

Untold

Von Gary

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?