

MOONRISE
A Tsukishima Kei Zine



via @jercydee
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No matter how high you go,
there's always someone better.
Even if you do work hard and get pretty good,
you'll never be the very best. Never!

Somewhere, somehow,
you'll always lose to someone!

Everybody knows that, so where the heck
do they find the energy to keep going?

Hi there!

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *Moonrise: A Tsukishima Kei Zine*! I cannot begin to express how much your support means!

From back in December 2019, when the idea for this zine was first brought up, to when I'm writing this just ahead of production, this project has been an amazing experience.

When we were first discussing a theme for a zine dedicated to Tsukishima, there was no doubt in my mind what it should be. The thing that most defines Tsukishima throughout *Haikyuu!!* is his character development, and I couldn't think of anything more fitting than to have the different stages of his life be the central focus of the zine.

As such, we're bringing you Tsukishima content about his childhood, his time in high school, and further into the future. Several of our contributors have also done pieces combining these periods of Tsukishima's life.

Although *Haikyuu!!* has now come to an end, I am very happy with how it wrapped up, and so incredibly proud of this snarky, salty boy we all adore so much, of how far he's come.

Contributors, thank you so much for joining us in this zine—you've given so much life to this project and made it what it is. Your pieces are absolutely stunning!

I want to say a special thank you to my fellow mods: I don't think I could have asked for a better team. You've put so much time into this, in the middle of a global pandemic and all that brings with it. It's been hard work, but I've also learned a lot from you and had an amazing time with you over the course of this project.

I am truly thankful for all the effort and work everyone has put into the zine, and readers: I hope you will enjoy the incredible pieces our contributors have created for this zine as much as I do each time I look at them.

On behalf of the mod team,
Mod Ro



ROWEN LISA SHAY JERCY ASTRID
TSUKKI ZINE MOD TEAM

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鳥野

ICS

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THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Fic by Mads © Art by Salmon

“Pssst.”

Tsukishima purposely doesn't turn around.

“Psssst. Tsukki!” The whisper comes a little more loudly this time. “Look over here! It's us.”

“Did I do something in a past life to deserve this?” Tsukishima stares up at the ceiling and wonders aloud. Against all of his better judgement, he abandons his place in line for the showers, ignoring his teammates' curious looks, and follows the voice down the hall and around the corner.

He's entirely unsurprised at who he finds waiting for him.

“Aww, Tsukki!” Bokuto pats Tsukishima so hard on the back, it knocks the air out of his lungs and makes his glasses fall down the bridge of his nose. “You don't have to do anything special to deserve this, we just like being your friend!”

“I meant something like mass murder,” Tsukishima grumbles under his breath, pushing his glasses back into place.

“Come on, we gotta hurry. Chop chop, Tsukki.” Kuroo places two firm hands on Tsukishima's shoulders and starts leading him down a back hallway with a set of double doors at the end, Bokuto and Akaashi following closely behind them.

“But it's after curfew?”

“Yeah, we know that.” Bokuto grins widely at him, eyes glinting with mischief. “That's why we gotta hurry.”

“I'm not even dressed for practice!” Tsukishima gestures to his sleep shorts and flip-flop clad feet.

“We aren't going to practice,” Akaashi says simply.

Tsukishima falters in his steps. He had just assumed that they were going to the third gym because that's where the four of them had been going together every night this week. He thought maybe they were sneaking out for some late night practice and wanted Tsukishima to come help block for them. What else would they need him for?

“Then where are we going?”

“What is this, twenty questions?” Kuroo says exasperatedly, squeezing Tsukishima's shoulders in a gesture that's a strange mix of chastising and comforting. “Bo and I have been doing this every year since we were first years, and Akaashi came with us last year. We know what we're doing, okay?”

So this is some kind of ritual for the three of them, something entirely separate from volleyball that they just do...for fun? Not just as fellow players, but as...friends?

And they want *him* to come with them?

Tsukishima glances over at Akaashi out of the corner of his eye and the older

boy gives him a small, encouraging smile.

“Alright, fine. But if we get caught—”

“We won't get caught!” Kuroo cuts him off. “Jeez, Tsukki, don't you ever do anything without expecting the worst possible outcome?”

“Not really.”

“How about just this once you expect the best possible outcome, okay?”

Kuroo gives him a final pat on the shoulder before letting him go and working with Bokuto on silently easing open the doors while Akaashi keeps watch and Tsukishima stands there like an idiot, still turning Kuroo's words over in his head.

He's always found that expecting the best is dangerous. If you expect good things, it means you get your hopes up. And if you get your hopes up, you set yourself up for disappointment, which is precisely why Tsukishima never sets his expectations too high.

But maybe just this once, it couldn't hurt.

Once Bokuto and Kuroo have the door cracked open just big enough for four teenage boys to slip through and have it propped open with a broom from a nearby supply closet so it doesn't lock behind them, they sneak out into the night. The summer air is sticky and the humidity clings to Tsukishima like a second skin, but he still breaks out in goosebumps. Probably more to do with the excitement of breaking the rules, the adrenaline that floods his system, than the temperature.

“We have to go up to the top of the hill for it.” Kuroo points up to the top of Tsukishima's least favorite hill on the planet.

“No thanks,” Tsukishima crosses his arms and plants his feet. “I've gone up this hill enough times to last me a lifetime at this point.”

The group collectively winces, remembering all of the penalties Karasuno has served this week already.

“Fair enough,” Kuroo concedes.

“Don't worry, I got this!” Bokuto crouches down in front of Tsukishima, turning back to him with a grin so bright it shone in the darkness. “Hop on, Tsukki, I'll carry you up!”

Tsukishima's face screws up in mortification and Akaashi coughs delicately to try and cover his snort of laughter.

“Absolutely not in a million years.” Tsukishima shakes his head vehemently.

“Aw, c'mon Princess,” Kuroo nudges him with his elbow, teasing grin on his face. “Just trust us, would ya?”

Tsukishima looks around at each of the three of them, slowly in turn, and finds that despite his best efforts over this past week to avoid it, he really does.

Trust them.

“You better not drop me,” he warns Bokuto threateningly before wrapping his arms around his neck and jumping onto his sturdy back. Bokuto catches him easily with hands hooked around the backs of his knees and when he laughs, Tsukishima can feel the way his entire body shakes with it.

“Aye aye, Captain!” His gaze slides over to Kuroo, grin turning devilish. “Bet I can run to the top of the hill with Tsukki on my back and still be faster than you.”

Kuroo's eyes sharpen, smile showing all of his teeth.

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“You’re on, man.”

Tsukishima considers trying to stop them but knows it’s a lost cause. He squeezes his eyes shut and crosses his ankles around Bokuto’s waist. There’s nothing he can do now except hold on tight.

Akaashi counts them down and Tsukishima feels a scream trapped in his throat as they take off. He can feel the wind whipping his hair all across his face and the uncomfortable way that Bokuto’s fingers dig into his legs. It’s not a physically pleasant experience by any account, but when Tsukishima does manage to peek his eyes open and sees the world flying by in muted blue hues and hears Bokuto and Kuroo’s wild laughter ringing in his ears, he doesn’t entirely hate it.

Kuroo ends up winning, but it’s a close call.

Their actual destination is a little ways away, they tell Tsukishima, as they head further and further from the school. Bokuto hasn’t stopped carrying Tsukishima yet, and for some reason Tsukishima doesn’t ask him to. He can’t remember the last time someone carried him on their back like this.

Probably Akiteru, when he was much younger.

They end up in a small clearing in the middle of a sparse grove of trees where the landscape opens up into a grassy field. Bokuto carefully slides Tsukishima off of his back, and he watches in confusion as the three older boys drop to the ground, laying on their backs in a circle with their heads crowded together in the middle.

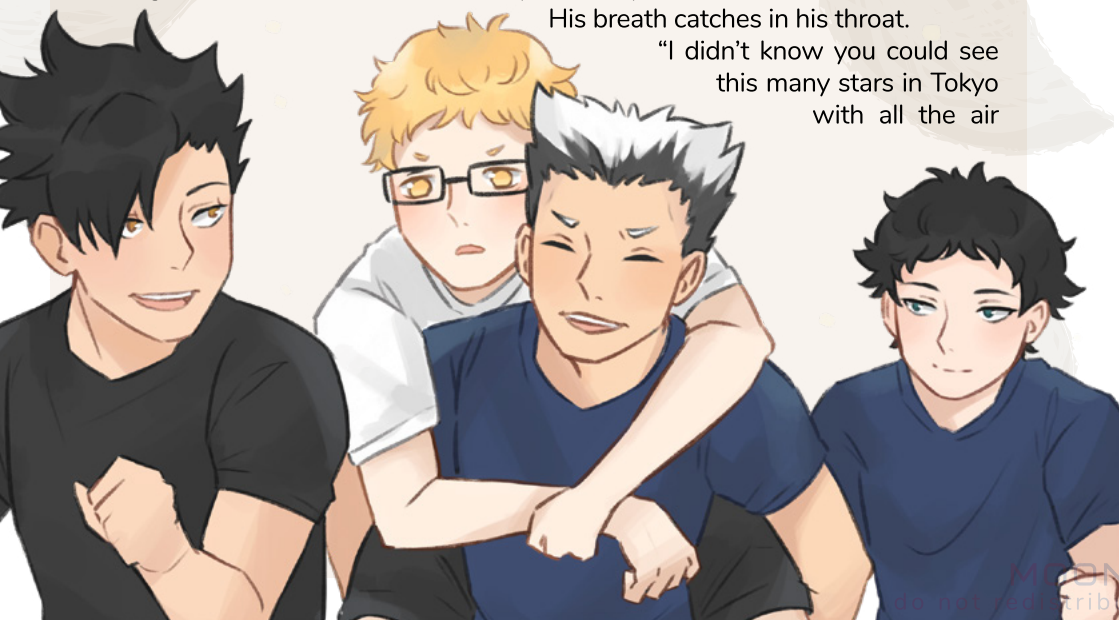
“What are you waiting for, a handwritten invitation?” Kuroo pats the spot on the ground next to him. “Get over here, Glasses.”

Tsukishima can’t think of any good reasons not to, so he crawls into the space between Kuroo and Akaashi and rolls over onto his back. He’s about to ask what they’re doing down here when he looks up and sees them.

Millions and millions of twinkling stars smattered as haphazardly as Yamaguchi’s freckles all across the inky black sky.

His breath catches in his throat.

“I didn’t know you could see this many stars in Tokyo with all the air



pollution,” Tsukishima says quietly, like he’s afraid to scare this moment away.

“We’re far enough from the city out here that on the really clear nights like this, you can see a few,” Kuroo explains without looking away from the stars.

It’s not at all what Tsukishima expected when he followed the three older boys that night.

It’s a whole lot better.

They lie in silence for a few minutes longer, just taking in the beautiful, endless sight above them. Eventually, Tsukishima hears someone shifting to face him, and sure enough when he turns his head, Kuroo is looking right at him with a thoughtful expression.

“What?” Tsukishima asks, suddenly nervous.

Kuroo takes a moment before he speaks, as if he’s carefully considering his next words.

“I was talking to some of your teammates the other day and they said there was a guy on the team a few years back with the same last name as you. Said he might be...your brother?”

Tsukishima’s heart gives a painful lurch. “He might be.”

“So that’s why you started playing volleyball, right?” Kuroo asks innocently. “You wanted to be like your brother.”

“I guess so.”

That was all Tsukishima ever wanted.

Kuroo smiles like that explains everything about Tsukishima, like he can suddenly see beneath every layer of Tsukishima’s walls. It was really only a matter of time before he found out what made Tsukishima tick, and they both knew it.

“That’s pretty cool of him,” the older boy says quietly. “That he gave this to you, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Tsukishima blinks back up at the sky. His heart doesn’t hurt so much anymore. “I guess so.”

• • •

“Tsukishima Kei, I hereby declare that you have the right to the pursuit of happiness!” Bokuto says grandly on the last day of the training camp in lieu of a simple goodbye like a normal person.

“What kind of nonsense are you going on about now?” Tsukishima rolls his eyes but lets the older boy pull him into a bone-crushing hug, ignoring the snickering from his teammates.

“No, no, he’s right!” Kuroo jumps in. “I’ve heard that one before! It was that English guy, right?”

“Oh, uh,” Bokuto releases Tsukishima and scratches the back of his head sheepishly. “I don’t actually remember exactly where I heard it from...”

“It’s an adaptation of British philosopher John Locke’s fundamental natural rights,” Akaashi supplies quietly. “The Americans changed the ‘right to property’ to ‘the right to the pursuit of happiness’ in their Declaration of Independence.”

“Right, that’s it!”

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"It basically means that every person has the right to freely pursue what makes them happy, as long as they don't hurt anyone else."

"Well there ya go!" Kuroo throws an arm around Tsukishima's shoulders, cocking his head to peer at him curiously. "Does this make you happy?"

Which part is Kuroo talking about? Playing volleyball, or being friends with the three of them?

Either way, he supposes the answer is just the same.

"Maybe a little," he admits softly. He's surprised when another pair of arms are suddenly wrapping around him.

"Then don't give up on this," Akaashi whispers, low enough that only the four of them can hear it. "Your moment will still come, Tsukishima. Please don't give this up."

Tsukishima thinks that maybe, just because it was Akaashi who asked him, he won't. For a little while longer, at least.

When he pulls away and looks Tsukishima in the face again, Akaashi smiles gently.

"Don't be sad. We'll all see each other again very soon."

"We will?" Tsukishima asks. He's not sure what in his expression gave away the fact that he was sad.

"Course we will!" Bokuto rests an elbow on Akaashi's shoulder, beaming at Tsukishima.

"At Nationals," Kuroo finishes with an air of finality, like it's an indisputable truth.

And Tsukishima thinks that maybe the look on his face—on all of their faces—is a little bit proud.

Tsukishima is a little bit proud of himself, too.

• ◡ •

He waits until everyone else has fallen asleep on the bus ride home to pull out his phone and punch in a familiar number.

When the ringing stops, a warm voice answers from the other end.

"Kei! Isn't this a pleasant surprise."

"Akiteru." Tsukishima smiles and rests his head against the window. "Sorry to call you so late, I just... I wanted to talk to you about the training camp I was just at."

"You—You want to talk to me about volleyball?" Akiteru's words come out a little choked, and even through the phone, Tsukishima knows his older brother is tearing up.

"If you're not too busy."

"No! No, I'm not too busy at all. I'd love to hear about it."

"Okay," Tsukishima breathes. "It all started in the third gymnasium..."



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illust by kuramelleo



ECDYSIS STUDY

Fic by Brella © Art by Lisa

I.

Dear Kei-kun,

I can't believe you were nice enough to give me your email and I'm repaying you by writing in May. May! Come on, Hitoka!! What's he supposed to think other than that you've forgotten all about him, and never wanted his email in the first place, and are spending your days in Osaka cursing his name?! If you think that, Tsukishima, I promise it isn't true! I would never, ever forget you, and when you gave me your email I cried!! I've just been super forgetful since university started, what with moving in and starting classes and joining the Journalism Club and signing up for the school lit magazine's editorial board and volunteering at the youth sports center by my apartment complex and...

Well, anyway. I miss you.

It's probably weird to hear me be so candid. But I just do! I can't help it. I miss Tadashi, too, and Shouyou and Kageyama-kun. And lots of people and things besides. I miss the way the rain clouds looked coming over the mountains. I miss getting snacks at Sakanoshita. I miss the sound of sneakers on the gym floor and the smell of air salonpas. I miss being able to see the stars.

Do you miss the stars, Kei-kun? I hear there's a really good planetarium in Shibuya. Maybe you and Tadashi could go one weekend when he comes to visit. He told me he might over the summer. Summer in Tokyo sounds so nice... like something out of a coming-of-age movie. Ah, but I guess we already had our coming-of-age movie, didn't we? Like, three times over.

Oh well. I guess growing up is a thing you do lots of times. If you didn't, it wouldn't really be life, would it?

Ah! I'm being so boring! I'm sorry!!! Tell me all about school! Are you taking any fun classes? Most of my coursework is general ed first-year stuff, but I managed to get into a lecture on the Man'yōshū, and I'm really excited! The professor is a real scholar. She reminds me of Shimizu-senpai, a little. But she isn't as pretty. That's between us, okay?

Tell me about the things you miss. Tell me about the things you don't miss. Tell me anything and everything you want!

Until next time,

Hitoka

• © •

Hitoka-san,

Thank you for your note. Rest assured it did not once cross my mind that you loathed me nor that you had somehow erased me from your memory. I'm busy, too. I think most of being alive is being busy.

You should try to avoid crying when people give you their emails. Just some advice.

I'm taking introductory classes on business statistics, general economics, managerial accounting, and ethics. Plus a poetry class, but that was not consensual. We'll be reading the Man'yōshū at some point too, I expect, but the professor has a particular fondness for the Shin Kokin, and we've had to do recitations, my nightmare. I went with the one about evergreens and loneliness, and the autumn mountains. Stupid as it sounds, it reminded me of home.

Maybe it will disappoint you, but I haven't found myself missing anything yet. It's nice to be in a place where my name could belong to anybody—not just to Tsukishima Kei, middle blocker for Karasuno. Now I can be Tsukishima Kei, benchwarmer for Tokai, or Tsukishima Kei, who recited the poem about mountains. Tsukishima Kei, protagonist of a lauded coming-of-age movie. Just kidding.

I hadn't thought about the stars one way or another. But now that you've mentioned them, I have. I can't see many of them here, but I can remember what it was like to see them. I think that's what matters.

Write back. Or don't. But rest assured, whenever you do, I won't have forgotten you. If I can remember stars, then I can remember a friend.

Kei

II.

Hey, Tsukishima!

I can't believe you still use email. You're such an old man! Just text like the rest of us! Eh, I guess I can't complain, since it's way cheaper to use Wi-Fi than text overseas—so really, you're doing me a favor! Anyway, how's Tokyo? Is it super cool? Do you get to see the Tokyo Tower all the time?! Are they done with the Ariake Arena yet? Did you say hi to Kenma like I asked? What nerdy classes are you taking? Did you decide to join the team after all? Aah, I can't believe you get to play volleyball for Tokai; that's so COOL! Cooler than you deserve! Geh, that was mean. I guess since it's easier to say over email than to your super smug Tsukishima face, I'll just say it—maybe you do deserve it. You're amazing at volleyball, so I bet you'll keep being amazing!

You gotta go to Brazil sometime! It's AWESOME AND HUGE! I've been training super hard at beach volleyball and I've gotten like six sunburns! I'm shooting for ten! I love sunburns, y'know? You're probably gonna say I'm a freak for that, but hear me out—isn't there something so cool about getting burned, I mean really burned, by the SUN? And isn't there something even cooler about how our skin peels off, and then it's all fresh and pink underneath, and that becomes our new skin? So it's kind of like you get to be reborn every time you

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get a sunburn, like you're a lizard, what's the word, molting? Like that! I love sun-molting! And I love the new person I'm becoming in Brazil!

Maybe you're molting, too, into a brand new person in Tokyo. I wonder what the pink Tsukishima underneath is gonna make of himself? Well, whatever it is, I won't lose to him!

Later!

Hinata

• ☾ •

To Hinata Shouyou,

Ah, how strange. It seems your many emails were routed to my spam folder by mistake. Could it be because you've sent me thirty emails containing links to volleyball clips and cat videos? No, I'm sure there's no relation.

How you manage to make emails noisy I'll never know. You are a being beyond my comprehension.

You've been to Tokyo; you don't need me to tell you what it's like. I can usually see your precious Tokyo Tower from campus. They are not done with the Ariake Arena. Kenma sends his regards, as he has sent them to you personally by text many, many times. I will ignore the insinuation that I take nerdy classes. I expect it must be a lot of work for a creature of volleyball such as yourself to comprehend the idea of a well-rounded education. Don't try.

Don't compliment me so earnestly. It's disturbing. Besides, is calling my face "super smug" your idea of not being mean? Forgive me if I don't weep with gratitude.

Not to grab the low-hanging fruit, but you always make it so easy: you are a first-class freak. Who likes getting their skin singed off? Wear sunscreen! And for the record, your sunburn metaphor does an extreme disservice to lizards, which are resilient, responsible creatures that have adapted themselves to sun exposure through generations of evolution. Let me know how that molting thing works out when you contract skin cancer.

You'll be glad to know that the Tokai team is just as impressive as their past accomplishments led us to believe, back when we were all looking up universities on Hitoka-san's computer after school. I was able to play in a practice match last week. We won. Shocking that such a thing is possible without you and His Majesty's weirdo quick to back it up, but I suppose all things pass with time. Ah, it was so pleasant not to have to deal with you hollering your head off when I'd block a straight... so pleasant not to have you climbing all over me like a poorly trained koala. University volleyball is paradise.

I doubt I'll make it to Brazil before you make it back to Japan. We've got our whole lives ahead of us, after all, or so everyone keeps telling me. Besides, the moon is always chasing the sun, isn't it? I've given up on trying to catch up to you. But summer is here, and the light is long, and the earth is still turning.

The only thing surer than our endless chase is that we'll always share the same sky.

Regards,

Tsukishima Kei

III.

Tsukki—

Sorry. I know I could just text or video call you like usual, but... I kind of liked the idea of writing you an almost-letter. Now I can't think of anything to say, though! Hm, let's see... what to tell Tsukki that I haven't already told him... ah, I know!

Okay, so... ever since I came to see you and we went to that planetarium, I've been thinking about space. It's funny, because I was never that interested in it before. But the other night, I was up until 1 AM reading all these scientific articles and fact sheets about it, and watching documentaries... I just couldn't sleep, thinking about all of the stars and planets and galaxies out there; thinking about how so many of the stars we see aren't even there anymore. How their light took such a long time to reach us that they faded away while it was traveling. It's so exciting, and so cool, but it also makes me really sad.

Anyway, have you ever heard of cold welding? It's this thing that happens where—like, if two pieces of the same metal touch in space, they'll permanently bond to one another. See, on Earth, they need heat to do that—they're kept apart by air and water, among other things—but out there in the vacuum of space, there's nothing to tell them that they're two separate pieces. Apparently it's a real problem for actual spaceships, and parts can get cold welded and cause actual dangerous things to happen, but the principle of the thing is... kinda nice, right?

It made me miss you a lot less. Way back when, when you first showed me how to play volleyball, I feel like we kinda cold welded together. And now being together is so natural that when we're apart, it barely even hurts.

That's super corny, isn't it? My bad. Guess I should stick to telling you boring stuff about my course on logic design.

How's that poetry class going? How was your match this weekend? Did you decide to let your hair grow out after all?

Let's video call soon. Even if the glare on your glasses makes you look like an evil robot.

Yamaguchi

• ☾ •

Yamaguchi,

I didn't know about cold welding.

The leaves on campus have started to change. Soon they'll be all red and bright, falling everywhere in the cold afternoons. My favorite. But they'll be back again, too. Green. Your favorite.

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Our poetry final is coming up. I think I'm going to do my paper on that one I recited for you when you came. The one about the mountain and the moon.

We lost our weekend match. But it's okay. My pride is tougher than that.

You can write me more emails. I don't mind.

Tsukki

P.S. I'm considering switching to a double major. Maybe History. All of this court poetry is getting to me. But maybe it wouldn't be so bad to start a career someplace that places value on remembering. A museum or something. We'll see. Thought I'd run it by you first. You tend to be pretty good at helping me figure out the things that are worth the effort in this life. So here I am again. Asking.

IV.

hello tsukishima hinata will not shut the hell up about me emailing you apparently everyone else has done it so here i am. how are you and is the tokai team strong. kageyama

•◡•

Um, Tobio-kun... I don't know if this was intentional... but you sent this to the old Karasuno distro that I set up for the five of us back in our first year... but it's okay! It's really nice to hear from you!

Tsukishima: we just finished the Shin Kokin, and when I read the poem you mentioned, I got goosebumps! It's so... I don't know... it's just very you. I ended up doing a recitation of it for the oral portion of the final exam. I hope I did it justice!

I can't believe our first semester is coming to an end. We can tell each other all about it when we get back to Miyagi, so for now... everyone do your best!

Love, Hitoka

•◡•

HAHA, KAGEYAMA! Nice going!

Well, while I'm here, Tsukishima, might as well tell you that all that stuff about the sky went way over my head, but... it sounded kinda nice anyway. When the moon and stars come out in Rio, you can go down to the beach and watch them glinting off the water, all bright and glowy and calm. When I do that, it's like you're right there with me! Except if you were actually right there with me, you'd be telling me not to go to the beach in the dark because I might drown probably because I'm stupid and blah blah. Well, for your information, that only almost happened, and only once. But Pedro saved me.

Good luck with your sun-molting!

Hinata

•◡•

Hi, Tsukki! Hi, Kageyama! Hi, everybody!

Wah, so much pressure to think of something cool to say... here's a picture of me and Tsukki at the planetarium over the summer. Hitoka-san, what kind of things can I bring back to Miyagi for you from that big stationery store you like? Send me a list!

And Tsukki—I think court poetry moves you for a reason. Like the mountain moves the moon.

Yamaguchi

•◡•



Now, now, let's not mock His Majesty's technological ineptitude too much. Kings are above such things, after all. There's no need for email in the imperial court. It's not his fault.

Jeez, you people never change. This email thread is like a scroll of the ancient past. I can almost smell the air salonpas, wafting off of my phone screen and into the train car. It's giving me a headache.

Hitoka-san: Congratulations on your poetry final. I'm sure you did right by the evergreens.

Hinata: I will not explain myself further. Wear sunscreen if you're going to be molting.

Yamaguchi: Thank you. I'll take the merits of court poetry under advisement. Please delete that picture. Had I known you were hiding a camera I would not have smiled.

Ousama. Kageyama. Tokai's strong, same as plenty of other teams are strong, and will always be strong, with or without us. But their strength has roots, not wings. That's all.

See you all at winter's end. Even if one of you is dialing in from a beach in Rio de Janeiro, I'm sure it will be like no time has passed, and like no distance has grown. We're already cold welded, after all.

Kei

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HOW THE MOON LEARNED TO SHINE

Fic by Leah ☾ Art by Jules

Kei is six years old when he first hears about volleyball.

It's just a club, but it's all Akiteru has been talking about since joining his middle school team, and his enthusiasm is so contagious Kei can't help but get excited about it too. Soon enough they're leaving dinosaur documentary marathons behind for hours sending the ball back and forth in their garden, learning all these new positions and plays that Akiteru's so eager to show him.

Day after day they practice and practice until mom calls them for dinner and then some more, and every time Kei sees Akiteru using one of those plays in a real match, he gets to say, "He practiced that with me!", throwing a V-sign as their eyes meet, their smiles so big they almost don't fit on their faces.

"I'm gonna be the ace soon!" Akiteru keeps saying, and Kei knows he will. He's seen him getting back home late because he stayed for extra practice, and even after long matches he still has the energy to practice some more. He practically breathes volleyball at this point and Kei isn't surprised when Akiteru becomes not only the ace but the captain of his team during his last year of middle school.

He's aiming even higher next year. Akiteru is joining Karasuno, he's going to make it to the active roster as a rookie and take his team to Nationals, he promises. Kei knows he will. He's achieved everything he's tried to achieve until now.

How could it be any different now, when he's working so hard?

• ☾ •

Kei is twelve when he learns hard work isn't always enough.

"Did you score a lot today, nii-san?" Kei asks when his brother gets home from a match. He doesn't even give him time to properly take his shoes off before attacking him with questions.

"Of course I did! We're gonna take Karasuno to Nationals!" Akiteru replies with a broad smile, pulling him down by the hand to sit next to him by the genkan and tell him all about today's game.

After every match, the smile on his brother's face as he gets back home seems bigger, but the time he spends telling Kei all about his match seems shorter. Every time, he'll greet him, ruffle his hair, say he did great, and rush past him. They still practice after dinner, talking about the middle school team Kei just joined and helping him with his receiving, but there are no more *Ten more*

minutes when Mom calls them to bed, only Night, Kei and his brother's back hurrying to his room.

He must be tired after playing so much, Kei thinks. He's been practicing more than ever, and Kei is sure his team's matches must be getting tougher, the more they progress and get to play against better opponents. So he decides not to bother him, he probably needs the rest. They can talk about the match tomorrow.

But tomorrow Akiteru doesn't want to talk about it. He doesn't seem to want to talk about anything.

Refusing to accept defeat, Kei decides it's time for a different approach. Akiteru keeps saying he doesn't want him going to his games because knowing Kei is there will make him nervous. Well, that only means it's okay to go as long as Akiteru doesn't know, right?

It's easy to get Yamaguchi to go with him—he's been wanting to watch one of Akiteru's matches since he heard he's the ace of a powerhouse. It's easy—and accidental—to get one of their classmates to join them, too. He keeps claiming Akiteru hasn't played any game but it's not possible. His brother would never lie to him, and Kei is going to prove it this weekend.

Except he doesn't: when the match comes, his brother isn't on the starting lineup. His brother isn't on the bench, either. His brother isn't even down on the court.

His brother is in the stands, rooting for a team he isn't a part of.

There's no V-sign when their eyes meet this time. There's no smile, either. Kei doesn't think he'll ever forget the look on Akiteru's face, the whirlwind of disappointment and confusion going through his mind until all he feels is numb. How lame of him, getting so wrapped into some club, reducing his own brother to volleyball and volleyball alone. Maybe that's why Akiteru felt he had to lie to him, pretending for years instead of letting him down.

Or maybe Akiteru had just been lying to himself. Fake it 'til you make it, but faking isn't enough, wanting isn't enough, hard work isn't enough. But why, then? Why fake, why want, why work hard for some lame club that won't mean anything in the end?

• ☾ •

Kei is fifteen when he starts to understand.

He's not entirely sure why he joins the Karasuno Volleyball Club. *It will be fun, Tsukki!* Yamaguchi had promised. It isn't fun. It's exhausting, keeping up with Hinata's overflowing energy. It's annoying, putting up with Kageyama's unreasonable demands. And it's kind of weird, following Akiteru's footsteps after how it worked out for him, like he's trying to fill a spot his brother couldn't.

It almost feels wrong when he's put into the starting lineup for their first practice match, and the next one, and the one after that, too. He's not even trying, but he's still part of the starting lineup for every match of Interhigh. He's not even trying, and he's already done more than his brother ever did on this team. So much for hard work when all that matters is that he's tall.

What's the point, then?

Why get so invested in some stupid club if it's only going to make it hurt that much worse when it all crumbles down, when you learn you will never be good enough, you will always be losing to someone? Maybe he's just been missing something everyone but him can see. Bokuto keeps going on and on about The Moment that gets you hooked on volleyball. Even Akiteru claims to have felt it—after all the pain volleyball caused him, he's still not satisfied. He's still chasing that thrill and Kei can't help but want that, too. Maybe he can, if he tries just a little bit harder.

So he tries. Kei feels he's being pushed in all directions, out of his comfort zone, out of everything he thought he was sure of, and for once he finds he doesn't mind it that much. There's something about blocking the unblockable that makes his chest swell with something akin to pride. It's just a block, it's just one point out of twenty-five, but as he hears the crowd cheering for him he thinks he gets it, now.

This is volleyball.

• • •

Kei is seventeen when he finds a reason to share everything he's learned.

The start of his third year comes with five new starry-eyed overexcited teammates. Second Shadow is the most starry-eyed and overexcited of them. Kei should be used to that kind of energy, he's played with Hinata Shouyou for two years. But Hinata Shouyou didn't follow his every step. Second Shadow? He's everywhere.

When Kei arrives at the gym, Second Shadow is waiting for him. When Kei is practicing his serve, Second Shadow is watching him. Even when Kei is doing nothing, Second Shadow is there.

"You're so cool, Tsukki-san!" He said the first time Kei did a read block during a practice game and hasn't left his side since then. He kind of reminds him of six-year-old Kei, running behind his older brother and trying to learn everything about volleyball. He hopes it won't end in disappointment, for either of them.

Maybe that's why Kei agrees to help when Second Shadow decides he wants to be a middle blocker. Maybe it's the stern look Yamaguchi sends his way. Whatever the reason was, somehow Kei finds himself staying late to help Second Shadow with blocking practice. Hinata and Kageyama are there, too, because of course they are. He can't remember the last time he saw them leave practice right after it ended.

"What do you want to learn?"

"Everything!"

It takes everything in Kei not to sigh, turn around, and leave. "What do you want to learn first?"

"That thing where you guessed where the ball would go?" Second Shadow must have felt his second-guessing, judging by the way his shoulders slump down.

"You know how you jump as soon as a spiker gets in position?"

"Yes!" He nods proudly.

"Well, don't." Kei almost feels bad at Second Shadow's soft 'oh'. "For read blocking, you have to wait and watch where the set goes, and then jump."

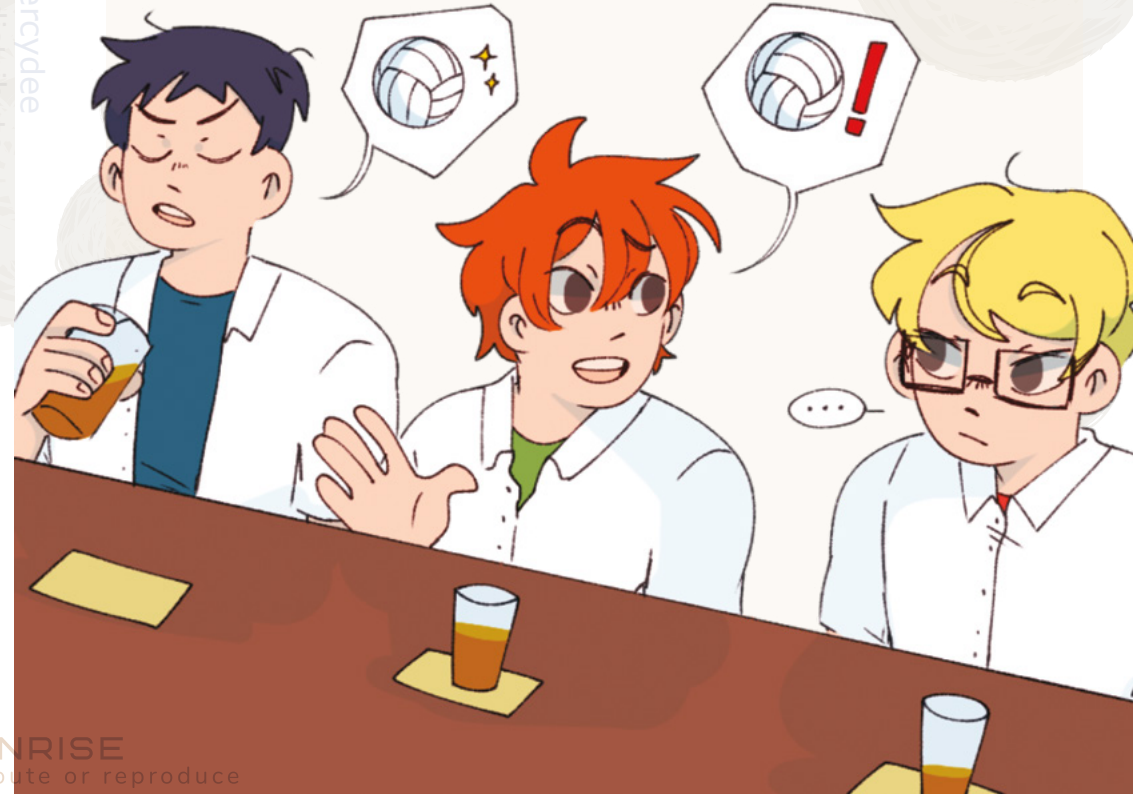
"Can we try?"

Before he knows it, Kei is passing down his title as the shield of the Karasuno Volleyball Club. His high school days might be over, but he has no doubt that he's leaving the team in good hands. He trained those hands himself, after all.

Graduation day comes around and Kei barely registers the ceremony. Too many speeches, too many tears, too many questions about the future. Kei doesn't want to deal with any of those, let alone spend any more time there. If anyone asks, it's only because of some sense of obligation that he lets himself be dragged to a ramen shop to celebrate with the rest of his first-year team. It's a long night but it's over too soon and by the time Kei checks his watch—1:58 a.m.—it's just him and the dumbass duo.

It's going to be weird not seeing them attached by the hip anymore. Hinata is getting ready to move to the other side of the world. Kageyama is getting ready to climb to the top of the top. Kei? Kei is ready to let go.

Or so he thinks, because when Kageyama asks, *Where are you trying out?*, Kei doesn't say *Nowhere*. He takes a long sip of his drink to buy himself some time. Is he ready to let go? He's downed half his glass by the time he realizes he doesn't have an answer.



“Why?” he asks, meeting Kageyama’s frown with a blank stare.

“Why not?”

“I’m not...” He doesn’t need to finish his sentence for them to know what he means. He isn’t them. He doesn’t have that hunger for more, that fire driving him forward.

“That hasn’t stopped you before,” Hinata says, and Kei hates that he’s right. Not being good enough was a good excuse for first-year Kei, but almost three full years have gone by and he knows he can do more, if he tries.

He’s still thinking about it when he gets home an hour later, exhausted and wanting nothing more than to crawl into bed and shut his brain off. He should’ve known it wouldn’t be so easy: Akiteru is having tea by the kotatsu, and if Kei knows his brother well enough, that can only mean one thing.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks despite knowing the answer. Akiteru has always had a penchant for meaningful talks just when Kei needs them the most, even when neither of them knows it.

“I was waiting for you,” Akiteru confirms his suspicions. “How was dinner?”

“The usual... Too much talking and not a lot of minding their own business.”

“Are you talking about them or me?”

“It depends on why you were waiting up for me.”

Akiteru chuckles. “I just wanted to check on you, in case we don’t get to talk before I leave tomorrow morning.”

Kei sighs, admitting defeat. “It was alright... Everyone seems to be pretty set up with their future plans.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?” Kei knows it’s pointless to play dumb, Akiteru can read through him. That won’t stop him from trying to escape this conversation, though. “I’m going to college.”

“And that’s it?”

“What else would I do?” Kei frowns. “I don’t—”

“Don’t you dare say you can’t, because you know it isn’t true,” Akiteru cuts him off and all Kei can do is blink at him, mouth agape. “I saw you fall in love with volleyball... Can you really say you’re satisfied?”

• ◡ •

Kei is twenty-one when he decides that no, he is not satisfied. College volleyball isn’t enough. He can do more. He wants more.

Three years playing for some high school volleyball team and then some more for his college’s were enough to prepare him for League Division 2. It’s been a year since he joined and he’s sure Akiteru still tears up when he boasts about his 195 cm tall little brother, middle blocker for the Sendai Frogs.

They’re all ready to step into the court—all but their newest recruit.

The third time Koganegawa drops his tape, Kei decides someone needs to talk to him.

“You know you probably don’t need this anymore, right?” he asks, picking up the tape from the floor.

“Yeah...” Koganegawa sighs, “But it helps me feel grounded.”

“Here,” Kei nods in understanding, “Let me help you.”

Koganegawa mumbles a thanks, falling quiet as Kei carefully tapes his fingers. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?” Kei raises his eyebrows. It can’t be the taping—Koganegawa has been doing it for years.

“Not being... nervous.”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“I don’t know, you seem so... calm and collected.”

“I’m really not that—”

“You totally are!” Koganegawa cuts him off. “How?”

Kei opens his mouth to reply, half-expecting to be interrupted again, when he realizes he doesn’t have an answer. Despite what Koganegawa might think, he is nervous. Messing up a block could potentially mean losing a match. He knows he can’t beat an opponent all on his own. But even now, years later, he remembers the rush of confidence when Hinata covered for him, the silent certainty that Kageyama would put up the ball precisely where it was supposed to be, the inspiring presence of Yamaguchi spurring him on. He remembers Akiteru, all the way up in the stands with a V-sign and a smile ready. He’s never been on his own. He’s not on his own now, either.

“It doesn’t really matter what I do on my own, does it?” he says, a barely-there smug smile curving his lips at the confusion in Koganegawa’s expression. “I have a whole team behind me.”

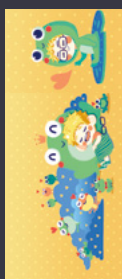
As they enter the court, his mind wanders back to his own first official game and even further back in time. Volleyball might have started as just a club, but the crowd cheering for them reminds him it’s so much more than that. It’s the thrill of the audience calling his name, the frustration on his opponent’s face when he stops a spike, the satisfaction of scoring with a block.

It isn’t easy juggling his last year of college and volleyball at a pro level. It will be even harder once he starts working full-time. But if there’s something Kei has learned over the years, it’s that it’s worth it.

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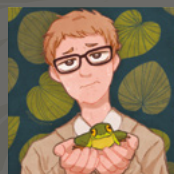


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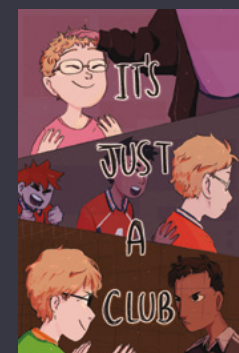
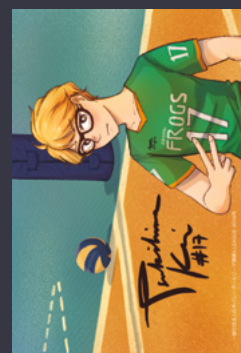
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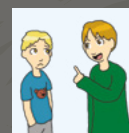
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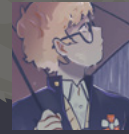
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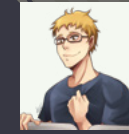
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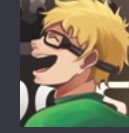
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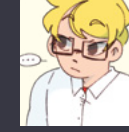
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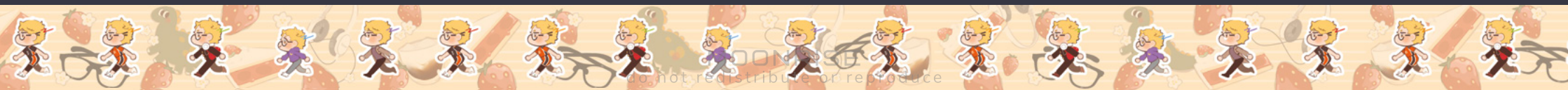
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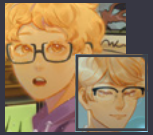
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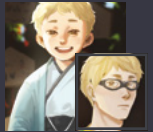
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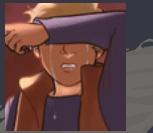
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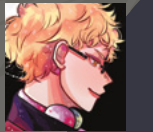
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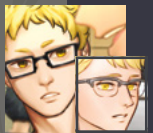
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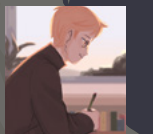
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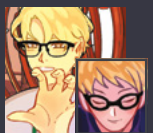
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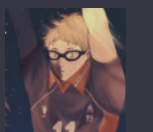
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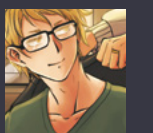
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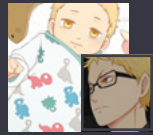
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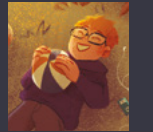
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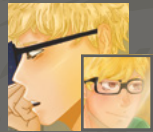
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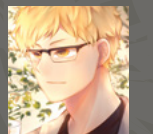
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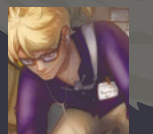
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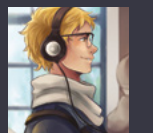
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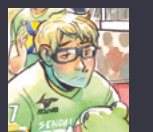
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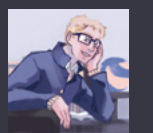
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Gabi
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There's just something about
seeing them out there on that court
that makes me feel like
I have to get moving too.



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