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# TWISTED DESTINY

# SAMPLE CHAPTER

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# PROLOGUE

As a kid, I never seem to care about sports. If any adults will ask me what kind of sports I like, I will say that I don't have any particular interest in it. Who cares about sports as long as it's fun to play, right? Well, it's a simple philosophy and I live by that rule. Kids in this neighborhood love baseball. So, this is what me and my bestie, Hideki played all the time.

Even until I'm in the first grade, I still can't find any sports that I consider fun to play. Baseball is fun, but I feel like there must be more fun sports to play besides baseball. Teachers in this school find it impressive with the fact that I'm tall even among the first graders. One thing I know for sure is, I'm not the only one who is tall in the first grade. Hideki is tall too. In fact, he's taller than me.

I remember that one of the teachers said to us that we can play basketball when we grow up because of our height. Hideki and I are happy with the compliment. But for me, any sports are the same no matter how different they are. Well, I was wrong until I saw a basketball match for the first time. I stumbled

into the basketball match on TV when I was flipping the channels. By the way, I learned that habit from dad. Whenever he's around, he likes to flip the channels when he's bored.

I have never played basketball in my entire life and neither any of the kids here. Seeing the basketball match for the first time was the reason that got me to keep on watching. Like I said, I never care about sports. But I couldn't stop watching the basketball game until it ends.

Even my sister, Haruka who was still small at that time watched the game with me. The game was between Minagawa Academy from Kanagawa prefecture and another high school from Tokyo. I didn't care about the other school because I was so drawn to one of the players from Minagawa Academy, Takizawa Hayashima.

I could never forget how amazing he was during that game. He was also the one who inspired me to play basketball. Ever since then, I've decided to start playing basketball and go to the same high school as Takizawa Hayashima. Of course, he won't be there by the time I enter the high school. But hey, it's amazing to be in the same school as he is.

The next day, both Hideki and I can't stop talking about the basketball match. None of the kids in the first grade was watching the game. So, they have no idea what we were talking about. "Let's play basketball together. Since none of the kids here want to play basketball, we'll play basketball with just the two of us," I suggest this to Hideki. Hideki nods, agreeing to play basketball and that's the start of our effort to become a basketball player.

Too bad that none of the people here has played basketball. So, there's no one who can teach us on how to play it. But still, it doesn't stop us from learning everything about playing basketball. Mom suggests us to go to the bookstore to find any books that can teach us about basketball. Sure, it's not a good idea to learn by the book, but it's better than not having any guidance at all.

Hideki and I play basketball like this until we're in the third grade. At this point, we won't consider ourselves great. But we do admit that our skills are only

average. If we're in the basketball team, we're better off as a bench-warmer because we're not good enough to be in the starting team.

That's the time we get to know a new kid from Tokyo, Akira Hirakawa. He's just moving from Tokyo and he'll be going to the same elementary school with us. His parents are currently working in the States so he's currently staying with his grandparents. Akira knows a lot about basketball because he played basketball a lot while he was still living in Tokyo.

He's glad to know that he can still play basketball even after moving to Kawasaki. He thought that none of the kids here was playing basketball, so he would feel lonely to play basketball all by himself. Well, he's lucky that he bumps into us since we're the only kids in this neighborhood who plays basketball.

Akira then starts to play with us because he wants to know how good we are. He admits that he's better than us, but I don't believe what he said. I thought that he's saying it just to scare the hell out of us. He may sound cocky, but he's not kidding when he said that. Before we can do anything, he's fast enough to bypass us and shoot the ball. I can't believe it with what I've seen.

"You guys have a strong basic in basketball, but you can never become strong enough to play in the real match." What Akira says pisses me off, but he's right about that. "So, does that mean we won't be able to be in the real match no matter how hard we try?" I ask Akira, feeling disappointed that I could never be able to play in the real game.

"Well, you won't be able to play in the real match if you don't work your ass off. It's that simple," Akira says to us while having the ball spinning on his index finger. Okay, I'm glad that the only thing I need to do is to work hard. I thought that we're doomed for the rest of our life. I look at Hideki and I can see from his eyes that he's also determined to work hard to become a strong player.

Without hesitating, I insist Akira to teach us everything about basketball. Akira smiles and stops playing around with the ball on his finger when I tell him that. "I knew you would say that. Even if you didn't tell me that, I will still going to teach you anyway. It's just that, I want to see how resolved you are."

So, we begin our crash course about basketball with Akira's help. It doesn't take that long for both of us to understand basketball completely since we're already familiar with it. Without realizing, we're now in the fourth grade and we continue with our basketball drill as usual after school.

As we're about to begin, another kids come to the basketball court and are about to approach us. We have never seen them before, so my guess is they're just moving here. They also look alike, so they must be a twin. Both of them smile at us as they come and approach us.

"We thought that we may have to play basketball by ourselves, so it's great to see the kids here play basketball too. Can we play with you guys?" Wow, we have new kids who want to play basketball with us. I'm happy that they want to play with us, but they don't seem like amateurs to me. I can't tell why, but I can feel it from their aura.

Akira seems thrilled to see them. I bet that Akira can also tell that they're not ordinary players. "Well, why not? The number is odd, but you don't mind if there's only two of you on your team, right?" The twin brothers look at each other and one of them gives a definitive answer to Akira. "Sure, we don't mind about that. Even if with just the two of just, I'm pretty sure that you guys will lose. We already knew about that even before the game starts," says one of them.

Akira looks pissed when they said that to us. I've never seen Akira looks this mad before. They sure are confident with their skills. Otherwise, they won't be saying something like that. Maybe they really are good. Now I don't know if it's the right thing to play against them.

Akira looks at me, knowing that I don't have the confidence to challenge them. "Don't worry. I know you can do better than them." Thanks to Akira's word, I feel relieved because I'm so scared that I will screw up. I know that I'm not in the official match, but it's enough to make me nervous. The twin brothers smile, agreeing with Akira's term. So now, our so-called informal match begins.

"Kaoru, let show them what our combo looks like." The other kid smiles and agrees, "Sure, Hikaru. Let them see what we can do even if it's just the two of us." The twin brothers seem confident that they can beat us with just the two of them.

Well, they remind me a lot of Akira when we met him for the first time, though. He did the same thing to us when he met us for the first time. And now, the twin brothers are doing the same thing to him.

When the game begins, Akira is the one who has the ball at first, but the ball ends up with one of the twins. We have no idea when they have the ball. And then he passes the ball to the other twin so then he can make a shot. Even Akira didn't even realize when they had the ball. It seems that they're good with stealing the ball from him.

I'm hoping that he will miss the shot, but no, the ball goes into the hoop. As I've expected, they're not ordinary players. The boy laughs after the shot goes in, apologizing to us for being cocky.

"I don't mean to become cocky with you guys. We can't help but want to show you the wrath of our combo. We hope you don't mind about that." We're too shocked to react because we thought that they want to challenge us so badly. It turns out to be that's their way of greeting us. Akira sounds pissed because he thought that they can be a new rival for us.

"I'm Hikaru Kitazawa. This is my brother, Kaoru. We're twin and we've just moved here from Sapporo. We have been playing basketball since we were kids. We have also participated in a few tournaments while we were still living there." Well, they don't seem like a nasty kid to me. So, we allow them to play together once we introduced ourselves. Ever since then, we play basketball together after school. We don't have a basketball club in our school. So, we play basketball on our own after the school is over.

Fourth grade and fifth grade are wonderful years for me because this is when I feel like we're a complete team. At this moment, I feel like we can become a strong team and play together until we enter the middle school. Even if the school that we go doesn't even have a basketball club, we'll just go and form a new club. That's how determined I am to have everyone plays together.

Well, that's what I thought until we're about to enter sixth grade. Hideki, Akira, Hikaru, and Kaoru tell me that they'll be moving out of Kawasaki by the time we enter the sixth grade. Akira has to follow his parents to the States and



Hikaru's and Kaoru's family will be moving to Osaka. Even my bestie, Hideki is leaving me because his family is moving to Yokohama.

Before they leave Kawasaki, we've decided to see each other again for the last time in the basketball court we used to play. During that time, we remain silent while gazing at the sky. It's such a beautiful night, so it's such a waste for us to gaze at the sky while not saying anything at all. Akira becomes pissed because none of us had said anything ever since we were here.

"Look, I know it's my idea that we should see each other for the last time, but you don't have to act cold like we don't even know each other. What's got into you guys?" Akira asks us, looking so puzzled with our behavior. I don't feel like saying anything, even though I should tell them what's bottling in my mind.

"Okay, fine! I guess I should be the one who needs to start first," Akira says with a pissed look on his face while scratching his head. He's tired of us because of our lack of response. "It's only a few years we play basketball together. And to be honest, I enjoy playing with you guys. If I could choose, I really want you guys to be my teammates no matter what. But I know that's not going to happen."

What Akira said has caught our attention. We can't help but to listen to what he's going to say. "I know it's weird for me to say this, but I don't think we're meant to be a teammate. From what I see, we're better off as a rival," Akira says to us without camouflaging any of his word. So, all this time, Akira thinks we're a rival and never a teammate? How can it be possible? I find it hard to believe with what Akira had said just now.

"So yes, I'm pretty sure that we'll see each other again, not as a teammate, but as a rival instead. I bet that it's going to be fun when the time comes," Akira says to us, with a smile carved on his face. It seems that Akira enjoys the fact that we've become his rival instead of his teammate. To be honest, I don't want to be his rival, especially not after we've been playing together for so long.

Akira then looks at me and Hideki. "As for the two of you, I can't picture myself seeing you guys becoming a rival. For me, it feels odd to see you and Hideki on the opposing team. So, I think you're the only one that I think will be



on the same team.” I don’t know whether I should be happy or not, but I still don’t like the idea that we’ll be a rival in the future.

“Maybe you’re right about that. But for the time being, Takumi and I will become rivals when we’re in the middle school,” Hideki replies back to Akira with a faint smile, “But then again, I have no doubt that the time where Takumi and I are in the same team will eventually come true. I don’t deny that possibility though.” Well, I do feel a bit relieved to hear Hideki’s response. But I still can’t sink myself with the thought of meeting him as a rival.

“Well, I also have the same feeling that we’ll see each other again as a rival. Besides, I always want to fight head-to-head with you for real,” Hikaru says to Akira while placing a piercing gaze at him. “Heh, bring it on!” Akira says to Hikaru, trying to provoke him. “We’ll save that for our future fight then,” Hikaru says, “Let’s go, Kaoru. We’re leaving.” Both Hikaru and Kaoru leave without saying anything.

Our meeting that night left a bitter taste to me despite the rest of them seems to look forward to competing against each other. I don’t look forward to it because that’s the last thing I had in mind. To be honest, I don’t want to compete against them. It’s not because I’m not confident enough to win. It’s just that, I don’t want to fight with someone who I have played in the past. It’s too much for me to accept that.

Because of that, I’ve decided to quit basketball because I don’t want to face them as my rivals. After my encounter with Makoto, I realized that I could never stop playing basketball because of how much I love it. As a result, I’ve made peace with myself that I need to suck it up and fight them, even if I’m reluctant to do it.

During the basketball tournament for middle school, I have to fight against both of them when I was in the third year in the middle school. It was painful at first, but then it’s no longer a big deal to me anymore. This is when I realize that fighting against your best friends isn’t as bad as I think. In fact, it makes me want to strive better.

But still, I prefer not to fight them if I can choose. I'm glad that Hideki and Makoto have decided to enter the same high school as I am, but I don't think I can feel relieved just yet. I still have to face Hikaru, Kaoru and Akira in the future. Sure, we can be buddies outside of the court, but we're rivals when we're inside the court.

I'm amazed that Hideki and Makoto can do this just fine, but I really can't do it just like them. It's just way too painful for me to do it. There's nothing I can do at this moment other than believing that it's my fate to face them as a rival.

# CHAPTER ONE

“Man, high school sure is different than the middle school.” I’m somewhat in awe with the high school environment when I’m talking to Hideki. Hideki just smiles without saying anything. He knows that I’m always like this since we were in the elementary school. I think my expression isn’t that different back then.

This spring, we’re now a high school student. And we’re also entering the same high school, Minagawa Academy. It feels great to be able to enter the same high school as Takizawa Hayashima.

Most importantly, it feels even more amazing to have Hideki around. Hideki isn’t just my best friend. He’s also one of the teammates that I can count on. That explains why I want him to be on my side so badly. I don’t want the same thing to happen between me and Hideki when we were in the middle school, where I had to face him as a rival. Damn you, Akira. I never thought that your premonition has come true. It gives me a chill down to my spine when I think about it.

This year, Hideki and I are in the same class. So, it’s easier for us to go to the basketball practice together. “Hey, you’ll be joining the basketball team too, right?” I ask Hideki just to make sure that I’m not the only one who will be joining the team. “Of course I will. What else can I do besides basketball? There’s no point for

me to be here if I don't want to join the basketball team," Hideki chuckles when he says that to me.

Well, Hideki has a point there. What's the point of entering Minagawa Academy if he doesn't even have the intention to join the basketball team, right? Hideki just laughs at me because of my silly question. I shouldn't have asked him that question because I already know what his answer is going to be.

"I can't wait for the school to end so we can go straight to the gym after that." That's how enthusiastic I am with basketball. Now I sound like my old friend, Takeru Mikoshiba. He was my classmate when we were in the middle school. Just like me, he was always so enthusiastic about the basketball practice. It seems like now I have become somewhat like him and annoy the hell out of Hideki.

As I'm busy talking with Hideki, I suddenly sense an unpleasant aura as someone walks by us. I can't tell who it is, but it does feel unpleasant. At that time, I can hear that someone is muttering something even though it's only a faint voice. "Takumi Ichirou, 188cm. Power forward in Takamiya Private Middle School basketball team."

Yes, I'm pretty sure I hear that right. That person is muttering about me. Who in the world is that? I immediately stop talking to Hideki once I heard the muttering, but that person is nowhere to be seen. "I can hear that someone was muttering about me, like that person wants to curse me or something."

I sound panicked when I told Hideki about this. But Hideki shrugs, telling me that I must have imagined things. I wish I was imagining things, but it feels spooky. "Maybe that guy could be one of your rivals when we were in the middle school? Well, it's not surprising if he still has the sentiment towards you," Hideki convinces me trying not to think too much about it.

Maybe I shouldn't be too concerned about that. Hideki and I head back to our class because the class is about to begin anytime soon. I still can't get over the muttering because it feels so odd to have someone cursing me. How can I remain calm if that person is trying to make my life doomed for the rest of my life?

I can't help but talk to Hideki about it during the break. "Okay, why don't you try to recall who might want to curse you so badly? I can only think of your past

rivals because they might resent you so much.” I can’t think of anyone in my mind because back then, I was so focused on facing Hideki and Makoto. I wouldn’t care about anyone else because they weren’t worth my attention.

“After a long thought, I can’t seem to think of anyone at all.” I sigh as I’m about to give up on thinking of the possible candidates who wants to curse me. Hideki is busy munching on the yakisoba bread he purchased just now in the cafeteria. I don’t have the mood to eat anything because I’m too occupied with that person.

“Here, eat this. It’s not good to think too much about it. Besides, we have to fuel our body for the basketball practice.” Hideki hands me the energy bar as he’s trying to nudge me to eat something. “Why do you have an energy bar in your pocket? Do you always bring this around with you?”

Hideki laughs when I ask him that question. “Well, it’s a backup for me in case I can’t get my hands on the yakisoba bread here. I heard that the yakisoba bread in this school is delicious, so I was worried I wouldn’t be able to buy it. They said that you have to be quick if you want it because the yakisoba bread sold out pretty fast here.”

I think I can imagine that Hideki may only eat yakisoba bread for the rest of his high school year. I’m not surprised at all because he was always like this when we were in the elementary school. After school, he would always buy some pieces of melon breads on our way back home. On top of that, he did it without fail and never missed it even a day.

“Wait, do you happen to buy extra pieces of yakisoba breads? I don’t think you bought only one, do you?” Hideki seems surprised when I ask him that, never expecting me to ask him that kind of question. “Of course I do. I’m saving it for the time before we’re heading to the gym.” I knew it that he would buy more than one. I bet that the yakisoba bread was sold out in the first place because of him.

Even after many rounds of convincing by Hideki, I still can’t keep my mind off from the muttering. I’m sure that I’m not imagining things. Even if there is someone who has a sentiment towards me, why would he choose this school? My only reason for choosing this school is because of Takizawa Hayashima. And I

don't care about anything else. Okay, another reason for me to choose this school is because it's just a walking distance from grandma's house.

Damn, I can't stop thinking about it no matter what. I wish I can concentrate in the class, but I don't think I can right now. I find it hard to believe that the faint voice muttering about my stat is enough to drive me crazy. Hideki who is sitting behind me notices that I'm still thinking about the muttering.

I'm glad that school is over because I can't wait to hit the gym. I hope that the sweat session is enough for me to forget that silly muttering. Who would have thought that a muttering is enough to drive me crazy for the whole day? "You want a red bean bun?" Hideki passes the red bean bun to me as we're about to head to the gym.

"Thanks." I don't feel that hungry, but since Hideki offers me the red bean bun, I guess I should just grab it and have a quick bite. "You're still bothered with the muttering?" Hideki asks me when he's in the middle of indulging the yakisoba bread. "Yeah, I still do."

Both of us become silent for a while as both of us are still indulging with the food when we're on our way to the gym. "Hmm, maybe you can recall who that is when we're in the gym? If that guy resents you so much, he's definitely going to be there in the gym. Well, unless he quits basketball altogether."

Okay, that's a good idea. Why didn't I think of that? I can bet that this guy wants to seek revenge on me so badly that I'm sure we'll cross the path one way or another. "Hmm, that's not a bad idea. Maybe I should go and have a look when we're at the gym."

When we reach the gym, some of the new and senior members are already here. "Do you recognize any of them?" Hideki whispers to me when we're inside the gym. "Nope, I didn't recognize any of them. These members might be just a bench warmer during the game. No matter how forgetful I am, I will remember everyone that I have faced during the game back then."

This is getting weirder than I thought. I thought that I may have recognized any of them who may have a huge sentiment on me, but there are none! "You know, a strong player like you tends to forget those who have lost to you. Are you

sure you can remember them all? Maybe that guy slipped under the radar without you realizing it.”

What Hideki says makes sense to me. Maybe I did forget people who I have defeated in the past. If you’re worthy of my opponent, I will remember you even if you have lost to me. But then again, I didn’t recognize any of them.

The captain, Ryou Takahashi comes while I’m still busy detecting the guy who wants to curse me so badly. “New members, please line up in one line. After that, tell me your name, which school you came from and your position in the past,” says Senior Takahashi in a loud and clear voice.

I’m trying to recognize any of them when they introduce themselves, but I’m positive that I have never fought any of them in the past. They must be in the different block when we had a basketball tournament for the middle school. As far as I know, some of these schools were the schools that Hideki had fought in the past. But why the guy is cursing me instead of him? I have nothing to do with this!

After everyone is done with introducing ourselves, Senior Takahashi has something to say to us. I thought that he’s going to say things like we’re going to become the champion for the Inter High and Winter Cup, yadda, yadda. Well, that’s what I said to my teammates when I was the captain. But it seems like he has something different to share with us. It doesn’t look like he’s going to give us a usual, cliché speech like I’m used to listening to.

“I don’t know why you choose this school. But still, I’m grateful from the bottom of my heart for coming here. This year, I’m happy that we have two strong players who used to compete head-to-head in the past to be on our team.” Okay, this guy is talking about me and Hideki. I can see that the rest of us are in awe with us. Though, I don’t see anything special about that.

“I’m sure that you’re already aware of this. Minagawa Academy used to be one of the Best 8 in Japan, but we’re no longer in the list anymore. Our rank had slipped down when our coach, Hideo Toshimitsu passed away because of a heart disease. Even though I was only a first-year student at that time, I felt that it was my responsibility to restore the team into its glorious state. Initially, I thought



that it was impossible. But I think we can when we have Ichirou and Nakamura on our team.”

I knew it. They’re counting on us to restore the team like it used to be. It feels great to shoulder that responsibility, but I have no idea either how we can do that. “Besides Ichirou and Nakamura, there’s another person we need to bring back the team’s glorious era. Too bad, she’s not here yet.”

Before Senior Takahashi continues any further, a girl is barging into the gym out of nowhere. She looks so exhausted like she’s been running a mile. “I’m so sorry that I’m late, Senior Takahashi,” the girl says to Senior Takahashi while trying to catch a breath. “Speak of the devil; she’s the one I’m talking about. Anyway, I’d like to introduce you to our new manager, Chiyu Sakuraba. She was from Takasendo Middle School.”

The girl finally regains her composure and starts introducing herself. I don’t know why, but I had this sensation that she might be the one who was muttering when she passed us by. But then again, I was wondering why a girl like her has a sentiment towards me? Have I met her somewhere? I can’t seem to recall whether I’ve met her or not.

Even if I do, how come I forget about her? She’s pretty and she’s my type too. So, there’s no way I can forget a girl like her. Well, I shouldn’t be too self-absorbed about that. The practice begins once she’s done with her self-introduction. The practice isn’t that intense because it’s only a first day. We don’t do anything much other than undergoing the basic training.

During the break, I tell Hideki that Chiyu might be the one who was muttering in a faint voice. “Are you serious?? It can’t be her! She doesn’t even look like someone who wants to curse you.” Dumbass! Why your voice has to be so loud like a loudspeaker? Do you want the rest of them to hear what I’m saying to you? I can’t help but pinch Hideki’s cheek, just to stop him from saying anything loud again. Hideki looks in pain and his cheek becomes red after I did that, though.

Everyone looks at us, feeling somewhat curious because of our odd behavior. “Okay, I know it’s impossible. But I had a feeling that it was her. I may have mistaken her for a guy, but the voice sounded like hers. The only thing that I

don't get is the aura part. I can't sense any unpleasant aura from her when she's here."

Hideki sighs because he still finds it hard to believe that Chiyu was the one who was cursing me all along. "I don't know if this is a good idea, but you'd better ask her when the practice is over. She doesn't look like the kind of person who will do that." Well, that's what I'm planning to do, though. The only thing I need to do right now is to think how I can approach this subject to her. I can't just ask her why she was muttering like she was cursing me.

After the practice is over, I begin to approach her. I wish that I was wrong, but I'm sure that it was her. I'm still wondering what I have done to her that makes her so angry at me. Hideki is tagging along because he's wondering about the same thing too.

"Chiyu, I know this is so sudden...but have we met before?" Wow, that's a great ice-breaking conversation. I can't believe it that I can become a smooth talker when I'm talking to her. I'm expecting that Chiyu will be surprised with my sudden question. But she doesn't look surprised at all. That means we may have met each other somewhere.

"Of course we do. We have met in the basketball court before. That was when our team was against your school. I was the manager for the team. So, it's obvious that I've met you before. It's just that we have never talked to each other. That's all."

I'm surprised that she noticed me! Does that mean she has a crush on me? "Don't get the wrong that I have a crush on you. I knew you because we need to know more about your team before we were going to face you during the game," Chiyu says, looking a bit flustered while convincing me that she never had a crush on me.

Man, she's quick to deny that she was having a crush on me. Come to think of it, she doesn't even look like someone who will have a huge crush on me. If she does, she would rather hide herself instead of passing me by while muttering about my stats.

“So, your school has fought with his school before, right? Do you have some kind of sentiment towards him that you feel like you want to curse him so much?” Hideki, that’s a straight shooter question. I like the way he asks her a question. But why he makes it sounds like I’m a bad guy?

“Hmm, I did have a sentiment towards him.” Whoa there, that is a straight answer I least expect from a girl like her. She admits that she does have a sentiment towards me. “That’s because our team lost, no thanks to Takumi who was always getting in our way. Otherwise, my team would have won the game. But then again, I admit that Takumi was a strong player. So, it shouldn’t be a surprising thing to us.”

Now I remember which team she was talking about. We did have a match with Takasendo Middle School in the past. I remember that Mikoshiba was the one who pointed out that the team that we were going to fight had a pretty manager. I wouldn’t know if Mikoshiba didn’t tell me anything about the team.

Those guys from Takasendo were only average players, but they did manage to give us a hard time. We were wondering what made Takasendo was strong despite only having average players in the team. It turns out to be that Chiyu had a complete data about us. She used the data to match it up with their players’ abilities to increase the odd for them to win the game.

From the logical point of view, it will take forever to train them to be on the same level like us. But they didn’t even need to do that. Thanks to Chiyu’s ability, even an average player can stand a chance against us. She may have a pretty face, but you’d better not underestimate what she can do. Now, she’s here to do the same thing on our team. The only difference is, she has a triumph card in her disposal. Yup, it’s none other than me and Hideki.

“I think that was like when we were in the second year, right? Do you still hate me that much even until now?” I have to ask this because I don’t want her to curse me for the rest of my life. As much as I want to take this matter lightly, I don’t think I can if it’s involving a curse. “Well, not really. There’s no point for me to hate you because we’re now in the same team. We should be working together instead.”

What? How can she be so simple? Before I can ask her, Hideki interjects. “So, you don’t intend to curse Takumi?” Chiyu laughs when Hideki asks her that kind of question. “What?? Why would I want to curse him? It’s true that I was muttering his stats when I saw him. But that’s just my own way to analyze him. I won’t do that to him even if I hate him.”

I can’t help but laugh because of how silly I am. I thought that it was a guy who had a sentiment towards me, but it turns out to be a girl. Not only that, she didn’t mean any harm at all. With Chiyu’s ability, I’m looking forward to seeing what’s going to happen next. I bet that it’s going to be fun.

## CHAPTER TWO

It's been a month since Hideki and I have joined the basketball team. Our goal for this year is to qualify for taking part in Inter High. So, we're working hard to achieve that goal. Despite the vigorous training we have, only a few members decided to quit basketball altogether. I'm grateful that I have teammates who have strong determination.

But still, I wish that we do something else besides the training. I know that training is important to strengthen and correct our basics. But I don't enjoy that much. It will be great if we have a match, even if it's just a match with the seniors.

We don't have a lot of members, so there won't be a match between the second string and the third string. Even if there is, I'm pretty sure that both Hideki and I are not in the second or the third string. I don't mean to sound confident, but I know so well about my own ability. Hideki will agree about this too.

"Man, I wish we can have a match instead of the usual training," I complain to Hideki as we're having our lunch at the rooftop. Hideki is busy with munching the yakisoba bread he bought just now. This guy doesn't look like he will feel sick of eating the yakisoba bread despite eating it since the school starts.

“Yeah, that would be great too. We have been training together since we came here. Now I’d like to see our end result,” Hideki replies after he’s done with munching the yakisoba bread. “You know, even the match between the seniors and the junior members will be awesome too. I wonder do they ever think about it.”

I sigh because if this is going to continue, I’m afraid that I will abandon the team no matter how much I love basketball. I wish I don’t come into that decision, though. Besides, I’d like to know what kind of abilities and skills the other teammates can bring during the game. Even though we’ve been practicing together, I still can’t tell how good they are.

Sure, they may not come from the strong teams, but I still believe that they have something to offer. Who knows they may have become a lot better since entering the high school, even though it seems contradicting. After the training is over, Hideki and I are still in the gym to practice more. We can’t practice together during the training. So, this is the only chance we have.

Whenever we’re staying back, I don’t see any of my teammates are here to practice more. We’re always the last one to leave. So, I’m pretty sure I have never seen any of them. Maybe they may have gone somewhere to practice. I can’t say much about them.

“Speaking about our teammates, what do you think about them? I’m surprised that they’re still here despite the vigorous training.” Hideki laughs when I say that. “Why are you saying like that? If they want to become a strong player, they have to endure it.” I agree with what Hideki said, but I know most people aren’t that strong and willing to work their ass off to achieve their goal.

I knew this because it already happened when I was in the middle school. They already gave up whenever the tide was against them. And they quit when things get tough. I’ve seen this for the past three years I’ve been in the basketball team. It was a common thing to happen. Maybe that kind of situation never happened in Hideki’s team, I guess.

“Well, I bet you’ve never seen that kind of situation in your team before. The reason why they joined a basketball team might be because they were doing it for

fun, or maybe to look cool among the girls. At the end, the one who remains in the team is the only one who loves basketball,” I say this to Hideki. I assume that he had never experienced this before.

“I agree with you. But too bad, I’ve seen the same thing as you do,” Hideki denies my accusation for not seeing a situation like that. Sorry, Hideki, my bad. “Talk about the girls, they were raving about you since the first day of school. You sure do garner a lot of girls’ attention.” Hideki laughs when he says that to me.

Say what? I admit that this is normal since my middle school days, but Hideki is no different too. Whenever we walk together, I can hear that the girls are whispering saying both of us are the cool and the good-looking type. I can feel that they were raving about us. On a second thought, I hope they were not thinking about shipping us. It’s hard to think what the fujoshi had in mind when they see us together.

“Moron, why are you talking about me? Aren’t you the same? The girls are raving about you too. You’re popular among the girls as well.” Hideki laughs at my comment and he doesn’t even deny what I say. So, that means I’m right. No matter how much Hideki tries to deny it, he realized that he’s popular among the girls too. I bet that we’re the only teammates in the basketball team who are popular among the girls.

School hour is passing by rather quickly. And now it’s time for us to head to the gym for another round of basketball training. I think maybe I should come up with a specific training menu for myself and do the training on my own. Now, I’m getting sick of undergoing the same training no matter how important the training is to them.

When we enter the gym, I notice that my teammates look so worried. They have never acted like this before. So, I assume that they must have received a bad news. As we’re about to get ready for the training, Chiyu approaches us. She looks giddy when she comes to us.

“I have good news for you,” Chiyu says to us, “Senior Takahashi wants to do a practice match between the juniors and the seniors. He wants to see how ready



you are for the Inter High preliminaries. Even though this is only a practice match, just come with whatever you've got."

Wait, did I hear it right? Are we going to have a practice match with the seniors? This is the moment I've been waiting for. Finally, we're in to have fun. Hideki seems hesitating. But I know that deep down, he's also as excited as I am. I can't wait for the game to start. Now I know why the rest of us look worried.

"The captain wants to see how good you are so much. But I already know the outcome for this match," Chiyu says to us, feeling confident on what's going to happen in the end. "Hey, the game hasn't even started. And yet, you told me that you already know the outcome? Are you thinking that we're going to lose to the seniors?" I can't help but piss at Chiyu's remark.

"That's not what I'm talking about. Whether you win the game or not, it doesn't matter. Didn't I say that before? Senior Takahashi just wants to see how good you are in the team. The rest is not important. He has seen you how you perform back then. He's just curious how good you are when you and Hideki are in the same team. That's all," Chiyu sighs when she tells us her point of view.

I'm relieved that's what Chiyu is referring to. I thought that she wants to look down on us, thinking that we won't win against the seniors. Some of the seniors are not here yet. The game will begin once everyone is here.

When Senior Takahashi is here, we gather before the practice match begins. "As you're already aware, we don't have a lot of members in this team. This practice match is only meant for you to prepare yourself for the preliminaries. Who knows you may need to be in the game if there's anything happened to the regular members during the game. Even though this is only a practice match, I don't want any of you to treat it like it's nothing. I want you to give your best."

Most of us become restless because they feel like they're not ready to be in the official game. Just like them, I'm also feeling restless because I don't know what to expect during the preliminaries. I don't have anything to say other than to brace myself for what's coming next and the outcome.

Before the game begins, I'm giving a quick talk to them because I don't want the same thing happen to me again when I was in the middle school. "Okay, listen

up everyone. I don't know if we can beat the seniors, but that will be good if we can. Just do your best and don't mind about it if you screw up. Hideki will help us with the offense and the defense inside the goal area. As for me, I'll do what I can for the offense. If you're not confident with your shooting, just pass the ball to me. Like I said, don't worry too much if you make mistakes."

We cheer as loud as we can to get ourselves fired up for the match. This ritual is important because we need to get ourselves hyped up before the game begins. "Oh, I need to tell you guys this before we go," I pause for a moment before I continue, "Don't even think about giving up until the game is over." I have to say this because I don't want their negative thoughts to hinder their ability. I know it's not easy to mute your negative thoughts. But I hope that they're able to do it.

"You sound like a real captain, Takumi," Hideki tells me after we're done with the briefing. I just smile. I think this is what I should be doing even if they don't appoint me as a captain. I don't mind to shoulder the responsibility. And I will still do it if nobody wants me to. Well, I was the captain back then. So, it's a natural thing for me to do.

"What are you talking about? Weren't you the captain of your team before? You sound like you've never become a captain before." Hideki just smiles when I say that to him. "You were like this too back then when we were still playing with Akira, Hikaru, and Kaoru. But then again, they didn't complain at all because your words lifted them up." Hideki, are you telling me that I'm doing the wrong thing even back then?

"I don't know. It feels natural for me to do it. If you're not happy, I'll vote for you to become our next captain next time." Hideki chuckles when I say that. "No, that's okay. I don't enjoy being a captain. So, I'll just pass that idea. I prefer to be the vice-captain, though," Hideki says in a modest tone. "If that's the case, I'll appoint you as a vice-captain if the senior is appointing me to become a captain then."

Hideki and Senior Takahashi gather at the center of the court for the tip-off. I know that Hideki's jump is so powerful because I have seen this when my team was fighting against his team. Let's see who's better during the tip-off.

When the ball is already in the midair, Senior Takahashi and Hideki jump in full power so then one of us will get to control the flow of the game. The tip-off isn't really my thing maybe because my jump isn't powerful enough compared to Hideki. I have experienced being a center in the practice match during the middle school, so too bad that I don't enjoy being a center. I prefer to be on the offensive side which is why I'm the forward in the team.

Hideki manages to grab a hold of the ball and pass it to Hibiki Kudou, one of my teammate who is also a point guard. He used to be a point guard too when he was in the middle school. His dribble and the way he controls the ball is average which makes it less difficult for the seniors to steal the ball from him. Now, the senior already has the ball and we have to switch to defense mode fast enough to get the ball back.

"I'm sorry, Ichirou," Kudou apologizes to me for his mistake. "Don't mind about that. We'll get the ball back before the senior team gets their first score." This is the time that I have to walk the talk because I want the rest of the team to know that I mean what I say. I can blame them if I want to during the game, but it's meaningless to do that. I know it so well that blaming people will only make them lose their fighting spirit.

I've seen this before when I was in the middle school tournament. The ace for the team blamed his teammates even though it was just a petty mistake. I know that mistake is not allowed when your action depends on it, but it's inevitable. Whether you like it or not, you're bound to make mistakes no matter how much you try to avoid it. It's even worse when you keep on telling yourself not to make any mistakes. It gives you a reverse effect instead. So, I don't want any of us gets caught up with the mistake no matter how big it is.

When Senior Sakurai, who is also one of our seniors in the team, is about to shoot when he's in goal area, I'm quick enough to block his shot. One of my teammates gets a hold of the ball and quickly passes the ball to me because he's afraid that the senior will take advantage of him. That's a wise move to do in this situation. I wish that he stopped projecting fear in his own behavior because

experience players can see it through. It's easier to take advantage of the situation if the opponents can sense your fear.

Well, whatever. The ball is in my hand and we're going for a fast break. The first point is ours. That's what I'd like to think, but Senior Takahashi is fast enough to catch up with me. "You're fast, Ichirou. No wonder you're such a most wanted guy." Okay, Senior Takahashi. Are you praising me or making fun of me?

Since Senior Takahashi is here, that means he's going to block me from shooting. I'm not surprised if he intends to do man-to-man defense on me and the other senior will do a screen on Hideki as well. I don't care about it right now. What matters to me now is to get our first score.

Just like what I expect, Senior Takahashi has been eyeing on me from the beginning. He knows that I will block the shot and run off with the ball. He also knows that I'll be the one who is going to shoot first for the team. "Bring it on, Ichirou," says Senior Takahashi as he's guarding me.

His defense is strong too, which leaves me no choice but to shoot. I know this is risky, but I'd like to know how far he can go to guard me against shooting. He jumps as I'm about to shoot but too bad, Senior Takahashi. I've been intending to do a feint from the beginning. Kudou is already there by the time I'm about to shoot.

I bet that Senior Takahashi would assume that I'll score for the team myself and Hideki will be doing the defense all by himself. I admit that the rest of my teammates are average players, but they're still my teammates no matter what. Our belief in each other is what matters the most. That's the reason why I don't hesitate to pass to Kudou because I believe that he can receive the ball. Our basic training has paid off.

"Nice pass, Ichirou," Kudou shouts and begins to shoot a three-pointer. At this moment, nobody is defending him because the rest of the seniors are keeping an eye on both of us. With no one guarding him, Kudou can shoot a three-pointer without much problem. Despite no one comes and block his three-pointer, the ball doesn't go inside the hoop. The ball only hits the hoop instead.

Well, I already know what to do next. If Kudou's shot doesn't go in, I can only get the rebound, but it's impossible for me to do it because of Senior Takahashi's defense. Because of his defense, it's hard for me to do a screen-out. I'm at the disadvantage right now because I don't have the best position for myself to get the rebound.

Suddenly, I hear a loud smash. It turns out to be that Hideki who gets the rebound and does a dunk. Thanks to Hideki, we're the first to score in the game. "Nice rebound, Hideki," I say to him as we're doing a high five. Hideki just smiles because he successfully gets the rebound for the team. "That's amazing, Ichirou. Your teamwork with Nakamura and the rest of your team is so good," says Senior Takahashi who sees how good we work together.

"Well, what do you expect? I can work well with everybody as long as we work together and trust each other. Basketball isn't a one-man sport. It's normal for me to make full use of my teammates, right?" Wow, well said to Senior Takahashi. "I knew it. You really are able to work well with the rest of your team." Senior Takahashi leaves us as we're about to get ready to switch to the defense mode.

The game continues with each of us fight to win the game. Our game play becomes more aggressive whenever the gap becomes wider. As much as we want to win this game, fun is the one that triumphs over our desire to win. Maybe they're just like me who don't fancy doing training for the whole day. It's being in the game that makes us feel the adrenaline rush.

Even if we lose the game, it doesn't matter as long as we're enjoying ourselves. But then again, it's not the case during the preliminaries for Inter High. If we lose the game, we won't be able to play in the next game. And for the rest of the seniors, losing the game will mean it's over. Senior Takahashi is already determined to bring back the glory of this team like how it used to be, so I'm willing to do what I can to grant his wish.

The game ends with the senior team winning the game. Of course, I feel frustrated because of the loss. But I feel different this time. Maybe it has something to do with everyone is doing their best. And the best part is, they don't

give up until the game is over. This is the determination that I have never experienced before. And I can feel it right now. They're maybe average players, but their determination to win the game is something that you can't joke about.

What's more important, I get to know how strong our seniors are. On the surface, they look like the kind of people that you can crush easily. But wait till you face them during the game. I don't have to mention how strong Senior Takahashi is. His defense is as solid as Hideki. He's better than Hideki maybe because Senior Takahashi has more experience than him.

The shooting guard, Senior Miura Sakurai, is also another person that you shouldn't underestimate. Even if the rest of us guard him, he's still able to shoot a successful three-pointer. I can tell that he must have practiced a lot to improve his three-pointer. I bet that it will take Kudou a few more years to improve his accuracy.

Besides them, Senior Sato Yamada who is the point guard is also amazing too. The way he passes the ball looks like how Mikoshiba would pass the ball. If I were going to play together with him during the game, I think I have no problem with receiving a ball from him. I won't deny that he's the one who changed the flow of the game into their favor. What a scary guy! They can be a bunch of fearsome guys too if you let your guard down.

The power forward and the small forward for the team, Senior Okada and Senior Yamamoto aren't that easy to beat too. It's not because of them that the senior team wins the match. It's because they have a strong defense that makes us lose the game. Even if with just Senior Takahashi alone, we were already struggling to stop him.

After the game is over, we have to clean the gym before we head home. When we're done, Chiyu wants us to stay here for awhile because Senior Takahashi has something to say to us. She's complimenting us for our performance during the practice match. "You guys are doing great. I know you'll do just fine, but Senior Takahashi just didn't believe it until he saw it himself how powerful you guys are."

Whoa, Chiyu. Thanks for the praise. I won't deny that it feels great when there's a girl who praised me besides my mom. Senior Takahashi chimes in when we're in the middle of talking with Chiyu. "You guys are amazing. It seems that I've made the right decision to guard you instead of asking Okada to do it. You're so persistent. And I don't think Okada can hold you off any longer. I've seen you played before, so I already expect what you're going to do then."

I can't help but feel happy with Senior Takahashi's compliment thrown at me. "You're amazing too, captain. Even with me and Takumi combined, we were still unable to stop you." Senior Takahashi laughs when he hears what Hideki says.

"Man, I'm happy to hear that someone like you will compliment me. Now you know how good we are, huh? To my surprise, you and Takumi are doing fine when you work together. It feels like this isn't the first time you guys are working together. Your teamwork is so smooth that I find it hard to believe that you were on the opposing team back then."

Well, we have known each other for so long. Of course we can work together just fine. "You may not know this, but Takumi and Hideki are childhood friends. That's why they can work well together," adds Chiyu.

"Is that for real? That's amazing to know. Now you guys are playing in the same team. It must be great to be able to play together again. I'm so envious of you guys," Senior Takahashi laughs when he says that to us. Chiyu just laughs sheepishly when she sees how Senior Takahashi reacts to what Chiyu had said. Who would have thought that Chiyu will do a research about me deeper than my stats and my playstyle.

"I guess that I don't have to hesitate to make you guys as the starting member," Senior Takahashi tells us after he finally stops laughing. What? Hideki and I will become the starting members? Wow, that's amazing. I never expect that Senior Takahashi will make us become the starting members so soon. "So, we're going to have a different training menu for you guys starting tomorrow. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Senior Takahashi leaves after he tells us what's in it for us for tomorrow. I'm so happy that we're heading into the direction we want. Since both Hideki and I



are the starting members, so that means we'll be able to play during the preliminaries. Nothing is happier than becoming a starting member. Well, that's how I define my happiness right now.

Little that I know that I will discover the harsh reality the moment Hideki and I become the starting member. In fact, I have never thought that I will experience the same thing when my childhood friends were going on a separate ways.

## CHAPTER THREE

Ever since the new term starts, I'm always worried that everything will reach a plateau. All this time, I don't do anything much other than practicing together with Hideki after our usual training. That's the only thing we do. I'm worried that what we do may not be enough for us to prepare ourselves for the upcoming preliminaries.

I'm glad that Senior Takahashi has decided to have a practice match between the senior team and the junior team. Otherwise, I doubt that I can keep my sanity if things are progressing slowly. That's more than enough for me to rot in the corner.

Even until now, I still can't forget the adrenaline rush that I've experienced during the practice match. If only we can have another match, but with a different school instead. That will be awesome. "Practice match with another school? That will be awesome!" Hideki says, feeling anticipated with the thought of having another practice match.

"Have you organized a practice match with a different school before?" I ask Hideki, wondering if he has any experience doing something like that. "Nope, we only do rigorous training. I think it's difficult to do something like that in the

middle school.” Neither I nor Hideki has any clue on how to get the other school to have a practice match with us. I guess we can only propose this to Chiyu when we go to the basketball practice.

As soon as we’re in the gym, I make a quick proposal to Chiyu about the practice match. “Well, you’re in luck today. I’m about to announce to everyone that we’ll be having a practice match with another school. So, let’s keep this as a surprise until the captain is here, okay?” Chiyu says to me while making a gesture to keep this as a secret until Senior Takahashi is here.

Whoa, is that for real? It looks like we’re going to have a practice match with another school. I know that Chiyu won’t tell me more which school we will have a practice match with, but I’m curious how strong the school is. It’s meaningless to have a practice match with a school that is almost equal to our strength.

Chiyu seems annoyed when I look skeptical about the school that we’re going to have a practice match with. “Of course the school is a strong school. In fact, they’re one of the Best 8 in Japan. And they’re always participating Inter High without fail every year. You can say that we’re just like them in the past.”

Now, that’s what I’d like to hear. The rest of the team isn’t that enthusiastic, though. They feel anxious only by a minimal clue that Chiyu gave me just now. I bet that they may have asked the same thing before both of us were here. Senior Takahashi comes later with the rest of the third and second-year students. He seems composed when he enters the gym.

“I think you’re already aware that we’ll be having a practice match next month. We will have a practice match with Echizen High. So, they’ll come all the way from Osaka to have a practice match with us.” Everyone suddenly becomes even more anxious when they hear about Echizen High. They find it hard to believe that they will have a practice match with a school like Echizen High.

“Now, we only have about a month to get ourselves ready for the practice match. So, those who are on the starting team will have a different training menu than the benchwarmers for the obvious reason. So, I’d like to begin announcing the name that will be on the starting team.”

We already knew that we'll be in the starting team. But still, it feels amazing when Senior Takahashi announces our names before the practice begins. The rest of my junior teammates don't even bicker at all because they know their own potential well enough. If they want to be in the starting team so badly, then they should work hard towards it. Maybe I'll give them a chance if they really are an amazing player.

So, besides me, Hideki and Senior Takahashi, Senior Sakurai and Senior Yamada are also in the starting team. Before our training begins, Chiyu will be talking to us about our stats and her analysis for the best play for the team. She seems contemplating to tell us about what she had discovered.

"To be honest, it makes me feel uneasy to say this," Chiyu says to us, looking so reluctant to tell us more. "I know that Echizen High is a strong team. So, there's more reason for you to tell us what we need to know about our team," Senior Takahashi says to Chiyu. He's hoping that this will encourage Chiyu to spill it.

Chiyu then starts to tell us how she usually comes up with the best strategy for the team. "Ever since the day my team lost during the game, I began to feel doubtful of my own method of coming up with the best strategy for the team. So, I'm not sure what I do will be favorable to us again," Chiyu says with a disappointing look on her face.

"Chiyu, what's your method for coming up with a strategy for the game?" Senior Sakurai asks her, wondering about the method she used. "Oh, I usually use the weakest player as a benchmark and come up with a strategy based on the weakest player. With this method, even the weakest player has a chance against the strong player. People tend to underestimate what the weakest player can do to them. So, they don't realize that the weakest player can come into the game, fully prepared."

Everybody is in awe with the way Chiyu comes up with a strategy against the strong team. "That sounds like a war game to me," Senior Yamada says with an awkward laugh. "That sounds like a good method to me, though. I think we may be able to beat them if we know how to use this strategy," Senior Takahashi says, "Why you're reluctant to use this strategy?"

Chiyu looks like she resists telling us why, though. “The gap between our team and theirs is too big. I doubt that my method will work. The only people who are at the par with them are only Takumi and Hideki. The rest,” Chiyu pauses for a while, “You will have a difficulty to handle them, even if you use my method.”

Now I understand why Chiyu feels like her method will not work when we have a practice match with them. She may not worry so much if the rest of the players are just like us. The problem is, they’re still not strong enough to fight them head-to-head. Because of that, it will be me and Hideki that have to do the heavy-lifting for the team. And that’s the last thing she wants us to do.

“Chiyu, I know that you’re concerned about us. But don’t you think we’ll become better by practicing more? Who knows we may be able to win the game if we practice hard enough. I’m pretty sure that the seniors are also thinking the same,” I say to Chiyu, trying to convince her not to worry so much about us.

“Well, Ichirou is right. I guess we need to practice more if we want to win the game. Well, that’s not the purpose of the practice match, but it will be good if we can win the game, right?” Senior Takahashi says with full optimism. “So, I supposed we shouldn’t be wasting time. We should get going now,” Senior Yamada says, looking so eager to get started. “You’re right about that, senior,” Hideki says with a faint laugh.

So, the training for the starting members begins. The training is a lot more vigorous than the usual training we had. Again, I don’t fancy training because it bores me to death. But it’s still important no matter how much I despise it. As usual, I will still stay back with Hideki after the training is over. During this time, we’re practicing on our own. We also have created our own training menu because we prefer a specialized training that fits our position in the team.

The only time that we can’t stay longer after our usual training ends is during the exam time. Well, we can always ask for the permission to stay longer, but I find it a hassle to do that. So, Hideki and I have decided to use the basketball court that isn’t far from where we live. The practice match with Echizen High is getting nearer. So, we have no time to slack off.

“Man, I wish the exam week is over faster. It’s killing me and I want to practice more with everyone.” Chiyu who is walking together with us sighs. She seems like she already expects that I will complain about this. “You don’t think about anything else besides basketball? Just take it as a break. Your body deserves that.” Hideki just chuckles, agreeing with what Chiyu says.

“What else do you want me to think about? I can’t sit still because there are only a few days left before our practice match with Echizen High. It’s annoying that my practice time becomes shorter because of the exam week,” I say this to Chiyu while still feeling irritated.

Chiyu looks annoyed when she knows that all I care right now is to practice more. “Think about something else; girls, dating, anything besides basketball. You’re annoying the hell out of me.” Hideki laughs so loud when he hears Chiyu’s suggestion to think of something else. “Chiyu, that’s not going to work. As much as he cares about the girls who talk to him, that kind of stuff ends up taking a backseat. He thinks that’s not important,” Hideki says to Chiyu while still laughing at what Chiyu has said just now.

Chiyu gives up with the thought of telling me to think of something else. No matter how pretty is the girl right in front of me, I will still be thinking about basketball. Wait, will I be doing that? I’m not even sure myself if it’s true because I’ve never fall in love with anyone before. So, I can’t say that for myself.

As we’re about to reach the basketball court, we notice a glimpse of someone who is playing basketball there. Even though we rarely go home during this time, we know that the basketball court is empty most of the time. I know that because it’s only me and Hideki who plays there during the weekend. It feels odd to see there’s someone else besides us playing there.

As we’re about to walk past the basketball court, the glimpse caught my attention. For some reason, the guys who are playing basketball look familiar to me, but I can’t say that for sure. Those guys look like Hikaru and Kaoru. Wait, is it really them? “Hideki, look over there! Is that Hikaru and Kaoru?”

Hideki looks at the direction I’m pointing at. He looks surprised after looking at the direction for a couple of minutes. “I can’t say that for sure, but it looks like

them.” Chiyu’s expression changes when I mention Hikaru and Kaoru name right in front of her. “You’re not going to play with them, right?” Chiyu asks me when she tries to grab my arm. She seems like she won’t allow me to play with them.

“That would be great, but I just want to greet them. What’s wrong with that?” Chiyu realizes what she has done to me. So, she lets go off my arm. I’ve never seen Chiyu acting like this before. Do they have anything to do with her? “Sorry about that,” Chiyu apologizes to me for what she did. Why Chiyu seems worried about that? It’s not that I’m going to punch them or anything.

The guys already noticed us and looked at our direction. Suddenly, one of the guys shouts to us in a cheerful manner. “Hey, is that you, Takumi? Oh, you’re here too, Hideki.” I recognize that voice. We may have not seeing each other for a long time, but I do know this voice. It’s none other than Kaoru and his twin brother, Hikaru.

“Man, it’s really them.” I just run off towards them because I’m so happy to see them again. “Hey, there,” Hideki greets both of them after catching up with me. Chiyu follows along behind Hideki after that. “Hi, there. How are you doing? Never thought that we’ll see you guys here,” Hikaru greets us when he sees us.

“We’re doing fine, as always,” Hideki replies back to Hikaru with a sheepish smile. “I’ve never imagined that I’ll be seeing you guys in Hakone. Don’t tell me you guys are now living here?” Kaoru asks us in a cheerful tone. “Long story short, yeah, we do live here. Haruka and I live with our grandma. But Hideki lives alone here. His family is still in Yokohama, though,” I reply back to Kaoru’s question.

I still find it hard to believe that I’ll be seeing Hikaru and Kaoru here. I thought that I won’t be able to see them again. After the happy reunion, Hikaru tells us the reason why they’re here. “We will be having a match with Minagawa Academy. So, we’ve decided to have a look at this place. We doubt that we have time for sightseeing after the practice match, though.”

“Oh, we skipped school today so we can come here early,” Kaoru says to us in a sing-song tone. Hideki and I are laughing because they’re still the same old Kitazawa brothers who do whatever they please. “So does that mean, we’ll be



playing against your school?" I ask the twin brother just to confirm what they've said just now.

"Yup, that's right," Hikaru says to us while fiddling with the ball. "And who are you, by the way?" Kaoru asks Chiyu, feeling curious why she's here. "I'm...the manager for the basketball team in Minagawa Academy. That also means that I'm the one who is managing these twerps who are right in front of you," Chiyu says to them. They seem impressed when Chiyu tells them who she is.

"I can't believe it that we're going to fight against your school, Takumi. We've heard that there are two strong players in Minagawa Academy. Whenever we've heard about that, we were thinking that it might be you guys, though we weren't sure at that time. It seems like we were right after all," Kaoru says to us with excitement. Wow, I've never thought that we're that well known even in Osaka.

"I'm also surprised to see you here. Besides sightseeing, we were also here to confirm whether it's you or not. Since you've said it yourself, then there's no doubt about it," Hikaru says to us. As usual, he's not as talkative as Kaoru. "I guess we've got to go now. See you again in the practice match," says Hikaru to us. He looks like he's rushing to leave this place. "Kaoru, let's go. It's getting late already." Kaoru follows Hikaru along and waves back at us before they leave.

I've never imagined that the destiny has brought us back again by having a practice match together with them. I'm happy with our reunion with Hikaru and Kaoru. It's just that I have never thought that we're going to fight against each other during the practice match. I can tell that Hikaru and Kaoru are different than the last time. I bet that the practice match will be full of surprises.

"So you know the Kitazawa brothers?" Chiyu asks us. "Yeah, they're our childhood friends back when we were living in Kawasaki," Hideki replies back to Chiyu. "Even if we haven't fought them yet, I can tell that they're on the same level as you. Don't lose your guard just because they're your childhood friend," Chiyu warns us. "Don't worry about that. We won't be so easy on them either," I tell Chiyu with full confidence.

The day that I've been waiting for is here. Today is the day that we're going to have a practice match with Echizen High. As soon as the team from Echizen High

steps into the gym, we can feel how intimidating their aura is. Their aura says it all that they're strong, even the players who are in the second string look as strong as the players in the first string. As expected from a school who is in the Best 8.

Kaoru who seems aloof most of the time looks dead serious as he's getting ready for the practice match. I don't need to mention Hikaru because Hikaru always looks dead serious all the time, even if we were only playing for fun back then. I can tell that they're going to bring their A game to the match even though this is only a practice match. I've met a lot of strong team in the past, but I've never imagined that Echizen High can be this overwhelming.

Just take a look at Yuichirou Kagami who is the power forward and the small forward, Kazuya Suzuki. By just looking at them, I can tell that they're not an ordinary player. What worries me the most is Hiro Mayama, the center and is also the team's captain. He's a lot bigger than Hideki. I think that Hideki may have a huge problem guarding him inside the goal area.

As the game starts, we have the advantage over the game because of Hideki during the tip-off. Mayama may look stronger than Hideki, but Hideki has more jump power compared to him. Since the tide of the game is in our favor, we thought that we'll be able to be the first one to score. But we're so naïve about that. Echizen High isn't in the Best 8 list for nothing.

They know that Senior Sakurai's accuracy isn't as good as Kaoru. Because of that, they take their chance by pressuring Senior Sakurai to shoot since Senior Sakurai has the ball after the tip-off. Because of that, they're able to block the shot before we can even get a rebound. Rather than we think we're doing according to our plan, we're actually playing according to their plan instead. The block causes the ball to be out of bound. And now, it's Echizen High's ball this time.

When Kagami gets a hold of the ball, I'm guarding him closely so then he won't have any chance to shoot. To my surprise, he passes the ball to Kaoru instead. Kagami is already a pain in the ass to deal with, so I doubt that I can make it to block Kaoru's shot. Senior Takahashi is able to be in time to block his

shot, but he failed to stop him. The ball goes into the hoop and Echizen High gets their first score at the beginning of the game.

This is only the beginning, but I already have a difficulty to stop their track. I already expect that their offense and defense is strong, but I have never imagined that they are hard to break. Unlike Kagami, Suzuki isn't really that strong so I assume that it won't be a problem for Senior Takahashi to guard him. Man, I was wrong about that too. It's not a problem for him to make Senior Takahashi loses sight of him. Besides that, he knows how to get a foul strategically to add up more of their scores.

As for the offense and the defense inside the goal area, Hideki is also struggling to keep his eye on Mayama. Because of Mayama, he fails to get the rebound for us. I know that Hideki can jump higher than Mayama, but he's unable to get the rebound because of Mayama's screen. Mayama is bulky, so Hideki has a problem to push him away to get the rebound. It looks more like Hideki is pushing himself against a boulder that gets his way.

I thought that Hikaru and Kaoru are the one we should be focusing on because of their infamous cooperative play. It looks like the rest of the players are as difficult as them to deal with. Their previous cooperative play that they showed us was already perfect back then. I bet that their current one will be even better than the last time. It doesn't matter what we do, it doesn't look like we'll be able to break their offense and defense apart anytime soon.

Now I have a doubt if we can even break their offense and defense. Senior Sakurai doesn't seem like he's on the same level as Kaoru as a shooting guard. As for Senior Yamada, he may not even come close to being as good as Hikaru when it comes to controlling the game flow.

I wish that I can help them in dealing with Hikaru and Kaoru, but it's impossible at this point. I already have my hands full with guarding Kagami. And Senior Takahashi is already struggling to keep his eye on Suzuki. We're running out of time, and our score isn't budging at all. I've never struggled this much in a game before. Now I have no idea what I should do since we're running out of the option to stop them from scoring even more.

The score gap between our team and Echizen High is getting bigger. At this point, I feel that it's impossible for us to close the gap not only because of the time limit, but we're also at the brink of exhaustion. "Crap, so this is the power of a team who is always participating in Inter High? They're freaking strong," says Senior Takahashi while trying to grasp for air.

Damn, how can we stop Hikaru's and Kaoru's cooperative play? It's their play which is the one that contributes the most in their score. I don't believe that there's no loophole in their cooperative play. It looks more like their play has no weaknesses at all.

Chiyu looks so worried since we're not getting anywhere. And our stamina is depleting faster than she thought. Now, I have no idea if we can last until the fourth quarter. It's only a second quarter and we're already this exhausted!

Seeing that the game flow isn't on our favor, Chiyu decides to request a timeout so then we can plan again. Even during the timeout, we can't still think of a way to stop them from scoring more. They're way too strong for us, but I won't accept that excuse so easily. Echizen High is truly on a different level than us.

Without realizing, our timeout has ended and we have to resume the game. Even if Chiyu calls for another timeout, I don't think it will improve our situation because we have no clue on how to stop them. Hikaru and Kaoru become more aggressive during the third and the fourth quarter. That makes it even harder for any of us to break the play.

If it's not because of me and Hideki, we're still able to score despite their strong defense. The seniors are totally out of their league since the difference in their strengths and skills are way too big for them.

As much as I respect the seniors, they're no match for Echizen High. I'm sorry for that. At this moment, all I ever want to do is to close the gap. I no longer care about winning the game because I can see it clearly in their eyes that they're going to abandon the game. It seems like only Hideki and I are the only one who don't seem to give up on the game just yet.

I can also see that Chiyu hasn't given up on hope too. She's expecting me to create a miracle even though it won't be much. Chiyu may not play in the game,

but she knows what she's supposed to do in this situation. She's not hoping for the others to close the gap. So, she's expecting me and Hideki to turn the situation around.

The game ends with Echizen High winning the game, with the score 105-65. I feel frustrated, but I should have known this better that it's impossible for me and Hideki to win the game on our own. The practice match has shown us clearly that there is a big gap in our strength and skills. Even if we qualify for Inter High, I bet that we're going to struggle to win with our existing strength and skills.

After the game is over, Hikaru and Kaoru come to see us. "I'm sorry, Takumi. But I have to be blunt here," Hikaru says, "I admit that you guys are stronger than the last time. I can see that Kagami has a problem marking you. I know that you can become even stronger, but I don't think you can."

What Hikaru said has caught us by surprise. I always believe that we have more room for growth, but Hikaru thinks otherwise. "Look, it's not because you've already reached your limit. It's because you're surrounded with mediocre players. Do you think you can become stronger and better by having those guys in your team? Give me a break! You don't need me to tell you that. I think you already know the answer by now."

Hikaru then leaves us. Kaoru feels guilty because of what Hikaru had said to us. "Guys, I'm sorry for what my brother had told you. He doesn't seem to know how to say things in a nicer way," Kaoru apologizes to us. "That's alright. I admit that it hurts, but I know that he's right," Hideki says to Kaoru, trying to hide his frustration because of Hikaru's word.

I don't feel like saying anything because I'm still surprised with what Hikaru had said to us. "You know, my brother is just saying it because he's concerned about you guys. But then again, I agree with what he said. You can only become stronger if you're surrounded with strong people. With this kind of team, I doubt that you can see Akira during Inter High," says Kaoru.

Both of us are in disbelief when Kaoru mentions Akira's name. "Wait, are you telling me that Akira has come back from the States?" I ask Kaoru since I find it hard to believe that Akira has come back for real. "Yup, and he's in Kunizuka High

right now. He also knows that you guys are in Minagawa Academy. He's looking forward to seeing you during Inter High."

Later that night, I try to reflect back what Hikaru had said to us. As much as I try to deny it, they're right about that. The reason why we lost isn't because of Hideki and I are not strong enough. It's because the others are not even strong to begin with. And they're not even close to our level. I always believe that the seniors are strong, but the practice match with Echizen High indicates otherwise.

Now, I'm not sure if we can even qualify to take part in Inter High with our current team. I always thought that having a strong player in the team will reverse the outcome. It turns out to be that I was wrong. There's no point of having a strong player if the rest of the people in the team are just plain weak. Just like what they've said, I can only become stronger if I'm surrounded with strong people.

I have lost in many games in the past, but I have never imagined that something like this is the reason why we lost the game. Losing the game is not fun, but knowing that we lost because the rest of the team is weak is even worst. Now, I start to lose my faith with the seniors. And I can't seem to look up to them like how I used to.

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