

the bet

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the bet

by [mollE](#)

Summary

“Oi, oi!” Mateus jogs over, his own dark skin glistening with sweat and humidity but no more pink than usual. He’s never done anything other than tan and tan evenly, the Brazilian asshole. “Found our fourth—where’s Nils?”

“Dominating on third court,” Ines says. “Those poor Americans never had a chance.”

“Thought they were Canadian.”

“No, no. Accent’s all wrong. American.” Ines nods at her own conclusion before sliding her sunglasses onto the top of her head to get a good look at Mateus’ companion, a short-ish man she’s never seen before. His hair is a shock of orange, and his fair skin is going to give him hell on the beach, especially if he keeps wearing t-shirts and shorts like he is now.

--

or, the one where shouyou's friends make a bet on how long it'll be before he gets with this mysterious tobio guy.

Notes

i wanted to do a POV on brazil's side of things during moody but a little different ig since hinata isn't so,,, moody and i guess it worked out because this got written. eventually. took a while to even start LMAO it's fine i hope you all enjoy!!!

also. ended up watching 2012 olympic men's volleyball matches during this. what the hell. what was the reason.

edited at one in the morning between a feelings admission from one of my only friends and the therapy session that followed that so don't blame me for any mistakes FGHGFGHJJHGF

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“I’m *sunburnt*,” Vitor complains, a miserable expression on his face and his hands ghosting over his pink shoulders. “Already. What the hell?” From under her umbrella, Ines makes a mocking noise and laughs at the way his skin turns white then bright red again under the pressure of his fingers.

“Dumbass,” she laughs. “You just got over that last one. How have you not learned your lesson, huh? Sunscreen, stupid. Sunscreen.” She snaps her fingers and returns Vitor’s glare over the rim of her sunglasses. He looks away first. Ines scoffs, smirks.

“Oi, oi!” Mateus jogs over, his own dark skin glistening with sweat and humidity but no more pink than usual. He’s never done anything other than tan and tan *evenly*, the Brazilian asshole. “Found our fourth—where’s Nils?”

“Dominating on third court,” Ines says. “Those poor Americans never had a chance.”

“Thought they were Canadian,” Vitor protests.

“No, no. Accent’s all wrong. American.” Ines nods at her own conclusion before sliding her sunglasses onto the top of her head to get a good look at Mateus’ companion, a short-ish man she’s never seen before. His hair is a shock of orange, and his fair skin is going to give him hell on the beach, especially if he keeps wearing t-shirts and shorts like he is now. He has a bag slung over his shoulder and a wide smile on his face as he glances around at everything the beach has to offer—more specifically, all of the sandy courts. Most are occupied by tourists who aren’t any good, but a few are empty, and the man shifts where he stands like he’s itching to get to one of the nets. “Who’s this?”

The man meets the flick of her hand with an uncomprehending look before glancing toward Mateus.

“Hinata Shouyou, fresh off the plane from Japan,” Mateus explains in English. The man’s—Shouyou’s—face lights up, this time with both comprehension and excitement. He sticks out a hand for Ines to shake and Vitor after she finishes with him. “He’s in Brazil to play for the National team, scouted straight from high school.”

“So he’s good?” Vitor asks. Shouyou keeps his grin, not complaining that he’s being talked about like he’s not standing right there. “You’ve got to be really good to get scouted from across the world, don’t you?”

“I want to get better,” Shouyou insists in accented English, “so I can play with—so I can get to the highest court. I want to fly.” He nods and looks proud of himself despite the strange, metaphorical quality of his speech. Ines blinks at him before the urge to laugh bubbles over her lips.

“Well, kid. It’s a whole different thing to fly on sand, hear me?”

“That’s why I’m here—if I can play good on sand, I can be the best on a solid court. I want to be the next Small Giant!” She’s never heard of such a person, figures he must be some

Japanese player who hasn't had the chance to get popular over here yet, but she doesn't tell this kid that. The look on his face is something she doesn't want to crush out of him, no matter how often and how loudly Vitor insists she's a cold-hearted bitch.

She's not a cold-hearted bitch. Vitor's just dramatic. She would know; she's been dealing with his dramatics since the womb.

"I've done some research," the kid continues, "but I'm excited to learn everything I can from you guys!" He beams at her, and she opens her mouth to comment on the fact that she hasn't played seriously since college, but there's a commotion a little ways down the beach where a small crowd has formed around one of the courts. Cheers mixed with groans, a sure sign a match has just ended, and Nils emerges from the crowd, red-faced but vague and expressionless. His narrow chest is heaving, and he pushes his visor away from his forehead to rub away the sweat on his hairline.

"Lehmann!" Vitor cheers, throwing an arm over Nils' skinny shoulders. "How were those Canadians?" Ines holds out a water bottle for him to take, the condensation pleasantly cool against the skin on her palm. He chugs the water for a long moment before wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"They were shit," he mutters. He's silent for another long moment. "And they were American."

"*Dammit*," Vitor mutters, all but collapsing onto his back under the shade of the umbrella. Ines leans over him and gives him the bird, sticking out her tongue. "Yeah, yeah. Accent was all wrong. I get it, Ines." He mutters to himself and throws an arm over his eyes so he doesn't have to look at her anymore.

"Don't mind them," Mateus tells Shouyou, and Ines feels a little guilty for forgetting about him even for a second. He shakes his head, still smiling. "Nils, up for a match? I want to get a feel for Shouyou here. Gotta see how much we've got to work with." His big hand comes down on Shouyou's shoulder.

"Sure, sure. Go get a court—need a mo' to cool off," Nils tells him, waving his free hand and tilting his head back to drink more. His Adam's apple bobs. He finishes and hands Ines the bottle as Shouyou drops his bag on the sand near one of the closer courts. "Isn't he a little short for volleyball?" he mutters in Portuguese.

"He could be the best Japanese player there ever was, but beach is a whole 'nother game. Give him hell, Nils." Ines slaps him on the shoulder and drops her sunglasses back onto the bridge of her nose with a smirk as Nils duck back out of the shade. Mateus, on the closer side of the net with Shouyou already, has given Shouyou his spare pair of sunglasses to keep the sun out of his eyes. The green-purple lenses clash terribly with his hair, but he doesn't seem to mind. He shoots Mateus a thumbs-up as he drops into a semi-squat, thinking he's ready for Nils' serve.

Ines chuckles to herself; there had been one match last spring in which their opponents couldn't receive a single one of Nils' serves and dipped, embarrassed and thoroughly beat,

after half a set. She hopes this kid'll stick with it. She likes the look of him, really, and would hate to see that brilliant smile smote by her friends.

Ines isn't looking to feel like a total dick today, really.

Nils presses his lips together before throwing up the ball and swinging his arm to hit it. It seems to float over the net—a float is risky, but there isn't much of a breeze today. The day is sticky with humidity, and sweat sticks to the inside creases of Ines' elbows and knees even as she watches from under her big umbrella, and she holds her breath as she watches the ball drop into Mateus' and Shouyou's side of the net. Mateus doesn't move for the receive, and she can tell even from the back of his head that he's side-eyeing Shouyou to see if he'll go for it. This match is to gauge his skill, after all.

Shouyou takes two steps forward, almost directly under the ball, and it drops onto his forearms; he receives it perfectly, sending the ball back over the net to Vitor and Nils. Ines whistles lowly to herself and sits forward in her seat as the two duos rally. There hasn't been an opening for anything yet, but Mateus is finally stepping forward toward the net instead of leaving the match essentially to Shouyou.

She figured he would. Despite his constant nonchalance, Mateus is competitive, and he will want to win. He and Shouyou share an obvious glance as Vitor bumps the ball back over to their side, perfect for a set. She can't see Shouyou's eyes because of the distance and the colorful sunglasses, but his lips are pulled into another excited grin. He looks like a sweaty, grown kid in a candy store as he bounds toward the net. He's making too many big movements, she thinks, and his beginner status is obvious.

He stops, waits for a split second, and jumps straight up as the ball comes toward him. His jump is impressive even on sand, but Ines wishes she could see it on a solid court—that comment about flying must be awfully and scarily accurate.

His hand arcs over his head just a split second too fast for the ball. It catches on the side of his pinkie finger and wobbles in the air before falling next to him instead of on the other side of the court. Mateus dives for it but comes up short, and the point goes to Nils and Vitor.

As Vitor celebrates the point (cheering as if they've just won the biggest match of the season instead of just one point against a total newbie), Shouyou bows in apology, promises to get the next one. Mateus shakes his head good-naturedly and waves him off.

Even from so far away, Ines hears Shouyou request a faster set. Her lips part in surprise; Mateus is a setter to be reckoned with because of the sheer power behind his sets, and though the one he sent toward Shouyou wasn't one of his faster ones, it's still a surprising request to hear.

Just what the hell kind of indoor volleyball has this kid been playing?

The next spike that Shouyou attempts goes worse than the first; his jump is too early, and the ball is nowhere near his hand when he swings. This time, he has enough time to fumble the ball over the net with a one-armed bump, but he nearly over-balances when he hits the ground again. He stumbles but manages to right himself before the ball comes back.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says to Nils. “I’m used to—my high school setter and I did quicks, so I’m a little out of sorts for the normal sets.” Shouyou rubs at the back of his neck and laughs. Mateus only blinks at him, half gaping. On the other side of the net, Nils and Vitor are staring at him like he’s crazy. Ines thinks he might as well be.

The next time is only marginally better—the ball gets over the net, but it’s a near thing, and Mateus is obviously trying to set faster and faster each time. His shoulders heave with each breath, and his face is glistening with sweat. He shakes his head as the ball hits the ground on the other side of the net in a flurry of sand and grunts as Nils and Vitor try to receive it.

“That was totally yours,” Vitor grumbles as he brushes sand off of his shirt and arms. Nils rolls his eyes.

“Can we try a faster set?” Shouyou asks. Mateus laughs, the sound loud and deep, and his shoulders shake with it. He slaps the kid on the shoulder, and he’s still grinning wide enough to show most of his white, straight teeth.

“Sure we can.” On his way back to the back of the court, he shakes his head and mutters something that looks a whole hell of a lot like *Jesus*. Ines shares the sentiment, really, and she’s sure Nils and Vitor do, too.

Mateus and Shouyou lose the match two-nil, not that Ines expected a team with one newbie to beat the duo of well-versed beach players, but Shouyou is still smiling and clapping Vitor and Nils on the back in congratulations. Toward the end of the first set, he’d adapted enough to hit a few of Mateus’ sets, though not because Mateus set fast enough but because Shouyou slowed down enough to hit them. Still, he obviously doesn’t know how to move on sand, and his energy waned in the second set.

As Nils and Vitor return to the shade under her umbrella—as afternoon approaches, the temperatures are only getting hotter, and it’s really only a matter of time before they all end up sweating their asses off despite the reprieve the shade offers—Mateus keeps Shouyou back on the court to teach him the very basics of beach volleyball. Shouyou’s mess of orange hair bobs each time he nods.

“That guy,” Nils mutters as he takes a seat next to Ines, “is a monster.”

“*Mateus* could hardly keep up with him.” Vitor shakes his head and wipes at the sweat on his face. “‘Faster set, faster set, please,’ he said. I thought Mateus’ arms were going to fall off or something.” Nils huffs and nods faintly. Ines slides the visor off Nils’ head and throws it to the side. His curly hair is dark and matted with sweat and sand. He lets her run her fingers through it despite Vitor’s gagging noises beside them.

“He’s sure as hell something else, though,” Ines notes. Over on the court, Shouyou nods at something Mateus says before backing up and bounding back toward the net for a jump block. His fingertips reach just barely over the net, a testament to how tired he is from just those two sets as his first few jumps showed an impressive block. He lands again and has to bend over to catch his breath, hands on his knees even as he continues to listen to whatever advice Mateus is giving him. He nods and mops at his collarbone with his t-shirt before backing up again.

This time, he takes two steps toward the net, stops and lets his feet sink in the sand, bends at the knee, and uses his arms to propel himself almost directly upward. This time, his jump is higher, even, than during the game. His eyes seem to shine behind the lenses of Mateus' spare sunglasses as he mock-spikes. The power behind it would be terrifying, Ines thinks, if she were on the other side of that net.

"Nice, Shouyou!" Mateus cheers, and he claps Shouyou on the shoulder with a whoop. Shouyou's laugh is high and sunny, and Ines wonders briefly how anyone ever got anything done around him back in high school.

Mateus invites him to lunch at one of the local joints that they like.

"Gotta learn the local secrets early," Mateus insists, "or no one around here will ever stop seeing you as a tourist."

"But I live here," Shouyou tells him. He has to crane his neck a little to look at him as they walk side-by-side. "That means I'm not a tourist, doesn't it?"

"Just act like you've lived here since forever, and no one'll think any different," Ines advises. "If you start to make a name for yourself on the beach, it won't be a problem. Nils here came from Germany and got to be a local legend before he ever learned to speak English or Portuguese." She pats his elbow and leans into his side with a grin. He shrugs.

"People would come up to him to congratulate him on a good match, and he'd just stare at them." Vitor jabs him on his other side and dodges when Nils' hand shoots toward the side of his head.

"Dumbass. I'll beat you one-on-one, shit head."

Shouyou laughs, suddenly and unexpectedly, one of his hands covering his mouth and the other wrapped up in the fabric of his t-shirt. He waves off their looks.

"You remind me of my setter back home in Japan. Kageyama, er, T-Tobio is his given name, he's sort of...grouchy. And vulgar. His favorite word is probably 'dumbass.'" He snickers to himself like there's an inside joke none of them know.

After a second, Vitor bursts into laughter too—obnoxious and howling laughter.

"He called Nils *grouchy*!" As Shouyou turns bright red beyond just the flush from the sun and heat of the beach and stutters out explanations and apologies, Vitor stumbles and repeats *grouchy*, *Nils—grouchy!* over and over again, cackling to himself until Nils really does manage to get a hit on him.

* * * *

One day at the end of December, Ines shows up to the beach early, half by chance and half because she'd gotten bored laying awake in bed. The sand is cool between her toes, and the sun hasn't yet risen over the horizon. For the most part, the beach is empty—there are a few stragglers, likely left over from whatever party or bonfire went on last night, but she pays

them little mind as she carries her bag and her big umbrella from her car to the spot that she's staked claim to for years now. It's close to the water, far enough away from the entrance to the beach that she never gets swarmed, and from this spot, she gets the best view of the volleyball courts.

It's a perfect spot, maybe the most perfect spot on the beach, and it's *hers*.

Victoriously, Ines works the post of her umbrella into the sand and ends up sweating already. She heaves a sigh because it is far too early to sweat, even if she chose to come to the beach this early. She glances around the beach, basking in the sound of the tide and the ocean and the seagulls—usually, these sounds are lost under a mess of voices, and hearing them is almost nostalgic.

Down the beach, Shouyou is meditating. She knows, first without even looking, because he does it every morning, says he likes the smell of the ocean which he can't get where he lives back home. Shouyou talks often of the smell of the mountains, and from what she understands, it's wholly different from the smells she's used to.

She knows it's him, also, because she recognizes his obnoxious hair when she thinks to look for him. She's seen some baby pictures on his phone in passing, and his hair color is natural, but Ines still thinks it's obnoxious. Poor kid.

His head is bent; Ines doesn't meditate and has never meditated since she can't fathom why anyone would want to sit alone and do nothing for so long, but she's pretty sure his posture is not supposed to be as hunched-over or as tense as Shouyou's is right now. His head, while bent, is really just hanging from his shoulders, which are slumped and undisciplined and nothing at all like she's ever seen the kid in as long as she's known him.

Granted, a few months isn't enough to know someone, but so far, he's only ever been all-smiles. Seeing him now, she thinks *he's dying* and promptly panics as a salty breeze blows in off the tide.

Ines chews on the nail on her thumb, thinking. She glances once at Shouyou's dejected form, then at her chair, then down the other end of the beach where more and more people are appearing. The sun has quickly risen just above the horizon, which means Mateus will be here soon enough since he arrives, every morning on the dot without fail, at nine. Nils will follow soon after, and Vitor will be the last to arrive, but he'll bring breakfast.

She could leave it to one of them, any of them.

That's a lie. Out of any of them, she only trusts Mateus to handle this. Nils is too quiet, and Vitor is certifiably an idiot.

Ines sighs and accepts the fact that today will be the day she finally tries out meditation. This is what she gets for waking up early; from now on, she will leave it to Mateus to claim her perfect spot for her.

The sand on this side of the beach is firmer since it's so far out of the way. No one, except for Shouyou, ever comes down this way, and the cool, settled sand proves it. It barely shifts

under her as she lowers herself to sit with her legs crossed.

She's close enough to the kid to feel a vague heat coming off of him from his knee where they almost touch, but he doesn't so much as lift his head to greet her. Ines can see, now, that his eyes are closed, and his hands are curled into fists on top of his thighs. If not for his light breaths, she might have thought he was sleeping or actually meditating.

Ines stops looking at him and instead focuses on where the sky blends seamlessly into the ocean. She squints against the sun and draws in a deep breath because she's heard that's what people who meditate do, probably from some fake magazine in a random waiting room.

"Morning, kid," she murmurs, hating how abrasive her own voice sounds in her ears. Would shutting the hell up have been a better idea? She isn't sure, but she wishes she knew.

"Good morning," he answers, but it's muffled because of the way he has his chin tucked into the top of his sternum, and he still doesn't open his eyes to look at her.

Ines hadn't been expecting to have to carry the conversation—Shouyou is usually a ball of rapid, excited words, no matter what he's talking about, whether it's what he ate for lunch or a match where he came out as the victor. She flounders for a long moment, opening her mouth and closing it and hoping she's not making things worse.

"It's Kageyama's birthday," the kid sighs— *mercy* , she thinks. Then, *who the hell is Kageyama again? Oh yeah...Tobio, was it?* Finally, he opens his eyes and lifts his chin off his chest to look at the same sky she's looking at. "December 22. He's nineteen, now, and I'm not there." He laughs without much humor in it. "He's probably eating a cake *Tsukishima* bought him. Ugh."

A moment of silence passes between them, half because Ines is a little lost on what's happening and half because she's waiting for him to keep talking.

Shouyou is crying when she steals another look at him. It's so subtle and quiet and nothing at all like him that Ines doesn't notice the exact moment his eyes go glossy. Maybe he's been crying the entire time he's been on the beach, but this...his shoulders tremble with it, and he curls his knees into his chest, fully giving up the facade of his meditation. He hides his face in the knobs of his knees and cries in a way Ines is pretty sure she's never seen anyone cry before.

It's quiet, almost silent, and full of a desperation she doesn't understand in the slightest. Even Mateus would be out of his depth here.

"Did you know Kageyama failed English in high school?" Shouyou laughs into his knees, and he lifts his head, only glancing at her before averting his eyes toward the tops of his knees again. His voice is clearer, if wet and congested, when he continues, "if he ever comes over here, I'll have to translate everything for him because he's just a big dummy like that... but it's okay because I don't mind doing it for him."

"Is he going to visit?" she asks instead. Ines stares at the side of his face, at the way his lips are pulled down. The tip of his nose is pink.

“I don’t know.” Shouyou heaves a sigh and cranes his neck as if looking for clouds in the cloudless, early morning sky, but his eyes are closed. His arms are still wrapped around himself in a twisted, lonely sort of hug, and something twinges hotly under her sternum at the sight. “I miss him, Ines. I miss him more than I have the words for in all the English *and* Japanese that I know. I don’t know too much Portuguese yet, but I don’t think any language has the words for this. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“No,” she tells him honestly because all the people she’s ever loved are right here in Brazil—Vitor has been by her side since forever, and maybe he’ll never leave (she complains about this fact often, but him leaving would be similar to losing a limb, she thinks); Nils is looking for apartments and a permanent visa; Mateus loves the city too much to leave. Most likely, she will never understand what Shouyou is feeling, and there’s no use in lying about it.

Still, he huffs out a laugh. It is hollow and nothing at all like how Shouyou usually sounds.

“That’s okay.” He shakes his head, and his fringe falls across his face. “It just...aches, I think.”

“Which part?”

“That I’m here—I love it here, and I love you all, but I-I can’t talk about him because none of you know him, and it just makes it worse.” To Ines, he looks exactly like what she’s been calling him since he arrived on her beach: a kid. He is curled in such a small, tight, vulnerable ball that he looks small and childish, and she wishes she could take this from him, just for a minute.

She imagines this is the sort of ache that never goes away, keeps getting worse and worse and bigger like a rotting tooth.

Ines rubs a gentle hand along the line of Shouyou’s hunched shoulders and considers everything he’s said. It seems obvious to her, but she’s come to learn that the kid is a little... stupid sometimes. It’s endearing, really.

“Talk about him all you want,” she tells him. “We can’t know him if you never tell us about him.” Shouyou turns, and his expression is so shocked, like he hadn’t thought talking about this Tobio kid was an option, that she has to bite back a laugh. His eyes are wide, red, and framed by lashes that are tacky and dark with his tears.

“Really?” he breathes, gaping.

“Yes, kid. Really. Talk about him all you want.” He looks at her for another second before his back goes straight, and his knees back away from his chest. His eyes, for the first time this morning, are light and excited and happier, even, than he normally is.

“I—I’ll tell all of you at breakfast,” he promises with a resolute nod. Together they stand, and Ines discretely and internally urges the three others to get their asses onto the beach so she can hear a little more about this Tobio guy who Shouyou misses enough to *cry* about him.

Already, he's smiling as they settle in to wait for the others under her umbrella, and his face isn't even red anymore.

Unreal, she thinks but would never say. No one can possibly bounce back from a meltdown like that in ten minutes flat, but here he is. Shouyou is a mystery to her, and Ines has a feeling she will never quite figure him out, no matter how hard she tries.

Their breakfast place is mostly outside—there are three walls out of four and a full patio of tables and chairs and big umbrellas—and somewhat full by the time they're seated. There's a general, loud chatter around them that they have to talk over as they wait for their drinks and then more while they wait for food (Mateus orders for Shouyou because he can't read the menu and the waitress is speaking in rapid Portuguese), and Ines finally takes it upon herself to prompt him to start with the gushing he's so obviously preparing for.

"Kageyama is—he's *amazing*!" he starts, and he sure does talk with his hands. Still, she's almost never seen him so happy. He's giving her whiplash with his moods, his smiling and crying, and Tobio's ears must be burning over in Japan. "His tosses are like *guwahhh*, you know? I always want to hit them, forever, but sometimes he sucks and doesn't toss for me. He's sort of annoying like that." He shrugs and plays with his fingers over the table. "He's going to university back in Japan, got scouted for a team 'n everything!"

"What's he going for?"

"Uh..." He trails off, rubbing at the back of his neck again and smiling bashfully. "Something with sports, probably. Volleyball is everything to him." Another laugh—seriously, if she hadn't just seen the kid crying, she would wonder if he was human. No one is this sunny all the time, and if this Tobio guy is close with Shouyou, he must be just as perpetually happy. Ines can't see how anyone could be grouchy around him with all the smiling and laughing and joking. Even Nils looks a little brighter as their lunch goes on.

"Got any videos of your matches?" Vitor asks, leaning over the table. "I wanna see for myself how fast this guy's tosses are if Mateus is too slow for you." He tuts, and Mateus nudges him back into his chair. Shouyou flushes bright red at the mention of that first match, which none of them have ever let him or Mateus live down.

"I've got a few videos of us practicing up on my Instagram!" Shouyou wrestles his phone out of his back pocket and taps around on the cracked screen for a few seconds, the four of them watching as he chews on his tongue, brows furrowed, and searches for the video he's looking for. He must find it because he pumps his fist in the air and turns his phone around for the four of them to see.

His phone screen, at first, is just an extreme close-up of Shouyou's face as he positions the phone just right. His hair's a little longer than it is now, curled around his ears and cheeks and sticking to his sweaty skin. As he positions the phone, his tongue sticks out of the side of his mouth, and he stands and backs away a few frames later. Without Shouyou's face filling the screen, they can instead see a terrible angle of an indoor volleyball net, the floor around the camera littered with volleyballs. Far from where the camera is propped up is a blurry form with orange hair and a white t-shirt. Closer is a taller boy with dark, flat hair who glances at the camera and then back toward Shouyou.

He calls out something in Japanese, Ines assumes, and Shouyou rolls his eyes.

“Kageyama asked me why I needed to record us practicing,” he translates. “I told him because I wanted to post it, and then he called me a weirdo. *Meanie* -yama.” Shouyou rolls his eyes and smiles fondly. On the screen, Tobio shrugs, and Shouyou makes a gesture so he throws up the ball for a toss. Before it even starts falling back toward Tobio’s waiting hands, Shouyou sprints toward the net, jumps, and the ball somehow makes it to the palm of his hand and is bouncing off the side of the net closer to the camera before Ines can even register what she’s seen. Her mouth is open, and her eyes are wide.

“Hold on, hold on,” Vitor splutters, “play that again. I didn’t even see the damn ball until it hit the ground again.”

“That was our fastest minus-tempo. We never did get to try it out in a match.” His voice is wistful, and he chews on his lip. “This is the first time I’ve played volleyball without him on my team since junior high,” Shouyou explains. “I’m here to get better so I can get to the top with him and play for the longest time.”

“You must miss him a lot,” Mateus says, and the big softie looks like he’s on the verge of tears. Ines’ stomach seizes, and she moves to shush him before he can trigger another one of the kid’s terribly off-putting meltdowns over missing Tobio (on his birthday, no less), but Shouyou only waves his words off as he pockets his phone again.

“I do! A lot...but it’s worth it.”

“Ah! What a cute couple,” Mateus coos, holding a hand over his chest.

“N-no—oh, we’re not...Kageyama’s my best friend,” Shouyou stutters. “We aren’t, um. A couple, I mean.” He holds his red face in his hands. The tips of his ears are brighter, even, than his hair.

“Sorry, sorry.” Ines laughs awkwardly, and the subject of Tobio drops for the time being. After Shouyou leaves, promising to meet up with them on the beach again in the morning, the four of them place bets on how long it’ll be before they *do* get together.

Ines bets a year at most.

* * * *

In all the months since that first day, Shouyou hasn’t been late to a match. He’s notorious within their group and within a few circles of locals for being awake at the ass crack of dawn to jog, practice on the beach, or meditate, like she found him back in December.

Ines thinks he’s crazy for waking up before the sun *every day*, but at least he’s never late. Or, he hasn’t been late until today.

“Where the hell *is* he?” Vitor all but whines as he collapses in the shade of Ines’ umbrella. He throws an arm over his face dramatically and groans like a widow in an old movie. Ines rolls her eyes at him.

“He’s not back in Japan, is he?” Nils squints up at her like she’ll know. She shrugs and glances toward the tall buildings of the city just beyond the beach. There is no head of bright orange hair bounding toward them, only a group of women in bikinis, armed with towels and chairs. They are smiling at each other as if Shouyou isn’t *missing*.

“No, no,” Mateus says, rubbing at his chin with a contemplative look. “He reminded us of his trips back home about a million times before he went. We wouldn’t all just forget if he told us he was going.”

“Unless it was a surprise trip home,” Vitor suggests. He sounds proud of himself for thinking the idea up.

“The kid’s poorer than any of us,” Ines huffs. “He worked like a million jobs just to afford the few times he’s gone home. No way he could make a surprise visit.” She shakes her head resolutely, lips pressed together because if Vitor tries to tell her she’s wrong, Ines is willing to fight him on it. He doesn’t say anything more for a long while, his face drawn up in deep thought.

“He’s fine!” Mateus looks so sure of himself as he says it that it’s so easy to believe him. She watches him stand at the edge of the shade of her umbrella from over the top rim of her sunglasses, his hands on his hips and a charming smile on his face. Ines narrows her eyes, and his grin falters for a split second.

Gotcha.

“You know something,” she says as she slides down her chair. “You *know* something, Mateus.” She feels sort of bad for Shouyou, now, because his naivety and newness to this group is so unbearably obvious, now.

Mateus is the worst liar she knows—the worst liar on the beach or maybe even the world, she wouldn’t know. But he’s a shitty, shitty liar, and she only knows it because she made the mistake of asking him to cover for her. All she had wanted to do was go to a college party, and she’d come home to find Mateus, red-faced and guilty as hell, sitting in her living room with Vitor (smirking like he’d won the lottery) and her parents (supremely pissed off).

Poor Shouyou, she thinks with only the barest hint of sympathy. He’ll never make this mistake again, at least.

“Who? No, I don’t—I don’t know a thing, actually,” Mateus stutters. His eyes flit away from her as she smirks. “Nothing, no.” He shakes his head, holds his hands out in front of himself. Around her, Nils and Vitor sit up slowly without taking their eyes off of Mateus. The big guy rubs at the back of his neck and presses his lips together into a tight, thin line.

“He knows something,” Vitor murmurs, and not for the first time in her life, Ines understands why people think the two of them are so similar. Over Nils’ head, they smirk at each other, sly. “Nils, what do you think, huh?”

“I think he definitely knows something,” Nils says in his deadpan voice, “and I think it’s about where Shouyou is.”

“And why he’s late.”

“And how he’s definitely not in Japan right now.”

“I mean,” Ines adds, “how else would he know that Shouyou is for sure okay?” In front of them, Mateus shifts, and the sand moves around his feet. “If he knew nothing, he wouldn’t be so sure about it. He would be worried.”

“I’m worried! I am!” But Mateus is biting his lip, and she knows that with a little more weeding, he will break, and they will know where Shouyou is. “We should go...look for him. Maybe. In case he’s dead somewhere.”

Nils, Vitor, and Ines stare at him without saying anything. Ines is on the edge of her chair, and there is sand sticking to the sweat on Vitor’s back. He’s sunburnt again because he never learns, and she can already hear the whining complaints that are sure to come when the pain kicks in later. She considers staying with Nils tonight to avoid it.

“No, we... *shouldn’t* go look for him,” Mateus corrects, talking slowly. He squints at all of them and looks vaguely betrayed.

“Which is it, Mateus?” Nils asks, and somehow, he keeps his voice flat, still. “Should we go looking for Shouyou or not?” Mateus licks his lips and swallows hard. Ines is getting tired of waiting, and Vitor fidgets where he sits. The situation is obviously losing his attention, so she stands so fast she hears the blood rushing past her ears.

“I’m going looking because, frankly, you’re all boring compared to him,” she says, turning on her heel and digging her shoes out from under her beach chair. They’re covered in sand, but so are her feet, so what difference does it make? She slips them on and ventures into the sun, out from the semi-cool shade she’d been lounging in before Mateus stops her.

“You can’t,” he tells her, sounding as if he’s on the verge of pleading with her. She bites back the thought of Mateus begging with her to stay here, on the beach.

“Why not?”

“He’ll be here, just... *later*. ”

“Is he hungover or something?” Ines flicks her hair over her shoulder with a laugh. They’re all intimately aware of Shouyou’s drinking habits. The problem with them is that Shouyou, while getting broader and more muscular the longer he’s here training in Brazil, is still short. Shorter than any of the National team players and the shortest of their little group—even Ines has a few inches on him.

It’s only occasionally a sore spot for him, one that Vitor pokes at probably too often.

“I thought I left jabs about my height in *Japan*,” Shouyou says each time Vitor starts, arms crossed over his chest and head shaking slowly. He purses his lips and looks so much like a disapproving parent that Ines can’t help but laugh; Shouyou is years younger than them,

being straight out of high school, but she could swear he's older than her own brother sometimes.

Point being: Shouyou is a lightweight. The kid has muscle, but he's still filling out. In the meantime, Ines has seen him show up to the beach hungover more times than any of them. She feels like they're corrupting him somehow, but she's not going to be the one to stop him.

Mateus says he'll learn his lesson one of these days—that day might be today, actually, if it's bad enough to keep him off the beach.

"It's got to be a real bad one if he's staying home," Vitor adds, and she hates him for saying exactly what she'd been thinking.

Just a few weeks ago, Shouyou had shown up sweaty and quiet for the headache and a little more sweaty than usual. Still, the kid had played fine, better than the tourists he'd beat who walked away to lick their egos while he tried not to lose his breakfast. It was quite the sight, and he must be on the verge of dying for real if he's decided not to come to the beach today.

"Is he sick?" Nils asks, and for the first time, he sounds genuinely concerned. He leans forward and stares Mateus down. "If he's sick, we can help. We will help."

"Our mom taught us the best soup recipe." Vitor nudges Ines in the side as he says it. "It was almost in a magazine and everything, one of those fancy food ones with people like, uh, that Atala guy. We'll make it for him if he's sick." He nods eagerly.

"He's not sick!" Mateus breaks, and Ines watches him apologize to Shouyou internally. She's sure the kid'll hear an earful of them in person once this is all over. "He's not sick, and he's not hungover. Probably."

"Probably?"

"Probably." Mateus nods once like he's pleased with himself, and Ines has to give credit where credit is due; she hadn't expected him to last this long, especially against all three of them. Maybe he really is getting better at lying.

Still, his lips tremble. The three of them watch him like vultures as his face crumbles, and his broad shoulders drop.

"He's got a friend over from Japan," he sighs. The excitement drains out of the rest of them like a big, sighing exhale. Ines cocks a brow and puts her hands on her hips.

"Tooru? *He's* the secret?" She huffs. "That's boring."

Ines isn't sure she quite believes in fate or coincidences, but the closest thing she's ever seen to it is the day Shouyou dragged Tooru Oikawa onto her beach. He'd been smiling wide and literally pulling the guy behind him, explaining rapidly about how he'd just happened to run into him on the street— *what are the chances, guys? It's so crazy!*

Personally, Ines isn't sure how she feels about the guy. First, she'd thought he was too much of a pretty-boy to be any good at volleyball, but even she has to admit Tooru is one of the

best setters she's ever seen; it's no wonder Argentina scouted him so early, and she's already plotting ways to get his autograph to sell on eBay.

Who knows? It could get her a pretty penny sometime in the future. She's already come across more than a few articles about the up-and-coming setter on the Argentinian team.

He and Shouyou had, together, decimated another pair, and they worked with a strange familiarity despite the fact that neither had ever been on the same team as far as she understood through their vague and slightly confusing explanations of their high school teams. Tooru might be a cocky son of a bitch, but his arrogance isn't unfounded. He seemed to know what sort of toss Shouyou wanted before even *he* knew.

"We make quite the duo, don't we, Chibi-chan?" He'd laughed, slinging an arm over Shouyou's shoulder as the losers of their match shuffled away. "Wonder what the King'd say if he saw you now, playing with me." Ines was pretty sure Japan had a prime minister, not a king, and even then, she couldn't imagine the government bothered with a bunch of high school kids. She'd chewed on her lip to keep from asking.

"He'd be mad, and you know it." Shouyou paused, considering something, his lip pulled in between his teeth and brows furrowed slightly. "And don't call him that. He hates it coming from you."

"Oi! Coming from *me* ? What's that supposed to mean?" Tooru whined. He slouched. "Kageyama practically idolizes me, Chibi-chan! He should love it when I call him a title like that." Shouyou huffed and rolled his eyes.

"He hasn't idolized you since junior high."

"I bet he lets *you* call him King." Tooru's expression was smug, and Ines would've loved to slap it off of his face. She hadn't—for some reason, Shouyou seemed to like the guy. It must've been about familiarity or something because Ines sure as hell didn't understand it.

"As a matter of fact, he does," Shouyou replied, grinning proudly. Again, Tooru cackled.

Yeah, Tooru's a little insufferable, she thinks, but Shouyou likes him. Still, he's a lousy secret. Ines crosses her arms over her chest.

But Mateus shifts again, and he won't meet her eye as she stares him down.

"Oh my god—it's *not* Tooru, is it?" Mateus sighs, and the three of them, including Nils, cheer. "Who is it?"

"He wouldn't tell me," Mateus mutters, and he's almost pouting. It's almost comical to see such a childish expression on such a big guy. "He just said he's got a visitor and would be on the beach late."

"I wanna meet the kid's friend," Ines says, and she turns on her heel and starts across the beach without bothering to collect her things, "see if they're any good, you know?"

“Well, *I* want to see who’s so important that Shouyou can miss a day of practice,” Vitor adds as he struggles to stand. He groans with the movement. “He’s a little machine—whoever he’s got over has to be, like—I don’t even know.” He shakes his head.

“I’m curious.” Nils shrugs, stands, and follows.

“Wait!” Mateus calls, and now he really *is* pleading. “Doesn’t he deserve a little privacy?”

Ines thinks of the number of different versions the kid has of the Bathroom Song. She presses her lips together and shakes her head before continuing across the beach.

Privacy has never been an issue with him before, obviously.

Shouyou’s apartment is a few blocks away from the beach. Ines has been there once or twice in as long as she’s known the kid, but only ever to drop him off after a late night at the beach or at one of their bars.

This time, his roommate lets the four of them in without so much as a second glance.

“Haven’t seen much of him since last night,” Pedro murmurs, glancing at Shouyou’s closed bedroom door. “Never seen him sleep in so late.”

“You haven’t thought to check in on him?” Vitor replies, sounding incredulous.

“Considering the scary guy he came in with last night, no.” Pedro gives an unbothered shrug. “But feel free to make sure he’s not murdered in there.” He disappears back into the kitchen, where something is sizzling loudly on the stove.

Ines, Vitor, and Mateus press their ears against the smooth, cool surface of Shouyou’s bedroom door. Beyond, there is some quiet shuffling but no other sound or indication that whoever’s inside is actually okay or alive.

“Scary guy?” Ines mutters to herself, mulling the thought over. Shouyou talks about his friends back home more often as of late, but none of them have ever come across, at least to her, as scary. She can’t imagine Shouyou’s friends being like that, considering his own sunny demeanor. Then again, that Kageyama Tobio guy—Shouyou called him, what? Grumpy? Vulgar? He didn’t necessarily look *scary* in the video she saw of him.

“You’re taking too long,” Nils says, and he tugs on the doorknob, sending the three of them toppling into the room. Ines manages to catch the side of the door before it can bounce off the wall and before she can eat the wood floor of Shouyou’s bedroom.

The three of them freeze in the doorway, Nils slouching in the hallway behind them, his hands shoved into his pockets in an attempt to appear innocent. Ines raises her eyes from the floor at her feet to the foot of the bed to the two figures on the bed (*two* figures?), one bigger than the other and with his back to them. Over the shoulder of this bigger figure, Shouyou cranes his neck and blinks at them. She blinks back, semi-aware that she’s gaping but unable to stop herself. Shouyou’s face breaks out into a smile at the sight of them.

On top of the kid is a broad, tall guy with dark hair. His chest rises and falls steadily, indicative of sleep, and she's glad, now, that she caught the door. Shouyou's arms are wrapped around the guy as he sleeps, and his legs are lost in a mess of blankets and other legs at the end of the bed. It looks like Shouyou should be suffocating under whoever this guy is, considering his size and the fact that he is so wrapped up around the kid that his head rests on his narrow shoulder instead of on the pillow, but Shouyou doesn't seem to mind it at all.

In fact, he looks pleased. Thrilled.

He pats the guy on the back, shaking him, and the guy shifts and mutters something.

"No—come *on*, Sleepy-yama," Shouyou grumbles, shaking the guy harder. "I've been laying here for hours. My friends probably thought I was dead or something. Look, they even came looking for me."

"Talking too fast, dumbass," *Sleepy-yama* mutters, and a big hand descends on Shouyou's face as the guy pushes himself up. Shouyou wriggles and yells into the palm covering his face. Ines gapes as the guy sits up and stretches, and she catches the side of his face.

Oh—he really *is* scary-looking.

It's undoubtedly Tobio, from the video, though much older and much more grown than he'd appeared on the cracked screen of Shouyou's phone. And much, much scarier; his face is pulled into a scowl as he swats at Shouyou's flailing limbs, and he rolls his eyes as the kid shouts under him.

"Shut *up*," he mutters.

"I let you sleep for so, so long, and you're still mean!" Shouyou insists. "I could've made you sleep on the floor, and we don't have a futon here, so be grateful, Kageyama!" He smacks Tobio on the shoulder with a huff.

"If you don't stop being annoying, I won't toss to you." Shouyou glares at Tobio but says nothing more; Tobio's expression is triumphant.

"*Anyways*," Shouyou continues, finally gracing the four people in the doorway of his bedroom with his attention, "sorry I wasn't at the beach this morning! Kageyama was jet lagged and fell asleep on me for, like, forever." Tobio yawns and makes a grab for Shouyou's hair that the kid dodges easily, as if he's used to it. "Be nice! Introduce yourself."

Tobio stands, and the bed creaks under the shifting of his weight. He's almost as tall as Nils. He blinks slowly at the four of them before bowing his head, avoiding their eyes.

"Kageyama Tobio," he says, and his tone is so different toward them than it had been just a second ago that Ines has whiplash, probably.

"Mateus Lobo!"

"Vitor Rocha Vehlo." He takes Tobio's hand and shakes it enthusiastically.

“Ines Rocha Vehlo.” She offers him an apologetic nod. “Sorry about my idiot brother.”

“Nils Lehmann.” He nods, too, and doesn’t dare venture farther into the room than the doorway.

“They’re teaching me how to play better on the sand, Kageyama,” Shouyou explains, standing up on the bed so he’s taller than Tobio is. He wobbles but stabilizes himself.

“Yeah, them and *Oikawa*.” He growls the name, and Ines smirks. She likes this kid already.

“Oi, don’t get jealous,” Shouyou tells him sagely. “I still like your tosses better.”

“I’m not jealous, dumbass. He’s just an ass.”

“He’s an ass who’s better at beach volleyball than you are,” Shouyou sings. Tobio rounds on him, and if she were faced with that expression, Ines thinks she would surely just curl up and let him kill her. She wouldn’t fight it.

“I’ll kill you!” Tobio insists, and Shouyou dodges another swat aimed at his head.

They don’t stop arguing until Vitor challenges them to a match on the beach, just as the sun starts to set over the tide. The two of them share a look, and Ines has a terrible feeling about it—maybe, she thinks, it would be better if they just kept up their bickering.

It’s Mateus and Vitor against Shouyou and Tobio, and she has a brief moment to consider that monster quick Shouyou showed them before the match starts with Tobio serving. The ball hits Mateus on the biceps, and even he looks surprised by it as the ball flies off to the side, out of his control and out of bounds.

Shouyou turns and shoots a grin and a thumbs-up to Tobio. He smirks and gets ready for another serve.

Later, after Shouyou jumps for a particularly intense spike, a flurry of sand kicked up around his feet, Ines watches Tobio’s shoulders slump. His expression is awed, his mouth dropped open and eyes wide as he tracks every movement Shouyou makes. The ball hits the ground on the other side of the court despite both Vitor and Mateus diving for it, and Shouyou turns around almost mid-air to gauge Tobio’s reaction.

He masks his awe with a flat, nonchalant expression.

“Kageyama! Did you see that?”

“What?”

“*Gwah!* Kageyama!” Shouyou whines.

“I didn’t see anything,” Tobio denies. His bangs flutter as he huffs and crosses his arms. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, idiot.”

“So mean!”

Ines leans in toward Nils.

“Is there any way I can change my bet?”

* * * *

Ines doesn't expect to cry when the four of them drop Shouyou off at the airport, his one-way ticket back to Japan clutched tightly in hand—she's known for months, now, that he was moving back to play on Tobio's university team and hopefully get scouted for a professional team over there. With the national season ending in Brazil, there isn't much left for him here in terms of volleyball, and there's only so much the four of them can teach him.

He's gotten stronger. Ines sees him in terms of the kid who showed up on the beach with Mateus that first day—skinny, bright-eyed, and eager to learn—and then, now, as he stands opposite the four of them with his carry-on settled by his feet. He's broader, more muscular, all grown up, and the people on the beach loved him like a local. They're sorry to see him go.

So is she. Nils looks like he's biting back tears, and Vitor is crying (*weeping* is more like it, considering the snot on his upper lip) without shame. Mateus pats Shouyou on the shoulder hard enough to almost send him tumbling head-over-foot, and the smile on his face is wide and sad.

The kid is older, now, and she's seen him growing in front of her for how long now? Not long enough, apparently, because her vision is blurry, and the edges of her eyes burn like hell. *Dammit* .

Ines snuffles valiantly, lying to herself when she says she won't, absolutely won't, cry. Now *or* later in the privacy of her apartment.

“I'll miss you all,” Shouyou promises, and he doesn't try to hide the redness of the tip of his nose or the wateriness of his eyes. His lip trembles, but he tries to keep up his smile as best as he can despite the obvious effort it takes. “So much— *so* much!” Shouyou nods like a bobblehead, once, twice, faster as if he can't bring himself to stop. His crazy hair bobs along.

“Don't go, Shouyou!” Vitor pleads, and it's selfish, so selfish, but Ines has to keep herself from nodding along with him. “We have an indoor league here, too, or—I'm sure Tooru could get you—Brazil is better, but Argentina could be—I would settle for Argentina.” Vitor is blubbering like a pathetic idiot, but Shouyou still laughs wetly and shakes his head.

“I have to go,” he says. “Kageyama is waiting for me. Or, he will be, since it's such a long flight 'n all.” He snuffles and shrugs, glancing down at the other busy terminals. There are about a million strangers who don't bother to bid the five of them even a second look. “I already got accepted into his university, and I think he's excited that I'm coming back, even if he won't admit it.” He huffs out another wet laugh and rolls his eyes. “So I have to go—but don't think I won't keep in touch!”

“If you don't,” Ines insists, and her voice cracks embarrassingly, “I'll come over to Japan and kill you myself, kid.” His grin widens, and he nods.

“Of course.”

“We’ll make it work,” Mateus promises, sounding like they’re all going into a five-way long-distance relationship. Ines has never had a long distance *anything* before, let alone a friend the whole way across the world.

The time difference is twelve hours; she knows because she Googled it two nights ago and then again last night as if it would somehow change. When the kid’s waking up all the way over there, she will be cooking dinner or watching evening television. When she is watching the sun set over the ocean, he will be starting volleyball practice—indoors because, Shouyou says, there aren’t many beaches suited for playing outdoors where he lives, but he won’t forget everything they’ve taught him.

With their advice, he will get to the top.

Ines repeats her promise to herself over and over again and wills her eyes to dry. She blows out a big breath and ignores the semi-asmused, semi-understanding look Mateus shoots her way.

Over the speaker, a drab voice announces the flight Ines knows is on Shouyou’s ticket, claims that it’s boarding now, *first class, please!* Shouyou is not first class, but he still chews on the corner of his lip and glances over his shoulder at the terminal where a lot of people are suddenly standing up to get in line.

It feels like there’s nothing left to say. Ines won’t say goodbye because she’s keen on keeping this promise to herself, and she’s a woman who knows her breaking points.

Nils doesn’t seem to share these sentiments because he surges forward and stoops to wrap his arms around Shouyou. The kid has put on a few vertical inches, which he boasts about often, but Nils is still taller, and the angle of the hug looks awkward. Neither of them complain about it, even though Shouyou is straining on the balls of his feet and Nils is hunched over entirely.

Shouyou’s arms come around Nils’ sides, and his hands wrap around the extra fabric of his t-shirt. After a long moment, Nils pulls away and wipes his face on the back of one of his hands.

“You will do great things,” he promises, and Shouyou blushes but accepts the praise with a nod. A tear streaks down his cheek as Nils returns to Ines’ side—his face is flushed, the edges of his eyes red and puffy from crying. It’s strange to see him in such a state but somehow comforting, too. Ines grasps for his hand, and he lets her.

Mateus rushes forward next and picks the kid fully off the ground and spins him around like he’s a little kid. Shouyou’s bright laugh bubbles over the noise of the chaotic terminal and full, bustling airport.

“Make us proud!”

“I will!” Because Shouyou doesn’t *try*, Ines has found in the year she’s known him. He just *does*. He will make them proud.

Mateus sets him on the ground next to his carry-on again, and Vitor descends on him in a split second. He might say something profound like the other two had, but Ines can’t figure out what it is beyond the weeping and crying and sniveling. Shouyou chuckles and pats him on the back as Vitor tucks his face away in the junction of his neck and his shoulder, but there’s no way any of them are ever going to hear the end of this from him. Ines can hear it already: three decades from now, Vitor will see a sand-dusted volleyball and say, wistfully like a widow in an old book, *Shouyou used to play volleyball in the sand...*

And then he’ll cry about it.

Ines rolls her eyes at the thought, and for the first time today, it’s a genuine eye roll, not one to hide her own tears.

Mateus pries Vitor away as the next group gets called for Shouyou’s flight, otherwise he’ll never let go, and Shouyou really will be stuck here.

Ines steps forward, biting the side of her tongue so hard it aches in her jaw, and she’s sure she won’t be able to keep this promise. Her face crumbles as Shouyou stands before her, waiting, his eyes wide and just looking at her.

“You’re a real good kid,” she manages before her shoulders shake with a heavy sob, and Shouyou all but barrels into her, his head resting just under her chin and his firm arms wrapping around her middle. She buries her face in his hair and lets her promise-breaking tears soak the strands.

The kid doesn’t complain about it. He’s sweet like that, and she’s really, really going to miss him.

As they untangle from each other, Shouyou bends to pick his carry-on up from the floor beside him. His cheeks are red and shiny with his tears, but he still smiles at the four of them. Smiles so wide his eyes are forced closed and his cheeks bunch up and all of his straight teeth show.

“Don’t forget me!” he tells them and bows at the waist. He turns to board his plane but seems to remember something at the very last second because he fishes something out of his bag and turns back around. “Ah! And Vitor gets all of the sunscreen I didn’t get a chance to use.”

He shoves three bottles of sunscreen into Vitor’s trembling arms and boards his plane.

True to his word, Shouyou keeps in touch. They have a group chat, which he is active in despite his university classes and, from his descriptions, his brutal volleyball practices. They hear about Tobio often— *kageyama and i...oh and kageyama...his tosses are just...* —but it only makes Ines more confident in her wager for the bet the four of them over here in Brazil have going.

The kid’s obsessed with his setter. It’s a typical case, only a matter of time, she thinks.

The five of them try to do a video call at least once a week because out of all of them, Shouyou's messages are often so riddled with spelling errors they border on impossible to decipher, and it's easier to catch up without that barrier getting in the way. Usually, they meet up in Mateus' apartment, seeing as he has the biggest living room and a television that hooks up to his laptop without too much fuss, and he keeps boardgames in his hallway closet. At heart, he's just an old man who gets absolutely heated over *Scrabble* on a semi-weekly basis.

Shouyou never misses these calls—he is nothing if not determined to keep up the bond he has with the four of them despite the distance and his dorm building's shitty WiFi. He often freezes mid-blink and doesn't unfreeze until moments later, and his speech goes all garbled at random intervals, but he is always there, ready to hear about everyone they beat on the beach since they last spoke. He cheers them on and talks about his own games, which are going well, and at least once every week, he attributes his university team's winning streak to their teachings.

But this week, Mateus calls him, and the call rings out.

Like, rings out and hangs up on them, and Shouyou doesn't answer. Mateus blinks at the television screen showing their message history and the one new notification: **SHOYOU missed your call (10:42AM) . Call back.**

"Oh my god, he's forgotten about us," Vitor wails, falling against the front of Mateus' couch dramatically. He throws an arm over his face and makes a strangled noise. "I knew it was only a matter of time, but I haven't even used up *one* of his bottles of sunscreen! It's too soon." Nils leans over and flicks him on the shell of his ear.

"He hasn't forgotten about us. Shut up with that."

"He might be sleeping—it is almost eleven over there," Mateus reasons. Oh, curse this time difference. Ines shifts where she sits on the floor next to the coffee table.

"And the only reason you haven't finished a single bottle of his sunscreen is because you're an idiot who forgets to use sunblock most of the time." Ines sticks out her tongue at him when he pouts. "I keep reminding you, but do you—"

From the speakers on the side of the television comes the noise that indicates an incoming call. Mateus scrambles for the 'accept' button, his knees sliding on his shag carpet in his haste. The call buffers for a second before Shouyou's face appears on the big screen so close to the camera that his nose appears bigger than it really is, and his hairline is grainy.

"Ah!" he mutters before leaning away. "I missed your call."

"We noticed," Nils drawls. Next to him, Vitor is still wailing, apparently unaware of Shouyou making an appearance.

"But that's okay!" Mateus assures as he settles on the couch. "We understand if you're busy, Shouyou." Shouyou shakes his head, pressing his lips into a tight line.

“Of course not! I clear my schedule for this every week, and you know it.” He puffs out his cheeks, and even though he’s technically an adult, he looks exactly how Ines imagines he looked in junior high. The kid leans forward in his seat again, squinting at the screen of his own laptop all the way across the world. “What are you guys playing this week?”

“ *Battleship* ,” Nils says.

“Doesn’t Vitor always cheat at that?” Shouyou asks, laughter in his voice. Vitor squawks, indignant, and finally sits up straight and stops his wailing as the kid snickers behind his hand.

“Oi, I do *not* cheat.” When none of them seem to believe him, including Shouyou, he crosses his arms over his chest and glares at the other side of the room. “I don’t.” As Ines opens her mouth to prove him wrong (she’s known him her whole life, and he has *always* cheated when it comes to *Battleship*), there’s a long, loud creak coming from the television speakers, followed by a quiet voice.

“Are those your friends?” It’s muffled by distance, and Shouyou looks toward the other side of whatever room he’s in. It’s a dark room, which is odd since he usually keeps a lamp on in his dorm during their calls, but Ines hadn’t thought much of it. A smile breaks out over his face, and he shifts to sit up on his knees.

“Yeah—oh, Kageyama, come say hi!” Shouyou tugs Tobio down into frame so all of them can see his flushed, wide-eyed surprise. He looks away from the camera and mutters something that’s lost to her. “Don’t be shy. You know them, anyway.”

“H-hey,” he stutters and offers only a cursory wave. Ines gapes at the television.

“Woah, hey, what’s Tobio doing in your dorm? Isn’t it, like, super late over there?” Vitor asks. He looks almost offended.

“Oh, I moved out of my dorm. I must’ve forgot to tell you guys.” Shouyou hums and rubs at his chin, brows furrowed.

“Dumbass—how could you just *forget* to—”

“Oi, don’t call me dumbass, you literally—”

Ines watches them wrestle each other like little kids. The camera rocks precariously, blurring with the motion.

“So Tobio’s helping you move?” The two of them stop wrestling and turn toward Shouyou’s laptop again. Tobio is leaning half over the kid’s body, his hands wrapped around his wrists, and he’s frowning.

“No,” Shouyou says like it’s obvious, “we’re moving in together.”

“You— *huh* ?” Ines snorts so hard her tonsils must come unlodged from the back of her throat, and Mateus covers the bottom of his face with his hand. Nils smirks.

“We’re...we bought an apartment?” Shouyou unravels himself from Tobio’s grip to crowd the camera again. “Are you feeling okay, Vitor?”

“He probably thinks you’re a dumbass for forgetting to tell them,” Tobio insists behind him.

“Shut up!” Shouyou swats at him, but he must dodge because Ines doesn’t hear any noises of contact. She can’t see him beyond Shouyou’s enlarged face. “He does *not* —anyway, my roommate was a total weirdo. I told you about him and his...baby corn. And he’d stay out all night and then come back while I was leaving for class.” Shouyou seems to consider this for a moment before his eyes go wide. “Oh my god, do you think he was a vampire?”

“I doubt it,” Ines says while Tobio mutters, “Probably.”

Shouyou exhales and turns to look over his shoulder. “Totally dodged a bullet there,” he says. “But I got tired of him and his baby corn, and since Kageyama’s roommate didn’t like him either, we just decided to move in together.” He shrugs. “It was easier this way.”

“That’s...nice,” Mateus mutters vaguely. His attention seems to be caught on the corner of his end table rather than on the screen.

He’s probably thinking about his nightmare neighbors who bicker constantly and live upstairs. Praying for anyone who lives within a block of Shouyou and Tobio’s apartment.

“Yeah, our friends from the team helped us move in, which was nice. We still haven’t unpacked at all, so you’re balanced on a box of, uh,” Shouyou cranes his neck sideways to, presumably, read the side of the box, “Kageyama’s sports magazines.”

“Good to know.” Nils nods and looks like he’s seriously filing this information away.

Shouyou turns around to look at Tobio, who is mostly lost in the darkness of the room with his dark hair and slightly less dark sweatshirt. “Now, go away. And don’t listen in on my conversation, you creep!” Tobio grumbles but disappears from the frame without much resistance. Distantly, a moment later, a door closes. “He’s going out to get more milk, so I can tell you this.” Shouyou draws in a big, shaking breath and blows it all out again before continuing. “I think I’m going to confess to him soon.”

Vitor looks like he might actually pass out. Ines trusts that Nils will catch him if he does.

“Confess?” Ines asks, sly. Shouyou gives her a strange look and runs his finger along the seam of the box’s edge, his lips pursed.

“Yeah, you know. Plan it out all romantic and tell him *I like-like you* . Like in those cheesy shoujo mangas Asahi-senpai used to read while he was waiting for everyone else to get ready for practice.” He pauses for a moment, eyes focused on something over the corner of the camera. “I should ask him for advice on how to do it...”

“Why don’t you see if Tobio, uh, confesses first if you don’t know how to do it,” Mateus suggests because currently, Ines is coming the closest in terms of their little, secret bet.

A competitive light enters Shouyou's eyes. "I won't let him confess first—I'll beat him to it!" God bless this kid and his need to win. God bless him.

"Oh, well, we're happy for you either way, kid." Ines bites back a laugh but allows herself to smirk at the others in the room. Mateus hangs his head and seems to concede defeat then and there.

"Thanks," Shouyou says, sounding suspicious. He shakes his head at himself. "You guys are weird."

"*We're* the weird ones?" Vitor splutters. He holds his hands up and shakes his head like a wet dog as if he's trying to rid himself of the idea. "*You're* the one who's in love with Mr. Bitchface!"

"I-I'm not—in *love* with him," Shouyou insists, but his face is red, and he won't make eye contact with the camera anymore, "and don't call him that. It's rude." He pauses for a moment. "And you're the one who had a crush on Oikawa of all people, so I don't think you can talk about who I like." The kid turns his nose up at Vitor with pursed lips as Vitor flushes bright red, then pale as a sheet.

"You knew?" Vitor hides his face in his hands. "How?"

"You aren't exactly...oh, what's the word?"

"Subtle?" Ines offers, grinning.

"Yes! You're not exactly subtle, Vitor," Shouyou huffs.

* * * *

How Mateus manages to get the channel that's streaming the Japanese University Nationals all the way over here in Brazil, Ines will likely never know. Mostly, she doesn't want to know, just in case it's not exactly...legal.

Mateus is an upstanding Brazilian citizen who will do anything, go to any length, to support his friends, and she wouldn't put it past him to break international laws to get this stream.

So, she doesn't ask. Ines sips the beer he offers her, and she pointedly tries not to wonder about it as a lot of bright, Japanese commercials that she doesn't understand at all flit on and off on the screen. There's a woman selling what Ines thinks is a chocolate bar, but she can't be sure because there are no subtitles until the game starts.

Just last week, Shouyou had called them in the middle of the night so that each of them had to pick up the call in their respective apartments, rather than just doing a two-way from Mateus' apartment, and he hadn't even bothered apologizing (or saying hello or good morning, the heathen) before he started in about Nationals.

Ines had thought the kid was dying or something and had sat up and turned on her bedside lamp so fast that her back *still* hurts.

“We’re the—the only first-year starters,” Shouyou gushed, the words coming out so fast (and in her half-asleep state) that Ines had had a hard time discerning if most of it was even English or Portuguese or any other language on Earth, really. His cheeks were ruddy with excitement, and his eyes seemed to sparkle even with the terrible quality of his iPhone camera. Now that she thinks about it, that may have been less about the quality of his camera and more to do with the fact that he couldn’t seem to hold the phone still.

“Shouyou?” Mateus groaned, and his square was still dark despite the camera being unmuted. He’d sounded as unintelligible as ever, his voice deep and hoarse with sleep. “What?”

“Kageyama and I—they put us as starters for Nationals! They think we’re that good, good enough to start already, and I’m just all... *buwahh!*” His high, ecstatic giggle filled her bedroom, and she wanted to smile with him, be happy for him, but the words he was saying wouldn’t register until later, after her alarm went off.

The realization almost made her choke on her breakfast as she gasped around a mouthful of food, suddenly awake and scrambling for her phone like she would die without it.

The kid apologized for the late, semi-unintelligible call, but she told him to *shut the hell up this is exciting*, to which he replied *IKR!!!!!!* but with more exclamation points. Ines had dared to ask how Tobio was feeling about all of it.

Shouyou said something along the lines of, ‘he thinks it’s obvious we would be starters’ and followed it with an insult and more than a few emojis he reserved for talking about Tobio and his terrible attitude, which made her laugh out loud in her apartment while Vitor groaned at it from the living room.

Mateus’ television clears of advertisements for the first time since he fiddled with the channels and did whatever magic he did to even get the channel, and the preppy advertisement women are replaced by two serious-faced men with microphones. They stare the camera down, and behind them, a blurry crowd cheers.

“Final match between The University of Tokyo and Kindai University here at the Komazawa Courts. Two of the university-level’s best teams compete here tonight for the title of number one,” one of the men starts as the other shuffles a stack of papers.

“It’s fair to say that within this league, this is a highly anticipated match,” the other explains, “not one anyone wants to miss. These teams are considered the prime of the so-called ‘Monster Generation’ here in Japan, and on the roster here we see, even, a few names that were big in the high school leagues.” Again, he shuffles his papers.

The crowd cheers as the camera pans toward an incoming team. The jerseys are white and blue, and Ines can make out a familiar head of orange hair among the team—orange hair next to a taller, dark haired kid who she’s absolutely sure is Tobio. She slides toward the edge of the couch, sitting forward and gripping her drink tighter, biting back a smile.

“Oh my god, I see him,” Vitor gushes, pauses, then continues, slumping, “no, wait. That’s not him.” He shakes his head and squints at the screen again, searching for the right pixels.

“From Tokyo University—Number three, middle blocker Morino Yasunari,” the announcer starts, and his tone is more excited, now, than it had been before. Number Three jogs onto the court with a wave to the crowd and the cameras. “Number four, right side hitter Kuga Yoshitomo. Number seven Tsuzuki Ken, libero. Number nine, setter Kageyama Tobio along with number ten, middle blocker Hinata Shouyou. Finally, number thirteen, opposite hitter Tengan Shichirobei.” At Shouyou’s name, the four of them erupt into cheers that will definitely have Mateus’ neighbors calling in a complaint before tomorrow morning.

“That nine and ten—they’re only first-years, aren’t they?” the second announcer asks like he doesn’t already know.

“Kageyama and Hinata are two of those big-names from the high school leagues I was talking about. Anyone who knows anything about the high school volleyball leagues knows that this pair took the league by storm just a few years ago. They’re devils—just wait until you see this quick the duo boasts. Even I haven’t seen it in person, and I’m hoping we’ll get a chance to see it in action, seeing as they’re starters.”

“Could be an intimidation tactic,” the other announcer notes, glancing at where the Kindai University team is entering the gym to a cacophony of cheers. “Kindai is notorious for getting rattled right at the end. Speaking of Kindai, here is number one, captain and opposite hitter—”

“Did you see our boy?” Vitor crows, flinging himself back onto the couch precariously. “I’m so proud of him—look at him, just *look*. ” Except the camera is focused on the other team’s middle blocker (number eleven), who is tall and artificially blond and nothing at all like Shouyou.

“He looked thrilled,” Mateus agrees. It’s really no surprise that Shouyou loves to be on television and in front of such a big crowd, made obvious by his enthusiastic waving and wide, blinding grin. Before him, Kageyama hadn’t looked at the camera or the crowd, instead glaring straight ahead as he made his way onto the court. The juxtaposition of the two is almost humorous, and she wonders if they know it—if they picked those consecutive numbers to emphasize the difference between their personalities or something.

The match starts with the other university serving following the captains’ coin toss, and Ines is inexplicably nervous. She can’t imagine how Shouyou, who she knows practically lives in a bathroom stall before big games like this, is feeling. She can’t make out his face from the angle the camera is at, since it’s focused on the guy who’s serving.

Ines is jealous, suddenly, of everyone who’s there to see the game in person. And of the person standing next to Shouyou because she’d love to give him a hearty pat on the back right about now.

Dammit. Ines might’ve cried when they dropped him off, but she absolutely can’t cry now, months later, while watching him play. She won’t let herself—for real this time. If she does, Vitor will never, ever let her live it down, she knows.

Shouyou receives the first serve almost flawlessly. Despite herself, Ines finds herself analyzing him (and everyone else on the court but mostly him because she *knows* how good

the kid is) for everything he's doing right and wrong. She narrows her eyes at the screen and forgets to drink the beer in her hand. Her jaw is clenched, her shoulders tense; she hasn't been this keyed up over a match in longer than she can remember.

She grins like an animal when Tokyo scores the point.

Later in the set, the announcers have long since shed their serious masks, now cheering for both teams and yelling each play into the microphone.

"Here comes Hinata, number ten from Tokyo University," one shouts, and Ines sits forward farther in her seat. Next to her, Nils shifts, and she's pretty sure none of them are breathing. "This kid's got a pair of legs on him, just *look* at that jump!"

"I heard he went to Brazil for training," the other says. "All that sand-jumping—imagine the levels this league could get to if we all took a page out of Hinata's book." They laugh, but they interrupt themselves with a gasp. "My god, did you see that ball?"

The camera focuses on Shouyou's face as he turns to his team, fist clenched victoriously in front of him. He's smiling so hard she's sure his cheeks must ache like hell.

"No! That thing *blasted* past Kindai's blockers before I could even see it—is that it? Was that the monster quick?" He sounds incredulous and disbelieving, and Ines smirks. That's her kid, making them proud just like he promised to do before he left.

"I think it was! It's even faster than everyone said—this truly is a Monster Generation."

"Kageyama's toss was perfection, right into Hinata's palm," the other announcer gushes. "Like it was tailored for him or something. We've seen a hell of a lot of amazing tosses from Kageyama tonight but none quite as showstopping as that one."

Shouyou's team wins in the fourth set, and Ines' throat is hoarse and painful from cheering, and she's pretty sure Mateus is going to have to ask one of them for a place to stay soon, seeing as his neighbors must be plotting his murder by now.

There is so much happening in the aftermath of the final point that Ines can't bear to force her attention elsewhere, even as Vitor dances around the couch, singing and nearly spilling his drink in his histrionics, and she's glad she's watching when, not a moment after the ball hits the polished flooring of the court, the camera flashes to Shouyou and Tobio, wrapped around each other.

And kissing. Quite passionately, she would say, for international television—or, national with a single questionably-legal connection in Brazil. Vitor falls silent at the sight, gaping and shocked. When they pull away, oblivious of the cameras broadcasting their affections, Tobio is smiling. Ines can't see Shouyou's face, but she's willing to bet it's a similar expression.

"That's my *boy!*" she cheers. "Pay up, you sons of bitches—I *won* ." Nils and Mateus hand over their bets, and Vitor stands, stock-still, for another long moment until the camera moves on. She rubs her win in their faces for the entirety of the limbo between the end of the game and the ensuing interviews with players.

When Shouyou appears for his interview, he is still flushed, sweaty, breathing hard, and (unsurprisingly) grinning. Behind him, other players mill about on the court littered with stray volleyballs, but he stands at the center of the frame.

“How does it feel to be one of the only two first years that played as a starter—let alone one who scored so many points?” The reporter tilts the microphone toward him, and he starts to answer without taking so much as a moment to think the question over.

“It’s amazing! This stage is so different from any place I’ve ever played before, and I couldn’t have gotten here without my team here or my team over in Brazil! Or Kageyama!” He nods once, obviously satisfied with his answer, and Ines falls back onto the couch.

“Oh my god, he’s really in love with that kid,” Vitor murmurs behind her. “How could I be so blind?”

“Cause you’re a dumbass,” Ines answers, dodging the flick he aims at the shell of her ear with ease.

“Thank you and congratulations, Hinata!”

“Thank you!” The kid bows at the waist and bounds off to meet up with the other members of his team, disappearing into a crowd of his euphoric peers.

The next interview is with Tokyo’s number four, Kuga Yoshitomo, and he smiles easily at the camera like he is meant to be in front of it. He glances over his shoulder at his team and then back at the interviewer.

“Kuga, congratulations on your win,” the interviewer says, and he shakes her hand. “I think we’d all like a little insight into the team on a personal level—especially after what we all saw after that last set ended.” The woman laughs. “So, anything you can tell us about your teammates?”

“You’re talking about Hinata and Kageyama?” he clarifies.

“Are they an item, maybe?” The reporter is obviously digging, but Ines can already tell that this will be a big moment in the volleyball world, maybe even trending on Twitter or something for the next few hours.

“God, you should’ve *seen* Kageyama when Little Red was over there training in Brazil.” Kuga gives an easy laugh and a faux-shudder. “He was a scary guy, but the moment Hinata was in the picture, he stopped being so...moody, if you know what I mean. They bicker, but they really are meant for each other—anyone on the team would agree with me there.”

“I thought they were together way before they were,” a nearby player interrupts—Mawatari, his jersey reads when he turns back around. Kuga only laughs again and nods, shrugging.

The camera cuts to Tobio swatting at Shouyou’s head, fingers tightening around the air above him. Shouyou is laughing, but Ines can’t make out the sound over the chaos of the gym.

Shouyou shoots a thumbs-up towards the camera when he notices it, and Tobio turns away, flustered.

They're two sides of the same coin, that's for damn sure, and Ines couldn't be happier that they found each other—and that they helped her get some extra cash.

End Notes

stay hydrated and healthy!! <3

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