

THERE AND BACK AGAIN



A PRINCE OF TENNIS FANZINE

There and Back Again, A Prince of Tennis Fanzine © 2020
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And to our dear readers, thank you for taking the time to peruse this incredible passion project!

We hope you enjoy! Now let the adventures begin!



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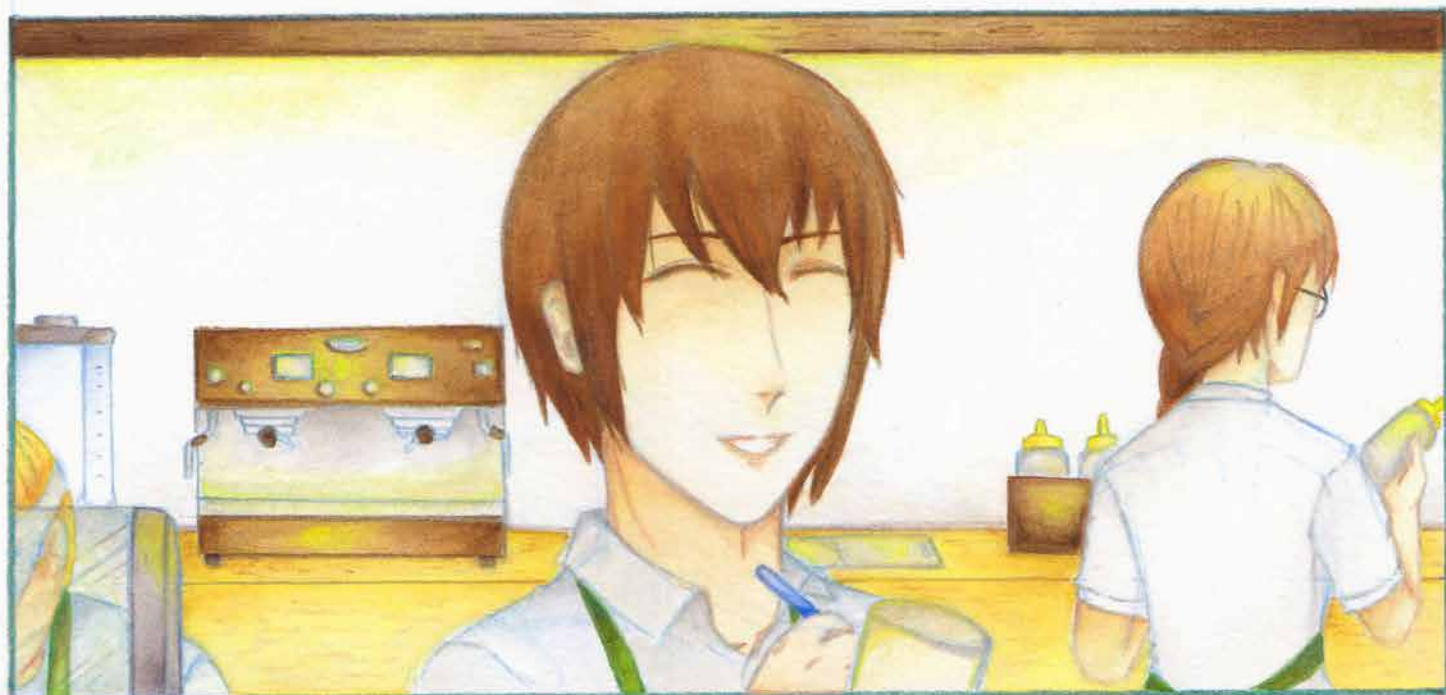
@genichiwwb











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The Rehabilitation of Fuji Shuusuke

by Solosorca, "Royalty"

The news that the Prince of Seigaku was marrying the first son of Lord Tezuka spread around the kingdom like wildfire. It was a very eligible match; the Tezukas were one of the more powerful and respected families in the land- kind to their people and extremely loyal to the King. Not only that, rumor had it that this was a love match.

Fuji Shuusuke, first son of the Fuji clan, was interested in that. The last time he'd seen Prince Ryoma, the young boy had proclaimed loudly that he would never marry. The young prince had been ten at the time, but the memory always made Shuusuke laugh.

He wasn't particularly close to the royal family, nor to any members of the various high-born families of Seigaku. The Fuji family never was. Always respected but kept at arm's length.

Still, a royal wedding was cause for the gathering of the clans and an excuse for a big party. Shuusuke was looking forward to it. There would be kings and queens, princes and princesses, lords and ladies, all of them looking at him with a tinge of fear.

Shuusuke might even get to see his own betrothed.

The rise of the Kawamura family had been quick, like a firework

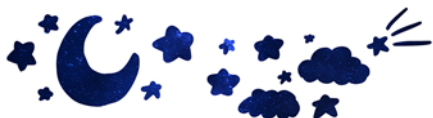


exploding. The family had originally been fishermen who had gained some wealth through trade. They had been well respected in their town but unknown outside of it. Then the War in the North had happened, and the great-grandfather of the current Lord Kawamura had saved the life of the then-King of Seigaku on the battlefield and had been promoted.

The fall had only taken a generation. Any money had been squandered on grand castles and frivolities until all that was left was a family with a title and no money. Nuevo Riche without the Riche.

On the Kawamura's side, the marriage of their son to Shuusuke was a great one. The Fujis however had always felt hard done by as they saw no benefit to them.

"We can get free fish at least," Shuusuke's younger brother had sneered on more than one occasion. Shuusuke himself couldn't bring himself to mind. The marriage wasn't likely to go ahead for many years -if ever- leaving him free to do as he pleased. He didn't even know what his future husband looked like; they'd only met once ten years ago and 18 year old Shuusuke hadn't been interested in his 8 year old fiancé who had talked endlessly about something, Shuusuke couldn't remember what.



People stared as Shuusuke walked into the ballroom of Seigaku Castle and whispered amongst themselves. He'd had to come in place of his uncle, the current Lord Fuji, who had named Shuusuke as his heir after disowning half the family. Nothing would happen at a Royal wedding and it gave Shuusuke a chance to meet the heirs to the families he would have to work with in the future.

There was no sign of either of the grooms and Shuusuke was slightly disappointed, he'd wanted to see whether there was truth to the love match claim. After all, the only family better than the Tezukas at manipulating public perception were the Echizens. Consolidating the power of the two biggest families sent shivers down many backs, but if it were a love match then it was romantic. But before the two lovebirds could tie the knot, they all had to get through the week-long festivities; balls every night, tournaments and entertainments all day.



Shuusuke had had a long journey to Seigaku, and wasn't wild for the idea of staying up all night being and polite. But this was his future, so he put on his best smile and buried his feelings of hurt and annoyance at the looks he kept getting. He prided himself on his smile, it was virtually opaque.

He sidled up to the fireplace, grabbing a drink along the way, and warmed his back. As long as no one was looking at him with barely concealed fear, he enjoyed crowd watching. A group of girls next to him were keeping up a loud and giggly running commentary and he listened in to pick up the latest gossip.

"Look over there," one whispered, clearly tipsy and unsubtly tilting her head towards Shuusuke, "isn't that the Fuji family heir?" They all followed her gaze and it took all of Fuji's will not to wave.

"Be careful girls," another girl giggled, "we all know what the Fuji family is famous for."

"What?" A younger girl asked curiously.

"You're so sheltered."

"They poison people," the girl who'd first pointed Fuji out said in a stage whisper. "That Fuji's great uncle poisoned loads of Lords and even tried to kill the king!"

"He can hear you," the most sober girl of the group hissed.

"So what? It's all true! The knowledge of poisons is passed down through their family, so keep your drinks covered."

"Lady Sakuno tripped and fell in the lake," the sober girl said loudly and pointedly, "and immediately Lady An jumped in after her!"

"Lady Sakuno has no luck. If I were her, I wouldn't have come!"

"They were never attached," Shuusuke could hear the eye roll in this girl's voice. "At least this wedding has been arranged out of love."

"So they say..." The first girl said darkly.

There wasn't much that could pull Shuusuke's attention away from



gossip. His siblings had been known to have to physically pull him away from eavesdropping on many occasions. But one thing that could distract him was hot guys.

This particular guy wasn't really much to look at in the face department, not ugly nor handsome, just average with brown eyes and brown hair. But he was tall and- most importantly- solid and muscular. Shuusuke detached himself from the wall and sauntered over.

"Hi there, we haven't met, have we?" He purred.

Five minutes later, Shuusuke was exactly where he wanted to be -pressed up against a wall, his hands up Hot Guy's tunic and kissing him wildly. Whoever he was, he was a fantastic kisser. Shuusuke moaned as his bottom lip was nibbled and he had to cling tighter to the muscular back under his hands.

He was in heaven.

He surged forwards, smashing their mouths back together, digging in his fingernails. The man growled -which was probably the hottest thing Shuusuke had ever heard- and pushed Shuusuke harder against the wall. The kiss was becoming more and more feral. Someone was bound to come down their corridor, the thought just turned Shuusuke on more.

Music floated up the corridor- the ceremonies were beginning. And Shuusuke, as a tournament competitor, had to present himself to the couple. He took a couple more long, deep kisses and pushed away.

"See you around," he said, giving the men a pat on his lovely cheek and trying to ignore just how hot he looked with kiss swollen lips. He left him looking shell shocked, which was exactly how Shuusuke liked to leave his men.

Shuusuke wasn't particularly interested in the tournaments, but as the representative of one of the country's major families, he was expected to take part. Even though everyone knew the whole thing was just an excuse for Prince Ryoma to show off. The first event was the sword, not Shuusuke's best event. He took one of the sabers from the wall of swords and swung it experimentally. It would do.



“Fujiko!!” A cry came from the other end of the room and, before Shuusuke could even look around, he was caught in a rib crushing hug. “I thought I saw you yesterday, but I couldn’t get away!”

“Eiji!” Shuusuke laughed, squirming as Eiji bounced happily.

Kikumaru Eiji- no, Shuusuke corrected himself- Oishi Eiji, had been his best friend. Eiji’s family hadn’t been aristocrats, just well-off landowners who had owned the land next to the Fujis’ extensive estate where he and Eiji had grown up together.

“How have you been? I’ve missed you!”

“I’m fine,” Shuusuke replied as Eiji finally let him go, “how is being married into the prestigious Oishi family?”

Eiji blushed happily, grinning from ear to ear. It gave Shuusuke a lovely warm feeling in his chest knowing how in love his best friend was with his husband. Having seen the young Lord Oishi, Shuusuke had no doubt the feeling was mutual.

“Oishi is so nice,” Eiji sighed blissfully, “but he’s really busy with this wedding. And stressed.”

“You should do something to relieve that stress,” Shuusuke said innocently.

Eiji looked slightly shocked but his face quickly slid into what could only be described as ‘troublemaking’. “What about your betrothed? Have you seen him yet?”

“No, why?” Shuusuke turned his attention back to the sword in his hand, admiring how the light glinted along the blade.

“He’s over there.”

Shuusuke’s eyes shot up and along Eiji’s gesturing arm to... The man he’d seduced the previous night. Eiji cackled at the look on Shuusuke’s face. Of all the men in the world Shuusuke could have stuck his tongue down the throat of it had to be him. His betrothed. At least he’s a good kisser, a little voice at the back of his head said.

“Not the hottest guy in the world,” Eiji mused, “but not unfortunate.”

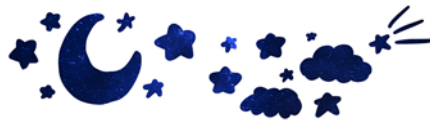


Shuusuke bit back on the comment creeping to his tongue about how the exact same description could be applied to Eiji's husband. "Oh! He's coming over."

"My round is being called," Shuusuke said, escaping towards the door.

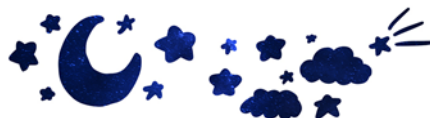
"No, it's not. Fujiko!"

But Shuusuke was out of the building. He didn't really know why he'd fled, just the thought of facing the man he was going to marry when his only memories of him were as a child and a nameless almost-conquest made him want to shrivel. Luckily, he didn't have to stew long as his name was called, and he made his way to the ring.



Shuusuke was well and truly defeated. Not that he'd expected anything else. He left the arena and headed straight for the gardens—one place he knew he would be truly at peace. No one else was around, not with the exciting tournament to watch. Shuusuke found a nice tree and sunk against the trunk, his body aching from the blows it had suffered. He had salts and herbs back in his room, and after sprinkling some into his bath tonight, he would be fighting fit. Tomorrow was archery, one of Shuusuke's specialties. He had to make sure his arms and shoulders were back to normal.

A soft breeze washed the fragrance of the flowers over him and he smiled. This was where he was most at peace; surrounded by plants. He took a deep breath and hauled himself onto his feet. Seigaku Castle was famous for its collection of rare and exotic plants and Shuusuke planned to look at all of them and take samples if he could get away with it.



As expected, Prince Ryoma won that day's tournament. The toasts made by various nobles from various countries took almost the first hour of the banquet that night. The mood in the hall was jubilant and even the whispers about Shuusuke had died down. He sat at a table with sons of nobles from the kingdom of Hyotei and joined in



the toasts to the health and happiness of the upcoming marriage. Every now and then, he glanced towards Kawamura at the next table over and caught him staring. Shuusuke smiled at him and Kawamura blushed.

Vaguely, Shuusuke wondered if he had known who he'd been kissing the previous night. Had he been the only one in the dark?

Yes, by the look on Kawamura's face, the tenth time Shuusuke caught him staring. That made him feel guilty. He got to his feet to do...something. But a cry from the high table grabbed his attention along with the rest of the room.

"Ryoma!" The Queen shrieked, shaking her son who had collapsed forward into his plate. Tezuka was on his feet and by his fiancé's side immediately, taking him by the shoulders and pulling him upright. Even from Shuusuke's far position, he could see the prince was deathly pale. Chaos erupted as doctors were called and Tezuka carried Prince Ryoma out of the hall. It hit Shuusuke like an ice-cold shower that all around people were looking at him. And their looks were just as biting.

Once the royal family had left, a deathly silence fell across the hall, all eyes now firmly fixed on Shuusuke. Oh, Shuusuke thought, thank you so *much* great-uncle. He smiled pleasantly as his eyes darted around for an escape route but found none, not without fighting his way through. He was determined not to speak first, let them accuse him.

Finally, the son of Lord Horio spoke up. "So, you thought you could just murder our prince?"

"He's my prince as well," Shuusuke replied coolly, Lord Horio owned less land than Shuusuke's herb garden. "Why would I kill him? He has done nothing to myself nor my family."

"Your family has form."

Shuusuke kept himself looking passive. How dare he! The upstart! The problem was whatever Shuusuke said it would not convince anyone. The gentry surrounding him had already made up their mind and expected Shuusuke to deny it. Out of the Corner of his eye, he saw Eiji starting towards him. He caught his eye and shook his head minutely. He couldn't let his friend get mixed up in this.



“When would I have a chance to do it? I haven’t been near Prince Ryoma nor the kitchens.”

“Slow poison,” someone shouted and Shuusuke rolled his eyes.

“Slow poison requires multiple doses over a long period of time,” he snapped in exasperation.

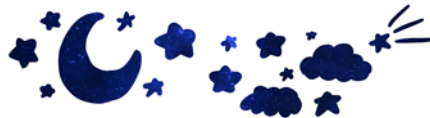
“See!” Horio shouted, “he’s thought about poisoning the Prince!”

I can think of *someone* I’d like to poison, Shuusuke had to stop himself saying. He was trapped and the hounds were closing in.

“Take me to the dungeons then. Lock me up. Nothing I can say will change your minds.”

An uneasy atmosphere pervaded around the hall. No one had the authority to order the guards to arrest Shuusuke. And so, Shuusuke went up to one of them and held out his hands.

“Please lock me in the dungeons.”



The dungeons weren’t so bad, Shuusuke reasoned. They clearly hadn’t been used for many years, perhaps even decades and Shuusuke had found at least seven different escape routes. There was also a distinct lack of nobles and noise. The guards had been bemused that he’d *wanted* to go to the dungeons. Still, they had locked him up, but left him unguarded. He sat on the ancient bed and kicked his heels.

What now?

He could save the Prince. But there was no way anyone would let him near him.

A few hours later, he heard footsteps coming down. He got up and walked to the bars of his cell. He was starting to feel cold now, hopefully it was a nice guard come to let him free so he could slip off to his room and sleep in a proper bed. It was Kawamura and Shuusuke was surprised when his heart fluttered at the sight of him.



"Have they decided to sentence me to death?" Shuusuke asked jokingly to cover it.

"No," Kawamura replied. "They still think you... did you do it?"

Shuusuke sighed. He needed Kawamura to believe him. "I didn't. I could be next in line and I would still never poison him."

"They're saying..." Kawamura trailed off, a hand gripping the iron bars between them.

"What?"

"That you did it because you're in love with Tezuka."

"Huh."

"You don't?"

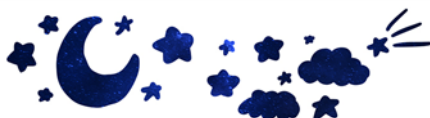
"Kawamura," Shuusuke said softly, placing a hand over the other man's. "I don't love anyone. Not romantically- I love my friends and family. But," he said, seeing Kawamura's face, "You are my betrothed and I am fond of you. Give me time."

Kawamura nodded. "I came down because Ryoma's condition is getting worse. I know you do medicine and stuff; can you help?"

"Of course. I'll just-"

Kawamura grabbed the bars and pulled, his muscles bulged, and the rusty ironwork fell apart.

"Very nice," Shuusuke purred. "Come on, I need to visit my room first."



In Shuusuke's room was his box. A chest made of oak so old it was almost black and bound with iron.

"It looks heavy," Kawamura said, eyeing it up.



"It is," Shuusuke assured him, taking one handle. "What's the quickest way to Prince Ryoma?"

"His room is on the other side of the castle." Kawamura's eyes drifted to the window, "You can see it through there."

Shuusuke dropped the box carefully and nipped over to the window. "We can get there across the roof?"

Kawamura joined him. "I suppose. It'll be quicker and we won't have to go near the Great Hall."

"Good." Shuusuke pulled the window open. His room was only a floor above the roofline, it would be easy to drop down onto it.

"I'll go first," Kawamura offered. "You can lower your box down to me?"

"Be careful with it," Shuusuke warned him as Kawamura slipped his legs out the window. "It's fragile." As Kawamura lowered himself out, Shuusuke grabbed his box and tugged it to the window. He heaved it up onto the sill and looked down at Kawamura, who was looking up at him. "Ready?"

Kawamura nodded and Shuusuke dropped the chest which Kawamura caught easily. Now it was time for Shuusuke.

"Catch me!" He called and jumped. Seconds later, he was safely in Kawamura's strong arms.

"What would you have done if I'd missed?" Kawamura asked, giving Shuusuke a squeeze before setting him down on his feet.

Shuusuke had spent his entire childhood running around the sprawling rooftops of his home. He didn't have a single doubt he wouldn't have landed perfectly on his feet. "I knew you wouldn't miss." he said, giving Kawamura a kiss on the cheek. "Come on."

Kawamura picked up the chest and followed Shuusuke across the rooftops. He was a lot less sure on his feet than Shuusuke and kept slipping on the tiles. Shortly, they arrived at the other wing of the castle and started looking for a way in. Back at Shuusuke's home, there was always a window that didn't lock properly and could be jiggled



open, but here Shuusuke didn't know which room every window led to. It wouldn't be a good look to appear before one of the nobles who had attacked him earlier.

"This one looks like it goes into a storeroom," Kawamura called over. They spread out to find a way in. Shuusuke jogged over and started to jiggle the top half of the sash window, trying to work the lock open. The window was not very well fitted and had a lot of give and, by the looks of it, the latch hadn't been swung across fully.

"Come on," Shuusuke muttered to it, rattling the window back and forth.

Eventually the lock slipped open and Shuusuke was able to pull the top half down and slid through the gap. He swapped it so the bottom half was open and helped Kawamura get the chest through.

"That door better not be locked," Shuusuke said. "I don't have anything I can pick a lock with on me. Do you?"

"No, sorry."

"Oh well, let's hope the gods are with us." They were with them. The door opened as soon as Shuusuke turned the handle.

"This way," Kawamura said and led them to the Prince's quarters. The guards at the door recognized Kawamura and let him in without hesitation, even as they cast Shuusuke curious looks. It looked like if he were with Kawamura, he could be trusted.

Prince Ryoma was lying in bed, deathly pale, asleep but still breathing. Sleeping beside him was Tezuka, an arm thrown across his fiancé's chest, a sword in hand. If the situation weren't so dire, Shuusuke would have recognized that this marriage truly was a love match. But he has more important things to think about.

The opening door roused Tezuka, who pushed himself up and frowned at the intruders. "Kawamura?" He asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Fuji can help," Kawamura said, placing the chest down next to the bed. "He knows about poisons."



In a flash, Tezuka was up off the bed, his sword drawn, the tip millimeters from Shuusuke's throat. "If you make Ryoma worse, I will cut your throat."

"And mine," Kawamura butted in, pushing Tezuka's sword away.

"Kawamura no-"

"Fine," Tezuka said after eyeing Kawamura for a long moment.

Shuusuke ignored Tezuka's malevolent hovering as he opened his box and started to pull out herbs, plants and equipment and scatter them across the table. Tezuka started when Shuusuke moved over to the sleeping prince.

"I need to look at him to see what I'm dealing with," Shuusuke explained. "There isn't a magic cure-all."

Prince Ryoma looked worse up close. His skin was pale and covered in a cold sweat. Shuusuke pulled up his eyelids and saw the whites of his eyes were bloodshot. He waited for a response and, seconds too late, the prince moaned softly. His breath smelt... sweet?

"Do you know what it is?" Tezuka demanded.

Shuusuke paused, wondering how much he should say. He knew what it was but... it would implicate himself if he said as much.

"I can fix this," he said, pulling the covers back up to Prince Ryoma's chin.

Quickly, he set about snatching up the ingredients needed. The blossomtree root he'd dug up that afternoon hadn't been dried for a month and he should have at least a week to stew the plants in the alcohol. It wouldn't be as effective as usual, but it would work. He'd just need to make more of it.

Ground dried bitter grass leaves mix with the chopped hot nettle pods. Heat gently in alcohol- well, he could only hold it close to the fire, but it would work. Next went in the roots of fanged colewort and leaves and berries from fire hedge, fever wintercress, dusk wormwood and dawn crownberry. They should be left to infuse, but there was no time.



"Here," he handed Tezuka a bowl of the clear, slightly green liquid. "He'll need to drink the entire bottle." He held up a bottle containing 2 liters of the cure.

Tezuka frowned but took the bowl to his beloved. Shuusuke hung back whilst Kawamura helped him sit the prince upright. "Ryoma, drink this," Tezuka said softly, holding the bowl to his lips. As if stirred by the voice of his true love, Prince Ryoma summoned enough strength to drink. Tezuka patiently helped Prince Ryoma drink at least half the bottle of antidote before the prince could drink no more. He was starting to look better. Antidotes were never a quick fix and maybe it was Shuusuke's eyes playing with him, but he seemed to have a bit more strength.

"Make sure he drinks the rest when he wakes up," Shuusuke said as Prince Ryoma was laid back down in bed and Tezuka kissed his forehead. "He needs rest as well, but he will get better."

Tezuka nodded, "you should get some rest yourself."

"I will," Shuusuke said, glancing at Kawamura, who adorably-blushed.

"There's a guest room two doors down," Tezuka said, "stay there in case Ryoma needs you again."

Kawamura walked him to the room. He didn't need to, but it was sweet.

"You're going back to your own room?" Shuusuke asked as they reached the door.

"I guess I should," Kawamura replied but didn't move.

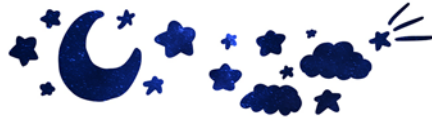
"Thank you for siding with me. I couldn't have done any of this without you." Shuusuke looked up at him through his eyelashes, something he knew was a killer move. Sure enough, Kawamura turned bright red. Slowly, Shuusuke slid a hand down Kawamura's chest. "You're so good to me, Kawamura."

"Call me Takashi," Kawa- Takashi said, closing in on Shuusuke.

"Takashi," Shuusuke repeated.



Takashi sealed their lips together in a fiery kiss. They'd kissed before, but this was so much better. Shuusuke sighed happily and searched blindly for the door handle. They slid into the room, hands all over each other. Shuusuke dearly hoped he wouldn't be needed for the rest of the night.



The next morning, Prince Ryoma was doing much better and able to sit up in bed.

"That stuff was foul," He said bitterly, gesturing to the empty bottle.

"I'll make it taste better next time you're poisoned," Shuusuke said, patting the prince's head and enjoying the pout of annoyance. He was cute. The entire room turned to stare at him as he came down to breakfast. He was fairly sure he saw food dropping from some of their mouths.

"Lord Tezuka," Horio began, "he-"

"Last night, Prince Ryoma was saved by Fuji," Tezuka said in a tone that was not to be interrupted or defied. He turned to the King. "Your Highness, I would like to invite Fuji Shuusuke to dine with us at the high table. He saved your son and my fiancé."

Shuusuke smiled serenely at all the jealous nobles before him. He would never be forgiven for this by them, of course, but it looked like the prestige of the Fuji family had just skyrocketed.

The next day, Prince Ryoma was well enough to get out of bed and to demand that he marry Tezuka that day. His request was, of course denied, but that didn't stop him loudly complaining about it. Shuusuke caught Tezuka smiling softly at his fiancé as he argued with his mother about whether a royal wedding was truly necessary.

With the tournament cancelled, Shuusuke spent the next few days between making sure his patient was fully recovered. And Takashi... He was growing more and more fond of the man by the day. He was so cute, especially when he blushed every time Shuusuke smiled at him- something Shuusuke made sure to do at every opportunity.



Prince Ryoma's constant complaining did manage to get the wedding moved forward a day and it was as spectacular and long as the Queen had wanted. It had been very boring, but Shuusuke had found comfort in the discomfort of all the great and good around him as they had to stand for hours on end.

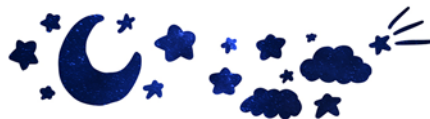
And then, it was time to go home.

"I'll visit you soon," Shuusuke promised as Takashi saw him to his carriage. They said their goodbyes. It wouldn't be long before they saw each other again and they had survived ten years without seeing each other, but it still hurt.

Once the carriage had started rumbling through the countryside, Shuusuke turned to his box. He carefully took out the layers, setting them aside on the floor and then reached in and found the tiny button in one corner of the case. A hidden draw popped out the bottom of the box containing a single, scrappy book that contained the families' knowledge of poisons. He flipped through it, page after page all written in the different hands of generations of family heads.

Finally, he found what he was looking for. He knew he'd recognize the smell around the poisoned prince.

His uncle was going to have some explaining to do.





Qui in Mare Spirant

by *Waterlinkedgirl*, “Merman”



“Captain, we have catch!”

One of Shiraishi’s crewmates rushed over the wooden planks of the deck to where he was standing. Shiraishi put down his handmade astrolabe and raised him an eyebrow.

“Why tell me that? Surely the catch hasn’t been that bad the last few days?”

The crewmate smirked.

“No, Captain, it’s—”

A fierce gust of wind made Shiraishi’s ship wobble in the water.

“Let me go! Let me go, you filthy humans, or I’ll drown you all this instant!”

“We caught a Merfolk manfish!” the crewmember gushed. “What should we do with it, Captain? Those scales will fetch gold on the black market... Or should we cook it up whole and see if its flesh really gives immortality? Or maybe—”

Shiraishi almost dropped his astrolabe.



“You idiot!” he shouted, and not wasting another second he stormed off in the direction of the nets.

“Ah, wait up!” In his haste, he was barely aware of the crewmember loosely running after him.

And when he arrived, Shiraishi saw his worst fears come true: fins and scales were tangled up in their fishing net, wavy hair wearied by the sea. Nails and teeth, trying to tear through the metal mazes of the net, but no matter how much the being of the sea struggled, he could hold no edge.

“Captain!”

Plenty of his men were assembled on deck, waiting for his arrival, his approval. All around that single being they regarded as catch...

The fishlike figure turned in his uncomfortable hold. Beautiful blue eyes met Shiraishi’s own, and were it any other situation, Shiraishi would have stood still in fluster.

“Let him go this instant,” he said, calm, commanding.

“But—”

Shiraishi looked over at the crewmember who spoke up in protest, and made direct eye contact with him.

“Right. Now.” Pulling out his left arm from under his sleeve, he took the bandage in his hand.

“Y-Yes, Captain!”

The muscles among his men rushed over to the ropes holding those fins airborne, to untie them.

Shiraishi walked over to the being of the sea, and caught him in his arms as the net was lowered. Though he tried to help him get the net off from his scales, Shiraishi quickly had to parry his nails, and in defense, had to drop him.

The net-bodied being slithered to the nearest corner, clutching his side.



Was he hurt...?

"I'm really sorry for the rough treatment my crew has provided you," Shiraishi told him softly, kneeling down at a comfortable distance from the Merman.

"What is your name?" Shiraishi asked.

After a few seconds of silence, the being softly hissed, "It's Yukimura."

He smiled. "My name is Shiraishi. As you might've noticed, I'm the Captain of this ship. Unfortunately, my crew has no tact in dealing with beings as reverable as you... Are you hurt?"

"That's none of your bus—Gh..."

Yukimura's face contorted in pain as he clutched his side, and Shiraishi noticed he was slowly dripping Merfolk blood from under his finned hand. He took in a breath.

"I know my crew hasn't quite," Shiraishi glared at his men, "left their best impression, but that looks like a wound that should be treated. Will you come with me to the infirmary?"

Yukimura looked at him, eyes both incredulous and apprehensive.

"...I'll be fine." Yukimura turned his gaze away from Shiraishi's, hand still trembling tight on his side. Even one of the Merfolk could do something as human as lying, it turned out.

"Please, I insist on making it up to you even for the tiniest bit."

Now, Yukimura did connect their gaze, piercingly so.

"I said I don't need your filthy crewmates' treatment!"

As Yukimura raised his voice, a gust of wind creaked in Shitenhouji's mast. Shiraishi smiled, calmly letting the winds tug at his coat.

"Then, would you consider leaving yourself in my personal care?"

At those words, Yukimura fell silent. His eyes travelled from Shiraishi's own bandage, to his outstretched hand, to his reassuring



smile. The finny webs on the place of his ears lowered.

“...I must be going crazy,” Yukimura whispered under his breath, before taking Shiraishi’s hand. He in turn guided it to his shoulder, where Yukimura quickly took the hint and grabbed tight.

Arm behind Yukimura’s back, and with the other around his tail, Shiraishi raised him off the ground in a gentle hold.

“I want you all to think carefully about what you were about to do,” Shiraishi addressed his crew from over his shoulder. “And I expect you to come up with a right countermeasure.”

“Y-Yes...”

Setting that aside, though...

He smiled again at Yukimura, felt his nails slightly pricking into his skin.

“I’m heading off.”

And so, without a further word to his crew, the two of them made their way off the decks. The moment the first door closed behind them a groan came, pained, from the Merman in his arms. Yukimura’s hand tightened on his shoulders.

“Are you alright?”

“Shut up...”

That, was the one thing he wouldn’t do. He couldn’t help Yukimura directly until they arrived, but...

“We’ll get to my room in just a bit. It’s just at the end of this hall. I don’t know how much you know about human ships, but the captain tends to sleep apart from his crewmates, since they’re in a position of privilege... It wasn’t me who thought of that, though.” He laughed, then continued, “But it does mean you won’t have to worry about people entering without permission.”

“That’s... good to hear...”



Yukimura looked at him as he was talking, relief sparking faintly in his deep blue eyes. Without thinking, Shiraishi found himself breathing out in that same feeling.

“Again, I’m really sorry for the brashness of my crew...”

His eyebrows furrowed softly in apology, before he closed his eyes and curled his mouth up.

“I don’t enjoy having to be stern, you know. But this crossed the line by far.”

Shiraishi smiled at Yukimura. “Don’t worry though, before the end of the day they’ll come to you with at least an apology.”

Yukimura’s stare was cold and piercing, like an ocean storm.

“If you think that a simple apology will cut it, you’re mistaken.”

Shiraishi laughed. “Well, I suppose you’re right. But I’ll see to it that the scores are evened, one way or another. Ah, we’re there!”

Shiraishi softly pushed the door open with his shoulder, revealing his familiar green and yellow room. He’d left his window ajar, so the fresh sea wind greeted him pleasantly, raking the curtains, secured charts and sheets lightly with its touch.

“It’s a bit of a mess, I’m afraid. Do you want me to close the window?”

“No...” Yukimura looked over at it, at the sea glimmering vaguely beyond. “I’m fine.”

Shiraishi smiled. “That’s good to hear.”

He lowered Yukimura onto the blanket of his bed, and as he set him down, the hands on his shoulders loosened their grip.

“Let me get that net off, first.”

Yukimura had done enough work to get his arms and face free, but the net still spun around his chest and tail. Starting from his shoulders, working down, trying not to cinch it by being too forceful, Shiraishi started taking the rest off. Careful, as to not disturb the wound on



his side. And careful, to not tear any of Yukimura's scales. When it let loose, he swiftly folded it and laid it in the corner of the room.

"Could I take a look at your wound? That way I'll know how bad it is and how I should treat it." Regardless of what answer Yukimura would have given, Shiraishi walked over to his personal medicine cabinet, and took out a few necessary supplies.

"Do all human 'captains' store bottles there?"

Yukimura looked at him questioningly, hand covering his wound, but Shiraishi just laughed. "Booze, maybe? But I promise you this is all herbal medicines. They're one of my passions, you see."

He took one of his rolls of bandage linen with him, cleaning cloth in his hand, and knelt down in front of Yukimura. When Shiraishi looked up in a silent question, their eyes met.

Quietly, Yukimura removed his hand from his side.

When Shiraishi's eyes lowered at the gash, dabbing some excess blood away, he discovered the wound was still trickling slightly.

Fingers brushing over Yukimura's hip, he hissed between his teeth under his breath.

"Does it hurt?"

"...What do you think?"

Shiraishi laughed nervously. "It sure looks like it," he whispered.

Yukimura flinched lightly when Shiraishi pushed onto his wound with his cloth.

"You can squeeze my shoulder, if you want. It's to stop the remaining bleeding."

After a moment of nothing, then with slightly more force than necessary, he felt the tips of Yukimura's fingers push into his skin, until Yukimura's touch gentled as time passed between them. When Shiraishi lifted the cloth again, the bleeding had stopped.



Fortunately, the way the wound had been cut, Shiraishi needed only light pressure to keep the edges of the wound together. It didn't seem stitches were necessary. Still...

"This balm is a brew of my own." He held up a little jar. "It'll sting a bit, but it'll prevent the wound from getting infected. Will you let me?"

Yukimura didn't move for a few seconds, eyeing the glass jar with a mixture of suspicion and surprise.

His own gaze rose up to Yukimura's face again, in a pleading worry.

"A wound like this for a human would mean you won't be able to go in the water for a while, at least not until it's healed. My balm won't hold underwater, but at the very least it'll heal better..."

"Do it." Yukimura's voice was soft, slightly uncertain, but resolute.

Shiraishi gave him a reassuring smile. "I will."

With the tips of his fingers, Shiraishi started lining Yukimura's wound with his balm. "You know... Us Merfolk have a similar salve, if one gets wounded. I hadn't expected a human, of all things, to come with something resembling it."

Shiraishi chuckled softly.

"In my family, there's been a recipe— A book, passed down, containing scriptures of and about your kind, and I based it on that. I don't have access to the same fish and marine flora as you, though, but I know some terran herbs that have the same effect."

When he'd completely covered Yukimura's wound, with the linen he prepared, Shiraishi took his time in bandaging Yukimura's wounded side. Gently round his middle, over his hip, back over the wound again, time and time again.

"You're... pretty good at this."

"Thank you. I've had some practice, after all..." He flicked his own bandaged arm, before wrapping up on Yukimura. "Did you get this wound when my crewmates fished you up?"



Yukimura shook his head. "If I didn't have this, I wouldn't have gotten caught in your wicked nets in the first place."

Shiraishi laughed. "I bet. What happened?"

"...I ran into a berserk shark, and couldn't fend it off without hurtling myself into coral."

"That sounds dangerous... I wonder if we sailed into its waters."

Shiraishi caught Yukimura looking at him as he washed down the bloodied cloth, then down at his freshly bandaged wound.

"Any normal human would've left me in the nets to bleed out in bottles."

Shiraishi briefly closed his eyes.

"What can I say? I was raised well."

Yukimura raised his eyebrows. "Unless, of course, you're keeping me here to grow scales or something. Wouldn't put it past you."

"Would you?"

Yukimura took in a breath, held it.

Shiraishi smiled.

"I'm glad. ...This is just a question, but, are you fine outside the water?"

"I have lungs, if you're asking that, and as you can see I'm breathing."

Shiraishi felt a pang of worry in his heart. "It doesn't hurt?"

"Not a lot," Yukimura said flatly. "It'll take some getting used to..."

A sigh. "I'll make sure to heal fast. I can at least do that."

Shiraishi blinked. "You can?"

"Others of the Merfolk are better at it than I am, but yes. It'll take



longer than a single night, though..."

The salty seawind blew softly through his hair as Shiraishi put his hand on his tail.

"...Will you stay on my ship until your wound heals?"

"I don't have much of a choice, do I? If I am to believe you."

"Do you believe me?"

Yukimura's blue eyes closed.

"...At the bottom-most line, you've given me more reason to than any human I've ever encountered. Take that as you will."

Shiraishi smiled.

"I'll take it as a good thing, then."

His eye fell on the stray blotches of blood staining the blanket of his bed.

"You should rest. I'll take care of the blanket for a bit."

He took his blanket in his hands, and Yukimura took to the pillow. Fins curled up on the sheets, his bandaged side up.

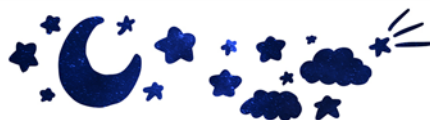
"I won't sleep." Yukimura's eyes were still suspicious, and Shiraishi wouldn't blame him for that.

"That's alright. As long as you get some rest. I'll be back around dinnertime."

Folding his blanket over his arm, Shiraishi walked to the door.

"Please call me if you need anything."

And with that last, warm glance over his shoulder, he closed it.



Shiraishi returned with the ringing of the dinner bell and a tray with soup. It was quiet, aside from the rushing of the sea, and he found Yukimura with his ears down and eyes closed. Before he could call him, though, Yukimura opened his eyes.

“You returned?”

“As you can see.” Shiraishi smiled. “How are you feeling?”

Yukimura heaved himself up to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Wounded, still.”

He laughed lightly at Yukimura’s sarcastic remark.

“You should eat. It’ll help you feel better.”

Sitting himself next to Yukimura on his bed, he handed him one of the two bowls on his tray.

“What is this... murky plant water?”

“It’s vegetable soup! I don’t think they make this underwater.” Shiraishi laughed. “I have a bowl of the same, so you can be sure it’s safe. Don’t worry and dig in.”

“This is soup...”

Without holding back, Shiraishi started on his bowl, and before long, Yukimura joined with him.

It was a dinner spent in a not quite uncomfortable silence.

The sound of Yukimura’s spoon hitting and resting in the bowl signified the end of their dinner.

“How was it?”

“It was very edible,” Yukimura stated.

“I’m glad.”

Stacking empty bowls on the tray and setting them aside on his



desk, Shiraishi paused, then looked over at Yukimura. “My crew said they wanted to talk to you...”

“They took their dear time.”

Yukimura set his fins off on the floor, and startled, Shiraishi reached out to catch him. However, before he could make contact...

Scales changed to smooth skin, fins to feet. Yukimura's features shifted, until aside from the ocean in his eyes and locks he was indistinguishable from an ordinary human.

“This form won't hold for long, and it's exhausting to uphold. But, I'm figuring this would be easier to move around in on deck.”

“I'd...” Shiraishi's breath stopped when Yukimura brushed his hair from his face, fingers lithe and elegant and almost mesmerising... “I'd have carried you, if y—”

“No.”

Shiraishi's gaze travelled down, then spontaneously shot to the side.

“Y-Yukimura... Clothes...”

“Ah, that's right. You wouldn't happen to have spare ones lying around?”

“Y-You can borrow some of mine...”

“Yeah, thank you.”

Trying his hardest to calm his blush, Shiraishi walked to his wardrobe and handed some of his clothes to Yukimura. As if he weren't familiar—he wasn't, Shiraishi supposed—with their concept, he studied them, studied Shiraishi as well, before putting them on.

“Ideally, I'd have you take more time to rest, but...”

Yukimura took hold of one of his jackets. “Hey, the arms go here, right?”



“They do—”

“If you think I’ll sit still and play princess you’re sorely mistaken.”

“Move too much, and your wound will reopen again,” Shiraishi warned. “Wai— Didn’t I say that those are for your arms?”

Yukimura had Shiraishi’s jacket draped over his shoulders.

“Wearing it like this is more convenient.”

Yukimura stumbled once —Shiraishi supposed he wasn’t used to walking, but together, they made their way back to the deck where his crew sank down to their knees the second they walked out.

“Sorry, Yukimura...! For catching you, and wanting to strip your scales off...”

Without missing a beat, Yukimura replied, “There are those among you who wanted to eat me.”

A collective swallow could be heard from his crew.

“W-We’re really sorry! We’re not sure if it’ll earn from the great Yukimura our forgiveness but... We will throw a banquet in your honour overmorrow! Please look forward to it!”

“I hope your actions then will show your repentance.”

“Y-Yes...”

With one cold gaze over the crew, Yukimura took his leave with the dignity of a sovereign. Desperate eyes met Shiraishi’s, and he gave them a nod, before joining Yukimura.

“A banquet,” Yukimura muttered, as he found the door to Shiraishi’s room again. “What is that going to be.”

“Who knows,” he admitted. “But know that they’re willingly sacrificing part of their rations for it.”

Yukimura sat himself down on Shiraishi’s bed in apprehensive silence, and as if letting a load fall off his shoulders, he returned to his



Merfolk form.

“I have a few duties left to fulfil,” Shiraishi said, making a light by the papered desk, “But I think it’d be best for you if you went to sleep before sunset. You can borrow my bed, for as long as you need.”

“What about you?”

Shiraishi chuckled.

“I can make do with the couch here just fine.”

Lips twitched for a moment.

“Could you...”

Yukimura sighed softly, before continuing, “Would it be alright to have a bucket of water beside your bed? I don’t think I can sleep all that well without the touch of water— Ah, seawater is fine...”

“Of course! I’ll get some fresh sheets, too... Give me just a moment!”

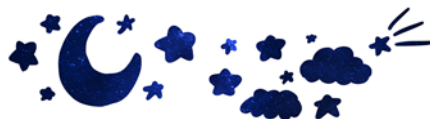
He took to the door, but was halted by Yukimura’s voice.

“Shiraishi...”

When he turned around, Yukimura’s mouth curled into a faint smile. “Thank you.”

Unexpectedly, a sense of happiness filled his chest.

“You’re welcome.”



In the end, Yukimura found the so-called banquet in his honour was nothing more but an excuse to party. Perhaps it’d been their intention to have him party with them. Or perhaps it had always only been for their own fun. He judged the latter to be more likely.

In either case, as soon as his presence had slipped from the attention of the rest, he had slipped back to Shiraishi’s room, watching the



shimmering of the waves in the light of the moon out the window. His wound had thankfully stopped hurting over the days, but...

"I thought you'd be here."

When Yukimura turned around, he saw Shiraishi, light in hand. "I'm not the type to get myself sloshed on beer like your humans."

Shiraishi chuckled.

"I'm not getting drunk, either. I can't afford to, at least not with this crew."

He joined Yukimura at the window, the moon reflecting forlorn in his eyes.

"This'?"

"This is my ship, but the crew is not my own. I've been assigned it, while mine recuperates on the cape. We'll get there in about three weeks..."

Fingers on the frame of the window, Shiraishi's gaze was far on the horizon. "Not that these guys are bad... How could they be, when a crew is only as good as their captain? But what these people need is not an equal, but a leader. And I have to act accordingly."

Yukimura hummed, listening to Shiraishi's words.

"What do you think makes a good leader, then?"

In the pale light, Shiraishi laughed.

"At the very least, I want to be able to be someone people can put their trust in."

Yukimura raised an eyebrow for him to continue, as he locked gazes with him.

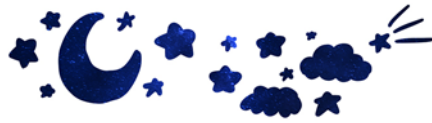
"T-To be honest..." Shiraishi nervously fiddled with the ends of his bandage, "I haven't figured it out yet. Not entirely. But I feel I come closer to it with each voyage I make."



Yukimura turned his eyes back to the ocean.

“You’ll return home,” Yukimura gently whispered. “I know you will.”

Shiraishi smiled in the corner of his eye. “In time.”



What woke Shiraishi was not the sound of seagulls or the morning bell, but a flash of light too short to be the sun. Still drowsy, he tried to look around to see what was off. He saw clear nights outside, so it wasn’t lightning. He saw Yukimura sleeping peacefully, tail fin resting in a small basin of water.

Dark shadows.

Yukimura’s yelp was quickly muffled by a hand on his mouth, and in an instant, all of Shiraishi’s sleep-drunk sobered.

“What are you two doing?!”

“Ahh, you woke your little minion up, manfish.”

The crewmember with his hand on Yukimura’s mouth sneered mirthfully, while his lackey held Yukimura down to the bed as he struggled.

Shiraishi quickly got up from the couch.

“How did you get here?! The nightguards should’ve—”

“The nightguards ain’t shit! And if ya hadn’t guessed, we’re splitting the catch with the others.”

Not only that, but the others were in as well?

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Shut up!”

Shiraishi could hear Yukimura’s muted cries as he tried to twist his tail to escape, a sudden gale rattling his window.



"I won't. Let him go."

"You've just been bewitched by this thing! You've gone mad!"

Shiraishi raised his voice.

"If there's anyone who's gone mad it's you! What are you doing laying a hand on another person?!"

Yukimura's assailant laughed harshly.

"Person' he says— Argh!" The crewmate cried out, pulling his deeply bitten hand back. In that very gap Yukimura tried to free himself, but the man was ahead and put his arm to Yukimura's neck. The moon disappeared behind rumbling clouds.

"Let me g—"

As the man pushed down, choking, Yukimura clawed at the arm keeping his breath.

"Lucky, hadn't thought that'd work on someone of your kind."

A lash of his tail against the body of the lackey made the floor under Shiraishi's feet heel over under the rumbling of a wave. Barely, Yukimura could gasp for air, before the man continued with doubled vigour.

This is bad...

"Let Yukimura go right now!"

He had no weapon— he looked around him, there was nothing close by he could use— but if he didn't do anything now—!

"I'd stay the fuck away if I were you."

A knife gleamed in their vision. Yukimura's eyes widened. Another surge of wind swayed the ship to the other side, he could hear the masts creak, had to hold on for support.

"What the—"



At last, the crewmates connected the dots. Terror struck when shouts from under the deck sounded.

Scrambling for a grip, not knowing whether to run or to finish Yukimura off, in that very panic one of them raised his knife.

Yukimura braced for the slash, and instantaneously, Shiraishi heard the breaking of wood and the roaring of water. A wall of water came crashing down, together with the ceiling, a rain of wood splinters flying by his ears.

And soon after the ceiling, the floor gave way.

The weight of the waves instantly beat all air out of him. It was dark, too dark, and the seawater was chilling cold. He had to surface... Shiraishi tried to swim, but could hardly fight up against the pressure, and in the ink-black dark didn't know which way was up. He struggled, but as his lungs started to burn for air with nothing in sight his hands slowly halted.

He wasn't going to make it to the surface.

'A captain sinks with his ship,' they sometimes whispered on the shores. Shiraishi hadn't expected it would be a destiny he'd follow, not here, not with a crew that was not his home.

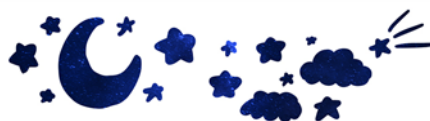
He was going to drown.

Together with his screaming lungs, his heart hurt, knowing he wouldn't get a chance to say goodbye to the smiling faces in his memories. He closed his eyes. The sound of the sea around him faded.

On the edge of his conscious he heard a last distant echo, so distant...

"Shiraishi!"

He was kissed by the dark.



The ebbing waves tugged at the tatters of clothes, hanging loosely



around a body. Yukimura had dragged the both of them onto the sand of a beach, where the sea still lightly flushed against his fins. It was dark.

“Shiraishi...”

Yukimura leaned over him with trembling hands. He’d brought them all the way to a shore, but Shiraishi wasn’t...

He didn’t know what to do. Yukimura tried shaking him, once, twice, but he didn’t stir.

“Shiraishi... Please...”

Biting his quivering lip, Yukimura shook him again, before he balled his fists, leaned his head down. The sea behind him drowned out his shaky breaths.

No... No! Not you...

You were the only human I could save— the only human worth saving.

Please...

Yukimura cupped Shiraishi’s cheek in his hand.

“Wake up...” he whispered, voice breaking.

In silence, a tear slipped from his eye, rolled off his cheek and onto Shiraishi’s.

A gurgle sounded from beneath him. The body beneath him fell into a wheeze, Yukimura couldn’t move a fin as he watched Shiraishi cough the water from his lungs.

“Mgh...”

Yukimura’s hands hovering in the air dropped to his lap.

“You’re still alive.”

As their gazes met again, and Shiraishi turned to sit upright, a



smile welled up on Yukimura's face.

"Yukimura..." The breaking of the morning sun reflected in Shiraishi's opened eyes. "You saved me...?"

"Yeah..."

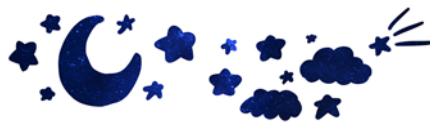
Voice still unsteady past an ever broadening laugh, Yukimura tried to wipe away the tears falling freely from his eyes. Shiraishi's fingers reached out, to draw one away himself with his thumb.

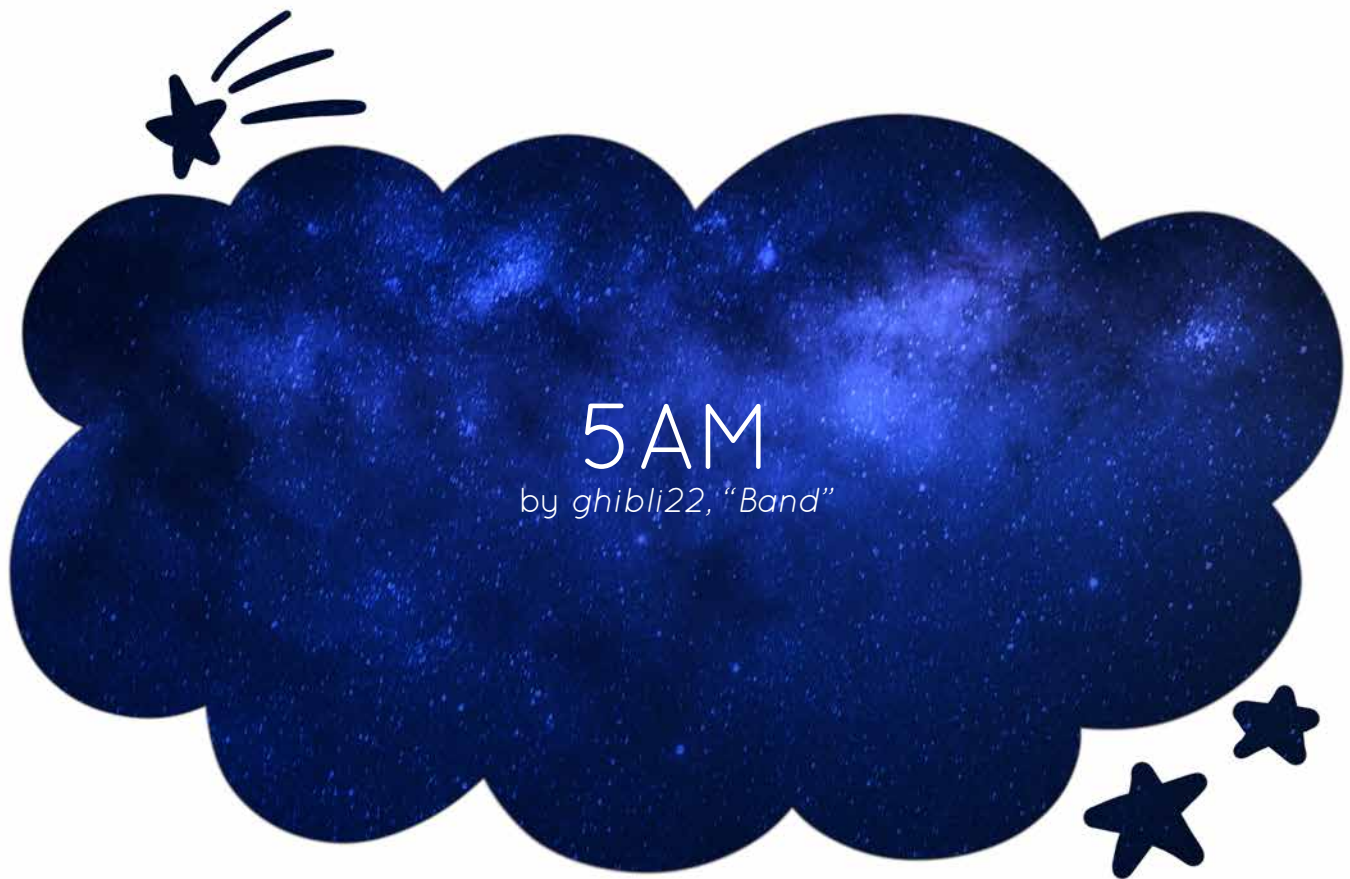
"I'm glad..."

When Shiraishi leaned himself against Yukimura's chest, he could feel Shiraishi breathe. Fingers slipping into Shiraishi's hair, Yukimura held him.

What is left of a captain, when he is left on his own? Without the people he holds close, without his ship. He is but a human, and yet, Yukimura comes to join him.

In that breathing silence, sea at feet and fins, the warmth of daybreak wrapped around them.





5AM

by *ghibli22*, "Band"

"Just a little further now..."

Inui adjusts his grip on the guitar pedal in his hand, tilting the tiny box so he can get at the final screw. With a few twists of his wrist the back pops off, revealing the wiring and circuitry within. Inui grins as he swings his desk lamp closer to get a better look. Exchanging his screwdriver for a pair of tweezers he starts his excavation, only pausing to readjust his glasses.

It's quiet in the studio, which is how he likes it. There were only so many times Inui could stand Momoshiro and Kikumaru competing for who could play for the loudest the longest. Their slapdash soundproofing could only do so much when competing with their guitars, a wall of amps, and the occasional accompaniment of Kawamura's drums.

"What other secrets are you hiding in there?" he muses to himself as he pulls out a few connecting wires to jimmy the circuit board loose. Not even his precious keyboard was safe from his experiments today: the synthesizer sat at his feet, its back pried open with all manner of wires spilling out of it. Some went straight to his laptop while others hung from the sides, waiting for a connection. Reaching down Inui grabs one to compare its end to the circuit board in his hand.



He hums, a slight frown pulling at the corners of his mouth. "I think I'm going to need more solder..."

"Inui-san?"

Inui jumps and the board falls from his fingers, landing with a clatter in the belly of his synth. He twists around in his seat and sees Kaidoh standing by the door, his bass slung over one shoulder and a large folder in his hand. He hadn't even heard the door open.

"Oh, Kaidoh," he reaches down to fetch the fallen circuit board as he continues, "I didn't hear you come in."

Their newest member shuffles awkwardly in the entrance, looking between Inui and the mess he'd made. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I can always come back some other time."

"No, I don't mind the company."

Inui turns back to his work, opening his laptop to make a few notes. "I'm only surprised. I didn't think anyone else in the group liked to work this late."

There's a beat of silence. "Inui-san, it's five in the morning."

Slowly lifting his head, his eyes find the clock at the corner of his screen. Sure enough, the little blinking numbers inform him that it's just a few minutes past the turn of the hour.

"... So it is."

All of a sudden Inui feels every hour of his work hit him, as if being made aware of the time had given the rest of his body a right to complain. He groans as he rolls his neck, wincing as the vertebrae crack.

Finally taking off his shoes Kaidoh walks into the studio, sliding his bass off his back to rest it on the couch in the corner. After a moment he sets the folder down too, his fingers lingering for just a moment before straightening up. He walks over to Inui with a frown on his face.

"Inui-san, how long have you been working here?" Kaidoh asks.



Inui grins sheepishly, one hand still rubbing at his neck. "Would you like the truth or a slightly less embarrassing lie?"

With a deep sigh Kaidoh steps behind him, heading towards the small kitchenette. "I'll make us some tea."

"There's some instant coffee in the cabinet over the sink, I think."

"I'm making tea, Inui-san," comes the firm response.

Inui chuckles, running a hand through his hair as he surveys his mess. While Kaidoh busies himself in the kitchen he takes a moment to actually straighten up his work. All the screws get shuffled into a small bag, and most of the empty pedal casings find a home in a spare cardboard box. The circuit boards he leaves out for the moment, a small pile of plastic and potential.

Just as he closes his laptop Kaidoh walks over with two steaming mugs of tea. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

He shrugs and shakes his head. "I don't mind."

"Still though," Inui says, blowing on his tea to cool it before taking a sip. "It must have looked like Frankenstein's laboratory when you first walked in here."

"Maybe a little." Kaidoh's gaze strays to where he'd left his things, the bass still sitting untouched on the couch. Inui sits up a little straighter, careful not to spill his tea all over himself.

"Please, if you have work to do feel free. I don't mind the company."

His eyes snap back to Inui's. "No! I..." Kaidoh takes a deep breath and sighs, the sound coming out like a hiss between his lips. "I didn't have anything in particular I wanted to work on. I just wanted to get in some practice before my shift."

"Oh."

A moment of silence passes between them.

"I didn't think anyone else would be here."



"Right. That's an entirely reasonable assumption."

When Kaidoh still doesn't step away Inui finds himself looking around his desk. It would probably be for the best if he packed up for the night. Or at this point, morning.

"Well as long as you're here, Kaidoh," Inui starts, "would you mind helping me put this synthesizer back together? It's easier if I have someone holding it while the screws go in."

"Oh. Sure, Inui-san."

They set their tea aside and move onto the floor. Inui helps Kaidoh maneuver the instrument into his lap and presses the back piece in carefully, climbing onto his knees so he can see everything clearly.

"What exactly are you working on, Inui-san?" Kaidoh says as he places one hand on the back of the keyboard to balance it in his lap.

"Curious?" Inui pushes his glasses back up as Kaidoh nods, thinking of how best to respond.

"What I've been trying to do," he starts as he slips in another screw, "is to create a custom pedal for my keyboard, similar to the ones you use. But since they're built for another instrument, they aren't able to handle the inputs without some modification. I'm hoping to improve the quality of my music. Help me with this?"

With the keyboard securely back together they both stand, carrying it towards the back of the room.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with your sound, Inui-san," Kaidoh says, his mouth pressed into a frown.

"It's not that there's anything wrong with it - okay, there we go."

As they rest the synth back in its cradle, Inui bends down to check that none of the screws came loose as they moved.

"I've been told my playing can be a little mechanical," he says, rising once he's satisfied. "I can program this for any kind of effects I want, of course. But I thought something interesting might happen if I was forced to be more manual with it."



The bass player's face is still pulled into a frown when Inui turns his head to look. "Did Momoshiro tell you that?"

There's no way to prevent the laughter that bubbles from his chest. He still wasn't sure why Momoshiro and Kaidoh seemed to rub each other the wrong way, but their rivalry was a definite source of amusement for everyone. "Well, he isn't the only one to say so."

"And it doesn't bother me, if that's what you're worried about," Inui continues, walking back over to the desk to retrieve his tea. "I've enjoyed experimenting. It's something I wouldn't have tried otherwise."

Kaidoh doesn't follow him back to the table, and doesn't respond beyond a grunt.

Sipping on his tea, Inui watches as he walks over to his bass and slips it out of its case. The silvery metallic finish sparkles in the lights of the studio. He remembers thinking that it would look great on stage when Kaidoh first auditioned for them.

After slipping the strap over his head Kaidoh sits heavily onto the couch. His eyes linger for a moment on the folder sitting on the coffee table, then he sighs and leans back, plucking a few notes out of the strings.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with your playing, Inui-san," he says after a moment. "But I think what you're trying to do is amazing. No one else is taking a risk like that, trying to make something new."

Inui smiles, and settles his weight back to lean on the table. "I appreciate it, Kaidoh. Thank you."

They fall into silence after that. Kaidoh plucks at the bass strings, playing some kind of a melody he doesn't recognize. Inui takes his time finishing his tea, taking out his phone to scroll through local ad pages, looking for people selling used audio equipment. They'd gotten more than half of their amps this way and each one of them sounded a little different. Now that he was thinking about it, maybe he'd already been doing some experimentation.

A yawn pulls at his lips as he saves a few bookmarks for later. Maybe he should start to head home for some actual sleep.



"Shit."

Inui finds himself once again startled by the sound of Kaidoh's voice. Looking up from his phone he sees Kaidoh's folder lying on the floor, the papers scattered everywhere as the bassist hurries to take his instrument off. Quickly finishing the last of his tea Inui walks over and bends down among the mess. "Here, Kaidoh, let me help."

"No, Inui-san, it's fine, really-"

"I don't mind," he says, pulling papers into his hands. "You helped me clean up, so it's only... fair."

He trails off. In his hands are numerous sheets of music. Each page is filled with hand-drawn notes, some messier than others, as if scribbled quickly on a train. A few of the pages even have lyrics to match, although heavy erasing and rewriting makes some of the words hard to read.

"A meteor running through the sky like tears down your cheeks..." Inui mumbles. "Kaidoh, did you write these?"

All he gets is another hissing-like sigh in return. When he looks up Kaidoh is decidedly not meeting his eyes, cheeks lightly dusted red, a guitar pick twirling between his fingers. Inui hesitates, then slowly goes back to picking up the music.

"I don't mean to pry," he says slowly, "you just never mentioned you wrote songs yourself."

Kaidoh shakes his head. "I don't really. I mean... it's just something I do in my spare time. That's all."

"You must have a lot of spare time to have written so many," Inui teases lightly.

Kaidoh ducks down, his face going an even deeper shade of red. "It's not... I don't think that as a bass player it's..."

Inui half-smiles as he puts the music back on the coffee table in a neat pile. "It's hard not to feel like a support role, right?"

This time Kaidoh does look up, although he doesn't say anything.



Inui gets back to his feet and stretches, sighing as some of the tension in his shoulders loosens.

"I think it's about time for me to head out. Get a good night's sleep. Or a good day's sleep at this point?"

Inui hears a quiet laugh as he gathers his things. Once he's all set he pauses by the door, looking back into the studio to where Kaidoh still sat on the couch, staring down his own work as if it might burst into flame any second. His fingers are still on his bass strings, hovering like he isn't sure how to play them."

"Kaidoh?"

This time Kaidoh is the one who jumps. He twists in his seat to face the door. "Yes, Inui-san?"

"If... if you ever feel like sharing with someone, don't feel like you have to hold back." He smiles. "Sometimes it's easier to try something new when you have someone to give you a little feedback?"

Kaidoh's eyes widen. Even from where Inui is standing he can see his fingers tighten around the neck of his bass.

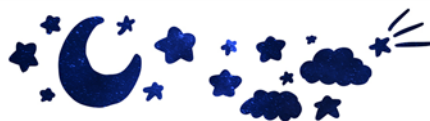
"... I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, Inui-san."

Inui's grin spreads wider. "You too, Kaidoh. See you later."

"Yeah."

Finally opening the door Inui steps out into the light of the new day. The sun is just over the horizon now, the light casting long shadows over the ground. Inui takes a deep breath, looking out at the city for a moment before starting his walk home.

As the door closes behind him he almost swears he can hear singing from inside the studio, accompanied by a steady bass line.





Don't Throw Stones in Glass Lighthouses

by Jupe, "Sci-Fi"



Turn on and off the light, don't talk to nobody. Not that there's anyone to talk to out here. Occasionally the other guy comes by, but he doesn't say much, just pushes up his glasses and nods as he inspects the equipment. Shishido would say there should probably be more than one of them out there, in case something were to happen to him. But he doesn't know what. He's always been a strong swimmer, loved the sea since he was a young boy. The fact that the jagged rocks give way to tide pools and a deep shelf that falls into nothing doesn't frighten him any. His uncle used to take him and his brother and cousins diving, and there he saw the splendor of the deep for the first time and it enchanted him.

It's lazy days up at the top, nights watching the light circle around and catch the distant shadows of the behemoth ocean, rising up like some creature in the night. In the day all is calm with the cacophony of gulls swirling about, and the fish below circling like some mirror image. He doesn't mind it. He reads a good book, eats his simple meals, and relaxes on the cot. Only a month and a half left and he is free. Back into society, back into home.

It's one day, he's not sure of the day of the week anymore, when he sees a flash of bright color in the summer light. It is shady today, and it looks like it will rain. Now more than ever the light will be needed to cut through the fog in the deep dark, and so he makes sure everything



is well stocked and ready. But the light keeps flickering, and he grows curious, so he climbs down the stairs and onto the shore. He hops lightly over the rocks, slipping here and there, but his boots footing catch him in the nick of time. He keeps going until he comes to a flat drop off a rock, and peers out at the water in front of him. Something is bobbing and glistening and floating in the light, and with some deliberation he removes his heavy waders, pulls off his tattered undershirt, and goes in.

It's a short ways away, the distance between him and this object bobbing on the surface, and he closes his fist around it and stares. A cross, like the ones Christians carry, silvery and shiny and untarnished by the murky waters it sat in. It is lightweight, almost supernaturally so. He swims back and hauls himself up on the rock, peers a little at the funny trinket for a while and then tucks it away in his pocket. He dries off and changes, and goes back to his reading. Moby Dick, this time. He is enchanted by the tale of the white whale, and gets so lost he never hears the door below open and the footsteps on the stairs.

"Hello," says a calm, reedy voice. He jumps about a foot, nearly dropping the book in the process. A man stands before him, impossibly tall and thin, but well-built all the same, such as though Shishido would hesitate to get in a fight with him. His hair is curiously without color, pale and grey as the stormy skies above. His clothes are as loose and pale as his unblemished skin, and his eyes are huge and brown, the color of tree bark. He extends a long, slender-fingered hand.

"I lost something here, the other day. I believe you found it?"

His mind goes blank before he remembers the little cross, and he fishes it out from his pocket. "This?" He croaks, wondering how the man knew.

The other fellow smiles keenly and warmly, though it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "That's it! Thank you for finding it. It's a treasured family heirloom, I should have been in a lot of trouble if you hadn't recovered it for me."

"No problem," he says quietly, dropping the necklace into the stranger's palm. "Were you swimming out there? It's dangerous, you know."

The man huffs a small chuckle, the corners of his mouth turned up.



Now the smile does reach his eyes, and they are quite nice to look at. "For some, perhaps. But no, I was with my sister and must have dropped while I walked along the shore. The chain isn't very good you know, it's quite old and I really must have it replaced."

"I could fix it." He clears his throat as the pale young man raises an eyebrow at him. "I mean, I have lots of chains and bolts and files and things here. Kind of a hobby. Gets boring, sometimes." He shrugs.

"All right," the other man says softly, and hands over the cross. Shishido moves back to where he keeps his little wooden box of trinkets, mostly broken and missing pieces he'd found to put back together into new shapes when he had the time. And here, he had nothing but time.

"I didn't catch your name," he says, digging out a likely looking chain, this one a bit thicker but just as silvery.

"Ootori."

"Ootori," he repeats, smiling. He gets to work at the little side table fastening the new chain on, while he gestures Ootori to sit in the seat opposite. Never made sense to have two chairs, but he's glad of it now otherwise he'd be stuck sitting on the bed. Not that there was anything strange about that, he told himself viciously.

Finally, after a few moments, his work is finished and he holds out the newly affixed chain for inspection. Ootori clasps his hands in delight, smiling wide.

"It's perfect. Thank you."

"Hey, no problem. Like, it was literally nothing. Should hold better now."

Ootori gets up to leave, then stops. "Is there something I can do for you? You know, in exchange?"

Shishido's ears burn a little. "Naw. It was just a little thing. Don't worry about it."

"I'd feel bad if I couldn't repay a debt." The other man looks thoughtful. "Well, if you ever think of anything, just give me a call."



Shishido nods dumbly, caught in the brightness of that beautiful gaze. It was only after Ootori had gone that it occurred to him he hadn't left him a phone number of any kind. Just as well, phones didn't exactly get very good service up here, and the old landline was barely in working condition. The thing had to be older than his grandmother.

He sits back on his bed, no desire to return to the adventures of the sea and the mysterious white whale. He thinks of the pale, curly hair and sharp eyes of the boy who only moments had been in this very room, sitting across from him. Why hadn't he asked for more than his name? His number, where he lived, how he knew that Shishido was the one who found his cross? Had he seen him, been watching him? The thought gave him pause and made him wonder. He'd said he'd been with his sister, but there was no girl around anywhere that Shishido had seen.

Deciding these questions were all too much for the moment, he fell into a fitful nap wherein he dreamed he was floating on a giant cross in the middle of the ocean, and there were several dozen all around, identical to the one he was on, bobbing and dancing in the waves. At once a white whale with its enormous maw opened beneath him and swallowed them all, cross and boy alike into the depths of his stomach.

He awakens, somewhat sweaty, on top of his bedsheets with the book fallen down from the shelf and landed on his stomach. He puts it back and haphazardly tidies the room. The inspector will come by, top them up with oil and be gone again. He isn't looking forward to the prospect, the man usually has little to say and is kind of creepy to boot. But this time was to be different.

He shows up late, almost when darkness is setting in, flashlight swinging at his narrow hip. He lets himself in and puts a finger to his lips, hissing Shishido quiet.

He peers out through a crack in the door, and clicks it shut.

"You see anything strange today?"

"Just a tourist, why?"

The man grumbles as he set about his duties. "Tourist! No, I mean something truly strange and appalling. Something you couldn't



explain.”

Shishido thinks about the pale-haired boy and the silvery cross he had worn on his neck as he left. “No. Why?”

“There’s a strange happening afoot, that’s why.” The tech snaps, shaking his flashlight around for emphasis. “Man-eating sea creatures, is what.”

“Huh?” says Shishido.

“Call them men, but they go back into the ocean at night. I heard tell of them, other jobs, other lighthouses. Never wanted to believe. Not here, surely, in this stuffy little port town. But sure as I’m alive, they’re real and they’re out there.”

The flashlight casts a glow under his bespectacled face that is haunting and makes Shishido shudder. No other reason.

“What makes you think that?”

“I saw...” He shakes his head, as if what he has seen has been too horrific to share. “I saw bird corpses strewn about over the dunes, blood pools here and there. No coyotes in this area, nothing to do something like that. And the marks... Slide marks in the sand where they come up to feed. Gnashing their horrible sharp teeth, they’ll get birds in their nests and eat the eggs. Get humans too, if they could. Why do you think people aren’t allowed on the beach at night?”

“Because it’s not a recreational beach, and it’s dangerous with the rocks and such?” Shishido frowns.

“Well yeah, that’s part of it. But not all of it! Things come around at night, you’ll see, you’ll hear their strange sounds and despair. Better lock up tight tonight. I’m going, before it gets fully dark. Finish the rest yourself.” He sloughs over the oil canister and moves back down the stairs. He stops, points at Shishido.

“You tell any tourists you see the same thing too. They ought to know not to be out at night.”

“Okay, okay, I will,” Shishido says, mostly to humor what is clearly a madman, and proceeds with the rest of the night’s work.



It takes him a while, and finally it is time to curl up again with Moby Dick.

He isn't sitting on the bed very long when he hears a kind of rapping along the walls. That gives him pause. He pulls his blankets closer. It's just the wind, he tells himself. He flips another page, lost in his book, until he can't ignore what is unmistakably a tapping at the lower door.

Don't go out at night. There's bad things out there. He ignores the advice of the lighthouse tech and slides the covers back as he pads downstairs to the main door. It is bolted shut against the wind and storm brewing that night. He opens it just a crack, still having his good sense about him.

"Hello?"

He calls to the night. For a moment he sees nothing, and then he sees a pale woman stride up, her dress white and long and flowing and immaculate. He feels sweat over his body. He never was good with talking to women, they made him uncommonly nervous. But the pale-eyed woman reminds him of someone as she smiles sweetly at him.

"Hello," she says, in an ethereal tone. "I wanted to thank you for helping out my little brother. He said you wouldn't accept anything, but I'd hope you'd at least take something for your kindness. You don't know what that necklace means to him."

"Uh," Shishido says, kind of dumbfounded. "I mean, it was really nothing. You don't have to..."

"Oh but I do." She interrupts with her melodic voice, and bids him to hold out his hand. Nervously, he holds his palm up and she drops what looks like a large chunk of jade in his hand.

"If you're ever in trouble, or in danger of the water, use this." She says, and winks. He doesn't really get it, but decides to humor her anyhow.

"Well, thank you. Say, I didn't get your name."

"Names are not important. I trust my brother gave you his? Silly boy. Always so reckless with such things. Anyway, I hope that you



have a pleasant night, monsieur.” And with that she steps back and curtsies like an honest to goodness princess, and is gone in the night.

Shishido bolts back up the door and sinks against it, holding the jade in his palm. Now what on earth was that about? So the mysterious sister did exist after all. But why was she walking around at night, barefoot at that? He opens the door to ask if she needs help getting home but she is nowhere to be found. Not even footprints were left in the sand where she had been standing. It is all so terribly strange, and Shishido begins to think himself crazy. Sea madness, except he wasn't even on the sea. He returns to his book upstairs by the warmth of the light and then, thinking better of it, goes to bed.

The next few days pass without incident. No bird corpses, strange nighttime visitors, or errant bits of jewelry distract him from his task at hand. The tech still came by, shaking his head and muttering about monsters but had gotten a lot quieter about it all, like someone had come to tell him to shut up about those things. Shishido was grateful, he hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary save his new pale-haired friends, and didn't think they meant any harm.

It went on like this until one day he went out and nearly steps into a pile of gore. Bird gore, to be exact, ripped and torn one after the other. They were laid out like dark omens on the sand and the concrete, necks snapped and bodies torn but the wings left perfectly intact. He covers his nose at the stench, and uses the landline to call for the main office. They are none too pleased with his report, and tell him in so many rude words to take care of it himself. Getting a shovel from the storage compartment, he begins the unpleasant task of removing the birds away from the lighthouse steps and back to the ocean. The corpses bob up and down, staining the saltwater red. When he is finished, sweat gathers on his brow and he still clutches the broom he'd used to scrape the blood and gore away. He takes a step among the rocks, turns back to the lighthouse, when his foot falls in an errant puddle of bird blood and goes out from under him, sending him flying.

He hits the edge of the rock with his side, a nasty cut to be sure, and was grateful in that moment to have tucked his head in so he didn't smash his skull on the rock. He bounces off the slippery rock, and rebounds into the surf, splashing up on the jagged pieces here and there. It is a little deeper at this point, enough for the tips of his toes to brush sand beneath, but barely enough to keep his head above



water when he is clutching the now open wound on his side. Blood spills into the water, and all he can think about are sharks, roused by the bodies of the gulls, and now his struggling, weak human form.

He clutches the gash as it stings with salt and fetid water, and he kicks carefully towards the shallows. He feels his feet on somewhat dry land again and falls to his knees, blood droplets scattering over the sand. He pants, catching his breath, before thinking of the first aid kit upstairs and how weak his body feels after all that. He'd have to crawl up, and it'd take forever.

"Aw. I thought you were drowning," came a familiar voice. He turns to see a head poked up just above the waves, in the too-deep water. The silver haired punk smiles at him wryly, and splashes his way over to the shore, climbing out slowly. Shishido has just enough time to avert his eyes as the boy is naked except the silver cross glittering on his neck.

"Need some help?"

"Yeah." He breathes, after a moment, still looking downwards, ears burning red. "My first aid kit's upstairs... if you could go and fetch it for me..." He is aware of the other boy in his space, wet and warm, and suddenly he is being lifted off his feet.

"That won't do. You need your stuff, yeah? I'll take you to it."

His face burns as he is bridal carried up the steps of the lighthouse to his room at the top. Ootori sets him down on his bed and quickly takes instruction on where to locate the first aid kit. He bustles around like a true mother hen, disinfecting and wrapping the bandages over Shishido's side with a careful ease.

When it is done he puzzles over Shishido curiously.

"You should get out of your wet clothes." Shishido flushes again, and this time the other guy has the decency to blush as well. "So you don't get sick!" He says quickly.

"Where are your clothes?" Shishido asks wryly.

"Oh. On the shore somewhere, I expect. I was skinny dipping. Didn't exactly think about it when I saw you floundering around bleeding."



Shishido scoffs, but winces at the moment he stretches his wound. "Well, thank you. For. Uh, the save, I guess."

"Thank my sister," Ootori says dreamily, and before he could ask him what the hell that meant he sits down next to Shishido on the bed. Shishido is very aware how there is a naked guy next to him, and in a very small, cramped room, and his thoughts go all sorts of strange places. As if reading his mind, the other boy huffs a soft laugh.

"You should get some rest." He inspects the injury one last time. "It's not deep, but if it keeps bleeding you'll probably need to go to a real doctor." Shishido nods at the ceiling, bites his tongue.

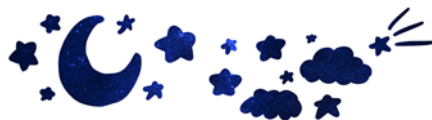
"Anyway." He sits up, cross dangling temptingly out in front of Shishido.

"Thanks," he croaks again, and with a smile and nod the very nude, very handsome young man departs the staircase.

There is a thundering up the stairs a moment later.

"What was that? Who was that? One of your tourists? I should say, if you're going to have visitors, you ought to be more discreet. Is he one of them free-spirited types? Winked at me as he went by, you know. Shameless. Listen, I don't care what you do in your free time up here but try not to give people heart attacks, yes?"

"Yeah, yeah, gotcha." He would roll away from the busybody tech but his wound prevents him from doing that. He wishes he could have told him to stay. The boy, that was. He could have found him clothes and they could have had tea. Next time, maybe. Something tells him he hasn't seen the last of the lad.





Sound of the Morrow

by Nagisa Umibe, "Apocalpyse"



The night was quiet.

He remembered clear as a day how Tokyo was once filled with lights, restless and alive and brilliant; how the seasons would gracefully settle as the residents of the city celebrated their arrival. It was a place of constant change, a melting pot of endless encounters and possibilities. He was raised here, met the people he would call lifelong friends, and fell in love. The days were always filled with uncertainty, as if something was always bound to happen, and he loved the city dearly for it.

The streets were quiet.

Trembling from the cold air of winter, he walked past abandoned stores and stumbled when he failed to take notice of a crack on the roadside. Aided by only the moonlight, it became noticeably difficult for him to see the cracks and holes. He was tempted to take the flashlight out, but the battery had become alarmingly low—and the last thing he wanted was to be without light when an emergency situation came. Sighing, he pressed forward.

If his memory didn't fail him, it would take him roughly twenty minutes to reach his destination. Twenty minutes of walk, and his steps felt heavier with each stride made. He still recognized every corner,

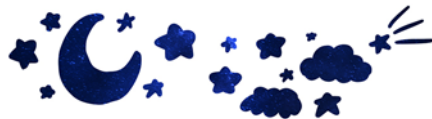


every landmark he passed by, their memories somehow kept fresh in his mind. But if memories are meant to be a constant, no matter how fickle, reality always moves. He could never get accustomed to the stark difference between the two.

It was a scar; not one of the body, but of the mind. No matter how many times he had seen the scenery, or the years he had lived in it.

The view of the now—ruined city, silent and dark and seemingly devoid of life, always left a numbing feeling inside him.

The world was quiet.



Grief comes in many forms, and conveyed in many ways; some apparent, some more subtle, almost unnoticeable; like a wildflower that quietly wilts amidst a field of lilies. He once had naively thought that time could numb the feeling of loss, no matter how deep it may be. Now, as he placed a clumsily-made bouquet of wildflowers in front of a ruined house, he realized that grieving was the only way the heart would remember what had been lost. He managed a faint smile and placed his hand on the flowers affectionately, though the smile wasn't meant for them. The passing days had claimed too much of him—surely a weak smile would do for now.

"I've come back to visit all of you," he spoke, though only the wind was listening, "And I will come back again, without fail."

He, after all, had sworn that he would always remember this day—and would always return here.

May 5th.

The day that claimed the life of his family, and destroyed everything he loved.

He learned on that day how easily life fell to shambles. All it took was the whims of those who held power, and everything he knew, everything the city knew, was reduced to mere memories.

The heat that burned the skin. The terror from above; the rain of



lights, the deafening explosions that follow, and the blaring siren that mixed with horrifying screams. The faces marred by confusion, dread, and despair. The disfigured bodies on the streets that used to be someone's parents, friends, family. The hopelessness as everything crumbled before the eyes, never to return to normality.

The stench of that day—

—was nauseating.

He breathed, gasping for air. Cold sweats raced down his temples as the irregular beating of his heart, loud and suffocating, snapped him awake, bringing him back to reality. The sounds that were reverberating in his mind gradually subdued, until the familiar quietness returned. With a trembling hand he reached towards the flowers that now lay in front of him, attempting to anchor himself. His breathing had yet to stabilize, but it would. He would recover again. He always did.

He had to.

"I'm tired."

Before he knew it came the words, low and in a whisper, from his own lips.

He broke.

In a muffled sound he mourned, sobbing as warm tears raced down his cheeks. He was tired from everything. The life he knew, the people he loved, all were reduced to distant, painful memories. Everything was claimed by the fire, by the rain of explosions from above, by the terror and anguish that left more than scars. Now all he had left was the struggle to keep moving, to keep on going, just for the sake of remembering.

Yet he couldn't remember the last time he saw someone else. He couldn't remember the last time he heard laughter, or music, signs of life, other than the deafening silence in a place that should be bustling with sounds.

It was all too quiet, and he was tired of everything.



Hushed, faint notes slowly came. Gradually it filled the air; melodies that, though distant, was enough to break the silence. He raised his face and held his breath.

There was music.

Amidst the quietness of the night, in a world that had grown silent—somehow, music could be heard.

He rose. Though his knees were trembling, and his body had grown cold from the sweats, he could hear them clearly; piano notes that spread gently and slowly until they reached him.

Who, or what—it didn't matter. He moved, guided by the sounds. What was initially a few hesitant steps slowly grew into a hastened pace, and before he knew it, he was already running. His eyes and limbs were tired and his stomach was growling, but he couldn't care less. The exhaustion and stumbling didn't falter him. He kept running and running, clinging to the sounds as if it was his lifeline.

Reaching the garden of a run-down church, he came to a full stop. The foundation of the building, ruined as it may be, stood still against harsher times. The light inside it, though faint, was enough for him to make out a faint figure sitting within the church.

How long had it been... How many days, no, weeks, since he last seen someone?

How many months since he last heard music?

With trembling steps he approached the church, careful so as not to stir the other party. Years of surviving the dreadful aftermath of war taught him that presence is not always welcomed, particularly of those whose intentions are unknown. He might be seen as an intruder, or even worse, an enemy.

He rightfully thought so when cold metal was pushed at the nape of his neck. Alert, his heart jumped; in his carelessness he had been ambushed.

"Hands up in the air. Move four steps forward and turn around," commanded a youthful, though rugged, voice. "One misstep and that'll be the end of you."



He did as commanded, mind already racing with ways to escape his predicament. When he turned, he saw that the ambusher was of average height. What other features the person had were veiled by the lack of light, though his focus was on the metal that was pointed at him; even in the darkness, he could tell that it was a gun.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?" the ambusher asked.

He opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out. Only then did he realize how dry his throat was, how erratic his heartbeat had become, how foolish of him to have put himself in this situation. After a deep breath he mustered what courage he had and spoke,

"I'm—I'm Kawamura Takashi, survivor from the Tokyo area. I, I rushed here after hearing the piano, looking to find another survivor."

"Really?" Unimpressed, the alertness in the ambusher's voice grew thicker. "And what do you intend to do after finding one, huh? Put a hole in their head?"

"I intend no harm, I swear!" Panic began to creep into his voice. Trembling slightly, he hastily added, "If, if you think I'm harmful, you may check my belongings. I'll give everything to you! Just let me go, please."

How pathetic, he grimaced. But to live to see the morrow was more important than any of those belongings, no matter how important they were. He had promises to keep. He would see that he lived through the following days to ensure the promises are kept.

The ambusher sneered. "And what, risk giving you the chance to make a move? Nuh-uh, not happening."

His stomach dropped from the response; the chance to survive seemed to grow dim. One wrong move and he might end up joining the cold bodies on the street, victim to his own recklessness. His insides were already churning from the tension. Amidst the cold of winter, he thought how bizarre the situation was; how contrasting the piano in the background was to the view before him. Breath halted, he prayed that he could somehow walk out alive.

If this is the end, then...



Abruptly the piano stopped. Both him and the ambusher were still, the air heavy with unease. Though he was held at point-blank range, his mind raced with possibilities and what-ifs; how to disarm the ambusher, how to escape, how to avoid the bullets—if any of those were even possible. The seconds of silence were broken when a calm and controlled voice came from the church's entrance, speaking,

"What's the situation?"

He was about to turn if not for remembering that he was still held at gunpoint. Faint steps were heard from behind him as the ambusher replied, with a weary tone,

"An intruder from Tokyo area—or so he claimed. See, I told you not to play the piano too much."

A chuckle came as a response, light and almost playful; a tone rare in this time and era. "Sorry, I just can't resist. More importantly, I see that we have *another business* to attend to now."

If Kawamura thought the newcomer's tone was playful, now he begged to differ. Even without a firearm pointed at him, he could clearly tell that this person was even more dangerous; an aspect belied by the calmness of his voice. He wanted to speak, but chose to keep quiet. Reason slowly returned to him, and he decided to assess the situation before making any move—or saying any words he might regret.

"Bring him inside," the newcomer spoke to his fellow. "Let's see what he's got with him."

"...You sure this is a good idea?"

"We'll do the usual steps."

"On it. *You*, cross your arms behind your back—but don't even think of trying anything funny. One suspicious move and that'll be the last thing you do."

With the gun waved at him, Kawamura did not need such warning. He was already at their mercy, holding the faint hope that they would somehow find him harmless enough to let him go. He shifted his arms carefully, crossing them behind his back. Soon after he felt cold metal



encircling his arms; handcuffs, from the dreadful locking sound that followed.

"Now turn around and walk to the church slowly. Don't even think of running away."

He did as the ambusher commanded, turning and finally meeting the figure who had just joined them—what he assumed to be the pianist whose music had enticed him to come to the area. The pianist had a smaller frame, though his posture, full of alertness and of no opening, would make him a more dangerous foe than even the gun-toting ambusher. For the calming tunes to be produced by this person's fingers...

"What are you waiting for? Move."

Kawamura walked with heavy steps, marching towards an uncertain fate. The two followed closely behind, keeping his very life in their hands.

The church, their only destination, was kept alight by faintly glowing lanterns. Warm orange hue filled its space, holding no effect to ward the chilling wind that passed carelessly through the cracks on the wall. Rubbles from the collapsed roof scattered about. Vines and other manners of wild plants found their home here, growing along the walls and what furniture remained inside.

As they reached further into the church, he saw a white piano at the corner, near what used to be the altar. The piano had seen better days, but it was miraculously intact—and *functioning* no less. If not for the dire situation, he would have thought how romantic this place was: claimed by time, yet still retaining what grace it had prior to its ruins.

He was brought in front of the altar, where he was made to kneel. How ironic, he thought, that he might have his life ended in such a place.

"Keep watch of him. I'll check what he has with him."

The pianist, still retaining impeccable composure, approached him. He stayed in silence as the contents of his bag were scattered to the floor, each one scrutinized for functionality or value—and perhaps the



danger it could pose. This scene was not unfamiliar to him. Through the years of surviving, he had seen this situation unfolding before him time and time again, some he witnessed in hiding and some he had suffered himself.

Another moment of despair. Another moment of hopelessness.

"This is..." The pianist momentarily stopped.

Kawamura turned to his left and saw that his belongings had been lined up; among them he spotted his pocket knife, ID card, strips of dried flowers, old photos, a broken watch, and an old story book.

The pianist stared at the story book, reaching it in disbelief. "'The Little Prince'..."

"Wait, for real?" the ambusher sprung, curious of the finding.

"The cover's already worn out, but the title is still legible. To think I'll find it here..."

"That one belonged to a boy," Kawamura suddenly spoke, finding himself surprised at the calmness of his own voice. "If you're going to keep it, promise me you'll take good care of it."

"And who gave you the permission to speak?" the ambusher retorted.

"Wait, Eiji." The pianist raised his hand. "You said this belonged to a boy?"

For a moment no words came to Kawamura. He eventually nodded, replying, "There was... a boy under my care. He was in hiding when I found him, his... parents were taken away by other survivors. The usual story."

"What happened?" the pianist asked.

Giving him a weak smile, Kawamura replied, "Intestinal infection. During his hiding, he had been eating all kinds of things to survive, sometimes there were none. His body just decided to give in one day. We had no meds, no means to fix him, no help to rely on." A sharp pain constricted his chest when he regarded the book. "He always loved



bedtime stories. We were lucky to find that one at an abandoned home. I read it to him to help him sleep, and... in his final moment."

The room was heavy with silence. Even with his life on the line, he still remembered the faces of those he cared for; family, friends. The boy under his care. How he kept mementos with him all the time, unable to let them go.

"...Except for the knife, you can take everything else with you. Go and never come back here," the pianist broke the silence, surprising both his companion and Kawamura. When Kawamura lifted his head to see his capturer's face, he found that the man had roughly-cut, shoulder-length brown hair. His expression was unreadable, brown eyes bearing into his own as if to assess; to read his soul.

"Wait—are you sure, Fuji?" The ambusher, bright red hair now visible, asked with a barely contained shock.

"Look at his belongings, Eiji. Look at *him*," the pianist, Fuji, responded. "This man barely had any means to fight back. Even the pocketknife isn't properly stoned." He took said knife, assessing it before putting it inside his pocket.

"But... *gah*." Eiji, the ambusher, turned to Kawamura. "You heard him. We'll release the handcuffs and you can take back your stuff, but don't be mistaken—I'm still watching you."

True to his words, the gun was still pointed at Kawamura. To his mercy, Fuji kept his own words and released the handcuffs. Kawamura took no time to gather his belongings, shoving everything back into the bag in a haste. He wanted nothing more than to leave this place.

—or so he thought.

An outrageous idea, however, began to orbit his mind. He was already on his way out when he suddenly stopped, leaving his former capturers puzzled.

"What is it? Keep moving and don't stop until you're out of sight."

He wanted to, but for some reason that he was yet to understand, another thought persisted in his mind. A foolish, wistful thought. He turned to face the two and spoke,



"Please... let me stay with you."

Eiji's eyes widened from the unexpected request. His companion, on the other hand, had an unchanging expression, still unreadable. Still assessing.

"Huh? *Are you out of your mind?*" Eiji spoke in disbelief—a response Kawamura found to be understandable. After all, his request was both abrupt and absurd, considering the situation he was in prior.

"What makes you want to join us?" Fuji asked, unwavered.

If Kawamura were to speak the honest truth, there were plenty of reasons that came to mind—though he had no idea how to convey them without sounding like an irrational fool. "...I... I have been traveling on my own all this time. Having company would be nice," he replied. "I promise you I'll be of use. I can fix things, gather woods, scour for food. Anything you ask of me."

No immediate response came from the two. Eiji looked at Fuji for an answer, though none came from him. Instead, the brunette moved, approaching Kawamura with a watchful gaze. "...Well, I don't see why not. He can be useful to us."

"Fuji, you can't be serious—"

"Come now, Eiji, you were the one who was always wishing we had a third person in our company."

Now only standing a few feet away from Kawamura, Fuji looked straight at the taller man and said, "*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly.*"

Kawamura recognized the phrase; be it written or spoken, he'd quickly recognize it like he would a breaking dawn. Remembering the little boy, his eyes grew misty as he responded, "...*What is essential is invisible to the eye.*"

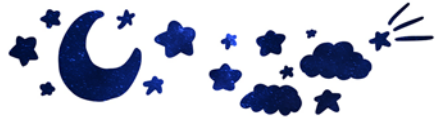
For the first time a smile adorned Fuji's visage, warm and genuine. Nearing Kawamura closer, he offered a hand to him. "Pleased to meet you, Kawamura."

Once, the world fell silent. Each morning was a painful reminder



of the days that would never return, and the nights were filled with echoes of unspeakable losses. Through the agonizing years he kept wondering why he alone was still alive; if the promises he held would be enough to push him to continue forward. He would wake up and repose to silence, the years mending nothing of the scars left by the war.

Once, the world was silent. As Kawamura raised his trembling hand and shook his new companion's hand, his heart was roused awake; beckoned by the newfound sound of the morrow.



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ADDITIONAL WORK

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🐦 @nfra3711



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Nagisa Umibe
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As the Stars Fell

Kawamura Takashi + Fuji Shuusuke + Kikumaru Eiji

Far and wide the melodies resonated, speaking what words could not to what remained of the silenced world. From the night sky the lights came bearing down, falling upon the planet as a shower - this time to meet it once and for all. But no goodbyes were made.

[Read the continuation of Sound of the Morrow here!](#)



Akutsu Jin/Kaidou Kaoru

Atobe Keigo/Tezuka Kunimitsu

Fuji Shuusuke + Kawamura Takashi +
Kikumaru Eiji

Fuji Shuusuke/Kawamura Takashi

Fuji Shuusuke/Tezuka Kunimitsu

Inui Sadaharu/Kaidou Kaoru

Kai Yuujirou/Kite Eishirou

Kaidou Kaoru/Akutsu Jin

Kaidou Kaoru/Inui Sadaharu

Kawamura Takashi + Fuji Shuusuke +
Kikumaru Eiji

Kawamura Takashi/Fuji Shuusuke

Kikumaru Eiji + Fuji Shuusuke +
Kawamura Takashi

Kikumaru Eiji/Oishi Shuuichirou

Kirihara Akaya/Liliadent Krauser

Kite Eishirou/Kai Yuujirou

Liliadent Krauser/Kirihara Akaya

Mouri Jusaburou/Yanagi Renji

Mukahi Gakuto/Oshitari Yuushi

Niou Masaharu/Yagyuu Hiroshi

Oishi Shuuichirou/Kikumaru Eiji

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Sanada Genichirou/Yanagi Renji/
Yukimura Seiichi

Sanada Genichirou/Yukimura Seiichi

Shiraishi Kuranosuke/Yukimura Seiichi

Shiraishi Kuranosuke/Zaizen Hikaru

Shishido Ryou/Ootori Choutarou

Tezuka Kunimitsu/Atobe Keigo

Tezuka Kunimitsu/Fuji Shuusuke

Yagyuu Hiroshi/Niou Masaharu

Yanagi Renji/Mouri Jusaburou

Yanagi Renji/Sanada Genichirou/
Yukimura Seiichi

Yukimura Seiichi/Sanada Genichirou

Yukimura Seiichi/Sanada Genichirou/
Yanagi Renji

Yukimura Seiichi/Shiraishi Kuranosuke

Zaizen Hikaru/Shiraishi Kuranosuke





THERE AND BACK AGAIN

A PRINCE OF TENNIS FANZINE