

Comfort

Von Gepo

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Prolog: Sleeping tight

Kagami gently snored while Kuroko adjusted himself to find a better position. Who knew that lying down could be this hard? He tried both his sides but it only made him slide onto his stomach which was uncomfortable. He also tried lying on his back but it sent a sharp jolt up his spine. In the end he sat up and leant against the headboard with a pillow behind him.

His mate continued to snore.

Kuroko simply sighed, trying to ban the thought of how nice it would be to wake him up as punishment. He would not have to suffer alone that way. But Kagami had a game tomorrow, it was a wonder he actually slept for once. For months the blue-haired man had tried his best to curb the other's overexcitement and he was quite proud of himself for being able to calm him to this extent. By now he did not even need sex for that, a few words and a loving kiss was enough to put the other to sleep. Kuroko stretched out his hand, touching the red strands as gently as if he touched a cat's first fur. It was just as calming. A minute later he felt himself slipping into reverie, only to jolt awake when his stomach ached suddenly. He groaned in annoyance, nearly overwhelmed with the need to cry. Was it too much to ask to be able to sleep for even one night?

„Kuroko?“ A sleepy voice asked.

He had the immediate urge to excuse himself but he felt too drained to be sorry about waking his mate. He rested his tired eyes for a second, only to look at the other with a pained gaze.

„Can't sleep?“ Kagami rubbed his eyes, having his eyelids drop time and time again as if they were too heavy to withstand gravity.

„Everything hurts“, he admitting miserably.

„Shall I kiss it better?“

„That won't work, Kagami.“ Kuroko slumped in defeat.

„You could sleep yesterday when we spooned.“

„Your spawn wasn't awake then.“ He nearly cringed at his own words. How could he? He turned to his stomach, rubbing soothing circles onto it. „I am sorry, little one, I am very frustrated right now.“

„It must be bad if you are losing your cool.“ Kagami yawned mightily before sat up.

„He seems frustrated too. He is taking it out on my bladder“ The other stated.

„Being in there must be like sitting on the bench.“ The red-haired cuddled up to him, laying his much bigger and warmer hand on the round stomach. „He can't wait to come out and play.“

„He has another three weeks of being a bench-warmer.“ Kuroko sank against his mate, glad for the comfort he provided. „That little one is just as bad as his father.“

„I don't remember you being very calm whenever you had to sit out a game“ Kagami necked him.

„I am his father too.“

That drew a laugh from his mate. Kuroko smiled lazily. He liked to hear the other laugh even though he was still unable to do the same. Laughing out loud was something he had not experienced since his first year in middle school – since his first heat.

„In a few years you will be happy that he is just like us“ Kagami whispered into his ear.

„An unbearable idiot with no facial expressions?“ He had found sarcasm instead. It wasn't a good substitute for his missing laugh but it made his mate happy, so it was alright.

„Don't worry, he'll have some of me too.“ The other replied wittily. He had lost a bit of his hot-headedness over time which gave him an adult's charme.

Kuroko had a quick reply on his lips but he chose to kiss his mate instead. He was too tired for lengthy discussions. The other adjusted himself, so that they could place Kuroko's huge stomach on the crook of his. Their son always took that as an invitation to kick his father which spared Kuroko's bladder at least. Kagami also sneaked an arm under the blue-haired head, righting their comforter, so that his mate got the maximum warmth.

„Try to sleep. I'll watch our little one“ The red-haired promised with a lulling voice.

„You can't do that. He's still inside me, Kagami.“ His words were careless but they triggered an ache deep inside him. Their baby was there, it was alright. He was still inside, he wasn't gone. Kuroko had to repeat that four times before he could let go of his breath.

„Just watch me“ The other replied. He did not seem to have noticed the shift in his mate's mood.

Kuroko decided to stay silent and tried to relax. He rubbed ever-growing circles into his stomach until Kagami's hand found his and interlaced their fingers right above their baby.

Their thirty-six weeks old baby.

In another three weeks it would be gone.

Of course, it would be born then but Kuroko still dreaded the moment. It was his eighth after all – the first one who might make it to term. Three weeks. They scared him more than he would care to admit. The other seven hadn't made it after all.

Kagami had begun to snore again.

Chapter 1: Dawn, the first glimpse of light

„I am back home“ Kuroko greeted monotonously.

„Is that you, Tetsuya?“ There were steps from the kitchen to the front door, quick and excited. His mother stood before him, smiling nervously. „How was your first day?“ He simply looked at her without answering. One might even say he stared. His gaze lost focus after a moment. Excitement? Being nervous? He had forgotten how that felt like. Inside him was nothing but emptiness.

„Was it scary?“ His mother bit her lip and made fists with her delicate hands. Scary? He remembered fear. In the back of his mind, it lingered like a long forgotten enemy, ready to strike in a moment of weakness. It was there so he would not tell. He shall never tell a soul. The fear had endured even the death of his love. It was an enemy as much as it was a friend. It protected him. Yes, the fear was a friend. It protected him from shame.

„Well, you can tell me later“ His mother decided after not getting an answer for a while. „Come in, I made your favorite. Today's a celebration day. It is so good that you are visiting a new school. I hope you'll find some friends. Have you talked to anyone?“ „No one noticed me“ He answered weakly, his voice not more than a whisper. He could not remember how he had ever been able to talk loudly. Had he? He could not remember that either.

Remembering hurt. His memories were full of pain, filled with sorrow, agony and unbearable shame.

„Pity that, you are such a cute boy.“ She kept up her chatter, filling his plate while talking about this and that. Things on the radio, politics, the newest neighbor's gossip. A grandniece of the women living two houses over had apparently been married off to some company's CEO. „A great catch! Though I still pity her, she's only fourteen. I am very proud that you are such a responsible boy. You'll wait for the right one, don't you? That's admirable. I love that about you, Tetsuya.“

If only she knew. He clamped down on the thought, feeling himself break into cold sweat. Shit! Sweating was dangerous! He stood, abandoning his food and said: „I'll take a shower, mother.“

„What? But you haven't finished-“

„I am not hungry.“

„Have I said something wrong?“ She came after him. „Sorry, did I talk too much? Please stay, Tetsuya. I'll promise to keep silent. Tetsuya!“

He shut the bathroom door in her face.

„Sorry“ he mumbled, whispered rather. There was no way his mother could hear it. He was unable to speak up though.

Shame. It coursed through his veins, filling him with remorse.

He could not tell her, could never tell. No one should know. No one should know his secret. He was abominable. He was a murderer. She could never know. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw nothing but blood. He had bled so many times, losing his life, losing those lives inside of him. She could never know. His mother was so proud of her unstained boy, her fairy tale romantic hero that waited for his prince to come. There was not a single scratch on him, nothing to scream out the obvious. He knew only he was able to see all that blood on himself.

His and the blood of six lives he had aborted.

She could never know.

When their coach had told them to take off their shirts, he had immediately stepped into that Alpha's shadow. It was an instinct reaction, not especially logical but it felt better than to be exposed like that. Taking off his clothes was like bringing down a bit of that armor that enabled him to stay clear of pain. It felt uncomfortable.

Though it should have felt less uncomfortable than having a strong Alpha around. That red-haired guy looked amazing, smelled even more amazing. He was a walking pheromone-bomb, an Omega-trap much like the Alphas that surrounded him in middle school. Somehow he did not feel intimidating though. Maybe that was because he did not seem to notice Kuroko at all. Did that one already have a mate? Or was he finally able to suppress his scent so much that not even an Alpha took any notice of him? If that was true, it would be a huge step in the right direction.

He was so lost in thought that he only noticed the end of the inspection by the coach shouting for practice to start. He stepped forward, not wanting to be left out but hoping he would not have to take off his shirt. But of course he had to. He felt all eyes upon him, especially those hot ones burning into his back. Would that Alpha recognize him as an Omega by sight, even if he could not do so by scent? Kuroko was unmated, that would be plain to see for him. Would that man prey upon him? It was horrible standing with his back to that person. He should have just stayed in line beforehand. When he was allowed to robe again, he glanced over his shoulder. That Alpha was looking away, already starting to warm up for practice. Huh ... he did not seem interested in Kuroko. Strange that. He had come to fear Alphas for their lust and brutality. Maybe this one was really mated. Did Alphas lose their hunting nature once they were mated? Omegas changed but did Alphas? Their cycle would adapt to their mates but did it make them uninterested in others? He had heard that in some countries owning Omegas was a question of prestige, so it was allowed for one Alpha to mate with multiple Omegas. That had not sounded like Alphas underwent much of a change.

So maybe it was really his scent. Most likely that Alpha had not recognized him as an Omega. If so, something good might actually come out of this. If that man could become his light without becoming his owner ... well, that might even work. Having an Alpha as a partner and protector without becoming his mate, that would be perfect. This one looked strong enough to hold down even Aomine or Midorima if need be. He wasn't sure about Murasakibara but that one was living far away at least. He should test that man, find out how strong he really was. He had opted for a school with no Alphas on the basketball team but one oblivious one would be okay. As long as that redhead would never find out what he was, he would be alright. He hoped.

Damn, that Alpha was good. Not like his former teammates but he was strong and rapidly developing. Their coach was also great, so Kagami should shape up in no time. And it was true, he did not smell him. For the first time in months Kuroko allowed a small smile on his lips. This might work, it might actually work.

At this rate, he might even be able to face his former teammates again, not hidden in shadow but menacing them side to side with his new light. He would not have to run for the rest of his life. Hearing their coach, hearing Kagami talk about their goals, about actually beating all his former teammates ... Kuroko felt like he should be crying in joy, even if he could only feel a slight happy pang in his chest. This was new. This was what real hope felt like.

He was able to sleep for the first time in years that night. Even the morning after, he felt like shouting out in joy, even though his throat closed up if he tried to open his mouth. So he found his own way to shout by chalking a message onto the ground. They would win. They would be the best. He wanted to trust in that Alpha and his sempais. Seeing Kagami smile at him when he noticed the message made Kuroko's heart skip a beat.

Damn. Who knew he was still able to feel that bit of positive emotion? He was an Omega. His body was built to light up in joy if a strong Alpha looked his way, smiled at him, touched him, fucked him. Kagami might not recognize him as one but that did not mean that his smiles weren't dangerous. They triggered Kuroko's Omega responses. He would have to watch out in a whole new way to not make the same mistake that he had made with Aomine – to think that an Alpha might feel the same.

They did not. Omegas triggered nothing but lust in them. Not joy, no love, no pride, only an bestial instinct to couple and reproduce. Smiling at an Alpha did not make them happy but let them crave sex, an Omega's smile was an invitation to get said Omega pregnant. He knew – he had learned that the hard way.

Of course his little bubble of happiness crumbled sooner than he had thought. A practice game against Kaijou High. That explained that scent in the back of his mind. He had thought he was only imagining things, now haunted by scents as he was by memories but no – Kise was real. He was here. He concentrated on his nose, able to scent the other coming nearer. He was followed by about half the school's female population, all unmarried Omegas right in front.

His instincts urged him to stand by them, to vie for Kise's attention. His rational mind wanted to throw up just for looking in his direction. He was assaulted by the memory of that smile right in front of him, right above him as Kise pounded into him for the very first time. He had that trademark grin, telling Kuroko how beautiful he was, how beautiful their pups would be. He made an instinctual step in Kagami's direction, breathing in a noseful of his scent to forget Kise's stench for a moment.

Kagami did not notice. In the last two weeks, Kuroko had learned that the redhead's best quality was that he was unbelievably oblivious. He seemed immune to Omegas. Not only was Kuroko's scent really weak, he was unimpressed by all other Omegas as well. Two girls had tried their luck with him, one of them an Omega, and he had simply told them no, not even fazed when the Omega girl threw a blast of her pheromones in his face.

He was nearly as composed as Akashi in that regard. Omegas did not affect him at all. It gave Kuroko such a feeling of safety that even now – with Kise right in front of him – he knew he would only need to ask for help, Kagami would not even demand sex afterwards. It was a freedom he had never experienced before. This must be what a having a mate felt like. No wonder every Omega spent their whole focus on finding the right mate.

It just wasn't for him. He wanted to punch Kise in the face with success, showing him that even though he was an Omega, he wasn't weak, he did not need an Alpha mate to be stronger. He wanted to scream, to shout, to make that smirking Alpha submit to him. But all he did was tremble, fearing the moment that light teasing would turn to innuendo, that Kise would release his pheromones and make Kuroko crawl to him to kiss his feet.

Kagami saved him by aiming a basketball at Kise's face.

Well, that came as a surprise. It was less surprising that Kise trashed him for that, followed up by trying to reclaim Kuroko for himself. He remembered that leering grin

on the hunts, in the shower and in the locker room. He remembered Kise above him, behind him, under him, could still feel that double penetration Aomine and Kise liked so much when they weren't completely beat after training.

Again, Kagami supported him more subtle than he ever could have imagined. Was the redhead doing it instinctively? Because he did not seem aware that he challenged Kise's claim again, telling him to back off at the same time. Kise noticed. Kuroko knew that Kise noticed. Kagami seemed oblivious to it all, though Kuroko had to ask if maybe that guy was simply a very good actor. But no, his subconscious seemed to have put a claim on Kuroko without his conscious ever noticing he was acting like an Alpha mate to an Omega.

It felt a bit like being wrapped in a warm blanket of protection. Even though Kuroko did not want to be protected, it felt nice all the same. For right now, he wanted to stand by that man's sight and see how far it would get him.

That moment Kagami put a hand on his head, telling Kise that he was the reason Kise would lose, Kuroko had a sudden urge to be fucked by Kagami.

That was deeply disturbing.

The urge to be fucked was an Omega one, quite natural when an Alpha touched him. That much was not a surprise. Using sex as a tool for gratitude was also an Omega urge that triggered apart from being touched. What surprised him was that even his conscious mind supported the thought instead of vehemently fighting it. His urges did not feel humiliating, they felt natural. He felt respected, worshiped even. Kagami was placing him on a pedestal, one even above himself and it made Kuroko feel so fluffy and nice around his heart that being taken by the redhead seemed completely logical. Of course it wasn't, so his rationality put a stop to that train of thought. Kagami complimented him on his basketball skills, seeing him as an athlete, an equal partner. After a life of being ridiculed, of course that felt good, but he should not destroy it by giving into his Omega urges. Akashi, Kise, even Aomine had never seen him as more than a tool, a nice accessory to make things easier for them. To Kagami he was someone to be respected. And damn, he wanted to show himself worthy of that trust. Even though Kise got more serious by the minute, enraged by an Alpha beating him, Kuroko felt secure to taunt him a little. He knew Kagami was with him, stood by his side, protected him without asking a price for that. He wanted to kiss that big idiot but for now, it was enough to pass him balls, so that he could beat Kise to a pulp.

In hindsight, Kuroko was very sure he fell in love with Kagami at that game. Somewhere between hearing the pride in his voice and being carried by him when his legs gave out, Kagami became his world, his sun, his reason. Omega urges, consciousness and logic aligned to have one common goal: When they had beat the Generation of Miracles, he would make Kagami his mate.

Chapter 2: Essence of hurt

Kuroko had noticed Midorima in the stands in one of their preliminary games. Not only him, his whole team seemed to have come. He saw the other leave with an unreadable expression, closely followed by a Beta he had never seen before. He decided to follow them, just putting on a jacket and telling a still celebrating Kagami he would be back later. At least he already knew that if he went missing, Kagami would come for him. The guy was an idiot but a reliable one.

He found his old teammate in the park, sitting on a bench with that blackhaired Beta next to him. When Kuroko drew near, he overheard his name, so he stayed in the shadows, listening in to their conversation.

"Kuroko is an Omega." Midorima explained right now. "He was the blue-haired one next to that Alpha."

"An Omega athlete?" The other asked in surprise. "Shouldn't he be mated and pregnant by now?"

Kuroko clenched his fists and told himself to calm down. This was just what everyone thought. This was normal. Any person would react that way. Somehow it hurt to see Midorima look as appalled as he himself felt at that statement. Sometimes it was really hard to stay mad at the guy. He did not like Midorima at all – but he had to admit that man was a good person to the core of his being.

"Was he ... did you lose a fight over him?" The Beta guessed. The greenhaired man negated which made the other ask after a few moments: "Why does this hurt you so much?"

Kuroko had to actually hold a hand to his lips to keep himself from gasping in surprise. Who was that Beta? He spoke like a really good friend, someone who knew Midorima well and was used to being trusted. Did that neurotic, misanthropic man who always kept to himself really confide in another person? Kuroko did not trust his ears when he heard the other reply: "It reminds me of my failures."

Yes, Midorima seemed to have found a friend and placed his trust in him. It was so strikingly different from the boy he went to school with a few months before. This was what being friends meant. This was how they should have been in middle school. This was what Kuroko had wanted for himself, someone he could talk to, someone who listened, someone who did not care if he was an Omega, Beta or Alpha, simply a friend. He had lost the only one who ever behaved like that because of those that called him friend but did nothing but rape him.

It reminded him that Midorima was one of them which enabled him to focus on the conversation again. He did not immediately get what his old school mate was talking about: "They don't seem to show the cruel stuff. I guessed so. I choked an Omega once. Akashi was the one who revived him. After that he punched me in the face. Akashi, I mean. The Omega never dared."

Yes, he remembered that incident. It was one of the later hunts when all five of them were after him. Midorima had found him first, Akashi being right behind him. Good thing that he was because Midorima would have killed him. Out of all of them, he lost control the most when he went into rut. Kuroko did pity whoever Midorima would mate with eventually.

The Beta who did not only seem to like him for unknown reasons but also seemed to be quite sharp asked: "Kuroko?"

"Yes. He was the only one ever to make me lose control. I hope that Alpha claimed him. He seems strong enough to protect Kuroko from me."

His hand fell from his lips to his heart. Midorima wasn't one to express his feelings but what he said just now was full of sympathy for him. He always knew that the shooter blamed and hated himself for what happened but he had not guessed to what extent. Midorima's voice sounded broken when he asked his friend: "Have I finally driven you away?"

"I am still here, am I not?" There was some rustle of clothes which made Kuroko look around the tree he hid behind. He stopped in astonishment when he saw Midorima in his friend's arms, not exactly leaning into him but not shoving him off either. "I am sorry that happened to you."

"It is just so unfair. Omegas have inhibitors, so they can live a normal life. All I can do is chop off my cock and hope that's enough."

Kuroko felt like he was ripped into shreds when he watched those two. One side of him wanted to comfort Midorima, wanted to tell him that it was alright, that he had survived. Another side wanted to say to Midorima that chopping off his cock would be a good way to redeem himself and a fine punishment for all he had done. Another part wanted to scream at that Beta why he was consoling Midorima when Kuroko stood just a few feet away, hurting more than he had for months. Listening to Midorima ripped open a lot of wounds that he had patched up these past few months. "Please don't do that. As long as you do not go near an Omega in heat, you should be okay." This Beta actually petted Midorima's head. Kuroko couldn't believe how jealous that made him. "So now you are afraid to meet Kuroko?"

"Not really. Kuroko is fine. He wasn't even angry. I just don't want to go near him when he is in heat. I hope that Alpha claimed him."

Fine. Kuroko nearly snorted. How could he be fine? Midorima had been the first of all of them to rape him, his first men, the first one to get him pregnant. He had been the one to teach him fear. He had clawed at him, bitten him, pounded him into the ground with those delicate hands and his not so delicate cock. Sure, he had been the only one who did not act like an asshole afterwards. He had excused himself for his brutality, he had offered to mate with him if Kuroko was so inclined, he had really tried his best to make it less horrifying in Kuroko's memories. It did not change the fact that this first time with Midorima was the worst in his whole life, even compared to Murasakibara to whom he owed an actual scar in his anal ring. He was nowhere near fine.

"Actually ... why didn't you claim him? Isn't that kind of an instinct?" The Beta asked.

"He wore a collar. He did not wear one today, that makes me hopeful."

He stopped wearing a collar when he felt safe enough from Alphas. It had been the day he met Kagami. That sudden image in his mind calmed Kuroko down in an instant. Kagami. He did not have to be afraid anywhere. He could control his pheromones and if anyone ever tried to assault him again, Kagami would crush them. Kagami was his light.

"So he was okay with sex but not with mating?"

"No, I raped him. I was thankful he wore that collar."

Oh, so Midorima was honest to his friend. Of course, Midorima was always honest but somehow Kuroko had expected him to omit that little detail. By now he simply hoped that very nice Beta would not abandon Midorima. It was not as if he had raped Kuroko out of his own free will, he had been as appalled and disgusted with himself as he was.

"You ... what?" The Beta looked up, not exactly horrified but definitely shocked. "Just

by scenting him, you lost so much control that you raped and nearly killed him?"

"Yes." The other sighed. "I hate being an Alpha."

"I ... see." The blackhaired sounded rather put off but he kept Midorima in his arm.

"Was he the only one? Or were there others?"

"He was the only one but it happened ... eight times I think." Yes, Midorima was a person who would count. "He had seven abortions."

Not correctly though. He had not aborted his third baby. Kuroko put a hand on his stomach, suddenly feeling very empty. Shit. This was something he definitely did not want to remember. Kagami. Kagami dunking a ball, eating a ridiculous amount of rice, sleeping in class. Where was Kagami anyway? Shouldn't he be already looking for him? How long had he been eavesdropping on Midorima? Should he leave? He was inclined to do so when he heard Midorima explaining to his friend what exactly happened back then. Call it morbid curiosity but Kuroko decided to stay.

"Akashi wanted us all to become the best we could be. He set nearly unreachable goals. The one who came closest to reaching his goal was the one allowed to chase Kuroko that month. Kuroko's goal was to mask his scent, so that he would not be found. His motivation was clear, I guess. And when he had finally learned to mask his scent even in heat, Akashi set more of us after him. The last year of middle school was one gang rape after the next. Even if I weren't in rut myself, I could not resist Kuroko's allure. I could control myself not to rape him when he was out of heat, but as soon as he went into it, I went wild."

Well ... that was a pretty accurate summary. Packed into those few words it sounded even more sick than it had felt. How had he ever agreed to that? He knew why but he did not want to go there.

"That is sick", was also the Beta's conclusion.

"It was why I chose a high school none of the others would go to. Akashi is quite smart but the others are dumb as bread. And I knew where Akashi would go. I just wanted to get away from all of them. Kuroko did the same, he went to a completely new school none of us would go to. He isn't angry with any of us, he said, but still ... I know I am the worst." Dear gods, Midorima, really. Out of all of them he was the most decent. He had pleaded with Kuroko to stop, had told Akashi to stop, had offered to stop it himself by mating Kuroko. "Being an Alpha is about being strong to protect your mate. But how can you protect someone when the beast is you yourself?"

"You are still scarred, I see." Oh no, had he really just said that? He had not wanted to make those two notice him. But on the other hand, it hurt to see Midorima so down. Even after all the pain and resentment, Midorima had been by his side, had helped him countless times, even saved his life twice. Yes, he was angry and hurt, he did want to see the other suffer but not like this. This was just too much. They might not been the best of friends but somehow Midorima was dear to him, even if he did not like the guy's personality.

That poor Beta nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Adept as ever." Midorima wasn't even surprised. "As sick as it all was, it did teach you what it was supposed to. You are invisible to my senses."

True enough. It had taken more than a year of continual rapes to reach that state but he had. In a twisted way it made him proud. He had consented to those rapes after all. It wasn't like he could really blame any of his old teammates, he only had himself to blame. So he said: "I am still not angry. But none of you seem able to forgive yourselves."

"Most days I think about killing myself", Midorima answered monotonously.

Okay, that was definitely enough. He had to get the other off that guilt trip. If Midorima was like this, Aomine would be even worse, maybe even Murasakibara. He wasn't sure about Akashi, that man was hard to read. Kise had seemed fine but only on the surface. He had an inkling that the other was just as hurt, he simply expressed himself differently.

"I want you to let go of your hurt. I want you to continue living. I want you to forgive yourself." He calmly stated. "So I will win our match to show you that I am not helpless. I could have put a stop to all that we did at any time. It was my own choice not to. So you have no reason to blame yourself."

Well, that was a lot of bravado but it certainly was what he wished to feel. It was a recent development that he felt in control again. Kagami assured him that he was allowed to make his own choices.

"You want to beat me with that new Alpha you got?" Midorima asked with a voice much older than he was, a tired and hopeless one.

"No. I'll beat you myself."

Chapter 3: Bittersweet feelings

„I can't believe it.“ Takao patted Kuroko's shoulder not exactly gently. „You actually did it.“

„We will continue to do so.“ He directed his gaze at Midorima. „Thank you for the game.“

„I can't believe you stopped that move.“ Those green eyes actually glared.

„Ah, don't pout, Shin-chan!“ Takao put an elbow into his partner's side. „Save those feelings for the next time we play them. Or for practice. Wait, no, don't save them for practice, that'd be the death of me.“

Kuroko could not help but chuckle at watching those two. Really, Midorima had always been a stoic, honest to a fault character, not interested in others. A pure egomaniac whose only social graces were the moral code his mother must have drilled into him. This Shin-chan though – Takao's personal version – wasn't so bad. Midorima alone was horrible but coupled with Takao, he was fun to be around. They'd make a cute couple. It was a shame that Takao was a Beta instead of an Omega or Alpha.

When Midorima turned, his eyes were glossy as if he was about to cry. Takao instantly turned his focus onto others, being loud and boisterous to give the other a moment to himself. He was a really attentive friend.

„Is Midorima crying?“ Kagami asked out loud.

Kuroko just sighed. That redhaired idiot was as inattentive as he was good at basketball. At least he was still oblivious regarding Kuroko's status. Other than Kise Midorima had made no jabs or barbs regarding their past relationship. If Kuroko had not overheard those two, he would have been sure the other was long over him.

The intensity of Midorima's feelings had certainly surprised him. Maybe this was what fate held in store for him. Not only beating all of his former teammates but also teaching them better. All those egoistical, I-play-only-for-myself characters should be humbled by teamwork. He wanted them to bow their heads, to acknowledge him as an equal. This would be his way to overcome his own trauma.

„Kuroko!“ Kagami pat his shoulder, smiling at him. „What has got you so serious? We just won!“

„That we did.“ He smiled in spite of his thoughts. „Thank you, Kagami. It was a splendid game.“

„Well, thank you. You just saved our asses, man.“

Yes ... that was new. Being needed instead of being a bit of flourish and extra cream on top. This was completely different from Teiko. Kuroko felt a honest smile tucking at his lips.

Aomine.

He wished it did not have to be him next. Forgiving Midorima was rather easy, especially now that he saw him with Takao. He was a whole new person, one able to show his care and smile. He was also a lot less neurotic than before.

But Aomine was a completely different matter. Not only had he done far worse, he had switched so often between feeling sorry and enjoying the hurt he caused. Some days it seemed like he cared and Kuroko's heart still ached for those moments Aomine held him close, whispered words of love and worship into his ear and caressed his body. On other days he made Kuroko submit, forced him to choke on his cock and

fucked him in the worst possible places, often making him miss lessons or even practice. He might not have proof but he was very sure that the last four aborted babies had all been Aomine's.

Aomine never cared much for the hunts, he simply fucked Kuroko whenever he found it convenient. Or rather, whenever he needed an emotional outlet. Kuroko had always let him, knowing what fueled those messy sessions that left him bloody and hurting. He was what kept Aomine alive. Just like Aomine had been what kept him alive in that time where one rape was followed by the next. He did it all for Aomine.

He had still lost him though. Aomine kept raping him but he took less and less pleasure from it until it seemed like hurting Kuroko had become his way of hurting himself, of hating himself more. It was then that Kuroko put a stop to it all, walking away from basketball and his former teammates. By now that was nearly a year in the past. Neither of them had moved on though. The chapter called Aomine was the most painful in his whole live, surpassing even those six abortions and the hunts that happened with the other four. And he knew well why: He had loved that man, a small part of him still loved him even now after all that happened.

Even after what Aomine did to Aoki. Kuroko held Nigou near, that small pup having to deal with all the pain and sorrow caused by the events that fateful day. For the first time in nearly two years, Kuroko allowed himself to say that name: Aoki.

If he had not lost their child, Aoki would be sixteen months old by now. He would be able to walk, would speak his first words, would make his first attempts to eat alone. If he closed his eyes, he had a clear image in front of his eyes. A tanned boy, dark blue hair, light blue eyes. Everyone always told him Nigou looked like him but whenever he looked at the Huskey pup, he thought he looked into his child's eyes.

For the first time in two years, he allowed himself to cry over that baby boy that would never call him Mama.

Seeing Momoi again was the first step in facing Aomine.

He noticed how everyone got jealous about the fact that the Alpha woman was all over him – everyone but Kagami. Kagami looked simply on edge, keeping a watchful eye on the situation. When Momoi asked to talk to Kuroko alone, he was the only one hesitating for wanting to stay with Kuroko instead of being all over Momoi.

Kuroko hadn't exactly expected that but it was nice to know all the same. Kagami really regarded him as his mate somewhere in the back of his mind. His fists clenched when Momoi had bitten Kuroko's ear while she held him from behind.

He knew Momoi did that on purpose to test Kagami. The only one completely oblivious was the redhead of course. Momoi was quick to mention it as well. Kagami was a lot like Aomine just ... more stable. He never let him down, never got violent with him. He held him dear and never blamed him. Kagami was very much like that positive side of Aomine that Kuroko had loved. That side which Aomine had lost over time.

Of course he promised Momoi to try and bring that side back. That man who loved basketball more than anything, who loved life, who loved Tetsuya, his little shadow. On the other hand he feared to bring him back. Wouldn't it make him fall all over again? Or was Kagami enough to remind him to stay clear of Aomine? Because even if that positive Aomine came back, no one could tell how fast he would leave again. Kuroko could not go through all that a second time.

With all those thoughts running in his head, it was a miracle that he stayed attentive enough to notice the change in Kagami's behaviour. When he came to practice the

next day, he was rather solemn. Maybe seeing Momoi had got him thinking? Hopefully not. That oblivious side was what Kuroko loved most about him.

But no, it was even worse. He had run into Aomine. Or rather Aomine had sought him out to test him and renew his claim on Kuroko. The only think worse would have been to tell Kagami the whole story.

„It sounded to me like you weren't just ordinary teammates. What happened between you two in middle school?“ Of all those questions Kagami could ask ... how should he ever answer this?

„It's complicated.“ He answered truthfully. „And a long story.“

„Well, I am not allowed to practice, so I have time.“

That he did. Oh well, no escape here. He did plan to mate with this guy after all. He took a deep breath before he began: „When I came to Teiko I was a very shy boy.“

„I can imagine.“ Kagami smiled encouragingly.

„I had this dream of joining a national basketball competition, so I signed up for the basketball club. But I was weak, really weak. The coach told me to quit.“ It still hurt to remember that, even though it was a piece of cake after all that happened afterwards. But Kagami seemed to get the mood, he stepped closer to Kuroko. He seemed to have already notice that this calmed Kuroko down. „I practiced until late at night, trying to get better. Aomine found me one evening and from then one, he helped and supported me. He gave me a chance to be noticed, he even threw his own basketball career on the line when they threatened to throw me off the team.“

„He sounds nice.“ Kagami offered when Kuroko stopped.

In that pause he debated with himself if he should tell Kagami or not. He finally decided: „I ... I fell in love with him.“

The redhead only nodded. So he wasn't completely oblivious after all. He did not look upset, only thoughtful, so Kuroko dared to continue: „I became a regular, we won and kept winning. In our second year Aomine began to change. No one was a challenge anymore, so he started to lose his drive. It got worse and worse. He stopped to come to practice, he even stopped playing with me because both made winning easier. In the end, he closed himself off completely, saying the only one who could beat him was himself.“

„What a prick.“ Kagami harumpfed. „Did you ever tell him how you felt for him?“

„Yes ... he rejected me.“ That was a nice description for nearly killing him in a fit of rage. But that was a story he did not want to tell.

„I'm sorry.“ Kagami offered.

„It wasn't to be. I am not exactly over him but I don't think my feelings will get in the way when we play him.“ He hoped. Actually, he was sure his feelings would get in the way but what should he do about it?

„Do you want to win?“

„Of course I want to win!“ He had promised Momoi after all. He would try to bring back the old Aomine, no matter what it would do to himself. „I want that smug grin off his face and ... I ...“

Kagami put a hand on his shoulder in silent support.

„I want to ... I-“ Damn it, why was he crying? He hated Aomine. He had hurt him so much. Why did it still hurt so much? „I don't want him to stay lost. He lost himself. I want to bring back his smile.“ He closed his eyes, a snuffle breaking past his lips. „I am sorry.“

„You love him. I get that.“ They stopped with Kagami still holding Kuroko up with that hand on his shoulder. „You don't have to be ashamed of loving him.“

„I'm sorry.“ Kuroko took a step forwards, embracing Kagami and pressing his cheek against that broad chest. „Sorry.“

„You can't help who you love.“ The other put an arm around him as well, petting his head from behind. „Thank you for telling me. This will be hard on you, won't it?“

„I'm scared.“ Kuroko admitted with a small voice. „What if we lose? He won't change. What if we win and he really changes? What will that do to me? What if we win and he doesn't change?“

„I'll be by your side whatever happens“ Kagami promised.

„I'm sorry.“ He just couldn't stop crying. How could he tell him about another guy? He loved Kagami. Aomine had only hurt him again and again. Why was he still pining over that guy? He wanted his number one to be Kagami. Why couldn't he love just him? He did not want those feelings for Aomine.

„Don't worry.“ The other simply held him.

It hurt.

Losing hurt. It hurt so much, Kuroko couldn't believe he was able to feel this much pain. Losing Kagami hurt so much more than losing to Aomine. How could he ever have thought differently? Of course it hurt that he could not show Aomine how good he was, could not make him acknowledge him. He could not change him either, for good or for worse.

But all that paled in comparison to losing Kagami.

Kagami was his pillar, his rock, his light. He was all Kuroko needed. He hadn't even noticed how important that man had become. When had he last felt emptiness? When had he last felt shame and fear? At what point had he stopped hating himself and begun to heal instead? When had he begun to trust in Kagami so much that he felt brave enough to face his past?

And now Kagami had left him. Just like Kise had predicted, Kagami had left. He was gone to look for a way to become stronger himself, leaving Kuroko behind. He was alone again.

He was useless.

No, worse. He was used up. He had fulfilled his purpose and was left behind. He had been useful but he was unable to give his partner what he needed. Just like he had been unable to save Aomine. He had let him down. He had let Kagami down. There was nothing left for him.

Shame.

He was unworthy.

He was an Omega. He was a thing to be used until the other was fed up with him. That was how Alphas and Omegas worked. He would be left again and again. No Omega would ever be able to be everything their Alpha needed. They could never stand beside them, they would always fall behind. Alphas were far superior to Omegas, so it was only right. They were amusements, inspirations on the side. He would never be more.

He was nothing.

„If you really don't think you can do it, at least tell Kagami.“

Kuroko blinked. Kagami? Why would he care? Kagami had already abandoned him. Why bother? The redhead would only ask why Kuroko felt the need to tell him. Kagami would not stop him. He was a burden.

„He believed in you. He told me you would take this loss as your drive to overcome your limits. Do you want to make him a liar?“ Hyuga shook his head with a smile.

„I- I'm ...“ Kuroko stottered, not really knowing what to say.

Kagami hadn't ignored him because he was fed up? He had been sure he would make a comeback and become stronger than ever before? Gods, he had been blind. How had he misjudged his friend like that? Didn't he trust in Kagami?

Kagami would never abandon him. He had promised.

Kuroko began to run. His heart called out to him, telling him to find his mate. How could he ever have faltered in his trust in Kagami? He loved him after all.

Chapter 4: Claim, a question of belonging

„You aren't mated yet?“ Takao blinked in surprise. „Jeez, I had been sure Kagami would have already claimed you. How long have you been together now? Half a year?“ „It is not like that.“ Kuroko averted his gaze, trying to get some serenity from looking at the guesthouse's inner yard. „We are only teammates. Kagami and I aren't like that.“

„Yeah, but ... I know it's the prejudice talking but ... he is an Alpha, you are an Omega-“

„That is exactly why I won't have a relationship with him.“ He shot the other a blazing look. „Does your team know about Midorima and you?“

„Yes, they know.“ Takao leaned on one arm and sighed. „I told our captain right away.“

„You ... what?“ Really? He knew Midorima was honest, too honest for his own good but Takao had always seemed like the one able to interpret the world to his partner and Midorima to the world. He must have known that telling his team he was going out with their ace would have negative consequences.

„Well, not exactly right away. But Shin-chan kissed me in front of all of them in practice, so I had to. He doesn't get the meaning of a taboo.“ Takao chuckled.

Well, that sounded a lot more believable. Midorima was oblivious on a whole different level than Kagami. He wasn't oblivious of certain aspects of life – like love relationships – but whole life domains. Like social interactions and people in general. Midorima did not get those things at all.

„How did they take it?“ It must have had a good end or Takao would not sit next to him in his club's summer camp.

„They threw me off the team.“ The other shrugged his shoulders. „Next day they begged me to come back because they could not stand an unfiltered Shin-chan without me.“

„Well ... there's that.“ Kuroko had to smile in spite of himself. „I can't reproduce that with Kagami.“

„I don't think your team would think any less of you. They know you are an Omega. Kagami is all over you anyway. They call you light and shadow. Would it really be awkward if you added sex into that mix? I am sure they expect you to turn up bitten any day now.“

„Well ... maybe.“ Maybe Takao had a point. Kuroko always got the seat next to Kagami now, the team kept their distance when they were talking and they had given Kagami and him the only two-bedroom they had booked. „Yes, I think they believe we have sex.“

„You want to, don't you?“

Well, yes. He had wanted to since Kagami's presence got stronger than his haunting memories. When he was with him, the background noise of pain and fear simply quieted. Especially since Kagami had made it clear how much he trusted Kuroko. That whole Aomine-drama ... it had been painful but at least it had showed Kuroko exactly where he wanted to belong.

„Is it ... um ... no, please forget I said anything.“

„Ask away.“ Takao grinned. For someone who was here for a training camp he was pretty relaxed. Midorima was practicing in the front yard and Kagami was still out running.

„I don't think you are able to answer the question. Or if you are, I don't even want to ask. I just wondered how it is to have consensual sex.“

„Con ... woah, yeah, that's kind of a hard question. No, I have never been raped, I can only imagine how horrible that must be. You really never had sex that you wanted? Not even once?“ There was a crease between Takao's eyebrows but at least he was able to stand the conversation. Kuroko had tried to talk to another Omega once but that one only told him that everything that felt good was alright, so there was no raping an Omega. That had been disturbing.

„I just thought ... well, you are a Beta, so maybe Midorima isn't brutal with you. Sorry, that is a horrible topic.“ Kuroko slumped and drew his legs to his body. He should not have said that. He was talking to Takao about his boyfriend and how that one had brutalized him. That was horrible.

„Shin-chan is completely different from what you saw of him.“ Somehow Takao's voice was steady, not even a hint of doubt. „He told me in detail what happened with you because he could not keep it in, it traumatized him as well. When he is with me, he can let himself fall without fearing to lose control. That is consensual sex, you don't know what exactly will happen but you know it will be alright. You can trust the other that he will not hurt you.“

Trust. He trusted Kagami. But could he trust any Alpha to stay in control if he did not keep this tight a leash on his hormones? What about their ruts? Even if he wasn't in heat, did they not have their own circles? „Has he never hurt you?“

„Only once. An Omega released all her pheromones. Shin-chan ran, I followed him and he assaulted me. But he was able to control himself shortly after, so nothing really bad happened. I only got a glimpse of what you had to go through.“

A glimpse. How could one ever know? There was so much. The fear while he ran, the desperation when he was caught, the pain, humiliation, shame, those long fingers around his throat, suffocating, dying, gasping for breath, dying, clawing at that hulk of a man, dying, dying, dying-

„Kuroko!“ Someone shook him. „Breathe, man, come on. Slowly. Stay with me, do you hear me?“ Takao. It was Takao. „Right, just like that. In. Out. Slowly. You are doing great, Kuroko. In. Out. Just like that.“

Oh God. A panic attack. He had had them so often in middle school. They had stopped when he left the team. Why did he have one now? It was over. It had been over for so long. He remembered his breathing exercises, calming down his breath.

„Are you back?“ He nodded. „Did I say something wrong?“ He shook his head. „Did you have a flashback?“

Kuroko blinked in surprise. Was Takao some kind of psychologist?

„I read a lot about trauma and autism for Shin-chan. It's not like he would ever go to a professional, so I try my best as his friend. I heard you can have panic attacks when you flashback.“

„Does Midorima have them as well?“ Kuroko asked in honest astonishment.

„No, he has guilt trips. He remembers some things suddenly sometimes but he doesn't have such flashbacks as you do.“ Takao, who had come near to anchor him in reality, returned to his former seat leaning against an outer pillar on the veranda.

„How often do you have them?“

„I ... not really often. This was the first time since I ended it all.“

„Hm.“ The other blinked, seemingly unsure what to say. „Is that now good or bad?“ They stayed silent for a moment, neither coming up with an answer. „Do you think you should consult a professional?“

Kuroko immediately shook his head.

„Why not? You are clearly traumatized. At this rate I am not sure sleeping with Kagami would be wise, even though you want to. You would be devastated if anything went wrong, wouldn't you? That's a lot of pressure for something meant to be fun.“

„Fun?“ Kuroko blinked.

„Yeah, fun. Sex is meant to feel good, an activity you can do together that makes you feel all tingly and pleasantly worn out. It's a lot like basketball actually.“

„Really ... my Teiko teammates play basketball like they fucked. Brutally with no regard to the other. I hated it. Basketball with Kagami makes me all tingly and happy. If sex with him feels like that, I don't have to be afraid.“ He smiled, trying to imagine feeling that good if they got intimate.

„Well, basketball with Shin-chan makes me damn proud of myself. Sex too if I may say so.“

„Sorry, I cannot imagine Midorima being a careful lover. He was the worst of them all, even though he was the nicest when I was out of heat. Akashi controlled himself best but that was even more creepy because when he used me, I know he fully intended to do so.“ Kuroko sighed. „I know Kagami would never hurt me intentionally but what if he loses control? What if I feel too safe and let go of my pheromones too much? Even if he can control himself, what does control mean to him? Aomine raped me even if I wasn't in heat. He said he didn't want to hurt me and then he did it over and over again.“

„Kuroko, if you don't want to talk to an professional, talk to Kagami at least. He might be unsure about some answers but I cannot imagine he would ever force you in his right mind. You have such a good control over your pheromones, even Shin-chan begins to relax around you. Tell Kagami what you are afraid of.“

„I can't.“ Never. He would never tell Kagami. Never tell a soul, no one could ever know. Except for Takao, he was told by someone else, so it was alright. But no one else.

„Why?“

„I can't tell him what happened.“ Kuroko shook his head. „I can't ever tell him about ... about-“

Aoki.

His baby had had a name. Even though he was never born, he was named. He was loved. He was missed. Kuroko felt the traitorous prickle in his eyes.

„You can tell him what you are afraid of without telling him why you are afraid.“ Takao startled him with a hand on his shoulder. „You don't have to confess everything that happened. Though it might be best, but talking about your fears is a good first step.“ Kuroko looked into the other's eyes for a long moment before he carefully nodded. Takao was right. If he ever wanted to mate with Kagami, he had to take this one step at a time. Talking was one of those.

He just couldn't do it.

In summer camp Kagami had been drained every evening. Back home, they never were alone. If they were, they were out eating or playing basketball or something else. It was never the right time. He could not ask Kagami over or go to his place to talk about something like that. How should he open such a conversation? Hey, Kagami, can we talk about sex? Kagami did not even know he was thinking about that. Most likely Kagami had not even noticed yet that he was an Omega. What if that worsened their relationship as friends or teammates? No, he should wait.

So he waited until fate punched him in the face. That punch came in the form of the most attractive Omega Kuroko had ever seen – a guy going by the name of Himuro Tatsuya. An Omega that was apparently not only best friends but nearly a brother for Kagami. A man he had grown up with, a man he wore identical rings with. Their whole behavior screamed of mates, there was an unbelievable sexual tension between them. So Himuro's behavior had suddenly changed in middle school, he pushed Kagami away and told him he did not want to be his brother? One really had to be as dense as the redhead not to notice the pheromones leaking out when they recalled that event. Himuro wanted Kagami as his mate, the idiot just didn't get it. At least the Omega did not notice that Kagami simply misunderstood him.

Kuroko did not plan to enlighten any of them. But could he really do that? Wouldn't Kagami feel betrayed if he ever found out about his friend's interest in him if he was mated to Kuroko? Could he really keep silent about that? But then Kagami began to stumble, to mutter ... this was going bad far too quickly. He did not want to lose Kagami, he could not lose him.

So he did the worst he could think of in that situation: He took up Nigou and held him up to Kagami's face. It totally snapped his mood which was good for now. But how should he proceed? What if – after their game – Himuro decided to openly confess his feelings? He could not do the same. Kagami would feel obliged to answer to him, even if he would have wanted Himuro more.

Who could blame him? Himuro was a premium Omega, he played as well as an Alpha (at least if he could really take on Kagami), he was tall and well-built and about everything Kuroko was not. He was self-confident, he was more beautiful than any guy Kuroko had ever seen and he was obviously vying for Kagami's attention.

Maybe that was why Kagami never made a move on him. His subconscious knew there was someone far better waiting for him. Just like with how that guy brushed over Murasakibara ... an interesting guy? If not for his lacking brain power, Murasakibara was a premium Alpha. Even with how sophisticated, intelligent and mannered Akashi and Midorima were, Murasakibara's pheromones even put Aomine to shame. With how easy-going Himuro regarded him, it was plain to see how many Alphas that guy must have strung along.

But he wanted Kagami.

The only one Kuroko had ever wanted for himself.

He was never more glad to see their old team's giant, even though he was obnoxious. He had grown even more, easily going past two meters. What was much more important though was how Himuro and him reacted to each other. Himuro immediately gentled down. And had Murasakibara just said that he had come with him to show him Tokio? He did not even stand up if he wasn't bribed with food. It was plain to see what had brought him here. Murasakibara wasn't what you would call a lovesick puppy but his focus was Himuro and that one was clearly reacting. Thank the gods, Himuro seemed a lot more smitten with Murasakibara than with Kagami.

He had hope left.

But listening to those two behave like three-year-olds made him question Himuro's taste. Kagami was bad enough but Murasakibara? That was just plain weird. The guy might smell like every Omega's wet dream but Kuroko preferred someone who might be able to hold a job. One had to think practical these days.

Seeing Himuro leave without asking for Kagami's number was a relief. But this was a wake-up call. He should tell Kagami.

Chapter 5: Daring, a matter of trust

He still did not.

He knew he was a coward but this was getting out of hand. How many wake-up calls did he need? He had to tell Kagami, end of discussion. He told himself that every morning and still whenever he opened his mouth, nothing came out.

It should not have come as a surprise that his final wake-up call was a blue-haired, tanned, young man but Kuroko had shoved that reminder to a faraway place. He also had not expected to meet him in an Onsen of all places.

Kuroko started to shiver when he noticed they were alone. Why had he sent Kagami to get him a drink? What if Aomine attacked him here? Would the others heard him scream? Would they come if they heard him? Would he even be able to scream loud enough? His voice had gotten louder but he was not sure he could scream. He had never screamed back then, not even in pain. Where was Kagami?

Aomine leaned against the wall across. Kuroko told himself not to panic, to rein in his pheromones. Panicking would only make him a target. He was in control, he kept a tight leash on his pheromones. Bad thing was, Aomine had never cared for his pheromones, he had simply taken him whenever he felt like it. What if he felt like it now? Kuroko could not outrun him, his circulation was still off.

Aomine was making conversation. That was new. Maybe he was safe. Maybe the other had his eyes on someone else, had lost his interest. Kuroko noticed with a bit of surprise that he had lost interest in the other. Aomine smelled nice, sure, but his feelings were rather normal. Looking at the blue-haired man, he felt sadness, regret and fear. That burning longing, that desperate need, that sexual emptiness craving to be filled, it was all gone.

Aomine took a step nearer, making Kuroko flinch and shrink. He would hurt him. God, it would hurt, hurt so much. Aomine always bit down and he did not wear a collar, he would be claimed, he would be enslaved, he-

Kagami. Kuroko took a lungful of his scent. Kagami was here, he would protect him. He would show Aomine his place. Kuroko was drawn to his side, standing next to the one who was his everything. This was where Aomine could have been if he had not lost himself. But he had and now it was too late. Kagami had taken that space in Kuroko's heart – and filled it quite nicely.

He had sworn to himself to tell Kagami the very next day – only to hear that Kagami had taken off to America. Really, was he so out of luck? Maybe he should ask Midorima for a lucky item. That pen had worked quite nicely, maybe he had something for chaining Alphas to him that did not involve actual mating.

Of course he had to get a call from Akashi before Kagami came back. Just his luck. He definitely should ask Midorima. The coach was nice to sent Furihata after him, she must have noticed how stiff he was and sensed the danger. One never knew with Akashi. He might just call a hunt then and there, so it was good that Furihata was with him, even if he could do nothing.

Again, Kagami showed up right when Kuroko felt like having a panic attack. Did that guy have some kind of radar? How was he able to sense Kuroko's need? Or did he just have an unbelievable timing? Even if Akashi wasn't happy with him showing up, Kuroko was. Who knew what that man had-

Oh God.

Had he just attacked Kagami with scissors? He knew Akashi was weird but this ... this ... what if Kagami had not dodged? What if he had been injured, had been unable to play? This was sick. Kuroko wanted to face-palm for a moment. Sick? He was talking about the guy who had invented Omega hunts as prizes for well-behaving Alphas. Was he really freaking out over an attack with scissors?

And what did he mean by promise? What promise had those five made? And why was he here if the others had made a promise Akashi wanted to confirm? Did he have to do anything with it?

Kuroko blanched.

Was he a prize again? Was that promise about him? Whoever won the WinterCup would ... have a go at him again? Was that what this promise was about? He stared at Midorima, silently begging him to say something. Akashi left while the others stood stock still. Even Aomine seemed uneasy. Only Murasakibara was unaffected, snacking on his chips.

"Would anyone care to enlighten me what this promise is about?" Kuroko asked, a certain venom in his voice.

"You seem able to guess correctly" Midorima answered monotonously.

"Really?" His hands balled to fists, his voice accompanied by a slight tremble, his lids drawn to slits. "After all this time? Have none of you learned?"

"You must know I do not want this" The green-haired man said. Right. Midorima had Takao. Of course he wasn't interested.

"Yeah, that's not what I want either" Kise admitted, scratching his nose while looking like a kid caught at stealing.

"Tatsuya would be mad" Murasakibara offered, turning to leave right afterwards.

Only Aomine stayed silent. Did he really want Tatsuya as a prize? Really? Had he sunken that low?

He would tell Kagami his feelings. Further, he would ask him to claim him as soon as they lost, no, before. No way in hell that he would give himself to any of them just because they won a basketball tournament. He would be Kagami's. Kagami would protect him. No matter if they won or lost, he would be Kagami's tonight.

They won.

Gods, Kuroko could not believe the relief that brought him. They won, that meant Aomine was out. No way in hell that Aomine would claim him now. Even better, he had seen a glimpse of the old Aomine and it only brought him joy. No regrets, no pining, no nothing. He was free. His heart belonged to Kagami.

All that pressure finally crashing down made him swoon like a princess, falling into Kagami's arms right in front of Aomine. In another life he would have been embarrassed but right that moment, it felt incredibly good to be caught and held by his Alpha. Hearing said Alpha lecture his ex-lover-slash-rapist was even better.

It was time to close that chapter. He held out his hand, received his fist bump and let go. Bye bye, first love. Bye bye, baby Aoki. Sorry you hadn't been born, it had not been meant to be. It was time to let go, so no other sibling would ever meet the same end. He'd rather have a brood of redheads with mean eyebrows and sharp teeth who would at least know they were loved. He should still protect himself, it was easy to get him pregnant and they had the rest of the tournament in front of them. He did want to kick Akashi's ass after all. He was not a prize to be given to anyone.

Of course it did not work out. After that attack, he had not asked Midorima for his

scissors, so of course fate had thwarted his plans. Not only had everyone come over to Kagami, they had been poisoned by their coach and lost consciousness. Would he ever be able to confess?

No. This was just like that situation with Himuro. When he finally made up his mind, some extremely attractive person with a claim on Kagami had to show up. Why was an Alpha blonde bombshell in his bed? Why was ... why was she kissing him? Why ... his basketball teacher? Really? That sounded like the worst excuse any guy could have when he was caught with a sexy blonde in his bed.

Would this be his future fate? Finding his mate with beautiful Omegas, naked Alpha women and ... kids maybe? Trust Kagami to forget he had a whole family stashed away somewhere. Kuroko bit his lip. He had to tell Kagami. But what if he said no? Or what if he said yes, they mated and Kagami stayed exactly like that? He thought nothing about kissing women that stayed over and slept in his bed. How could he take such a carefree man? Maybe he should wait after all.

Yes, maybe he should get his own things in order first. There was something he had to do before he could even think about mating someone. He had to make peace with his past. Sudden inspiration struck, so he took Kagami aside and said: "Kagami, can I ask a favor?"

"What is it?"

"I need to borrow money. I don't know how much it will be yet but it might be a large sum."

"You know I don't have any spare money, right? I am broke every month because of food costs." Kagami's eyebrows had risen.

Kuroko simply sent a glance at that very expensive looking flat.

"Well, okay, I have savings. But they are meant for college."

"I'll pay you back before you go there" Kuroko promised.

"Well, okay, sure." Kagami looked at him for a minute. "This is something important, huh?"

"Yes, it is very important."

"You can have as much as you want."

Good. He would buy a tombstone for Aoki.

Buying a grave and tombstones was surprisingly easy. No one asked if he was old enough to put his signatures on all those papers. He paid by credit card and no one asked if that was his name either. Because Kagami was underage, they all went only by PIN anyway and the other had had no problem to even tell him those. Kagami trusted him infinitely.

So he should trust in himself. He dialed Aomine's number, asking him to meet him and telling him it would hurt. It took nearly half a minute before the other cautiously replied he would come. But somehow Kuroko was sure he would not be in danger. He even had an inkling that Aomine's words would not touch him, even if he lost it.

He was still arranging the stones when he felt Aomine's presence. So the other had not turned tail, even though the coordinates for their meeting place were in the middle of a graveyard. Kuroko shot the other a look, pleasantly surprised that he had even brought a water bucket from the entrance. Aomine set down the bucket without a word and took a step back. Kuroko took it instead, watering the six tombstones and the Jizo in their middle before he prayed.

Aomine had not budged, waiting to be addressed in silence. Losing in basketball seemed to have brought back his conscience. Or rather his ability to stay in touch with

it. Kuroko had sometimes caught him sneaking apologetic glances in his direction but whenever the other noticed, those had turned into a leery grin.

"I would have named him Aoki. The moment I found out I was pregnant, I knew there was no other name for him. I did not even know he was a boy but I somehow felt it. I don't think I have ever been happier. I knew you were suicidal at that time. You were on the edge of killing yourself, always tempting fate and lashing out at everyone. Still I thought we could be happy. Even if your own family was horrible, I thought I could be your new family and make you happy. You, me and Aoki. I got lost in that dream, too high to really think about your feelings."

"That does not excuse me" Aomine admitted.

"No, it does not." Kuroko looked over his shoulder. "You killed our baby. I don't think I can forgive that."

Aomine closed his eyes and stayed silent.

"Well, it is over now." Kuroko stood, saying a toneless goodbye. "Our son finally has a gravestone. Feel free to visit if you ever want to."

The other followed him without a word.

In front of the graveyard, Kuroko asked: "Are you up for a bit of basketball? I want you to teach me how to shoot."

Aomine just trailed after him, having regressed to his grumpy, slightly childish self.

Chapter 6: Cheers, it's a date

He still had not said a word to Kagami. He always found an excuse. Alex staying with him was a good one, because really – he could not take Kagami to his place. Could he? No, no, that was ... he could not do that.

"Good luck for your game today!" His mother said excitedly.

"Thank you." He smiled back at her while putting on his shoes.

"You know ... I am really happy you went to this school."

"Huh?" He looked up in surprise.

"You looked so unhappy and exhausted when you went to Teiko. The last half year, you were like a ghost. I was afraid you would never be happy again. But you have been smiling a lot lately and you get up in the mornings full of energy. I like seeing you like that. This new school, the new team, they are good for you." So she had noticed. Of course she had noticed, she was his mother.

"Um ... thank you?" He smiled shyly. "You know, mom ... there is someone ... special." She squealed, doing a little cheering dance right in their entrance room.

"He doesn't know yet. I haven't confessed."

"Why not?" She asked, all fired up.

"Because ... I don't know, it is never the right time. I was thinking about inviting him. Would you meet him and tell me what you think? Just don't tell him anything about my feelings, I want to do that myself." Hopefully this would work out. But she was a nice person, Kagami would like her.

"Sure, invite him." She hugged her son standing on her toes because she was even shorter than him. "This is how it should be. You should be able to choose, ask for advice and then make a decision."

"I'll ask him to come tonight, okay? I'll send you a message if he does. He eats for at least ten others, no joke."

"Growing boys do." She grinned. "Growing Alphas at least. He is one, right?"

"Yes, he is." Kuroko smiled shyly. "And don't you dare say anything about sons-in-law, grandkids or whatever. He is thick but not that thick."

"Ah, the muscle without brain type." She teased him, poking his cheek. "Is he reliable?"

"He is very reliable." H was sure of that. Even if for his mother, someone who wouldn't run at hearing their mate was pregnant was most likely reliable enough. Well, she had raised him well in his opinion. But sometimes he could see her loneliness in her smile. His father had taken her only chance to be with someone after all. She knew what was important. Someone who would weather everything thrown at him was the man one should want. Good thing that came with great looks in Kagami's case.

"Go get him, Tetsu."

"Kagami? Uhm ... would you come to my place tonight?" Huh. Wow, that had been hard. He had finally done it.

"Huh? What about training?" The other looked at Alex.

"You play Tatsuya tomorrow, you need rest." She waved him off. "Don't do anything too exhausting at his place."

The rest of the team snickered. Oh, man. Did they really think ... of course they did. Kuroko specified: "It is a dinner invitation. My mother wanted to meet one of my friends."

"Oh, splendid!" Alex grinned and slapped Kagami's shoulder. "Go leave a good impression, will you?"

"Eh ... okay." The other scratched his head. "Food always sounds good."

"My mother is a great cook." Though Kagami might be on par with her but Kuroko wasn't about to tell him that. "I'll send her a text."

"Will you be alright?" The redhead asked his teacher, always the reliable one.

"Sure, sure, have fun, have a sleep-over." She took out her phone. "I'll help you with your game tomorrow by inviting Masako for drinks."

"Masako?" Riko asked.

"Yeah, Yosen' coach. It's been a while since I've seen her. She played for the Japanese team when I was active." Alex grinned. "Always such a stickler for rules, really."

"We'll cheer for you, Kagami." Koganei said with Izuki and Mitobe nodding along.

"Huh? What for?" Kagami asked, resulting in a collective sigh. "Oi, what do you mean?"

Thick as always. Kuroko had to smile fondly, watching his big idiot. His. Everyone acknowledged him as that. Even his quasi-mother had just given her blessings. Hopefully Kagami would take it well. He was still at odds with Himuro after all, maybe he wanted ... no, then Alex would have reacted differently, wouldn't she?

"Let's go and win today's game." Hyuga finally said, making everyone drop the topic. Sometimes Kuroko asked himself if they might have wages going when Kagami would finally take the hint. They had decided not to openly tell him after all which Kuroko was thankful for. Riko flashed him a smile and ruffled his head while Teppei sent him a thumbs-up. Everyone wanted them to be a couple.

Hopefully Kagami wanted to as well.

"We are home!" Kuroko shouted to the kitchen, only noticing in that moment that he already included Kagami in "being home" when he was actually a stranger.

"Welcome back!" His mother answered from the kitchen. "Come on in, I can't leave the fish right now."

"Smells good" Kagami noticed, smiling at the promise of food.

"Follow me." He took Kagami's hand, directing him to the kitchen. He wasn't inclined to let go, so he simply did not. They had an open kitchen with a small table in the middle. Their whole apartment would have fitted in Kagami's living room but it had never seemed cramped. With the redhead standing in their kitchen though, it looked infinitely small.

"Oh my!" His mother exclaimed. "Now I see why you said I'd need to buy ten times as much food." She blinked in awe. "Are you still growing?"

"I ... guess." Kagami answered, a bit surprised by that greeting. "I am sixteen after all."

"Six... wow. You'll go through the roof with that growing speed." She let the fish be after all, taking a step nearer to look him up and down. "It is very nice to meet you. I am Tetsu's mother."

"Kagami Taiga." He tried to bow but it was awkward with a person who reached his lower ribcage at best. "Nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting me." He owled at her for a moment. "You are ... very tiny."

"Kagami." Kuroko admonished him.

"Ah, I am sorry, I was just surprised!" Kagami shrunk away from him. "You know, with all those basketball guys around, I forget what normal looks like." He scratched his head. "This is what Japanese apartments normally look like, right? I've never been to one."

"Yes, Mister American immigrant, this is Japan." Kuroko replied in an annoyed voice.

"We don't have much space and the average Japanese man is 172 centimeter. So it is normal you don't fit through a door."

"Uh, sorry." The other scratched his head. "Can I help with something?"

"Oh no, just sit down." His mother had returned to cooking. "Tetsu, get the side dishes from the refrigerator, please."

He did so, already sneaking some of them into Kagami's mouth behind his mother's back. She acted as if she did not notice and the redhead grinned in mischief. They made light conversation until the fish and chicken was ready while Kuroko began to serve rice.

"Thank you for the food!" They said in unison before digging in. Well, Kagami did, the other two ate at a more sedate pace. It was always amazing to watch how much one single human could eat. Even his mother looked astonished. Even though she had cooked for ten, this seemed to be stranger than she had expected.

"Kagami, your parents have to be rich if you always eat like that." She fished for information after a few minutes of silently handing him more food.

"Uh, yeah, I think ... my mom pays for food, my dad for the flat." He stopped shoveling in food. "Your cooking is really good, I can't help myself."

"No, please, dig in! It's not like my son or I could eat this all before it turns bad." There was a moment of silence where Kagami's eyes scanned the table, then Kuroko and his mother before slowly continuing to eat. "What do your parents do?"

Oi, was this turning into a marriage interview? He had asked her for her opinion but wasn't this too forward? Kuroko decided to stay silent though, he was interested as well. Kagami was rich as far as he knew. His allowance for the next few months would go into paying him back after all.

"My dad works as an architect here in Tokio. I think he's doing something at the airport right now, I am not sure ... he sleeps at his workplace mostly." Kagami explained between bites. "My mom is an actress back in America. She lives in Los Angeles."

"Are your parents divorced?" Too forward! But she did not catch his glances.

"No, they are still married. But they don't like each other much, I think. They work best if they don't live too closely." Kagami looked a bit sad at that. "Well, they like me though. So it's okay. They can agree on that, at least. I think it's cool to be able to fly freely between Japan and America."

"I've never been to another country. How is it?" His mother asked before those two fell into a discussion about the pros and cons of America versus Japan.

The ease of the conversation stopped when Kagami finally asked: "What about your father, Kuroko?"

They boy stayed silent, quietly asking his mother to elaborate.

"He left when he heard I was pregnant. We were never married, so he was able to leave without taking responsibility." Remembering always brought sadness to his mother's voice.

"I am sorry." Kagami said quietly. "That must have been hard."

"Well, a lot of Omegas are single parents." She patted Kuroko's head. "I am happy my boy turned out alright."

Shame. He did not. He had just taken the easy way out and chose not to have his kids. Most of them anyway. But he would not tell her, he'd only make her cry.

"He turned out great." The redhead said, flashing her one of his devil-may-care-smiles.

"Thank you for raising him so well."

Kuroko felt himself flush. Gods, who said something like that? Kagami could be so

corny sometimes. "You are embarrassing me."

"Oh no, thank you for the compliment. Tetsu, get the dessert for this nice young man." His mother enthusiastically said. Trust her to glow at such a comment. "And you should have told me he is from America! Hopefully you still like my ice-cream, I thought it was something you teenagers might like. I fear it won't be as good as what you know from over there."

"You already won me over with that great buttered mackerel and the tempura. I am sure your ice-cream will be delicious." God, how could a man so thick be so smooth with compliments? He was a poster-boy son-in-law. If he had not already decided on Kagami, his mother would gift him to Kagami on a plate.

He took the bowl out, arranged some smaller bowls and tried to get out the ice-cream with a spoon – well, so much for that. It was completely frozen. He turned to his mother saying: "Sorry, I am unable to serve that."

"Oh, let me." Kagami was at his side in a second, taking the spoon and testing it. "The trick is to heat the spoon beforehand. Sit down, I'll do it."

"I can't let a guest serve us. That is against the rules, Kagami." The other's answer was to ruffle his hair, not exactly taking him serious, so Kuroko tried to grab the spoon – Kagami was just faster. "I demand that spoon."

"Ice-cream is an American dish, so I have to serve it."

"Ice-cream is Italian and that argument is invalid anyway." He tried again to grab it but Kagami held the spoon up. They ended up standing front to front with the other bemusedly smiling down on him.

"You are very cute when you pout. When you hold me up even longer, the ice-cream will have melted enough that you can serve it. But I'll be starving by then."

"It is not cute to use your height against me." Kuroko deadpanned, trying to ignore the compliment that wanted to make him blush again.

"You are more stubborn than Riko sometimes." With a sigh the other caved in, giving the spoon to Kuroko. "Good thing I like your obstinacy."

"Says the guy more bullheaded than anyone I ever met." He heated the spoon under the water. "We should not fight, it will be a disaster."

"I have heard enough fights for the rest of my life." Kagami took over when Kuroko still had problems, filling the bowls in a few seconds. "Want to serve it now?"

The blue-haired boy did so with a satisfied smile. His mother knowingly smiled back at him. He did not have to ask what she thought of Kagami.

Chapter 7: The art of confessing

"This is ... tiny." Kagami looked at Kuroko's room in astonishment. "Where do you sleep?"

"I lay out a futon." He pointed at the free spot in the middle. "My mom has less space. Do you think you can fit?"

"Uhm ... sure. But where will you stay?" Kagami took a sitting pillow from him and sat down beside his low table he used for doing homework. It was not even half the size of Kagami's couch table.

"I don't take too much space." He took a deep breath. "I ... wanted to tell you something. I have been wanting to tell you for a long time."

"I am listening." Kagami went all serious in a second, sensing that this was stressing the other out.

"I don't know where to start." Kuroko admitted.

"Midorima seems to be the easiest one, Aomine the hardest. Right?" Oh God. Dear God. Wasn't Kagami thick? How had he noticed? How did he know? How much did he already know?

"I ... I can't. I am sorry, I can't." He felt tears well up, clouding his vision, breaking his voice. His hands clenched at his trousers. He stared at them, trying to will Kagami away.

"Okay." A big hand entered his vision, gently unclenching one of his and enveloping his in warmth. "You don't have to tell me." Kagami tucked at his hand, an open invitation to sit nearer.

Kuroko scooted closer, sitting right in front of Kagami, his hand still warm in the other's. He wanted to tell. It was only right. But how could he ever tell someone what happened? Kagami wouldn't understand. Even worse if he understood – he had done it all for Aomine, his unrequited love, who had tossed him away every time he had let him in. It had been such a destructive path to go down with him.

"Kuroko?" Kagami squeezed his hand. "Please don't shut me out."

Oh God. He was doing the very same thing to Kagami. He was stringing him along, never letting him in, afraid of being hurt, afraid of being abandoned. How could he do that? Wasn't he just as bad as Aomine?

"I love you." He blurted out as all words inside his head had begun raging, forming nothing but chaos. "But I am very afraid of you."

"Afraid? Of me?" Kagami's eyebrows rose up. "What's to be afraid of?"

"How much Kagami can hurt me if I allow myself to love him." Kuroko only whispered, his gaze on the ground.

The other gently tucked at his hand again which made Kuroko look at his legs at least. How should he come even nearer? He was already sitting so that his knees nearly touched Kagami's shins. He could only ... did Kagami want him to sit in his lap? Should he follow that invitation? Kagami would not tell him he did not feel the same with Kuroko sitting in his lap, right? He cautiously patted his way forward, being helped to find a comfortable position by Kagami. He ended up sitting on one leg, leaning sideways against the other's upper body. The redhead was as hot as a furnace. A warm hand gently pressed against his cheek, inviting him to lay his head on Kagami's shoulder.

"I don't know what happened and I will not ask. Tell me whenever you are ready. But I

understand that others have hurt you. Aomine most of all if I guess correctly. I can't promise to never make you cry, I am bad with that, but I can promise to never abandon you. Kise once told you I would toss you away some day. I don't plan to and I am mad at those guys to make you think like that." The arms that had loosely embraced Kuroko before tightened around him. "Don't listen to your memories of them. You have already taught them better."

Kuroko felt the tears that had threatened to spill run down his face. He hiccuped, clenching Kagami's shirt with one hand. God, this wasn't what he had planned. Kagami had known all along, hadn't he? He wasn't thick. He was much too smooth for a thick guy.

The other heaved a big sigh. "There, I already made you cry. What do I do now?" He actually sounded lost. Well, maybe Kagami was just a very straightforward guy. He simply spoke what was on his mind. Knowing that made his previous words even more precious.

"Hold me" Kuroko advised him, snuggling against him.

"I've already kinda been doing that."

"Continue." He smiled, soaking in the warmth. Being held by Kagami felt unbelievably good. This was so not what he had expected when he had thought about confessing. He had expected the other to blush and stutter and put it all on Kuroko to sort through.

"Would a kiss help?" Kagami sheepishly asked him.

"Only if I blow my nose first." He felt the other look around, leaning over to pluck a tissue from the table, holding Kuroko steady with one hand. The shorter one dried his tears and turned as far in the embrace as he could to blow his nose. "Now I feel kissable."

He looked up into those red eyes for the first time since they had sat down. Kagami was looking at him with concern, interest and astonishment. He had to smile at the mix. The other hesitatingly smiled back. Gods, this was nothing like he had ever experienced. Even that kiss was gentle, careful, only a shy touching of their lips before they parted only to be drawn back in by a force neither could explain. Was this what love felt like? Because in that case he had not loved Aomine at all. This was so much better.

Kagami's hand was lazily playing with his hair, stroking his head and neck. His kiss had not turned hungry at all, staying comforting and nice. There was no force at all. Kuroko had always thought it had to hurt to be real. But this wasn't painful, it was like being wrapped in a warm blanket. He felt relaxed. He felt cherished. Kagami had changed to stroking his face, his cheekbone, his jawline, his lips when Kuroko laid his head back in the shoulder.

"I thought I was in love with Aomine" Kuroko very quietly said. "I can't say exactly what it was. I wanted to be there for him because he was hurting so much. I thought I could save him somehow. I was very dumb back then."

"You were just a good person, I'm sure" Kagami admonished him.

"No, I ... made a lot of mistakes. I let people hurt me. I thought if I hurt, I could make it better for him. It made no sense at all. I always found excuses for his bad behavior. I allowed things to happen that ... it hurts to remember."

"You are still taking the blame." There was a crease between the red eyebrows, a frown even. It made Kuroko feel good to see that.

"I was responsible for letting it happen and not putting a stop to it. I should have done that when I noticed it got out of control. I healed enough to see that I am neither

innocent nor the only one responsible. It takes two for an abusive relationship."

"Well ... true." Kagami huffed. "I don't have to like it though. I'll beat Aomine the next time we play."

"You already beat him" Kuroko reminded him.

"I don't care, I'll do it again."

"Do that." He kissed the other's cheek. "I'll be by your side to help."

Kuroko awakened with a shock and stiffened up completely. He could feel a hot breath on his neck. It took a moment to remember that this was Kagami behind him. It was alright not to wear a collar. Not only was he alright with being bitten, Kagami would also not do so without asking. They had simply slept like that – the other spooning behind him, offering his arm as a pillow. He was so unbelievably warm, Kuroko could not imagine sleeping without him ever again. In winter Japanese flats tended to get very cold, every bit of warmth was welcome. He looked at the clock, deciding to simply stay like this and enjoy it while it lasted. Kagami snored lightly, it was kind of adoring.

His mother silently opened the door half an hour later, blinking in surprise at their sleeping position. Seeing that her son was awake, she tiptoed in and sat down near his head. She glanced at Kuroko's neck, sending her son a questioning gaze when she saw no bite mark.

"He is decent" He whispered.

"A bit too much of a gentleman rather." She lay her head to the side with a sigh.

"Secure him before someone else does. You won't come about another one like that in a decade."

"I know." He felt Kagami stir behind him, drawing his nose through Kuroko's light blue hair. "He's waking."

"I made breakfast. Get up, you two." With a smile she stood and left the room.

"Have you heard, Kagami?"

That one just grumbled and drew Kuroko near with one arm to take a deep breath of his scent. The other told himself to relax. It was Kagami. Kagami was allowed to bite him. That one mumbled into his neck: "You smell better than breakfast."

"I am not food though."

"I feel like eating you up." Kagami still sounded half asleep.

"But you still need me for today's game." Kuroko felt a certain something poking his behind, trying not to imagine how amazing it would feel inside him. Damn. He had a fast-track mind sometimes. What was that about Alphas ravishing poor defenseless Omegas? He felt like pinning down his Alpha instead.

"Was your mother in right now or did I dream that?" Kagami had his eyes half-open and blinked lazily.

"She was in to tell us to get up for breakfast." Kuroko turned, pecked the other's lips and sat. "Come on, today is a big day. You need to be well fed for the match."

"Food sounds good." The other sat as well before leaning in for another kiss. The redhead smiled afterwards for a few seconds before he sobered and seemed to finally wake. "Wait a moment, does that mean your mother walked in on us sleeping like that?"

"Don't worry." Kuroko leaned against him. "She actually asked why I did not have any marks and all my clothing still on."

Kagami's face went as red as his hair and he stuttered: "That's not- I mean ... she can't mean- I would not- no, that's-"

Kuroko simply kissed him to shut him up. His soon-to-be-mate was adorable. But he wanted Kagami to choose him with a clear mind, so first they had to play Yosen. The other had to resolve the matter with his brother before anything further should happen. Kuroko could wait. He trusted Kagami to return to him.

Winning against Yosen was great but the most important moment for Kuroko was what came after. Hearing Murasakibara tell Teppei that he only played because of Himuro convinced him that his hunch had been right. One did not have to love basketball to enter the Zone, one simply had to completely devote himself to something related to basketball. In Murasakibara's case it was clear as day what or who that was. He would not give up on basketball as long as Himuro played.

And the other knew that. The moment Himuro ruffled the bent over Murasakibara's hair was when he knew how this would go. That beautiful, graceful Omega would return to be Kagami's brother because those disturbing feelings he still held would vanish as soon as those two Yosen players could find a room.

Murasakibara had finally been able to touch Himuro's heart. It was quite a feat for him to have lasted this long in winning the other's affection. It was so out-of-style for Murasakibara that one had to admire the tenacity and willpower it must have cost him. When an Alpha was ready to go that far for you, you just had to answer to that.

Much like Kagami was not only fighting for himself but for Kuroko and their team as well. He had already gone far beyond expectations to prove that. Kagami had kept faith, had been his pillar and wings. He had given Kuroko the means to rise above all that haunted him.

He would answer in kind – just like Himuro.

So he gave Kagami back his ring and bid him fare-well, trusting his Alpha to come back to him even after sending him off to be confessed to by an Omega who knew him longer, had a more intimate relationship with and was far more alluring than Kuroko. After all, who would want a shadow if they could have a rising star? But he trusted Kagami. He gave him free to become a harbor he could return to.

And Kagami did in the most spectacular way possible. He took Himuro's confession – who was already mated at that point – right before the Rakuzan game, then stood by Kuroko's side without a doubt and won over the last darkness that clouded his soon-to-be-mate's life by showing the whole world how intimately he trusted Kuroko. He dived into that special connection they shared without the slightest doubt that Kuroko would follow him.

The second they were out of the camera's sight, he used all his strength to pin Kagami against a wall and kiss him senseless. The whole team cheered and even hollered in support, making them blush to the roots as soon as they came back to reality. And what a reality! This was it. Kise had become serious, Midorima had stopped blaming himself, Aomine had come back to life, Murasakibara had found his passion and that cruel side of Akashi that had subjected Kuroko to all that abuse had been vanquished. Kagami had made his peace with Himuro.

There was nothing left in their way to being mated - except that Kagami was an unbelievable gentleman and Kuroko had no idea how to even breach that subject.

Chapter 8: Consequences of silence

In hindsight it was laughable that the one who finally brought them together was Midorima Shintaro. The one most inept at talking, interacting, even having an interest in humans was their matchmaker – his saving grace was that he had never planned on it. It began with a text message in which the other asked if they could meet. A most peculiar message for reasons stated above but Kuroko thought it must have to do with having a sociable boyfriend. Maybe Takao had forced him into contacting at least one person on a regular basis or something. Kuroko was not exactly sure what the other saw in Midorima but he had no doubt that those two shared a deep and lasting relationship. One had to be blind and deaf not to notice how the green-haired changed in a matter of months. He had only blanched when Himuro had cooked his lucky item at the party last week and let it go afterwards. That was huge for Midorima.

They met for a basketball double-date, Takao and Midorima against Kagami and Kuroko. They ended up with Kuroko explaining misdirection to Takao and Kagami teaching Midorima some of that “wild” play. Kagami's face was hilarious when the other asked him about throwing angles, rotation speed and air resistance. Somehow Kuroko was not surprised that Midorima had calculated all his shots' aerodynamic values. After they got some ice-cream, him and Kagami were talking about their last game when Midorima said: “Next time I won't play you when I am still sick.”

“You what?” The red haired turned to him with a shocked expression. “You were sick? I didn't even notice.”

“I had a cold two weeks before our game and was still under the weather.” The green-haired smirked. “You won't get off as easy the next time.”

“Man, you are unbelievable. I can't believe how horrible it must have been for people to play Teiko. No wonder everyone seems broken when they talk about losing to you in middle school. Akashi alone was horrible enough.”

“Akashi is special.” Kuroko agreed. “With teamwork, we would have overtaken the JBL.”

“We could still do that.” Midorima smiled at him – actually smiled, it even looked convincing. “Do you want to issue a challenge to them in our name?”

“I would like to relax for a bit more first.” Somehow Riko's training and playing streetball afterwards had become his version of a relaxed life. “Winning against you all has been my focus and reason for a long time. Now I have to sort through my priorities.” Mating Kagami was on the top of his list but what else did he want? He was so content right now. He just didn't know.

“Will you be alright?” The other suddenly turned serious. Had he actually gotten that? When had Midorima become perceptive?

“Thank you for asking.” Kuroko's smile turned to a slightly melancholic one. “I was able to close the chapter called Aomine. I am not too sure about the other one right now. It will take more time I think.”

Kagami looked at him with a questioning gaze. Yes ... he still had to tell him about his past. Everyone else knew, at least everyone from his middle school time. Even Takao knew. He just had to, it wasn't fair to leave him in the dark forever. But when he could not even tell the other he wanted to stay with him forever, how could he tell him about six abortions, gangrapes and his not-exactly-relationship with Aomine?

“I would like to close my own.” Midorima interrupted his thoughts. “Would you help

me one last time?"

"Of course." Hopefully it wasn't too hard. He trusted the other not to ask something unreasonable, Midorima was pretty decent for a rapist. It wasn't like you could exactly put the label "offender" on him when he was victim as well. "What is it?"

"As you know I hate that I couldn't control my Alpha instincts. I have trained that as well. For months now I have not been influenced by people's scents anymore. I could even pass by Omegas without a reaction. I have not tested myself on a full blast of Omega pheromones though. Would you loosen the control on your scent for me to test myself?"

That was ... surprising. It was Midorima's ultimate horror to loose control. To actually ask for that, he had to trust his skills a lot. So it was an easy decision: "Sure."

He heard Takao sharply draw in his breath. So he had not known his boyfriend would ask that. It must be hard to be with an Alpha when you were a Beta. Every Omega could just snatch your boyfriend away, you would have no chance. Midorima was doing this for himself as much as for Takao. It was cute in it's own special way.

"Kagami, if Midorima attacks me, please try not to kill or maim him. You are strong enough to simply hold him until I rein in my pheromones again." The other seemed pretty resistant to hormones, he had not reacted to Himuro after all. He had not even noticed his brother was an Omega.

"Err ... okay?" Kagami scratched his neck. "You are an Omega?"

Well. Yes. That answered some questions Kuroko had not voiced until now. So Kagami had not noticed ... no wonder he had never asked about mating before. He wasn't a gentleman, he was simply thick as an European door. He said so when Takao seemed close to facepalming.

"Oi, how should I notice my own brother suddenly ... well." Kagami became as red as a tomato. "I mean you don't expect your brother to develop such feelings."

"Himuro is with Murasakibara now, right?" Takao asked.

"Yes, after Kagami still did not notice a thing, even after meeting again, Himuro mated with our old friend." That one did have an affinity for airheads but at least his mate wasn't exactly holding back his feelings. It must be reassuring to have your lover's eyes on you all the time. "Murasakibara isn't exactly intelligent but he is reliable when you tell him it is important. He is certainly not the worst choice as a partner."

"I do question your taste. Though it is not as if your own choice was a fine example of brain power." Midorima remarked with a scoff while looking at the redhead. "Why you two who could have everyone chose nothing but muscle is beyond me."

"It is about taking responsibility." Kuroko smiled slightly. "That has become more and more important the older I got." He stiffened a bit, still surprised that the other had not shown any reaction yet. He had released his pheromones bit by bit and already reached about fifty percent of what he could do.

"True." Midorima seemed lost in thought for a moment. Maybe he remembered Aomine. "In that case I understand completely."

"How do you two do?" Kuroko felt compelled to ask. Sixty.

"I am not sure how to answer that question. As you can see, Takao is still with me. I don't think you are inquiring about our sexual activities, so what do you want to know?" That sounded so purely Midorima, he felt like laughing but he knew the other was completely serious.

"Do you quarrel?" The first question had merely been a nicety but this was something he was actually interested in. How did a relationship with someone like Midorima

work? He upped his pheromones again.

"Not that I know of. What is the definition of quarreling? He does annoy me sometimes." Well, that was Midorima for you. He did not comprehend human interaction if he wasn't explained what it was about.

"Err, Kuroko? Kagami looks strange." Takao said.

While he was still on the last word, all seemed to happen at once. With a jump even more impressive than anything before Kagami was lunging for Kuroko. Midorima stepped in between, stopping the bull-rush and being knocked at least two meters backwards for his effort. He closed his arms around his abdomen to brace for the impact, landing with a crash and sliding further for at least half a meter.

Kuroko stared for a second, having already taken a step back by instinct, before his survival instincts kicked in. Run! Run, you fool! His head urged him to go fast, faster. Outrunning an Alpha was impossible but with a head start he might make it ... where? Where should he go? Pheromones ... water. He needed to get them washed off. A fountain! Damn, no water. A pond? Yes, there was a pond.

Why hadn't Kagami already gotten him? He did not dare to turn. Maybe Midorima had grabbed him. Please have someone hold him back, he needed to make it to the lake. He did not want to be raped again, not even by Kagami. Especially not by Kagami. That was not how he wanted to be mated. He wanted to take it slow, make it nice, make it painfree.

Kagami gave off the scream of an enraged animal, quite a bit behind him. Someone must have grabbed him. Midorima screamed – even farther behind. Did Takao grab Kagami? Oh gods, Kagami would kill him. He ran faster, faster than his legs would ever carry him on a basketball court.

"Run, Kuroko!" Takao managed to scream in absolute horror. Thank god, he was alive. He must have let go.

So Kagami was free. Kuroko felt every hair on his neck stand up. He saw the pond. It was so near. But he could hear the other, hear him sprint, hear him gain on him. He would not, could not, he had to, he jumped-

Kagami had him. A hand on his leg, he would be- the hand let go. He heard another voice roar before he was engulfed in unbelievably cold water. He dived, swam, gained distance. Gods, it was so cold. A hand grabbed his clothes, ripped at them. He flailed, tried to stay underwater, dived again but Kagami was stronger. His shirt was in tatters, a hand on his leg, one on his jeans, no, please not, please-

Kagami was gone with a crash he could even hear underwater. Two fighting figures went under beside him. He turned and swam away. It must have been Midorima, he was massive enough to give even Kagami a fight. Why was it always Midorima who saved him in these situations? He saved him so often and still blamed himself for being unable to save Aoki. No one could have saved Aoki, Aomine had been far too fast for ... not now.

He got up and gasped for breath before sinking back into the water. He saw the two Alphas still fighting, Kagami throwing a punch at Midorima and knocking him back quite efficiently. He stilled after that though. He looked at the other for a moment before he held out a hand to help him up. The green-haired simply took it without any hesitation. Only after that did he look around and found Kuroko who was underwater up to his nose.

"Oh God." Kagami began to tremble, looking at him in horror. "I ... I am so sorry, I ... Kuroko." Well, yes, he knew that routine. At least Kagami had not raped him and stood above his bleeding body. It was far harder to react coolly in such a situation.

"Your control is splendid, Midorima." He stood and nodded to the other. "Thank you for protecting me twice. Thank you as well, Takao." He bowed to him. Midorima was an Alpha, he was strong enough for such situations but the Beta could have been killed. "Are you hurt?"

"Just a bit bruised." Takao only had eyes for his boyfriend. "Are you okay, Shin-chan?" That one seemed annoyed at best, a bit grumpy, a bit mad at himself, but mostly okay. He took in his surroundings and then himself. "I want dry clothes." The green-haired stepped out of the water. "We will catch a cold if we stay like this." What a Midorima thing to say. Well, being rational had it's pros.

"Quite right." Kuroko followed him, beginning to shiver before he even left the water. He would look at Kagami in a minute. Just a moment to compose himself. "Is anyone living nearby?"

"I do." Takao nodded. "I'll run and get our bags. Shin-chan, take them straight to my flat."

"I will." Midorima followed him out of the water.

Kagami did not. Well, this was it. He had to turn. He had to face that sight again. A guilty Alpha, blaming himself for losing control. He had never wanted to see Kagami like that ... and it was all his fault. How could he have been this stupid? Even with a splendid control, Kagami was still an Alpha. Only because Midorima did not react did not save him from another Alpha. It was his fault this had happened. He should turn and take the blame off of Kagami.

"Kagami?" Kuroko turned to the now silently crying boy still standing in the water.

"Would you please carry me? I feel cold like this and you are naturally hot-blooded."

The redhead looked up with eyes asking, no, crying for forgiveness, afraid of being hated, afraid of being rejected. He was such a good man. How could he have done that to him? But saying so would not convince Kagami it was alright. This was too horrible for that. He had destroyed Kagami's trust in himself. This was his work, his guilt.

"Come out, Kagami, before you get a cold." Midorima supported him. He knew what this was like. He had been so broken after he raped Kuroko for the first time. It had been the first time he had regarded the green-haired as human.

"Idiots don't get colds." Kuroko deadpanned.

"True enough." The other nodded. "You'll carry Kuroko the whole way as punishment. Now come out before he loses the rest of his clothes from shivering."

Oh yes, his shirt was gone. His jeans was ripped too. It was barely hanging on his hips as the zipper was broken. He held it with one hand. A gust of wind reminded him how cold it was. Jumping into a pond in February ... well, it was better than being raped on the frozen ground.

Kagami jumped into action after a moment, coming near with long strides. Kuroko had to hold himself back from flinching by tensing up. The other slowed down, opened his arms before he gently picked him up, one arm around his upper body, the other around his hip to lift him up. He ended up pressed against Kagami's warm body just like he wanted. He let out his breath, relaxing his muscles and sinking against the warmth.

Midorima directed them to Takao's flat in silence.

Chapter 9: Speaking is silver

He was ushered into the shower by everyone which was very nice but also necessary. He had begun to shiver on the way and continually lost heat. His lightheadedness went away after a few minutes under the spray.

Damn. What should he do now? How should he face Kagami? The other must be wracked by shame and guilt. It would not be enough to kiss him and tell him it was alright. It would be cruel to try and diffuse his guilt. Guilt meant you had done something wrong. If something went horribly wrong and you were guilty, it meant you would have been able to change something. To let go of guilt meant that you had to accept that you were unable to change anything of what happened. For Kagami it meant to accept that he would always be a danger to Kuroko.

He sighed, closing his eyes and letting go of the tears that had threatened to fall since his heart had slowed down from its maddening pace. He would not cry in front of Kagami. He would not let the other see his fear. He would not put that on him as well. He would take Kagami's blame, he would ... it was the same as always, wasn't it? Trying to put everything on himself because it made him feel more like someone in control and less like someone caught in a hurricane of fate.

He was an Omega. He was destined to be raped, impregnated and thrown away by Alphas. He had decided to defy that fate and he would. He would not be a victim for all of his life. He chose Kagami and he would stand by that decision. He would help Kagami overcome his guilt and ask him to mate with him. This time for real, he could not let something like this happen again. It was in his power to make it a reality, to stop this cycle of abuse.

But first he had to come out of this shower and face Kagami. And Midorima, not to forget that one. This was likely to be a heavy trigger for flashbacks to the time the shooter lost control and nearly murdered Kuroko. How come he had developed such splendid control? He had not reacted at all to Kuroko's hormones. That only happened to Omegas who were mated or pregnant, not to Alphas who could not ... could he? Alphas who mated reacted less to Omega's pheromones. Alphas who were pregnant though ... what were the chances?

What were the chances of Midorima Shintarou bottoming and having that one in ten-thousand chance of getting pregnant? By a Beta no less, they were even less potent than Alphas. Aomine and Kise had fucked so often without anything ever happening. Kuroko had been pregnant every time he was raped and able to conceive, no wonder with those premium Alphas he had been surrounded by. But Midorima? He had protected his abdomen when Kagami charged him but he had jumped into the pond and wrestled with the other without hesitation. Maybe his body had unconsciously tried to protect a baby while the Alpha was completely unaware of his status?

That might be. Maybe Midorima just trained himself well but if he could, he would have already done that in middle-school. But though he tried, he had actually become more violent every heat he encountered. So a pregnancy wasn't such a far-fetched thought. He was in a stable relationship after all. And while Kuroko could not imagine Midorima bottoming, he had not imagined him in a relationship as well. He had not thought he himself could win a national championship against the Generation of Miracles either and he had done that.

He called out to Takao from the bathroom door: "Could you lend me some clothes,

please?"

"Of course! Sorry, I didn't think." Takao answered with a guilty voice.

"Do not worry. And please tell Midorima to take a shower next. He might rebel, so insist." Kuroko instructed.

"Err, okay. I will." Takao blinked but seemed in the mood to take orders. Or maybe that was his personality, he was with Midorima after all. He went to the back of the flat.

When he stepped into the living room, Kagami was nowhere in sight. Midorima stepped into the bathroom which left him with Takao who went over to give him a mug of hot chocolate. Wow. That was nice. Kagami must have told him how much he loved hot chocolate in the winter. It came right after vanilla shakes in the summer. He sat down on the couch to enjoy the drink.

Kagami stepped out of the room at the end of the flat, most likely the bedroom, wearing clothes that clearly belonged to Midorima. So he was here often enough to have at least two complete sets of clothes here. Most likely he wasn't wrong with the pregnancy theory. But that only diverted his attention from Kagami. That one had stopped in his tracks and stared at Kuroko with a mixture of shock, fear and shame. He called him to come nearer with a hand gesture. Kagami followed that prompt without hesitation. Following another hand gesture, he knelt down next to the couch. He looked ready to kiss Kuroko's feet if prompted to do so. But he simply pulled the red haired head onto his knees and began to scratch the skin underneath. Kagami tensed for a second before he sank against Kuroko, enjoying the sensation and letting go of a bit of that fear.

"Please have some tea, Kagami." Takao placed the tray on the couch table. "It is not as good as Shin-chan's but I learned a thing or two from him. Would you like another hot chocolate, Kuroko?"

"Yes, please." He poked the head he had just petted. "Get up, Kagami."

The redhead did as he was told. He sat beside Kuroko a lot calmer than before and took his hand to intertwine their fingers. This was nice. Very nice. He liked Kagami's small gestures of affection.

"Would you like to shower too, Kagami?" Midorima asked who had come out of the shower.

"No, I'm fine, thanks." He squeezed Kuroko's hand. "Idiots don't catch colds after all."

"What about you, Takao?" Kuroko asked their host.

"What?" The other blinked in confusion. "I wasn't dragged underwater."

"I wanted to ask how you were. I was quite occupied running but I understood you fought a hunting Alpha. Most people who try that end up dead or badly hurt." Actually it was amazing that Takao was in one piece. He had heard Midorima scream in horror after all. Kagami had attacked the other, he was sure of that.

"Err, yeah. Kagami aimed for my throat, so I let go. I was too afraid of being hurt. Sorry." Takao actually looked guilty about that. Really, how all of them were so quick to take blame was amazing.

"I am glad you did. You were in more danger than I ever was." Kuroko calmly stated.

"Alphas normally don't kill Omegas but interfering Betas ... well."

"Yeah." The other stroked his unblemished throat. "I just got dragged around a bit, so I am okay." He sat down next to Midorima who had sat in an armchair. "What about you, Shin-chan? He knocked you down pretty hard and punched you." He gently touched the beginning swelling on the other's cheek.

"It will bruise but that is all. I am tough."

"You certainly are." Kuroko focused on him. Time to go all out here. "Since when have you been unaffected by smells?"

"I am not too sure. Somewhere before the Winter Cup. Why?" The tallest drank a bit of tea, smiling at Takao after tasting it. Whatever that was about.

"While I was turning to run, I noticed how you wrapped your arms around your abdomen before you landed. I know those symptoms."

"Symptoms?" Midorima looked at him, an actual expression of confusion on his face. That was surprisingly expressive for him.

"Not emitting a scent, being unaffected by other scents, easily catching colds, feeling weaker, less endurance and protecting your body like that." He watched the other for a reaction. "Maybe even a slight nausea and sometimes dizziness? I know those well."

"I couldn't be ... could I?" The other averted his gaze in thought but seemed not to reject the possibility on the spot. So it was true. Midorima bottomed. Pigs could fly.

"I can't follow." Takao exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

"Pregnancy." Kuroko answered.

There was a long moment of silence. Takao blinked at him in surprise, not exactly seeming to get it until he turned to look at his boyfriend who had gone very still. Kuroko expected one of them to say something sooner or later but it was Kagami who blurted out: "You were pregnant before?"

Shit. Oh no. How had he forgotten that Kagami did not know everything about him? Where was his head today? Did the other make him relax so much that he got stupid? Or was it infectious somehow? Why did everyone think he calmly planned his moves when everything he seemed to do was floundering around making one mistake after the next?

"Yes." He answered cautiously, looking to his left at Kagami. "But I was much too young at the time." Abortion was a taboo. Even if you were twelve, you did not abort. You gave away the child but you never, ever aborted one. With him it had been more than once, he could not even write it off as an accident. Having had six abortions was on the level of "irresponsible slut". This was Japan after all. Abortions were more common in America, maybe Kagami would not hold it against him. But still, six ... that wasn't what you wanted in a partner.

"You mean you were raped." The redhead said lowly. His eyes still showed so much guilt. Maybe Kagami would be able to live with Kuroko's past. Maybe now was the right time to tell. The other leaned forwards, lifted his hand and stroked first Kuroko's hair, then his neck. Gods, that was nice. "You were too unfazed for someone surviving a hunt for the first time."

So Kagami wasn't oblivious. He had noticed. He had not abandoned him though. That was the only important thing, Kagami did not hate him for being assaulted. He was seriously the best. Kuroko knew that rationally it made no sense at all to dislike someone for becoming a victim, one could not do anything about that after all, but your emotions weren't rational. Hearing that your partner had been raped, impregnated and aborted said child must be hard but Kagami was completely thinking about him here.

"It was your first time though, wasn't it?" He had looked crushed after all. He still did a bit. With Himuro throwing himself at him and not even noticing that, Kagami had always seemed pretty immune to scents.

They were interrupted by Midorima asking: "How does one determine if he is

pregnant or not?"

"Just a second." He had that clinic's card with him, right? He must have. It was one of his safety items, reminding him that if worse came to worse, he had a place he could go to. "There is a clinic specializing in male pregnancies without judgment. It is where I went to in middle school."

"You still have their card?" Kagami asked, brushing over that "middle school" information bit.

"You never know when you might need help as an Omega."

Midorima accepted the card, Takao reading the data over his shoulder. With a look at the clock he said: "They are still open. Do you want to go? We could still make it."

"They have an emergency service for these kind of situations." Kuroko drank the rest of his hot chocolate without sitting down again. "I can accompany you if you like." Going to a clinic for male gynaecology was scary after all. Even more so when one was an Alpha. Kuroko did not remember ever seeing an Alpha patient there.

The green haired said: "Yes, let's go."

"So ... Midorima might be pregnant." Kagami leaned back on their waiting seat. The other two had just gone into an examination room, so they were alone. "That's a strange thought."

"I did not expect that to happen either." He leaned against the other, relishing in the fact that being a male couple was completely alright in here. "How are you? It was an eventful day after all."

"I need a good night's sleep." Kagami sneaked an arm behind Kuroko's head to embrace him. "I am just happy you're still here with me."

"I am happy you are with me too." He allowed himself a small smile.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Kagami exclaimed.

Well. Here goes nothing. They had about half an hour of waiting time on their hands after all. No better moment than now. Kuroko took a deep breath before he said: "I told you this wasn't my first hunt."

"I kinda expected that. You are seventeen and unmated after all. That must have been one hell of a struggle." Kagami was so warm and nice against his side. He was relaxed even though they talked about so hard a topic. He simply was the best.

"I had my first heat with fourteen. I was able to stay at home, my mom got me depressants right away. There were people banging on the door but she shut us in and barricaded the door. She saved and protected me like a lion."

"She's an Omega too, right? I saw the bite." Well, Kagami continued to amaze him. Maybe he noticed a lot and simply choose not to think about it much.

"She took my temperature every day, always medicating me whenever a heat draw near. I was able to continue to go to school and learned to do the treatment myself."

Gods, this was hard. He felt Kagami's questioning gaze. "I ... there was ... Akashi persuaded me ... to stop the medication." He was so dumb. He had been such an idiot.

"What the fuck?" The redhead's face was overcome with dawning horror. "For whatever reason?"

"It ... well ... it doesn't make sense today but back then-" He couldn't, he just could not say it. "He said it was training. That I should train to control my hormones myself, that it was possible. That if I was unable to do it, a hunt was a good way to train too. He promised he would be there to stop others from claiming or hurting me."

"You believed him?" Kagami shook his head. "That sick psycho."

"No, I did demand proof. I am not that gullible." Kuroko looked up. Kagami looked

horrified. He should stop. He should not ... but Kagami could already guess the rest. "He is an Alpha after all. I wanted to know if he was really able to control himself, even if he had a full blast of my pheromones."

"I see where this is going. You said before that Akashi is the only one able to withstand you fully."

"Yes, he did pass that test. And when I was hunted, he did save me from being killed or maimed multiple times. He fully kept that promise." His fingers dug into Kagami's arm. "I tried to stop so often but somehow he convinced me ... until I stopped trying and let it all happen to me."

"How often?" The other's voice was nothing but controlled anger.

"Did I try?" Kuroko guessed. It was pathetic. He had tried only twice before giving up.

"Were you hunted?" Kagami asked instead.

"I ... I'm not sure. Sometimes I was pregnant but Akashi still had them hunt me. It wasn't as intense but they still found and raped me. Should I count those?"

Kagami simply sighed and drew Kuroko's body onto his lap while mumbling: "Forget I asked."

Really? Maybe it was better to tell. For the slight chance that Kagami would still want him, maybe he should ... no, it was better this way. It was enough to know it happened at all. It was worse to know how often he had let that happen.

The redhead took a deep breath, inhaling Kuroko's slight scent, unafraid of what might happen. He buried his nose in the light blue hair and said: "You smell of milk and innocence. You smell like someone who just had a baby and is all smiles and laughter. When I hold you in my arms, I want to protect you, protect the life you created. You don't smell like someone who did not want to hold that life."

Chapter 10: Sometimes it is gold

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He felt the tears on his cheeks, felt himself choking when he tried to draw in air. How did he know? How could Kagami guess such things? Could one really smell something like that?

"I want to kill Akashi for this" The other said with a very low growl.

If only it had been Akashi. Gods, he so wanted to put this on him. It would be easy to blame that dark personality but he could not. This had been all him. He had killed those babies himself. He cried on Kagami's shoulder for a few moments before he felt able to speak again: "It wasn't him."

"What?" Kagami blinked in question, even though he was still in a dark mood.

"Akashi persuaded me regarding the hunts but ... someone else killed my baby." He could not tell that. It was too much. He could never tell. Kagami would kill Aomine. "I am sorry. I am so sorry, Kagami. I never wanted to lie to you about this, I just couldn't- I'm so sorry."

"Shush" The blue head was plastered with kisses. "Don't worry- I won't- hate you for your past."

"You should" Kuroko said, suddenly all serious. "I killed six babies in here and lost the one I wanted more than anything."

Kagami kept silent but his hug got fiercer. It felt like crushing or maybe melting into each other. He wished he could. He wanted to vanish, dissolve, become the shadow he claimed to be. Like a shadow he wanted to grovel at his light's feet. In bright sunlight he wanted to stop existing. He had taken revenge, had taught all those who had hurt him better. Why did it not feel like a accomplishment? It all felt hollow. He was still nothing but a shadow to be hidden away in the dark. How should he ever exist as something else than a dark secret?

"You knew it would hurt to bring Midorima here. Hearing that he is pregnant will hurt you more than anything. One of those who nearly broke you, having what you wanted for yourself ... we should go, Kuroko."

He silently shook his head.

"Why are you so intent on hurting yourself?"

"I don't deserve happiness." It was this place. It held so many memories. "Last week at my birthday party, I was so incredibly happy that we were all able to smile again. Even I smiled. And then I remembered how I killed our babies. The first was Midorima's and when he smelled the termination on me, all those neurosis started to spiral out of control. Second was Murasakibara's and he held me just like you now. He even cried. He hurt so much. Third ... it was the one I did not want to lose. I was so sick of it all and I wanted nothing more than to keep it."

"But someone killed it" Kagami continued when Kuroko could nod.

"In a fit of rage." He wanted to say it was an accident but it was not. Aomine had aimed for his stomach. He had fully intended to kill Aoki. "After that I ... did not care anymore. I got raped daily, I simply didn't care. I feel so filthy."

"You don't smell filthy." Kagami still had his nose in Kuroko's hair. "Milk and innocence. You smell like someone mourning their lost child. That is okay. You don't have to hate yourself for that."

"I wanted to die" Kuroko confessed.

"It must have hurt very much." Even Kagami sounded lost. "Please don't get lost in

your pain. You still have a future."

"How can I live when my baby did not?" The t-shirt Kagami had lend from Midorima was already wet in front. Kuroko felt too tired to even lift his head to free the other from his unending tears.

"Because one day you will have another child and that one will need you. I need you too. I don't want to be without you, Kuroko." Even Kagami sounded close to tears by now. His arms trembled for a second. "I love you. Please don't leave me."

He would not. The fingers of one hand dug into the soiled shirt. Kagami was right. He had a bright future ahead of him with Kagami by his side. It was okay to mourn his babies. It wasn't okay to stay in the past and refuse to look ahead.

Did Kagami just say that he loved him? He looked up and searched the other's miserable red eyes. There was so much tender care, sorrow and even a slight bit of fear in his gaze. Kagami really did not accuse him for his sins.

He could ask the other if he would mate with him right now. Kagami would immediately say yes, Kuroko was sure. He stayed silent though. He did not want pity. He did not want to be saved. He wanted to be loved, flaws and rough edges included. So he would not ask. He would mourn his babies first.

"Are we ... interrupting something?" Takao asked with a small voice.

"Oh" Kagami looked up and blinked like he had completely forgotten where they were.

"How did it go?" Kuroko cleaned his face with one hand, desperately telling himself to calm down.

"We'll know tomorrow." Midorima got out a pack of tissues and held it out to the other.

"I see." The blue-haired took it and dried his face before cleaning his nose. He could do nothing about Kagami's shirt though.

"Are you up to dinner or do you want to go home?" Takao asked him.

"Dinner sounds good" The Omega answered.

Kagami sighed with a concerned look at Kuroko. He still followed though.

Mister gentleman had dropped him off in front of his door before he turned and went home himself. Kuroko had wanted to hold him back, call after him, even scream but as always he had done nothing of that. He used the next day to visit the graveyard and say sorry to every little stone there for deciding against birthing them. In the end he leaned forward and kissed the Jizo statue, saying goodbye to Aoki and sorry for being unable to save him.

Kagami was right. It was a bad idea to linger in the past and blame himself for everything that happened. He would only take his fiery redhead down with him. He should focus on the future instead. His future called Kagami, his love.

His future children.

He blushed thinking about that, even in front of those seven gravestones. He had aborted six of those children. Could he really think about having another? Would he be able to love that one child instead of looking at seven accusing faces? Would he be able to hold a little boy and not whisper Aoki every time he looked at him?

Could he? Could he accept Kagami and never say Aomine's name when he closed his eyes? Sure, what he felt for Kagami was a lot more, it was more intense, it was full of love and trust. All those thoughts still conflicted in his head. He wanted a clean plate, wanted to love Kagami and cherish their children but he did not want to forget those seven gravestones in front of him.

He could never forget. They told a tale of squashed dreams, broken promises and violence. They were beauty in the darkness, a curse and a chain. They meant so much to him and had mattered so little. They were a symbol of his weakness, his sin, they were all he had wanted. It was all so confusing.

He wanted Kagami. He wanted to be held. He wanted those voices to be quiet. He wanted to listen to the heartbeat of the only one he wanted to be held by in life. So he left the cemetery and took the train to his flat. Would Kagami be home? Would he open the door? Would he hold Kuroko?

When the redhead opened the door, he drew the shorter one into his arms and whispered into his hair: "I was afraid you'd done something to yourself when your mother told me you had gone out this morning."

"Why would I?" He asked.

"Have you read Takao's SMS?" Kagami lifted him to carry him around and closed the door.

Kuroko kicked off his sneakers and answered: "I haven't but I guess Midorima is pregnant then?"

"Yes, he is." Kagami studied his face while he said that.

"I wish them luck. Losing a child is a horrible experience. Midorima was there when I ... he knows the terror. We will not see him playing again." Kuroko snuggled against Kagami's side, happy to be carried around. He liked it.

"Maybe we'll make preliminaries then." The redhead smiled. "You seem to be in a good mood."

"I visited my babies' gravesite."

"Oh." Kagami hung his head. "Should I accompany you next time?"

"Not if it makes you look so down." Kuroko closed his eyes. "It was draining but also a relief. I said sorry to all of them."

"Did they have names?" Kagami sat down on a sitting cushion and arranged Kuroko on his lap.

"Aoki had one. He was the one I wanted to keep." Well, that made it easy to guess who the father was. "I am sorry he died that way."

"How did he die? You said someone killed him."

Kuroko only shook his head. He would not tell on Aomine. Kagami would rip him to shreds if he knew. On the other hand, he wasn't as oblivious as he had thought, so maybe ... maybe he should: "Aomine did. As you can guess from the name, it was his child. I have ... no, I have not forgiven him. I never will. But I decided to let it rest. Aomine has suffered enough for it."

"I remember him from that first game, standing above us and gloating. I am not sure he suffered enough." Kagami's eyes had narrowed to slits, his muscles bulging under his skin.

"He knows what he did. He still feels guilty. Taking revenge won't make it any better." He let go off his breath and kissed Kagami's cheek. "I told you because you know I had feelings for him. I just wanted to assure you that whatever I felt for him died with Aoki. I will never forgive him."

"Those feelings still bind your heart." Kagami looked away.

"Yes, they do" Kuroko admitted and hung his head. "I don't come unattached. I am not pure anymore. I loved others, will continue to love some of them. Aoki most of all. I can only offer a big piece of my heart and my body."

"Dummy." The other's long arms enveloped him just like yesterday. "Children should always come first. I won't get jealous because of a baby." He inhaled a bit of Kuroko's

scent again. "I do want to punch Aomine and Akashi in the face though."

"Then claim me." Oh god, had he really just said that? "I mean, then no one but you will ever be able to touch me again." Technically they might but his smell would be off-putting to them. He would smell of Kagami. "Sorry, that was too forward, I shouldn't have."

"The smell of milk is gone." The other still had his nose in Kuroko's hair. "You smell sweet and enticing. The scent of mourning is gone."

"Yes, I was ... Kagami, what are you doing?"

It wasn't inhaling anymore, it was sniffing. Kuroko knew that all of his pheromones were down but it still got him nervous. Kagami continued down to his neck, sniffing there.

"Kagami?"

"Do you want me to bite you?" The other's voice had darkened.

"I ... yes" Kuroko fidgeted, unnerved from having the other breathing on his neck, even if it was from the front and he wanted to be bitten. "What are you doing there?"

"Smelling you." Kagami grabbed his hips with both hands and changed his sitting position, so that his legs fell right and left from Kagami's, making him sink against his crotch. "My mother taught me to distinguish scents when I was too young to be affected. You are going into heat."

"I am?" Kuroko asked with panic in his voice. "But my temperature was normal this morning."

"Yes, the hormones will kick in tonight." The redhead leaned back and looked at the other, quite relaxed for an Alpha who just smelled an Omega's heat. "That means I can claim you if you want me to."

"Today?" Well, okay, that was ... faster than expected. He wanted this, sure, but now? Did he really? He was only seventeen, he could wait a bit longer, he could ... it would expose him to danger. He never wanted anyone's hands on him but Kagami's.

"Tonight." The other smirked. "But we can practice for it until then. I need to bite you right before coming while you are in heat after all."

"I ... Kagami, I'd love to but I am not sure I am ready for ... for another pregnancy." He whispered the last part.

"Heavens, no!" The other's eyes widened. "I do have condoms, relax. I don't have to impregnate you to mark you."

Kuroko let go off his breath, sinking against Kagami's upper body and mumbling: "Thank you."

"That is a given. Man, you just told what others put you through, how can you believe I would ... well, it is because of them that you believe that, right?" The other ruffled his head. "I am not even seventeen yet, you are older than me. I am too young to be a father. You too."

"Good." He sat up again which pressed his cleft against the bulge that had formed in Kagami's pants. "Uhm ... listen ... I never had ... sex which I agreed to--"

Kagami interrupted him with a slow, gentle kiss. When Kuroko did not speak afterwards, he nudged his nose with his own.

"I am not in heat yet and you have a good control, so ... can you be gentle the first time? Please?" Trying would be nice at least. Alphas liked their Omegas in pain, he knew that. They liked it rough. Midorima had bitten every part of his skin not protected by his collar, Murasakibara had an unbelievably huge cock that hurt more than those times Aomine and Kise double-penetrated him. Aomine had loved to go at it again and again until he felt raw. Only Kise had ever looked out for him, at least

when they were alone. In front of others he had been just as brutal.

Kagami sighed, leaned forward and hugged him. Kuroko felt the other deflate immediately. Oh. So that was a downer. Well, he would survive. Maybe even rough sex felt better when he had at least agreed to it.

"Nothing I say will reach your ears, I guess." Kagami grabbed his behind again and lifted him up while standing up himself. "I just need to show you. I could ask to tell me when you don't want something and I am sure you would never say something. I wish Akashi hadn't messed with your mind like that but I want you as you are. One day you will not be afraid to say what you want. I can wait."

Kuroko felt confused. Hadn't he just said what he wanted? And if Kagami wanted to wait, why were they in the bedroom? The other placed him on the bed and he could see lube and condoms on the nightstand, so it was clear what was expected in this situation. He did not have to understand, he simply had to get through this. He sighed and told his body to relax. He could take this, he had lived through worse.

Chapter 11: Love and tears

[Only members of full age can access this chapter]

Chapter 12: Glowing embers, flaming lust

[Only members of full age can access this chapter]

Chapter 13: A twinge of happiness

Kuroko had insisted on Kagami to come with him to tell his mother the news. His mate seemed flustered for the first time, fidgeting and glancing at Kuroko on the way. He did not budge from his side though and that was all that mattered.

"What if you are not pregnant?" Kagami whispered.

"I am. I went out of heat the same day. If I was not, I would have stayed in heat for at least three more days" Kuroko calmly answered.

"Well ... yeah." He stayed silent for a bit. "Will your mother be furious?"

"I don't think so. She was fifteen when she had me. She knows what it is like to be an Omega." He leaned to the side and was directly drawn into a half-hug. "Normally you get mated off at fourteen or fifteen. You could say I am actually old for my ... first child."

"Does she know about the others?"

"No" Kuroko answered immediately. "She would be heartbroken. Don't you dare mention that to her." He looked up, catching Kagami's eyes. "I mean, don't even hint. You are my first boyfriend, there has never been anyone else."

"Why?" The other stayed calm, not asking in defence or anger, simply asking.

"Because she is very proud she could spare me the fate so many Omegas have. I can't tell her I threw all her hard work in the wind and actually agreed to being raped over and over again." He balled his fists. "I wish I could go back and punch my stupid self in the face."

"You aren't one for violence." Kagami smiled and petted his head. "If you could go back, you should offer yourself help to have the courage you have today."

Kuroko closed his eyes, trying his hardest not to cry. He really wasn't worthy of Kagami. How that man simply accepted anything and tried to make the best out of everything was beyond him. But no matter how hard the challenge, he always rouse above himself. Where was the social idiot who made girls cry? That too honest, good for nothing guy? Well, he was still very honest but Kuroko found it endearing. He loved that sheepish oaf who somehow always found the right words when Kuroko needed strength to carry on.

They got off at the right station and walked the rest of the way arm in arm. At least Kuroko had both his arms around his mate's stomach while Kagami slung one around Kuroko's shoulders. The people looking at them seemed surprised, some disgusted, some aghast. Mothers changed the walkway to spare their kids from the image. The blue-haired did not care as long as Kagami did not. And seeing as the other was in no way ashamed of being with him, Kuroko did not see a reason to hide. His Alpha was alright with showing everyone who he belonged to.

One of the reason Akashi had never fucked him was that he might have gotten pregnant. Even if he did not, he might have claimed it was Akashi's kid. This way he was unable to do so. No Akashi ever lowered themselves to copulating with an Omega, they had more class than that. The redhead most likely thought Kuroko should be thankful he was allowed to suck his captain's cock. Somehow he did not even doubt that a lot of people were vying for that and were denied. Reo Mibuchi for example. What was it with Akashi and teammates who screamed "whore"? But Akashi would not sleep with him, Kuroko was sure of that. Reo had too much ego for the redhead.

Midorima had no problem with showing who he was with. But that was more because he did not know how to lie than because he wanted people to know. Aomine and Kise would have rather been caught dead than honest about who they slept with. Only Murasakibara would have stood by him but Kuroko had decided early on that while that one had unbelievable pheromones, he was too unreliable as a mate. Himuro was charming enough to get a job even with three bawling children hanging onto him but Kuroko was not. He would have to depend on the one he was with.

On that note, he should really tutor Kagami. Better today than tomorrow. His mate was actually close to failing this year. Maybe he should make Kagami stay with the kids and earn money himself. Nice vision ... but no, he wanted to be with his children and he would not be allowed to work when he was pregnant. He had an inkling this would not be his only child.

He heard that in some countries being an Omega was completely alright. You had to take your medication and that was it. In all other regards, you were just the same as everyone else. He wanted to see such a thing one day. Here in Japan, being an Omega meant you were sub-human. You were mated or married off and kept inside to care for children. It wasn't as bad as it was a hundred years ago, when Omegas were just a dirty secret you had next to your wife. Seeing an Omega out on the streets for more than shopping, especially seeing them aside their Alpha ... that was nearly unheard of. But Kagami never cared for social norms, so Kuroko did not worry too much. He simply enjoyed being with someone who had no qualms about showing how much he loved him.

It was exhilarating.

He wanted to stuck out his baby-belly for the world to see but of course there was nothing yet. Just a few months and he would be able to proudly show it off. Hopefully Kagami would stay the same and not get cold feet. Up to now he held up admirably. He had gotten stiff though when they stood in front of Kuroko's door.

"We're home!" He called after opening the door.

"Tetsu!" His mother came out of the kitchen – the television could be heard in the background. "Oh my ... you've brought your handsome mate."

"Have you told her?" Kagami asked in surprise.

"No, silly, I'm his mother, I know such things." She stepped out with a smile, throwing her arms around her son. "Let me see, let me see!" Kuroko lowered his jacket and turned so she could inspect the bite-mark. She laughed in delight and asked: "When is my grandchild due?"

"Nine months, you know that better than me" Kuroko necked her.

"Good thing you already have your middle-school diploma. I was thrown out of school when I could not hide it anymore." She sighed. "It is the great beginning of manning conbinis at night and mopping company floors."

"No way" Kagami spoke up. "They won't do that ... will they?"

"Welcome to Omega life." Kuroko just nodded. "At least I won't have to live on the street. Kagami asked me to move in with him. Can I?"

"Really?" She turned to the redhead in surprise. "What does your family say to that?"

"My father offered money and my mother said she is fine with anything as long as I don't quit school. But how will you tutor me when you don't go to school yourself?" Kagami looked conflicted. "I'm sorry, I didn't know that could happen ... I can't believe I was that careless." He hung his head.

"Let us go and see your principal tomorrow." His mother took his hands and pressed them in support. "You know, maybe they are a bit more open these days. We can at

least try."

"We should wait. It's only been a day. About eighty percent of pregnancies fail in the first three months. We should not rush too much."

"You are right." She nodded and looked at her son's stomach. "You are still too young but I hope you won't loose it. It's part of nature but it still hurts. I don't think I ever told you but I was pregnant once before you."

"Really?" Kuroko looked up in surprise.

"Yes. It only lasted two weeks though. But it made me sad enough that when I thought about aborting you after your father ran away, I could not stand the thought. I still feel guilty I even thought about that, so I am happy I could not consider going through with an abortion. Even imagining that after loosing a baby was unthinkable."

"I can imagine" Kuroko plastered the most fake smile he could muster on his face. "Do you have some food? I am a bit hungry."

"You are too early for hunger pangs." She winked and turned. "I have some wakame and I can cook some rice. Are you hungry too, Kagami?"

"I'll take some rice, please. Just fill your cooker, I'll eat whatever is left." He looked at Kuroko for a few seconds. "We'll wait in your son's room, alright?"

"Sure, I'll call for you!"

"Thank you, Miss Kuroko." Kagami took his hand and dragged him to his room.

"I see why you don't want to tell her." Kagami sat down and dragged a sitting pillow next to him. "But I also fear what keeping this a secret is doing to you."

"I am alright" Kuroko mumbled.

"You are not." The other shook his head. "You beat yourself up because you think she would be disappointed and ashamed of you."

He nodded. He knew for a fact that she would be. Shame. It was enough how ashamed he felt about himself. She would be right to blame him for what happened, for killing those babies. He had done that. Kagami must be ashamed of him as well, he just did not say so because he loved him.

"Can we talk?" Kagami turned to fully face him. So this was it. His mate must have finally realised what he had gotten himself into. Kuroko lowered his head but Kagami drew it up again with a hand under his chin. "Why are you suddenly so down?"

"You don't want a baby, do you?" Kuroko whispered. "You go along with this because you know I would never, ever abort it."

The redhead stayed silent. Of course. What else should he say? He could only hurt Kuroko further or lie. Both would only make it worse. Kagami loved him, he was sure of that, but this ... this seemed unsolvable.

"Do you have Akashi's number?" The redhead's voice was trembling with fury. "I can't hit the guy right now but I want to scream at him for doing this to you."

"Akashi never did anything, it was all me. You may scream at me." Even though he said that Kuroko curled in on himself. He did not want his mate angry with him.

That one sighed deeply while all anger seemed to drain from him. It looked a bit like meditating until he opened his eyes again and softly said: "I can't make you believe that I love you, that I want to stay with you through thick and thin, that I want to be with you and raise our baby with you. It frustrates me so much that my words and actions don't reach you. What can I do to make you believe me?"

Kagami could not mean that. He must not have thought this through. Why should the nicest, best-looking, powerful guy want to stay with someone as tainted as him? He trusted Kagami that the other had feelings for him. He had mated with him after all.

But more than that? He wasn't worth that much.

"Okay, even if you don't believe me: Yes, this was unplanned. I don't regret it though. I hope it won't open too many old wounds or that if, I am somehow able to close them, I don't know. I just want you to know that I support you. If you want this baby – not because you feel guilty or ashamed or don't want to disappoint people – if you yourself want to have this, I will support you in any way I can. If you can't believe me, than at least know is not because I don't mean it. I fully mean it. I ... I don't know what more I can say."

Kuroko closed his arms around his stomach and calmly stated: "I want this baby."

"Good." Kagami took a deep breath. "Then we will have this baby. Not you, we. I am part of this. We are partners, are we not? You are always right to call me out when I start a one-man-show, now I call you out on it."

"Aren't you afraid?" The blue-haired whispered.

"Afraid?" The other blinked. "Of what? The baby won't eat us, even if it has my stomach."

Kuroko simply shook his head with a smile. Right. What should they be afraid of? It was only a baby. Kagami could make everything seem so easy. And hadn't he been right before? He had said they would be the best in Japan and that was what they did. How hard could raising a child be when you already became a national basketball champion and threw all your former tormentor's arrogance in their face? He was right. It was just a baby. Omegas had them all the time. And he would not be alone.

"Stay with me", Kuroko whispered, "I'll be sure to believe you some day."

They began packing the next day. Due to being poor and living in a one-tatami-room, Kuroko did not own more than what the three of them could comfortably carry. It was sad that his school textbooks were the heaviest thing he owned, followed by a sport bag full of clothes that Kagami carried.

His mother was delighted by their flat. She most likely had never seen something so big, coming from a fairly poor farming family herself. Her father had not wanted to support a pregnant Omega daughter, so she had been in state custody until she was old enough to support herself – being the competent woman that she was, that had been three months after Kuroko's birth. She danced in circles in the spacious living room.

"If you can stay in school, Tetsu, I'll watch your baby, yes? I can change my shifts back to evening-shifts. I want to watch my favorite series on that TV." She clapped in delight, standing in front of the large plasma screen. "Hey, do you think I should move too? Maybe I find something cheaper in the neighborhood. I can live with one less room now."

"I'd rather you look for something bigger. You'll have less expenses now."

"Ah, don't worry. Having you live with me is not expensive, you don't eat much. Just think how my life would have been raising someone like your mate. I would never have been able to get enough money for school and food." She laughed. "No wonder Alphas tend to get rich. They'd never be able to raise their children otherwise."

Kagami looked like he wanted to sink through the floor. Miss Kuroko went up to him and asked nicely: "Would you help me move, mister son-in-law?"

"What? Eh, sure. I'll help." He scratched his head. "Just tell me what you need, I'll do it. If money is a problem, I'm pretty sure my parents would gladly pay for your help with the kid." He looked at her annoyed face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that in a bad way, it's just ... they have nothing but money to offer. They'll never watch a kid or anything. If

you move and change your job just for us, that's ... I know that's most likely something you just do, you're a great mother, but I didn't grow up with taking things like that for granted. I just mean ... it's only right if my parents do their part, even if it is with money." He looked down in shame. "I just wanted to say thank you."

"Thank you is enough." She nodded. "I won't take money for caring for my grandchild, no matter how poor I am. That is just the right thing to do." Well, no one had ever done the right thing by her, so no wonder she adamantly kept to that. "But I'll gladly call for you whenever I need help. I bet you can repair our cupboard in no time."

"Last time we tried I lifted my mother but we were still unable to secure the top" Kuroko explained.

"How about I come over tomorrow and I try to fix it?" Kagami offered.

"Such a reliable young man!" She took his hand. "No show me where you plan the baby room."

Chapter 14: Dispersing the illusion

Kuroko fully enjoyed having his mate with him every night – and he felt secure to say that Kagami liked him there too – so he got quite grumpy when the other left the bed on Saturday evening because his phone was ringing. They had not done anything special, just cuddling after sex that they had right after school, but it still annoyed him. Kagami always found that cute, so he felt secure in indulging himself a little.

"Hey, Takao, how do you do?" Oh, Midorima's boyfriend. Hopefully their baby was alright too. "Yeah, sure, tomorrow is fine. Do you have a lot of stuff?" The pause was shorter this time. "Holy shit! Really?" It did not sound bad but Kuroko got curious. "Sure, I could use a couch. Do you have a transporter? That's great. Okay, when and where?" Kagami noted something down. "I'll be there. See you tomorrow." He ended the call.

"What was that about?" Kuroko immediately asked.

"Takao is moving in with Midorima. They told Midorima's parents and they are okay with their son having a child."

"Really?" Kuroko sat up. "He has strict parents. I am surprised they allowed that. I only met them a few times but they always impressed me. His father is a tea-master from an old samurai line."

"Wow, okay ... that might be why we get a couch. Takao said I can have everything that does not fit in his new home which seemed to be about all the furniture he owned. Maybe we can get some stuff for your mother's new place."

"She hasn't even decided to move yet." Kuroko smiled in spite of his words. Kagami always thought of everyone. "But it is a good idea to take the extra furniture. We'll have to change your father's room into a baby room anyway."

"Or we take my father's room and change this into a baby room." Kagami grinned. "Dad's old room has the big bed."

"Get your mind out of the gutter." Kuroko shook his head indulgently. "It makes more sense to keep the bigger room for the kids until we have so many that we have to move."

Kagami stared at him with a hanging jaw. The blue-haired grinned until his mate got the joke. In a flash he had come over, knuckled Kuroko's head and said: "Don't shock me like that!"

"It all depends on you, you know? Your mom said you would surely forget the condoms again" He teased.

"I am not that big an idiot" Kagami grumped.

"You already forgot once, you know?" He cuddled up to his mate. "Or I might get twins, who knows? With how often you fuck me, I could have quadruplets by now."

"That's not how pregnancies work." The other shook his head. "And what is this about how often I want to have sex? You're the insatiable one."

"I am simply reacting to your pheromones."

"My pheromones come with my arousal and that depends on what you do, so don't try to put this on me." Kagami held the squirming Omega, burying his nose in the light blue strands.

"I do nothing out of the ordinary" Kuroko deadpanned. "It just makes you think of ecchi things."

"Yeah, going to see Nigou every noon and bending over to pet him when nobody is

around is completely normal behavior."

"Maybe I always did that and it is only now that you follow me." Kuroko grinned challengingly.

"No, you spent your noons eating lunch." Kagami seemed to decide not to react to that and kissed his mate instead. "Should I make bentos for both of us from now on?"

"No more noon sex?" The shorter one pouted.

"It is barely spring, having sex outside is not good for your body. And if we get caught, being thrown out of school will be a shared problem. So we should stop now before my body begins to crave for it. Also, you need the nutrients. Don't forget you are eating for two."

"At least two."

Kagami rolled his eyes.

His mate came back from helping with the move in a sombre mood. There seemed to be agitation, just like after their loss against Touou, as well as something like sorrow. Or maybe not sorrow, more like ... mourning? It was such a strange look on Kagami. Kuroko cautiously stepped near, lifting himself on his toes for a kiss but Kagami did not bend.

He fell back, hanging his head. Had he done something to anger his mate? Had Midorima told him something that angered him? He had told Kagami everything there was to know, hadn't he? Except for the details but his mate did not seem to want to know. Could he ask? Or would Kagami get angry?

"I was able not to punch Aomine in the face but I was close" His mate whispered.

"Aomine was there?" Kuroko looked up. Oh no. Midorima and Aomine was not a good combination. The green-haired had stood right next to him when Aomine had killed Aoki.

"Yeah ... Midorima hinted he was still angry with him and Aomine told him to get off his case, that this was between him and you. That made me angry."

"Why?" Kuroko laid his head to the side. So that was all? Why did that make Kagami angry?

"Why?" The other looked at him in shock. "Because it's not between him and you, even if you are the most important person here. You are our friend and it concerns us all because we all have a part in this. I am your mate. I am the one who holds you at night when you cry."

No. This was between him and Aomine. Kagami did not have to do anything with this. It happened long before he met him, what business did he have to get angry on Kuroko's behalf when he himself wasn't angry?

"Kagami, this is my problem alone." Even though his mate's eyes widened with hurt, he continued. "No, don't even speak. This is between Aomine and me. I know you probably mean well and think you are only protecting me but you don't belong in this. Aomine does not have to apologize to all of you, he only has to apologize to me and he did that. So he is right: Get off his case."

"Kuroko-"

"No, Kagami." He took a step back and crossed his arms.

"But he hurt you and you are clearly not over this-"

"And you think you make it better by threatening him? Who do you think me to be? Some helpless princess you have to protect? If you want a mate you can lock in a tower, choose somebody else!" He turned and went into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

"Kuroko" Kagami said in defeat. "Shit!" He kicked the wall, continuing on to the living room.

The Omega sighed and curled in on himself, sitting in front of the bathing tube. You just did not go into the bathing room in clothes, you didn't go into a toilet with your normal indoor shoes but he had not cared. He sat on the floor tiles in his normal clothes, drawn up knees and looked at his plushy bunny shoes.

This really was no concern of Kagami. How did he dare interfere? Okay, Aomine had done something unforgivable but did nobody trust him to settle this by himself? Damn it, he could protect himself. He did not need any stupid Alphas to solve his problems for him. He was not a victim. It had been his choice, he could live with the consequences. Who did Kagami think he was? He might be his mate but he wasn't his owner. Kuroko was no property, harmed by someone else.

He did not want to feel like an object again.

Not by Kagami, the only one who always took him serious and treated him like he could do things himself when really ... he could not. He could not get Midorima to trust him to do this himself. He could not even get Kagami to trust him. Would he always have Alphas fight over him, even after he had mated? He hated this. Why couldn't Kagami trust him when he asked him to let it be? What did he have to do to cool everyone's rage? Why did Alphas always have to fight?

"Kuroko? Are you alright? You've been in there quite a while. It worries me. Please come out. We don't have to talk further if you want or you can scream or hit me, I don't care, just don't shut me out, please?" Kagami begged from the door.

Kuroko sighed. His mate was right. This was childish. He was no better than those two hotheads. He got up and opened the door, silently looking at the other.

"Uhm ... I made some dinner. Are you hungry?" Kagami asked.

The blue-haired nodded and followed him.

It should not have surprised him to get a call from Takao the next day but it did. As expected, Midorima was not over it all and even Takao sounded concerned not only for him but for them all. This whole thing continued to drag down everyone involved and got more people involved. Just why was he this helpless?

"You know, I called for a specific reason ... this might hurt you. Is it okay to talk?"

"Of course." It was only memories now, it could not hurt him. He had lived through it after all and survived once. He was stronger than this.

"Yesterday when Shin-chan told the others about his pregnancy he said I was reliable opposite to Aomine. That one got really angry and told Shin-chan off quite rudely. Kagami stepped in before it could escalate to a fight but Shin-chan edged him on a bit to hurt Aomine. I could calm them all down but Shin-chan was still angry afterwards. He feels that Aomine hasn't been punished enough for what he did. He said he wanted to respect your wishes but that is was really hard for him. Logically he tells himself that this is a thing between you and Aomine and that he should stay out of it but his emotions get the better of him when the topic comes up. Maybe it's just the hormones but I fear someday there will be a fight between those two. I was happy Kagami could stay so calm and help me to calm the situation down but what if he had not been there? I am unable to protect Shin-chan myself. I feel so useless in this all. Do you have any idea?"

Kagami had calmed them down? It had sounded like he had been the one to pick a fight. Maybe he had been a bit too hard on his mate? The redhead had seemed down the whole evening. Maybe he had overreacted a bit?

"Kagami told me about it. I struggle with the same, my mate was angry when he came back yesterday." Somehow just saying "my mate" seemed to make everything better. They would solve this somehow. It just would be great to have an actual idea how to. "Yeah, it might not have been the best idea to invite Aomine but it was actually Shin-chan's idea. I think he wanted to try to reconcile a bit. It doesn't help that Aomine is such a hothead." Takao sighed. "No, how do we get our mates to calm down a bit? I don't think that even if Aomine apologized it would do the trick."

Good question, next question. How did you get a protective Alpha to stop protecting you and to acknowledge you actually knew what you were doing? At least Midorima had to know that he did not just forgive Aomine but that ... actually, no, the green-haired had never seen him to anything to Aomine except for beating him in basketball. Most likely Midorima had no idea what exactly happened between Aomine and him, why it happened and why it was alright in his opinion. He would try to convince Midorima first and if that worked, he would try the same with Kagami.

"Can you meet me today after school?" he asked Takao.

"Sure, where and when? We didn't plan on going to training, so we are off at four o'clock."

"Hm, there is a temple near, we can meet and go from there ..." Kuroko began to describe the the position of the Jizo temple near the graveyard.

When he finally arrived there, he was late himself because Riko had been furious to hear he would not return to training. Only after he finally told her why (not because he did not want to but because she did not let him) was he allowed to leave practice early. Kagami seemed unhappy to see him go but really – he had it with overprotective Alphas right now.

When he saw Takao and Midorima, the first was putting a talisman on Midorima's book bag. It might not be the worst idea with someone strongly believing in faith. When he came near, he saw it was one wishing luck and health for unborn children.

"Good afternoon." Kuroko smiled, bowing in front of them. "And congratulations on your pregnancy."

"Thank you for noticing." Midorima smiled back at him – again, it was a real smile, something strange but amazing on his face. "It was still a bit too late. The doctor said they would have to do a Cesarian in the seventh month."

"A good reason for praying. I am sorry to hear but hopefully it will turn out alright."

"Thank you." The tallest one nodded. "Kazu told me you wanted to show us something. I feel a bit surprised that we meet up here."

"It was the nearest location that was easily identifiable. What I wanted to show you is over there." Kuroko pointed to a wooden wall that divided the temple from what lay behind. Were the others aware they would go to a graveyard? Had he told Takao? He wasn't sure. When he went through the gate, Midorima stopped and asked: "A graveyard?"

"Yes. I wanted to show you a grave. Several in fact."

The green haired stood rooted to the spot. There was disbelief, followed by something akin to horror in his eyes, before he closed them. After taking a deep breath he opened them again and stepped forward.

Chapter 15: Prayer, a light in the dark

Kuroko took a bamboo bucket and filled it with water. Midorima mimicked his motions while Takao simply followed them. He went to the burial spot he had bought. The Jizo and the six stones were in perfect condition. Kuroko carefully put a spoon of water on every one of them before he watered the Jizo too. While he knelt to pray, Midorima did the same and knelt down next to him.

Traditions and rites. It was a way to work through your feelings when they seemed unbearable. It was a way Midorima must be familiar with. Unborn and stillborn children were "water-children" which Jizo helped to cross the river of death into afterlife. He prayed for all seven that they had found their way.

So ... where to start? It helped when you were able to make sense of something. So he started: "Akashi changed in our second year. He came up with the idea of hunts and I stupidly agreed to it, thinking it would only be training as well. When I was pregnant right after the first hunt, I was scared but told no one about it." - that had been Midorima's child - "I forged my parent's signature for the abortion and went through with it. I was conflicted about continuing but somehow I thought I could control what would happen, now that I knew what to expect. Of course I couldn't. So I aborted again and went to Akashi to tell him I wanted to stop." - that had been Murasakibara's - "First he seemed to agree but then he mentioned it would have been Aomine this time. I was ... I loved Aomine back then. So I told Akashi I wanted to continue. I can't really say what I thought at that time but I was losing him back then, he was losing himself and somehow I thought I could make it alright. When I found out I was pregnant, I was actually happy about it. I went to Aomine and told him I wanted to keep our child, that I wanted to quit basketball and be with him. Somehow I thought he would smile as he used to and be happy."

He had been so stupid back then. He believed you could save someone with your love. You could not. Not if you thought it, not even if the other thought so. People could only save themselves, you could only help. But Aomine had been lost, unable to find his way, unwilling to fight for himself.

Midorima clapped his hands to begin a prayer while Kuroko continued: "Instead he completely lost it. He took a right hook to my stomach that ended the pregnancy right there and told me to get back to practice. Midorima attacked him, Akashi stopped them both from taking out each other and finally Midorima took me to the nearest hospital. I was bleeding profusely and had to get a blood transfusion in the end."

Takao was still as a stone, listening to him talk about it all as if Midorima wasn't kneeling right next to him. He stood only a foot away though.

"After that I simply did not care anymore. I let them rape me, aborted children, I felt dead inside. I finally ended it all by quitting the team. Even after that it took me half a year to piece myself back together enough that I could go on living." That had been hell. Deciding that the pain wasn't worth it, that he could not save Aomine, that everything had been in vain, it had been horrible. It should have been an easy decision but it had been the hardest one he ever had to take. "After I met Kagami, I began to return to the living. He gave me hope, he helped me find a reason to keep on living and without even knowing, he helped me heal. I asked him for money to buy this graveyard spot and the stones and he gave it to me without even asking why."

Yes, Kagami had been there for him. He had always been there. He had protected

Kuroko all this time. How could he have gotten angry at his mate for continuing to watch out for him? He had had a horrible reaction yesterday.

"Aoki." Midorima read the name on the Jizo. "You named it after him even though he did that to you?"

"Love is a strange thing." Kuroko looked at the other for a long moment. Had it even been love? He wasn't so sure now. What he had with Kagami was love. But with Aomine ... he had thought it had been love but now it did not feel like it. "Has Akashi ever told you how he came up with the idea of the hunts?" The other shook his head, so he continued. "On that one day I ever skipped practice, I went to talk with Aomine. I know he had lost his spirit, lost his motivation. I had pep-talked him so often, I thought I could do it again but I couldn't. So I went to Akashi to ask him what to do. Akashi told me we should give up on Aomine." Midorima looked shocked at that. "He told me a plate was still usable if it had cracks as long as it wasn't broken."

"I am beginning to think Akashi was worse than Aomine could ever be." There was bitterness in his voice.

"Yes, the other Akashi was a cruel being." Kuroko nodded. He felt uneasy just remembering that golden eyed monstrous version of his friend. "He then suggested the hunts as a way to motivate Aomine and thereby chain him to the team."

"He used your feelings." Midorima balled his hands in anger. He had become quite expressive.

"He did. It may have been the right thing though." The other took one of those hands, enveloping it his own smaller ones. There was a reason it was hard to be angry with Akashi, even though his idea had been horrible. "You remember that day Aomine ran out of practice and our coach decided he did not have to come anymore?" Midorima nodded. "I found Aomine afterward, trying to kill himself. That was a month before the whole hunting idea came up."

"Aomine was suicidal from our second year onwards?" The other seemed stunned.

"Yes. Of course I was horrified, angry and disappointed about what he had done. But I also could not forget how close he was to killing himself. Aomine was very sick and not in his right mind when he attacked me."

It was more than that. There was always more. Seeing his friend so down, losing his joy in the only thing that was still good in his life ... Kuroko knew about Aomine's home life. He had abusive parents, his younger brother had died from their horrible treatment of their children. Basketball had been his only reprise from pain, both physical and emotional. When he lost basketball, he lost everything he held dear. Kuroko had thought he would be able to become Aomine's reason to live. That had worked for some time – until the abuse Aomine showered on him became too much. Seeing Aomine trying to kill himself had triggered an intense urge in Kuroko to protect and save his friend, to free him from his abyss of pain. How naive he had been. "It does not excuse him. I may have forgiven him but I will never forget. Even though he is stable now I will never trust him again. And I am happy I fell in love with Kagami who is much more reliable than Aomine, even though they are similar in other ways." There was a long moment of silence.

"Kagami is a stable personality." Midorima stood and helped Kuroko up. "It seems what happened back then hurt all of us. It might have been better if we never went to the same middle school."

"If anything changed, we wouldn't be here now, would we?" He smiled. Sure, he had lost Aoki and that had hurt unbearably. But living without him ever existing? That sounded more cruel. It had been a short moment but Kuroko had been happy back

then, dreaming of his life with Aomine. "You might be without Takao. You might be without your child. Even though we experienced something that hurt us, we all found happiness, did we not?"

The other blinked in honest surprise. His boyfriend shook his head with a smile on his face before he asked: "Have you told Kagami about this?"

"No. I wanted him to stay as carefree as he was. But he pieced everything together himself anyway." Kuroko touched his neck. Kagami was his mate. He deserved the truth. He would tell his mate what he told these two. "He is normally slow but he can be sharp when it is about me. That is an annoying habit."

"He wants you to tell him." Midorima said in a surprisingly small voice. "Even though he might know everything by now, he wants to hear it from you. He is hurt that he has to find out from others."

"I fear you are right." Kuroko took a deep breath. "I'll jump over my shadow and tell him. What about you?"

"Me?" The other inclined his head.

"Can you let go of your anger now?"

Midorima froze for a second before he finally nodded. So, this worked. Honesty was able to overcome pain, anger and hurt. He would be honest with Kagami and hope for the best.

"I'm home!" He shouted, a bit surprised not to hear Kagami when he opened the door. He went further in, noticing that the lights were off. Maybe Kagami had gone out to eat with the others after training. He switched on the lights in the living room – and nearly screamed.

"Oh. Evening." Kagami looked up from the couch on which he lain. Had he been asleep?

"What have you been doing in the dark?"

"Thinking."

"Oh." That did not sound good. Not good at all. "I've been thinking as well."

Kagami sat up, silently watching him with a careful gaze.

"I ... overreacted yesterday. I am sorry. I spoke to Takao today. He said you helped him keep Aomine and Midorima from fighting ... I had pictured you picking a fight with Aomine and had been irritated about that."

"Oh." Kagami grinned. "Yeah, I see. No, I didn't. Takao reminded me that you would be angry with me if I picked a fight, so I was able to stay calm."

"Yes, so ... I am sorry." Kuroko came over and sat down next to his mate. "Of course I want you to protect me. I just don't want you to pick fights I am fighting on my own. That feels like you don't trust me to care for myself."

"That was how you felt?" Kagami's eyes widened. He leaned over and gathered Kuroko in his arms. "I know you are strong. You don't need me to fight for you. I only want to support you."

"Yeah ... sorry." Kuroko kissed his mate. "I told Midorima about what exactly happened with Aomine back then. He won't try to aggravate him again."

"Hm." Kagami nodded but looked away.

Kuroko laid a hand on his arm, waiting until the other looked at him and said: "You can ask, you know. I see that it bothers you."

His mate looked at him for a long moment before he said: "I want to know what happened with Aomine. My head comes up with so much, it makes me feel nauseous but also insanely jealous because I don't know how much you still feel for him, even if

you say you don't love him. I just can't imagine how you let all of that happen because of him and not ... love him."

"I see." He had expected as much. "Do you think you will be able to hold me while we talk?"

Kagami looked at him for a long moment before he sat Kuroko on his lap and leaned back against their new couch's backrest.

"I met Aomine in our first year of middle-school. Like I told you before, I was training hard to meet my friend who went to another middle-school. Aomine was a star, he was an idol and when he asked me to train with him, I felt honored. He complimented me so much, believed in me, he quickly became my everything because he supported me more than anyone before in my life. I loved that Aomine, that is true." Kagami tensed but was able to breath through it. "He confided in me. I can't tell you what he told me, I will not dishonor my promise not to tell anyone but I can tell you: His life was a mess. Really, everything but basketball was very bad. The only good thing was basketball, it kept him alive. So when he lost his drive, when basketball became nothing but a disappointment for him, he tried to kill himself."

Kagami's eyes flew open, horrified by this revelation. "Aomine? That arrogant bastard?"

"He had already become arrogant, so yes, exactly that one." Kuroko smiled. "I found him nearly unbearable with his bad attitude but when he was suicidal, I remembered that very nice boy that he had been, the one I had been in love with. I wanted to bring back that boy. I would never have forgiven myself if he had killed himself."

"I kinda understand." Kagami nodded slowly. "Even I would try my hardest if Aomine became suicidal now and I knew. I don't even like him. But I know how it ripped my heart that one day I thought you might do something to yourself."

"I asked Akashi for a way to save Aomine because talking didn't help. That was how he came up with the hunts. It was a cruel, horrible idea but it was efficient. That was what the other Akashi was all about – being efficient and winning. I don't know what exactly happened to Akashi that somewhere along the way he split his soul but I imagine it must be something worse than what I lived through."

"Really?" Kagami lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, my soul isn't split." He corrected his position to lay more comfortably on Kagami's breast. "So I guess."

"So that was why you said yes. You wanted to save Aomine."

"Yes." Kuroko looked at his mate. "I thought I loved him. But even at that time I already loved a memory, not the person he was then." He saw Kagami nod slowly and relaxed, seeing that his mate understood. "When Aomine was my hunter, I did not run. I embraced him. I wanted him to trust me, to fall in love with me. I thought giving him my body would mean he would give me his heart."

Kagami kissed the top of his head, replying with nothing but: "I love you."

"Yes, you did not abuse my trust. He did though. But I did not want to see that, I dreamed about him falling in love with me, becoming my mate and raising our child."

"It still hurts to know you wanted him to be who I am today" Kagami admitted.

"I know. I am sorry. It was my fairytale prince who you are and he could never be."

"Yeah ... that sounds better." His mate smiled. "You wanted to have what we have today, you just chose the wrong person."

"I went to him full of dreams to tell him I was pregnant and to ask him to become my mate. I never got to the second part. When I told him I was pregnant and wanted to keep the child, he looked at me in horror before punching me in the stomach with full

force."

"What?" Kagami sat up, clutching Kuroko in his arms to keep him safe. "That bastard!" "He killed our child, I fully meant that." He took a deep breath. "Don't worry, I won't ever forgive him for that. I am not angry anymore but I was, make no mistake about that."

"How can you even stand to look at him? I'd want to kill him every time I- hell, I want to kill him right now. For real. Isn't that murder?"

"I did not go to the police. Midorima was there, he tried to kill Aomine by snapping his neck. But Aomine was stronger, he nearly broke Midorima's left hand before Akashi stepped in. He punched Aomine in the face, threw him out and sent Midorima to my help while he called an ambulance. It was touch-and-go for a few hours, I lost a lot of blood and nearly died myself."

Kagami held him tight, his nose buried in Kuroko's hair. Smelling his hair seemed to be some kind of calming method for his mate. Maybe smelling himself and their baby on Kuroko was enough to keep him sane.

"After that ... I wasn't the same. I could not think of revenge, I was ... nothing but a ghost really. I became a shadow, not feeling, not being, becoming nothing at all." Kuroko remembered the black hole his heart had been back then, sucking in every emotion. "Aomine started to rape me and I simply was unable to care."

"I fucking hate him" His mate growled.

"In hindsight, I understand that feeling." Yes, had he ever actually been angry? He could remember resentment but actual anger? He knew it was somewhere but it had not returned yet. "Right now, it is mostly sorrow. I was able to accept losing Aoki. I was able to accept losing myself ... you were right, I was unable to make any decisions at that time, I simply survived somehow. I let them mistreat me." He dug his fingers into his mate's shirt, feeling tears welling up. "I felt helpless at first." He sobbed. "Then I wanted to die, so I did not fight them."

Kagami simply held him, rocking them forward and back, making some nonsense-noises.

At once all those tears turned to anger and made him spat: "Aomine raped me one day after I returned from the hospital. He did not use a condom, nothing. He simply smirked when I cried. It just hurt so much. I thought we could talk it over or something, that maybe it had just been some fit of rage, I don't know, something ... but he raped me."

"Please, please let me trash him" Kagami begged, his voice sounding beastly.

Kuroko just cried, unable to answer. Really, why hadn't he been angry? Aomine had been horrible to him. Why should he protect him? Why not let Kagami let out his anger on him? He deserved it, he so deserved it. But then he remembered the young boy crying at his brother's grave. He hated who Aomine had become but how could he disregard who he had been? But that wasn't an excuse. It wasn't okay, not in the slightest. Maybe he should let Kagami hurt him. Gods, yes, he wanted to. He wanted Aomine to feel what it meant to lose everything he had ever wanted.

But he had.

Aomine knew exactly what it felt like to lose the only thing that kept you alive – he knew how it was to live without hope. He had pulled through, just like Kuroko. Kuroko had only stood in the cross-fire in that process, sharing the pain that ravaged his friend. He did not want to forgive, did not want to forget but it was so hard to stay angry at Aomine.

"He would welcome that." Kuroko looked up after a few minutes of crying into

Kagami's shirt. "It might alleviate his guilt a bit."

"I rather want him to suffer" His mate admitted.

"Then don't hurt him." He sighed and relaxed into the embrace. "It hurts him more if you don't hit him."

"Well ... okay." Kagami scoffed. "Though he was afraid of me hitting him for what he did."

"I also fear you might kill him if you meant it" Kuroko admitted but still smiled a bit.

"Yeah, I ... okay, I should not hit him." The other grumbled. "I still hate him."

"That's okay." Kuroko followed the line of one of Kagami's biceps with his index finger. "You never met a likable side of him after all."

"Don't invite him again. If he comes to a party, I'll throw him out."

Kuroko just nodded. That sounded reasonable.

Kagami lay his head on his and continued to grumble unintelligently.

Chapter 16: A fresh start

The next morning, the world looked fresh and new. Kuroko wriggled out of his mate's embrace, greeting the spring morning with a smile. He had an urge to call Aomine and make up with him but actually there was nothing to make up for. Aomine had already said he was sorry and that he expected Kuroko's anger one day. Maybe he should call to say he had been angry. But really, he was alright, Aomine was not. Maybe he should linger in that state of mind for a bit.

Kuroko made breakfast and woke up his sleepy mate with a cup of coffee. Kagami followed him to the living room to sit down for fish and rice, only waking up after eating about three portions. They had settled into an easy routine soon enough. Kuroko cooked breakfast, Kagami dinner. Kagami used the leftovers to prepare their bentos for the next day, more often than not cooking more food because apparently he ate even more since Kuroko moved in. He had necked his mate that co-pregnancy was not appreciated. The only thing that had not worked until now was studying because whenever they were alone, Kagami would drag him off to bed.

Not that he resented that in any way. But he had promised his mate's mother to get her son to study, so he used the basketball practice to come up with a schedule. Finals were in two weeks, so they were short on time. The others eyed him from time to time, their gaze sometimes falling to his stomach which was of course completely flat. But knowing that and actually refraining from looking seemed difficult. Kuroko understood. He looked often enough himself. Nine months. Damn, he could not wait. It was the opposite from Midorima who seemed a bit overwhelmed and scared, not that he would ever admit that. But finding out you were five months pregnant and would have a cesarian in two was a bit fast, true. Especially when you never expected to be pregnant.

Somehow his thoughts returned to Aomine over the course of the week. He wanted to tell him about his pregnancy, his happiness with Kagami, his burst of anger and the relief that followed. But wouldn't he only burden the other? By now that wish to see Aomine suffer had completely vanished. Was it a bad idea to call him? Or good? Really, he didn't know. Could he ask Kagami? Gods, he wished this was easier. How did you go on as friends after something like that had happened? Did he even want to be friends with Aomine?

Yes. Yes, he wanted them to be friends. He wanted the old Aomine back, not the one he loved but the one who smiled when he played, who forget his worries when he played. He didn't know how but damn, he cared. Was it wrong to care about someone who nearly destroyed you? Would Kagami understand? Or should he just not tell him? "You are unnaturally silent" Kagami noted on their way home.

"I was thinking."

"Well, spill it. What is going on?" The other took his hand into his own, warming it in the chill spring air.

"I fear you might get angry." Kuroko looked up. "It's about Aomine."

"Somehow I knew it was too easy when you said yes to never inviting him anymore." Kagami sighed. "You can't stay angry with anyone, can you?"

"No, it is not healthy. He made a lot of mistakes, he apologized. He don't think he will ever do something like that again. Even after all, he is my friend. I don't want to throw him out of my life." Kuroko gazed at his mate imploringly. "I know it does not make

sense to you but I like him. Just as a friend. Buried behind that arrogant, spiteful wall is a very nice person. I don't want to accept I'll never see that person again."

Kagami's hand squeezed his forcefully, trembling, before his mate sighed in defeat and looked at him with a face full of agony and sorrow, whispering: "I don't want to lose you to him."

"Silly." The shorter one stopped to turn the other's face back to him after Kagami had averted his eyes. "You know as well as I that Omegas mate for life. There is only you, there will never be anyone else. I am pregnant with your child. In how many more ways can I belong to you?"

"What if he hurts you?" Kagami voiced his next doubt.

"Then I can decide again if trying to get Aomine back as a friend is worth it."

"It's just ..." The other seemed to collect his thoughts. "You are so bend on mending your relationship with Aomine. What about Akashi for example? Or Murasakibara? I see why you don't have strong ties with Kise, that one is horribly superficial but what makes Aomine this special when you talk about friendship? Are you sure you are not confusing love with friendship?"

"Yes, I am." Kuroko laid a hand on his mate's perfect abs, enjoying their feel. "I don't like Murasakibara much, he's very unreliable. You are right about Akashi, I think I should talk with him as well. But Aomine was my best friend for a year and I miss that friend. I won't think about anything strange as long as I have my fairytale prince at home." He smirked at his mate.

Kagami blushed and mumbled something Kuroko did not quite catch. His mate looked up after a moment and bend down to pick Kuroko up in the middle of the street. It was his time to blush but he calmed when the other whispered into his ear: "I want to be that fairytale prince. I don't want to ever feel like a substitute for the one you could not have."

"You don't have to" Kuroko promised. He knew he meant that. Just how could he get that across? "I love you, Kagami."

"Taiga" His mate replied.

"I love you, Taiga." He smiled. "And you may come up with whatever endearment you want."

"I'll stick with Tetsu for a start. I always hated how he got to call you that and I did not." Really? That had bothered him? Silly Kagami. But yes, he had hated that Himuro got to call him Taiga and he did not.

"Don't worry, you are allowed so much more."

Kagami finally relaxed again.

He had invited Aomine to burgers and vanilla shakes. The weather was getting better, so he changed from drinking hot chocolate back to his beloved vanilla shakes. Best thing was: Kagami had learned how to make really good vanilla shakes at home.

So he found his friend sitting in front of a pile of burgers, just like Kagami always did. He greeted him with a grin and a wave, saying: "Hey, Tetsu!"

"Long time no see, Aomine." Kuroko nodded and sat down with his vanilla shake.

"Want a burger?" The other offered.

"Yes, why not." He had not begun feeling nauseous, so he should eat as much as he could.

"You still eat like a small bird. I don't guess you'll grow more, won't you?"

"I fear not. You'll all tower over me forever." Kuroko smiled. "Being small makes picking up children easier."

"Those will outgrow you too, you know. I mean, how much can you even carry? My brother had a weight of ten kilo by the time he was one year old. Babies grow awfully fast." Aomine bit into a burger, seemingly not bothered by the topic.

"Pregnancy still takes nine months." He lay a hand on his stomach.

"Why am I not surprised?" The other sighed. "Did your mate really let you meet me in such a state? I'd have expected him to be more protective of you. He is aware of what I did, isn't he?"

"Yes, I told him. I also cautioned him not to hurt or threaten you, I don't appreciate such behavior."

"That is normal Alpha behavior." Aomine shrugged. "I mean, I'm thankful he's not out to kill me but you know that you are really testing his stress tolerance with this, don't you?"

"I don't appreciate it if others think they can make decisions for me. Who I am friends with is my own business." Kuroko felt a surge of annoyance. Why did they all think they were entitled to tell him what to do or not?

"Friends?" Aomine put down his burger and looked at him for a moment. "You really think we can be friends after all of this?"

"Why not?" Kuroko tilted his head. "Don't you want to be friends?"

"I ... of course I want to be friends. Damn, Tetsu, you were my best friend. But ... I did so many horrible things to you, you can't really want to forgive me, can you?" There was unnerving disbelief on the other's face.

"Do I have to forgive you to be your friend?" Kuroko drank a bit of his vanilla shake. "I understand why it all happened, why you lost yourself. If you ever try to hurt me again, this is over. But I don't have enough anger to hate you."

"You have a complicated mind." Aomine sunk back in his seat. "I never know what you are thinking. Sometimes it seems like you want to forgive me, sometimes you seem angry, then full of sorrow. I lashed out at you in anger so often, are you not afraid I'll do it again? Because I am afraid of that."

"If you do, Kagami will return it tenfold." He was sure about that at least.

"What did he say about you hanging out with me?"

"He said he doesn't ever want to feel like your replacement. His biggest concern is that I fall in love with you." - Aomine scoffed - "Yes, I find that highly unlikely as well. His next concern was that you would hurt me."

"And you don't think that is a legit concern?" The other bit back into his burger but did not seem to have the same appetite as before.

"No. You can refrain from physically hurting Momoi, so I'll expect the same respect from you from now on. I don't plan on protecting you from the repercussions if you do hurt me anyway." He took a pause to let those words sink in. "I won't excuse your actions from now on. You are responsible for how you behave."

Aomine slowly chewed and finally swallowed. He did the same with the last part of his burger before he nodded and said: "Fair enough. But really, I should take responsibility for my actions up to now ... is there any way to make it up to ya?"

Making it up. No. There was no way. He did not plan on forgiving Aomine. Ever. There was no way for making up for killing a baby. So he shook his head.

Aomine heaved a sigh and said: "Kay, no making it up. You do really plan on letting this hang over me forever. Fair enough. It will anyway. You are right, I can never make that up. Right ... so, how far along are you?"

"A week." He smiled, unable to keep the sombre mood.

"That's early." The other took a new burger from his pile. "How did Kagami take it? Did

you plan it?"

"No, it was an accident. He took it well though. He called his parents to inform them and helped me tell my mother." He also took up his vanilla shake again. He liked the sweet creamy consistency. He had already begun stocking their flat with fruit juice and hid some flavors Kagami liked to use when he cooked.

"I'd have already failed at that point." Aomine stated that as a fact, not as a depressing thought. "He is a much better man than I am. So he even met your mother? I bet she liked him."

"Yes, she did. But I already introduced them beforehand. I learned from the last time and asked her to give me her opinion of him."

"An extremely reliable idiot" The other offered.

"She did not say idiot but yes, that was her opinion as well. But only I get to call him that." He did not need Aomine's approval but it was still nice to hear.

"Yeah, whatever. I do know what is good for you and that's not me. It makes me damn jealous but I'm glad to see you happy." The Alpha admitted. "When Kagami told me you were his mate, I was afraid for my life but really happy for you."

"He asked for my approval to beat you up more than once."

"Pussy." Aomine snorted. "I'm not a masochist but he should listen to his instincts."

"He is not as barbarian as you. I would not sit here if I obeyed him like a good little Omega." Kuroko's eyelids drew together to form a sharp line.

"Yeah, I know, just ... my instincts tell me to protect you from harm, even if you are not my mate. They'll get stronger the longer you are pregnant. I really should have followed mine back then. I hate the fact that I was- no, am such a coward."

"Who or what are you afraid of?" Kuroko tilted his head.

Aomine looked highly uncomfortable at the question but slowly answered after a bit anyway: "My father for once. Whatever Kagami would do for me killing your baby is nothing against what my father would do for getting you pregnant. If you think I am a barbarian, be glad you never met him. He is a monster. I am still unable to hit back, even if I throw a pretty good punch by now. I knocked out Hayazaki with one hit."

"Momoi told me. She was worried."

"Yeah, she does worry a lot." Aomine ate a bit more of his burger. "You know why it is easy not to hit her? She hits back. And damn, she can throw a punch, I tell you. Even Kise cowers when I get serious but she never does. I know that shouldn't be the reason why I don't hit her but it is. So I guess you really don't have to worry, I would not want to go against Kagami. Your mate is insanely powerful, even if his basketball is weak." He smirked.

"Is not." Kuroko understood it was a joke though. "Are you and Kise still an item?"

"Well ... no. Not exactly." The other scratched his cheek. "His team's captain walked in on us and nearly took his head off for fraternizing with the enemy or something. He's only a Beta but Kise had the gall to tell me we would not do it again and went with him. I can't believe he did that. I texted him to ask if he was with that shrimp now but he texted back they were only teammates. Do you understand that?"

"Kise has idolized but never loved you." Kuroko smiled, thinking about the quirky blonde. "He's become a bit more serious last year. So he knows that real friends are better than casual sex. Kasamatsu is his friend, thereby he is more important than you."

Aomine made an annoyed noise and stuffed himself with another burger. After half a minute he mumbled: "Finding real friends is hard."

"That's why I did not want to cut you off." Kuroko stole a burger from the other. "You

were my best friend before this mess happened."

"I fear you are my only friend next to Momoi." A small smile flitted over Aomine's features. "It's good to talk to you again."

"Same here." Kuroko leaned forward. "So what happened while I wasn't talking to you?"

Kagami opened the door before he was able to find the right key. He smiled when he saw his mate smile and embraced him before Kuroko could take off his shoes.

"So you made up?" The redhead asked.

"Yeah, we are talking again. We're friends. If he ever hurts me, he knows you'll come after him for that." Kuroko kissed the cheek next to his lips. "He was okay with that."

"I don't really care if he is okay with that or not" Kagami offered, straightening a bit to look at Kuroko. "If anyone hurts you, I'll hurt them back."

"Please run your plans by me beforehand. But when it comes to Aomine, it's okay. Just don't kill him, please." He bit his lip. "I have a question ... I know you don't like dogs much but can Nigou come live with us? I hate the fact that he has to live outside. A few of our teammates smuggled him into their home when it got really cold but that is not a good life for a dog. This apartment complex does allow pets, does it not?"

"Well, yeah." Kagami stepped back and allowed Kuroko enough space to take off his shoes. "You know that a dog is a lot of responsibility? I know you already feed him but you would also need to walk him and groom him and-" He looked at his mate in exasperation. "Oh well, yeah, it's okay. But only him. No other pets, you hear me? You are not picking up any more strays."

"I don't plan on doing so." The shorter one smiled. "Nigou's eyes really look like mine. When I found him, I had to think of my dead child. I could not let him starve there. Now that I can finally accept all that happened, I want that dog with me."

"The dog reminds you of your dead child?" Kagami raised his eyebrows. "That's a heavy burden for such a small animal."

"Yes, I need to learn to love it as a dog now. Aoki is buried." He had a sudden urge to embrace his mate, so he did. "Sorry that I am so difficult sometimes."

"Yeah, it's okay. I decided to stop overthinking again. You are my mate, you love me, you tell me if you need anything or if I make a mistake, right? 'Cause I don't want to keep thinking about if you are unhappy or want to leave me or rather have Aomine or whatnot." Kagami laid his chin on Kuroko's hair. "It makes my head hurt, you know?"

"I promise to tell you." A big smile plastered his face. "You are my mate, the only one I'll ever have, so stop fretting. It's not like you."

"Well, I may be your only mate but there is the dog and our child and your brand new old friend and the team and your mother and-"

"Shut up, Kagami." He raised himself on his toes and kissed the other. "You are an idiot sometimes. How about you start dinner?"

Chapter 17: Finals, a dreaded date

Kagami passed his exams – though only barely. They did ask Midorima for his magic pencil again and gifted him with a talisman for a prosperous family in return. Kuroko vowed to himself to get his mate's grades up next year. He would most likely not go to university but a high-school diploma would be nice anyway. Or maybe he would study sports. Or maybe he would become a professional basketball player, who knew. Good grades wouldn't hurt anyway.

Though he achieved it by rolling the pencil, Kagami sent his mother a photo of his 92/100 Japanese history test which he was really proud of. His very enthusiastic mother promised to fly over and bring him a congratulatory present in person. That let Kagami go on a cleaning spree, even if the flat was spotless in Kuroko's opinion. He heard curses about the dog's hair for three days before Kagami went back to normal. His mother had not shown up though.

"Something must have come up" The redhead excused her. "It happens. Celebrities don't have a fixed working schedule."

Kuroko simply cuddled up to him. How Kagami had become such a reliable character was a mystery to him, both of his parents seemed to be as trustworthy as active volcanos. His father lived only half an hour away but he had not once called or shown himself in a whole month while his son's mate moved in with him and happened to be pregnant.

Kuroko's mother called at least every other day and visited once a week. She had found a flat only a few blocks away which Kagami would help her move into in their school holiday. They exchanged recipes and looked at old photo books with her telling him stories about his mate when he was small. Kuroko loved seeing his two most important persons together, even if most stories were embarrassing.

Misses Kagami showed up about two weeks late. Kagami was out playing basketball while Kuroko was watching TV while cuddling with Nigou on the couch. They had come back from basketball camp two days ago where everyone had been extremely happy that Kuroko was pregnant and thereby had enough time to cook their meals. So he was alone, longing around in a sweater much too big for him when he heard the bell. He went to the door closely followed by his furry companion.

In front of it stood a woman nearly two heads taller than him with bright orange hair and hazel eyes. She wore a big smile on her face and her curious gaze took in Kuroko's frame before she said to the stunned boy: "Nice to meet you! How do you do?"

"Good afternoon." He bowed to her. "My name is Kuroko Tetsuya. Am I right to assume you are Misses Kagami?" He remembered her from the photo Kagami had shown him.

"That I am. Is my son in?" She looked over Kuroko's shoulder, seeing Nigou instead of the redhead. "Oh, that is a cute dog! Is that yours? Taiga hates dogs."

"He was afraid of Nigou at first but he is fine now. Please come in. I can phone Taiga, he can be here in half an hour ... if he hears his phone."

"Okay." She stepped inside, took off her shoes and thanked Kuroko for the guest slippers he gave her. "I've never been here, you know? Is my husband living with you?"

"No, he sleeps at his workplace. Taiga lived here alone until I moved in."

"So my son lived alone for a full year?" She crossed her arms and made an

unappreciative sound. "I allowed my husband to take Taiga with him under the condition he would look after him. I can't do that due to work but he should have been here."

"Taiga said he had not expected anything else. He did not seem bothered. It's not as if he was here a lot, school and basketball training preoccupied our time. We spent all our holidays training. You are lucky to come today, we were on a training camp until two days ago."

"Oh, did I not say I would come today? I must have forgotten. Mary keeps my calendar, I would never be able to remember all those dates. Say, is that really all? A bathroom, two bedrooms and a living room with a kitchen? It's quite small, isn't it?" She looked around. "It's okay for a couple but do you really want to raise a baby here?"

Class differences. So that was how the world looked when you were an Alpha. Kuroko took a deep breath and tried to explain: "It is very big for a flat in Tokio. Most are much smaller. Where did you grow up if I may ask?"

"Oh, not too far from here, we lived in Yokohama. I think my parents still live there. I haven't seen them in years." She sat on the couch after giving it a not exactly kind look. It was a used couch after all. "Maybe I should give them a visit, now that I am here."

"Wouldn't they be delighted?" Maybe not. Kagami had never told him his grandparents lived around these parts.

"I'm not too sure ... I ran off to become an actress. They haven't disowned me or anything but I don't think they are happy with my choices. They hated my husband too, not that I blame them, they were right that time. I just did not want to listen. I can be quite stubborn, you know? Taiga got that from me."

"Would you like something to drink?" He gave her some tea when she nodded. "Is Taiga aware that his grandparents live around here?" He pulled out his phone and texted his mate. Hopefully he would look at his phone soon.

"No, I don't think so. They never answered the birth announcement card or sent birthday presents, I don't think they want to have anything to do with their grandson. That's just how Alphas work, we don't really have family ties. When I trained Taiga in scents, the one he most appreciated was male Omegas, it made me relieved. At least one of us has a sensible head. You Omegas have a good instinct when it comes to family, that was direly needed. In my family there hasn't been an Omega for five generations."

"So you really appreciate the fact that your son chose an Omega?" That would be quite astonishing. Omegas were sextoys for most, obedient wives for others. They were kept at home as shameful secrets or carefully kept prizes. Normally the best an Omega could hope for was to be bitten by a wealthy Alpha who kept them safe, fed and had an interest in the children they produced – which was often a mass of children because Omegas got pregnant so easily and doing anything against it was heavily discouraged by society. It was how families like Mitobe's came to be.

"I was pretty sure it would happen sooner or later. I was actually surprised he did not jump into bed with that other Omega friend of his, this ... oh, what was his name again?" She looked at the wall as if it would hold an answer.

"Himuro Tatsuya."

"Yes, that one! You know him?" She smiled proudly as if she had been able to remember.

"He followed Taiga to Japan but fell in love with a friend of mine called Murasakibara Atsushi. They mated a few months ago." He informed her.

"Oh, really? So how come my son chose you?" There was curiosity in her eyes, not malice but Kuroko still felt off somehow. Was she unhappy that Kagami had chosen him? It sounded like she had fully expected him to mate with Himuro. It was what Kuroko would have expected too, they were the best of friends, they knew each other inside out, Himuro was more beautiful than anyone ... but Kagami was with him. Was he a disappointment to her?

"I am sure Taiga could answer that question. I am just happy that he did." He hugged himself, remembering his mate's arms, trying to rub some warmth into his body, happy about the fact he was wearing Kagami's pullover which slightly smelled of him.

"Ah, sorry, I forgot that Omegas are meek creatures who would never praise themselves." She took a sip of tea. "So what would my son say about you?"

"You need to ask him that." Kuroko looked at his phone, seeing that he had no answer yet. "I better call him, it seems like he hasn't seen my text yet." He did not have to but he went to the balcony to make the call.

Kagami picked up after a few rings: "Hey, Tetsu! What is it?"

"Your mother is visiting. She sits in the living room."

"Oh." Humor left the other's voice. "Are you alright? She can be a bit ... insensitive."

"I noticed." Kuroko took a deep breath. "Can you please come back quickly?"

"Give me twenty minutes. Ask her about her current job, she can ramble quite a bit." He advised.

"I'll do that." Just hearing his mate made him smile. "Please hurry."

"Yeah." He shouted at the others that he had to go. "I'll run. See you soon. And Kuroko? I love you."

"Love you too." He sighed with a smile, kissing the luke-warm phone screen before heading back inside. "He is on his way. What series are you starring in right now, Misses Kagami?"

The woman was still going on about a coworker who had criticized her handling of the toddler – which she didn't even knew the real name of which disturbed Kuroko on numerous levels – when his mate returned. He was still in his training clothes, he hadn't even changed his shoes. Kagami leaned down to kiss him, no, claim him. It was more than a greeting, it was something like a show of ownership in front of his own mother of all people!

"I'm back, Tetsu." Kagami looked up to wave at his mother who still sat in the living room. "Hi, mom! I'll take a quick shower before I greet you, okay? I'm soaked from training." He did not wait for her answer. "Tetsu, could you please bring me some clothes from the bedroom?"

"Sure." He saw his mate vanish into the bathroom. Okay, he was soaked with sweat but ... gods, this was a strange day. He got some clothes from the bedroom, choosing carefully to prolong the process. He did not want to face Kagami's mother alone again. She wasn't intimidating or mean or anything just ... she did not make him feel at ease. Her disregard for most things that were important to him terrified him somehow. He went into the unlocked bathroom, stopping in his tracks in front of a stark naked Kagami who smiled at him when he noticed him.

His mate was already showered, smelling of his favorite showergel, toweling his hair. He could not have had more than three minutes, he must have really rushed. It made Kuroko smile while he held out the clothes for the other to wear.

"Thank you." Kagami dressed in record time and let his mate hang up the towel before they both stepped out of the bathroom. "Now I'm presentable. Hi, mom."

"Hello to you too." She stood to embrace him and they shared a short hug. "How are you?"

"Fine. You?" They sat on the couch with Kagami pulling Kuroko onto his lap. What was all of this very possessive behavior about?

"Splendid! Your mate kept me good company, he is very nice. But how do you stand to be around such a timid creature? He looks easily breakable." Again her tone did not sound mean but it felt dismissive all the same. How could she talk about him as if he wasn't in the room?

"He is a lot stronger than I am." Kagami kissed his forehead, making him blush with his words and actions. "I admire him."

His mother looked stunned. She blinked, seeming to need a moment to compose herself. Then she smiled, though it seemed a little strained and said: "Aren't you a darling? Where did you get that from? Certainly not your father."

Did she have to fight out her marriage problems on her son's back? Kuroko was beginning to get angry with her. She seemed to like her son but she gave off no maternal feelings, it was more like she simply regarded her son as another adult. Or more like an adult she liked to control. It was disconcerting.

"No, I learned that from my nanny. Getting an Omega woman to care for me when I was small was a good decision on your part." Kagami smiled friendly at the women in front of them and it was in that moment that something in Kuroko's head clicked.

She wasn't Kagami's mother. Well, she was the one who had born him but she wasn't the one who had raised him. She held the title of "mother" but not the feelings. So that was why Kagami behaved like he did. He had been raised by an Omega women. The one in front of them was not a stranger but not someone who he held familiar feelings for. It wasn't mandatory that Kuroko should please her world-view.

He stood from Kagami's lap and kissed the red hair before ruffling the still wet strands and said: "I'll make some more tea. Do you want some soaked lemons beforehand? You must have run at quite a pace to be here this early."

"Oh, yeah, that would be great." His mate smiled up at him. "Can I have a riceball or two as well? Oh, mother, are you hungry? And where are you staying?"

"I chose the Hilton Plaza and I ate at the airport before coming here, thank you for asking. We can have dinner later if you'd like." She offered.

"Sounds good." He still took the lemons and riceballs. "Did you really just come to visit or do you have business here?"

"Your father and I decided to finalize the divorce, so I came to fill some paperwork." She grunted. "It's such a hassle. I changed my mind, can I have a riceball as well?"

Kuroko got her one with chicken and mayonnaise, his own favorite. It was a good excuse to turn and hide his distraught face. Did none of them care a wit about family? It seemed like Misses Kagami meant what she said, pure Alpha families did not seem to care about family ties. He had to think of Akashi in that moment. If he grew up with such people, somehow Kuroko did not wonder how he turned out so screwed in the head. Same with Aomine, his parents were pure Alphas as well. Midorima and Murasakibara had Beta mothers and those two were strange but nice – it seemed a lot of difficult behavior could be attributed to their parents' second gender.

He was suddenly happy to be an Omega with an Omega mother. He should take pride in his heritage if having Alpha parents could turn people into ... direly misguided persons. And that was putting it nicely.

"Those riceballs are great! Having an Omega around must be nice." The woman complimented.

"Taiga made them. He is a much better cook than I am." He looked at her with an inner smirk. Somehow it made unbelievable fun to shatter her world-view. "He's also better at cleaning. He takes his task of spoiling me rotten pretty serious."

"Your mate is surprisingly feisty, Taiga." She crooked her eyebrows, looking at her son. "You take that tone from him?"

Kuroko balled his fists. Really? Did she even understand the word love? Were all relationships about power for her? Was he a creature to subdue for her? She had just edged her son on to intimidate his mate into staying quiet.

"Of course I do. He is my mate." Kagami did not react to the provocation.

"You are so whipped." She laughed. "I thought mating an Omega was about not having to worry about the other running his mouth and having constant fights."

"That's a question of character rather than second gender, I think." Kagami scratched his head.

Kuroko looked at his mate with a shocked expression. Did he say what he thought he just did? Did his mate tell his mother it was her character flaw that she was unable to keep a relationship? He wasn't wrong, sure, but telling her that to her face ... wasn't that a bit too cocky?

And why was he getting wet from watching his mate clash with his mother?

"You should show a bit more respect for the women who bore you and finances your life." Her eyelids contracted in annoyance. "Is this puberty hitting you?"

"No, this is an angry Alpha who is tired of hearing his mother affronting his mate. If you have nothing nice to say to or about him, I don't think he should be around you."

Protection. So that was it. It was why he was getting wet and weak in his knees. It was why Kagami had tried to keep him bodily near him. He had instinctively reacted to his mother's contempt for Kuroko. She had no actual problem with him. In her world, he was a silent breeding and house-keeping tool and she was alright with her son having one. It didn't mean she respected or liked him. He just did not matter much to her, especially not his character. For her all Omegas were like one another, only separable by their looks and how well they did their tasks.

It was the most infuriating attitude he had ever encountered.

He stayed in the kitchen while Kagami kindly requested his mother to go and accompanied her outside to make sure she actually left. When he came back inside, Kuroko greeted him like the good little Omega she thought him to be. He kissed his mate deeply and spread his legs.

Chapter 18: The root of all evil

Kagami went to meet his mother for dinner by himself. He did not really want to as he was still angry but Kuroko told him that family was important, even if his mother did not seem to grasp that concept. So the redhead went.

He used the time to call Akashi. Really, he had procrastinated long enough. It was high time to get this over with, it was long due.

"Good evening, Tetsuya. How are you?" The other greeted politely.

"Good evening, Akashi. Not so well right now. And you?" He decided on honesty as the best course of action.

"I'm fine but I am sad to hear you are unwell. What happened?" Was that actual concern? It sounded genuine but one never knew with Akashi.

"I just met Kagami's mother, a beautiful Alpha women full of Alpha pride."

"That must have been an unsavory meeting." The other was still calm but it seemed like his concern was real. "Did it come to blows? Do you need my help?" It was good to know that Akashi was actually inclined to come to his aid if needed.

"No, thankfully not. It simply gave me an impression how you must have grown up and what led to your actions." He said monotonously.

There was silence on the other end for a few seconds. He knew the other was still there because he could hear him breathing. After a few more moments Akashi said:

"May I offer an invitation to my house? It may give you more insight if that is what you seek."

"Thank you." Go to Akashi's house ... was that safe? He wasn't sure. This Akashi would not hurt him but what about the other? On the other hand, the worst he had ever done was ask for a blowjob. Ask. It was actually an order but even the cruel Akashi had been nice about it. Did he feel powerful enough to say no? Yes he was. "I'd like to take you up on that offer. What day would be convenient? It is in Kyoto, right?"

"No, it is on the outskirts of Tokio. About one and a half hours into the countryside. If you come to the nearest train station, I could pick you up there." Akashi changed to free speaker to browse his calender. "I am at home for the holidays right now. I am scheduled to go for a ride tomorrow afternoon but I am free in the morning."

"I have time tomorrow morning." He wanted to have some plans in case Misses Kagami wanted to do anything. He had seen enough of her for a bit, even if visiting the Akashi household might be just as "unsavory" as Akashi had titled it.

"I'll send you the train dates. You are living with Kagami Taiga now, right? Second chome three-hundred-and-two in Nakamachi near Kodaira station of the Seibu-Shinjuku-line?" Well, that was Akashi for you. How and why he knew something like that was one good question, the other would be why he knew the address by heart. Creepy.

"That is correct" Kuroko said though.

"See you tomorrow then." The other sounded pleased.

The Omega shuddered. Hopefully this wouldn't turn out to be a pretty bad idea.

Kagami had simply sighed when Kuroko told him his plans and asked him to look after himself. And if anything happened, Kuroko was to come home immediately. The way he said "home" left no doubts what Kagami really meant – even if Kuroko got raped, he wanted his mate back no matter what. It wiped every doubt the blue-haired ever

had out of the door.

Well, his mate only knew Akashi as a psychopath. Attacking him with scissors just for disobeying had left an unfortunate impression on him. But even though Kuroko had watched that, he had never feared for himself. Akashi had not exactly been nice but except for accidentally choking him for only a second once, he had never hurt him physically. Sure, those blowjobs were rather questionable and the whole hunting idea disastrous but all in all, Akashi had always asked Kuroko first. The problem had been that saying no had sometimes been hard.

The danger of Akashi was not his physical strength – which was extraordinary for his small body – but his persuasion. His old captain could get him to do about anything and Kuroko only had himself to blame in the aftermath. Even knowing that, he obediently followed the instructions on his phone. The train took him out into the countryside, driving past fields of rice, wheat and even a tea plantage. The scenery was surprisingly peaceful.

He arrived at the train station a bit after ten a.m. and was the only one getting off here. An older pair stepped in which left one young man in a brown trench-coat standing on the platform.

“Good morning, Akashi. Thank you for meeting me here.”

“Thank you for coming all the way out here. It is a bit out of the way.” The other waited until Kuroko walked next to him before leading them out of the station.

“The scenery is beautiful though. It must be nice to grow up in this peaceful atmosphere.”

“Rather out of everyone's eyes.” Akashi headed straight for a black limousine and stopped next to a fine looking chauffeur who held open a door. “Please get in. It is still a bit farther off.”

Well ... Kagami knew where he was. They had installed a tracking app, so that he always knew where Kuroko's phone was at least. It had been the Omega's idea because no matter how big his bravado was, Akashi was fear-instilling. He got in the car after mustering the other for a second, seeing no ill intent. Not that he would. Akashi was perfectly able to hide his murderous intents.

“So how are you? How is your mate?” The other asked after they were seated.

“I am fine. Kagami is a bit unhappy that I came here alone. He does not have a favorable impression of you.” Which was taking it lightly.

“I can imagine.” The redhead nodded. “I had no doubts you would persuade him but I am sure it was not easy. That Alpha is very protective of you. Not that I blame him with the state you are in.” State? How did Akashi know he was pregnant?

“The gossip mill is running fast again.” Was it good or bad? What did it mean to Akashi?

“I was slightly unhappy to hear after Daiki, Satsuki and Ryouta. Aren't those big news? I had expected you would inform all of us.” It was a given that Aomine would tell Momoi but who told Kise? Aomine? Had Kise given in to him again?

“As soon as I was sure, I would have. Pregnancies can easily end in the first three months.” Which was why you did not announce them beforehand, it brought bad luck. The traditionalist in front of him should know.

“Yours seem not to, they all would have survived as far as I could tell. A lot of people would be envious of that.” Akashi still seemed friendly but the topic made Kuroko uneasy. “I was unable to ascertain how far along you are. Would you care to enlighten me?”

“Seven weeks.” Another five to go until he was in his second trimester and his baby

would most likely be safe.

"That is a precarious time." Akashi nodded. "How does your mate feel about your pregnancy?"

"He takes it with a large grin, enjoying every challenge thrown his way, just like always." Kuroko smiled. This time he had a much better answer than when Aomine asked him. "He pampers me like a good mate should, running to the conbini at least twice every night to cater to my cravings."

A red eyebrow rose, lifting one corner of the other's mouth with it. So that was what real amusement looked on Akashi's face, not that condescending expression he used to wear. It was followed by an unusual statement for someone as polite as Akashi: "Please excuse my plebeian reaction but your mate is so whipped."

"His mother said the same." Though not as nice as that, it didn't sound insulting when Akashi said it. "I just think that such behavior is a minimum requirement when you get your mate pregnant. Alphas have such strong bodies for a reason. Seeing as Omegas these days do not need physical protection, they can use their powers for childcare. Or pregnancy-care if they don't have children yet."

"The image that was taught as the norm to me was that Alphas earn the income." The other did not seem offended by Kuroko's words. The nice thing about Akashi was that he never felt insulted because he was completely sure of himself as a person.

"Taiga is underage, so his parents pay our bills. His occupation is to go to school but so do I. So he can take a role in supporting me with this."

"It seems to me that you simply love to be spoiled." The other necked him.

"That might factor into it as well." Kuroko gave a sideways look. "It is nice to spoil your mate."

"And rather inexpensive when it comes to you." Akashi sighed. "My fiancée wants a diamond collier for her birthday. Getting up twice a night for a few months sounds easier than trying to come up with that much money." Why was he not surprised that he had a fiancée? Most likely one chosen at birth or something equally traditional.

"How about you tell her no and ask her to come up with something that might actually show affection instead of wealth? Are you sure she has any interest in you? How old is she anyway?"

"Sixteen. She is a spoiled little princess." The redhead shook his head. "I should not talk about her like that but she exasperates me. I really don't know how to get out of this situation. My best plan is to set her up with a nice young man with which she elopes. That way I save my family honor but am finally free of her. I should enact the plan before her birthday." He looked out of the window. "Do you think Ryoua would be interested in helping me? My supply of flirty male teenage idols is rather short."

"If they do more than flirt, it would hurt his image. If you plan to make a scene about her betraying you and it gets out to the public, it could screw his career. Your best shot would be a professional but it has the risk of exposure as well as a high price when the target is an underage girl. Maybe buying that diamond collier or finding a more legal way would be a better idea. How about telling her that you don't like her?" Kuroko was a bit annoyed at how Akashi was thinking but on the other hand it immensely pleased him to be asked.

"We aren't marrying because we want to. The question is how to keep up the expected behavior while guiding her to the point where she breaks up with me."

"Buy her a collier of a stone she doesn't like." The other looked up at Kuroko's words. "It's extravagant, expensive, very Akashi-style and will annoy her direly. Give it to her in front of everyone, so that she can't make a scene. Even better if she makes one,

then you can break up with her on account of immaturity."

"Costly but effective." Akashi nodded. "Thank you for your input. I normally ask Shintarou but social situations aren't his forte."

"Not exactly." Kuroko had to smile. The other's roundabout, polite way of phrasing was similar to his own, just that the other often used it to deliver insults without the other party noticing. "It is nice to see you asking for someone else's opinion instead of just doing whatever you think is best. Kise would have done that for you but he would have been unhappy in the aftermath."

"You taught me that I am not perfect. I still need to learn. Conferring with trusted individuals seems a good way to do so." The other smiled back at him. "I count you as someone I can trust."

"You can. Not that an Omega like me could do any damage to you anyway, especially now that I am mated." The car seemed to come to a halt. "Have we arrived?"

"Yes, we have." He opened the door himself, got out and held it open for Kuroko.

"Welcome to Akashi manor."

Yeah ... manor. Visit his house he had said. Just that the house was a manor. Not any manor. Kuroko ended up in front of a three-story-building with a main house, two wings, a park and ... stables? Yes, he heard a horse. Hadn't Akashi said he had a ride scheduled for the afternoon?

"Build in 1883, this has been the family's home for over a century. My great-great-great-grandfather was a merchant in the Meiji era, trading weapons with the Westerners. He build this manor. Since 1945 our main income changed to machines, later electronics. By now the Akashi Foundation is a world-leading investor, owning about twenty-seven percent of Japan's industries and some further abroad." Akashi stepped nearer, lowering his voice. "And since the founder times, we were only allowed to marry Alphas for a pure bloodline." He scoffed. "Unsurprisingly, about every third child died in childbirth."

Omeegas. This family killed their Omega children. Kuroko shuddered.

"Let me show you around" Akashi offered.

He was shown grand ballrooms, luxurious furniture and exquisite art. All he could think about were those Omega babies who had to die as not to sully the image of perfection. Everything he saw seemed covered in blood in his eyes. It was beautiful and grotesque at the same time.

"This is our music room. I was home-schooled as a kid, learning various languages and instruments at an early age. To further my understanding of social interaction, I visited a debating club from the age of eight to the age of twelve. Afterwards I asked for permission to visit a public school to come in contact with all kinds of people and was allowed to go to Teiko with my friend Shintarou who I had met at the club. He had learned basketball from me and we decided to join the basketball team together. You know the rest." Akashi sat down on the piano stool and begin to play a light song with a sad undertone. "Our family motto is "excellence in all". Not being the best is unacceptable. Accepting something substandard is unthinkable. The most important is that everyone recognizes an Akashi as a superior being, no matter how that is achieved."

"Losing was unacceptable." Kuroko surmised.

"Losing to you was the first time in my life in which things did not go the Akashi way."

"Akashi way? What about your way?" Kuroko sat down next to him, entranced by the beautiful music.

"My way died with my mother." Akashi stopped playing and looked at him. "You were

the one who brought me back. The real me had been sleeping for a decade."

"A decade?" The stool wasn't very big, so Kuroko leaned against the other. "How old were you when she died?"

"Five." Akashi held him with an arm around his waist. "I buried my wishes and dreams and became a machine, able to be the best, to always win."

"That is very sad." He felt the other stiffen against him. One second to the next, Kuroko was left alone sitting on that stool. When he looked up, the other had taken up a book of sheet music.

"Seijuro, what is the meaning of this?" A middle-aged man in a suit demanded who seemed to have come here looking for his son. Judging by his angry steps, whatever made him furious was something he knew before he entered the room.

"Father." The redhead turned and bowed to the man. "What has gotten you so angry?"

"What is this whore doing in my house?" The man pointed at Kuroko without looking at him. Oh. They really hated Omegas here. This was going to turn ugly really fast.

Chapter 19: Unforeseen revelations

"Please modulate your tone, father. This seems to be a misunderstanding. Kuroko is a good friend of mine from my time at Teiko middle-school." Akashi rose up again, his eyelids tightened in disapproval. It was good to know he did not share his father's views. But Kuroko was beginning to understand how his friend could have come up with an idea such as the hunts after growing up in this environment.

"An Akashi never befriends a low-life like an Omega. Get this thing removed from my house" The man ordered.

"I choose my friends according to our familial goals. Shunning Omegas in today's society is an antique view and not supportive of our aims. I ask that you take back your discriminatory words and apologize, father." Akashi did not budge even a millimeter, his voice frosty as ice.

"You go too far, Seijuro." The older man balled his fists.

"I act according to the standards you implemented. Politeness even in front of lesser creatures, as you see Omegas as, is mandatory. Anything else would besmirch our image. So apologize."

Both exchanged blows with their looks and subtle bodily reactions. Kuroko simply tried to diminish his presence as far as possible to be able to escape. He did not want an apology, he simply wanted to be somewhere else.

"Omega, you are unwanted in this household. I do regret the name-calling. Now leave." The older man pressed out.

Kuroko went up to Akashi and whispered: "Please show me out, Akashi."

The redhead did not seem happy about this turn of events but he acquiesced. His father stepped aside when they passed him and went the other way as soon as they were out of sight. Kuroko let go of the breath he had been holding this whole time.

"I apologize. I did not want you to see such a scene." Akashi sounded rather subdued.

"Will this have consequences for you?" Without question. That father had seemed like a demon incarnate.

"He will cut my funds. It will take my opportunity to end things with my fiancée. He won't touch my horse if he knows what is good for him." The murderous intent was clear to see on his face. He wasn't angry at his father. Akashi hated that man with a vengeance.

"Do you hate him that much?" Kuroko shuddered again. Did no Alpha know anything about family values?

"My mother didn't simply die. She bore an Omega. He wanted my brother dead, she forbid it. They both had an unfortunate car accident just a few days later." The other looked at him, one way completely golden. "As soon as I can get away with it, that man will die."

Oh god. Dear god. This was so wrong. It made him happy to hear Akashi wanted to avenge them and did not take the same stance as his father but killing someone was still wrong. He took the other's hand, shook his head and whispered: "Please don't."

"Why should I spare him?"

"Because I don't want you to live with the burden of having killed your father. Accumulated sins only make you turn into him." He hoped Akashi was still able to hear his words, not too lost in his world of cold and precise brutality.

The other stopped, looking at Kuroko with astonishment and blinking until his eyes

were red again. After that he stayed silent for another moment before he spoke again. "You are right. I am very sorry you had to see that side of me again." Akashi looked at their connected hands, turning his to take Kuroko's hand into his. He continued to whisper while he led the other out: "It is my biggest fear to turn into him someday. In my eyes you are the only one able to stop me if that should ever happen. So please don't ever be afraid to speak your mind in front of me."

"Why am I the only one?" Kuroko asked curiously.

"Because you will be the first to notice." Akashi looked over his shoulder, suddenly changing course and drawing him down another corridor into a small dining room that did not seem to be in use. The curtains were drawn, the furniture under wraps. The other closed the door behind them. "Listen, Tetsuya."

Kuroko drew in breath, stealing himself for something horrifying.

"I love you." Wait, what? Those red eyes bore into him. "I have done so since you became a first string player in middle-school. I wanted to be your mate but I knew I was never allowed to. I set you up with the hunts because I was bitter and because it was one way to have a piece of you I would not be allowed otherwise. That was cruel and horrible and I know that. You have every right to be angry with me. I am appalled at my own behavior. I was turning into my father back then and you brought me back from that once. I know that it is much to ask but if you have it in your heart to forgive me, I'll be an eternally grateful friend to you."

Batch.

Akashi's head turned to the side, his eyes wide with surprise.

Kuroko's were even wider, looking at Akashi's cheek, then his own hand in astonishment. Had he just slapped Akashi's face? Really? An Omega hitting an Alpha? He tensed, fearful gaze turned toward the other. Should he run?

Akashi lowered his head and whispered: "I deserved that."

Good. He was still able to take things calmly and objectively. Kuroko relaxed a bit.

"You tend to amaze me, Tetsuya." The other looked up again. "I did not think Omegas were able to raise their hand to an Alpha. You always defy fate." He smiled. "Really, that's why I love you. It's a shame I didn't come to my senses sooner. If I had not been such an idiot in middle-school, I'd have asked you to elope with me." He sighed and closed his red eyes for a moment. "It is too late now though. I hope your mate will make you happy. If not, I am only a call away. Okay?"

Okay? Really? Nothing was okay. This was so far from okay, it was ... oh god. Akashi was in love with him? That guy was resistant to his pheromones, so he really meant it. Akashi was in love with him and had been for over three years.

"I apologize, that may have been a bit too much for one morning." The other held out his hand. "May I accompany you back to the train station?"

Kuroko nodded weakly and took the offered hand. Home sounded good right now. Somewhere where Mister Perfect did not tell you in one sentence that he was in love with you and therefore had other people rape you for him. That was so wrong on so many levels ... damn. Had he really just slapped an Alpha and gotten away with that? Somehow he wanted to ask if he was allowed to do so again. Hitting Akashi had felt really good. There were people you just did not hit and Akashi had simply taken the blow. Kuroko would really like to take a photo of his reddened cheek. Could he ask? No, that was going too far. But really, that had been good. As sweet as the knowledge that he could call that man for about anything and might actually get it.

"I promise to call if I am in trouble." He said when they were already seated in the limousine.

"I am glad to hear." Akashi took his hand, enveloping it in his warm, calloused one for a moment. "I owe you for what I did in my confused state. And I can't ever thank you enough for bringing back my original personality."

"If you ever get close to turning into your father again, give me a call. I'll try to bring you back again." Something else was on the tip of his tongue but it could tip the other off. Should he try? Akashi was rather stable and calm after all. "Please give your children into my care as well before they take the same turn."

"That might not be a bad idea." The redhead smiled. "Though I fear your mate will not take lightly to that. He will accuse me of trying to win you over with children."

"He will need to learn to reign in those urges." Annoyance mixed into Kuroko's voice.

"I will never betray him willingly. He will need to learn to trust me on that."

"He is an Alpha. He knows that a stronger Alpha can win you over if he meant it. If I wanted to, I could break your bond. I won't ever do that because I respect you but he instinctively knows that I am a danger and will always be. He can also smell my feelings for you, even if he does not register them knowingly. Just as I was able to smell your feelings for him. Even I don't tend to attack people out of the blue if I do not have a reason for it."

"You attacked him with scissors because you were jealous?" Kuroko asked in disbelief.

"Pretty much" Akashi admitted. "I was really conflicted after that meeting. I wanted to win you over but on the other hand I wanted you to be happy and I knew he could make you happier than I could. I kept thinking about that our whole game long." The other sighed. "It was the strangest thing, I did not want to lose but a part of me wanted nothing more than to lose to him to make you happy."

Dear god, could anyone please stop this man? He really had a way with words. Suddenly Kuroko wanted nothing more than to ask the other to break his bond with Kagami. Good thing that he was pregnant and therefore had a reminder with him that made him able to escape those sweet words. No wonder Kagami hadn't wanted him to meet this handsome devil. Akashi really was a league of his own.

"I hope you will find someone else worthy of your devotion and able to return your feelings."

"I hope so too." The redhead looked at him for a long moment. "I hope I won't make the same mistake twice. I should never have let you go. But I am happy I did. It is good to see you this content."

"Thank you for not making this any harder." He did. He made it harder. Just in a sweet, caring way that was so much harder to resist than the insults thrown at him. All those insults ... his childhood had been full of them. As a child, he had accepted all of them as true. His mother and he were trash, the bottom of society, only an Omega bitch with her a child doomed for prostitution. He felt tears in his eyes.

"Kuroko?" Akashi leaned over, having sensed or smelled the change in the other's mood. "What is it?"

"I ... I don't know." He hiccuped. Tears? Why was he crying?

The redhead signaled something to the driver which made him park the car. After the car did not move anymore Akashi unfastened their seat belts and collected the other in his arms, trying to calm him with humming and an embrace.

"Shush ... what did I say? Why are you crying?" Akashi actually sounded lost.

"I really don't know." He uttered. He just felt so, so sad. Like having just realized that someone dear to him had died. Something out of the blue. But nobody had died. He had already accepted Aoki's death. Was his baby alright? He did not feel any pain. Oh god, could it be his baby? "I feel strange. Akashi, I need to get to the clinic. I need to

know if my baby is alright.”

“Why shouldn't ... well, okay. Where is this clinic?” Akashi took the card Kuroko gave him, telling their driver the address through their intercom. “Do you want me to hold you while we drive?”

Oh god, yes. Yes please. He clutched Akashi's shoulders, not allowing the other to let go of him. He cried and shivered in the other's arms the whole hour of their drive. This was most likely unsafe but being held by the other felt unbelievably good. It shouldn't be like that, this should be kept to his mate. Was it true that Akashi could break their bond? Was that what was happening? If the other bit down on exactly the same spot, would he still be Kagami's? He wasn't sure anymore.

At least it did not seem like this was planned in any way. Akashi looked distressed, he even smelled distressed. Kuroko found it hard to remember if he had ever seen the redhead this uncomfortable. He held him, stroked his head and cheek and took control of his breath whenever it got too fast. God, he remembered those gentle strokes from the times Akashi had asked him for blowjobs. He wasn't sure how he should feel about them today but at the time he had liked to give them. Or at least they had been enjoyable physical contact, only slightly forced.

Kagami would scold him for thinking like that. Even Akashi himself had said that he had used the rape situation as a way to have Kuroko without anyone making assumptions. The other had forced him into a situation where he himself had been his protector, benefactor and maybe even savior in the end. If Kuroko had not met Kagami and Akashi had won the Winter Cup, would he really have used that right to claim Kuroko? No, most likely he would have come up with something new because he was still in a position where he could not mate with an Omega.

Or maybe he would have killed his father before the Winter Cup final.

That was another possibility. Truthfully Kuroko did not like the way he was able to follow Akashi's train of thought, especially when it got to murdering or maiming people. But it did get him thinking how far the other would have gone for him. He wasn't sure how to feel about that ... being flattered would certainly be wrong. You could not be flattered when someone actually planned on killing people to be with you, no matter the circumstances.

They arrived at the clinic a bit over an hour later. Kuroko had been able to calm enough to ask: “What about your appointment this afternoon?”

“It would have been with my father. I fail to see why I should spend time with that man right now. Even if, you are more important to me. Please lead the way.” Akashi gave the driver some kind of sign which made the man drive off. He followed the blue-haired into the clinic, standing next to him while Kuroko asked for an emergency appointment.

The nurse asked some questions about pain, bleeding and dizziness but he had to answer negatively to all of them ... by now he actually felt a bit silly. Really, all his other pregnancies had survived multiple daily rapes and often even violence. His kids seemed to have an unshakable will to live. But Akashi wasn't annoyed with him, standing by his side all concerned and attentive. Damn, this felt a bit like having an affair. He had Kaga-

Oh god, Kagami. Why hadn't he called his mate? He should do so right now. He blanched which immediately made Akashi ask what was wrong, only to see the other furiously blush and shake his head. Kuroko turned away from him before answering: “There is a balcony from which people are allowed to make calls. I want to call Kagami.”

"Of course." Always the gentleman, Akashi opened the balcony door for him, went to stand in the wind to break it for Kuroko and helped him when the blue-haired dumbly fumbled with his phone.

Oh god. He was so screwed. He knew what this was. He was mated, he was pregnant and his heart was doing summersaults for another man. This was so not good. He could not fall in love with Akashi. Should that even be possible with a mated Omega? Shouldn't his scent be off-putting to the other? When he looked up, he saw calm, attentive pinkish red eyes who only looked at him.

He should not be flattered. But damn, he was.

Chapter 20: A fight for dominance

"Tetsu? Are you on your way back?" Kagami asked, having finally picked up the phone.

"Erm, no. Listen, Taiga, don't freak out. I am at the clinic right now."

"Is anything wrong with you?" The other instantly shouted. Well, so much for staying calm.

"I don't think so by now. I was feeling strange earlier and had Akashi drive me to the clinic. We are waiting for someone to see us right now." Him, not them. He should not include Akashi in an "us". There was no "us". Kagami and him were an "us". "Can you come, please?"

"Sure, I'll be with you in ... about fifteen minutes or so. Keep me updated, I'll read my texts."

"Okay. See you soon. Bye, Taiga." Normally he would have blown the other a kiss but it felt strange with Akashi standing right next to him.

The redhead led him back inside, sitting next to him and going as far as to draw Kuroko against him with an arm around his shoulders. The Omega did not exactly resist in any way. He cuddled up to the warmth the other provided. Was he really this easy? Warmth, cuddles, gentle strokes and pheromones? It did not seem to take much to coerce him. Really, he should be embarrassed. He was behaving like a stereotype Omega, offering himself to the strongest Alpha he could get his hands on. And that even though he was already mated.

"Can a mating bond really be broken?" He whispered, trying to sound appalled instead of eager. Oh god, he was pathetic. Hopefully seeing Kagami would right his world again.

"Yes." Akashi petted his hair. "Any Alpha stronger than the one you are mated to can break a bond. If he is only slightly stronger, he has to kill the mated Alpha. If he is much stronger, it is enough to normally mate with the Omega, the other bond simply dissolves." He let his gaze wander. "I could break every bond in this room without fighting anyone."

Kuroko looked around as well, only now noticing how nearly every Omega in here stared at Akashi with hunger and longing. Oh ... so feeling like this for Akashi did not seem to be as strange as he first thought. He dared to ask: "Even Taiga?"

Akashi looked at him, raising an eyebrow – Kuroko blushed and ducked his head. Oh god. The other must know exactly what he meant. How should he ever look Kagami in the eyes again? Shame. Shame on him. How could he even think about something like that?

He felt a hot breath in his ear before Akashi silently spoke: "I'd kill my father for you. If your mate ever hurt you, I'd kill him as well if you wish it."

He should not be flattered. He should definitely not feel flattered. Oh god, he was getting wet. This should not happen. This ... oh god. He lay his head on Akashi's shoulder. He should not. There was a low rumble under his ear, a sound like a content cat. Just more like a purring lion than a cat. His Omega side screamed to swing his leg over the other and ride him, his human side was appalled.

"Please be the mature one and stop me" He begged Akashi.

"Sometimes I hate to be the mature one" That one admitted but still pulled away. He stood and handed with trench-coat over to Kuroko. He grabbed it and buried his nose in the warm cashmere that smelled so much like the redhead. "I'll get us some drinks."

Do you have a preference?" Akashi offered.

He was able to shake it head, not disconnecting his nose from the trench-coat. God, this was so ... so Omega. He hated how his instincts took control. It only took until Akashi had rounded the corner until the first Omega – only slightly older, maybe twenty – sat next to him and asked: "It that your mate? He smells heavenly."

"No" He admitted in a small voice. "He`s my friend."

"How do you stand not ravishing him? I know I would if he let me." The black-haired young man took a cuff of the trench-coat and sniffed it. "If he is your friend, would you be alright with me trying to flirt with him?"

"You can try but he is so strong that he is resistant to pheromones. He is also completely uninterested in Omegas. So he will most likely just tell you to leave him alone. It`s why we are able to be friends." Kuroko explained, finally calming a bit with not having the redhead right next to him. So it was only a temporary effect. If he stayed clear of Akashi`s scent, he would be alright. He folded the trench-coat on his lap.

"You don`t look like friends, you look completely infatuated with one another." The other informed him. "Don`t let your mate see that, it will turn ugly."

"Yeah." Kuroko touched his mark. "My head is ... I feel confused."

"Hormones can be overpowering, even if we don`t like that fact. We like to think ourselves so cultivated but in bed we are nothing more than animals." The other man leaned back. "Be honest with yourself, it doesn`t help to try to lie to your head. Lying to your mate is bad enough but lying to yourself is plain stupid."

They both snapped to attention, hearing and smelling Akashi before he turned the corner. The redhead only sent the other Omega an unenthusiastic look for him to flee back to the other side of the waiting room. Yeah ... Akashi could be terrifying if he wanted to. He gave Kuroko some strawberry milk before sitting down and opening his pear juice. Hm, pear ... still drinking fruit juice. Having Kagami drink juice had had exactly the wanted effect, he tasted sweet now.

"Would you like some?" Akashi asked, misinterpreting Kuroko`s look.

"Huh? Oh, no, sorry, I was just ... staring." Well, so much for honesty.

The redhead smiled amused and took his trench-coat back. It was only a second before Kuroko could smell Kagami himself, his whole focus instantly zooming on his mate who stepped into the waiting room. He was up in the same second, running into his embrace – well, taking the two steps – and drinking in his mate`s scent. Yes ... this was home. His world felt right again. His head filled with thoughts of Kagami.

"You`ve got to be kidding me." The Omega who had spoken with him before said in dismay.

Kagami blinked at the man and asked: "Is something wrong?"

"No." Kuroko stretched and kissed him. "I missed you." He did not have to look to the side to know the other Omega was rolling his eyes at him. Well, it was true though. He missed not having to think. Akashi`s scent had been a bit much to handle.

"Being envious of others only makes oneself ugly. Aiming for success yourself is a way to make others notice your worth" Akashi berated the other Omega.

The man snorted and said bitterly: "We`re Omegas, who but a brothel would employ us?"

Well, he wasn`t wrong. His mother worked as a cleaning women and cashier. Omegas could normally only hold low-income-jobs. Those who worked normal jobs often slept their way up.

"Just because something is hard does not mean it is impossible. This guy is the

national basketball champion." Akashi nodded to Kuroko. "And I don't mean his mate, even though he is one too." He stood. "Alphas respect success. If you want a better partner, impress them. Pheromones only work on the small fry."

Well ... and young Alphas. At least if they weren't Akashi Seijuro. He had some unbelievable skills of which one wasn't exactly seeing the future but something close. He had stood because the nurse had come – though she had been at least two corridors away when he stood – to ask after Kuroko. They followed her to one of the consultation rooms.

"Ah, Kuroko! Long time no see." The doctor greeted him, one of the ones who still knew him from his middle-school times. "Well, that's a line-up of impressive Alphas you brought in."

"Good day, doctor Haragata. This is my mate Kagami Taiga and my friend Akashi Seijuro."

"Glad to know you finally settled down. Natsuki tells me you are pregnant?" He pointed at the chairs and they followed the invitation.

"Seven weeks." He smiled proudly. "I had a bit of a scare today. I suddenly felt strange, it was like a horrible bout of sadness ... like back then when I lost Aoki. It's alright again but it scared me."

"It's what we're here for. You don't exactly have the best history with pregnancies. How about we do an examination and an ultrasound?"

Kuroko nodded and went over to the examination table. Thankfully he knew all the procedures well. Kagami and Akashi exchanged a look though, silently asking the other if he had any idea what they were supposed to do. Kuroko grinned, waved them over and pointed at two stools on the left side of the examination table. He had Kagami sit next to his head, Akashi a bit further down. When he held up his shirt and opened his trousers, he saw both of them fidget for a moment.

"So, this is the first pregnancy you encounter?" The doctor addressed both of them, just as amused as the Omega was.

"Sure, he is my mate." Kagami scratched his head.

"I am unmarried." Akashi averted his gaze.

"First-time mothers are a bit of a hassle but first-time fathers always are a highlight with their awkwardness" The doctor admitted to Kuroko.

"It is my first time having anyone with me. I like the feeling" He replied honestly.

"Yeah, it is much nicer. It's good you found someone who doesn't run in fear. Even two, I don't think I ever had two Alphas in here. Even those who decide to support their Omegas would often rather be caught dead than set a foot in here." The doctor had begun to probe his stomach after listening with a stethoscope. He was one of the seniors, so he had rough, calloused hands from all the births he had assisted with.

"Why is that?" Akashi asked in disbelief. Kuroko would have rather expected Kagami to ask that.

"Because common prejudice is that Omegas are responsible for the children, so why should an Alpha have anything to do with the pregnancy other than to making it happen?" The doctor looked up. "I like to see that this thinking seems to change. Omegas heavily rely on their Alphas in pregnancy and not having them supporting them is a big stress factor. Omegas often lose children simply due to the fact that they are neglected." The man shook his head. "Until the Meiji restoration, Omegas were cherished and cared for just like women. The Westerners brought a lot of prejudice with them, degrading Omegas to today's status. Omega prostitution was

nearly unknown until the Meiji era."

It was a topic most doctors in this clinic could ramble about. They were all Alphas or Betas – no Omega would ever be able to get a medical degree – but they cared deeply for Omegas, enraged by the disregard and abuse most of them had to suffer daily.

"So there are Alphas who tell their Omegas not to annoy them with food cravings, stomach pains and morning sickness? Who simply ignore that?" Kagami seemed appalled. He actually seemed to like to go running to the next combini. He said the smile it brought to Kuroko's lips and the kiss he always got for it made it worthwhile.

"Worse. About forty percent are physically abusive and another thirty percent lock their Omegas in except for daily shopping. I don't think those Omegas would dare to ask for support. They often come to this clinic in secret, fearing that their Alpha mates might find out they have been here. It is still better than living alone for most though. We have a job center for Omegas here but employers who accept Omegas are scarce. So they have no choice but to suffer their Alphas. And then we have their children here who have long lost hope they could have anything better than a partner who abuses them, thankful when their partner stays, even if he hits them. It is really sad to watch." He looked at Kuroko. "This seems to be in order. I'll put up a screen and start the ultrasound machine, okay?"

"Yes, please." The screen was used because most Alphas did not take kindly to looking at someone else fiddling with their Omega's genital area. Early pregnancy scans required anal ultrasounds. Kuroko was relaxed, he had done this often enough. He feared the other's reaction though. "Taiga, this is an anal examination. Behave."

"A- what?" The Alpha blanched.

"It's how you got me pregnant, so keep calm." He trusted Akashi to keep his composure but he was unsure about his mate. "Do you want to hold my hand?"

"Yeah" His mate admitted.

The doctor had set up everything by then and asked: "Do you remember the procedure or should I explain again?"

"Please just continue. I remember and it would make these two squeamish." Kuroko smiled amused. He did enjoy then flinch both of them had when the doctor picked up the rectal ultrasound head.

"I am having phantom pains right now" Kagami admitted.

"You are much bigger" Kuroko informed him. "Those babies I had were bigger as well. Abortion doesn't save you from birthing them after all."

There was a moment of tense silence which the doctor interrupted by turning the monitor and saying: "I found it. It's not exactly easy to spot but this is the baby. It's the size of a blueberry, so we can't see much."

He tried to zoom in which made it more blurry. Kuroko was used to deciphering the strange grey blobs but he saw the other two squint their eyes.

"This is the head, the body and the tail." The doctor pointed at said parts. "The child has arms and legs but they look like fins and aren't very long. The important thing is this." He pointed right at the middle. "This rapidly moving square is the heart and it shows that it is beating normally. So your baby seems to be alright."

"Thank god." Kuroko smiled and squeezed Kagami's hand. "So it was just a scare after all."

"How would it look like with twelve weeks?" Akashi asked.

"Well, about the size of a lime. No tail, fully grown arms, legs, hands and feet. It's the week where the hands begin to grab." The doctor grinned. "It is a lot more human than sea-rob then."

Akashi did not smile back. He looked ... crushed. A bit like after their game, before he found his smile again. Kuroko did not like that look on him. Was he getting self-conscious? Or was it guilt over what happened in middle-school? He was responsible, yes, but ... well, no, he was responsible. He seemed to be realizing that.

The doctor seemed to notice his pensiveness but decided not to comment. He printed out the ultrasound before taking out the device. Kuroko cleaned himself and put back the screen himself after dressing. He thanked the doctor before tipping both Alphas on the shoulder to have them follow him. Both seemed to be lost in thought, even Kagami.

Chapter 21: Empty words aren't apologies

"Tetsuya?" Akashi said in the lobby of the clinic after suddenly stopping in his tracks.

"Hm?" He turned and blinked in question.

"Would you please hit me? Not that barely stinging slap from before but a fully meant fist to my face."

"What?" Kuroko closed his eyes, opening them again to the same scene as before. Akashi was standing before him, hands turned to fists, his eyes downcast. Had he really just asked that? "Are you serious?"

"I am dead serious. Please hit me. I want to remember this, so I never do something as awful again." The Alpha took a deep breath. "I knew that what I was doing was wrong, I just never realized how wrong it was until now. What I did was unforgivable."

"But I already forgave you." Kuroko tilted his head. "And I already slapped you."

"Really?" Kagami whispered astonished.

"That didn't hurt enough" Akashi responded slowly.

"His fist doesn't hurt much as well but I'll gladly trash you in his stead-"

"Taiga, we spoke about this" Kuroko reprimanded his mate. "I don't want you to hit anyone."

"Come on, he's asking for it. Just once. Please?" The tallest begged with a childish grin.

"Even you aren't angry at him anymore." The Omega shook his head. "Physical violence solves nothing, it only makes things more complicated. I don't want you to fight. More than that, I don't want you to lessen his guilt."

Akashi looked up at that, a stricken look in his eyes.

"Make no mistake" Kuroko warned him upon seeing that. "I am not forgiving you for your sake but for mine. I am tired of being angry, sad or mournful. I don't want to feel responsible for your guilt, lust or misery. You've got to deal with that yourself. So no, I will not hit you, so that you can feel better. I want you to work through this, yes, but you need to learn from your mistakes by yourself. I won't take that burden from you and give you an easy way out."

The other looked stunned, unable to give a response. Kagami gave one by gathering Kuroko into his arms and kissing him before saying: "That's my mate. Damn, your words can be a lot harsher than my fists. Sorry I did not trust you to be able to be this cutting in your remarks."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" He asked doubtful.

"It sure is. Were you this hard on Aomine as well?" Kagami grinned, delighted by ... something, Kuroko could not exactly say what. Had his words been hard on the other?

"I guess so." Well, no, actually. He had been mindful of Aomine's state and he had not been angry at him. Not in front of him at least.

"I really am sorry" Akashi interrupted them with a small voice. "I am not sure how to voice those words to make them believable. I feel like crying but I have been unable to do that since I was five years old. I just want you to know that whenever you need me, I'll do my utmost to help you. I owe you for what I did and what you taught me about it."

Kuroko just nodded before actually thinking about what the other had said. It was good to be able to be owed a favor by Akashi – he was a powerful man after all – but there was something he could do. So he ordered his thoughts before saying: "I want

you to remember this day. What your father is doing is only an outspoken version of what most people are thinking. Omegas are trash to most people. It's nice to be a national basketball champion but where does that get me? No team will ever let me play for them. I am mated and living with my mate, so everyone can guess that I will have other pregnancies after this. No one will hire me, even if I promised my mate and I were safe, no one would trust us. Even if someone hired me, I have a child to think about. I have heats which means I am unable to work one week out of four. No employer in their right mind hires Omegas. There are ways around that of course, some kindergartens are run by Omegas only who integrate their heats into their working schedule but that is too bothersome for most people. So I can choose between being a stay-at-home-mother and some low-income-jobs. Being a national basketball champion helps me in no way at all. It is alright with me, I have my mate and he will most likely make a ton of money because I am sure he'll join the JBL or NBA. But a lot of other Omegas aren't that lucky. The man you looked down upon for being envious of me, he's working as a prostitute to support his kids because his Alpha left him and there is no job for him that makes enough money otherwise. The Japanese government only supports single mothers, not single fathers. Omegas count as fathers in this matter, even if they birth the children. He has no other choice if he wants to keep his children. If he wasn't a prostitute, he would have to give them into government custody."

Akashi lowered his head and said: "I have been arrogant and insensitive again, haven't I?"

Kuroko nodded. He had been able to smell that on the other Omega, so Akashi must have too. It hadn't clicked in that moment but now that he thought about it, it made him angry, so he said: "Even though you resent your father's ways, you look down on others just as he does. You do understand nothing of the circumstances most Omegas live in. We are allowed heat medication but it does not work well, it only curbs the excess. We aren't allowed birth control. Alphas can be prosecuted for rape but often enough, the charges are dismissed because of course it is impossible for Alphas to control themselves when they smell an Omega. It's always the Omega's fault. If an Omega is impregnated, they are only allowed to get child support from the Alpha if they were married before – so male Omegas will never get anything because a mating bond is not acknowledged as marriage. For all the emphasis our government puts on family, they only give a shit about kids who grow up with two married parents. I spent my whole life with my Omega mother in a thirty square-meter flat, watching her work at least two jobs at the same time because she continually lost one because of heats, me being sick or refusing to sleep with her employer. There were weeks we had no water, no electricity and no food because my mother got sick from being overworked and lost all her jobs in the process. I remember being laughed at while I dug through trash for food, the neighbors openly saying that my mother and I were a disgrace to society, that all Omegas should be euthanized for our own sake. When I got older, they kindly told me that I should look forward to my first heat because then I would at least be provided for – if I was lucky to have it at home of course, otherwise I would just end up like my mother. Even other Omegas told me that the best that could happen to me was that my mom signed me up on one of those Alpha-wants-Omega sites, so I could be mated off to some rich Alpha who would pay a nice sum for me. It would secure my survival and that of my mother. I would most likely be a sex-toy on the side for my Alpha but at least I would have food, a nice home and might be able to care for my children without prostituting myself to more than one man. A lot of

Omegas are sold at the age of thirteen or fourteen."

Akashi's face showed pure horror. Kagami was white as a wall.

"If you really want to atone for behaving just like those people, thinking that hunting, raping and nearly killing Omegas is somehow alright, then do something to make our lives better. You are in the position to actually make a difference. Taking responsibility means realizing your possibilities and acting on them." Kuroko took a deep breath – he wasn't sure he had ever talked as much as he just did. "Just thinking something is wrong but not acting on it is not enough."

His words were followed by a moment of tense silence. Akashi seemed to be at a loss for words, not even trying to open his mouth, simply staring at Kuroko. Kagami was the first to move, enveloping his mate in a hug and whispering: "I never knew."

"What?" Kuroko hugged him back.

"How some of you had to live." The other kissed his blue hair. "The only other Omega I know is Tatsuya and his parents are nice, supportive people who always told him he could be anything he wanted. So he trained to be a basketball champion, never doubting he could become one."

"Kuroko is right, he won't be hired. Atsushi will have to support him. No team will ever take him on" Akashi said in a strange tone of voice. It wasn't exactly monotonous but it seemed hollow somehow. "You gave me a lot to think about. May I take my leave for today?"

"Sure." Kuroko nodded at him. "Thank you for meeting me today."

"No, thank you." The other deliberately breathed in and out to snap out of the mood that had come over him. "You turned my world upside down, just like you tend to do. It's why I am happy to have you as my friend." In spite of his words Akashi seemed rooted to the spot. "You were also right this morning. I will tell my fiancée she is vain and superficial and not mature enough to be associated with my family. I also need to have a word with my father, he treated you abysmally." This time it was more of a sigh than just breathing. "First of all I need to apologize to the man in the waiting room. Please excuse me." This time he turned and went to walk back into the heart of the clinic.

Kagami and he stared after him until he had rounded a corner. They stood still for a second longer before the redhead said: "I am very happy you are my mate, Tetsu. For one because I love you. But on the other hand I never want to be of the receiving end of a lecture by you."

"Have I been too harsh?" And if he was – with what? He had only stated some facts.

"Well ... you made Akashi Seijuro cower and nearly break out in tears. That's quite a feat." Kagami shook his head in disbelief. "Damn, even I feel like tearing up. You have a way with words sometimes. Know what, you can invite Aomine whenever you like. If you talk to him like that, I really don't have to be afraid. And if you ever need me to hit someone, just say the word."

"I ... don't think I can be this honest with him. I don't think he'd hurt me but he's not exactly stable" Kuroko admitted.

"You're afraid he'll break? Aomine?" Kagami raised a red eyebrow. "Has he ever actually hurt himself?"

"I once bullrushed him before he could jump off a bridge." He looked up to his mate.

"So yes, I do believe he could get suicidal again."

"But if you dance around him like he was an egg, he'll be stuck in depression forever. Being all nice and cuddly hasn't really helped, has it?" At Kagami's words the other lowered his head. "If I promise not to hit him, would you allow me to give him a piece

of my mind about this?"

"No, really, Kagami, he's had it so hard-"

"I don't care if they killed his pet goldfish, it does not give you the right to treat someone else like shit-"

"His parents killed his brother" Kuroko admitted, no longer able to keep that in.

"Shit." Kagami went silent for a second. "It still doesn't give him the right to lash out at you. Worse, he most likely thinks of himself as a monster, no better than his own parents."

Well, yes, that was it in a nutshell. It summed it up quite nicely, so he nodded.

"I guess his brother was helpless and couldn't fight back?" The redhead waited for his answer. "Then what do you think it does to him that you aren't angry at him? You don't fight back as well. By not telling him he's an asshole, he can only conclude that he is just like his parents. It might be a lot kinder if you screamed and kicked."

Huh. He had never seen it like that. He blinked in confusion.

"Being angry at someone gives them the right to acknowledge that another being is angry at them. It means they don't have to be angry with themselves. You can apologize to someone else but apologizing to yourself is hard."

Oh yes, he knew that. He knew that so well. His babies had been unable to accuse him, so he had accused himself for so long. How often had he named himself a murderer? How often had he imagined Aoki's eyes, looking at him angrily or sadly? He had bought that grave and the tombstones to be able to apologize to them.

He had done the same thing to Aomine.

"I am not sure I can be angry at him but I want to try." Kuroko took his mate's hand.

"Will you help me?"

"Yeah." The redhead had a blinding smile full of pride.

Chapter 22: Healing with anger

[Only members of full age can access this chapter]

Chapter 23: The last one to forgive

"Midorima?" He sat down next to the green-haired who wore his orange trikot over a pullover to keep warm. It covered his little baby bump but it truly was little. For someone in their seventh month, it was much too small.

"Kuroko? What are you doing up here?" The other looked him up and down, finally using his sense of smell. "Oh! I thought you wanted to wait."

"I did. But I am used to things not going my way."

"Was it ... did it ... I mean-"

"He didn't hurt me" Kuroko answered the question his companion seemed loath to ask. "We were in the heat of things, quite literally. Hormones make you stupid."

"Oh. Well, I am glad to hear it wasn't ... like back then. You're keeping it I guess?" Midorima looked really pained. This conversation must be hard on him. Talking about his emotions or trying to sound nice did not come easily to him.

"Of course." He smiled. "I don't want to ever abort a child again. Even if it makes us very poor."

"You mated a future NBA player, I don't think you need to worry." The other scoffed. "If Aomine doesn't shape up mentally, Kagami will be the only one of us but I have to admit he is good."

"What about Kise? You don't think he'll stick to basketball?" Akashi was out for obvious reasons and Midorima was stroking his. "Or Murasakibara? Even though he does not like the sport much, I think Himuro will kick him out if he does not earn a living."

"I am not a doctor yet and I have not examined him personally but I don't think Kise's foot and knee will heal fully. Aomine's elbow just needs a good training regime. Murasakibara ... you most likely know better than me, I am not good at making predictions about social behavior." Yes, that was one way of putting it. "I don't know Himuro Tatsuya well enough to judge correctly. I only know that Murasakibara by himself will not consent to a professional career."

"Himuro will make him play because there is not much else Murasakibara can do to provide for their family."

"Is Himuro pregnant as well?" Midorima looked up in surprise.

"I don't think so or he would have informed Taiga. But Murasakibara is very family oriented. Not traditional like you, he just likes kids. Maybe because they are easy, small kids have his level after all. I think he was even more crushed that I aborted the babies than you."

"Really?" Midorima was silent for a moment. "I wouldn't have expected that. I was ... distraught. I knew that people could abort, I just never considered anyone would do so. I was very naive."

"If I had not done it, we would have been mated for nearly three years now and I would be pregnant with our third child." Kuroko looked at him. "I would have left school without a degree and would spent my whole life shut away in your home. You'd return every day to my melancholic smile and you would most likely abhor yourself for the rest of your life for forcing that on me."

"It was for the best." Midorima rubbed his stomach. "Your decision was the right one, even if I could not see that at the time." His eyes followed Takao, no, Midorima Kazunari actually, with a smile on his lips. "Staying together for a child would have

been horrible. It or they would have grown up with two unhappy parents. Even if the situation isn't perfect, having parents in love with each other is important."

"You do, don't you?" Kuroko smiled. "For years I thought you were unable to properly feel emotions."

"I am still not sure I do. But I am beginning to understand what they are and those things I feel do resemble little versions of what other people seem to have. Love ... for me that is trust. To trust someone with my whole being and give myself to him. And there is this certain urge to touch." The other sent him a coy look. "I don't know if it is instinct or love but touching Kazu is nice. I abhor touches from most other beings, my mother is the only one from whom I allow that."

"I would hate to have to live in your head. Even after all that happened, I can feel love and joy and happiness." Kuroko knew his expression showed what he talked about. "I can relax." He did just that, sinking into his seat. "I haven't had flashbacks or panic attacks for months." He looked Midorima up and down. "Hey, could it be you don't have a lucky item with you?"

"Of course I have one!" The green-haired pulled a flamingo plushie out from under his trikot but immediately put it back. "But I have learned that some of those items count as embarrassing, so I try to hide those."

"How did you learn that?" The blue eyebrows shot up.

"Well, I went to school with this statue of a fairy on a unicorn-"

Kuroko could not help himself, he had to laugh thinking about that sight. Hilarious! Everyone must have burst out laughing. So even Midorima had noticed that it might have something to do with him? His – was it husband now? No, marriage between men was illegal in the country – had really come a long way with him.

"Well, yes, that was everyone's reaction. I asked Kazu about it and he explained the concept of shame to me. I still cannot understand why anyone would feel ashamed about something another person does but I was able to integrate the concept into my daily behavior and adjust it accordingly."

Well, talking to Midorima might not be the easiest thing but it had one advantage over talking with anyone else. You did feel much less like a failure of nature afterwards.

"It is how you learn from other people's behavior. You identify with people you see or hear or read about and imitate favorable behavior. It is why watching pornography is bad, it distorts your view on reality." That was something no other than Akashi had explained to him once when they talked about Aomine. One of his parents unfavorable quirks had been to watch pornography with their kids, so he had been brought up with a horrible attitude towards relationships and sex.

"Why would anyone want to see other people have sex?" The green-haired seemed confused.

"It turns people on." Normal people. Midorima would most likely be put off. Aomine had showed him some pornography in their first year of middle-school which had been deeply disturbing for Kuroko. It was where he finally learned why everyone regarded Omegas as cockhungry sluts. It was hot, sure, but why someone would decide that raping a person who was unable to consent was hot was beyond him as well. It was a lot less fun when you were on the receiving end of such treatment. The usual five-Alphas-rape-one-Omega-flick was beyond disgusting to him as well – at the same time it did turn him on. Watching porn always left him disgusted with himself and in fear he would receive the same treatment. A year later he had received that treatment from Aomine, so that fear had not been unfounded. Come to think of it, he

hated pornography. "But you are right, I also don't want to see other people have sex. What I have is nice enough."

"So Kagami treats you well?" The green-haired actually smiled.

"Yes, he does." Kuroko actually felt like grinning, so he tried, but it came out mangled, so he stopped. "I am glad I learned to control my hormones. It is how it should be, we are both able to have a choice. It makes being together much more meaningful." It made him remember Akashi though. If that one ever decided to give him a blast of his pheromones, it would overpower Kagami's. It also made Akashi very honorable for not doing so, but he hated the possibility. "Midorima ... did you know that Akashi had feelings for me?"

"He hinted at that, yes." They were best friends after all. So Akashi told his best friend possibly ruinous things. "He never said so outright, anyone could have overheard and used it against him but he did talk to me about that dilemma. I think that I was the first to hunt you wasn't due to the fact that I had somehow been the best one that month but to make me forget he ever hinted at that. I just do never forget."

"So you knew all along? Did you ever talk to him about it?" Kuroko felt anger surge up in him. So Midorima had been able to do something against those hunts?

"I tried after that first hunt. I never got out a full sentence before his gaze told me he would murder even me if I continued. That dark side of Akashi ... that wasn't my friend. I stopped talking to him after that day. He scared me." Those green eyes filled with guilt. "I am sorry. I should have protected you more. But I was very scared of him back then." He lowered his gaze. "A good Alpha always puts his Omega's needs over his own. I did not do that. Mating with you had been my only idea how to get you out without being hurt too much. I am sorry for having been such a coward."

"Don't worry, it was a honorable offer. It was more than anyone else ever gave me." Kuroko leaned over and shortly squeezed Midorima's hand before remembering he hated touches from others. "Especially when you knew that Akashi wanted me for himself. You would have put yourself in harm's way like that."

"Maybe ... maybe Akashi would have decided to visit and fuck you right in front of me. I am not sure I would have done more than tell him I did not like that. I am not a good Alpha mate. I relish in being taken care of, not the other way round."

Kuroko froze for a second before saying: "Thank you for your honesty."

So he would have ended up a plaything for two Alphas, one mourning that fact, one relishing in the chance to have him however often he pleased. Worst case scenario the family in which he lived would have shunned his babies, not knowing if they were actually theirs. His gut feeling had told him not to take Midorima up on his offer, even if that meant more consecutive rapes. It had been good to trust his feelings, even though he had doubted his decision again and again.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be a broken record, you are long forgiven." Kuroko decided to screw that no-touch-thing and lent against the other. "I found you unbearable in middle-school but I learned to appreciate your way of communication. One has to learn to like you but it's okay. I do now."

"Thank you, I guess?" The green-haired had stiffened but already relaxed again. "I still don't exactly understand friendship but Kazu teaches me. I'll try to be a good friend."

"As long as you follow morale, we'll be fine. I told Akashi the same. Did he tell you I slapped him?" Midorima looked back with something akin to fear. "Don't worry, we're good. He actually asked me to punch him in the face after he understood where I was coming from. He is very sorry about middle-school."

"Are you sure he understood you correctly? When an Akashi actually says he is sorry, he will do his utmost to correct his ways. This ... might be dangerous in some circumstances." Midorima sounded a bit doubtful. "Do you know what he plans to do now?"

"He said he wanted to talk to his father – I met that man, he is horrible." Kuroko felt the other stiffen again. "I guess you know him?"

"I was invited and deigned a suitable acquaintance for his son after a thorough background check. Since then I have been Akashi's only friend up to now. There were others he was allowed to talk to but he found most of them insufferable. Akashi hates mindless chatter and it seems that is all those stuffed-up rich kids are able to do. We were taught that it is polite to talk like that but it was a chore for us both. We stuck together because we were able to just stay silent and be happy with that. The adults were happy to know we had friends while we were able to enjoy the quiet." The other sighed slowly. "From what I know now, I'd say we were lonely kids, trying to find some respite in a life that demanded more than we could give. Akashi was someone I could relax with because he did not ask anything of me and I not of him. Mostly we played basketball or chess or shogi or simply read books next to each other. I think for him it was the only time of the day where he was allowed to do something he liked instead of having to learn things. He never complained but I knew he hated his life. When he was allowed to visit a public school with me, he complained to his father so that the man would not guess how happy Akashi was to escape him. He was and is a man who accepts nothing but perfection. He would suddenly turn up, demand his son to demonstrate some skill and beat him up if it wasn't on the level he expected. I never once saw him praise Akashi. My father is similar but he would never dare to raise his hand against me. But after Akashi's mother died, well ... there was no one to protect him. If you met the older Akashi, you can be sure that he beat his son up for talking to you. You are not on the suitable acquaintance list."

"That is horrible." Kuroko sat back up and looked at the other. "Is there nothing we can do?"

"Just ... don't judge him if his father does turn up dead one day. I can't condone murder but it is hard not to with that man. I tend to just overlook some of Akashi's more strange behavioral traits. It's not as if that man or I were good role-models, so there is no one Akashi could learn good behavior from. There was a time I had to explain social interaction to him."

"Poor Akashi. Nothing against you, Midorima, but that is not your forte."

"Don't worry, I know. I don't get mad about you stating the terribly obvious." Midorima resumed stroking his stomach. "Kazu will teach our daughter human interaction. I'll just listen and learn and if I see something Akashi doesn't know I'll tell him."

"I asked him to please let me teach his kids. Somehow I don't see his wife being any better than him at raising a child."

"Would you teach me too?" The green-haired suddenly looked at him. "When it comes to things people see as instinctual, I learned it's best to observe more than one person for a better understanding."

"How about playdates with both our babies? When is yours due?" He remembered something about hearing Alphas babies were often early-born.

"This month. There trying to keep her in as long as possible but my stomach does not give much. I am having ultrasound checks every week to decide if she is allowed to stay in another week. With the rate she is growing, I guess it will be next week or the

one after."

"I still have half a year, I'm only eleven weeks now. So maybe you should come over beforehand ... how about you bring her to our Sunday basketball meetings? I am not allowed to participate, you won't be for a few months and Takao will most likely be glad to spend a bit of time with ... normal people his age."

"Are you implying I am not good company?" Midorima smiled, getting the meaning.

"You are not exactly one to joke around and do stupid stuff with. Relationships are important, but they are not the only thing in life. Especially when you have kids, you need to remember to have friends too. Otherwise your life will get lonely."

"Since I met Kazu, it's the first time in my life I haven't been lonely." Which was pretty believable with the honest smile on his face – it was still out of place in Kuroko's perspective but nice all the same. "Can you believe he dragged our teammates and me to karaoke? Again, I might add."

"You sing?" Kuroko deadpanned.

"I'm pretty good too" Was that a smirk? Dear god, Midorima smirked. The world was coming to an end. "He began teaching me some modern ballads. He means to invite some girls next, having me sing pop songs with them."

"You have some unexpected qualities. I can't hold a tune. Kagami is even worse, at least if I judge from his screaming under the shower."

"Rather than singing, he should learn not to foul so much first" The other commented the game they were watching for the first time. "It's his luck Kimura is so afraid of him, he mostly jumps out of the way."

"Don't be mean, he holds his ground well. It's his first season, isn't it?"

"This team is doomed without me." Midorima shook his head. "With Otsubo, Miyagi and me gone, we are at a severe disadvantage against veterans like you, even if you are without Teppei and yourself. We don't have anyone rivaling Kagami right now. This game is a one-man show."

"Takao is holding his ground well. With his team-work, your team was able to circle the ball around Kagami quite often. You'll be able to join the WinterCup, though maybe not the InterHigh. Your shooter is not even a quarter as good as you. You are right that the team is severely lacking without you, but as soon as you join, Shutoku will be unstoppable again."

"Let's have our rematch next season. Plan your next child after high-school, alright?" The other Alpha not only smiled but poked his side. Midorima and poking. When had he learned to relax like that?

"I direly hope I finally learned all about controlling my hormones." Kuroko sighed deeply. "Otherwise I'll end up with twenty kids or so."

Midorima chuckled. The world was coming to an end.

Epilog: Epilogue

"And there she is" The nurse said, transferring the bloody, screaming bundle onto his chest. "Wasn't that a great birth? Only four hours and twenty-seven minutes, that was a fast one. This isn't your first, right?"

"Second" Kagami answered for him while Kuroko still got his breath. "Our son is three years old."

"Oh, nice. So you know what you're doing by now." She cut the umbilical cord, painting even more of what they could see in red.

Kagami had averted his gaze while Kuroko stared at the squishy thing bawling in front of his face. It wasn't cute yet but he knew she only needed a good wash and a few hours to acquaint herself with the world outside the womb. It might be the blood but she seemed to have a shade of red hair. Their son had been purple which made everyone ask – jokingly of course – if Murasakibara had anything to do with their baby. It had only been fun for the first few times. But as jokes go, Himuro had born an orange-haired kid, so he had been forced to listen to the same crap. Of course Midorima had been the lucky one whose daughter looked like she actually was his kid. Not that he wasn't grateful for his children but even his new one did not seem to look anything like Kuroko at all. From the way she screamed, he expected her to turn out an Alpha just as Shiro had done. Kagami's genes were strong.

"Can you wash her, please?" He asked his mate.

"Oh, sure." That one seemed happy to be given a task and went over to draw a bath in the baby sink. It was only his second time in a delivery room but he seemed at home anyway.

Kuroko was soothing their baby in the meantime while he pressed out his placenta. The nurse had begun to wipe him down a bit which he was immensely thankful for. Maybe he should try a home-birth next time. Japan had been okay but here in America, birthing in a hospital was somehow ... unpleasant. To be honest, the whole country seemed unpleasant at times. He was happy Kagami had decided to quit his NBA career and play for Japan instead.

He wanted to be back home.

The nurse chatted some more, not exactly bothered that she did not get answers anymore. His mate had taken their daughter while a gynaecologist bustled in, did some kind of examination and proclaimed him healthy enough to be brought back to the ward. She stepped next to Kagami, admiring him more than actually looking at their child, gushing over how beautiful their baby was while looking at his mate.

Well. Good thing he had no reason to ever get jealous. Though he should take a bath soon and get some sleep to look more refreshed. Even his hands were a bloody mess after petting their newborn. In this country, everyone waited outside, no one respected the need for privacy after an event that felt a lot like being butchered. He asked Kagami for washing materials after he had dressed their daughter in baby clothes. Good mate that he was, he brought over a basin for Kuroko's hands before whipping him down himself, even though the Omega protested weakly – very weakly with how good that felt. Good mate.

He didn't even have to change the bed himself, his mate just carried him over and put their daughter in his arms before wheeling him out himself because he was tired of waiting for some nurse to come down and get him. In American hospitals, you

sometimes waited for hours just to be brought from A to B when you had to stay in bed.

Just two more months and they could go home. Kuroko slept through the cheers of Kagami's teammates.

They had developed a routine for all the traveling they did over the years. Kuroko would take Shiro – and now Tsuki strapped to his back – while Kagami followed him with two luggage carriers full of bags and suitcases. So it was Kuroko's job to find their way through the airport which mostly worked without a problem. By now he knew Tokio airport like the back of his hand. This time he had been promised by Akashi to be taken home from the airport.

So he was not surprised to be greeted with flashlight, a smiling red-haired Alpha and a limosine waiting outside. Right now his friend was the talk of every Japanese gossip magazine again after disengaging his fiancée a month after his father's death. To the surprise of all, the other had had no hand in his father's demise – at least as long as you believed Akashi was unable to cause strokes. Kuroko at least wanted to believe that.

So now Akashi fought with Kise over the title of "most wanted bachelor" (though he never wanted it) which made paparazzis follow him everywhere. By tomorrow, his friend would most likely have an affair with Kuroko, with Kagami (at the same time without them knowing it) and might even be their daughter's illegitimate father if you believed the magazines. Admittedly, Tsuki looked a bit like him, having inherited light red hair and Kuroko's fair features. He was also her godfather which did not help the rumor-mill. His first question as soon as they were out of sight was of course: "How is my baby princess?"

"She did not like flying." Kuroko sank against his mate, closing his eyes as soon as his head touched his shoulder. "She cried until she lost consciousness. The other passengers stared holes into us."

"It's what you have me for." His mate kissed his head but pushed him back a bit. "Let me buckle up Shiro, I'll take her then."

"Taiga was great. He carried her up and down the aisle, followed by everyone's complaining over her crying. I would have broken down in his stead, I was close to crying for hours."

"You are just very sensitive, no one was complaining. Grumpy babies are hard to calm down, everyone knows that. You kept Shiro entertained, so it was all in order." Kagami had buckled their daughter off Kuroko's back. "Here, Akashi, take your little princess. If she wakes and cries, she's your responsibility."

The Omega laughed humorlessly and shook his head, telling his mate: "You're horrible."

"I spent fourteen hours with a siren next to my ear. You just said you wouldn't have made it. Right now, I need a break." Kagami wrapped his arms around his mate and dragged him onto his lap. "Give me a minute to recharge."

"I gather it was nerve-wracking." Akashi held their little angel who had not exactly been angelic for the duration of their flight. "Do you want me to hire a nurse for the night, so that you can sleep for a bit?"

"Big mighty CEO can't handle a baby?" Kagami smirked at him but closed his eyes again. "No, Shiro will sleep like a rock and after being fed, even Tsuki will have a few hours of rest. I can do that before I crash."

Kuroko did not really hear more of the conversation, his world went black.

He woke to his daughter's cries, stumbling from an unknown bed in an unknown room – at least Kagami was next to him, so it was most likely alright – to her crib. Due to the fact that it was bright daylight outside, he checked his phone to find that he had been asleep for six hours. He had not been able to have so much sleep for months.

Kagami neither. So he was very sorry to wake his mate but he did not know where the other had put the formula, bottles and other stuff. After feeding, cleaning and cuddling their daughter, they decided to wake their son and spent the rest of the afternoon awake, so that they might be able to have less jet-lag by tomorrow. Good thing this was moving back and not just visiting, flying with small children was just horrible, no matter how adorable they were elsewhere.

They met Akashi again on the next day's evening, having simply decided to stay where they were because their shipped belongings had not arrived yet, so they would have no furniture if they moved into their new home now. Kuroko was quite sure his friend had no problem at all with them staying in his mansion, it was big enough for fifty families at least and he lived here all alone. The smile that took over Akashi's face when he found them in one of the living rooms spoke volumes. Most likely his friend had been lonely over here, never one to actually socialize much. With Midorima, Murasakibara and Kuroko caring for their kids, he did not have many people to meet with. Actually, he might have none at all.

"Welcome back." Kuroko said lightly, happy to see his friend's expression brighten even more. "Forgive my directness but are you seeing anyone right now? I don't mean romantically, even just friends."

"I am sorry to have worried you." Akashi nodded to Kagami and sat down on the carpet next to Tsuki who was gnawing on a toy. "Am I this easy to read?"

"You look extremely lonely" Kuroko told him and observed the reaction.

It wasn't hard as the other just nodded and began to tickle Tsuki who squealed in joy and grabbed the finger to examine it with her hands and mouth. After a long moment in which even Kagami seemed to stay quiet, he said: "Now that my father is dead, I am free for the first time. Free to think about what I like, to make decisions about my own life ... do I even want this job? I don't know. Who do I want to be friends with? What kind of person could be my partner in life? And what life even? Do I really want to live in this house that ... holds so many bad memories." He just observed the baby girl that gnawed on his finger now. "I know enough about my preferences to know I want an Omega mate and kids and I like work ... my job is good enough, I guess. But the rest just seems a mess to me."

"As far as I heard, you opened company kindergardens and employed a lot of Omegas. Did you know that you are my mother's new boss?"

"Am I?" Akashi looked up with a smile. "Where does she work now?"

"At your second headquarter in Tokio. She really likes her job." Kuroko disentangled his friend's fingers from his daughter's mouth. "You still need those."

"Then I'll definitely keep my job. It's good to be able to do something sensible and make a change. I was also told that those kindergardens are like some kind of partnership platform for all those Alpha employees we have. As our corporation picks the best of the best, it seems a lot of Omegas were able to leave their bad partners for Alphas treating them better. I made it a corporate policy that respect for Omegas is expected or employees can get fired on the grounds of discrimination."

"But you haven't seen anyone you like?" Kuroko drew up his eyebrows.

"I ... haven't spent a lot of time near a kindergarden. I have neither kids nor anyone I

could visit there." Akashi looked at Tsuki again, a slight blush on his face. "I mean, it would be suspicious if I showed up there, right?"

"You could visit my mother. Tell her hi for me and ask her if she has ideas how to optimize the kindergardens. You are working in the Tokio branch right now, right?" And most likely his mother would have some ideas who to pair up his friend with. She had a good nose for such things.

"Hm ... yeah, I could do that. Do you know if she is working tomorrow? Her name is Kuroko as well?"

"Yes, she raised me by herself." He laid a hand on Akashi's arm. "It would reassure me to know you aren't working yourself to the grave while the rest of us lead a happy life."

"Daiki is single as well, you know. I am not the only one without a partner."

"I am not sure that comparing yourself to Aomine is a good idea. So Kise had found someone?" He hadn't known that. All he got about their friend was that he was seen with one model or actress after the next.

"I gathered he has a secret relationship with his old team captain. Was that information wrong?" Akashi tilted his head.

"Really? I didn't know that. I never exactly asked ... last thing I know he was still having a secret relationship with Aomine but that ended years ago. Come to think of it, Aomine said something about being found out by Kise's captain ... I always thought they were just friends. So there was more to it after all."

"They are living together, so I thought they must be serious. But maybe they really are friends and I got the wrong impression."

"Anyway, even Aomine won't stay single for long. He plans to ask Momoi out when he's out of therapy. In a few months, you won't have any excuses left."

"Oh my." Akashi smiled crookedly. "Your uncle really has to pull himself together, little princess. No more drowning myself in work."

"You are nearly twenty. That's kind of late for still being single." Kuroko picked up said princess and sniffed her, deciding to change her diapers soon. "At this rate, I'll have another baby before you share your first kiss."

"My first kiss was with you" The other countered.

"Oi!" Kagami finally intervened. "Don't flirt up my husband."

"He is easy to tease." Akashi smiled but nodded and took some distance from Kuroko.

"So how is life treating you?"

"Fairly well. They want me in tomorrow for training." The readhead grinned.

"I miss basketball" Akashi admitted. "Maybe I should go professional after all? I could restructure and manage the company on the side."

"Sounds awesome." The grin widened. "You'll take Kasamatsu's place in no time. With Murasakibara as center, you as point-guard, Aomine and me as power forwards, we just need a decent shooter ... Mibuchi Reo is playing for the JBL, isn't he? Damn, you don't think we could get Midorima to come back, do you?"

"No, he enjoys med school. He's also not allowed to play with the potential of getting pregnant."

"Idiotic rule." Kagami rolled his eyes. "Actually, if Kasamatsu is with Kise-"

"That's why their relationship is secret." Akashi leant back and smiled. "Though I can't really see that happening. I still don't want to take the starter position from him, he is a great point guard."

"You are still better. Let's overtake the NBA, I've got some bone with my ex-teammates."

"You quit one year after joining." The CEO looked at Kuroko though. "What happened?"

"I refused to play when Tetsu had our daughter. I did not want to miss that. They called me a sappy idiot and blamed their loss on me, so I decided I had enough of them." Kagami huffed. "They've got nothing but basketball on their minds. Even before, they sometimes made derogatory comments regarding Omegas which I did not appreciate."

"I am not sure the JBL is better but at least all their top tier players are friends and know Kuroko. I don't think any of them would laugh at someone who once beat them." Akashi looked down. "On another note, have you already eaten?"

"We ate with Shiro. It's already past his bedtime." Kuroko looked around for his oldest. "Shiro, time for bed!"

"No!" The three-year-old yelled immediately, looking up from the blocks he had build houses with.

Tsuki used her chance to begin crying as well, filling the room with the sounds of two unhappy children. Kuroko just sighed and looked at his mate.

"I take Shiro, you teach our princess' godfather to change nappies." Kagami got up and went over to his son. "Up with you, little demon!"

Shiro ran laughing, his father hot on his heels. Kuroko had to laugh watching them, seeing his mate letting their son go again and again as if by accident. With a shake of his head, he turned to Tsuki and picked her up. Akashi actually got up as well, so he asked: "You really want to learn?"

"I have to train for my own children. Akashis always know what they are doing, it's an image I plan to keep. Perfectly changing nappies sounds like a useful skill." He lowered his voice. "When your mate pushed her into my arms yesterday, I thought I'd get a heart attack."

Kuroko chuckled and rocked Tsuki to tone down her crying. He admitted completely out of context: "I really look forward to seeing everyone again."