

# Not good enough

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## Prolog: Taiga

Taiga was an idiot.

He was unobservant, insensible and utterly clueless about human interactions. He never reflected himself or others, he planned as far as the tip of his nose and he took everything at face value. He had nothing but basketball on his mind, not even girls or boys or anything else had more value than the damn sport Tatsuya had taught him.

Sometimes he hated basketball. What had connected them for years had stood between them in the end. Ten years and still everything in Taiga's life was about basketball. Tatsuya was nothing but a brother to him, someone to play with, someone to look up to, someone to tease and compete with.

He had wanted to be more. He still wanted to be more than that. He wanted to be his one and only, his focus in life, his reason for being, his everything. He wanted to be the first one he saw in the mornings, the last one before he closed his eyes in the evening, even the last one to see before he closed his eyes forever. He wanted to be Taiga's Omega. He wanted to be the one he adored, pampered and loved for than anything else.

More than basketball.

But for Taiga everything was about basketball. Their talks, their dates, their whole relationship – their brotherhood. Oh, how he hated that word! Brother. He was no brother, he was only a boy who wanted the one he had groomed for years finally between his legs. Forever. He wanted Taiga in his life, in his bed, by his side until the end of time. Taiga was his everything.

But he was nothing but a brother. He was the one to play with, to compete against, to talk about basketball with. He was forever friend-zoned. Taiga did not notice that he had grown into an attractive man, that men and women fawned over him, that he was the best choice in a partner one could make.

But Taiga only saw his ball, his court, his wins and losses, his thirst for new players, new techniques. For him everything was about higher, longer, better. He only looked Tatsuya in the eyes to guess where he would move to, if he would jump or not, if he would pass or attack. He never noticed the longing, the hunger, the pain.

Taiga was an inattentive idiot, the worst he knew – Tatsuya did not yet know how wrong he would be with that assumption.

## Kapitel 1: Arrival in Akita

Tatsuya had settled into Yosen Highschool without problems. He was quick at making friends, he had always trained his Japanese and he had enough self-discipline to read up on all topics he would need to revise for class. Akita was cold but his school was well-heated. It was cozy and classic at the same time. A high class dormitory with a school far away from most civilization.

Of course that also meant it specialized in housing some very strange characters. A few students only came to a few classes and had others by themselves or in special groups. There were a lot of nerds unfit for normal society who had special courses after school to keep them from doing strange stuff. It was an all-boys school, so it also housed some boys who had messed around too much with girls for their parents' liking. So regulations and punishments were strict, there was a lot of special support for different reasons and one could spend morning to night in courses and clubs.

Tatsuya did not like being away from people but of course his parents had wanted the best for him – so a private boarding school it was. At least they had a great basketball team, that had been his only wish. Well, he had had two. He had not wanted to be anywhere near Taiga, so Tokyo was out of question. It left Rakuzan and Yosen but Rakuzan was above his parents' budget.

Yosen was okay. He would see the rest of Japan whenever they played basketball. For every game they would fly, live in hotels and eat in restaurants as long as he got in first string. Honestly, he wasn't worried. He might not be the biggest or most muscled player but he knew his technique was great. Even the fact that he was an Omega did not worry him. He had lived with discrimination all his life. He had never cared and he would certainly not start now.

The school was full of male Omegas. It was another group that needed to be separated and protected. They had their own dorm which was securer than most prisons. They were not allowed to bring anyone else in, so not even an invited guest could be a risk. They got their prescription inhibitors and had a wide range of collars to choose from every morning (as it was the only allowed fashion statement in a school with uniforms, it was actually nice to wear them). If any of them decided to mate the school had family dorms, so that Omegas could continue their school career. Even if he ended up raped and pregnant by some twist of fate (and a lot of the Omegas here had suffered exactly that before coming here) this school would take care of him. It was what had persuaded his parents to allow him to escape their loving but slightly overprotective clutches.

So he was actually a bit surprised to see so many Alphas at the same school. He soon learned that most of them were not your average good-looking athlete but had some kind of flaw that made them an embarrassment to their parents. He had seen some boys with disfigurements, some punks, some pretty dumb guys and some Alphas with really nasty attitudes. He was sure some of them were here because they had raped people and somehow evaded prison. But security was tight so he wasn't worried.

Of course the basketball club was full of Alphas. He had not expected anything else. All of them were as big as mountains and – quite honestly – most weren't the sharpest tools in the shed. Their coach was an Alpha woman who was stricter and sterner than even Alex (who was prone to screaming at Taiga and him all the time). When she wasn't screaming in very short, easily understandable orders she was

speaking slow and in no-more-than-seven-words-sentences. He knew from talking to her before that this wasn't her normal speech which told him a lot about his new team. Their captain held a speech as well in the same manner, though it sounded like that was his normal way of speaking.

Wow – he would be surrounded by stupid oafs. Maybe one of them would be a bit sharper. Even though he had already learned that knowing each other's reason for being here gave people an easy label. The group of dumb Alphas was large, they were nothing but powerful muscle. He did pity them a bit to be honest. Just like him they were born this way and did not fit into normal categories. They were Alphas unsuited for life – he was a rebel Omega intent on making something out of his life other than popping out babies. They all did not fit the category they were born with.

So he simply accepted the fact that he would need to speak slowly and carefully in his club. As with most simple characters the other players were genuinely nice and honest. In only their first session he got compliments from three different people and one of them asked him out. None of them were degrading, most boys seemed to adore him on sight. He knew it was only due to his pheromones but their attention did not leave a slimy feeling. Most likely they did not even comprehend that chatting up an Omega and praise him on his looks and smell could be insulting. And due to the fact that all of them seemed to know they were misfits, none of the boys seemed to expect him to actually deem them worth his time. Even the rejected one only smiled and nodded. He did not want to be mean but in his head he compared them to oversized dogs. They did as told, got treats for it and were glad for the attention.

The treat thing was no joke. When their coach grabbed a package of sweets and began to give out candies (three if you did well, less when you did not meet her expectations) he had been flabbergasted. But the players were really keen on getting their rewards. Even more they tried to console those who did not get three and gave them tips how to get all of them next time. Even their captain got candies like everyone else.

Tatsuya did not feel like he needed sweets to motivate himself – he did not even like candies – but he went with the flow and ended up with three of them. He was told that the new ones would be tested after five training session. Now that he saw who he would have to go up against he got a bit insecure. The other six were all Alphas, two of them dumb giants, one of them a punk and two of them were people he could not label. Those two kept their heads together and laughed about some team members after calling them imbeciles or idiots.

Okay, true, this team was full of good-natured giants unable to function on their own but that did not mean it was okay to call them names. On the way back to the locker rooms he was quite annoyed and kept to the nice giants. When they changed he could practically feel everyone's eyes on him. As always it disgusted him a bit but he had learned to ignore it over the years. There would always be some idiots in the world. If they stayed on the team he would ask for his own changing room. All those giants looked at him too but their gazes were okay in his book. He knew they did not mean anything bad by it. At least he hoped so. They did not give off a dangerous feeling like the other guys.

"Hey", one of the giants said to him, this one had lavender-colored hair. He steeled himself for some utterly stupid question or another compliment, so he was a bit surprised by the question posed to him: "Aren't you going to eat your sweets?"

"Eh? Err, well, no, not right now." He had simply put them on his bag. Could it be that they were more of a temptation than his nearly naked body?

"Newbie, eating other people's sweets is forbidden", the captain lectured the giant who had asked that question. "It's not allowed to bully others for sweets."

"I did not bully him", the guy drew out his words and looked back at him. "Did I bully you?"

"No, it's okay. You only asked."

"Asking is not allowed too. We are too big. That might scare others. So asking can be bullying", the captain explained in his very simple ways, "Asking smaller people for things can be bullying."

Tatsuya blinked. Wow. They really did teach some basics to people here. So that was why all those giants seemed so genuinely nice. Their coach taught them manners.

"Let me guess: You don't get candies when you bully people?" One of the strange Alpha newbies snickered. "Who cares about three little bonbons when you can bring a cutie like this to suck your dick?" He made a vague gesture in Tatsuya's direction.

"It's not allowed to make sexual comments. You could hurt an Omega. They can feel exploited", the captain drowned on. It seemed he had really learned his lines. Tatsuya began to understand why he was the captain. In his very own way he was the one-eyed man in a group of blind sheep.

"Why should I care? Is that really the worst they can do here? Take away candies?" The guy shook his head. "Man, you're too dumb to even understand how much you get played here. You're fucking huge, you can just take what you want."

"That is wrong. If you force people they won't like you. Coach Araki likes us because we are good boys. She's a good teacher."

Tatsuya just hurried up to get into his clothes. He was sure that if he asked his captain for help the captain would help without question. Still it would not be the worst of ideas to get out of the situation before it escalated.

"And what will she do? Hit you with that bamboo sword? Does that really hurt with all those muscles you have? Why do you want to please her? For candy?" The guy scoffed at the captain with all the arrogance an Alpha could show.

"No, they listen to her because she means well and they know that. You are simply an asshole", Tatsuya told him in no uncertain terms, "You don't deserve people that like you. I would chose every one of them over you in a second."

"You say that now but if you were in heat you would not even look twice at them. Omegas look for good genes and these here are all simpletons. You'd let me fuck you, don't even deny it."

"Stop saying such things or I will tell our coach", the captain warned the guy.

"You might get my body in a weak moment, true, but you would never get my heart and soul. So your ass would be in prison sooner than you can apologize." Tatsuya smiled at the other. Why did such guys always think he was defenseless? He knew how to attack back. "You're here because you raped someone, didn't you?"

The other guy paled. Being a known rapist was the worst that could happen to you here. Those guys were shunned, no, ostracized. Everyone looked down on them. The school took them in and they seemed to have some special program to reform them but the students weren't as kind.

"I am not!" The guy looked around in panic. "You make that up because you are pissed at me."

"Then maybe you shouldn't piss people off. All of these guys already learned that. You are the one lacking."

"Fuck you!" The guy screamed, took his bag and fled.

The one who had talked with him before looked at the wall, his face just as white.

Tatsuya studied him for a moment but he seemed harmless now. So was he a rapist too? Or had he just been unfortunate to talk to the other guy? The punk had simply kept out of this, that made him alright in Tatsuya's book.

"Do you want to say something too?" The lavender-haired giant from before asked the other guy staring at the wall.

"Wha- err, no. No, sorry. I didn't expect that. I'm shocked. Really!" That one looked at the others with slight fear in his eyes.

"Oh." The giant hung his head, a pout on his face.

"Why does that disappoint you?" Tatsuya asked him curiously.

"If he had attacked you I could have had- have- I mean, I protect you." The sentence seemed to have been a bit much for him. Grammar wasn't easy, true.

"That's very nice but I can look after myself", Tatsuya explained.

"Would you give me candy if I do well?" The boy tilted his head.

Tatsuya looked at him for a moment. Really? So the guy wanted to be his knight in shining armor to get more sweets? That was ... cute somehow. He seemed a bit like a dog wanting to please to get a treat. Tatsuya decided to pocket the candies. Having them lie around in open sight might be a bit harsh for people who wanted candies that much. Instead of giving an answer he asked the lavender-haired giant in front of him: "What is your name?"

"Murasakibara Atsushi", he said intent on pronouncing his name in the right way. It certainly was no easy name, it must have taken him a bit to learn.

"My name is Himuro Tatsuya."

Murasakibara scrunched his eyebrows and finally said: "Can I call you Muro-chin?"

Maybe his name was too complicated. Well, the nickname wasn't too bad so he nodded. He decided to choose another topic: "So which class are you in?"

"S1", Murasakibara answered without any concrete intonation.

"Only S1?" Tatsuya had already learned that S1 was the class for intellectually impaired boys. Most only had some main topics in that class and spent easier classes like music or art with the normal pupils.

"Only S1", Murasakibara sounded pretty resigned. He seemed to have accepted long ago that normal classes were too much for him. Tatsuya had heard others mutter the class name in shame or anger but never with such a downtrodden tone. While others seemed to try and hide their weaknesses Murasakibara did not seem to care much.

"All of us went there", their captain informed him good-naturedly, "Teacher Tsueda is nice but strict."

"I like her. She hasn't hit me yet", Murasakibara answered in his droning voice.

Tatsuya felt his stomach drop. The boys were hit here? Wasn't that a bit harsh? They might be on a low level of intellect but they were still human. Were corporal punishments by the school still allowed in Japan? He really needed to look that up.

"She never hits people. She doesn't even scream. But she cuts down your candies and your pearls", the captain explained to Murasakibara.

Tatsuya simply wondered about pearls. Were pearls some kind of reward? Did they have a reward system that went beyond candies? It would be a good idea because while these boys were doing a lot of sports he had seen others that were overweight. Murasakibara and the captain spoke about their favorite candies, so he used that time to wish everyone a good day and leave the gym.

The guy who had been joking about the giants in the club with the other boy that had left jogged up to him. Tatsuya looked at him mildly annoyed, so he held up his hands and said: "Sorry about before. Hideki treated you horribly and I just wanted to tell you

that I did not support his words."

"In that case you should have told him that and not me. If you see something that is wrong, man up and do something", he admonished the boy. He had been forgiving in ground school but he was long past the phase. He was fed up with people keeping silent while others were hurt. "And you aren't better than him, you joked about the captain and our sempais as much as he did."

"Yeah, well, okay, but they are ... you know ... they are pretty dumb." The boy looked uncomfortable.

"Yes, they are. They were born this way. Just like I was born an Omega. I don't make jokes about Alphas and whatever else I could label you with, so don't make fun of things other people can't do anything about. I'm sick of hypocrites like you. If you think Omega-bashing is wrong, then think before you bash other people too. It's not like any of them can do anything about the fact that they are intellectually impaired."

"Err, ehm ... sorry?" It was always kind of satisfying to see how easy it was to intimidate even the most bad-ass Alphas. "You pity them, huh?"

"I pity them as much as I pity myself for being an Omega or you for being an Alpha. Do you feel my pity?" He stared the bigger man down.

"Ehm, err, I mean, err ... so ... would you like to go on a date with me?"

"What do you think?" Tatsuya lowered his voice dangerously.

"No?"

"Exactly that. Grow up before you ask me again." He scoffed at the other and left. He hated idiots. These kind of idiots, not the intellectually impaired ones.

## Kapitel 2: Gaining a friend

When Murasakibara entered his classroom, saw him and smiled, Tatsuya felt good about it. Mostly, when Alphas smiled at him, they wanted to get in his pants. So this was a nice kind of change. Somehow it was reassuring when a guy was more interested in the candies in your pocket than your body.

Murasakibara came over and proudly told him: "I got an A class!"

"Great! So you have home-economics with us?" It was the class they were about to have. So there was something that Murasakibara could do well enough that he did not need an S-class for everything.

"I'm very good at baking." His smile made Tatsuya want to give him a pat on the head.

"Not so good at cooking though."

"I am a very good cook. Maybe I can teach you cooking and you teach me baking." Not that he was actually bad at baking, he was quite alright, but still it felt like treating Murasakibara as an equal was the right thing to do. And who knew – maybe he was better than Tatsuya. With such a sweet tooth he was most likely interested in being able to make baked goods by himself.

"I want to make cake."

"Let's see what our teacher wants us to do."

Murasakibara began to check their table's stores and found everything but milk. There even was enough egg powder for a few cakes. He looked at their things and asked: "Does strawberry milk work like real milk in a cake?"

"I am not sure. There is a lot of chemistry in strawberry milk. I think most of them are made from water with milk aroma."

"Would green tea with milk work?" Did Murasakibara really want to make a cake with milk from the vending machine?

"We could ask the teacher. He'll be here soon. Ah, look, that's him I think." Tatsuya saw Murasakibara turn and walk in his direction. "Wait!"

"Why?" The giant asked annoyed.

"First he'll begin his lecture and then he gives us tasks and only then can you ask." Had the other boy ever been to a normal class? Did he know what class structure was?

"I don't want tasks. I want to bake a cake." Murasakibara still looked at him.

"Students, take your seats. Groups of two or three at every cooking table", the teacher told them.

"Look, in this class we do what the teacher wants us to do. We need special permission if we want to do something else. Let's go and hear what he wants us to do, okay?"

"I want cake", Murasakibara said with a pout on his lips but followed him back to their table.

Tatsuya wished for their teacher to want cake today but he feared it would be something else. How would they get Murasakibara to cook anything but cake? How did classes with him work? He could not grasp the concept of school and why people were obedient in class. Did he understand long-term gain? He seemed to think as far as his next treat. So that was why their coach gave out candies for those who went to practice.

"Today we will prepare different kinds of mixed salad and talk about their substance of content. It is important to be able to evaluate nutritious facts, vitamins and

micronutrients. Can anyone tell me which vitamins can be found in green salad?", the teacher began his lecture.

Himuro raised his hand while looking at Murasakibara. How was he supposed to follow such a lecture? Would he start to mess around if he got bored? Would he simply interrupt their teacher by asking for cake? Himuro was called upon, so he began to explain the difference of water-based and fat-based vitamins. The giant next to him seemed content to listen. It was plain to see that he stopped trying to get the content after a few words and instead concentrated on a small insect that was flying through the room.

How did anyone expect that man to be able to follow a normal class?

Murasakibara was pouting after their lesson. Himuro offered to buy him dessert for lunch because the other had not only been unable to bake cake, they had really only prepared different salads. None of those had been filling in any way which was why they had decided to visit the cafeteria for their break. They both swiped their cards for a normal menu. As promised, Himuro handed over his dessert.

He noticed that Murasakibara's hand was as big as the plate filled with karaage. Would one normal menu be enough for this giant? He looked like he needed at least two. He had gotten this big somehow. Had he really such a good metabolism that he needed only this much? Himuro offered his own meal after he had enough and the other took it with happy relish.

"Why didn't you get a larger one?"

Murasakibara swallowed before he answered though he still had rice sticking on his skin: "I only have enough money for one menu. Mama says that I eat too much."

"But you are still growing and you play basketball." No matter how intimidating that growth part sounded, he was likely to get even larger.

His new friend just shrugged his shoulders. His lips looked pouty when he said: "Mama says this school is expensive. So I can get one meal and one package of candies." That was most likely the longest sentence he had heard Murasakibara speak yet.

So his parents had financial problems. Then why did they send their son to ... oh, well. This was the only school where they had special courses for mentally disabled boys and who treated them reasonably well. He had heard the others in the locker room. Beatings, food taken from them, imprisonment. It had sounded like they were talking about broken down pets instead of their lives up to now.

"So you are very hungry?" The other nodded in answer. "What would you normally eat?"

"Five meals. Eight packages of candy."

Tatsuya had to swallow. At this rate the guy would starve! No matter how poor you were, you could not cut down your growing son's rations like that. It wasn't like Murasakibara was fat. He was lean as a stick. "Who gives you your money?"

"Teacher Tsueda."

"I'll ask him if you can get a bit more. It's hard to play basketball when you are hungry."

His friend only smiled at him as if Christmas had come earlier this year. Tatsuya gave into the urge to pat his head. He had been the cat type up to now but dogs seemed good as well.

Teacher Tsueda was not what he had expected. His mind had pictured either a man looking like his teammates or a woman looking like their coach. Instead he met a man

as tall and broad as Himuro himself – which meant nothing much of both. The teacher was a mousy, unremarkable Beta who immediately blushed upon seeing him. It was a typical reaction of men both drawn to and intimidated by him.

“Wh- what can I do for you, Mister Himuro?” The teacher stumbled over his own words.

“You know my name?” The student raised an eyebrow.

The man blushed only deeper. Oh. So it was like this. At his last school the teachers had passed around his picture which made half of the staff fall in love with him. He had not expected that from a school that housed a large size of Omegas but it seemed true what his doctors had told him. His pheromones and his beauty were something else – not that he cared or wished for that, he wanted to be a professional basketball player. But it seemed to have happened again. He shuddered at the thought of middle-aged men wanking to his school application picture.

“I wanted to talk to you about Murasakibara Atsushi.”

“Oh! Has he harassed you? I am very sorry, I will talk to him, of course.” The man bowed frantically.

“Not at all. He’s one of the few guys not interested in me. I find that very refreshing.” Himuro tried but failed to keep annoyance out of his voice.

“Oh ... yes, of course.” The teacher cast down his eyes. So he knew about his attraction. “So what about him?”

“I accompanied him to lunch and was shocked when he said that he only has enough money for one meal a day. He’ll starve at that rate.”

“Oh. He hasn’t told me. So it’s not enough? His mother told me to cut down on his food expenses.” The teacher looked up from a bowed down position.

“His average seems to have been five meals and eight packages of candy. While it makes sense to lower his candy intake, it’s harsh to cut down on his meals. He is a growing two-meter-tall Alpha playing basketball. He will need at least the size of four meals. There is enough money for that, is there?”

“Err, wait, I’ll get his folder.” The teacher put up his hands before turning and scurried back into the teacher’s lounge. He seemed nice enough, just a bit ill-prepared for ... well, about everything. Normal humans most of all. Maybe you got that way when you only worked with mentally disabled children. He returned with a folder that made Tatsuya’s eyes bulge out a bit. “Wait, where was that section about food?” Tsueda began to turn pages. There was a large block on hygiene, on basketball, on aggressive behavior, on punishments (why were there about twenty-five pages on punishments?) and clothing before they arrived at the one labeled food. “If this is the amount per week and a meal is five- to eight-hundred and he needs four a day and gets one package of candies,” the man mumbled to himself while counting in his head, “yeah, that’s enough money. It leaves a small margin, so my plan to save up for basketball outings will not work out. His parents would need to pay extra for him to accompany the team.”

“Why that? I thought the school paid for their starters,” Tatsuya wondered.

“I can’t just expect him to immediately become a starter, can I? I know he is one of those basketball miracles but are they really that good?”

Basketball miracles? Tatsuya feigned being in the know and said: “I saw him in training. He is very good and I am sure he will be a starter soon.”

“Oh, really?” The teacher smiled brightly. “That’s good. It’s always good when the boys have something they can be proud of.”

Tatsuya had to smile at that. So this man was proud of his students and wanted their

best. It was nice to see. Just that one lunch with Murasakibara, he had seen the sneers, heard the whispered comments, felt the loathsome gazes on his skin. Guys like him were mercilessly picked on. He could only imagine how often his friend had gotten in trouble because he had reacted to that. It could explain those twenty-five pages of punishment. Tatsuya itched to read that file.

"I'll tell him he can up his meals to four. Will that suffice?"

"I'll accompany him to lunch and give you feedback." He indulged the man a bit by giving a winsome smile. It always made grown men swoon.

This one was not different at all in that regard.

Christmas had come early. Tatsuya could not think of anyone but Taiga who had ever smiled this much. To no surprise it had also been about food. Taiga had taught him what that black hole Alphas called stomach could be filled with. Watching Murasakibara eat was a lot like watching Taiga. He was just as ravenous, just as messy and just as happy. It made Tatsuya glad to watch.

He was also sure he had gained a friend for life. Murasakibara had hugged him after hearing how much more food he was allowed now due to Tatsuya's intervention. It was also the first time the giant had seem to caught on to the fact that Tatsuya was an Omega. He had simply said "You smell nice" and left it at that.

What disturbed Tatsuya had been his own reaction. He knew Murasakibara was an Alpha. He knew the guy as a freakishly tall basketball player. But he had been around basketball playing Alphas for years, so he was used to delicious male scents. He could safely say that no one – not even Taiga – smelled as good as this guy. If people called him a premium Omega, he was sure Murasakibara counted as a premium Alpha. And didn't that throw up some questions ... was intelligence important? The Alphas good at school and sports had always smelled better than the ones only good at sports. Smell and pheromones were something related to genes. So if Murasakibara had genes that made him this disabled, shouldn't he smell worse? Tatsuya tried that theory at their next practice, smelling the other guys on their team.

They did not appeal to him at all. So intelligence was something that changed the smell. Then why did Murasakibara smell as appealing as he did? Maybe his mental disability was not anchored in his genes? Could you get mentally disabled without being born that way? Most likely. But how could he solve that mystery? It wasn't like he could go up to Murasakibara and ask him why he was so dumb. Because he really was. Ten practices in and Tatsuya was sure he was able to appraise his teammates' intelligence. The captain was rather intelligent in comparison to the rest. Their shooter was also not the worst. But Murasakibara was. He really was the dumbest of all of them. Though there was one guy on the bench that did not talk, so Tatsuya wasn't a hundred percent sure.

But Murasakibara was far from bright even compared to the other mentally disabled boys. He could count to twenty but could only do calculus with numbers up to five. He could not play dice games because counting the dots on more than one dice was too much for him. He could read Katagana but not Hiragana. His writing was atrocious and nearly unreadable even to himself. He was a bit better at playing Memory but if Tatsuya had played seriously he would have won by a mile. They could play Uno and Murasakibara even won sometimes. It made him smile.

Tatsuya did notice how much he liked to make Murasakibara smile. So he played games with him or cooked with him in the evening – Murasakibara hadn't lied, he was a great baker – or simply challenged him to basketball games. As he had expected,

they were both chosen as starters soon after. The one point where Tatsuya was not at his happiest was when they did homework together. That normally meant working side by side. While Tatsuya leafed through his books and wrote pages of history summaries, poem interpretations and math thesis, Murasakibara colored his homework sheets. No joke. He took his crayons and drew butterflies. Every time Tatsuya tried to motivate him a bit, he just said: "I am too dumb for this."

## Kapitel 3: The question why

So Tatsuya went back to teacher Tsueda to ask him about Murasakibara. It was the first time he saw that blushing, coy face change to a halfway serious expression. The man said: "Mister Himuro, for one I am very glad that you still spent time with Murasakibara. He seems to have had friends in middle-school but before that he had always been alone. Those friends were his basketball teammates, so I am not too sure how deep that friendship ran. But like you, most of them seem to have been incredibly gifted students who could afford someone like Murasakibara in their circle without having to look down on him. What you described to me is exactly how I know him as well. He can only do calculus with numbers up to five and he won't learn more than that. In math I give him practical work, so he has to calculate prices for shopping items. It's so he knows what the ingredients for his favorite dishes cost and how much he can afford for the budget he might have in the future. We try to give all students the chance to live by themselves, even though most of them never will. Murasakibara is one of those that most likely never will but I am loath to give up hope. So I try to prepare him for the reality he will have to live in."

Oh. So that really was the best he could do? That was ... not a lot. It most likely was for him. Tatsuya could not even imagine that. What his friend had learned in ten years of school was what Tatsuya had learned in two or three months.

"Language is about learning to read and write. His writing really needs more work and that will be his main focus for the next three years. Some boys learn English, Murasakibara won't. Otherwise we have cooking classes which he excels in and a lot of practical skill classes like wood-working, sewing and some others. We also have music and art. Murasakibara is able to play one drum."

So he was in high-school to learn to write more legible and try to learn basic survival skills for living by himself. Why should he even live by himself? He could always live with one of his friends, couldn't he? But no, he would always feel like an underdog. If he were to live with people like him, they would need someone to look after them. Would he always live in a dormitory then?

"Do you think he'll be able to hold a job?"

"If someone is willing to guide him, sure. He is a great baker. Maybe he could work at a small bakery with a head baker who needs a helping hand. But try to imagine him in a baking faculty which bakes for hundreds of bakeries."

Tatsuya simply nodded. Even if it was just filling a pot with kilograms of sugar and flour, Murasakibara was likely to mess up counting the sacks he had to throw in. He would need someone to tell him which sacks to throw in and when to stop. What worked for baking one cake would not work for a baking company. Murasakibara's options were pretty limited.

"So what are his homework sheets about? Maybe I can help."

"That would be great!" Tsueda smiled. "Most of them are about Katagana. He is to redraw them twenty times or so. Instead I get back sheets filled with butterflies. I still haven't gotten why. Sometimes I have him draw the letter five times before letting him go but he still does not continue to draw it again later. He even has his earlier drawings right in front of his eyes. I don't get it."

Hm, yeah, that was mysterious. He was able to see, Tatsuya knew that from practice. Why draw butterflies when the letter was in front of him? He promised: "I'll try to find

out."

"Please do." Tsueda smiled. "His former teachers thought it was laziness and punished him, but I don't think that's it. He's always jealous when the other boys get candy for their homework and he doesn't. Something else seems to block him but he won't say, no matter how I ask."

Punished. As in beaten and taken food from? For drawing butterflies instead of Katagana? Tatsuya felt an unimaginable sadness well up inside of him. He could imagine a little boy with lavender-colored hair getting praised for his beautiful butterflies. And then he had to imagine a freakishly tall boy with the same hair getting beaten for drawing butterflies. Was Murasakibara even able to understand why people did that? Or was the world nothing but chaos to him? Maybe he was still that little boy that did not understand why drawing butterflies did not lead to pats on the head anymore.

When he went back to where he had left his friend (sitting outside under a tree) he found him drawing butterflies. He wasn't sure he had ever seen someone this content by simply looking at a butterfly flutter by.

Tatsuya did not understand why but he suddenly felt hot tears run down his cheeks.

In the evening Murasakibara colored his homework sheet. Tatsuya simply sat down next to him and watched him draw a butterfly. Should he just ask? But most likely teachers had asked again and again and failed. Maybe he should not start by asking. Maybe he should start by drawing a butterfly. He took a pink crayon and began to add his own butterfly to the sheet.

Murasakibara added dots to it and Tatsuya colored. His friend smiled at him. So he felt free to ask: "Shall we draw that letter together?"

After a nod from the other Tatsuya drew the first line. The giant added one, he did another. Murasakibara studied the original before adding the dots. Tatsuya praised him and tasked him with drawing the first line this time. After the next one he asked the other to do one himself. That seemed considerably harder but his friend did it. Tatsuya urged him to try again and Murasakibara drew one after the other until it became easy to him. As easy as drawing small characters was to a man with hands as large as the whole sheet.

"Well done. Teacher Tsueda will be proud of you tomorrow."

"Really?" Murasakibara smiled upon hearing that. "Do you think I'll get candy?"

"I hope so. If you do the task he sets you, you get some as a reward, right?"

"I never got candy for homework." He pouted.

"Well, you haven't done the task he set up to now, right?"

"What was the task?" The lavender-colored eyes looked at him questioningly.

"You were to draw this letter twenty times. Don't you remember that task?" Tatsuya felt his heart sink.

Really? Murasakibara had been punished because he couldn't remember the tasks? His friend shook his head. That was cruel, just cruel. Of course if someone asked him why he hadn't done his homework he would truthfully say that he couldn't remember. Teachers would get angry because they thought he lied. But he didn't lie. He really was unable to remember.

"Do you often forget things?"

Murasakibara just blinked. Yeah, stupid question. How was he to know if he had never known differently?

"Do you remember my name?"

"Muro-chin," his friend answered and smiled.

"Very good. How were you able to remember?"

Murasakibara sat up a bit and took something from his back pocket. It was a card made from thick paper which had a few names on it. On the top was Tsueda, then coach Araki, their captain and below was his own name with the label "beautiful", all of them in carefully drawn letter. The giant said: "Mama says names are very important. So I write down names I shouldn't forget."

"That's really smart." Tatsuya smiled while trying to hold back tears. Yes, he pitied his friend. This was just cruel. How did the guy survive? "Maybe you should write down your homework tasks."

"I'll try to remember."

Tatsuya made a mental note to talk about that with teacher Tsueda. Was it possible that with a file that thick people had missed his memory deficiency? How long did his memory last?

"Can you remember what we had for lunch?"

Murasakibara shook his head.

"Can you remember when you last had a snack today?"

The other patted his stomach as if he would be able to find out from that and guessed: "Dinner?"

"Yeah, you had one before dinner." And another right before homework which they had begun around a quarter of an hour before.

"Can you remember what was your homework today?" Tatsuya dreaded the answer a bit.

Murasakibara seemed to think for a second but shook his head.

So ... he did not remember what happened more than a minute before. That was bad. Time to test this: "Do you know what an elephant looks like?"

"Yeah, I saw one at the zoo." Murasakibara smiled.

"Did it have big ears?"

"So big!" The giant stretched his arms wide.

"Do you remember what we talked about before we talked about elephants?" Please let him remember, please, please, please. Tatsuya bit his lower lip.

"Homework?" Murasakibara glanced at the sheet in front of him. Well, maybe that had been too easy. Maybe he had guessed.

"Which animals did you draw on it?"

"Butterflies." He looked at them. "I like butterflies. They have so many colors."

"Can you remember which animals we talked about before?" Tatsuya balled his hands into fists.

Murasakibara blinked and finally said unsurely: "Butterflies?"

The Omega closed his eyes.

Teacher Tsueda looked as if he would cry any time now. He sighed and led Tatsuya to an empty classroom. His face looked grave as if he was about to give him very bad news. Well, maybe that was what was about to happen.

"Himuro, as you might know I am not allowed to tell anything about any of my students," the teacher said and sat down on a free chair, "but I owe you an explanation."

Tatsuya sat down in front of him. This was good but at the same time ... this would be hard.

"Most mentally disabled boys are born this way. They grow up with it and they are

slow but able to learn. It's different with Murasakibara. He was born normal but he had a car accident when he was four years old. Due to the bleeding he became like this. He's had memory problems ever since. Some days it's better, some days it's worse. You seem to have experienced a very bad day. I got from the file that normally, he can remember things for a bit. He's not completely unable to make new experiences. It's why he was able to learn as much as he did. And he does recognize you, doesn't he? So he can remember your face."

Yeah. He had been able to remember him. The coach, the captain and him. He had not recognized the punk that had quit the team after their first practice. He had not recognized their home-economics teacher. He only recognized the people written on his list without fault. He did remember some others but they seemed to need to be important for that to work.

So that was why he was like this. It was very hard for him to make new memories. Not only was he slow due to that, he was an oddity even among other mentally disabled boys. How was it possible for one sixteen-year-old to be so utterly alone?

"It's hard, right? I thought the same when I read that file."

"He's such a good boy. He is sweet and always tries his best. He has a great personality. He needs so little to be happy ... like butterflies." Tatsuya smiled sadly.

"He'll be in a suitable institute for the rest of his life. He'll have time to watch butterflies."

"He can't even reflect how sad his situation is." He shook his head.

"That's true. But maybe it's a blessing. He can enjoy life that way."

"Can he? Do you think he's happy?" Tatsuya looked up to see Tsueda's eyes.

"He looks happy to me. Especially now that you care for him. I sent his mother a picture and she said she hasn't seen him smile this earnestly for more than six years. He talks about you in class. All the boys are quite jealous, you know?" The teacher smiled at him. "I think half the class is in love with you."

Tatsuya blushed at that. He hadn't blushed for years! But how should you react to such a statement? Loads of people lusted after him but Murasakibara ... he had never let that on. He had marked him as "beautiful" to remember him by, so yeah, it seemed true. But his friend had never acted on it. Did he understand sexuality?

"Do you think he might be dangerous? I am an Omega after all."

Tsueda's face fell. Not only that, he looked like he had received a punch in the face. It took a moment for him to answer in a small voice: "His middle-school teacher wrote down that Murasakibara told him about raping an Omega. But the Omega in question denied that. He said it was consensual."

"So he does know what sex is?" That was worrisome.

"Very much so. The Omega seemed to have become pregnant and aborted the child. Murasakibara cried in class, it was how it came out. The class got sexual education after that. So he should know about sex and condoms." Tsueda looked at him for a longer moment. "Are you interested in him that way?"

"What?" Tatsuya looked up in shock. "No!"

"I was just wondering." The teacher held up his hands. "I did not mean to pry."

"Do you think he remembers?" The Omega only whispered.

"I did not dare to ask," Tsueda admitted. "He seems to like small children. His mother told me he likes to play with them. He's still a four-year-old inside, so they share the same interests. She asked him about family and he told her he wants children of his own one day. I just don't see anyone willing to marry him."

"Well, his pheromones are god-like." Did he really just say that? "He would have been

incredible without that accident. Tall, strong, smart, just perfect.”

“His father seems to be such an Alpha.” Tsueda shook his head. “He left the family after the accident. Murasakibara is an only child, he only has his mother left.”

Tatsuya sighed and shook his head. Such a pity. Such a waste. If not for that one accident ... well, that was most likely what everyone thought when they looked at him. Tatsuya should not even start with it. It was how it was. Murasakibara was mentally disabled and had memory problems. He was still a great basketball player and could draw colorful butterflies.

It was how it was.

## Kapitel 4: The topic of sex

Tatsuya waited for a quiet afternoon where they could sit outside and enjoy cake while watching the clouds. Peaceful. A good atmosphere to ask heavy questions: "Tell me about middle-school."

It had been on his mind for two weeks now. Had Murasakibara tried to court that boy? Had the Omega gone crazy for his pheromones? Had it been a miscalculated first heat which the giant had happened to walk into? But then the Omega would have been bitten. There had been no mention of mating. Did Murasakibara even get what had happened? Had anyone talked with him about it except for giving him sex-ed?

"Teiko?" The giant lazily turned his head. "Teiko was ... okay. We won a lot of games."

"Basketball?" Tatsuya guessed.

"Yeah, that. All three championships."

Holy shit. So their team won every year? He distinctly remembered Tsueda saying something like "basketball miracle". His teammate was damn good and he knew. So he had been on a great team before as well.

"That's impressive!" He smiled down at the giant lying on the grass. "Can you remember any teammates?"

"Akashi was our captain." Murasakibara held up his fingers to count them. "Mido-chin was our shooter. I hated Mido-chin. He was always nagging. Mine-chin was power-forward. Kise was small-forward. And there was Kuroko."

"What was Kuroko?" He knew the name Kise. Kise Ryouta was a model who had started playing in his second year of middle-school and was now a famous player. Tatsuya had read about him in Basketball Monthly.

"A phantom," the other man simply answered.

"What's a phantom?"

"Well ... he's invisible." Murasakibara shrugged his shoulders. "Our sixth man."

"You seem to like him."

"He's cute." The lavender-colored eyes focused on him. "He's even smaller than you."

"Hey, I'm tall for an Omega." Tatsuya punched the other's shoulder.

"He is an Omega too."

Oh. Had he been the Omega? The Omega Murasakibara had slept with? His voice did hold affection. Could he ask? "Were you in love with him?"

Murasakibara simply blinked.

"I mean, did you like him? As more than a teammate?" How to describe it?

"He was pregnant with my kid." The giant looked away, his face clearly distorted in sadness. "He aborted it."

Tatsuya's throat constricted. Oh god. Murasakibara was still hurting. Why did he even ask? Shouldn't he have known this would be painful? He was an idiot. He choked out: "Why?"

"He said he is too young for a child." The giant man curled up his legs and lay on his side away from his friend. "I don't believe him."

"You don't think he was too young?" Tatsuya blinked in surprise. Did Murasakibara know what having a child meant for an Omega?

"He was pregnant again a month later. He wanted to keep it." The other sounded petulant.

"Oh." Tatsuya balled his fists. Well ... it was understandable that he wanted a more

reliable Alpha. It was understandable that he wanted to spare Murasakibara. But though he was dumb, he wasn't this dumb. "It wasn't yours?"

"It was Aomine's. But he didn't want children. He punched Kuroko's stomach." The giant snorted. "I wouldn't have done that. That's bad. It hurts. It killed the baby. Aomine is evil."

Tatsuya could wholeheartedly agree. This Aomine guy had punched his pregnant mate to abort their child? That was plain horrible. Who came up with such a ... he didn't even want to think about that. It was disgusting. He told Murasakibara so.

His friend turned and looked at him. After a moment of silence one of those extremely large hands grabbed his and squeezed them. He said: "I would never hurt my mate. Mates are to be protected. Especially pregnant ones."

"You are right," Tatsuya said through his constricted throat, "Alphas are to protect Omegas, especially their mates."

"Coach Araki teaches us in manners. I wrote it all down. Just like you told me."

He could not do anything but pat Murasakibara's head as a reward. His heart felt like he was stabbed. His friend might not understand or know much but his heart was in the right place. Life was to be cherished, mates to be protected. It was basic but oh so important. And Murasakibara really did his best to learn.

Tatsuya moved over so that the lavender-haired man could lie his head on his lap. He began to stroke his hair, making Murasakibara hum in appreciation. Half a minute later he started asking questions again: "How come you aren't mated to Kuroko?"

"He wore a collar."

"Did he agree to have sex with you?" Did Murasakibara even know what that meant?

"The best player of the month got the right to hunt him. He agreed to that."

Tatsuya choked on his spit and had to cough. Holy shit. An Omega had agreed to being the team's bitch? Because there was no nicer word for that. He sincerely doubted that Kuroko had done so. Someone must have pressured him into that. Especially without protection. Did Murasakibara really mean a hunt as in those archaic events where a group of Alphas hunted down an Omega like a wild animal to be put down? Because those were organized rapes. They were forbidden in most countries due to their violent nature. A lot of Omegas had died in those events. Did Japan allow those?

"So he was given a head start when in heat and you tried to find him and raped him at the end of it?" he asked to avoid misunderstandings.

"What does rape mean?" Those lavender-colored eyes looked up at him.

"It's when you have sex with someone and would not stop if that person says no."

"He didn't say no." The other seemed lost in thought for a moment. "He only cried."

"Did that make you stop?" Tatsuya was not surprised by the shake of then head on his lap. "Then it was rape."

"Is rape a bad thing?" How come no one had ever taught this boy about that? Especially after it became known that he had impregnated a boy?

"Rape is a bad thing. It's called rape if the other person does not explicitly say he wants to have sex with you. Or if that person is under thirteen or dependent on you. Like if you are his boss or a senpai or a teacher."

"What if you get something for it? Like candy?" Murasakibara seemed very focused. It gave Tatsuya the chills. Had his teammate been raped?

"Then it's called prostitution. It's when you are paid for sex. It's forbidden in this country." Was that understandable? "I mean, you are not allowed to pay someone for sex and you are not allowed to get paid for sex."

"I got paid once. I never got paid again. I told my mama and she got angry at my

teacher. Then the teacher had to leave school." Murasakibara looked at him again. "I took his candy. Why didn't I get punished?"

"Maybe because you were so young?" Tatsuya thought he would choke any second now. "How old were you?"

"Don't remember." The lavender-colored eyes looked sad. "I was smaller than him." With his growth that must mean it had been in elementary school. "I got scolded for the time with Kuroko. Was that because I raped him?"

"Yes, I think so. But also because you got him pregnant. Do you know what condoms are?" Was he really giving sex-ed to his teammate? His really gorgeous, clueless, giant teammate?

"Our teacher told us about them. We tried them on on bananas. You wear them on your penis, so girls and Omegas do not get pregnant." Murasakibara gave him a proud smile. "Right?"

"Right." Tatsuya smiled back. "You did not wear one, so you got scolded for that too."

"But I wanted Kuroko to get pregnant." The smile faltered. "I like babies."

"Yes, but Kuroko did not want to get pregnant. It's not your decision, it's his. So you are only allowed not to wear a condom if your partner says he wants to have your kid. Understood?" This sounded so wrong. His friend did not know the first thing about what it meant to have a child. Could he explain that? Had Murasakibara even understood what he had been told up to now?

"So he wanted to have Aomine's baby but not mine?" The giant pouted. "Why not mine?"

There was a multitude of answers to that. How should he explain? Could he explain? It wasn't like he could just say "Go ask the person you raped". It wasn't as easy as that. Murasakibara would never get an honest answer. But he could only guess at Kuroko's reasons and take the most obvious: Because Murasakibara was unable to care for a baby.

"Is it because I'm dumb?" Those lavender-colored eyes sought his with a dulled sadness that spoke of years of abuse and degradation.

"No," Tatsuya felt compelled to say, even though it was most likely true, "one only has children with his mate. That's because a mate protects you and cares for you. A mate earns enough money so that you and your children can live from it. So when an Omega chooses a mate, he looks for someone that cares for them and earns enough money." Well, there was more to it than that but it was the gist of it.

"Aomine neither cared nor did he earn money."

"And Kuroko did not mate with him, right?"

"But he wanted to." Murasakibara thought for a moment. "Mine-chin would have been a bad choice."

"It sounds like that." Someone who punched a kid out of you was without a doubt a bad choice. "What happened to Kuroko?"

"He dropped out in our last year." There was another long moment of silence. "I think he did not like to be raped. He did not speak any more. He even stopped crying. I don't think he liked the hunts."

"No Omega likes hunts. They hurt. They are also forbidden," Tatsuya explained with controlled fury. So that Omega had been tortured and only escaped by running away. Were had the teachers been? Shouldn't they have reacted to the fact that a mentally disabled student had raped and impregnated someone?

"None of us got punished for hunting him," Murasakibara informed him.

"You should have been. All of you. Hunting an Omega is a very bad thing." But could

he really be angry with Murasakibara? He didn't even understand. Maybe now he understood a bit. "As a fellow Omega I feel angry and horrified by what your team did." Degrading one of their own team members to nothing more than an object for their satisfaction.

"Are you angry with me, Muro-chin?" Murasakibara sat up and looked him in the eye. Was he? It was more like being angry at everything and nothing at all. He was angry about the situation Murasakibara described. It wasn't really his fault. He was without question not able to be held responsible for what he had done. But wasn't that the worst kind of situation? This Kuroko most likely knew. What was it like to be raped by someone who would never get more than a scolding for doing so? Someone like Murasakibara wasn't likely to go to prison, right? Hopefully no one would ever get the idea. Prison did not make sense to someone who could not distinguish between right and wrong.

"What can I do to make you less angry?" The giant hung his head and sounded sad.

"I am not angry at you. I am angry at the situation. Who came up with this hunt idea? That person is to blame."

"Captain Akashi." Murasakibara looked up, a sullen expression on his face. "He's scary."

"And a bad person if he really made Kuroko agree to those hunts. No Omega ever wants to be hunted. If they say they do then they don't know what they are talking about or they have been pressured into saying so. This captain Akashi most likely pressured Kuroko into agreeing."

"And that's bad." Murasakibara nodded. "Hunts are bad. Rape is bad. And you have to wear a condom if the other person says so. And ... paying was bad too?" He used his fingers for counting off the new things he learned.

"It's called prostitution. It's not allowed. Some people work as prostitutes, they sell their bodies. But it's not really allowed and most of them don't want to do it. They have to because they need money for food."

"I had a lot of food money at Teiko." The giant smiled at the memory.

Tatsuya just balled his fists. Of course his friend had no deep emotional reaction, for him it was learning something new. But did he even get what he had done? How much he had hurt this Kuroko? No, he didn't get that. He most likely never would. It wasn't his fault, he was ... well, dumb. It was hard but true.

So they continued to talk about sweets and snacks.

## Kapitel 5: The InterHigh preliminaries

“Gather around!,” Coach Araki yelled.

The team followed that call, a few of them excited about the paper she had in her hands. This could only be one thing: The Interhigh match-ups. How many schools would they have to play? Where were the other good schools placed? Yosen had won their region’s preliminaries for six years straight, but it wasn’t like their victory was a given. Though Tatsuya had to be honest, he didn’t know how they could lose with Murasakibara on their side. Their training matches had been deeply impressive.

All his life he had played streetball as well as official games and faced a lot of good players. Taiga had been his rival, always an worthy opponent. But Tatsuya was sure that even Taiga would lose in an one-on-one with Murasakibara. He himself had played some one-on-ones against him and lost all of them. That young man that could not even get three plus three right was a genius on the court. Admittedly his fine movements were rather awkward. But who needed fine tuning when you could just grab the ball out of it’s flight? Or punch it down like a skilled volleyball spiker? Tatsuya had learned that Murasakibara had been a volleyball player in elementary school which had taught him his current ball control. All his brain power went into moving with the speed of a hurricane.

When he wanted to. Most days his friend was lazy and would only train to get his candy quota. He had a competitive spirit, so when you wanted to rile him up it was always effortless. But everyday training was something he found annoying and tried his best to wriggle out of. His best meant pouting, sighing and being a general nuisance to be around. Tatsuya found it hard not to smirk every time he saw that. In his opinion it was damn cute. His heart throbbed every time Murasakibara pouted like a child.

The other place that throbbed was a bit more disconcerting. Tatsuya was used to be around Taiga while his body screamed at him to release all pheromones, lie down and spread his legs. So it wasn’t hard to feel the same for Murasakibara but not act on it. Still it wasn’t like he had perfect control over his Omega instincts. He always sat next to the giant. He often touched his shoulders or arms. He stood next to him in the shower instead of using the shower stall he was meant to use. Thankfully Murasakibara was perfectly in control of himself. He never took the initiative to touch Tatsuya. He did growl at everyone that entered Tatsuya’s personal space and always minded it himself. Sometimes he sniffed Tatsuya when he was sad, angry or excited and seemed to act based on instinct to match the Omega. So Tatsuya was free to cuddle up to or dance around Murasakibara freely without being bothered with unwanted advances for it.

He felt safe with Murasakibara. That thought was strange because he had never felt particularly unsafe. He was the only child of two Alpha parents who had always fiercely protected him without restraining him in any way. He had parents that gave him wings while making sure he did not fall. So feeling this safe was something new. Even Taiga had never given him such a feeling. He did not understand the difference. Why was it better with Murasakibara?

He was still contemplating this while he listened to Coach Araki explain the preliminaries. There would be 66 schools competing to be allowed to join the Interhigh quarterfinals. They were not allowed to lose even one game. There were

seven serious contenders in their block and a few other schools seemed to have added foreign students which might prove difficult. The games would be held in Sapporo and the first string would get a week without school to play those games. If they won they would get a long weekend for the finals.

Sweet! One week without school sounded mightily fine. As expected Murasakibara and him were starters, so they would get the whole trip for free. While they others went back to their training Coach Araki called for him. He went over and greeted her with a wide grin.

"You seem excited about the Interhigh," she said with a indulgent smile.

"I sure am! Our team is strong, we can take on anyone."

"We'll see about that. Himuro-kun, you know that the school pays for this trip, right?" He nodded.

"Normally this is a trip for about fifteen Alphas and myself. I never had an Omega in the team before. So the school pays my room and group rooms for the team. I don't think it a good idea to let you room with the boys, so I am at a loss what to do. I asked the principal and he gave me special allowance for one double-room. Now the question is if that is possible or if I should put more pressure on the principal."

"I'm okay with rooming with Murasakibara. He knows how to keep his hands to himself," Tatsuya said full of conviction.

"Are you sure? He seems to listen to you without fault but our boys ... well, sometimes they do unexpected things. He is an Alpha after all. And I don't think any of us could stop him if he put his head into doing something. We have some Betas on this team, don't you thin-"

"No, thank you. I feel safe with Murasakibara. You don't have to worry about me."

Coach Araki looked at him for a few seconds before she nodded and said: "I'll inform your parents about your decision. They have to give their consent as well."

"I'll talk to my mom about it," Tatsuya promised.

"Then I'll call her tomorrow." She looked at the training players. "Five more laps." He took that as his cue to leave.

"Hey, mom."

"Tatsuya-darling!" His mother sounded enthusiastic. "Has the world come to an end? Or what makes you call in the middle of the week?"

"I wanted to tell you that my coach will call you tomorrow about the trip to the Interhigh preliminaries."

"Of course you can go. But you know that already, don't you? Were will you go and when?" As always she fully supported his basketball career.

"We'll go to Sapporo for a week the one after next. If we win there, we'll go to the Interhigh finals."

"Splendid. Keep me informed how you do. I wish you the best of luck. Is that one player coming with you that you told me about?"

"Yeah, Murasakibara is coming too. We are both starters. He's our center, I'm the shooting guard now. Coach Araki is going to call you about him. It was decided that I am going to room with him," he explained to his mother.

"Don't worry, dear, we can pay a bit extra for a single room, don't worry-"

"No, mom, you don't need to. I'm fine with rooming with him."

There was a moment of silence before his mother asked in a suspicious tone: "Is there something I should know, Tatsuya?"

"Not at all, mom. He's a decent guy. I like being around him and he makes me feel

safe. He would never force me or anything. So I have no problem to room in with him."

"But he is an Alpha, isn't he?" His mother did not sound convinced.

"Yeah, he is. Nearly everyone is, you know that. The whole school is full of Alphas. I'll wear a collar if it makes you feel safe," he promised.

"It's not my safety I'm worried about, you know? I am the last to say that every Alpha is a beast but he's sixteen, right? Sixteen-year-olds aren't known for their perfect control over their hormones. I don't want you to accidentally end up with someone and regret it later."

"Same here, mom. I'll wear a collar, don't worry." He rolled his eyes.

"And take a package of condoms with you."

"I'm not going to sleep with him!," he shouted before looking around that no one had heard him. How embarrassing! Good thing that there was no one around.

"You can never be sure about that, believe me. Just pack some, okay? I do know you aren't a virgin, don't even try to lie to me," his mother scolded him gently, "you are really too damn attractive for your own good."

"If you know that much, you should know I am capable of protecting myself," Tatsuya sullenly answered. But maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. While he wouldn't sleep with Murasakibara, they were going to a tournament full of muscled Alphas. Who knew who he might meet there. "You're so embarrassing, mom."

"I only want your best. Now what shall I tell your coach?"

"That it's okay that I am rooming in with an Alpha and can take responsibility for myself."

"We'll see about that. If you're pregnant, don't be afraid to call me. Youthful bravado would be unnecessary in such a situation. Don't even dare to start forging my signature."

"So, so embarrassing!" He shook his head. He took everything back, his mom was a demon.

"I love you too!" She blew him a kiss over the phone.

He simply ended the call.

Tatsuya was given the message that teacher Tsueda wanted to speak to him, so he went to the teacher's lounge three days before their trip to Sapporo. The teacher asked him if he felt up to taking some responsibility for Murasakibara and managing his spending money for sweets, so that he could have some everyday. He would normally ask their coach but if Tatsuya spend every free minute with him, it made more sense to give him the responsibility. Of course he agreed. By now he knew how to speak with Murasakibara. They had made countless trips to supermarkets and confectioneries where he had to talk his friend out of trying to buy more than he had the money for. These last few weeks he had even been able to explain a bit about saving up money to get things he would not be able to buy with his daily allowance. Murasakibara had been very proud of his strawberry cake which he had needed to save up for for three days. The sweetest moment had been when the normally very greedy giant had offered him a spoonful of cake.

So he got seven days worth of daily allowances for sweets (their teacher was entrusted with the general food money) and a thumbs-up from teacher Tsueda. He helped Murasakibara with the packing and thereby found out that his friend lived in a dorm with supervisors. The young man had to prepare his clothes for the next day every evening. There was a daily plan that included brushing their teeth twice a day and showering once every morning. Murasakibara had his own personal plan in which

he noted down the fulfilled tasks (which were written down with pictures beside them). Those plans were controlled every evening and if the boys did not fulfill their plans their allowances were cut. Tatsuya packed seven copies of the plan and told Murasakibara that he would control them and give him his allowance depending on how well he did. Murasakibara pouted about that. Later he asked the dorm supervisor about Murasakibara's quirks and was told that his friend often forgot toothpaste when he brushed his teeth. So the supervisor controlled his breath.

Well, teacher Tsueda had told him that his friend was still a four-year-old in his head. Of course he tried to weasel out of brushing his teeth and putting his room into order. He was unable to see the bigger picture. So Tatsuya was not surprised that Murasakibara had problems with following basic hygienic rules. He was rather surprised about the competence with which the dorms handled that. He would not have thought of controlling someone's breath or making a picture plan. Because Murasakibara had some of those: One picture plan how to correctly brush his teeth (laminated of course), one how to shower (laminated as well), one how to dress at which temperature (he would have to guess every morning, he did not have a thermometer on him). Tatsuya promised to return on the morning of their departure to pack those as well. When the supervisor happened to walk by, he even told Tatsuya to let Murasakibara pack for their way back and only supervise his packing. The giant grumbled about that and got scolded for letting his friend pack in the first place.

So they started well equipped into their trip. Tatsuya was sure that he had packed everything Murasakibara would need (including a plush panda for homesickness), even if that meant that his friend was carrying a bag twice as large as everyone else's. As expected that did not hinder him at all. Tatsuya had to hold back from asking if his friend would not only carry his bag but himself as well. Most likely he could. But he knew it was his Omega side speaking. Of course he would not ask his giant friend to carry him around. But it was tempting. No, Murasakibara was not boyfriend material, he should refrain from thinking about him like this. He was happy to look out of the window on the train and he followed Tatsuya step by step wherever he went, trusting him to lead the correct way. The Omega allowed him to buy some snacks at the train station for that. From there they took a bus to their hotel and finally arrived after some hours. Tatsuya felt bored out of his skull while Murasakibara seemed completely content with being dragged around the country. Gone was the dull laziness, there was a spark in his gaze. He seemed to enjoy traveling. Maybe. The spark was actually rather recent.

"Tatsuya, you and Murasakibara have room four," Coach Araki told them.

"Huh?," Fukui asked, their rather punk-looking point-guard. He was the only third-year Alpha who wasn't mentally disabled. Aside from holding inspirational speeches he was more of a captain than Omura but their power forward fit the needed image more. "You're rooming together?"

"I need someone to protect me." Tatsuya winked at Fukui, knowing he would get the hint about who was looking after whom here.

"Oh, yeah, sure." The other nodded and looked at Murasakibara. "It's your responsibility that our princess stays unharmed."

Tatsuya would have punched him if he had not used the address Ohime-sama. Like this it sounded like a compliment instead of an insult. It made the rest of their team nod in understanding. Only those intelligent enough to notice that their exchange made no sense furrowed their brows – the nerd first-year and a surprisingly normal looking second year who were on the bench.

Tatsuya turned to his charge and found that one looking at him with surprisingly serious eyes. He swallowed his laugh and asked in a slightly cautious tone: "Shall we look for our room?"

Murasakibara just nodded but seemed to continue to study him. Or maybe he thought really hard. He sometimes looked like this when he couldn't decide which snacks to choose. He followed his friend up the stairs to a room that contained ... a bunk bed.

Tatsuya stared at the ugly thing right out of a school nightmare. Of course their school would not pay a first-class hotel but a youth hostel with bunk beds? Really? They were the reigning regional champions, did that count for nothing? He checked the bathroom and found a tube of sixty by sixty centimeters. Was this a joke?

"You smell unhappy," Murasakibara remarked. "Why?"

"The room is so cheap." Tatsuya sighed. "I was expecting two single beds and a proper tube, not this ... well, it's tiny. You won't even fit in the bed."

His friend just shrugged his shoulders and said: "It's always like that. Everything is too small."

"Well, this is too small even for me." He looked at the bunk bed. "I guess you want the lower one?"

"I crashed one when I was twelve. I am not allowed on the top bed," Murasakibara explained to him.

"I'd rather not have you crushing me, yes." Tatsuya looked up at the higher bed. "No other choice, I guess."

"I could sleep on the floor." The other man offered.

"Nah, you would wake with kinks in your back. We need you on the court. I'll survive."

He hung his jacket and opened his bag to begin unpacking. "Let's begin with doing the beds."

Murasakibara nodded and got out the linen. Tatsuya proudly watched him from the corner of his eye doing all those mundane tasks. Someone must have spent a great deal of time teaching all those everyday tasks to his friend. Was it his mother? Or had he been sent to special institutes and schools all his life? When had been the last time he lived at home? Teiko and Yosen were both boarding schools. Had his elementary school been one as well? How did his mother cope with her son being like this? Was she able to show love or could she only show regret?

Somehow he did not dare to ask.

## Kapitel 6: The first game

They had met up for sight-seeing, dinner and getting their essentials from a supermarket before they were sent to their rooms and Coach Araki reminded them to meet up at seven for their morning run. Even though they had a game tomorrow, she would not diverge from their daily schedule. While that did not make sense in an athletic way, it was a sensible plan for their team that was mostly made up of guys that needed a daily routine with as few changes as possible.

So Tatsuya set a timer, oversaw Murasakibara's morning routine – and man did the guy try to cheat out of about everything – and spurred him a bit when they were nearly late for their morning run. Tomorrow he would have to set the timer earlier, Murasakibara was slow in everything he did. Not even telling him he would need to get up sooner if he did not hurry seemed to have any effect. It only made him even slower, it was infuriating. Well. He now had an inkling what looking after Murasakibara meant.

Their coach still gave him an approving nod when she saw the giant. While jogging – she drove in front on a bicycle – she thanked him for taking over Murasakibara's care. Normally she was the one to control all daily schedules but it seemed like all the other guys needed a lot less control than their miracle. She had been unsure how to manage him as well as all the others. Though she also reminded him that she would take over the moment he felt like it was becoming too much. She did not want him to feel pressured into doing this. He assured her that looking after Murasakibara was the least of his problems – his hurting back was more of a concern actually – but he would tell her if it ever bothered him.

She spoke even lower when she asked him if Murasakibara had made any untoward moves. Tatsuya just smiled at her and shook his head before saying: "You don't need to worry about that. He's a very decent man no matter his faults. All of them here are perfect gentleman. Murasakibara tells me that you teach them manners and always remind them to be nice and courteous around Omegas."

"But ... well ... I wouldn't be too sure that nothing happens when pheromones come into play," she cautiously said.

"I wouldn't share a room with just any of them, yeah. But Murasakibara is not like that. He really tries hard to learn right from wrong and he knows what rape means. I wouldn't trust him around every Omega on the planet but I have no concerns in regard to myself. I can tell him if he crosses a line and he reacts to that without fault."

"I hope you know what you do." Coach Araki sighed in concern. "Still, please wear your collar, okay? I could not face your parents if something happened to you."

"I will do that for the tournament, yes." He just didn't want to. It felt suffocating. It marked him as Omega and most people liked to reduce him to that. If he could take a jog in between his teammates without having to wear the damn thing he wanted to take the opportunity. He wanted to feel safe for once. Completely safe. Not only safe because of all of his bravado but because he could trust the people he was with.

For a moment he even wondered what it was like to be the team's bitch. Not in the sense of having someone pressure you into it but choosing it out of your free will because every one of them had your full trust. It somehow sounded nice in the abstract but he would not want the reality. He did not trust all of them. But he did trust Murasakibara. So he would not wear a collar in their room. No concerned adult

would persuade him to give up that freedom.

It was even worse than in America.

The looks. The whispered comments. The snickering. The unbelieving gazes. The leering. Being an Omega – the only Omega player – in a gymnasium filled with over sixty teams and hundreds of spectators was beyond uncomfortable. As always he did his best not to let it bother him. But it really had been easier when there had still been at least some Omegas around. He had not expected to be the only one.

They put their stuff down on the bank next to court where they would play their first game and lined up on the end of it. After a greeting they stepped on the print to begin their warm-up. Of course that was the point to be bombarded with comments from the rival team. That was normal. In America it had been fitting behavior to insult about anything you could find because in the game insulting would lead to fouls. So you tried to demoralize the other team beforehand. He had expected it. He said it to himself again and again.

"Is that an Omega? I thought Yosen was the regional champion. Why would they need an Omega on their team? Are they that bad? I thought we would lose the first round but seems like we are in luck. Yosen seems to be a lot weaker than we thought. Hey, Taizaki, look there, they have a mascot! Look at that butt. Omegas are really something else."

Tatsuya just ignored them. It was hard not to shudder in repulsion at the last part but he was used to this. This was normal. Everything would think it strange if he said something against it. But, man, did he want to ... did he really have to take this abuse? It was unfair. Was he making derogatory comments about Alpas? No, right? So why were they allowed to?

"Hey, beauty. Hey, you there!," one of them called out to him. "Are you ignoring us, bitch?"

There was a loud thud that somehow did not sound intentional. Tatsuya glanced over his shoulder and saw one boy on the other team curse while he held his nose. There was a basketball rolling away from him, painting the floor slightly red with blood that seemed to have splattered onto it.

"Sorry~," Murasakibara called over, "The ball slipped." He took a few strides over to the middle line. "Were you hurt?"

"What the fu-," the hurt boy suddenly stopped his rant as he looked up to the other young man more than a head bigger than him.

"So sorry." The Alpha did not sound sorry at all. "Shall I bring you to the medic?"

"Nah, man, we'll escort him," one of the other boys said and tucked at the hurt one's upper arm. "Sorry to have bothered you."

"Sure." Murasakibara looked at the ball. "Go disinfect the ball, will you?"

"Yeah, of course." A third boy had joined them and took the ball before leading the others away. "Sorry, see you later."

Murasakibara just waved after them.

Tatsuya blinked in surprise and looked at his friend who just patted his head while he turned to get on with his warm-up. For the rest of their game no one from the other team bothered him. When they left in the evening he just walked next to his friend and did not let the comments and looks bother him.

Due to the fact that they took showers next to each other in the communal showers Murasakibara knew that Tatsuya had no problem with his nudity. And he really had

not. At least he had never had them. His friend was good-looking, yes, he had nice pheromones, yes, but he wasn't boyfriend material. So Tatsuya had never been interested in him.

Until now. Even before Murasakibara had sometimes acted like a mate around him. When boys in the school looked down on Tatsuya his friend had always been there. So why were today's events different? Why had that one basketball to some insignificant boy's face changed anything? It made no sense. But when Murasakibara walked out of the shower Tatsuya could not avert his gaze.

Why? Why indeed. Something had changed. The fact that Murasakibara was hung like a horse had been a passing thought before. Now his cock looked downright tasty and the place between the Omega's legs ached to be filled. So Tatsuya changed into his clothes as fast as he could and ran from their locker. Of course that would only stall the inevitable. Murasakibara and him lived in one room. There was nowhere to run. Tatsuya checked the collar and thankfully found it tightly clasped upon his throat. Would Murasakibara smell his willingness on him? Some Alphas could. It was an open invitation. Would his stupid giant get that? He had to admit he adored the guy but still ... this was such a bad idea. He should not sleep with Murasakibara, no matter what his body wanted. But for fun? His teammate was hot. But they were also on the same team and in the same school. Others already thought they were a pair. Now was that good or bad? Did he want to be known as the boyfriend of someone not even able to tie his own shoelaces?

Everyone would think that Murasakibara had taken advantage of him. No one would ask if he might be the one taking advantage of the other. Was his friend even able to consent in sex? His IQ was most likely too low to be legally allowed to count as willing because he was unable to understand the full implications of deciding to sleep with someone. So was Tatsuya even allowed to sleep with Murasakibara? Hard question. Should he ask his coach? It would be the sensible decision but ... well ... it was not a question he was looking forward too. But he had their room key so he would have to face Murasakibara sooner than later.

He called his coach on the phone and asked for their current location. Of course they had gone to eat and Coach Araki had been just about to call him. She asked if he was alright – she sounded a lot more concerned about his well-being than he himself was. He told her that he was fine but that he wanted to talk about something after dinner. She consented and they finished the call.

He found the others in a ramen shop. Murasakibara was slurping his third bowl, their captain and some others were on their second. Tatsuya ordered a small plate of gyoza. His friend asked if he was sick but he just shook his head. Murasakibara looked at him a bit longer before asking if anyone else had bothered him. The Omega declined but wore a proud smile after that. The other must have thought long and hard to come up with that question.

Back at the hotel Tatsuya gave him their room key and told him he would come back later. Coach Araki led him outside again to a bar he was definitely not allowed to enter. With a smirk on his lips he followed her in and waited until she got her ordered beer. They sat in a quiet booth where their coach led out a sigh and said: "Well, now I am all ears."

"Do you often take students here?" Tatsuya grinned.

"No, you sly fox, and you know that. My job is getting harder every year. What began with a few special students mixed in is now a reformatory school. Mentally deficient Alphas, troublemakers and a few Omegas mixed in-between, that's all we have now.

So the basketball team is nothing but a group of needy Alphas by now. I shouldn't depend on you this much but I am really happy to have an Omega with me on this trip. I love my boys but they're a handful and it's getting worse every year. So whatever I can do to keep you satisfied, just name it."

"Do I get a drink?" He eyed the bar. Who would pass up on such an opportunity?

"You can have juice, insolent brat."

"Worth a try." He shrugged his shoulders. "I wanted some advice."

She made a hand-gesture that told him to go on.

"You asked me if I was in a sexual relationship with Murasakibara." She looked completely unimpressed by that start. "Just for the record, I am not. But ... I have been thinking about it."

"Dumb men are great in bed but they tend to make horrible husbands. It's what I tell every rowdy Alpha that ever tried a relationship with one of our mentally deficient students. It never went well and often caused problems because the boys wouldn't understand why they were left. Their intelligence is nothing they can change, so being left for it is always a blow. It's why I try to nip those ideas in the buds. It causes too much heartbreak and often I lose players that way. I really don't want to lose either of you two, you are our aces." She took a deep draft of her beer. "Murasakibara is certainly eye-candy and I am not above saying so. His pheromones put everyone else to shame. I can totally see the attraction. But you are the one living with him right now. You should know best how much work he is. He needs constant care, a very precise schedule and you cannot leave him alone. Without supervision he would do nothing but eat and sleep. I am deeply thankful that his sexual urges seem so well-controlled. I had others who masturbated in lockers or the communal showers and I had to be the one to discipline them. You can't imagine how many naked boys I have seen in the last few years."

"I can. I shower with them. The captain is good at disciplining unruly students. He is preaching your rules from the heart."

"Okamura is a good boy. I'll be sad to see him go next year." She shook her head.

"Honest question: Would you mate with Murasakibara?"

"No," he said immediately. That was easy.

"And that is why you should not start an affair with him. We teach the boys that sex is meant for marriage or their mating bond. Teaching them about more than that would just be too much. Yes, they want to have sex. They can have sex with each other, okay. But others often hurt them or they get into a position where they are accused of hurting someone. It's a lot easier to tell them to look for a partner who they want to have sex with. And before they do, they have to come to us get a lecture about safe sex and how to prevent misuse."

"Then I am here for that." Tatsuya leaned back on his chair. "I know that it would just be an affair and I have to explain that to him before. I don't want him to be hurt when I move on. He is precious to me after all. I also don't want to misuse him. Honestly I am more scared of that than being misused myself." He lowered his gaze. Maybe he should just listen to her? It had never ended well. Really, Murasakibara did not want only sex. He had said himself that he wanted a partner and kids. If he was asked, would he even be able to decline?

"And for how long? Until the end of high-school? Until you find someone else? Murasakibara is the simplest of them all. Even if you explain that it is just an affair he will fall for you and his heart will stay with you forever. In their heart all of them are pure because they do not conceive deception. They take things at face value. If you

kiss him, you will be his boyfriend for him. You can explain that you don't want to mate with him but he will only wait for you to change your mind. If they give their body, they give their heart. They don't hold back in that. No explanation in this world can change that, it might only reduce the hurt a bit." Her beer was down to half. She had slumped a bit, staring at him over the rim of her glass. There was no judgment in her eyes, even though it was clear that she did not support his idea.

"You mean I will play with his heart and I will hurt him no matter what I do?" He let out a deep sigh and looked at the ceiling. "Shit."

They shared a moment of comfortable silence. Tatsuya had the feeling his brain was working on something, even though his conscience sounded blissfully silent. He let it. The words would come to him, he was sure. His mouth opened and he was surprised himself by what came out: "And what if I thought there might be a possibility that I may choose him as my mate?"

"Then I have nothing against it." Araki blinked. "Though I would honestly question your taste."

"I am questioning my sanity right now." He closed his eyes. "But yeah ... he is pure. He loves with all of his heart, all of his being. I got a glimpse of what it would mean to be his all and everything. I have to admit that it sounds tempting."

She smiled at him, tilted her head and said: "You wanted an affair, so you wouldn't fall for him, right?"

He laughed rather desperately. Oh, she got him. Yes, now that he thought about it, that was it. He had thought about giving Murasakibara his body and retracting his heart. His heart belonged to Taiga after all. Or so he had thought ... now that he thought about it, he had not wondered about Taiga in the last weeks at all. Murasakibara had completely taken his place. Three years of unrequited longing and one lavender-colored guy wiped it all off the plate in one swoop.

It filled him with panic. He leaned forward and pushed his hair out of his face before saying: "I can't fall for him. He really isn't mating material. Why am I falling for him? Why is my head conjuring up possibilities of being with him? I have tons of Alphas vying for my hand and my head really wants him? It makes no sense at all. And at the same time it does because really he ... he is so deserving of love."

"Himuro, you have already fallen for him," Coach Araki informed him.

"I have, right?" He groaned. "I'm so screwed."

The woman just smiled at him in sympathy.

## Kapitel 7: What is love?

Tatsuya knocked on his own door and gave Murasakibara a slightly loopsided smile when he opened the door. His goal had been to crash on the bed but he was unable to even reach it. The room was a mess. Clothes, toiletries, everything was on the floor.

"What the hell have you done in here?" Tatsuya shook his head.

Murasakibara just hung his head.

He stepped close to him and looked into his face from below. He was met with silence. After a moment of calming he decided on an ultimatum: "Well, you can either tell me the truth and I might decide on a lesser punishment or you stay silent. In that case you will have to get everything in order by yourself and you won't get sweets for three days."

"I was hungry," his friend mumbled.

"Yeah?" Tatsuya tapped his foot.

"So I wanted to buy food." Murasakibara looked to the side. "So I was looking for money."

"You thought I might have hid money between the clothes?" Where exactly was the logic in that?

"Mom hid sweets between her clothes. She thought I wouldn't find them there."

Tatsuya just shook his head and explained: "For one people normally don't hide things between their clothes. Secondly it is very rude to snoop through someone else's things. And even if you do that, which you should not, just throwing clothes out is very mean. Now those clothes will have to be ironed and refolded."

"All of them?" The lavender-colored eyes widened.

"Yes, all of them. And that will be your job if you want your candy like normal."

Murasakibara looked close to tears, gnashing his teeth in frustration. It made the Omega feel bad for a moment but the supervisor had warned him not to let his friend's tears, pleas or angry outbursts make him falter.

"You knew I would be angry, right?" Tatsuya sighed. "Why haven't you started on refolding the clothes at least?"

He was only met with silence. Murasakibara had balled his hands into fists. Just like a scolded child that did his very best not to run away in anger and slam a door. Tatsuya took pity on him and enfolded one of those hands in his. He felt his friend relax slightly at the gesture, so he offered: "I'll help you, okay? Go stand at the table, I'll bring you the clothes and I'll put them away after you folded them."

Those lavender-colored eyes looked at him for a moment before his friend nodded and went to stand at the tall but small table at the side of the room. Tatsuya picked up the first shirt that would not need to be ironed and brought it over. One by one they put the shirts in order, then the shorts, the jeans, the pullovers ... it was a damn lot of work. Murasakibara had ripped everything from wardrobe, even his own things. How desperate must he have been? How hungry?

"I tried," Murasakibara mumbled into the silence.

"Hm?" Tatsuya was just picking up their toiletries.

"You asked why I did not start to put everything back. I tried. I just ... got lost. I didn't know where to start," his friend finally admitted.

Tatsuya blinked in surprise for a moment before he patted the other's head and said: "Next time just tell the truth. If you apologize, people won't be as mad."

"I'm sorry I made a mess of your clothes."

"Very good. Now let's iron the rest and then we can go to bed."

Murasakibara nodded. Both of them ignored his growling stomach. Tatsuya just made a mental note to speak with Coach Araki about the food allowances. Three portions just weren't enough for the giant. So they ironed clothes at ten in the evening while Tatsuya asked himself how he had fallen for this guy.

Coach Araki consulted her food allowances sheet the next morning, then her notes on each individual player before apologizing and saying: "I miscalculated his food expenses. I'm sorry. I'll take responsibility and pay the rest from my own money."

"Really?" That was no small amount. "You know ... I thought about that myself but it's really a lot."

"I'll try to get it back from the school. It was my mistake. But I don't want my students to go hungry. Thank you for looking after him like that."

If she only knew. He had two and a half hours of refolding and ironing to show for that. Oh well, it was how it was. It wasn't like Murasakibara had had a phone and could have called him. He also wouldn't have gone out to ask others for money. He had been told to stay in the room, so he did. Just like a hungry, caged animal. Tatsuya knew that the other tried his best not to do wrong. So he didn't whine when people told him he had enough. He didn't go begging others for money. He just held his cramping stomach and tried to endure.

"Hey, Murasakibara." The other looked up. "Coach said it's okay to have more food today and for the rest of the trip. I hope you won't go hungry again."

"Thank you, Muro-chin." He smiled his wide and happy smile.

"No worries." Tatsuya petted his hair before sitting down himself and enjoying his breakfast.

They had two games that day. Both weren't too hard and they were starting to move and act like a team more and more. They just left Murasakibara under their hoop, it seemed to be a good strategy. At lunch Himuro charmed the event's caterer into giving him an extra lunchbox, so that Murasakibara could have two and the rest of his. As those were actually made for bulky basketball players he was unable to finish his own. His friend happily shoved food into himself. Adding the four dinners he got they finished the day in satisfaction. Tatsuya could read a bit of his book and Murasakibara played with a box of Lego.

From time to time Tatsuya watched him do it. The supervisor had said that his friend had Lego to learn some fine motor skills and regulation of his strength because the very small pieces easily broke or got lost. Building something with them seemed quite the challenge and he heard the other swear more than once before sending him a fearful gaze if he would get scolded for it. Most likely he should scold him but he found it much too endearing. Just like when he played robbers and cops with his self-build police car – which only loosely resembled a car, let alone a police car – and his stuffed panda.

The next day found them playing a rather strong school whose video they had watched yesterday evening. Tatsuya had taken note of the taunts they threw, so it wasn't unexpected when he became a target at warm-up.

"Look, it's the team's bitch. Hey, beauty, wanna suck my cock too?," one of them leered.

He simply continued practice. His team was there, his Murasakibara was there. No

reason to get upset. Though the next part was a bit harder to ignore: "I bet your ass feels nice and wet. Though it won't be tight anymore with those guys pounding into you."

He sunk another three, taking up another ball and sinking the next. Just ignore them. He was above such petty comments. He knew his worth.

"Aaah ... guess you know all about handling balls with those delicate hands. I bet you remember all the guys you sucked when you hold one in your hands."

His shot missed. But he felt Murasakibara who had stretched behind him until that moment get up to his full height and ask: "Can I crush them?"

He was tempted to say yes. Oh so tempted. But then his friend would be banned from the court and they could not afford that. So he answered: "Crush them with your basketball skills. Do you think you are able to block every one of their shots?"

Murasakibara just smirked and went to ask their coach for a hair tie. It was how Tatsuya learned that for one his friend looked stupidly sexy with his hair drawn back and secondly that he had a much higher gear than he had shown them up to now. They ended the game 87-0.

He heard the other team whisper how Murasakibara was a monster, a freak, a beast. Whispers, disgusted glances, snorts. So the giant had to live through the exact same shit he did. He looked up to see if his friend listened and yes, he did. His stoic face showed nothing but Tatsuya could see the tightness around his jaw. So he got onto his toes, kissed said jaw and whispered into his friend's ear: "Today you are my hero." It was only fair, right? Murasakibara defended him, he defended the other. His friend grinned and said with a finger pointing at himself: "Atsushi."

"My hero Atsushi?" Was this his way of asking him to call him by his first name?

The other nodded vigorously and smiled as if Christmas had come early.

Coach Araki asked him at dinner if she should plan to talk with Atsushi this evening about his offer. Tatsuya was still riding his high of having his friend defend him like this today but did he really want him as a boyfriend? Sex, future prospect and everything? He suddenly felt shy. He had had one-night-stands but he had never had a real relationship. Should he really start with someone that needed so much attention to keep his life in order? They would never be equal partners. He would always have to care for his friend. He was only sixteen, should he really make such a weighty decision at this age?

He wasn't deciding about mating with him right here and now. Being boyfriends was kind of like a trial phase. And yeah, he wanted to try. He wanted to know what it was like to be loved by Atsushi. He wanted more than just talking and pats on the head. He wanted Atsushi's hands in his hair, on his body, in his ... oh well. Yeah, he was in love. He recognized all the signs. He would never get it out of his system if he did not try.

He nodded to his coach. She asked again if he was sure. So he said: "I am not sure, I am fucking scared. But I want to try. Maybe this will go wrong spectacularly, maybe it will ... I don't know. I am not even sure what is scarier. That it goes wrong or that it goes right? Because if it goes right, then ... I might even decide to spend the rest of my life with him. That thought scares me more than anything. But I want to ... to see if an "us" can work. I want to know. Even if it might work out."

His coach just looked at him for a long moment before nodding. So back at the hotel she asked Atsushi to speak with her. His friend send him a fearful glance, so he nodded encouragingly. He even whispered: "Don't worry, I haven't told her about yesterday."

It made Atsushi follow her with a smile.

Tatsuya felt his heart break in tiny pieces and glue back together. Atsushi was so damn cute. His hero Atsushi. Gods, it was so wonderful and hurt so much to think about him. It was even worse than when Taiga left. Love was such a horrible thing. Tatsuya felt like giggling like a middle-school girl.

He sat on Atsushi's bed biting his lip. Would his friend say yes? Would he like to be his boyfriend? Should he have gone with their coach? No, he would have only influenced his friend just by sitting there. But he wanted to know! Would Atsushi say yes? Did his friend like him that way? He was protective and he found him beautiful, that had to mean something, right? Gods, please let Atsushi say yes. Maybe she should have timed this better. What if Atsushi said no? Could he even look the other in the eye? Tatsuya bit his nails before reminding himself that nail care was an important thing for shooters and he had stopped the habit eight years ago. No nail-biting! Gods, he wished Atsushi would come back. Just what were they talking about? What took him so long?

Tatsuya let out a shaky breath and stood. If he wanted his nails to survive he would have to pace the room. Up, down, up, down, one circle, two, three, this room was too small. Had he done all he could? Maybe he should brush his teeth. Yeah, if Atsushi wanted to kiss him it would be much nicer with brushed teeth. He went into the bathroom and prepared the toothbrush. But what if Atsushi came back now? Did he want to greet his boyfriend with toothpaste-foam? How long would it take? He just shook his head and began to brush his teeth. He made sure to rinse, gurgle, check between his teeth, even massage his tongue with his toothbrush.

Where was Atsushi? Why did it take this long? Maybe his coach thought he would wait downstairs and they were searching for him and the door clicked. Tatsuya came out of the bath with a smile. There was Atsushi – looking as stoic as ever – and coach who smiled. Smiled! Tatsuya grinned, looking from one to the other. Was this a positive answer? He came to stand in front of Atsushi.

"Eh~ ... what do I do now?" Atsushi scratched his head.

"Do you want to be my boyfriend?" Tatsuya bit his lower lip.

"Yeah?" The other tilted his head.

"Then you may kiss me." He looked up and stepped on his toes.

Atsushi not only met him, he held him with one arm around his waist, another in his hair to angle their faces. Tatsuya felt stupid that he knew nothing better than to lay his arms on his boyfriend's – boyfriend! – shoulders. Wherever had Atsushi learned to kiss like that? God, he was good. Tatsuya moaned into the kiss.

"I see I am not needed. Don't be too loud, boys. The walls are thin," their coach said before the door closed.

If someone had asked him right now he would not have been able to remember what their coach had just said. He was completely lost in that embrace, the hot mouth on his, the tongue that – oh god, that sinful tongue – gently teased his own. He felt his knees go weak but Atsushi held him up without a problem. More than that: the arm around his waist lowered itself to his ass and picked him up. He immediately slung his legs around Atsushi's waist. Suddenly his boyfriend drew back and had to take deep breaths.

Tatsuya dazedly watched him with a goofy smile before deciding to pepper his jaw with kisses. When he reached the ear he asked: "Where did you learn to kiss like that?"

"I watched Akashi" - deep breath - "Kuroko got red after those kisses."

"Have I blushed?" He felt like he had.

"Yeah." Atsushi grinned proudly. "Must learn to hold my breath longer."

"There's a trick how to kiss and breath." He pecked the other's lips. "You'll learn with practice. That kiss was really, really good."

"Boyfriend-good?" He still grinned. Gods, it looked so cute.

"Super-boyfriend-good." They shared a hug, just smelling and feeling the other, listening to each other's crazy heartbeat.

"I really like Muro-chin."

"I like you too, Atsushi. Do you want to call me by my first name as well?"

The giant blinked at him.

"It's Tatsuya," he reminded the other.

"I know." Atsushi still seemed to think though. "Tatsuya. Tatsu. Hm ... I like Muro-chin better."

"Why?" He tilted his head.

"Kuroko's name is Tetsuya. Akashi and Aomine called him Tetsu. You know when ... when they raped him."

Oh gods. Oh dear gods. Tatsuya embraced the other again and said: "Sorry. I didn't know. Of course you can call me Muro-chin. I like the name. Only you call me by that name, so it's special."

"Good." Atsushi kissed his temple. "I like Muro-chin."

He drew back and kissed him full on the lips again. One of those drawn out, sensual, immensely intimate and sexual kisses. Everything was better than saying the words that had been on his tongue. He was falling too hard. He didn't know if he wished he could stop.

## Kapitel 8: A bubble of happiness

*[Dieses Kapitel ist nur Volljährigen zugänglich]*

## Kapitel 9: Cracks

Tatsuya felt a bit too worn out that night so the pair just slept. They went back to Akita the next day with Atsushi carrying both their bags and Tatsuya carrying their drinks, snacks and lunch. He fed his boyfriend some pretzels on the train and read the rest of his book. He also listened to a most hilarious conversation in which their captain asked Atsushi how to score a boyfriend. That one had no idea but he reiterated what their coach must have taught them: be polite, don't intimidate, fulfill your daily structure plans. He also recounted how Tatsuya was proud of him because he defended their hoop against those players that had picked on him. For Atsushi that seemed to be the reason why Tatsuya had decided to become his boyfriend. Well enough, it was simple but not too far off the mark.

"So I need to look for a girl picked on by others." The captain nodded with a serious expression. "Then I save her and she'll be my girlfriend."

"Yeah, you need to be her hero," Atsushi told him just as serious.

"Then she won't be frightened of me and maybe she'll look past my chin." Which the captain stroked right that minute. Tatsuya was sure that the beard stubble was more off-putting than the chin but he wasn't the one giving love advice right now.

He was completely content to listen to his boyfriend giving advice to their senpai. And who knew – maybe it would work out. Tatsuya was doubtful but love had strange ways sometimes. After all he had his own personal hero now – he did his best not to snicker – and could always play the damsel in distress. Atsushi supported him in his own way with his own methods. Being his hero was okay.

Back in Akita the other Omegas in his dorm asked him about his trip. Of course they were far more interested in his relationship than the basketball championship. Other than wishing him good luck for the InterHigh finals they were quiet about the topic. But a relationship seemed to be a reason for endless debates, chatter and memory sharing. They had a family dorm for Omegas with children (and mated couples) and theirs for single Omegas. He normally tried not to mingle with them because their only topic seemed to be how to score the best Alpha. This time though he wanted at least a few people to envy him. Most of them did not know Atsushi so they were cooing over a photo Tatsuya had taken with his cellphone.

"He's eye-candy! Just look at those muscles. Can he lift you?," one of them asked.

"Just look at all the sweat, how much does he work out?," another asked.

Just for a bit Tatsuya liked to glow in the attention. It was soon broken by one Omega asking: "Isn't that the giant from the special classes? I thought he was a half-wit."

"He is mentally disabled, yes." He continued to smile. "That's no reason not to love him."

"I think that's a rather strong reason. We won't have jobs, we can only try to mate with the most caring but also richest Alphas we can find. Why would you sell yourself so cheap?" It wasn't mean, just brutally honest. The pink-haired Omega talking to him seemed tired beyond his years.

"It's not cheap, Atsushi cares a lot. He saved me from bullies, he looks after me and does his very best to please me. He might not be the smartest but he's good to me."

"He'll be a social case forever. All of them are. He might be sweet as a grape but he won't ever make a cent in his life. If you choose to be with him it would mean to

willfully choose prostitution for the rest of your life. How dumb can you be?"

Tatsuya remembered now. The boy's name was Minato. He was a second year that was by no means a single Omega. His parents had sold him at thirteen years old. He was only going to school because his mate was a forty-something-year-old guy that wanted his Omega grown-up before bedding him again. The boy certainly knew about decent and not so decent Alphas.

"I'm sorry about your parents but mine would support me no matter what I did. Even if all went wrong and I had two kids by the time I left school, they would simply take me back and help me raise them. So I feel free to choose my own mate."

The other boys all looked at him with big eyes. Only Minato showed open resentment. He scoffed and said: "Well, good for you. Then go and have some children who'll be dependent on you for the rest of their lives."

Tatsuya decided not to correct him that Atsushi was like this because of an injury, so their children would be perfectly normal. It wasn't the point. The focus of these boys was to secure a mate that would let them raise their children in peace with enough money to support them. It was essential to them because a wrong step would mean living on the street and prostituting themselves instead. It wasn't the same for Tatsuya. His parents made a ton-load of money and would never abandon him. So he did not need to feverently look for the best Alpha to bed.

He could actually choose to be with Atsushi even if he really never made a cent in his whole life. Living for love, just because you could ... what unimaginable freedom. It was something all of these boys did not have. He stood and left for his room. Suddenly their admiration tasted like nothing but ash.

"So how was your trip, darling?," his mother asked over the phone.

"It was great, thank you." He smiled just hearing her voice. "We won the preliminaries and the regional championship."

"Way to go, Tatsuya! That's great." Her enthusiasm was never fake, she had even come to watch some matches back in America. "So what's next?"

"The InterHigh finals. There are four regional champions who'll play in the finals. Those are Kaijo, Touou, Rakuzan and us. One of them will become this year's national champion."

"Your team must be really strong. Rakuzan was the other school you thought about applying to, right? The really expensive one."

"Yes, it is. It's also the reigning champion. I haven't seen them in action yet but their players are rumored to be top-notch. It's also the school with the most known captain in the country. Atsushi went to middle-school with him."

"Who is Atsushi?" His mother sounded surprised. Why didn't she- oh, he had used his last name before.

"Murasakibara. It's his first name," Tatsuya explained.

"Oh, your roommate. So it went well?"

"Err ... yeah. Uhm-"

"Are you pregnant?" She sounded neither angry nor excited, her voice was rather toneless.

"Of course not!" He sighed deeply. "I do know how to use a condom, alright?"

"So you did use them. Imagine my surprise." Well, that was pure irony.

"I did not." He looked left and right to see if he was alone. "I just sucked him off, okay? Don't fret it. He's so huge, he would just have ripped the condom."

"Oooh." His mother giggled. "Sounds like a great catch."

"You just had to joke about that." Tatsuya rolled his eyes. "And yes, he is."

"So was that another affair or can I actually meet a boyfriend for once?" That seemed to be a prospect she actually sounded excited about.

"Well, I ... I mean ... he is, but--"

"You really have a boyfriend? Cool!" Way too excited! "Can you send me a picture?"

"Uhm, yeah." He pushed a few bottoms on his phone to send her the one he had also shown his dormmates. "It should be there in a second."

"Oh, my, he's seriously hot. He's still growing up, lanky, uncoordinated and unsure about himself but with a bit more self-confidence and age, he'll be a gem."

"You can get that from just one picture?" He knew his mother was extraordinary but that was a lot of information from just a glance.

"He just screams dorky teenager. Give it time, he'll grow into his role. He just needs support and reassurance. He does not value himself enough. It's in the way he slumps his shoulders. Having you as his boyfriend will make him grow in a good way."

"That's pretty accurate, mom." Tatsuya smiled again. "Being cared for makes him grow like a neglected plant."

"And is he good for you or are only you good for him?"

Straight to the heart of the matter, huh? He answered: "I don't know yet. When I see him grow it makes me proud. It's all tingly when he plays, especially when he plays for me. I want to cuddle and kiss him when he acts like a child and ... well, something else when he acts all mature."

"You're seriously in love?" His mother sounded astonished.

"Oh, shut up!" He felt himself blushing. "He's ... he is precious to me, okay?"

"My baby is growing up." She let out a deep sigh. "Is he as smitten with you as you are with him?"

"I ... don't know", he barely whispered, "he thinks I am beautiful. He trusts me and he listens to me and he does stuff for me he wouldn't do for others. Words aren't his strength but his actions ... I think he really likes me."

"How about you two come visit us? I'd like to get to know him. Even if it won't work with you two I want to know who your first boyfriend is. When is your next school holiday?"

"Uhm ... summer. We have a summer camp, then InterHigh finals and then we have a bit of time. But I don't know if he is allowed to go on a trip to America. And if his mother has enough money, she seems to care for him by herself." Did he have a food budget because there wasn't enough money? It was not like he was getting fat or something.

"Oh, don't worry, we can pay for a ticket. If his mom worries about him coming, I can talk to her if you like. Just give me a number, I'll call her." Same as always, his mom was awesome.

"I'll speak with Atsushi and his mom first. I never met her, I don't know what kind of mother she is. I'll call you once I know her feelings on the matter."

"And your boyfriend's! Don't forget, they tend to get nervous meeting future in-laws for the first time."

"I'm not marrying him!," Tatsuya growled into the phone. "Also, I don't think Atsushi will worry. He's ... he is not the brightest, okay? If I tell him that you'll like him he'll just accept it at face value. He does not worry, you know?"

"Everyone does, Tatsuya. You will worry, so he will worry. It's what your body says, it overrules the words out of your mouth. Your voice trembled just now. We won't eat him, okay? I'm just curious and I miss you. So please show up once in a while, with or

without a boyfriend." He could practically see the indulgent smile on her face. "You're my everything, you know? Take care."  
"You too, mom. I'll call," he promised.

Tatsuya asked Atsushi to meet him at lunch under the tree they often took as a meeting point. His boyfriend showed up with a big smile on his face but sulked when he saw Tatsuya unpack his lunch.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I thought you called me out for sex." Atsushi sat down beside him.

Tatsuya just blinked slowly before asking with a shocked voice: "What?"

"Akashi had Kuroko suck him at lunchtime."

"I am not Kuroko." The Omega recoiled a bit. "Sex is ... you know, what you experienced is sex. It's rather meaningless. Boyfriends make love, that involves feelings, it's special. So you make love on special occasions, not because you have a break and nothing better to do."

Atsushi looked at him for a long moment before saying: "Can you make love and have sex as boyfriends?"

Good question. He'd always gone for sex, it was easy and without complications. It just wasn't what he wanted with Atsushi. But maybe Atsushi wanted nothing but sex? Was he even able to get the difference?

"I guess you can," Tatsuya mumbled but looked away. How often could he say no if Atsushi wanted sex? Would that be the only way to sleep with him? Was his boyfriend even able to enter into a deeply emotional connection?

"You don't want to."

The Omega blinked. What? He looked back at his boyfriend.

"You don't want to have sex. It's not okay to sleep with someone who does not want that. It's rape. I'll lose you if I rape you. Right?" Atsushi wrinkled his nose. Oh ... so he had caught up on his scent.

"Yes, that's right." Tatsuya smiled at him. "Sex is for people who aren't special. But you are special, so ... I only want to make love with you."

"Okay." His boyfriend smiled at him. "So ... how do we get to making love?"

Cute. It was such an innocent question. Atsushi just wanted to please him. So he said:

"How about I come to your room tonight and we'll see where we end up?"

Atsushi seemed to think about that for a moment before he replied: "Does that mean I need to tidy up?"

"Yes, you need to tidy up beforehand." Tatsuya smirked.

So his boyfriend sulked again.

## Kapitel 10: Kinds of love

Tatsuya had not expected to get nervous but he was. Not only was he nervous, he was terrified. Why? He had had no problem to give his boyfriend a blowjob. It wasn't even clear if they would have anal sex tonight. Was making love always like this? Fumbling around like a middle-school girl with her first crush, blushing at every opportunity and giggling at every touch?

He imagined a blushing Atsushi and could not help but grin. Would he get his boyfriend to blush? Would his nervousness be infectious or would he calm him? He wasn't sure what he would like more. An insecure Atsushi would be cute, a serious Atsushi would be sexy. What if Atsushi was bad in bed? He only knew rape, so what if his boyfriend hurt him? Would he notice? He would care, Tatsuya was sure of it.

Would he himself be able to explain what he wanted and what not? He didn't know. He had never made love. He didn't even know what that meant. He knew it was different from having sex because it meant to involve feelings and make oneself vulnerable. He would have to leave his poker face behind, show his joy, his fear, his anger, his disappointment and sadness. Maybe even his disgust. Was he able to express all that?

He was afraid to be hurt. Physically, emotionally, in terms of partnership. To have his expectations crushed, his trust misused, his emotions disregarded. Did he really trust Atsushi enough to give himself into his care? A young man that was mentally disabled and had raped someone else before? From an objective point of view Atsushi was the worst person to trust.

But Tatsuya wasn't objective.

He was in love.

He wanted to trust Atsushi, he wanted to let himself fall so much. What if it would hurt? Not on physical level but an emotional one? What if Atsushi was incapable of getting his signals, understanding his words, processing his meaning? There were so many ways this could go wrong. So many ways for this to screw them up.

What if it became nothing but sex for him? He knew how that worked. He knew he could do it. He knew how to secure his heart. Did he know how to give it? Would he be able to? Was Atsushi able to? Coach Araki had said that the mentally deficient boys always gave their heart unconditionally. It was why it would be broken one way or another if they got close. Would Atsushi really lay himself bare before him?

Would he be able to handle that? More than the risk to himself, would he be able to live with the pain he might cause his boyfriend? Because before they were boyfriends, they were friends first. He did not want to hurt the other. Suddenly he felt selfish regarding his thoughts beforehand. He had not even once thought about his boyfriend's feelings. Did he know what Atsushi wanted? Sex, okay, yes, but did his boyfriend know what that meant? Would he really go all in with his heart? He had been hurt before, deeply hurt, Tatsuya knew. Could he avoid inflicting an even greater pain upon his boyfriend?

Was there anything he could do to avoid hurting them both and giving them the chance to give their hearts at the same time? There seemed to be no answer. Maybe he should give them more time. But what if he hurt Atsushi in the process?

He didn't know.

He didn't know who to ask.

Wait, he ... no, impossible. That was- no. Just plain no. He could not ask a teacher. Teacher Tsueda would ... well, maybe? Maybe he should. Maybe it might be a good idea to ask. Maybe he should try at least? Yes, he should. He was no coward. He would ask.

"So how can I help you?," the teacher asked with a smile once they reached an empty classroom. They took to of the seats to sit next to each other while still being able to comfortably look at the other.

"Has Coach Araki told you about our competition week yet, sir?"

"Of course she has. Congratulations on your relationship. I guess that's what you would like to talk about?" Tsueda did not look concerned about that.

"Yeah ... that's right. I was talking with her about the possibility of being hurt but also of hurting Atsushi. She said that men like him give all of their heart when it comes to relationships. Atsushi isn't one for using words much, so ... I am not sure what that means. I have an inkling how I express deep feelings. I just don't know how much Atsushi can actually feel, how profound those feelings are and what might be expressions of it. To some extent I guess I know – like if he wins a game for me or protects me or cares about how I feel. It's just ... I don't know what to expect." He worried his lower lip. "I don't even know my exact question. I am sorry."

"It's quite alright." Tsueda smiled reassuringly. "I'll try my best to tell you what I know and I hope that somehow, you'll grasp your question and I an answer." The teacher looked to the side for a moment in thought. "Murasakibara is one of our lowest ranking boys in terms of IQ. That normally hinders the normal development, depending on their surroundings as well as the exact reason for the mental deficiency. Murasakibara had a normal childhood until the age of four. That means he was able to learn the basic feelings of sadness, joy, anger, fear and disgust. He also learned the first complex emotions like pride, frustration, ambition and shame. He is rather good at feeling his own needs but he has problems changing perspective. So what is still beyond him is the feeling of love or regret for example. Both need the ability to understand what another person wants or expects. If he does something for you, it's because he learned that you wanted it and thought it might give him a reward because he knows pleasing people is good. So he will be quite honest with you. As long as you satisfy his needs, he knows he has done well and he will further implement the behavior. If he does not get a reward he will slowly stop doing things. He doesn't act because something is right. He does certain things because he has learned that they get him rewards from certain people. So the better your reward, the higher the possibility of using or misusing him. It means that as his boyfriend, you will have a major influence on him. Give it some time and he will place your word above all else."

That was what he feared, yes. It was nice in one way but scary in another.

"It comes with a certain responsibility because his goodness comes from your goodness and his behavior directly links to yours. You can't just be grumpy or joyful without having to explain it. You can't be moody or he'll become erratic in what he does. He directly reflects on you and will most likely do that for as long as you are a couple. It's the same for us as his coach or teacher, it's the same for his mother. Depending on the situation one has more influence than another but in the end we just have to be a team. You have to be aware that being Murasakibara's boyfriend means being a part of his caring system."

"I am aware of that." That was the least of his problems.

"What's important is that you aren't alone in this. Murasakibara is a handful. You might get into a situation where he tries to pressure you into a situation you don't want to have. Please come at your earliest convenience. I don't care if it's food or basketball or sex. That boy is pushy and it's not always easy to get him to accept a no. You don't have to fend for yourself. It's the same as with our sexual offenders, they are also not allowed to just enter a relationship unsupervised. I want you to tell me regularly how Murasakibara is doing and if you are uncomfortable with anything."

"What would happen if I were to enter a relationship with a sexual offender?," Tatsuya asked out of interest.

"The other boy would have to explain what he did, why he did that and what his personal risks are. Then you would be coached in how to avoid getting exploited. Your parents would need to consent to the relationship and you would also regularly be interviewed on how it's working."

That was restricting and liberating at the same time. Someone must have put a lot of thought into the system. Tatsuya said: "I wanted to introduce Atsushi to my parents. Do you think that is possible?"

"I would highly recommend it. Do they have the possibility to come here?" Tsueda smiled at him.

"No, I'd like to take Atsushi with me to America."

"Oh." His smile fell. "I don't think his mother will be able to--"

"My parents would pay, of course!" Stupid him. "I haven't asked him yet, I wasn't sure who to ask first. Do you think his mother might agree?"

"I'll talk to her, okay? Most likely she'll want to speak to you. She's really nice, just ... overwhelmed with caring for her son. He is a bit much for one person alone and I don't want you to feel like you are his main caregiver. He's still our charge and if he misbehaves, bring it to us, please."

Well ... should he ask? It was intimate but Teacher Tsueda had said that it was alright, right? He just still did not know his exact question. He fiddled with his hands and whispered: "So ... about sex. Is that really okay to ask?"

"I'll try my best to answer," the teacher promised.

"Atsushi asked if we could have sex. I have nothing against it per se, it's just ... I don't want to get hurt. And I don't want to hurt him. I know how sex works, the mechanics are easy, I am just unsure about ... feelings. I want to trust him but I don't know if I can. I don't know if he can. I don't know ... I guess I am just unsure about what to do."

"But you don't want to say no?"

"No!" Tatsuya blushed. "I mean, he's ... I would like to have the experience, yes."

"Have you had sex before?" The man did not seem ashamed at all asking that.

"A few times, yes." The Omega curled into himself a bit. Hopefully the teacher would not think of him as a slut. He hated that prejudice.

"That's reassuring. It's good that you have because then you know what might be okay and what not, what you might like or not. Murasakibara needs you to set him boundaries, so it's good that you have experience."

Really? That was the first time anyone ever thought that having a lot of meaningless sex was a good thing. Up to now everyone had expected him to be ashamed of what he had done. It had become an instinctual answer whenever he had to tell anyone about his experience.

"So if you don't want to say yes or no, how about saying you want to try? Who says that you have to jump into bed after the first date? Just because it's become a cultural thing to instantly go for the most intimate sex, you could just start with

kissing and fumbling around. It is how you learn to gauge your partner's reactions. If Murasakibara is pushy, you'll say no but otherwise you could broaden your limits bit by bit. Your boyfriend is a good boy but just because he wants a treat doesn't mean he has to get it directly. He'll like the other stuff just as well."

"He certainly likes blowjobs," passed his lips before his brain could register what he said, "Sorry, that was too much information."

"It's the same with blowjobs. Don't let him push you around. It's your body, you decide what you do with it. His wishes are just that: wishes. Just like he wishes for candies, cuddles and babies all the time." Tsueda fondly shook his head. "Sex shouldn't be a treat you give him but for him it's exactly that. Love is too complex for him. It's about the satisfaction of his needs, not about devotion for you and your wishes. It's what you get when you choose someone like him."

"I see." Tatsuya hung his head for a moment. So Atsushi did not understand love. He knew attraction but not love. It was a bit sad if you thought about it. "I need him to be by my side, to hold me when I cry, to laugh with me when we win games and protect me when I feel insecure. What is that? Is that not the same as only caring about my own whims?"

"But is that all?"

They were silent for a few seconds before he said: "No ... I want him to be the best he can, to laugh and live life to it's fullest. I don't want him to end up in some kind of kept housing where he is to play games until he dies. He can be so much more if only someone cared for him. I want him to have opportunities."

"And do you think he likes caring for you as much as you like caring for him?" Tsueda smiled gently.

"What?" Did Atsushi like it? "Well ... he does care. I don't know if he likes it. But he has learned that that is a boyfriend's job and he likes being a good boyfriend. He likes the praise."

"I fear that is the difference. You like being his boyfriend and he likes being a good boyfriend. But you can be sure that there are very few people he could actually be a boyfriend for. He likes someone like you and he is attracted to you specifically. It's the closest he'll get to love. It's his kind of love. I hope it's enough."

Tatsuya could feel the tears stinging his eyes. The closest he would ever get ... because the concept of loving someone for themselves, wanting them to achieve the best they could be while sharing his most inner thoughts was a bit much for someone like Atsushi. Was that enough? He could have real love. He could have anyone. But wasn't Atsushi's kind of love real as well if it was the closest he could get to Tatsuya's kind of love? Who could promise him that someone as intelligent as him would be able to love him like he wanted to be loved? Atsushi's love wasn't perfect but it was his very best. Wasn't that something Tatsuya could honor?

"I don't know yet," he answered truthfully, "but I am still willing to try."

"That's enough." Tsueda nodded. "It's more of a chance than most other people ever gave him." He put a hand on Tatsuya's shoulder. "Stay in touch, okay? It might be strange to share your feelings with a teacher but most others won't understand the situation you are in. Of course I don't understand it perfectly but I know Atsushi and I know mentally deficient boys in general. Don't hesitate to talk to me."

"I will." Tatsuya smiled genuinely. "Thank you, teacher."

"And talk to your coach as well. Her heart is in the right place and she might give you another good perspective."

He nodded full of confidence.



## Kapitel 11: Fumbling around

*[Dieses Kapitel ist nur Volljährigen zugänglich]*

## Kapitel 12: Bubble distortions

Tsueda had called him out to come to him at lunch. The teacher only needed one look to smile and say: "You're glowing, you know?"

"I know." Tatsuya came to stand in front of him with a smile. "So what do you need me for?"

"I called Murasakibara's mother about the trip and she wanted to talk to you. She knows that you are her son's boyfriend and that you have been very good for him. Do you have time to talk to her now?"

"Of course!" He was let into the teacher's lounge and brought to one of the many compartmentalized desks here. Tsueda typed a number and exchanged greetings before giving him the phone. Well, here they go. "Good morning?"

"Good morning. This is Murasakibara Aiko."

"Hello, Misses Murasakibara. This is Himuro Tatsuya. How are you doing?" Polite was always best. She sounded a bit fragile, unsure about herself, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh, thank you, I am fine. How are you?"

"Perfect right now. I am very happy with your son. You raised a good boy." Good thing that Alex had taught Taiga and him some manners in young years.

"Thank you very much." She sounded embarrassed though. "I don't think I had much to do with it. He had had good teachers."

"That he has. Teacher Tsueda is really looking out for the boys." What else could he say? "Atsushi is a sensitive boy that looks out for others. I am sure that this comes from you." It wasn't hard to guess with how shy she sounded.

"Oh, yes, that may be ... it is new though. Until now he mostly looked out for himself. Not that that is bad thing."

"He looks out for me and he cares a lot. He notices a lot more than I would have thought. He surprises me positively." True again, he had expected worse last night. Atsushi had been really, really good. On the trip as well, he had always checked his scent.

"I am happy to hear that. I feared you might be ... well. A lot of people pity him once they get to know him."

"Atsushi doesn't need pity. I am very proud of what he can accomplish despite his limitations. He really tries his best everyday." None of what he said was a lie. Why did it feel like he had to persuade this woman of her son's worth?

"Thank you for acknowledging that. My son should be happy to have met someone like you." Her voice was a bit more strong now. "Have you been on a trip with him yet? He needs a lot of special care."

"I am aware. We have been to the InterHigh preliminaries together for a week and I was in charge of his care." The biggest problem had as always been his food budget.

"There were some minor problems like trying to omit toothpaste but all in all it worked out."

"That's reassuring. You know, except for basketball camps Atsushi has never been on holiday. We went when he was really small but since the accident ... well, it hasn't been easy. Especially financially. I am so glad I was able to get a stipend for this school. One of his middle-school friends looked after him and helped me so much with him. It's the first school where teachers are looking after him and he is actually

learning something. Elementary school was a disaster and when they told he had to go to middle-school, that it was the law ... but he had some really good friends in middle-school that helped him and taught him reading and writing. I am so glad that there are boys like them and you that look after my son." She gave a tone somewhere between smiling and sobbing. "Thank you so much."

"Err ... sure. No problem. So can I go on vacation with Atsushi?" He did not really expect her to say no at this point. It felt too easy though. She didn't even know him. And who were those middle-school friends?

"Of course. America, right? Teacher Tsueda told me. You need to get a pass, correct? I promised Teacher Tsueda that I'll send my consent for him to get a pass. He also needs a visa, right? Do you know how much they cost?" Her voice lowered again. It was shame. She was ashamed of being poor, ashamed of having a son she could show to no one. What a shame – she could not see how perfect Atsushi was.

"Don't worry, I'll pay for those. I want to take him with me after all."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you." It had been a sob, he was sure. She had a nasal voice by now. So she was crying and trying her best not to let him know. "Don't forget his allergy to penicillin. He should not be alone for more than half an hour. And if he cries, give him his stuffed panda. He really loves that panda."

"Sure. I know the one." By now he felt like crying himself. How could one woman sound so helpless and desperate? "He'll have plenty of opportunity to play basketball and my parents will keep him well-fed."

"Yes, that is a hardship. Don't give him too many sweets. He acts out when he is high on sugar."

"Don't worry, I know, I'll keep his quota. He wouldn't remember his hygiene if I were to give him more sweets than allowed." Had others given him sweets out of pity and destroyed his daily routines that way?

"Good, good." She was openly sobbing. "Please bring him back safely."

"I will. I promise." Could they please end this call? "It was nice talking to you."

"Yes, thank you. Goodbye. Thank you."

He put down the phone with a deep sigh and turned to Tsueda. They just looked at each other for a moment before Tatsuya asked: "Is she always like this?"

"If she cried and ended up saying the same again and again, then yes, she is." The teacher slowly nodded. "She is ... overwhelmed with her son's care."

"That is an understatement." He looked around and saw that most other teachers were occupied and did not seem to be listening in. "She said that Atsushi got a stipend for this school. One of his middle-school friends organized that?"

"Murasakibara was very lucky. He went to Teiko middle-school which not only had the highest ranking basketball team through which he got a sports stipend but also hosted the two brightest minds of his generation. That would be Akashi Seijuro und Midorima Shintaro. They always challenge each other for the top spot at national exams. Both seem to have taken pity on him. They spent their free time teaching the boy, paid his food expenses and found this school for him. Mister Midorima even brought him here because his mother cannot handle him by herself."

He remembered the name Akashi. That was the basketball team's captain, right? So Atsushi knew some pretty important people that had taken him under their wing. If his mother was unable to accompany a train ride, since when had he had structure plans? Had those two middle-schoolers been the ones to keep him in line?

"And now his mother has to pay for food." Tatsuya sighed. "Teacher Tsueda, I know I might be repeating myself but Atsushi still does not get enough food. You can see

every rib on him. You can even see his spine. He really, really needs more food."

His teacher just nodded and looked away. After a moment he admitted: "I have already asked the principal. There is no way but to bill his mother. Mister Midorima said that if any problems occurred I should call ... I am still debating if I should. If Mister Akashi still cares about the boy-"

"You want to ask two high-school freshman for money?" Tatsuya raised an eyebrow.

"It's why I haven't done that yet. It sounds ridiculous." Tsueda shook his head. "But those two are rich, so maybe ... it certainly wouldn't hurt them. I looked at my own finances but I don't have enough."

"Two rich, smart kids who conveniently care for a social case?" Tatsuya knew he was unfair and that he should not take this tone with a teacher but he felt more angry than at Taiga's flight. "I can't believe that's the best this country has to offer."

"His stipend is already paid by Akashi!" Tsueda groaned in frustration. "Those aren't normal high-schoolers, okay? Akashi is heir to the Akashi cooperation and Midorima is heir to the Midorima family household, those two are in the most prominent families in the country. Akashi is one of the princes, he's in line for the throne. Those aren't normal boys. For them, raising Murasakibara to what he is today was a pet project. They did that next to running companies and winning three basketball championships in a row. They aren't called miracles for nothing."

"You put a lot on the shoulders of sixteen-year-olds." Himself included. "Then by all means call them. I can't stand seeing my boyfriend starve in front of my eyes."

"I wish the world was different." Teacher Tsueda hung his head. "I wish someone cared for boys like Murasakibara."

"I do." Tatsuya passed the teacher by and left the lounge. It was better than saying something he would regret later. Teacher Tsueda was doing everything he could, the situation was just bad. At least Atsushi was in a good place where people even cared. No one had cared in elementary school.

He only got here because two geniuses had nothing better to do in their spare time. It made Tatsuya so mad, he wanted to punch a wall.

He found Atsushi sitting under their usual tree with empty boxes of food around him. In his lap was one that still held one piece of karaage. When his boyfriend noticed him he shouted: "I saved you some food!"

Tatsuya couldn't help but smile. He really loved that boy to pieces. He greeted him with a kiss before being fed some chicken. That one piece was not exactly enough for lunch but it was better than nothing. The more important thing was that Atsushi had remembered that he might not have enough time to get lunch after being called to the teacher's lounge. And he had really saved him a bit of his own precious food.

"Thank you." Tatsuya cuddled up to him. "It was delicious."

Atsushi beamed a smile. The food container ended up like all others – strewn around him. Tatsuya would make him tidy up at the end of lunch. But not now. Now he simply wanted to enjoy the arms around his whole torso.

"I talked to your mom."

"Oh?" His boyfriend looked at him in interest.

Should he say something about her total lack of self-confidence? How bad it must have been with a mother that felt overwhelmed and cried every time her son was mentioned? Was Atsushi even aware how wrong that was and how much better he deserved?

"I asked her if we might be allowed to visit my parents in the holidays. She said it's

okay. Would you like to go on vacation?" He knew his smile was a bit strained. But no. He would say none of that. Atsushi only had this one mother.

"Will there be food?" He looked excited.

"There will be hamburgers and donuts and pizza and even ice-cream for good boys." Of course that would interest his boyfriend the most. "My parents live in Los Angeles, that is in America."

"We are going to America?" Atsushi grinned.

"We will be going to America for a week, yes. Do you want to?"

"Yes!"

Great. Now he just had to explain to his mother that his boyfriend was more interested in food than nervous about meeting possible in-laws. And really, why should he? Meeting people meant being met by either pity or disdain. It wasn't like meeting people was a good prospect in any way. Of course Atsushi would concentrate on the food. It was so damn sad.

"Atsushi?" He tightened his embrace. "Can you tell me more about middle-school?"

The giant simply nodded and looked at him. Maybe he was supposed to pose a question.

"Akashi and Midorima. Who are they?" Being straight was always the most intelligent with his boyfriend.

"Akashi was my basketball team captain. Midorima was vice-captain."

Well, yes, he had gathered that much. Two geniuses that challenged each other for about anything. How to ask what he really wanted to know? He said: "I heard that they helped you with school stuff."

"Yeah." Atsushi looked deeply annoyed at the memory. "Akashi was really nice. He was good at explaining things. But I made him mad in our second year. Then he never helped me again. Instead Mido-chin taught me. Mido-chin is really strict. He always said I was lazy. But he gave me money when I did my plans right. Akashi made those plans."

"How did you make Akashi mad?" So this Akashi guy was the first one to actually care for Atsushi. Only one year – in one year he made a boy that made his mother cry at every opportunity into someone able to read and write and win basketball matches.

"I was really angry that day. The kids in my class had said really mean things. Mine-chi had not been coming to practice for days and coach said that it was alright. So I said I don't want to go to practice too. Akashi got angry and I said I don't listen to weak people." Atsushi's voice got smaller. So he knew he had been bad that day. "We decided on a match. I nearly beat Akashi but something changed. It was like he became a whole new person. His smell changed and his stance and his eyes. And then he trashed me."

"He beat you?" Tatsuya looked up in alarm.

"He won the match. I had no chance." Atsushi was slightly shivering. "He never turned back. He stayed that mean, cruel person. He never helped me again. He made us to do bad things."

"Like what?" Tatsuya held him tighter. Why was his boyfriend shivering? Was he so afraid of Akashi? It sounded like some kind of strange split personality thing. Like in the movies where nice people suddenly turned into vicious killers.

"That rape thing. He told me to rape Kuro-chin. He told Mido-chin too and Mido-chin also did because ... fear. Mido-chin was afraid of Akashi. I was afraid of him too. This other Akashi was very mean."

Okay, so this Akashi who was some kind of very important person had a split

personality with a nice person and one that pressured his friends into raping other friends. What the fuck? How did no one ... oh, who was he kidding. No one would lock up a royal prince in a psychiatric ward. Princes could do everything. Really, some of the sexual offenders here had some well-known names. They were just let loose on humanity without control.

"I am sorry you had to meet such a scary person." What else could he say?

"It's my fault Akashi got this way. I made him go bad." Atsushi was still shivering. His eyes glistened over slightly.

"No! No, Atsushi, it's not your fault!" Damn, he wished he knew something more about split personalities than just watching some B-rated movies. "You triggered that change, yeah, but those personalities were there before. It's not your fault. It's just how Akashi is."

"You think so?" His boyfriend looked at him thoughtfully. "That would be good. No one blamed me. I thought they were being nice."

Really? Atsushi was able to get the concept that sometimes people thought one thing but said another? Yeah, of course, society ruled that some people would tell him what a nice boy he was, even if he did something bad. So he knew that not every word said was meant like that.

"I really don't think it's your fault." The bell was ringing. "Oh, it's that late? Hurry, we have to tidy up here. Come on, up, we need to pick up all these boxes."

"Such a bother." Atsushi moved like a snail.

"Only good boys get sweets, Atsushi. Good boys tidy up and are punctual."

His boyfriend groaned but began to pick up his trash.

## Kapitel 13: InterHigh finals

Tatsuya had really taken on a task getting that pass and visa. The pass was the easy thing, they only needed to ask two hours off from school. Taking photos, applying for the pass, certified documents and signatures, it all took money but it was alright. But that visa! As an American citizen he never had to apply for a visa for his own country before. Even just visiting needed a shitload of forms to fill and cost a whole week's budget. Thankfully his parents paid him back.

When he had explained to his mother that his boyfriend was mentally deficient, only spoke short sentences (and only Japanese) and had learned to ignore the pitiful looks over the years, she had stayed silent. He did not want to give a false impression beforehand. He loved Atsushi but he knew others would think this strange. He just hoped he would not get such a reaction from his parents. Atsushi was different and not what you would expect at first sight. Hopefully his parents could see what a good soul he was behind all of that. He was such a good boy after all.

But that trip was still a bit off and what came before excited both of them: The InterHigh finals! Only four teams left: Kaijo, Touou, Rakuzan and them. Four players of the so called generation of miracles. After that talk with Atsushi, he had asked for some old Basketball Monthly magazines. Now he finally knew what all of them meant when they talked about "miracles".

Atsushi's article had focused on his basketball skills. It had been the shortest one of them all. Akashi certainly had the longest one and of course there was no word of a split personality in it. There also had been no word of his imperial lineage. But Tatsuya had learned exactly how big the Akashi cooperation was. Same with Midorima. His shooting was simply outrageous but his stance on traditional values was just as noticeable. Aomine's article was mostly plastered with shoots from similarly outrageous positions while Kise's article focused on his model career and idol status. Atsushi's teammates had been off the charts in all aspects.

What disturbed Tatsuya most of all though was not what he read but what he did not read – there was not even a word on Kuroko Tetsuya. Akashi said something about his phantom strategy in his interview but no one even asked after that. One article in another issue had held the names of all bench players and that had been the only one where Kuroko was mentioned. Did no one care that there had been an Omega player on par with those basketball legends? He had posed that question to Atsushi who only said: "They wanted an interview but then they forgot about him."

Tatsuya felt like crying hearing that. In one of the newer issues they wrote about the regional qualifiers. Seirin had been soundly defeated by Touou. It featured a small picture of Aomine standing above two Seirin players. Atsushi had told him that the one on the left was Kuroko. Again, the article only talked about Aomine and Kuroko was not even mentioned. For some reason it made Tatsuya mad enough that he wished for a sound defeat of that guy. Sadly they would have to win against Rakuzan first to face Touou – if they even won against Kaijo. He secretly rooted for the model boy that only started basketball in his second year of middle-school.

So they would face Akashi first. If Atsushi was to be believed they would face off against a mean-spirited ruler without mercy. Someone that was called "Emperor of the court". A boy that had not only been courted as an ace player but asked to be captain of a team that did not even know him. A player that acted as captain as well as

advisor to the coach. He even invented the team's training menus. In America someone with such an ego would be mercilessly disregarded and teased by players older and stronger than him. Japan was even stricter in its age-based hierarchy.

Tatsuya was somehow not surprised to see a completely unified team that followed their captain without any dissent at all. So Akashi really was that scary. No one could rule a bunch of teenage boys and even their coaches without a hint of fear. He could not imagine that boy – man – as someone patiently teaching Atsushi to read.

Especially when said captain called out to Atsushi after the official opening of the InterHigh finals. Like a well-trained dog his boyfriend went over to his former captain. Tatsuya decided on following him.

"Morning, Akashi-chi," Atsushi greeted him with a frown on his face.

"I would like you to deliver a message to your coach. Listen up." Akashi's tone was cold. There was no joy at all about seeing his old teammate. He sounded like it was a nuisance even talking to Atsushi.

Tatsuya balled his fists in anger.

"For our game this afternoon, she will not put you in."

What? Tatsuya could not help but open his mouth in shock. Was that man crazy? One could not just order around people like that, especially another team's coach. Was he mad or something?

"In exchange for that, I promise not to join the game as well. It should even be the odds enough to make this match interesting." Akashi never looked away from Atsushi's face. "Can you remember that?"

"Yeah." Atsushi pouted. "But I wanna play!"

"You won't." Akashi's gaze sharpened. "That's an order. Now run along and give my message to your coach."

Wasn't this the part to turn and walk away with a flying overall or something? No. There was no dramatic exit at all. Akashi simply looked at Atsushi, expecting him to follow the order. And Atsushi did. Tatsuya stared after his boyfriend in a mix of disbelief and horror. Really? His boyfriend that could not be made to clean up after himself followed an order like that? He looked back at Akashi but that one had turned and was talking to his coach now.

Tatsuya ran after his boyfriend. This could not be true. Or maybe ... well, his coach would know what to do. They would not follow that order, would they? This Akashi seemed used to everyone obeying his whims but coach would not do that, would she? Atsushi had just finished relaying what Akashi had told him when Tatsuya came to stand next to him.

"I can't believe his nerve." Coach Araki glared at the Rakuzan team. "If their coach had said that, the team would immediately be disqualified. Something like that is illegal."

"You'll put Atsushi in, won't you?" Tatsuya immediately asked.

"I won't play."

Both of them looked at their ace in shock. Their coach simply asked: "What?"

"I won't play." Atsushi lowered his head. "It was an order."

"He has no right ordering you around!," Tatsuya growled.

"I have to listen to Akashi." Atsushi did not sound happy about that.

"Why would you have to listen to that shithead with an inflated ego?" Tatsuya tried his best not to scream. That total asshole with his-

"Because he pays my school fees." His boyfriend looked like he was about to cry. "I can't go to school if I don't obey."

It completely shut Tatsuya and their coach up. Yeah, there was ... of course he knew.

Tsueda had told him. Akashi paid not only the school fees, by now he paid all food expenses as well. Without Akashi his boyfriend neither had a home nor food. He really had to listen to that order. He even knew that. He remembered without anyone having to prompt that memory. Atsushi knew that he was completely dependent on that red-haired devil.

"It's still unfair." Tatsuya put his arms around his boyfriend.

"We'll make him eat his words." Araki put a hand on his shoulder. "If Akashi thinks we are crippled without Murasakibara, we just have to show him how wrong he is about us. Once he steps on the court, no one can blame us for sending Murasakibara out as well. So let's make Rakuzan desperate enough that they sent out their own ace."

Their captain and vice-captain nodded at her words. Tatsuya just smiled up at all of them and nodded. They would show that arrogant prick what they were made off.

"You won't be able to."

All of them turned to Atsushi in shock. Had he really just said that? Were was his fighting spirit? But he simply looked crushed, his shoulders slumped, his eyes tired.

"If Akashi says that his team doesn't need him to win, then they won't. Akashi knows such things." Atsushi petted Tatsuya's hair. "Sorry."

He felt like crying again. Crying with impotent rage.

Aomine and Kise were both monsters. There was no other word for that. They were faster, more powerful and more daring than any player Tatsuya had ever seen. He watched that game with a slight feeling of horror. They really were a good team, a magnificent team with two aces. But he feared that those two players topped Atsushi and him by miles.

He sat beside coach Araki while watching the game and was surprised when she whispered: "I think I know why Akashi ordered Murasakibara out."

He blinked at her in surprise.

"Closely watch their movements. Can you see what is off?" She pointed at Aomine and Kise.

"Off?" He could see nothing but inhuman strength going off against each other.

"Aomine used to favor throws from the far right. He's getting closer to the basket with every quarter. Especially now that Kise keeps up, he's making nothing but inside plays. Same with Kise. Since he began copying Aomine, he jumps less and less."

"Really?" Tatsuya stared at them. "I haven't noticed."

"I think their bodies aren't able to endure that style of playing." Her eyes were glued to the game as well. "They are destroying their joints. Both must be in severe pain by now."

"I don't think they can feel that with their level of adrenaline."

"I fear the same." Araki shook her head. "Murasakibara just had a growth spurt. His muscles aren't long enough for his bones, his tendons might snap if he got serious. He needs to fill out before he can use his new height."

"And you think Akashi noticed that and reacted to it?"

"Well, he does pay for Murasakibara's career. He doesn't look like a character that acts from the goodness of his heart. Raising star players gives every company a boost but only if they really make it to the national level. It's in Akashi's interest that Murasakibara doesn't suffer a serious injury this early in his career." She sighed. "And though I hate to admit it he is the one writing training menus and recruiting for the Rakuzan team. Those players are all top grade. Akashi does have an eye for talent."

"If you say so." Tatsuya pouted. "I say he was afraid of our strength."

Coach Araki just smiled at him and nodded.  
He knew she did not think so but the thought was nice at least.

Tatsuya knew defeat.

He had tasted it so bitterly when he met Taiga again. His tiger, his sun, his partner. He had fallen in love with him, battled him to the blood and finally had to conclude that he was unworthy. Taiga had become stronger than him. His little brother, that red-haired rascal that had always looked up to him, had taken wing and was soaring the skies high above him.

It had hurt but on the other hand Tatsuya had been happy for him. Because when you loved someone you wanted their very best. Even if that very best was far away from you. His defeat was burned but his love had proved a stronger flame. His hurt had not consumed him. He had been bitter and sad but he had not broken.

This defeat tasted like smoke and ash. Nothing but burned embers, no warmth or comfort. He looked at his boyfriend, the one he had let down and was met by a sad, but accepting gaze. Atsushi smiled at him, a tired and lonesome smile. He had known all along how this would end. He had accepted it the moment Akashi told him his order.

It was so fucking unfair.

"Let's line up," his captain said and pushed him with one hand when he wouldn't move.

They went to the middle of the court and bowed in front of the other team. Tatsuya tried not to look in their faces. He wouldn't cry. He did not allow himself to cry. He was stronger than that.

"Hey, cutie," a deep, booming voice appeared in front of him, "can I have your number?"

No. Tatsuya closed his eyes. Some boys really had the tact of a bulldozer.

"Apologize."

He looked up in surprise and saw that Akashi himself had stepped on the court and was glaring at Nebuya who had just asked that question. That one had actually flinched and was looking at his captain with big eyes. After a second he whined: "What for?"

"For being tactless and rude. Also for being disrespectful. My team will not be known for it's derogatory comments towards Omegas." Akashi actually sounded angry at this point.

"Why was ..." Nebuya really did not seem like he got what he may have done wrong. He did take a step back though and bowed to Tatsuya. "Sorry about ... whatever was wrong with my question."

"I'll explain it to you, muscle-headed gorilla," Reo told him rather venomously. He bowed as well. "Sorry for his lack of tact."

"Uhm, it's okay." Tatsuya blinked in surprise.

So Akashi was a true emperor but he did have principles. Maybe he had really ordered Atsushi off the court out of concern. He had also held to his promise not to enter the court himself. Up to now. Which meant that Atsushi was standing right behind him and glaring at the Alphas from the other team. Tatsuya leant back with a smile and was enveloped by an arm.

"Ah, young love." Reo held a hand to his cheek in an effeminate way. "Aren't they cute, Sei-chan?"

Sei-chan? Tatsuya stared at the Rakuzan captain in shock. Did he really allow his vice-

captain to call him like that? A boy that was obviously as gay as they come?

"I am happy you found someone to support you, Atsushi." Akashi nodded at him. "Do remember to eat enough, so that we can face off in the Winter Cup. I expect you to be in a better physical shape come winter." For the first time the red eyed gaze actually met Tatsuya. "Feed him better. His form is sloppy."

Tatsuya bristled in anger. He heard the unsaid "That's an Omega's job after all". How could he admonish his teammates about being disrespectful but say something like that himself? He didn't even know how often Tatsuya had to complain about his budget-

But he knew. He paid it now. This was the man that paid for his boyfriend's survival. Tatsuya wished he could throw a punch at him. He wished he could growl at him like a cat dipped in water. He wished he had claws to wipe that smirk off that smug face.

"That was mean, Akashi," Atsushi told his former captain off.

Everyone stared at the giant in more of less surprise. Had he really just told the Rakuzan captain, the Emperor of the court, off? All eyes turned on said man to await his reaction.

"You are right." Akashi nodded. "I was rude." He changed his stance and bowed to Tatsuya. "Thank you for looking after Atsushi. Please continue to take care of him."

"I'm not doing it for you," Tatsuya replied before his brain could stop the words. Shit. He had not meant to be impolite. His boyfriend really was dependent on this guy, Tatsuya shouldn't enrage him.

Akashi just smirked at him. He didn't need words. That stupid half-smile was enough.

"We'll beat you at the Winter Cup," Tatsuya promised.

## Kapitel 14: Outrage

"This Akashi really is an asshole," Tatsuya raged later in their hotel room, "I can't believe he has a nice side somewhere. What was his other personality like?"

"I really liked him." Atsushi sat on their bed and sprawled out. "I went to school in unwashed cloths and smelled. All the kids laughed at me. He asked the teacher to take me to the infirmary. We did not go there though. We went to my dorm room. He helped me wash all my clothes. He bought me a box for used clothes. He taught me to fold and iron laundry. I had no clothes my size. He took me shopping and made me prepare my clothes in the evening. I couldn't brush my teeth or shower on my own. Mom had always done that. He taught me and made me my first picture instruction. He found out I couldn't read but he didn't laugh. He asked the teacher to be allowed to sit in the last row with me. He explained what was going on and what we were supposed to do."

He sounded really nice and caring. Tatsuya had been unable to imagine Atsushi in a normal class of middle-school and he had been right. His boyfriend had been unable to follow the teachers. So Akashi had taught him for more than a year, had shown him what he should have learned in elementary school and even explained what they should learn now. That Akashi had been nice.

"What do you think made him like this? To have two souls that are so different?"

Atsushi just blinked at him.

Tatsuya just smiled, went over and kissed him. He whispered: "I am happy you are so uncomplicated."

"Akashi always said that too." Atsushi looked away. "He was the only one though. Mido-chin was always angry at me. After Akashi turned bad, he took over my care. He wasn't happy though. He said I was too much work. He said I didn't give my all. Lazy, lazy, lazy Atsushi."

"Midorima was just very stressed. You aren't too much work." Tatsuya gently touched his boyfriend's face. "You give your all and I know that. You aren't lazy."

"The bad Akashi taught me other stuff though." Atsushi looked back at him. "He taught me about sex."

Tatsuya stopped breathing. No. Please not. Atsushi had already told him about that teacher in elementary school that gave him sweets after raping him. Not Akashi too. That wasn't fair. Had no one looked after his boyfriend? He cautiously asked: "What did he teach you?"

"I had an erection. So I asked him what that was. He explained about puberty and Alphas and Omegas. Erections happen to adults. Alphas are meant to sleep with Omegas to make babies. One day I would find an Omega that would be my mate. I would have babies with him. Until then sex was meant for fun. Like getting blowjobs or sleeping with unmated people."

Well, that did not sound too bad yet. It was a bit too easy, one could become a pair with Alphas, Betas or Omegas after all but Atsushi would most likely mate with an Omega if he ever did have a mate. An Alpha wouldn't take him if he wasn't mentally deficient himself. Same with Betas. An Omega would take him if he became a professional basketball player. It was what Akashi had planned for him, right? He had to be sure though: "Akashi did not sleep with you?"

"No. He called for an Omega and had him suck his cock in front of me for education."

Tatsuya balled his fists. Oh, for the love of ... that fucking jerk. His respect for Omegas was astonishing, really, simply astounding. He whispered: "Kuroko?"

"Nah. That was later. He told me what to do when it was my time to hunt Kuro-chi." Atsushi placed his hand on Tatsuya's fist. "I walked in on them once. Akashi was angry about that. He didn't like to share Kuro-chi. I think Akashi had feelings for him."

"I can't imagine that man having feelings for anyone." Tatsuya snorted.

"When Akashi looked at Kuro-chi, his eyes were ... softer. He smelt sad. Like longing." The Omega relaxed and looked at his boyfriend. Atsushi might not be the smartest but he had a good radar for feelings. So Akashi had secretly been in love with his team's Omega. Then why had he organized hunts on him? That did not make sense at all. Some Alphas had strange tastes but he could not imagine anyone getting off on seeing their beloved raped by other guys.

"We can just talk to each other, alright? No secret longing."

"Yeah." Atsushi smiled up at him. He bit his lip after a second and talked around that: "Can we have sex then?"

Tatsuya shook his head in amusement. No secret longing, right? Of course his boyfriend wanted sex. They would not have a game tomorrow and they had a hotel room all to themselves. He leaned down, kissed his boyfriend and whispered against his lips: "Okay."

Tatsuya wrote a new diet plan for Atsushi. It included one more meal a day and three except for two sweet units. One for school, one for hygiene, one for social behavior. The last one would be the new one. He wrote down some things he had noticed Atsushi needed training on. Like with most of his sweet units, he had five rules for which he got sweets. One easy one, two slightly difficult ones and two hard ones. For hygiene for example, brushing his hair was the easy one (Atsushi did love his long hair), wearing fresh clothes and showering were the slightly difficult ones and brushing his teeth and caring for his nails were the hard ones. Atsushi often forgot about his toe nails and then got infections. This new sweet unit would have five rules on social behavior and would be filled by him in the evening. The first plan on hygiene was filled by the dorm teacher in the morning, the second one by Tsueda after school. Then Araki had an unofficial sweet unit after training. But no one had any control over Atsushi's behavior when he went shopping or met people in the streets or ran around while eating. Thus a new sweet unit.

As well as a meal between school and training. Lunch was nice and all but Atsushi's stomach often rumbled in the afternoon. He got tired in practice and sometimes had stomach cramps. Their lunch did not have enough time for him to eat more than five meals, so they needed an afternoon meal. It wasn't perfect to eat right before training but it certainly was better than starving. Atsushi needed more fat on his ribs, he was too thin.

He discussed the plans with Tsueda and Araki who made some minor changes but approved in the end. Tsueda discussed the new plan with Atsushi in Tatsuya's presence. His boyfriend kissed him out of happiness. Tsueda just chuckled and handed Tatsuya money for the evening sweet unit. It felt a bit wrong to take it – he knew where it came from after all – but in the end he knew he did not have enough to pay for his boyfriend's needs by himself.

By the time their summer holidays came around Atsushi had gained twenty-three pounds and still looked like a twig. At least now you could not see every denture of his spine and only the last few ribs. It looked a lot healthier. He also had more energy

in training. His cheeks had filled out a bit which made him look as cute as a teddy bear. Tatsuya loved pinching those cheeks. Most of all Atsushi looked happy. He smiled and he cuddled and he slept on Tatsuya's lap when they were sitting outside. Life was good.

"Name and reason for your visit, please," a bored migration officer asked.

"His name is Atsushi Murasakibara and he came with me to visit my parents." Tatsuya offered his passport and Atsushi's pass with the visa.

"Can't he talk for himself?" The officer drew his eyebrows together. What a nice exemplar.

"No, he doesn't speak English."

"Have him line up for the photo. Stand over there, camera is here."

Tatsuya arranged his boyfriend. They took photos, fingerprints and address dates of his parents. Really, they behaved as if foreigners were all criminals. Tatsuya was happy when they were finally able to leave this part of the airport.

Atsushi stoically followed him. Traveling seemed to be fun for him, he never complained. He did not even get bored of standing in line, he just watched people. They had searched him four times by now but his biggest complaint had been the prices of sweets on the flight. Tatsuya vowed to pack masses of sweets for their flight back.

They got their luggage without problem – Atsushi's had been checked again, it was all in disarray now – and left for the exit. Thankfully his boyfriend was bigger than everyone, so he never was out of sight, even if they were separated in a crowd. Tatsuya's parents found them by looking for Atsushi instead of Tatsuya.

Both his mom and his dad were Alphas. His father was an American of Japanese descent, his mother a Japanese woman. Both were tall for their lineage – his mother above one meter seventy, his father nearly one eighty – but seemed small next to Atsushi. When it came to behavior though, both were Americans. They were nice, open-minded and liberal.

His mother greeted Atsushi with a smile and offered her first name. His father followed suit and did the same. Atsushi did like he had been taught and introduced himself with his full name and bowed. Tatsuya kissed him for that, his mother praised him on his manners. All in all, it was like he had expected.

"Tatsuya?" His boyfriend suddenly looked at something far off to the right. "They are selling ice-cream there. Can I have an ice-cream?"

"Sure." Tatsuya opened his wallet for some extra money. It wasn't Atsushi's fault that the sweets on the airplane had been so expensive. "Get me a cup with one spoon of vanilla, alright?"

"One vanilla," Atsushi repeated. He just left his luggage and went over to the ice-cream parlor.

"Did you want some as well?" Tatsuya smiled at his parents.

"No ... he is a bit like a big child, right?" His mother looked after him.

"He often behaves similar to a four-year-old, yes. It's where his mind stopped due to the accident," Tatsuya explained.

"It's a strange sight." His father put an arm around his mother's shoulders. "Will he stay like that?"

"Most likely, yes." His voice still held his fondness. "He'll grow into his body though. All those jerky movements will get smoother. And we are working on his slump. I want him to face the world with a straight spine."

They saw Atsushi take the front of the line. After trying to explain what he wanted and being met by confusion, he turned in their direction and shouted through the whole hall: "Muro-chin!"

"Sorry, I have to save my prince." Tatsuya winked at his parents.

Atsushi simply loved his room. His racing cars, his plane models, even his recipe books. He did not understand any of the English words but he loved looking at the pictures and asking Tatsuya to cook this or that. Tatsuya liked to comply, so they spent most of their time in the supermarket and the kitchen. He also took his boyfriend to the natural history museum where he told him everything he knew about dinosaurs.

Atsushi was ecstatic. Dinosaurs became his new topic of interest. Tatsuya asked his mother for his old books and translated the English texts for his boyfriend. Atsushi was unable to remember any of the complicated names, so he just invented his own. The tyrannosaurus simply ended as rex, the stegosaurus as pin, the triceratops as spike and the brachiosaurus as neck.

They also went to the beach. Los Angeles was full of beautiful people (it did contain Hollywood after all), so Tatsuya had not expected them to be noticed. He had underestimated his boyfriend's pheromones though. Every Omega beach bunny, every Beta girl and even some boys tried to hit on his boyfriend. If he took his eyes off him for only one second, he found someone attached to Atsushi who only looked overwhelmed that people suddenly hugged him. When one Omega finally had to idea to throw a blast of her pheromones in Atsushi's face, Tatsuya finally had enough. He screamed at the Omega and told his boyfriend to pack.

Only in hindsight did he notice that while most Alphas would have reacted with throwing down that Omega and fucking her (which was what had happened while they left, Tatsuya had felt guilty for about a second), Atsushi had not reacted like that at all. He had seemed completely unaffected. Tatsuya asked about that on the way home and only got the answer: "You smell much better. You would be angry if I touched that Omega, right?"

"Yes, I would." He was still a bit surprised. Was Atsushi really that immune to smells?

"Then I did the right thing." Atsushi smiled proudly. "Or should I have chased away those Alphas? They raped her, right?"

"Yeah." Tatsuya hung his head. "I did not want you to get hurt though. There were three of them."

"I could have taken them on." Atsushi grinned. "I'm strong." He furrowed his brows.

"Should we go back and help her?"

Better not. By now someone would have either called an ambulance or it had become a rape party with at least ten Alphas. No matter how strong, Atsushi would not get out of that fight unscathed. So Tatsuya answered: "I am sure someone already helped."

"Okay." Atsushi looked thoughtful for a minute. "I'll help next time though. It's what a hero does."

"Just look out for yourself, okay?" Tatsuya grabbed his hand. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"Yeah. It's mean when they fight as a group."

Hopefully Atsushi would really watch after himself and not do any heroic stunts. Tatsuya did feel bad for leaving that Omega to fend for herself. But throwing around pheromones on an open beach was downright suicidal. There was no cure for stupidity. He just wished the price wasn't so high.



## Kapitel 15: Blasting bubble

*[Dieses Kapitel ist nur Volljährigen zugänglich]*

## Kapitel 16: Embrace

They seemed to have collectively decided not to talk about that evening again. Staying silent was a lot easier and healthier in his opinion. It was only on their last day that his mother brought it up for a second when they were about to part.

"He's quite alright." His mother finally told him a few hours before their flight back. "Unconventional, but really alright." She kissed Tatsuya's cheek. "I want you happy. If a basketball career doesn't work out for either him or you, we're still here." Her smile was a bit off but genuine. "I love you even if you come home with twenty babies and no job."

Tatsuya just laughed and hugged her. "Don't worry, it won't be that bad."

"Nineteen babies then." She sighed into his hair. "Say, do you know if ... I mean ... I don't want to sound disrespectful but-"

"You want to know if his mental disabilities are hereditary." Tatsuya chuckled. "They aren't."

"Oh good." She smiled and pulled back. "I like him but more than three of him would drive me nuts. Caring for him is already a full-time job. I would find it exhausting."

"I do get the perks." He winked at her.

"Naughty boy." She smiled ruefully. "Once you are back ... please do a pregnancy test. Just to be sure."

He just nodded. He had already concluded the same. If he had gotten pregnant due to this incident, he would abort. And he would not tell Atsushi anything about it. One day they would have a child, once they were mated and Atsushi had a job. Until then he would not make his boyfriend sad with anymore talk about abortions or babies.

"So, you'll spent a few days in Tokio?" She had a new sparkle in her eyes.

"Yeah, I always wanted to see it." Tatsuya forced a smile upon his lips as well. It would take a bit more to be effortless again. "Atsushi grew up there. Maybe he can show me around."

"You better buy a map and see that he doesn't get lost." She giggled. "He has a horrible sense of direction."

"Well, yeah ... he has." He hugged his mother again. "Thank you for accepting him."

"How could I not after what happened?" She hugged him back. "Don't worry. Most heroes aren't known for being the smartest."

True enough.

Oh no. No ... of course this had to happen. In the middle of Tokio.

He lost his boyfriend. His mentally deficient boyfriend. This was so not possible! The guy was over two meters tall and had purple hair. How could you lose someone like that? He immediately tried calling him but - as always - Atsushi did not hear his phone. Tatsuya waited for ten minutes but his boyfriend did not show up again. Okay. Where could he have gone? Everything was colorful. There were sweets and toys and games ... he could be anywhere. He did not have much money though. Once he ran out, he would look for Tatsuya. Should he wait here? Or maybe ... hm. Streetball tournament. Yes, his boyfriend was much more likely to find his way there. He would just go to the tournament in the park right beside this street lined with shops. He texted the place to his boyfriend. Hopefully that one would be able to find a park which had signs pointing towards it.

So he wandered over to the park. The tournament hadn't started yet, good for him. He looked at some of the teams and came by a group of people asking around for a fifth player. Hm ... why not? He had to wait anyway. He let himself be signed up and asked his teammates for their experience. The other four were university students that had played in high-school. So they were experienced but not overwhelming. They were pretty impressed that he was a starter at Yosen. Thankfully it made them overlook the fact that he was an Omega.

They played some easy games until they had to play a team called Seiho. They were extremely good and Tatsuya finally got warm. Without him their team would have lost spectacularly. It really brought them together. He was still giving fist-bumps when a slight scent drew in his gaze.

Taiga.

No. What were the chances? Of course this was Tokio and Taiga lived here but ... this was Tokio! It was one of the biggest cities in the world! You did not just stumble over your long-lost love in the middle of a city of millions as if you lived in a Shoujo manga! Well, it seemed like he did.

"You don't look surprised at all. Keeping the usual poker face?," Taiga asked him.

He negated that. He did though. If he just ran with his emotions, he would go over and plant a kiss on his so called brother. His feelings weren't brotherly at all, not that Taiga ever noticed that. Oh, had he spoken English? He changed to Japanese.

So this seemed to be Taiga's friends. A few Betas, one unremarkable Omega. Taiga told them their story. It was a bit strange to stand right beside him and hear about their life but on another note it was interesting how Taiga saw it all. So he really thought it was only about being rivals and brothers. If it hadn't unmasked his feelings, Tatsuya would have laughed out loud.

The other Omega's eyes were on him instead of Taiga. It seemed like he grasped the full story. But they weren't bonded, they did not even smell of one another. Taiga was still single. Now what? Should he reveal his feelings? Should he finally tell this so called brother, this stupid idiot, how much Tatsuya's heart yearned for him?

He suddenly remembered Atsushi. Dear Atsushi. His hero. Tatsuya shook his head. Taiga had been the one closest to him, someone he adored, someone he had a crush on. Was it love? When Tatsuya thought about Atsushi, Taiga felt more like a passing fancy. He should really end this. It made no sense to long for someone that seemed more dense than his mentally deficient boyfriend. He really had a thing for stupid Alphas, didn't he?

"Let's fulfill that promise today," he told Taiga.

That one wasn't happy about that. Tatsuya had always told himself that somewhere, somehow, Taiga was most likely in love with him too but didn't notice. That his reluctance was a sign that he cared for Tatsuya. Gods, he had really lied to himself well. Taiga cared for him, yes. He cared for him as his brother.

"I ... you," Taiga stammered.

Tatsuya sighed and turned back. What? It wasn't like his dense brother had finally- oh. Oh, well, that was one jealous Omega. So that one did have feelings for Taiga. Tatsuya smirked. Most likely his brother had not noticed anything again. He really had to keep from letting his emotions show when he heard the other one lecture Taiga.

So Taiga's new friend had noticed that the redhead had no clue about Tatsuya's feelings. He had also decided not to reveal them and made all of this about basketball pride. That was one smart boy. Taiga really did not deserve the Omegas in love with him. Tatsuya was fine with this outcome though. He had Atsushi. This boy could have

Taiga. Maybe one day he might go back to actually talking to his not-brother, once his feelings had settled.

"Sorry, but who are you?," he asked the Omega.

"I'm Kuroko Tetsuya. Nice to meet you."

Oh. Oh! Well, that explained a lot. What a strange twist of fate. So Taiga's might-be-lover was the Omega abused by Atsushi and his old team. Tatsuya smiled anyway. He had wanted to meet this guy, even if these were strange circumstances. Hopefully he would not have a harsh reaction if Atsushi showed up.

Did Kuroko know that Atsushi went to Yosen? Most likely. Tatsuya had introduced himself with his school. He still dropped a hint though. Hopefully Kuroko understood. His serious expression told Tatsuya that he did. So Kuroko was aware he had been done an injustice. He knew and he was wary of being reminded. He did not seem afraid though. He gave off a feeling of nothingness but now that Tatsuya seriously looked at him he saw nothing but strength.

What was Kuroko whispering about with Taiga? They did look a bit hostile. Maybe because Tatsuya did not hold back his fighting spirit. Atsushi's pheromones on him might have something to do with it too. Oh, Atsushi! Tatsuya blinked in surprise. With all of his fighting spirit, had he really just overlooked his over two meters tall boyfriend? He sighed. It was the boyfriend that had gotten him into this mess. He wouldn't even be playing if his boyfriend had not gone missing.

"You're late, Atsushi."

"Sorry. I got lost." Big surprise there.

"It's been a while, Murasakibara," Kuroko told him.

Tatsuya watched him. The other Omega was tense. Atsushi was careless but he did notice the tension. Was he intimidating Kuroko? Should he say something? Was this Kuroko able to fend for himself? Atsushi should really not play jokes on someone he had raped. His boyfriend did not get the magnitude of his deeds in the least. He noticed Kuroko's feelings alright, he just could not link them to anything but his present actions.

Tatsuya's heart went out to the other Omega. He had to smile when Kuroko slapped Atsushi's hand away. So he was able to set boundaries now. Good. Tatsuya decided to distract Atsushi for a bit, so that Kuroko could calm and distance himself. He did not do that though. He stood his ground. So his experiences had hardened him ... and maybe they had made him stronger instead of weaker. His voice was strained talking about Akashi though. So he was mad, it was in his undertone. There was an undercurrent of hostility.

While he still pondered Kuroko's actions, Atsushi told him that they were not allowed to play in unofficial games. Damn it all. He had wanted to finally settle the score with Taiga. Maybe it was for the best though. Kuroko looked ready to rip someone's throat out. It was a wonder that no one seemed to notice that. Was it really just Atsushi and him that seemed able to read the Omega? It was kind of sad. Taiga had his own case of stupidity but that was no excuse for the rest. He should really look after that Omega more. Atsushi was better in noticing Tatsuya's moods than Taiga was in reading his Omega friend. So Atsushi was the better choice in his opinion.

"Hey, wait. You can't just barge in here and leave like that," Taiga said to Atsushi.

Taiga was such a hot-head. Tatsuya looked over his shoulder to see his boyfriend plug a part of Taiga's eyebrows. He grinned, trying his best not to laugh out loud. Oh gods. No one had ever dared that, even if everyone wanted to. Atsushi was the best!

Oh no, of course Taiga had to taunt him. Well ... Tatsuya did want to play that game.

Especially with Atsushi by his side. Him and his boyfriend against Taiga and his ... not-boyfriend. Whatever. Anyway, this would be fun. Good thing that Atsushi was this easy to rile up. He just shouldn't lay on his arrogance ... oh well, most likely he just did not remember the name of that other guy and did not want to be found out. As if not remembering was that bad. He should just say.

Wait, he did remember that center's name? Wow, the boy must have been really good for that. Tatsuya felt like he should explain just how precious this was but ... well, Atsushi taking his opponent seriously and playing at full strength was a kind of miracle in itself and this guy probably knew. Teppei. Atsushi had told him about that guy, right? He had been injured in a game by an opponent. He had also read about it in one of the old basketball monthly magazines. Atsushi also seemed to take Taiga seriously. Had he noticed something in Tatsuya's behavior? Did he unconsciously feel threatened?

Oh, just why did it have to start raining now? Tatsuya rolled his eyes at being called off the field. Fate really wanted this match not to happen, didn't it? Taiga looked just as annoyed as he felt, even if he did not show it that obviously. The guy still wore his heart on his sleeve. All in all, he was still the not so little brother Tatsuya wanted to impress. Maybe he should just do that? Taiga did not know the last technique he had learned from Alex.

So Taiga was still as easy to impress. Tatsuya felt pride swell up inside of him at seeing that amazed look. That was what he had fallen in love with, those wide eyes full of wonder. Atsushi still looked at the world like that, even if basketball did not stir him.

"Murasakibara, do you still find basketball boring?" It was Kuroko that had posed the question.

Boring? Basketball wasn't boring! There was the thrill of playing, not knowing if you would win or lose, facing your rivals- "If you keep talking about that, I'll crush even you, Kuro-chin."

Tatsuya blinked in surprise. Atsushi did not like basketball? He had never given off that feeling.

"I don't know what it's like to have fun. Isn't it enough that I like winning and I am good at it?"

What? That wasn't sportsmanship at all, it wasn't about ... competing. Well. Atsushi had never lost to his knowledge. Except for Akashi, his boyfriend had never lost in basketball. Maybe he did play because it was the only thing that really worked for him. Basketball and being a good boyfriend, those were the two things Atsushi was good at.

Kuroko glared at him for that. It was a bit much to expect understanding, Tatsuya guessed. That someone could play solely for the feeling of being worth something instead of looking for a challenge. Kuroko obviously fought from the ground. He was neither an Alpha nor an athlete, he simply looked for challenges to prove himself. They weren't so different and were at the same time. Two different bodies but the same drive. Both just did not want to see their similarities.

Tatsuya wished they did not have the rape stand between them. Both could profit from the other if they allowed the other to. It was a sad sight.

## Kapitel 17: Sympathy

Tatsuya was getting used to earning looks of sympathy. People, especially old ladies, smiling nicely at him after looking at Atsushi. Mothers followed him with their eyes, a fond smile on their faces. He could guess what they thought. They saw him as a caretaker, a brother, maybe even a bonded mate that had unfortunately ended up with such an Alpha. It irked him that no one found his situation envious. Even the young girls giggling and gossiping about Atsushi fell silent when they heard him speak and turned tail. No one wanted to be in his shoes, wanted to be the partner at Atsushi's side.

He really did not know why. Maybe you needed to get to know him to be able to cherish him. His delicious pheromones, his perfect control, his open, loving heart, his will to be a hero for the people he held dear, you never saw or got those things on first sight. Maybe the pheromones and the looks. But really, what did they matter? It was the goodness Atsushi's heart held, his love for life and beauty. His love for Tatsuya.

No one saw those. All they saw was a great oaf, a disproportioned boy stumbling through life, led by a despicable creature because he could not care for himself. Sometimes Tatsuya wanted to punch those ladies smiling at him in sympathy. It put Atsushi down, made him seen like a burden to be pitied for. Atsushi was no burden. He was Tatsuya's everything.

It hurt that no one seemed to get that. The people he met on the street, the Omegas in his dorms, the other Alpha students who weren't mentally disabled. The people supporting him were teacher Tsueda, coach Araki, his basketball team and by now his parents. Maybe. His mother might have already changed her opinion, now that he was miles away. Would it always be this way? If he were to mate with Atsushi, would everyone think he was a poor rape victim saddled with him as an Alpha?

It hurt because of what it said about Atsushi. He did not want his boyfriend seen like that. He wanted him strong and independent. Well, as independent as he could be at least. It would never be optimal but one day he wanted Atsushi to hold a job as a basketball player, to stand on a court where hundreds, thousands shouted his name. He wanted to stand by his boyfriend's side and bask in the envy of others, knowing Atsushi was his and his alone.

Was that selfish? He wasn't sure. Didn't every Omega want the perfect husband to look good at his side? And why would he even want that when he might just be that player himself? Did he really want envy? He wasn't sure. He just wanted Atsushi to get the praise he deserved. He did not want the pity, the sympathy, the veiled "I am so sorry you have to deal with this".

He chose to be with Atsushi. He even chose him over Taiga who would certainly reach the exact same stage, the exact same level of professionalism. Taiga would even reach it by himself. Taiga knew how to clean, to cook, to look after himself. He did not need a minder. Still, Taiga did not have what Atsushi had. He did not have the same eye for detail, the dedication and the skill to lose himself in his emotions. Tatsuya might not know how Taiga was in bed but he could not imagine anyone more attentive and satisfying than his boyfriend.

He felt so Omega thinking that. Yes, the sex was great. It was the best he ever had. He did not even want people to know that. At the same time he wanted to tell everyone.

Maybe he wanted envy. Maybe he just wanted someone to acknowledge that Atsushi was desirable. Maybe he only wanted someone to tell him he was doing the right thing.

Every look of pity he got, he asked himself if he should choose differently. He loved Atsushi and Atsushi loved him. They had great sex. His boyfriend would be a professional basketball player and make tons of money. Their children did not run the danger of being mentally impaired. Still nearly everyone pitied him. He always told himself they didn't know the circumstances.

But he doubted. By the gods did he doubt. What should he ever do with those conflicting thoughts in his head? He wanted to bleach his mind, to stop asking himself the same questions over and over again. What did he want? He didn't know. He didn't know and he did not even know how he ever should know. How did anyone ever decide on a mate? Maybe those rape victims were fortunate in a way. They never had to ask those questions. They never had to ponder if they made the right choice. Choosing was oh so damn scary.

Tatsuya hesitated to dial. It was Wednesday, he was back in school, it was the day he always called his mother. He had never, ever missed a call. If he did they had always spoken about that before. Training, competitions, sometimes there wasn't time. But he had never missed a call unannounced. What would happen if he did not call his mother?

He sighed. This was ridiculous. They would not go back to normal if he did not call. It wasn't like anything could happen over the phone. There might be tears and apologies and ... who was he kidding, that would be bad enough. He just wanted them to be normal again. He didn't want to be treated like someone who had gone through a horrifying event. His mother had seemed a lot more shaken than he felt. Atsushi had saved him, his pregnancy test had been negative. Everything was alright.

He had to call his mother and tell her about the test. He had promised. It would take a huge load off her back. He owed her a call. They would get this over with and then they would go back to normal. He so desperately wanted them to be normal again. He just had to call and tell her and then-

"Himuro? There's someone at the door for you," a dormmate informed him.

"Thank you." He hung up the phone and moved to the door immediately. Anything was better than calling. He thanked whoever was outside to see him at ... well, it was pretty late, who could this be? He reached the first floor and had the double doors that secured their entrance in sight. They were heavy doors build to keep out crazed Alphas. If they did not open their windows, the building was even scent-proof. If anything happened they could barricade themselves in here and call the police. Anyone that wanted to enter had to ring a bell and wait until the asked for person came outside. No one but Omegas were allowed in here. So there was a meeting room right outside the doors.

He stepped through the second security door and saw Atsushi standing in the waiting room. His boyfriend immediately put his long arms around him and said: "I sensed distress from you."

"You sensed?" Tatsuya blinked but returned the hug anyway. "I thought you smelt my emotions?"

"I smelled them before. Now I sense them."

"Did you bite me at any time?" Because sensing only happened to mates. Atsushi shouldn't be able to do that. Were they somehow bonded by accident?

Atsushi brushed his hair to the side – Tatsuya did not wear a collar, he did not have to inside their secure dorm – and studied his neck. He finally said: "I can't see any marks." "Then how can you sense me?" That was weird. Very weird. Could two people bond without a mark? He had never heard of something like that. Bonding worked by being bitten in the throats of heat. He had not even spent a heat with Atsushi. That was only allowed when two people wanted to bond or were already bonded. In all other cases, the Alphas were supposed to go to school. Having Omegas take a week off every month was worse enough.

"Don't know." Atsushi shrugged his shoulders. "What were you upset about?"

Oh. Maybe his emotions had been so strong and linked to him that somehow it had been enough for Atsushi to sense it? But didn't emotion sensing work by smell as well? This dorm was smell-proof, there was no way Atsushi had smelled him. There were only fairytales of people being so in love and suited to each other that they completely tuned in on the other and could sense them even over miles. No one had ever been able to explain such phenomena, so naturally people thought them to be stuff of legends.

"I was ... afraid of calling my mother." Tatsuya told him. Could he really tell his boyfriend about that? Would he even understand?

"Why that? She was nice." Atsushi just watched his face, holding him securely.

"She felt so guilty about what happened in the garden. I'm afraid she still thinks like that. I don't want our connection to become weird because of that."

Atsushi looked at him without blinking. He seemed to ponder that.

Tatsuya just wasn't able to wait for his answer, he felt tears well up in his eyes. He sobbed, burying his head in Atsushi's chest. His voice laced with tears he said: "I feel so ashamed this happened. It's all because of me. Why was I born an Omega? My parents always said that the worst that could happen to us was if they ever lost control around me. They said they would not know how to live with that. Well, I don't know too! I don't know how to talk to her! I wish I wasn't an Omega. This would never have happened if I hadn't been born this way."

"I like you as an Omega." Atsushi kissed his head. "You're small and beautiful. You fit in my arms."

Yeah, of course. He wouldn't be with Atsushi if he wasn't an Omega. Maybe Atsushi wouldn't even be interested in him. Of course his boyfriend loved the scent of his pheromones. Everyone loved his god-damn pheromones. He was sick of them. If not for his pheromones he would never have been raped by his own mother.

"One day I'll mate with you. We will have beautiful children. We could not have children if you weren't an Omega," Atsushi told him with a voice full of fondness.

Tatsuya took a deep breath. Right. He was able to have children. True enough, they would not be able to have children if he weren't an Omega. Being sought after for his pheromones, for his looks, he was simply the epitome of fertility. It was what drew Alphas to him. His pheromones marked him as someone perfect for breeding. He would have beautiful children, no doubt about that. They would have beautiful children. He smiled up at Atsushi and kissed him.

His boyfriend made a satisfied noise and wiped the tears from his cheeks. He told him: "You are my perfect Omega boyfriend."

Tatsuya had to chuckle while he cleaned his nose. Well, Atsushi might not be the most eloquent but Tatsuya got what he wanted to say. He was exactly like his boyfriend wanted him. They would not share this deep connection if Tatsuya wasn't who he was. What he was. He should take pride in his genes, not hate them for the complications

they had in store for him. Atsushi would not have been able to sense his emotions if they weren't Alpha and Omega.

"Can I come with you to your dorm? Can you hold me while I phone my mom?," he asked his boyfriend.

"I'd like that." Atsushi grinned at him.

It was the perfect solution. If it didn't work out Atsushi would be there for him. He might even be allowed to stay in his boyfriend's room to cry his eyes out if it became catastrophic. By now he knew their dorm supervisor, they liked and respected each other. Tatsuya greeted him on the way in. Habara, the supervisor, looked surprised but waved him in.

"Good evening again. I wanted to use your phone and have Atsushi near me."

"Oh." Habara looked shocked. "Is it that kind of talk?"

"That kind?" Tatsuya blinked.

"Well ... the part where you tell your parents that you are pregnant?"

Ouch. That hurt. It was a realistic guess on his part, Habara couldn't know how wrong ... how offensive this was. Tatsuya took a deep breath and said more cutting than he wanted: "No, I'm not pregnant. I still want Atsushi around. Can we have the phone?" Atsushi supported that with a growl on his own. He must have smelled or sensed the upset. Habara handed the mobile phone of the dorm over in record time and just added: "Please give it back in half an hour. The other boys wait for their mother's calls. Don't let it get too late, okay? They need their promised calls."

"Sure." Tatsuya took the phone and went to Atsushi's room. He just wanted this over with. It helped to know he had a deadline. So he ignored the slight mess in the room – an opened but unfinished chips bag on the floor – and sat on the bed.

Atsushi picked him up again and sat him on his lap. It was a comfortable place, he was able to lean back against his boyfriend. He knew the number by heart and soon he heard the ring start. It wouldn't be long now. His mother knew their time, she would sit beside the phone and wait-

"Good evening, Tatsuya. How are you?," she greeted him, her voice only slightly less lustrous than before.

"Hi, mom. I'm fine. How are you?" Atsushi's arms tightened around him, a clear reaction to his insecurities.

"Well ... I can't say I have been fine. I worried. But other than that, everything is normal."

Straight to the heart of the matter. Maybe they should really just get it over with. He said: "The test was negative. Everything's fine. Atsushi and me had a great trip to Tokyo. Thanks for sponsoring that! Can you believe that I actually met Taiga there?"

"You did? What a surprise!" The answer sounded only slightly forced. "I remember how depressed you were when he left. How did it go?"

"Good, I guess. He is still the same. He doesn't notice ... anything really. There is an Omega on his new team. I think the boy is in love with him but again, Taiga doesn't notice a thing."

"Kuroko?" Atsushi asked.

"Oh, is Atsushi with you? That was his voice, right? How is he? Greet him from me!" This was not forced at all, his mother genuinely seemed to like him.

"Greetings from my mom. And yes, I am talking about Kuroko. I think he likes my brother," Tatsuya said to his boyfriend. He turned back to the phone and said: "He says to greet you too. He's fine."

Atsushi kissed his temple while his mother began to ask questions about his meeting

with Taiga. Good. They would never have to talk about the rape again. They were fine. All was fine. He relaxed in Atsushi's arms. He would be able to just forget about it. He told his mother about the places they had visited, the tournament, the failed final match with Taiga. He told her how much he was looking forward to the Winter Cup, playing against Taiga, playing against Akashi, playing with his boyfriend most of all. He added in some special moves he had seen his boyfriend do and said one kissed his neck or temple for every appreciative comment he made.

This was happiness. Why could no one see that? He felt like crying and talked about basketball and his boyfriend. Atsushi simply held him and breathed in his scent. He continued to do so minutes after Tatsuya had already ended the call. Habara came to get the phone. After he closed the door behind himself, Tatsuya cried. Atsushi held him through it.

## Kapitel 18: Trust or doubt

Tatsuya had been quite dissatisfied when they had spent the summer training near their school. Of course the landscape was full of fields and hills and thereby perfect for training but he had wanted to travel. So naturally, he had been looking forward to their fall training camp. Not only would they travel, it would be followed up by the Winter Cup.

After their last outing he had not expected their coach to want to talk about accommodations again but she called him out after training. Of course he would room with Atsushi. Was that a problem now that they were together? It wasn't as if it was a secret that they were sleeping with each other. He pouted a bit but decided to just listen to their coach first.

"So, this next training camp ... have the others already talked to you about it?"

"They told me it would be fun and that we would have some Onsen near us and would make our own food. It sounded like we were short on money but otherwise fine." He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well, yes, that's ... well, have they told you that we would be camping?"

"Camping?", he exclaimed in shock.

"Yes, camping. This is something like an outdoor-survival trip. We will be camping, roasting meat on sticks and wash in natural hot springs. It's quite the adventure for the boys." She looked at him unsurely.

Camping in the wild. Wash in vulcano-warmed pools of water. Make fire and eat self-grilled meat. His mouth corners had dropped considerably. Of course this was Hokkaido, there was a lot of wild landscape but this ... "Will there be bears?"

"Yes, there will be bears." Her eyes were trained on him, her gaze serious.

"Do you ... bath with the boys? Is there more than one hot spring?" There must be, right?

"I just get up very early. Maybe you can go while the other boys grill meat and I'll supervise them? They normally go after dinner, that could be a compromise. Or you get up even earlier than me. But I would not advise on it, you have to train after all."

Bath out in the wild. Alone. With bears. The shock was slowly waning but he certainly wasn't over it when he asked: "Can Atsushi come to? I'm sure he could wrestle a bear."

She had to smile at that. She nearly laughed before saying: "Bears don't attack humans if they aren't provoked. It's more often that monkeys steal your clothes."

Monkeys! Holy fuck, what had he gotten himself into?

"You know ... if you don't want to go, that is okay, you know? I won't hold it against you. I had my worries when I myself became coach but I have been doing this for some years now. I am not worried about the boys, but I am worried about you."

Monkeys. Bears. Alphas in the wild, grilling meat, returning to their roots. And he was the only Omega around for miles. Even the coach was an Alpha. If she wanted to push him down, she could. He was completely defenseless against all of them. This could go sooo wrong.

"Think about it, okay? Talk it through with your mother. I don't expect anything bad to happen but where we are going ... there's no police, no ambulance, only a lot of wilderness. It's no place for an unbound Omega."

Hikers. Wanderers. Tourists. He would be running around and sweating. He would

have to bath in the open. There would be no safe dorms, no doors to hide behind. If anyone got crazy, it could become a hunt.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and nodded to him. With another "Think about it", she left him standing there to think about it by himself.

He shuddered. He never, ever wanted to be raped again. He did not even want to chance it. This was not safe. He could not do that. He trusted all those boys but what if ... anything could happen. He would never have thought like that half a year ago but he had learned since then. This was- this-

He heard footsteps to his right and turned. Atsushi. It was Atsushi jogging up to him. His beloved Atsushi, his hero. Long arms wrapped around him and he was able to bury his nose in his boyfriend's sweaty training shirt. It normally turned him off but whenever he felt unsettled, he loved his boyfriend's smell. It must be his Omega instincts.

"What is it, Muro-chin?", the other asked.

"I think I'm having a slight panic attack. Had. Whatever." He breathed in deeply. "I'm better now. Or not. Just hold me." He hugged the other more tightly. "Don't leave."

"I'm here." One big hand began to pet his head.

Big breath in. Out. He had never had a panic attack but he knew the drill. He'd seen this in movies. Control his breathing. He could do this. He wasn't out in the wild with bears and rape-thirsty Alphas. His pheromones were under control. No one was going to attack him. He felt a tear roll down his cheek. He wiped at it angrily. This was no reason to cry. Nothing had happened. He was behaving like a whimpy Omega, this was no way to-

Atsushi picked him up and kissed him. Oh. Good. Nice. His Alpha's scent enveloped him and he began to relax. Was this what Omega pheromones felt like to Alphas? They were either soothing or arousing. He felt soothed right now, but also slightly aroused. Atsushi's pheromones were really nice.

"Let's go shower, yeah?" Atsushi looked him in the eyes.

"Hm-hm", he mumbled and simply melted against his boyfriend. Being carried was nice. Being held by Atsushi was nice. He pressed his nose against his boyfriend's skin. The scent lulled him in.

"Can you still answer?"

He simply hummed.

"Is this like back with your parents?" Atsushi sounded concerned.

He hummed some more.

It wasn't a shock to wake from his high this time. He knew how this worked. When an Omega became distressed, they could be soothed by their mate's scent. It's why they build nests out of clothing that smelled of their Alpha. It was a completely normal process – for someone that had mated.

He was soothed by Atsushi's scent and Atsushi was able to sense his emotions. Both were things that only happened to mated pairs and not even all of them. Happily mated pairs. They weren't even mated. How would they be if they did? Would he feel even closer to Atsushi? Would he be able to sense and sooth Atsushi? Because right now this seemed to be a one-way-street. He remembered how he had been told that boys like Atsushi committed to someone, they did not hold their heart back in relationships. As Alphas weren't marked by their Omegas, maybe Atsushi had already bonded to him? Maybe Atsushi was already his and they would only need the bite to seal this and make him commit as well?

He wanted to. Despite all his doubts and insecurities, he really wanted to belong to Atsushi. It wasn't rational. It really made no sense at all honestly. But his heart said it was the right thing. In love songs they often sang "Listen to your heart". Nobody ever sang "Listen to their coins clink" or "Watch how he behaves around children". It wasn't what love was about. But the question was: Was mating about love?

Most mating partners did not love one another. Some mated because the Alpha happened upon an Omega in heat. Some mated because the Alpha bought his mate. In some cases Omegas were able to choose – they normally chose whoever would earn the most and treat them right at the same time. Omegas mating out of love, that was ... mostly something people thought foolish. Omegas that mated out of "love" mated young, only to learn that their partner did not earn enough, left them for someone else or simply lost interest. Those Omegas mostly ended up as prostitutes. It wasn't what he planned for himself. Having Atsushi devote to him like this – with visible signs of his devotion! – was more than any Omega could ask for to know that this was the right thing. The worst that could happen was that Atsushi would be unable to pay for him and their children. In that case his parents would help out. They could make this work. They really could.

Yes, he would mate with Atsushi.

At some point in the future at least. Right now they had the Winter Cup to win and before that they had this dreaded training camp in the wilderness. If coach had told him beforehand, he might have planned on mating with Atsushi during his last heat period. As it was, he would have his next heat a week after their camp. Did he want to live in the woods as an unmated Omega? Did he trust his team enough that no one would fall prey to his pheromones? Could they make it work?

He didn't know. He didn't even know who he could ask. It wasn't like he knew any cool Omegas that had any other interests than looking for a-

He did. Kuroko Tetsuya. He knew an Omega interested in something far more important than mating who would get the horror of being with a bunch of Alphas, the danger of rape, of hunts ... could he really ask that? He had only met him once. It would be quite a strange talk, asking a near stranger about how dangerous it might be to camp with over ten unmated Alpha teenage boys as a lone unmated Omega.

He could answer his own question even without calling Kuroko. It was suicidal to go on that trip. If he was mated, it might be possible, but unmated ... but Atsushi had devoted himself to him. He would come to his rescue wherever he was. He would be protected, looked after ... was Atsushi strong enough to hold the others off while he ran? Did he trust himself to be able to run from a horde of Alphas? Before, the answer would have been yes. Right now he wasn't so sure.

Was it just his new experience holding himself back from something he would enjoy without question? Or was it life experience teaching him the folly of youth? Had he been overconfident before or was he too anxious now?

Maybe he should call Kuroko. Maybe not. Oh, he didn't know. He really didn't know.

"You smell unhappy," Atsushi informed him later that evening.

"I know." He was lying on Atsushi's bed trying to read something for his homework. He just wasn't able to concentrate.

"Why are you unhappy?" His boyfriend had dutifully filled his homework sheet. His letters were getting better and better. It helped that Tatsuya sat beside him, even if he just watched or did his own work.

"I don't know what to do about our training camp. We'll actually be camping. Have

you ever camped before?"

Atsushi shook his head.

"It's out in the wild, no electricity, no running water. You bath in streams and natural onsen, you grill or cook over a fire," Tatsuya explained.

"I saw that on TV. It looked cool." His boyfriend smiled.

"It's supposed to be pretty cool. But it can also be dangerous. There are wild bears and boars and other animals. The bears often come looking for food, so you cannot have any of it lying around. I don't think you'll be able to have snacks that week."

"Oh." Atsushi looked crushed.

It made Tatsuya smile. For some people other things were much more important than others. He continued: "I do not fear the bears. But I am an Omega, so I fear the other Alphas. Except for you, I'll have no protection there. What if anything like what happened at my parent's place happens? There won't be any showers. And even you can't fight off our whole team."

"Hm." Atsushi studied him for a moment and seemed to take this seriously. "Then I need to get you and run to a stream or onsen."

"Yeah ... but would you be able to outrun the whole team?" Tatsuya sighed in defeat. Atsushi seemed to think again and finally answered: "No. But I do not need to. I can hold them off with my pheromones and growl."

"You can hold them off?" The Omega looked up.

"Yeah, like with dogs ... you growl, they run. Humans are the same. I growl, they run."

True. Atsushi was strong. His pheromones told everyone how strong he was. Tatsuya had heard him growl once when Atsushi pulled his mother ... well, off him. His memory was hazy but he remembered the sudden stench of fear. It had not been his. Was it possible that Atsushi might be able to hold the team off by growling if the worst happened?

He was good at triggering animal instincts and the rest of their team were trained in listening to their gut feeling. They would back off if Atsushi got serious. His Alpha was enough to protect him. But if he lost his mind and raped him after all? Or whatever it might be when Tatsuya was too out of it to listen to rational thought? Did he trust Atsushi enough to simply drop him in an onsen and wash him off?

He had done it twice now. Really, why shouldn't he trust Atsushi? His boyfriend had already proofed himself. He nodded to himself and turned to the other boy: "Okay, I'll trust you in this. If I lose my senses to pheromones, you'll come get me to wash me off. You'll protect me from the other Alphas."

"I will." Atsushi lay a hand over his heart as if to swear.

"Okay." Tatsuya nodded again. He would do this. He just had to try. If worst came to worse, he might be raped, he might get pregnant. He would not be forcefully mated to someone. And Atsushi would be a wall between him and every threat there was. He had to trust his boyfriend.

## Kapitel 19: Training camp

They took two small buses to their camp, one driven by their coach, the other by teacher Tsueda who had agreed to sacrifice his holidays to oversee their camp and meals. He would also be the one to do everyone's checklists. He had specially sealed packs of sweets for the boys, so Atsushi would not have to go without. His boyfriend smiled in bliss when he heard.

All the people with intelligence oversaw the construction of the tents. No one of the boys was allowed to do one by themselves, even the third-years had to wait for an overseer. It seemed like they were so prone to frustration that tents had been destroyed in the past. Tatsuya oversaw four tent constructions before Atsushi and him build their own. Most boys had shared tents for two or singles, so theirs wasn't abnormal. Though the coach had told him that they were expected not to do any sexual activities in the camp – as if he was that dumb with 15 Alphas around. Atsushi had not been happy about that part.

There was one onsen a five minute walk away. It was part of a stony landscape surrounded by trees. Tatsuya had no problem to imagine bears up here, though he was a bit surprised to see hairy apes. Even though coach had talked about them and they typically appeared in historical mangas whenever people went to an onsen, he had not expected them. At least there wasn't a whole family bathing in their pool. Their coach and teacher Tsueda reminded them to only use soap outside the onsen and to wash off in the nearby stream before entering it. Tsueda took the first group for practical demonstration while their coach began to make a fire with the rest of them.

Tatsuya learned that making a fire was far harder than he had imagined. They were making one with dry wood, cones and leaves instead of using gasoline or something similar. Above it they constructed a metallic roast which could be lowered into the flames. Tatsuya got a short peak at the isolated boxes full of ice in which they had transported kilograms of meat and vegetables. It seemed like whatever teams normally got for training camps in terms of money had completely gone into their food budget. His mouth watered just thinking about all that meat. Back in America they had grilled all the time. Here in Japan, meat was so expensive that even if you wanted a steak, you would never make more than a third of it in tiny pieces. Eating a whole mouthful of meat was unthinkable ... until now. If they planned to feed Atsushi, they would have a steak for Tatsuya. A real one.

The fire had finally burned to lump of coals on which they placed more wood, so it was hot enough to grill meat. The first group came back from bathing, the second left. Atsushi and him were supposed to go as the last group but he wanted to be fed first. Their coach promised him the first steak, so he helped her to stock the roast with meat and veggies. They sat Atsushi next to them and gave him veggies to cut. The result looked ... uneven. Well, it was eatable, that was all that mattered.

As promised he got the first steak and Atsushi the next. Honestly, it was fifteen steaks ready at the same time, but in his opinion it still counted. He was moaning over the heavenly juicy meat just as Atsushi did. In the time he had his third bite, his boyfriend was already asking for the next steak. He got some grilled veggies instead that he had cut himself. He seemed happy enough though. But it meant that they had to wait not only the second but third round (coach already reserved two steaks just for Atsushi)

before he could drag his boyfriend from the barbecue to wash.

Atsushi was extremely unhappy about washing off in the cold stream. He shed his clothes easily enough but the frigid water wasn't his favorite. He soaped himself on Tatsuya's orders and dumped a bucket above him before sprinting into the onsen. Tatsuya had to smile at seeing that before doing the same. Honestly, the water was extremely cold. Atsushi had even waited at the shore to carry him into the hot water, so he wouldn't slip and fall.

Heavenly. The hot water, his boyfriend, the wild nature ... Tatsuya kissed the other and let himself be caressed by the water and his boyfriend's hands. This was what life should be like. Living in the woods, being won over by a strong man and carried off into ... well, an onsen. This could definitely compete with sex. What a shame they could not have sex in the onsen, it would be the best ever. When Atsushi was really wealthy, they would buy a plot of land with an onsen on it.

Now they would have to train for that dream to come true. They would train and beat that horrible two-faced shit that was Atsushi's former captain. His train of thought suddenly got lost when he felt Atsushi harden against him. They had to stop. They really, really had to stop.

"Atsushi." He drew back.

His boyfriend whimpered as if their distance physically hurt.

"Atsushi, we can't dirty the water. Also, we don't have a condom." It did feel like it would hurt any minute to say those words.

"If you suck me off, the water won't get dirty," Atsushi answered with a smile that was as dirty as they come.

That was a quick comeback. Not even a bad one. Tatsuya hesitated for only a few seconds before he said: "Only if you suck me off as well."

"Deal."

Oh, he was already seeing this become a daily routine.

Their days were full of exercises, their evenings full of barbecue, hot water and hotter blow-jobs. They slept like babies, even though they could hear their captain snore from four tents over. They saw bears sometimes but they never wanted to interact and the boys were sharply warned to never, ever approach a bear. One might think that sixteen-year-old boys would never heed such commands but the mental deficient boys were trained to good behavior and did their best to stick to the rules.

Not even one moment seemed dangerous, so Tatsuya enjoyed his time immensely. And the meat. And the blow-jobs in an onsen. Gods, this trip had been a marvelous idea. On their last evening, they roasted marshmallows over the fire. Tatsuya sat with his back to his boyfriend on his lap and fed him with the sweet concoction.

He was so happy he had not been too afraid to do this. He bubbled with happiness, watching his boyfriend bite into a half-melted marshmallow to see it burst and run down his chin. Tatsuya helped by licking the sweet stuff off the other. Their coach cleared her throat next to them which made him grin with an innocent bat of his eyelashes.

"Himuro Tatsuya, you are causing distress among the other students."

"Ups." He turned around again to sit with his back leaning against Atsushi. "Sorry, coach."

"Youngsters." She shook her head at them and stalked off.

Atsushi rumbled into his ear in satisfaction and he simply closed his eyes in bliss.

The next day came soon enough where they had to pack up and leave the place.

Tatsuya oversaw the deconstruction of various tents while Atsushi's only job was to fold the big sheets. The various poles were too much for him but Tatsuya had not minded doing them himself. His boyfriend was able to help anyway. They sang on their way back (at least in the beginning) and finally slept the last hour of their journey.

Tatsuya loved seeing his bed, deeply thankful for the first time in his life for all the comfort it held. Running hot water. Electricity. He still loved having the experience of that one week out in the wild. And he had an idea what kind of extras Atsushi's and his house would need. A very big bathtub. Oh yes. One they could dirty, one where Atsushi could fuck him over the tube's edge and ... maybe he should go visit his boyfriend.

By the way, he really needed to mate with the guy to get a shared flat in the family dorms.

The Winter Cup was just around the corner, so he decided against asking Atsushi to mate with him the week after. They should plan it, it should be special, not just something to ... well, fuck more often. He had never expected to become so Omega. Maybe he should wait for his hormones to quieten a bit and make a decision ... how was he expected to wait three years before he would be allowed to live with his boyfriend? No, he wanted to mate with him. A lot sooner than after school. But he really should wait. He didn't know if Atsushi would be able to get a job, to hold his interest, to ... oh, who was he kidding? Atsushi had already bonded to him. It was cruel not to reciprocate. And again, he really, really wanted more se-, no, a flat with Atsushi. He was hopeless, wasn't he? He sighed listening to his own thoughts.

But he had nothing to do than fantasize about his boyfriend for a whole week. Everyone would dream about hot sex in that case, right? Tatsuya did. Fingering himself, stuffing toys between his legs and still not being satisfied when he remembered his boyfriend's perfect cock.

Okay, yes, he had become pretty Omega. He was allowed to. In his opinion, he had the perfect boyfriend. He did not need more time to think. He just had to wait for the right moment.

But first they would win the Winter Cup.

What energy! Tatsuya was grinning most of the time now. He had only seen Taiga from afar but he was sure his brother would notice the difference. No poker-face anymore, just straight happiness. What else should he show when they had won two games in a row without giving their opponents even one basket. Atsushi had been their main force. He was highly motivated after Tatsuya had promised at least a blow-job for every game they won without their opponents scoring. Unfair? Not at all in his opinion. This was what being an Omega was for. He could motivate others pretty well. He had promised the other boys he would introduce them to the other Omegas if they won the Winter Cup. So everyone was in high spirits.

Tatsuya cuddled up to his boyfriend when they watched Seirin's games. Taiga was really cool. Tatsuya could see that without any indecent thoughts. By now he felt so close to Atsushi that Taiga was ... well, he looked good, he was a great player, a wonderful Alpha, but he was ... not only was he not Atsushi, one could also see the looks he shared with Kuroko. His heart seemed finally drawn to someone. Tatsuya would not stand in his way. He had Atsushi and his boyfriend was everything he could ask for.

So he went onto the court without any distracting feelings. This was his moment. He would beat Taiga and his Omega with his own Alpha. Afterwards they would face that demon overlord of an ex-captain. No one would stop them. They had Okamura, Liu and Atsushi as a shield, Fugui as their game-maker and him on the offensive. They were unstoppable. Atsushi even remembered Seirin's center by name. Tatsuya would have kissed him in pride if they weren't in the middle of a game.

"Tatsuya." Huh? Taiga? "Honestly, I didn't want to play you."

Tatsuya blinked. Why? He was sure that Taiga did not plan on losing, so why would he not want to face him?

"I wish things had stayed the way they were."

Being brothers? Tatsuya doubted it could ever be the same. Even if he could see Taiga as nothing but a rival instead of a desirable man, it would not be the same. He would never be able to unmake the realization that Taiga was ... well, not a sibling. You just did not think about your brother as desirable. But Taiga was and it was something Tatsuya could not forget. Even when he had Atsushi, even knowing Taiga had Kuroko, it was not something you were able to forget.

"I'll crush you with everything I have!"

Good. Tatsuya answered and allowed a smile afterwards. They would be able to overcome this. He had overcome his infatuation after all. He ran once he heard the whistle. Time to win a game!

He loved to see people realize how helpless they were against a guy like Atsushi. Especially on Taiga's face that realization was like the sweet taste of honey. The desperation when you got that you could not score from neither inside nor outside. When fast-breaks were useless and rebounds were taken from you. Thirteen points turned to fifteen, to eighteen. Nothing could stop them. Even getting one rebound was not enough to ever overcome the wall they had trained to build.

Seirin would not score a single point. Neither this Kiyoshi nor Taiga nor that shooter captain- Kuroko? Tatsuya's eyes widened. Why would Kuroko shoot ... oh no. They had developed an invisible shot. Really now? An invisible shot! What the heck?

"I didn't think you would be the first to score against me in this tournament."

Well, yes, no one had expected that! Tatsuya still stared. Okay, come down again. So winning would not be a piece of cake. He had never expected it to be. He yelled: "Restart!"

They ran their offensive with Okamura scoring for them. But it wasn't the same. Kuroko scored. Either by himself or by diverting and passing. He was more of a game-maker than the point guard. He was the heart of Seirin. It frustrated Tatsuya as much as it made him happy to see an Omega be so vital to a team. He wasn't alone. Kuroko might not be an ace but he was integral to his team. It was a beautiful sight, even from the perspective of the opposing team.

Well, not like they would win. Tatsuya was relaxed when they ended the second quarter. It would have been too easy if they had played another zero-point game. This was better. He smiled at Atsushi who nodded back at him. It was more than they had expected and at the same time, it wasn't unexpected. Their coach seemed to think the same when she held her speech: "Seirin should bench number 11 in their second half. The disappearing shots were a surprise, but there must be some necessary condition since they didn't use it until the second quarter. It's most likely related to his misdirection. If it is, they'll definitely return him to the bench. This will be accompanied by a change in their formation."

All of that made sense. So they would rack up points in the third quarter and try their best to defend in the forth. Tatsuya smiled. He knew what that would mean. Coach Araki said exactly what he thought just a few moments later: "Himuro, the third quarter will be yours. I want you to go all out. Make them regret their futile hopes." He grinned and nodded. Taiga would not be able to stand against him.

## Kapitel 20: The game

“Come at me like you’re trying to kill me.”

Taiga’s eyes widened. But right that moment, Tatsuya meant it. He wanted Taiga at full strength. He wanted to beat that near perfect Alpha in all his grace and strength. He wanted to stand on top and know that being an Omega did not mean being weak. Taiga was a potential mate but also a rival. Right now the last part counted a lot more. Why ever did they have to exchange him? Sure, they wanted him serious, just like Tatsuya, but ... oh well, maybe his Omega could encourage him. Tatsuya wanted a real enemy. This should better be good. In the end it only supported their strategy of winning points off Seirin- had that center just shot a three? And why was their center acting as point guard? What the heck was with that point guard double team? Who would ever think of such a strategy?

Tatsuya watched in astonishment. And here he thought Hyuuga would have the main part in trying to take some points from them. No wonder Atsushi remembered that center’s name. He was not only good, he was great. Brilliant. They were really pressuring them with shooting abilities, just that all of them could shoot and at least two of them had no trouble with overwatching game-play. That was hard, even for a team as good as them.

Their coach called for a time-out. Tatsuya immediately used a bit of his pheromones to calm Atsushi down. Really, they had to stop that vicious cycle of having Atsushi react to Teppei’s moves. Coach explained the same. Atsushi only sighed and buried his nose in Tatsuya’s neck for a moment.

“Stay calm,” he murmured against his boyfriend’s skin.

“Same to you.”

They both nodded before going out again. So Kagami was back as well. Was he ... yes, he was. He was finally playing seriously. He was feral. Tatsuya smiled before he fainted, fainted again, faked – and lost the ball. What the heck? Tatsuya grit his teeth, ran, but could not even keep up with him.

Atsushi took the ball. Thank god. He was strong and would always be strong. They scored, took the ball from Seirin again and ran for it. Above all they were still much better. He would make that shot, Taiga was stumbling, he was ... getting the ball? Had he seen through that mirage shoot? How? Why was Seirin scoring this much? Yosen was triple-teaming Teppei, Seirin was triple-teaming Atsushi and somehow they still scored. Taiga was blocking his shots. Unbelievable.

“I can’t take it anymore.”

Tatsuya looked over his shoulder and saw Atsushi step forward on their offense. Oho? He had seen this once. That first game where he finally had enough of being insulted and Atsushi stepped in to defend him, he had actually changed to offense for once. It was the most beautiful sight. Atsushi crushed three players all by himself. He stopped Teppei by himself. He stopped Taiga by himself. Atsushi was truly invincible.

Well ... he did not have to break the hoop though. Hopefully Akashi was fine with paying for that. Tatsuya kissed his boyfriend anyway and whispered: “Keep that up and you’ll get a huge reward.”

Stealth Full-Court Man-to-Man Defence. What a mouthful. And damn was it effective. He saw Atsushi kick the bench and get hit for it. But really, he should have more trust.

This was their game. Tatsuya could do this, even all by himself if needed. Seirin would not win this. It was their moment, their game. Atsushi was the perfect partner. Tatsuya would win. He turned his hands into fist. He would make this team win. No way, they would never lose. He went out again, heart on fire, a visage of ice. He would not lose to Taiga.

Fukui got the ball and everyone ran to their positions. Taiga took center position right in front of Atsushi like he was able to ... was he trying to cover the entire inside like Atsushi? He saw his boyfriend grit his teeth. Rightly so. Taiga would never be able to be as good as Atsushi was. Ah, there it was. Atsushi's attack blew Taiga away. Tatsuya smirked.

Time to get serious. He got the ball and ran at full speed. Fake right, turn left, full dribble-

"Murochin, stop!," Atsushi shouted.

He reacted on sheer instinct with a full stop and a backwards dribble. Kuroko. Whenever did he get there? Gods, Atsushi had saved him there. It give Seirin enough time to sprint into position with Taiga as a lonely center again. Tatsuya grit his teeth. This stupid oaf! This wasn't courage. It was underestimation of their team! Tatsuya was better than that. Atsushi was better than that. He would never let that stand. He faked right again, passed left, dribbled forward and jumped for the shot.

So Taiga had figured out the mirage shot? Who the fuck cared. He simply shot the first one. Eat that, imbecile. If Taiga really thought he could win against Tatsuya and Atsushi by himself, he could taste the sore mouthful of defeat. They took Seirin's ball, having Atsushi score. Tatsuya took the next basket. One after one, they drew away from Seirin. Atsushi overcame Taiga in nearly every turn.

They scored and scored. Taiga seemed more serious but his team wasn't good enough. One could not hold out against a fully trained team. Seirin took a time-out but it seemed like they had given up. Their coach was gone, their center was gone. Taiga and Kuroko were on their last leg. Tatsuya dared to give Atsushi a kiss and smile at him.

They took the next basket. But Taiga stopped the one after. And the next. What the hell was going on here? Taiga was getting annoying. Atsushi took Seirin's ball for a come-back and ran. Tatsuya grinned before he saw Taiga sprint. Sprint! In the forth quarter. Had he taken drugs or something? He got in front of Atsushi, jumped higher than him and punched the ball out of his hands.

How was that possible? Could it be the zone? Tatsuya had heard about it but never seen it. An athlete without pain, without speed limits, full of stamina even though he should run on empty. Tatsuya scoffed. Let's test that. He called for the ball and faked off all his three defenders. His real opponent was Taiga. He jumped for a mirage shot while Taiga jumped for the first release. Tatsuya caught to ball again to shoot but ... Taiga was still in front of him. Floating. Flying. Eerie.

They ran back only to see Taiga draw ahead of them and shoot a three. He ran back before Tatsuya even reached his own side of the field. Well – shit. So this was the zone. How were they supposed to stop this?

"Give me!," Atsushi shouted.

Tatsuya breathed a sigh of relief. Of course. Atsushi. He was fighting for them, he was used to fight with and against people far stronger than any normal player. By now Atsushi was like a dog fighting for his bone. They had woken his soldier spirit.

And Taiga stopped him. Taiga took the ball from him in mid-air. Tatsuya's eyes widened. No way. Atsushi was brought to his knees from the force. No way in hell this

was happening. No ... it wasn't possible. None of this was.

Taiga was faster than humanly possible. He was as agile as a cat. He dribbled while running at full speed. He zipped between players. It was like he was teleporting, somehow always holding the ball when he neared the basket. Even if it was Yosen's ball. Kuroko was completely in sync with him and simply took the ball from anyone. Tatsuya's heart broke when he saw Taiga air-walk above Atsushi and slam a dunk over his head. More than that – he had jumped over a guy that was more than two meters tall. That was taking the cake.

Their coach called a time-out. Thank god, hopefully she had some kind of solution to this. How could one stop a god-like player? All of them took their towels and drinks, trying to realize what just happened.

Atsushi was the first to find his words: "I've had enough."

"What did you just say?," Fukui asked after a moment of silence.

"I said I've had enough. I quit. Sub me out."

Tatsuya felt too stunned to react. What?

"What?," was what Fukui asked as well, "Don't be ridiculous! What are you talking about?"

"I don't understand," Liu admitted.

"I am not having fun anymore," Atsushi droned on in his pouting voice.

Coach asked a bench player for her sword.

Their captain stood and placed himself in front of Atsushi to say: "If you drop out now, we'll lose a game we might still win. Are you saying you don't care if we lose?"

"Yeah. After all, no one can stop Kagami now."

Tatsuya lost it. One moment he was sitting, next he was standing in front of Atsushi, a fist in his face. He punched him full-force, no matter the consequences. Who the fuck did that guy think he was? Tatsuya grabbed his shirt and shouted: "That's enough, Atsushi! The game's not over yet!"

"Ow." Atsushi looked up at him, his eyes without any spark. "It's annoying when you get hot-blooded. Besides, you're even more useless against Kagami than I am."

Tatsuya held back from punching his boyfriend again. Barely.

"Can't you tell he's better than you?"

No. He wasn't. He would never be ... Tatsuya stumbled back. Taiga wasn't better than him. Never. They had the same training. Tatsuya had always been better than him. He had the better technique. He trained more. He had always been better until ... until they hit puberty. Until Taiga grew over his head and got the muscle mass he never would have. Because he was only an Omega.

"I know." He took a shaky breath. "I know that. I have always been jealous of him." Being an Alpha. Being superior to everyone by birth alone. "But you have what I desperately want," he continued while thinking of that perfect body, those perfect genes his boyfriend had, "and you're trying to throw the game." He tried not to cry. He really tried to. But how could he not when it was thrown into his face what a failure he was? By no other than his own boyfriend, his future mate? How could he? "You are making me mad with rage."

Atsushi blinked at him. Once. Twice. He finally said in low anger: "Get away from me. That's so annoying."

Tatsuya felt his heart break again. Not in despair. This was pure disappointment. Atsushi ... wasn't what he had thought he was. This was no way for his mate to behave.

"Anyway, I can't believe you're crying. I sort of noticed, but I didn't think you felt so strongly." What did that tone mean? "Actually, this is the first time I've been amazed ... by how much someone repulses me."

Tatsuya could not believe his ears. This could not be true. This wasn't ... didn't they have a bond? Was this really all there was? Disdain? Once he wasn't who Atsushi wanted him to be ... had there not been more than this? This was what their relationship was when their world-views clashed? Repulsion?

"I guess I'll stay on the court until the end of the game."

Huh? What? Atsushi stood, not heeding the hand still holding his shirt. He asked their coach for a hair tie. Seriously? Atsushi only got himself a hair tie when he was completely ... Tatsuya smiled in relief. It had never been Atsushi's word that counted. It had always been his actions. If this was his answer Tatsuya would forget his hateful words.

Atsushi would play.

And he would go all out.

Still triple-teaming him. Well, no matter. He could take three. Hell, he could take four. And together with Atsushi, he would even take Taiga in the zone. He jumped a fake for Kuroko, another fake for Taiga and passed to Atsushi – who passed back to him. This wasn't about pride anymore. This was a fight for survival, going all out, even overcoming their own instincts for the sake of winning.

Seirin countered with the same double-point guard strategy they had before, just with Taiga as their point guard. It was seriously annoying to fight a team with three people able to overview the whole court.

Yosen countered with a Tatsuya-Atsushi tag-team. Bouncing the ball back and forth in high speed even overcame Taiga. He could not be in two places at once. One of them scored without fail – just like Taiga scored by using his teammates.

Right until the last minute when Seirin decided to send Kiyoshi back in. Seriously? They still had him as a trump card? Hadn't Atsushi destroyed him mentally and physically? How was he still standing? He had seriously earned the title iron-heart.

Well, on to their last stand. Tatsuya got the ball and passed it to Atsushi while overcoming Taiga. But that one still jumped again to stop his boyfriend. Atsushi made a pass backwards into Tatsuya's hands but Kiyoshi jumped in front of him. No matter. He could not stop the mirage shot. He faked well, but now well enough for Tatsuya. He took the shot, released the ball – like lightning some hand speed in from the left. Their shooter? God damn it, they were all mad dogs.

"Stop them! Don't let them score!," coach Araki shouted.

Taiga shot a three and missed. Kiyoshi jumped above Liu and Okamura – how did anyone do that in the forth quarter with two guys over two meters tall? – and passed to their shooter who made a sudden three.

Okamura ran free and passed him the ball with a cross-court high pass. Tatsuya got it anyway and threw off that cursed shooter. Another fake to draw in Taiga before he passed to Atsushi.

"I'll win! I'll finish this game!" Atsushi jumped to dunk.

Taiga was fast enough again but not strong enough.

Kiyoshi jumped to his support.

I couldn't be. Atsushi was strong. But he still lost the ball to those two. Atsushi turned and was ... fast? Tatsuya realized he had never seen his boyfriend sprint at full speed. It was like watching a hurricane. He looped around Taiga and Seirin's shooter to stand

in front of them. Atsushi was downright scary. There was no other word for it. Tatsuya knew that Alphas had a feral side. Sinking into themselves, close to their instinctual level was an animalistic graze in all of them. He had never thought he would see his slow, lazy, immovable boyfriend become feral.

He was beautiful.

Taiga still dunked over his head with a technique Tatsuya had last seen in America. Meteor Jam. Alex was one of the few who could pull that off. Tatsuya grit his teeth. No. He would not accept this. He would never accept defeat. He sprinted forwards just as Atsushi sprinted in the other direction. Tatsuya took the ball and made a cross-court pass.

They would win this.

But Atsushi could not jump anymore. In a nanosecond Tatsuya saw Akashi telling him he should feed his boyfriend better. Train those muscles. What a pathetic figure his boyfriend made. His eyes widened. No ... he saw Kuroko sprint up to his boyfriend, right beside him, jumping ... no way.

An Omega beating an Alpha.

At the turning point of their game.

And the whistle signaled the end of their game.

Tatsuya stared. He simply stood, unable to move. He saw Seirin's team run up to Kuroko to throw him in the air and parade him around. He saw Taiga hug that little Omega.

He saw fate.

This was a boy no one had ever expected to amount to anything. A scrawny thing, an Omega, a rape victim. He was everything Tatsuya never wanted to be: Weak. But all those bulky guys, those athletes, that perfect Alpha his brother was – they all loved him. They admired him. They accepted him as one of their own.

Why? Why was he different? Had it been himself that held others at bay? Had it been himself who always thought he was less worthy? Had it been his doing and his actions that made others treat him like dirt? Because this boy over there, this Omega, he did not believe himself weak. He did not accept the limitations life set him. He victoriously rose above them.

Tatsuya looked at Atsushi. His boyfriend. The one who had been treated like shit for something he could not do anything about either. He had always been the slowest, the dumbest, the worst at everything. His only island had been basketball. He had never lost that.

Now he had. Tatsuya had made him play this game. Tatsuya had taught him this pain. He saw his boyfriend shake like a leaf, not only from exhaustion but from grief. How could he console him? What could he say?

Okamura called them to the middle line to thank the other team for the game. Atsushi and him both went on autopilot. Tatsuya knew he was sad, he just couldn't ... feel it. He told Taiga they weren't brothers anymore. That part was over. Taiga was his rival now. A rival that he wished the best of luck, especially in winning that unbelievable Omega in his team.

"I am quitting basketball," he heard Atsushi say. "I played until the end because Murochin was so desperate. But it wasn't fun. It's already a boring enough sport. There is no reason to keep playing after I've lost."

Tatsuya stared at his boyfriend walking away. Whatever should he say? Atsushi had played for him, he knew. His love had lost the only thing that ever made him feel good

about himself. How to ... but had he lost it? And weren't there two things that made him feel good? Tatsuya smiled to himself. He suddenly knew what to do. He went over and said: "We'll win the next time, Atsushi."

"What?" He could hear the tears in his boyfriend's voice. "I told you I'm quitting."

"You sure? It doesn't seem that way to me." Because he loved basketball. And Atsushi loved him. His boyfriend would be able to overcome this.

Okamura praised him and patted his head. It only made Atsushi hit in his direction aimlessly.

Tatsuya stepped up to him and dried his boyfriend's face with his towel. He took some tissues out of the back and gave them to Atsushi while saying: "Dry your tears so I can kiss you. You did well."

"But I lost." Atsushi sounded like a pouty, whiny four-year-old.

"I know. But it's not about winning or losing. It's about giving your all. You did that and you earned yourself a big treat for that," Tatsuya promised.

Atsushi blew his nose but still sniffed.

He kissed him anyway.

## Kapitel 21: Brotherhood

Tatsuya kissed his boyfriend senseless. They were actually told to get a room by their teammates before coach Araki finally decided to split them up. She announced they would get dinner now and he could only come if he behaved himself. Tatsuya gnawed on his lower lip and finally told her he would eat by himself. She gave him a bit of money and the others left.

Atsushi did not even ask for a parting kiss after seeing the annoyance directed at him. It irked Tatsuya a bit but on the other hand he understood. Their coach could be terrifying. They would see each other after dinner and then they could ... well, enjoy the night.

But this was so much more! Atsushi had fought for him, him alone and that was ... it was so important! Maybe he should have asked his boyfriend to skip dinner too. But maybe that would only have lead to him being left in favor of food – so it was better not to have asked. He was disappointed anyway. He would have fucked Atsushi in the locker room if they weren't looked after by their coach.

Maybe that was the reason why they were supervised. Tatsuya sighed and leaned against the wall. So – what to do with this fine evening after their first loss as a team? Should he go get dinner? Should he join the others? He took out his phone and checked his inbox. Alex still wanted to meet with him. Well, why not now? His day was about as shitty as it was perfect anyway. He would celebrate with Atsushi later tonight and he would mourn their loss tomorrow. Today was a day of important decisions – like mating with Atsushi in his next heat. His teacher should know that he gave up on the career she had imagined for him. He sent a message with a meeting point next to the stadium and Alex replied that she was on her way.

They met up at the door and went up one staircase in silence. Alex seemed to get his somber mood and decided to stay silent. Now, how to say something like that? Thank you for everything but I am throwing away ten years of training? That was a hard lump to swallow. Was there any way to make it less painful? She would still have Taiga after all. Taiga would certainly keep playing.

"Close game, Tatsuya."

"Yeah." He relaxed his shoulders. He should simply go with the flow. "But I feel refreshed now." He had made a decision after all. "Sorry, Alex." Here it goes. "I was-" "Don't get worried about it." Huh? What was she- oh, she thought he wanted to apologize for his words before. He should do that too. "Athletes get worked up before a game all the time. Anyway, it was a great game. It was worth the trip to Japan."

Tatsuya had to smile. Alex was so uncomplicated sometimes. Talking to her felt a lot like talking to his mother. Or at least how it had been before ... well, before. Before bad stuff happened, before he madly fell in love with a disabled man, before he wanked to the memory of his own brother. A lot had gone wrong, some of it with a good outcome, some bad. His impure thoughts, his Omega urges, his pheromones ... they weren't wrong but they meant he was destined for something different. Maybe something greater. A whole basketball family, maybe their own family team. Who knew? He turned to Alex to tell her but was rudely interrupted.

"Hey, an attractive babe."

Oh no, god spare them. Could those Alpha idiots just vanish altogether? He saw Alex

cringe as well.

"A foreigner? A half-blood? Can you speak Japanese?," the creep asked.

"Who the hell are you?" Alex tried to stand her ground but the revulsion was rolling off her.

"So you can speak!" The guy leaned into her space. "Gimme your digits! Let's go play somewhere. Come on!" He threw an arm around her.

Alex dodged and held back from punching him in the face while saying: "Quit joking! Don't touch me like we're friends."

Tatsuya decided to step in. Normally Alphas like that would get more violent when an Omega joined the mix but this one was already going too far. He said: "Stop it. I'll hear what you have to say."

"Huh? You ... weren't you in that game right now? Seeing you up close, you really look like a loser."

Well, good thing he had learned long ago not to listen to shitheads like that. Yeah, he lost. He did not have to take shit over that from anyone but it was his decision to get angry or not. This guy wasn't worth getting angry over.

"Or more like ... did you just say something?" The creep stopped his slouching and stood straight. Damn, he was tall. Taller than Tatsuya. More muscled as well. He suddenly pulled a punch and threw it at the Omega.

Tatsuya was too surprised to react adequately. He dodged left, only able to pull up his arm on instinct. Shit! Was that guy seriously trying to fight here? Wasn't he a player? They would be thrown out of the tournament if anyone saw. Not that it mattered to Tatsuya, he was out anyway. Had this guy lost as well? Was he trying to let out steam over a loss?

"What is that? Despite your looks, you are pretty used to street fighting." The creep followed him, stumbling as if he was drunken before accelerating suddenly and kicking Tatsuya in the stomach with full force.

Tatsuya gasped and fell to his knees. Holy shit. Ough ... fuck, this hurt. One did not hurt women or Omegas. Especially not by kicking them in the stomach or hitting their face. Everyone knew that. It was plain horrible. Crippling someone of their only value in societies' eyes was a gruesome act.

"Tatsuya!," Alex cried out and ran over.

He wanted to tell her to stay away. To run. To leave him. This Alpha was dangerous, they shouldn't both- he saw it in slow motion. That arm grabbing Alex, the hand on her breast. She leaned away from him, struggled. That creep just pressed his nose against her saying: "You think Alpha bitches get heats too?"

Tatsuya pulled himself together and launched forward. He threw a punch at the guy who dodged by letting go of Alex. The Omega only shouted: "Run! Run and get help!" The fucker hit him again for that. This time Tatsuya wasn't fast enough, he was hit in the face. His lip split, his body was thrown to the ground. No matter. As long as Alex got away- she gasped. Oh no.

Tatsuya looked up to see his teacher dangling off one hand grasping her throat. She clawed at him, kicked him before trying her best to simply keep a blood-flow in her head. She grasped his arm, trying to get the pressure of her throat.

Tatsuya smelled Taiga before he saw him. Thank god. Taiga was strong. Taiga was an Alpha, he could get them out of this. Taiga just looked as horrified as him and screamed: "What are you doing? Who the hell are you?"

Was that important? He should punch the damn bastard. Alex was choking, she was- oh, well, she was still an Alpha herself. She nearly kicked that creep in the face who

had to let her go to dodge.

"Scary!" Who was? "That ain't a girl's kick."

Of course not, Alex was 34. And now Taiga had to flip! Tatsuya held him back and warned: "Don't join in. It won't be just you responsible if they find out players were fighting here."

It was enough that he was there. Taiga was enough of a threat for anyone to stop. And he really shouldn't fight ... he had to win this tournament after all. He owed that to Tatsuya.

"What the hell happened?" Taiga's eyes scanned his face, most likely finding the abrasions and budding hematoma.

"He picked a fight out of nowhere." And trashed him. "He tried to hit on Alex, I tried to stop him and this happened."

Taiga looked as taken out as he felt. The creep sadly felt like continuing this and tried to punch Taiga too. That one dodged left as well and took two steps back. The creep tried to follow but was stopped by a basketball thrown in the direction of his face. Sadly he caught it.

He knew that one ... the model from Atsushi's old team, right? Kise Ryouta? Yeah, he seemed to be.

Thank god that helpful people were coming. Tatsuya turned to Alex who was still on the ground and asked: "How bad is it?"

"You or me?" She smiled weakly and let him help her up.

"You know this guy?," Taiga asked Kise.

"Well, guess so. He's Haizaki Shogo. He was a starter at Teiko before I joined the team."

Really? Tatsuya looked at the creep. Atsushi had not told him about this one. Had he really forgotten him or tried his best to forget him? Anyway, he understood. This guy was trouble.

"He's the one forced to retire from the team by Akashi-cchi."

Understandable. No one would want someone like him around. So that horrible split personality-guy had some real power. Had he threatened him? Used violence? Drugs?

"What curious turn of events is this?" Kise went to stand between them and the creep.

"There's no real reason. It ain't revenge either." Haizaki scoffed. "If anything, it's just killing time."

Tatsuya flinched back in repulsion. Gods, this guy was ... urgh. He was really, really disgusting as a human being. He thought of how seeing such a creature must have affected Atsushi. Gentle, child-like Atsushi. His lover who only wanted to be praised for doing well. And then this guy who did not care about others at all.

"Kagami-cchi." Kise turned to them. "I really hate to say this ... but can you stand down for now?"

Stand down? Tatsuya would call the police on him. He did not intend to let this slip.

"I kind of get the situation, but I really want you to let me play him in the next game."

Right this moment Tatsuya knew he would never like Kise. The guy was too arrogant. Sure, Taiga was a fellow Alpha. But the ones beaten and choked were Alex and him. Who was that asshole to ask Taiga this as if he was able to decide for them?

"I'll take responsibility and kick his ass."

That was the least he could do in Tatsuya's opinion. He would still call the cops. At least that got the creep to finally leave. Tatsuya sighed and told himself to calm down a bit. He was safe. Alex was safe. Taiga and Kise had saved them from the fucker. Anyway, what was Taiga even doing here? By now he was used to Atsushi having a

sixth sense for him, but Taiga?

"Why did you come here, Taiga?"

The other man turned and took a deep breath as well. His smile had a charming edge when he said: "Sorry. We'll talk another time. For sure!"

Oh well. Most likely it was about their future. Tatsuya dreaded that talk, so he was happy to leave it at that. Taiga went to talk with Kise and Alex and him decided to look for a place to get some food and warm up again. They both needed a bit of distance right now.

"I hate that creep. I want to go see him lose," Alex admitted over a bowl of ramen.

"I am sure we can be back in time for the last quarter." Tatsuya smiled at her. To be honest, he didn't want to go back. He wanted Atsushi to come and take him away. But his boyfriend was somewhere off munching down plates of food.

"So, anyway, great game back there. I know you are probably feeling down about losing but I don't think you have anything to be ashamed of. One step faster and you guys would have won. Just train that giant boy a bit and have him grow into his body, you'll sweep the tournament. He won't have problems to become a professional player."

"It's what we groom him into." Tatsuya looked up and smiled.

"Oh no." Her eyes widened. "You're in love with him."

"Yes, I am." His smile widened to a grin. Here it goes. "Alex ... I want to mate with him."

"That direly handsome athlete? Go for it." She grinned as well. "You know, I always imagined that one day Taiga and you would have a grimy love story but I always saw that one ending badly. I am happy you came to your senses."

"Why would that have ended badly?" So he wasn't the only one who had imagined they would be an item one day.

"Because your whole life seemed to be about him. Taiga had friends, he was social, but for you it was always him, me, basketball and nothing else. You were so fixated on him. You were nice to everyone but you never let anyone in. One wrong step and you would have been completely alone. So I am happy to hear you fell in love with someone else." Her smile had something of a motherly touch. "You choose your friends very carefully. If you chose him, I am sure he is the right one. I saw you punching him on the court and I thought it would lead to bloody murder. But he simply accepted it as his due and came back loads stronger. Men like that are rare. He must love you deeply to acknowledge you like that. Though you really shouldn't hit your boyfriend, violence is a no-go."

"I'll apologize tonight." He did not really feel sorry though. But he should explain why he did that. "He wanted to throw the game. I couldn't accept that."

"So he played for you?" She blinked. "As ferocious as that?"

"Yeah." He grinned again. Pride, thankfulness, intimacy. It filled him with so many feelings.

"So that tipped the scale? How long have you been with him?"

"Hm ... half a year? Around that? A bit more. I think it was the regional qualifiers where I decided to give it a try." He fondly shook his head. "At that time I still thought I would never mate with him but still had an inkling it might become a possibility. Everyone has their weaknesses and his was glaringly obvious. I still thought about my image and all that crap. I was such a teenager."

"You still are." Alex laughed. "So what is so obvious? His laziness?"

"It's not laziness. He's mentally deficient." Tatsuya sighed. "He had a car crash in his childhood and his brain took a lot of damage. He's a basketball god but he can barely read and write."

"Oh, that's ... I am sorry about that." Alex blinked. "How come his body is working like that?"

"It's not. His fine motor control is bad. His attention span is short, he does never give his all in training. He's just been doing sports all his life because he is bad at everything else."

"And he is still relearning? Because I could not see any motor control problems from upstairs."

"He recently got some incentive to train his hand coordination." Tatsuya grinned dirtily.

"Oh my, you're a handful." She shook her head in exasperation. "That's some special grooming. So you plan on mating a pro-basketball player now?"

"Yeah, I ... I know I always said I wanted to go pro but ... I fear I'll leave that to Taiga."

He stared at his ramen. How would she react? She had spent eight years training them on and off. It was a lot of time she had invested in them both. Would she be mad?

"And you'll supply me with some great kids for my training camps? Neat." There was a grin in her voice. "You and that mate of yours combined make for some great genes for future athletes. Do you think you'll live here or in America? You could join me as a trainer if you came back."

He timidly looked up. She was really alright with that? Had she not expected something else from him? No, her smile did not look forced. Not that slightly glad, slightly sad smile people sometimes had. She was happy for him, genuinely happy. He smiled back at her.

"Nah, okay, maybe it's a bit early to ask. First you have to finish school. Don't even think about quitting, school is important. Actually, how is school working out for your mate?" She seemed confused about that.

"He has some special classes. He won't get a high-school diploma but his teacher hopes he'll be able to read and write by the end of it."

"Well, that would be useful. If you want him to grab some groceries on the way home, he should be able to read your shopping list." She pointed at her bowl. "Anyway, let's finish these, I still want to see that bastard lose."

## Kapitel 22: Reward

Tatsuya and Alex came back to see the end of the third and the forth quarter. They both came to the conclusion that Atsushi's old teammates were simply insane. All of them. But Kise was definitely the worst of them. Tatsuya had not seen the two geniuses yet but he could not imagine anyone better than Kise. Not even his boyfriend if he was honest. The guy was off the charts. Aomine had been magnificent but this one was even better. It did give him chills about how Akashi and Midorima would play. Did Taiga really stand a chance? Tatsuya wanted him to win but after seeing Kise ... oh well. So that was who they would play tomorrow. He certainly wished his ex-brother good luck.

He found Atsushi in their hotel's lobby watching the people going in and out. Had he waited for him? Oh no, Tatsuya owned their key card because his boyfriend would only lose his. So he had had to wait for him. He went over and kissed the young man before saying: "Sorry for the wait. Have you been here long?"

"Hours." Of course, Atsushi had no real concept of time. "I missed you."

"I missed you too." He gave him another kiss. "But I needed some time for myself. I told my basketball teacher about us."

"Oh?" Atsushi tilted his head.

"Here name is Alex, she trained me back in America. She came to watch our game."

"Was she disappointed?" His boyfriend looked down.

"Not at all. She said it was a great game. We were extremely close to winning thanks to you. Next time we'll definitely make it." He kissed his boyfriend's jaw. "Would you like to go up to our room and be rewarded for the great game you played?"

"Even though we lost?" Atsushi seemed to be suspicious.

"It's sad, yes. But watching you give your all is all I ever wanted. You did well." He hugged the bigger man while still looking at him. "I am really proud of you."

"Yes?" His boyfriend smiled.

"I promise." He gave him another kiss. "So I really want us to have a great night together."

"With sex?" The smile turned into a grin.

"Yes, with sex," he whispered back.

"Okay." Atsushi picked him up and brought him to the elevator.

Atsushi was lying above him, kissing his face while they cooled down again. He was always so caring and loving and gentle and ... Tatsuya giddily laughed into their kiss. Atsushi just smiled and kissed him again.

"You're getting heavy," Tatsuya reminded him and was rolled to the side by his boyfriend.

"I like to be rewarded for playing," the other mumbled into his ear.

"For playing seriously in an important game." He lay his head on his boyfriend's shoulder. "You were magnificent."

"Magnificent," Atsushi echoed. "That's something good, right?"

"It's something very good."

"I really like you, Muro-chin."

"I love you too." He kissed the skin of the shoulder he was lying on. "Do you want to stay with me forever?"

"Can I?" Atsushi grinned at him. "I'd like that."

"I'd like that too." He crawled up and kissed the other on the lips. "If you want us to be together forever, we can mate in my next heat. Do you know what mating is?"

"I bite you and you'll be mine forever."

"I'll be yours and you'll be mine. Forever."

Atsushi nodded like an excited child.

"Thank you." They shared a tender kiss.

His boyfriend seemed to vibrate with energy though. He asked immediately after the kiss: "Can we have a baby too?"

"Once you have finished school and got a job, yes."

"What kind of job?" Atsushi looked up at him.

"You'll train seriously and then you can become a basketball player. That's a good job." His petted his boyfriend's face with a finger tip. "You just continue to train and play and next year, we'll win a tournament. Then the year after, we'll win one again and you'll get a job and then we can have a baby."

"I want one now." Atsushi pouted at him.

"One has to work for the things one wants in life. You worked hard to get into a nice school and to have a boyfriend and you are really good to me, so you'll get me as a mate. Now you'll continue to be a great basketball player and then we can have a baby." He kissed the pout turned frown. "But know what? Once I am your mate, we can have a dorm room for ourselves. No more sneaking into your dorm and out again. We'll be legally allowed to have sex in our dorm room."

"We can have more sex?" His boyfriend grinned.

"Yes, that too." Tatsuya snuggled against him. "You'll do your plans and care for me and then we can have loads of sex."

"I love you, Muro-chin."

"I love you too." And most of all, he loved how uncomplicated his boyfriend was.

Now who should he tell? Coach Araki and Atsushi's teacher of course. His parents and Atsushi's mother. He would tell Taiga once he came to talk about their future. Was there anyone else that was important? Did they have to register with any supervisors or something? He could pose that question to their coach.

They went down to breakfast and were informed that they were allowed to stay another night and watch the finals. Cool! Atsushi shoved loads of food inside himself while Tatsuya asked their coach if they could meet up tonight for something important. She nodded before continuing to look after the other boys who often messed up their table manners. Tatsuya did the same for Atsushi.

The first game was Shutoku against Rakuzan. As he had feared, those two miracles were simply nuts. Midorima was bad. Really bad with that high projectile three pointer. But Akashi was worse. Way worse. He got how everyone feared and admired him at the same time. His personality seemed shit but his leadership skills were superb. Somehow Tatsuya was a bit relieved they did not have to play him now. But he really needed to wish Taiga good luck.

But first Seirin had to play Kaijo. Honestly, Tatsuya did not know how they were supposed to beat Kise. The team was good but Kise ruled. Not exactly like Akashi, that one might still be better, but he was bad news for Seirin anyway. The first minute showed that without fault. Kise would have to tone it down but if he had more stamina – no one would stop that man. When he saw him starting to limp, it felt like the world would break. No. How could ... why had Akashi let that come to pass? Why

hadn't he ordered Kise off? Because he didn't pay him? Did he only look after Atsushi? It was so unfair, no one should waste a genius like Kise like that.

His team knew as well. They called him off and threw the game. Well, they still played bravely but this was over for them and they knew. It was sad and also uplifting to see. This happened. They would go on anyway. Next year, next chance, just like with them. Next year Atsushi would have filled out more, would be able to not only defend but attack from start to finish.

For now, it was how it was. He texted Taiga to meet up with him tomorrow morning. But today, he had a talk with coach in the evening. Should he go alone or take Atsushi with him? How would she react? Would she cheer him on? She had been the one to sternly tell him he should only be with Atsushi if he gave mating a chance. As she had allowed their relationship, she most likely supported them, right? Hopefully she would see him as good enough. Honestly, he feared her more than Atsushi's mother. He expected that one to be happy that someone took the boy off her hands.

"Would you accompany me for drinks again?" Coach Araki smiled at him.

"Sure." Maybe this time he could talk some alcohol out of her.

"Where is Murasakibara?" They began to walk to another area where they would find some bars.

"I left him in the hotel room. He was playing with his toys and still had some chips left from his evening plan." Lately, Atsushi did his plans perfectly. He would have to talk to teacher Tsueda about making them a bit harder.

"It's hard to imagine such a giant playing with cars."

"It's mostly Lego right now. I also got him some puzzles, they are pretty hard for him. He hasn't been able to do the 100 pieces one yet but he's trying." He had been quite proud when Atsushi got the 48 pieces puzzle right. Before they met, 16 pieces had been his maximum before he lost interest due to difficulty.

"I really admire you, you know?" she said in a voice no louder than a whisper.

"Huh?" He stopped in his tracks. They were standing next to a road full of shops behind which the dining and bar district would follow.

"How you do that. Being with him. Seeing both the man and the child and loving both of them. If I had to care for him, I don't know if I could still see him as desirable. If I loved him, I don't know if I could be his caregiver. It's not easy to fill both roles and I admire you for being able to do that."

Oh. Well. Hm ... somehow it was nice to hear but it also filled him with something dark, a sinking feeling of ... dread? He was only himself after all. He wasn't someone special. He did what he did and he liked it. It made no sense to spend idle thoughts on "What if Atsushi wasn't mentally deficient" because that would never happen. He liked Atsushi the way he was, even with all the work it included. He didn't know if he was good though. He didn't know if he was able to fill all those roles and he didn't know if he could continue to do so. He didn't feel like someone that could be admired. It was more like he waited for the hammer to fall – to have someone tell him he wasn't good enough.

"You don't look happy though. Did you want to tell me it's too much?" She took his arm and lead him on.

"I don't look happy?" He bit his lip. He had felt happy but maybe she saw something else?

"Right this moment. Normally you do, so I was surprised."

"I am happy." His shoulders slumped. "Just insecure, I guess."

"What about?" She looped her arm around his as if they were going out. They had entered the bar district and he saw quite an amount of Alphas turn their heads for him.

"Can we sit down first?" He felt threatened by the glances. They entered a bar and went down into a partly lit cellar with a bar. There were some free tables and she took one of them.

"I'll get some drinks. What do you want?"

"Alcohol?" He knew she would shake her head and wasn't surprised that she did. "Coconut milk."

She raised an eyebrow but went to order at the bar. It seemed like they actually had coconut milk, she came back with a beer and his drink. They toasted and drank before she asked: "So spill. What is this about?"

"Atsushi." He took a deep breath to gather his courage. "I'd like to mate with him."

She looked at him for a moment before leaning in and asking: "Seriously?"

He quickly nodded and took another swallow of coconut milk.

They shared a few seconds of silence. It seemed like an eternity. What would her reaction be? Why wasn't she answering? Was it really so far-fetched a concept? She had been the one to tell him this relationship was to be a serious one. Had she still expected him to get tired and run? He was a teenager but he ... he had known what being with Atsushi meant. It hadn't been an easy decision. There had been hormones, pheromones, sure, but still ... he had known what he got himself into.

"Somehow I never expected this." She sipped her beer and seemed deep in thought. It took a bit until she continued to speak. "You know that he won't get better? There won't be any miracles making him better."

"I take him as he is."

"You will have to control his plans, his food, his training for the rest of your life. You'll be his partner, his manager and his caretaker." Her gaze was saddening. "You'll never have someone other than him in your life." She seemed like she was remembering something mournful. "You're very young still and this is a life-changing decision."

"So you don't fear I could be the wrong one for him?" He asked timidly.

"You?" She blinked. "How did you come up with that idea? Who was the one to motivate him yesterday? He would have done that for no one but you." Her gaze lingered on him for some seconds before returning to her beer. "That's it, right? It's what tipped the scale."

He just nodded and smiled.

"No one can doubt that he is devoted to you. He cherishes you and will surely continue to do so. But if you become his main caretaker, this could turn to resentment. Atsushi is like a child. He loves the one caring for him unconditionally but whenever he is angry he'll be like a petulant child. And there is always the knowledge that you won't ever be equals. Who tells you when you are doing well? Who warns you when you misuse the power you have over him?"

"For the next two and half years, I trust you and teacher Tsueda to do that." And then? Who would be there afterwards? "I hope Atsushi will be able to build some friendships, so that his friends will look out for him."

She nodded slowly, the shock and sadness still fresh in her eyes. They spent another moment in silence before she said: "You know, on one hand I am immensely proud of you. On the other hand I am scared as hell. If I were your mother, I don't think I could let you be mated at so young an age. At the same time, I know that most others would already be mated at your age. Some already have kids. Whenever I see you, I can't

wrap my head around the fact that Omegas tend to mate at thirteen or fourteen years old. That should be forbidden."

"At least I was able to make my own choices." He smiled at her but his smile was tinted with sadness. She was right. This was not how life was supposed to be.

"I don't know what I should say as your teacher, but as a human I think you chose correctly. In terms of love, I don't think anyone could be more devoted than Murasakibara. As your teacher, I guess I should think of your career and your life choices and opportunities and warn you off but ... it feels right. You two are good for one another. I just hopes it stays that way." She sighed deeply. "I hope you won't grow to resent him. Being tied to someone can be very upsetting. He will be tied to you, you to him. That's a very secure bond but also very constricting."

"I want to be tied to him." He may feel insecure if this was the right way, the right choice, but it was the direction his heart pointed into.

"Once upon a time, I was in love too ... but she wanted freedom. She did not want to be tied down. So I was left alone." Araki's beer was almost gone. "I can see the appeal to have someone that wants to live a family life. Even if that someone is ill and unreliable in some aspects."

"Are you still waiting for her?," Tatsuya dared to ask.

"Guess so." His coach shrugged her shoulders. "I don't wish that fate on anyone."

"Thank you." His smile was void of any sadness.

## Kapitel 23: Blessings and misgivings

Tatsuya had sent Taiga a message that he wanted to meet him before his game with Rakuzan. His ex-brother replied that that was fine and texted a meeting spot and time. Of course it was a basketball court. Tatsuya had to shake his head in amusement. Really, Taiga had always been the same, never changing, never to be deterred. The whole drama had happened in his own head and he had hurt his brother in the process.

Taiga was wearing their ring. He was standing there, his head down, looking much too small for his tall body. Such a boy. Somehow Atsushi seemed more mature, even though intellectually and emotionally he was only four. When he looked at his boyfriend, he saw a man. When he looked at Taiga, it was a mix between his sexy body and his childish naive self. He really had a thing for immature characters, hadn't he? Tatsuya smiled up at his ex-brother.

"I want to ... I don't want us to be strangers," Taiga told him.

"You could never be a stranger, Taiga. We grew up together." He grabbed his own chain and ring from his pocket and showed it to him. "This is sacred. I really wanted you to be my brother. But I sabotaged myself, I lied to myself. I can't be your brother." Taiga looked at him with hurt in his eyes.

Tatsuya did not need him to speak to answer his question: "No, you did nothing wrong. I was in the wrong and I didn't open up about it. It's my fault."

"Will you tell me now?" Those red eyes sparkled with something like hope.

Tatsuya nodded and smiled. He took off his scarf and showed Taiga the bites littering his neck. None of them was a mating mark because he hadn't been in heat but they said enough.

"You're an Omega?" Taiga's eyes widened.

"You are obtuse, you oaf." It felt so good to finally say that. "You never noticed. You never noticed how I blossomed, how I went from boy to adult, how brotherhood turned into love and desire."

Taiga squeaked like a pig. It might have been cute if he didn't look that panicked.

"Yes, Taiga, I was in love with you. I desired you. I guess I still do. But I found someone I rather want to be with." He stroked his own neck. "I wanted to end our brotherhood because I couldn't stand the thought of desiring someone I called my brother. I wanted our brotherhood to end to be able to court you. But then I found someone ... well." He smiled fondly. "I guess by now the question is naught. Someone else claimed me and I am happy with him."

Taiga looked like a deer caught in headlights. When his eyes seemed able to move, they moved up and down over Tatsuya's figure before the Alpha turned his body as if to run away. He stopped himself in the middle of the movement and stared at Tatsuya again.

"Why did you never tell me?" His voice was a mixture of curiosity and panic.

Oh why? Because he loved their easy camaraderie, their friendship, their shared love for basketball. He loved to have a brother. He never wanted anything to come between them, especially not his own feelings. How should he ever put that into words? He said: "You were too precious to me. I did not want to lose you."

"Because you knew I would not return your feelings?"

Tatsuya had guessed so. It still hurt to know. Taiga had never seen him as anything

else than a brother, a rival, a friend. He had never seen him as someone desirable, as a man. He had never been a possible partner.

"I'm sorry." Taiga looked torn over something. "I am in love with someone, I cannot return your feelings."

"I know." His eyes filled with tears, his throat closed up. Why? He had known. He had always known, it was why he never told Taiga. "I know. Damn it." His hand clenched around the chain.

"I love you as a brother." Taiga turned back to him. "I don't think that will ever change. I want you in my life. But I want you to accept my future mate too."

"I give you and Kuroko my blessings, even if you don't need them." Tatsuya breathed out shakily to avoid sobbing. "I wish you the best of luck. Just treasure him, will you? I want you to be happy."

"I will." The other man sighed and nodded. "I will treasure him and be happy." He stepped closer and looked at the bitten neck. "Will you?"

Yes. He would. He would have said so if he hadn't sobbed. Taiga put his arms around him and held him close. Why did it hurt so much? Why? He had thought he was over him.

"I'm sorry." Taiga petted his head. "I never noticed."

"It's good you didn't," he said between sobs.

"Yeah ... I like being with Kuroko. He's like a bird. He can fly but he needs a nest."

"Aren't you a poet?," Tatsuya teased the other with a smile. "Believe it or not, Atsushi is less oblivious than you are. I'm fine with him protecting me."

"You would have always tried to protect me, never letting me be the strong one."

"That's what you need?" Tatsuya shook his head. Taiga had always been his little brother. The one he taught, the one he protected, the one he held his hand out for.

"It's what I want in a mate. Someone strong and fragile at the same time. You always tried to be the strong one."

"I am fragile too." He showed that side to no one but Atsushi though. "It's my mate's right to see that side of me."

"I hope he'll make you happy." Taiga smiled at him and took a step back. "So who is the guy?"

"Really?" Tatsuya raised an eyebrow. "Obtuse doesn't cut it."

"Hey, I'm no brain, I know, okay?" The redhead clenched his fists. "Cut me some slack."

"Murasakibara Atsushi. Does that ring a bell?"

"Oh, that one." Taiga stared into the distance for a moment. "He's really childish, isn't he?"

"I don't think I want to hear that from you." Tatsuya was able to smile though.

"Yeah, you're right." The Alpha scratched his head. "Does he make you happy?"

He nodded once.

"That's good." Taiga looked at him for a moment. "Will he really quit basketball?"

"No, he won't."

"Oh, good. I felt bad after that. I want to play him again."

"We will play again and again." Tatsuya grinned. "Prepare to lose, Taiga."

The finals were ... it was hard to put into words. Akashi wasn't called "the emperor" because he had legions of people following him. He simply ruled the court. If Kuroko and Taiga (and Tatsuya knew that Kuroko was the most important factor here) hadn't shocked him so much, Akashi would have won without fail. And while Taiga was impressive, seeing Kuroko adapt to new threats in seconds, thinking up new

strategies and employing them was a humbling experience. Tatsuya knew he was a better shooter, a better small-forward even, but he wasn't a strategist. Kuroko came up with things no one else would have thought of. He was a true trickster.

Tatsuya was filled with energy, all pumped up for practice. His teammates looked at him as if he was insane, especially Atsushi. But he explained to them what he wanted them all to learn, what he wanted Atsushi to learn and somewhere during their flight back their captain was full of energy as well, even though he would not play any more tournaments with their team.

He would make Atsushi into the perfect player, his boyfriend would be Japan's number one. Even with Aomine, Kise, Akashi, Midorima and Taiga aiming for the spot, his boyfriend and future mate would be the one to humble them all. Tatsuya would be by his side through it all. He swore to himself: Atsushi would stand on top.

"What if he won't become a basketball player?," teacher Tsueda asked him.

Tatsuya blinked in surprise. What kind of question was that? What else should Atsushi be? It wasn't like he had a whole range of ... oh. Yeah. He asked what would be if Atsushi did not get a job. He answered: "I will have to ask my parents for help."

"Would they help out?"

"I am sure of that." Tatsuya leaned back and thought for a moment. "With how much Atsushi eats, opening a restaurant might be a good idea. He is good at baking. He's in my home economics class, you know? We make a pretty good team. It's something that might be possible with kids. We could move to America and open a Japanese restaurant."

"Are your classes going well? Even with your heats?"

"I am used to it. They don't bother me, I'm good at school." He made up for what Atsushi couldn't do. What he lacked was a body that did not give out on him. Being unable to work one week out of four was unbelievably annoying.

"And do you think you can get him to work even if you are in heat yourself?" Tsueda raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Well ... yes, that's the hard part, I guess. I can get him to wear condoms even when I am not exactly conscious, that's something I am quite proud of right now."

The teacher smiled in amusement.

"I have to train myself in that. It's inexcusable if he doesn't go to school or work. He really needs it and Akashi is paying a huge amount of money for him to train reading, writing and basketball. So there's no skipping school or practice, no matter what my body demands." Tatsuya sighed deeply. "Easy to say but it will be so hard."

"I suppose so." Tsueda nodded slowly. "I have nothing against your mating, I think you are a great couple and I thank you for considering Atsushi. But if he starts missing school, your dorm room will be taken again."

"I see." The Omega nodded. "That was to be expected, I guess." Consequences for unwanted actions. In that regard Tsueda was a strict one. He had to be with the boys he taught.

His mother enthusiastically wished him the best of luck and congratulated him on finding someone he wanted to stay with. It was only on the surface though. Somehow it wasn't hard to hear that behind her nice and supportive words, she did not want him to be with Atsushi. She liked him a lot, but she wanted someone better for her son.

Tatsuya understood. It still hurt. He wished she would be able to actually be happy for

him. Most of all he wished she would be honest. He had never expected he would one day wish for more honesty from his mother but here they were. She tried to be nice out of guilt, he did not want to call her out on that. What a vicious cycle.

He saved the most unpredictable conversation for last. He asked for a phone date with Atsushi's mom. He had thought before that she would be delighted if he was taken off her hands. But was that true? After his own mother's reaction, he wasn't so sure anymore. She had never even met him. And what if she was happy? What if she cried again and thanked him overly much? Being raised into the heavens was somehow just as bad as being humiliated and degraded.

Or was it his fault? Was he the one who could not, would not believe them? Was he too doubtful and they actually meant what they said? He didn't know who he could trust. Himself? Them? None? He wished it was easier. He wished he could simply fall in love and not care about tomorrow. He wished there wasn't any Alpha/Omega or pregnancy business to think of, forcing people to bond at too young an age. Everyone should be free to choose who they loved.

But it wasn't to be. So he had to live with what he had. He had debated with himself whether to call Atsushi's mother from that one's dorm or from the teacher's lounge. As he expected her to get very emotional – and not in a good way – he decided on the teacher's lounge and asked teacher Tsueda for help again. So they sat together after school and the older man called her.

"Good afternoon, Misses Murasakibara. Yes, this is Atsushi's teacher. I have your son's boyfriend Himuro Tatsuya here with me. Yes, that's right. Atsushi is well, don't worry. Yes, yes, shall I give the phone to Tatsuya? Yes, thank you, the same to you."

That sounded quite normal. She greeted him full of cheer and expectancy and inquired after his health.

"Fine, thank you. How do you do?" He gave her some time to answer. "Yes, Atsushi and I are still in a relationship. He's doing really well. We were fifth in the national championship."

"Oh, that's nice. It's so good that you are full of energy."

"Yeah, I am really hoping that Atsushi will be able to become a professional player."

"That would be good, yes. I don't think Mister Akashi will support him forever. It would be nice if he could hold a job."

Well, not exactly the cheer he wanted but good enough. He said: "I guess if that does not work out, we'll think of something together. He is a great baker."

"Oh, is he? I didn't know that." Somehow she sounded a lot prouder about that than the whole basketball prowess but maybe it was more relatable to her.

"I thought about some possibilities for our future. Atsushi will need someone at his side to navigate through life."

"You would do that?" Her voice was full of disbelief.

"He is my boyfriend, isn't he? Or did you want to have him back with you after school?" That would give the whole affair a new perspective.

"Well, I had guessed I would have to take him back..." Didn't that sound happy and full of cheer?

"If you allow me to, I will continue to look after him."

"Really?," she whispered. It was followed by a pause of a few seconds. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I love him." Tatsuya clenched his fist. It was a legitimate question, no reason to get angry. Everyone would wonder. She didn't know her son as man. She never visited. Had she visited him in middle-school or had she not seen him for four years?

He had to close his eyes and take a deep breath.

"You must hate me, right? I am such a bad mother." She sobbed. "I am sorry. I'm sorry I can't be there for him."

"Please don't cry, Misses Murasakibara. It's alright. I'll look after him. If you give your consent, I'll take him as my mate and off your hands." He was too angry for more niceties. He could not stand her tears, her helplessness. If her son was too much for her, she could just hand him over in his opinion.

"I am so sorry. It's all my fault. If I had just looked after him more attentively, he would have never-

"Misses Murasakibara, it's no use to live in the past. What happened, happened. Atsushi is how he is. I like the person he is now. I understand that it's hard for you to see him this way but it's not hard for me. So please give your consent to our mating." He looked at teacher Tsueda who gave him a hand-gesture to calm down a bit. Tatsuya tried to regulate his emotions.

"I ... can I see him first?" She was still teary.

"You are his mother, you can visit as often as you want." If she could behave herself and not break into tears every time she saw him.

"You'll let me?" There was a tentative hope in her voice. "Mister Akashi told me to stay away from him. He said that I ... that I wasn't good for him. Whenever I visited, Atsushi would get out of control and act out for weeks."

Oh. That gave the whole thing a new perspective. He exchanged a glance with teacher Tsueda who looked as shocked as him. He answered: "Well, we can try, can't we? If that still happens, we'll talk about it afterwards. You are his mother after all. You should be allowed to see him."

"That's so nice of you!"

Yeah, well, was that even his decision? Okay, he had just asked her to hand her son over but that wasn't meant in terms of ownership. Atsushi was still human, he could make his own decisions. If he wanted to meet his mother, he could. Why had she listened to a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old boy making decisions about her son?

"It's not my decision, teacher Tsueda and coach Araki are looking after Atsushi as well. He is also able to make some decisions by himself. He wants to mate with me and everyone here is in favor of that. But you are the one making his final decisions for him, you are his mother."

"If all of you say it's the best, then I trust your decision." There was not a sliver of doubt in her voice. Did she really put this much trust in people she had never even met?

"When do you have time to visit?"

"How about New Years? I have some days off. We could celebrate together."

"That sounds nice! Teacher Tsueda, are you here on New Years?," he asked the man beside him.

"Either me or coach Araki will be here, so someone can supervise." The older man nodded.

"Great. See you at New Years. I am really looking forward to meeting you!" And it would be exactly one week before his next heat. Perfect timing.

"Oh, I am so happy! See you then! Oh, wait, what can I bring? Does Atsushi have a wish? More Lego maybe?" She sounded really excited.

"He always loves to have more Lego."

"Great. I'll bring some. I saved the money I would have send for food, I can buy him something nice from that. Oh, I am so happy I won't have to worry anymore. Thank

you, Mister Himuro! Thank you so much."

"Sure." He simply blinked. How was he supposed to react to that? Did that mean she was okay with their mating? "See you in a bit."

"Bye-bye!" She hung up.

Tsueda und Tatsuya looked at the other for a moment. After a moment, the teacher took the phone and put it down. They both sat down in silence afterwards.

"So ... I guess that was the first time it didn't end in tears," the teacher concluded.

"That's nice ... are you sure she is ... well, normal in the head? I don't want to sound offensive but it's ... talking to her is really difficult."

"I can see Atsushi acting out. It could happen this time as well. He feels her fear, apprehension and guilt. I don't think it's easy to be around her, especially for him. If she does nothing but cry, we'll have to cut the visit short for Atsushi's sake."

"Did you know it was this bad?" Tatsuya leaned forward to speak in a softer tone. "Did you know that a thirteen-year-old boy forbid her to see her son and she actually followed that command?"

"That left me speechless as well. But I can see Mister Akashi doing that."

Tatsuya slowly shook his head. Why was everyone acting as if you had to kiss the floor the guy walked on? He was charismatic, he had money, yeah, but ... anyway, who would want to live with that kind of pressure? Who would want to live with such expectations?

"You know, I don't want to burden you with all this but I really think you are by leagues better than what would wait for Atsushi if you weren't there. I am unbelievably thankful you decided on mating with him. I promise to be there for you whenever you need me." Tsueda took his hand and squeezed before letting go. He stood and seemed full of energy. "So, let's prepare Atsushi for his mother's visit. He hasn't seen her in four years. This will be hard on him."

"I can't even imagine not seeing my mother for four years. He's still such a good boy." Who had been there for him all this time? Akashi and Midorima? Had he ever had a dependable adult in his life? How had he learned to be as normal as he was now? "I really need to go hug him."

"Do that." There was a glimmer in Tsueda's eyes, he seemed close to tears. "I'm not allowed to hug the boys, otherwise he would get a big hug from me too."

Tatsuya just nodded and left the lounge to look for his boyfriend.

## Kapitel 24: New Year

Misses Murasakibara was a short woman. It was hard to imagine how such a giant had come out of so petite a woman. She wasn't exactly tiny, she was more than average for a Japanese woman. But Atsushi was big even for Dutch measures. So it was surprising to see that she was smaller than Tatsuya. Her late husband must have been a giant as well.

Tatsuya hadn't exactly known what to expect. Atsushi breaking into tears? Not likely. His mother breaking into tears? Very likely. He had expected hugging, maybe even desperate clinging to one another. He had not expected them to simply stare at one another. Atsushi had his hands in his coat's pockets, his mother clutched her own as if in prayer.

She was the first to react. With wide eyes and an unblinking stare upwards she said: "You've grown."

Atsushi simply nodded once and stretched out a hand to lay it on her head while saying: "You're tiny."

"Silly boy." She smiled up at him and took a step forward to hug him. "It's been too long."

"I've missed you, mom." He hugged her back, being mindful not to crush her.

Tatsuya had to smile at hearing that. When he had told his boyfriend that he had invited his mother, that one had only given him a blank stare. It had taken half a minute for Atsushi to ask if she really wanted to see him because while she had said so again and again, she had never done it. What followed had surprised Tatsuya because his boyfriend had become angry and irritable for two days. He had said again and again that she did not need to come, he did not need her. Only then had he broken down and cried and told Tatsuya how much he had missed her. It had been an eventful week.

"I've missed you too." Oh, there it was: she sobbed.

Atsushi strengthened his hug and Tatsuya decided to step in to gently chide his boyfriend not to overdo it. Often the young man had no idea about his power. Atsushi looked at him for a moment, then to his mom, before loosening the hug and saying: "Mom, this is my boyfriend."

She blinked away tears, looked at him and smiled crookedly. Becoming aware of her appearance, she wiped her cheeks with her cuffs before bowing slightly and saying: "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"It's my pleasure. My name is Himuro Tatsuya. How do you do?"

"Murasakibara Honoka. How do you do?" She bowed even lower.

"I am fine, thank you." He bowed as well.

"My name is Tsueda. I am Atsushi's teacher." That one introduced himself as well.

"Thank you for visiting us today. Atsushi was eager to meet you."

After his initial reluctance at least. After all was said and done, Tatsuya knew where Atsushi was coming from. In his eyes, his mother had abandoned him. Had he even known that Akashi had forbidden her to come? Tatsuya had not dared to tell him. He didn't know what to think about it all. But he was happy that they were able to reunite.

"Are we going to watch TV and go to a shrine?", Atsushi asked his mother.

Misses Murasakibara looked at Tatsuya and Tsueda for a second in question.

"We are going to a restaurant and at sunrise, we will go to a shrine, yes," Tatsuya decided for them. The dinner was planned and he had wanted to go to a shrine. He did not want to spend the night watching TV though.

"No TV?" Atsushi pouted. Of course that was the only thing he heard.

"Was it traditional that you watched something together?" Tatsuya turned to his future in-law.

"We have watched Kohaku Uta Gassen every year. Music always calmed Atsushi a bit, so we watched it together," she explained.

"Then we went to get food and I got to play in the park all by myself and then we went to a shrine." It was the longest sentence Tatsuya had ever heard from his boyfriend.

Tatsuya shared a look with their teacher and thought he saw the same conclusion on his face. Keeping Atsushi up the whole night did not sound like a good idea. He turned and said so: "We will sleep between dinner and going to the shrine. Depending on your behavior, maybe we can watch a bit of it later before going to sleep."

"But I want to see it!" Atsushi shouted in the direction of his mother.

Tatsuya was beginning to see why Akashi cut their contact. Atsushi reverted back to his poorly raised self in front of his mother. Thankfully it was Tsueda who stepped in: "Atsushi, moderate your tone. Tatsuya promised a bit of TV if you behave and right now, you are not doing so. Your mother is a guest. Her words do not overrule ours, so don't even try."

There seemed to be a war going on on Atsushi's face. His old self warring with the new one. Tatsuya took his hand and squeezed, trying to remind him that there was merit in growing up. Atsushi looked at him and seemed to calm a bit. After a moment he squeezed back and nodded. Tatsuya smiled at that, straightened and kissed his boyfriend's cheek.

"That was amazing." Misses Murasakibara looked from Tsueda to him and back. "How do you do that? Normally, Atsushi would have started to kick things or me by now."

Tatsuya sent his boyfriend a chiding look and asked: "You kicked your mother?"

Atsushi flushed in shame.

"I guess that you gave in and promised him TV if he calmed then?" Tsueda looked slightly exasperated.

"Uhm ... yes." She lowered her head. "I guess I shouldn't have done that?"

"I taught him that kicking his mother is a good way to get his will." The teacher turned to Atsushi. "It's good that you learned what a bad thing that was."

"Just for the record, if you ever kick or hit me, I am out of your life," Tatsuya warned his boyfriend.

"I know," Atsushi mumbled. "Violence is bad. Mido-chin said that Aka-chin would be a very good boy if ... err, he was bad and made us do bad things to Kuro-chin." Sentences with if-clauses were still a bit hard for him.

"Sadly, yes. If not for that and his callous words sometimes, he would be good." Though it was hard to say because Tatsuya hated everything about him except for his money. What was harder was how casually Atsushi brought this up. He had to teach his boyfriend that talking about their rapes in public was a bad thing and hurt Kuroko.

"Don't ever do something as bad to me."

"Mister Akashi did something bad?" Misses Murasakibara sounded confused.

Oh no. And here they had the exact problem he had wanted to avoid. Tatsuya sent a searching gaze to Tsueda, only to find him looking at him questioningly as well.

"You don't know?," he asked their teacher in something akin to shock. He was met by

a blank stare. It actually made him turn to Atsushi for a moment and say: "I'd like to avoid talking about this in the future. If possible, please only talk to those about Kuroko that were involved in what happened."

"Wasn't Kuroko the boy that was raped?" Tsueda looked at Misses Murasakibara who closed her eyes in pain.

"Yes, it was. Atsushi raped him after being told by Akashi to do so." Tatsuya clenched his fists and looked down. "Akashi seems to have been a good teacher and educator for Atsushi but due to certain reasons, he changed in their second year of middle-school. You might say he snapped. He made various boys, including Atsushi, rape that Omega boy. It was hushed up and Midorima took over Atsushi's care because Akashi was clearly unfit to continue doing so."

"Oh god." Misses Murasakibara put her hands over her mouth. "I didn't know that."

Tsueda only blanched and looked at Tatsuya with wide eyes.

He looked at his boyfriend and found him not perturbed by any of this. It was the story how he knew it. Akashi had been someone he trusted and he had turned bad and made him do a bad thing. He had been scolded heavily for it and for years he had thought that Akashi turning bad was his fault. By now Tatsuya wasn't sure if Atsushi still believed that or if he had gotten through to him that none of this was his fault. Except for listening to Akashi when his heart told him that he had gotten a bad order. But Tatsuya did not expect his mentally deficient boyfriend to stand up to his parental figure at fourteen years old. He didn't even stand up to him now. Everyone taught Atsushi that following social rules and parental advice was rewarded, he wasn't taught to question the rules given to him. No one could expect him to go against what his minders told him. Atsushi was exactly as good as the people looking after him. It did not reflect on him, it reflected on them. One day it would reflect on Tatsuya.

"I see why you were so enraged when I said I wanted to confer with Akashi over Atsushi's future." Tsueda had finally found his voice again. "That he pays for Atsushi's education ... is that hush money?"

"Someone like Akashi does not need hush money." At least of this Tatsuya was pretty sure. No one would believe a mentally deficient boy and not even Kuroko himself seemed inclined to report his former team captain. Top national student, student council president of the most prestigious school in the country, captain of a top achiever sport's team, sole heir to the leading national firm, most likely he even was royalty or something. "He pays because at least before he turned bad, he genuinely cared for Atsushi. He respects him for his athletic abilities."

Most likely it had something to do with Midorima. Tatsuya did not claim to understand the whole dynamic but from what he got, Midorima seemed to be something like the right-hand man cleaning up Akashi's mess and keeping everything from blowing up. He had even taken over Atsushi's care for one and a half years even though he didn't even like Atsushi and was deeply annoyed by how much attention Atsushi needed.

Tsueda looked at Atsushi with doubt before he very cautiously asked: "Has Akashi ever done anything sexual to you?"

"Nah, he likes male Omegas." Atsushi scratched his ear, uninterested in the topic. "Can we go to dinner now? I'm hungry."

Tatsuya squeezed his boyfriend's hand and smiled up at him. He gently chided: "First of all, we need to show your mother her room. You could offer to take her luggage there if you want this to go faster."

"Mom, shall I take your bag?" He held out his hand.

She handed it over, still stunned into silence. Her eyes were full of unshed tears.

Tatsuya couldn't stop the vicious thought that she should have looked for suitable care for her son instead of keeping him clutched to her until giving him to a mentally unstable thirteen-year-old and even listening to him breaking off their contact. But it was no use. What was done was done. It didn't help to hold it over her. Akashi paid and Midorima had looked for a suitable school. No matter how much damage they had wrought, both of them had done more for Atsushi than anyone else before.

More than all of that, it scared him that he began to sympathize with an Omega-rapist. It scared him how his expanding reluctance to interact with Atsushi's mom was something he had in common with Akashi.

By the time they went to dinner, they had found new topics to talk about. Tsueda and Misses Murasakibara shared a liking to some singers and Atsushi even knew some of them. It was heart-warming to see him share in a normal conversation. Normally, when anyone talked, Atsushi would simply keep silent. Often he would even zoom out after some time because just following the conversation was too much for him. It wasn't much that he said but he was making a real effort to join in the conversation.

Whenever he saw his boyfriend getting tired of concentrating this much, he would kiss him and tell him what a good boy he was and how well he was behaving. So when they parted after dinner and decided on a time and place to meet for going to the shrine to watch the sunrise, Tatsuya had no problem to follow Atsushi to his dorm room and stream a bit of the annual singing show over his phone before they went to sleep.

Getting up at five o'clock in the morning was a real pain. Not for Tatsuya – but waking up Atsushi and getting him to do his morning routines was a hassle. Even today, everything had to follow the normal course, so Atsushi needed one hour in the bath. Tatsuya had forgotten to have him lay out his clothing for today yesterday, so he did it himself to avoid a crisis. Routines should not be disturbed. He reminded Atsushi that he would get him at a quarter to six before running over to his own dorm and freshening himself up.

By some miracle, Atsushi had not gone back to sleep and not cut on his hygiene. Tatsuya controlled his teeth and clothes, giving him perfect marks on his morning plan before they set off. Misses Murasakibara and teacher Tsueda were both already waiting for them, but they weren't late. Tatsuya was rather proud of Atsushi for being able to do so.

They set off to go to the shrine. Tsueda carried a flashlight to guide them safely through the masses of snow that piled two meters high on the side of the road. The poor people freeing the roads must have been up all night. Tatsuya certainly didn't envy them. Thanks to their work, they reached the shrine safely. It seemed like Northerners were either a very religious lot or already immune to the cold and darkness – the shrine was packed with people. Tatsuya took Atsushi's hand, so he wouldn't get lost. They went up to the box in front of the altar where he gave his boyfriend some coins. Together they threw them in, clapped twice and prayed. Or whatever Atsushi did, either way he was standing still while Tatsuya prayed. Tsueda and Misses Murasakibara prayed beside them. Afterwards, they looked for a good place to watch the sunrise.

All the good spots were already gone of course. They had to stand a bit further back. By now, Tatsuya had also calmed down a bit. Here in Akita, even if Atsushi got lost, he would always find his boyfriend again. With his height and his purple hair, he stood out. It wasn't the same as in Tokio where everything was big and colorful. This easy,

normal world suited Atsushi a lot more. If a basketball career or a restaurant did not work out, they could simply work some fields here. Anyone could use a farmer with Atsushi's build.

With a smile on his lips he put his arms around his boyfriend and leaned against him. Atsushi reacted in kind and slung an arm around his shoulders. It was pleasantly warm. Now that Atsushi had not only gained more muscle but also a bit of fat, he felt good to hold. One could not see his spine as much as before, even though you could still count his ribs. Hopefully his boyfriend would fill out over the next few months. Maybe some of his muscles would buff out as well, that would be nice to touch. Right now, he felt as strung as a cat, just without the fur.

They watched the sunrise in silence. Tatsuya got a bit sleepy, enjoying the warmth of Atsushi's body and his scent. At some point Atsushi seemed to decide to simply pick him up and carry him. Tatsuya fell asleep on his shoulder.

## Kapitel 25: Past and future

Tatsuya woke to the sound of his boyfriend's whiny voice saying: "I'm hungry."

"I admit I'd like to have a cup of coffee. How about a family restaurant?," Tsueda inquired.

"Breakfast sounds great." Misses Murasakibara laughed happily. "I have some more hours before I need to catch my train."

"I don't think I have asked, what kind of work do you do right now?"

"I work as an assistant in an accountant's office. My late husband was a lawyer, I was his secretary. When I needed work again to care for Atsushi, I went back to my old job, the same office actually."

"I remember reading in the file that your husband left after the incident?," Tsueda probed not so gently.

Tatsuya opened his eyes but stayed lax in Atsushi's arms. His boyfriend was carrying him down the stairs from the temple. Tatsuya did not want to interrupt, this was something he wanted to know.

"Yes, that is correct ... I was in love with him but he did not care for me much. He casually slept with me and reluctantly married me when I got pregnant. When Atsushi was in the hospital, he told me that he was tired of me and married life and left." She sounded mostly sad, not even bitter about what the man had done.

"That's a horrible thing to do. Did you even know if Atsushi would survive?"

"No, the doctors were sure he wouldn't make it. My husband promised to pay the hospital bills, but after ... he said without Atsushi, there would be no reason to stay with me." She sounded teary but she seemed to be able to hold the tears back. "When it was clear that Atsushi would wake again, I called him. I hoped he would come back but he said he had already found someone else." She sighed. "In the end, he payed nothing. The divorce gave me enough money to pay for the hospital but not for rehabilitation. It's my fault Atsushi isn't better off now." At this point her voice finally broke and she sobbed.

"That is not your fault," Tsueda tried to console her, "your husband should clearly have helped." He gave her some tissues and waited for her to calm a bit. "Did you not get any insurance money? It was a car accident where a driver hit your son, right?"

"Yes, it ... I never inquired about that. Should we have gotten money?" She still sounded a bit nasal but not as teary as before. "My husband was a lawyer, so I thought he did everything that was needed."

"Did you get aliments from him?" Tsueda's voice held a quiet fury that Tatsuya had come to know. It was the voice he used when he tried to stay calm.

"He said that if I tried to sue him, he would win the lawsuit." She hung her head. "I think he hates me."

"No matter what he thinks about you, Atsushi is still his son. If he had the money due to him, we would not be dependent on Mister Akashi." Tsueda really tried to keep his voice steady but it betrayed his anger. "The car insurance should have paid not only for rehabilitation but also for special schooling, specialized child-care and physical training. His father earns enough to be able to pay for food and boarding."

"I guess." She sounded uncomfortable. "It's too late now, isn't it? Like everything. I also lost my husband because I am plain and cannot make decisions." She cried into her hands. "I am a failure."

Tatsuya clenched his fists and hugged Atsushi. Hard. How could she say that in front of her son? How could she just stand there and blame herself but not do anything? He wanted to rage and scream and he had to remind himself every second that it would only make it worse.

"Can we go?" Atsushi said it not to him but to Tsueda. "I'm really hungry."

Tatsuya wanted to cry.

He simply kept silent. He thanked Atsushi for carrying him and he walked beside him hand in hand to the restaurant. They poured over the menu, getting this and that mainly for Atsushi and tried their best to ignore the adults. After a few minutes of calming himself, Tsueda had begun to explain to Misses Murasakibara what she had to do now. Even though she worked in an accounting firm, she seemed overwhelmed with even the simplest tasks.

She did not know who had run her boy over. Neither the name nor the insurance company affiliated. She did not have any papers from back then. She did not know if her husband had ever filed a lawsuit against the driver. Tsueda looked ready to smack her but he stayed calm and explained to her that she needed to call the police where the accident had happened to get a copy of the files. She should also look for a lawyer to sue her ex-husband for alimments. First she said she could never do that. Tsueda was a bit merciless in telling her that no amount of kindness towards her ex-husband would bring him back. After weeping over that, she said she had no money to pay a lawyer. He gave her some addresses where she could find help on that.

All the explaining, weeping, going over it again and again took hours. Atsushi was on his ninth dish when his mother remembered she needed to catch her train. Tsueda promised to pay for her food and asked her to leave her key on the door before telling her to simply go. After she left, he looked close to trashing the place. It was a strange look on a teacher but completely understandable in Tatsuya's opinion. Atsushi munched through all of it and Tatsuya simply decided that if they did not have enough money, he would pay for everything else. Right now he was happy that his boyfriend could be calmed with massive amounts of food.

Honestly, he did not know how his boyfriend had turned out so decently. How he even withstood all that emotional turmoil in the last few hours. Tsueda looked shaken, Tatsuya felt something between anger, desperation and complete and utter sadness for the life his boyfriend must have had. Most of all he felt a sudden respect for Akashi for standing up to this women and telling her to leave her son alone and surrender his care to him. No matter his faults, that had most likely saved Atsushi's life. Anything between being beaten to death by the wrong crowd and starving would have been his fate otherwise. He felt like weeping.

"Talking to mom always makes people sad," Atsushi told them over pudding. "Or angry. Me too. I always get angry as well. But that's no good. It's wrong to kick your mom, I know."

"You're a very good boy, Atsushi." Tatsuya leaned against him. "Your mother loves you. She is just unsure and full of anxiety."

"She is very passive," Tsueda added. "It's good that you try your best to reach your own goals. You wanted Himuro as your boyfriend and got him. You want kids, so you will do your best in training and get the job as a basketball player. You are an active person."

"It's a good thing to fight for the things one wants." Tatsuya kissed his boyfriend.

"I want her back," said boyfriend replied.

Tsueda and Tatsuya exchanged a look. After a moment, Tsueda answered: "I'm sure she'll visit again. You behaved well, so we can have her over."

"Good." Atsushi smiled widely. "Do you think she'll tell me I'm a good boy?"

"We can ask her to do that." Tatsuya's heart clenched again. Atsushi just wanted to know that she liked him and she could not even say that much. For that she would need to know what she liked in a son and it seemed like she could not even say that much. Being with her must have felt like floating without directions in a hostile world. Atsushi stared into his empty bowl. After a moment he said: "Muro-chin ... I feel sad. Why do I feel sad?"

Tatsuya looked at Tsueda for a moment. How the heck was he supposed to answer that?

"We all feel sad," Tsueda explained. The anger had drained from his voice. "Tatsuya and I wished that you had a mother that could say what she wants or not. A mother that could scold you when you do wrong and praise you when you do right. Your mother is not such a person and we are sad for you."

Atsushi seemed to think hard on that and finally asked: "So you mean a mother that could do my plans with me?"

"Yeah, exactly." Tsueda smiled proudly. "A mother that notices when you misbehave and says something about that. A mother that praises you when you have been exceptionally nice."

"That would be good." Atsushi smiled at Tatsuya. "I'd like for Muro-chin to be my mom."

Wait, what? Tatsuya blinked in something between surprise and disgust. He wasn't Atsushi's mom. Yeah, okay, he wished his boyfriend had a less shitty one but he would not want to be his mother. One did not sleep with one's mother. How should he explain that concept to Atsushi?

"Himuro is your partner. He'll be a good mom to your children. But your mom will always be your mom. Everyone has their own and they can never be changed."

"I like my mom." Atsushi looked at their teacher. "You are right, I don't want another. I'd like my mom to be like Muro-chin."

"Maybe you can explain to her what you like about Himuro and what you would need from her. You can make a wish. It's her decision what she does with it. But one can try."

"I want her to be able to scold and praise." He looked at his empty bowl again. "I'd like that more than Lego and food."

"You can tell her that the next time you see her." Tsueda smiled.

Tatsuya could read that smile and he knew what their teacher was not saying. Atsushi would have forgotten this conversation the next time they saw her. Nothing would ever change with those two because Atsushi was too mentally disabled to ever follow such a conversation and the people caring for him had long given up on his mother. He felt like crying again.

Tatsuya wrote a formal inquiry to be allowed to use the school's heat room in the family dorms. He got the signatures from both his parents and teacher Tsueda got one from Atsushi's mother. Tatsuya wasn't sure what he did, maybe he just told her to sign in a stern voice. That seemed to do the trick. Thinking about mating felt wrong after what he had witnessed but the heat scorched those thoughts from his head. Soon he was filled by nothing but thoughts of Atsushi, the children they might have, the sex to get those children. In the end, he was filled with Atsushi in the most literal

sense, not even thoughts of him remained.

He was the only Omega at this school who had ever chosen a mate from an S-Class. The other Omegas in this dorm welcomed him anyway. He knew most of them from his own special classes, he had held some of their babies and even visited one or two outside of class. They asked him if he had done a pregnancy test yet which he refuted. He would not need one. His perfect mate had been able to follow the instruction to use condoms, no matter what Tatsuya said or did. He loved Atsushi for it. He loved how he had someone at his side who was able to think before he acted, even as a mentally disabled person. Despite everything, he was well-raised and well-mannered. Tatsuya loved that about him and he knew who he would have to thank for that. He did not like that fact though.

He dreaded meeting Akashi. One part of him wanted to scream and rage, another wanted to thank him and ask for advice. How should he behave if he met him? Because they would meet, no question about that. Every basketball tournament, every miracle get-together. Friends were important and Atsushi's old teammates liked him despite his disabilities. It was why he had urged his boyfriend to go to Kuroko's birthday basketball game, even if Atsushi found it "too much of a bother". It only occurred to Tatsuya after their little dispute that his boyfriend had no money to visit friends in Tokyo and had long since given up on asking for more of anything regarding costly things.

It was Akashi's phone call that really brought home Tatsuya's need to decide on his opinion regarding the red-haired psycho. Was it possible to like and dislike someone at the same time? Because the Akashi that called Atsushi, that told him he had organized a practice match for their teams in Tokyo, so that Atsushi would be able to visit Kuroko's birthday, that Akashi was extremely likable. The one that ordered people around and looked down on Omegas and people in general, that one seemed quite unlikable. But maybe having a split personality entitled someone to be liked and disliked at the same time. So maybe he should just adjust his behavior to whom of those two personalities he would meet.

Somehow he was quite relieved that Taiga invited him over when he heard that he would be in town. Like that, he would not have to meet Akashi so soon. He could bring Atsushi to his friends, then go to Taiga and wait for his boyfriend's call to pick him up somewhere without having to see Akashi. It sounded perfect. So he dropped off Atsushi in the park on the 31st of January and pointed him in the right direction before taking off to meet Taiga.

He really wanted to tell his ex-brother about his mating. Not the gory details, just ... that it happened. Show off his bite mark and be happy for a bit. Not that he wasn't happy on a daily basis, just this special kind of happy when you could tell others how happy you were. Yeah, well ... something like that. At least that was the plan until he found himself lost, brought to his friend via rickshaw and was roped into preparing a party for Taiga's not-quite-yet-boyfriend. That was not how he had planned this. But cooking with Taiga was nice anyway, even if the guy was as oblivious as can be. Tatsuya tried his best to have him notice the bite mark but he didn't.

Idiot. Thick idiot.

Maybe he should help his ex-brother with winning his own sweetheart. But everyone seemed to be in on the joke that Taiga was Kuroko's destined mate and no one told him. It was so terribly obvious that everyone beside Taiga noticed. Tatsuya debated taking his ex-brother aside when the bell rang and Furihata came back with a tow of rainbow-color haired people in tow.

Including Akashi. Oh, the joy.

## Kapitel 26: The emperor

Tatsuya placed Atsushi next to him, followed by Takao – who was a really, really nice fellow – and his boyfriend “Shin-chan”. Seeing Midorima in the flesh had finally clicked who exactly this “Shin-chan” was. So Atsushi wasn’t the only one who had actually found someone for a healthy relationship. Watching the other couple interact brought home how much of a disturbed group the Generation of Miracles had been. Midorima seemed to be a very neurotic character. Tatsuya wasn’t exactly sure what Takao saw in him but most others would question his own choice as well. He would not question anyone else, he knew how hard it was when everyone thought you were making a bad choice.

It disturbed him a bit how easily Midorima assumed the role of a parental guardian again. Atsushi seemed used to listen to him, even if the green-haired boy sounded mostly annoyed. He spoke as if Atsushi should already know all he said or remember it by himself. Midorima did not seem to grasp the extent of Atsushi’s mental disability. He could not remember what was told him once. Or twice. Or a hundred times. But all in all, the other boy cared and that was what mattered. Tatsuya introduced himself again to Midorima, thanked him for his care and politely asked him to leave Atsushi to himself. The other boy just blinked and silently nodded. Takao translated that to: “My boyfriend is sorry to not have grasped the situation correctly. He hopes you aren’t offended in any way.”

“Not at all. You couldn’t have known. But it’s hard for Atsushi to concentrate on more than one person helping him along.”

“And you are too harsh, Shin-chan.” Takao placed a peck on his boyfriend’s cheek. “People will misunderstand your kind intentions if you use that tone of voice.”

“My tone?” Midorima scrunched his face.

“Yes, the way you say words. It’s harsh, strict and sounds angry. It does not sound helpful but rather aggressive.”

“Mine-chi is always angry,” Atsushi drawled.

“I am not.” Midorima turned his full body towards the giant and looked into his eyes. “I did not mean to sound angry. I am sorry I gave that impression.”

“Mine-chi wasn’t angry with me?” Atsushi seemed to need a moment to process that.

“Okay. Can I have kiritampo now?”

“We will wait for Taiga to open the buffet.” Tatsuya turned to his ex-brother who seemed to have a heated discussion with the blue-haired miracle. “Taiga? Can we dig in?”

“What?” The other boy looked forth and back between Tatsuya and Aomine. “Right! I challenge you to a food duel!”

“Sounds fun,” Atsushi commented.

“Oh no, you are not joining something that barbaric. Now fill your plate, you can have as much as you want tonight.” Tatsuya leaned up a bit and kissed his boyfriend before his lips would have another purpose for the next hours.

“Eh? Is that a bite mark?” Takao even went as far as to lightly tuck on Tatsuya’s hoodie.

Atsushi growled at him for that, food completely forgotten. Midorima growled back, drawing Takao into his arms.

“Silence.”

Everybody instinctively listened to that command and the room was filled with a deafening void of sound. Even Aomine and Taiga stopped in stuffing their plates and looked around with questioning gazes, finally following Akashi's gaze towards Atsushi. Tatsuya saw red, letting out a growl that turned into a hiss towards Akashi.

"Sorry, sorry!" Takao waved both of his hands. "My bad! Sorry, I didn't think. Can we stop with all the animal sounds now? We're all civilized people, right?"

"Yeah, you're scary, guys," Taiga added. He looked at Atsushi, Midorima and Akashi, but nobody could deny the tuft of light blue hair on the back of his shoulder that he was speaking for. "So why is everyone behaving like a cat that got stepped on its tail?"

"Just some sort of chain reaction." Takao wriggled out of his boyfriend's embrace.

"Hey, we're cool?" He held out his hand towards Tatsuya.

"Of course." He leaned forwards as well and shook it. "You overreacted, Atsushi."

"You as well, Shin-chan." Takao kissed his boyfriend anyway.

"Do I get a kiss?" Atsushi mumbled lowly.

"You get a plus point for intent but a minus point for behavior. You meant well but you overdid it. Takao is not a threat." He decided to kiss his boyfriend anyway.

"What the hell?" Aomine looked aghast. "Why is everyone kissing here?"

"Muro-chin is my mate. I am allowed to kiss him," Atsushi informed his former teammate.

Tatsuya smiled in amusement. He had planned on a less direct approach but this worked as well. He wasn't the only one getting outed tonight. Though Takao looked at his boyfriend in expectation and did not get any kind of reaction. Midorima was direly socially stunted, he did not even get the barest of hints.

"Really? With a bite mark and everything?" Kise's eyes sparkled in interest. "That is so cool, Murasakibaramacchi!"

"Tz." Aomine poked Taiga with his chopsticks. "What about our match?"

"Oh, uh, yeah." But instead of piling his mountain of food higher, Taiga turned to Kuroko and ruffled his hair. Said boy smiled back and after sharing an affectionate moment devoid of any movement, he moved back to his former seat between Momoi and Kise.

Momoi was just telling Atsushi how happy she was for him and wishing him good luck – she did not elaborate for what but it seemed to be about keeping Tatsuya happy – while Akashi somehow seemed to sink inside himself. He seemed small and dejected and his eyes unfocused. It was a bit scary to see and everyone seemed to give him a wide berth. It did look scary in a way. Like he wasn't really there, like he was talking with people from outer space or something. If he was daydreaming, it did not look like a pleasant dream.

"So you actually decided on Atsushi or did it just kinda happen?," Takao asked Tatsuya.

"I decided to do this." Somehow the question had not sounded insulting, so Tatsuya felt free to answer with a voice full of happiness.

"That's cool. That's how it should be. If you're wondering, I actually decided on Shin-chan as well."

"Oi, Takao! I understood that." Midorima glared at his boyfriend.

"Pity." The raven-haired boy grinned though. "He actually gets my jokes now."

Tatsuya had to laugh about that. Takao was to be his new favorite person in this group of oddballs. He was sure that without him Midorima would not have been able to apologize to Atsushi like that. And let's be honest, his boyfriend had needed that apology to know that he had not been a bad person in Midorima's eyes. That boy

mattered to his boyfriend.

Just like Akashi. Tatsuya tried to observe him for the next half hour as good as he could while behaving normally around others. He spiced up the soup, talked some more with Takao, moderated Atsushi's calorie intake a bit – at least so he ate more than chips and sweets – and scolded Taiga for being sick after his food contest. He had to smile back at Kuroko who looked really happy about all his friends being here with him. As long as Taiga was close, he seemed relaxed around everyone but Aomine. Seeing how longingly that one was sometimes looking at Kuroko, they seemed to share a history of a very toxic relationship. Tatsuya remembered Atsushi telling him that Kuroko had wanted to have Aomine's baby. Seeing as they were without one, Tatsuya was sure that that part was a rather sad story.

So for Kuroko Akashi wasn't the worst one, even if he had been the one to organize those rapes. Even though – if Atsushi was to be believed – it had been this Akashi's alter ego. Because he was facing a young man with two red eyes and he remembered clearly that before the Winter Cup, both had been differently colored. Atsushi had explained to him that after turning bad, one eye became golden. That was a rather easy way to differentiate personalities. Even if that had not been the case, it was rather noticeable once you knew.

This Akashi did look up instead of down. He smiled genuinely and was able to laugh about jokes. He did not give off the feeling of absolute superiority. He actually seemed rather approachable and nice. Still, there was something off about him. It was in the way he held his shoulders, in the edge of his smile, in the straightness of his spine. There was an air of "I am nice as long as I want to be, don't come close to my limits". It was also in the way every miracle did not even look at him when he looked back.

All of them were afraid of him. Everyone except for Kuroko who talked to the redhead as if nothing bad had ever happened. Could he differentiate that easily? What if the bad Akashi came back? Midorima and Atsushi both tried to always have a table between them and him. They were polar opposites and did not exactly like the other but they had no problem sitting next to each other and keeping as far from Akashi as possible.

Kise inched nearer towards Akashi and Kuroko who were still talking. For the lack of a better word, Kuroko seemed smitten with him. Tatsuya was amazed how Taiga did not even get any of that and obliviously talked with Aomine. Even that one sent concerned gazes over. Kise finally reached the couple and threw his arms around Kuroko, earning himself an immediate death glare from Akashi that wiped away every kind of nice facade. For the blink of an eye, there was a golden glint, enough to make Kise stumble back and apologize profusely.

Tatsuya had seen enough. Once a madman, always a madman. Red-eyed Akashi might be nice but golden-eyed Akashi was close enough to the surface that you could not relax around him. And he was pretty sure that red-eyed Akashi wasn't the real one that was simply tormented by his big bad alter ego. Golden-eyed Akashi looked a lot more real than red-eyed one. The nice one was a facade, Tatsuya was sure about that. So how came Kuroko was this blended? Shouldn't he notice how scary and horrible Akashi was?

Tatsuya decided to ponder that standing in the kitchen and making more food. They had become a lot more people than planned and Atsushi and Aomine ate for at least ten people anyway. So he cooked rice and made some onigiri fillings. He was a bit surprised when he was suddenly asked from his right sight: "May I help?"

Tatsuya nearly screamed like a girl but was able to reign it in. Kuroko. Of course, he was a phantom, a ghost. You did not see him coming. After his heartbeat normalized again, he answered: "Of course. Can you form some?"

"Sure." They began to work side by side.

This would be the perfect moment to ask. Was it rude to ask? Kuroko was traumatized after all. Not only that, all of his rapists were present. It might be a bad idea to ask. But what other chances would he have? He decided to simply go with the flow: "Akashi is rather scary. How come you seem so comfortable around him?"

"I have known him for quite a while. He can be a bit strange but he never hurt me. Also, his anger has never been directed at me. I know he would never let harm come to me."

Tatsuya simply stopped all movements. What? Rather – what the fuck? Hadn't that guy organized gang rapes and Omega hunts on Kuroko? He looked at the other boy that peacefully formed onigiri. What was he to say to that? Was it okay to ask? He tried: "I understood from Atsushi that some bad things happened in middle-school and ... well, wasn't Akashi the one who had the idea?"

"I consented to his idea." Kuroko looked up to him. "So it's not like he hurt me against my will."

"Okay ... so you are not afraid of him in any way? Last time I heard, he tried to stab Taiga with a scissor. He is extremely possessive of you. I fear the moment Taiga actually becomes aware that he is an Alpha with an attractive Omega friend."

Kuroko blushed slightly which looked really cute on him. It was followed by an indulgent smile that told everyone looking how much he was in love. His gaze immediately found Taiga who sat beside Kise and Momoi that seemed to try to explain something about fashion to him.

Tatsuya decided to leave it at that. Somehow, Kuroko seemed not to be afraid for Taiga. Maybe Tatsuya was just overanxious when it came to Akashi. He just hoped his ex-brother would not meet some gruesome end at the madman's hands. He finally looked around for said man again and found him staring intently back at him, his eyes sharp and cutting. Tatsuya shivered and looked down again.

Akashi was dangerous. Nothing good would come from antagonizing him, nothing good would

come from confronting him. The best would be to keep his distance and keep Atsushi safe from him. It was the best there was. Maybe he should go as far as to thank the redhead for his continued support and leave it at that? It might just be the best for everyone. Let old grudges go, accept the fact that Akashi was a very scary being and keep peace. His Omega side urged him to submit.

He formed some onigiri into cats, bunnies and bears and brought Akashi his very own plate. He took it with gracious thanks as if there was nothing strange about being personally served. Only then did he bring one to his boyfriend. Atsushi smiled at him but Tatsuya was able to see and smell the hurt on him.

Had he let his boyfriend down?

## Epilog: Epilogue

The next time he saw Akashi was at the InterHigh tournament in their second year. Atsushi had actually trained with more and more motivation. He hated losing, he gained weight and he really wanted to know Tatsuya's secret gift for winning one great tournament. With those motivations he became a force to be reckoned with. On a bit more selfish note, Tatsuya really enjoyed those muscles his mate was gaining. Akashi – the nice version – was smiling at them and complimenting Atsushi for the way he had developed. As one of Atsushi's main concerns, he simply asked back: "So I can play this time? You won't stop me?"

"No, I'll face you personally if you reach the finals. Your boyfriend has taken good care of you, I can see." Akashi nodded to him before looking back to Atsushi.

Tatsuya had decided not to get annoyed at being treated like Atsushi's side-kick. His boyfriend was stronger and had the personality of a mule sometimes while Tatsuya was a lot more harmonious. To Akashi he was someone useful but not someone worthy. In Akashi's eyes that only included people on his level and Tatsuya had no problem to acknowledge that he was no basketball genius in a way the miracles were. He did not have that drive anymore. He was happy at Atsushi's side. He had reached his limits and that was alright for high-school basketball. He would never be allowed to go pro anyway.

"We'll play." Atsushi pointed in the direction of Aomine and Kise. "Are they still injured?"

"Daiki is better but I fear Ryouta won't play many more tournaments. I advised him to take it easy but he decided to spend his high-school time playing against Daiki and working as a model afterwards."

"He'll give up basketball?" He looked shocked.

"As soon as his foot gives out, yes." There seemed to be a sliver of pain in Akashi's red eyes. "I'm glad good people are looking out for you."

"Tatsuya looks after me. Satsuki looks after Mine-chi. There's no one for Kise-chi."

"Sadly, yes. I had hoped his captain would have a bit more bite." This time his voice was colored with anger. "I hate to see my work go to waste."

"You smell unhappy." Atsushi looked at his former captain. "Even worse than before."

"I haven't been well these last few weeks. It was summer vacation after all." Akashi gave a small smile that looked not even remotely sincere. "Thank you for caring." He nodded to Tatsuya. "I'll see you in the finals. Let's have a good match then."

Tatsuya let out his held breath when Akashi had turned and taken a few steps. He had expected for his boyfriend to be ripped apart for mentioning Akashi's tense state. That had been rather civil all in all. When they were out of earshot, he asked: "Why is summer vacation a bad time for Akashi?"

"He has to go home." Atsushi began to bounce a ball from one hand to another. He had learned some tricks over time. "He hates home."

"Do you know why?" Tatsuya had always thought that Akashi was this strange because ... well, he had never really thought about it. It made sense that his home life was shitty. Why else would he have multiple personalities?

"His father is a bad man." The other stared at the ball in his hands in concentration. "I think he said it's lonely." Atsushi looked like he tried really hard to remember something. "When no one really cares for you, it's lonely inside. When someone cares

too much, it's also lonely."

"Did he say that?" What did it mean? How could it be lonely when someone cared too much for you? That made no sense. What counted as caring too much? What did that look like?

"I think so. I didn't really understand but I told myself again and again to remember." Atsushi looked at him. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know. I don't understand that as well." Tatsuya reached up and kissed his boyfriend. "I don't think I ever saw someone that cared too much." He could only imagine Akashi as being spoiled rotten and still complaining about that.

Actually, no, he could not. Akashi did not complain. He commanded where he could, he advised where he could not. He was sad when people did not follow that advise but he did not throw a tantrum. He did not act spoiled at all. He acted like he knew everything and not following his word was an act of stupidity but it may result from him being right most of the time. It was hard to say what exactly was wrong with him except for having that strange second personality that seemed a lot more genuine than this one. The power-hungry, violent asshole was a lot more believable than the caring, nice guy.

A caring, nice guy on the verge of snapping. Someone holding onto sanity with the last shreds of his power. Somehow it wasn't hard to believe that this was the reigning basketball champion. It was easy to believe he had anger to burn through. What was a bit harder was how everyone followed him – was he intimidating? Was he caring? Was he a genius? All of it. But was he reliable?

Atsushi relaxed around him which was a good sign. By being deeply connected with his instincts Atsushi was a great judge of character. He had a great perception of danger by being sensitive to other's emotions and scents. So why did he have such a different read of Akashi than Tatsuya?

"Aren't you ever scared of him?," he asked his boyfriend.

Atsushi looked at him for a moment and answered: "I am stronger. But he'll hurt you if I offend him. That's scary."

"You're scared for me?" Tatsuya leaned against him.

"You need to be protected. You're my princess."

He had to smile involuntarily. Most likely he should be offended. But he had read Western stories to Atsushi where heroes saved princesses from dragons and his boyfriend had declared him to be his princess then. It was kind of cute.

"You know, I once thought I might have to protect you from him." Tatsuya wasn't surprised this led to confusion. "You're a lot stronger than I once thought."

Atsushi simply blinked and looked at him. He did not seem to be able to grasp what he meant.

"I love you." Tatsuya kissed him again.

"That's good." His mate smiled at him.

Sometimes that ability not to think too deeply and draw too many connections was a gift rather than a disability. It might not fit in this society but it fit into something where having your heart in the right place mattered more.

It fit him.