapped her hands together. "Where are you from, my boy? Are you just visiting? Working?"

"Working." Well, it was technically work. "I'm from Miyagi," he added after a second.

"Oh! My husband came from Miyagi too! In Sendai. He graduated from Shiratorizawa. I was from Kyushu, Fukuoka. We met here in Rome. It's nice to meet people from home. We've lived here for a while, and we've pretty much adjusted to the environment, but it's nice to be reminded of our old place, you know? Sometimes living here still feels weird, like we don't belong." She had a warm smile, bright and friendly even in her old age. There were wrinkles around her eyes when she smiled. Her kind personality reminded Tobio of someone, two someones, actually. "It's not common anymore, but it still happens." Tobio nodded.

She kept talking to him about how her son was working hard in Milan, about the differences between Italy and Japan, little things, while he continued eating, gave nods, and the occasional hums as responses. It wasn't unwelcomed.

After some moments when he noticed it was getting late for him, he said, "I have to go now." He bowed, stood up, and left his payment on the table.

"Take care, my boy." She clasped his hand and finished it with a pat. The sudden touch surprised Tobio, making the back of his neck heat up. "Come back anytime."

Tobio exited the restaurant with a funny feeling in his gut. It wasn't the food, he thought. It probably wasn't heartburn either. Tobio was blessed to not have any food allergies, and yet his throat was tightening. No, it wasn't about the food at all. He was brought back a few years ago, when he was still small and younger.

"Am I weird?"

Tobio piped up on the way to the gym, his grandfather's hand on his own, warm and safe. The road to the gym wasn't too far, but they did have to ride the bus a little because Kazuyosan said he wasn't as young as he used to be. Tobio didn't mind. The bus ride was nice and Kazuyo-san always let him have the window seat.

"Yep," Kazuyo-san said without missing a beat.

"Oh."

"But so am I." Kazuyo-san chuckled. "So is everyone. Everyone is weird in their own way."

"Even Miwa?"

"Yep."

"And Mom? And Dad?" Tobio recounted everyone he knew.

"Absolutely. Your classmates too. And your teammates." Kazuyo-san grasped his hand tighter, waiting for the light on the intersection to turn green before they could cross the street. There weren't many cars in their side of town, but Tobio still clung to his grandfather closely.

"But—" The light turned green and he waited for them to cross to the other side of the sidewalk before he continued talking. "People don't dislike you."

Kazuyo-san hummed. "Do people tell you that they dislike you?"

Tobio stared at his white shoes. His outdoor shoes were white and plain, but his volleyball shoes were black and blue, and they were in the bag Tobio was bringing. He liked his volleyball shoes. "Not really."

"I can feel a 'but' hanging there." Kazuyo's tone was calm and warm. It was what Tobio liked about him, Kazuyo-san was always friendly and understanding. His hand was firm but gentle whenever he held Tobio, and his laugh was always bright and loud, it never sounded mean. It never sounded wicked. It was very different from the kids Tobio played with. They felt cold instead.

"I don't think I belong in that place," Tobio murmured. "With them, I mean." He wasn't as oblivious as other people made him to be—he was to some extent, he knew that, but there were times he could be observant too. It wasn't as much as Tobio not seeing what was happening, but rather not understanding why. In theory, he understood why people did things, why people played games, went out with friends, or had crushes, but he lacked understanding in a more primal, instinctual way that everyone just seemed to know from the start.

It was like Tobio was watching from outside the window, or some high, high wall he just couldn't see the view on the other side of, something he couldn't see on his own.

"Then you can find some other place you can belong to," Kazuyo-san said once again. "Or they find you. It can happen anytime, or it can take a long time. You can't really tell for sure, no one could--but once you do, I tell you, they'll stay with you forever."

Kazuyo-san said those things a lot, promises, words of encouragement, and little nuggets of wisdom that were never really clear cut for an elementary schooler, vague lessons to be learned that *he would learn later when he was older*. It seemed cruel to a child. Why couldn't he just say it straight? Why let them suffer from one puzzle to another? But growing up made Tobio realize how knowing was different from experiencing, and knowing was different from learning as well.

Kids weren't assholes per se, they could be quite kind if they were equally treated with kindness. They weren't idiots either, but there was only so much you could tell them without confusing them, without dictating how they lived their lives. And they should get to choose how to, it was their lives after all. The words you say may slide off them like water, but some of them stick forever. You never really know which ones they'll keep to heart and which ones they decide to ignore. They weren't idiots, but sometimes you just needed to let them wade

through life by themselves, let them learn how to fly and fall, let them learn how to swim and sink on their own.

When Tobio learned to receive spikes, his arms started bleeding from the inside. Getting hurt while training was inevitable in the sport, sometimes you get hit head-on by stray balls, sometimes you scraped your knee and elbow when you dug a near impossible receive. Sometimes, life was all about that. No one would get better at playing without it.

Tobio's chest was heating up, his stomach queasy.

Maybe he should check out some heartburn medicine after all.

"Left!"

Tobio's body reacted with lightning speed. The ball barely grazed the tips of his fingers and sent it flying to the other side of the court, a satisfying sound of a spike echoed through the gym despite the noise of the game. The ball was blocked in an instant even with the power behind that offensive.

He growled. His plays weren't working—and even if this was a practice match, Tobio should perform to the best. Never hold back, never strive for anything but the best, if he gets really good, he'll find stronger people to play with, and then the game will be longer. The strongest stay in the court the longest, and the setter touches the ball the most.

The ball went up again from the opponent's serve. It smashed its way to the arms of their libero then off course, Tobio had to chase it. An offensive setup from such a low angle. It didn't matter to Tobio. So long as the ball was up, the game wasn't over. The ball flew to the most optimal position for a spike and it whizzed past the blocks. An arm dug it out for a hustle, a few inches separating the ball from the floor, a palm between their point.

It just would not drop. The rally trudged on, one attack after another. One receive after a spike, one block after an attack. It never ended.

The ball was back to them once more for a chance ball. Higher. Faster. Tobio's fingers crackled with electricity, lighting in his veins and thunder roaring in his ears. He needed to evade the blockers. He needed something agile. Tobio's mouth spread into a grin. The ball on his hands, it was the perfect time for a quick and—

"What?"

The ball's fall was soft but the thud was deafening to Tobio's ears. It fell pathetically on the center, where a bright orange man would be, already mid-jump. Balls missing their spikers were no longer common for Tobio, but he certainly wasn't unfamiliar with it. Heat made its way to his face, blooming into pink against his skin. His neck felt hot.

"Hey Tobes, what was that about? That sucked," asked Miguel Garcia, the newest recruit from America, with his characteristic high energy personality. He could get too loud sometimes, but he was a capable wing spiker so Tobio had no problems with him for the most

part, and he spoke English more than Italian, which Tobio was grateful for because his grasp of Italian was still pretty bad. He could be quite blunt though, which sure had its advantages, but sometimes it could get on Tobio's nerves.

Somehow, he always ended up paired with people with too bright personalities.

"Sorry," Tobio said between gritted teeth. "Force of habit."

"Dude, nobody could hit that!" Gracia laughed, though Tobio wasn't sure what was funny. "That toss must have been for some kind of monster."

Indeed, that toss was for a volleyball monster halfway across the world. He was probably practicing as well.

"*Vabbè*, Don't let it get to you, Tobio." Giovanni Russo, an outside hitter and their captain, pulled Gracia from the scruff of his collar. His English was fluent and easily understandable for Tobio, who had difficulties wading through their accent. "Though it is rare to see you miss. Something happened?"

"It is nothing," Tobio waved off with his limited English, "Won't happen again."

Practice went smoother after that. No more surprise unhittable quick sets due to resurfacing old habits. He was a pro athlete, damn it, not some 16-year-old kid in a new training camp, tasting his first experience on separation. It wasn't a problem then, it shouldn't be a problem now.

Tobio finished practice a little early, evening for him and probably afternoon in Brazil. Calls between him and Hinata occurred only once a week after all, but he was itching to get his phone. He leaned his head on the lockers, sitting on the bench and trying to catch his breath.

"Hey Tobio! Me and the boys are planning to get dinner together, you coming?" That was Luca Moretti, their starting libero. Tanned skin, bright smile. Garcia said he looked like some kind of model on the way to the runway, not that Tobio knew. The way he said Tobio's name was lilting and thick with an accent, so different from the rigidness of Japanese. He wasn't about to forget how his name was actually said, but Miwa was the only one who ever called his name properly nowadays since Kazuyo-san. She was the only one who did before Tobio left for Italy, period. His parents were barely around anyway, so they barely counted, not that Tobio had any problem with it.

There were things you got used to, and this was one of those things.

Tobio stared at his phone, lacking activity, and considered the offer. "Okay."

Moretti blinked. "*Ma va'!* Okay, wow. Sure. Okay. We're going to that old pasta place downtown—you've been there before? It's not far from here and if it is, I'm sure Giovanni can give you a ride, *si*?"

Tobio nodded noncommittally. He wasn't actually sure if he'd been there. He was bad with directions, and he feared he was going to get lost if he ventured into the city by himself with

nothing but barely existent Italian and strung together English, even if it had been years since he came here. The latter had improved since high school, thank goodness, and maybe practicing with Romero in his old team was helpful. Communicating in volleyball matches wasn't a problem at least.

"Bene . I'll go and tell them." Moretti clapped his hands and called the rest who were still stretching. There were surprised looks laced with disbelief. It was not like Tobio never went out with them so it didn't make sense why they were making too big of a deal out of it. Back when he was still playing for Adlers, the rest of the team pretty much left him alone when they weren't having practice. He did stick closer to Ushijima—him being the only familiar face in the team. Next, Hoshiumi joined them a year after Tobio joined. His company was mostly kept between them since then. Except Hoshiumi may sometimes bother captain Higurami, who was apparently the older brother of the Higurami he knew. Not that Tobio noticed till Hoshiumi pointed it out.

Beyond training, Tobio kept himself spare. It wasn't that he disliked company, Karasuno proved otherwise, and it was not that he couldn't get along with his teammates. It just wasn't in the nature of Tobio to mingle with people all the time, it didn't come naturally like how Hinata proved to be some kind of magnet for people, drawing them close and befriending them at a minute of interaction. He was simply like this. Maybe it was just a Kageyama thing, something his parents passed on to him and Miwa. Aloof, and maybe a little weird. Their family stuck to one thing they liked and stuck by it till the end.

Kazuyo was a special case though, as he always was.

Anyway, the pasta was good, garlic bread and the wine as well. Tobio usually didn't drink unless it was celebratory champagne after a victory, or during social parties. He had a diet to keep. Though red wine was said to be good for the heart occasionally, and so Tobio took little sips from the glass, enough to warm up his throat, his face, and his chest.

The rest of the team were busy talking to themselves, Italian peppered into the conversation, frankly too fast for Tobio to comprehend. He wasn't sure what to do either, especially without anyone to goad him into eating contests or bother him with chatter a mile a minute. So he decided to focus on the garlic bread and the wine instead. His face was starting to warm up. His limbs felt loose, wow.

He hadn't actually eaten in silence throughout high school, had he? With that in mind, Tobio drank another glass of wine. The taste was starting to get to him, tangy and a little sweet.

"So Tobes," Garcia turned to him, a bright grin on his face, "What do you think?"

Tobio blinked slowly. It took him a minute to realize they were asking him a question.

"What?" The words felt heavy on his mouth. He took an even longer time thinking about what the English translation was.

"Who do you think is a bigger threat in the world championship finals? Brazil or Russia?" Martin De Luca was their middle blocker, who was past 200 cm in height. Tobio would love to see Hinata stand next to him just to see the latter squirm.

- "Russia has some tough blockers," Garcia commented. "That one receiver they have—Morisuke Yaku, wasn't it? It's tough getting the ball through. He's Japanese, isn't he Tobes? You know him?"
- "*Mamma Mia*, Miguel. Just because he's Japanese doesn't mean he knows them," De Luca's reprimanding chide followed Garcia. His face looked dour.
- "No. Yaku—I know Yaku," Tobio explained. "We trained in the same camps. National team too. He was in Nation's League. Good libero." Nekoma's defense was formidable, and being the libero was an honor and proof of one's abilities, one that Noya-san acknowledged. In last year's Olympics, Yaku played rather well right next to Komori, saving balls after balls from hitting the floor.
- "So who do you think is gonna win?" Garcia repeated.
- "Brazil," Tobio answered without hesitation.
- "Oh?" That caught more attention from the table.
- "I see." Russo hummed. "So what do you think about our possible opponents, Tobio?" All their other teammates looked at him with expectant expressions, curious on what his takeaway was, probably interested in an elaboration of his answer. At least Tobio knew what to do at these moments, volleyball he could talk about easily. It came simply like breathing. Language was no barrier for it either. To Tobio, volleyball transcended all.
- "First," Tobio reviewed. "Russia's blocks are high, their receives are strong, but their spiking power is umm—average." Average was the right word for it, right?
- "Mah, only Tobi would think of Russian spikes as average." Ricardo Santini, a wing spiker, laughed from the other end of the table. Tobio thought of Ushijima's strong southpaw spikes, Sakusa's unique spins, and Atsumu's serves, equally ridiculous. Indeed, Russia's spikes were strong but they weren't impossible. Not to mention, his receives had gotten so much stronger.
- "Brazil's Lucas Silva can rack up ten service aces on a good day," Tobio enumerated. "Ronaldo Esteves is said to be Nicolas Romero's successor having trained under the same team and coach. Brazil's combination play is superior, adding to their individual strengths. Their setter too, Juan Pacheco, can do some incredible plays." Hinata didn't hesitate to tell him all about him when he started practicing. He couldn't pull off 100% of his monster quick, but he sure could give insane quick sets to everyone in the team like crazy.

Of course there was more, Brazil didn't earn their status as number one in the world for nothing, but it was these three who he needed to watch out for the most. Their defense was stable, their libero was good, Hinata as opposite hitter was good support too. He was digging crazy balls left and right after all. The international league was full of hard hitters. Tobio was never going to say it out loud to that dumbass, but that scrub had gotten really good.

"You know lots about Brazil, don't you, Tobio?" Moretti nudged his chest.

"I watch lots of their games," Tobio explained. How else was he going to get Hinata to shut up? "Um... their opposite hitter, we need to watch him too."

"Damn! I heard about him!" Garcia exclaimed. "My old college friend from back home used to show me clips of this crazy dude who does all these sick moves, right? He's playing in beach now, and dude said 'hey Miggy watch this son of a bitch here. He looks like a ninja' and boy does this kid jump high! He's less than 6ft! Appears outta nowhere to receive the ball. Dude! He's Ninja Shouyou, isn't he? I was surprised to see him compete indoors, but good for him!"

Tobio sipped more of his wine. He didn't get half of it, save for 'beach', 'ninja', and 'Shouyou'. The rest was speculation on Tobio's behalf, but that dumbass' moniker seemed to just follow him around everywhere didn't it? He was so ecstatic to find out about it too. He didn't need any more going into that head of his.

"We will need to stop him," Tobio declared.

"Hey, he was in the Olympics too, was he not? And last June too." De Luca looked at Tobio pointedly from the other side of the table. "Your quick was monstrous. It ripped apart blocks after blocks. *Capista!* That game against Argentina sure was something, wasn't it?"

"Oh, Argentina?" Santini exclaimed. "Yeah, I was watching with my girlfriend. Nearly had a heart attack. The ball just would not fall!"

Indeed, Argentina was thrilling and stressful to play against. At the very least, Tobio wasn't going to see Oikawa in the finals, or in EuroVolley. He was going to go against Ushijima, and while it wasn't entirely unpleasant, it was a strange idea playing against a former teammate. Orzeł Warszawa was an interesting team.

"We'll figure it out when it happens. No need to worry too much with EuroVolley still in the way." Russo ended the discussion there, so that was that.

The topic moved on to the next and Tobio was lost once again, mind swimming somewhere else. Without volleyball to talk about, he didn't really have much to offer. What were his plans after the championship? He hadn't decided on anything yet. What about you Tobes, got a girl you're interested in? He was not interested. Planning to go back to Japan, maybe? Don't you miss home? Tobio honestly did not know.

He drained the last dregs of his drink.

He was starting to feel his eyelids droop, his limbs more relaxed than they had ever been before. He thought of sake and after-party champagnes, some cheap beer from an izakaya with seniors and upperclassmen. Sugawara surely drank a lot that night, ended up sitting on top of Daichi and Azumane while passing out. Tobio didn't drink too much, wasn't really the type to. Alcohol made you reckless, and it was a hazard Tobio wasn't keen on dealing with, not when it could come between him and volleyball. Alcohol wasn't up to his taste anyway.

But there were two years of separation, two years of running and chasing, and there was homecoming, a match won, a promise fulfilled. There was Hinata Shouyou laughing under

the Miyagi streetlights, a foreign and familiar thing. Tobio wasn't sure why he was thinking about it now, Tobio didn't usually think of Hinata outside of volleyball. It was probably the fact that he might be coming this autumn, or because of the wine, Tobio reasoned to himself.

"Hey Tobes, you good? You're looking all red."

Tobio's eyes opened blearily. The lights were a little muted, the world painted in such soft colors. Tobio liked the world looking like this. It felt a little bit amicable, like every orange tint was a friend and rich pools of honey amber were liquid happiness.

"Tobes? Tobi? Damn, aren't you a lightweight?"

The words that left his mouth started as a garbled mess, but he managed to force out some reiteration of *I'm fine*, before the world faded into black.

It might be a silly time to think about fish. And yet Tobio dreamt of fish that night, floating in the sky and swimming freely as if the air was water and gills and tails were used to traverse against gravity. They did as fish did, moving in schools, swiftly and gracefully as they cast a shadow over the sun.

It was a funny dream. There were fishes in the sky, and there were birds swimming in the water. *Fishes don't fly silly* — all they can do is jump, but there *were* birds that swam underwater. Tobio was nine when he saw penguins from their school field trip to Sendai Umino-Mori Aquarium. He didn't really put too much mind to it back then. It was just funny, a bird that dived into the ocean and a fish that jumped high out of the seas to the sky, both seemingly out of place, and yet natural and real.

In the dream, the fish that swam in the sky opened its mouth and swallowed the sun whole, devouring it all for himself, and then Tobio woke up.

He pried his eyes open by force, wondering what could have pulled him out of his coma, a little confused about what had happened before he fell asleep. First things first, he was in his own apartment. At least that meant he got home safely. Second, he was feeling like shit. Not even intense training could leave him this dead inside, not even a spartan five-set match in the finals. Tobio embraced that ache, this just made him feel like death. Lastly, Tobio noted that his stupid phone was vibrating on his table and his head was throbbing hard, the roof of his mouth dry and rough.

He had been careless last night. He drank too much and passed out. Tobio wasn't even sure how he had gotten home.

Heat crept up his neck. No doubt he was already late for practice.

If he hurried up, he could still make it on time.

But then the phone was still vibrating.

Tobio rolled out of bed and grabbed his phone. It was just stupid Hinata. It wasn't even time for their weekly calls, why was he calling now? He'd call him next time when he was no longer feeling shit. Tobio declined the call and threw the smartphone to the side of his bed.

He needed breakfast and he needed to shower first.

The phone was just as insistent as the caller apparently, and just as annoying. It practically screamed at him to pick up. He could always turn it off though, but then Tobio was sure Hinata would see it fit to not pick up the next time Tobio called, and then it was going to spark competition, then it would end up having no contact from either side for months. It happened once, and Tobio was not keen on it happening again.

"What?" Tobio barked the moment the other side picked up.

"Wow, you sound like shit." Hinata laughed. "Rough night?"

Tobio groaned. This was the second time Hinata woke him up with a call from overseas. "What do you want?"

"Grumpy." Hinata huffed and Tobio was tempted to end the call right then and there. "I won't be able to call you until later. The training schedule got changed with the South American volleyball championship coming close. EuroVolley starts the same date, yeah? September 1. And then there's some interviews as well. Ads to shoot. You know them."

He bit back a sigh.

"You called for that?" They should practice. Tobio's own schedule was getting more hectic, the opponents across the net stronger. The European volleyball championship was also starting on his part. Tobio would accept nothing less from him too.

"Cold." Hinata clicked his tongue. "It's just until after the games I think. Don't miss me too much."

"I won't."

"Again, cold. What are you, in the middle of practice? Isn't it lunch break yet?" The other line went a bit shaky. He must be running again. Hinata's breath was heavy, he was basically panting. Definitely running then. With a twelve-hour difference between Japan and Brazil, it transferred their call schedule from seven in the evening to seven in the morning for Hinata.

Tobio tipped his head back and stared at his ceiling. "I'm in bed."

The other line was silent for a minute. "That's rare. Day off? You sick?"

"Hangover." Tobio glanced at the clock by his bedside table. He really needed to get up now. He could still try for the afternoon sessions. "I think."

"You think," Hinata repeated, unimpressed. "Never been drunk before?"

Somehow, he knew that the tone of the conversation was picking a fight with Tobio, or at the very least goading him into reacting. "Have you?"

"Yeah. Brazilians love to drink. *Caipirinha* tastes pretty great. The one from Heitor and Nice's wedding was good, and Pedro always bought cheap beer when he's having exams. And then Coach Lucio—the beach volleyball coach, remember? He said it's better to know what kind of drunk you are beforehand so he offered me some during my breaks and I got drunk the first time, not that I plan to drink a lot from then on. But it's cool." He chuckled. "I may have started crying a bit. Pedro said I'm an affectionate drunk. I started clinging to everyone, but hey Rio is friendly and they laughed it off."

Rio. Tobio had only been there once for the Olympics, and even though he had set foot in the country once, every story Hinata weaved from his two years there felt unreal. Two years, he stayed in a foreign land where he barely understood the language and barely had friends, learning his sport again from the start. It must have been hard. Tobio wondered how he managed, wondered what he thought of while he was there.

"That's... you were underage, weren't you?"

After high school, they parted ways with the promise to meet again later. Why say goodbye? Their paths were always connected with volleyball, even back when they were fourteen and nothing more but strangers, opponents across the court. At nineteen, Hinata was in Brazil and Tobio played in the Olympics.

At nineteen, apparently, Hinata had gotten drunk for the first time and hugged everyone he could find. It shouldn't be a surprise. There was something about that piece of information that niggled some memory in the back of Tobio's mind, something he didn't want to deal with now. Especially when he was trying to tame a hangover.

It really shouldn't be a surprise.

"Brazilian drinking age is eighteen, Kageyama." Hinata scoffed. "What made you get drunk anyway? That isn't like you." His voice was chiding, but part of it was also amused.

Tobio thought about last night's dinner. Hinata's question was something he couldn't answer himself. As far as he remembered, he was drinking glass after glass until the taste had grown over him. While everyone around him talked, he was busy with his own food as he usually did when it was dinner time. Food becomes muscle, muscle becomes power.

"The wine was... interesting," Tobio finally settled on for an answer.

Hinata burst into rambunctious laughter. Tobio pulled the phone away from his ear, mouth in a downward pout. Of course he would do this. He huffed. It wasn't that pathetic. So what if he was pushing twenty-five and had only gotten drunk for the first time? It wasn't in his interest to do something that could be a danger to his body. He was an athlete for goodness sake, he relied on personal maintenance and habits—drinking was not part of it. Maybe he should hang up, after all, see if Hinata found it funny.

"Sorry, sorry. Don't go." Hinata wheezed. "And?"

"What do you mean 'and'?"

Hinata hummed. "What kind of drunk are you?"

Tobio thought about what happened. The last thing he remembered was Garcia talking to him before everything else turned black. There was a loud thud, the last thing he heard, and perhaps some cut-off exclamations from his team.

"I think... I passed out in the bistro." He wasn't sure but if head to guess, he might have fallen face-first on the remaining pasta sauce on his plate.

More laughter.

Tobio finally ended the call and threw it on the heap of pillows across the room.

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There was running and then there was chasing.

Tobio was familiar with both.

"Jesus Christ Tobi, you're an animal." Gracia panted next to him. "How are you so fast? We've been at this for three hours now."

"This is my normal pace." Tobio raised a brow. "Want to stop?

"Please." Garcia's hands were on his knees, one hand raised up, a general signal to wait. Tobio halted his pace, eyeing one of the free benches in the park. Without needing to say anything, Garcia trudged to the seat. Tobio followed.

"How brutal. You do this every day?"

He's got an average of a hundred kilometers in small separate portions per day. He's been running since he was a kid, stamina was no problem and road work helped him keep his head clear. Day after day, without fail, Tobio had donned his blue jacket and black leggings, pursuing, in pursuit.

Tobio thought about Hinata who ran every day on the beach and how his balance no doubt got more ridiculous. Tobio hated it, but if it was about running longer, maybe Hinata could pass him easily now. He'll just have to make it up with speed.

There's a subtle difference between running and chasing. In running you are alone. In chasing, at the very least you have someone in front of you, no matter how far away. Tobio was familiar with chasing, but with it, he also became familiar with being left alone.

It was an interesting balance with running, with keeping up, with having someone keep up with you. When Tobio was young, he used to run with Miwa and Kazuyo-san. Miwa, being older and with longer legs, often ran past Tobio with a smug grin on her face. These were the times when her playful spirit came out, competitive in nature. Miwa was still competitive at thirty-something years old, it was just something that never left you. Tobio figured this too was a Kageyama thing.

Little Tobio Kageyama had been chasing his sister since he was four years old. Miwa had already been playing volleyball before Tobio was born, and he had been chasing her ever since. Miwa in front, Tobio in the middle, and Kazuyo-san always behind them with a smile.

"I'm quitting volleyball," she said, fifteen and older than Tobio. It came as a surprise, though —in hindsight, it shouldn't have. It was not as much as a ball straight to the face as it was a missed receive. His sister lived in a different world, something Tobio did not understand, like some secret he would never learn. She saw a different kind of Miyagi outside the window of their home, one with girls in pretty powders, dresses, lipstick rouge, little plastic combs, and hair clips. It was not bad. Never. Just because Tobio didn't understand didn't mean it was bad.

FIfteen, and in love, Miwa stopped running, and Tobio had gone past chasing her. Fifteen, and in love, but to what exactly? She had a boyfriend—not that Tobio knew anything in that area—but she didn't devote herself to him. She did not worship him, not like Tobio worshipped volleyball anyway. This was not what she loved, this was not her master. In love and fifteen, and didn't want to cut her hair, so she quit volleyball. So simple. You could always quit anytime, but Tobio didn't want to.

So be it. Miwa no longer played, but at least Tobio still had Kazuyo-san. With chasing, you also become familiar with leaving behind.

"Maybe you should be in a marathon or something. You barely broke a sweat." Garcia fanned his face, a towel hanging on his shoulders. It was odd for Tobio when Garcia was the one who wanted to join his road work, and the company wasn't really a problem, just that his pace was making Tobio slower.

"No. I like volleyball more." Tobio said with practiced ease. *Like* didn't even begin to describe it. Volleyball was volleyball, more than a sport, something close to a feeling; a lifeline.

"Yeah. You never do anything in halves. It's always all or nothing for you." Gracia laughed. "You're so intense about everything. That nail care routine of yours, the constant exercising, always on a proper diet, even the volleyball journal you write on every day—intense I tell you. That's why I was surprised the other day when you passed out."

Tobio's face turned pink.

"That was a mistake."

"Yeah, I figured." Garcia smiled. "You're so disciplined, don't you get tired of it?"

Past words rang back in Tobio's ears. *Personal maintenance is important to volleyball too*, and *y'know Tobio*, *if you get really good*, *you get to play more matches. The best players get to play lots of volleyball*. Such old words, yet Tobio never forgot. Years ago, little Tobio held back his serves to play the game a little longer. He had never done that again ever since. He swore to himself to never do that again.

In a way it cost him. In a way, he gained so much more.

"It's not so bad," Tobio reasoned, because it wasn't. Not really.

"Yeah but," Garcia gestured his hand. "Don't you wanna do something else outside volleyball? Overdoing things isn't the way to go."

It made Tobio frown, because he had heard of this so many times before, he didn't expect to hear it here of all places. *Why do you like volleyball*? They asked and Tobio answered just as he usually did. *It's fun*. He knew when he was overdoing things. Overdoing things would be playing without rest while having a fever, only to collapse on the last set. Overdoing it would be practicing serve after serve because some snotty fourteen-year-old kid had no friends and no outlet for grief. Overdoing might be practicing serves yet again because all traces of orange and honey amber had left Japan to train on the other side of the world and no one could keep with him and hit his tosses.

Some of them tried to, but it just didn't feel the same.

Tobio shrugged. "Not really."

"Oh, maybe you should get a girlfriend. That should get you to relax." Garcia patted his back. Tobio immediately declined. Garcia laughed. "Boyfriend then?"

This Tobio mulled over at least with a little hesitation before he declined again.

"No."

"But I see a little interest there." Garcia immediately latched on. "Hey man, I ain't no judge." He's really fine as a teammate. Except when he was being nosy, and Tobio didn't know what to do about that. He was a year younger than Tobio, and yet—

It's fine, Tobio reassured himself. He had dealt with Tsukishima's snark and cynicism for three years, and he could deal with someone like this. Sugawara taught him to maintain a

good relationship with his team, coach Ukai taught him to see the conditions of his spiker. Karasuno as a whole taught him the importance of trust.

"I'm busy with volleyball now," Tobio said at first, because knowing himself, denial was always first to greet everyone. *Did you receive the ball with your face?* His answer would be *My nose isn't bleeding*. And when some orange ball of pure energy bounds to him and asked, *Did you see my receive?* Tobio would pout with furrowed brows, saying. *No. I didn't see anything*. Tobio always denied before one could reach the truth, and the truth was something you needed to strangle out of him sometimes. It was instinctive by now, another one of his habits. "But maybe later."

"And when you finish that and you stop playing volleyball—will you have time for relationships, then?"

It's a complicated feeling.

Garcia looked at him with this contemplative look. It was one of those expressions that Tobio couldn't comprehend. He simply looked pensive, like he was assessing Tobio from head to toe. After a moment, he must have found what he was looking for, because he smiled.

"Alright." He stood up and cocked his hands against his hips. "Later then. For now, we go running."

He didn't have a lot of memories of Miwa when she had quit volleyball, nor was he any close to understanding her, but he did remember the different lovers—boyfriends. Miwa did not worship her lovers, and Tobio doubted if she really ever loved them. What did Tobio know about love anyway? Not when he was ten, and not when he was thirteen, or fifteen, or nineteen, or twenty-one, or twenty-five.

She changed lover the way she changed her clothes. Tobio didn't remember all their names, nor did he remember their faces. He did vaguely remember one of them with brown curly hair who played with Tobio once. He sucked, and Tobio couldn't enjoy the passing drills properly with how much he missed every ball, but only he, among everyone else, tried to interact with Tobio.

Incidentally, that was also Miwa's last in a long string of lovers.

They broke up, as most other boyfriends of hers did. There were no demands for explanation or outraged cries of questions. They just broke up, and the guy stopped coming to their house. By the end of the affair, Miwa packed up her things, dresses, powders, lipstick, hair clips and all, and decided to learn cosmetology in Tokyo. Until now Tobio didn't understand what the change had been, didn't understand the point of all those lovers. At twenty-five, Miwa married a man and had a daughter with him, trying her luck at romance again. At twenty-nine she was divorced. Tobio hadn't been able to attend their wedding, which was a small ceremony in Tokyo, too busy training for nationals. Maybe romance just wasn't in their department either. Another Kageyama thing.

When Tobio was twelve, he met a brilliant senior with national-level skills. He was in his third year when Tobio was still in his first. Oikawa Tooru, Kitagawa Daiichi's starting setter. He was everything Tobio wanted to surpass, something he had wanted to chase. He had a terrible personality; he was arrogant, petty, and childish, but was servile to his teammates on court.

He was Tobio's role model.

The only issue Tobio had with Oikawa (besides the terrible personality) was the girlfriends.

Like Miwa, he had a long string of lovers too, he changed them the way he changed his moods—and he was very moody. Except, interestingly enough, he was the one getting dumped and not the other way around. Every other week or so, a girl would come and complain to him. Every now and then, Oikawa would pick up calls, only to be dumped by whoever was his latest beau. Tobio had no opinions about it save for the fact that all his efforts on finding and keeping a girlfriend could have been used practicing.

One day, Tobio overheard Oikawa crying on someone's shoulder, someone who was not Iwaizumi, relying on them. It was a woman that did not look like his girlfriend either, unless Oikawa was into older matured women now, something like pity and scorn dancing on her face as she tried to comfort the mess that was in her arms.

I had to love him of all people, Oikawa said mid sob, frustrated and angry at himself. I'm a fool.

You weren't a fool for loving him, you idiot, the woman said to him in admonishment, thick brown curls covering her face from Tobio's perspective. You became a fool when you started dating women to forget you're in love with your best friend, you dumb kid.

It took Oikawa a day of absence to recover.

Oikawa, Miwa, both different and the same.

From then on, Tobio decided that romance was not for him. It got in the way of volleyball and was too much of a nuisance to think about. So that was his promise, twelve years old, barely a first year in middle school. Tobio was familiar with promises, and he intended to keep most of them, but he was a little older when he realized he couldn't keep every promise. Yes, I'll eat green my green peppers; yes I'll make sure to finish homework tonight; no I'm not overworking myself; no this is absolutely the last toss, we need to go home--

Tobio tried to keep most of the promises he made.

Of course he really couldn't keep all of them.

"Ah."

Tobio stared at the blank screen of his phone noticeably lacking in activity. When Hinata promised he wasn't going to call, he definitely didn't call. There were texts, but those were scarcer than usual too.

It wasn't like Hinata kept all of his promises either. One more toss and we're going home; I'll buy you milk tomorrow; I'm not tired; we won't practice too late; I'm not injured, I'm not injured. I promise I can still play—

Hinata couldn't keep all his promises. But between the two of them, Hinata was better at keeping them than him. It was what made you want to believe in him, always so earnest it made cynics like Tsukishima shudder. It defied all logic.

Tobio stared at his phone. It was so quiet without the constant conversation that filing his nails without the buzz of static layered chirps from his phone's speaker was making Tobio antsy. Why—he wasn't sure. He wasn't in the habit of self-examining himself and his feelings when it wasn't related to volleyball. He could hear the soft *zhk zhk zhk* of his nail file, the *clip clip clip* of his clippers.

Every sound was ticking off something inside Tobio, and it was pissing him off.

It was pissing him off mainly because he was pissed off and he didn't want to be pissed off over something so trivial. It's like he was fifteen again and couldn't comprehend his feelings, couldn't put them into words, like he was fourteen and he was grieving over how unfair the world was, skin itching over something he couldn't reach and only when he was playing volleyball would it calm down.

"Oh! Tobio! What's the matter? You look like you're close to killing your nails, boy!" De Luca walked into the locker room with wide eyes.

Tobio stopped his actions and looked at De Luca. There was really no need to look that worried. Whatever was on his face was just his regular expression—they should know that much.

"It is nothing." Tobio gripped at his nail file and shoved it in its bag with a little too much force. "Don't worry."

"Vabbè, if you say so Tobio." De Luca carried on. "Want to join us for lunch? Moretti and I are going for pizza."

Tobio thought he wasn't really in the mood to mingle with anyone right now, not after the last incident. It was not like he hadn't experienced whatever he was feeling right now before, and he was half tempted to screw lunch and practice serving again. He wanted to hit some balls—of course, if Russo caught him, there was going to be hell to pay, and besides, Tobio wasn't careless.

"No. Please enjoy your meal." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "Next time, maybe."

De Luca pointed at him with a grin, "That's a promise, si? I'm holding you on to that, Tobi."

"Yeah." Tobio waved. Satisfied, De Luca walked out while the rest of the team were busy chatting amongst themselves, but Tobio drowned them all out as he packed his bag and left.

Here was the thing about promises.

You couldn't really keep all of them.

Tobio was familiar with promises, Kazuyo-san loved making lots of them after all, and he also taught Tobio the importance of keeping them. If you eat your green peppers, we will stay longer in the gym today; if you finish your homework faster, we will watch the match's recording sooner; if you take good care of your health and body, you will be a better player; I promise I'll take you to a live volleyball match if you do good, Tobio—

If all promises were that simple, then nobody would have any problems keeping them, but then there were those that needed more effort, needed more thought, and more time. I'm fine, I promise I'm just a little tired. So don't worry about me, Tobio; Of course I'll be there to watch all your games; If you become really good, I promise you, someone even better would come and find you--

In hindsight, Kazuyo-san was probably set on fulfilling the second. In hindsight, the first one was probably a lie. And as for the third—

Tobio took a deep breath.

Here's the thing about promises.

Promises meant trust. Promises meant there was half a chance of getting disappointed or hurt. There was always commitment involved in promises, and Tobio wasn't sure if he had more of him to commit when all of him was already bound by volleyball. It made him wonder how Hinata did it, being able to give time for so many different things. It used to anger him, the way he wasted his time doing useless things, frivolous activities that could have been used for volleyball.

Now, Tobio wasn't so sure.

He didn't regret anything, of course not. Tobio was happiest playing volleyball, and he was playing against the best. But it made him wonder how Hinata managed to do all that and reach the same stage as him. *It's because I'm weak, Kageyama*. He could imagine him saying that. That dumbass knew that, himself. Hinata accepted that early on. He was weak and because of that, people would help him—he explained this one night after late practice. When you were empty, all you could do is take, and all people could do is give. But then when Tobio thought about it, Hinata had so much to give too.

"We're friends. Rivals. Partners," Hinata said, all painted in such soft colors under the muted lights. It was probably the beer buzzing Tobio back into tipsiness, but it was making him feel fuzzy inside. Not drunk—just tipsy. Tobio hadn't been drunk before. He wasn't planning to now, but he sure was close to it. "It's not like anything major has to change. I promise. It's mostly the same but—" He gestured with his hands, because it wasn't going to be Hinata Shouyou if he wasn't animated. "More 'gwah' and 'gyun' in between."

If you asked anyone but Tobio, they'll need clarification about whether Hinata was talking about volleyball tactics or something else entirely. But Tobio was not 'anyone'.

[&]quot;Nothing would change?"

"Not exactly nothing," Hinata murmured, face a little pink—from the wine, from shyness—who knows? "But yeah, nothing much. There's still volleyball after all."

"Volleyball."

"Yep."

"Okay."

"Yeah?" He smiled just a little. "I'm holding you onto that, Kageyama-kun. It's a promise."

Here was the thing about promises:

Hinata was way better at keeping them than him.

Countdown:

\(\text{EuroVolley: 10 days} \)

★ FIVB World Championship: 91 days

★ South American volleyball championship: 10 days

Sora's Birthday: 0 days

Tobio did not consider himself a sentimental man.

The state of his apartment was one of the biggest proofs.

When Tobio got back to his place after practice, his first business was to cook dinner. Lunch was always eaten outside, but Tobio made dinner by himself back in his apartment. It was easier like that, cheaper and healthier too. Their nutritionist was particular about their diet, but that was nothing new for Tobio. It was not so restrictive, at least not like the ones other athletes Tobio heard about had, chatter from the Olympics and whatnot. Tobio liked the meticulous meal plans he had.

His apartment was modest, but it had a good enough kitchen to make decent meals. He had been cooking dinner by himself since middle school after all. Much to Tsukishima and Hinata's apparent surprise, Tobio wasn't helpless living by himself. He did all the chores on his own, thank you. There was not a lot to keep anyway, and due to a deeply ingrained routine and a virtue for cleanliness, his apartment was just as reminiscent of his old childhood house, just as bare.

So no, Tobio figured he was not necessarily a sentimental man; and *tamago kake gohan*, despite being traditionally a breakfast meal, was his food choice for the night because he hadn't gotten the time to go grocery shopping yet and he had just enough eggs and leftover soup from last night's dinner for it.

Tobio sat on the dining table, mid-chew as he took in his apartment in relative silence.

Really, living alone overseas wasn't too foreign an experience for Tobio because it didn't make too big of a difference from when he was living in Japan, whether it was in Tokyo or in Miyagi. He was still barely home, and the chores were all done by him anyway. Utensils, clothes, house slippers, mugs—all only good for one person despite the vacant room in his living space.

"Fuck—"

His phone vibrated on the tabletop, startling Tobio out of his reverie.

A call was coming through. Tobio snatched the sleek gadget off the table and accepted the call, brows furrowed together. "Dumbass, why are you calling? I thought you had a match to prepare for?"

"Tobio, is that how you should talk to your sister?"

Tobio's eyes widened into saucers. It wasn't some annoying high-pitched voice that answered as he expected. Instead, it was cool, calm, and pointedly not male.

"Miwa-neesan."

There was a chuckle from the other side, no doubt she was making fun of him as she always did when she had the chance. It wasn't necessarily mean-spirited, but it annoyed Tobio sometimes.

"Were you expecting someone else?" She was definitely making fun of him. Wasn't it early morning for Japan at this hour? That's an eight-hour difference between them.

"Something like that."

"Is it Shouyou-kun?"

Heat crept up Tobio's face. The silence should be damning enough for him. Was he really that obvious? Or did Miwa suddenly gain some kind of inquisitive sense on reading Tobio like a book? Miwa was more perceptive than Tobio as the older sister, but she never voiced anything out loud before.

Tobio cleared his throat. "Why are you calling?"

"Did you forget? It's Sora's birthday." He did forget and there was admonishment found in her tone that made Tobio wince.

Ah shit.

"I was... busy." It sounded more pathetic out loud; a flimsy excuse.

"Mhm. Yeah, I thought so," Miwa said. "Your schedule is pretty tight."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. The European Volleyball Championship is close right? And the World Championship is this year, isn't it?" Miwa hummed. "You might be facing Brazil." That she felt the need to emphasize it was embarrassing enough.

Tobio decided not to comment on that.

"I'll... I'll be sure to send her a gift."

"Sure do that. And if you can, send some things for me too. I'll text you what I need. Anyway, turn on your video. Sora wants to see you and she set an alarm and everything just to catch you on your break." Ah, that explained the lateness of the call. There was a shuffle on the other side, but Tobio complied. His phone screen reflected his image and after a few seconds, another face popped out as well.

"Uncle Tobio!" A girl between ages seven to eight with a bright smile appeared on the screen, comfortably wrapped in her blanket as she spoke with visible giddiness that could be felt all the way to Italy from their apartment in Shinjuku. There were noticeable gaps between her teeth from where the baby teeth fell out. She was a split image of Miwa with her bowl cut, but looked like Tobio when he was a kid as well. It was a little disconcerting. "Hi!"

"Happy birthday Sora." Tobio did a small wave, not really sure how to act around children.

"I missed you! How's Italy? Are you winning? Are there pretty girls there? Are you coming home soon? I want to learn volleyball from you again!" She talked a mile a minute, the one hand that wasn't holding the phone was animated with gestures to accentuate her words. Despite Sora looking exactly like a Kageyama, her personality was nothing like them.

It made Tobio smile a little.

"Your mother can teach you while I'm not there. She played volleyball too."

Sora pouted. "But she's not a pro! And she also tells me to ask your uncle Tobio instead, he's better at it than me. And then you're also busy!"

There was snickering in the background. Miwa was having a kick out of seeing him getting told off by a kid, wasn't she?

"Sorry. I'll make it up to you," Tobio tried to appease her.

"Promise?" Her wide steel-blue eyes stared at him through the grainy screen. There he was and promises again.

"Yeah."

"Good! Because otherwise, I'd just ask uncle Shouyou instead!" Sora declared. Miwa was yet again snickering in the back.

Tobio's mouth turned downwards. "Shouyou." The syllables were clumsy in his mouth. It made him flush a little.

"Yeah! He said to call him Shouyou 'cause Natsu-ne plays with me when she has free time and it can get confusing. It's a good thing her university is near our apartment!" Sora said. Indeed, Tobio vaguely remembered Hinata's sister already in a university in Tokyo, something neither he nor her brother thought of doing. She was in Waseda, if Tobio was right.

"And anyway! Uncle Shouyou sent me a gift!" Tobio held back a wince at the fact he had forgotten to get her a gift, and yet somehow Hinata remembered. How embarrassing of him. Sora continued as she was midway relegating what she had done during the day. "Oh yeah, by the way, thanks for your gift too. I liked it a lot!"

"My... gift." Tobio blinked.

"Yeah! Uncle Shouyou called earlier and told me all about it."

If he wasn't so stunned about the fact that he apparently sent a gift he didn't remember, he would have been a little offended at the fact that Hinata called his niece, but not him.

And for the third time, Miwa laughed in the background. So she knew something behind this.

Sora went off somewhere and the screen shook as she brought the phone with her, presumably towards her gift that Tobio apparently sent. "See! I love it!" Tobio was a hundred percent sure he didn't send his niece videogames of any sort, but she claimed he did, and Tobio wasn't going to refute that. "And here! This is what uncle Shouyou sent me!"

Now she was holding a signed Nintendo switch by none other than the *Kodzuken*, so Tobio had a faint idea of what was happening. That dumbass, really. He could have said something beforehand.

"I'm happy you like it. Make sure to thank your uncle Hinata. Anyway, can you give the phone back to your mother? It's late. You should be sleeping."

Sora looked a little disappointed, but after promising to call again sometime, she relented and returned the phone to Miwa. She was trying to hold back a smile when Tobio saw her again.

"If you wanted me to send you things, you could've said that." Tobio sighed.

"Where's the fun in that? Seeing you squirm from guilt is more entertaining." Miwa snickered. "You're *still* buying Sora a gift though, you airhead."

"Yes." Tobio was going to do that even without her telling.

"Thank Shouyou-kun for saving your ass."

"I will." Tobio huffed, that is if he could contact that dumbass. "Listen, I'm still eating dinner." Nevermind how it had long gone cold. He should heat it up again.

"Yeah yeah. We need to sleep anyway." Miwa stretched. "I'll call you again sometime."

"Yeah."

And with that, the call disconnected. Tobio sighed, got up, and reheated his soup at least. He had barely made a dent on his meal.

Dumbass Hinata

You didn't say anything about giving Sora a gift dumbass.

You could have warned me.

✓ read: 8:16 PM

Tobio didn't bother waiting for a response. It was probably afternoon in Sao Paulo, and he should still be training. Tobio did indulge himself in scrolling through his Twitter instead, one of the rare occasions that he bothered to. His team's PR handled his official verified Twitter used for sponsorship promotions and the like, and he barely ever used it—or any social media really. It was a stark contrast to Hinata who liked to broadcast whatever it was he was doing to the world. For more exposure he said; something that Kozume and Kuroo apparently told him to do.

And it was paying off. Hinata was getting sponsorships on top of sponsorships, and even more interviews lately He had somehow managed to get more people getting interested in volleyball through him—or at least interested in Hinata, if not the volleyball.

Either way, Tobio's Twitter only followed his previous teammates and his sponsors' official Twitter accounts. So, with Hinata being an avid user of Twitter, most of his tweets are in Tobio's timeline.

"Dumbass." Tobio rolled his eyes.

Most of it were pictures of the beach and whatever new food he was trying now. Occasionally selfies with his team. Sometimes they were random streams of thoughts and Atsumu was apparently one of the biggest interactors. He eyed the tweet he sent Hinata with the laughing emojis.

Shouyou Hinata ✓ @ninja shouyou. Jan 23

The world needs to see how much of a loser Kageyama really is 😂 😂

[Image [] [image []



True enough, it was a thread of Tobio's face in low quality where he looked dazed and out of focus. Tobio frowned. The caption was in English.

Even Tsukishima, Yamaguchi, and Yachi commented, albeit in Japanese.

Shouyou Hinata ✓ @ninja_shouyou. Jan 23

The world needs to see how much of a loser Kageyama really is ② ② ② ② [Image □] [image □]

Q30 replies □ 2.5k retweets ♥ 10k likes

Tsukishima @k_tsukki1996. Jan 24

For a king, he's terrible at getting pictures taken

Q1 reply □ 26 retweets ♥ 197 likes

Yama @tadashi1201. Jan 24

lol

most of our pics of him have his eyes half open. How does that happen all the time?



There was noise. Tobio snapped back to his stove which had his soup boiling by now, forgotten in favor of scrolling through his phone. He shut the fire off before pouring it back to the bowl.

Guess all of his friends were having a kick of making fun of him, Tobio huffed. But then again, when was that new? Especially Tsukishima, who would never let a chance to ridicule him pass.

Ignoring that, he continued to scroll down. There were more pictures, pictures of training, pictures posted from way back when he was still playing in Japan, even way back when he was still playing beach. Compared to Tobio, Hinata was definitely more sentimental. Tobio would never bother taking pictures of anything, keeping anything for himself as reminders.

Usually, anyway. Tobio saw a picture of Hinata on his way to his plane, smiling and waving at the camera. Tobio wasn't present to send him off, too busy training for the Olympics. Case in point, Tobio not sending off his first friend of three years proved how little sentimentality he had. But Hinata didn't mind, in fact, Tobio thought he would kill him if he missed training just to send him off.

Though maybe if training didn't coincide with the schedule, maybe Tobio would be there to send him off.

Maybe.

After that, Tobio never saw Hinata again for the next two years. He didn't plan to meet up with him after the Olympics in Rio, and Tobio didn't greet him in the airport when he came back.

Tobio didn't consider himself sentimental. He couldn't even remember his niece's birthday, and he couldn't even be assed to send his friend off.

But if he saved that picture of Hinata, no one would know.

"Seems a bit drastic to come to Tokyo for a haircut."

"I'm actually visiting Kenma later, and you just happened to be in Tokyo," Hinata explained with a smile, his newly cut locks were fluffy and lightweight, no longer bouncing in curls. As far as Tobio was concerned, they defied gravity just like how its owner defied all natures of physics. "So really, you're more of a layover."

"And so you decided to bother me with your chores instead." Tobio rolled his eyes.

"Hey, you said you know a good place. What I didn't expect was to meet your sister. Seriously, you have a sister? You really don't bother saying the important stuff, do you? This is like that V-League thing all over again." Hinata pouted. He acted like some kind of betrayed child every single time. "And I'm bringing you someplace fun, too. For free! So don't complain.

Tobio didn't bother refuting about how Hinata never told him about his decision to go to Rio, how somehow he had to be one of the last people to know about it. Even Tsukishima heard about it before him! There was no point arguing about it now, so Tobio looked around instead. Everything else was blue and luminescent.

"Fine. But why here?"

There was an eerie sound threatening to swallow him whole, a thrumming that felt like the whole place was alive.

"Kenma and I were supposed to go together but he was held up due to some meeting or another. He's starting a company, you know?" Hinata shrugged. "So we decided to meet for dinner instead but Kenma already bought the tickets. Good thing too because now I have time for you, and since you won't be there to see me off to Rio, think of this as your personal send-off. Not that you're sentimental like that." He rolled his eyes.

Everything was blue and dark and luminous. Everything was behind glass, refracting light to bounce into different directions, painting their faces with its colors.

"Oi, Hinata I want to tell you something--"

"What?"

Tobio frowned. He tried to say the words again.

"What?"

The thrumming grew louder, overpowering what Tobio was going to say. His mouth kept moving but no words were coming out .

Hinata couldn't hear the rest. So Tobio repeated it again, this time louder.

"*What?*"

It was no use. Hinata couldn't hear him, and Tobio was wordlessly mouthing off sentences that Hinata couldn't grasp, the thrumming growing louder than ever, rumbling in echoes and straight to Tobio's ears.

There were penguins flying around in thin air. It was normal for birds to fly—but not penguins. Fish don't fly silly, they belong in the sea, the same way birds belong in the sky. Not penguins though. Penguins evolved to swim underwater instead. It didn't really make sense. Why were there penguins on air?

Tobio groaned.

How annoying.

He was usually too exhausted to have dreams these days, especially memories repurposed into dreams. He hadn't thought about that incident since years ago, he wasn't sure why he was thinking about it again.

Tobio blinked the sleep out of his eyes to find the source of the thrumming. It was too early to wake up, it was barely past midnight and Tobio didn't like being disturbed from sleep. He shouldn't be surprised to find his phone beeping a notification.

Dumbass Hinata

You didn't say anything about giving Sora a gift dumbass

You could have warned me

✓ read: 1:25 PM

You were going to forget it

I know you

You can be an airhead most of time

You're welcome by the way

You should thank me

✓ read: 1:29 AM

Tobio shouldn't take the bait, and the logical thing to do was go back to sleep. But he was already awake and he could see the dumbass still online. Tobio typed out a response, the glare of his screen's LED lights making him squint. After hitting send, the reply was immediate.

Dumbass Hinata

idiot

✓ read: 1:29 AM

!!!!!!!!!!

KAGEYAMA!!!

YOU'RE AWAKE!

How am I the idiot???

YOU forgot about it not me

✓ read: 1:30 AM

You didn't need to do any of that

✓ read: 1:32 AM

And let the kid down?

I'm not a monster Bakageyama

If you want to just buy a better present next time

✓ read: 1:33 AM

Tobio sent gifts before. He had never made too big of a deal out of it before though. Tobio didn't exactly grow up with people to give gifts for, and if he did have to give any, they always ended up being volleyball-related things.

It was not that Tobio didn't care about other people, it just was that he had his head in a different direction. When people said his priorities were somewhere else, they weren't exactly wrong.

Dumbass Hinata

I forgot you suck at choosing thm

You probably don't even know what to give a little girl

If I leave it to you you'll give Sora-chan heat packs

Or a month's supply of milk boxes

✓ read: 1:36 AM

Tobio gritted his teeth. He was obviously goading him into making this a competition as well. He had used his connections with Kozume for a gift, and an autographed Switch from the YouTube personality was absolutely difficult to one up. This meant he needed to step up his game for his gift for Sora to even it out, and he needed to find Natsu a better gift than him during her birthday to win, and then send something for his mom too before he could send something for Miwa so Tobio could obliterate that dumbass out of the competition.

But really, what irritated Tobio more was the fact that Hinata wasn't wrong at all.

Dumbass Hinata

Or a month's supply of milk boxes

✓ read: 1:36 AM

I don't suck at gifts

✓ read: 1:37 AM

Lol you gave me a phone case

When I left for Rio

It had a milk box design

Who does that? Lmao

I think you just want me to remember you while I'm away

Milk sucker lol

but then I remember you don't do that

✓ read: 1:37 AM

Tobio's lips downturned, brows knitted together. He wasn't sure what Hinata meant.

Do what?

✓ read: 1:38 AM

Mushy feelings

✓ seen: 1:40 AM

Tobio's stomach lurched uncomfortably at those two words. He didn't know what to reply to that either, so he watched as the three dots appeared and disappeared on the screen while Hinata was typing.

Dumbass Hinata

Usually anyway

It's fine

It's more creepy if you were suddenly all sweet and gushy out of nowhere

I'd literally scream

Your smile is already creepy

The Kageyama Tobio branding is to frown and be grumpy all the time

✓ read: 1:42 AM

I'm going to kill you dumbass

✓ read: 1:42 AM

That's the spirit!!!

(*´´`*).°*°

✓ read: 1:42 AM

Tobio rolled his eyes. Arguing with Hinata usually led nowhere, especially when it was behind a screen. Tobio's retorts had less venom, less impact; and yet somehow Hinata still

managed to be just as annoying, like his energy was somehow transmissible through digital characters.

Dumbass Hinata

Anyway

It should be 2 am there

Go to sleep

I'm going to fight you if you get sick

✓ read: 1:45 AM

I was asleep

Your texts woke me up

Dumbass

✓ read: 1:46 AM

 $(\bigwedge *' \forall `)_{\circ} *^{\circ} +$

✓ read: 1:46 AM

He stared at his screen even as it turned black, effectively putting out the only light in the room. Tobio rolled to his back, staring at the ceiling, an annoyed huff at the tip of his lips.

It was not that Tobio didn't care about other people, it was just that he had a different way of showing that he cared. The whole friendship schtick was new to him, even though it had been nearly ten years since high school. Tobio had different priorities. While his teammates sent his first friend off to Rio, Tobio was in a training camp. When most kids wanted to play video games, he was in the court practicing serves; and when his teammates didn't care about a match against a small orange-haired kid in a newbie school without prior experience, Tobio yelled at them to jump higher.

Most fish wanted to swim. Tobio wanted to fly in the air.

Maybe in hindsight, it was why nobody really wanted to be his friend since he was a kid. He was self-centered, some had even gone as far as to say he was an arrogant, tyrannical king. His priorities were elsewhere, and he pushed people past their limits. He was harsh, rough, abrasive—both inside the court and out of it. He was difficult to like, difficult to love.

Kageyama Tobio was selfish.

And because of that everyone abandoned him.

Tobio wasn't a stranger to loss. He wasn't a stranger to being left alone, his parents were the first after all, too busy to look after their children. Tobio didn't hold it against them, and it didn't stem from any form of self-loathing either. His parents were busy because their priorities were elsewhere and children were probably some kind of milestone their ever dutiful selves were supposed to fulfill. There were no questions about it as it was what was expected of them; like how Tobio was expected to join interviews and sponsorship meetings despite being a volleyball player.

In hindsight, maybe Tobio's detachment and misplaced priorities might have been attributed to his parents. In hindsight, maybe as Hinata put it, *mushy feelings* weren't in his area because of it. Regardless, *being left alone* was a constant in the Kageyama household, and kids growing up there had no one but each other and their grandfather to rely on.

Tobio was familiar with being left alone. His classmates in elementary didn't like to play with him too much, and it didn't really get any better. Miwa, after her decision that volleyball wasn't really for her, packed her dresses, powders, lipstick, and hair clips to Tokyo, leaving Tobio on his own with Kazuyo-san. And Kazuyo-san—

Tobio rolled to the side of his bed.

Well. Even he couldn't stay forever if he tried.

And then there was junior high. That was a disaster.

An egocentric king.

Thirteen and venerated with a title he hadn't asked for. The cape was too loose on his shoulders, it slipped; the crown was heavy against his brow. Built a throne for the king of the court; crafted a crown for a tyrant. Look at the brat who didn't know how to give and did nothing but take.

The court split into a rift. A toss fell without a spiker. No one was there. It was utter rejection.

He couldn't say he blamed them. Tobio was selfish, and maybe it was because he was empty growing up that he yearned for more, maybe it was because there was always some form of hunger gnawing inside him, a certain hollowness that feeds his greed. Decent wasn't enough for him, average didn't satiate him. The way Tobio loved was a gaping hole that threatened to swallow you whole, egocentric and miserly. Tobio loved in the way he loved volleyball, too much and never enough, somehow obsessive if not entirely impulsively desperate, pathetic.

And maybe, fifteen and freshly abandoned, Tobio thought perhaps this was what those long strings of lovers were, ever-changing like his sister changed clothes; or what crying in the locker room in the arms of some woman as if you had just lost your ticket to nationals in your last match in high school, angry at yourself for being in love.

Maybe there was a hollowness in them too, a hunger, yearning, some cavity inside your body that begged to be filled.

Kageyama Tobio had been selfish—still was.

But Karasuno didn't mind.

They didn't mind his odd priorities, didn't mind what he deemed important and not. They didn't mind being threatened by his trust and his obsessive, desperate love for volleyball that would've overwhelmed anyone else, whether he was abrasive or harsh.

Karasuno didn't mind that he was greedy.

No one could tell what is and isn't important to you better than you do, uttered in their old backyard so long ago when Miwa quit, coming back to remind him over and over again, especially when he was on the cusp of doubting himself. Miwa stopped volleyball over something most people would think was shallow. *Shallow* was a subjective concept, in ways Miwa thought volleyball was compared to hair, in ways Tobio thought playing video games with friends and visiting shrines with them for good luck were compared to practice.

The words you say may slide off children, they usually did honestly, but some of them stick forever; and you never really know which ones they'll keep to heart and which ones they decide to ignore. Kids had a different concept of what was important, but just because it came from a kid doesn't mean it's not worth anything, doesn't immediately flag them as pointless.

Tobio's concept of importance was just as different as he was. He's trying of course, but--

He huffed, rolling to his back and closing his eyes shut.

He needed to sleep.

Training started early tomorrow. Tobio had other things to think about, and thoughts that reached no conclusions had no place in his head.

It occurred to him, just as he was on the edge of falling back into slumber, that this was the longest conversation Tobio had with Hinata in a month.

📆 Countdown:

\(\) EuroVolley: **3 days**

TIVB World Championship: 84 days

South American volleyball championship: 3 days

Team infighting wasn't uncommon.

Tobio should know that more than anyone.

"Get your sloppy receives in shape." Santini slammed his hand fist on the locker door, after a rather intense practice. It was a bit too close to a match to have an argument, but the tension

of an upcoming match must have affected some of his teammates' moods.

Fighting wasn't bad, not all the time anyway. Sometimes, fighting could be good, but as Tobio grew up from being a first-year and became an upperclassman himself, he had lost patience for fights. Not that he grew out of it permanently--he still taunted Hinata when the occasion called for it, and he still rose against Tsukishima's provocations, because it was Tsukishima and that cynical bastard was a pain in the ass.

"Shut up. Just because your girlfriend broke up with you, doesn't mean you get to be a prissy little bitch," Moretti snarled. "Your spikes are just as shitty."

"Say that again to my face, pretty boy," Santini spat, throwing his towel on the floor.

At this point, Tobio tuned them out. Some of the first years before Tobio graduated from Karasuno were rather... passionate, and were often into scuffles with each other. Precocious brats often gave Yamaguchi and Tobio troubles. He wondered if this was what the senpais had to deal with when they were younger. Yamaguchi never failed to rub it in.

Infighting wasn't bad; a loud outburst from both parties usually got the issue resolved quickly. They had to rip it off like a bandaid. He just lost patience for it, and he certainly did not expect to witness it when he was in professional clubs. The difference with high school and professional teams though, was that Tobio was sure they were mature enough to handle themselves. Moretti and Santini were often at each other's throats, and at the same time, the bestest of friends: rivals. They shared a complicated relationship, one that Tobio knew not to intervene. It wasn't the first time it happened after all. They just needed to cool their heads

Tobio only wished they didn't choose to do it so close to EuroVolley.

"Hey, guys—calm down. Getting physical isn't the answer," Garcia tried to intervene, the poor newbie.

"Don't bother them." De Luca laughed. "They're going through their routine lover's spat."

"When they are done," Tobio sighed, "Tell them I'm in the court for extra practice." One of them bounded to ask for training time with him after arguments like these. Tobio wasn't sure how it started, but Tobio was grateful for any extra practice time.

"Don't stay too long, si?" Russo waved his hand.

"Yes sir."

Tobio had his own fair share of fights, and he really wasn't one to talk. His ugly temper was difficult to rear, his communication skills were abysmal, and often he said the wrong things at the wrong time. He's been butting heads with teammates since he was in junior high, in fact, it was one of the greatest hurdles he needed to overcome for the longest time.

Junior high was a tipping point, and as Tobio practices serves and tosses all alone in this gym, the thoughts of isolation still scared him, thoughts of his tosses rejected haunted him.

Communication was a two-way street, and Tobio was better at it now—not the best, but better

"Merda! Poroco puttana, quel fottuto stronzo!"

The door blasted open with the sound of Italian curses following. Tobio was going to have a good repertoire of curses the next time he went back to Japan, and he thought he was already vulgar growing up.

Santini's darkened glower made Tobio raise a brow.

"Hit me some, Tobi."

He was practicing tosses tonight then. He wondered where Santini was blowing off steam.

Tobio wasn't good with words, but he could help through volleyball. This was camaraderie, team building. It helped to be there when someone was going through something, if only to vent out frustration into something productive.

The spikes were erratic. The lines in Santini's body tense and coiled, as if it was going to spring into lashing out anytime, a ticking bomb ready to explode. Distantly, Tobio wondered if he was once like that too--still like that too. There were only so many spikes you could do to ease out anger.

"We should rest." Tobio stared at the fuming man who had his hands on his knees, bowed out while he rasped out pants.

"No." Santinti's accent thickened with every harsh breath. "One more."

"Injure yourself, and we will have no chance of winning EuroVolley."

Santini glared at him, but Tobio knew he was in the right this time. Figuring out the conditions of his hitters was an important job as a setter, knowing when to push and when to pull was a skill. Setters brought the best out of their teammates, Tobio knew that now.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Santini sighed, the coil in his tense posture was unraveling. He laid on the gym floor, back flat, and face up the ceiling. "Lucas is planning to go play in a foreign club," he finally revealed. "He's already signed a contract. He's leaving next season."

"Ah." That was news.

"The bastard didn't tell me," Santini gritted out. "He should have told me. I had to learn it from Coach of all people." He was more petulant in saying it, less angry, and more frustrated. It was all curious to Tobio.

"You're angry because he didn't tell you?"

"Yeah?" Santini turned to him, a questioning look on his face. Tobio wondered if the answer to this was obvious.

"Why? Would it change anything if he told you?"

Santini laughed in near hysterics. Tobio wondered if he said something wrong. "Of course! It's—you know, life-changing! He's Lucas. My best friend! I won't be seeing that bastard anymore. I won't get to play with him. He's in a whole different country! Fucking France of all places."

Life-changing. Tobio had heard of that before. This whole conversation was familiar.

"What's the French got that we don't have? Fuck the French," Santini continued his tirade. "He doesn't even speak French. He's going to get lost in there."

Tobio didn't really speak Italian either, but he didn't point that out just yet.

"But then you can still play against him," he pointed out instead. "EuroVolley, worlds. Then you can play together during the Olympics and the nation's league." There were lots of ways for them to meet. It was not the end, so long as there was volleyball.

Santini scoffed, still agitated. "Oh come on Tobi, I don't think you ever had a friend who went overseas," Santini said, rolling his eyes. Tobio blinked at him. He didn't seem to understand what Tobio was trying to show him. Santini stared for a few more seconds before realizing. "Oh. You're the friend who went overseas."

"Mhm." Tobio sat on the floor, cross-legged. "I have a friend overseas too. A couple of them, actually. We'll meet some of them soon." Ushijima from Poland. Yaku from Russia. Tobio didn't know where he stood with Yaku, but he thought they were acquainted enough to be called friends. Ushijima was his teammate, and so, in some way, they were friends—even if it was nearly unbelievable. Then there was Hinata.

Hinata, his... partner.

Tobio wasn't going to see him till after EuroVolley though.

"You must look forward to seeing them," Santini mused.

"Yes." Tobio was counting down the days, slowly, but surely. It made training meaningful, every burn in Tobio's calves, in his back, and in his forearms, the ache in his fingers—they were all to meet *him* again. He had been waiting, patiently, carefully.

Tobio was waiting for so long.

They fell into companionable silence, simmering in the air while they contemplated their thoughts separately; Tobio decided to stretch his muscles to cool down.

"Was it difficult? Leaving?"

Tobio looked up from a seated straddle that had his chest nearly touching the floor. Santini's brows were furrowed, but it lacked the heat of his previous anger.

"Not really." The decision to leave wasn't difficult. Adjusting to the new place was a different story, however. Tobio knew going overseas was important to improving. The top of Japan, the world stage. Tobio had been ready for it since he was a kid who knew from the start volleyball was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

So Tobio had no right to say anything to people leaving. He knew he would have done the same— had done the same.

Santini laughed, a bittersweet sound. "Suppose it's different being the one left behind."

Tobio broke out of his seated straddle and picked his body off the floor, straightening his posture to look at Santini.

"No, I—I tried that too." The words struck. That was the cost of improvement; separation was inevitable for Tobio. Separation was something he had been long acquainted with since he was young. Maybe that was what made the decision to move easy for Tobio. Being left behind was nothing. It just meant he needed to catch up, having no one to catch up—that was different. The latter was scarier in Tobio's opinion.

Santini looked intrigued at his response, the question at the tip of his lips.

"What do you mean?"

There was the question. Tobio's face was impassive, but his palms had sweated a little, and heat curled at the back of his neck, tickling his nape with tiny goosebumps.

"A... a teammate left for two years to train." Tobio hummed. "He didn't say anything either. I found out by myself. He was planning it for a year." Bright orange tint marching off to miles away as they parted ways, rich pools of honey amber looking back one last time before finally moving forward. The announcement wasn't a stab in the back as much as it was a splash of cold water in the face; not a betrayal, just pure surprise. There were raised voices, and then there was silence. Tobio found out that the silence was harder to deal with than the explosive frustration.

"What happened? You fought?"

Tobio tipped his head to the ceiling, and thought, *recalled*. The memory was golden, or perhaps Tobio simply spun that moment to look too dream-like; the price of forgetfulness and Tobio's idealization.

"We're not fighting right now," Tobio said then. There weren't bruised faces or screaming this time, no raised voices or short tempers. It wasn't necessarily a fight, but that didn't mean they were okay either.

"No." Hinata nodded to himself. "We're not."

Tobio had too many arguments with Hinata to count, several of them physical, and Tobio had been in a lot of misunderstandings, but he only had serious scuffles with Hinata five times—two of them physical, four of them with raised voices.

That was always the odd one.

"No," Tobio confirmed. "Just tense. We didn't talk."

"Bet." Santini chuckled. "Dick move not saying anything, you know?"

Tobio nodded.

"And he's my friend since forever," Santini continued. "He should've said something! That's what friends do! It's big! Life-changing! Didn't he trust me?"

Trust.

The nature of trust was different for each person. Tobio's trust was absolutely different.

Tobio's trust did not come easy; it was not easy to handle. Trust should be something that you give up, something you offer as you lose control. Tobio's trust was something he thrust upon his peers, like a problem he shoved to his teammates. If trust was the act of giving a piece from the brick wall you put up around yourself, Tobio kept his up until there was enough banging for him to open up, then he retaliated by throwing his bricks at people.

It was not a good image if the metaphor even held up. Not that Tobio was ever good with metaphors; countless nights spent by Tsukishima and Yachi in despair while they studied for modern literature was good enough proof.

"Your friend," Santini brought the topic back to him. "He any good?"

"Not at first." Tobio smiled. "He sucked. Bad. He hit the back of my head with a serve once."

Santini guffawed. "Where's he now?"

"Brazil. Superliga."

Santini whistled. "This was the orange ninja then? The shorty who toys with the blockers. Shouyou Hinata, was it?"

"You know him?"

"Know *of* him," Santini corrected. "Difficult to miss. Jumps around like nobody's business. Saw him during the nation's league too. You still talk?"

"Yes." More than they should actually.

"And you're fine with it? Fighting against him in court? He was your teammate once."

Before they became teammates, they were enemies. Hinata stood before him in his green jersey, all hunched while grasping at his stomach, too nervous for the first game of his entire career. Before they were partners, they were rivals. Tears streaming down his face, hand clutching at his chest, Hinata declared a promise to defeat Tobio. A year later, Hinata renewed that vow. Even if it took him ten or twenty years, he was going to defeat him. He was going to follow him, to the top of Japan, and the world stage.

Before they became the freak duo, they were Hinata and Kageyama.

"Yes," Tobio replied. "I look forward to it." Every day. Every hour. Every minute. Every second. The thought of meeting helped pass the months. It was not the whole reason why he played volleyball; Tobio mused he still would be playing even without Hinata chasing after him, but he admitted that he probably won't be where he is now without him.

"Well if you guys turned out okay..." Santini chuckled, looking away.

"Talk to him." The advice was awkward in Tobio's mouth. "Talking... works. Don't waste time. It's limited." He was not qualified to give any, especially when he rarely heeded his own advice most of the time. It sounded right anyway, and in a logical sense, it was a good course of action.

"Nnhh." Santini got up and studied Tobio's face, green eyes dark even under the gym's lighting. He was not sure what he was searching for in his face, but it unnerved Tobio. Before he could speak, Santini opened his mouth and said, "Do you think talking to your friend beforehand could have made a big difference for you?"

Tobio swallowed a lump caught in the tightness of his throat. The question caught him off guard.

There were two ways to answer it; two options stood before him.

There were short answers and long answers when prying them from Tobio—though most argued the differences were nearly nonexistent; the answer depended on those who were willing to listen and those who did not. The short ones were usually defensive, the long ones usually just tragic.

The short answer was no.

The long answer was denial at the tips of lips, dangling by his tongue as a reaction to anything that hit close to home. The long answer was a question left hanging in the air, pregnant pause palpable while Hinata Shouyou, home after two years of absence, six years of memories, and all twenty-two years of waiting fermenting in tension, waiting for Tobio who was trying to sort his emotions.

The long answer was still no.

His answer was neither.

"Probably."

There was no blunter way of putting it. He needed his teammates to get along before the game started, and based on experience, nothing was going to happen unless they communicate, talk it out of their systems—even socially obtuse Tobio knew that. If Santini knew Tobio's thought process, he didn't let it show, but being a professional was knowing when to be petty and when to take things seriously. It was just a part of growing up. Some things were more important than pride.

"Alright," Santini said, and Tobio was half surprised he agreed to it. "I'll talk."

"Okay." Tobio stared as the other stood up with resolve.

"Okay."

Tobio hoped it all went well.

"Okay."

Countdown:

\(\text{turoVolley: 2 days } \)

🜟 FIVB World Championship: 83 days

★ South American volleyball championship: 2 days

"Hello, good afternoon. This is Kageyama Tobio speaking."

Tobio was not good at keeping in touch.

His sister was a little better at it; his parents were just as horrible as he was.

So it surprised him to see his phone ring with his father's name on the screen on the way home. Skeptically, Tobio picked up the phone and pressed the device on his ear, customary greeting out of his mouth, stiff, scripted, and practiced.

"Tobio." There was the gruff sound of his father speaking through the phone, the electric tone of his voice warbled by static was oh so familiar to Tobio by now.

"Father," Tobio answered in kind. "How can I help you?"

There was silence on the other line for a brief moment. Tobio's father was twenty-seven when he married his mother, who in turn was just barely past twenty-five, like the responsible son and citizen he was. His parents' marriage was from a matchmaker where they found each other agreeable, settled into an agreement after a few months of seeing each other, and then held a small ceremony for the marriage.

Both of them were an only child, career-driven, and a little too workaholic. Tobio supposed that was what made them compatible with each other. His mother worked as a sales agent

between Miyagi and Tokyo, only home occasionally, his father was often working odd hours in a hospital as a cardiologist. With that in mind, it should be three in the morning in Japan. It must be important if he was calling between his shifts.

"How are you doing lately?" There was an awkward shuffle on the other side, a rustling of papers, and whatever trinkets that littered a cardiologist's desk. Tobio never knew. Hopefully, he never would; learning about it late at life only meant one thing, and it's not ideal.

"I'm good," Tobio said. Belatedly, he added, "You?"

"Alright."

There was that pause once again, a dead air of silence, a lull in the conversation. It was the social equivalent of wading in a thick pool of water. It was a bit suffocating.

"So, do you need anything?" Tobio cleared his throat.

"I have a conference next week in Zurich. I was wondering if you wanted to meet up? It's just a train away, isn't it? I can pay for the fare, if you want."

That was nearly a seven-hour ride. It was almost as long as a train ride from Tokyo to Osaka, and a ride from Osaka to Miyagi would have been longer. Logistically, Tobio could—if he wanted, or if he was free. The latter was impossible, the former was doubtful.

"I can't do next week." Tobio tipped his head up, inhaling and holding his breath in. "I... I have a game." He had been doing this for more than six years, half of it abroad. Something about the timing of that question made Tobio blanch. He wasn't sure why.

"Okay."

"Is that all?" Tobio drummed his fingers against his lap. Talking to his parents always had some kind of looming difficulty in it, a tension like taut lines on a string pulling at him. Phone calls were difficult, even back when he was a kid. They haven't changed now.

"Have you heard from your mother?"

Tobio had not. The last time she had called him was to invite him to the daughter of his colleague's wedding, nevermind that he was in America for a training camp. She was probably going to urge him to find a woman to settle down with, as she often did when another of her co-worker's children started having families of their own.

His mother was strict. A woman who held on to traditional values despite being the exact opposite of the said values as a woman who opted to focus on her career rather than be a stay-at-home mother. Tobio didn't call her out on it, even when he was grown old enough to. In some ways, all Kageyama children got their work ethics from her.

Once they found something they wanted to take, they would focus on it alone. To his mother, it was her career, to Miwa it was hairdressing, to Tobio it was volleyball.

"No," he said. "She hasn't called lately."

"Ah," he said, though not at all surprised. "She must be busy. I'm guessing you're busy these days too."

"I am," Tobio replied. "You too."

"Yes."

Tobio waited for a full five seconds before talking once again. "I have to go. I need to go home and eat dinner."

Free practice was done earlier than usual for the upcoming matches, and the gym was locked during these times to stop them from overworking themselves. Tobio felt like that latest rule was directed at him, being usually the last to leave the gym from free practice. His coach had sent him on a monthly visit to a masseuse so he could avoid body fatigue.

If it wasn't for the change of schedule, the call would have gone to voicemail.

"Okay. We should..." He trailed off. "We should catch up soon." He hadn't talked to him in nearly a year, last time was probably Christmas, both to greet him for his birthday and to wish him Merry Christmas. He'll probably call next around that time.

"Alright." Tobio shuffled on his feet. "Bye."

"Bye."

Tobio ended the call and turned it off. He let out the huge breath he was holding. Communicating was never their strong suit, and he wondered if talking to him was like that —like pulling teeth. It made his temples throb. He didn't dislike his parents, on the contrary, he was grateful. They've been kind enough to fulfill all written obligations expected of them, get him a good house, give him good food, a comfortable enough childhood to never be in need of anything more, supportive enough to let him pursue volleyball even when they thought it would stop as nothing more than a hobby.

When Tobio insisted he didn't need to pursue college, he had expected a strong talking down to reconsider. There had been none, just as Miwa decided to leave for Tokyo. It was more than enough for Tobio. His parents had no objections about his career choices, and they never pressured him over his grades, never even asked about them, save during the occasional small talk about how he was doing at school when they *were* around. And they were scarcely around to begin with, even more as he grew up, so his horrible grades were mostly a nonissue.

His memories of them were just about the number of fingers he had on his hand, mostly memories from his birthdays where they were at least present. The most vivid one was from his tenth birthday where they bought him a brand new set of shoes as a gift, wrapped in elaborate blue paper and an orange bow. They were colored red and two sizes smaller.

It was an insignificant detail that Tobio latched on. Kids latched on the strangest things.

Tobio didn't dislike his parents. He loved them, but Tobio loved them the way respectful kids were expected to love their parents and how hardworking citizens of this country loved their kids, the way children loved getting a different thing for their birthday from what they really wanted. Tobio loved his parents the way he loved those red-colored shoes that were two sizes smaller. He loved them as he bowed to them in thanks, box in hand and a smile rigid on his face--he never did learn how to smile. Love was filial piety, the wrong-sized shoes, and terse phone calls once a month or so.

It was the thought that counts. It was customary to give something for someone's birthday, reestablishing connection and rapport from one party to another. Calling someone was just as expected, and that was what all those calls were. It's their own method of raising children, valuing independence and resilience more than anything where others liked to keep a close eye on them, overseeing their manners and lifestyle, raising their voices at mistakes, and rewarding them at every good decision. This was where children usually learned things like *please*, *sorry*, and *thank you*.

His parents never raised their voices at him since he was seven, and Tobio never had to apologize for anything, barely had to ask permission for anything after he turned fourteen. He never fought with his parents, not like some others he had heard from his past classmates. It was difficult to fight someone who was barely present.

Tobio was familiar with fighting though, all tongue lashing and fire burning within him, anger consuming him like flash paper. His anger was quick to burst, easy to douse. Flash paper indeed. For some time, Tobio liked the rage. He liked how it gave him something else to feel other than numb or pain. It was easier to be irrationally angry than examine himself and all that was broken inside.

Nowadays he was tired of rage.

Fighting was easy. Tobio had his fair share of fights. Even so, he was not familiar with the art of apologizing which usually came after the confrontation. Apologizing meant communication, and Tobio proved himself useless in that department, didn't he?

Tobio scrubbed a hand over his face.

Fights. He had one in middle school. Five in high school, all from the same person. None after that. Kindaichi and Kunimi were reconciliation seven years in the making, but Tobio surmised that was only because of Hinata. Hinata was always there, a buffer between Tobio and the rest; way back his first year in Karasuno and even till they became upperclassmen themselves. Hinata, who kept his crown and cape when he was ready to bury it on the grounds of Karasuno.

He was there when he played beach with Kunimi and Kindaichi. He was there when Tobio stood clenched fists on the court, teeth gritted together and itching to move forward. He was always there to guide Tobio through his clumsy apologies.

Maybe that was why when it was time for Tobio to show remorse and ask him for forgiveness, Tobio floundered like a fish swimming in the air, a bird drowning in water. Maybe that was why all of his serious fights were only ever with Hinata.

He'd like to think he remembered that exact moment perfectly, but realistically he was bound to get some things wrong. The thing about forgiveness, you need to communicate to get it right. He never did learn properly how to communicate--a shared family trait, and in turn, he never learned how to ask for forgiveness.

"You know," That lilting voice no longer as high as it was years ago spoke with a thoughtful hum. His curls bounced with every movement, the afternoon light seeping through the gym's windows bleeding through him. He looked too pretty to be real, but memories had a tendency to be conflated with romanticisation "The first time we fought—like really fought—Yachi was there."

The Tobio back then frowned as he tried to remember what the Hinata then was talking about, not that it took long. He remembered it clearly. What made him hesitate was the thick silence that loomed over them before Hinata decided to break it.

"Yeah?" What about it?"

"I think that was the first time I seriously fought with anyone." Hinata hummed, holding on to the ball, face spaced off, contemplative, as he always was when he was observing a game. He got quiet at times, not in the way where he was obviously psyching himself up, or worrying about ridiculous things from when he was younger than he was now. "I think I cried a little on the way home." He laughed wistfully, the way someone older reminisced a distant past. Has it really been that long?

And Tobio, had he been anyone else, wouldn't have picked up on where he was headed to; maybe if it was a few years, or maybe even months earlier, Tobio wouldn't have either. But he was not just anyone, and so many things had happened in between.

"We're not fighting right now." No, they weren't. Not exactly. There weren't bruised faces or screaming this time, no raised voices or short tempers. This wasn't necessarily a fight, but that didn't mean they were okay either.

"No." Hinata nodded to himself. "We're not."

Here was one thing they don't tell you (but by now Tobio supposed nobody really told him anything growing up): some things weren't worth getting angry about, some things didn't need divine fury. Tobio spent too much time in his teens with rage stuffed in his mouth till it exploded in venomous words. Maybe it was the maturity brought with time, maybe it was because of the new environment, but Tobio had mellowed out most of that wrath into something more manageable—palatable.

Sometimes it was just disappointment.

(A decline to practice digs).

(A replay of old volleyball games stores in CDs postponed).

(Red shoes, two sizes too small),

Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Sometimes you reach the end of the line, with no sickness, accidents, or pain. You lost because you weren't strong enough, even if you practiced hard every day, even if you tried so hard for it, even if you wanted it so much you could taste it, you could feel it. You reached third of all the nation, and that's all you can give for now. It's bittersweet. It's an accomplishment. You played a good game; you think as you stare at the lights on the stadium's ceiling, stretching your worn-out muscles. It was a good game with little mistakes. Realistically, it was a good way to end your high school career and what little time you spent in it in the grand scheme of things. Realistically, three years were short compared to all the years one could play in the future. It was a good game.

You still want more.

But then, life had this thing where you needed to compromise. Settle for third for now, try again later. Lose a match, eat, rest, and train again. Lose a silly race, run faster the next time. You can't always win. You can't always be selfish. Tobio didn't like compromises and Tobio was greedy.

"So," Hinata was tiptoeing around everything and Tobio would really rather he just fucking spit it out, "V-League, huh?"

"Yes," Tobio finally gritted out.

"You didn't say anything." The accusatory declaration finally dropped.

Hinata didn't face him. He was dribbling the volleyball on the floor. Every smack of palm against rubber, a thud against the floorboards was louder with every second Tobio said nothing. "You never tell me anything," he continued.

Tobio thought of his parents and their erratic schedules, cold dinners that needed to be put away, and mornings with leftovers for breakfast. He thought of Miwa who didn't mention having a boyfriend until it came up, never mentioning breaking up and getting a new replacement. He thought of Kazuyo-san with harsh pants behind his warm smile. They never told him anything. Tobio, in turn, never learned how to.

"You didn't tell me about Rio."

That was a foul. Hinata knew that too. In Tobio's defense, the invite came just after nationals when everything had been a blur of emotions and highs. It wasn't the priority. Hinata on the other hand had an entire year.

"You're angry," Tobio said out loud, just so everything was out in the open, just so there was no more sulking.

"Of course I am! It's the V-League! Division one and everything! This is huge!" Hinata exclaimed, voice rising in pitch. "I don't know, you could have said something. This is... it's life-changing, you know? We're partners. Shouldn't you say something?"

The thing was, Tobio thought it was a given. He thought Hinata understood that it was obvious. He wasn't going to go to college. He was going to the top as fast as he could, by

whatever means possible. Tobio examined the lines on Hinata's face, the way they curved up in his cheeks and brows and jaw. He was wide-eyed with gritted teeth, not mad—not really. Just petulant, annoyed. So maybe he did understand and all this was just stubbornness on his part. Maybe this was Hinata, refusing to compromise as well.

"Brazil is literally halfway across the world," he pointed out. If they were doing this, then this was coming out too. "Everyone knew but me. What's up with that?"

That was the thing about forgiveness, you need to communicate and bare yourself to truly earn it.

Hinata's cheeks puffed up, and he looked like he wanted to say a lot of things but could not give a proper response. He was like a kid this way. "Shut up!" he said, cantankerous and animated at the same time. "It's not my fault you're not as perceptive as the others! I wasn't even trying to hide it!"

If there was a lesson to be learned here, it was that Tobio was bad at communicating.

On one hand, Hinata can be just as bad as well.

"Welcome—oh you're that kid! You came back."

Tobio blinked away the traces of the memory in the soft edges of his peripherals, no longer somewhere seven years ago, but back in the present in the familiar lights of a traditional Japanese restaurant. The image of a gym was forgotten in favor of the smell and sight of food.

He was a little surprised at being remembered. He last came here more than weeks ago and yet the old woman was there smiling at him. She was wearing a light blue *komon* beneath her kappogi and Tobio hadn't seen one in a while.

"I'm back." Tobio stared owlishly, not sure what to do or how to act. He came here on a whim, really. The vacant free time before dinner gave Tobio the time to kill, and before he knew it, his feet had taken him in front of this restaurant.

"Come, sit." The grandma ushered him to a seat, her wrinkled hand was warm but firm as they grasped his wrist to one of the tables. "Come, what would you like to eat?"

The woman was fussing over him too much. But again, it wasn't unwelcomed. Tobio sat on one of the tables and listened to the old lady talk while he nodded at opportune times. It's not much, just small talk about the weather, how different living in Italy was, how her son was doing in his job through the details, all the while Tobio ate his curry.

It was good. Thoughts about parents and empty gyms were momentarily forgotten.

"I didn't want to say it the first time, but you look a lot like my son when he was your age." The old lady smiled. "Of course, he's busy these days but it would be nice to hear from him sometimes."

Tobio made a small sound of agreement. The conversation was leaning on one-sided, Tobio not sure what else to say—he was never good at talking. The old lady didn't mind though, she seemed content on speaking Japanese on her own. She kept talking about her son, and how she missed Japan, how Italy was different, and how they managed to build a life here.

"My boy is going to turn thirty tomorrow." She said. "How about you dear? When is your birthday?"

"December."

"Ah do stop by then. I'll whip something up for you."

It was nice to listen without the pressure to respond. He was bad at communicating, but he didn't mind listening.

When he finished his meal, the woman sent him off with a pat on his head. It made Tobio's cheek heat up, a queasy feeling fluttering in his gut as he walked out of that store.

Countdown:

\(\text{turoVolley: 1 day} \)

+ FIVB World Championship: 82 days

🜟 South American volleyball championship: 1 day

"Rio," Tobio said, unsure what else to say. "That's life-changing."

He nodded. "It is." Then a beat later. "Are you mad?" Hinata looked at him with careful prodding, careful eyes.

"Why would I be?"

"I didn't tell you." The answer came bluntly.

"I don't care. It's a good idea." Tobio scowled. "I'm more annoyed that a dumbass like you thought about it. It's perfect for you." A good friend might have said something else. A good friend might even be mad, might've reacted more betrayed. Tobio wasn't necessarily mad. He was thrilled.

Because this was another step to fulfilling their promise. Hinata would get better, and beach volleyball would do just the trick. Tobio was thrilled, because he was selfish and he wanted Hinata to catch up to him already, to play lots and lots of volleyball with him forever even if that meant pushing the man to the other side of the globe.

"Thanks." Hinata smiled, a smile unlike his usual ones. Tobio didn't have the capacity to decode what it meant. For now, Tobio tried to wrap his mind around the idea of Hinata leaving, Hinata who was constantly at arm's reach, Hinata who annoyed Tobio at every turn.

They didn't always hang out, not outside of volleyball anyway—though there were more moments in Tobio's days doing something related to volleyball than there were without. Hinata had other friends, because Hinata always had more of himself to give. They didn't always hang out outside of volleyball, so separation shouldn't be an issue.

Still, Brazil. Two years. Something about it made Tobio's stomach twist itself into knots. His chest was squeezing into itself, throat closing in. Halfway across the world. It was a compromise.

"Why didn't you say anything?" The words were out of Tobio's mouth before he could swallow it back down. The silence that followed was too loud.

"I don't know." Hinata shrugged, looking pensive. "The same reason you didn't say you were going to the V-League, I guess."

Whatever that was, Tobio didn't know either. He had a feeling Hinata didn't as well. They were on the same page, but the page wasn't something they could describe. It's probably the trust. The trust that they were headed in the same direction, the same goal, even if they had to go their separate ways toward it no matter what. In hindsight, it was rather obvious, in hindsight, it shouldn't have been a surprise. Too bad Tobio was bad at hindsight.

Tobio was thrilled, truly, but he hated compromises as well. Perhaps that was the reason for the churning in his gut when he found out of Hinata's plan out of the blue, referenced by everyone in conversations like they knew all along and Tobio was the only one out of the loop. He wasn't mad, not really, but he was irrationally irritated.

And he had already spent most of his teenage years being irrationally angry at the world. Tobio didn't want to add this to the list.

Some things weren't worth getting angry about. Not everything needed to be dealt with anger.

"Okay." So Tobio sighed, letting the issue go. "Come back stronger."

"I will," Hinata said it in the same way he said his promises. Hinata was always better than him at promises. "I'll come back after two years and beat you."

"You better."

Countdown:

★ EuroVolley: 0 days

TIVB World Championship: 81 days

****** South American volleyball championship: **0 days**

It was late at night and he should be asleep by now. Usually, anyway.

With a game so close, the last thing Tobio was supposed to do was lie in bed and do the opposite of resting. It was too early for this.

It wasn't stress. He hadn't been nervous about matches in forever.

Rome was noisy even at this hour, not too different from Tokyo, but certainly far from the stillness of Miyagi. Tobio could handle noisy—he had been handling noisy ever since, loud, orange, and overly energetic. Tobio slept like the dead anyway, most of the time.

It was an unfortunate time to be losing sleep.

He was indulging himself. He knew this. Their next game wouldn't start until Monday next week, but that didn't mean he was free to lose sleep over this. He was going to regret this tomorrow during training.

Regardless, he found himself watching the Livestream of the South American Volleyball Championship on his phone right by his bed. The tiny image of red and jerseys flocking on court was impressionable, and despite the different people crowding around, Tobio knew just where to look for orange hair. It was an instinct, the general awareness of Tobio to Hinata's presence. Because Tobio had always been attuned to Hinata, in court or outside, because Hinata had always drawn attention to himself. Ridiculous orange hair, absolute bright personality. No matter what you did, you just gravitated towards him. It was what made him an effective decoy.

Brazil vs Argentina. Both formidable teams.

The last time they played Argentina was in the Olympics. They lost to them in the quarterfinals, who in turn won bronze. Oikawa had gotten better once again, and Argentina, who was already strong to begin with, improved even further.

They didn't make any mistakes. Nobody was injured. Tobio was at his best and so was Hinata. The entire team behind Tobio's net were the top players of Japan, and yet they still lost. Argentina's strength came from combination plays and strong teamwork.

Tobio admittedly still had a long way to go.

A crowd of cerulean and white marched forward across the court for their warm-up. The number 13 emblazoned on the broad back of one brunet was obvious in the camera as he ran to the orange-haired man with open arms. Oikawa and Hinata, in a surprising turn of events, got along swimmingly. They met each other like best friends during the Olympics too—somehow the greeting between them was more dramatic than Oikawa's greeting to Iwaizumi, who was actually his best friend.

It was probably after the chance meeting in Rio, two months before Tobio left for the 2016 Olympics. A coincidence—Hinata said after sending a selfie of them on the beach. Oikawa apparently had joined a foreign league, Argentina of all places, leaving immediately after

high school. They were miles away from each other and somehow against all odds, met anyway by chance.

There was a part of Tobio nagging him at the thought of them meeting, that made him glare at his phone when that cursed selfie came up. That same part of him also made his eyes twitch when Hinata turned down seeing him at Rio, not two months after that incident.

The game was about to start, the players lined up in the center of the court as the commentator introduced the players. The South American Volleyball Championship was only five days long, compared to EuroVolley's two-week scrimmages. By the fifth of September, they were already in the final round while Tobio had barely played his second game.

It meant Tobio got to play more games. Therefore he won.

Of course Hinata had some other ideas.

Tobio squinted at his phone screen, eyes burning from sleep threatening to claim him.

First to serve was Brazil; Hinata walked to the backline, volleyball in hand. The camera zoomed into Hinata's grinning face. He looked absolutely enthusiastic, positively glowing, while holding that ball. He hadn't seen his face in months and Tobio swore he looked bulkier than last time. He was probably tanner too. Something about that made Tobio frown.

There was that pre-service habit of his again, shaking off the ball as if sand still clung to the ball, like he was still playing beach. Tobio thought the beach would always cling to Hinata anyway, the sand always sticking to him even when he was already indoors. A man was made up of his habits. This pre-service ritual was proof of that.

The whistle blew its sharp signal. Hinata tossed the ball and flew in the air, sending the ball to the other side of the court with a loud smack. Argentina bumped the ball into play, sending it back to Brazil's court in the back, but Hinata was already there waiting for it—ninja, as they all said. He kept it in play, and without a minute to lose, ran up to the front of the court for a quick.

The first ball of the game landed on Argentina's side, and the crowd went wild. The camera panned to Brazil who wrapped Hinata with open arms, ruffling his hair affectionately. Hinata, drunk in adrenaline and laughter high fived his teammates.

A shot to Argentina's side showed Oikawa's irritated smile.

The difference between seeing a match live and watching it in a Livestream was too big. There were many moments between team members, both opponents and comrades alike that were hidden away from the prying eyes of the screen with the editing of a broadcast and a replay. There were benefits to both, but Tobio liked the rawness of a live game.

Hinata was back on screen, his face intense and focused. Tobio pressed a finger between the creases of his brows from behind the glass of his phone. It was different seeing him on screen than seeing him in person, just like how it was different seeing a real game and seeing it from a broadcast.

Dumbass Hinata

I'm in Rio

Meet up?

✓ read: Aug 1, 2016

Sorry!

Can't see you

I have part time

And then training

Maybe next time?

Good luck tho

✓ read: Aug 2, 2016

okay

✓ read: Aug 2, 2016

The call came somewhere between four and five in the morning. He should have expected it.

"Hinata."

"Hey, Kageyama!" There was that chirpy voice that his phone's speaker could not give justice to. It sounded different here, deeper, robotic, wrong.

"You woke me up, dumbass." Tobio blinked his eyes open. Hopefully, he was not making a habit out of waking him up at odd hours of the morning with a call.

"Ah sorry."

To his credit, he sounded apologetic. It would be helpful if he didn't sound like a kicked puppy whenever he does so that Tobio didn't feel like a dick for admonishing him.

"It's not the first time you did." You needed to do something twice for it to become a habit after all.

Tobio rolled out of his bed, checking the clock for the time. The digital screen lit up the room in its soft blue lights: 4:52 AM it read. It definitely was too early for this, and yet it was too

late to go back to sleep, too little sun to do anything. It's that gray area between morning and night, where everything was too soft and too cold at the same time.

"Haha... right." He was actually embarrassed. There was that slur in his vowels, elongating the stresses in his words, consonants sharper.

"You're drunk, aren't you?" he accused. It definitely wasn't the first time for this either.

"I'm sober!" Hinata denied vehemently. Then there was the spluttering usually present when he's trying to make excuses. "Mostly—okay I'm a little tipsy—but not drunk!" *Tipsy*, not drunk. The distinction was important.

Tobio rolled his eyes. He was definitely close to being drunk. Mistakes were often made in this state. Hinata and his little alcohol-induced calls were something Tobio had hoped to have stopped at the first time. The second time, Tobio had resigned him into accepting this being a thing now.

"What do you want?"

It was too early for this. Bad decisions were made in the early hours of the morning and when you're riddled with alcohol in your system. The loss of inhibition was dangerous for them both. Tobio shouldn't indulge in this. Tobio shouldn't indulge Hinata at all.

The words left his mouth anyway.

"I dunno. I just wanted to call." Hinata hummed with that stupid drunk voice of his, groggy and slow. "We won."

There was something vulnerable with the manner he said it. It was not gloating. He said it as it simply was, just a soft announcement of what was factually true. Brazil won. Hinata was saying this to him at four in the morning in Italy, probably midnight somewhere in Argentina.

He would've found out anyway in the morning from the news. He didn't know why Hinata insisted on telling him directly. He didn't want to know why it pleased him either, but it did please him. It was early morning. He could admit that much.

Tobio tipped his head up to look at the ceiling. He had memorized the cracks and chips of paint falling out of it at this point.

"I saw," he confessed, just as soft.

Hinata gasped. "You did?" He was always stupidly candid even when he was trying not to be.

His gut was churning again, chest constricting at every passing minute. His throat was tight, muscles taut with tension. Even still, the air was soft and the dim lights were making it dreamy.

"Yeah. Oikawa was with you." Tobio drummed his fingers on his lap. He was getting agitated for some reason, like he couldn't sit still. It was making him volatile, impulsive. He shut his

eyes and thanked whatever was out there listening to him that Hinata couldn't see him right now. At the same time, he wondered what Hinata looked like at present.

Probably flushed pink and drunk, droopy-eyed and loose-limbed.

Laughter came from the other side. It was loud and unrestrained. "He's still with me, actually ___"

And whatever soft atmosphere they had hanging between them was immediately gone with the phone getting passed to someone else.

"Tobio-chan! Fucking eat your heart out and be jealous! Me and Shouyou-chan are having the time of our lives. Did you know he's got a piercing on his—"

The loudest voice blared against Tobio's ears and he had to pull the device away from himself before the sound of a crash. He suspected that the phone wasn't passed to Oikawa as much as it was snatched from Hinata's grip. There were signs of a struggle between the two men. Tobio would snicker if it wasn't too early in the morning for it.

"Yeah, he's kinda out of it right now." Hinata laughed, breathless as he came back to the phone seconds later. Tobio could only imagine what he did to immobilize the other man. "He's been trying to call Iwaizumi-san since a while ago but he's not picking up—"

"Long-distance is a bitch!"

It wasn't difficult to surmise what had occurred. Oikawa and Hinata grabbed drinks together after their game. Oikawa must've goaded him into calling Tobio just to be a pain.

"Okay, that's it. I'm going to have to get you to your hotel room, Oikawa-san." Hinata grunted with exasperation. "I'll call you later, Kageyama. Goodnight."

Tobio swallowed the tightness in his throat. This was for the best.

"Yeah."

The call was cut off not a second later. Tobio dropped his arm onto his lap, the screen of his phone displaying Hinata's grinning face.

Seeing him through a screen was different after all.

Just before Tobio decided to go back to sleep, a photo of Oikawa and Hinata popped out in Hinata's text box. Oikawa was leaning all over Hinata, nearly passed out drunk. Hinata was also flushed from the alcohol, cheeks tinged pink from the blush. This was the second selfie he got from these two, and he hoped it wasn't going to turn into a habit as well.

Tobio decided it was early enough in the morning to go for a run after all.

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ITALY vs POLAND: European Volleyball Championship Hot Underway

HELSINKI, FINLAND—the long European Volleyball games are soon coming to a close with volleyball teams Italy's Ali Roma and Orzeł Warszawa from Poland close to battling....captain Giovanni Russo says he's confident with....and with the help of starting setter, Tobio Kageyama... < read more >

There was no time left to think about other frivolous thoughts.

Tobio sat in the waiting room, different emotions coursing through his body. Excitement, anxiety, exhilaration, impatience. They're all crackling from his gut to the tip of his fingers as he filed them into neat measurements. The winners get to play more games, the strongest get to stay on the court longer, the best get to move up and go against stronger ones. Tobio was thrilled. Today, once again he took another step towards the world stage, towards that promise.

Head bowed down, chin nearly tucked to his chest in concentration. Tobio should buy a new nail file, his old one was getting worn out, a thought that flitted through his mind as he focused on nothing but the soft *zhk zhk* of his routine.

When you've done things enough times, it becomes a routine. Once an action becomes a routine, it becomes a habit. One's habits make up a man, a constant repetition of actions. Practice enough serves, you're bound to get some in; practice more than enough and you can control the direction and the strength with precision to take service aces. Toss the ball up your hands for as many times as you need until the ball is your friend, practice enough of your form until it deceives even the most observant players.

Incorporate self-maintenance enough into your body as a kid, it becomes muscle memory; calm yourself down at every beginning of the match, breathe through your lungs, and listen to the pounding of your heart, convince yourself that this too was practice. Tobio had practiced enough, played every game like it was his last. This wasn't any different.

If you think every game's stakes were the same, then you have no more reasons to be nervous, and Tobio had always played like he had everything to lose.

Most people sitting where he was would be a bundle of nerves.

Here was another thing that made him an oddball: whenever Tobio stepped into the court, the only thing he felt was giddy anticipation even when those who stood opposite the net were stronger than him—especially when they were stronger than him.

Someone called it Tobio's drug, and he was in a deep addiction he couldn't ever break free from. That someone suspiciously sounded like Tsukishima, so by default, something Tobio didn't bother listening to.

If you played every game like it was your last, then you'll play every game the same way you've always done. Here was the thing about Tobio, none of it will ever be enough.

He knew about endings and beginnings, about last matches and 'last' chances. At middle school he was benched till the end of his last match. His last highschool match ended with them third in the nation after losing to Itachiyama. His last game with his first *real* team ended when Hinata collapsed. His last match with the Adlers ended with a win for them. Tobio played through all of them as he always had.

(He thought of a lanky boy, barely fifteen clutching at his stomach and desperate to finally play after all three years of waiting; at sixteen high strung and deliriously feverish, a few points from victory and yet crumpled helpless on the floor; eighteen and quietly contemplative, up against the highest obstacle yet; twenty two and with a grin to his face, meeting the court like he was meeting an old friend.)

It's not the start that made people like Tobio nervous. It wasn't the thought of getting into court and throwing the first ball into play; in fact, Tobio could argue that starting was never the reason why people become stressed with tension. It's not really the thought of starting as much as it was the thought of ending. Tobio didn't want the match to end. Tobio never really wanted it to.

"How are you holding up, Tobio? Nervous?" Giovanni Russo sat beside him on the bench, a small smile on his lips. The captain was around seven years older than Tobio, a veteran of this sport. He's sure to have more experience than Tobio had, but he still asked that every single time since Tobio joined Ali Roma, always checked his teammates' conditions one by one. In some way it might be strategic. The best six wins the game, one must always be aware of his teammates' state.

In some way, maybe the captain just wanted to talk.

"I am fine." Tobio stared at his nails, freshly done and clean. "Just pregame routines."

"Gets the nerves at bay, si?"

"Yeah." Tobio blinked. "How about you?" It's a social courtesy to ask about the other person, something Tobio didn't figure out till a little later. Tobio was never familiar with the general rules of engagement. It's something that's always like he's outside looking in, not any different from watching the gym through the bars of a window, looking at a match under the shade of a towel while sitting on a bench from the sidelines. He knew about the game, understood it better than anyone, but it never felt like he was playing with them.

"Oh, I'm a little nervous. Never goes away even with more than twenty years experience." Russo smiled at him. Tobio guessed it never does leave you, even if you were a veteran.

"Yeah."

"Used to call my wife before games. We'll talk about something not related to volleyball. Love of my life, but ah she's busy with work," Russo continued, "Pulls all these crazy hours. We haven't had enough time to bond with the kids. Wish I could spend more time with my babies."

"I see."

"You have someone like that in your life?"

Tobio looked down at his hands, fingers still holding his blue nail file, the rest of his kit on the bench beside him.

"I'm not married."

Russo laughed. "*No*, *non letteralmente*. A girlfriend? Someone special? Someone you make small talk with over the phone." He patted his shoulder. "I hear you in the locker room. You have someone, *si*? I do not understand Japanese, but I hear it."

Tobio thought of Hinata, the only person who he calls in the locker rooms, and immediately frowned. "Not a girlfriend either."

Russo's eyebrows knitted together. Russo reminded Tobio of Romero sometimes.

"But," Tobio added, but he wasn't sure how and what to call his relationship with Hinata. It's not something you could put under a single label, or something you could describe with words alone. It could also just be Tobio's lack of communication skills, or his inability to grasp social etiquette. Hinata certainly was unique to Tobio, an oddball much like himself, an anomaly.

Hinata didn't label whatever they have with anything serious either. It's something that hangs precariously above 'friends', something not exactly what you'd call romantic, but not necessarily less. Tobio didn't think there was any innate romantic bone in his body even if he tried to use an x-ray; he's guessing Hinata knew this too.

A rival. A friend. Something more than that. Something less. Hinata Shouyou and Kageyama Tobio. They just *were* .

"A partner." Tobio settled on.

"Partner, huh?" Russo looked wistful. "Il compagno. Va bene, Tobio."

Their coach called them to gather around. The warm ups were about to start.

" *Oh*, it's time." Russo beamed. " *Grazie, Tobio*. Small talk makes me less anxious. *Mi fa sentire meglio*. " A hand ruffled his head.

"It's nothing." Tobio shrugged, but his cheeks were warming up. "Figurati." The words were slippery in his tongue, too flowery against the rigidness of Japanese.

The weight on his head disappeared, and Russo grinned at him with a thumbs up. "Anyway, let's go kick those Orzeł Warszawa butts."

Trends for You

1. Trending in Italy

Ali Roma

15,203 tweets

2. Trending in Italy
Tobio
1,367 tweets

Poland

- 13,423 tweets
- 4. Trending in Italy

3. Trending in Italy

Orzeł Warszawa

- 17,901 tweets
- 5. Trending in Italy

Wakatoshi

- *3,217 tweets*
- 6. Video games. Trending

Kodzuken

100k tweets

7. Sports. Trending

Kageyama

- 9,2022 tweets
- 8. Entertainment. Trending

Jeonghan

- 62.4k tweets
- 9. Arts. Trending

Chocolate man

- 12,051 tweets
- 10. Music. Trending

SEVENTEEN

11. Politics. Trending

USA

500,9k tweets

13. Food. Trending

Curry King

2,0910 tweets

14. Anime. Trending

Meteo Attack

35.8k tweets

15. Manga. Trending

Zombie Knight Zombish

10k tweets

16. Celebrities. Trending

MARRIED

700.7k tweets

17. Movie and TV. Trending

Jujutsu Kaisen

17k tweets

18. Sports. Trending

VOLLEYBALL PSYCHO ACCOUNT

18k tweets

19. Sports. Trending

JVA

1,078k tweets

20. Sports. Trending

1,002 tweets

The game was spartan.

Tobio could see the end of the match in picture-perfect clarity even after hours of the game. It replayed behind his eyelids in a loop, the moments leading up to it, mistakes, things to improve, the better course of actions. Tobio obsessed over it countlessly. The last toss, the last spike, the ball that slammed past the blockers, outstretched hands in desperation. One inch, one centimeter, one millimeter. All the possibilities. Tobio looked through it all.

Poland put up a hard fight, their setter toyed with their blockers a lot, those quicks were fast-and if Tobio wasn't built with an anti-freak quick master plan in his body from creating a monster quick, he didn't think scoring those points would be easier. Every set was fought tooth and nail, the difference in points was only in the ones and twos, and the deuce felt never-ending.

Ushijima's spikes were absolutely difficult to counter as well. His southpaw spun the ball in more erratic ways, plowing through their blocks.

The game went better than Tobio expected.

Yet they still lost.

He was in top condition today, and so was his entire team. The finality of finally seeing the ball drop on their court and sealing Orzeł Warszawa win was finally sinking in Tobio, the adrenaline rush was settling down, and making him weak in the knees. His joints and muscles burned with fatigue, but he was feeling good.

The game was satisfying even if they lost. There was comfort in knowing they could play some more after this loss. 2-3. There was no helping it. It's been long since he screamed in frustration due to a lost game. It's been a long time since high school. He didn't feel sad, just frustration at the thought of what he could've done better, disappointment, and finally a quiet sobering acceptance.

The next goal was the World Championship. Then the new Serie A season starts. Nation's League, World Cup. There's still more. More volleyball to play, more chances to redeem himself. It's not the end. It still left a bitter aftertaste.

Post match dinners were going to be held in a high end place with lots of sponsors and press, then there was traditionally an after party to celebrate the win, or mourn the loss privately. Tobio was already a tiny bit exhausted at the thought, but at least before that, there were stretches and showers. And then before that, there was the fan meet.

These were the strings attached to playing volleyball as a living, responsibilities in exchange of doing what Tobio loved the most. This was an obligation, and Tobio was just fulfilling them.

It's not exactly so bad, though it wasn't Tobio's favorite thing either. He didn't expect to find a lot of people queuing up asking for his autograph in Finland. There weren't a lot of fans in his first year, but he's found a growth in the length of the line waiting for him as the years passed by. He's blase about fans really, but he knew very well how important it was to have an idol to follow as motivation--he knew first hand as well what limitations it could bring.

Their captain was busy taking interviews from the media, Gracia was the same. Tobio usually steer cleared from interviews if he could; partly, it was because of his lack of skills in the language, but also because even if he could speak fluent Italian and English, he was still awkward in handing out answers that weren't volleyball related.

So Tobio was resigned to signing autographs and taking pictures with fans.

"Signore," A little boy with blazing red hair, just a little short of orange, grinned at him with gaps in his teeth, and pulled at the hem of his jersey for his attention. He should be somewhere in elementary school and was accompanied by his grandmother to the game. "You were so cool, signore Tobio! I came all the way from Italy to see the game! The way you made the ball go bam and bam! Setters are so cool!"

He pushed his paper towards his hands, bouncing with excitement. His accent was thick and Tobio couldn't understand him properly, but the energy was starting to affect him as well.

"Thank you." Tobio plucked the paper and uncapped his marker, ready to create the autograph Sugawara had taught him to make. "What's your name?"

"Luce!" The boy's eyes sparkled, blue eyes shining with excitement. "And I want to be a setter! They're the most important players on the team. I wish my teammates were as good as me but they don't work hard enough."

Tobio blinked, thinking about how fate had a funny way of playing with him.

"All players are equally important." He told the small child as carefully as he could. Kids could be quite kind if they're equally treated with kindness, how you treat them was how they were bound to grow up into. The words you tell children may slide off them, and they usually did, but some of them stick forever; and you never really know which ones they'll keep to heart and which ones they decide to ignore. Kids had a different concept of what was important and what Tobio tells this wide eyed kid barely past ten just might be. "You cannot play volleyball without the other five, and the setter's job is to bring the best out of his hitters."

Tobio thought about freak quicks, the highest point of contact. He thought of tosses just slightly away from the net, of balls that allow the hitter to analyse the best course of action, of sharp crosses and straights. Tobio thought of arms wrapped around his waist in defiance, insisting to fight midair with his eyes open, of raised voices and short tempers that felt like forever ago.

That was, if forever was measured in something close to ten years. Realistically, it had only been six.

Tobio came to Karasuno, rejected, abandoned, unaccepted. So be it. If he needed to play everything by himself, then he would. All the sets, and spikes, and receives. If no one else took the game as seriously as him, then it didn't matter. He came to bury a crown in the grounds of Karasuno. If asking was what made people push him away, then he would never ask for anything again. High School was a stepping stone to the pro league. Three years was small in the grand scheme of things, insignificant.

But then there was Hinata Shouyou, an anomaly who shattered all of Tobio's plans to the dust, mashed it all together and threw it out of the window, spiked it away like some kind of ball. He had a habit of interrupting plans--jumping to receive a ball in the middle of Tobio's spiking practice, calling at odd hours of his sleeping time, leaving Japan to go to the other side of the world.

Hinata Shouyou, who refused anything less from Tobio, who hit his fast tosses when no one else could, who made him cave into his demands, who would hit anything Tobio threw at him, believing it would come to him.

Maybe it was the blind trust. It was ridiculous really, Hinata had basically decided on trusting him from day one. Who spikes a quick attack with eyes closed? Who jumped without even looking? Hinata was crazy. Tobio was maybe even crazier for going along with it.

Tobio's trust did not come easy. Not like Hinata's. His trust came like his temper, in brash drills of receiving practices because one could never be too sure, in never ending spikes from morning to evening, when the sun had yet to rise and when it had long gone down behind the mountains. Tobio's trust came the way he loved, a gaping hole that asked for too much, always asking for more. It was a threat, the same way it was vulnerable.

And Karasuno stepped up to the challenge.

Kageyama Tobio was selfish.

But Karasuno didn't mind.

Karasuno didn't mind that he was greedy, or that he had a heavy crown on his head and a too large cape slipping down his frame. They didn't mind that he was a king. He came to Karasuno to bury his crown, to rip that velvet cape off and prove them all wrong. He was no dictator, he was not a tyrant.

But then there was Hinata Shouyou, and then there was Karasuno.

Tobio thought about freak quicks, the highest point of contact. He thought of tosses just slightly away from the net, of balls that allow the hitter to analyse the best course of action, of sharp crosses and straights. Tobio thought about eighth in all the country, and then later third. Back then it felt like a loss. Today it was a testament of the team's strength. All six players were important, and the setter who could bring out the best form of the team whether by pushing or pulling, proved himself the best.

You cannot play volleyball without the other five. The child was still looking at him with expectant eyes. "The setter's job is to bring the best out of his hitters," Tobio repeated.

"But," There were raised voices, short tempers, the look of rejection. A toss without a spiker. *Mr. Goody Two Shoes*. The threat of being abandoned again. And then there was a weight on his head. A recrowning. "That doesn't mean you can't talk it out. Communication is important. And as a setter, you may still know what's best. Sometimes your teammates do." Karasuno taught him that, and now he was never afraid to give a toss again.

The boy was wide-eyed. His blue eyes were shining with wonder, like something had started to click but hadn't reached there yet fully.

"Hey," Tobio cleared his throat. Communication was never his best suit, but communication worked both ways, and all of them taught Tobio that. "Trust in yourself and your teammates. It's going to be fine. Just talk it out." He pressed the signed paper to the child.

"Grazie signore Tobio," the child murmured to himself. "I think-I think your words helped!" With that, he left back to his waiting grandmother, chattering about the experience.

Of course Tobio didn't know if the kid got what he meant. Of course there was no way to know, but if it helped in any way, that's enough for Tobio.

"Hey Tobes!" Garcia flung his arms around Tobio's neck, laughing with super high energy even with the loss. "Just finished interviewing. Let's go get cleaned up and finish business, huh?"

"Yes. Let's do that."

"Cheer up a little dude. We'll take it back the next time 'round, yeah?" Gracia patted his back. "Anyway, coach wants us in and out fast. There's still a press conference after this. Then the banquet with the sponsors after a quick bus ride back to the hotel room."

"Okay."

The next bits were a flurry of activity, a press conference with media throwing questions on the spot, sometimes non related to volleyball that made it difficult for Tobio to answer; then there were photo opportunities, more meet and greets. It exhausted him to the point where he spent the bus ride back to the hotel deep in sleep. He should catch his rest now with how long the night was going to be.

The dinner with sponsors would be much better if they just let Tobio eat dinner in silence. Generally, Tobio didn't talk during meal times unless addressed to. Then again, that was just generally how he spent most of his time. Regardless, dinners like these weren't Tobio's style. The food selections were too tiny with mostly glasses of alcohol served in trays. Then there was small talk which Tobio was worse at, people congratulating him and asking about personal things unrelated to volleyball. If the topic was anything about volleyball, Tobio would have no problem talking his way through. But Tobio had long learned these older men and women had little interest in the sport, just what it could give them.

Tobio hooked a finger on his collar. He didn't wear suits often either. His movements were too confined, fitted around his shoulders and waist uncomfortably. Well, loose suits weren't

any better either in his opinion. A loose coat that hung over his frame like he was a coat hanger, the hem of his slacks rolling past his ankles, a too big pair of shoes. It was a grown up's suit. He's only ever worn something like that once and Tobio did not want to revisit that experience at all.

There were experiences that stick with you after all. It's not just words. There was muscle memory too, much like practice hardwired emotions and memories into you, polishing reflex and instinct into intuition. It's like how Tobio immediately starts filing his nails at every lunch break; like how air salonpas immediately brings a nostalgic smile to him; how a faint had Tobio immediately diving to the floor; the perfect setup for a monster quick had him tossing to empty space to where a bright orange figure should have been.

Suits then evoke a feeling of distaste from his gut. It's not necessarily because of the clothing, though restrictive as they were. No, it was the association Tobio had with suits to *otsuya* and *ososhiki* the same way lilies and white chrysanthemums are associated with death. It's a rather morbid thought, but Tobio had only ever worn a suit once before he went pro.

(He never got to attend Miwa's wedding after all.)

All the people who came over back then might as well be strangers to Tobio. The Kageyamas didn't often visit family, so when a reason to meet up arrived and was no longer something they could excuse themselves out of, the conversation often had a stilted atmosphere of small talk and catching up; and Tobio was never good at small talk.

It's a quiet affair, traditional, private, stoic. It's very on brand for a Kageyama. The smiling picture of Kazuyo was awkward in the sea of hardened austere faces.

Nobody cried. Not even Tobio. He wondered if he should have.

It's the only time he wore a suit before turning nineteen, and the only time he wore one outside of work.

(He also wasn't able to attend Tanaka and Shimizu's wedding, the day coinciding with one of the games in the V-League. Tobio was selfish. Karasuno didn't mind—*doesn't* mind. It doesn't make him any less guilty.)

Tobio had long worn suits that fit him better now.

And he had better significant events to wear a suit these days, events that were no longer so dour or gloomy. And yet, even if they were slightly better, it didn't change the fact that they were tedious. Anything that needed a suit was immediately tedious, anything that needed small talk already too much trouble.

Between the stress of the post game responsibilities, it wasn't till he was holding a glass of champagne, needing an excuse to look busy, that he turned on his phone and realized how much notifications he's been receiving. Tobio decided to comb through it, if only to snap himself out of the morose mood he's gotten himself into.

The texts were well wishes from most of the people he knew, the old Karasuno team, various people from the Adlers. A couple from his agent with an explanation why he couldn't attend the dinner, and *please talk to the sponsors and the officials, Kageyama-san. Don't forget to smile.* One from Miwa, that was probably a congratulations as well. Some from Hinata.

And then there were Twitter notifications from the app, which he apparently had not logged out of since the last time he was online and thus flooded his phone. Fans were wishing him good luck, then encouragement from the loss. Some of his old friends and teammates tagging him on pics from the game, some from those who he met earlier in line.

One by one he thanked those he knew through texts, the rest he prompted to ignore.

Except—

Shouyou Hinata ✓ @ninja_shouyou. Sep 14 2022

@kageyamaT That's 2432 wins for me and 2430 losses 52 ties

[Video □]

□ 10 replies □ 1k retweets ♥ 7k likes

The video was basically just a compilation of Tobio goofing around...or it would seem like he was goofing around but really that's just how he acted out of the court, and it seemed to be compiled by someone else. Tobio didn't even realize he was being filmed. It did seem like they liked his curry commercial a lot with how often it came up.

Tobio huffed, picking a quiche with one hand and the other texting out a reply.

Shouyou Hinata ✓ @ninja_shouyou. Sep 14 2022

@kageyamaT That's 2432 wins for me and 2430 losses 52 ties

[Video □]

Q11 replies □ 1k retweets ♥ 7k likes

Kageyama Tobio @kageyamaT

Replying to @ninja_shouyou

Shut up dumbass. I'll kick your ass this november

Translate Tweet

04:12 PM · Dec 5, 2022 · Twitter for Iphone



He typed in the response, and minutes after, his phone started vibrating like crazy once again. Not knowing what to do, he immediately deleted the twitter app and sighed with relief.

But then his phone started to ping again, and Tobio groaned. What was it now?

Dumbass Hinata

Heyyy

Can you stop trending every other week? Stupid handsome face making you popular

Whatever I win

Must be difficult dealing with Ushijima's spikes

Oh wait you replied to my tweet lmao

Glad to know you're not a caveman

✓ read: 6:45 PM

Tobio frowned. He's not that far behind the times, for goodness sake. He could use a simple app if he wanted to.

Aren't you supposed to be training?

How did you even see my game?

✓ read: 6:48 PM

I didn't

I was scrolling through twt while eating lunch and saw you trending

AGAIN

I'll be watching it while lifting weights

✓ read: 6:50 PM

✓ read: 6:51 PM

You're right

I should watch it without rush

Savor it

That way I'll be able to see more of your mistakes

Wyd btw?

✓ read: 6:54 PM

Banquet

✓ read: 6:54 PM

Oof

✓ read: 6:54 PM

Thought you enjoyed these things?

✓ read: 6:55 PM

At first yeah

But then it gets a bit annoying

Gotta stay still too long. Not really fun

Has anyone asked you yet if you're single? I bet you get a lot of those questions

Atsumu-san and Omi-san gets asked them a lot

At least Bokuto-san has Akaashi-san as an excuse

Some of them ask me too just in case ur curious

✓ read: 6:57 PM

I'm not

And I haven't

Yet

I'm avoiding them

✓ read: 6:57 PM

For some reason, his dating status was a popular topic among people. It's questions like these that made Tobio uncomfortable with these situations. He'd really rather not talk about his relationship status right now—or ever. Besides, he didn't know how that connected to his skills as a volleyball player. It's not like a relationship was automatically going to make him win more games or play more sets. Tobio didn't understand it at all.

His agent even suggested using his relationship status as a way to promote him to his fans. Tobio, immediately, and very politely, declined.

Dumbass Hinata

But Kageyama-kun

What's the point of these dinners if you don't talk to them?

lol

✓ read: 6:59 PM

Shut up

✓ read: 7:00 PM

As if you haven't heard that from your PR and agent lol

Surprised you haven't made any PR disaster with how awkward you are

I bet you give Misato-san a lot of problems

Oh hey brings me back

the first time I attended one of those things, Atsumu-san, Bokuto-san and Omi-san nearly burnt down one of the table cloths

Well Omi-san would never admit it.

but if he didn't tell Atsumu-san that he can't brulee a creme brulee then Atsumu would never steal those tiny torches

Atsumu said: if Samu can do it so can I

no it didn't go well

Bokuto-san panicked and threw wine all over it

And I guess you can guess the rest

Captain Meian nearly caught a stroke from stress

✓ read: 7:05 PM

Tobio snickered. Somehow that fool always found himself in the most troublesome situations. Somebody really needed to take care of that idiot, keep him under control.

Dumbass

✓ read: 7:05 PM

Hey I'm not the one who got into it

...I just took a video out of it

JUst like what Atsumu-san said!

Though captain did tell us to delete it

✓ read: 7:06 PM

Lol

I bet you didn't delete it

✓ read: 7:06 PM

Of course

[Video [

✓ read: 7:09 PM

The video started with Atsumu holding a small torch with a small blue flame. Tobio didn't turn on the sound so as to not attract people around him, but it seemed like Atsumu was telling Sakusa something. His mouth was moving and his hand was holding the blowtorch from who knows where. Tobio wasn't sure where they got an unfinished creme brulee either but Atsumu pointed the flame on the dessert and it immediately burst into flames. The camera shook while everyone surrounding it panicked. Bokuto got over towards the fire, and doused the burning dessert with the red wine he was holding, causing it to grow bigger. And then while they all tried to put it out, the video had cut to the still of Atsumu taking off his jacket in an attempt to put out the fires.

Tobio huffed. He dreaded thinking about how that went down in the aftermath.

"Oh Tobi, what's got you smiling on your phone?" Moretti slid next to him with an easy smile, Santini right next to him. They were probably a little tipsy judging by the flush on their faces and the arms they had around each other to support their weight. They look awfully cheerful for someone who lost the game, and it seemed like they'd forgotten about their fight two days ago, like they weren't so close to ripping each other's heads off.

" Signore Tobio isn't such a lonely man after all, huh?" Santini offered Tobio a flute of champagne, and with nothing better to do, he accepted it.

Tobio eyed the screen where more dots appeared in the tiny speech bubble of Hinata's text, nevermind that he was apparently smiling. "A friend."

"Friend huh? The one in Brazil? Possibly be something more? *Il tuo amante*?" Santini raised his brows. When Tobio said nothing, Santini continued. "Tobio, *amico mio*. You never smile at anything other than volleyball and food."

Tobio thought that comment should warrant an offended denial, disgruntled contradiction or maybe even an indignant splutter, but it was also right on so he didn't answer that and showed them the video instead. The two peeked into the screen of his phone as they played the file back and within minutes, Santini and Moretti were howling with laughter.

" Oh merda! These your friends?" Moretti slapped Tobio's back, still wheezing.

"You got a rowdy bunch in there." Santini grasped at the phone, playing back the disaster on camera. "Oh wait. You got a message from your friend." The message ping was obviously from LINE. Santini had a smile on his face and pointed the phone towards Tobio. The undeniable snap of a camera went off, and Tobio feared for the worst.

"Oi did you send that to his friend?" Moretti snatched the phone from Santini's fingers and tutted disapprovingly. "Sober up Cardo."

" Vattela a pigliare in culo." Moretti snorted.

Santini rolled his eyes, pushing the phone back to Tobio's hands. "Alright. Drink up and calm down. We don't want you drunk before your bedtime."

"Levati dai coglioni."

Tobio was silently grateful for that even if he figured they wouldn't be able to understand Japanese. Santini dragged De Luca to one of the corners of the room where they could settle down. The phone pinged once again and this time, Tobio peered at it with a bit of hesitation.

What's up with that pic?	
You never take pics щ(° П	°щ)
Are we doing this now?	
Alright	
I'm not gonna lose!	
[photo 🔤]	

✓ Read: 7:12 PM

Tobio rolled his eyes. Of course Hinata was going to take it as a challenge. The picture in

question was a selfie of him doing a peace sign by the lockers, probably about to change clothes for afternoon practice. Hinata's bright grin shone bright, the once faded tan lines after playing for Japan in two years were prominent once more now that he's spent time under the Brazilian sun. It's very different from Tobio's awkward stolen photo in a suit.

Begrudgingly, Tobio had to admit Hinata won this, but since he never counted this as a contest to begin with, then it absolutely did not count. Plus, Tobio had a handicap so everything was null.

Go to practice dumbass

✓ read: 7:16 PM

So I win

(ブ⁻³-)ブ♥

✓ read: 7:17 PM

Tobio glared at the screen. That little shit. He kept his phone back in his pocket with a scoff, but not before saving this picture of Hinata as well.

"Kageyama Tobio."

Tobio looked up as Ushijima made his way to him. He looked older, bulkier, up close. They last saw each other in June. People changed a lot in the few months they were apart. It wasn't long after Tobio left for Italy that Ushijima considered playing for a foreign team as well. Tobio admitted that seeing an occasional familiar face was comforting.

"You played well." Ushijima had said.

"Ohoho. It's been awhile since I saw one of the volleyball monsters in person." Another man grinned too wide and with too many teeth. It was a little uncanny. Tobio didn't notice the presence of another person trailing behind Ushijima, and it had come to him as a surprise. He spoke in Japanese as well, probably an old friend.

"Ushijima-san congratulations." He bowed in greeting. "And--" Tobio squinted at the man. His red hair and shifty eyes were familiar, but he couldn't put a finger on his name.

The man's face split into a wide and eerie grin. "Your face obviously says you forgot my name, hmmm?"

"S-sorry." Tobio's face flushed. The man didn't sound offended, on the contrary, just amused. He smirked at his accurate jab, almost like he was particularly pleased about it. The expression started to jig something in Tobio's memory. "You were the guess blocker in Shiratorizawa."

"I haven't been addressed that in awhile." He whistled. "It's *chocolate man* these days from the fine netizens of the internet. Wakatoshi-kun, why don't you introduce me again?"

He obliged with a prompt nod. "Kageyama Tobio, this is Tendou Satori. He's working as a chocolatier in Paris." Ushijima's introduction made the man grin wider, if that were even possible. "He's my best friend."

Tobio remembered now. He was the guess blocker in Shiratorizawa who was closest to Ushijima. Occasionally Tobio would catch them exchanging calls back when he and Ushijima were still in the Adler's. Despite Ushijima keeping his life private, it was obvious they were close even beyond graduation.

Tendou giggled. "No no. Wakatoshi-kun. I'm not your best friend anymore."

Tobio's eyes widened. Was he wrong? He looked at Ushijima questioningly.

"My apologies." Ushijima waved his hand without a hint of worry. "This is my fiance."

"Oh."

Oh.

That was a surprise.

"Congratulations. I didn't know." Tobio found the words leaving his mouth before he could think about it. The revelation still had him grasping for thoughts.

"He's surprised." Tendou smirked. "Like an innocent child who just found out about—"

"Tendou." Ushijima chided.

"—relationships." Tendou's smile was a little unnerving. He's watching Tobio like a hawk, never blinking or looking away. He usually didn't mind the staring, but it did put him a little off.

"Do you have a problem with my relationship status, Kageyama?" Ushijima's face was impassive, yet chillingly cold in addition to the usual stoicism. His expression deadly sharp behind the calm.

"No. I'm just surprised." Tobio said. "The distance--it seemed difficult to maintain a relationship being countries away."

Ushijima nodded; the taut lines of his body language softened immediately. His tone was back to making amiable conversation. "It is challenging. But Tendou comes to visit when he has free days. And I will go when it is mine. We also call every day." He nodded at Tendou who beamed at him. "Of course, you would know all about it wouldn't you?"

There's this expectant voice in the way he asked. Tobio wasn't sure what he meant.

"What?"

"Arent'cha buddy-buddy with Chibi-chan? The distance is bigger between you, ya know?" Tendou leaned towards him, patting his shoulder with a grin. "He's in Brazil now, isn't he? How's your other half doing?"

Tobio blinked at the question.

"Hinata Shouyou." Ushijima said. "He is your partner, isn't he?"

Partner. The way he said the word was like he was verbally tripping over it. Partner, yes--in whatever sense that he meant, Tobio wasn't sure. It should still hold true, despite whatever implication they were hanging around it.

"He is," he confirmed. "Hinata is my... partner."

Ushijima and Tendou exchanged looks, the latter was playful while Tobio could never get anything out of Ushijima even back when they were teammates. Tobio liked Ushijima as a teammate though, despite the lack of communication from both sides. It was usually calming.

Right now, Ushijima's face was blank. Tendou on the other hand was intrigued. It threw Tobio off the loop. Tendou raked his gaze all over him, those heavy lidded eyes and their red color was unnerving as they inspected Tobio, filing away things Tobio could not begin to guess. He's being scrutinized and it took him aback.

"Hmmm. Never expected the two of you to be okay with separation." Tendou stroked his chin. "Both you and the little orange shorty were basically joined by the hip throughout highschool, no? Tsutumo told me so."

"At camp." Ushijima turned to his friend--no, fiance, Tobio still could not believe it. "Hinata Shouyou made an opportunity he was not given. He was fine on his own without his setter."

"So he was." Tendou chuckled as he scratched his chin. They must be talking about the first Shiratorizawa camp Hinata had crashed into. "Very lively, that kid. He basically pushed everyone to do better, didn't he? Pulled everyone to dance his tune. Even that annoying first year with the glasses got moving."

"Yeah." Tobio huffed. "He does that a lot, the dumbass."

Tsukishima was very disgruntled when he came back. Hinata was someone who did things at his own pace--a very fast pace, it was. And when it doesn't go to his plan, he plows through a way for him by force, carving a place for him. He's stubborn like that, ambitious, prideful.

"They won the South American volleyball championship, didn't they? They beat Oikawa." Ushijima nodded to himself, breaking Tobio from his train of thoughts. "You must be proud."

"Yes." Proud. Of course. He was his partner. He saw his journey first hand. "And also irritated." Tobio scrunched his nose.

"Mhm? Is this jealousy I see?" Tendou stared at him. "Don't worry about it. Wakatoshi-kun is simply stronger than Oikawa. Second place isn't too bad." He nodded to himself. "Yes, it isn't too bad."

"That's not it." Tobio explained, It's not jealousy. It's something bigger than that, but not exactly envy. It's something close to it, something unnamable, an emotion exclusively felt when he thought about Hinata. "He's my rival too. It's a competition between us." Maybe it's jealousy, but directed at the wrong person, the wrong thing. He was not jealous *of* Hinata, but it did twist something inside him that made his pulse throb faster.

"Healthy competition is good." Ushijima chimed with his approval.

"It's hot in bed too, isn't it? All that sexual tension from the rivalry." Tendou's comment choked Tobio and had him coughing as his face heated up from shock. The man's laughter from his reaction rang with gleeful delight, clearly enjoying his plight. Ushijima on the other hand simply sent him an apologetic glance.

He certainly did not want to comment on that.

He cleared his throat. "When were the two of you engaged?" Deflection. Tobio thanked the smallest social graces he learned over the years to be able to change the subject to something else. When in trouble, mention an interesting topic to shift the focus.

Tendou probably caught on to his scheme, but let it go without another word as Ushijima replied.

"A year ago after the Olympics. He came to meet me as I went back to Poland as we promised when we met in Paris. At dinner, I asked him to join me in a legal union."

"It was romantic. He asked me while in the middle of a run. He decided to match my pace and everything, I thought it was strange at first. Wakatoshi-kun waits for no one, not even for me." Tendou beamed as he showed off his ring, a simple gold band on his finger. The other

match was on Ushijima's own hand. "We'll probably marry when he retires. It'll be confusing when he changes his family name into mine."

Retirement. Even though he was still at the peak of his career, it was surreal to hear Ushijima make plans for when he no longer competed. The thought of Ushijima out of the competitive circuit was almost impossible to imagine. Ushijima Wakatoshi was the summit even back when Tobio was a kid in middle school.

"Wait, change his name?"

"Yeah." Tendou laughed. "You do that when you get married. Dont'cha know that?"

"No, I know that. But—"

"I opted to take Tendou's name." Ushijima explained. "My family..." He looked at Tendou with an unreadable expression. "They were not so approving of my future decisions."

"You'll sound great with my name anyway--Tendou Wakatoshi-san! Speaking of, you'll have to practice calling me Satori." Tendou nudged him with an elbow.

"Mhm. I'll be sure to do so." Ushijima said obligingly as he glanced at his watch. "We should turn in early. Our train leaves early tomorrow."

"You should mingle with your teammates, ya know? You just won against Italy, afterall." The redhead turned to Tobio with a smile, unapologetic.

"I don't see you often. They'll understand." Ushijima nodded. "Yes. Let's turn in early."

"Ah well, if you say so." Tendou didn't look too bummed. In fact, he was delighted at the decision. He snaked an arm around Ushijima. His demeanor was awfully pleased.

"I'll be seeing all of you this November. Tell Hinata Shouyou I look forward to meeting him there."

"I'll send your regards." Tobio bowed.

"Mhm." Ushijima looked satisfied.

"Volleyball monsters indeed." Tendou beamed. "It's different seeing Wakatoshi-kun with his brethren. He looks positively animated."

He could not see the difference. Ushijima acted exactly the same as he did, at least to Tobio. That was something he was not privy to, he concluded. People in relationships had that exclusivity to each other, to know their lover in ways other people did not know, from the most vulnerable to the peak of their strength.

The thought made Tobio grip his flute of champagne harder, knuckles turning white.

"Ushijima-san, Tendou-san. Wait—"

They stopped in their tracks, staring at him with intrigue.

"Can I take a picture?" Tobio felt a little silly asking, but he was also competitive. This was in payback for that drunken picture with Oikawa. "I'll send it to Hinata."

Dumbass Hinata

[photo 🔤]

✓ Read: 8:02 PM

Is that Tendou-san?!!!

HAHAHAHA SOMEONE NEEDS TO TEACH ALL OF YOU HOW TO SMILE

✓ Read: 12:08 AM

VOLLEYBALL JOURNAL ENTRY # 6473

[September 19, 2022 - Monday]

European Volleyball Championship: Italy (Ali Roma) vs. Poland ()

Result: 2-3 sets [LOSS]

Personal Statistics:

- Service aces: 20 set 1 (4), Set 2 (3), Set 3 (6), Set 4 (2), Set 5 (5)
- Missed tosses: none
- Blocked spikes: 29 set 1 (5), Set 2 (7), Set 3 (9), Set 4 (5), Set 5 (3)
- Outs: 8 set 1 (0), Set 2 (0), Set 3 (2), Set 4 (5), Set 5 (1)

Note: Orzel's blocks are formidable. Work on spiking power. Add 5 more kg in weights for workout and 2 more reps. Practice the timing for the pipe with Russo and the quick with

Gracia. Ushijima's spikes became more unpredictable. (see manager's notes for other stats)

Misc:

Some sponsors want to shoot a promotional ad. Keep schedule open for when it's announced. The flight back to Italy is the day after tomorrow, then a day off. Adjust meal plan and exercise reps accordingly.

Met with Ushijima-san at the post match banquet. He brought his friend over. Tendou-san and Ushijima-san are engaged. Hinata would want to hear about it next time. Ushijima-san seems to already have plans after retirement.

Everyone seems to already have something planned ahead in their lives.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tobio tries to remember memories he had made sure to suppress. There were inconvenient truths he had to face, all while the day he had to face Hinata drew closer

Chapter Notes

Well my shady connection somehow managed to pull through. It's Tobio's birthday. I would have liked to finish posting on his birthday but alas.

Happy winter solstice.

"Lovers of whores don't care, happy, calm and replete:

But my arms are incomplete, grasping the empty air.

Thanks to stars, incomparable ones, that blaze in the depths of the skies, all my destroyed eyes see, are the memories of suns.

I look, in vain, for beginning and end of the heavens- slow revolve:

Under an unknown eye of fire, I ascend feeling my wings dissolve.

And, scorched by desire for the beautiful, I will not know the bliss, of giving my name to that abyss, that knows my tomb and funeral."

— Charles Baudelaire, Lament of an Icarus

Giddy laughter. He was like champagne bubbles trapped in a bottle, threatening to overflow. "Yeah, so sit tight in Italy because I'll meet you on the world stage and I'll beat you there.

[&]quot;You're leaving for Rio again?"

I'm going to fulfill that promise long ago."

Champagne bubbles, beer foam, wine and spirits made flesh. The more exposed you are, the drunker you become. It leaves a fizzy feeling in your mouth. It loosens your inhibitions, makes you choose dangerous things.

"Which one? You made a lot." Their conversation is a push and a pull. This too, was a habit, a routine. It was a game they play. This too, was a competition.

"All of them! I'm going to fulfill all of them! The world stage, defeating you, teaming up with you." He always kept promises better than anyone. If promises were something you could consume, he bet they tasted like champagne bubbles and beer foam, like swallowing the sun, drinking the light directly from the sky—sun beams probably tasted like champagne bubbles and beer foam; it was something that gets you inebriated.

Intoxication was never good for your common sense.

Some would argue he never had common sense to begin with.

"And us?" He blinked. The words tripped over his mouth, slippery from his tongue. It's a shade too honest than he liked. This was a game and he was losing.

A soft smile, like muted light, the sun hiding behind the shade of a cloud, a sunset just before twilight. This was a game but when he saw that smile, for once he didn't really mind *not* winning. There was fondness in the eyes, glittering like the city's lamplight, like cars and their headlights. Everything was slow and languid, painting the world in such soft colors. He liked the world looking like this. It felt amicable; the orange blur in front of him was a little more than a friend, and the rich pools of honey amber staring at him were liquid happiness.

"And us." The whisper of a reply was as quiet as the wind in the mountains, stealing a tinkle from a windchime. "After everything else."

"Finland is cold. My ass is freezing here."

Garcia was bundled around his jacket. Tobio wasn't doing any better, himself. It wasn't even winter yet and the temperatures had dropped lower than the ideal. Finland was viciously biting at this season and they need to take more precautions on their health. It's even colder than Rome.

"Missing the warmth of the U S of A, eh Yankee?" Moretti clicked his tongue and shot him with a finger gun. Santini laughed beside him. They look well. They must have resolved their issues. Tobio was glad.

"This here is a purebred Afro-Latino from California, what can I say?" Gracia shrugged with a large grin. "Warm beaches as far as the eyes can see. Always scorching hot, it gets you sweating all day long."

"We should go inside somewhere." Santini piped up. "Some cafe or shit. I don't care."

"You doing good, Tobi?"

"S'cold." Tobio wrapped his blue scarf tighter around his neck. He was already ridiculously bundled up more than usual. His teeth would start chattering if the temperature went even lower

"Why'd we even go out of the hotel?" Moretti grumbled. There was the beginning of mist forming in the air as they breathed, faint but visible. It smelled like cool autumn air, crisp and icy as the blues and grays surrounding them blurred with the cold.

"Cause Garcia here, said he wanted to go sightseeing." Santini huffed. "Now, *alla caffetteria*. *Andiamo*."

The chill clung to Tobio even as they entered indoors which was significantly warmer than outside. It made him shiver, a sensation he could feel deep in the balls of his joints and the hollowness of his bones. That was another thing he couldn't seem to adjust. The weather was different from Japan. The entirety of Europe was just so unfamiliar.

"So," Moretti smirked, leaning over the couch of the booth as they ordered their drinks. "You boys got any plans for the break? What do you wanna do when we get back?"

"Ha ha. You just wanna brag about going to France." Santini rolled his eyes.

"Like you're not coming with me." Moretti shoved him on the shoulder, a grin on his face. Maybe they did settle their argument for good if they could joke about it openly.

"Gonna visit Nana and Abuelita." Garcia enthusiastically shared. "It'll be nice seeing them again. They used to run this salon, and if you've never been in a salon with all these nosy tia's, then you never know how wild the gossip runs around these places. I heard the wildest shit in my Nana and abuelita's salon."

"Ah, good to know both your *nonna* get along even from different families." Moretti snickered.

"Well of course they would be." Garcia blinked. "They're married."

This time, Moretti was the one who looked gobsmacked. Santini, on the other hand, was delighted. He was wheezing with his face on the table, body shaking with glee.

"Gay people exist, Lucas. How can you forget that when you look at yourself in the mirror everyday?" Santini snorted.

"Shut up! That's why it shocked me alright? You're not one to talk. You'll flirt with anything alive." Moretti huffed. "How about you, Tobio?"

"I don't really care about either."

"Tobi isn't the type to go for romance, even though he's definitely popular with both women and men." Garcia winked at him.

"A certified workaholic, eh? We're not here to judge. We're all volleyball idiots after all. Tobi here's probably just the biggest one of us all." Moretti laughed. "But that's not it, no. I was asking about your plans on the break."

"Volleyball." Tobio answered without hesitation. There was ACVC to watch.

"Workaholic." Santini nodded his head.

"Don't you have a family to visit, Tobes? They probably miss you." Garcia asked.

"All busy." Tobio added belatedly. "Workaholic."

"You can't just do volleyball for an entire half month. Resting isn't slacking off, you know?" Santini offered his advice. Tobio already knew this. He's already heard it years ago.

"It's fine." Tobio waved off. "I know my limits." He knew first hand not to overdo it. He wasn't careless, he's far off from being careless and easily agitated.

"You can join me if you want. I can show you around California, see the warm beaches there. Maybe play beach volleyball if you want. I'm sure my Nona and Abuelita would love to meet you. They love to meet anybody, really."

Beach volleyball.

"It's fine." Tobio repeated. "But thank you for the offer."

"Beh, just don't overdo anything, *si?* We wouldn't want our best setter to get injured, would we?"

"No." Tobio closed his eyes and sighed. "No, we don't."

Post-matches were usually spent for day offs. Tobio had an entire week without practice. Rest days were important especially now that the games were tougher, harder. There was only so much that the body could take, nobody really knows how long it could hold up. Tobio knew right from the start that no matter how careful he was, accidents happened. There were too many factors, anomalies.

A bad landing. An overworked muscle. Tobio was one injury away from retirement. He had seen athletes injure themselves in the middle of a match, overworking themselves into breaking their bodies. Some of them were careless, Tobio was close to doing it too. He was twenty five, realistically there was still a long time before he needed to officially retire. Five, ten years? Realistically, he knew ten years were over in a blink of an eye.

Ten years. Here was the thing about being in your twenties: everything feels so fast and slow at the same time. Twenties, still at the prime of his career. The twenties felt a lot like running and being chased. It was not so different from being a teen really, but maybe that was just how being an athlete was; maybe that was just how Tobio was, always running, always chasing.

Five, ten years. It felt like forever really, and at the same time a blink of an eye.

You could go through something life changing in that time, meet someone important, lose someone you care for. You could be a different person, and at the same time it could mean nothing at all. It was a desecration of mathematics really, not that Tobio was any good at it: sometimes the three years you spent would be more memorable than the rest of the years you've lived so far, and the people you meet that time would mean so much more than people you've been with since you were born. Sometimes two years stretched forever, and sometimes all fifteen would be over in an instant as if you've barely lived through any of it at all.

It doesn't really add up in the end, just as Tobio was incompetent with anything that had to do with arithmetic save for how much the opponent was ahead of them, and how much more they needed to surpass them.

It's like this: sometimes all your memories from the past when you were a kid to when you were fifteen were easy to forget. Important things: birthdays, anniversaries, events, people you met, acquaintances, things normal people would remember. Toss them away like how Tobio tossed all of his school notebooks into the garbage the moment he graduated. He didn't need them, not to where he was going.

And then there were some memories that you keep—or maybe more accurately, are stuck with. There are just some things that stick to you, words, actions, muscle memory, habits. Red shoes two sizes too small, champagne flavored lips, fishes in the sky, birds in the ocean.

There were times they were annoying, and then there were times like these:

Tobio, in the cusp of waking and sleeping where it's neither day or night but something in between and reality was nothing but a foreign concept outside Tobio's bed, where he's in between the past and the present. There was no need to be realistic at this time, and maybe Tobio could allow himself some indulgence.

It goes like this:

"Look what you did!" The image of orange curls fell over the boy's face. They were getting longer now—he said he was growing it out. Tobio had this stupid itch to get it cut, or grab them with his hands again, maybe pull at them. Hinata dipped his chin to his chest as he held up Tobio's leg. "Let me look at it, stupid and stop moving it! You're being such an idiot!" He couldn't see what expression the other was wearing, but he might have an idea.

"I'm not getting a lecture from you," Tobio hissed, because he was prickly and brash and foolish. Tobio bristled at anyone, even his friends, even to the person trying to help him. Even to Hinata.

"Oh but you are, so think about what that means, stupid." Hinata growled. "Bakageyama. Stupid, idiotic Bakageyama."

He was careless, but he wasn't going to admit that. Not to Hinata. The denial was also instinctive, like some kind of conditioned response. Tobio was rarely ever honest to anyone,

especially Hinata.

Hinata, the stupid idiot, still manages to catch on every single time.

Tobio sighed. "It's just a sprain. It'll heal." He reassured Hinata, and maybe a small part of it was reserved for himself. It's just an injury on the ligament. It's stretched or torn, but it will heal.

"But you won't get to play for weeks." Hinata said with a petulant noise. "Are you really okay with that?"

"What do you want me to do, dumbass? Make it worse by playing?!" Tobio ground his teeth.

It's a compromise, an exchange, a little game of cause and effect. Don't play volleyball and you won't injure yourself more. If you're obedient, you'll heal up faster. Life is always full of compromises, it's always one thing or another—ever both at the same time. Tobio was never fond of them, especially when it hindered his volleyball. He still went through the silly process of picking from either choice because there was always something more important to him when it came down to it, and the one you pick would be the more important one.

"No! That's why it's stupid!" Hinata exclaimed. He never held back with his reactions. Hinata never holds back. "It sucks that you can't play!"

"Oh, and of course you care so much." Tobio rolled his eyes.

Hinata slapped him on the thigh. "Of course I care, you idiot." He's even more petulant now. "Who's going to toss for me, huh?"

Spoiled damned brat. Tobio clicked his tongue with a displeased side eye. Of course volleyball came first, nevermind Tobio was literally sprawled on the floor with pain, his fucking ankle betraying him now of all times.

"Thanks for caring. Get your tosses from the first years since you're so close to them."

"Oh shut up." Hinata smacked him on the thigh again. Tobio swatted his hand away. Was there not a single gentle bone on this boy? "If the roles were swapped, your first thought was how it was going to affect my playing. Don't lie. I left an official game because of a fever so I know."

Tobio didn't comment on that. The image of Hinata collapsing on court revisited his mind; a delirious feverish smile plastered on his face in denial, overheating, burning up. Painful.

"Don't worry about it. I'd do the same anyway. Actually, I'd be more upset if you didn't." Hinata interrupted as if he could hear his thoughts. "Second. The first years are fine, but they don't give me the tosses I want. And aren't setters' jobs focused on giving what their spikers want?" His mouth spreaded into an annoyingly self-satisfied, shit eating grin. He was being an obnoxious pain in the ass even more than usual.

"Go tell them that then."

"I don't want them. I want you." Hinata whined like a kid. "So you get your ankle back into shape and send me the best tosses, okay?"

"Shut up, dumbass. I need to heal first." Tobio sighed. "Otherwise, talking about volleyball would be useless." Hinata always had demands. He always knew what he wanted. He always pushed back when Tobio pushed. So Hinata simply laughed, and most of the fight had left Tobio's body limp and at ease.

"But Kageyama," He said the last syllable with an elongated stress, botching up his name in that sing-song tone of his. Tobio stared at the overly fond way Hinata's eyes crinkled at the corners, quiet giggles spilling out his lips. The memory of it made his chest tighten, and his throat bobbed as he took a hard swallow down his throat. Like consuming something too bright, too hot, too much.

Suddenly, everything was clicking into place. Hinata filled in the last of his sentence, finishing it off with a sure smile.

Shit.

"That's volleyball too."

He shot out of bed. Tobio woke up before his alarm blared off.

3:23 AM. The clock on his hotel nightstand flashed.

Tobio sighed.

He had been losing lots of sleep lately.

Ali Roma ✓ @aliromaitalia official

Heading home with silver

[Photo [P

Q105 replies ⊆ 21k retweets ♥ 508.9k likes

Countdown:

★ FIVB World Championship: 55 days

Asian Men's Club Volleyball Championship: 0 days

Cynical Four Eyed Bastard and Yachi Birthday Celebration (Group Call): 1 day

Tobio was preparing lunch while his laptop played the Livestream of the ACVC. Black and gold jerseys filled the screen. Japan's Black Jackals won the ticket to represent their country

in the games, facing off Iran on the orange court.

It was a whim really. He had planned to watch the ACVC on his own, but Japan and Brazil were twelve hours apart anyway, and this was usually when he would call. Hinata might be running, or he might be watching the livestream as well. He was a volleyball idiot after all.

"Oi, dumbass. Are you watching the livestream?" Tobio settled on his table, laptop in front of him and stir fried vegetables served on a plate for lunch.

"Sorry, I don't speak Japanese. That was Japanese, right?"

The voice that picked up the call was definitely *not* Hinata, and was spoken in English. Tobio was already thinking of a million possibilities of how Hinata's phone ended up in some stranger's hands. He was probably careless again and lost it. Tobio was about to yell at the man when shuffling replaced the voice on the other line.

"Hey Shouyou! Your phone was ringing! I answered it for you!"

They were on speaker, and next were loud thuds of feet approaching in a run paired by indignant squawking.

"Why would you do that?!" Hinata's familiar voice was close to earshot. The other man said something inaudible, and Hinata replied in Portuguese. He spoke fluently in different languages, his Japanese accent no longer thick. Tobio bit his tongue at the thought.

"Hey Kageyama! What's up?" He was breathless when he spoke to him, immediately switching to Japanese. "You never call first, something wrong?"

"You're busy." Tobio found himself saying. "I should call back later—"

"No! No, no, no, no, no—" Hinata interrupted. "SAVC is done. It's time for the weekly calls, right? Don't mind Juan. He's just being *rude*."

Tobio narrowed his eyes. "Isn't it 7 am in Brazil? It's a bit early to have guests over."

"See. He wanted to watch the ACVC livestream with me and because he has a bigger TV, I decided to sleepover at his place. You know how it is with time zones. I was showering when you called, but he was being such a *puta* — *yes*, *I am talking about you*—*Yeah fuck you too*." Hinata yelled, but you could hear the affection lacing his curses. Tobio was familiar with his fond insulting barbs, afterall. "Anyway, how is it at your end?"

Hinata sleeping at another person's apartment—it's normal. People do that. Tobio had sleepovers before. Training camps counted. And those days when they needed to study extra hard for an exam also counted. It was why he slept over at Hinata's house that one time, afterall. The point was, sleepovers were normal.

It still stuck Tobio's tongue to the roof of his mouth uselessly.

"I'm watching the ACVC too." He said, when he finally managed to speak. "That's why I called, actually."

"Cool! Let's watch together!" Hinata exclaimed.

Tobio drummed his fingers on his lap, skeptical. "Won't your friend mind—?"

"He doesn't ." The response was immediate. There was more awkward shuffling from the other side of the line.

"I won't if you put it on video call. I'm sure Shouyou's gonna want to see the notorious Kageyama-san's face—stop! You're getting too comfortable with hitting my face!"

Tobio rubbed his face. Maybe this was a bad idea.

"I don't mind." He said, if only to stop the roughhousing from the other end. He opened his camera and started a video call with Hinata for the first time. His face popped out of the screen at an awkward angle. Hinata's face appeared next, orange hair standing in different directions, tousled and disheveled. He certainly fit the look of a man who had just gone through a fight, or someone who just woke up.

"Okay." Hinata breathed. His cheeks were pink, visible even through the camera of their phones. "Sorry about that." There was sheepish laughter from the side. Just slightly, but not entirely, out of the camera was a tanned man with dark hair and a stubble. Most people would probably consider him handsome, high chiseled cheeks and blue eyes the shade of cobalt. He was casually leaning on Hinata while his feet dangled on the other end of the couch. There was literally enough space for a little distance between them, so the closeness was a conscious choice.

Belatedly, Tobio realized this was ASAS' setter draped over Hinata languidly. Cheek squished over his shoulder, arms tucked in his arm. Tobio narrowed his eyes on him. Was it a cultural thing to be overly touchy? Hinata sure had a knack for befriending lots of setters. The idea irritated him. It was like he was a quick bait for anyone in the position. It was like he has some kind of magnet that attracts them to his orbit; it was ridiculous.

Tobio decided it wasn't worth the fuss over, especially with the game about to start and so he refocused his attention to his screen.

The white jerseys of the opposition were perfect in contrast to MSBY's colors. The camera panned to several of their players while on warm up.

"Ah! Atsumu-san and Omi-san!" Hinata pointed.

Atsumu was giving spiking drills before the match. Sakusa jumped to give it a strong spike. It seemed like it was as snappy as it ever was—maybe even more. Bokuto followed, cheering when he made a wicked cross shot. They were in top form. This was going to be a fun match.

The first serve was Japan. There were different players in the roster since Hinata had left the team. He vaguely remembered one of the new members as the strong rookie from Itachiyama in their last high school nationals. There were already fresh faces becoming pro, faces that Tobio had never met before.

It was strange. Not so long ago, Tobio was the newcomer and the men he played with and played against were the men he used to worship, faces that hung on the glossy and matte posters of childhood bedrooms, on sports stores, and the big electronic screens in Shibuya avenue. The role reversal was weird. Tobio's face was probably one of those that hung on the future generations' bedrooms.

Japan claimed the first point. The crowd roared, Bokuto's laugh and energy was infectious. It got Hinata clapping in his seat.

"Did you know Bokuto-san had multiple offers to play overseas?" Hinata said. It had been silent on their end for a while, focused on the game in front of them.

"Is that so?" Tobio listened to the usual chatter, and for a moment everything felt like it was back to normal.

"Yeah. But he said he didn't want to leave Akaashi-san. Tokyo and Osaka were already far away and that *somebody needed to wrangle his husband to sleep and eat something other than onigiri*, is what he said." Hinata chuckled. "Akaashi-san looks very put together, but apparently he could be a bit careless. He once put salt in his coffee instead of sugar and when Bokuto-san called him out on it, he chugged it all down to deny it. Bokuto-san sure has a lot of stories about Akaashi-san."

Tobio remembered. From Hinata's stories, it seemed like they had eloped, a rather impulsive decision for someone who was anxious about details like Akaashi. They held a reception afterwards though, one that Tobio was not able to attend either because he was already playing overseas. Unfortunate for him, Hinata said, because there was an unlimited Onigiri Miya buffet.

"Hey, Shouyou. What are you guys talking about? Let me join too ." Cobalt eyes tugged at Hinata's shirt.

"Just talking about an old teammate's husband." Hinata explained. They conversed in Portuguese, and Tobio tried to tune them out. There was no way he was going to be able to understand anything from that. He ignored the way the words rolled out of his tongue, and the way his voice became deeper with the forieign accent.

Tobio chewed his lip. Hinata would fit anywhere in the world. He'd be able to make a home wherever he goes. That was the thing about him, he'll carve up a place for himself even if there was nothing for him. He took up all the space in whatever room he was in, just like when he was playing on court. His presence was everywhere.

Iran blocked the spike from Sakusa, but the spin put it in an erratic direction for a block out. Japan snatched another point from Iran.

"Omi-san also had offers to go overseas, but he said it was too much of a hassle. He likes the comfort of Japan and going abroad needed too much planning that he didn't have time for. But Atsumu-san says he thought places outside of Japan were unsanitary and he was going to die. Also, if he had to leave the country, he'd wound up bringing his whole house with him." Hinata explained. "Omi-san kicked him, of course. He had already figured out his retirement

plans, apparently. Did you know he graduated with a bachelor's degree in pharmacy from Waseda? How he managed that and volleyball, I have no idea."

Tobio grunted. He was not really sure why Hinata was telling him all these details. Tobio wondered how he managed to remember all these things either. He was a good friend, the ideal that Tobio was not.

"Damn did you see that wicked serve?" Cobalt Eyes exclaimed.

Iran unleashed a powerful no touch service ace that cut right on the line. It was an insane shot. There were cheers for them too. It was good.

" Sure. I can't wait to eat some of that Galinhada. " Cobalt Eyes shook hands on it. Hinata beamed. Even in Brazil, he's goading people. Tobio huffed. Apparently he was competitive enough to do it with just anyone at this point. Back in their Tokyo excursion and when he and Tobio weren't talking yet, he was also bothering Nekoma's middle blocker. Lev Haiba, wasn't it? He was all over Nekoma—in fact.

Number 15 went for another serve. Just out of pettiness, Tobio wanted Cobalt Eyes to lose.

The impact caused a loud thwap sound that was audible even from the screen. It cut through the air and unto the backline. However, MSBY's Inumaki dug it back for a set to the middle by Atsumu and unto a quick attack with Sakusa for another point.

Hinata jumped with a cheer, and Tobio made a satisfied sound.

Tobio rolled his eyes. He wasn't even trying. What was the point of playing if you didn't even expect to win? Was Hinata even getting good competition from this guy?

The game continued. Tobio watched carefully, but it was distracting when the people on the other call kept talking.

Iran's blocks were high and formidable. It was difficult to pry them open.

"Oi dumbass."

[&]quot;Number 15's serves are a menace." Cobalt Eyes continued.

[&]quot;Wan-san's good. He will get it on the next serve." Hinata declared.

[&]quot;Is that so? Wanna bet on it, Shouyou?" Cobalt Eyes egged on. They were making bets, competing. Tobio scoffed. His English wasn't the best, but living in a foreign place made his ears adjust enough to understand just enough.

[&]quot; Dinner's on the winner ."

[&]quot; You're bad at bets, Juan. You owe me five dinners now." Hinata laughed. Cobalt Eyes chuckled and didn't even look any bit regretful.

[&]quot; Mhm. You're right. I'm bad at competitions. Still fun though ."

"What's up Kageyama?" Hinata shifted the phone so that they're face to face. "You alright there?"

"Let's bet. Winner gets food for free."

Hinata's face immediately perked up. It brightened up like sunshine. "Oho. Kageyama-kun is getting into it. Okay, what do you want to bet on?"

Tobio stared at the game. Atsumu had been tossing the ball consecutively towards Bokuto. The blockers had sealed his cross since the first half of the set. It lost them a lot of points.

They're currently at a timeout. The loss of points was affecting MSBY's momentum.

"Bokuto is going to score the next point." Tobio declared.

"No," Hinata immediately countered. "It's a diversion. Once Iran becomes too focused on Bokuto, he'll switch to Omi-san."

Tobio recalled Atsumu's words from when they were in his first Youth Camp. The hitters who couldn't spike his sets were worthy of his tosses. Atsumu was someone who pushed his spikers to their utmost capacity.

"I'm a setter. I know how he thinks better." Tobio contested.

"We were teammates for two years!" Hinata spluttered. "You think you can top that?"

"Positive."

"Unbelievable!" Hinata scoffed as he spoke to Cobalt Eyes in Portuguese, slow and halting but obviously indignant. He was explaining it to him.

"I think I'm with Shouyou here, and I'm a setter. I'd know." Cobalt Eyes said and Tobio held the urge to roll his eyes and snap at him. He didn't ask him for his opinion and the man was such a pushover. The thing that irritated Tobio more was how he would agree to something easily without putting much thought about it—to Hinata of all people.

"See Kageyama? That's two of us here. I think you're making a big mistake. You can change your decision at the last minute." Hinata smirked.

"No thank you. You're buying me curry."

"Deal." Hinata pointed.

Time out was over. Next serve Iran. The ball grazed through the net and dropped on the frontcourt. The MSBY rookie hustled for the save. The ball goes to Atsumu for the toss, Tobio grasped at the table's edge in anticipation for what the next play was going to be, in more ways than one. Hinata was waiting as well, those two seconds of decision seemed to stretch forever.

Atsumu's body was posed for a toss to Sakusa. Hinata was already moving on his seat. Tobio could see it from the peripherals of his eyes even as he kept his rapt attention to his laptop screen. He knew he was right. This was his gut feeling as a setter, his pride on the line.

Sakusa jumped for a spike on the center, but the ball didn't go to him. It went to none other than Bokuto from the right.

He hit it with a whip-like flash of his hand and it landed on the opposite side of the court with a loud boom. Tobio grinned as the score sealed his win. Hinata on the other hand wailed as he slid off his seat, shaking the phone camera on the way.

"That's free curry for me, dumbass." Tobio grinned. "And another win for me."

"Ugh. Shut your stupid mouth and your stupid gloating." Hinata hissed. "I'm going to wipe that stupid smirk off your stupid handsome face, just you wait! Let's have another bet! Japan wins three sets to two. Loser does whatever the winner asks."

"Fine by me. Japan wins three sets to one. Come at me with all you have." Tobio said. Logically, there was no way for sure to know the outcome of that, but there was no way he was backing down.

"Fine." Hinata nodded his head, resolute.

" Jeez, you don't need to go to all those lengths if you just wanted to get a free meal, Shou." Cobalt Eyes hummed, and he sounded amused. "I can always take you out."

Tobio frowned harder. Hinata replied something in Portuguese and Tobio had no hope of understanding what he said. He simply sounded pressed and indignant. He probably didn't like the implications of him being cheap.

Hand. There was a hand on Hinata's thigh. There was an arm around his shoulder. They were awfully close, closer than what was appropriate for watching TV. Tobio couldn't imagine himself being that touchy with anyone and it bothered him. Friendships were strange waters. Skinship was another problem. There were team hugs after points scored, after a win, and then there was the touch of an individual. It made something in Tobio's skin convulse, tingling strangely.

Tobio tore his gaze from the phone and forced himself to stare at his laptop instead. His half eaten lunch was turning cold, he thought absently while chewing the stir fry. He was not in the mood to reheat it.

The game continued. Tobio did not look at his phone for the next three sets unless Hinata explicitly talked to him. It was better like that, it took away distractions from analyzing the match. It won't be long before they have to face these very same faces in Rome. After watching it, he would have to write it down in his journal and figure out strategies on how to get around them. Setters are the control towers of the game; they hold the brain and the backbone of the tactics in the game.

"Come on Iran! Break!" Hinata exclaimed.

"Oi, dumbass! You're supposed to cheer for your own country!"

"Yeah, but later! I can't lose to you!

Japan led with two sets against Iran. One more and Tobio would win.

Atsumu in the backline to serve. He readied for the serve toss, jumping to meet it with a swing of his arm. It caused a loud and satisfying thwap, and yet it landed just an inch out of the line. They were tied with Japan now and Tobio let out a growl.

Iran to serve. Number 17, Ismail sent a super ball in the furthermost corner of the court. A no touch ace sealed the set for them. Hinata, competitiveness overcoming nationalism, let out a loud whoop of joy.

"You're going to cause our country to lose." Tobio clicked his tongue.

Hinata laughed. "Japan can burn to hell."

How dramatic of him. Tobio wasn't the nationalistic type either, but he could pretend a little.

The final set was the moment of truth. Iran winning the fourth set meant Tobio was no longer going to win, but no matter. Hinata had not won yet either, and that was all that mattered. This time, the feeling was reversed. There were only fifteen points between Hinata, and Japan, from winning. Tobio was secretly hoping Japan lost—just a little bit, for the sake of their competition.

He wasn't that much of a patriot anyway.

There was irony in trying to berate Hinata about nationalism, he realized, with them playing for foreign clubs and standing as opponents against Japan in the upcoming World Championship. He can't help it. Tobio's loyalty was with volleyball first and foremost. He knew Hinata was the same

Fifteen points. The climb to the top was slow and tedious. Every rally was longer, drawn out. It was the determination to win, the desperation not to lose. Tobio could almost feel it, being in a game, as he watched the score rise to the double digits. He was itching to move, to practice, to replicate the plays on screen. He wanted to hit some balls.

The score was 13-14. A match point and led by Iran. The pressure to rack up three consecutive points loomed over Japan. Thankfully for MSBY, they managed to stop Iran's momentum. Atsumu to serve, a chance for a breakpoint. The setter stood behind the backline after a timeout, the pressure heavy on his shoulders. The anxiety was palpable, even more to Tobio who knew exactly the value of a good serve in this stage of the game. Missing this was the fine line between making and breaking it.

Atsumu's service stats were higher than Tobio's, a detail he had been trying to remedy but with no results so far. His service prowess was known by every opponent standing on the opposite court. In this game alone, he unleashed several aces by himself. Tobio was sure Iran was on its toes as well.

Atsumu dribbled the ball with six steps from the backline. Was it going to be a spike or a floater? The different options were what made it difficult to know. Tobio licked his lips, trying to figure it out as the whistle blew for a serve.

Atsumu jumped for the hit, and the ball sailed to the other end of the court. It lacked spin, a jump floater. It was obvious from this view of the court, but playing against it would be a second too late before you realize it. Iran's libero tried to get his arms up for an overhand, but the ball swerved right and went out of bounds after hitting his arms.

Japan burst into cheers. That was a deuce. MSBY crowded Atsumu with slaps on his back.

Tobio felt the immense concentration rolling off from Miya Atsumu even through the TV screen. It was the type that would root you on the spot if you were playing him in a real game. Iran was surely laced with tension. One more point.

Atsumu threw the ball for a serve toss, six steps from the backline and a smash to the other court with a jump serve—more like a spike at this point. The ball had intense control, spinning to the corner in less than seconds.

A hand managed to save it from the floor—just barely. Iran's libero was quick to his feet and dove right to where the ball landed. It was pandemonium. The ball was going out of the court, but number 17 ran for a save. It was taking all they had to send the ball back to Japan. A chance ball.

It was either a toss to Bokuto for a solid smash through the blockers, or a quick to Sakusa while preoccupied with Bokuto's immense presence. It could be a pipe from the Itachiyama rookie. Which one? There was a few seconds to decide.

If Tobio was in his shoes, what was he going to do? What was the best course of action?

"It's a quick!" Hinata yelled. He said this with confidence.

Tobio looked at the scene yet again. Hinata was right, goddamnit he was right. He knew before Tobio could even decide. If Tobio was playing, he would go for a quick as well. A quick to the center and the ball goes to none other than Hinata, already midair—

But they weren't playing.

The ball flew to Sakusa's waiting swing. It had one blocker and a half, the spin made it go out of course after the receive.

The ball fell on the court.

It was over.

The MSBY team rushed towards Sakusa and Atsumu who were dazed from the high of the last attack. Atsumu laughed, and turned to Sakusa for the post-win congratulations that often took place after the match. Tobio didn't bother looking at the screen anymore. He just lost a bet to Hinata of all people—goddamnit. The price of a good game, he supposed. Hinata was already rubbing it on his face—quick to gloat on one win over him.

But then the gloating turned into a gasp. Hinata was no longer looking at him.

Tobio turned to the screen.

Sakusa had pulled Atsumu for a kiss. Live on international TV. In front of everyone, proudly for everyone to see. It was quick. The replay from the last attack was already rolling on screen, and they swept the affair under the rug save from a few amused comments.

The room was oddly hot.

He just ate lunch and it wasn't sitting well inside Tobio. Skinship was normal. It was just so *baffling*, especially when it was broadcasted like that. People actually do that. People kiss their friends in front of the world, kiss their lovers passionately after a match. His mouth was dry and his hands were sweaty.

"Kageyama, you feeling okay?"

There were brown eyes looking at him. He had probably lost track of the conversation. Was he feeling okay? He felt like awkward high tens being exchanged and team hugs, ruffling on his hair. He was feeling like sandpaper in his mouth and awkward shuffling while some random girl tried to press a pink envelope in his ha2nds, expectant looks shining in her eyes. Like generic refusal leaving his mouth while tears started falling on the girl's face— and goddamnit feelings were difficult—so now there he was awkward pats on the back which felt like sandpaper on his hands as well, like setting with tape on his hand—all wrong.

"I'm fine." Tobio gritted out. "They're together?" He nodded at the TV. Hinata looked at him with a stare that knew how much of a lie that was, but he didn't call him out on it. He might have if they were face to face, or if they were any younger and lacking tactfulness.

"Yeah. Atsumu-san and Omi-san were dancing around each other for years." Hinata chuckled. "Glad to see them sort that problem out by themselves. I think Wan-san, Thomassan and Oliver-san were making bets about when they were going to end up together."

Tobio hummed, noncommittal. Even they have settled into a relationship—Sakusa Kiyoomi and Miya Atsumu, once the top highschool spiker and setter on the entire Japan respectfully. It seemed like everyone had settled into something at their age. Tobio remembered Ushijima.

"Anyway." Hinata continued. I'm looking forward to claiming that prize this November. Kageyama-kun."

Tobio scoffed. "Treat me to dinner first."

Hinata laughed. "Pick a date and we'll do it." There was incoherent Portuguese from his side of the connection. Tobio had forgotten about Cobalt Eyes being in the same room. "Anyway, it's not yet noon here, so we'll sneak in a bit of spiking practice before lunch."

Tobio frowned.

"Don't get jealous, Bakageyama."

"I'm not jealous."

"You have that pouty look on your mouth—yeah that one." Hinata snickered. "Just sit tight in Italy. I'm going to make you toss for me when I get there."

Cobalt Eyes came into view, slinging an arm over Hinata's shoulder again as he whispered something in his ear. His tactile gestures sure were making Tobio sour.

"I need to leave." He said. "Go practice."

"Right. Catch you tomorrow." Hinata waved before the feed got cut off.

Right. Tomorrow.

Tobio sighed.

He had never seen his parents kiss as a kid. He sure hasn't seen Miwa kiss his ex-husband either.

Trends for You

1. Trending in Italy

Sakuatsu

17.8k tweets

2. Trending in Italy

Sakusa

105k tweets

3. Trending in Italy

Atsumu

99.8k tweets

4. Trending in Italy

MSBY BLACK JACKALS

300.5K tweets

5. Trending in Italy

TEAM JAPAN

6. Sports. Trending

ASIAN MEN'S CLUB VOLLEYBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

700k tweets

7. Sports. Trending

AMCVC

309k tweets

8. Culture. Trending

LOVE WINS

62.6k tweets

9. Celebrity. Trending

Atsusaku

12,691 tweets

10. Music. Trending

BURNOUT SYNDROMES

90.2k tweets

11. Politics. Trending

Climate Crisis Strike

50.9k tweets

13. Food. Trending

Onigiri Miya

7,110 tweets

14. Anime. Trending

Chainsaw man

29.8k tweets

15. Manga. Trending

Tokyo Revengers

19.7k tweets

16. Celebrities. Trending

Keanu Reeves

17k tweets

17. Movies and TV. Trending

ICARUS

1,598 tweets

18. Entertainment. Trending

Kodzuken's BF-san

1,993 tweets

19. Sports. Trending

JVA

1,008k tweets

20. Sports. Trending

Osamu

1,020 tweets

VOLLEYBALL JOURNAL ENTRY # 3781

[December 01, 2014 - Monday]

- Freak Quick statistics: 96% success rate
- New Serve Technique Statistics: 78% success rate
- Toss Statistics: 98% success rate
- Hinata's blocking statistics 81% success rate
- Hinata receiving statistics: 84% success rate

- Hinata's jump serve statistics: 43% success rate
- See yachi's notes for other members statistics

Note:

Get the freshmen to practice receiving drills with Hinata. Practice the pipe after the quick with Yaotome, nail the timing down. Practice more quicks with the others. Force Tsukishima to extend blocking practice for the freshmen. Practice more new serves. Ask Yachi for the percentage formula for success rate. Bring extra money. Hinata steals my meat buns every single time. Buy a new journal.

Misc:

More girls are watching us at the gym. I'll coordinate with Yamaguchi to get them to leave. They're distracting practice. Maybe we'll just close the gym for good from outsiders.

I don't understand girls.

At some point it got irritating.

Confessions weren't new—as unbelievable as that sounded—Tobio was popular with the girls at school. He wasn't so oblivious to not realize this, not with every February 14 filled with chocolates and letters stacked on his locker, not when there was a girl calling him to some corner to profess their affection to him. These girls would mostly lose interest when they learn how he was only obsessed with volleyball—he was just an average person who was addicted to a sport and happens to have a more than average face.

It had gotten him thinking about how they hardly know him at all, and these fleeting feelings they call *love* was nothing more but idealization. Maybe these girls just wanted the idea of being in a relationship. It was another thing he didn't understand, the visceral need to not be alone. It had people in a chokehold. It made them do so many strange things.

Sugawara told him to be more gentle in rejecting them, after one of them had bursted into tears back when he was still in first year. It was an intricate routine—socializing—some strange ritual that Tobio did not understand but does his best to participate anyway, like a player looking at a game from outside the court, peering through the window outside the gym.

It used to be something he could tolerate and brush off.

Until it started to affect the team.

He was not sure how it started, but he did remember vaguely when. It should be somewhere in their second year to the beginning of third year. Or, maybe it started at the end of their first year, when Karasuno reached Nationals. It did get worse at the beginning of their third year.

Either way, there were girls sneaking a peek at the gym whenever they had practice and Tobio was so done with it. They've been nothing but a distraction from the start. Yamaguchi had respectfully asked them to leave multiple times, but to no avail. He was reminded of Kitagawa Daiichi and Oikawa, a gaggle of girls trailing him, messy breakups, him hunched over the bench and crying. It was a *distraction*.

Tsukishima had his fine share of admirers. Tobio was easily convinced people had a masochistic tendency for liking horrible people the most, or they rarely do look deeper than the surface. Tsukishima was an ass, and Tobio was cold.

But then there was Hinata.

It was always him, wasn't it? Always the anomaly.

There was Hinata, loud, brash, and yet likable. He had grown nicely in three years, muscles building up after intense training, still friendly with everyone. He was warm, bright, and caring. He made sure to welcome everyone, even if they were assholes. He pulled everyone along at his pace as he pushed forward. He had done it since the beginning, he had done it with Karasuno, with Yachi, with Asahi, with Tsukishima, and of course, Tobio himself.

It was not a surprise to have girls liking him too.

And Tobio didn't mean to pry. He didn't mean to see any of it, but he couldn't help it when they just had to pick the spot near the gym by the vending machine where Tobio often got his box of milk for lunch.

"Alright Hiromi-san, what did you want to talk about?"

"Hinata-kun," The girl had nondescript, regular brown hair, and regular height. Tobio didn't recognize her from anywhere, but she could be one of the girls that spent their free time watching them and giggling. "I've known you since we were classmates in first year."

"Yep! You let me borrow notes when I forgot to borrow from Yachi-san. I probably would've failed without your help. Thanks so much." Hinata laughed, scratching the back of his head.

Tobio punched the straw into his box of milk and sipped. The right thing to do was mind his own business and leave. Unfortunately, Tobio froze in the middle of a life-threatening scenario, so he was rooted to the ground and just staring.

"Umm, Hinata-kun," she said in that timid voice that girls often employed. "I like you." A deep bow followed by a thrust of a pink bag of cookies to his chest. Straightforward. Curt. Polite. Tobio didn't have a lot of opinions on confessing, but if he had to pick, he liked to avoid messy and emotional ones. They were harder to deal with when he eventually had to reject them.

Hinata might not. He was always complaining to him about his popularity with the girls. Maybe Hinata would like to date. Maybe he'll end up with a girlfriend.

What about volleyball?

"I liked you even before you qualified for nationals." She continued. "I was too shy to approach you, but we're about to graduate, and I thought I wanted to try."

Hinata was pink all over. It was rare to see him flustered when Shimizu-senpai graduated, he had never been flustered by anything else, not even when he had done something dumb. But Tobio reasoned that it was just Shimizu-senpai's effect on most people. The reaction nearly captivated Tobio. "Um—" He stumbled over his words. He was floundering with clumsy movements from his arms, like a bird squawking, mouth bubbling open and shut like a fish out of water.

Tobio sniggered. He looked like an idiot. He always looked like an idiot, but even more so with his mouth gaping like that, flies could land in them.

"Hinata-kun?"

"Sorry." Hinata finally regained footing on the conversation. "I just—I don't know what to say. I guess I'm really happy you like me that way, Hiromi-san."

Tobio frowned. All previous amusement left him in an instant.

"Really?"

"Yeah," Hinata laughed, but his face wasn't all happy. "But—"

"But?"

Before Tobio knew it, he found himself invested in what Hinata was going to say. He's holding his breath to keep himself from moving, biting his tongue to keep quiet. Breathe in, and then out. The condensation from his milk was wetting his fingers and Hinata was taking his sweet time.

"It's not that you're not great—you've been very kind to me! I mean—but—-"

"It's okay Hinata-kun." The girl chuckled. "I know when I'm being rejected." She dipped her head and stared at the ground. "I figured this was the outcome. I wanted to try anyway."

"Ah." Hinata scratched his head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I inconvenienced you. I should be sorry instead." The girl waved her hands.

"Umm, but if you don't mind me asking, is it because you like someone else?"

"Ah—Ha?!" Hinata turned an even brighter shade of red.

"I shouldn't have pried. Sorry, you can ignore that!"

"No, it just surprised me!" Hinata spluttered. "It's fine! I mean—" His demeanor shifted while he calmed himself down. "I'm too busy playing volleyball for now, so I've got no time for romance. I don't think it'll be fair to you either. I'll be a very selfish lover! And I think you deserve more than that."

There was something in Tobio's chest that loosened, something he wasn't even aware was lodged deep between his ribs, branching towards his throat. Hinata's answer had him releasing a deep breath he had forgotten for a second he was holding.

The girl's face fell. "I see. I should have known it was volleyball after all."

"Yeah."

"Do you plan to play it till college, Hinata-kun?"

"Well, I don't know about college. Maybe not, but I know I'm going to find a way to reach the pros!"

"And when you finish that and you have stopped playing volleyball," The girl asked. "Will you have time for relationships, then?"

Hinata paused. He was thinking, baffled. It may be because he could not fathom a moment where he stopped playing volleyball, maybe he was seriously considering it.

"I once made a promise to a friend." He began. "Ten years, twenty years. I'm going to defeat him. I'll follow him to the top, be it in all of Japan or in the entire world. I want to stay on the court longer, and I want to play more games.I don't know how long it'll take me, but I'm still planning to fulfill that promise."

Tobio swallowed.

Sometimes Hinata becomes really quiet, and sometimes he says the strangest things. There was a shine in his eyes that would usually send a jolt of fear down your spine. Sometimes he becomes so serious, and he was looking at you with this intense look that was almost as if he could see beyond you, see something in the distant future, something that Tobio could see vaguely when he was running and all his muscles were hot and aching from fatigue.

This was one of those.

"I see. You must really like volleyball."

Hinata laughed. "I love it very much. It comes first over everything else, so I'm not interested in anything else. Romance is going to be a distraction, so I'm not interested in any of it until I reach my goal." Then he bowed deeply. "I'm sorry."

His answer soothed Tobio, smoothed over all the creases in his stomach that threatened to twist itself to knots. Then again, something inside him felt unsettled too, something tucked away at the back of his consciousness. *Romance is going to be a distraction*. He agreed wholeheartedly—so why did Tobio find himself gritting his teeth and digging white crescent with his nails on the flesh of his palms?

"Again, it's alright. Good luck then, Hinata-kun. I'll be on my way." The girl said. Tobio was ready to turn around and do his best to forget everything about the exchange. Just like Hinata said, they didn't have time to fool around, no time for distractions. And yet the girl added. "But—ah, before I get fully rejected, can I ask for one thing?"

"Sure!"

The girl leaned in and whispered. Tobio furrowed his brows. Hinata had turned pink again, but he gathered himself up and shut his eyes while the girl gave him a quick peck on his cheek.

Tobio bit the tip of his straw.

He did his best to forget about that too.

Tobio unleashed serve after serve, the gym was empty save for him and the few custodians maintaining the area. The gym's staff were the first people he truly got acquainted outside his team, even with his shoddy Italian and butchered English. Being the last person to leave the place, muttering *one more hour please* in a thick accent, bound to leave an impression or two.

He had too much free time after the AMCVC stream, and if Hinata was practicing, so was he.

There were not enough people to practice tosses and spikes. If he was just going to do wall drills, he could've just stayed at home. But he couldn't stay at home either, too stuffy, too big, too quiet. He wanted to train till he got so tired, he'll end up sleeping straight through the night without dreams. He wanted to pass out in bed, wake up the next day, train hard, rinse and repeat.

Excellence is a habit. Tobio had ingrained volleyball to the core of his. Train hard enough every day, and he'll make excellence his default.

He was used to practicing serves on his own anyway. He had to be.

It was what he did in Kitagawa Daiichi. It was what he planned to do in Karasuno as well, the first day of club, a volleyball at hand with the intention of practicing serves. The world had a funny way of disrupting plans.

He dribbled the ball and struck the ball so it hit the last of the water bottles lined up neatly on the other side of the court.

There's a certain calmness that washed over Tobio whenever he did service practice. It was the same mindless activity that was mostly instinct at this point, the movements engraved in his muscles. Dribble, serve toss, hit, aim. He liked the control. He liked the expectations. As a setter, control was the first thing he needed to learn.

Control his body. Control his toss. Control the court. There were no gods who controlled the course of a match, only the setter. It was the closest thing to that of a deity in a game.

("Do you have god hands?!" Burning, hot hands, fire in his skin, the sun in his palms.)

Tobio frowned.

He walked to the other side of the court, calmly picking up the water bottles and setting them back into position.

"Your serves are getting more ridiculous. Disgusting." Beer foam. Champagne bubbles. Light and airy. "Did you practice serves until your arms fell off?" Hands on his shoulder, fingers digging into his flesh. It's hot and scorching.

"The start of my V-League career." He hummed. "It's easiest to practice serves. You don't need anyone but yourself."

It was warm. Warmer than he'd ever been. "Psh." Fingers on his cheek, then his forehead. It lit fire under his skin, burning him. You need to do something about that pouty, grumpy face of yours." Laughter. "Wards off your teammates."

Tobio let loose another round of serves.

One after another. He knocked one bottle after another, and when nothing was left standing, Tobio continued regardless, smack, after smack, after smack with his palm until they're red and raw. They were calloused now after years of use. One after another until the ball cart was empty.

It was not enough.

"Oi oi! Cosa stai facendo qui? Tobi, it's our day off!"

Tobio snapped his head to the direction of the voice. Captain Russo was standing by the doorway. "Tobi, Tobi, Tobi, You're officially overworking yourself. It was late. Go home." He was stern in his command. "The staff needs to clean up the gym. Come on, let's pick up the balls, *si*?"

It was already dark outside the windows. The balls littered all over the floor. Tobio stared at them, panting. He hadn't seen this view in awhile.

"Sorry." Tobio wiped his face with the collar of his shirt. "I'll go and clean up."

"Tobio." Russo stood by the gym's doorway, pensive in the eyes, gentle smile on the lips. "Eat dinner with me." He said this not as a request. He said this firmly, but gentle. It was a polite invitation, but left no room for excuses to decline.

"Okay." Tobio had little choice but to agree. He doesn't mind.

"Dunque, you do not mind eating in a diner with me?" Russo told him as they walked to the city. Rome was a fairly walkable city, Tobio learned months of residence in the city later. "It's my treat."

"You do not need to, Russo-san."

"You're slipping out the honorific, eh? Does it bother you so much?" He laughed. "Don't worry, don't worry. This is what seniors do to their juniors, like a Japanese *sepai*— right? *Niente*, I'll treat you to dinner okay?"

Tobio had little say in the matter in the end. They slid in a cozy diner near the gym, ones that made really good garlic bread and focaccia. There were lots of good places to eat in Rome, it

was almost found at every corner.

"Have you tried their pesto here, Tobio? They're good. I like it." Russo peered at him through the menu. He was busy browsing the selection while Tobio stewed in his seat. He rarely went out to eat with his teammates like this.

"Um." Tobio opened his mouth before closing it again, deciding to drop it instead.

"You're wondering why I asked you to eat with me." Russo grinned, raising one brow. It was like he knew exactly what Tobio was going to ask.

"Yes." He came out clean.

"Eating with company is better, is it not?"

"I guess so." Tobio went back to his own menu.

"I hope you don't think wrong of me," Russo began after calling the waiter and graciously took the initiative to order for them so Tobio no longer had to trip on his words. "Rest is important too. Resting and slacking off are not the same."

"I know." Tobio said. "I've rested enough. I don't want to get rusty."

Russo smiled. "You're a hard worker, Tobio. I commend it as a volleyball player. It was admirable."

Tobio blinked owlishly. "Thank you."

"But I worry about you." Russo continued, and it left him reeling. "Dedication is not bad, however ruining yourself for this sport is not the way to go my boy. Volleyball isn't all there is in life "

Tobio knew this. He had been told this since he was young. He knew it, but he didn't understand it. It was the same way he knew why people do things, know on a shallow leve, yesl, but never really understand it.

Really, he'd rather have volleyball over life.

"Something is bothering you. What's the matter?" Grey eyes were staring at him knowingly. They were kind eyes, gentle. It was what the face of a kind father would probably look like, or a caring older brother—and if he stretched it hard enough, that was how kind grandfathers with dwindling days looked like too, the ones who loved their grandchildren enough to listen about their petty little troubles while hiding their own. It baffled Tobio.

The usual denial sat on his mouth, ready to come out, but something told him that they would come empty in front of this man.

"It's not volleyball." Not exactly. Playing was fine. It was what came after it, that was the trouble, things such as talking, things such as life.

"Bene ." Russo nodded. "That's good. So what is bothering you?" It was gentle prodding, coaxing him to open up. It was not eggshells in the metaphorical sense, the way most his teammates toe around them whenever conversing with him. Karasuno was like that too until they started to learn the proper steps to the conversation—like Sugawara-senpai and his careful navigation towards the matter at hand. This was more like picking them up and clearing them away, slow, steady, patient.

Tobio said nothing.

He didn't know.

"It's not—" Tobio made a noise at the back of his throat. "I don't know how to say it. It is not something I can put into words." He'd always been shit at communicating, and he braced himself for the lashing out or the ridiculing that followed after confessing this, just for split second, before remembering that this was no longer elementary school, he wasn't talking to kids who were unintentionally cruel, or teenagers who were just as angry and as frustrated and confused as him. This was a grown up, talking to him as an adult.

There were just some things that stuck to you.

Sometimes Tobio didn't wear his age well either. Sometimes it fits too loosely on him, sometimes it was too tight on him too. Twenty-four didn't feel right.

Russo didn't say anything either. He stared at Tobio patiently—*picking up eggshells* — something about it made him feel even younger than his age, like a kid in conversation with someone so much older than him. It left him out of depth.

"Russo-san," Tobio began. Just talk, everyone used to say, spit it out, their faces tell him because they're too polite to say it out loud. It was difficult when you don't know where to start. Tobio swore everyone must have some kind of flashcards given to them as kids with how easy they all made it seem." What are you going to do when there is no more volleyball?"

Maybe it was odd to ask that when he just said the problem wasn't volleyball. But the problem wasn't volleyball at all.

"Are you having trouble with the break?"

"Not really—maybe a little." Tobio pinched the bridge of his nose. Words were such hard work, and people were just as complicated. He clarified himself. "I mean when you no longer get to play as a professional."

Russo's face was impassive. Maybe the question was taboo among athletes, especially when they were reaching the age range of Russo, who was well past his twenties and was in the dwindling age of mid thirty. Athletes aged really quickly, the years dwindled too fast, their shelf lives precarious. Their bodies were basically their only means of income. Maybe this wasn't something people usually discussed in the open, but what did Tobio know?

"Interesting question." Russo nodded pensively. "It's something everyone avoids talking about is it not?"

"Yeah."

Russo smiled at him as the waiter served a basket of garlic bread on the table. Tobio took a piece and started tearing through them. It was good.

"Do you have plans on retiring already? So soon." Russo asked before the waiter came back with two glasses and a bottle of wine. He thanked the waiter once again and poured wine for both of them. Tobio eyes the whiteh liquid warily, his one mishap coming back to mind briefly.

"No. That's not it." Tobio reached for the glass and sipped some anyway. Warmth immediately filled his chest and his neck, an earthy aftertaste remained in his mouth. He decided to eat more garlic bread instead.

"Do you want to know why I was in the gym today?" Russo offered when their dishes arrived.

Tobio looked up as he picked a fork and twirled the pasta for eating before it could go cold. "Okay." He said, though he usually steered clear from asking people about their business—hey were entitled to their own privacy after all, and for the most part, he wasn't interested to know. He would listen when it was offered though, but he wondered if he should have. People were so much hard work.

"I was talking to coach, actually." Russo told him, a wistful expression on his face. "I think the World Championship will be my last match."

Tobio bit his tongue on accident, making him hiss out in pain. Russo looked at him with a questioning look with also a bit of concern.

"You are retiring?"

Russo nodded. "I haven't been spending time at home for a long time. I haven't spent time with my kids." His eyes crinkled when he smiled, warm, gentle. "I'm a husband and a father too, you know?"

Tobio didn't say anything. It wasn't his business, and therefore it was not his decision either. People retired at some point. Ali Roma's line up was going to change drastically in the next season, and Tobio had to adjust to the new members once again. So much work to do, so little time.

Regardless, he promised Sugawara back then that he was going to take whatever team he would be in towards greater heights. He was not about to stop right now.

"You look disgruntled." Russo told him. "Just say what's on your mind, Tobio. It's fine."

"You love volleyball. Don't your family know?" The moment the words left his mouth, Tobio was suddenly conscious of how insensitive it sounded. It made him cringe, eye twitching in

discomfort. "Sorry. Forget about that."

"No, I told you to speak up, didn't I?" He grinned. "I love volleyball." He said with the sentiment of someone who truly loved the sport, who gave up years for it. "But you know, amo la mia famiglia. I love my family too, and they know it will break my heart having to choose between them, so they made the decision for me. They let me follow my dream, so now, I have to choose them this time."

Tobio looked at his plate of pesto. He was picking at the pasta with his fork. "Okay." He wondered if the other members knew already.

"I'm getting old, Tobi." Russo placed his palms flat on the surface of the table. "This old man's weary body has been through many injuries and muscle pains. I need to stop at some point before something drastic happens."

Tobio wanted to tell him that nothing drastic would happen to him, because he knew where his limits were. He knew when to stop. He wasn't someone careless because he couldn't afford to be careless. He was just someone who liked to practice a lot. He was just someone addicted to volleyball.

"You know I used to be like you too. I practiced hard every day, dedicated all my time to volleyball and at some point I overdid it. Tore my ACL after a bad fall. Had to go through surgery." Russo explained. "It's not that I'm telling you you're in the wrong Tobio because we are playing this sport in the pros, and if you weren't a little crazy about volleyball than most people, you wouldn't be here." He laughed. "But putting time for other things in your life isn't too bad either, you know?"

"Putting in time...for other things..." Tobio furrowed his brows.

"Tobio," The man was still smiling even with the evident confusion in his face. His voice was gentle, patient. It was like he'd never raised his voice on anyone ever. "What is volleyball to you?"

Tobio jolted at the question.

"It's—"

The words died on his lips.

You'd think someone as sure about volleyball as Tobio would know what to answer. Tobio, who spent all his life worshipping the sport, the court being his church, and the ball being his altar, him nothing more but a dedicated acolyte.

There was no discovering volleyball for Tobio, no world turning in slow motion as he saw the beginnings of what would constitute the entirety of his whole life. He'd been holding it since he was a baby, barely a year old. To him, volleyball had always existed alongside him. His grandfather was a volleyball coach, and his sister used to play volleyball.

Volleyball was taking his grandfather's old wrinkly and calloused, but warm and firm hand. It was running up the slope near the street corner of their house with his sister. It was something that thrilled him, that made his blood sing with ecstatic fervor. It was promises from the top of the stairs, yelled, renewed, fulfilled. Volleyball was—

It was—

"It's something I do. It's...it's volleyball." Tobio finished lamely, heat creeping up his face. He added belatedly. It was not something he could justify. It simply was. "It's fun."

He felt like he said something wrong, or that he missed something Russo was trying to tell him, but there was a glint in his eyes which Tobio could not read. Something about it was just too elusive for him to catch. It was not sad, but there was in likeness to doleful, not happy either, but something close to glad. Maybe Tobio did not understand anything. Maybe emotions were just complicated.

"We all have our different reasons, Tobio," Russo told him, "Volleyball is different for each of us, and I'd still play volleyball even in retirement. You asked me what when I no longer get to play as a professional, didn't you? My love for volleyball would never disappear, but I just share that love with something else." He patted his chest. "My heart is big enough for all."

Tobio pressed his mouth into a thin line. It wasn't despair twisting in his chest, neither was it indignant rejection. But there were just things that would slip through him, things he would never really comprehend, things that might be left in the gray area of uncertainty, forever some form of unanswered speculation that would keep him discontented.

By the end of the night, Tobio realized he'd forgotten to ask Russo what volleyball was to him.

VOLLEYBALL JOURNAL ENTRY # 4401

[April 28, 2015 - Tuesday]

• Freak Quick Statisti

• Latest Service Technique Statistics: 37% success rate

• Toss Statistics: 65% success rate

• Teamwork Statistics: 51% success rate

Note:

Schweiden Adler's training regimen is more intense than Karasuno. Ushijima is in the same team. He's interesting to play with. Tossing for a left-handed spiker needs adjustment and getting used to. I don't remember most of the other members' names. The dumbass would laugh at me if he was here. He's probably somewhere getting ready for Brazil.

Spent 3 hours practicing serves today. The team's gym has more options for weight training. Add 5kg for tomorrow's bench press. Learn the styles of the team (and their names). Use tomorrow's practice match as reference. Why does the name of the captain sound familiar? I think I've heard it somewhere before.

Misc:

Tokyo is big and confusing. I need to find an apartment. Shinjuku is an hour too far from Kodaeira, and Miwa-ne and Sora are too busy. Need to remember the train routes. I need to buy new shoes. Tsukishima, Yamaguchi, and Yachi are starting university. Hinata sent a voice message in Portuguese. I think they're doing well.

Countdown:

★ FIVB World Championship: 54 days

Cynical Four Eyed Bastard and Yachi Birthday Celebration (Group Call): 0 days

✓ Training Camp - Trentino: 7 days

Tobio's first love was volleyball.

He mulled over this as he went on a run in the morning just as the sun peeked above the line of the mountain ranges; sleeping had been a chore recently, and he was hardly accomplishing it. So he ran. He was good at running, the burn of his calves and the rolls of sweat down his temples even against the breezy coolness of when the summer air started shifting to fall. Italy was biting at his neck, nipping at the tip of his ears. He wears his blue scarf often these days when he goes out, a semi-permanent fixture on his shoulders.

He had run the same route for the last four years, from Stadio Olimpico to Ponte Guglielmo Marconi, following the Tiber river mostly because it was the first suggestion that popped out when he searched the net, nowadays mostly because it was a routine. Regardless, Tobio let out a shuddering breath. Thins wispy mist formed at his every harsh pant.

Running was a nice way to clear his head. Case in point, he was putting his thoughts in order once again as he took sharp inhales of the Roman air slowly burning through his lungs, the sky cloudy and the sun nowhere to be found.

Volleyball was his first love.

There was no introducing him to it. There was no love at first sight. He was known volleyball ever since. It was a general fact he accepted, a looming presence in the backdrop. The love he

had for volleyball was almost familial, the way most babies when born in this world were held in the arms of their mothers, the way they knew their parents before they were even pushed out into the world. It was intrinsic. It was something Tobio had always known.

Where there were two parent shaped holes inside him, volleyball managed to fill it. (Tobio was riddled with holes, he found. There was always some kind of hollowness in him that craved to be filled.) There was his grandpa, there was his sister, and then there was volleyball.

So how does he explain that? How does he put such a big, unfathomable thing into something short and concise? People liked short explanations. People rarely had the patience. Tobio certainly didn't have any for anything more than twenty words at a time.

Unless it was about volleyball.

Volleyball was icy hot spray in gyms and late nights with his grandfather when his parents had to work extra shifts. It was running uphill with his sister and receiving drills in the backyard while his arms prickled with red spots from internal bleeding. It was spiking drills after the feeling of loss, the comfort of aching muscles after a long day of grief. It was balanced meals, and slow-cooked eggs on top of curry, nail care, the smooth pages of a journal. It was loud, annoying and obnoxiously *orange* of all things. It was promises from twenty years ago, today, and twenty years later.

Volleyball was—

Then someday I'm going to beat you, and I'm going to be the one who gets to stay longer in the court more than anybody else.

Volleyball was his first love.

It was late night practices in an old highschool gym, worn out from use. It was spiking drills that lasted until the sun had gone down and *please Kageyama*, *just one more toss won't hurt*, bruises after a fight, and raw throats from screaming because god dammit he had to be the most stubborn bastard Tobio had ever met, and Tobio was just as equally stubborn. Immovable force meets unstoppable object; the object in question was an annoying 168.2 cm brat, and wasn't that what drew Tobio to him in the first place? So really, can he really complain?

Tobio picked up the pace of his run. Eleven kilometers of scenic Italian history flashed before his eyes as he continued his route to the south of the city, to where the river meets the sea. He didn't think he could appreciate it properly though, Tobio was not built for such things. Maybe Yachi would've instead, Tsukishima too—probably. That was what their degrees were for. Tobio never went to college, what did he know? He didn't know a lot of things. Tobio didn't know anything.

He closed his eyes and let muscle memory guide him through the run. There were a lot of runners even at this time of hour. It was a popular route after all. Tobio easily passed them.

He only understood his sport. Many would tell him that his head was filled with nothing but volleyball. He was a simpleton, as Tsukishima would say to Yamaguchi with a snicker, a super dedicated athlete coming from a kinder, more forgiving Yachi, a volleyball idiot from the rest of Karasuno.

He didn't have a specific moment when he fell in love with it, no prophetic visions, or grandiose scenes of aces hitting a spike on national TV that took his breath and mesmerized him towards a future he would soon fulfill.

It had always been there, a natural part of him, an extension of his body like a limb visible only to him. Y *ou love volleyball don't you?* And the answer would always be *yes, of course. More than anything, more than anyone.* But Tobio's love was a gaping hole that threatened to swallow people whole. It was egocentric, selfish and miserly. Tobio was too much and never enough at the same time, somehow obsessive if not entirely impulsively desperate. Enough to miss his friend leaving towards a whole new foreign world, enough to walk away after wearing his heart out in his sleeves and letting it bleed over.

His first love was volleyball, Tobio determined, but then he wondered what *love* really meant all this time.

"You are being unreasonable, your highness. Grow up. Stop sulking. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"I'm not *sulking*." Tsukishima of all people was lecturing him. How much lower could he possibly get?

"Oh really?" Somehow everyone looked unimpressed whenever they talked to him these days. Maybe not the underclassmen who, according to Yamaguchi and Yachi, worship him somehow. Their exact words. The rest of the third years though, were unimpressed. It still rubbed him the wrong way. "Aren't you just proving yourself to be a selfish king all this time?"

"Tch." Tobio shoved his hands into his pockets. "Shut up. There's nothing like that going on."

"Bullshit." Tsukishima continued, staring Tobio down. He doesn't ever meddle with other people's affairs. Why was he being such a pain now? "You're acting like he's never returning. You haven't even staked an official claim on him and you're already acting so possessive. Don't tell me you're actually going to *miss* him? Afraid he's going to find someone better, hmm?" There was the Tsukishima brand of mockery that he was not in the mood to deal with.

"I said shut up." Tobio quelled the beating in his chest. He wanted to walk away from this conversation, but he knew doing something like that to the stingy four-eyed bastard was going to cost him later.

That was where he was wrong. "I don't hate it. I don't care that he's leaving."

"Oh please your highness, you wear denial like a crown. I'd believe that if you tried to put more effort into lying." He rolled his eyes. "Is it because he didn't tell you?" Tsukishima sniffed, nose turned up haughtily. There was a mocking smile curled on his mouth. "I didn't know we had to tell you everything we do, your majesty." This was Tsukishima being Tsukishima, but It was agitating Tobio.

Hinata was in no way obligated to tell him—the same way he wasn't obligated to tell Hinata he had joined the V-League as early as possible. Yet even he knew there was a big difference between going to Tokyo and moving forward to his goal, one train ride away, versus packing up and going to Rio to train beach volleyball. Tobio liked to think he had the right to feel *pissed*.

Tobio's reaction was very reflective of how he dealt with his problems. And he had already spent the most of his teenage years being irrationally angry at the world. Tobio didn't want to add more to the list.

But it was strangely reminiscent of hospital visits that grew exponentially longer and longer with passing time, long drawn out breaths with half hearted smiles, struggling to keep up. *I'm okay Tobio, don't worry about me*, when it was obvious that he wasn't. Tobio wasn't dumb. He could feel the subtle changes of Kazuyo-san getting more tired and weaker everyday, the same way he could see Hinata looking at beach volleyball videos, and learning Portuguese, and planning travel routes and foreign accommodations. It was just watching something slowly slip away from you when you don't really know what was wrong when you do know something was wrong, that infuriated him.

It was like they were all playing one big game and Tobio was watching from the bench again. Tobio thought for sure the anger was justified.

The whole point of the move was to improve, and it was so much like Hinata to gamble the stakes. Tobio should understand. He loved volleyball just as equally as Hinata did after all. And no this wasn't anything like their first year when Hinata wanted to do their freak quick with his eyes open. Tobio knew his reasons were justified back then. He wasn't against Hinata improving. He was against losing, that was all. And at that time, that was what Tobio thought was necessary to win

Though realistically, he knew leaving was a good decision. It was a stupidly good decision, enough that it also made Tobio angry. It was such a great plan that Tobio hadn't considered it. Who in their right mind would fly halfway across the world without any guarantee of things working out?

This feeling was harder to justify. Irrational. The only person he was trying to win against was Hinata who promised to beat him years ago. Ten, twenty years, for as long as it took. Tobio wanted that. Tobio wanted to play volleyball with Hinata forever, next to him or on the opposite court, and if he wanted it to happen, Hinata going to Rio wouldn't frustrate him.

"I'm not against it. I'm not against Hinata leaving. He sucks and leaving would help him improve. I want him to improve even if the cost is leaving." Tobio smoothened his scowl. He took a deep breath and sighed. "But knowing he is, I can't help but feel like I'm losing."

Even though he was leagues ahead. Even though it was Hinata chasing after him, Tobio was the one leading the race.

Tsukishima's gaze hardened, and all traces of humor and goading had left him. "It's just two years, king. You're acting like he's never coming back" He peered over him with scrutiny. Right now Tobio was a gameplay in the middle of the court, and the four-eyed bastard was studying him. "Unless..."

Tobio's lips were thin.

"Unless what?"

"You finally figured your shit out."

Life had this thing where you needed to compromise. Settle for third for now, try again later. Lose a match, eat, rest, and train again. Lose a silly race, run faster the next time. Run out of words in a conversation, shut up and walk away. You can't always win. You can't always be selfish. Tobio didn't like compromises and Tobio was greedy.

He still wanted more, and it filled him with a bone deep itch that blinded him with rage. It was a bottomless pit and the water was always pouring but never filled, an ancient well and the stones you threw still haven't made a splash. It was thirst that couldn't be quenched, hunger that couldn't be satisfied, sunbeams you couldn't grasp with your hands.

He still wanted more.



12:00 NN - ROME, ITALY

September 27, Tuesday

Cynical Four Eyed Bastard and Yachi Birthday Celebration (Group Call)



"I seriously would have preferred if you guys didn't call."

The electric static of Tsukishima's voice droned on from the speaker of Tobio's laptop, and yet somehow it had not affected the lackluster droll behind his voice. It might've made it more robotic than it already sounded. Tsukishima was still as stingy and cynical as he always was, still had this no nonsense attitude when talking to them. It was nearly comforting if only it didn't make Tobio blanch admitting it in his mind, nevermind saying it out loud.

"Oh don't be like that Tsukki. It's your birthday." Yamaguchi was next to him, sitting just close enough to fit in the camera. The space they occupied was a mess of trinkets in boxes and papers littered in stacks everywhere. It would probably be a nightmare to organize.

"Some of us need to work, and you didn't need to ambush me in my own office." Tsukishima rolled his eyes. They were in the Sendai City Museum then. "And why would I want to celebrate the day? Birth is a prison. Existence is *suffering*." He said this, nevermind that there was obviously a half eaten slice of strawberry shortcake on his desk among the other things littering them, something Tobio didn't even want to ask or know.

"This isn't about you. It's about Yachi's birthday. Shut up and go back to eating your cake, Stingyshima." Hinata's face was slightly pixelated on the screen and he kept moving around, which didn't help his case. Tsukishima's face soured, but Yachi simply laughed from her own square of pixels. She's eating her own matcha flavored cake in her own office in Tokyo.

They were all eating cake actually, the idea coming from Yamaguchi. Something about feeling connected in celebration.

"He says that, but Tsukki has been very excited for this day." Yamaguchi laughed. "In his own Tsukki way."

"Shut up, Yamaguchi." Tsukishima rolled his eyes as he bit down his strawberry with sullenness, but Yamaguchi simply smiled and ate a forkful more of his own slice of cake, absolutely used to the former's prickly personality.

"Is that *brigadeiro*, Hinata?" The words were clumsy in Yamaguchi's mouth, like the icing that slipped from his lips which Tsukishima wiped exasperatedly. There was only minimal bashfulness from the former captain, however. Yamaguchi was unfazed by it.

"Yep, and coffee." Hinata showed off the chocolate confection on the screen. "Nice sent me her recipe and I spent the whole morning making it. It tastes good. I'll make it for you guys the next time we see each other."

"Isn't it too early to be eating sweets?" Tobio raised his brows. It should be eight in the morning for Hinata.

"Oh lord, caffeine and sugar. The worst combination you could possibly ingest." Tsukishima frowned. "I thought we agreed not to give the runt any caffeine?"

Hinata spluttered. "I messed up one time—"

"You broke my glasses, is what you did." Tsukishima glared.

"Not my fault you're blind as fuck."

"Ugh, can you not mix in English just to insult me." Tsukishima huffed.

"Now, now. You guys should behave. We don't get to catch up this often." Yamaguchi patted Tsukishima's arm. "Kageyama, what cake are you eating?"

Tobio looked at his hasty purchase at the cafe down the block. He'd never been there prior to today. He was not sure what he bought either, opting only what looked most appealing at that time. "It's *cassata*, I think."

"Ooh. Is it any good?" Hinata's eyes glinted.

It tasted creamy, soft, and tangy with the candied fruits in its filling. Tobio thought he might return to the cafe for more, hungrier than before.

Tobio shrugged. "Find out when you get here. I'm not your taste tester."

"Fine. Take me to get one when I get there." Hinata demanded, because he was Hinata and demanding was what he was. It made Tobio scrunch his nose.

"Oh can you two not start?" Tsukishima took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Go flirt with each other when we're not around. You two are ridiculous enough as it is."

Tobio scoffed. Hinata stuck out his tongue at them.

"Ah I miss the bickering. It's been so long." Yachi grinned. "And it's weird because I see you on TV and everything. I don't think anyone would believe me if I told them I knew you guys."

"We happened to be friends with some monsters. It was easily understandable to not believe it the first time." Tsukishima placed his now empty plate on his table with a wrinkle on his nose.

"Tsukishima-kun, you're a monster yourself, you know?" Yachi giggled. "Congrats on winning the Kurowashiki, by the way. I bet everyone was surprised at the turn of events."

"Please don't lump me in with those two freaks." Tsukishima blanched, typical of him to ignore the praise handed to him.

"Mhm. They were probably betting on MSBY or Adlers to win." Yamaguchi piped in, completely ignoring Tsukishima's comment in turn.

"It was luck." Tsukishima hummed. "But Hoshiumi's annoyed face was fun."

"Bet he hated the blocks." Hinata nodded. "He can't use his blockouts as much when he's competing against you."

Tobio remembered. The first anti-Hoshiumi game plan was created by Tsukishima back from their first nationals. The memory of that game was clear even as the years passed by. It was hardly anything forgettable, Tobio thought, not to everyone involved in that match. He looked at Hinata. He didn't say anything, his face didn't give away anything either.

"Tsukki's been watching him since your first match with the Adlers, you know?" Yamaguchi grinned mischievously. "It finally paid off after all this time."

"Ugh. Let's talk about something else." Tsukishima buried his face in his palm. "Yachi, how's work so far?"

- "It's good." She said, but her face was anything but. "I'm getting assigned more projects these days. Guess they liked how the last one turned out. It is a bit demanding."
- "Yachi. You don't look like you're doing good." Yamaguchi commented. "Are you getting enough rest?"
- "Do I need to send you more books?" Hinata peered at his screen so his image was now unreasonably zoomed in. He was probably using his phone for this. He was squinting at them. "You're not neglecting sleep again, are you? At least eat something, Yachi-san. We don't want you to collapse from overwork again."
- "This is coming from the idiot who does everything at 500%." Tsukishima snarked.
- "Stop treating me like I'm fifteen again. And besides, Kageyama's doing the same thing, so I'm obviously not in the wrong here." Hinata huffed.
- "His highness is just as bad. Don't use him as a comparison. He's a small brained volleyball workaholic whose only rival in stupidity is you. It's like you're made for each other."
- "I'm still right here you know." Kageyama deadpanned.
- "Oh sorry, both of you never listen to reason anyway. I forgot you weren't deaf for a moment." Tsukishima smirked. Tobio clicked his tongue in annoyance.
- " *Workaholic*. I'm not the one who juggles work, division two, *and* finishing a master's degree." Hinata stuck his tongue out adamantly. "Why do you even need a master's degree? You can always take it later."
- "Tsukki said he's impatient." Yachi grinned. "And because he's also a little reckless sometimes."
- "It's not reckless." Tsukishima scoffed. "It's perfectly calculated. And unlike the two of you volleyball idiots, I can't do volleyball forever."

Tobio raised his eyebrows at that.

- "Yeah, I saw him write the spreadsheet, timetable and everything. It's got all these crazy schedules that gets you tired just looking at it. It's color coded too." Yamaguchi quipped. "He said, and I quote, *if an idiot like Hinata could survive Rio at nineteen, then I can juggle work as well*, so It's actually because Tsukki is very competitive. In fact, this coworker of his—"
- "We are not bringing that bastard up." Tsukishima seethed.
- "What's this? Someone other than Kageyama pissing Stingyshima off?" Hinata perked up.
- " *You* also piss me off too." Tsukishima pointed out. "It's just some stupid jerk who thinks he's better than everyone."
- "You're a stupid jerk who thinks he's better than everyone." Tobio said.

Everyone on screen let out loud ugly laughter save from Tsukishima who gritted his teeth. "Why thank you, your highness. That's because I am better, especially against the likes of you. I, at least, understand my feelings."

Tobio frowned. That was low.

"Some coworkers can be difficult to get along with." Yachi laughed softly. "I have some too. They can be a bit stressful sometimes."

"Yachi, who do we need to kill?" Yamaguchi smiled ominously.

"Hey no! It's not like that at all!" Yachi spluttered. "They can just be—well, they can be a bit, know, pushy? Some of them don't know when to back off, but other than that it's fine!"

"Names Yachi." Tsukishima joined. "We need them now."

"You're not actually planning to kill them are you?" Yachi exclaimed.

"We won't." Tsukishima reassured her, though his face was the furthest from reassuring. "But I know someone with rooster hair who looks shady enough to know the right people who will."

"Pfft—" Hinata choked. "Omi-san and Atsumu-san did say he looked like a scam artist. But Kuroo-san wouldn't know anyone like that."

Tsukishima sighed. "You're right. He's too much of a loser for it. Kozume-san though..."

"Hey, Kenma doesn't know anyone like that!"

"But are you sure though?" Yamaguchi hummed thoughtfully. "You attract weird friends, Hinata."

"And speaking of weird friends," Tsukishima clicked his tongue. "How are you dealing with that creep who kept hitting on you? Apparently she followed you all the way to your house. I'm assuming you were being an idiot and you just let her."

That caught Tobio's attention. He didn't hear anything about this before, so why did Tsukishima know something about Hinata that he hadn't told Tobio?

"What?" Yachi exclaimed. "Who? Hinata, what are they talking about? Are you okay there? You're not in danger are you? Sh-should we call the authorities? Have you called 110? Wait —you're in Brazil—are you in trouble?"

"He's going to be, if he doesn't sort that problem out as soon as possible."

"Who told you about that?" Hinata spluttered, cheeks dusting pink and the screen shaking so that he was out of view for a few seconds. The choppiness of the movement was irritating Tobio that was listening through his headphones.

"You blabber enough to your sponsor." Tsukishima raised a brow. "And your sponsor blabbers to his boyfriend, who in turn blabbers to me, his best friend, and his best friend's husband. Whatever I learn about your business in Brazil is against my will."

"You say that Tsukki, but you still read their messages when you can ignore it anytime."

Hinata's eyes widened. "Is there a group chat between the five of you that I'm not aware of?!"

Yamaguchi snickered. "That's what you're hung up about?"

"Bokuto-san never told me!" Hinata groaned. "And we were teammates for two years!"

"It's a surprise, honestly. He's equally airheaded as you that keeping secrets should be impossible. I guess his husband did him good."

Hinata nodded. "Bokuto-san did mention how much Akaashi-san helped him get where he is."

"Back to the topic at hand." Yamaguchi cleared his throat. "Hinata, isn't it a bit concerning to have someone who won't take no for an answer following you around?

There was a smear of sheepishness in Hinata's face as he scratched the back of his neck. "See, Kenma was making a big deal out of it. She didn't really follow me towards my apartment—okay she technically *did*, but not because she was hitting on me! Actually, she kinda did before the incident and she was really insistent about it—but it's not what you think it is!"

Tobio could see the unimpressed expressions on everyone's faces, his own facial muscles probably reflecting the same. This dumbass was still as stupid as ever. That shit was awfully dangerous, and Tobio was close to personally flying to Rio just to tell him off.

"Pray tell me why she followed you then?" Tsukishuma had a disdainful look that challenged him for a convincing answer. Tobio wanted to know as well, and he was leaning closer to the laptop screen.

"Sure, Elena—that's her name by the way—was a big flirt at first, but you know how some men can be creepy." Hinata explained fervently, which caused Tobio's eye to tick. "Anyway apparently she got out of a date from this bar cause this guy was a total *arrombado*, absolute *asshole* apparently, and she's walking home tipsy when she felt like someone was following her so she made a mad dash towards the first place she knew."

"And she just happened to be near your area." Tsukishima concluded. "How did she even know where you live?"

"Ah that's—" Hinata turned away. "We kinda went on a date once before she laid off me for good?"

The tick on Tobio's eye doubled as Tsukishima groaned. Yamaguchi and Yachi looked resigned.

"It was just one date, come on guys. We're friends now and she wouldn't stop unless I said yes," Hinata puffed his cheeks. "You guys act like you won't drive all the way to Tokyo if Yachi's in trouble."

"Aw that's really sweet Hinata-kun," Yachi, being the sweet friend she was, told the dumbass. "But it's just weird to see you go on dates after all those years of rejecting admirers."

"It's like Hinata's become some kind of heartbreaker, hasn't he?" Yamaguchi laughed. "Dating men and women, left and right, never really settling down."

"I haven't been on a lot of dates! You guys are exaggerating. Don't make me out to be some kind of womanizer." Hinata crossed his arms while chuckling. "Besides, dating is *normal*. Stop looking like I'm cheating on someone."

Somehow Tobio could feel eyes boring on him, three pairs to be exact. His throat was closing in on him and his skin was a little prickly, palms sweaty. That was probably his cue to say something. The expectations weighed heavy in the air, waiting for something from him, anything.

Tobio decidedly kept his mouth shut.

"Oh please." Tsukishima pressed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, disdain clearer in his face. Tobio could almost hear the words he was trying to say, amplified in the silence. *Coward*. It was pissing Tobio off. It's pissing him off more because in some way, he was probably right. "It's not like you're actually planning to take any of these dates seriously. Why even bother?" There was a sneer there too.

"My teammates had tried setting me up with all kinds of people to *help me settle down cause it's weird for someone like me to not have anyone* or whatever when I just joined the team. It's rude to turn them down." Hinata shrugged. "When they noticed I really wasn't interested they stopped."

Yachi, Yamaguchi, and Tsukishima looked at each other thoughtfully. There was something about the way the three of them looked at each other, like they're having silent conversations with each other whenever the subject of the discussion was about him and Hinata. It wasn't unreasonable to suspect that they've been talking about them without their presence, more often than usual. It's not like it mattered what they thought, but it could get meddlesome at times.

Like now.

"Isn't his majesty a little quiet today?" Tsukishima drawled. *Meddlesome*. It irked Tobio. It wasn't really any of their business, even when he knew they only had his best interest at heart, something that took him time to reconcile. There were people out there who cared for him even though they weren't necessarily related by blood, even when they were reluctant to admit to it.

"And you're being really talkative."

"Eh. Kageyama doesn't care about dating." Hinata waved off. "He's probably thinking about food or volleyball while silently fuming about how I'm wasting my time over nonsense again. He probably doesn't even know how to date even with all the fangirls lined up for him."

"I don't care what you do." Tobio huffed. "As long as it doesn't get in the way of volleyball. If you lose this November because you're not training properly, you won't be flying back to Brazil in one piece."

"As if that's enough to make me lose!" Hinata shook his fist at him, a smile stretching into a grin where every line of his lips was a stroke of a word and every dip of his dimple was a letter, spelling the word *challenge* so boldly to Tobio. It was always a challenge to Hinata, and Tobio never wanted to lose.

"Then prove it."

"I will!" Hinata laughed. "That's a promise."

Promise.

He really shouldn't hand over promises like it was nothing. Promises weren't things you could just carelessly give without thought.

"Oh stop it. Both of you." Tsukishima rolled his eyes. "You two are ridiculous. Seeing your faces tire me out."

"I don't remember when it became your business, Singyshima!" Hinata shot back, and the conversation had moved on to another topic where Tobio could barely follow. He was content to simply listening to the chatter, eating the plate of cassata sitting on his lap for a good half hour.

"Are your heads made up of air?" The usual barking of a tired third year was often heard these evenings by Sakanoshita's, where five students would be gathered around the table, books and papers scattered around until they were a mix of everyone's stuff and they would have to sort it all out by the end of the session. Tonight, it was Tsukishima manning the front lines with his usual grouchy look, bangs long enough to cover the irritation in his eyes.

Yachi and Yamaguchi were holding on to papers filled with red marks, dejected, and understandably, tired.

"Do you have volleyball for brains? Do I need to smack it to put them into good use too?" He slammed his hand on the table, and Tobio didn't look him in the eye or else he wouldn't be able to hold back in throttling him. He needed their help after all. "If you volleyball idiots can't pass the final exam, you might as well say goodbye to the V-League." Tsukishima glared at them.

Tobio scowled. He didn't even bother looking at the person beside him, rather he refused to look at the person beside him, even if he knew that he was sporting the exact same

expression.

"And you—" Tsukishima pointed, ruthlessly frank. "If you can't pull your grades up before the final exams, then don't even expect to reach Rio, let alone survive there for two years."

Hinata scoffed. He had his arms crossed against his chest, nose turned up with a sniff. He was so prideful, so goddamned stubborn and ridiculous, it made Tobio angry.

There's a niggling in his chest that's bothered him all this time, etched deep in the sinews of his ribs, a gaping hole that buzzed loudly at every beat of his heart. The hollowness echoed in Tobio's ears. It made him nauseous. It made him burn.

"This is simple math. A = B = C. Distributive property. This was tackled in elementary school for goodness sake." Tsukishima continued in his tirade, papers rustling whenever he slammed his palm on the table.

"It's not easy when it's already in the mix with all the other complicated stuff." Hinata murmured, scratching his head while he grabbed his worksheet to review his mistakes.

"Both of you are just idiots."

"Don't lump me in with that stingy bastard," Hinata grumbled.

"I don't want to be lumped with you either." He clicked his tongue. Tobio's words lacked bite as he took back his paper from Yamaguchi. He could feel Hinata staring at him, but he wasn't going to return it even with the prickling sensation it left in his skin; his presence grabbed you by the collars and shook you all over till it rattled your bones; Tobio decidedly ignored him anyway. He was not going to be pulled to that runt's pace this time.

"Guys," Yamaguchi sighed. "But both of you are grown-ups now. I think you can talk out your problems, right?" And wasn't that mortifying? Everyone knew very well about the thing he had tried to suppress, there was no denying it, especially with the unimpressed faces staring at him.

This time Tobio did look up. He hadn't looked at him for so long, but the image was committed to his memory. Dark circles under his eyes, shoulders slumped down, uniform loose on his frame. They were disheveled just like his hair which was in desperate need of combing or a haircut, top buttons open due to the heat of the upcoming spring.

You look like shit. The words were already on the tip of Tobio's tongue, ready to come out, but he hadn't spoken to Hinata in weeks, and yet it was almost easy to fall into familiar habits. He looked like shit, probably from all the lectures and notes he had to cram before the final exam even if he wasn't going to university like how everyone thought he would—like how Tobio thought he would. He was probably tired from all the packing and all the preparations he needed to do to fly to Rio of all places, something he forgot to mention until the last minute where they're only weeks away from graduating.

"You look like shit." Hinata beat him to it. There was no malice in his voice. They were just familiar habits.

Tobio hadn't exactly been keeping up with his appearances, and every other thing he'd done had been methodical—brushing his teeth, combing his hair, clipping his nails—things he'd never forgotten to do, but the slopes of his face still betrayed the truth, and the way his skin was sallow and and pallid was undeniable. Even with the robotic maintenance, there was no other word for it. He did look like shit.

"Go look in the mirror, dumbass." Tobio rolled his eyes. Familiar habits. Familiar territory. It was safe. It was secure.

Tobio liked the familiarity, even though he knew breaking out of comfort was what led to improving. Yesterday was over, what will you be today? What about tomorrow? He knew this. He knew this very well. It was an uphill battle, a run up a steep mountain slope where stopping could be dangerous, else you were going to fall. Stagnancy was the first thing that would kill progress, change was inevitable—even. This was a fact. And yet—

And *yet*—

There was nothing like a wrench in your plans than Hinata-fucking-Shouyou after all, some kind of mathematical error in the grand scheme of things, not so different from the worksheets Tsukishima was grinding into their brains. Mathematical equations, numbers coupled with letters that should not make sense but apparently did, and somehow Tobio was fluent in solving this equation, memorized the process, knew the result even if the answer pissed him off. No matter how much he turned it over his head, the end was inevitable, the process logical, and there was nothing left but acceptance.

"How are you going to survive Rio if you're like that?" Tobio finally said. *Acknowledged*, after months of avoiding it, denying it, the one thing Tobio was good at.

Hinata's eyes widened, the rich brownness of it, wide like saucers and dinner plates. It was fucking stupid. He shouldn't look this happy over it, not when it was the bare minimum. All Tobio did was accept it as reality, because Hinata's decision was not wrong, just as Tobio's decision wasn't, and they were being unfair.

Because they were selfish, weren't they?

"Yeah?" Hinata snickered. "Don't get lost in Tokyo either." He shot back, the slants and slopes of his face losing edges, softening into a not-quite-smile, but no longer tense at least. The sight was enough to warrant Tobio a sigh.

The niggling in his chest had eased, the echo of his gaping chest allayed even for just a moment; the buzz quieted itself into nothing more than a low thrum, just like the goodnight chiming of a ticking clock.

Everything was going to be alright.

>>> 10/05/2021, 17:08

From: press@jva.ne.jp

To: kageyamatobio1996@mail.ne.jp

[INBOX] Greetings Kageyama-senshu. I hope this email finds you well. We are sending you this email in the hopes to invite you to an interview.... <see more>

"So Kageyama-senshu, Hoshiumi-senshu, I'm glad to see both of you in the interview despite the logistics issue with Kageyama-senshu playing for an Italian club and Hoshiumi-senshu on a training camp in America."

The screen flickered to show the face of a smiling woman. Tobio sat comfortably on his couch, laptop on the table while the interview was going on. Interviews were a normal part of an athlete's life, especially when you managed to reach the world stage.

"Hey! I'm very glad to be here." Hoshiumi was on another square on the screen. Tobio's old teammate was just as bright and energetic as usual. Was it something short people shared? It had always puzzled Tobio.

"Me too." Tobio replied in turn, though more mellow. It was nice to have the interview with someone Tobio was already familiar with. Hoshiumi was part of the youth camps Tobio had joined since highschool, as well as his teammate when he was still with the Adlers on top of being in the national team.

Tobio liked Hoshiumi, and the pairing was likely made to balance out the energy.

"You'll be in a different training camp tomorrow, won't you, Kageyama-senshu?"

"Yes." Tobio nodded. "It's for the World Championship."

"Then I'm glad we caught you on time."

The interviewer explained the goals of the interview, the JVA being very adamant in drawing in new players from kids, promoting interest in the sport. Apparently knowing about the athletes personal lives was going to help with that. Tobio didn't exactly understand why, but he kept nodding along and answering when questions were thrown at him to the best of his ability anyway. He preferred if they stuck to things related to training and playing.

But then again, individual habits might also be useful. The way you live your life is crucial to your success.

"So Hoshiumi-senshu, any success in the romance area? Is Japan's Little Giant officially off the market?"

"Romance?" Hoshiumi laughed. "Yeah you can say that!"

The interviewer perked up. "Care to share who this mystery girl is? I'm sure she's wonderful!"

"They're the best! But they made me swear not to mention their identity during an interview. Sorry!" Hoshiumi grinned. "Though I think saying that they're very smart and loves animals

wouldn't hurt. I would brag about them if I could, but they hate attention. They're very lax about a lot of things, but it was better not to push it. The last thing they want is to have their vet full of paparazzi—said it bothered the animals there."

"Is your lover famous then?"

Hoshiumi gave a secretive smile. "Something like that. Or maybe their family is, especially with my career choice."

Tobio blinked. He wasn't expecting his old teammate to also be entangled in a relationship. Then again, they were in the middle of their twenties. Most of the people Tobio knew were already in relationships, his teammates, his friends. It was normal for people to like settling down, he guessed. Or half the people he knew had some kind of plan for their future.

"How about you, Kageyama-senshu?"

Tobio snapped back to the present.

"What about me?"

"Is Kageyama-senshu taken as well?"

"I'm not." Not exactly. "I've never been in one."

"That sounds very surprising." She gasped, a little too comical and dramatic to be sincere. It was the exaggeration that came with being in show business. "I had thought Kageyamasenshu was a ladies' man!"

Hoshiumi laughed. "Kageyama is very popular! But he was either so oblivious or too focused on volleyball to notice."

"You're also focused on volleyball, Hoshiumi-san." Tobio furrowed his brows.

"Yeah, but I definitely notice when people want to take my picture with them." He chirped a reply. "Did you know on one of our post-match dinners, some women were trying to flirt with him? He didn't even notice. If I didn't know better, I'd think he's already taken or something."

"I'm not." Tobio repeated. "I want to focus on volleyball for now."

"Very dedicated. It's admirable of you." She clapped her hands. "That's from a world class athlete for sure. I'm more curious about how both of you got into volleyball, and what made you stay. Hoshiumi-senshu, why don't you go first?"

"I joined volleyball because my brother was easily better at basketball than me!" Hoshiumi huffed. "My brother constantly looked down at me— *literally*— he's this tall giant of a man who's also a bit of a jerk sometimes, and I mean this affectionately." He cackled. "So I joined the volleyball club to break free from his looming shadow, but then of course he's good at that too!"

"Who would've known Hoshiumi-senshu has some strong sibling rivalry!"

"That's just how siblings are," Hoshiumi said, and Tobio could attest to that even when he and Miwa spent little time together. "Having someone challenge you is how you grow. I'm surrounded by tall people. My brothers and my father are tall, and so is my partner, but that doesn't necessarily make you weak. Height and talent is nothing if you don't polish it, and now look at who among us is the world-class athlete now." He nodded to himself, satisfied.

"I see, that is interesting! What about Kageyama-senshu?"

"My grandfather played volleyball. He coached a local team when I was a kid so I've always played it ever since." Tobio replied. This was not the first time someone asked him, and it surely wasn't the last. There was a generic tale to the question which made everything easier to talk about: His grandfather coached a team when he was a kid and he brought Tobio to the practices and the matches. Soon, Tobio learned to love the sport which led him here.

It was cut and dry. Simple. Sanitized. He didn't just love volleyball, he lived it. Ever since he was a kid, it had always been there. They didn't need to know about the details, the way Tobio's soul would spark into life whenever he held a ball, the way he absolutely refused to let go the first time he held it. They didn't know the nights, the days, the pain, the heartbreak, the grief, the waiting, the endless waiting.

Interviews don't really capture everything about a person anyway. It was always just the veneer of what made someone. Ask an athlete how it feels to win, and they'll tell you it was amazing. Ask them why they think they lost, and they'll list a few glaring errors. Ask them how they became good, they'll tell you to work hard.

It was never about running, and late night training, and *one more toss—please, just one more*, or serve after serve after serve, and taking care of yourself, picking yourself up after a fever because there was always going to be next time. Not the tears—or perhaps the lack of it, really, because you always did freeze up at important vulnerable moments, standing uselessly in front of those who did cry.

It was never about how losing could sting but also feel like coming home, and winning was the sensation of arms around you, champagne bubbles kissing his lips, and pats on the back, a flight back to Japan from across the world. Its shouts of *I'm here I'm here I'm here I'm here!* And as long as I'm here, you are invincible, loud and clear, unmistakable, distinct. It was seeing the sun after long winter days of being left alone in his own house and failing entrance exams and rejections, like spring melting the snow. I'm here I'm here I'm here I'm here— yelled every step and jump, like the pounding of a heartbeat inside his hollow rib cage, and quick attacks, and toss to me, toss to me, toss to me, I'll take everything you have, you don't have to hold back. It was unspoken, at the same time screamed so that there was no mistake. Today, tomorrow, twenty years from now.

Because how could you say all that and make sense? How could a single interview encapsulate all of what Tobio was thinking of?

Get him started talking, and he wasn't going to shut up. There was a long and a short answer for everything, depending on how willing you were to listen. People barely had the patience

"Kageyama-senshu really has been playing volleyball since he was a kid, wasn't he?" Tobio nearly forgot about the interview. "I'm guessing your grandfather is very proud of you."

"Yeah." There was some kind of tightness lodged in his throat at hearing those words, Tobio managed to keep his emotions in check. "I hope so."

It was not like Tobio was really going to know.

VOLLEYBALL JOURNAL ENTRY # 2171

[November 17, 2010 - Wednesday]

Kazuyo san might not---

The hospital was---

I came from Kazuyo san's room and the doctors said he's not coming ba--

I don't want him to leave. I don't want h--

I went to practice my tosses today in the backyard. Miwa practiced receives with me after a while. She stopped after five sets but it's okay. It was nice. We haven't played together in so long. Mother and Father are coming home next week for the funeral. Kazuyo-san died today.

VOLLEYBALL JOURNAL ENTRY # 4759

[April 11, 2016 - Monday]

• Toss Statistics: 98% success rate

• Teamwork Statistics: 78% success rate

• Latest Service Technique Statistics: 93% success rate

Note:

Currently in Kagoshima to train for the Olympics. As I thought, everyone here is good. One of them hits a very nasty serve and block. Oikawa-san was not picked for the national team, and I haven't seen him in the V-League so he must have gone overseas.

Bokuto-san and Ushijima-san were invited as well. They're the only ones I know at the moment. I haven't integrated in the team yet, but I'm not yet the starting setter. I guess they

picked me with the thought of using me as a pinch server. That's alright.

Next week, I'll be in America for some away games. Reminder to ask Yachi for help in learning some English.

Misc:

The dumbass left me

i won't see him till

Why didn't he say

Hinata left for Rio.

[America Today] 4 hours ago.

How A Beloved Giant Rat Won Free Speech Rights:

The 12-foot-tall inflatable called "Scabby" has been used for decades as a symbol in union disputes. Last year, the National Labor Relations Board signaled it could outlaw its use in some situations <read more>

[Morning Edition] 12 days ago.

You Can Now (Possibly) Get Your Hands On A Piece Of Princess Diana's Wedding Cake:

A large slice of icing from one of the nearly two dozen official 1981 wedding cakes will go up for auction next week. The auction house says it's in good condition, "but we advise against eating it."... < read more>

[SeafoodSource] 16 hours ago.

Celebrating Asian/Pacific American Heritage with Tobiuo Sushi and Bar:

The Tobiuo or the Flying Fish is good for sashimi and sushi...with a menu of innovative, beautifully presented sushi...has earned wide appeal and accolades... < read more >

[Lifehackers] 1 week ago.

Capcom to Announce New Ace Attorney Game:

OBJECTION—Capcom has released the seventh installment for the Ace Attorney series, following the protagonist, Phoenix Wright and his best friend and rival, Miles Edgeworth in solving cases...the seventh installment is playable on Nintendo... < read more>

[Medical News Today] 21 hours ago.

Guidelines on sunlight exposure for vitamin D may need revising:

Researchers used blood samples from 75 individuals to assess vitamin D levels regarding current sunlight guidelines, which scientists originally based on skin samples. Their results suggest that... < read more>

[FIVB] 6 months ago.

News - Player of the Week: Shouyou Hinata

Japanese men's national team player Shouyou Hinata's love of volleyball started in middle school. He says that he fell in love at first sight when... < read more >

[JVA] 52 minutes ago.

Featured Athlete: Kageyama Tobio

Japanese men's national team player and Ali Roma setter, Kageyama Tobio shares his thoughts in an interview conducted last week.... < read more >



22:00 PM - KAGOSHIMA, JAPAN

April 11, Monday

Departure to Rio (Dumbass)

<<snooze>>

Let's start at the beginning. Stories were best told from the beginning, though arbitrary and subjective. You know how it starts. This was the beginning as you know it.

There was a boy who loved volleyball so much, but his love was different from everyone else. He yelled and he pushed and he burned in frustration out of his deep, immeasurable love for volleyball. There was a boy who had left behind everyone else, and was abandoned in his pursuit of his love. He was odd, a resident fish out of water, jumping up to the surface to fly as if it were life or death.

There was a boy who only wanted someone to match him for once. Who wanted someone to come and find him, from the promise whispered by an old man's lips who had now crossed this world to the next.

There was a boy with flaming hair and eyes shining like sunburst, bones cracking with fire. He stood across the court, unprepared. And wasn't that unfair? The only person taking all this seriously was on the other side of the net and barely managing to keep up. He couldn't even take care of himself and yet he declared shamelessly that he was going to win. What was he doing for the past years? Where was he all this time?

Superhuman reflexes, the thirst to win, hunger—insatiable hunger and greed. Tobio knew the looks of it, familiar with it like the back of his hand and the very planes of his face, every line and curve and muscle of his body. He saw it everyday in his reflection staring back at him, and this sunlit boy was a mirror that threw the image back at him. There was a boy who cried atop the stairs, promising to defeat him, to stay the longest on court.

There was a boy who was rejected by his favored school, rejected by his teammates, a lonely tyrant king with a heavy crown on his head and a too big cape loose on his shoulders, both which he didn't ask for. And there was a boy from the sun who burst into his life, demanding from him right from the start, asking, always asking.

There was a school by the foot of the mountain with a team of highschool boys, like a flock of crows, and in that team, Tobio had planned to bury his crown and fold his cape neatly out of sight. Life was filled with compromises. Cut your corners, too much, nobody wants too much, Tobio was too much and too little at the same time. Nobody wanted to follow a king. Nobody wanted anyone that overbearing.

And he did learn, and his teammates finally accepted him—even his shameful past. He stepped down his throne and he knelt on the ground with them, sharing sweat, tears and the occasional blood. He was no longer abandoned because had found a place for himself, no more tosses unspiked, no more lonely serving drills by himself.

But there was a boy who flew high, bright like the sun, and he was always interrupting Tobio's plans. He demanded only the best from Tobio, wanted everything he could offer and more, hungry, starving, greedy. He wasn't content, no. He pried the gold out of the ground and crowned him anew till Tobio was shining brightly, touched by the sun himself.

And Tobio was king.

His Serene Highness, all his greed and his selfish love, everything in between.

The name that Tobio hated the most was given new meaning, seated on his new throne with teammates that were not lowly subjects, but subordinates, comrades. He'd learned to give his trust—he ugly, brash thing—and he got to take everyone else's, bringing it along to the top of the world.

This was the story as everyone knew.

But what about the inbetween? Who would talk about the missing pieces? The blurry line where the sea meets the sky? What about after nationals? What about those two years of separation? Of the twelve hours difference where his today was yesterday to you? Who would talk about the absence of the sun? At some point the day had to end on one side of the world, and it would be morning on the other end. Who would talk about *see you laters* and *I'll beat you, just you wait* and *I promise, I promise, I promise.*

There was a boy, a fish in the ocean who jumped out of the water. It leapt out in desperate attempts to survive. For a moment it met the sky in fleeting seconds, and the Tobiuo managed to narrowly escape death then. It was always been an instinct built inside it. The Tobiou was born to jump out of the water, a natural default, but part of him wondered if it forced itself to

leave the salty waters to reach for the light afterall. The Tobiou was attracted to light, and maybe it defied the laws of physics, flying to meet the warmth of the sun, to be showered with its brightness where in these few short-lived seconds it was golden.

Fish don't fly silly.

Yes, they don't fly. They jump and then they fall. Curse physics. Curse gravity. It sees the sun for a split second, meets it briefly, before parting yet again. It was just like this with him, isn't it? Tobio was only going to meet *him* briefly before they were separated again, because Tobio was selfish as he was also desperate. Really, Tobio didn't regret his choices. He didn't. Anything that let him play volleyball was ultimately the best decision.

But the *what if's* haunted him every night, every quiet moment when he wasn't playing volleyball. Heat, feverish gazes, oceans, airports, and goodbyes. There was a lot of things that bothered him: drunken calls at 3 AM, the taste of champagne, the stank of beer on breaths, stupid slurred confessions damning him to hell.

Maybe Tobio should have sent him off after all, see him one last time before he left. Maybe he should have been honest from the start. Maybe he should have asked for more; did he have the right to ask for more? He was already asking for too much. He couldn't have it all. It was a compromise, the world was full of them.

Here's what they know:

Kagoshima was 17 hours and 53 minutes away from Narita airport by car. A good 1,468 kilometers stood between them, making it impossible for Tobio to see him off before he left the country. If he had been in Tokyo, it would have been possible, but it was almost like fate had wanted to keep them apart.

Logically, Tobio wouldn't waste a day for something like that. He was not sentimental enough for it. Even if Rio was kilometers away from Japan, volleyball came first, everything else second.

Here's what they don't know:

Tobio sat on his bed, one phone call away from insanity. He held the device in his hand, the screen facing up. His fingers were close to the call button, hovering over it as he considered his choices. Anxiety pumped through his veins, and his heart was jumping out of his ribcage and lodged itself into his throat. He was one call away. Just one call.

His phone rang the alarm. 10 PM it said, loud and ear-piercing.

Tobio turned off his phone and went to bed.

Coward.

Here's what they know:

There were 18,571.83 kilometers between Tokyo and Rio. Tobio was one of the youngest representatives of the Olympics at that time, flying to Brazil to represent his country and play

against the world's best. Nineteen years old, rising up the ranks, the world was within his reach, victory hung on his fingers. Kageyama Tobio, national team's latest member and the volleyball world and social media's new obsession.

Here's what they don't know:

When the games were over, Tobio was just a teen in a foreign country who barely spoke English. He got along with his team well enough, had fun playing with them; anyone good in the court was bound to make Tobio's blood sing with excitement, but there was still a gaping hole inside him despite it, niggling, gaining cracks. It was begging to be filled, wanting, always wanting.

Tobio could unleash several service aces in a row, and his name would trend all over everyone's phones, computers, and televisions. Then he'll be invited to join them in postmatch parties, but ultimately, Tobio would still want to see one person, and that person would refuse to see him. *Sorry! Can't see you. I have part-time. And then training. Maybe next time?* It was a compromise, and Tobio was always waiting.

Here's what they know:

Tobio had a rigid set of habits and routines in his life that he preferred not to break, filing his nails, running in the morning, eating on time, sleeping enough hours—routines made things easier. Practice was good precisely because of its repetitive manner. Tobio used all his energy doing the things he found important, and the rest he slept through, and then it would be difficult to wake him up.

Here's what they don't know:

Somewhere in those two years of separation, Tobio got a call in the middle of the night, one that he purposely got out of the bed for and picked up. The person on the other line was drunk, coming home from a friend's wedding. Tobio would never forget the words exchanged on that night.

Here's what they know.

Schweiden Adlers won a total of 11 championships and were runner-up 6 times in the Japanese League, V.Premier League, and the V.League. In the Kurowashiki Tournaments, Schweiden Adlers won 14 times and placed second 7 times. They were the favorites to win the season's championships as well.

They lost.

Here's what they don't know:

That loss was a long time coming. Tobio waited, and waited, fourteen years overdue before finally, *finally*, it happened. Tobio was always waiting, and now two years, fourteen years, *he* was finally here. It was homecoming, because this was where he belonged after all, in the court with Tobio whether beside him or across the net. *I'm here! I'm here! I'm here!* His

whole presence yelled, shining brightly, blinding everyone in the stadium. Tobio wasn't sad at the loss. He was smiling the whole time.

Here's what they don't know:

After that fateful game, a reunion was at order, in more ways than one. This was for friends, family, people long apart and haven't seen each other for years, there in Sendai where it all started. Drinks, dinner, they had an entire izakaya full of rowdy men. Beer and sake were passed around, and Tobio really didn't need alcohol in his system but the senpais were blatantly persuading him to drink, Sugawara to be exact.

And it gets stupid really, Tobio wasn't drunk, just tipsy, but a little alcohol in him tended to make him loose-lipped and heavy-eyed. It didn't help that rich pools of honey amber and orange were grinning at him after years of absence, bludgeoning Tobio with his presence. He really didn't need any more alcohol in his system, but he was tasting celebratory champagne in his mouth when he had never drank any that day, mixed with the stank of beer. He was drinking it in someone else's mouth, tasting the sun for the first time and cruelly parting again for air.

Tobio wondered if he should have asked for more that night. He wondered if he even had the right to ask for more.

Countdown:

★ FIVB World Championship: 47 days

✓ Training Camp - Trentino: 1 day

"—fishermen use the flying fish's attraction to light to catch them at night, using giant flashlights in their fishing boats—"

This was the sound that greeted Tobio the moment he gained back consciousness. It took him a few seconds to catch up that he was in a hotel room in Trentino for the training camp in preparation for the World Championship. Tobio got up groggily to glare at the source of the noise.

"Sorry did I wake you up? My tia turns on the TV in hotel rooms whenever she's in one. Said it warded off ghosts cause they haunt you if you kept the room too quiet." Garcia explained the flying fish documentary currently playing on cable TV. "I can lower it. Or I don't know, do you wanna watch sports instead?" He picked up the remote and switched the

Tobio grumbled, which was a sign for Garcia to do whatever he wanted. He was already awake, he might as well get up. Tobio slid off the bed and stumbled to the bathroom with a yawn, quick to settle in new places, rarely bothered by the change in his scenery when sleepy.

They didn't have practice until tomorrow, but Tobio would like to get some exercise in.

"They got football playing right now. Come watch with me if you wanna. Football's popular back home too, you know?" Garcia called out when Tobio stepped out of the room. Tobio glanced at the players on screen and decided that he wasn't interested in watching people on screen kick a ball across a field for more than an hour.

"Nhnn."

"You leaving?" Gracia looked at Tobio curiously, the expression on his face probably gave away Tobio's plans.

"I'll go for a run."

Garcia frowned. "Do you know the way? Don't get lost, yo."

"Yeah." Tobio said, picking up his blue jacket discarded on the bed. He took note of a good garden path to run laps before they checked in. The elevated mountain path was ideal for it too. The Miyagi scenery came back to Tobio's mind, plucked from the memories in the back of his mind. The mountains, the crisp air, lamp posts turning on a few minutes after sunset, the world that once was painted orange slowly turning to blue and black.

"Okay. Go tell coach before you go, alright? And-and bring you phone will you? Just in case." Garcia reminded him. "Not that I don't trust you man, but you might get lost, you know? Trentino's kinda new." He said. The device was already in Tobio's pocket, secured in case of any calls and emergencies. He appreciated the concern regardless.

"I will."

Tobio turned back for one last peek at Garcia before leaving. The screen was playing the beginnings of the old Seabreeze commercial. Tobio flinched at the sight of familiar volleyball shoes on the gym floor. He excused himself from the room before he could see more, cheeks heating up.

"You should have asked ahead, dumbass." Tobio huffed.

"I did!" Orange, gold, and black waved around in front of him. "Tsukishima said he was going to text the location when they decided where to eat. He didn't bail on us at the last minute, did he?" Phone pressed on his ear, the call was not connecting. Hinata, dressed in casual clothes and basking in the post-match afterglow, back after years of separation, was currently thumping his head on the wall of the locker rooms in impatience.

Tobio rubbed his temples. That option was very likely from someone like that cynical foureyed bastard. He was already hungry and he'd really appreciate it if they could just get to the damn restaurant as soon as possible. The post-match interviews took longer than usual, and they were already running late.

"Why don't you try calling them? You have Sugawara-san's number, right?"

Tobio bit back a sigh, but he obligingly took his phone and texted the group for directions.

"You could just call." Hinata peeked into Tobio's screen, body closer than it had ever been in the entire day. "Seriously, what do you have against calling? It'll be faster that way."

Tobio rolled his eyes. The phone pinged with the notification tone. It was Yachi who messaged them the name of the izakaya they were staying in. He squinted at the screen.

"Do you know where this is found?" Tobio nearly shoved the screen to Hinata's face.

"Why would I? I haven't been back to Miyagi in months since I returned to Japan. Who knew what changes happened in two years?" There was a scowl in his eyes, a downturn of his lips. Right. Two years. With him in front of Tobio, suddenly it was like he never left at all. "You didn't go overseas, you should know where these things are."

"I was in Tokyo for three years, dumbass. How would I know shit?"

This was their first non volleyball and non competition related conversation in two years, and of course they were already arguing. Of course, Hinata Shouyou, back in Japan and freshly out of a game he had just won, would immediately annoy Tobio at first chance.

"I forgot you were bad at directions."

Tobio grabbed Hinata's hair, pulling at them while the latter swatted his hand away, falling back into old habits. Like he never even left at all.

"You're not any better, dumbass." Tobio squinted at the Google maps on his phone, leading them to where they needed to be. It was twenty minutes away by bus, probably longer if they walked. There weren't any buses coming till fifteen minutes later.

"Hey, if you must know Bakageyama-kun, I am a master of commuting. This guy would not survive Rio without a good sense of direction." Hinata puffed his chest out proudly.

"Tch. I don't want to hear that from the idiot who got lost while running." Tobio rolled his eyes.

"That was years ago! Let it go!" Hinata squawked. "And didn't you get lost with me that one time too?"

"Ugh." Tobio scrubbed his face. "Whatever. Let's walk. I don't think a bus is coming soon. It'll be faster if we just walk" He marched off towards the direction of the izakaya, bag on his shoulder and hand in the pocket of his jacket, not bothering to wait for him, confident he would fall in step with Tobio's pace. True enough Hinata was already beside him.

"Hey, are you going back to your old home after this?" Hinata asked. Normal conversations. Tobio could have normal conversations.

He glanced at Hinata with a pensive look. It was not like there was going to be anyone who'll greet him back, with his parents busy with work and Miwa and her child back in Tokyo. It really won't be anything different from usual. He'd still be going home to an empty house.

Hinata looked at him. "Yeah. Natsu's gonna wanna see me again. She's in Niiyama Girl's now. She has a lot of things to tell me in person." He grinned. "Bet she'd love to see you too. It's been—what? Three, four years since she saw you?"

"I see." Tobio hummed. "The Adlers already left for Tokyo. I asked to stay behind for this so I'll be in a hotel." They rode the Schweiden Adlers' bus, save for Ushijima who left to visit his family as well. Tobio promised to be back by tomorrow night in time for practice the next day.

"Mmhhmm." Hinata made an acknowledging noise at the back of his throat, nodding along. It was just like going home after practice or a late-night study session for exams from Yachi's house. It felt nice, familiar, and at the same time, different. The Hinata before him was no longer the one Tobio had known two years ago, not entirely. His face was also different now, more angled, jaw more pronounced, copper hair cropped. He had grown a lot.

His stare was also different, hardened, yet astute, shrewd. It was strange. This was the same kid who threw up at Tanaka's lap due to nerves. It was almost unbelievable.

"Oi, what's your problem? Picking a fight?!"

"Tch. Hurry up or I'm going to leave you behind. Your short legs are slowing us down." Tobio tore his gaze away from Hinata.

There was exasperated choking from behind Tobio where Hinata paused. "And here I thought you matured already!" Hinata bemoaned. "You really haven't changed."

"You did." Tobio noted.

Hinata stopped yet again for the second time. This time, Tobio stopped and looked at him where he was hit by the full curious scrutiny in Hinata's eyes. They stared at Tobio intensely. "Is that so bad?"

"What is?"

Hinata shrugged. "Change."

Tobio was tight lipped, brows furrowed in contemplation. He was not sure what to say to that, not sure what to feel. He opted to shift the subject. "Do you really think that I didn't change?"

"Well, no. I know you did." Hinata faltered. "It's just—it's weird because you obviously grew up since last time I saw you, but deep inside, you're still you. Does that make sense?" Hinata was wistful with his words. "It's just nice to know, comforting. Two years is a long time."

It was when he heard stuff like these coming out of Hinata's mouth that Tobio painfully noticed the gap between them. It was like coming home only to find your furniture moved an inch to the right, or your rooms suddenly bigger than last time. It was like breaking in new shoes, freshly bought from the store, or playing in a new court for the first time, trying a size

5 volleyball when you were sixteen. It was familiar, but just slightly off. It needed easing in, adjustment.

"Two years is a long time." Hinata repeated as he thought about the last time they talked face to face. It was in Tokyo, a few days before Tobio left for Kagoshima and Hinata for Rio. "Did your mind change from last time? Or is it still the same after all these years?"

Tobio knew what he was talking about. Hinata was a mixture of different expressions, mostly hesitation, a little bit of anxiety, recognition, embarrassment, a deer caught in headlights, brown eyes wide, wide—

"Depends." Tobio answered gruffily as if his heart hadn't stopped beating for a moment. "Have you decided?"

If Tobio's emotions didn't hang on Hinata's answer to his question, he would have smirked at the gobsmacked expression on his face again. As it stood, Tobio was too tense for humor, and maybe if he had felt less for him, he would have easily brushed it off.

" *Porra* ." Hinata flinched at the sound of his phone ringing. The moment was over the moment Hinata picked up the call, an not so apologetic look in his face. There was a hint of regret.

Tobio didn't let his disappointment show. Instead, he noted dryly that the little Portuguese slipping through Hinata's vocabulary was yet another thing different about him from last time. Tobio didn't know what to make of all these changes. It was not unwelcomed, but they were strange.

"They're asking where we are." Hinata pocketed his phone. "Race you to the Izakaya. Loser buys dinner."

Tobio narrowed his eyes. "Fine." He abandoned the previous conversation. It might be better not to talk about it now. It might be better not to talk about it at all. "You're buying me curry with tonkatsu." Before Hinata could reply, he started bolting to the direction of their destination.

"Hey!" Indignant yelling protested from the back. "That's a false start!"

Tobio stopped running. His calves were burning with exhaustion. He was contentedly tired from the run up the incline, fatigue catching up to him.

He looked around his surroundings. It was dark with the sun long gone from the sky, instead there were countless stars all over the vast black evening as well as the lamplights from the city. It was a beautiful place, Tobio decided with a deep inhale from the crisp mountain air and the mossy smell of the lake. Every exhale left faint traces of mist in the air.

He looked around his surroundings, distracted from his thoughts.

Tobio looked one more time to be sure, before he picked his phone from his pocket, dialing the number second to the top of his contact list.

The phone rang once, twice, and then it picked up in the third.

"Ciao." Tobio let the awkward words out of his mouth. There was a deep sigh of resignation on the other side.

"Tobes," Garcia kept his chuckles to a minimum. Tobio appreciated it. "You're lost, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

There was a deep sigh.

"Do you want me to pick you up?"

Heat crept to the edges of his neck and ears. Tobio's lips thinned before he responded. "Please."

"Alright. Turn on your location, will you?"

Trends for You

1. Trending in Italy

Kodzuken

270.8k tweets

2. Trending in Italy

Meteo Attack

13k tweets

3. Trending in Italy

volleyball

183.8k tweets

4. Trending in Italy

GO OFF ANEMIC KING

200.5K tweets

5. Trending in Italy

Kodzuken's BF-san

30.5k tweets

6. Sports. Trending

Nekoma

30.9k tweets

7. Business. Trending

Bouncing Ball Ltd.

39k tweets

8. Fashion. Trending

Asahi Apparel

10.6k tweets

9. Entertainment. Trending

ONE OK ROCK

12,691 tweets

10. Music. Trending

HEARTACHE

90.2k tweets

11. Politics. Trending

#DEFENDPRESSFREEDOM

50.9k tweets

13. Politics. Trending

ACAB

9,110 tweets

14. Anime. Trending

Heike Monogatari

1,408 tweets

15. Manga. Trending

Tokyo Revengers

54.7k tweets

16. Entertainment. Trending

Mikey

7k tweets

17. Movies and TV. Trending

The Owl House

17k tweets

18. Entertainment. Trending

Lumity

1,993 tweets

19. Sports. Trending

JVA

1,008k tweets

20. Sports. Trending

Shouyou

1,020 tweets

Tobio filed his nails quietly in the locker room. His window to pick up this call was limited with the training camp schedule hectic, so they needed to keep it brief. He figured Hinata was on his run this time too. This was part of his habits as well. It made Tobio worry about that klutz. He was going to get his phone stolen if he wasn't careful.

"Yeah?"

"Mhm. It was an A quick to the center from your emergency set, wasn't it?" Tobio zipped his bag open for a spare shirt, fresh out of the shower and still dripping wet, he scrubbed his hair dry with a towel. Hinata was still on loudspeaker so he could move about as easily.

[&]quot;I saw your game last week. The exhibition game."

"No complaints this time? Isn't that new for you, Kageyama-kun?" Hinata laughed.

"Your toss could do some improvement." Tobio thought about Hinata's previous game as he slipped on his old setter's soul shirt. He made sure to get a new one before moving to Rome. It was getting a little tight on the arms and the chest, but it'll do. "Do some finger push-ups."

"I did!" Hinata huffed. There was the sound of doors banging open on his side. It was a bit of a commotion. "The set was *fine*. Kenma said so too. I'd like to see you pull off a toss while nearly splitting. You couldn't even do a king pigeon pose!" His voice was muffled on the last bit.

"Your ridiculous athleticism and flexibility pisses me off." Tobio sat on the bench and pulled out his kit. The nail clippers and file were already out in an instant. One finger, then the next. Personal maintenance. Tobio started his business. There were fifteen minutes left for the call, and Tobio was already behind schedule due to some team discussions beforehand. "And I could do yoga just fine."

"Keep eating—" Hinata spluttered. The sound of water splashing in quiet drips reached Tobio's ears. "—your heart out." He gasped. His voice bounced through the walls, bounding through echoes, like he was in a closed space.

"Hinata, are you seriously showering while talking to me?" Tobio deadpanned. That was unmistakably the sound of the shower spray.

"You called late!" Hinata exclaimed. "I needed to make do. Besides, I don't take too long."

He bit the inside of his cheeks, fluttering his eyes shut with a sharp inhale through his nose. "Dumbass." He clicked his tongue. He may have overdone one of his nails and it was sure going to bother the heck out of him for the rest of the day. Damn it. He blew on it, salvaging what he could. Tobio wondered if the idiot was doing this on purpose.

"Hey, you gonna hang up? Doesn't that mean you lose?" Hinata's voice was barely audible and his words were jumbled with splutters, and yet his smug and goading voice was still palpable through the speakers.

"Lose how exactly, dumbass?!" Tobio rolled his eyes. Hinata didn't even bother answering, he simply laughed loudly. Did he even have any teammates there? "Oi, are you in the lockers?"

"Nah." Hinata descended once again to some spluttering. "It's our day off today so I'm at home. Aaaand I'm done. See? That wasn't so bad." The squeaking sound of the faucet turned off echoed in the tiled walls. There was shuffling on his part and the sound of the phone getting picked up and changing locations.

"Day off." Tobio moved to the next hand. He still needed to file five more fingers.

"Yes. Time to rest. Do some chores. Hang out with some people I haven't seen in a while. Pedro has business in Sao Paulo so I'm seeing him later." Hinata listed his schedule off. It shouldn't surprise Tobio. Hinata had easily blended into Brazilian life. Tobio could dispose of

the man to Antarctica and he would still find a way to be friend the wildlife and settle down there. He would make a good penguin. It made absolutely no sense.

"Right." Tobio looked at his handiwork, inspecting his nails. Trimmed, straight, and even. It looked good enough, even the one that was shorter than usual. That was going to tick him a lot later. "I need to go now."

The rest of his teammates were already filing out of the showers as well—or at least the louder ones were. They didn't really bother Tobio when he was in the middle of his calls, not like they could understand what he was saying anyway. But it still put him off though.

"Finished with your nail care then?" Hinata chirped.

"You better not be neglecting your nails."

"I'm taking good care of them! Anyway, weren't you supposed to leave? Hang up already."

He wanted to say that Hinata could hang up first if he really wanted to, but he had a feeling he was making this into one of his silly competitions again, and Tobio was reluctant to hang up first as well, not planning to lose. He was going to give him a piece of his mind when another voice joined in before Tobio could answer.

"Oh Tobi is calling someone? Didn't know he could smile."

The needless competition delayed them even further and now his teammates caught him between calls. Garcia was looking at them with wide eager eyes. He was obviously teasing, but Tobio was suddenly protective of his own private calls with Hinata.

"Tobi?" Hinata from the phone snickered. This might exactly be the reason why Tobio didn't like being heard, but it wasn't like there was any other time to call. By the time they were off, Hinata would be training, when Hinata was on break, Tobio would be training. They slept early too. The fact that they could hold a semblance of a regularly scheduled call was nothing short of a miracle and stubbornness.

"Calm down Miguel, Tobio doesn't like getting his calls interrupted." Russo entered the room with an easy smile, quick and efficient in changing before exiting the room. "Lunch is in fifteen. Don't take too long."

"Are those your teammates Kageyama?" Hinata piped up. Damn his newfound fluency in English. How many languages does he speak these days anyway?. " *Hey, teammates of Kageyama! Morning!*"

"Woah!" Gracia exclaimed. "Hey! Tobio's friend! Good morning to you too!"

"I'm hanging up now." Tobio sighed. Letting the two energetic forces of nature interact was just a disaster waiting to be unleashed.

"Stingy-yama!" Hinata grumbled. "Anyway, talk to you next week. See you in November. Bye!"

"Yeah. See you next month." Tobio clicked the end button.

"Who was that?" Garcia put on a shirt.

"A friend," Tobio explained. "A teammate. Don't worry, you'll meet him soon." Very soon.

"Oh you know, it's probably that orange ninja Tobi is very close with." Moretti walked in the room, joining in the discussion as well. Tobio wasn't aware that there were others listening to their conversation. "Hinata Shouyou, wasn't it? You've been teammates since high school, *si*? I listened to some of his interviews. He's very energetic. Lively kid."

"Now why would you watch interviews about Tobi's friend? Most of it is in Japanese isn't it?" Santini followed from the showers. "*Pettegolo*."

Moretti threw his sweaty shirt at Santini's smug face. "It's called scoping the competition. You wanna know what Brazil has to offer, no? Besides, that kid is crazy. He tooled lots of spikers. Short stuff's got people wrapped around his fingers."

Tobio snorted. That was accurate in more ways than one, honestly.

"Right, and not because you wanted to snoop into Tobi's life." Santini smirked.

"What's happening now? What's up with Tobi's life?" De Luca came in with a towel on his hair. "Are we finally gossiping about Tobi?"

"Is it even gossip if the person we talk about is in front of us?" Moretti shook his head, obviously amused. "No, this is *not* gossip. Gossip is for *nonne* and *tias* every family reunions."

"You're no better than *nonne* and *tias*, *stupido*." Santini rolled his eyes, muttering something in Italian

"*Nanas* and *tias*' gossips are the best though." Garcia piped up. "If you're a PI, befriend the *nanas* and the *tias*. You can dig whatever shit you want on anyone. It was scary. Gossip holds society together."

"How are they even getting all that info? I swear they have super vision and hearing." De Luca sat on the bench and faced the group, nodding sagely.

"It's just good to see Tobes with a friend though. Seriously dude, you work so hard."

Tobio frowned. He had heard of this a lot of times, too many to count. Deep down, he knew that only he was ever going to know what was truly important to him, and only he got a say to it. That was what Kazuyo-san taught him, and that was how he was living his life all this time. And yet, if so many people had told him this, then it must hold some weight, right?

"Am I really?"

The rest of the team looked at each other, quiet. Joking about Tobio's workaholic nature wasn't new. But his response and reaction was. Tobio had never acknowledged this, and now

here he was second-guessing himself.

"You are," Santini said. "A little bit. Maybe," he added, as if it could salve over the bluntness of his words.

"Sometimes I look at you training and I feel like you're running away from something." De Luca offered his own nugget of opinion. "No, like you're chasing something far away and you get lost in whatever, erm, tunnel vision you have in front of you."

Garcia nodded. "You play volleyball like a man starving for his next meal. It's terrifying, and inspiring. It's like, I think I definitely need to not screw up every time I step in the court, ya know? It's good as your teammate, but abso-fucking-lutely scary on the other side of the net. I think if I need to receive those serves on a live game, I'm going to shit myself."

The team shared chuckles while Tobio considered every word. This wasn't like middle school, mind. Everyone here was more than willing to catch up to Tobio and work just as hard. Nobody becomes this good without hard work and genuine love for volleyball. Even so, when he boiled it all down to the very end, something was just different.

Volleyball was volleyball, and playing it was just like breathing for Tobio. It was jumping out the water and taking a deep breath of air then diving back into the ocean, though Tobio wasn't sure where he really belonged. He traversed both. Playing volleyball was a survival instinct. It was the only time and place where he could fly.

"I need the training," Tobio explained. Maybe he was looking at this differently. "I need to be strong enough to play more games."

"Why do you like volleyball, Tobi?" De Luca asked. Everyone was looking at him now.

"Do I need a reason to want to play more?" Did he need a reason to love volleyball? Did he need a reason to want to win? "I will stay the longest in the court. I cannot do that if I do not win. And if I do not win, I can not play more matches. I promised a friend..."

Partially, that promise was the reason. It was a driving force, motivation, something to look forward to, a reason to keep running despite the ache in his legs. But that wasn't everything there is to it.

"Shouyou Hinata." Moretti interrupted. "It's him, isn't it? You're talking about him."

Tobio's face reddened at the mention of his name. It was involuntary though, and he was certain his face was a little red with the heat. It was a ridiculous reaction. It was just a name. "How did you—?"

Moretti shrugged. "Sounds like the most logical line of thought to deduce."

"Yeah." Tobio admitted.

"He's your old teammate, no?" Santini probed. "Friend?"

"Best friend." Never mind that they barely hung out beyond volleyball. Never mind that Hinata probably had dozens of best friends. "Rival."

"Rival." Moretti repeated. "Shouyou Hinata said that you made that promise when you were highschool. Seems a little intense, don't you think? I certainly won't promise twenty years of my life to my rival. I'd dump his ass on the next bus to loserville."

At the same time Santini said to Moretti, "That's because you're a loser," De Luca exclaimed, "Wait from high school?"

"Yeah. It was from an interview." Moretti told them. Tobio scowled. What made it damningly worse was that he knew exactly what interview he was talking about, and his face left no cause of deniability as if he hadn't obsessively watched it when it aired, as if he couldn't tell you what was said in detail.

"But oh man, twenty years." Garcia scratched his chin. "I sure can't do that. Not even to my best friend."

"Sounds like something you'd tell your girlfriend, isn't it?" De Luca chuckled. "I haven't even said anything like that to my wife, and we've been married for three years."

Tobio had the urge to defend himself, fighting the churning in his stomach. The conversation had shifted towards discomfort now and it was slowly prickling him all over his body.

"Oi. What is the hold-up?" Russo re-entered the room with a stern face. "It's lunchtime since ten minutes ago. Be slower and you won't be able to eat."

"Scusa . We were talking about Tobi and his friend." De Luca explained.

"Stop harassing Tobi. *Venire*. It's time for lunch." Russo clapped his hands and everyone started to shuffle out of the locker rooms. "*Spicciare*. Come, come. We have a full schedule this afternoon."

With lunch and the intense afternoon practice, the topic about Tobio and his relationship with Hinata had been pushed aside in favor of talking about tactics and techniques, combination plays, block formations, and upcoming scrimmages. This Tobio was more comfortable with, this Tobio could do.

Not that their words didn't haunt him.

If he laid awake later in his hotel bed, then that was no one's business but his own.

NINJA SHOUYOU CAME HOME @ninjashouyoustan. Sept 21, 2020

Hey guys! I just translated @ninja_shouyou's interview (yeah the one that got him curling adorably and turning red after the interviewer asked him something and the fandom just FREAKED OUT?!) DISCLAIMER my english is rough

link to the interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EST4S7UlyHa

	THREAD
	42 ◯ reply 4k ☐ retweet 9k ♥ likes
	NINJA SHOUYOU CAME HOME @ninjashouyoustan. Sept 21, 2020
	I: So thanks again for accepting our invitation Mr. Hinata
laug	H: No, no! It's my honor! I'm sorry if my Portuguese is bad. I am out of practice. hs
	I: You're surprisingly fluent actually!
	H: is that so? I'm glad!
	I: So, congratulations on making it in ASAS Sao Paulo.
	1/n
	42 ◯ reply 4k □ retweet 9k ♥ likes
	[Show replies]
	•
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	•
NINJA SHOUYOU CAME HOME @ninjashouyoustan	
I: H	e's your teammate, isn't he?
H: Yeah he's my best partner! But also my best rival! So I'm going to defeat him and I look forward to it.	
I: To	bio Kageyama is a formidable enemy.
H: H	Ie is, isn't he? I made a promise when we were in high school and I said that even if it
19/n	
12: 3	8 AM. September 21, 2020. Twitter for Android
20k r	etweets. 53k likes
○ re	ply 🔄 retweet 🧡 like

took me ten or twenty years, I will be the one who stays in court the longest (what??)

I: highschool! (lmao same though?)

H: yeah! *laughs*

I: that long?

H: Kageyama's been there with me since I played volleyball. I just can't imagine the future without him in it (hello??)

20/n

13 ← reply 16k retweet 19k likes

NINJA SHOUYOU CAME HOME @ninjashouyoustan. Sept 21, 2020

actually in my first ever volleyball game, he was on the other team and he beat the heck out of us! He looked like a jerk, right? But without him, I don't think I'll be where I am now. *laughs* don't tell him though

I: it's a good thing this is in portuguese then *laughs*

21/n

7 ○ reply 10k retweet 14k likes

[Show replies]

Tobio kept his eyes on the ceiling.

The cracks on the paint were the same as they ever were that they've long stopped bothering him. His phone rested on his pillow next to him. It was late and they've gone home from their training in Trentino. It was a success. He felt more prepared for the upcoming match, and on the court Tobio was pumped up with adrenaline, unstoppable.

And yet it was late in the evening, and everything was slow, teetering between the realms of dreams and wishes. Nothing was real in this hour, and whatever desires left Tobio's lips in whispers were things that would never meet the light of day. Late nights have tasted a lot like regret lately, and Tobio was spending more late nights awake than not.

Phone in his hand, longing palpable in his chest, he could taste it in his mouth. The screen played a familiar voice, that chirpy voice that his phone's speaker could not give justice to. It sounded different, deeper, robotic, wrong. Hinata Shouyou in his stupid deodorant ad, and his stupid topless body. He had been very ecstatic to show them the ad, *so much better than your ridiculous curry ad*, he said. When Tobio viewed the damned thing, he had to take a pause.

There was a reason he didn't like seeing it, and it was not for the reason most people thought.

It was a deodorant commercial, of course this was only normal. He could tell most of what he was seeing was artificially reproduced anyway, props and make up from a studio. Tobio's tongue was still stuck to the roof of his mouth, dry and parched. There's rumbling inside him, some kind of hollowness that's yearning to be filled.

Hinata, bare with the top of his body dripping with sweat from playing volleyball before transitioning to the showers. It was not an improvement in Tobio's opinion, not with the water dripping down the line of his muscles in rivulets, grazing his fading tan lines from when he was still playing beach volleyball.

This wasn't a good idea. Tobio reasoned with himself, and when that failed, he reassured himself. Just this last time. No more after this. He told himself repeatedly as he shut his eyes and took a shaky breath. Late nights tasted like lies too.

He placed the video on repeat. The commercial begins again from the start, Hinata on court and spiking midair, form beautiful and solid, he was almost flying. Tobio let his voice drone on in the background.

It won't happen again. Tobio murmured to himself. Just for tonight and that was it.

His mind went digging in his memories. He had kept them sealed away all the time, except for when it was time for stupid decisions such as now, and it came spilling out. Hands slipping down the hem of his pants, teasing the hair that trailed down his groin. It was just for tonight, and he'll rinse his hands so he could forget about it in the morning, pretend everything was alright. Tobio was good at it. He was good at pretending everything was fine.

What are you doing?

Whispers in a hotel room in Miyagi revisited him, soft, drunken, and amused, questions he didn't have answers to provide back then, still don't four years later. Tobio's lips thinned as he bit them down, keeping the sound to a minimum. If he doesn't voice it out, it doesn't become real. If he doesn't utter the words out loud, there would still be plausible means of deniability. Choke it down, swallow it back to the hole in his chest.

"Getting in bed, dumbass."

And there was laughter, bubbly and effervescent. Tobio could still taste the champagne in his mouth, the beer and sake too. He licked his lips to chase the flavor.

"Oh, you're new to this." Annoying. They were playing an unspoken game, and Tobio was trying his best to catch up. "Am I finally better than Kageyama-kun at something?"

"Shut up." Tobio murmured out loud. Even in his memory, he couldn't stand that infuriating smile. He began at a languid pace, stroking the heat fluttering in his groin. His body was enclosed with warmth, breaths shaky at every pant, immersing himself again with the vision of orange and warmth.

"Kageyama, look at me." He was getting dizzy. He wasn't even sure how they ended up in this situation. It had been a blur from the izakaya to the hotel room, heavy tension and

lingering stares consisted most of the taxi ride. Don't blame Tobio for suddenly feeling embarrassed.

The bed dipped at the sudden added weight, knees and arms crowding Tobio into this quaint pocket of sensual heat. Palms on his face, urging him to look up. Tobio didn't put up much of a fight, and he let himself be led to the man's behest. It was always his pace. He always made you dance to his tune. So Tobio looked, and he stared earnestly, drinking the sight before him with open admiration.

"Kageyama." Lo and behold, Hinata Shouyou in all his damningly provocative glory, grinning down at him with a twinkle in his eyes. His face was riddled with promises, riddled with all the things he was planning to do to Tobio. "You're not too drunk to do this, are you?"

"No." It took him a stupid long minute before he managed to respond. "Just tipsy. Not drunk. Important distinction." He echoed what Hinata had told him earlier.

Hinata snorted, shooting him a look of doubt. "Right." He was making idle circles with his thumbs on his chest. It was leaving sparks of pleasure in his flesh, shivers running down every bone of his spine. "That's a no for me."

Tobio made a frustrated noise at the back of his throat. He was not denying him this, not when he was so pent up after years and years of suppression, not when there was a rather obvious bulge in his pants, and Tobio was desperate for friction. Get Tobio to talk and he would never shut up. Get him started and he wasn't going to hold back. Provoke him into action, and he was sure to finish all the way. "No. I can do this just fine." He was fumbling with his belt buckle, trying to relieve the pressure on his groin.

Hinata laughed and his breaths fanned against his cheeks. "Stubborn Kageyama. You better not regret this in the morning." Lips on lips, tongue coaxing out the most obscene sounds out of Tobio. Hinata leaned over with a kiss and made Tobio sing. He swore he wasn't this loud, but Hinata was obviously an expert in this scene, and it made Tobio burn just thinking of how much practice he must have had to be this good. Rio taught him more than just volleyball, and here were the results.

Fingers on his thigh, trailing up to his length where the touch made Tobio buck up. The softest touch had Tobio moaning. How embarrassing, was something so simple enough to get him undone? Was he going to let Hinata best him?

Not to be beat, he grasped at Hinata's ass, and the way the man before him hitched his breath was satisfying. Hinata parted for air, looking down at Tobio with glazed darkened eyes. There was a challenge reflected there, sparking Tobio into moving. Hinata grounded his hips over his crotch—and oh god, how was he doing that? Damn him, damn his ridiculous athleticism and flexibility. It was probably yoga. He did mention doing yoga.

"We're not doing it all the way tonight." Hinata said with resolute determination. Tobio thought that decision could go to hell.

"You're so full of shit." Tobio said through his teeth.

"I'm not saying we can't have fun." Hinata clambered off him, and Tobio at least had enough dignity to not whine at the loss of warmth. Hinata got up the bed, and was now by his thighs, bracketing them with his arms. He looked up to Tobio with wide eyes.

"Hinata..."

Mouth on his clothed member, tongue moving expertly; that goddamned tongue, driving Tobio insane. His thumbs hooked on the waistband of his pants and pulled them with dexterity expected from someone who used his hands everyday for control.

"Come on, Kageyama." The abrupt coldness from the air made Tobio shiver but it was easily replaced with lips on the tip of his leaking member, desperate for touch, aching for more. "No need to hold back. I can take all of it."

Tobio cursed out loud. Hinata held his thighs down so he couldn't move, helpless till all he could do was squirm and pull at Hinata's hair. Hinata moaned at every tug. Every sensation was too much for Tobio, too much and not enough at once.

Hinata parted his lips and Tobio's cock was encased fully into the wet heat of Hinata's mouth. "Give me everything."

Fuck.

Tobio gasped from the strength of his unraveling. The pleasure had reached its peak, shaking him to the core, like a coil in his gut let loose. His eyes flew open, vision riddled with the post orgasmic haze. He's back in his own room, in his apartment in Rome.

It was wet and sticky, and all high of ecstasy was starting to crash into low thrumming disgust as he let out heavy pants. Whatever cocktail of chemicals was in his body prior was starting to cash in what it was due.

Damnit.

Regret had always left a bad taste in Tobio's mouth, so did pointless recklessness. Shame, fear, and anger were nearly from the same source. This was another string of promises he wasn't able to fulfill.

Goddamn it.

He filled himself to the brim and spilled it all away, leaving him empty, with a gaping hole yearning to be filled again. There was a hollowness between his ribcage that rattled at every second. Shame, fear, and anger were nearly from the same source, but so was loneliness, so was longing, so was hunger, and Tobio was voraciously hungry, starving.

God fucking damnit.

Because even if his mind denied it, his body was ruinously honest when one was familiar enough with it, and while he could lock away his thoughts and his words, he could never suppress his carnal desires.

It's been the same every night when sleep eluded him. It was always been the same, and there was only so much he could do to quell the longing inside him.

There was a splatter on the screen of his phone, where the video had paused right at the exact moment of Hinata's smile. It was dirty. He should clean that mess up. He should clean all this mess up. Tobio was a fucking mess.

Tobio wanted. Tobio wanted to devour the light, to take the heat between his hands and push them into his open mouth. He wanted to swallow the sun with all of his selfish glory, reach up the sky and pull the burning ball in the air.

But fish do not fly. How silly.

And if Tobio did not burn first, all he'd ever done was fall.

"Uncle Tobio, are you still listening?"

"Yes. I am listening, Sora." Tobio reassured the hyperactive child from the screen. She really was nothing like all the Kageyamas Tobio had seen, except maybe Kasuyo-san. Somehow she got his enthusiasm, and the thought had made Tobio smile.

"There were so many kids there, but I beat them all for the starter spot! Look, here's my jersey!" She waved the shirt with the big Little Falcons emblazoned on the back. The sight was a little nostalgic to Tobio. He must have been around that age when he joined his first volleyball club too. "But there was a kid who sucked." She frowned, mouth into a pout—a signature Kageyama pout, as Miwa liked to call it. "She's jumping all over the place, and doesn't even take care of herself."

"This kid is irritating you?"

"Very!" Sora exclaimed, pounding her tiny fists on the table and shaking the screen. "But she's the only one in the team who's taking it seriously, so it makes me more angry!"

"Sounds a little familiar, don't you think?" A faint voice called out from beyond the frame of the screen. Miwa was probably cooking dinner in the kitchen. Tobio didn't deign her teasing remark with an answer, and opted to answer Sora instead.

"You can't lash out at your team. Everyone loves volleyball differently. A team is supposed to—"

"—connect. I know." Sora dragged her tiny hands over his face. "The team with the better six is stronger. The setter is there to help the team connect. The easiest toss to hit are the best tosses, but don't be afraid to ask for more. Finally, getting really good means I can play more volleyball! I remembered everything you told me, uncle Tobio." She declared with pride.

Tobio nodded slowly. "That's good. Er, keep it up."

"Oh! And he who climbs the ladder must begin at the bottom!" Sora added, and Tobio narrowed his eyes. The words were painfully familiar. "Uncle Shouyou told me that once! He

also said to annoy my teammates into cooperating, cause that's what he did to get you to toss to him."

"Of course he did." Tobio had to talk to Hinata about his influence on his niece. The slight mention of his name heated up Tobio's neck, but thankfully Sora was too oblivious to notice." *He* was the annoying kid who couldn't take care of himself back in the day. I first met him on his way to the toilet because of his loose bowel movements before a game."

Sora's eyes widened. "Uncle Shouyou also said to be careful of the dangers of going to the toilet. Is that why?"

"Alright, Sora. Why don't you wash up before we eat dinner?" Miwa entered the frame with an easy smile on her face. "I'm sure your uncle Tobio needs to eat lunch too."

"Aww." Sora pouted—and it did look exactly like Tobio's pout. Kageyama signature pout, indeed. 'Talk to you next time, uncle Tobio. I'll be calling you when we win my first official match!" She hopped off the chair and headed to the bathroom, and Miwa was left grinning at Tobio. She had been grinning a lot lately again, especially with Sora growing old enough for a little independence. It was a lot different than the impassive face he wore when they were teens, even more so after Kazuyo-san's passing. It was a good look on her.

"She really looks up to you." Miwa teased. "Sometimes I feel like she's more of your kid than mine, but then sometimes I think she's more of Shoyou-kun's than yours." Tobio's eyes twitched at that, the heat in his neck returned two-fold. "He's really doted on Sora, hasn't he?"

"He said it was his older brother's instincts kicking in." Hinata was very fond of kids. He got them to like him without much trouble, which was a far cry from Tobio who barely manages to hold a kid's hand without making them look uncomfortable. The day Hinata saw Sora, he was instantly attached.

"Well, at least I know someone's going to look after her if I'm gone. Hooray. Mr. Shizo Abe can relax. Japan's birth rate is going to be just fine" Miwa chuckled. She sighed, before looking serious once again. "You're pouting like you're actually planning to make me disappear. What's up?"

There was a time when Miwa didn't speak her thoughts out loud anymore. It should be sometime when she started losing interest in volleyball, and they gradually grew apart. She had been through a lot too, growing as her own person even when she was distant from Tobio. Nowadays, she was somewhat back to being the same Miwa Tobio had known when he was three, the same Miwa who showed him the picture of a Tobiuo and told him they were alike, never precisely the same, but familiar.

"You're happier."

Miwa was taken aback, but she composed herself easily. "Guess I am. If you told me I'd like motherhood when I was eighteen, I thought you were crazy."

"So this is because of Sora?"

"Most of it. Sure. It's nice having a cheerful kid around. Difficult, but nice. Livens up the mood. She's a lot different than us, don't you think?" So she was thinking the same thing.

"That might be for the best." Tobio said.

"You think so?" Miwa hummed. "I certainly don't want her to be like our parents." This was one of the changes Tobio had meant. She had become more frank over the years. This was something they usually glossed over in the past. Maybe it had something to do with motherhood, forcing you to roll up your sleeves and cut through everyone's crap. Maybe Miwa simply decided the world didn't have a say on what she did, maybe it had something to do with the nine years she had over him

And she was been everything their parents were not. That was something for sure.

"She reminds me of Kazuyo-san." Tobio ignored the jab at their parents instead. He doesn't hate them, he had no strong opinion for them other than his love through obligation. Miwa had strong opinions on the other hand, something that came with being the older sister, he supposed.

"You never had to deal with her tantrums so you think that." Miwa laughed, the talk of parents was forgotten. "Kazuyo-san had always been this wise, caring figure who had more love in him than all Kageyamas combined." She said wistfully, then sadly. "He would have loved Sora."

"Yes." He would have. Kazuyo-san loved kids too, especially ones that loved volleyball.

"He would have loved Shouyou-kun too." Miwa smirked, and of course it would circle back to that dumbass. He couldn't even talk to his own family without his name getting mentioned. This wasn't the best time to talk about that dumbass.

"He probably wouldn't like Shin." Miwa continued before Tobio could retort. "He didn't really like my boyfriends in the past. He's too caring to comment though, believing that I'll be able to figure it out on my own. Guess I did at some point." Shin. Yes. That was the name of Sora's father, Miwa's ex husband. Tobio had officially met the person thrice during the entirety of the marriage. He's not sure if he could recognize his face if they passed each other in the street by chance.

Tobio didn't know the reason for their separation, just like how he didn't understand Miwa's long string of lovers. She never gets dumped, always the one to break the relationship off. Except for her ex husband, apparently. She said he couldn't stand to be with her any longer.

"Anyway, how about you? Any plans on actually asking Shouyou-kun out?" Tobio's eyes twitched when Miwa broke into laughter.

"No."

"I'm kidding. Stop pouting." She told him. "I don't understand both of you for sure, and it's not any of my business. But don't you think four years is a long time for whatever it is you

have going on between you? When you introduced him to me years ago, I had thought you two had...something."

Well, it certainly was a thing. Tobio just wasn't sure what it was.

"It's for the best." Tobio said. "I said I wouldn't do anything, not while we're still playing."

"Hm?" Miwa raised a brow. "Why?"

"Because—" It was a distraction. It was going to hinder volleyball. It was going to need more from Tobio when he had got nothing left of himself to give, because he was selfish; because Tobio was too much and too little at the same time, and if you got him started, he wasn't ever going to stop, and he would take everything and ask for too much.

"Because you're afraid, aren't you?" Miwa stared at him with a thinly unimpressed face. Tobio preferred if she didn't put it that way.

"I'm not."

The deadpan expression didn't change. More disbelief had been added in her eyes. It was difficult to argue with it when Tobio himself wasn't too convinced with his words.

"Look, it's not like I can tell you what to do with your life. I don't think I have the right after all these years. Kazuyo-san did say that only you can tell what's important to you." She picked a lock of her hair between her fingers and examined it, contemplative. "But anyone with eyes can tell that Shouyou-kun is important to you."

Tobio shut his eyes. This was not a revelation, and he was not denying this. He just didn't like mentioning it out loud. There were things better left unsaid, left in swimming in the cavity of his desires. Saying out loud made it damning, keeping it hushed gave a sense of hope that he could take it back anytime.

It was not a revelation; it was not news, but where everything began and ended was always a question that Tobio could never solve. When was too much and never enough? When was he allowed to give it his all and when was it time to hold back? Tobio never held back—cannot and would not—not with his serves, not with volleyball, and certainly not with *this*.

Did he leave because you were too much? Or was it because you weren't enough? Tobio didn't voice out. Instead he asked, "Did you marry Sora's father because he was important to you?"

Miwa's gaze hardened for a second, but the affliction had immediately left her eyes not a moment after. It was replaced with resignation. "I was in love." Like that was enough of an answer, like Tobio was supposed to understand. She still talked like she knew half the secrets of the universe, but couldn't be bothered to share.

Was. Tobio bit his tongue, and a sinking feeling started gnawing at the pit of his gut. Love. "And all those other times too?"

"Does it matter?"

Yes. "No."

"You do think so." Miwa pressed. "Is that why you're so afraid?"

Tobio thought this wasn't a conversation meant to be held between the cold divide of a screen, but when did they ever care about sentiments anyway? He'd got half the mind to just end the call and leave, but while a younger version of himself might have done so with a flimsy excuse in his mouth, he was old enough to know this wasn't something he should do. There was irritation throbbing at the base of his skull though, and he was trying his best to keep his finger away from hovering close to the end call button.

"How did you know it was love?"

"It's not something I can tell you. You have to decide for yourself." Miwa was stoic, a little apologetic, like she too did not have answers for his questions. She probably didn't even if she wanted to tell him. "It's like what Kazuyo-san said: you're the best judge of what's important to you."

There was that sinking feeling again. Were all the things you love important? Were all the things important to you, things you love? Did you love them because they were important? Or did they become important because you loved them? "It doesn't look sensible."

This time Miwa laughed, soft and rueful. "Nothing about love is sensible, Tobio."

And that was unfair. Tobio was already behind what people thought was normal.

"Stop looking like you're contemplating murder. Jeez, falling in love isn't a crime. Is that so bad?"

Tobio's brows were knitted together. Was it so bad?

"You don't need to do anything about it, but denying your feelings isn't going to help you." Miwa continued. "It's not always pretty, and it could hurt, but it's giving. Though, it can be selfish too. You just know, Tobio." She sighed, whispering the last part to let the weight of it sink in slowly. "You just know."

It didn't reassure him. Tobio supposed Miwa wasn't here to reassure him.

But while nothing about it was sensible at all, and understanding it was as ineffective as grasping light with his palms, he thought he could feel its existence enough to believe it to be tangible. While love was as elusive as grasping sunbeams in his hands, there was no denying its presence even if he decided to lie about it to himself.

When the moon starts waning, does one reject its existence? When the sun sets, does one deny having felt its warmth on their skin? Tobio doesn't understand a lot of things, but maybe he doesn't need to understand everything. He still felt it, and he still longed, and it still hurt him anyway.

Maybe he did *just* know.

It was fifteen minutes before ten in the evening. Tobio sat on his own bunk bed, opting to take the lower one of the two. The room the training camp provided had very little furniture save for a closet and one lamp shade. Kagoshima was quieter than Tokyo, and the lack of traffic noise was almost jarring after a year full of traffic noises.

His roommate wasn't around, apparently still in Fukuoka because his wife was undergoing labor and as a good husband and father, he needed to be there for it. He would arrive tomorrow they said, but for now Tobio had the room for himself.

Only the gold of the lamp's dim light lit the room. Tobio's toes curled at the soft carpet and held on the material in tense segments. He tipped his head up, closed eyes and thinned lips. It was five minutes before ten, and Tobio was usually asleep by this time. Hinata should be on the plane now after nearly four hours of bus travel from Sendai to Narita airport. That was, if he wasn't being a dumbass again. If Tobio didn't join the training camp for the Olympics, he could have met him at the station and sent him off in the airport, just the two of them.

He might still have, if he was sentimental enough for it. Hinata would probably flip at him for missing training though, and riding 17 hours to see someone off was impractical, even if that someone was leaving to the other side of the world for two years. It still rubbed Tobio wrong, Hinata being so far away from him when he had always been within reach, and him not telling his plans to just pick up and leave certainly still left an unsavory flavor in Tobio's mouth.

It was five minutes before ten. Hinata was already seated in a plane, probably by the window. He always insisted on taking the seat by the window, and Tobio was more than happy to give it to him after the vomiting incident the first time around.

Tobio held the phone in his hand, Hinata's contact info one click away. It had been like that since thirty minutes ago. He could have called earlier. He probably still could, if only to hear his voice before he left the country. Tobio still could, a thumb hovering by the call button.

Hinata was flying to Rio for two years, and though he had already accepted that it was happening, part of him was still a little angry. Not at Hinata. Not at himself. Not at volleyball. After all, Tobio understood why he needed to do it. And yet understanding didn't immediately mean he would no longer feel the torment of his impatience, no longer long for the light when all he could feel were shadows creeping inside him. And if he could chain the sunrise to keep its shine on the sky for himself forever, Tobio would. Tobio was selfish after all, wanting volleyball and the sun. He wanted both Hinata's promise to be fulfilled and to keep Hinata next to him.

It was a compromise, an exchange, a little game of cause and effect. Go move up to the V-League and forget about college, and you will get to play more volleyball—he was never good with school anyway. Fly halfway across the world and maybe you will get better enough to keep your promise from years ago. Life is always full of compromises, it was always one thing or another—never both at the same time. Tobio was never fond of them, especially when it hindered his volleyball. He still went through the silly process of picking

from either choice because there was always something more important to him when it came down to it, and the one you pick would be the more important one.

You can't always win. You can't always be selfish. Tobio didn't like compromises and Tobio was greedy.

It was Hinata by his side, or Hinata playing volleyball forever with him. It was Hinata or volleyball and Tobio was forced to choose.

The answer was obvious. Otherwise, he wouldn't be sitting in bed with his phone in his hand, a call that was never sent waiting on his screen, Hinata Shouyou's stupid fucking picture staring back at him blankly with his frozen smile, oblivious to Tobio's turmoil. The answer was obvious, which was why Tobio was so vexed all these months.

"It's just two years, king. You're acting like he's never coming back." Tsukishima's words came back to him in a heartbeat. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

It was ten in the evening. The alarm on Tobio's phone rang its damning shrill tune. Hinata was aboard a plane flying out of Japan and onto the other side of the world, taking all orange and warmth, all rich pools of honey amber that stared at you like liquid happiness. Hinata, with all his suitcases, barely passable Portuguese and slightly better accented English, packed up Tobio's heart with him; 18571.83 kilometers between them, leaving his chest hollow.

"You finally figured your shit out."

It made him angry, and Tobio spent too much time in his teens with rage stuffed in his mouth till it exploded in venomous words, because he wanted everything. He wanted that promise fulfilled, but he also wanted Hinata. He didn't want to compromise. He didn't want an either/or. The world was unfair and at the same time fair. Tobio wanted to strike a bargain.

"I've always known." But there were some things that weren't worth getting angry about and some things didn't need divine fury. "But it's better thinking that I don't."

Some things didn't need struggle.

Some things were just sad.

"Are there any good places to go in Rome?"

Everyone looked at Tobio with wide eyes. It wasn't the most outrageous thing he said in his whole career in Ali Roma, and yet everyone looked so flabbergasted at his inane question. The question was for a good reason though. Tobio had only realized less than a month before Hinata arrived that he still hadn't explored the better half of the city despite the near four years of residence in Rome, and he wasn't going to endure another barrage of teasing.

You're so bad at directions, Yamayama — Tobio could see it panning out when they end up lost in the middle of the city. Tobio had no one to turn to for this matter, and asked his

teammates while they were on break.

"Um," De Luca exchanged looks with Santini. " *Sicuramente* . Are you planning on going out? So near the World championship. This isn't like you."

Santini elbowed him on the rib. "We are *not* saying you can't." There was a glare to De Luca. "But it is pretty sudden, no? You usually stay holed up in the gym for an upcoming match. Sometimes we even have to drag you out."

"I am not." Tobio said. "Not till after the championship. Someone I know is staying over after the games." That was what normal people usually do when they have their friends visiting them, isn't it? Show them around town and take them to famous places.

"Dai! Veramente?" De Luca exclaimed. "Is it a date?"

Santini elbowed him again, this time with more force than last time. "Do not mind him. *Nel senso*, knowing what kind of person we're talking about helps. What are they like? Who will be staying?" De Luca murmured something under his breath, while rubbing his ribs. Tobio was a little unsure, but he thought he called Santini a gossiper.

"My old teammate." Tobio explained but was interrupted before he could continue.

"What are the two of you up to, now?" Russo walked over to where they were seated on the floor. "Stop harassing Tobi." The captain looked at them sternly. The man somehow reminded him of Romero sometimes, now that Tobio had thought about it. It might have been the stubble though.

"He's the one who asked us for help, captain." De Luca defended.

Tobio nodded in affirmation. "I need help."

Santini shrugged, explaining the situation to Russo. "His friend's staying after the World championship. We're giving Tobi ideas on where to take them."

Russo looked surprised as well, but he didn't say anything. He was probably too polite for that. He looked like he wanted to say something though, but had thought better.

"So who's the guy?" De Luca pressed. "What are they like? What do they like?"

Tobio considered how he should explain the man to his teammates.

"Annoying." He decided. People laughed. "Loud. Stubborn. Moves at his own pace. Makes everything a competition." Then as an afterthought. "He's a dumbass." Tobio pondered, remembering the important points. It should be impossible to describe him with justice, there was too much to say and too little words for it.

"Sounds like quite the character." Santini chuckled.

"He is." Tobio's lips quirked up. "Hinata is something."

"Wait, you are talking about ASAS' Shouyou Hinata then?" Russo finally let out a reaction. "Their opposite? He's the one staying?"

"I'd expect it's him. I can't imagine Tobi asking someone else to come visit." Santini grinned. "They have all these calls every week or so, no? And the timing fits. ASAS is Brazil's representative for the world championship. The two of them seem rather...close." Santini winked at him. Tobio could feel the heat at the back of his neck. *Close* seemed to put it lightly.

"I didn't ask." Tobio huffed. "He insisted."

"You didn't say no."

"He could be very persuasive." Hinata gets what he wants. He always made sure of that. "You can't say no to him." Tobio usually tries to make sure it doesn't go as easily as he plans though, often he would put up a fight. Ultimately, he would still find a way.

Santini smiled at him cryptically. Tobio didn't know what it was supposed to mean, but there was a knowing twinkle in his eyes. It was unnerving. Unsettling. He was putting pieces together in his head, and Tobio felt like he wasn't going to like the conclusion he was going to arrive at.

"Okay. What do you guys usually do together?" De Luca brought them back to the original question at hand. Tobio was a little thankful. "What does Shouyou Hinata do for fun?"

"Volleyball," he answered without hesitation. It was always volleyball. But he looked at the gazes directed at him, and added. "Should I pick something else?" He had never hosted a friend over before, not even when they were in their third year, even if his house was often available with it being empty most of the time.

"Roma is a beautiful city, and your friend has never been, no? You can go sightseeing in museums," De Luca said.

"I don't think they will enjoy museums. They don't look the type. Tobi was halfway asleep when we went to that last one in Munich last year." Russo chuckled. "I know a good *ristorante* near the area. I can place a reservation just for you."

"Thank you." Tobio dipped his chin with a curt bow. "I could use the help."

He could use a lot more than just help.

VOLLEYBALL JOURNAL ENTRY # 4787

[February 9, 2018 - Friday]

• Toss Statistics: 98% success rate

- Teamwork Statistics: 78% success rate
- Latest Service Technique Statistics: 93% success rate

Note:

I sprained myself today while practicing serves. It's only mild, but it's the middle of the season. It's not as bad as when I was in my third year. I was careless. Coach said I'm not allowed in the gym for two weeks to be sure, but I think I'll be better in five days or so. I'll go see a physical therapist just to be sure.

For now, all I can do is review old matches at home. I can start rewriting my analysis on my previous games tomorrow. I can rewrite my high school ones too.

I'm considering my options in playing in a foreign league. My contract for Adlers will be over after next season and there were multiple offers from abroad. Ali Roma doesn't sound bad. They're reigning champion in Seria A. I think I would like to try out.

Misc:

I wonder how that dumbass never sprained himself despite all of his restless movements

The first call had come in the afternoon while Tobio was in bed. The sprain had put him in house arrest, orders from their coach. It was stupid of him, and now all he had done was rewatch old game footages and take afternoon naps. The day was awfully slow without volleyball.

Tobio picked up the ringing device, eyes wide at the name flashing on the screen. It was unusual. He never called, not in all the months he was gone.

"He," The voice on the other side of the phone spoke, the voice, who also happened to be on the other side of the world, whispered to him oh so gently. Tobio's heart lept right into his throat at the first sound of it. "Are you awake?"

"Hinata." Tobio's brows knit together. There was something wrong about how he sounded, all choppy and jangled. It was heavy, and every last syllable was stretched wide. "It's three in the afternoon, dumbass. Of course I'm awake."

"Oh." Hinata sounded surprised. He was so out of it. Something was wrong. "I forgot."

"What do you want?" He better not have done something dumb. He better not have a concussion. He better not be dying, or caught some kind of illness. Tobio was going to kill him if he did. Hinata didn't have a reason to suddenly call when there were twelve hours between them, with Rio probably three in the morning.

"Nothing." Hinata murmured after a long pause. "I felt like calling. I heard from Yachi-san you got a sprain. You're doing a piss poor job at taking care of yourself, Yamayama." He

chuckled, mostly breaths than sound, it was more of a wheeze than a chuckle.

"Shut up." Tobio glared at the compression on his ankle.

"It's just like third year. I was surprised you didn't die after all those weeks without volleyball. I was lonely." Hinata sighed, wistful. Somehow he was being sentimental, and his words were very soft and gentle. It had been so long since he had heard that voice. Too long. The memory Hinata talked about revisited him, and Tobio's cheeks were already flushing pink. *That's volleyball too*. He couldn't possibly forget.

Tobio caught his train of thought before it could spiral further. Was the time and distance making him sentimental?

"It's 3 AM there. Why are you still awake?"

"Cold." Hinata hummed, though he sounded more amused. "You're very cold. And blunt. You're an idiot too. It doesn't make sense when I think about it."

Tobio sucked a deep breath. "Go to sleep, Hinata."

"It's Heitor's wedding." Hinata promptly ignored Tobio. "Was his wedding. He's my beach volleyball partner, right? His girlfriend proposed to him last December. Heitor was going to propose to her if we won our game. We lost though." He laughed. "It's a good thing Nice came through. Although I was surprised—we all were!"

Tobio wasn't sure where Hinata was heading with this, but he decided to hear him out. Surely he wouldn't call out of nowhere just to tell him about a wedding?

"Heitor said to me on the day before our last game that I think of volleyball as something like eating food." Hinata continued. "It's not something I think of as actual effort. This was something he said after he talked about proposing to Nice."

Tobio drummed his fingers on his lap, confused. Hinata was barely making sense, and he was out there rambling his mind out in the middle of the morning, calling Tobio out of the blue, and for what? It was making him nervous, like something big was going to drop, some important revelation that he wasn't ready to hear.

"The funny thing is, Kageyama—do you know what's funny? When Heitor told me about it, the first thing my mind jumped to was you." He laughed, though Tobio had no idea what he found so amusing about it. "Everything in Rio reminds me of you." He added as an afterthought. His words were getting sloppier, each end of the syllable said in a stammer. It was suspicious, and Hinata did mention that he came from a wedding.

"Are you drunk?"

Hinata sounded sheepish. "I might have drunk more than usual."

Idiot. Tobio was going to kill him for being careless. "Where are you right now, dumbass?"

"At home. Don't worry." Hinata sighed. "My room, but it's not really home. Pedro is a fine roommate though, and it's not so bad. But it still feels off."

"Good." Tobio huffed. What was Hinata thinking? Did he call him at random just to drunkenly talk to him? "Sober up. Go to sleep. You're going to regret it in the morning." Tobio had never been drunk before, but he had seen enough hangovers to know the general gist, and he knew it wasn't going to be pretty.

Again, Hinata ignored him. "Do you know why I got drunk though? When Heitor and Nice got married, I thought that was pretty great of them. I may be a little jealous, and I thought about you again. And then I thought about the last time we saw each other." Hinata rambled too fast. "It's kind of hard not to. I still use the phone case you gave me that day after all—the one you gave because you couldn't see me off. Do you remember, Kageyama?"

Tobio's lips thinned as he closed his eyes. He would rather not remember, honestly, but that proved to be impossible even without Hinata prodding at the tender memory. "Of course I do, dumbass." It wasn't something you just forgot.

"Tokyo, 2016, Sunshine Aquarium. We were watching the penguins that day." Hinata reminded, as if to make sure Tobio remembered in case he had forgotten. "Did you change your mind?"

Tobio clenched his fist. "Change my mind from what?" He wanted to make sure they were talking about the same thing.

"What you said—" Hinata explained. "You said I didn't need to do anything about it, but after two years, did your feelings change?"

So it was. Tobio let a minute pass. Then another. He was thinking. Why was Hinata digging up the past? What could he possibly gain from it? Yes, Tobio remembered. They were watching the penguins that day, and they looked like they were flying in the sky, albeit only an illusion. That was the last time Tobio saw Hinata, and for Tobio time had stopped between them at that moment. What did Hinata want now?

"Why do you want to know?" Tobio wanted to think he said this with a growl, but it was nothing more than a whisper. His tongue was stuck at the roof of his tongue and his guts were twisting itself into knots from the inside. He was on the defensive here, on the receive, and Hinata was serving several balls at the same time.

Obviously Hinata wasn't deterred. Nothing was ever going to when he put his mind to it.

"Just answer the question." He almost sounded sober saying this, with solemn urgency that gave Tobio the cumplosion to be honest. Hinata didn't toe around eggshells, and he certainly pushed and pulled against Tobio's rhythm. He was also so straightforward you couldn't help but be honest with him anyway, even when Tobio's knee jerk reaction was denial.

Two years didn't change anything, and he meant what he said back then. Hinata didn't need to do anything about it. It was Tobio's problem after all. No, two years hadn't changed anything at all, not when everything in Tokyo had only made Hinata's absence obvious, not

when the toss he made had always felt one second slower than usual because no one could hit it properly at its full speed, not when Tobio still practiced serves on his own to the point where he injured himself with a sprain out of carelessness.

"No." Tobio confessed, damning him yet again into vulnerability. Hinata's breath hitched up, and Tobio curled consciously into himself as the silence between them stretched longer than what was comfortable.

"When did it start?" Hinata apparently wasn't going to stop his interrogation, one that he could have done two years ago. Sure that conversation stood still because neither of them gave it a proper conclusion. But he was adamant on making the clock turn on that frozen moment, if only just a few minutes, and Tobio still didn't know what this was all about.

Tobio decided not to be outdone. "Why did you call?"

"You're going to laugh."

Tobio sighed. "I really won't, dumbass."

"Because—" Hinata laughed, nervous yet also resigned.

A beat. Then another. The tension was high and suffocating. Tobio could hear his heartbeat in his ears, throat closing tight. The silence choked him, and Tobio wanted nothing more than to end the call and run away, but something had kept him frozen in place, gut instinct telling him that he would regret not hearing this to the end.

Hinata sighed, and Tobio braced himself for what was to come.

"I think I like you."

Ice had doused Tobio's entire body, and then been replaced by fire. He was white all over then red. Unreal. It had to be unreal. Tobio had to have misheard. He was sure his heart had stopped beating.

"Kageyama?"

"You don't sound sure." Tobio said.

"I'm not." Hinata admitted, and something about that dropped lead inside Tobio. "But it felt like it. And I think I do. So—" he hummed. "I thought you'd like to know."

So the dumbass had thought about his feelings and the first thing he thought to do was to call Tobio about it despite the lack of communication between them. He can't say it was farfetched. Hinata was blunt like that.

"You're drunk." Tobio huffed. "Talk to me when you're sober, dumbass. Go to sleep." Talk to me in person when we're face to face, not like this. Not when it could be easily forgotten, not when there was still a shred of deniability that intoxication provided. Tobio's hands trembled as he gripped his phone from slipping off his hand.

"Kageyama." It was the third time Hinata ignored him in this conversation. "You haven't answered my question."

Tobio drummed his fingers on his lap, the compress on his ankle suddenly felt incriminating. "Third year. You yelled at me when I sprained myself."

There was irony at play here, Tobio thought bitterly. He was never going to injure himself never again.

"Oh," Hinata said dumbly.

"Go to sleep," Tobio ordered this time. He didn't think he could last talking to him any more tonight at this stage. He was barely keeping himself together.

"Okay." Hinata finally agreed. "Goodnight, Kageyama."

"Yeah."

The call ended with a click, and Tobio all but collapsed back in his bed.

Third year . What a joke. It wasn't wrong exactly, but that wasn't when everything started, that was only when he could no longer ignore it with denial. It had always been there, when Hinata had collapsed from a game and all Tobio could do was stare. It was there when they won third place in nationals, when they looked at each other solemnly in understanding—this was not the end, this was just the beginning. It was there when Tobio had left for youth camp, when Hinata dumped that goddamned towel on his head, when they race every morning, when they made stupid bets, when they buy pork buns at Sakanoshita, when they study at Yachi's house every weekend and camp at Tsukishima's classroom every lunch.

It was there when they first fought, when they yelled and screamed at each other raw, and Tobio had gone home with a couple of bruises on his face; it was there on every succeeding fight ever since. Tobio could feel it the first time they created their new quick, something that wasn't as spontaneous as the first one, but rather something they both equally worked hard on; and maybe it wasn't there yet when the first monster quick was made, when Hinata was all but a flightless crow and Tobio was nothing more than an abandoned king of the court, but it was starting, and it was blooming, even before he knew about it.

Certainly, it was still there even as Hinata left the country to Brazil, and it had fucked Tobio enough till this day.

Really, Tobio had always known, but something about Hinata made him unwilling to admit anything. He drove Tobio crazy, made him want to swallow every secret of his down and keep it hidden from the rest of the world. And yet the fact had always followed Tobio around, a presence that had always existed inside him till he could no longer pinpoint it's true beginning, or see its definite end, much like volleyball's presence in his life.

The truth could no longer be denied. Tobio, grasped at his throat, staring at the ceiling. The incriminating, damning truth that wasn't even a secret to begin with, yet he had decided to seal off from the world before it could ruin everything it touched, because it was selfish, and

miserly, and it only ever took too much, and never gave enough. Until it ate and ate up his insides, till it was nothing more than a cavity of longing and emptiness.

But with what Hinata told him that day, Tobio was no longer sure what to do with the truth. The truth, that was damningly complex in its simplicity:

That Kageyama Tobio, irrevocably, utterly, and painstakingly loved Hinata Shouyou all this time.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hinata was here, with his brightness, searing Tobio with his presence. Suddenly everything started to make sense.

Tobio finds, he doesn't mind burning.

Chapter Notes

Lord this was a nightmare to format.

oh yeah idk if anyone is interested, but this is the playlist I made while churning this baby out these songs were on repeat for 5 months and while I don't claim I have good taste in music, I just wanted to share for the heck of it

See the end of the chapter for more <u>notes</u>

"Love and mercy – and not mauling await you there
But standing outside the door your suppositions bar you like a bolt.

Don't set fire to this thicket be silent, heart! hold your tongue, for your tongue is a lick of flame."

- Rumi, Rumi: Swallowing the Sun

He was dizzy with too much beer in his system. Tobio was never a drinker, and going for more than two glasses was enough to get him lightheaded. In comparison, Hinata looked unbothered. Not even a hint of flush on his face.

How was he supposed to know there were penalty drinks for being late? It was not his fault they got lost while racing, not entirely anyway. Miyagi had changed a lot in the three years he hadn't gone home from Tokyo. Daichi and Sugawara had to pick them both up. It wasn't that

different from high school. If Tobio closed his eyes, he could imagine it happening when they were back in first year.

"Hinata! Who knew you could put away so much!" Tanaka—the male Tanaka—Tobio reminded himself, exclaimed. Tobio tried not to eavesdrop too much, but while he could pretend all he wanted that he was interested in listening to Tanaka—Kiyoko—talk to Yachi about work, his mind would often wander off to that direction of the table.

"Yeah, you're probably good enough to give Suga a run for his money." Daichi snickered. "He can drink everyone in this room under the table."

"Hey," Sugawara snapped. "Why don't you try dealing with kids every day? I love those gremlins but there was only so much *Kagome Kagome* I can listen to. Children are a handful."

"Whenever I get chewed out by my boss, I just keep thinking about how handling Hinata and Kageyama was way more difficult." Daichi said, and Sugawara instantly snorted into giggles. He and Sugawara were progressively getting less sober with every glass they drank.

"Hinata's matured real nicely though." Asahi commented from beside the two. "I could barely recognize him."

"Brazil's been a training ground for Hinata in more ways than one." Sugawara laughed. "I bet you started dating some nice Brazilian people."

This time, Hinata flushed pink. "Ah—well—"

Sugawara slammed the table. "He did."

Tobio shoveled more curry into his mouth, keeping his eyes trained on the plate and fighting the drowsiness in his system.

"It's not a lot!" Hinata had the decency to sound embarrassed at least. "I was busy training and working part time!"

"Doesn't matter!" Tanaka declared. "Hinata has finally graduated towards adulthood. Welcome to the big leagues."

"Hinata's probably more popular with the ladies than you, Tanaka." Sugawara teased.

"Yes. And I don't deny that." Tanaka said this with all seriousness. "But I married Kiyoko, my first love, so I still have the upper hand." He was obviously smug at the statement.

"Huh," Asahi smiled. "But isn't Hinata with Ka—Suga?!"

"Oh no" Sugawara said in the most insincere voice Tobio had ever heard. "That's one nasty stain on your clothes Asahi!" He dabbed tissues on Asahi's chest. "Why don't we go to the washroom to take that out?" He basically manhandles the man up while poor Asahi was just confused.

"I should call home too." Hinata stood up. "Natsu's gonna wanna know what time I'm going to get home." He excused himself as he stumbled outside the restaurant for privacy. Tobio followed his gaze to his retreating figure. Everything was warm, hazy, and his tongue was stuck at the roof of his tongue. He's not drunk, not yet. He was just more relaxed than he'd ever been before, tipsy.

Tobio waited for a few more minutes, waiting, waiting, always waiting. Asahi and Sugawara had come back to the table, but Hinata was still nowhere to be found. Tobio drummed his fingers on his lap, counting down the numbers and waiting some more. When a good fifteen minutes had passed and Hinata still hadn't shown up, Tobio drained the last dregs of his beer and picked himself up from his seat.

He followed Hinata outside of the restaurant where the cool air immediately sent Tobio shivering, enough to kickstart his brain to sober up a little. It was not difficult to find Hinata. His bright shock of orange hair and his loud voice was enough hints to follow.

"—look I know I promised, and I would if I'm not a little too drunk to walk up the mountains." Hinata exclaimed. He was having an argument on his phone, probably with Natsu. Tobio swore those two were alike in more ways than physical. Maybe Natsu was more demanding than Hinata, if that was even possible.

"We'll meet up tomorrow—yes I can stay until the day after. I'm just going to sleep in a hotel tonight to be safe. It's not good to be reckless, you know?" Hinata argued. The words struck Tobio. It was good to know Hinata really did start being careful instead of being an idiot. "Okay. Bye."

"Was that Natsu?" Tobio inquired.

"Yeah." Hinata rubbed his nape. "Guess who's upset that I'm not coming home just yet."

"You're drunk." Tobio stated bluntly.

"Not drunk, tipsy." Hinata pointed out. "But it doesn't hurt to be careful."

Tobio's mouth quirked up in approval. Hinata rolled his eyes at him, obviously remembering the same middle school memory of Hinata hunched over with his arms around his waist. It was their first meeting ever, and it was jarring to see just how much they've changed over that time.

"Why are you out here though?" Hinata craned his neck to look behind Tobio. He was staring at the entrance for a clue.

"I wanted some fresh air." Tobio explained. "It was getting too hot." And loud.

"Cool." Hinata was pliant as he leaned against the wall.

Silence befell the air. It was thick with tension, words left unsaid hung around them waiting to be spoken out loud. They strangled Tobio with every passing minute. Get him started talking, and he wasn't going to shut up. Tobio would pour all of his closely guarded secrets

with his heart so he'd put up his walls again before he knew it. He was curling inward and showing off his prickly shell.

Tobio must have known it was coming. He could sense it, the impending inevitable conversation that was to come. It should come, that way Tobio could put it all this away once and for all. This was three years worth of conversation, seven if Tobio was feeling generous. This was a decade worth of feelings laid bare for Hinata to see, nearly fifteen years of hopes and longing in all its incriminating glory. It was like unraveling his entire being.

"Kageyama."

Hinata's voice was resolute and it made Tobio's heart jump to his throat where it closed on itself. If he had felt less for the man, Tobio wouldn't be this affected, wouldn't be this worried. He was rarely ever scared, but this was probably one of those times where fear curdled in his blood till he was nauseous.

Maybe that was the alcohol.

"What, dumbass?" There were eggshells in this conversation, and Tobio was treading each of his words carefully. It was funny being on the receiving end, tasting his own medicine. It left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth.

Again, maybe that was the alcohol.

"I have decided." Hinata doesn't tiptoe around eggshells. "Tokyo, 2016, Sunshine Aquarium. I asked if you changed your mind since then. You said no."

Tobio raised a questioning brow, and Hinata had to elaborate.

"You asked me about last time too, didn't you? Before dinner." Hinata explained, equally as prickly, but not disgust; Tobio knew the face of repulsion in Hinata. He knew the face of ridicule if it stared him right at the face. (Like pushing plates of green peppers) This was not it, no. Hinata just became aggressive when backed in a corner and uncomfortable. "Before dinner you asked me if I made up my mind when I said I haven't decided over the phone."

"And?" Tobio had his nails clenched till there were white crescents indented on the flesh of his palms. He mustn't break skin or it would hinder playing volleyball.

Hinata walked in front of Tobio until they were barely inches apart. Hinata looked up, staring him in the eye. There was determination there, but when was Hinata never determined?

"I figured it out." Hinata said slowly, surely, carefully. "This is my answer." He doesn't tiptoe around eggshells, nor does he pick them up gently. He casually walks over them and clears them away easily with a broom, reminding him that that was all they really were—eggshells—not something that would hurt people if broken in the long run. But it was a bother for everyone, so he opened up a way for himself.

Hand on his cheek, calloused and firm—never soft. Hinata didn't have soft hands. They were rough, and somewhere between the knobby joints and knuckles was a scar from when Hinata

fell on the pavement from one of their races and he accidentally tore his flesh from a jagged rock from the asphalt. Those firm hands held his face, keeping Tobio from looking at the sun in Hinata's eyes. They were bright and intense, enough to make Tobio squint.

It was sudden. Hinata pulled Tobio to his face. It made him melt, the mouth on his mouth, tongue dragging on the front of Tobio's lips for entrance, prying them open. Hinata was kissing him, devouring him. He kissed like he played volleyball, with so much hunger and passion that could root you to the spot, send shivers down your spine, and light up a fire inside your soul. Tobio barely remembered to kiss back, being burnt by Shouyou's every touch—and oh god, how did he learn to do all this?

They barely part for a second before they start all over, and with every kiss, Tobio becomes hungrier. Champagne kisses and beer foam, a little trace of sake too, the taste of Hinata's mouth was intoxicating in its own right, inebriating, and Tobio had too much alcohol to think straight. He was hungry, starving, years of repression and waiting had finally broken loose. Tobio wanted to swallow Hinata whole.

"Kageyama—" Hinata sighed, leaning his head against his chest. "You're planning to check into a hotel room, right?" Tobio knew where this was headed, but before he could overthink it, he swallowed the fluttering emotion down his throat.

"Let's go, dumbass."

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★ FIVB World Championship: 11 days

"So you love the man." Moretti shot him an amused look. "As in amore. You want to hold him, and you think about him all the time, and you want to kiss him silly, and maybe fuck him in the sheet all night long."

"I'm sure signore Tobio has more sense of propriety than you, Luca." Santini rolled his eyes, and Tobio wasn't exactly sure how and why he ended up talking to these two with his problems, but for some reason they were very invested in the topic at hand. The knowing smiles they had flashed Tobio before he even shed off all his denial had been very telling.

Moretti shrugged. "He's a very fine man, that Shouyou Hinata. Very charismatic. I like him already." He was grinning at Tobio, which he wasn't exactly sure how to react to.

"He is a handful," he said.

"And you, *amico*, have very pretty hands that also happen to be very available." Moretti beamed while wagging his finger at him.

"Don't mind him. He is very deep in his matchmaking fantasy." Santini clicked his tongue. "He's a big *idiota* about it. Always has been." Santini often regarded his friend with disapproval. This wasn't any different than usual.

"I have been trying to set up Tobi many times. And now I know he had refused all of them because he was pining for his best friend and rival." Moretti scoffed. "And so many people wanted to have a piece of that." He gestured at Tobio's direction. Tobio recalled such attempts, which had always ended up with an awkward refusal, though it wasn't necessarily because he was pining. He just had a general lack of interest in anything not volleyball or Hinata related.

"Regardless." Santini interrupted. "That is nearly ten years. You've been pining for this man all this time, and you haven't bothered confessing? I think I understand how you can last long during our cardio runs. I would have lost my stamina just thinking about it." Moretti perked up and pointed at Santini in agreement to his comment.

"I did though." Tobio explained amidst the laughter the two shared, cheeks hot. "Confess, that is."

The laughter stopped.

They stared at Tobio with wide eyes. Was that so surprising?

"What?" It was Santini who recovered first, just enough to ask. They probably didn't expect him to make any move. Understandable. He probably wouldn't have thought to do so either, if someone asked him.

"I confessed. Years before. Before he left for Rio." Tobio repeated as he shrugged.

Moretti spluttered, taking one quick look at Santini's equally baffled face before exclaiming. "And what happened? He rejected you?"

"At first, somehow." Though it was more of Hinata standing there not knowing what to say or do. Tobio didn't really get an answer. He figured it was as good as a rejection though; he could understand that much. "But then he changed his mind later."

"Something like that." It was a question Tobio dreaded to answer. It was an answer Tobio would learn in a few days. It was complicated.

"Then how are you not in a relationship?" Moretti folded his hands together and pressed them on his lips, staring at him with wide questioning eyes. "You broke up?"

"No."

You can't exactly break up when you've never been in a relationship.

"Then why?"

The answer lay somewhere in Tobio's memories, in the lurking corners in his mind, crawling with its slippery elusiveness. He knew the situation was a culmination of their past actions. The present was often dictated by your choices and your habits, the way you interact with the world. His relationship with Hinata was no different.

He'd like to think he could pass the responsibility to Hinata as well, that this was something they both shared, the decisions that led to this complicated, nonsensical circumstance. It *was* a mutual agreement, one that Tobio had agreed on, a promise. Hinata was better at keeping promises..

"Volleyball." Tobio answered, which was the answer to most questions for better or for worse.

"Why am I surprised?" Moretti sighed, an exasperated smile on his face. "Volleyball is worse than a mistress for you, signore Tobio."

Santini clasped his shoulder. "So what are you going to do when he arrives?"

And Tobio, sincerely with all turbulent doubt and gloom, answered:

"I don't know."

Everyone had offered their condolences.

Tobio would rather pick at his suit instead.

The suit was loose on Tobio's frame—not too much, because he had grown well over the years enough to fill in the gaps, but not enough to get a perfect fit. The suit was his father's in the past. He borrowed it just for the occasion since they didn't have enough time to buy one for Tobio, and he was going to outgrow it anyway. Better use something that was already available.

It smelled like dry cleaners, incense, and too many flowers. He had enough of lilies and chrysanthemums right now. He was going to be sick if he saw one more.

His mother was going back to work tomorrow. His father wasn't able to come. He had a surgery to perform scheduled on this very day. They didn't need anymore people losing their

lives, such was the job of a doctor. The living could still come back, the dead cannot.

A painful reality to swallow. Tobio wanted to spit it out.

See, heart surgeons could take a look at a CT scan and analyse the dozen different ways it had fucked itself up, and think of two dozen ways of fixing it, list up the different symptoms and causes, slice up the muscle, drain the blood, replace all the veins and the valves of the organ, stitch it all back again, prescribe the proper medication.

A heart surgeon, however, could not fix the ache in Tobio's chest, nor could he fill the cavity between his ribs from where his beating heart should be.

His father could slice up Tobio's rattling chest and see it hollow.

"Tobio, it's time to go." Miwa walked to his side. She arrived two nights ago from Tokyo, looking no different from when she left for Tokyo a year ago. Pristine, sleek, perfect, not a hair out of place as she tied it in a ponytail this time. Tobio could see traces of Tokyo clinging to her though, the new cosmetics slapped on her skin, the more mature way she held herself. It was a good look on her, despite it being foreign to Tobio who was used to seeing her in a sweatshirt, bruises littered all over her arms and legs.

He was significantly taller than her too. The growth spurt had hit Tobio last summer. He was probably going to continue growing.

In a week or so, she was going to ride back to Tokyo. She couldn't stay too long with classes and part time eating away at her time. In a week she would leave, just like everyone else whose lives would continue after today. Life moved on. Today he was in a suit holding flowers and greeting relatives, tomorrow he will be in the gym, running laps, and practicing his serves. That was just how it was.

"Okay." Tobio looked one last time at Kazuyo-san's smiling face mounted on the frame. It still felt wrong.

"Are you angry?" Miwa's voice was soft, barely audible.

"No." Tobio stared at his shoes. They pinched around his feet, too shiny, too new. He bought them a week ago for today. He probably won't be able to wear them again. He toed the floor with the tip of his shoes, scuffing the tiles. "He's gone." He was gone meaning he wasn't coming back, and this wasn't like any of his visits in the hospital that lasted longer with every return.

Miwa looked at him. Her eyes were as blue and us cutting as his. The eyes were a defining Kageyama trait. It felt uncanny being stared at with them.

"It's okay to cry." She said without a hint of emotion.

"Yes." Tobio replied. He didn't cry either.

"It's okay to feel sad."

"I know." Feeling sad didn't really change anything. It didn't bring back time.

"Some things don't need anger." Miwa continued, handing him a scarf. Kazuyo-san died in the first days of winter, just before autumn faded away. He took with him everything bright and warm in the world. "Some things are just sad."

Tobio looked at the cloudy sky. In a week, Miwa would be back in Tokyo, his mother already planning her way back to her job, and his father was still in the hospital. Kazuyo-san had permanently left. In a week, Tobio was going to be alone.

"I know."

Customary to when a match was coming up, Hinata had stopped calling him every week, and for once, Tobio thought that might be the best.

Training had picked up intensity once again, and Tobio was more tired to think more often than not. It helped in ridding him of the annoying dreams and memories that haunted him both in his waking hours and in his sleep. This was exactly the kind of rush he had hoped to replicate, the forgetfulness that the ache of muscle and bones brought. Sometimes service practice just didn't cut it.

Practice helped Tobio forget, but when it did not, he could use it to clear his head temporarily at least.

Hinata was bound for Rome in a week. Even if Tobio practiced volleyball till the day ran out of hours, he still would not be able to escape that fact, and now he was getting anxious with every passing day. There were so many things to prepare, things to think about. There were many things to do when Hinata came, things to talk about.

"Hey Tobes. Can we talk about that toss before the combination? Can you go slower about it?" Garcia waved him over to the pull up bar, where he was resting. It was time for conditioning at the gym.

"I think you can handle a little speed." Tobio pointed out. He gestured haltingly.

"The..umm..you can outrun blockers with your natural ability, and it was better if you get used to defenders that appear out of nowhere." Especially since he was tall and hadn't played against smaller players in comparison. It was going to be easier to be ready just in case. Japan was participating this year, and while Tobio mostly knew the way MSBY worked after a couple of years, the system was new and Tobio was wary of the new elements since he left.

Many things to think about, many things to prepare for. Tobio was filled with energy that spilled out of his body at the thought of the championships drawing nearer.

"If you say so, man." Garcia raised a brow. "You okay, dude?"

"Yes." Tobio answered. "Why would I not be?"

"Okay if you say so." Garcia clapped his back.

Tobio glanced at their captain who waved his hand at the team to gather around the auditorium. It was time to analyze the other team's matches for the upcoming matches, create strategies, plays and counters. This was their home turf after all; they needed to give it their all. Time was dwindling, closing in, and catching up fast. He was running out of time.

Countdown:

★ FIVB World Championship: 9 days

★ Hinata Flight to Italy: 4 days

It was a Sunday morning that Tobio found himself cleaning his apartment. He had planned to buy groceries that afternoon, but decided against it. There were still matches before Hinata would stay in his apartment. So instead, he did some cleaning.

Tobio was raised in a household that valued cleanliness and habitual maintenance. He had lived in a house that had little trinkets and little presence. Everything went exactly where they needed to go. By extension, Tobio's current apartment was also neat and organized, so there wasn't much to clean.

There was little trash to throw. The kitchen was already tidy. The living room was vacuumed and mopped. It was barely afternoon.

He walked to the closet where he kept the spare sheets and blankets, reached up the top shelf, and pulled the thick blue duvet he used for the winter, when a loud clatter made him flinch. The box beside the stack of blankets had fallen on the floor, scattering its contents all over the floor.

It was just the recent medals that he didn't bother shipping back home. He gathered the box up and returned it to the shelf when his foot kicked something accidentally to the bottom of the closet. Sighing, Tobio blindly groped under the corner to reach it with his fingers.

Plastic and a little thick. It was a tissue packet advertisement for a yoga class back in Miyagi. The pack was already opened and half the tissue was used. He checked the familiar scratchy child-like handwriting that was printed in faded black ink.

The words were simple. Ten, twenty years. No matter how long. I'll see you there.

It had been three years, nearly four. He had no need for the tissue packet anymore, realistically. It had already gone past its use. He should use the rest of the tissues soon.

Tobio kept the pack and tucked it into the box anyway, along with the medals. Keep all the memories in a box and store them at the back of your closet, forget about them for years, then they come spilling back when you open them again. Memories were just like that. He returned the box next to the blankets as he took the spare sheets and pondered between putting it in his room or the guest bedroom.

The guest bedroom was more sensible. He should clean it out next.

Tobio bit his tongue and took the new sheets and blankets into his bedroom with pink dusting his cheeks.

"We are running laps outside while the staff does the scheduled equipment maintenance." Russo ushered them all outside. "Best behavior, boys."

"Really? So close to the match?" Moretti grumbled, but trudged forward anyway. The wind outside nipped at the back of their necks and the tips of their ears. The autumn weather made people understandably reluctant to move, sapping out all the motivation to work harder when the courts were infinitely cozier with its heating.

"It's scheduled. Nothing we can do about it." Russo clapped his back. "Take it as an opportunity to see the sights, yes?"

The rest of the team mumbled their agreements, shrugging on their jackets for the cold. Tobio added his scarf in addition to the already bulky team jacket he had on his shoulders. Autumn was already chilly enough at this time of the year to get you sick if you weren't careful. The sky was gloomy with the clouds covering the sunlight, though Italy always had this glow to it even when it was under the clouds' shade. Everything was orange with the leaves drying up and falling off.

Tobio wasn't sure if it was helping him.

"Tobi." Russo matched his pace. Tobio usually ran a few strides ahead of the group, so he didn't exchange small talk with his team often. "I heard you're having a guest over after the games."

"It won't get in the way of playing." He reassured his captain. These may be one of the last moments when he could call Russo his captain. If Tobio was more sentimental, he might have started marveling at how fast time had passed. Russo had always been the captain of the team since he joined Ali Roma. The team was going to change massively in the next season, many members moving on and changing.

Tobio thought back to his own contract. There were so many things to consider for his future.

"That's—that's not what I was worried about." Russo waved off, chuckling. "I know you're responsible, Tobi. I'm glad. It's good to see you interact with something other than volleyball, meet a friend," An afterthought. "Fall in love."

Tobio nearly tripped on his own two feet at the sudden appearance of a cat in the road. He skidded into an abrupt stop, stride broken as he waited for the cat to pass through. It took one look at Tobio before it scampered away. Fair enough. Tobio could only imagine what face he was making. He cleared his throat and ignored the burning in his face, but he couldn't pick up the same rhythm as before.

"Scusi. Scusi. I heard from Santini." Russo's apology was tepid, half playful. He wasn't really apologetic about it. Tobio wondered who else subscribed to his pathetic relationship status. "It is your partner, yes?"

Tobio ducked his head.

Russo laughed. "Ah. Don't worry about it. I was around your age when I met my wife. We married three years later. Just work at your pace."

They rounded around the corner, still a few paces ahead of the rest.

"Um." Tobio began. There's a part inside him that winced at his lack of social grace. "How did you figure it out?"

Russo took one deep inhale, catching up his breath as it started getting ragged. "Figure out what?"

Tobio avoided his gaze and looked ahead. "Settling down."

Russo didn't say anything for a while. He was probably assessing Tobio, carefully considering his words. He was careful like that, considerate. Partly, he reminded Tobio of coach Ukai too when he was being like that. They were probably close in age as well, Russo just a few years short of coach Ukai. It was funny how Tobio called him coach still, even though he wasn't his coach for years.

"You'll just know." He said, cryptic. Tobio figured that people rarely ever answered straight. There was always some kind of hidden message behind it. "Are you having doubts?"

"Not really."

"Is this something you end up arguing with your partner?"

It wasn't. They don't argue about it, funny enough, even though almost everyone who knew how stubborn they could be thought they would. It wasn't something Tobio wanted to talk about anyway. They both knew they would put volleyball first, and all distractions second.

"We're both busy." Tobio explained instead. "I don't think—" He sighed. "It's not going to happen soon." He wasn't sure what 'it' constituted at the moment. It could mean several things at once. He didn't think he could explain it.

"Long distance no good?"

Tobio shook his head. He was too greedy for that.

"Is what you have right now not working for you?"

He wasn't even sure what they have right now, but it was something alright. Tobio didn't know how to answer that, because deep down he didn't know what he wanted. He always wanted more, always wanted the impossible. He was a fish who wanted the sun, out of water and desperately trying to fly. He wanted something more than he could possibly swallow.

"What are you afraid of, Tobi?" Tobio faced Russo abruptly, who was shaking his head. "I sense that you are afraid. Why are you running away?"

"I'm not." The answer was fast out of his mouth before he could bite it down. He scowled. He could tell Russo wasn't impressed, nor did he believe him. Tobio picked up his pace. "I'm not." He repeated, this time slower, softer.

Russo didn't say anything after that, and Tobio was content to run in silence with only his thoughts to keep him company. They didn't make any good company, really, but it was better than whatever Russo had to ask him.

"Tobio." Russo said just before they hit the end of their run. "You cannot wait for others to define what you feel and how your relationship should be." Russo explained. "This is between you and him, yes? You get to define the journey, and you get to decide how it goes, where you want to be. Only you."

They slowly skidded to a halt. The sun had already set and the sky was already dark enough that the lampposts started lighting up one by one. Russo's expression was soft and open in the dim lights. He suddenly looked older than his age, the tired lines on his face more prominent. He looked weary—ooked weary.

"No one can tell you what to do, and no one can tell you how you should live your life, but being more honest to yourself wouldn't hurt. You can't figure out what you want when you aren't even honest to your heart." He smiled, punching Tobio's chest lightly, just enough for the knuckles to tap him. "You love him, don't you?"

And this, Tobio could admit at least.

"Yes."

Footsteps echoed from behind them. The rest of the team had finished their laps.

"Then you'll know."

>>> 11/15/2021, 20:21

From: misato_n@nihonsportsagency.ne.jp

To: kageyamatobio1996@mail.ne.jp

[INBOX] Greetings Kageyama-senshu. I know it's a little too early to run over your contract renewal details for Ali Roma, but I also have several.... < see more >

>>> 11/14/2021, 19:21

From: miwa k@mail.ne.jp

To: kageyamatobio1996@mail.ne.jp

[INBOX] [VIDEO FILES ATTACHED] Sora played in her school's games. I sent you some of the pictures but these are videos of her games. I thought you might want.... < see more >

>>> 11/14/2021, 10:09

From: TatewakiM@asics.ne.jp

To: kageyamatobio1996@mail.ne.jp

CC: misato n@nihonsportsagency.ne.jp

[INBOX] Good day Kageyama-senshu. We hope this email finds you well. We at Asics are offering you.... < see more >

>>> 11/14/2021, 02:01

From: digest-nonreply@quora.com

To: kageyamatobio1996@mail.ne.jp

[INBOX] Quora Digest

>>> 11/13/2021, 02:01

From: communicaciones.externas.@latam.cpm

To: shouyou hinata@mail.ne.jp

CC: kageyamatobio1996@mail.ne.jp

[INBOX] LATAM Airlines Brasil. Saudações! recebemos sua mensagem para ajustar seu horário de voo e.... < see more >

Tobio stopped midway through his stretch and turned to where Kindaichi was sitting, sand clinging to his board shorts and white shirt. The grainy sand that was coarse and irritating against the skin, and yet soft enough to cushion a fall. Tobio had spent a good half of the time rolling on the golden dunes.

"I had fun." Tobio said. "I enjoyed the game."

[&]quot;For someone who ate sand majority of the time, you look really happy."

Kindaichi snickered and stared ahead to the rolling waves, where the ocean met the shore. The sound was calming, and the salty breeze was cool against their sweat soaked skin. "You weren't like this before."

Tobio knit his brows together. "What do you mean?"

"When we played back in middle school," Kindaichi shrugged. "I used to wonder if you really had fun playing volleyball. You were always frowning, always yelling, always so focused on winning, so obsessed. I didn't understand it. You were always so intense about everything, pushing all of us to do what you want. And then it made me wonder if volleyball really was fun. I think I didn't enjoy it as much in my last year of middle school."

There was churning in Tobio's gut, like lead dropping to the bottom. "Sorry."

"Nah. I told you not to apologize. I still mean it now." Kindaichi waved away. "We were like —what? Thirteen? I said some ass words to you too. Forget about it, man. It's all in the past now." He laughed, but he directed his gaze at the sound of laughter near the shoreline, where two figures were waddling against the upcoming waves, dusting off the sand on their legs, bright orange laughing and another sulky brooding silhouette that trudged along reluctantly anyway. "Still, when I saw you again with that orange shrimpy, I wondered what it was about him. Were we not enough?"

Tobio glanced at Kindaichi, wondering what he could possibly mean, waiting for an elaboration.

"I just found it funny. I don't know. When I saw you again in that practice match, all docile and tame and nothing like the tyrant king we all knew, I didn't know what to feel. Suddenly, you were playing really well and improving like you never did when we were playing together." Kindaichi explained, still looking at the two. "It made me think, maybe we weren't trying hard or that we just weren't enough."

"No." Tobio interrupted. "I was...inexperienced." He admitted carefully. "When we played in the inter-high, I suddenly realized how controlling I was. Oikawa was able to bring out the best in all of you. I wasn't attentive enough to see how my orders were stifling your abilities. I should have done better." He would never forget that match. He would never forget the defeat. "I wouldn't be where I am without my team."

"After the game, I'll never forget you said 'We will win.' You never say 'we'." Kindaichi scoffed, smirking. "I thought your team must've been some kind of amazing bunch to have you, the most egocentric man I know, bow down and cooperate." He nodded to the two by the sea. A wave had nearly toppled the brooding Kunimi down. "I thought *he* must've been amazing."

The orange figure bowled over, Hinata tipped his head back in peals of laughter, so loud it echoed over to their spot even with the crashing of the waves. Kunimi splashed water at Hinata's face in revenge. Tobio was never actually sure how and when they became close. If he had to guess, it was during the training camp.

Tobio smiled. "My team was— *is* amazing." He still thought they were, even when they were no longer playing. "But that experience in middle school was a wake up call. Mistakes are nothing more than lessons we learn from."

Kindaichi stared at him with open wonder. "Man, when did you grow up?" He snorted. "You used to explode over the smallest things."

Tobio huffed. That was not the first time he heard of that in a while.

"But I mean it," Kindaichi continued. "You used to look like you didn't have fun playing volleyball, too obsessed with winning. But when you went to Karasuno—when you met him, you looked different when you played."

"Different?"

Kindaichi shrugged. "You smile a lot more, even when you don't win, even when you miss a serve. It's like you come alive."

Tobio considered his words and let them stew over his mind. The clouds were dark and grey overhead. The spring air blew all over Tobio's face, cooling his cheeks and his neck. Kindaichi didn't seem fazed by the cold, but Hinata had started to shiver.

"You were smiling that time too, you know?"

Tobio glanced over at Kindaichi.

"That Adlers vs Black Jackals game." He explained. "You were smiling when you lost."

"Oh." Tobio remembered. He was smiling, feeling the elation of Hinata back in front of him and better. Two years spent apart wasn't a waste; the time Hinata spent training was a success; it no longer left Tobio angrily clutching at a net and yelling at him, asking what he had done for the last three years.

"Anyway, yeah. You look so much better now, and I guess I just want to say good for you, man."

There was a pleasant warmth in Tobio's chest despite the spring breeze. It pleased him deeply inside, keeping him tingly and vibrant. "Thanks."

"And that guy too." Kindaichi chuckled. He nudged him on the shoulder with his elbow. "He makes you better."

There was no question who he was talking about. Tobio didn't need an explanation either. Hinata had waved at them, beckoning them to wash the sand off of their bodies as well.

"No." Tobio denied. His actions were his own. Hinata doesn't make him do anything. What Tobio accomplished was an accumulation of his habits and hardwork. "I don't think so."

The grey clouds were blown away by the sea breeze, parting away to reveal the daylight just before it started to set. The salt and brine of the ocean scent was a strong sensory experience,

enough for retention. Hinata's smile was blinding, and Tobio closed his eyes as he let the sun soak him with its light, committing the sight to memory.

He smiled, softly, whispering the words till the sound of the waves swallowed them instead.

"But he pushes me to be."

Here was one misconception about Tobio:

It wasn't like he was obsessed with winning. Of course he wanted to win—who goes to a match expecting to lose? The want to win was a basic requirement, but it wasn't that Tobio was obsessed with winning, no. Tobio understood that you can't always win.

The thing was, Tobio liked winning, but he hated losing even more.

Here was another misconception:

Winning and losing don't always come hand in hand.

Sure, in volleyball only the strongest can stay longer on the court, but life wasn't always like that. Sometimes, outside the court, everyone wins. Sometimes, everyone loses. And Tobio was a sore loser. He never outgrew that from childhood.

Tobio was familiar with losing. He had been losing since he was young. He had been losing since he started volleyball. Tobio was familiar with loss like the reflection of a mirror staring back at him, familiar like the taste of his own name in his mouth, like the burn of running, like the sting of ball drills.

"Yes." Russo answered, bringing back Tobio to the present. The sound of shutters going off in the room was slightly distracting. "I think Ali Roma is currently at its best. Please expect a good performance from the team this championship."

It was a press conference held days before the game. Tobio wasn't able to pay attention to what was asked, but he was lucky enough no one had asked him anything yet. HIs Italian was getting better lately, he could speak an adequate amount of sentences to survive, and he could understand enough from a conversation without people purposely slowing it down for him. Mostly it was for volleyball, important for interviews and press conferences like these.

"For Signore Russo as well, we hear that this is your last season. What prompted you with this decision, and how are you feeling about it?"

"I feel good. Excited. Maybe nervous too." Russo chuckled. "But I'm not sad. I get to spend more time with my family after this. They're the reason I decided to retire."

"Besides you being an old man?" De Luca guipped cheekily.

"Shh. No need to be loud." Russo laughed. "My wonderful wife, and my two daughters, the loves of my life would be there to support me. I think we can win with them around."

"Thank you so much for that signore Russo." One of the media people said. "Next question is for signore Moretti. There are rumours that you're going to be playing in France after this season, is this true?"

"Mhm. I'm afraid I can't disclose that yet." Moretti winked at the man. Santini rolled his eyes with exasperation beside him. "Legally anyway, but it adds to the excitement, doesn't it?"

There were several murmurs in the room, the camera shutters going off at multiple clicks. There were occasional flashes that made Tobio blink.

"This one is for signore Kageyama." One of the people in the crowd raised their hand and stood up when acknowledged. "You're known as the team's control tower as the setter. What are your thoughts on the teams that you will have to go against?"

Tobio at least knew this. He knew how to talk when it was about volleyball, even in clumsy Italian. "There are several teams I'd like to look out for. Brazil's ASAS is always a constant threat. Poland's Orzel too. Japan's MSBY will also be participating this year. They're all formidable."

Keep it short, curt. PR always said. No need to go into too much detail. The last thing he wanted was some tabloid spinning his words out of context, and that they don't actually have time for a full analysis on each team. Save it for the locker room meetings, they said.

Apparently, Tobio had been very blunt in previous interviews. PR didn't exactly always like that.

"You'll be playing against your own countrymen. How is that experience for you?"

"It is not the first time that I have to." Tobio said. "At the very least I already have insight on their moves. I'm looking forward to it."

Several murmurs and scratching on papers, the sound of keyboard typing away, phones buzzing and dinging, Tobio stared at them with mundane fascination.

"One last thing, signore Kageyama," the reporter said. "We heard your previous teammate from your old highschool team, Shouyou Hinata, where you both became the infamous monster duo is playing for ASAS Sao Paulo right now, isn't he?"

"Yes. He signed a contract for them about a year ago." He said. Tobio could feel several eyes on him from his teammates, as well as the rest of the reporters in the room, stares all glued to him in curiosity. It made his stomach flip with unease.

"Exciting." The reporter cheered. "Shouyou Hinata has openly expressed his stance on your rivalry. What are your thoughts on playing against him again?"

Hinata playing against him. It was years since they last competed on the same court, nearly three years of hiatus. It was just like this the first time. It was always increments of three, and Hinata standing across from him, holding a ball in his hand and beaming at him was years in the making. Hinata, playing against him, was coming home.

That loss was home, years overdue.

Sometimes, outside the court, everyone loses. Sometimes, everyone wins. Then, there were those rare moments when it happened inside the court as well.

Tobio smiled.

Playing against Hinata, regardless of the result, never felt like a loss.

"I'm going to beat him this time."

Trends for You

1. Trending in Italy

FIVB World Championships

109.8k tweets

2. Trending in Italy

Ali Roma

59.9k tweets

3. Trending in Italy

Russo

23.8k tweets

4. Trending in Italy

Moretti

34.5K tweets

5. Trending in Italy

Kageyama

13.2k tweets

6. Culture. Trending

Italia

10.2k tweets

7. Politics. Trending

FUCK TRUMP

305.9k tweets

8. Entertainment. Trending

ONE PUNCH MAN

19.4k tweets

9. Movies & TV. Trending

Saitama

12.7k tweets

10. Music. Trending

Genos

13.2k tweets

11. Manga. Trending

OPM 141

40.9k tweets

13. Politics. Trending

NFTs

300K tweets

14. Economics. Trending

FUCK NFTs

108k tweets

15. Manga. Trending

Murata-sensei

2, 345 tweets

16. Entertainment. Trending

Eyeshield 21

1,783 tweets

17. Art. Trending

Art Share

10k tweets

18. Food. Trending

CHOCOLATE MAN

1,500 tweets

19. Entertainment. Trending

Saigenos

1,069 tweets

20. Culture. Trending

SPILL THE TEA

6,660 tweets

"Tobio."

Kazuyo-san was already waiting for him in room, sprawled out on the hospital bed, complexion pale under the ugly white lights of the hospital. It made his skin more sallow than ever. Tobio didn't like that.

Unlike what they show in the movies, a hospital room doesn't actually smell like antiseptic. It barely smelled like anything really. It was all just staleness and discomfort. Tobio pushed the window open to let in some fresh air.

"Thank you." Kazuyo-san pushed himself up from lying on his back. It was taking longer to do this than it used to, physically more tolling. Tobio knew it was gradually getting worse as the hospital visits grew longer. He only wished he noticed sooner. He never said anything, all those years of slowly creeping sickness, or maybe Tobio was to blame—being too oblivious and too self absorbed.

"Didn't you bring CDs for us to watch, Tobio?" Kazuyo-san turned to him. His face was wrinkled, lines deeper whenever he frowned or smiled. He looked so tired already.

"No." Tobio sat on his usual stool by the bedside. His feet would already reach the floor flat. Another growth spurt had passed. "You should just rest." The hospital room usually didn't have a heart monitor, unless you were unlucky enough to be in a serious situation that warranted one, like—say, an atrial fibrillation. If he was a smarter man, Tobio would be able

to tell you all about it. The words were told to him since he was a kid after all, carefully explained by his father.

There was a laughable irony to it—a cardiologist's own father, suffering from a heart disease.

A quivering or irregular heartbeat that can lead to blood clots, stroke, or heart failure. A-Fib. That was Kazuyo-san's condition and it was getting worse. Even he couldn't hide it from Tobio any longer.

The heart monitor was not obnoxious or loud. It was muted in the background, unlike the medical dramas Miwa watched. It still grated on Tobio's nerves.

"Do I look so much worse for wear?" Kazuyo-san chuckled, coughing.

"Yes." Tobio said, blunt. "You should lie down more."

Kazuyo-san complied. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Why don't you tell me about practice?"

"It was alright." Tobio picked at the hem of his jacket. "They made me the regular setter now."

"Congratulations." Kazuyo-san reached out to ruffle his hair. Tobio ducked so he no longer needed to get up. Fingers running through his hair and to his scalp, for a moment Tobio felt warm inside, like he was a kid again. "I knew they would pick you. You work hard."

"I want to push my team to do better. I know they can." Tobio said. "But they won't. Maybe they will now that I am a starter."

Kazuyo-san smiled. "That's good. The more you improve, the more strong people you'll meet."

"We're also training hard for Nationals." Tobio continued. "Ushijima is in highschool. Coach said we might be able to defeat Shiratorizawa in the next game. I still think we can play well despite Ushijima on the other side of the court though."

Kazuyo-san laughed. "Oho. It would be very nice if my grandson can beat my old alma mater." He sighed. "Where do you want to go in highschool?"

"Shiratorizawa." It was a no brainer. It was the best school in the prefecture, and Kazuyo-san had nothing but good remarks about the school. To play more volleyball, Tobio should get stronger and play with stronger players.

"It's going to be difficult to get in." Kazuyo-san grinned at him in that playful way he usually did, and though Tobio knew, he couldn't help but pout anyway. "Ah jeez. I'm only teasing. You're so easy to read, Tobio. You're such a wonderful child, so honest with your feelings." He gestured for him to come closer, and as Tobio obliged, Kazyuo-san gave him another head pat.

"The other kids disagree." Tobio murmured.

"About what?"

"Being easy to read." He continued.

"You'll find someone who will be able to." Kazuyo-san reassured him. "There are people somewhere who think the same way as you. You just need to find them, or wait for them to find you."

Tobio honestly started to doubt that. "I don't need someone like that. I don't need friends who understand me, I just want teammates who understand that we need to win to play more games."

"Do you fight with your teammates often?" Kazuyo-san asked.

"Not always." Tobio grumbled. They don't fight, but they can get into some disagreements. The upperclassmen were often breaking them apart before anything serious could happen. "It doesn't matter. All I care about is playing volleyball. This is just a stepping stone to my real goal."

"And what is your real goal?"

"To play more volleyball."

And Kazuyo-san laughed, unexpectedly. Tobio looked at him in confusion. "But Tobio, isn't what you're playing right now volleyball too?"

Tobio frowned. He would like to argue with that logic, but he was stumped. So he resorted to biting his lip and keeping quiet.

"You're looking ahead already." Kazuyo-san chuckled. "Don't lose sight of what's in front of you Tobio, but it is good to see that you already have plans for the future. So you want to be a pro athlete, hmm?"

"Yes." Tobio nodded.

"You'll play in the V-League?"

"And in a foreign league." He promised. "I'll play in the Olympics too."

Kazuyo-san grinned wider, the wrinkles on his face more prominent. "That's wonderful. I wish I could be there to see it."

"You will be, right?" Tobio said before he could stop himself. "You'll be there to see it, right?"

It was heartbreaking, the way his grandfather looked at him that moment, the way a child would not grasp at his age, yet had some inkling of understanding of how nothing was ever

going to be the same, the way he desperately grasped at denial, though deep down in the part of Tobio that was growing and maturing, knew how it just wasn't going to happen.

"Oh Tobio." Kazuyo-san sighed, the weight of the world and his own mortality weighing down on him. He was the oldest person Tobio knew. He smiled wearily. "I can't promise anything. Tobio, one day I won't be here anymore."

"You're leaving?"

He was twelve then. The concept of death to a kid was so vast yet so simple too, and grief was not yet something burned in the back of his mind.

"Someday I'll be gone, Tobio." Kazuyo-san said. "But that doesn't mean goodbye."

"It's not?"

"People don't really leave you." the old man took Tobio's young and still growing hands. They were almost as big as Kazuyo's own. "It's just like how volleyball is a sport that connects. There will always be a part of me in you, like how a piece of you will be carried around by the people you meet—whether big or small in size."

"We'll always be...connected..." Tobio repeated clumsily, not fully understanding his grandfather's words but sticking by it and taking it to heart anyway, as he did to all his other teachings.

"So long as you keep playing volleyball, I'll always be connected with you."

"Really?"

"Yes." Kazuyo-san said softly. "Just like everyone who played volleyball with you. We'll always be connected through volleyball, may it be from thousands of miles away, in different cities, or different continents."

"So long as I play volleyball..."

"Yes, Tobio." Kazuyo-san whispered. "I'll always be here."

Countdown:



FIVB World Championship: 0 days

Kodzuken ✓ @applepi

Hi. I'll be streaming the FIVB World Championship in partnership with @JVA official please stay tuned.

Translate Tweet

210k retweets. 503k likes reply retweet **l**ike NINJA SHOUYOU COME HOME @ninjashouyoustan. Nov 23 2022 Replying to @applepi WHAT?????!!!! 4 reply 145 retweet 21k likes **Tobiomilk** @tobiosmilkbox. Nov 23 2022 Replying to @applepi FOR REAL THOUGH??! 10\(\text{reply 27}\) retweet 180\(\text{#}\) likes kingkageyama @tossamakageyama. Nov 23 2022 Replying to @applepi @tobiosmilkbox THE KODZUKEN???!! STREAMING AND COMMENTATING THE FIVB?!!!! 1 reply 3 retweet 2 likes Replying to @applepi @tobiosmilkbox @tossamakageyama Yea kodzuken plays volleyball back in highschool and his partner works in the JVA. apparently they were teammates too! 3 ○ reply 58 □ retweet 90 ♥ likes #21HINATASHOYO @shoushoushou. Nov 23 2022 Replying to @applepi @tobiosmilkbox @tossamakageyama @xxxapplepiexxx Mayhaps youtuber twitter isn't so bad after all reply retweet 1 likes

11:34 PM · Nov 23, 2022 · Twitter for Iphone

Kodzuken livestream - FIVB WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP 2022 [LIVE NOW]

Kodzuken

201M subscribers

#kodzuken #kenmakozume #FIVB #volleyball #FIVB Championship 2022

"Yes. Welcome. This is Kodzuken live. You know what to do. As I said previously I'll be covering some matches for Japan, Brazil, Italy, Poland, and Russia as per the JVA's request in the next few days. Hope you enjoy it here. Check out the official JVA channel too, they're streaming this as well."

Top Chat

Pewpewpew HIIIIIIIII

Ultimate challenger OMG HE'S WEARING AN OVERSIZED KITTY HOODIE!!!!!!!

RichardDiamond kodzuken I love youuu marry me

SpinelVolleyball kodzuken has a boyfriend you idiot

Nightmarishgaylesbian <3 <3 <3

rosequartzSU goodevening kodzuken-san!

Applepiestan122 その日に再生したと聞きました。今日までバレーボールを楽しんでいるのを見るのはとてもうれしいです

Kenmamamama kozume-san ang gwapo mo!!

PieApplePi dall'Italia. ti vogliamo bene

Sunshineshoyo lol is that Shoyo merch??

Ninjashoyostan1 it is!!!!

Sunshineshoyo in the back! It's a poster and a plushie

Tobioosama Volleyball woohhh!

seigiclermont salutations de france. j'adore ta chaîne!

sonicshotoyeager lol why volleyball?

"Why volleyball? Dunno. It's fun. I learned that."

Kenmamama oooooooohhh is it tetsu?

Sakuatsu69 was it testsu?? it is right?

Kiyomiomi Who?

Atsumewmew his boyfriend

"Pfft. That idiot did drag me into it, but it's not only him who taught me about how fun the sport can be. I can't leave him on his own though. He used to be pretty introverted, even worse than me. He's probably forgotten about it though."

Braindead Kodzuken is gay???

Ethereal yeah what about it?

IVYILY gay is putting it too simple. he's long stated he doesn't care about gender or attraction. It just happens

Rainyday Awwww both of you are so cute

Kenmamama who made you think it's fun tho???

sonicshotoyeager why are you holding the brazil flag aren't you supposed to support japan ezrafellcrowley kodzuken we love youuuuu

AWB0231 kkkkkkkk the obvious brazil and shoyou merch

GenoSAI kodzuken shoyou stan confirmed

Happy Villager It's not a secret that kodzuken sponsors ninja shoyo ya'll

Edamameme Kodzuken sponsors shoyo hinata through his company bouncing ball ltd.

"Testu is sulking because of it. He's a huge MSBY fan. I used to be when Shoyou was still playing there, but that's besides the point. He's a hypocrite though. He's secretly rooting for Russia to win."

Юрий Плисецкий lol MSBY sucks. Alders is better

ninjashoyostan1 what do you know??

tobiooosama adlers haven't been any fun since tobio moved to ali roma :(

kenmaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa Kenma HIIIIII

daddykurapika EXCUSE ME??! HOSHIUMI IS RIGHT THERE!!! THE SLANDER DJSDKSJDHL

Opaizz69 lmao hi kodzuken!!!

wilesedgemorth hi when will you finish your AA playthrough??!

Юрий Плисецкий oh hey aren't you the guy who went crazy at the hoshiumi interview? Lol

wilesedgemorth hi when will you finish your AA playthrough??!

daddykurapika I'm a very adamant Hoshiumi stan

Gifmaker2021 opening ceremony let's gooooooooo

stonewallband20 heyyyyy

bonniemarcybell why did you decide to sponsor shoyou though?

"Why? He's interesting. Even since we were in highschool. He always has something new. I said I would drop him if he stops being interesting though."

ricericerice harsh

volleyballsmolleyball wow dude so cruel

Юрий Плисецкий lmao hoshiumi has a lover tho. also he got blocked big time last kurowashiki against Tsukishima. Lol

tadadadadashi cold :(

wilesedgemorth hi when will you finish your AA playthrough??!

wilesedgemorth hi when will you finish your AA playthrough??!

Gifmaker2021 that's mean of you

luciananami i mean he is a businessman. What do you expect?

daddykurapika FUCK YOU HE'S STILL THE HIGHEST JUMPER AMONG THE ENTIRE V LEAGUE DESPITE BEING THE SHORTEST

wilesedgemorth hi when will you finish your AA playthrough??!

robloxmaster420 lol where are all these volleyball accounts coming from?

wilesedgemorth hi when will you finish your AA playthrough??!

daddykurapika and can someone block this guy?????!

wilesedgemorth [blocked]

ushiwakasbigtiddies lol i cant figure out if @Юрий Плисецкий is a troll or a big sendai frogs stan

Gifmaker2021 THANK YOU OMG

Ethereal Why does tetsu-san like MSBY?

"Eh. Tetsu supports MSBY mostly because of Bokuto-san. He's a great player, but he can be pretty loud. He used to be really unstable. It's nice to see him grow out of it, though I guess we can thank half of it to his husband. Only he has the patience to wrangle him."

breadbrain lololololol

godsyokai why the bokuto praise and slander in one sentence

kenmaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa LMAO roasty kodzuken appears again

ushiwakasbigtiddies sdkhsjhjfdslf you didn't need to burn him like that

akaashi_keiji あなたの彼氏もとても迷惑です

Nightmarishgaylesbian saltyyyyyy

seigiclermont okay but how do you know that?

Applepiestan122 あれは鬼頭幸太郎の夫?!!!

RichardDiamond dsjfdsjlfhsdlkfsdfsldfjk

rosequartzSU poor bokuto

Kenmamamama amp HHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA tangina

PieApplePi wwwwwwwwwww

Ultimate challenger F in the chat for Bokuto san

SpinelVolleyball F

breadbrain F

godsyokai F

stonewallband20 F

Юрий Плисецкий F

0paizz69 F

tobiooosama F

robloxmaster420 F

daddykurapika F

ezrafellcrowley F

AWB0231 F

GenoSAI F

robloxmaster420 I don't like volleyball but it's kodzuken so....

AWB0231 i got in to volleyball because of kodzuken

uchihauchiyama I got into volleyball because of meteo attack!

rosequartzSU I got into volleyball because of Alisa Hiaba

Kenmamama IKR?? I love kodzuken!! Any video he makes I will watch

[&]quot;Akaashi-san, aren't you supposed to be working? No need to be so protective."

akaashi_keiji 彼はあなたの言うことを聞くと機嫌が悪くなるでしょう。夜はとても面倒です

Gifmaker2021 lmao

haruhitamaki I like how kodzuken is commentating for volleyball. He's very analytical and i heard he played in nationals when he was in highschool! So I want to know what he thinks about the plays in the world championship

Opaizz69 oh look it's starting

Tobiooosama can you see who's coming in??

stonewallband20 HINAAAATAAAAA

kurokenshipxxxx who is kodzuken talking to?

kodzutetsu2021 @haruhitamaki SAMMMMEEEEEE

rosequartzSU ***Alisa Haiba

"You're not sleeping in the same timezone anyway. It'll be fine. Anyway the games are starting."

Tobiooosama JAPAN VS BRAZIL !!! GOGOGOGOGO

Sunshineshovo GOGOGOGOGOGOOOOO!!!

Ninjashoyostan1 ASKGDGJKSKJDSDLHSDSHDLSDLS

Sunshineshoyo SHOYOOOOOOOOO

SHOYOSHOYO is that kageyama in the stand?

SUN SHINE1972

Trends for You

1. Trending in Italy

FIVB World Championships

2. Trending in Italy

Kodzuken

329.3k tweets

3. Trending in Italy

LET KODZUKEN COMMENT ON ALL SPORTS

213.3k tweets

4. Trending in Italy

ASAS SAO PAULO

89.2K tweets

5. Trending in Italy

MSBY BLACK JACKALS

73.1k tweets

6. Sports. Trending

Shoyou Hinata

70.3k tweets

7. Entertainment. Trending

Kotarou Bokuto

69.1k tweets

8. Entertainment. Trending

Meteo Attack

49.4k tweets

9. Movies & TV. Trending

Marvel

52.7k tweets

10. Celebrities. Trending

Kiyoomi Sakusa

- 13.2k tweets
 - 11. Sports. Trending

Atsumu Miya

- 40.9k tweets
 - 13. Politics. Trending

#NeverAgain

- 17K tweets
 - 14. Music. Trending

Taylor Swift

- 8k tweets
 - 15. Manga. Trending

Demon Slayer

- 2, 345 tweets
 - 16. Entertainment. Trending

Tanjiro Kamado

- 1,882 tweets
 - 17. Art. Trending

Kimetsu no Yaiba

- 1,482k tweets
 - 18. Food. Trending

Onigiri Miya

- *1,210 tweets*
 - 19. Entertainment. Trending

Brazil

1,069 tweets

20. Sports. Trending

Kageyama

1,387 tweets

Kodzuken ✓ @applepi

Thank you to everyone who joined the stream. I'll be streaming the Russia vs. Italy match this friday Please stay tuned for it.

Translate Tweet

11:34 PM · Nov 30, 2022·Twitter for Iphone

560k retweets. 703k likes

reply retweet

🤎 like

NINJA SHOUYOU COME HOME @ninjashouyoustan. Nov 30 2022

Replying to @applepi

THANK YOU TOO!!! YOUR ANALYSIS WAS VERY ON POINT!!

4 Q reply 145 retweet 201k likes

MAR @MAR_cookies Nov 30 2022

Replying to @applepi @ninjashouyoustan

Omg i missed it!!!!!! :((((((

1 \bigcirc reply 1 \bigcirc retweet 8 \bigcirc likes

Tobiomilk @tobiosmilkbox. Nov 30 2022

Replying to @applepi

LMAO the Kageyama cameo though??

10 reply 207 retweet 1,080 **♥** likes

kingkageyama @tossamakageyama. Nov 30 2022

Replying to @applepi @tobiosmilkbox

IKR?! Mans got no business being there. What was he being all sneaky about anyway?

1 reply 7 retweet 80 likes
#21HINATASHOYO @shoushou. Nov 30 2022
Replying to @applepi @tobiosmilkbox @tossamakageyama
Isn't his game still this friday lol?
reply retweet 1 likes
[Show replies]
'So, how'd the meeting with Shorty go?"
Tobio grumbled as he entered the gym they were training at. De Luca, Moretti, and Garcia were waiting for them in the common room, huddled together in front of a, probably watching a replay of the games.

"It was fine."

"Signore Tobio bailed out." Santini huffed.

"We still need to train." Tobio replied. He just snuck in a look despite the conflict in schedule. It had been months after all. "I'll meet him properly when it's the proper time."

Hinata was probably too focused in the game too. He wouldn't appreciate any distractions.

Dumbass Hinata

I'm in RIo

Meet up?

✓ read: Aug 1, 2016

Sorry!

Can't see you

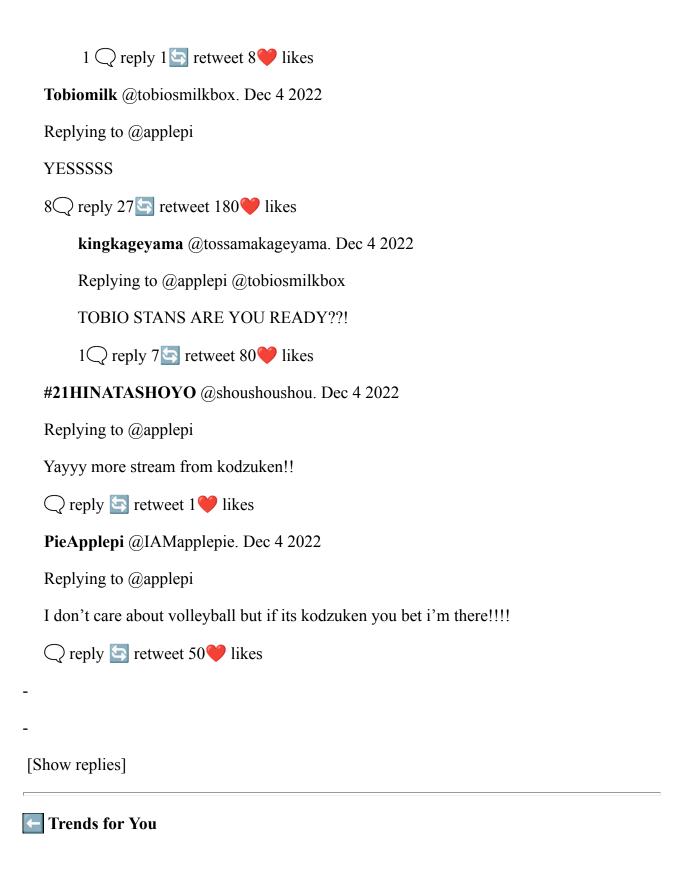
I have part time

And then training

Maybe next time? Good luck tho ✓ read: Aug 2, 2016 Why the fuck I haven't seen you in months and What did you do with oika Did you find a lover in Ri Was it what we talked about before you left fo Where are y why okay ✓ read: Aug 2, 2016 **Kodzuken ✓** @applepi Streaming in an hour. #FIVBWorldChampionship #FIVB #ItalyvsEgypt Translate Tweet 08:14 PM · Dec 4, 2022·Twitter for Iphone 50k retweets. 303k likes reply retweet **like** TOBIO ENTHUSIAST @tobitobifly. Dec 4 2022 Replying to @applepi AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA LETS FUCKING GOOOOOO 3 reply 15 retweet 100 likes MAR @MAR cookies Dec 4 2022

Replying to @applepi @tobitobitobifly

ALRIGHT HERE WE GO



1. Trending in Italy

FIVB World Championships

509.8k tweets

2. Trending in Italy

KING KAGEYAMA

- 99.3k tweets
- 3. Trending in Italy

MORETTI

- 93.3k tweets
- 4. Trending in Italy

ALI ROMA

- 79.2K tweets
 - 5. Trending in Italy

GARCIA

- 73.1k tweets
 - 6. Sports. Trending

AL ALY

- 60.3k tweets
 - 7. Entertainment. Trending

KODZUKEN

- 71.1k tweets
 - 8. Sports. Trending

ItalyvsEgypt

- 49.4k tweets
 - 9. Sports. Trending

Ahmed Kotb

- *52.7k tweets*
- 10. Celebrities. Trending

Viktor Nikiforov

- 34.2k tweets
- 11. Sports. Trending

Kastsuki Yuuri

- 40.9k tweets
- 13. Politics. Trending

ANTIFA

- 17K tweets
- 14. Music. Trending

BLACK PINK

- 8k tweets
- 15. Manga. Trending

DR. STONE

- 2, 345 tweets
- 16. Entertainment. Trending

DR STONE S2

- 1,882 tweets
- 17. Movie &T V. Trending

Ishigami Senku

- 1,482k tweets
- 18. Art. Trending

Asagiri Gen

- 1,210 tweets
- 19. Entertainment. Trending

RYUSUI NANAMI IS HERE

- 1,069 tweets
- 20. Anime. Trending

1,387 tweets

[CNN] 1 week ago.

FIVB 2022 Men's World Championship Hot Underway:

ROME, ITALY: The opening ceremonies for the 2022 Men's World Volleyball Championship starts with a bang as the opening ceremony begins with an explosive display of...<read more>

[VICE] 6 days ago.

Psychologist: What is sexting and is it common among teens?:

Sexting means sending or receiving sexually explicit videos, photographs, or messages via mobile phone or other digital device... <*read more*>

[Nippon Times] 1 week ago.

Japan vs Brazil: Japan misses victory with 3-5:

The Japanese representative, MSBY Black Jackals, missed victory against ASAS Sao Paulo after setter Juan Pacheco finished set 5 with a back toss to Ronaldo Esteves. Team captain Shugou Meian said that... < read more>

[BuzzFeed] 4 hours ago.

What Is A Platonic Relationship? Meaning, Benefits, & Drawbacks:

A platonic relationship is shared between two people who share a close bond, but do not have a sexual or romantic relationship. The word "platonic" means the absence of romance, meaning... <*read more*>

[Sports Italia] 3 hours ago.

Italy crushes Egypt with 1-3:

Palalottomatica, Rome: Ali Roma wins 1-3 over Egypt's Al Aly. Setter Tobio Kageyama finished the set with consecutive service aces... < read more>

[The New York Times] 6 months ago.

Anxious, Avoidant or Secure: 'Attached' Is the Book That's Shaping How We Understand Love:

Their instinctive aversion to intimacy can translate to more broken relationships with people they genuinely love, and thus, they are subjected to more loneliness... <*read more*>

[BBC] 32 minutes ago.

China: Man banned from all-you-can-eat BBQ for eating too much

A Chinese food live-streamer says he has been blacklisted from a grill buffet restaurant for eating too much.... < read more >

"Good job on that last serve Tobi!"

"Attaboy Tobi!

"Animal Tobi! Never know how you do it!"

The fresh win kept Tobio on a high for the rest of the evening, but good matches usually did for Tobio anyway. A win meant another step forward to the championship; it meant more games to play, it meant a chance to play against Hinata in the finals. He just needed to hold out on his own in his own block.

Halfway after getting ready to get back to their rooms, his phone buzzed with a message.

Dumbass Hinata

Congrats on the win stupid

DON'T YOU DARE LOSE UNTIL I DEFEAT YOU

✓ read: 9:36 PM

Tobio rolled his eyes.

Dumbass Hinata

I should be saying that to you

I'll kill you if you mess up

✓ read: 9:38 PM

Tobio smiled when he went to dinner that night.

Kodzuken

203M subscribers

#kodzuken #kenmakozume #FIVB #volleyball #FIVB Championship 2022

"People who just joined the stream. Welcome. We're already at set 3. Italy vs. Puerto Rico. Just a reminder that the subtitled video would be uploaded in the JVA official youtube account—yes the one Tetsu works at."

Top Chat

Applepiestan122 そのデュー!!!!

Pewpewpew I JUST WOKE UP

PieApplePi Fanculo!! Stanno recuperando!!!!

Sunshineshoyo OH NO MY LATAM ASS VS WANTING THE SHOYO VS TOBIO SHOWDOWN

Kenmamama Kenmaaa you looks so pretty!!!

Ninjashoyostan1 wait was that in???!

Sunshineshoyo WTF WAS THAT?!

Tobioosama @Sunshineshoyo IKR????!!!

"Mhm. Looks like it was out. Italy is challenging."

Sakuatsu69 the fuck?? That was definitely in.

Ethereal Lol so many volleyball fans where are all these people from?

Kiyomiomi What's happening?

Pewpewpew what

Atsumewmew I think it was the pin

"Yeah it's the pin. Hitting it is instant out. Point goes to Italy."

OikawaTotostan ah mierda tan cerca

IVYILY i like it when Kodzuken talks about volleyball

Kenmamama We should see Kenma play volleyball again!

AWB0231 i don't know who i want to win

Happy Villager This is like some intense blocker vs spiker battle

Edamameme GOGOGOGOGO ALI ROMA!!!

GenoSAI lo siento Tobi, eres lindo pero yo soy muy nacionalista

"Their blocks and receivers are very good. I think Kageyama-kun is going to have a hard time maneuvering over them to score."

ninjashovostan1 geez it's not even semi finals yet

daddykurapika I MADE IT

tobioosama Go Tobio!!! Wipe their asses with multiple service aces this time too!!

IVYILY I have no idea what's happening but im here to vibe

bonniemarcybell okay but what if Brazil vs Italy in the finals???!!

"Ah, Puerto Rico forced Italy to take a time out."

bonniemarcybell Wait did you see someone waving at him from the stands?

Iwachaaaaaaan Lol that looks like Oikawa

USHIJIMATEEDEES wow that block must be so hard to overcome

ArgentinaVolleyballFan Oikawa

NamikawaDai Oikawa

JelalFrenandez Toto

VenezianoIta Oikawa

genusevolution is he holding something up?

SilverKingKProject Oikawa

Otsutsukiwhiteboyz Oikawa

volleyballsmolleyball lmao someone screenshot Kageyama's face!!!

TotoBlesstherainsdowninAfrica I love how everyone just knows its oikawa lmao

иван брагинский Kodzuken. Мне нравятся твои стримы. с любовью из москвы!

yakuyekaterina LMAO LMAO LMAO LMAO

daddykurapika RUN FOR YOUR LIVES. HE LOOKS SO PISSED

robloxmaster420 how are there so many volleyball people here?

daddykurapika King Kageyama coming to beat asses like an asian mom and her trusty sandal!!

ushiwakasbigtiddies What flipped his switch? What did Oikawa say?

Sakuatsu69 LMAO

MuraseKaito F in the chat

Kiyomiomi SDKDKAJFHDKFHSFSLFKDSF

Atsumewmew KAGS CALM DOWN

[CNN] 1 hour ago.

Italy Wins Against Puerto Rico, Moves to the Next Round:

ROME, ITALY—Ali Roma bags another spot into the quarterfinals. Italy has been a favorite to win since Tobio Kageyama joined the team. Giovanni Russo, the team captain said so that this year's line up has been the strongest Ali Roma has ever been...<read more>

[VICE] 19 hour ago.

The Psychology of Commitment Phobia:

Someone in your life may have some commitment issues. Here's what it means if the idea of being in a relationship freaks you out... < read more>

[Anime News Network] 15 hours ago.

The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles Is Actually a Perfect Game:

That statement may come as a surprise for people who spent years wondering if the game would ever get an English localization at all... < read more >

[BuzzFeed] 4 hours ago.

How Dateable Are You Actually?

Are you as much of a catch as you think you are? Answer these questions and we'll tell you what... < read more >

[Sports Italia] 1 day ago.

Argentina Wins Against Poland: Match Ends with 5-3:

CA San Juan upsets Orzel Warszawa's chance to the quarter finals. The game ends with 5-3 after a setter dump to the center by Tooru Oikawa, facing off against his old countryman, Wakatoshi Ushijima... < read more>

[Daily Press] 12 hours ago.

For your kids' books: the New York Times bestseller list

IRON WIDOW, by Xiran Jay Zhao. (Penguin Teen) Zetian becomes a Chrysalises pilot to battle the Hunduns, but has an ulterior motive... < read more>

[BBC] 12 minutes ago.

Three Amigos summit: Awkward conversations for US with its neighbours:

If Joe Biden was looking for respite from the tricky global challenges he has faced in recent months, he may not find harmony closer to home... < read more>

Dumbass Hinata

Don't use other people to send messages dumbass

✓ read: 10:11 PM

SDJKSHDSLFDFDFDFDLKF

IN MY DEFENSE I DIDN'T KNOW HE WAS GOING TO DO IT FOR REAL!!!

Kodzuken ✓ @applepi

Brazil vs Russia tonight. Same time as usual. Please look forward to it

Translate Tweet

04:12 PM · Dec 4, 2022 · Twitter for Iphone

150k retweets. 270k likes

Q reply

retweet

ilike

NINJA SHOUYOU COME HOME @ninjashouyoustan. Dec 4, 2022

Replying to @applepi

YES MORE STREAM!!!

4 Q reply 45 ☐ retweet 1k ♥ likes

awesomecookies @FicwritesNcream. Dec 4, 2022

Replying to @applepi @ninjashouyoustan

Ah he's been at it nearly everyday! He needs to rest too!!!!

1 reply 1 retweet 8 likes

KAGEYAMA TOBIO'S ANGRY POUT @curryking4lyf. Dec 4, 2022

Replying to @applepi

Dude kodzuken GOAT idc about youtubers in general but dudee this man has done so much for the volleyball fandom

3 ☐ reply 27 ☐ retweet 80 ♥ likes

kingkageyama @tossamakageyama. Dec 4, 2022

Replying to @applepi @tobiosmilkbox

Kodzuken GOAT indeed

1 reply 7 retweet 10 likes

#21HINATASHOYO @shoushou. Dec 4, 2022

Replying to @applepi @tobiosmilkbox @tossamakageyama

Kodzuken king
□ reply □ retweet 1 likes
Shouyou Hinata ✓ @ninja_shouyou. Dec 4, 2022
Replying to @applepi
すばらしい!!!!!!
Translate tweet
Q10 replies ➡ 100 retweets ❤️ 12k likes
#21HINATASHOYO @shoushou. Dec 4, 2022
Replying to @ninja_shouyou @applepi
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
□ reply retweet 1 likes
Kodzuken livestream - FIVB WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP 2022 [LIVE NOW]

Kodzuken

204M subscribers

#kodzuken #kenmakozume #FIVB #volleyball #FIVB Championship 2022

"Hello, we have a guest today if you guys don't mind."

"Hello. I'm Akaashi Keiji. Nice to meet you."

"He'll help me stream today. I was going to ask another acquaintance, but she's busy covering the game on site. His brother is busy as well, so I asked a different acquaintance."

Top Chat

Nekoneko oh look a guest!!

PieApplePi he look familiar

Kenmamama he looks pretty too!!!

daddykurapika WHY DOES HE LOOK LIKE THE EDITOR OF METEO ATTACK??

Ninjahoeyo hiiiiiiii im glad i made it in time! I set an alarm this time cause i ama always asleep when u stream

Sakuatsu69 eyyyyy hello akaashi!

Ethereal how'd you two meet?

Tobioosama @daddykurapika not all japanese look alike wtf

"Highschool. We used to play against each other. We went to many training camps too."

"Yes. The last time we played with each other was in Haruko. It was a good game."

"Yeah. We definitely crushed you back then."

"Kozume-san has superior game sense and tactical intelligence. But that win was only once against many games."

"You don't need to sound so salty about it."

Sakuatsu69 AWW highschool friends.

Ethereal man volleyball's really deep in kodzuken's life huh

SUGAARMY Helllooooooo!!

Pewpewpew Okay @ daddykurapika is right. He looks like the editor of Meteo Attack

Atsumewmew how do you know that anyway??!

IVYILY more stuff to learn about kodzuken how niceee

Kenmamama HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEYYYYY! I MADE IT IM HERE!

AWB0231 WAIT AKAASHI KEIJI AS IN BOKUTO'S HUSBAND?!

Happy Villager who?

"Hmm yeah Shouyou does have it in his best interest to get to the championship games."

"Besides the fact that they're both volleyball monsters? It's lucky that Hinata-kun and Kageyama-kun are in different brackets. I think we can expect a showdown in the championship between our freak duo"

"Those two don't make sense. But it's what makes them interesting."

ninjashoyostan1 what are they talking about?

daddykurapika RIGHT?? HE'S DEFINITELY THAT PERSON

tobiooosama lol the way they talk about tobio and shoyo like they know each other

IVYILY OMG IT IS BOKUTO'S HUSBAND

bonniemarcybell the way the chat is just two different convos all together

"Well Italy is up against Argentina next. Their play styles are very complimentary."

"Mhm. It'll be a battle between setters. It's a shame we never managed to see Oikawa on the national stage. He would have been a good challenge."

"That's what happens when you have Ushijima Wakatoshi blocking your way. Shouyou and Kageyama-kun simply are monsters—all of Karasuno was to have caught up with those two."

"Hinata-kun has been pulling everyone since his first year, hasn't he? That training camp likely wouldn't be as successful without his and Kageyama-kun's monster quick. Then again Karasuno would not be the team it was without it."

USHIJIMATEEDEES LMAO USHIJIMA THE DREAM CRUSHER

ArgentinaVolleyballFan shut up!! Even if Oikawa never reached nationals he still won bronze at olympics!!!

JelalFrenandez SHUT UP

Iwachaaaaaaan HNGHHHHHHHHH

VenezianoIta Who cares if he never went to nationals??

SilverKingKProject SHUT UPPPPPP

Otsutsukiwhiteboyz OIKAWA GOAT SHUT UP

genusevolution Geez wtf is wrong with all of you?

volleyballsmolleyball where did all these Oikawa stans come from?

TotoBlesstherainsdowninAfrica NATIONALS IS A SENSITIVE TOPIC

NamikawaDai JHDALDADJADKAHL

yakuyekaterina dude

daddykurapika did all of Seijoh decide to get youtube accounts?

daddykurapika like dude

ushiwakasbigtiddies i love oikawa fr fr but some of his stans are so obnoxious jesus

Sakuatsu69 ^^

MuraseKaito (2)

Kiyomiomi SDKDKAJFHDKFHSFSLFKDSF

Atsumewmew F

"Isn't your libero playing for Russia, right now?"

"Yes, and Testu is on site right now to meet him."

"Ah. You don't look so thrilled about that."

"Oh I don't mind, but he's kind of cutting it close. I don't like being rushed."

"Ah."

Nekomimi here's to people who don't know anything about BokuAka

Nekomimi https://twitter.com/bokuakas/status/

819kyuu819 IKR THEY ARE A VERY CUTE IRL COUPLE!

ICeSCreAM Why does Kodzuken know a lot of people???

PinkQuartzDiamond does akaashi know Tetsu too??

YakitatteNippon I'm convinced everyone has a giant group chat filled with celebrities and Kodzuken is right at the middle of it

zlandsagagogogogogo okay but look it makes sense kodzuken knows tetsu testsu knows bokuto bokuto knows akaashi bokuto also knows ninja shoyo of course they'll know each other

Drawacirclethatsthatstheearth its almost like were all connected lmao

volleyballsmolleyball fun fact Kodzuken's old school Nekoma's motto is connect so yourre not far

youvebeenshreked how do you all know these shit?

yakuyekaterina dude

ushiwakasbigtiddies i mean they all do something volleyball related

daddykurapika the internet is a scary place

Sakuatsu69 same

revolutionarypearlrosquartz volleyball stans are scary

Kiyomiomi guilty

Atsumewmew lmao

[CNN] 1 minute ago.

Italy vs Argentina: Ali Roma Emerges as Victor Against CA San Juan:

Argentine world representative, CA San Juan, meets a stunning upset as Ali Roma blocked Argentina's last attack. Tooru Oikawa misfires at the last spike... < read more>

[HealthToday] 4 hours ago.

Overcoming Abandonment Issues in Relationships:

So you met a person you connected real nicely, and they're funny, cute, and they understand you more than anyone in the world. They're perfect for you in every way. Now it got you thinking about taking the next step and asking them out. But you're having second thoughts! Why can't you just ask them out... < read more>

[Nippon Times] 3 weeks ago.

Sudden Boom in Japan's Birthrate, Experts Claim Caused by Anime:

Where former Prime Minister Shinso Abe failed to succeed, the current survey experts claim to have anime accomplish what Japan has troubled over for the past years. Many citizens have mixed feelings on the.. < read more>

[BuzzFeed] 16 hours ago.

Tobio Kageyama and Shouyou Hinata: Rivals? Friends? Something More?

If you're active in the volleyball circles, then you would definitely know all about Japanese National Team Members Tobio Kageyama currently playing for Ali Roma as setter, and

Shouyou Hinata currently playing as opposite hitter for ASAS Sao Paulo. With the... < read more>

[Sports Italia] 1 day ago.

Brazil sweeps Russia, shooting straight to the semi-finals:

Opposite Hitter, Shouyou Hinata surprises everyone with a final quick attack against Ekaterinburg Cheagle's impenetrable defense, leading to their win. Russia's starting libero, Morisuke Yaku tells in an interview after the match that... < read more>

[Good Morning America] 42 minutes ago.

Man in Sumo Wrestler Suit Assaulted His Ex-boyfriend in Gay Pub After He Waved at Woman Dressed as a Snicker Bar

San Fransisco—A costume party held at a The Luxe Lounge ended in a fiasco as 25 year old Kirk Anderson assaulted his ex-boyfriend, Gerald Chiu when he waved at a woman ... < read more>

[Unknown Number]

[photo []

¡Qué quilombo

✓ read: 8:00 PM

Oikawa-san, is that you?

✓ read: 8:06 PM

Boludo

✓ read: 8:25 PM

?

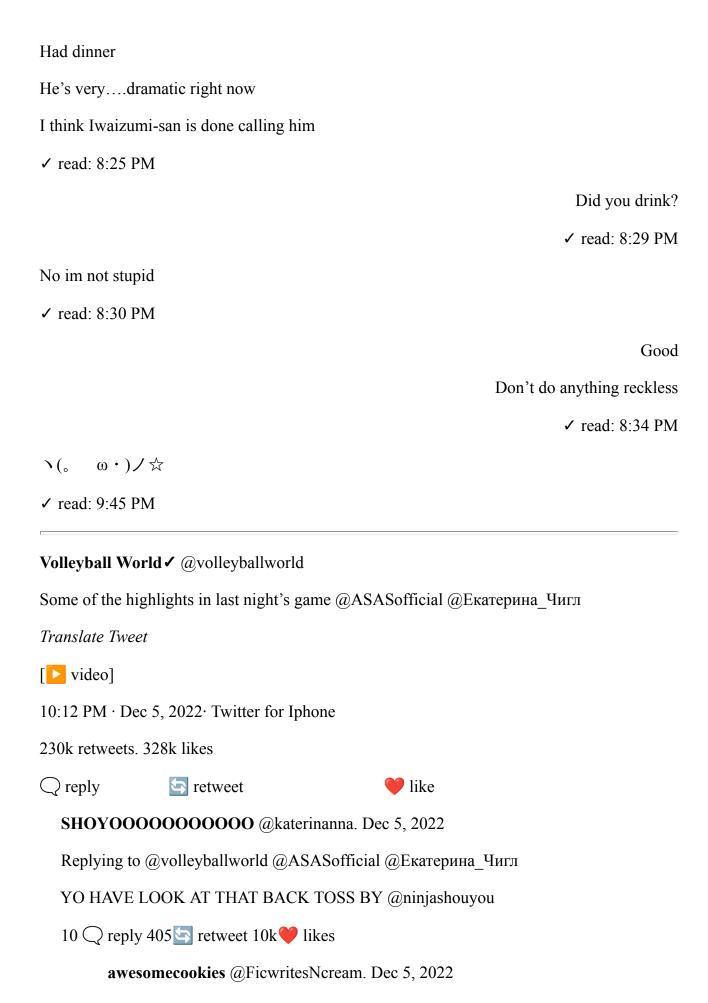
✓ read: 8:26 PM

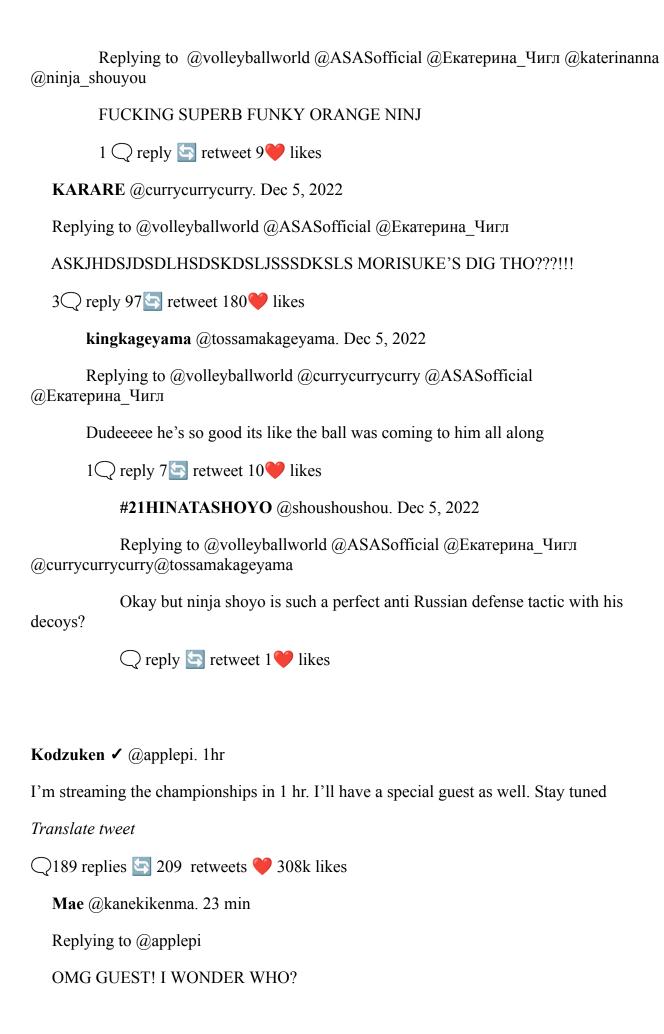
Dumbass Hinata

Oi

Is Oikawa-san with you?

✓ read: 8:28 PM





Hinata vs Kageyama LETS GOOOO!!! @hinatastan4ever. 1hr

GUYS! IT'S HAPPENING!!!!! #HinatavsKageyama #FreakDuoFaceoff

Q90 replies ≤ 309 retweets ♥ 21k likes

Mae @tobeflyyyyyyyy. 7 min

Replying to@hinatastan4eve

☐ reply ☐ retweet 12♥ likes

Tobio raised a brow. "Dumbass, what kind of question is that? That's stupid. Do you eat when you're hungry?"

"No. Just work with me here. I promise this is important. You love volleyball, right? Enough to fly to Italy for it." Hinata stared at Tobio with purposeful eyes. It took Tobio aback.

"Yes. There are better players in a foreign league, and I want to play against stronger teams." Tobio answered. "Why?"

Hinata nodded, considered it. Tobio didn't know what he was thinking about. He didn't know what conclusions he had reached. "Today, I proved myself equal to you. I promised you didn't I?"

"You did." Tobio admitted. "But you're still a few wins behind me."

"And I'll catch up! This is just the beginning. Just you wait." Hinata promised. It made Tobio quirk up the edge of his lips in amusement. "We still have lots of volleyball to play. I'll win the V-League championship ship on my first season—"

"Not even in your dreams."

"—and you still have to fly to Italy and win the Seria A championship on your first season." Hinata concluded with shining eyes. "Then I'll beat you in the World Volleyball Club Championship."

"Who said you're going to beat me?" Tobio scoffed. "I'll beat you, scrub."

"Not anymore a scrub." Hinata grinned. "The point is, there's so much more volleyball to play, Kageyama. V-League, AVC, the Nation's League, World Championships, the

[&]quot;Kageyama, you love volleyball don't you?"

Olympics...lots and lots of volleyball. And we're going to be busy, very very busy."

All he said was true, but Tobio still didn't know where this was all headed.

"Oi, what are you trying to say?" Tobio narrowed his eyes at Hinata.

"Kageyama, did you miss me when I was in Rio?" Hinata asked, opting to ignore Tobio's question. He always did that when he was deep in his own thoughts. He didn't wait for a response, likely because he wasn't expecting one. Hinata talked a hundred words a minute without ever sounding like he was talking too much. "Because I did miss you, even when I didn't know that I missed you. You're always in my mind, thinking about what you thought if you were there with me, and it was weird not having you next to me."

Tobio kept his gaze at Hinata, who swayed around while deep in thought. He didn't look at Tobio, he kept his eyes on the glittering city of Miyagi. Hinata talked, and Tobio listened, such was the arrangement of their relationship, unless it was about volleyball, then Tobio yelled and Hinata would grumble at him in return. So Tobio waited until Hinata finished.

"So now you're here in front of me, and you're leaving for Italy." Hinata sighed. "Then we're going to be apart again."

"It won't happen till next year."

"One year isn't a lot of time," Hinata said. "And we're too far from each other."

"So you have a problem with me leaving?" Tobio knitted his brows together. "I don't think you have a right to say that, when you left for Rio."

And he could see Hinata open his mouth, but no coherent words came out. Only incessant beeping and irritating noise where words should be.

Tobio slammed his alarm shut after it interrupted one of his dreams again, eyes wide awake and body heavy. Good grief. That was a rather grim dream before an important match.

He should put this to an end soon, this problem that had been clinging to him for years, starting today.

Tobio took a deep breath of the morning air.

Time to go running.

Kodzuken livestream - FIVB WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP 2022 [LIVE NOW]

Kodzuken

210M subscribers

"As promised we have another guest today." "Oya oya. It's Kuroo here. Nice to meet you all." "Forgive how he looks. He just got back from his flight." Top Chat Marxdaddy IT'S TETSUUUU!!!! PieApplePi TETSU???! KodzukanekiKen tetsu!!! **daddykurapika** why does he look like that psycho volleyball account that one time? Nekonekoneko Tetsuuuuuuu!!!! Ninjahoeyo OMG WE FINALLY SEE MORE OF TETSU!! Sakuatsu69 who? **Ethereal** Lmao the bedhead! **GawinAshryver** lmao flights am I right? "No, the bedhead is natural. That's just how he looks by default." "Hey. I actually managed to tame it nowadays." "I'm convinced a demon is living in it." "It doesn't." "It's sucking away your HP." "Oi don't treat me like one of your videogame characters."

Sakuatsu69 LMAO I'm loving them already.

Pewpewpew lol they're so calm and yet so feral at the same time

RarymondANCH hiiiiiii i just got here what's happening?

ItsumiMario i don't care about volleyball but were finally seeing more of Tetsu!!! Omg!!!

"What? You're here but you don't like volleyball? You should care about volleyball—you *are* the psycho volleyball account who trended awhile ago—yeah, youtube user *daddykurapika*, I am. What about it?"

"Kuroo, stop provoking the viewers."

tobiooosama pov: you're a regular salaryman who's coworkers with a rooster haired sleazy looking man who also happens to be dating the most popular youtuber ever

IVYILY pov: you're watching the most popular youtuber ever and see your coworker walk on screen casually while on pajamas

bonniemarcybell pov: you just realized your eccentric yet surprisingly handsome coworker is taken, gay, AND dating the most popular youtuber in the world.

"I'm actually bi and like them with long hair, but I could never convert Yaku to my side."

"I regret having you here."

USHIJIMATEEDEES that was surprisingly the dorkiest and yet hottest finger guns I've seen

letskillthislove Imao finger guns definitely bi then

perryshmirtz wait did he say he likes em with long hair?????

EDDRINKYOURMILK LMAO that explains a lot????!!! I mean kodzuken????

stewfordinner fxckyeh lmao kodzuken looks so done

"On to the serious part, let's talk about today's match. Italy vs. Brazil."

"It's a long time coming,"

"Yeah. How many years has it been since their last match against each other?"

```
"Three years. Don't look so glum."
"I'm not glum."
"You're down because Japan didn't win."
"Of course I am! It's literally my job, Kenma. I don't need to ask you about your opinion on
the games. It's written all over your face."
"What's that supposed to mean?"
"When you watch Shrimpy play, you get the same expression as when you're about to play a
game you just bought even after all these years."
"I don't make that face. I still don't know what face you're talking about."
"Really excited."
"No I don't."
"Yes you do."
"No I don't."
"You do."
"I do not."
819kyuu819 Is tetsu jealous of ninja shouyou? XD
ItsumiMario doesn't kodzuken sponsor hinata?
zlandsagagogogogogo kodzuken certified number one hinata stan
volleyballsmolleyball he buys all the ninja shouyou merch before we can
UtenAnthy it sounds like they've had this convo before
genasagiri doesn't he, as hinata's sponsor, get access to merch first?
revolutionarypearlrosquartz its cute that tetsu just knows?
```

[&]quot;Going back to the main topic at hand, I guess we can expect a ruthless match up ahead."

[&]quot;Yeah, those two never fail to give quite a show whenever they're on the same court."

"I'm expecting Shouyou to surprise all of us again. And it's Brazil and Italy. They're both known for their offensive power."

"Mhm. I'd like to see how it plays out. They've come a long way since training camp, haven't they?"

pieapplepi I'm convinced they know everyone

the13covenwitches does kodzuken know kageyama too?

anon125432893 lol volleyball sucks go back to playing video games

reigenaratakassaltsplash hey it's starting!!!!!

daddykurapika @anon125432893 shut up

asumakasumakurowasan hinata vs kageyama is actually happening guys!!!!!

revolutionarypearlrosquartz @anon125432893 rude??

Tobio had no reason to feel worried. This was just like every other game.

He filed his nails neatly as he always did before every game, a blue pouch filled with his supplies beside him as he worked with silent meticulousness on the bench in their locker room. The mindless rhythm kept him out of his own head and in the present.

This was like every other game, and Tobio treated each game with the same gravity as the last. There was no reason to worry, and at the same time, there was everything to worry about.

"Tobes! How are you doing?!" Garcia slid next to him on bench. "You finally get to meet your friend! You should look more lively."

"I think Tobi is frozen inside." Moretti followed after a quick change of clothes. "It's okay to be nervous Tobi. He's around here somewhere in the building, wanna go and find him?"

"No." Tobio huffed. "He's probably on his way to the toilet." That was what happened last time too. Two years of separation had made him anxious to see Hinata once again, and seeing him face to face for the first time in so long had made him weak.

"Playing hard to get huh?" Moretti waggled his eyebrows. "I like that."

Russo came by with a final announcement before the moment of truth. "We will go out in ten minutes. Get ready."

Tobio smiled up at Moretti, replying. "I'll meet him out there."

On the court where they were, once again, equals.

Trends for You

1. Trending in Italy

FIVB World Championships

609.8k tweets

2. Trending in Italy

Ali Roma

529.3k tweets

3. Trending in Italy

ASAS Sao Paulo

513.3k tweets

4. Trending in Italy

Shouyou Hinata

389.2K tweets

5. Trending in Italy

Tobio Kageyama

373.1k tweets

6. Sports. Trending

#FreakDuoFaceoff

212.0k tweets

7. Volleyball. Trending

Ninja Shouyou

209.1k tweets

8. Sports. Trending

KING OF THE COURT

159.4k tweets

9. Sports. Trending

VOLLEYBALL

- *52.7k tweets*
- 10. Celebrities. Trending

kodzuken

- 59.2k tweets
- 11. Entertainment. Trending

Tetsu

- 58.9k tweets
- 13. Gamers. Trending

TETSU IS HERE

- 17K tweets
- 14. Music. Trending

LIL NAS X

- 10.7k tweets
- 15. Manga. Trending

MP100

- 7, 345 tweets
- 16. Entertainment. Trending

Mob

- 2,882 tweets
- 17. Art. Trending

ARTSHARE

1,902 tweets

18. Food. Trending

MACARONI AND CHEESE

1.210 tweets

19. Entertainment. Trending

Shigeo

1.139 tweets

20. Anime. Trending

Reigen Arataka

1.037 tweets

The cheers in the stadium echoed on every inch of the venue, the claps and cheers paced the drumming of his heartbeat, threatening to leap out of his chest, adrenaline was high, the exhilarating rush of a new game crackles like lightning on Tobio's fingertips, waiting to be unleashed

This was normal. This was usual. This was routine.

It still excited Tobio anyway.

The announcer called their names one by one, and their team lined up to enter the court. The lights were bright, the energy high. This was the world stage, this was the top, and Tobio got to play on it.

On the opposite side of the court, where the commentators announced the opponents' names. Slowly, the other side was flocked with red and tan. The shock of orange hair bobbed along the line of tall men, equally tanned and equally energetic. His height was notably conspicuous among his peers, but Tobio was not looking at that right now. For now, he was focused at the brightness of his smile as he grinned up at Tobio who walked to meet him at the center, the net separating them.

At the foot of the stairs, in that old clubroom in their old school by the foot of the mountain. This same man before him vowed that he was going to defeat him on the world stage, ten, twenty years, no matter what it took.

"Today..." Tobio began.

Two years of training and separation, another two across the world play, nine years of waiting, finally.

Hinata smiled. "Today, once again..."

Today, Tobio had waited for this day to come, patiently, carefully, painstakingly.

It smelled like air-salonpas, he looked like the sun incarnate, he smiled like brightness stitched into flesh and bone. Tobio's heart had rattled in his hollow chest, today, on this court, it was not empty. Today, he was a fish jumping out of the water and meeting the sun. Today, he was coming home.

"I'm going to win!"

Kodzuken livestream - FIVB WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP 2022 [LIVE NOW]

Kodzuken

210M subscribers

#kodzuken #kenmakozume #FIVB #volleyball #FIVB Championship 2022

"—Brazil sends the ball to Esteves, smashing it to Italy's side—but de Luca manages to touch it! Russo hussles for the save, setting it for Kageyama's last hit and—Blocked by Hinata, jumping out of nowhere!"

"Shouyou baited them to do that. All those repetitive digs were getting on Italy's nerves."

"Unfortunately for Shrimpy, the ball falls just a little outside the line—wait, Brazil issued a challenge."

"There's murder in Kageyama's eyes.."

"Yeesh. No need to look that intense."

Top Chat

Marx-sensei Lmfao look at the two of them. They look so serious over a challenge

Kagecurry that was out tho??

Hinatatatata are you blind lmao

Ninjahoeyo hinata and kageyama are just making eyes at each other over the game

kagehina4eveah lmao yeah over timeout too

USHIJIMATEEDEES im screenshotting as much as i can right now lmao lmao their faces are priceless. Meme potential

AryaSansaDaenerys UMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM???!!

"They ruled it as an in. That would have been a technical timeout with Brazil leading with 16 points."

"Did Kageyama just curse out loud?"

"Hm. Shouyou is laughing at his face."

"He's being dragged away by his teammates. Amazing how they're not yet called out by the ref."

"They're not really disrupting the match. They're just making eyes at each other the majority of the time."

"Those two are really weird."

RarymondANCH THOSE TWO ARE REALLY WEIRD IKR???

princesspeach weird doesn't even begin to describe them

whatsyourfavoriteidea i like how kuroken just straight up acknowledges how weird kghn are

saltsplasharataka they seem like good friends ig???

flyingfishtobiuo Kageyama is like, a social media recluse, who knows what his relationship with hinata actually is

tobiomcguire yeah hinata stans are so well fed with all his livestreams and his tweets and his pics. Tobio stans get a scrap of meat every once in 2 years

madarauchihaGOAT lol remember when he had a curry commercial and all the kageyama stans ate that up? Me. I'm kageyama stans

"They've always been weird since highschool anyway. Batshit insane, and I'm friends with Bokuto. Volleyball monsters are weird."

"Mhm. Those two are strong together, even when they're going against each other—maybe even because they do go against each other. I could never slack off when Shouyou asks for sets."

"You said the same thing back then too, didn't you?"

"I did. It's more fun plucking his feathers apart. Trapping him in a cage."

"You get real scary sometimes, you know that?"

"I probably won't be able to get him on his knees like last time, but seeing Shouyou struggle and surprise everyone is fun."

"Well, that is true. Shrimpy has done nothing but surprise everyone since the beginning. Of course, it's partially thanks to Kageyama too."

"Mhm. Shouyou has done a number on Kageyama as well."

tobiooosama okay look Silva is serving

diehardvolleyballfun Go Brazil gooooooo!!!!

crowleykingofhellandserpentofeden DUDE DID YOU HEAR THAT BOOM??

lacucharachalalala THE POWER BEHIND THAT SERVE

eyyymacarena OH MY GOD THAT RECEIVE BY MORETTI

"Lucas Silva is one of the hard servers of the game, equal to Kageyama, isn't he? What's up with setters and serving? Miya Atsumu's like that too."

"Oikawa as well. Though Atsumu probably ranks higher than Kageyama in statistics."

"You should have practiced some hard hitting serves too, Kenma."

"Ughh."

"Well, no matter. That was a speedy offensive barely missing the libero's reach. So close. That's another point to Brazil."

"Brazil having two deadly setters in its arsenal allows them different gameplays and combinations. Italy needs to catch up."

"Between Pacheco's pinpoint intuition and Silva's analytical technique and precision, it's going to be difficult for Ali Roma. Now, what are they going to do?"

KAWAIICHI Silva is serving again!!! Go Brazil go!!!

leite Nos vamos ganhar!!!!

gungungunyougurt oh shucks that sounded louder than last time!!!!

EDDRINKYOURMILK hey hey hey hey!!! Is that legal? No one should be able to do that!

katsudonporkcutletbowl32 fuck fuck fuck they actually received it! madlads!!!

"Ah chance ball."

"It's a perfect time for a quick. Shouyou, Esteves, and Pacheco are running to the front. Silva is in prime position for a toss, will it go to the other setter, or will it go to the hitter—?"

Ligmaballzdeeznuts wait what happened??

daddykurapika SHOUYOU DID THE TOSS!! THAT WAS A QUICK ATTACK!!
ninjahoeyo THE REPLAY!!! THE REPLAY!!! SOMEONE DO THE REPLAY QUICK

Sakuatsu69 bruh bruh bruh bruh bruh

Aaaaaaaaaaaa dude?????!!

EDDRINKYOURMILK okay slowdown we need a breakdown for what happened!!!

"Mhm. First, Gomes receives the ball, Silva feints a pose for a toss but quickly switches places with Shouyou just as the spikers coordinate a synchronized attack. Shouyou makes the toss instead and passes it back to Silva who Italy's blockers were too busy with all the information on court to notice."

"That's right. With two setters on court, it can overload information, which is crucial in a battle fought in seconds."

"The Miya twins did this too during Haruko back in their third year, switching between setting and spiking, with a quick attack in their arsenal. It was really really annoying to deal with."

"Ah. You played against Inarizaki in the semi finals."

"Pacheco and Silva are already terrifying as a duo. Adding Shouyou—who can basically do anything now—in the mix makes it even worse. You're never sure if he's going to do a quick, a set, or a decoy. It makes ASAS' offense unpredictable."

[&]quot;That was a lot."

"Italy has their eyes on Shrimpy's infamous quick attack, huh? To think someone other than Kageyama or Miya Atsumu can recreate it."

"It's not a perfect recreation."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe when they were in highschool, it was. You can see it when you watch it carefully, Shouyou actually slows down to match Silva's tosses."

"Ah, you mean just like in set one."

"Comparing it from their current speed, Shouyou and Kageyama's quick easily outpaces what they can produce right now. It's still something to look out for of course."

ItsumiMario FUCKING INSANE

volleyballsmolleyball look at hinata's smug little gremlin face (affectionate)

shinebrightlikeadoitsu Tobio's face gets increasingly pissed off at every second of the match

zlandsagagogogogogogo is that what happened??

revolutionarypearlrosquartz can we appreciate that detailed breakdown from kodzuken? How tf did he even see all that?

"Italy called for a timeout."

"Can't be helped. Brazil is taking up the momentum of this set."

"That Shrimpy is having too much fun."

pieapplepi Did Hinata just wink at Kageyama?

MAR Kageyama's pout hahaha

drwhoregeneration14 is that even a pout? It looks like a menacing grin

daddykurapika ARE THEY SERIOUSLY FLIRTING??? IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MATCH??

revolutionarypearlrosquartz the sexual tension....is so.....thick.....

reigenaratakassaltsplash naaaauuuuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrrr

"Tobi, calm down." Russo dropped a towel on his head and patted his shoulder. "We'll get them next time."

"I am calm." Tobio took a deep breath. Damn that shrimp. He really got better in the few months they were apart. It was making Tobio's heart race. "I am calm." His head was at its clearest right now, running the last move over and over again in his head, visually stimulating it all over his head.

Hinata got him good. The combination he pulled off with their setter wasn't something they had a chance to showcase in the previous games. It was either something pulled off at the spur of the moment, or it was something they haven't practiced properly yet. Hinata did enjoy pulling off attacks in the middle of the match, always evolving at impossible speed.

His tosses were getting better too, the form, the direction, the speed. He was obviously practicing.

Tobio's mouth stretched into a grin.

Yeah. This was fun.

"Captain," Tobio removed the towel on his head. "I have a plan I want to take on."

This was really fun.

Volleyball World ✓ @volleyballworld 23 min.

Live now!! @ASASofficial vs @aliromaitalia_official watch the stream on our official links bellow #FIVB2022

Translate Tweet

[video]

9:00 PM · Dec 7, 2022· Twitter for Iphone

130k retweets. 221k likes

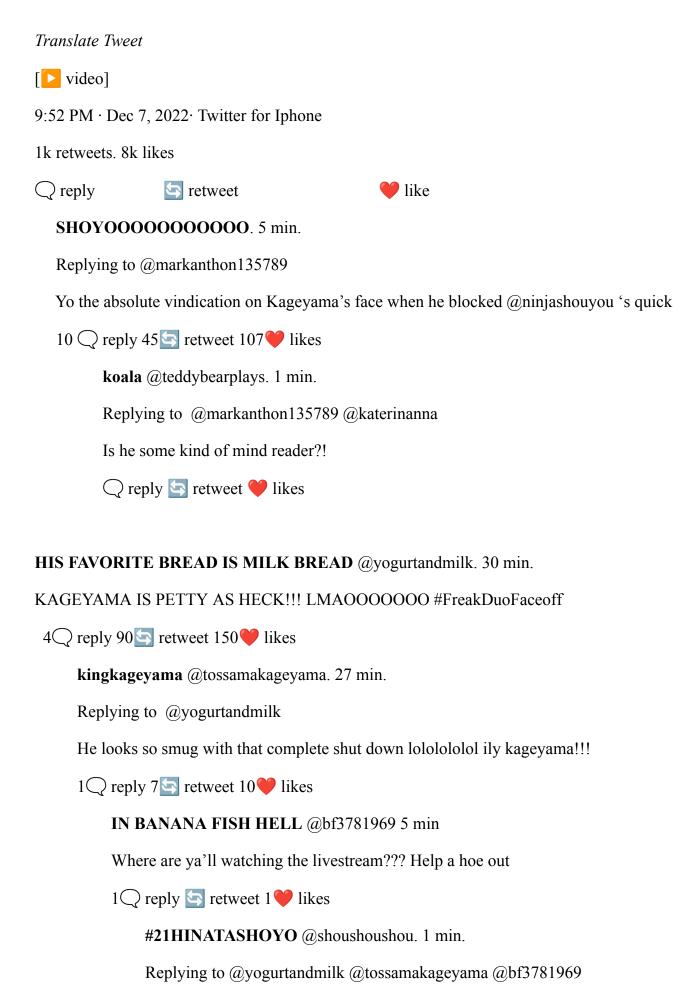
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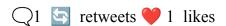
Mark @markanthon135789

When I told you I screamed I mean I screamed #FreakDuoFaceoff #FIVB2022



You can watch it in Kodzuken's stream!!!!!
1 ← reply ► retweet 1 ♥ likes
IN BANANA FISH HELL @bf3781969. 39 sec.
Replying to @yogurtandmilk @tossamakageyama @shoushou
THANK YOU!!!
□ reply retweet 1 likes
ALI ROMA BETTER WIN OR ELSE @kageyamastan_wanawan. 3 min.
This game is giving me a heart attack! But we're in set 3 now!!! Kageyama to serve first!!! #FreakDuoFaceoff
Translate tweet
○ 18 replies 29 retweets 190 likes
ALI ROMA BETTER WIN OR ELSE @kageyamastan_wanawan. 3 min.
But really, the way Ali Roma shut down Brazil's 2 setter AND Hinata!!!! GENIUS
Q1 replies ☐ retweets ♥ 20 likes
HINATAHAREM @beachindoorninja. 5 min.
Okay but everyone look at Hinata looking at Kageyama who's also looking at his two setters glaring at Kageyama while being protective of Hinata #FreakDuoFaceoff
Translate tweet
[video]
○10 replies □ 100 retweets ♥ 208 likes
Mavis CW: Dr Stone @regularvolleyballenjoyer. 2 min.
Bestie ily but wtf are you saying?
Q1 ➡ retweets ❤ 1 likes
Pink pearl's leia hair buns @pinkpearlvolleyball. 37 sec.

SO TRUE BESTIE. HINATA'S HAREM OF SETTERS KEEP GROWING

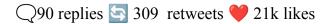


amber @mobpsycho100fanaccount. 1hr

Idk why Kageyama is trending right now but i need you all to see the best kageyama out there! I cant wait for S2!!!!!

Translate Tweet

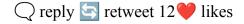




Annika semi IA for finals @annika arts. 7 min

Replying to @mobpsycho100fanaccount

Kageyama Shigeo so true bestieeee



Kodzuken livestream - FIVB WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP 2022 [LIVE NOW]

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"That's been a minute since the rally has started, neither wants to let the ball drop. We're now in set 5 and its anybody's game at this point!"

"Kageyama's serves before this rally have racked up so many points. Kageyama, who's known best for finishing the fifth set with merciless service aces, is a looming threat to anyone, even with Shouyou in the defense. Brazil obviously wants him out of the service position, and Italy wants to prolong the pressure. Halfway through the set, if Brazil doesn't knock Kageyama out, Brazil will lose."

"Being in the same position as them in the past, being in the adrenaline of a game, that single minded focus not to let the ball drop. Even when it's painful, it's like all your vision zeros into the ball and your position on the court alone."

"Mhm. But it's fun."

"It is, isn't it?"

Top Chat

thedirtunderyourshoe man the way they talk about volleyball makes you wanna try it

Thescientist the way these teams make me wanna get up and move!

axolotltardygrade IKR?? Maybe I'll give volleyball a try after this!!!

bibblybubblywibblywobbly I just got in the stream what's happening?

USHIJIMATEEDEES to anyone interested in learning volleyball after this tetsu has a video on how to start your volleyball journey in the official JVA channel its worth checking out!!!

timelordxxxdonna for real tho??!

USHIJIMATEEDEES YEAH I JUST FOUND OUT!

"The ball dropped on Brazil's court. Italy is leading with 10-6. Five more points to go."

"They still haven't gotten Kageyama out of the service spot, huh? Things are looking dire for Brazil"

"The pinpoint accuracy of his serves got even better. The way he aims for the back corner of the court and then switches to the other side, it's like he's playing with you. Even as a pinch server, Kageyama-san is a fearsome opponent."

"Hmm. Even if that shrimpy is a mass weapon of stamina and energy, this rally is surely taking a toll on him the more it continues. Even so he's smiling, isn't he?"

"Fufufu. Shouyou is just like that. I wouldn't expect anything less from him"

KanmuriShigeruMyLove god i can't look anymore! I can't look! Everytime the ball goes up my heartrate spikes up

princesspeach i needed to find my inhaler cause the game gave me an asthma attack between set 4

mineisbeingcreative hpw do you even keep calm in this situation??

serizawaking shit have you seen that clean bump? The sound is terrifying

greenisnotacreativecolor Moretti, de Luca, and Russo is the highest possible block combination!!!!

Yakitatejapuns AKDJSLJSDLSDSDS;DS

"Shrimpy manages to break through!."

"They finally get to bump Kageyama off the service spot."

"Brazil's counter attack is now."

├ Karasuno batch 2013-2014 **├** (14)

Suga

Another long rally!

Slksjdsdfddfkdfk

Just let the ball drop already!!

✓ read by 14

10:32 PM

Asahi

Suga you're not getting another noise complaint from your neighbors are you?

Its why we can't videocall anymore

✓ 10:33 PM

Suga

I'm watching in my bathroom

Stupid timezones. Why does it have to start at 5 am in japan anyway?

Nevermind that Brazil is tied with Italy at 14-14

It's going to be a deuce

✓ 10:32 PM

Tsukishima

Wtf why are all of you awake??

✓ 10:34 PM

Noya

Oi Tsukishima! Glad to see you join us!!!

It's currently 2 AM in India!

✓ 10:36 PM

Daichi

Jeez settle down all of you

✓ 10:34 PM

Shimizu-Tanaka

Hello Tsukishima

Ryu says hi to Tsukki

He's still busy bawling his eyes out

✓ 10:37 PM

Tsukishima

Hello

Don't all of you have a job to wake up to?

✓ 10:39 PM

Yachi

But Yamaguchi is here with us?

✓ 10:40 PM

Yamaguchi

Ah Tsukki you're awake

✓ 10:40 PM

Tsukishima

Is that why I woke up alone?

✓ 10:41 PM

Yamaguchi

Eheheh gomen Tsukki~

10:42 PM

✓ read by 14

He was tired. Tobio's arms and legs were aching. Any more of this and he was probably going to pass out. The opponents from the other side of the net weren't any different either. He could tell. Even though Hinata was a wellspring of stamina, he was bound to get tired at some point, especially with all of the digging and jumping he had done throughout five sets.

His thighs were going to split open, Tobio was panting through harsh breaths.

But...

"LEFT!!"

The rest of the movements were a frenzied combination of instincts and desperation. Nothing else mattered. Just keep the ball in play. One point at a time. One ball, one play, one defense, one attack. From the corner of his eye, Tobio could see Hinata signaling for a toss. Was it going to him? Was it going to number 25? Was it going to the center? Maybe it was going left after all?

Tobio narrowed at the set up. The first time caught him by surprise, but it won't work on him the second time. He knew Hinata. He knew the curves of that body, down to the spring of his jump, the peak of his spikes. Tobio had known it since they were teens. Tobio knew him best.

So that setup wasn't going to fool him anymore.

"One touch!!" Tobio yelled. Hinata had tossed the ball to number 19, and while his setting skills had improved since the last time they met, Tobio could still read the obvious tells in Hinata's body.

"Sorry it's long!" Moretti groaned. The ball was sailing across the net but Tobio ran to it before it could, arms stretched to reach it. One inch, one centimeter, even just a graze of his fingers. So long as he could touch the ball, he would win. When it comes to setting, nobody can beat Tobio, and Hinata still has a long way to go.

He was tired. Tobio's limbs were very heavy.

And yet, he still didn't want to stop. He never wanted to stop.

Yes, he wanted to keep playing. He wanted to keep playing volleyball.

Tobio grinned.

The pad of his thumb and his middle finger changed the ball's trajectory to the direction of Garcia's waiting palm, and when the toss was delivered, Tobio had already hit the ground. All his hitters had believed in him and jumped. He could zero in the moment Hinata had noticed the movement. He noticed too late.

He wanted to keep playing. He wanted to keep playing volleyball with Hinata forever.

Tobio was sprawled over the floor, finally the ball had landed on the other side of the court. Tobio looked up and saw Hinata on the other side of the net, still frozen in place. The whistle blew. The match was over. There were cheers from the crowd, but for now they couldn't hear any of it. They were still frozen from shock.

Italy won. Tobio won. Ali Roma was this year's world champion.

Slowly, Hinata turned to him with a bright grin on his expression, frustration scrunching up his face, but obviously delighted as well. Then he laughed, a full hearty giggle of joy for someone who had just lost. His face shone bright even at the flashes of the stadium lights.

And oh was this how he looked like years ago?

"Oi," Tobio smirked. Months of waiting, patient, careful, painstaking. Finally, "You're here."

Hinata sighed, reaching out a hand to hoist him up. "Yeah. I'm here."

Volleyball World ✓ @volleyballworld 23 min.

Congratulations to @aliromaitalia_official !!!! #FIVB2022

Translate Tweet

[video]

11:00 PM · Dec 7, 2022 · Twitter for Iphone

413k retweets. 301k likes

Q reply

retweet

ilike

Mark @markanthon135789 1 hr.

THAT WAS SUCH A GOOD GAME HOLY SHIT!!! #FreakDuoFaceoff #FIVB2022

Translate Tweet

29 \bigcirc reply 1.1k \bigcirc retweet 2k \heartsuit like

Mark @markanthon135789 1 hr.

That said look at this image of kageyama and hinata sitting on the sideline while stretching and talking together #FreakDuoFaceoff #FIVB2022

Translate Tweet





SHOYOOOOOOOO. 5 min.

I'M A DIE HARD ASAS FAN BUT THAT WAS A WELL DESERVED WIN! CONGRATULATIONS @aliromaitalia_official

koala @teddybearplays. 1 min.

Jeez i just saw something amazing. The #FreakDuoFaceoff was one of the best games I ever saw!!

HIS FAVORITE BREAD IS MILK BREAD @yogurtandmilk. 30 min.

I have no words dudes. I think my mind went blank at the third 1 min rally in the 5th set #FreakDuoFaceoff

kingkageyama @tossamakageyama. 27 min.

SDSFHDLDFDFDFL; I DON'T EVEN HAVE THE WORDS BRB CRYING

1 reply 7 retweet 10 likes

Dude that was one of the most intense games i've seen. Mostly from the game but also because of all that homoerotic tension!
1 reply retweet 108 likes
#21HINATASHOYO @shoushou. 1 min.
Shouyou lost!!! But Ali Roma absolutely deserves that win, congrats to them!!!!
1 reply retweet 1 likes
ALI ROMA WON @kageyamastan_wanawan. 1 hr
THEY FREAKING WON HAHAHAHAH I FUCKING MANIFESTED IT #FreakDuoFaceoff
Translate tweet
Q29 replies ☑ 109 retweets ❤️ 893 likes
<u>**</u> <u>**</u> <u>**</u> <u>**</u> <u>**</u> <u>**</u> <u>**</u> <u>**</u>
I may not know much about volleyball but seeing this with kodzuken has been very fun
Translate tweet
Q1 replies ♀ 2 retweets ♥ 10 likes
Achan @coffee_tea_me. 1hr
That was so cool! The very best game of the season no doubt!!!
Translate Tweet
□ replies □ 9 retweets ♥ 10 likes
Nico @nico_nico_nami. 59 min
AHHHH it's over!!!
☐ reply ☐ retweet 12 ♥ likes

They did not exchange anything meaningful for the evening, not yet anyway, nothing beyond the usual small talk, the usual tally of their wins, 1,312 for him and 1,314 for Hinata. That was routine too, a greeting. The tally was something nearly tangible between them, neat digits that put their relationship into some kind of value.

It was to be expected. They were in a foreign country, with duties and responsibilities such as interviews, press circuits, sponsorship parties, team after parties. Italy won in its homecourt after all, and everyone in the media was having a field day. All the strings attached to being able to play volleyball for a living. Tobio had to meet with his manager, he bet Hinata had to as well.

Floods of congratulations came in waves to his phone. A text message from the old Karasuno team, a few from the old Adlers team, one from Tsukishima, Yamaguchi, and Yachi, an excited phone call from Sora and Miwa, a message from Natsu as well. Tobio wasn't in a hurry to meet Hinata, who he suspected was just as bombarded with his own things to do.

It was funny like that, how Tobio kept waiting for months, and yet was taking his sweet time when the man was right in front of him.

"You're scared." Garcia chuckled as the team gathered in a small booth in a restaurant nearby for drinks, a tradition they did every after a big match. It was a little cramped, but it was admittedly cozy. "Didn't know there were things *the* Tobio Kageyama is scared of."

"I'm not." Tobio huffed. It was a ridiculous thought. It was just Hinata.

"So you're going to call him and meet him tomorrow, right?" Santini nodded at him, a little beyond tipsy and already leaning on Moretti to keep upright.

Tobio scowled, though he knew this wasn't something he could refuse anyway. So he took his phone and dialed Hinata's number, all while everyone stared at him with what he would like to think was encouragement, as baffling as that was.

"Hello?" The phone picked on the fifth ring. "Kageyama? Why are you calling?" The voice was pointedly slurred and groggy.

"Oi dumbass. Are you drinking again?"

Hinata made a noise at the back of his throat. "No, I was—" A yawn. "I'm sleeping.... was sleeping. It's past midnight, Kageyama. How are you still awake?"

"Strange." He murmured. "I thought you'd be drinking now. You always often do when we call."

"Hey don't make it sound like I'm an alcoholic, Bakageyama. Idiot! Idiot Kageyama!" Hinata scolded him even through his sleepy haze. "Okay. What did you call for?"

"Oh." Tobio's throat closed up, making it difficult to talk. "Let's meet up tomorrow."

Hinata laughed. "Is that all? Of course we would."

"I've got a room ready." Tobio didn't know where this was coming from. "Move out of your hotel and stay there instead."

"Geez, you could ask nicely, you know?"

"Do you want the free lodging or not, dumbass?!"

"Of course I want it!"

"Good." Tobio nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Fine." Tobio scowled. "Good night."

"Night."

"Bye."

"Mhm."

A long pause. Tobio waited for Hinata to hang up, but seeing as he made no move to do it, Tobio clicked the end call button instead.

Tomorrow. They'll meet tomorrow for sure.

Tobio had nothing to worry about.

Dumbass Hinata

Meet me tomorrow in Villa Borghese

I'll see you in the morning

Let's meet by Borghese Gallery

✓ read: 12:26 AM

Roger that \sim

✓ read: 12:29 AM

"Mhm?" The sleepy spell of early morning was broken by Tobio's query. Hinata's equally questioning hum filled the silence with his voice, soft yet earth shattering. He was pliant in bed, right next to Tobio, so close yet never close enough. "Why?"

[&]quot;Why didn't you meet me in Rio?"

"We were in the same city. You could have met me if you wanted to." Tobio took a deep breath, closing his eyes. Hinata wouldn't let anything stop him if he really wanted it. "I would have waited."

"I know." Hinata chuckled.

"Tsk. Dumbass." How unexpectedly harsh of him.

"Aw did you miss me?" Hinata rolled to his side to face Tobio, a grin on his face. "I have to say I'm a little happy."

"Shut up. I didn't."

"You're pouting." Hinata pressed his finger on Tobio's cheek. "You're cute when you do that."

"Ugh forget it." Tobio swatted the hand away from his face and rolled to his side, facing away from Hinata's knowing look.

"I'm kidding." Hinata pressed his head against his back. Tobio huffed, craning his head to look at Hinata and saw nothing but seriousness reflected in his eyes. "We weren't standing on the same stage yet—or rather, maybe I wasn't ready to see you back then."

"Not ready?"

"Mhm. Not ready." Hinata continued. "Would you have wanted to see me if I wasn't at my best yet? You would have admonished me for slacking off! And if you were in my place, you wouldn't want to see me if you weren't at your greatest, right?"

Tobio scowled. That part was true too.

"It was lonely in Rio, being in a new place without knowing the language, learning volleyball from scratch, not having friends. I kept getting lost. One day I sat in my bedroom by myself and cried, you know?"

No, Tobio didn't know, but maybe he would soon. Maybe he would understand.

"I figured I didn't want to keep crying, so I got on my bike and went to the beach. That's when I met Oikawa."

"Ah."

"Yeah. It wasn't so bad after that. He reminded me that becoming a beginner wasn't so bad." He laughed softly, eyes fond. "You were already in the Olympics, and I'm still catching up. It wasn't time to meet up. I'm sure you know what it's like to not be ready."

"Then I'm guessing you're not ready now either." Tobio said.

"No."

"Even though you just said being a beginner wasn't so bad. Seriously."

Hinata didn't respond for a while. "Before I left for Rio. What you said to me—you told me I didn't have to do anything about it."

"I'm not forcing you into anything you don't want."

"You could have said it better." Hinata moped. He shot up from bed and crossed his arms across his chest, looking at Tobio with a pointed gaze. "I guess you were being selfish in your own way too, even though you weren't ready either. You knew I was leaving, and yet you went ahead and said that. You wanted me to think of you even when we're apart, admit it! It explains the phone case too!" He nudged his arms.

"Tsk. As if." Tobio pushed Hinata's limbs away. "You were the one who invited me to go out, complaining about how everyone gave you gifts for Rio."

"Whatever." Hinata huffed. "It's not like you need to. Even if you didn't say that, I would have still thought of you anyway. Eating, sleeping, playing volleyball, filing my nails, going to the toilet—"

"Gross."

"—you're always there. It's almost scary!"

"Don't make it sound like it's my fault, dumbass."

"It is your fault!" Hinata stuck out his tongue. "Someone asked me out on a date and the first person I thought about was you. When I go to dates, I can hear your voice yelling at me to stop wasting my time. I thought I was going crazy. Horrible. It was horrible!"

Oh. Tobio admitted that actually felt good. There was a very smug part of him getting stroked while picturing how that played out.

"Wipe that satisfied smirk off your face!" Hinata exclaimed. "Well, thinking about you did make things less lonely." He huffed and unwillingly admitted. "At the same time, it also made everything lonely. I could picture it out, you looking back and saying *took you long enough*. When I play volleyball, I just feel like you're all there and *gwahh* but I'm also very aware that you aren't like *bam*. I don't know how to put it into words."

"I get it, dumbass." Tobio snickered. If there was any language he was proficient in, it was volleyball first, and second Hinata, but the two often intermingled with each other, if they weren't already the same. "I get it."

7:30 AM on the dot.

Tobio was walking in the park, wearing his usual tracksuit and scarf, backpack behind him. Maybe it was sixth sense, maybe it was the man's overwhelming presence, maybe Tobio was simply attuned to his very existence, but he snapped his focus to the side, sensing a pair of eyes staring at him.

And there it was. Brown eyes as warm as the sun.

They stared at him, wide with understanding that was driven deep in his bones, deep in the habits that make up his body. And in that very moment, Tobio knew that without another moment wasted, he had to run.

Tobio's legs had already carried him away before his mind could formulate a thought, bolting forward with a sudden desperation washing inside him. Expectedly, Hinata was already beside him, keeping pace. There were joggers at this time, trying to exercise this early in the park too, but both of them easily overtook them in their race. They zoomed past the lake and the different statues decorating the view. Tobio had already gotten his fill of them over his stay. The scenery was nothing new.

Hinata, though, this was entirely new having him here after days of visualizing his figure running ahead of him.

The villa was drawing nearer. The two of them were trying to outpace each other, adrenaline rushing through their body, the thirst to win, to make everything a competition. Running was a ritual for them, this too was a force of habit.

"I win!" Hinata yelled as he sprawled all over the gallery's doorstep, tanned hand infuriatingly stark against the marble floor. "That's 1,315 wins for me, 1,312 loses, and 138 ties." He wheezed.

"That's only because I'm bringing a bag." Tobio gasped, hands on his knees. "I would have crushed you without the extra weight, dumbass." He scoffed, deciding to ignore Hinata's explicit protest and rummaged through his backpack.

"We won our championships while you lost to Ushijima. I deserve another point." Hinata said.

"I played more games than you."

"I gained more muscle than you while we're apart."

"I ran more kilometers than you while you were away."

"I'm running in the sand. Plus points!"

"I've been running since I was a kid!"

"Same here!"

"You rode a bike!"

"Up a mountain! A 120 minute walk mountain! In less than 30 minutes!" Hinata exclaimed. "That counts as something!"

"It doesn't matter. I ran more than you ever did. I have been running since I was a baby. My grandpa said I wanted to crawl away the moment I came to this world!"

"And I did the same! In fact, I was born earlier than you, so I have six months—"

"It doesn't count!"

"It does!"

"It doesn't!"

"Argh." Hinata threw his hands up in frustration. He always used the six month gap between their birthdays to his advantage whenever he could, and Tobio was not having any of it. He started sulking though, as he always did when he didn't get his way. Obviously, Tobio didn't need to do anything about it, and Hinata was going to go back to his usual cheerful self.

Regardless.

"Here." Tobio finally showed him the ball from his bag and Hinata immediately perked up at the sight of it.

Tobio passed the volleyball in the air, and Hinata scrambled up to return it, settling on a rhythm they both liked best, fitting right in place. With this, Tobio felt right in place.

"How are you liking Italy so far?" Tobio asked later as they both laid on the grass, the day had passed to late afternoon and they had done nothing but play volleyball the entire time, including competitions in between. They were currently tied at 1,338, having given up for the day after Hinata broke his consecutive receive streak for the thirtieth time that afternoon.

"Hm." Hinata sat up, grass sticking on the back of his coat and all over the fuzz of his orange hair. "I really like their panini." He brushed himself off from the blades of grass. "And their affogato too, but it's really cold. I forgot how cold winters could be. It doesn't snow in Brazil often and summers are very hot."

"It's not snowing yet."

"Yeah"

He did look tanner than before, even with all the sunblock he applied on his skin. He was a nice shade of bronze, and Tobio would tease how much he resembled a tangerine with his orange hair if it didn't suit him. No doubt his tan lines would be very prominent too.

Tobio bit the inside of his cheek and tried not to think about it.

"How about you? Have you started dating or something?" Hinata laughed. "Finally fallen in love with someone?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Tobio rolled his eyes. Then after a heartbeat. "Have you?"

"Dates?" Hinata said. "Is being forced into one count? It's only been volleyball for me lately. Sao Paulo isn't like Rio, but having a grasp at Portuguese makes the move so much easier than years ago. Fernando is teaching me Spanish though, and it's a little similar to

Portuguese, and yet there's a lot of differences too, it gets confusing. Adjusting to the team wasn't as easy as MSBY, but they're all good people, very friendly too."

As expected. Hinata manages to connect with anyone and carve out a place for himself anywhere in the world.

"One of your setters is especially friendly." Tobio scoffed.

"Aw, are you jealous Kageyama?" Hinata had a pleased smirk on his face. It was horribly smug, it got on Tobio's nerves.

"As if." Because honesty was so difficult for him. "How are their tosses?"

"Good but it's nothing like yours, or Atsumu-san's. It's not like Oikawa's or Kenma's either." Hinata started. "Juan is younger than us, do you know? He's a very *gyun* kind of person, relying more on instincts than strategy. Even so, it's surprisingly accurate though, crazy high intuition." He scratched his chin. "Lucas is different. He's older, more analytic. He was fun to play with, but he's retiring after one more season in the Superliga."

"You're slower than you usually are in the game." Tobio pointed out. "It was easier to block you."

"I can do other things besides a minus tempo quick, and they planned to use that to our advantage you know!" Hinata sniffed. Tobio rolled his eyes. Of course he knew.

"They also taught you how to toss properly. You don't suck as much."

"Yeah! Kenma and Oikawa gave me techniques when I was in Rio, but Juan helped me with my form."

That ticked Tobio off quite irrationally. "I can still tell which direction you're tossing to. He sucked at teaching you."

"Argh!" Hinata spluttered. "Well....he wasn't good at teaching, I admit. He moves on intuition that doesn't translate well into words."

"Says the person who talks exclusively in onomatopoeia."

"Jeez, you're still as mean as ever." Hinata stuck out his tongue. "But in the end, I just focused on studying your form instead, visualizing how you do it, and eventually getting the hang of it."

Oh.

Hinata was studying him.

With that revelation, Tobio felt himself smirk a little.

"What are you grinning for? Wipe that out of your face. I wasn't just watching you, I was watching Atsumu too! And Lucas was very helpful with his tips!" Hinata smacked him, to

which Tobio retorted with a kick to his shin, even with the awkward angle from being plastered on the ground. Hinata grumbled and started kicking back. God, could he stop being feisty for a minute? "How are your hitters? He asked midway through the impromptu kicking competition.

"Good. Better than everyone I've trained with so far." Tobio said. "Some of them lack speed, but they make up for it with good aerial mastery and raw power."

"Yeah, they all hit hard like Ushijima-san." Hinata exclaimed. "Russo-san's consecutive spikes on the second set nearly tore my arms off. Crazy. The blocks too, all of them were very formidable. It had an unsettling feeling trying to get a spike past them. It was like the last Olympic game against Italy. Oh you played against that one guy—the one with the *woosh* spike in the VNL right? It was your championship game in the Super Lega."

"Marino." Tobio filled in. "In Modena. He's still nineteen, but he's promising."

"Man, nineteen huh?" Hinata rubbed his face, groaning at the grass in his hair and started to pick them off. "We were nineteen once. Isn't that so weird? The next thing I know, I'm already thirty and my joints are going to start cracking every time I move."

"You're not stretching enough." Tobio sat up and brushed the grass off him as well. "Drink more milk. Maybe your bones will get stronger and you'll grow taller."

"I swear you're trying to pick a fight." Hinata grumbled as he ran his hand through Tobio's head, carefully picking the leaves and the rest of the park stuck on the strands of his hair. "Your bangs have grown."

Tobio looked up and stared at Hinata's pensive face, focused on cleaning him up, from the furrows of his brow, to the slope of his cheeks, the small jut out of his lips while in deep concentration as he pulled the last of the leaves. The angle of light bouncing off of him made it seem like he was glowing.

"What?" Hinata looked down to meet his gaze. He quirked up his lips. "Wanna have a go at it?"

Tobio rolled his eyes, the sentence likely meant to have double meanings. "Come on. You still have your things in your hotel right? Let's go. We're checking out."

Tobio thought having Hinata around would change things for him, but it didn't really. Not when he really tried to think about it.

"You stupid dumbass." Tobio scoffed. "I won that. I touched the doorknob first!"

"I entered the room first!" Hinata insisted.

"Because you have the keycard, of course you'll enter first." Tobio clicked his tongue. There was a short reminder of an old memory from his first year resurfacing momentarily, the

[&]quot;I totally won that!" Hinata huffed.

visions of a broken gym doorknob before they had to go to Nationals and Daichi's angry face. A scary reminder. "Come on. Pack your things or I'll leave you behind."

"No you won't." He said with confidence that Tobio surely won't.

And he was right. That was what infuriated him, but he didn't mind threatening him with a little scare. "Good luck finding a place to live in for the next week."

"Oi wait dammit." Hinata spluttered. "I'm already packing, jeez. Let me get the stuff my teammates borrowed first. Martin borrowed my deodorant this morning; let me go to his room. You can stay here."

"Just get it when you go back to Brazil."

Hinata looked affronted. "It was the Seabreeze one." And without any other word, left the room with his quest to retrieve his bottle of deodorant. Tobio rolled his eyes. His deodorant back at home was Seabreeze too, but Hinata does what Hinata wanted to do, and not even he could stop that otherwise he would have done so long ago.

With nothing left to do, Tobio decided to look around the hotel room, seating himself on Hinata's bed. The space was well kept and organized, even the way he packed his clothes was efficient—more efficient than Tobio's own method. It couldn't be helped when Hinata obviously had more traveling experience than Tobio, even with all the training camps and away games he had done. Hinata's system was clearly more used to cramming as many things inside a limited space.

And while it impressed him, it also irked him a little to be bested in something like this.

"Oi, dumbass. What took you so long?" The sound of the door opening had Tobio slamming the luggage shut out of reflex. He wouldn't be caught snooping around red-handed.

"Sorry. Wrong person. I don't understand Japanese." It took a hot second for Tobio to realize that this guy was pointedly not Hinata, but his teammate. "Oh if it isn't the famous Tobio Kageyama."

It was Cobalt Eyes, grinning at him cheekily.

"Here with Shouyou? I bet. He was really restless ever since he found out the final will be in Rome."

"He is always restless," Tobio said in clumsy English. "Like a bug. Always jumping in all places."

Cobalt Eyes laughed. "That's what Shouyou said you would say too. He knows you very well. He likes you so much, even though you're pretty rude. I have to say, his impression of you is so spot on."

What was Hinata telling people about him? That bastard. He better not spread ridiculous things about him to his teammates.

" Say, Tobio Kageyama, what is Shouyou to you?" Cobalt Eyes asked, and Tobio wondered if he was one of those troublesome people. " I don't understand how he's so fixated on you. He looks so different around you, whether on court or off it." He continued, shaking his head with confusion. "I give him the exact toss he asks, down to the angle and timing, and yet he still doesn't look like he's having as much fun as when he's with you."

"Oi. Do you like Hinata?"

"Shouyou? I think you're a little dumb if you don't like him in some way. I know dozens of people who do. He's very charming, no?" The man laughed, just a shade near bitter. "That's why when I see how you—" He paused, but even Tobio could understand the anguish and frustration in the words he did not say. "He deserves the world given to him"

Tobio should be feeling a flicker of irritation now, but strangely he wasn't so affected by it. It wasn't like something suddenly clicked into place, nor was it some kind of revelation. Rather, it felt like something he finally needed to acknowledge, something he could no longer avoid either out of necessity.

"Hinata is my partner." Tobio said, meaning every implication that came with it. "That is all there is to it."

"You say that and yet..." Cobalt Eyes smiled. "That's being a little greedy, isn't it? Kageyama-san?"

He supposed he only had Hinata's best interest at heart, and Tobio couldn't blame him. He once thought trying to be the most servile setter was the best thing to be.

But even back when he was a goody two shoes, the tosses he gave Hinata had never been anything of the sort. When Tobio had tried to tame himself for everyone, the only person he hadn't held back on was Hinata.

Hinata was...

Hinata was stubborn. He was impossibly pigheaded, unyielding. He pushed back when Tobio was coarse and forceful, otherwise Hinata wouldn't have caught up with him.

"You don't see the problem." Tobio thought about it. The man before him was a pretty good setter. He was skilled. He wouldn't be on the world stage if he wasn't one of the best. Tobio wondered if he would've ended up in his position as well if he hadn't met everyone in his life that helped shape who he was today. "Don't give him everything he wants."

" What? "

"Giving him everything he wants." Tobio repeated. "He doesn't like that. He doesn't work like that."

He could tell the man was more confused. If he didn't get it the first time he met Hinata, then he didn't understand Hinata at all.

"Sorry for the wait! I had to tell Coach and the team that I'm leaving first." It was this time that Hinata decided to enter the room. Upon seeing the two setters, he paused. "Oh Juan. You're here all along, and I see you've met Kageyama."

The confusion in Cobalt Eyes' face smoothly shifted to a smile. " I have. He's been very friendly so far."

" Friendly? Kageyama? In what universe?" Hinata snickered, English rolling off perfectly.

"You better sleep with one eye open later, runt. I know where you'll be sleeping." Tobio warned.

"I know where you're sleeping too!" Hinata stuck his tongue out. "So it's a matter of who gets to—hey don't just walk away from me! Jeez, what are you even in a hurry for?" He packed his things in record time, not that there was much to pack anyway. Hinata seemed to have anticipated this to happen and packed in advance. "Maybe I'll forget about visiting you and fly straight back to Brazil."

"You won't." Tobio scoffed.

"I won't." Hinata finally zipped his luggage close. "Let's go."

"I guess I lose." Cobalt Eyes shook his head with exasperation. He walked towards Hinata and hugged him. "Bye Shouyou. Enjoy your vacation." He whispered something to him in Portuguese before kissing him on both cheeks. Hinata didn't look surprised, instead he simply laughed. Curse those greeting customs. Tobio rolled his eyes.

"Come on. If you get lost I'm not waiting for you." Tobio grabbed one of Hinata's bags and walked away.

"Impatient-yama!" Hinata stomped off before Tobio could get out of the room. "Bye Juan!"

"Oh." Tobio stopped at the doorway just before it closed. "I am greedy." He looked at the man one last time before he finally left for good. "But Hinata is even greedier than me." He pointed at the direction Hinata had walked away. "And I think that's why I'm into him. I don't want that to change at all."

He finally closed the door before the man could respond, letting him mull over the thought by himself. Hinata was waiting by the hallway, a huge smile on his face with enough brightness to blind people.

"Oi wipe that smile out of your face." Tobio walked past him.

"That's why you're into me, huh?" Cheeky.

Tobio's cheeks and ears burned. "You didn't hear anything."

"Sure I didn't." Hinata laughed, a skip on his step as he tried to keep up with Tobio's pace. "Come on. The other teammates want to see me off."

The bed was cold and empty. Too big, too vacant.

Tobio had dozed off after what he had done—what they had done. The memory was still fresh, as were the pains and the aches in his limbs. He cracked a tentative eye open, groping blindly over the space in bed where the empty dent of a body was left on the rumpled sheets.

The room was dim, and Tobio popped a couple of joints down his spine as he dragged his feet in search of his bedmate.

"Why are you awake?" Tobio scratched his chin with a yawn. It was a few hours past midnight, but Hinata leaned over the hotel room's balcony with a pensive look. "Go to sleep."

"You go to sleep." Hinata laughed. "You look like you need it, Kageyama-kun." He drew out the last syllables of his name playfully, nudging him by the shoulder.

Tobio frowned. "You're drinking again?"

"It's a cheat day. I won against you, so I deserve it." Hinata waved off. "Besides, I got it from the bar, and I'm paying for it. Relax." The bottle was half empty, moisture rolling down Hinata's fingers. "Here. You can drink some." He offered, and Tobio stared at it dubiously before plucking the bottle off him, downed the rest of it in a go, and set the bottle on the balcony's flat railings.

He choked at the sudden heat from the beer, coughing. He clasped a hand on his mouth, keeping the liquor from spilling down his chest. Hinata, ever the helpful bastard, started laughing. Tobio glared at his obvious glee.

"Oh, idiot. Not like that! What were you thinking?" Hinata reached his pockets and retrieved a packet of tissues, still giggling and pointedly ignoring Tobio's glare. "Here. Jeez, you're a mess." He opened the packet and dabbed his chest with the pulpy paper.

"Stop it, dumbass! I can do it." He snatched the tissue from Hinata's hands. He lacked any delicacy in wiping him off, and thrust the paper on his body repeatedly. Such was the duality of Hinata, to be so rough in one instance and be so heartbreakingly gentle in the other. "Why are you up? Let's go back to bed."

"I wake up sometimes in the middle of the night." Hinata said distantly. "It's not jetlag. That was worse months ago. The jet lag issue is fine." He shook his head. "I guess my body just forgets sometimes."

Tobio rubbed his temples. The alcohol settling in his bloodstream made him woozy. "Is that even possible?"

Hinata shrugged. "Dunno. I'll ask Yachi. Or Omi-san. I'm sure he knows. He'll probably tell me I can google it though."

Silence befell them, and it brewed over them with every minute. Tobio stewed his thoughts in the silence, content with just existing with Hinata for now and letting him stew over his thoughts as well. There was a time when he used to be hyper-aware of everything Hinata did, from the way he walked, his constipation before every game, his mood swings, his insecurities. Tobio reassured himself it was because of volleyball every single time, that looking out for the condition of his spikers was what setters did, and because Hinata was such a scrub that he needed more attention than the others.

There was also his larger-than-life presence. It was impossible to ignore him, even outside the court. He makes every setter want to toss for him, he plays with everyone, pushes and pulls until he gets what he wants.

Even so, Hinata was no longer an amateur scrub and he no longer needed Tobio's constant nagging, especially not after the game they had just played. It was still a force of habit anyway, asking Hinata about these things. Two years since they talked face to face and Tobio's first words were to ask how his stomach was. It was nostalgic. It took him back to the first time they met, the very same place, just before a game, and yet so different in circumstance. The Hinata Shouyou who turned around and looked at him that time was no longer the Hinata he had known, not in the last two years, not in the last six.

He got used to it, the worrying, the asking, the observing. Habits made up the man, and Tobio had integrated thinking about Hinata in his habits like some kind of footnote in his daily journals even when they were apart. It used to be something that was a big deal, and Hinata's temperamental actions often got Tobio jumpy and high-strung. It got better over the years.

"Just say it out loud." Tobio clicked his tongue. "Dumbass."

Hinata hummed, rocking himself with the heels of his feet. "I've been thinking."

"That's rare."

"Shut up." Hinata smacked his shoulder. "Kageyama, you love volleyball don't you?"

Tobio raised a brow. "Dumbass, what kind of question is that? That's stupid. Do you eat when you're hungry?"

"No. Just work with me here. I promise this is important. You love volleyball, right? Enough to fly to Italy for it." Hinata stared at Tobio with purposeful eyes. It took Tobio aback. Whatever this was, he was most definitely not going to stop until Tobio answered all his questions.

"Yes. There are better players in a foreign league, and I want to play against stronger teams." Tobio answered. "Why?"

Hinata nodded, considered it. Tobio didn't know what he was thinking about. He didn't know what conclusions he had reached. "Today, I proved myself equal to you. I promised you didn't I?"

Oh. Oh, were they actually going to talk about this? Was this six years worth of feelings and waiting finally aired out in the open?

"You did." Tobio admitted. "But you're still a few wins behind me."

"And I'll catch up! This is just the beginning. Just you wait." Hinata promised. It made Tobio quirk up the edge of his lips in amusement. "We still have lots of volleyball to play. I'll win the V-League championship ship on my first season—"

"Not even in your dreams."

"—and you still have to fly to Italy and win the Serie A championship on your first season," Hinata concluded with shining eyes. "Then I'll beat you in the World Volleyball Club Championship."

"Who said you're going to beat me?" Tobio scoffed. "I'll beat you, scrub."

"Not anymore a scrub." Hinata grinned. "The point is, there's so much more volleyball to play, Kageyama. V-League, AVC, the Nation's League, World Championships, the Olympics...lots and lots of volleyball. And we're going to be busy, very very busy."

All he said was true, but Tobio still didn't know where this was all headed.

"Oi, what are you trying to say?" Tobio narrowed his eyes at Hinata.

"Kageyama, did you miss me when I was in Rio?" Hinata asked, opting to ignore Tobio's question. He always did that when he was deep in his own thoughts. He didn't wait for a response, likely because he wasn't expecting one. Hinata talked a hundred words a minute without ever sounding like he was talking too much. "Because I did miss you, even when I didn't know that I missed you. You're always in my mind, thinking about what you thought if you were there with me, and it was weird not having you next to me."

Tobio kept his gaze at Hinata, who swayed around while deep in thought. He didn't look at Tobio, he kept his eyes on the glittering city of Miyagi. Hinata talked, and Tobio listened, such was the arrangement of their relationship, unless it was about volleyball, then Tobio yelled and Hinata would grumble at him in return. So Tobio waited until Hinata finished.

"So now you're here in front of me, and you're leaving for Italy." Hinata sighed. "Then we're going to be apart again."

"It won't happen till next year."

"One year isn't a lot of time," Hinata said. "And we're too far from each other."

"So you have a problem with me leaving?" Tobio knitted his brows together. "I don't think you have a right to say that, when you left for Rio." He was conscious of his voice rising in tone. Hinata wasn't the most calm either, but something about this conversation was rubbing him wrong.

"No, of course I don't have a problem with it. Heck, I'm even jealous. I'd love to play in a foreign league." Hinata huffed. "You said it yourself, didn't you? You're planning to take the world stage."

"So what *is* the problem?"

Hinata took a deep breath. "I love volleyball."

"I know, dumbass."

"I want to play forever."

"That's also obvious."

"We're very busy with playing, and training, and all the other things that come with it." Hinata said, this time looking at Tobio. "So I want to put what we have in a pause, even if—even if I already know how I feel about you. Even if we feel the same."

Tobio regarded this statement carefully. Hinata was serious to the point of saying it this way. He was feeling a little lightheaded. Maybe drinking was a bad idea.

"That's a selfish decision, don't you think?" Tobio gritted out.

"It is." Hinata said. "I know I'm selfish, which is why I also know that if I start having more of you now, we won't be able to stop— I won't be able to stop, and I'm afraid it'll keep us from playing."

Something inside Tobio flared at this. It made his ears and cheeks heat up, knuckles clenched till they turned white. "And you're telling me this after you sucked me off? Don't play with me. What was all that about then?"

Hinata hissed. "It's exactly because we did it, that I know. I thought you love volleyball?"

"Don't make this about me." Tobio glowered.

"This *is* about you." Hinata exclaimed. "And me. This is about us. I'm not saying we can't be together. I'm saying we need to wait longer." He grabbed at the front of his shirt. "Because tomorrow you'll be in Tokyo, and I'll be back in Osaka the day after that. That's nearly six hours between us. Next year, you'll be in Italy, and it will be a lot worse."

Tobio wanted to protest. Tobio wanted to rage. Tobio wanted to object and look for a different solution. He wanted to say that he had done enough waiting, that he had been waiting since the day he was born, clock ticking to the day Hinata would appear in his life, till the day he would find him, stand before him, someone better. Tobio wanted Hinata, but his words left a dull ache in his chest, like getting chipped away at slowly, opening a larger hole in his already reverberant heart.

Was Tobio too much after all? Did he need to hold back even with Hinata? Was it impossible for them to play volleyball and be together? Would it always be one or the other?

Suddenly he was back in the old high school gym. They weren't fighting, he insisted, but not every fight needed a screaming match. He was saying goodbye to Hinata once again, even though he had just found him after years, and he was losing someone he cared for again. This too, he understood, was a compromise. He hated compromises.

"So what do you want to do?" The worst part was that he couldn't argue with Hinata's logic. Both of them were busy, and they wouldn't be able to see each other often. And it had already felt like hell not being able to see him in the two years of separation. It made Tobio angry.

"We're friends," Hinata said. "Rivals. Partners." He continued, all painted in such soft colors under the muted lights. Even in anger, Tobio found Hinata bright regardless. How painfully infatuated of him, so sickeningly besotted. "It's not like anything major has to change. I promise. It's mostly the same but—" He gestured with his hands, because it wasn't going to be Hinata Shouyou if he wasn't animated. "More 'gwah' and 'gyun' in between."

"Nothing would change?"

"Not exactly nothing," Hinata murmured, face a little pink—from the beer, from shyness—who knows? "But yeah, nothing much. There's still volleyball after all."

"Volleyball." He repeated dumbly.

"Yep."

And it wasn't like Tobio could do much, could he? Such was the nature of things. Hinata made bizarre promises, and Tobio waited.

Hinata was harsh. He pushes and pulls, forcing Tobio to dance to his tune. He lashes at whatever walls Tobio built, demanding. He runs and outpaces Tobio, making him chase after him, making him want to look back when all he had ever done was run forward and look straight ahead.

Hinata beats down upon him, all hot and fiery, burns him with whatever brightness he possesses.

Hinata was competitive. He goads Tobio into action, starts the first step, plays the game and changes all the rules on a whim. He never wanted to lose, always playing to win.

Hinata...Hinata was greedy.

And Hinata made sure to be greedier than Tobio, as if he couldn't bear to *not* compete about it. He was greedy enough he wanted to win this too, the size of desire and the selfishness as well.

He swallowed. "Okay."

Because, more than anyone in the world, Hinata understood Tobio to the barest of his bones, down to his selfishness and his desires, his ugly temper, his demanding nature, his brashness and coarseness. Hinata, who more than anyone in the world was Tobio's equal in every way, without a doubt knew about his greed.

"Yeah?" He smiled just a little. "I'm holding you onto that, Kageyama-kun. It's a promise."

So Tobio will hold himself back. And he will wait. Patiently, carefully, painstakingly. It was funny how in being greedy, one becomes altruistically selfless as well.

"And if you change your mind," Tobio asked. "when all this is done. What would you do?"

"I won't." Hinata told him. "That's a promise too. When have I ever broken a promise?"

Tobio liked to say he trusted Hinata. Perhaps more than anyone in the world, Tobio trusted Hinata. Even so, he couldn't help but want something more substantial than that.

"Do you have a pen?" Hinata asked him suddenly. "I know Sugawara-san told you to bring an autograph pen all the time."

"Bring your own pen next time." Tobio clicked his tongue, but he did have the pen in his team jacket's pocket, so he fetched it despite being clueless as to what Hinata wanted to do with it. Hinata uncapped the marker, pulled the half used packet of tissues and wrote on its back. When he was finished, he gave a self satisfied nod and waited for it to dry.

"There." He said, proudly. "Don't smudge it."

Tobio stared at the packet between his hands. The words on slow drying ink were printed in clumsy handwriting.

Ten, twenty years. No matter how long. I'll see you there.

"Oi, what the hell is this? What do you expect me to do with this?"

"It's a ticket." Hinata's face stretched into a grin. "As long as you have this, I won't change my mind."

"Are you fucking with me?"

It was ridiculous. It was silly of him to think that the fickle mind could be tamed with a simple writing on a packet of used tissues, of all things.

"You don't want it?"

"Fuck off." Tobio stretched his arm to keep it out of Hinata's reach. "You already gave it to me. You're not getting it back."

Instead of retorting, Hinata laughed. "That settles it then. Don't fall in love with anyone else till then, alright, Kageyama-kun?"

The only person more selfish than Kageyama Tobio, was none other than Hinata Shouyou.

"We're not staying in yet?" Hinata took his shoes off the doorway and set them next to Tobio's. He was too busy ogling the apartment than actually listening to him, half of his attention all over the place, peering through the rooms and testing the couch for its softness.

"No." Tobio put the rest of Hinata's luggage in the guest room, which Hinata had pointedly raised a brow at. "My teammates reserved a table in a restaurant. They said they want to meet you." He checked the last message his team had sent him. Yes, they were still on schedule. "We have an hour to change, and—hey are you listening, idiot? Shut your mouth, you'll attract flies."

Hinata had let one of Tobio's throw pillows as it laid sadly on his floor. He had a stupid expression on as his was left agape.

"Oi, why do you look like that? It's just dinner." Tobio raised a brow.

"Kageyama, if I knew you were going to introduce me to your team, I should have asked my teammates to have dinner with us too so you could meet them." Hinata huffed.

"I did meet them. It's why we need to move faster if we don't want to be late." He had spent the past hour trying to greet as many enthusiastic men who kept patting his back and kissing both his cheeks while they rattled rapid fire Portuguese with Hinata. Somehow they all look very enthusiastic to meet him.

"I can't help but feel like I lost against you at something." Hinata frowned.

"Suck it up."

"You suck it up." Hinata shrugged off his previously sweat soaked shirt, to change into something more presentable. Shirtless, he shook his bottle of Seabreeze before patting himself with the powder. Tobio was right. His tan lines were more prominent than ever.

Tobio shook his head. No need to get distracted this early in the night. Right. He needed to change as well.

"Why an izakaya though?" Hinata's voice was a little faded as he walked out of the room. "Shouldn't you treat me to a famous restaurant instead? Introduce me to the local food?"

"I just thought it was more fitting. We can go tomorrow for that instead." Tobio reassured as he buttoned his shirt. The week was long. There was plenty of time. "What is that?"

"What is what?" Hinata looked up innocently.

"That."

Tobio stared at the metal protruding on Hinata's navel, the metal shaped like the sun and a blue stud sparkling under the apartment's fluorescent lights. Hinata looked down and made an expression of understanding.

"Oh this?" Hinata traced the metal with his finger. "I had just put it on. It's a navel piercing. I got it when I was restricted from heavy workouts for about two weeks after I strained my knees. Can't let it become a jumper's knee after all, can I? So I went and got myself pierced for the hell of it. An opportunity like that doesn't come often."

Hinata strained his knees? Tobio glared at the offending piece of jewelry, more importantly: "How come I've never seen you wear it?"

"I don't always wear it." Hinata replied. "It gets in the way of volleyball. It's dangerous. But we're just having dinner, aren't we? It will close if I don't put on the piercing." He grinned at it one more time before shrugging on a shirt, hiding the jewelry away from prying eyes. "Stop looking at it like you're planning to bite it off."

"I'm not. You're seeing things, dumbass." Tobio huffed, turning around. No need to get distracted so easily.

"Are too." Hinata laughed, obviously pleased with how his eyes crinkled in delight.

Tobio groaned. This was going to be a very long night.

"Seems a bit drastic to come to Tokyo for a haircut." The building was busy with people bustling all over the places, looking around the views and the sights for their recreation. Children ran around the place with excited giggles. Tokyo certainly was loads busier than Miyagi, and it took Tobio some time before he got used to it.

Regardless, Hinata was right next to him, just as energetic as the city, as if he was soaking up the brightness of the place, happily trotting along. It was surreal. Tobio had thought he wasn't going to see him again after resolving to be in Kagoshima on the exact day Hinata was leaving for Rio. It was a spur of the moment decision, it would seem—the decision to see him—that is.

"I'm actually visiting Kenma later, and you just happened to be in Tokyo," Hinata explained with a smile, his newly cut locks were fluffy and lightweight, no longer bouncing in curls. As far as Tobio was concerned, they defied gravity just like how its owner defied all natures of physics. "So really, you're more of a layover."

He defied all sense of logic too. An anomaly, in the most frustrating manner Tobio had to deal with.

"And so you decided to bother me with your chores instead." He rolled his eyes.

"Hey, you said you know a good place. What I didn't expect was to meet your sister. Seriously, you have a sister? You really don't bother saying the important stuff, do you? This is like that V-League thing all over again." Hinata pouted. He acted like some kind of betrayed child every single time. What was the big deal about meeting Miwa, anyway? He froze up comically at the sight of Tobio's older sister. "And I'm bringing you someplace fun, too. For free! So don't complain.

Tobio didn't bother refuting with how Hinata never told him about his decision to go to Rio, how he somehow had to be one of the last people to know about it. Even Tsukishima heard about it before him! There was a large inadeptness with communication between them, in the sense of verbalizing things into open understanding. It was the problem of being overly trusting, overly expecting to be on the same page every single time.

Hinata and Tobio didn't always talk about things because they were never good at words, and every attempt thus far had ended in a disaster. They don't talk about new quicks after all, they just do it in the spur of the moment, somehow connected by volleyball and something vague hanging between them, something between trust and competitive pride. On the court, they become unstoppable with it.

But was that enough now that they were no longer in each other's proximity? When they no longer play on the same side of the court, on the same side of the world?

"Fine." Tobio had resolved with Hinata leaving for two years. He had already decided to make peace with the compromise. There was no use thinking too much about it, so instead he looked around the blue glow of the place. "But why here?"

There was an eerie sound threatening to swallow him whole, a thrumming that felt like the whole place was alive. Tokyo's Sunshine Aquarium was crowded with activity, and while he didn't really care about marine life in general, he had to admit it was beautiful in its own way.

"Kenma and I were supposed to go together but he was held up due to some meeting or another. He's starting a company, you know?" Hinata shrugged as they passed by the jellyfishes, multicolored tanks shifting the colors that lit up his cheeks. Mesmerizing. "So we decided to meet for dinner instead but Kenma already bought the tickets. Good thing too because now I have time for you, and since you won't be there to see me off to Rio, think of this as your personal send-off. Not that you're sentimental like that."

"Thanks." Tobio scoffed. He wasn't sure what to feel about being a substitute for plans. It just happened that it was his day off too. Hinata's text had come so suddenly last night, shooting all of Tobio's plans out of the window. He didn't know why he was even indulging the dumbass, but he had arrived early in the morning, and Tobio had to meet him by the station. And after catching up by playing volleyball in the park for the whole morning's entirety, they found themselves here.

"You're welcome." Hinata responded with a shit eating grin. *Cheeky dumbass*. "Hey, don't you click your tongue at me, Frowny-yama! I know you're going to miss this cheeky dumbass when I leave."

Tobio didn't dignify that with a response—didn't *want* to dignify it with a response because he didn't trust himself to say something that wasn't humiliatingly desperate. So instead he shoved something to Hinata's chest. "Here."

"What is this?" Hinata peered at the paper bag with a curious twinkle in his eyes. "A phone case?"

"You've been going on about how everyone got you a gift." Tobio smirked. "So there, I bought you something. I win."

"How exactly did you win?!" Hinata exclaimed. "And it has a milk box design. What the hell?" He stared at the brand new phone case Tobio got him with a confused look, caught between wanting to complain and wanting to laugh. "You didn't take into account what I like. You just took the design you like the most!"

"Give it back if you don't want it then."

"Fuck off. You already gave it!" Hinata clutched the phone case protectively to his chest. "No take backs. It's mine now." He stared at it some more when Tobio made it clear that he wasn't going to take the item back anymore. "But hmm...Tsukishima gave me a more stylish sunglasses for beach volleyball though."

"....Give me the damn phone case back right now."

"No--"

When all things were said and done, Tobio should have remembered just how chaotic going out with Hinata could end up. There wasn't a time where they weren't arguing, but he also couldn't remember the last time he had gotten so worked up outside a match. Hinata's presence was a constant buzzing noise after all, and he infected everyone around him.

"For the last time, I told you already—" Tobio growled. "If Tsubasa wasn't sick—"

"It doesn't matter! Kaito's Meteo Attack isn't powerful enough yet to fight Yamikaze!" Hinata swung his arm in the air. "Toshiro's Dark Wind Defense wasn't even at its hundred percent!"

"Bullshit, Yamikaze's Dark Wind Defense is bullshit—"

"—And Kaito shouldn't have been so reckless to end up with a fever in chapter 410! So I stand by my decision, Tsubasa Kaito still has a long way to go!"

Tobio grumbled. This was exactly what he was talking about, they can't even agree on the same opinion on the manga they read. "Dark Wind Defense doesn't even make sense when you translate it into real life volleyball, unlike Tsubasa's Meteo Attack. Controlling the ball's spin so it would always fall near you is impossible, but breaking a net with a serve can still be ___."

"It's a manga! It's not supposed to make sense!" Hinata exclaimed. "Wait, did you try to recreate the Dark Wind Defense on court?"

Tobio paused.

Hinata stared him down, a feat considering he was nearly a foot shorter than him.

"I didn't." Tobio looked away.

"Liar!" Hinata exclaimed.

"Shut up."

"Ack. He ran away." Hinata mock whispered.

"I didn't run away!" Tobio scoffed. Where were his teammates?

"Did too."

Tobio stopped in his tracks, turned around and grabbed Hinata's hair. It was still as fluffy as it was when it was freshly cut years ago, gravity defying and lightweight. Hinata pried his arm, hand on his wrist. They've fallen back to old habits, and they're pushing and pulling at each other again, just like highschool.

"Signore Tobi?"

Hinata immediately let go and hid behind Tobio on instinct. He tugged at his shirt, peeking over Tobio's shoulder. That too was a habit from highschool he still hasn't shed. Tobio wondered if Hinata even noticed himself doing it.

Santini's voice came forward, staring at the two of them who were previously locked in a fight. The rest of his team were staring at them curiously.

"Oi Kageyama," Hinata strained on his toes to whisper in Tobio's ears, urging him to lean down. "Are those your teammates?"

Tobio was very much conscious of the way his team was looking at them, and it made him flush pink just a little while he tried to avoid their knowing eyes.

"Shouyou Hinata!" Moretti exclaimed, easily smoothing over the social creases and awkward pauses It must be great being socially graceful. "I was looking forward to meeting you."

"Si!" Santini pushed forward. "I'm in awe. The way you jumped around the court and pulled blockers to you yesterday really pissed me off and yet inspires. I wanted to take you down so badly."

"OH!" Hinata saw both of them with wide eyes. "I remember both of you." He spoke in his melodic accented voice when speaking a new language. English rolled off his tongue, the language curling around his mouth and making its home there. "Spiker! You hit insane cross and line shots!" He pointed at Santini. "And you're the libero who made that awesome save back in set 5! The way you move like you pull the ball towards you! It's very frustrating as a spiker!"

And as usual, Hinata's super enthusiastic praises worked on them like a charm.

"I didn't know signore Shouyou was such a charmer." Santini laughed. "We love to meet any friend of Tobi's"

"Me too! The lord knows he needs more of them." Hinata's statement prompted a burst of laughter from the group. They were getting along too fast and too well, which probably spelled disaster for Tobio.

"I'm starting to like you even more, signore Shouyou." Moretti grinned. "Now, come. Miguel is waiting in the restaurant in advance. He would love to meet you too."

"So, Shouyou," Garcia later looked at him with starstruck adoration. Tobio was right to assume that people end up loving him at first sight. "Can I–I can call you that, right?"

"Go ahead." Hinata beamed. "It was weird at first to be addressed by my first name, but almost everyone outside of Japan does it."

Shouyou, Shouyou, Shouyou. They all said his name so casually, so easily. The irony wasn't lost to Tobio.

"So Shouyou," Garcia repeated with obvious glee. "How long have you been friends with Tobi? What was he like in highschool? What were you guys like in highschool? I heard you're both high school teammates."

Hinata's eyes started to sparkle.

"He sucked." Tobio said before Hinata could say anything. "He didn't know how to take care of himself. He couldn't serve, block, and most of all his receives were the worst. All he knew to do was spike—"

"Hey!"

"—and they're all because of my tosses. He kept yelling about wanting to spike, yelling "I wanna jump! I wanna jump!" and skittering and hopping around, like a bug."

"Ack!" Hinata slammed his hand on the table, just enough for the utensils to clatter. "He was a big asshole! He was a jerk to everyone and he acts like some bigshot but his eyes roll back till they're while listening to literature classes." He pointed at Tobio. "He looks more serious deciding between yogurt and milk from the vending machine."

"You have shit grades too! At least I didn't knock off the VP's wig—"

"It was your serve!"

"It was your weak ass receive!"

Tobio technically was at a disadvantage because Hinata's fluency with English helped him talk shit about Tobio more quickly and smoothly to his team. It didn't matter, Tobio was't backing down.

Hinata scoffed. "You got lost on our third year training camp because you rode a different bust since you couldn't read—"

"Says the guy who—"

"No. We're not talking about that right now. I told you last time." He cut Tobio off as he shuddered. "Not while dinner."

Okay fair. Nobody wanted to know about the gritty details of Hinata's bowels as a kid as well as his weak constitution during pregame moments. Soiled pants and anecdotes about why Hinata had to sit on a window seat was not a good dinner topic.

"I sucked, yes." Hinata explained. "And this guy here is an asshole."

"Used to be."

"Is a greedy asshole." Hinata pressed on and ignored Tobio's correction, much to the three's amusement. "But I wouldn't be where I am right now if he wasn't a greedy asshole. So," He took a deep sigh. "I'll have to *thank him*—" The words were reluctant to pass his mouth. "For being a mean kid who yelled at me for not taking care of my health the first time we met."

"He yelled at you?" Moretti guffawed. "The first time you met?"

"On my way to the restroom." Hinata nodded solemnly. "We actually met at my first ever volleyball match! My school didn't have a boys volleyball club so I had to make do with what I could. In my last year of middle school, I finally got to play in an official match, and I had to meet this guy."

"And then?" Garcia listened to Hinata with rapt interest.

"Then we crushed them." Tobio filled in. "Into the dust."

"He crushed us." Hinata confirmed, nodding along though sulking. "It wasn't even a close fight. It was depressing. I swore I was going to defeat him."

"No mercy huh? How cruel." Santini chuckled.

"Kageyama was the only one who didn't hold back by then. He started yelling at his teammates to move faster, like the king he is." Hinata said "Everyone else was just—how do you say—I know this—ah, everyone was just *chilling*, but Kageyama wasn't taking any of it."

"I was the only one who took you seriously, you mean." Tobio rolled his eyes.

Hinata exclaimed. "I'm not arguing? You don't need to use that tone."

Santini laughed. "Ah, yes. Tobi is always so intense. He never holds back. One time we were at this training camp in Tuscany for the U17 team, and these other guys kept on picking a fight, right? That's was—"

"—2019. It was Tobi's first year. Has a lot of balls for a newbie. I remember thinking he's a bit of a jerk. Very arrogant. Barely talked to anyone." Moretti stepped in and continued the tale. Hinata and Garcia were enraptured, but Tobio started to remember what they were talking about.

"He probably didn't talk because he couldn't talk in English." Hinata grinned. "Half of his thoughts are about food or volleyball anyway. So you didn't miss a lot."

"Oi." Tobio glared at Hinata.

"Yeah. That sounds like Tobi." The four of them laughed. "But anyway," Moretti continued. "We got invited to help train the U17 for two days that year. Lots of kids, a talented lot. But some of them clearly didn't research foreign leagues."

"It's his fault really." Santini quipped.

"So this kid comes in at the beginning of a practice match and starts talking shit to his teammates, *si?* He was all up high high horse, real piece of work, that guy. It could get on your nerves." Moretti laughed. "So when it was our turn to play with them, Tobi here started targeting the guy. Blocks, serves, spikes—you name it. He demolished him."

Santini added. "The drills though. Tobi didn't hold back at all. I heard about some kids complaining about the spartan uphill run penalty. Kids were already gasping for air midway, but Tobi looked like he didn't even break a sweat."

"It's good training for them." Tobio said. "Formative. Gets them on the right path." He remembered it. The team that lost had to run with him. Ten laps over and back the mountain for every lost set. It was exactly like what they did in highschool. It shouldn't be a problem.

Moretti turned to Hinata with a very pleased smile. "Do you know what he said to them when they complained that it's impossible?"

"What?"

Santini snickered. "He said, with the most clueless face 'What? I can do it in thirty minutes when I was in highschool.' And he did it in less. Madman."

Hinata slammed his hand on the table while bursting into cackles.

"He doesn't hold back, and he doesn't ever do things in halves." Garcia told them. "When he runs, he looks like he's chasing someone, when he practices serves, he looks like someone's going to suddenly come in the court and steal the ball from him. Totally inspiring and also maybe a little terrifying."

Every word out of their mouths was incriminating Tobio, damning him into being honest, prying the truths he kept close to his chest's cavity, plucking them open from his ribs one by one till they laid bare for Hinata to see. Not that any of them understood what they were doing, and how could they?

But Hinata would know. Hinata always understood, even about the things he tried to keep secret.

Tobio sneaked a glance at Hinata, wondering what expression he was sporting. He imagined it was something smug, or perhaps something close to preening. Instead, what he saw was pure marvel. His eyes darkened with what looked like understanding, pure admiration, and—and—

Somehow it was more difficult to look at, the open emotion in his face that was very telling. Tobio wasn't blind, nor was he stupid, and he really wasn't as dense as people credited him to be. Both of them knew what it meant, but they would never be caught saying it out loud.

After all, they were less than lovers, more than enemies, not exactly friends. They were rivals. They were two people who understood each other the most in this world. Nine years of knowing each other officially, about a lifetime of waiting, two people who based their futures to forever meet each other, circling forever in a dance around each other's orbit, and yet

refusing to call each other with anything more intimate than a surname, a paradox of relationships.

Suddenly, he couldn't bear to look at him, couldn't see him without suffocating.

"Excuse me." Tobio stood up from the table. "I need to go to the washroom."

Call him cowardly. The past seven years already spoke volumes about it, a case study on how scared he was to fucking commit. Do it properly or don't do it at all, Tobio never did anything in halves and he didn't engage in anything that wasn't necessary because he had so little of himself to give.

Even though he already told himself countless times how this time, for sure, he was ready to face everything head on.

Tobio wiped the wet from his palms, scrubbing them dry as he busied himself from his thoughts, reluctantly walking back to the table.

"Oh, hey I haven't seen you around in awhile, my boy." The old woman in the kappogi smiled at him as he passed her by on his way back. Her smiles were still warm as ever. "How have you been? I didn't notice you with the busy dinner rush."

"I was busy too." Tobio replied. "Work."

"I see. Will you be having your usual?"

"No. I have friends with me." And at the mention of friends, her face lit up.

"That's wonderful. Is that why you look so happy?" She was so earnest with her words. "I had wondered how there was another Japanese around. I had just come from their table, that boy with bright hair was very lovely to talk to. Very cheerful one. He said he came here with a friend, I didn't know he was talking about you."

"Do I look happy?"

"It's a wonderful look on you, dear. You look at home." She patted his cheek. "You keep things that make you happy close, dear. Finding good people to surround yourself is difficult. You need to hold on to them."

"He makes me happy." Tobio said, the truth somehow easier to say to someone who barely knew him. "But I can't tell him."

"Why not?" She asked, and wasn't this rather funny? Here was Tobio telling someone else of his life's woes, someone who is so direly busy, instead of the man he's spent 116 days longing for, six whole years of waiting, nine years of wanting. Hinata understood him in ways no one could, but there were things that made talking to him difficult.

Why was Tobio running away?

"I'm scared." He finally said. "I'm so scared." Of messing up, of getting left behind, of leaving someone behind. He was scared one day he would turn around and see no one chasing him anymore, because Tobio loved running, Tobio liked the chase, just as he liked chasing.

"I don't really get it." She told him, gently. "Happiness isn't something you should be scared of."

"I know." Tobio said.

"Is keeping all your feelings bottled up making you suffer?"

"Yes."

"Then you need to let it out, dear." She continued. "Feelings, happiness, love; there is no scarcity with them.. You don't need to save them for something more important. You just let them out."

He knew. Of course he did. Still, Tobio, of all people, knew that knowing something didn't immediately spring someone into action.

But for Hinata...

"Yes."

A decision had to be made.

When did Tobio lose sight of the things he wanted? When did he start hesitating?

"Kageyama! Where've you been?" Hinata's voice called him out. He was gone for too long. He should head back.

"Thank you." He bowed before moving towards Hinata, finally moving forward.

"What took you so long?" Hinata craned his neck to look beyond Tobio. "Was it number two?"

"Shut up. I'm not like you." Tobio smacked the back of Hinata's head.

"Are you sure though? Pissing doesn't take that long."

He rolled his eyes. "Of course you would know all about that."

Hinata stuck his tongue out. One day, Tobio was going to catch that tongue of his, and then he would marvel at whatever flabbergasted expression Hinata would be sporting. It would probably be something caught off guard, just like what would happen when Tobio talked to him once and for all.

"Hey." Tobio pulled at the scuff of Hinata's collar.

"Hey?" Hinata spluttered. "I could've choked?"

"Hey." His eyes turned serious. Nine years of this was enough wasn't it? "Before we go home. Come with me."

Hinata laughed. "Where else would I go?"

Tobio ignored him. He made his decision. He was doing it now. "Just come."

The walk back home was calmer than Tobio expected, a large contradiction to the blood pumping in his chest, pushing blood to the pulse on his neck. It dizzies him with adrenaline, stomach roiling with nervousness. Ridiculous. He wasn't this nervous before a match.

But Hinata's existence was ridiculous enough to beat all odds.

They bid their goodbyes to Tobio's teammates, waving at them as they left for their apartment. They walked side by side across the city until they finally reached an empty playground where they could converse without anyone disturbing them. Tobio led them to the swings where they sat, Hinata warm beside him despite the cold of the winter, misty breaths puffing out of his mouth into wisps that faded into the air.

"It's great that the nice old woman liked you. She gave us some meat buns for free." Hinata hummed happily, peering into the paper bag with a large smile. "And taiyaki, how nice." He pulled the fish shaped pastry out of the bag and started munching on them. "She said it's for your birthday. I'm surprised you managed to talk to her."

"I can talk to people just fine." Tobio scoffed. "Give me back my birthday gift."

"Nrfgh wrghh!" Hinata exclaimed with his mouth full. He chewed as fast as he could and swallowed. "Don't be stingy!" His mouth was filled with crumbs and smears of red bean paste. He may be already twenty five, but sometimes Tobio felt like he was still talking to the lanky fourteen year old kid he met so long ago.

Well, some things don't really change, and Tobio didn't really mind.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." He admonished but without bite. "Wipe your mouth. You eat like a kid."

Hinata scrubbed his lips with his fingers, licking the paste clean with his thumb. He missed a spot near his chin. Tobio frowned and wiped it off with his handkerchief.

"Oh, thanks." Hinata was surprised.

"Mhm."

Hinata went back to eating, this time attacking the curry bread. He looked very happy wolfing it down as if they didn't have dinner a few hours ago. Memories of stopping by Sakanoshita resurfaced in Tobio's mind. Those high school memories used to feel like that

was all there was to life, as if they stretched into decades instead of a tiny portion of his life. Perhaps Tobio took them for granted, too focused on the future.

On his present.

Now, Tobio was a bit too hung up on the past.

'It was nice to be able to relieve some of those days right now.

"What?" Hinata raised a brow at Tobio. "Something on my face? You've been looking at me for a while. Do I have more crumbs on me?" He scrubbed his face. "Oh, did you want some? I thought you'd be wrestling me for them by now." He tilted his head, confused. "Wait, I just remembered!" Hinata pushed the paper bag into Tobio's empty hands while he patted his pockets for something. His face lit up when he found it, and so he pulled it out and showed it to Tobio.

Tobio stared at the package on his palm.

"Finger tape." It was blue and brand new, though hastily thrust into Hinata's pocket judging by the state of its rumpled plastic cover.

"For your birthday." Hinata laughed. "Happy birthday." He waved his phone, the obvious milk box design that was more rundown than when he first gave it to Hinata. "Payback. It's not gonna be the 22nd till two weeks from now, but I won't be here anymore by then. So..."

It didn't have an elaborate wrapping, and really, it was neither expensive, nor was it difficult to find. Tobio could buy this himself. He didn't even use finger tape regularly, preferring to feel the ball directly on his fingertips, and yet—

"Cool." Tobio shoved the item into his pocket, the back of his neck heating up.

"I know you said you don't like using it." Hinata grinned. "but you never know when you're going to jam a finger in the middle of a game."

And that was true too. It wasn't shoes a few sizes too small, and it certainly was something he could use. The fingers were a setter's most valued asset in his body. Nails, fingers, wrists. These were things you would easily know if you paid him any attention.

He eyed Hinata's phone case, the one he had given him before he left for Rio, frayed and worn out. After all these years, he still used that.

He should say something now.

"That's old." Tobio nodded at the phone case.

"It's surprisingly sturdy." Hinata showed him. "I nearly lost it to a pickpocket in Sao Paulo, but it's a good thing I managed to catch him just in time." He pumped his fist. "Of course I had to chase him down a couple of blocks. The look on his face when he turned around and saw an angry Japanese man running to him at high speed." Hinata laughed at the memory. "Guess all that time spent racing you worked out well, huh?"

"You should be more careful, dumbass." Tobio sighed. "But," he paused, the words slow to leave his mouth. He wasn't usually sentimental. Usually. "I'm glad you didn't lose it."

Hinata chuckled. "Well," he scratched the back of his neck. "You did give it to me." He said like it mattered. Well, it did matter in some way. It must matter, if Tobio was anguished enough to remember it all the time. It must matter, after all, why else would he think so much of it?

"That day. There were penguins there flying in the sky. That's what you said." Tobio began. "Do you remember—?"

"Of course I do." Hinata said, a weighty chuckle leaving his mouth. "It's all I've thought about before I realized that I—" He stopped, looking at Tobio with the expression that asked him if he truly wanted to talk about this now. The answer was yes. Tobio wanted to talk about this now.

The thing was, these things came without pomp and circumstance sometimes, and one just had to muddle through it anyway. Hinata seemed to understand, and so he continued.

"That's all I thought about. Your words. It made me think, you know? What it all means, and why I was so worked up when you said I didn't need to do anything about it, that it didn't matter." He smiled, wistful. "You really need to work on your delivery, Bakageyama."

Tobio scoffed, but it was true. Even though he would rather die than be caught admitting it. "You didn't feel the same way back then."

"Maybe." Hinata was pensive. "But maybe I did but I didn't know it yet. Maybe I have since the first time we met. Maybe I was in the process of feeling the same." He said, and this time he asked. "How long have you known?"

"I think I've always had." Tobio stared ahead, admitting. "I have been waiting since I was a kid for someone better than me. I've always known, but I was afraid so I hid it even away from myself until I couldn't anymore." This was one of the fewest cases of honesty from Tobio. He could tell Hinata was surprised by it too. They were older now, and even though they still squabble like kids who never learned how to grow up, someday they had to mature.

He was afraid. Of all the feelings inside him, of being left behind, of the damn truth. So he pushed them down and told himself it didn't matter, told Hinata that it didn't matter.

"I'm afraid too." Hinata said, matching Tobio's honesty with his own vulnerable truths. "That night when we did it the first time—you were going to leave soon. I was afraid. Truth is, I didn't want you to leave."

"Yeah." Tobio's mouth supplied helpfully when the inside was dry from anticipation.

"Rio was," Hinata laughed. "It wasn't lonely, but it wasn't the same. I thought about you all the time, you know? And if we were anything more, and you'd leave—"

"Yeah." It wasn't like Tobio didn't already know, but hearing Hinata say it out loud was soothing something inside him, like getting needles plucked out of his chest.

"We didn't have enough practice back then." Hinata laughed, a heavy sound. "I think we've had enough practice now. This is one of those things that you need to start at the bottom to get used to. It's not something to rush on about."

"Yeah."

Hinata kept his smiling face. "And if I had to choose between you and playing—"

"I'd choose the same." Tobio said. Without hesitation.

Hinata laughed, satisfied. "Yeah. I know."

"We're greedy." Tobio said. "I think that's also why I'm afraid."

"It's okay to be greedy I think." Hinata was tapping his hand on his lap. "I think I'm allowed to want more than one thing. You're allowed to want more things."

"Is it?"

"More for you, doesn't mean any less for me." Hinata explained. He had grown closer than ever, inch by inch, the distance between them was becoming non existent. "Isn't that what's holding us back all this time?"

And maybe Hinata was right. Maybe it was a matter of practice and waiting. Maybe this time...

Fingers traced the back of Tobio's palm, bashfully, slowly, but also a little bold. Inch by inch, centimeter by centimeter. He grasped Tobio's hand with his, though Hinata refused to look at it. The touch burned him. It seared through his flesh and into his bones.

Without looking at him, Tobio grasped his hand as well.

"Is it so bad?" The unspoken question finally aired out. Nine years of knowing each other, five years of waiting in ferment, half a year of waiting. His heart was lodged up his throat, pulsating with a strong throb.

The first few drops of snow had floated down to them, a sheet of white had clung to Hinata's eyelashes and every wayward tuff of bright orange hair. Hinata finally responded with a laugh. It wasn't cruel. It was soft, gentle.

"I don't think it's so bad." He whispered. "If we take it somewhere more, I don't think it's so bad."

The heartbeat in Tobio's chest, the hollowness between his ribs, in the sinew of his marrows finally shuddered into a halt.

"Then," Tobio peeled his tongue out of the roof of his mouth, the dryness in his lips had them cracked from the evening's winter chill. He licked them tentatively. The snow had already started to fall faster, and in the morning, it would cover Rome in a blanket of fresh white sheets of new things. "Let's go home."

"Look at the penguins Kageyama! They look like they're flying!"

The room was blue, and the water refracted light all over the walls, all over their faces, but if they were both honest, Tobio wasn't particularly interested in marine life.

There were penguins flying in the sky even though everyone knew they were swimming in the water, and all this was but an illusion. Fish don't fly in the sky, but birds do swim in the ocean.

The thrum in the room was a welcomed white noise from the backdrop to drown out the thundering in Tobio's chest.

"Hey. I need to tell you something."

Hinata looked at him with a tilt of his head. He looked at him curiously like he was part of the display in the tanks, like he was a fish out of the water.

He was a fish out of water. He was a fish flying in the sky, trying to reach the sun.

Hinata tilted his head. His dark eyes glittered as he blinked in question. "What?"

Tobio licked his lips, sighing. He opened his mouth and told him.

"Hinata." Tobio sighed, hands smoothening his hands all over the other's chest.

It didn't take long for them to reach the apartment, and the moment they entered through the door, Hinata had wasted no time in playing around. He tore Tobio's button down with much enthusiasm, leading them to his bedroom like he fucking owned the place, but with the way he was nipping Tobio's neck and sliding his hands into the gaps pf his shirt, Tobio was going to let him do whatever he wanted if he asked right now. Not without the usual resistance, but both of them knew Tobio always caved in the end no matter how inane Hinata's request was.

Tobio wasn't going to be bested in his own home of course, so he pushed Hinata into bed and crawled on top of him. He looked at Hinata, trapped underneath him, framed between his arms and legs. Hinata looked at him, dark eyes crinkling with his smile despite the drowsiness in them. This was soft and gentle, warm and very comfortable.

"Hey, Bakageyama," Hinata whispered between giggles, airy and light. He sounded too pleased with himself, like they were playing a game and he was already winning before it even began. His lips uncurled a smile wider than he was already sporting, tipping his head back to expose a column of his neck where part of his tan faded into pale skin. It skirted just barely on where the collarbone began.

They were playing an unspoken game and Tobio was *losing* —the nerve of this jerkass.

"You're here," Tobio murmured. He traced the lines on Hinata's body, wandering around flesh, relearning what had changed since they last saw each other.

"Mhm. I'm here." Hinata clung to Tobio's body, arms wrapped around his neck. The sleepy warmth of the moment spread all throughout Tobio's chest to his neck and ears, the tips of his fingers. Hinata had a bit of an accent, Tobio noted, the Portuguese melding in with his Japanese tongue. It made his sharp and rigid Japanese softer even when he was being annoying. He already noted it from days ago, but he couldn't pinpoint in the silky roll of his tongue where one language began and the other ended.

"You're also a little darker, did you know? Not too much but it's there." Hinata mumbled lazily while he pushed Tobio's button down out of the way. "It must be the Roman sun. There's a term for it in English. *Sun kissed*." He said while mouthing the small tan lines in Tobio's neck, kissing every spot earnestly. Here they were, relearning every line and contour of their bodies.

"You have freckles." Tobio replied after shucking off his shirt and exposing the rest of Hinata's body. He traced one spot to the next one, connecting the dots with the tip of his fingers. It made Hinata shudder, the freckles running down from his shoulder to his back. They look good with the tan lines.

He continued lower, determined to explore every inch of Hinata until he had known him freshly anew. He kissed every single skin he could find, an unspoken promise of pleasure in anticipation as Hinata curled his toes, every flex of his muscles could be felt against Tobio's own burning skin.

He kissed his chest, his ribs, his navel. Tobio ran a tongue over the cold metal snug on Hinata's flesh, over and over until it got Hinata whining. He caught it between his teeth, the taste of metal permeated in his senses as the jewelry laid flat on his tongue.

"Kageyama!" Hinata sucked in a moan.

He was holding the sun between his hands, trapping sunlight with his body. Hinata glowed beneath him whenever he smiled, bright flush dusting his cheeks, pure brightness stitched in his every fiber, his every being. Every noise he could coax out of Hinata was jolting him with sparks down his spine, making him tingle with goosebumps. He was putty between his arms, pliant to Tobio's minstrations. He found that he enjoyed this version of Hinata as well.

"You have a scar." Tobio traced the fine white line on his thigh. "How'd you get this?"

"Tripped." Came Hinata's grunt, laced with desperate urgency. "Shells on the beach."

"You should be more careful." Tobio huffed, his lips on the inside of Hinata's thighs. It gave him satisfaction to feel a twitch from Hinata's legs.

"And you're teasing." Hinata made a frustrated noise. "Come on, faster Kageyama."

He chuckled at the impatience, taking his sweet time in working Hinata up till the noises turned into whines of begging, Tobio's tongue dancing on the jagged line of Hinata's scar and newly acquired freckles on tan lines. He tasted the musky salt of his sweat, the tangy essence of Hinata that sticks to his skin, like tasting the sun.

Sex used to be a foreign concept for Tobio, and he used to flounder at the smallest mention of it, a fish out of water. It wasn't something he thought about often, and he was certain he didn't care enough for it before, too busy with volleyball to pay it mind besides the simple health benefits it could bring him. But of course Hinata had to change that.

Now all he could think of was his body, the planes of his abs, the lines on his collarbone, the way his shoulders curved, how his chest crested and fell with every labored breath. Beautiful. This body was so beautiful, carved by dedication, by his everyday habits. Written in this body was the story of his volleyball journey, these legs, these thighs, these calves, so much power, you swear he could fly.

Tobio wanted to worship it like how he worshiped volleyball, sending every kiss as a psalm, every bite as a prayer. He wanted to mark him, he wanted to claim him. He wanted to fall on his knees with reverence and adore it. Tobio wasn't religious, he rarely visited the temple believing that no god controlled his fate, no god could sway the play of a game, the movement of the ball—only the setter.

And still Hinata would contradict this, of course he would. One look at the deity before Tobio and he had all his beliefs shaken to the core. Tobio wasn't religious, but when Hinata sighed like that, he felt like he understood. Japan had millions of gods, and the land of sunrise worshiped the goddess of the sun. It made sense why, for people to supplicate before someone in the power of something so wonderful, so ethereal, so divine.

It made Tobio want to be a believer.

"K-kageymaaaaa." Whines and whimpers. Tobio could feel the length between Hinata's thighs growing harder at every tease. Impatient, Hinata started to grind up against him with shameless want, and Tobio could feel all of him. Any more of this and he was going to melt against Hinata.

"Dumbass." Tobio's voice was breathy. "Don't be impatient."

Hands wandered over flesh, mouth opening, legs spreading wide. Tobio mouthed Hinata's length, taking him deep inside him, tasting the salty essence of him. Tobio committed it to memory, the taste, the sight, the sound, the touch.

More. He wanted more.

Tobio wrapped Hinata's legs around his waist while he slicked himself up. He prepped Hinata open, exploring every inch of him. Every prod had Hinata squirming, had him crying out his name. The sound of it sent heat pooling in Tobio's gut, making his chest sing. It was a joy seeing Hinata so pliant to his touch, a purring feeling of pride curled inside him whenever the man whimpered from pleasure.

"Hinata..." Tobio sighed. He was greedy. He wanted so much more, and Hinata had so much to give. "Hinata." He said his name like a supplication.

"Kageyama." Hinata said his name as a claim. After all, Hinata was greedy too.

So Tobio gave him everything, and Hinata took all of him. Hinata gave Tobio his all, and Tobio took everything.

Heat, slick, melting around Tobio as he pushed into Hinata. He filled Hinata of himself to the brim and until no inch of him was empty. And Tobio took pieces of Hinata until the hollowness between his ribcage no longer rattled.

Loneliness, longing and heartache were nearly from the same source, but so was adoration, so was love, so was hunger, and Tobio was voraciously hungry, starving. He wanted to swallow all of Hinata. Because even if his mind denied it, his body was ruinously honest when one was familiar enough with it, and while he could lock away his thoughts and his words, he could never suppress his carnal desires.

He didn't want to deny it any more.

It's been the same every night when sleep eluded him. It has always been the same all those nights of careful waiting, of pining, and there was only so much he could do to quell the longing inside him.

More. More. More!

Tobio wanted. Tobio wanted to devour the light, to take the heat between his hands and push them into his open mouth. He wanted to swallow the sun with all of his selfish glory, reach up the sky and pull the burning ball from the air. He wanted to fly.

And maybe fish do not fly, not really.

But Hinata had always created impossibles, and with Hinata even Tobio could do the impossible.

"Kage—" Hinata gasped. "Kageya—more!" He cried out loud as he clung on to Tobio's body, nails digging into his back, hard enough to break skin. Tobio moved faster, hips losing rhythm and rhyme. Every thrust was a burst of stars behind Tobio's eyelids, every time they connected was euphoria deep in his skin, deep in his bones. His heart was a firecracker that exploded with every beat. Everything was so good. Everything was too good.

"Kageyama–Ka-ge-ya-ah!" Hinata whispered brokenly. Curses started spilling out of his lips, Japanese, English, Portuguese. His words were a garbled mess of languages that only Tobio understood. "Kageyama, Kageya—T-Tobio!"

The sound of his name rolling off Hinata's lips jerked Tobio into attention, a pleasant shudder curled through every bone down his spine. He wanted to drink that sound out of Hinata's mouth.

"Sh-shouyou." Tobio tried to return the favor, after all, he wasn't one to be beat. "Shouyou." Once he let it out, he couldn't stop himself. "Shouyou, Shouyou, Shouyou, Shouyou—" Just for now, just for tonight, in the confines of this room, the confines of this bed, he allowed himself to call him something more reflective of their intimacy, all nine years of it, a lifetime of waiting.

Tobio pressed his lips against Hinata, drinking the sounds of pleasure spilling out of his mouth, tongue clumsy, teeth clacking. It didn't matter. Tobio was too sun-drunk to care.

This was it.

Tobio thought, his insides reached the peak of pleasure.

This was the sensation of flying. This was him, finally flying from the ocean if only to meet the sun briefly. This was him, a fish swallowing the sun until all he could feel was warmth, until he became light incarnate, until they became one, and the lines of endings and beginnings blurred into nothing.

This was flying, this was falling.

And Tobio did not care if he burned.

"You'll find a place for you, Tobio." The wrinkled hand of his grandpa's wrinkled hand grasped against his tiny ones. "You can find some other place you can belong to," Kazuyosan said. The days were running out, Tobio knew this, so he kept all his words close to heart.

They both knew this of course, even if Tobio didn't want to believe it. Kazuyo pretended it wasn't either, and so he continued speaking.

"Or they find you. It can happen anytime, or it can take a long time. You can't really tell for sure, no one could," He closed his eyes with a serene smile. "But once you do, I tell you, they'll stay with you forever."

Tobio blinked his eyes awake.

This was a familiar scene, like an awful sense of deja vu. His body was heavy, his limbs as weary as when he finished an intense match. The drapes were closed, but strips of light still managed to seep through the gaps. For a second, Tobio was worried he might find the bed empty once again.

Light snores filled Tobio's ear, Hinata was spread against the sheets, passed out from exhaustion. Something within Tobio calmed down, the rattling in his chest fading into faint beats. Hinata was still here, asleep and tranquil. His chest rose with every inhale, air blew from his nose, drool rolling down his chin. Tobio didn't know why he expected something else.

Tobio chuckled. It was very Hinata of him.

Before he knew it, fingers brushed away the stray locks of hair on his forehead. This was tender, and Tobio made sure to commit these memories behind his eyelids, etching them forever in his mind before the inevitable separation. His heart had already started eating itself from the inside, gnawing itself into cavities.

"Nrgh?" The snores had stopped and a mumble replaced it, a hum laced with sleepy confusion greeted Tobio. "Wah'zz *matter*?" Hinata slurred his words, half in English and the other half in Japanese, sleep-rough and drowsy. "Kageyama? Go back to sleep."

"You go back to sleep, dumbass." Tobio huffed. No need to make a big deal out of it.

Somehow it had the opposite effect on Hinata. His eyes shot open and he pushed himself up to his elbows, determined to stare at Tobio despite the obvious haziness that came from just waking up. "You're thinking of something."

"I'm not."

"Liar." Hinata whispered, rubbing the drowsiness out of his eyes. "You're pouting that pout." He poked Tobio's cheek with a finger. "Come on, Yamayama. Talk to me."

It wasn't a big deal, but Hinata would never stop hounding him with questions if he didn't say anything. So Tobio asked, heart in his mouth.

"Why do you like me?"

Silence fell over them, thick and suffocating—at least it was to Tobio. Hinata simply looked like he was finally waking up, the topic dousing him with clarity. It was a little ridiculous, these conversations were long overdue, and they shouldn't only address them in the short time they meet again. Everything seemed out of order, a narrative that wasn't linear.

"Do I need a reason to like you?" Came Hinata's response. He tilted his head, confused. "Do you need a reason to play volleyball?"

"That's different."

"Is it?" Perhaps he never worried about it, perhaps Hinata was certain of Tobio's feelings for him. Of course, Tobio realized it first, confessed it first. It wasn't the same for them. "I don't know. What do you like me to say? That you make me happy?" Hinata hummed, and the words he said tasted like truth. The way he said things made you want to believe him. "I like you. I just do. It's like volleyball."

"Is that why you play? Because it makes you happy?" Tobio prodded. Is that what volleyball is to you?

"Well yeah? but not really?" Hinata pushed himself up from the bed to look at Tobio properly. "It's like you. it doesn't just make me happy. It frustrates me too, and sometimes it makes me sad, angry, afraid, proud. It just is, you know? It's just like me thinking about you. It's like eating and sleeping. It's just there and I do it."

Tobio considered this. For someone who took his sweet time figuring out his feelings, Hinata sure had a straight laced answer for something as complicated and abstract as feelings. He certainly was so sure about his answer. Maybe there were merits in pondering on it for a long time. Hinata's statement was unshakable.

"What about you? Why do you like me?" Hinata asked, his lips twitching into a smile. Obviously, he was trying to rile up a reaction from him.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out, dumbass." Tobio scoffed, flicking Hinata's forehead while he was caught off guard. He yelped and swatted his hand away.

"Hey!" He complained, whether affronted from the assault on his forehead or Tobio's statement, he wasn't sure.

"But if I'm being honest—"

"That's the first." Hinata snorted.

"Quiet!" Tobio shushed. "If I'm being honest..." He trailed away, as he always did when he was thinking. He shouldn't have to consider this, because deep down he had always known. It was the cost of honesty that often got the better of him, if the truth was a luxury he could afford to give away, if the threat of his miserly trust was something the other could handle.

He figured, if there was anyone who could handle it, it would be Hinata.

Besides, it was early morning before everyone was awake, but it was not cold, and he was certain that the sun was just by his side. This time, Tobio could afford to be honest.

"If I'm being honest, I can't separate you and volleyball in my thoughts."

Hinata looked at him, dark eyes boring holes into his steel blue ones. They were intense, but there was nothing but understanding. Then Hinata tipped his head and laughed, a full bellied laugh. The way his eyes crinkled, and the water that pricked the edges of his eyes casted a soothing spell in Tobio's chest, so much that he couldn't even bring himself to be annoyed over it.

"That'll do, Tobio." Hinata understood, even with the words Tobio still could not bring himself to say, even with everything in the air unspoken. But weren't the things they left unsaid the cause of their misunderstanding? The trust of not needing any words to communicate?

"No." Tobio got up from the bed, leaving the warmth and comfort of being Hinata's side. He rummaged around the closet for something important.

"What are you doing?"

"Quiet." Tobio pulled the thing out from the back of his closet, just like all the things he didn't-couldn't say. "Here." He tossed the item on the bed. Hinata picked up the thing on his lap.

"You kept it?" Hinata tipped his chin up to meet Tobio's gaze, unbearably smug. The words inscribed on it were damning, the faded loopy scritches of Hinata's penmanship searing behind Tobio's eyelids. He would be able to tell Hinata's handwriting at any given time.

"I still have it. Now, I'm giving you your ticket." He picked the blue tape from his discarded shorts, walking towards Hinata with conviction. He climbed on the bed, kneeling before Hinata who was leaning on the bed frame. Hinata talked like he was always promising. Hinata was better at keeping promises than him.

This time, it was Tobio's turn to make one.

"Hand."

"What?" Hinata licked his lips, eyes darting between his eyes and his own hand.

Tobio was unfazed. "Give me your hand."

"What are you planning, Bakageyama?" Hinata chuckled, but he complied without further protests. Gingerly, Tobio opened the package of his finger tape, wrapping them around Hinata's finger, working over them with dexterous hands. The blue looked good against his tanned skin, and Tobio smirked at his handiwork.

"There." Tobio had let go, allowing Hinata to marvel at it. "As long as you have this, you'll follow me for how long it takes. Whether you win, or you lose, ten years ago, or twenty years from now. You know what it means, don't you?"

But Hinata didn't answer—couldn't answer. He was gaping at the band on his finger, eyes wide like saucers.

"Oi Hinata? Oi-dumbass! Why are you crying?"

Hinata sobbed, the prickles on his eyes rolling down into rivulets on his cheeks. He hadn't seen him cry this much since that fateful game in Nationals, and for a second, Tobio wondered if he did something wrong again.

"It's—" Hinata gurgled between sniffs. "It's such an impractical ticket!" He said between half laughs and half sobs. "It's going to get in the way of spiking! And I'm going to have to take it off, and when I shower it's going to lose its adhesive!" Hinata exclaimed. "You can't just—you can't just spring this out to me without notice!"

"Then I'm going to replace it later, dumbass!" Tobio started raising his voice too, unconsciously. "I'll give you something permanent!

"Jesus Christ."

"You're not someone who accepts something less than gold, are you?!" Tobio goaded.

"No!" Hinata yelled. "Of course not!"

"Then it's settled!" Tobio declared. "I'm getting us both gold!"

Hinata looked at him like he wasn't sure if he wanted to punch the daylights out of him, or if he wanted to devour him on the spot till he was senseless. For now, he settled with wrapping his arms around his neck and burying his face in the crook of Tobio's neck.

The silence loomed once again between them, but this time it was comforting. Outside the window, where the city continued to move, the snow had covered the streets with its winter cold. But it was warm in Hinata's arms, and Tobio was losing a fight with sleep. The rise and fall of Hinata's breath was lulling Tobio into slumber.

The hollowness in his chest seemed to chime, the rattling quieting into a low thrum in his pulse.

Finally, Tobio thought while closing his eyes in content.

This was home.

Chapter End Notes

So that was all haha. I'll edit this properly when everything clears down here. Thanks for all the well wishes, were fine. But I can't say the same thing for others. The typhoon was very devastating.

Thanks for everyone who read this monstrosity. Like the forty something people who would probably enjoy this fic idk. I was just projecting when I wrote this, who knows if people actually enjoyed it...or read it. If you actually reach this part, then thank you. (I literally wrote a novel for them lmao.)

If you haven't seen Sal's art, then wtf are you doing with your lives?? Go see it. It's beautiful. Here it is. Marvel over it. Look at it again, but now with context.

Thanks to Nicki for the beta despite their busy schedule.

Finally, to the handful of people who did enjoy this, I'll be writing a companion fic for this on Hinata's pov (another long novel yay) hopefully I can get it out in six months (summer solstice baby and Hinata's birthday) if you enjoyed reading this, <u>you might wanna keep an eye on that.</u> or <u>ask me a question</u>

It's still technically Kageyama's birthday somewhere yeah?

Anyway yeah thanks for sticking till the end! Congratulations on reading an entire novel.

EDIT:

SO THAT ONE-SHOT CHAPTER AM I RIGHT??? I'M STILL FREAKING OUT I GOT A LOT OF THINGS RIGHT AND I MANIFESTED A LOT OF THEM HELL

YEAH!

on another note maybe hinata's pov might come a little later than planned because i apparently need to take 2 weeks away in the mountains for archeology classes. gotta dig some bones and stuff. so that will take away time to write and Uni is just killing me, it's giving me writer's block. i'm so sorry, but it is being written now. it will happen, but it will take longer than usual: (. very sorry to disappoint. still i appreciate all of your support and understanding. i hope to see you when i finish the fic

Works inspired by this one

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