

Not good enough

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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 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 or 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.