

Untold

Von Gary

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Kapitel 1: Glimpse

A practice game against Namisato High School. The fifth inning, Nishiura in offense, leading 4:2 with runner on second and third. With Tajima up next hopes were high that Nishiura would score again and all eyes rested on the short batter.

Watching Tajima steal bases or just bat at his best always caused Hanai's heart rate to pick up – and even knowing that he was *about to* made him tense up with excitement. He blamed it on the thrill it gave him, knowing that his teammate was bringing victory just a little closer to the Nishiura team, and never had given it a second thought.

The other teammates certainly felt the same way, didn't they? It was visible on everyone's faces whenever Tajima stepped onto the field: Hopes were high and admiration bubbled underneath the tense faces watching the play.

Hanai wondered if he would ever become a skilled enough player to cause the same reaction when he entered the diamond.

Tajima suddenly turned his head to meet Hanai's gaze with a piercing stare, and the team captain froze in place, feeling his ears heat up. Tajima couldn't read minds, could he? Unwittingly Hanai held his breath until the batter turned his attention back to the enemy pitcher, then released a shaky breath.

"It's still kinda intimidating, isn't it?" he heard Sakaeguchi next to him and gave a small nod, eyes never leaving the field.

The intense look Tajima put on whenever he concentrated during a game was something even his teammates hadn't gotten used to after a year of playing together. "Hanai, you're on deck!" Coach Momoe's voice pulled the team captain back to reality and, realizing that he had gotten carried away by his thoughts, he rushed out of the dugout to warm up.

He stopped just in time to see Tajima swing at the next pitch and send the ball to the other end of the field, to an empty spot no one could reach in time to catch it. It met the floor. Both runners made it home and even though the umpire called Tajima out before he could reach second base, a cheer broke out among Nishiura's players. They had scored two more points thanks to him, after all.

Hanai was still amazed at the precision of his batting.

Tajima wore a satisfied grin and gave his team a big thumb up as he came running back towards the dugout, and Hanai turned away again to hide his expression.

"Tajima's so cool!" Someone gushed behind him, speaking out what the team captain had been thinking. It made him feel a little less bad about the heat on his face.

"Nice batting," commented Hanai as Tajima passed him. The batter stopped in his tracks to smile at him.

"Thanks! I wish I had been a little faster though. Then you could've sent me home next."

The trust and confidence in him the words carried left a warm, fuzzy feeling in Hanai's chest as he stepped into the batter's box. *He believes in me. I want to show Tajima and the others that they can rely on me, too.*

A bead of sweat rolled down Hanai's temple as his eyes locked on the ball and he got ready to swing. He wasn't going to miss. Not with Tajima watching.

...

At the end of the 9th inning Nishiura's victory was announced with a score of 8:4. It had been a good game with both parties giving their all, but Hanai couldn't shake the feeling that he could have done better. He struck out twice – unlike Tajima who had hit the ball every time he bat – even though he had wanted to prove his team that he was just as capable. But maybe he simply wasn't.

Hanai creased his face as he pinched the bridge of his nose. His head had been feeling fuzzy ever since the sixth inning and despite drinking a lot, he couldn't seem to cool down the heat rising in his body. Was he getting ill? He sure hoped not.

"Hey, are you okay?" He looked up to see Sakaeguchi staring at him worryingly. They had finished thanking the opposing team and audience after the match, and most of the others had already run off to do ground maintenance, but Hanai had stayed behind without even realizing.

"Huh? Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired, is all." Hanai felt his head burn under his cap and he took a deep breath of fresh air, hoping it would cool him down a little. "Sorry, I must've spaced out."

"Yeah... Hey, why don't you go rest in the dugout and leave the maintenance to the rest of us?"

Did he really look that bad? He wasn't really in the mood to discuss it and felt like he really could use some water, so he accepted the offer with a nod. "Uh, alright. Thanks."

...

Drinking cold water in the shade of the dugout did help cool down a bit but Hanai felt guilty watching his teammates clean up the field while he stayed back doing nothing. He walked over to Coach Momoe as soon as he felt better.

"You're not overworking yourself, Hanai, are you?"

"I'm not, Coach."

Her eyes attentively looked him over, the arms crossed in front of her chest making her scepticism clear.

"Well, most of the work has been assigned by now..." She looked over her shoulder at the other teammates. "You can help Tajima retrieve the baseballs if you absolutely want to help."

"Got it," nodded Hanai before he headed toward the outfield.

He really hoped a wind would pick up to keep his body cool because he felt heat creeping up inside him once again.

...

"Hey, what was that all about? Are you not feeling well? I saw you talking to Coach." Hanai didn't have to look up to know who the voice belonged to. He did anyway and saw Tajima balancing half a dozen baseballs on his arms.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it."

For a moment there was no reply as hazel eyes rested on Hanai's face, long enough to make him feel awkward and turn away to resume his search. It was always a weird feeling to have the other guy stare at him like that and Hanai didn't really know how to handle it – or the way it seemed to make his heart beat harder against his chest.

Why did the other make him that nervous? Judging from Sakaeguchi's words before Tajima's stare had the same effect on all team members though. So it wasn't just him. Hanai exhaled a sigh of relief.

"Alright", came the late reply eventually and Tajima changed the subject. "There are no more baseballs in the outfield. I got them all."

Hanai turned back to look at his teammate, furrowing his brows in doubt. "Are you sure? The field's big, you could've missed-"

"I'm sure."

Tajima's bold statement shut the team captain up but he couldn't keep the scepticism off his face. Despite the shorter boy's confident look, there was just no way Tajima could be *that certain* that he was right.

"Three balls dropped in the outfield without being retrieved during today's warm up, five more during game. Another two went over the fence in the third and seventh inning. Ren did a great job finding all the balls after last practice, so there's just these ten balls we have to find. I've got six, you've got two. That leaves the two that went over the fence."

Hanai stared at Tajima in disbelief. How had he remembered all these things? There was no doubt that Tajima was a genius but having a memory this accurate... Was there even a chance that Hanai could compete with this guy?

"So, you ready to look for the last two balls?"

"Y...Yeah..."

Hanai straightened up and followed Tajima to the dugout to put away the balls they had already collected, all while his mind was still running wild. How was it possible that a dorky guy like Tajima had so much potential and was so skilled at sports and memorizing things? *All while sucking at school*, his mind added, reminding him of Tajima's grades that were mediocre at best. No stranger would expect a genius mind to rest behind the overly excitable façade.

Tajima really was something. But despite being envious of his skills, Hanai still was happy for him somehow. *He deserves it.*

"Huh? Did you say something?" Hanai flinched when Tajima turned to look at him questioningly and he quickly shook his head.

"N-No, I didn't! Hah! ...hah... I'll look over there, though! It'll be faster if we split up."

Without waiting for Tajima's answer, Hanai jogged forward to hide his red face. Had he actually spoken out his thoughts? He needed to be more careful – the last thing he wanted was to embarrass himself in front of Tajima, after all.

...

Damn, Hanai thought. It was getting too hot. The afternoon sun was burning down mercilessly and the embarrassment from before certainly hadn't helped either. His blush had faded but his body still felt too warm and it was starting to make him feel dizzy.

They had found one of the balls already, so at least it wouldn't be long until they could head back to the others and relax for a bit until they'd start with the debriefing. Hanai took off his cap to fan himself and closed his eyes for a moment.

"HEY!!! I FOUND THE LAST ONE!!!" He heard excited Tajima's voice and the sound of approaching footsteps. "LOOK!"

Hanai forced his eyes open again, catching a glimpse of his teammate who came

running towards him with an arm stretched over his head to proudly present the ball he had found. Suddenly the image began to sway.

"Hanai?"

He forced his unfocused gaze back to the boy whose jog towards him had accelerated to a sprint but the corners of his vision started to fade to darkness – "...Huh...?" – until his entire vision had gone black.

"Hanai!!"

"..."

...

When Hanai cracked his eyes open, a small groan escaped his lips and the first thing he saw were two hazel eyes staring down at him. "H...huh...?"

It took him a moment to realize that they belonged to a face – a freckled one – that was watching him with an unreadable expression.

What had happened? Hanai remembered that they had been retrieving baseballs and had moved out to find the ones that had made it over the fence. He remembered feeling hot and dizzy. Tajima finding the last missing ball. Then a fade to black.

Hanai opened his mouth to ask what had happened but something about the expression on Tajima's face kept him from breaking the silence.

His mind was slowly waking up again and when he realized that his head was cushioned on Tajima's folded knees, his face started heating up again. Why had Tajima chosen to watch over him in such an awkward position? He could have just laid him onto the ground and waited for him to wake up like that. He didn't have to make it so weird-

Hanai's thoughts stopped when he noticed that Tajima's hands that had carefully held his head in place were clammy and cold. Had he been worried? Hanai could have sworn that he had felt them shake a little just a moment ago.

"Hey, Tajima-..."

"Are you feeling better now?"

Tajima's question had come before Hanai could ask his own and the team captain wondered if he had done it on purpose. He figured that he owed Tajima an answer though – especially since he obviously had been worried about him.

"Not sure." He answered honestly. "I'm not feeling dizzy anymore but I still feel hot."

A cold hand moved to Hanai's forehead and he breathed out a blissful sigh. He felt bad that Tajima's hands were so cold but they did feel incredibly soothing against his hot skin.

"Your face is pretty hot."

"Thanks." Hanai answered without thinking, before the misunderstanding hit him a moment later. His eyes shot open, cheeks turning redder than they had been before.

"Wait, that's not what I meant-!"

Tajima's laugh silenced him and Hanai sat up with a flustered expression. At least that weird, unreadable look had left Tajima's face, he thought. Hanai didn't recall having ever seen it on the other boy's face before and something about it had been disconcerting.

It made Hanai wonder if there were parts of his teammate's personality he did not know yet... but what more could there be? Tajima already was a pretty multi-faceted character. Could there be even more to him than being loud, obnoxious, optimistic, perverted, gluttonous, overly excited and infuriatingly good at baseball? Hanai wondered...

"Seems like you're better already!" Tajima grinned once he had calmed down and stood back up. "Let's head back and get you a real coolpack to chill your *hot* face though."

He picked Hanai's cap off the ground, then offered his hand to help him up.

The last comment had brought an embarrassed blush back to Hanai's cheeks but he accepted the hand to pull himself back up. It wasn't clammy anymore.

"Thanks." He put his cap back on once Tajima returned it, then followed him back to the field to return the two baseballs they had found.

"How long was I out anyway?" Hanai couldn't stop himself from asking, both worried and curious about his blackout.

"Just a bit." Tajima didn't look at him when he answered.

When he finally did glance at Hanai the odd expression from before lingered in his stare again – for just a moment – before Tajima blinked it away and turned his attention back to what lay ahead of them. The rest of the team that had gathered in front of the dugout after they had finished their chores and they had obviously been waiting for the two missing teammates to return.

Before Hanai could comment on Tajima's unsatisfying answer or weird expression, the boy ran ahead, waving the two retrieved balls in his hand.

"Hey!! We found the missing balls!! Also, Hanai collapsed because of a heat stroke or something!! He was out for minutes, I was wondering if he had actually died!"

"Don't—!!" Hanai's face paled in terror when he heard Tajima's words. If Coach Momoe heard him...

"HANAI!!"

...he was going to be in so much trouble.

Kapitel 2: Rest

After his blackout Hanai had been banned from baseball practice and school for a week during which he was supposed to rest and recover.

His initial attempt to convince Coach Momoe to let him watch the training from the shade of the dugout had quickly led to the conclusion that he ought to spend that week as far away from the baseball field as possible if he cherished his life. It confirmed Hanai's suspicion that she was still mad at him for having hidden his feverish state during the practice game but he couldn't really blame her for that. It was her job to keep an eye on the team, after all. There was no denying that she could be terrifying if someone kept her from doing her job, though.

Part of Hanai knew that she was only being reasonable and that spending a week at home in bed probably was the best thing to do to ensure a fast and thorough recovery. It still didn't change the fact that it was a pain and that the week would be passing by excruciatingly slowly.

The lack of baseball practice and physical activity left Hanai frustrated and he let out an annoyed sigh as he stared up at the ceiling of his room. It had only been two days and he was already feeling done with staying at home doing nothing.

Abe and Sakaeguchi had dropped by to keep him updated on what had been discussed in class or during practice but instead of comforted, he felt somewhat guilty that they made an effort to visit so late in the evening only to make sure he wasn't falling behind.

Sakaeguchi had kept assuring him that they didn't mind and had wanted to check on him anyway, but he still couldn't fully shake it off.

One upside to being stuck at home was that he finally had time to get some serious studying done. It wasn't always easy to focus on school with baseball taking up most of his free time but keeping a decent academic record still was important to the team captain. He knew that he couldn't just rely on baseball when it came to planning his future, and that, no matter how awesome the thought, it wasn't likely for him to pursue a career as a professional baseball player. *Unlike Tajima*. If anyone, Hanai could see him becoming a star.

"All the more reason to buck up this week!" He encouraged himself as he sat up. Being able to study intensively was the only thing justifying the thought that maybe a one week break wasn't so bad after all. "Come on, Hanai! Let's do this."

Hanai was studying at his desk until his mother caught and scolded him for having left his bed, then resorted to working from there. They could keep him in bed but they could not force him to give in to unproductivity and boredom.

A day's worth of studying had left a cluster of worksheets, books and notes gathered around him and once he had finished working through the notes Sakaeguchi had brought the previous day, he was about to study some more for the upcoming Biology

exam. He had just opened the book when the doorbell suddenly interrupted him. It drew his attention to the alarm clock on his bedside table that read 7:00pm and he suspected that Sakaeguchi had returned to deliver today's school work. With him studying, time had flown by for a change.

His sisters were home, so Hanai knew he didn't have to rush to answer the door. Instead he was left with more time to clean up the paper chaos around him before his friend could reach his room.

"Azusa, your friend is here!" Haruka called over from the front door, confirming his guess, before she addressed the guest again. "He's in his room. It's the second one left."

"Alright, thanks!"

Hanai's movement froze in confusion. That voice didn't belong to Sakaeguchi. And neither did the rapidly approaching footsteps. They were unmistakably...

"Hanai! You better put away the porn, I'm coming in!"

...Tajima's.

The short boy yanked the door open and almost seemed disappointed to see Hanai surrounded by nothing more than books and worksheets.

"Wow, that's either the lamest porn ever or you're actually doing school work! Aren't you supposed to rest, get plenty of sleep and do nothing all week?"

The comment brought a flustered blush to his cheeks and Hanai furrowed his brows as he finished relocating his books and papers from the bed onto the nightstand. Why was it that Tajima made him feel like it was an unnatural thing to be studying for school?

"They told me to rest, not to take a vacation. Besides, I can't get behind on baseball *and* school work."

"So you're not only not allowed to come to practice but they're also making you study? That sucks!" commented Tajima before he turned away and began to inspect the room meticulously. "So this is where you live, huh?"

Tajima didn't look at him, curiously going through Hanai's belongings instead. While Tajima seemed to be able to focus on their conversation at the same time, the team captain was left terribly distracted.

Watching Tajima inspect his room made him feel strangely nervous and exposed. He didn't usually invite people over – mostly because he didn't want his family to embarrass him in front of his friends, but also because he enjoyed a certain level of privacy in his own home. Privacy that Tajima was shamelessly invading at the moment.

"No, that's not... Well, they're not *making* me study. I just don't want to fall behind on school work when I can't even go to... baseball practice. And I don't want to end up with... even more school work when I come back-..." Hanai decided to give up on trying to ignore Tajima's doing. "... Are you looking for something?"

"I'm not, but it's the first time I'm in your room. It's kinda interesting to see how you live."

"Not really..." mumbled Hanai, hesitantly observing Tajima who continued to go through his stuff as if he had been given permission to. Hanai didn't think there was

anything particularly interesting about his room, so he wondered why the other seemed so intrigued by it. Then again, he couldn't deny that part of him wouldn't mind seeing how Tajima lived either. Perhaps even mundane lives could seem interesting to outsiders.

He mused about it, eyes following his guest until a comment suddenly startled him.

"Hey, is that your girlfriend? She's hot!" Tajima turned around, hands holding a picture showing Hanai and a young woman at some beach club.

"W-What? No!" Hanai jumped out of bed – too fast, as a sudden pain in his head warned him – and snatched the picture out of Tajima's hand. "Where did you even find that!?"

"Hey, don't blame me if you leave things like these lying around for everyone to see!" Tajima pouted at his friend's rude reaction but obviously was too curious to keep it up. "So who is she?"

Hanai didn't seem too happy about the shorter boy's inquisitiveness but, after a moment of consideration, sighed in defeat. Not telling him was probably going to take more effort than just getting it over and done with.

"Just a girl I met when my family and I were on vacation sometime. We exchanged email addresses and write occasionally." Tajima's expectant stare brought an embarrassed frown and blush back to Hanai's face. "And that's all there is to it, so get your head out of the gutter!"

He walked past his guest and slid the photograph into one of his desk's drawers with a heavy sigh. Tajima had just arrived and Hanai's feelings were already all over the place. There was something about the boy that kept making him lose his cool and he didn't know why.

"Why are you here anyway? I thought Sakaeguchi wanted to drop by today."

"Oh, right! About that! Sakaeguchi had to head home right after practice, so he asked me to bring you his notes instead." Tajima reached for his sports bag and pulled out a notebook.

That explained it, Hanai thought, and accepted the book with thanks before putting it only the nightstand of top of the other books.

He turned back to Tajima but, all topics have come to a close, didn't quite know what to say anymore without making it sound awkward. Now that Tajima had given him the notes, was he going to leave? Did he want to stay some more? What time did he have to be home? Should Hanai offer something to do? He realized that he really wasn't used to having people over.

Just when he had opened his mouth to say something, a voice cut through the silence, calling him from the hallway.

"Azusa, is your friend staying for dinner?"

Hanai turned towards the door, about to answer 'no' when his eyes met Tajima's whose expression clearly read 'yes, absolutely' instead.

"... Yeah, he is."

"Woohoo!!"

Tajima tossed his hands in the air, face lit up with excitement, and Hanai was reminded of an enthusiastic child. It was kind of adorable how excitable Tajima was

though, he thought, oblivious of the soft smile that had settled on his face.

"Hey, Tajima, don't you have stuff to do for school though? It's getting pretty late, so if you've got homework for tomorrow you could do it while we're waiting for dinner."

"Nah, I'm good." The grinning boy crossed his arms behind his head. "I'll just borrow Izumi's tomorrow before class."

Hanai stared at him, his expression torn between irritation and disbelief, until it settled for irritation and he grabbed the other by his shirt.

"You will not!"

Tajima's grades already were suffering. If things got any worse he wouldn't even be allowed to keep playing baseball anymore, so Hanai could and would not have him slack off – especially not when he was using a visit to *his apartment* as an excuse to procrastinate. He was Tajima's friend but he was also their captain, after all. They couldn't afford losing a player like him just because he was too lazy to study.

"You want to eat here? Fine. But you better get to work first. Show me what you've got to do."

Hanai dragged Tajima to his bag and only let go of him, when the shorter boy unhappily dug out his English book.

"We've got to write a summary for that story we read in class", explained Tajima factually.

"Alright, so do that, then."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't get half of the plot." Tajima groaned and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "It was so *boring* that I stopped paying attention and then I kinda missed the teacher's explanation. Plus, I couldn't stop thinking about that magazine I found in the locker room the other day when I-"

"Alright, I get it. Please spare me the details. Bottom line is you didn't understand the story, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have it here?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then let's go through it again and I'll try to help you out wherever you're stuck."

"...Okay."

Hanai was surprised that Tajima didn't object to his proposal but, while he didn't appreciate him choosing his bed of all places to sit down on to study, he wasn't going to complain. The baseball prodigy willing to do school work without further objections already seemed like a miracle, after all.

...

It was amazing how someone who had proven himself to be such a genius on the baseball field could have such difficulties understanding a foreign language, Hanai pondered. It would have been one thing if Tajima was simply having amazing reflexes and his skills had been limited to the physical aspect of the sport. Running fast, having a feeling for how to bat to send the ball flying wherever he wanted to,... The sort of skills their opponents feared Tajima for.

He had also proven himself to have an amazing memory however, remembering the exact scores of a game, inning by inning, after having watched it no more than once.

Skills that made him an even more dangerous player than any of their opponents suspected and extremely valuable asset for his own team.

So how could he fail to remember a few foreign words? To Hanai it was a mystery.

He spent half an hour going through the short story with Tajima, explaining it whenever the other didn't understand – which was more often than Hanai had hoped – until they had finally finished it. By the end of it Tajima seemed a little more confident in his understanding of the plot. Formulating a summary with his own words proved to be a whole new level of difficult, though.

Hanai had known that Tajima's English grades hadn't been particularly good but he hadn't expected him to be *that* bad at the foreign language.

The summary he had let Tajima write and was now given to correct spoke volumes though: It was complete gibberish. Hanai struggled to not let it show on his face while reading it. He knew Tajima was watching his every reaction and didn't want to discourage him.

"Well... It's... Huh..."

"That bad?"

"It's not... *good*."

"It's okay, you can tell me if it sucks."

Hanai sent him a hesitant look. "Most of it doesn't really make sense. How about we work through it again? I'll help you this time."

The captain leant forward so that the both of them could see Tajima's summary clearly when his mother's voice suddenly interrupted them, calling from the living room: "Dinner's ready!"

"Coming!" Hanai answered loudly, knowing that Tajima had only stuck around to wait for dinner and that it was futile trying to get any more work done now that it was ready. He put the summary down and pushed himself off the bed but the other didn't follow. It honestly surprised him, that Tajima hadn't dashed ahead in the first place, so he turned back to check if he was alright. The words that followed surprised him even more, though.

"Can we continue afterwards?"

"Huh?" Hanai blinked confused. The last thing he had expected was Tajima wanting to continue working on his assignment. Why was he so serious about it all of a sudden? He knew he should be happy about the other's newfound eagerness to do his homework well, but it confused him nonetheless. "Sure, but it's getting kinda late. Are you sure you don't need to go home?"

"It's fine! My parents are out tonight anyway and my family's not gonna miss me."

Tajima answered with a grin. "So let's dig in and then continue where we left off! Come on, the food's gonna get cold!"

With that, the excited boy jumped off the bed and led the way out of Hanai's room.

...

"It's so nice of you to come visit Azusa when he's being sick, Yuuichiro."

His mother's words made Hanai's face heat up with an annoyed blush.

"*Mom*." He didn't even have to word what bothered him for her to understand.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I thought you and your teammates went by first names by now. Back when I was your age my friends and I dropped the formalities after the first few months." His mother sent Tajima an apologizing look which he waved off with a grin.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Hanai. Some of us already go by first names, but Hanai's a little more uptight." Tajima laughed, earning a blow to his side by Hanai's elbow.

"Hey!"

"What? It's true!"

"Hanai, where are your manners?" His mother sent him a scolding look. While she was used to her son being somewhat rude to her sometimes, she wasn't going to let him act like that with their guest in her presence. Especially not at the dinner table with her daughters watching. While her husband didn't really seem to mind, she wasn't going to allow it.

Hanai opened his mouth to say something, glanced from his mother to Tajima to his sisters and settled for a frustrated grumble instead.

"He's just here for the food anyway."

His mumble must have gone unheard because dinner resumed calmly afterwards with his mother offering Tajima seconds he gladly accepted and his sisters chattering on about their ballet class, the short argument swept under the rug and forgotten. Before long the small argument didn't matter to Hanai anymore either and he joined in on the dinner table conversations. It had been kind of silly to begin with anyway. By the time they were walking back to his room he had already forgotten all about it. Until Tajima suddenly addressed his words, that was.

"You're wrong, you know?"

"About what?" asked Hanai, confused about the statement that had come out of the blue. Tajima wasn't even looking at him while they were talking, which in itself was pretty odd, regardless of what he was going to say.

"I'd never turn down homemade food-" *Or any kind of food*, thought Hanai but kept quiet to let Tajima finish. "-but it's not the reason why I came to visit."

"Um okay."

Hanai didn't know what to answer to that and, contrary to his expectations, Tajima did not elaborate, leaving them in awkward silence. A moment passed and Hanai decided to ask him himself before it would get any worse.

"Why did you visit then?"

Suddenly Tajima's stare was on him, causing an uneasy feeling to rise inside his chest. Why did it still make him so nervous? He really should be used to it by now.

"How are you feeling?"

"Uh... Okay, I guess?" Tajima's inquiry wasn't exactly an answer to Hanai's question but the eyes resting on him pressured him to give a specific reply anyway. "I don't really feel sick or dizzy anymore. I've got a bit of a headache and I'm kinda tired but that's about it. It could be a lot worse."

"Alright, that's good." The shorter boy seemed satisfied with the answer and directed his gaze back ahead to the door they had reached. "I just wanted to make sure."

Once they were back inside Hanai's room, Tajima headed right over to the bed and picked up English notes they had left behind for dinner. Hanai's eyes followed him while his mind still pondered over the conversation they had just had. Did Tajima mean that he had visited to make sure Hanai was feeling better? So he must have been worried about him, right?

Somehow the thought that he was important enough for the other to come to his apartment late after school and baseball practice to make sure that he was feeling better was flattering and cheered Hanai up. He had believed that only Mihashi and Izumi were receiving that kind of special treatment. Perhaps he had been wrong.

Or perhaps he was reading too much into it and, while Tajima had been wondering about his health, it had just been Sakaeguchi's request to bring him the school notes that had pushed the boy to visit him.

The idea muffled his happiness a bit but before it could do any further damage, Tajima's voice pulled him out of his thoughts, hazel eyes looking at him expectantly. The homework had found its way back into his hands.

"So, you said my summary doesn't make any sense, right? Does that mean I have to start again from scratch?" Hanai couldn't believe that Tajima seriously wanted to continue his homework. He might have to start believing in miracles again.

"Well, you don't have to rewrite everything but some key ideas don't make sense." Hanai explained while he seated himself next to the other. He was feeling sleepy already, the dinner and his weakened body both certainly playing a role in it, but if Tajima needed his help, he couldn't possibly send him away. If they hurried and worked effectively the other would be able to head home before it was getting too late anyway.

"Here, let me show you."

...

Hanai drowsily opened his eyes only to find himself sitting upright on his bed, back against the wall and an English book resting on his lap. He was groggy from sleep and his mind took some time waking up. The alarm clock on his bedside table gave away that it was 1am. He breathed out a sigh and lifted his hand to rub the sleep out of his eyes. Or that's what wanted to do when he noticed some resistance keeping his arm down. He became aware of the warmth at his side and something weighing down on his right shoulder, making him sleepily glance to the side. He froze. The sight of Tajima, asleep and resting against him, woke him up at once.

"Tajima?"

Hadn't he gone home? The last thing Hanai remembered was waiting for the other to finish reviewing his summary and he had probably fallen asleep doing that. But why

hadn't Tajima woken him up? Or his parents? He was certain that his mother would have checked on them if their guest hadn't left the apartment at a reasonable time, if only to make sure that it was alright with his parents for him to stay out this late. Or to spend the night over, as he apparently was.

Hanai heaved a sigh, somewhat annoyed that no one had woken them to make sure Tajima would make it home on a school night. It wasn't like there was anything he could change about it now though, so he returned his attention to his guest.

"Hey, Tajima."

There still was no answer. It seemed like the boy was sleeping soundly against his shoulder and wouldn't be woken up so easily. It was kind of adorable, Hanai had to admit, but there was something intimate about their position that made him blush uncomfortably.

"Tajima, wake up. We've got to get the futon ready for you."

He shook his friend's shoulders lightly to stir him awake. There was a small mumble but the other stayed asleep. Defeated, Hanai released a deep breath and decided to just go do it himself, moving away from under the boy, who flopped sideways onto the bed.

"...Huh? What's up?"

Apparently *that* had woken him. If Hanai hadn't been so tired, he probably would have been amused over the sight of a groggy Tajima, but he only allowed himself to watch the other for a brief moment before he went on to his closet. Hanai might have been sleepy but it was Tajima who would have to get up early in the morning, so the sooner they could go back to sleep the better.

"Seems like we fell asleep while working on your homework." Hanai explained as he went through his clothes. Trying to find anything remotely Tajima's size for him to sleep in proved to be a much more difficult task than he had expected. "It's too late for you to go home now, so let's find you some clothes to sleep in, prepare the futon and hit the sheets. You've got school tomorrow and it's already 1am."

"Mmh... okay", agreed Tajima sleepily before he put away his school things, stripped down to his shorts and slipped under the blankets of Hanai's bed.

"Hey, don't fall asleep again!" Hanai threw a pyjama at his head that Tajima reluctantly slipped into.

Even though it was the smallest Hanai had found, the top was still too big for the other. It was nothing compared to how ridiculously long the pyjama pants looked on him though and, right after he had tried them on, Tajima kicked them off again. *At least he's wearing boxer shorts*, Hanai thought when he realized that Tajima contented himself with just the top and returned the pants to his closet.

"Come on, help me set up the futon." Hanai sighed impatiently when he saw that his guest had once again made himself comfortable in *his* bed. Hadn't Tajima been the one who told him to rest and get plenty of sleep? And now he was hogging his bed instead.

It was probably the lack of sleep but Hanai could feel himself getting grumpy at his uninvited guest.

"Screw that, man", yawned Tajima and shifted to the side to make room on the bed next to him. Hanai stared at him for a moment, about to object, before he decided that he was too tired to and didn't give a damn anymore. During the training caps they had shared futons, too. So...

Screw it, he repeated Tajima's words in thoughts, flicked off the lights and slipped

under the sheets as well. It was just for the night anyway.

...

It turned out that slipping into the same bed as Tajima wasn't as difficult as sleeping next to him, especially when their backs pressed against each other whenever Tajima shifted in his restless sleep. Hanai didn't mind the warmth the other's body gave off - there was something comforting about it, actually, even though it felt awkward to admit it - but relentless movements kept waking him up just when he was about to pass out.

"Tajima..." He grumbled unhappily when it had happened once again.

The feeling of the other's back moving away from his own let Hanai hope that his words were heard and that Tajima was finally going to give him more space to sleep in peace. That was, until he felt an arm move around his torso and was hugged close from behind.

Suddenly Hanai didn't feel tired anymore.

The level of embarrassment and uneasiness he had felt when he had woken up to Tajima leaning against him was nothing compared to what he felt now. The other's warmth engulfed him and the feeling of Tajima's strong heart beat against his back had put his own in his throat. Hanai had to correct himself. This was nothing like the training camps where the entire team had been sharing a room. This was nothing like the times the two of them had had to share a futon. This was nothing like anything Hanai had ever experienced with anyone in any kind of situation ever. Especially not in bed.

His face was beet-red in the darkness of the room.

When his head started to feel dizzy, Hanai realized that he had held his breath and gasped shakily to recover it, hyperaware how his body moved lightly against Tajima's with every inhale. This was driving him crazy.

"Hey, Tajima-..."

Hanai tried to loosen the arm's grip around his torso but he had to admit that Tajima was stronger than expected and seemed to hold even tighter onto him, the more he struggled against it. He was trapped, unable to shift away or turn around between Tajima's body and his iron grip.

When he understood that fighting against it didn't help, Hanai tried to get used to it instead, drawing deep meditative breaths to calm his flustered mind.

It was okay. It was only Tajima, someone he appreciated and trusted. Tajima was sleeping and perhaps he just happened to be a snuggler who grabbed whoever or whatever was in reach during his sleep. Or perhaps he had needed comfort. It was true that ever since he had begun holding onto Hanai he had stopped shifting around restlessly. Perhaps he had been having a bad dream and holding onto Hanai was helping him.

That train of thought actually allowed Hanai to calm down.

He didn't mind Tajima hugging him, if it helped dealing with nightmares, and if he was

completely honest with himself, the warmth he radiated was kind of comforting as well.

With the restless shifting having come to an end too, Hanai wondered if he was finally going to be able to get some restful sleep now. Instead of trying to remove the hand that was holding onto his side, he decided to give it a comforting squeeze for a change.

Finally coming to terms with his situation, Hanai released a deep sigh and closed his eyes. There really was something comforting about the hold, he had to admit, and he could feel himself relax in the warm embrace. Tajima's body was surprisingly comfortable and, despite his muscles, not as hard as he would have expected it to be. At least if one disregarded the bulge that pressed against Hanai's back.

"What the-!?"

With sudden, newfound strength Hanai freed himself from the hold and shoved Tajima away from himself, to the other end of the bed in terror. What the hell was he even dreaming about!? *And how could his sleep be so deep?* Hanai stared at the other's silhouette in the darkness, heart racing in his chest again, to make sure he was staying where he put him.

He hadn't signed up for this. He wanted to help Tajima but he really hadn't signed up for this.

Once again Hanai was on edge and unable to relax.

Boy, this was going to be a long night.

...

The next morning Hanai woke up to the unfamiliar alarm of Tajima's cellphone and realized with embarrassment that the other man's limbs were once again wrapped all around him. His attempt to shift out of the embrace failed miserably and so he shook the other's shoulders again, a little more sternly than he had the previous night.

"...Hey, Tajima."

A sleepy mumble was the only reply he got trying to wake the other, though the persistent sound of the phone's alarm seemed to do the trick. Tajima reached over Hanai to silence the phone on the bedside table, then rolled onto his back to stare up at the ceiling.

"I don't think I've ever felt so prepared for English class." He turned his head to look at Hanai. "Thanks!"

All traces of fatigue seemingly gone, Tajima suddenly sat up and climbed over his friend to get out of bed. While Hanai was glad that he could contribute to Tajima's preparations for school, the boy had been the reason why he had barely gotten any shut-eye the previous night, so he couldn't share his level of enthusiasm for now.

Struggling to stay awake, he sat up as well and watched Tajima get ready for school, trying hard to keep the previous night off his mind. Once Tajima was fully dressed and had gathered all his things, Hanai slipped out of bed as well and guided his guest to the kitchen.

As expected, Hanai's mother had known about Tajima staying over. She had come to

Azusa's room to check on the boys the previous night, and when she had found them passed out in bed from studying, she had decided to ask Tajima's parents if they minded him staying over. It wasn't often that Hanai had friends over, after all, and it had been getting late already anyway.

When the boys reached the kitchen the next morning, she had prepared a big breakfast and bento box for Tajima to take to class, that he excitedly accepted with thanks. He already had to rush to avoid being late for school, so there was no way he could have had the time to drop by at home to prepare his own, and spending an entire day of school without a proper lunch was a terrible thought.

Tajima thanked her again for letting him stay over before Hanai ushered him to the front door.

"Thanks for your help yesterday!" Tajima seemed in a really good mood again and offered Hanai a broad grin. Well, *he* hadn't been the one who had been kept awake all night because of a particular *someone*. Hanai tried to not blame him for having barely gotten any sleep himself - Tajima had been asleep, so it wasn't like he had done it on purpose, after all - but he couldn't wait to get back to bed. On his own.

"Thanks for visiting", responded Hanai and meant it. As exhausting as Tajima's visit had been, he had also appreciated it a lot.

Tajima promised to visit again soon, then ran off to make it to school on time. Hanai closed the door and heaved a deep sigh.

He wanted nothing more than to just go back to sleep and was already heading down the hallway to his room when his mother's voice called him back.

"Azusa, honey?" Hanai stopped in his tracks and made a tired hum to let her know he was listening. "Take good care of your friend, alright? He's a good kid."

The request was odd, especially since the friend in question was Tajima who was always upbeat and full of energy in the first place, and had plenty of other friends looking out for him. He was too sleepy to question his mother's sudden concern though, and decided to just go with it.

"Yeah, alright."

With a nod, he resumed his way to head straight back to bed. He would ask his mother what she had meant after he had finally gotten some well-deserved rest. For now, the wish to sleep ranked foremost his thoughts.

Well, right after Tajima and his visit. *I wonder how that English summary of his turned out. Did he ever finish it?*

He gave the question his last thought. Then his head touched the pillow and he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Kapitel 3: Beat

A bead of sweat formed at the batter's temple. Growing, it clung onto the skin until it grew too heavy and tumbled down his cheek to hit the floor. Determined eyes stared at the opposing pitcher, getting ready for his pitch on the mound. His breaths were deep and heavy. Everything depended on this moment. The air stood still and even the audience had fallen into silence.

It was the bottom of 9th inning of the Saitama Summer Tournament's finale and ARC Academy High School was leading 9:6.

Runners were tensely waiting on second and third. The scoreboard signalled two outs. One more and Nishiura's last offense this tournament would be over. Along with their chance to go to this year's Koshien.

They were so close, though... If only they managed to win back the lost points and turn the game around... Hanai's hands tightened around the bat.

Everything depended on him now.

The sensation of his bat connecting with the ball shot through the teenager and his eyes widened with excitement as he watched the orb shoot to the other end of the field. The next moment he broke into a sprint to 1st base. *So close.* It had almost been a homerun.

But had it been good enough?

Before he could stop safely at 1st base an excited yell from his teammates urged him to keep on running. They believed he could make it to 2nd and he trusted them. Giving it his all, he threw himself at the base, just before the baseman caught the ball.

"He's safe!"

A relieved gasp shot past his lips. He turned towards the roaring cheer coming from the dugout, then his gaze moved up to the scoreboard. It took a moment for him to process what had just happened.

His shot had not only given himself the time to move all the way over to 2nd but to bring both Izumi and Sakaeguchi home. The score was 9:8 now. They were only one point behind. His heart raced with adrenaline, excitement and newfound hope.

They actually stood a chance again. His batting had allowed them to score two more points and now they had almost caught up again.

Two more points, then keep the other team from scoring. If they could do that, they would be going to Koshien.

The teenager closed his eyes and drew a deep breath to calm himself down. He needed to stay focused if they wanted to win this. But they *could* win this.

Tajima was up next. Hanai readied himself to move on to 3rd base the moment the ball would connect with the bat.

The first pitch was a strike. The second a ball. Then Tajima swung. He connected with the ball. It flew across the field, then hit the ground. Hanai sprinted, reached 3rd and stopped. It seemed like the opponents had a hard time getting to the ball but Hanai wanted to play it safe. They were too close to take risks now.

He glanced back and froze in shock as the ball and Tajima reached 2nd base simultaneously. How had Tajima gotten to 2nd so fast? Why hadn't he played it safe and stopped at 1st? Had he gotten to the base before the ball had? *Or was he out?*

The stadium was filled with suffocating silence. No one dared to make a sound lest they missed the umpire's verdict that would decide whether the game had come to an end or they could carry on. Hanai's heart was in his throat, eyes set on the man in black. *Please*, the captain begged. *Please let him be safe*. The game couldn't be over yet. Not after they had almost turned it around. Not now, that Koshien was closer than ever, almost in their reach. Not now, that Hanai had finally played well enough to carry his team to victory. Not n-...

"Out!"

The audience's excited roar flooded the air. ARC Academy High School had won the tournament, beating Nishiura 9:8. The winning team assembled on the field forming a huge cluster of hugging, cheering and celebrating people. Backs were patted, compliments were uttered.

Hanai stood numbly on the field, the feeling he was falling down a bottomless pit paralyzing his body.

This was it. They had lost their chance to go to Koshien once again. When his body began shaking, Hanai realized that he had forgotten to breathe and drew in a shaky gasp. They had been so close... He looked up and saw Tajima still standing on 2nd base. His empty eyes mirrored exactly how Hanai felt. He looked terrible. It made Hanai wonder if he looked the same.

He allowed himself to look back to the dugout to see the rest of their team still processing what had just happened, their gazes as numb as Tajima's. *Damn it!* Seeing them like this tore the team's captain apart and he reminded himself of his role. If anyone had to keep it together, it was him.

"Tajima!" He called to the other player who still hadn't moved an inch after the game had ended. The eyes that looked up to meet his had a strange look in them and Hanai felt his chest tighten.

"Come on, let's go."

He turned and jogged towards the dugout to assemble the rest of his team. Seeing their shock and disbelief worsened the feeling in his gut but he knew he needed to keep a straight face. He was their captain, after all. At least for now he needed to stay strong for them...

"Hey, guys. Let's go thank the other team."

...no matter how terrible he felt.

...

The post-game meeting had come and gone. The general mood had been gloomy but the players had tried to pull themselves together and make the best out of the defeat they had suffered that day. If nothing else, they could learn from it and use it to improve for the next tournaments. Plans for future competitions had been consolidated and the goal to go to - and win - next year's Koshien had been set.

No one had dared speaking against it, despite the blow the team's ego had taken that day - they all knew they couldn't do anything but look towards the future with hope and determination, after all. Enough tears had been shed after the game and on the bus ride home.

"So let's consider this a learning experience and do our best next time." Hanai closed the meeting and his teammates answered in accord. They still missed their spark

though, the captain noted, himself included, and he decided he could do better.

"Let's win the next tournament!" He gave it another try, volume raised and conviction in his voice.

"LET'S!!"

The team answered in unison and their captain exhaled a sigh of relief. The teammates seemed to have regained their fighting spirit and their downhearted faces lit up with new hope. It warmed Hanai's chest with a fuzzy feeling. Losing the tournament had been hard, but seeing his friends disappointed and depressed had been the worst about it. It had made him realize just how much they meant to him.

It had only been a year ever since they had become a team but Hanai knew that he would do anything for them. Not that he would ever put himself in the embarrassing position of actually voicing his feelings, but the cleanup hitter decided that he would do everything to lead them to victory during the next tournament. This team deserved it.

They gathered their bikes to head home and Hanai noticed that someone was missing. He turned to Abe whose bike was parked next to his.

"Hey, where's Tajima?"

"He said it's his turn to do chores at home today, so he left as soon as the meeting was over."

"After a baseball game? That's rough!" Izumi joined in the conversation, his bike already readied by his side.

"I hope he's alright." They turned to Sakaeguchi who had walked up to them as well. "I mean, it must be rough, being the last out of a game. I know I felt awful when it happened to me during our game against Kanazawa High."

"He knows we don't blame him though, right?" Suyama added, moving next to Sakaeguchi. "It could have happened to anyone, and it's not like he was responsible for the other outs."

"Yeah, but it's still a pretty bad feeling." Sakaeguchi looked down at his feet.

There was a moment of silence.

All of them knew how hard-working Tajima was and how much they relied on his skills during games. If they had each played a little better, perhaps avoided at least one of the outs in the last inning... perhaps they could have taken away some of the pressure they had inadvertently placed on their teammate's shoulders and helped him lead them to victory instead. They regretted not having been able to support Tajima better.

"L-Let's all work extra hard from now on, then." Mihashi suggested, fidgeting nervously when all eyes turned to him. "So that Yuu-kun won't feel so pressured anymore."

Mihashi spoke out what everyone had been thinking and the approval showed on their faces.

"That's a great idea, Ren!" Sakaeguchi gave his back a comforting pat. "Let's do that. For Yuuichiro."

"For Yuuichiro!" The rest of the team joined in and Hanai understood that he wasn't the only one who saw his teammates as more than just people he played ball with. They were family and they all had each other's backs. Yes, he was going to work his hardest so that the next tournament would end in victory - but he wasn't doing this on his own. The entire team was going to work harder - to support each other and make

sure no one would be left with the pressure of having to carry the game ever again. A soft smile rested on his lips as Hanai readied his bike to leave. *His team was amazing.*

The group was almost off the school grounds when the captain glanced back and stopped his bike.

"Hey guys, go on ahead. I want to check on something."

"Are you sure?" Sakaeguchi stood as well and looked back at Hanai questioningly. "We could wait for you."

"Nah, it's getting late and it's been a long day. I'll see you guys at practice tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, alright..." His teammate didn't seem too convinced but probably was too exhausted to insist any more. It had been a very long and exhausting day, after all, and they were all looking forward to their beds. "See you tomorrow!"

Hanai waved goodbye, then turned around and headed back to school, where something had caught his attention.

The place where they had all parked their bikes before was empty but the captain had noticed a single bike standing further away, leaning against the chain-link fence of the baseball field, and couldn't shake the feeling that he should investigate the matter.

...

Despite the darkness, he could make out the baseball stickers on the blue frame which left little room for doubt who the bike belonged to. The realization stirred some concern. Hadn't Tajima said that he was needed at home and had left right after the meeting?

Led by apprehension, Hanai moved towards the baseball field, where he indeed found a sparky-haired silhouette sitting on a bench in the moonlit darkness.

"Tajima?"

The silhouette flinched, obviously caught off guard by the other's presence, but didn't turn to look at him.

"Hey."

"...What are you doing here? Abe told me you had to go home right after the meeting."

Tajima continued to stare at the empty field and avoid the other's gaze, which bothered Hanai more than he let on. This wasn't like Tajima at all. "They told me it's fine for me to skip chores today since we had a game."

"Well, alright. Why didn't you come back to ride home with the rest of us, then?"

Despite the unsatisfactory answer, Hanai tried to calmly get a grasp of the situation. It would be no use if Tajima got defensive because he thought Hanai wasn't even trying to understand.

The explanation that followed was as unsubstantial as the first anyway.

"I felt like coming here. Sorry." Tajima's voice sounded pressed and Sakaeguchi's statement came to Hanai's mind.

'It must be rough, being the last out of a game. I know I felt awful when it happened to me-...'

There was no doubt that Tajima had been acting off ever since the game and,

considering what had happened, Hanai strongly suspected him to be feeling the same way Sakaeguchi had described.

Was he blaming himself for their loss? Sure, his last move had been reckless but everyone knew that he had only done it because he had believed he could do it. That he could bring victory a little closer to the team. That he could help them get to Koshien. He had done it *for them*.

And Hanai was certain that, on another day, he probably would have succeeded, too. No one blamed Tajima for the out - the exception being himself, as it seemed - and Hanai stepped closer in concern.

"Hey, are you okay?" Tajima's eyes were locked on the baseball field. Hanai hadn't even seen him blink yet.

"Yeah." The answer was short and unconvincing.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine!"

There was an annoyance in Tajima's raised voice Hanai had never heard before but, despite his intent to be understanding, the reaction bothered him too much to stay calm.

"You don't *look* fine!" Hanai disagreed loudly, now irritated as well. It had been a terribly exhausting day for him too.

"So what!" Finally Tajima turned his head to look at him, anger glinting in his reddened eyes. "You've been looking terrible since the game too and you don't see me commenting on it!"

The statement took the captain aback. He had been trying not to let his exhaustion show but Tajima had noticed anyway, despite his own miserable state?

"Listen, I'm just worried about you!"

"No, you're not!" Before Hanai could react Tajima jumped to his feet and grabbed him by his jacket. He had never seen the other so upset before and an unwell feeling knotted in his stomach.

"Tajim—"

"You don't get to worry about me! Not after I lost us the game!"

"Hey, that's not tr—"

"Not true? You almost hit a home run! You managed to send two players home and got yourself to second! Your play turned everything around so that we were only one point behind and if I hadn't been so stubborn and run over all the way to second too, then we-..."

The hands on his jacket started shaking and finally Hanai managed to overcome the surprise over his friend's reaction. Tajima, of all people, was having a breakdown.

"We could've-..."

"Hey, Taj-..."

"I ruined our chance to go to Koshien, Hanai!" The eyes that stared up the captain no longer held anger but an expression that pierced right into his heart and, before he could think about it, he pulled Tajima into a tight hug.

Silence fell upon them, none of them saying a word as they stood in the darkness. Hanai was about to doubt he did the right thing, when his friend's arms suddenly wrapped around his torso and held onto him as well.

Left speechless, he carefully rubbed Tajima's back to comfort him.

For some reason Hanai recalled something his mother had said to him a few weeks

ago; something he had forgotten, caught up in preparations for exams and the upcoming tournament, but that made him wonder if the woman had seen a situation like this coming.

'Take good care of your friend, alright?'

Hanai looked down at the spiky-haired boy and remembered how, even in his sleep, holding on to another person had calmed Tajima down when he had been restless. Perhaps this hug was the best way he could help his friend at the moment, he pondered, and squeezed the trembling body a little tighter against himself.

"No one thinks you're responsible for our defeat today, you know." He finally managed to speak lowly, his words just loud enough for Tajima to hear. "As much as it pains me to admit it, you're by far the best player on our team... but you're still only human and that means that sometimes you'll mess up, too. Honestly, I'd go crazy if you never did. I mean, I mess up all the time and the team still lets me bat cleanup for them. So what if you messed up today? It happens! If we all hadn't messed up as well, there wouldn't have been two outs before you even entered the batter's box in the first place. We're all responsible for the result of today's game, so we'll work harder *together* to make it right next time!"

Tajima had stopped shaking, Hanai noticed with relief and released a deep breath.

"Especially the rest of the team and I. We've always been relying on you to get us out of tricky situations after we messed up, without realizing the kind of pressure that must've put on you, so we've decided to go our best to improve and take some of that weight off your shoulders. Sure, it's nice to feel trusted and relied on, but it's also more than should be asked of one single player. No one's perfect, so we should work on our own skills more instead of relying on someone else to fix the mistakes we made. So yeah. No one's blaming you, man, so please don't be mad at yourself."

"..t I ..nt t.. b... kt..."

"What?" Hanai loosened his hold and leant back a bit so that Tajima's words wouldn't be lost in his jacket again.

"But I want to be perfect," Tajima repeated, finally looking up at his teammate again, and Hanai was so distracted by the life that had finally returned to his look, that the words took a moment to sink in. When they did, the captain's brows lowered to a mildly annoyed frown.

"Of course you do. Who doesn't? But that's no reason to take on the blame when you're not, for once. No one can *always* be perfect."

"I can!"

"No, you can't! Everyone makes mistakes!"

"I'll work even harder not to!"

"Your goal is to never make mistakes again...?" Hanai sighed. How could Tajima even say such a ridiculous thing?

"Yep! And one day I'll manage to be perfect, just watch me!"

"Yeah, alright." He had given up trying to talk some sense into the other.

"Promise?"

"What?"

"Promise that you'll watch?"

Tajima stared at him intently and Hanai realized that the other was finally back to his

old self. A huge weight fell off his chest and he couldn't stop himself from smiling at the other in relief.

"Okay, I promise."

"Good!"

For the first time since the game, Hanai saw Tajima grin again and though it was night and the baseball field was lit by nothing but the moon, it seemed like the warmest and brightest moment of his day.

"Good," Hanai agreed, returning the smile. "But the rest of the team will be there to support you the best we can. Deal?"

"Deal!"

"Alright, then let's head home so we're rested for practice tomorrow."

Finally letting go of the other, Hanai turned towards the exit to get his bike. He felt the long, exhausting day taking its toll on his body already and couldn't wait to finally fall into his warm bed.

His gaze moved over to Tajima who readied his own bike, and he realized how glad he was he had spotted it on his way home. If he hadn't, Tajima probably would still be sitting in the darkness, drowning in self-blame, with no one to talk him out of it.

"Hey, Hanai!"

"H-Huh?" The words startled him out of his thoughts. Had Tajima noticed his staring?

"Yeah?"

"... Thanks."

The sincere smile he was offered caused a strange sensation in his chest and he hoped that his suspicion that Tajima could read thoughts was wrong, because if he could, Hanai needed the ground to open up and swallow him up instantly.

"Anytime", he answered honestly and soon they were going separate ways.

The same thought was lingering in his mind all the way home, during dinner and until he had finally fallen asleep, though.

Why had a simple smile made his heart throb like that?