



TENIRABI ZINE

/// PRESENTING
TENIRABI ZINE 2
WINTER 2020-2021

/// COPYRIGHT

Tenirabi Zine is a collaborative fanzine put together in celebration of the third anniversary of the New Prince of Tennis RisingBeat (新テニスの王子様 RisingBeat) mobile game developed by Bushiroad and Ambition.

The characters and storyline of which are based on The Prince of Tennis manga and anime series created by Konomi Takeshi.

The Tenirabi Zine contains fanart, cosplay, and fanfiction from 29 contributors, as well as some in-game screenshots.

Tenirabi Zine © 2020-2021

For more information visit <https://tenirabizine.carrd.co/> and <https://twitter.com/tenirabizine>

Tenirabi Zine was published digitally January 2021 in the United States of America.

This zine was organized, edited, designed, and compiled by Dusty and Whit; Karupin on the cover was drawn by link621.

All characters are copyrighted material of Shueisha. In-game screenshots featuring character art cards are material of Bushiroad and Ambition; in-game screenshots in the MySpace Gallery were taken by contributors.

All original fanmade text, artwork, and cosplay photography are copyrighted material of their respective owners.

/// ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, a big thank you to all of our contributors. This zine wouldn't have been possible without your time, creativity, and talent and we're so excited to share the culmination of it all in the zine. We appreciate each and every one of you.

A lot of work happens behind the scenes to make a fan publication come to fruition. Dusty and Whit have both volunteered hours of their time to bring Tenirabi Zine 2 to life. Thank you to Dusty for creating the zine website, designing, and laying out the zine; and thank you to Whit for handling communication, quality control, and organizing submissions.

Thank you to link621 for drawing anniversary Karupin for the cover and thank you to Kana for creating our promotional graphics!

Thank you to everyone who submitted MySpace screenshots!

Thank you Konomi-sensei who created this massive world with characters we know and love, and who have brought us together from all ends of the world.

Thank you to all the fan translators who have made it possible for everyone to enjoy content from Tenirabi and Tenipuri alike.

Finally, thank you to each and every one of you who are about to look through and enjoy the finished zine, and thank you to those who share with the rest of the community!

We're so excited to show off everyone's work and hope that you've enjoyed Tenirabi Zine 2 just as much as we've enjoyed creating it.

Have fun!

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DECEMBER 25, 20XX
7:00 AM

MERRY
CHRIST-
MAS!

JO-IT

THAT'S
COLD!

YOU'RE
TRYING TO
KILL ME?!

YOU SURE
WAKE UP
EARLY

I THOUGHT
I'D BE
THE
FIRST ONE
UP AND
ABOUT

BUT SINCE
YOU'RE ALREADY
UP ANYWAY...

NO.

HAHA,
SAME
HERE

IT'S THE
FIRST TIME
I'M AWAY FROM
MY FAMILY
FOR CHRISTMAS

I'M NOT
REALLY SURE
WHAT
TO DO

GOT ANYTHING
PLANNED FOR
CHRISTMAS?

.....



AT LEAST
YUUTA
IS HERE...

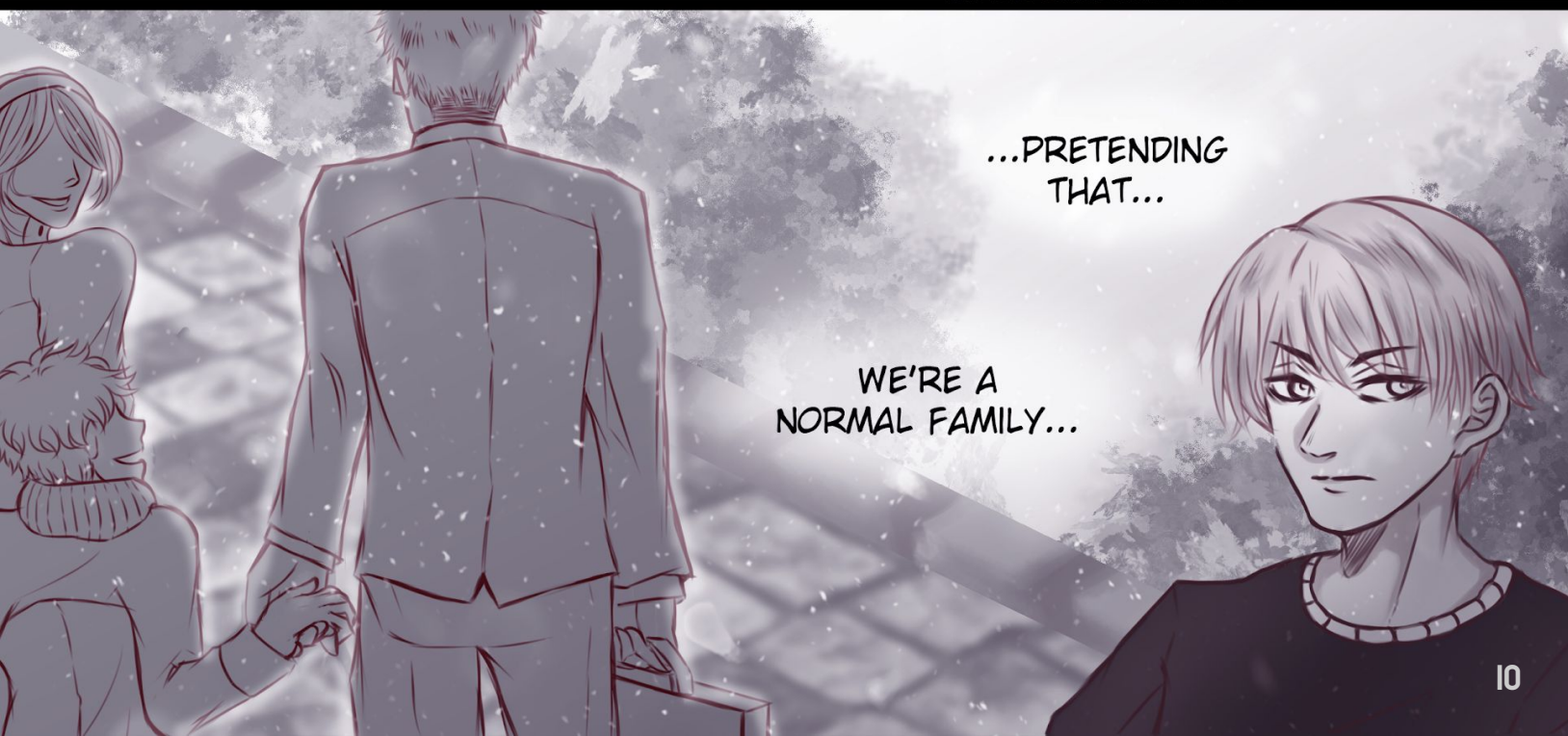
CHRISTMAS.....

...IS STUPID



SHE PUTS UP A SMILE,
AND PRETENDS EVERYTHING IS FINE

IT'S THE SAME THING
EVERY YEAR



...PRETENDING
THAT...

WE'RE A
NORMAL FAMILY...




BUT...

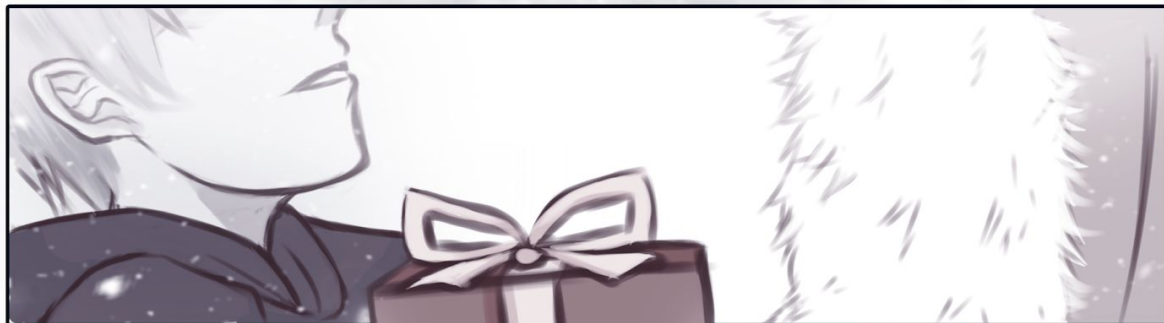


EVER SINCE
I MET YOU...

LITTLE BY
LITTLE...

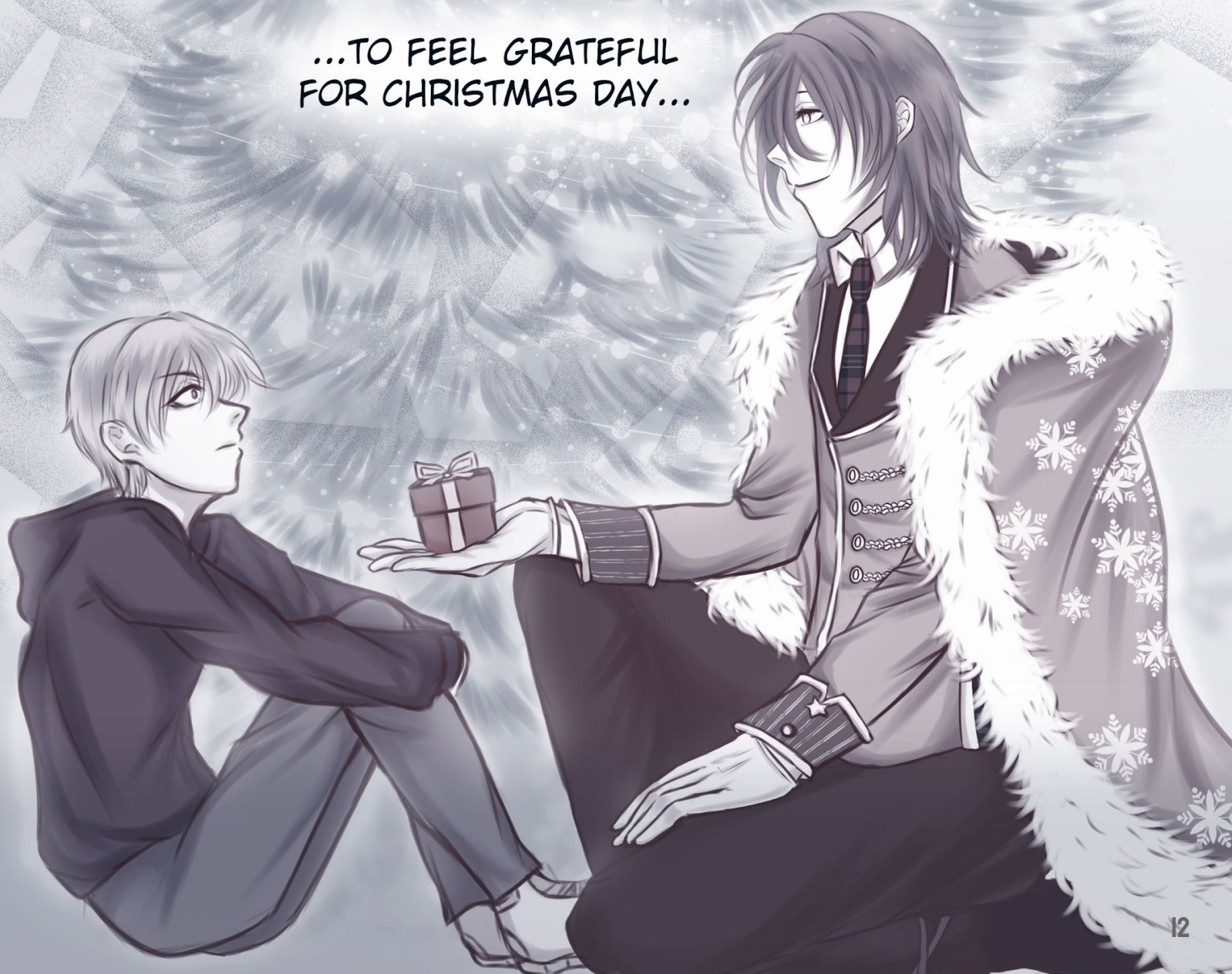
I STARTED LOOKING
FORWARD TO
EVERY DAY





FOR SOMEONE
LIKE ME.....

...TO FEEL GRATEFUL
FOR CHRISTMAS DAY...





...HOW
COMPLETELY....



RIDICULOUS....

HAHA....

HA HA
HA

HA HA
HA HA!!!



NOW THAT
YOU'VE
BROUGHT
IT UP

I HAD
THIS
STUPID
DREAM

OH?

WHAT
KIND
OF
DREAM?

LIKE
HELL
I'LL
TELL YOU

HAHA,
ARE YOU
EMBARRASSED?

HELL
NO!





/// CUPID HAS DOGGY BREATH (AND THE SOFTEST GOLDEN FUR)

BY PUFFCAT

“Thank you very much, please come again!”

Marui bowed enthusiastically as the woman took the pink and white striped bag containing her cake in one hand, leading her young daughter by the other. The bells of the bakery door jingled merrily as the pair left, and a soft summer breeze wafted through the cozy storefront, carrying with it the scent of the fresh blooms that sat in the planter boxes beneath the large windows. Glancing at the clock, Marui hollered into the back kitchen.


“I’m taking my break, boss! Be back in 30!” He slipped his apron over his head and hung it on the peg just inside the kitchen, before grabbing his wallet and strolling out the door.

Mitsuya just hummed his agreement as Marui left, too focused on frosting each cupcake in front of him with a perfect, meticulous icing rose. He finished each with a sprinkle of tiny white sugar pearls, placing them on the tray to his side. He was just about to finish his final rose when he heard the shop bells jingle once more – signaling the arrival of a customer. As much as he wanted to finish the creation and make the display tray neat and even, customers came first, so he put down the icing bag with a soft sigh. Adjusting his glasses on his nose, he rose and made his way behind the counter.

“Welcome to Ambrosia Patisserie, how may I help you?”

“Oh, I’ve never been here before. What would you recommend?”

Mitsuya wasn’t prepared for the deep, rich voice, or the – admittedly handsome – man that it came from. His usual customers were parents,



grandmothers, or fashionable young women looking for a sweet treat. This man was definitely someone he would have remembered, with his delightfully unruly auburn hair tied in a low ponytail; quite at odds with his stormy gray eyes, one of which had a faded arrow-shaped scar underneath it. If not for the cream-colored button down adorned with salmon collar and cuffs, and the calm aura he projected, Mitsuya would have pegged him for a member of the yakuza.

Mentally shaking himself back into focus, he gestured to the large glass display case in front of the register. “We have some staples, like our cupcakes. We have chocolate, coconut, strawberry champagne, and carrot cake today. If you want something less sweet, we have cheese danishes, croissants, and traditional melon pan.” He glanced at the man, tucking a stray lock of hair behind his ear. “But if you feel adventurous, we have our *tarte au citron* with yuzu and matcha. It’s our specialty, and my favorite item we offer.” Mitsuya couldn’t help the prideful note in his words – he’d spent many a late night experimenting until he got the tarte *just* perfect, where the citrus wasn’t too overpowering and the matcha became the ideal subtle compliment.

The man smiled warmly. “A slice of the tarte then. I could never turn down the pâtissier’s personal recommendation.”

Mitsuya nodded and carefully lifted the tarte out of the case and onto the counter. “Which piece would you like?” They were almost completely identical, each piece cut with mathematical precision, but Mitsuya always offered his customers their choice.

“This one, thank you.”

The soft yellow custard wobbled slightly as Mitsuya deposited it into a little box, and then one of the signature paper bags. He moved behind the register. “That will be 700 yen.”

The man handed him a 1000 yen note. “Please, keep the change,” he said

with another grin, eyes crinkling slightly at the corners. "I enjoy supporting local places like this. The care you put into your creations really shines through." Nodding politely to Mitsuya, the man took his tarte slice, and left the bakery.

Mitsuya bowed back. "Thank you very much, please come again..." he murmured, brows knitting in slight confusion. What a strange man... but he didn't dwell on the exchange long. He had cupcakes to finish, a birthday cake to start, and chocolate to temper. And Marui should be back soon to help him, they were on a bit of a time crunch, after all.


A week later, and Mitsuya had all but forgotten the odd man that had wandered into his shop. As always, time passed in a flurry of early evenings, earlier mornings, and clouds of flour and confectioners' sugar.

He sighed, leaning back in the delicate wrought iron chair outside the bakery, enjoying a rare break. In between bites of his egg sandwich, he surveyed the street; a quaint, bustling stretch full of colorful awnings and even more colorful flowers. Almost all the shops had their doors propped open, and some even displayed merchandise on their sidewalk.

"Woof!"

A gentle, muffled bark startled Mitsuya out of his wandering observations. A golden retriever had appeared, seemingly out of *nowhere*, and was currently sitting almost on top of his feet, bright eyes watching him and fluffy plume of a tail wagging happily. And in its mouth it held... a flower?

Mitsuya leaned down, stroking the dog's soft head. "Why, hello there... Are you lost?" He looked around on the street, expecting to see the owner running frantically toward him to recapture the wayward pooch. Instead, the dog just shoved his head further into his hand, nudging his hand with its



cold, wet nose. When it retreated slightly, Mitsuya saw that the bloom had been deposited neatly in his lap. Picking it up, he frowned, turning it over in his fingers. It had layer upon layer of velvety pink petals, spiraling outward from the center. "Is this for me...?"

To his surprise, the dog woofed enthusiastically, and raised his head to reveal a note tied carefully to his tagless collar. Mitsuya plucked it off, noting the thickness of the paper, and read the obviously handwritten message inside.

His eye when caught,

My head a muddle;

To gather my thoughts,

Like piecing a puzzle,


Or eating ice cream,

Before it turns to a puddle!¹

Mitsuya's cheeks warmed; this poem couldn't possibly be for him. It was innocent, sweet... a token of affection. Who would have such feelings for him...? He sighed. This couldn't be right. "Ah, I think you have the wrong person, my friend." He went to tie the note back to the dog's collar, but the pup yipped and danced out of his reach before he could, adamantly refusing to let him return the paper or the flower. He allowed Mitsuya one last pat, before loping off down the street without a care in the world.

Staring down at the flower on the table and the note in his hand, Mitsuya could do nothing but blink with bewilderment. Had that really just happened? Had he just been delivered a declaration of devotion from a dutiful dog? Or was he just more sleep deprived than usual? Shaking his head, Mitsuya

¹ Lang Leav, "An Admirer," Pinterest, accessed Jan 9, 2021. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/914862399848384/>.




stood, swept his cornsilk hair up into a neat bun, and made his way back into the shop. The flower he placed in a thin vase on the counter. The note he carefully folded and slid into his pocket. It was probably just a fluke, but he felt the weight of the paper on his thigh all through the afternoon.

But as he discovered the next day, it was *not* a fluke. No sooner had he sat down at the little table, sandwich in hand, did the same dog trot up to him from around the corner of the shop next door, tail wagging cheerily. He wasted no time in delivering his bounty, likely pleased to be free of it. Unlike the delicate pink blossom from the day previous, the bright, enormous sunflower almost completely obscured the dog's golden head. This time, the note was attached to the stem, tied with a cream satin ribbon. Mitsuya unfolded it with curious fingers.

*Not only did I love him,
But I could tell the universe
loved him, too.
More than others.
He was different.
After all, I would be a fool
not to notice the way
the sunshine played with
his hair.²*

As his eyes roamed over the words on the paper, Mitsuya's heart fluttered. He knew, now, that these tokens of affection were very intentional. Smiling to himself, he gave the dog a gentle scratch behind his silky-soft ears. "I wish I

² Christopher Poindexter, "Untitled," Instagram, published Nov 20, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CH1ce_YFpMF/.



knew what to call you... That way I could thank you properly.” The dog panted at him; mouth open in what could only be described as a canine smile. Mitsuya broke off a corner of his egg sandwich. “Please, take this as payment for your delivery.” Ever so gently, his messenger reached out and plucked the bread from his fingers, tail thumping the ground with joyful relish as he swallowed it down. Then, just as he had last time, he stood, gave Mitsuya’s hand a single lick, and turned around to make his way back to... well, presumably wherever it was he came from in the first place.

And so it continued, each day, without fail. Mitsuya would take his lunch, and like clockwork, his mealtime companion would appear, always carrying a different flower and a new poem. And each showered him with more sweet praise than the last, complimenting his delicate hands, his attention to detail, his enticing olive eyes. For someone who had never been wooed a day in his life, Mitsuya found himself treading in unfamiliar waters that grew deeper with each passing day. So, he did the only thing he could think of to repay this mystery admirer for his heartfelt gifts. He began to give them back.

Now, when he went out for his daily break, stomach swooping with anticipation, he took with him two pastries. One, a homemade dog biscuit, the other a neatly packaged sweet from the bakery. And at the end of every exchange, the dog would gulp down the biscuit, lick his hand as thanks, and carefully take the handles of the little striped bag that contained the treat. He even went as far as to jog slower, so as not to disturb the contents of his precious cargo.

And every evening, when Mitsuya descended the stairs to the little flat above his shop, he deposited his poem into a little jar on his desk. The flowers continued to brighten up his register, and when they began to wilt, Mitsuya tried his best to press them, so that he might be able to enjoy their beauty a little longer. The only one he could not save was the sunflower; too thick to press between the pages of even his largest book. But he had roasted the seeds, and used them to garnish the pastry he’d sent along with his faithful



delivery dog the following day.



Saturday of the following week saw heavy clouds in the sky, carrying with them a cool wind that made the frill of the awning over the bakery entrance dance wildly.

“Is your little mail carrier coming today? It looks like it’s going to rain...” Marui glanced down from where he leaned on the counter behind the register, cheek propped lazily on his hand. Mitsuya was carefully restocking the cream horns, they’d been particularly popular that day.


“Based on the current pattern, a visit is most likely,” Mitsuya replied, trying to keep the fondness out of his voice. He did hope he’d see the handsome pup today, but recognized that he might not if the weather did decide to turn. Which meant he’d have to wait until the bakery opened again on Monday to see his newfound furry friend.

Marui tilted his head, flopping his other arm over the counter. Were there customers in the shop, Mitsuya would have chided him about the slothful pose. “When are you gonna meet this person, anyway? Whoever’s sending you all those flowers and notes clearly has it *bad* for you, boss. Like. Crazy in love.”

Mitsuya fought down the heat that crept across his cheeks but did not deny his assistant’s observation. Whoever they were, they were certainly dedicated. “I suppose I’ll have to see, won’t I?”

Just as the words left his lips, the clock on the wall struck half past one. He stood and returned the empty tray to the kitchen, swapping it for his customary sandwich and accompanying gifts.

On his way out, Marui called after him, “Give the dog a scratch for me!”



It was cool out today, and Mitsuya pulled the cardigan he had grabbed tighter around his shoulders as he settled down with his lunch. The wind ruffled his hair, making his messy bun even messier, but he wasn't about to miss his daily appointment. Neither, it seemed, was his canine companion. He jogged up to Mitsuya from around his usual corner, carrying a single, gorgeous red rose.

To Mitsuya's relief, he saw upon taking the flower that someone had removed the sharp thorns from the stem so that its carrier would not be harmed. The rose truly was perfect, with thick, full, and perfect petals. Whoever had grown it had done so with the greatest care. Nodding his thanks to the dog with a smile, Mitsuya moved on to the note secured to his collar – this time with a thin red string.

*Of all the things,
I can do
on this earth,
I just want to build
a bridge
from my heart to yours.³*

This time, a poem was not all the note contained. In smaller script, beneath the verses, was a short message.

*For many days I have adored you from afar. It would be my
greatest pleasure, if I could have the honor of confessing my
feelings to you in person. Yuzu, my dearest companion, will meet*

³ Alexandra Vasiliu, "Untitled," Instagram, published Jul 8, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BzqO4X4l53Q/>.



you at closing, and bring you to me, where I eagerly await your arrival.

Yours, should you so desire to have me,

YY

Mitsuya's heart skipped a beat, and he couldn't help the way his breath caught in his chest. In a moment, his secret exchange had become truly real. This person, whoever they were, had actual *intentions* toward him. But that wasn't even what he fixated on. What he was stuck on, was the name in the note. The dog's name.


"Yuzu..." he murmured softly, and the dog woofed happily, tail whipping furiously back and forth. Mitsuya smiled, unguarded and genuine, and rubbed Yuzu's ears and carded his fingers through the dog's soft fur. He had never been one to believe in fate, but this made him think twice. His admirer's dog named after his most favorite food? Surely coincidences like this did not happen without reason. "I'll meet you later," he said resolutely, giving Yuzu a final pat as he handed off his usual bag.

He could have sworn, just before Yuzu turned to leave, that he gave the tiniest nod of his golden head, as if he understood.

"I'm meeting them tonight." The words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself as he returned to the kitchen.

Marui nearly dropped the bowl he was holding in surprise, swearing as he fumbled with it. "Shit-! Really? Boss, that's great! Are you nervous?"

Of course he was. "Of course I'm not," Mitsuya said, with what he hoped was believable confidence. "It's about time this person worked up the courage to confess to me in person." *Now hopefully he could work up the courage to go through with meeting them.*



“Unshakable as always!” Marui laughed, shaking his head. “Well, I hope it goes well. And that they’re not like. A total creep or something.”

Up until this point, Mitsuya hadn’t even considered that as a possibility. And for someone who usually analyzed every angle, every possible outcome of a situation, this was *highly* unlike him. If Yanagi ever knew about this, he would never let him hear the end of it. Even so, something in Mitsuya’s gut told him this wasn’t a scam, or a ruse, or a lure. No one would this much time into this were they not genuine. And besides... he hated to admit it, but. He just had a feeling.

The remainder of the day seemed to last forever, and Mitsuya’s mood dampened even more when a clap of thunder shook the sky, and the clouds finally opened to unleash a veritable deluge upon the streets below. Fat raindrops hammered the awning, drenching everything to the bone in moments.

When he finally flipped the sign on the door to ‘closed’ at four in the afternoon and looked out to survey the road still being pounded by heavy rain, there was not a creature in sight. He couldn’t help the disappointment that began to creep in. Yuzu, normally so punctual, was nowhere to be found. But he wouldn’t give up yet. He retreated to the register, and began to close out and count the bills, setting everything up for Monday morning.

Half-past four, and still Yuzu did not come. Marui gave him an awkward pat on his way out for the day, tugging the hood of his jacket up around his ears and over his strawberry locks. “Sorry, boss. Maybe something unexpected happened?”

Mitsuya did not reply to the reassurance, but bid his assistant good evening. He closed the register and made his way to the kitchen to take stock of his supplies.

At five in the evening, the downpour showed no signs of slowing. Mitsuya, more disheartened than he would ever admit to himself or anyone else, was



just about to shut off the lights and go up to his flat when he heard a sound at the door.

It almost sounded like-

“Woof!”


Turning on his heel, Mitsuya walked quickly out to the front, and could hardly believe the sight before him. A sopping wet Yuzu stood at the shop door on his hind legs, pawing urgently at the glass. When he saw Mitsuya, he barked again, and again, tail slinging water everywhere as it wagged furiously.

Fumbling with his keys, state of the weather all but forgotten, Mitsuya unlocked the door and ducked out under the awning. Yuzu pranced out into the street and yipped at him, practically bouncing with excitement.

“You want me to follow you?!” Mitsuya had to yell over the roar of the rain, and Yuzu barked his affirmation, moving further down the road. Nodding, Mitsuya relocked his shop, and pocketed his keys before glancing up. The clouds were dark, and he would surely be soaked. But that hardly mattered. He took a deep breath and stepped out beneath the stormy sky.

Yuzu took off, galloping down the street, and without a thought Mitsuya ran after him, straining his eyes through water-streaked glasses to keep the dog in his vision ahead. Through streets and down alleys they ran, and as they went, Mitsuya couldn't help but laugh out loud at the absurdity of it all; soaked to his skin, running through a rainstorm after a dog he didn't own to an owner he didn't know. But still his heart soared as he ran, and though his feet had carried him far, his body and lungs did not ache with the fatigue, instead spurred on by the promise of the undiscovered.

Turning one final corner, he saw Yuzu finally slow in front of a building, and slip inside the propped open door. A flower shop, of course. No wonder his admirer had been able to bequeath him such varied and exotic blossoms.



Cautiously, Mitsuya stepped inside, and was immediately hit with the aroma of hundreds of flowers, all arranged artfully in vases or baskets, set out on tables or stored in wall-to-wall fridges. It was cluttered, but in that charming way that only a flower shop could manage. Momentarily distracted, Mitsuya took his time walking amongst the displays, the damp chill permeating his skin all but forgotten. The little shop, however, was missing one, or perhaps two important things. Yuzu had vanished, and his owner was nowhere in sight.

But then, Mitsuya noticed a curtain behind the register, pushed aside to reveal an open doorway. Heartbeat kicking up a notch, he moved toward it. Beyond the archway was what looked like a greenhouse, filled with countless pots of every size, with plants in every stage of development. *They must be in there...*


Steeling himself, Mitsuya took a deep breath, and exhaled, squaring his shoulders and projecting as much confidence as he could. And, finally, stepped through the doorway.

And who he found, waiting for him at the back of the greenhouse, Yuzu sitting faithfully by heels, was wholly unexpected. But he was not unfamiliar.

"Welcome to my shop. I've been hoping to meet you again for quite some time now." That rich, playful voice, that fiery hair, that scar.

"It's you..." said Mitsuya, heart flitting like a net full of butterflies as he gazed at the man who had come into his shop all those days ago. He was dressed in the cream button-down, just as he had been when they met. This time, though, he wore cleanly pressed slacks instead of dark jeans, held up by smart-looking suspenders streaked through the middle with salmon to match the collar and cuffs. He held out a single red rose.

"I am so, so incredibly sorry for my lateness." He bowed deeply, expression and tone begging Mitsuya's forgiveness. "In a fit of nerves, I... I admit I must



have read the closing time wrong on your bakery's website. Please forgive the terrible first impression..."

Mitsuya could only shake his head, for he held no ill-will toward the man. He stepped forward, and took the offered rose, bringing to his nose and taking in its delicate aroma. "You can make it up to me by giving me your name," he replied, gazing up at his admirer from behind crimson petals. "Usually you get to know the man before you know his best friend." He tilted his head toward Yuzu, who gave a happy shimmy from where he sat on the concrete floor.


The man's cheeks pinkened at Mitsuya's words. "Of course, I'm Yamato Yudai. But if I may be forward, I would be honored if you would simply call me Yudai."

Indeed that was quite forward, especially from someone Mitsuya had only met once before in his life. But still, the request charmed him, warmed his chest, and made his stomach do a little somersault.

"I must say you're quite the poet, *Yudai*." And oh, something about that name just felt right as it rolled off his tongue. He stepped closer, enough so that the tips of their shoes were nearly brushing. "As I'm sure you've ascertained from my website, I am Mitsuya Akuto. But to reward your boldness... you may call me Akuto."

"Akuto..." It was with pure reverence that Yamato breathed his name, like it was something delicate, precious, a treasure to be carefully guarded. He tilted his face toward Mitsuya's, gazing deep into his eyes with a blue-gray that perfectly mirrored the heavens above them. Mitsuya felt that sweet, warm breath on his lips, and suddenly the air between them was electric, taught with anticipation and longing like a bowstring stretched almost to the point of snapping.

It was Mitsuya that closed the distance, leaning up ever so slightly on his



toes. His eyes fluttered shut as his lips first brushed Yamato's, soft as the beat of a hummingbird's wing – testing the waters. But then he felt Yamato's breath hitch, and a warm, rough hand cupped his cheek to pull him nearer, chest to chest, and in an instant Mitsuya's entire world narrowed to the man whose lips were flush against his own.

So, he let himself go. Steadying a hand on Yamato's shoulder and giving in fully to the kiss, he lost himself in the way their mouths moved together, giving and taking, and making one another fully whole. Mitsuya was almost overwhelmed by the rightness of it all, that he, the planner, the analyzer, lover of hard data and objective facts, had been reduced to nothing more than whims and the pull of his heart – all by a man he'd met only weeks ago. But it never bothered him for a moment.

As they pulled away just by inches, their foreheads resting together and breathing in one another's air, Yamato tenderly tucked a damp lock of platinum blonde hair behind Mitsuya's ear. It was then that he realized that he must look like a drowned cat, bedraggled and cold and wet, but at the moment, couldn't bring himself to care.

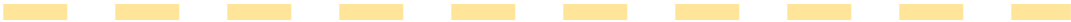
"Would you have me, Akuto?" Yamato asked. "And all that my heart can offer you? Even though we have known each other for only the shortest time?"

Mitsuya's answer came so easily, so quickly, that he didn't question it for a second.

"Of course I would."

Yamato grinned and laughed with elation, lifting Mitsuya around his waist and spinning him around. Yuzu leapt up too, barking and wagging his entire body as he pawed at them both, doing his best to get in on the embrace.

Mitsuya smiled softly, caught up in the thrill, and ducked down to press his lips to Yamato's once more.



Outside, the clouds began to part, and the rays of the setting sun streamed through the greenhouse windows, bathing the two men in a golden glow.





Haruka
@KuraAtoist



/// GOOSEGRASS, WEEPING WILLOW

BY ISOLATIONIST

Kirihara Akaya is Yukimura Seiichi's cousin, the son of the younger half-brother of Yukimura's late father. However slight, there is a family resemblance between them; the wavy hair that on Kirihara curls fully, their gazes ablaze in the same manner, the arrogant tilt of their mouths when faced with those deemed so far beneath them that it were an affront to dignify their presence with any acknowledgement. Yanagi believes Kirihara and Yukimura's sister may have a similarly sloped nose, but it has been long since he last saw the girl.

Kirihara Akaya is eighteen and believes himself in love with Yanagi. It is youthful infatuation, something passing, or mere confusion borne from constant company during their otherwise lonesome travels.

Take him to experience the world, Yukimura had ordered, too occupied at Rikkai to have the time or opportunity to provide Kirihara with this piece of education himself — and harbouring far too much faith in Yanagi to see it through in a satisfactory manner, that he would not bother to consider the option of there having been anyone more suited to take on a shadow.

They have all cycled through the role of caretaker for the young lord Kirihara; Kuwahara and Marui for his younger years, Yagyu and Niou for the middle teens, and now the role falls upon him. Certainly, more than anyone, Sanada has and will remain a continued presence overseeing matters.

A piece of gravel moves beneath the sole of his shoe, scratching against a larger rock with a noise that pulls him out of his thoughts. The gravel skitters down the surface of the rock, the slope gentle but enough to drag it further down the path they've been walking up the hill. Yanagi raises his head. There, not far up ahead the road, is an inn.


The building is smaller than Yanagi had thought from the description given, and from the noise level seeping through the walls and open doors, it would not come as a surprise to hear it is fully booked. Still, Kirihara whoops quietly at the sight of it, a small victorious noise. He is tired of sleeping at the mercy of the skies and he voices his feelings once more. Were Yanagi more talkative he would have agreed. The weather is unpredictable, the nights turning cooler again.

Most would assume he missed what now seemed foreign luxuries, the lustrous silks in muted colourways he had used to wear and the carefully selected oils for his hair, but more than that Yanagi missed the library he had only recently been able to set up. A simple pleasure yet the very height of luxury in his eyes; a collection of books and scrolls, the care put into acquisition and upkeep a small source of pride as much as an indulgence.

Its beginnings had been humble, only a few gifts from Sanada, a couple more from Yukimura, items he had mentioned or they knew from years of friendship would interest him. It hadn't been until the collection had grown further, another book he brought in secret from the imperial library where he knew it wouldn't be missed, and another a book that a friend had forgotten in his rooms but never had asked to have returned, that he had begun to think of it as a library.

Yanagi missed his library, spending the day in it. A private collection that he hoped one day would rival the one located in the Rikkai palace, if not in physical size then in terms of subject matter and content. He spent time curating it carefully, keeping everything to a high standard.


For his birthday last year, Yanagi had been surprised by a gift from Kirihara. It was with utmost certainty that he knew the gift had been picked and chosen with help. Three books, each carefully wrapped in fine paper to



protect them. Two of the titles volumes of a guide imported from a faraway country across the sea, books Yanagi had been looking for and made it known he had wanted among friends and acquaintances both.


The third book was smaller, thinner, and not at all in line with the others in content or origin, not even thematically close. Children's stories, just slightly more obscure and some very specific to the mountainous regions of Rikkai, by the foothills of the tall mountain towering in the skyline rather than the plains closer to the ocean. It would have been so easy to make a snide, pointed comment to discourage Kirihara's at the time only burgeoning affections for him. He hadn't. The book remained in his room, carefully wrapped up again with thin mulberry paper to keep it safe and protected.

When they had last passed a city, Yanagi had picked up a book in a small shop a lot less busy due to its location in an alley off the marketplace. At the time Kirihara was distracted by sweets and street performers, and Yanagi had taken the moment to allow himself some of the same freedom, to slip away and find distractions that brought him joy. He had seen in that shop, with rare collectables and cheap throwaways both, that same book he was gifted by Kirihara. His fingers ran down the spine, the price tag ignored.



There is only one bed in the room. Yanagi had assumed so much from the way the inn's owner had said, the nervous wringing of his hands once he realised the insinuations regarding the nature of their relationship had fallen short. It matters little, as long as they have a roof above their heads. The details can be sorted when the time comes, they are only looking for a moment's rest before dinner.

He washes his face and hands with care, enjoying the scent of the soap as he gets his hands clean. The pouch with their coins hangs securely at Yanagi's waist, and the smaller pouch with silver hangs from his neck and hidden beneath his robes. He adjusts it so no lines can be seen.



“You must be glad to return to your library,” Kirihara says. Yanagi casts him a glance, face mostly hidden behind the towel as he pats his skin dry. He lounges on the bed, body in an open and casual sprawl. Had it been anyone else, it might have looked inviting — Kirihara breaks any illusion of such things when he scratches the back of his head, yawning loudly without covering his mouth. To say his actions were full of boyish roguishness would be generous.

“You know what you said before,” says Kirihara, “about your thoughts getting away from you.”

Yanagi remains quiet.


“Do you really want to return to Rikkai? We— we could, you know,” he says, stumbling slightly over half-promises so painfully earnest Yanagi has to remind himself that beneath it all, Kirihara is younger not only than himself but than his years belie. Than his loud, brusque actions hide.

“What is it you think we could do? Elect not to return?” It is like promises from tales of lovers, highly romantic. Idealistic. Immature. Yanagi gives a precursory glance to Kirihara's form. Still sprawled out, but tenser now. Ready to pounce, leap forward — in attack or to escape, there's no telling.

The unpredictability of Kirihara's nature is unsettling for someone like Yanagi, who prides himself in his ability to understand and predict human nature. That undercurrent of instability is impossible to remove, it seems; that child not yet ready to taste the bitter defeat of maturity and control. Restraint is a word he has barely taken into his mouth despite the concept being pushed again and again until it took root most subconsciously, growing crooked and untrue. That is a failure at Yanagi's hand.



Kirihara had once been wild to the point he was likened to an animal; a feral



beast ready to lash out at any second, at anyone who came his way. Yanagi could recall with perfect detail the set of Yukimura's mouth, how his jaw clenched, and eyebrows drawn into a mien so severe it could only be called terrifying.


There lived a devil in young lord Kirihara, it was said. It was supposed to explain the circumstances in which Yukimura had found him; the ropes and the bruising. The dried blood.

A fiery temper bad enough to have him lose control once pushed far enough, yes. Nothing beyond that, as evidenced by the lack of success in forcing the spirit out.


Though fair, Yukimura had little kindness concerning certain aspects of his life. He steered Rikkai with confident control and oversaw each step of the militarisation seeping through the core of the region more and more by each passing year. On the battlefield, he was unstoppable. When Kirihara first came to live in the Yukimura residence, there was a long discussion among Yukimura, Sanada, and himself about the best course of action.

The fearlessness and raw power that surges through Kirihara was not something that could be left alone, unutilised. How to best forge that power into a weapon was less clear.

As such, they each have their role in rearing the young lord Kirihara. Yanagi himself far less hands on, until now, too preoccupied with courtly matters and building bridges, securing allegiances and fealty on behalf of Rikkai and of Yukimura; the two now being so synonymous that no distinction could really be made.




With a few coins more they have dinner in the hall among the other patrons, the inn owner apologising that they lack the space to bring meals to the



rooms. Yanagi doesn't say that it's no matter, simply inclines his head. The table set for them is adequate, nothing to complain about even if he would have preferred to dine alone. Kirihara eyes the leftover dishes at the other tables curiously as they wait, thankfully quiet.

It is late enough in the evening for the room is less busy with dinner service and most of the people still in it have moved on to drink, the atmosphere something less. Their food arrives quickly enough for Kirihara to only have begun to shift restlessly, subtly stretching his legs to keep them from falling asleep, and he's firmly planted in place once more to lean across the table to serve them both meals. Yanagi does not have to specify which foods are to his taste, and it is with an odd sense of amusement he takes in the certainty with which Kirihara grants himself the larger cuts of meats or the richer broths.



"What do you know of it?" Yanagi asked. His tone was light, entirely neutral. A look of confusion crossed Kirihara's face. Yanagi would have sighed, but not even Kirihara would misunderstand such poorly hidden exacerbation.

Kirihara was not a child, even if he had not yet gone through his coming of age ceremony, and Yanagi knew how others spoke. It was impossible for him to not know, or at least have heard conversations, of sexual relations between men. Of those who keep the company of both, of those who only keep the company of men.

Onna-girai, woman hater, some people referred to natures as his. Yanagi had never considered it such, merely a lack of interest in intimacy with a woman. Indifference was not hatred. If not desiring women was hate, he wondered what the acts of other men would be called.

"Sensei," Kirihara said, almost whined with how the title dragged out, flustered at having been called out for speaking on topics he was far from

knowledgeable on. Flustered perhaps from the topic itself. Confirmation that he had no idea what he spoke of, when he spoke of his affection for Yanagi. If he had bragged, or attempted to talk his way out of it, he would have only made it more clear.

Desire, any man could feel.

How the intensity of such feelings were wielded made all the different. He could only hope that this conversation would not spurn Kirihara to listen more closely to story tellers or the innuendo filled songs performed. If Kirihara learnt to focus his ardour, then one day he might become dangerous with charm.

They retreat to their room after dinner, which had ultimately been a primarily quiet affair, Kirihara scarfing down food as though he had not eaten in days. His words from earlier still ring in Yanagi's ears. If there is somewhere aside from Rikkai where Yanagi belongs, it is in the imperial court. His days in the capital city aren't ones he longs for, but all the same it has been indubitable that this was true.

"Did you see value in our travels, Akaya?" he asks, just a touch careful.

Kirihara sits up fully, wrapping his arms around his legs. He seems much younger in moments like that, obstinate juvenility to his actions as he refuses to even look in Yanagi's direction. Yanagi doesn't ask for eye contact, nor a head kept respectfully low; he only wishes for Kirihara's usual mannerisms. This deviation is another sign of a worsened mood, and since that first time they had been alone while it happened, Yanagi has learnt how to best bypass it without indulging Kirihara's whims.

There is no reason to walk carefully around him, won't help the matter any. Yanagi sits down on the empty space of the bed.



"I've enjoyed it," Kirihara says then, sudden and surly.

"Being away from Rikkai?" Yanagi questions, leadingly, aware that coaxing is his best bet to have Kirihara speak his mind. Better now to convince him to work through and process anything that might keep him from performing at his best upon return; because return they will. The reply is quick.

"No! Or that too," Kirihara acquiesces, "'s nice to not be, hm, to... to be seen as just me. But I meant— Sensei, I've enjoyed our time together."

Yanagi should have expected it, but his judgement had been clouded. He left himself open for an attack, for the topic he so resolutely refuses to let Kirihara speak of to be brought up. The affection, the curious tenderness to Kirihara's voice. It shouldn't be there, yet it is. There is a directness to Kirihara he has yet to teach him to leave aside even if it would be in everyone's best interest if he did. Surely, Yukimura is not expecting miracle work.

The tie in Kirihara's hair is bright scarlet red, the same piece of ribbon Yanagi had handed him this morning.

"I know," Kirihara continues, not really waiting for Yanagi to speak, "that you don't want me to talk about it, but I don't understand — is it so wrong?"

"It is not wrong, Akaya," Yanagi says. It's more open than he would like for it to be. His eyes find the fraying edge of his kosode, thankfully clean but from stray specks of dirt and grime from the roads, and a few pine needles that need to be brushed off. "To feel what you do."

"You're not much older than me," Kirihara says. If that were the only issue, Yanagi would have thrown caution to the wind and allowed himself the indulgence of a lover who wanted him. This boy, Yanagi thinks, understands nothing of the world still. He had been hindered by the weight of his early years for too long, and now he's still trying to catch up to his actual age.

There is a reason for his coming of age ceremony not yet having been held.

“Sensei,” Kirihara said. It made something like guilt settle deep in Yanagi. He wished to say he lacked awareness of what others thought, what the assumption was seeing them travelling alone as they are, with the difference in age and height. He wished to say he never had any thoughts of it himself, though the exact line in his mind would be a surprise to any other. In the months since Kirihara and he left Rikkai, Kirihara has grown taller, his body filled out more despite the at times plain diet.

His hair was growing longer, curls slightly less wild from their weight but still reminiscent of the seaweed he has been teased and derided for. Yanagi wordlessly handed him a ribbon, making sure to keep a few with him in case Kirihara were to lose his items as he had proven prone to. A grateful expression; a small smile, Kirihara's green eyes glittered.

The gentle stream was clear and cool, a streak of silver between moss and rocks, with long grass growing tall on either side. His feet were tired, and Kirihara's had to be too. The grass was wet with morning dew, not yet touched by the rays of sunlight where it grew hidden among trees.

It would tickle were it any shorter, but now it only soothed.

“Yes, Akaya?” Yanagi replied after a moment. He knew that a hair tie had not been the reason for Kirihara to call for him. He would have to commend the boy for not launching into the whinging he would have only months ago, though the growth was so slow despite its steadiness that it was not always noticeable until looked back upon.

Kirihara smiled. “You seem distracted, Sensei.”

“I must apologise,” Yanagi replied. There was truth to the words, most

absolutely. It would bring forth shame, were Yanagi not already burdened with that feeling from earlier. "It seems the closer we get to Rikkai, the more my thoughts get away from me."

"Allow me to comb your hair," Yanagi says. The inn luckily has a hot spring for them to indulge in, as asking them to heat water for a bathtub feels mildly inconvenient when they will return to travel tomorrow again already. Kirihara hangs his head low, still bothered from their talk. He is all too easy to read.

With Kirihara's curls detangled, they head down to bathe; it is but a brief indulgence necessitated from the overhanging need for sleep and the unavoidable promise of another long day ahead of them, but the hot water is heavenly, washing away the tenseness and weariness their conversation and the days alike have brought about.

Wrapped in their inner robes and skin still warm from the water, then comes the matter of the bed. There is just the one, and to Yanagi it isn't a question of who it belongs to — his family may have a good standing, but he is with the young lord of Rikkai, their age disparity and his own seniority aside. Of course, Kirihara rejects the idea. Loudly, so that Yanagi must hush him out of respect for their neighbouring guests. The unwavering stern look he shoots Kirihara does the trick. He then says,

"I won't fight you on this."

"I'm not sleeping on the bed, Sensei," Kirihara sneers. "I have had some sense beaten into this head of mine. It is not done."

His words are enough to bring the hint of a smile to Yanagi's face.

"We can share," Kirihara suggests, then. His face is open, honest, and from

the way he says it... it seems genuine, with no expectations nor any untoward intentions. Not that it would be like Kirihara to take advantage of a situation when it comes to romance or sex, still too oblivious to understand when either men or women come to him for that reason; youth or infatuation or both blinding him.

The rice fields were empty, the harvest completed, and the trees with coloured leaves just barely hung on to the branches stretched out as far as one could see. There was a certain melancholy that came with the season. Yanagi had always appreciated it; the quiet of it, the dry grass, the world ablaze with reds and yellows.

Home. Rikkai. With each step they made the distance shrink. Though it had taken longer than initially anticipated, if they kept this pace they would be sure to arrive safely before winter set in.

It had been early autumn when they left last year, barely out of summer. The last two of Kirihara's birthdays they had spent together. Evening dusk was fast to fall upon them, but they had met a traveller a few hours ago who had mentioned an inn were they to continue their route. Yanagi glanced at his charge.

Kirihara Akaya was Yukimura Seiichi's cousin, the son of the younger half-brother of Yukimura's late father. However slight, there was a family resemblance between them; the wavy hair that on Kirihara curled fully, their gazes ablaze in the same manner, the arrogant tilt of their mouths when faced with those deemed so far beneath them that it were an affront to dignify their presence with any acknowledgement.

Kirihara Akaya was eighteen and believed himself in love with Yanagi. It was youthful infatuation, something passing, or mere confusion borne from constant company during their otherwise lonesome travels.



Clean skin, clean bedding. The feeling of it for himself, and the scent of it too, a welcome change.

It has been very long since Yanagi shared a bed like this, with any partner. The warmth from Kirihara's skin is both natural, his body always running just slightly high, and the remaining heat of the bath. The empty space between their bodies is too small to be entirely comfortable, but Yanagi lays on his back with only eyes for the empty dark ceiling that is beyond sight in the darkness of night. Perhaps, this was as foolish an idea as he had thought.

It has been too long since he last had a bed partner, and he refuses resolutely to think of any by name, but his body remembers what usually comes with it with slight interest.


This had been a bad idea, just like so many of the ideas Kirihara came with. He exhales slowly, eyes closed.

The rain starts slow. For the first several moments it leaves Yanagi to wonder if it's there at all, so quiet and gentle it is as the pitter-patter of it hitting the roof comes about quietly. The sound wraps around him with comfort, and it grows with the degree of rain coming down.

"Sensei," comes Kirihara's voice, almost hidden by the rain. Yanagi could feign sleep.

"Yes," he replies, tone slightly questioning. He can feel Kirihara shifting from how the mattress dips and moves, but it seems that the space remains what it was. The hair on his arms stands up from the skin and he exhales slowly. The quiet is all the more dangerous.

He waits for Kirihara to continue, only the sound of their slow breathing and



the rain any indication of the time passing. The intimacy of the moment isn't lost to him. The threads of the bedding beneath his fingertips feel almost rough, sensitivity heightened.

"I'm grateful for everything until now," Kirihara says, unbidden. "For your kindness."

"I... Akaya."

"I don't, I am not looking to burden you any further," Kirihara continues, as though Yanagi had not said anything. Restraint colours the determination, but he seems as though he needs to get the words out. To say his mind. All too many times he has done just that, and Yanagi has let him. Allowed it. What will another indulgence matter, he thinks, perhaps this may be what leads to Kirihara coming to peace with his feelings. He regrets it almost immediately. "But you must know how I feel. How I, I like you."

I do, Yanagi thinks. He doesn't say it. Kirihara's directness is uncomfortable, making his skin itch. His heart beats faster in his chest — nothing close to racing, though. May Kirihara think his quietness is either sleep or rejection, in either case that would be better. Yanagi can't bring himself to say the words, knowing Kirihara would catch the untruth to them after these months of having learnt each other so well. It isn't without fondness he thinks.

Yanagi thinks of the book in his sachet, the one he bought as it reminded him of Kirihara's gift. If it were anyone else, anyone more knowing of the workings of Yanagi's mind, they would see it for what it was.

Kirihara shifts again, the sheets rustling from his movement. An exhalation of breath, something that could maybe be called a sigh.

The rain seems sempiternal. The moon won't be out tonight.











/// MELTING POINT

BY APRIL & YUN

Zaizen snapped a picture of his lunch to upload to his secret second blog. As he was typing out the caption to accompany the image, a green-haired boy, his senior Yuuji, slumped down in the seat right next to him. Yuuji let out a loud and heavy sigh before slamming his head on the table; a thud that was drowned out by the hustle and bustle of the cafeteria. Zaizen rolled his eyes at his senior's theatrics and immediately just turned his head towards the direction of loud giggles and flirtatious comments. There Zaizen saw Koharu, his senior's doubles partner, drifting from table to table, passing compliments to the boys from the other schools.

"Aren't you gonna make a big fuss about *that* today?" Zaizen asked, seemingly nonchalantly, but he proceeded to upload his blog post up quickly before putting his phone away.


Yuuji let out another big sigh and mumbled, "I still think making my own ice cream would be a better way to steal Koharu's heart. Even though he said it was fine to have bought it..." With Yuuji droning on and on about Koharu, Zaizen zoned out and picked up his phone and noticed several new notifications. He swiped to read them and noticed the new comments that popped up on his latest blog post.

Anonymous

Hey, stop talking about your crush and start talking to your crush! I know you're sitting next to them rn, why don't u just take this chance?!

Anonymous

Confessing isn't that hard, dude/dudette *eye roll emoji* You've been pining for waaaaay too long.



Zaizen cursed under his breath. He should not have turned on commenting in the first place. "What the? Have these people ever crushed on someone? It's so hard to just tell someone your feelings... Especially if your crush only has eyes for someone else," he thought to himself. However, having spent enough time listening to his senior's long-winded rant, he cut him off saying, "You're so gross, senpai."

"Oi! What do you mean by that?! I'll have you know that Koharu," was all Zaizen heard as he picked up his phone yet again and scrolled through his public social media's timeline. Suddenly, he saw a post that piqued his interest; it was from the ice cream cafe that he and Yuuji went for their first (and only) "date." Their latest post proudly proclaimed that they were offering limited ice cream flavours, created only from the freshest seasonal ingredients, and that it was the perfect time to bring their loved ones for a scoop or two. Zaizen ignored the last part before quickly shoving his phone into his senior's face in hopes that it might shut him up.

"Heh, Senpai looks so adorable with his eyes crossed like this," Zaizen thought to himself as Yuuji stared at the post intently.

All of a sudden, Yuuji's eyes lit up and he jumped out of his seat. Zaizen looked at him in shock and all Yuuji declared loudly in return was, "YES! This is it! I still retained the memory of the ice cream rolling process, let's do this!"

Yuuji then dragged Zaizen away from the cafeteria table and towards the kitchen.

"Wait, why do I have to do this with you again," he questioned.

Yuuji immediately shot back, "BECAUSE OF LOVE!"

With that, all Zaizen could do was roll his eyes before trying to keep pace with Yuuji.



In the kitchen, Yuuji pestered Zaizen to look up a basic ice cream recipe that they could tweak easily.

"Calm down, Senpai," a seated Zaizen tried to reason, but to no avail. Yuuji loomed over him, daring him to even stop scrolling through the hundreds, no, thousands of recipes.


Finally, he came across a recipe from a prominent family blogger who boasted that their recipe was a hit with the kids as they could make their favourite flavours and was something the kids could be involved with, which meant he hit the jackpot. The recipe was not only customisable, but more importantly fool-proof. When Yuuji saw that Zaizen stopped scrolling, he immediately snatched the phone out of Zaizen's hands, and scanned through the recipe.

After a momentary pause where Zaizen saw that Yuuji was done with the recipe, Yuuji spun around and headed towards the pantry. Zaizen stared in silence while Yuuji proceeded to grab all the ingredients and the tools necessary for their first attempt at creating love-filled ice cream.

Yuuji slammed all the ingredients that he managed to gather right in front of Zaizen and shoved the measuring tools into Zaizen's arms. He looked up at Yuuji with indignation, but Yuuji was already ordering him to start measuring out the ingredients as indicated in the recipe.

"Honestly, what am I doing here," he thought to himself as he just got to work. While measuring, he snuck several looks at Yuuji who was starting to dump the measured out ingredients into the mixing bowl, all while mumbling under his breath about something, probably related to Koharu. Zaizen hid a smile and concluded, "Oh well, I guess it's just love."

His senior-watching-hour was cut short when suddenly the whirring of the




mixer stopped and a spoon was shoved in his face which brought him out of his thoughts and musings. Curiously, he glanced over at Yuuji and he mouthed that it was his first try at the ice cream base from the recipe. Yuuji then proceeded to nod at him, urging him to try his homemade creation. Zaizen shot up and grabbed onto Yuuji's wrist, guiding the spoon to his mouth before taking a bite.

The taste was sweet, it was creamy, but something felt off, and he voiced it by saying, "It doesn't taste quite right. The one from the cafe had much more oomph to it?" Yuuji visibly deflated at his comments but then noticed the position they were in.

"Okay, you've had a bite. You can let go of my wrist now, bud," Yuuji sputtered and it immediately felt as though Zaizen's grip was burning hot, and he immediately dropped his grip on his senior's wrist with a sheepish and apologetic grin. Without missing a beat, he changed the topic, "Anyways, we might have to go back to that cafe to scout out what they use in their ice cream. For research purposes, of course."

"Mwahaha! More like a second "date"! Damn, who's the gross one now?" Zaizen mocked himself with a rare playful grin spreading across his face.



Luckily for the duo, the ice cream cafe's owner remembered them from their previous trip there and after listening to their pleas, the owner allowed the duo to watch the kitchen staff make their house-special treats. After getting that approval, Yuuji did not hesitate to whip out his pen and notebook so that he could be ready to jot down any important notes that were relevant to his research. He also pestered Zaizen to take photos and videos of the entire process and final products, just in case he missed out on anything. He could not afford to fail, Koharu *would* love his ice cream.

"Did you catch that?" he whispered excitedly to Zaizen who was trying to




document the ingredients and the process with his phone.

Zaizen groaned. "Yes, yes, calm down, Senpai," he said before stopping the filming process. Zaizen proceeded to go through his gallery and showed what the footage he had just filmed to Yuuji.


"Hmm, could it be in a better angle? Like this?" Yuuji mentioned before he stood up and tried to angle the phone in Zaizen's hands until he was satisfied with the image reflected on the screen. Zaizen froze up, Yuuji was leaning too closely into Zaizen's personal space. However, he forced himself to take a deep breath and to relax his stiff posture, before nodding and giving in to Yuuji's requests.

After a few tries of filming the process, Yuuji was finally satisfied and Zaizen was free to roam around to take pictures for his blog. When he deemed that he had taken the perfect pictures to post, he looked back at where Yuuji was seated - he was enjoying his ice cream and diligently writing notes with a content smile on his face. Zaizen took many snapshots that day that would never see the light of day on any of his social media accounts.



With a renewed vigour, the pair dashed back to the kitchen to apply their research to practical work. Zaizen once again handled the measurements, and Yuuji rechecked the recipe to make sure that he knew what he was supposed to do. Once everything was prepared, Zaizen quickly pulled up the videos he had filmed at the cafe and set it up on the kitchen counter. As he had reviewed the footage numerous times on the way back from the cafe, he had already memorised the ingredients in the order that they appeared in his videos. So when Yuuji made gestures at him to pass him the ingredients, he did so with ease.


They worked in relative silence, Zaizen passing the ingredients in the order he had remembered and Yuuji constantly checking in with the videos on the



countertop to make sure he performed every step perfectly. On the final step, just as Zaizen was about to pass the measuring cup full of sugar to his senior, Yuuji seemed to have the same idea as he watched the video. Their fingers grazed over the measuring cup's grip and suddenly, a clatter, as Yuuji retracted his hand, spilling some sugar on the counter.

On the other hand, Zaizen still held a firm grip on the measuring cup, internally screaming that their fingers touched for just a second. However, he tried to appear nonchalant as he apologised to his senior for the spilt sugar and offering to remeasure that ingredient.

Yuuji paid little attention to him, and just let him do what he had suggested. So while Zaizen measured that last bit of sugar, Yuuji continued to make his special ice cream for Koharu. As the machine whirred away, Zaizen heaved a sigh of relief that Yuuji did not notice the slight tremble of his fingers before going to work.




After multiple attempts, both good and bad, the pair were down to their last set of ingredients.

"Listen, Zaizen, we have to make this the best batch we made today." Yuuji clapped Zaizen's shoulder.

"Yes, yes, Senpai. I know," Zaizen replied as he watched Yuuji place his full attention on the churning of the final batch. "Okay, like, I know I was roped into this whole helping Senpai with his ice cream shenanigans but it kinda hurts seeing him put so much effort into this," Zaizen thought to himself.

On one hand, he could see his senior being serious about something for once and not being a jokester trying to make him crack a smile with Koharu, and he got to spend more time with him. However, on the other hand, seeing your crush working so hard on something for another person hurt.



Just like earlier in the day, Zaizen was interrupted out of his thoughts when a spoon loaded with ice cream was shoved near his face.

"Senpai, why don't you try it for yourself?" Zaizen questioned, exasperated and sick of the amount of ice cream he had to consume in a day.

Instantly, Yuuji shot back, "I don't know? Maybe 'cause you're my guinea pig and I trust your opinions?"

Zaizen took a bite out of the dollop on the spoon, allowed it to melt on his tongue, and swallowed it dramatically before turning to Yuuji with a grave expression on his face.

"W-what? What is it?" his senior asked nervously, wondering if he had failed once again.

"Nothing, it's just that it's better than the one we had at the cafe? No biggie."


"ZAIZEN! I was legit worried there for a moment! You are so bad at jokes, please stop making them!"

"Yes, yes, I know. Anyway, shouldn't we start the rolling process so you can give this to Koharu-senpai today?" Zaizen held up the metal trays that Yuuji had used when he tried making the ice cream rolls after their first "date."

"...Right. Let's get to work! But I'd like to work on the decoration first, y'know, let the ice cream solidify before doing it like what they do in the cafe!"

Wordlessly, Zaizen opened the fridge and got the blank chocolate plate and white chocolate pen that they had bought on the way back to the kitchen and set them on the counter. He watched in awe as Yuuji expertly wrote 'Koharu' and even drew a mini Koharu next to the letters!

"How does he do this," Zaizen wondered as he stared at the chocolate plate that he was asked to store in the fridge so that it was ready to be placed atop the ice cream rolls when they were done.



Yuuji let out a tense sigh before he put a big chunk of his frozen ice cream onto the metal tray. He made quick work of 'chopping' the ice cream, added toppings he knew Koharu would enjoy like cookies and sprinkles, and mixed them until he was satisfied. He then flattened the mixture and slowly started rolling up the ice cream using his spatula.

Zaizen watched him, thinking to himself that Yuuji was super cute with his tongue sticking out in concentration and marvelling at the fact that his senior was copying the movements that the cafe staff made while making the rolls (even though he knew his senior was good at copying movements).

Finally, they had the final cup of ice cream rolls in their hands. Yuuji gingerly picked up his decorated chocolate plate and placed it carefully between the rolls of ice cream.

"I think we've done it!" he declared and bounced excitedly on his feet. "I'm going to give this to Koharu right now!"

Just as he was about to head outside, Yuuji stopped in his tracks, as though remembering he had to say something to Zaizen.

"Hey Zaizen, thanks for your help with this, I probably couldn't have done it without you. Left a little something something in the fridge for ya! Have it with the leftover ice cream, 'kay?! Byeeeeeeee," Yuuji sang, before running off to locate Koharu before the ice cream completely melted.

Zaizen was shocked by his senior's parting words; he had not expected any compensation. He opened the fridge slowly as though expecting a prank but what sat on the shelf was a small tub of convenience store-bought *shiratama zenzai*, Zaizen's favourite.

"Stupid Senpai, the ice cream we made doesn't match the flavour of *shiratama zenzai*!" Zaizen mused as he took out the treat his senior left for him.



As he dug into the special treat given to him by Yuuji, Zaizen finally felt as though his efforts in Yuuji's ice cream shenanigans were worth it if he was appreciated by his senior.

"One day, I'll get Yuuji-senpai to see me for me."







/// PARTNER

BY DIESCHATTENWERD

A certain red-headed boy was sitting in the living room. The TV was showing a comedy program, but he was not laughing at any jokes – actually, he was not watching at all. Instead he was contemplating why he was suddenly left alone in the room. He had just said whatever was on his mind, loud and straightforward as he always was.

“Mukahi...” Someone’s voice startled him.

“Yes, Atobe?”

“Go get some sleep. It’s 11 already.”

Gakuto looked up to the clock behind him. Indeed it was already 11 pm. He was so deep in thought that he didn’t even feel sleepy, although he had to admit that he was so tired. So he left the couch that had accompanied him for God knows how long tonight and went in the direction of his room.

Atobe shook his head, “He even didn’t bother to turn off the TV. Kabaji...” He stopped abruptly, remembering that the said person probably was in his room at the moment, and now he only responded to his roommate, Niou. “Geez...” He then clicked the remote and immediately the screen went blank.

— — — — —

“Gakuto, finally you came!! Here, we saved some chocolates for you.”

When Jirou said the word ‘chocolates’, Gakuto’s body suddenly tensed. He remembered the thing that just happened and felt like he was losing his appetite.

“No thanks, I’m going to bed. *Oyasumi.*”

“But, Gakuto, these are the limited edition sweets that are only released once a year! Their taste of maple syrup is very suitable for the fall season like this!” A long silence followed after Jirou stopped talking, which led the other two to believe that Gakuto had already fallen asleep.

“It’s alright, we can keep some for him in the snack box. They will not melt, the weather is rather cold because it’s nearing December,” Marui decided.

“Or we can put them in the kitchen fridge, and just name the box to make sure no one will take it.”

“Good idea, if not, certainly Momo will eat these up! Just don’t forget to tell Mukahi tomorrow morning.”

They didn’t need to tell him because Gakuto was still awake. He was thinking about how the argument that exchanged between him and Kikumaru earned him a glare and that comment from Yuushi.

Earlier that night, he was watching TV with Yuushi and Zaizen when suddenly Kikumaru rushed in, saying he needed to change the channel. Gakuto was holding the remote and gave it to Kikumaru. Instantly after the channel changed, the boy jumped around like a mad man.

"Calm down, Eiji..."

"Nyaaaa, Oishi, this is a live show, I can't miss even a single bit!"

"But, you're disturbing others." Oishi then looked apologetically at the others in the room.

"It's alright, Oishi, we weren't watching anything in particular. In fact, we are glad Kikumaru came and we now have something to enjoy."

Kikumaru beamed, "Yeaayyy yeaaaayyy!! Thank you, Oshitari."

"What's the program about anyway?"

"Oh, you'll love it Mukahi!! It's a variety show with Chocolates as guests."

"Chocolates? As if that popular girl group 'Chocolates'? You are a fan, Kikumarū?"

"YESSSS, ZAIZEN!! You know them too? Nyaaaa I'm glad someone knows them."

"Of course, as a blogger I have to keep up with all the latest trends."

"Woah, that's incredible, Zaizen." Kikumarū clasped his hands. "Look!! They are performing the new choreography for their next concert!!"

"Great, I need to watch this closely for today's entry in my blog."

"Woahhh... Hold on, isn't this acrobatic? Are you sure they can do it?" Gakuto commented.

"Of course they can!! They have been practising for two months now." Kikumarū seemed annoyed.

Gakuto laughed hard and then shook his head, "Two months? Look at those shabby moves! Really, amateurs..."

"You have no right to say that, they have practiced hard!" Now Kikumarū was practically angry.

"Eiji... Gakuto doesn't mean that..." Oishi tried to calm him.

Kikumarū suddenly pointed to Mukahi. "Just wait till you watch the real concert!"

Zaizen raised his hand. "I also want to go! I heard it will be held nearby."

"Yosh, *minna*, let's ask the others and give our fullest support to Chocolates!" Kikumarū ran out of the room cheerfully.

“Ah, Mukahi, I’m sorry for how Eiji acted earlier,” Oishi said sincerely.

However, before Gakuto could say anything, Yuushi replied, “It’s okay, Oishi, someone really has to learn what the importance of hard work is,” while looking at Gakuto from the corners of his eyes.

“What...?” Gakuto’s words were cut by a sharp glare from Yuushi.

Oishi felt the sudden tension and quickly excused himself. Then Zaizen also left, saying he needed to start writing his article before it became too late at night, not noticing the exchange of glares between Gakuto and Yuushi.

After a long silence, Yuushi broke it by suddenly shaking his head while leaving Gakuto alone in the room.

“Atobe! C’mon! Talk some sense into Gakuto! He has become more irritating.”

“What’s with the fuss, Oshitari? You know it’s just how he is. Ore-sama thought you already understood that,” Atobe said calmly in his chair.

Throwing himself onto the bed nearby, Yuushi replied, “But, this can’t continue, he will have much stronger opponents in the future, yet he is still judging others from a glance.”

“They were really shabby moves, right?”

“Indeed,” Yuushi said rather too quickly.

“See? You agree with him, so what’s the matter?”


Yuushi sat up and then folded his arms, “Oh, please, do you, *the Great Atobe*, still need to ask for my answer?”

Atobe raised his hand, a sign for giving up. “Okay, Romeo, now you can go back to your room.”



“What...?” Now it was Yuushi who got cut off by Atobe walking past him to the corridor.

Considering how disoriented Gakuto was that night, Atobe decided that he should let the two handle their own problem.



“Mukahi!!”

Kikumarū ran towards him enthusiastically. As Mukahi stood up from his dining chair preparing to leave, Kikumarū already reached him and handed him something. A ticket. He looked up to Kikumarū who was smiling widely. “Didn’t I tell you...”

“No! You have to come! Look, they held a group dance competition too! I am sure we can win it as a team!” Kikumarū practically beamed.

“A team, huh? I’m certain my acrobatics are better than yours, so what’s the point of teaming up with you?” Gakuto answered with a mocking tone.

“What did you say?” Kikumarū glared. “You know what?! I actually didn’t want to pair up with you, cause I can’t stand that arrogant attitude of yours, but Oishi had a point – I can’t pair up with him this time and since you and I have the same skills, it would be easier for us to practice. Now I am sure Oishi was wrong, I should have asked someone else!” he strode out of the dining hall.

“Yeah, you should have!!” Gakuto yelled. Then he realized that Kikumarū left the ticket on the table. He was about to go when someone suddenly startled him.

“You should have accepted his offer,” Yuushi calmly said.

“It’s none of your business,” Gakuto spat and quickly left the room. Only

when he was in the corridor did he realize those words somehow came out harsher than he intended – and he felt a sudden pain in his chest.

Kikumaru looked at Gakuto like he just said that pigs could fly.

“Ugh... should I say it again?” Gakuto said more sternly. “I’ll be your partner. Let’s get practicing.”

Kikumaru suddenly jumped up hugging Gakuto, “YEAAYYYY!! THANK YOU, MUKAHI!”

“What are you doing? Get off, get off!”

“Why? Ochibi never asks me to get off anytime I cling on him.”

“Geez, I am not Echizen.”

“Whatever... Ah, well I would like to let Oishi know about this! See you at the gymnast hall tomorrow.” Kikumaru ran while waving his hands. “And don’t forget to look at some choreography videos – at least we still have to learn the basics,” he shouted, leaving Gakuto alone with his thoughts.

“Ga-ku-to,” Jirou whined.


“You’ve been spacing out a lot lately, what’s wrong?” Marui seemed worried.

What’s wrong? Gakuto replayed the question in his head. He didn’t have the answer either.

“Maybe I’m just tired of practising,” he weakly said.

Marui smiled, “Then finish eating. You didn’t touch any of it.”

“Ah, sorry.”



"Come on, Gakuto, you should eat a lot! It's not twice a year we get a huge discount like this!" Jirou exclaimed.

Again, Gakuto smiled weakly.



"Oshitari, what's holding you back?"

"Eh?" Yuushi looked up to Atobe confused like he just heard something in an alien language.

Atobe sighed, "You didn't play like your usual self today, what's wrong?"

"What's with the sudden question? I played well – my record isn't bad, is it?"

"No, it isn't." Atobe stopped a moment to pour more tea in his cup. "But even Tezuka said it out loud."

Yuushi raised his eyebrow. "Tezuka? What did he say?"

"Your play is off," then Atobe sipped his tea calmly.

Get yourself together, Yuushi! Yuushi cursed in his mind. If *the* Tezuka, man of little words, had decided to give a comment on his performance, which he rarely did for other players even his own teammates then Yuushi probably actually had been in a real mess.



It was the fifth day of practice and they only had two days left. "Here."

"Thank you," Gakuto accepted the cold coke from Kikumaru. "Hey, Kikumaru..."

"Yeah?"

"I just realized I haven't thanked you for the tickets."

"Nyaaa... Don't mind, don't mind! Oishi bought two tickets without me knowing it, so I accidentally bought another one!"

"Oishi bought them for you?"

Kikumaru smiled wider. "Yup."

"You are sure a lucky one," Gakuto said in an almost inaudible whisper.

"Eh?" Now Kikumaru fully turned to Gakuto, whose expression was very hard to read. As if Kikumaru could understand what was inside Gakuto's head, he smiled more cheerfully. "We both are."

Gakuto blinked twice. "What do you mean?"

"You are also lucky, having Yuushi with you."

"How is this suddenly related to him?" Gakuto felt irritated. Just moments later he realized the weight of Kikumaru's words. "Wait, who said Yuushi belongs to me?"

"It depends," Kikumaru giggled, then looked away absentmindedly, "Nyaaa... I guess at this rate Yuushi will confess first." Then he glanced at Gakuto. "Cause you still haven't realized it."


Gakuto narrowed his eyes. "Realized what?"

"You like him," Kikumaru said it clearly.

Gakuto gulped. "Do I?" Then suddenly he laughed hard while shaking his head, "No way. How come I like him?"

"Uwaaa... This is bad! Don't try to deny it, Mukahi."

"Don't be stupid! I—" Gakuto shouted.



Kikumaru cut him off. "Then how come everytime you look at him there is longing in your eyes?" When he only received silence from Gakuto, he continued, "Is that why you distanced yourself from him this past week?" Again, silence. Then Kikumaru smiled sincerely. "And I also see that same gaze on Oshitari's face."

Only then did Gakuto look up at Kikumaru, his expression confused but his eyes softened. "Kikumaru... If I truly like him, then why do I keep avoiding him?"

"That question..." Eiji trailed off, then seemed lost in his own thought.

Gakuto grew a little bit impatient, "That question?"

Kikumaru turned to him with a wide smile, "Only you two have the answer."



Mukahi, don't be hard on yourself.

Kikumaru's last words that day replayed in his head like some kind of recorded message. *Who's being hard?* He thought. *And what for?* He added.

Only you two have the answer.

Again, more words from Kikumaru echoed in his head. Really, Kikumaru's words were becoming like a plague. *Geez, he isn't helping at all,* Gakuto frowned.

Then, suddenly he realized it was about 9 days since the last time he and Yuushi talked. They had never had any argument that lasted this long. He had known Yuushi since their first day of school. Yuushi had always been a great help to Gakuto everytime he got in trouble or when everyone seemed to avoid him because of his sharp words. Moreover, that boy was also his very reason to involve himself in tennis - the sport he allowed himself to drown in.

He was sure their friendship was something, but uncertain of how he wished it to be.

Will we end like this? was the last question he remembered before sleep consumed him - unaware *why* he thought "we" instead of "our friendship".

"YOSSHHHH!! WE CAN DO IT!!" Kikumaru encouraged Gakuto although it seemed more like he wanted to reassure himself.

"BURNIINNGG!! EIJI, MUKAHI, FIGHT-O!!" Somehow Kawamura's voice was much louder than Kikumaru's.

"Take it easy, Kawamura-senpai, you'll make Eiji-senpai more nervous," Momoshiro commented.

Kaidoh looked at Momoshiro sharply. "Fsshuuu... Idiot!! Kawamura-senpai did it to encourage them."

Inui scribbled something on his notes while mumbling something about "cheerful" and "being nervous" - probably about how Kikumaru was behaving right now.


Echizen shook his head. "Mada mada dane, senpai," he said, taking a sip of his ponta.

"Relax, Eiji, you two have practiced hard this past week, nothing can go wrong," Oishi patted Kikumaru's shoulder.

"However, still, don't let your guard down." Tezuka crossed his arms.

Fuji chuckled. "I don't think this is the right time to say that, Tezuka."

"You should loosen up a little, Tezuka, this place is for having fun anyway." Atobe gestured to their surroundings. Indeed the mini-concert turned out to



be a lovely carnival with colourful garlands and small lamps all around. There were also many food stalls and game booths. No wonder almost all people in the camp eagerly came.

"Gakuto... smile!!" Jirou pinched his cheek.

"Ouch... Geez, you don't need to do that, we aren't even on stage yet."

"That's why. You better do it now so you will appear more natural."

Marui then gave him two boxes of cake. "Here, for you guys... Sweets are good for boosting your energy."

"Thank you, Marui!" Kikumaru jumped and hugged him.

Marui struggled. "Kikumaru, I can't breathe..."

"Hehehehe..." Kikumaru let Marui go and gave him a peace sign.

Gakuto opened the box and started eating. However, his eyes kept flickering everywhere but the cake.


"He is buying some takoyaki with Toyama around there." Atobe pointed to the stalls across the stage. Gakuto instantly turned to the said direction. Still, with lots of people in the crowd, Gakuto couldn't find the person he wanted to see. Just when he was about to frown, Atobe's word finally sank in.

"What do you mean?" Or rather, *damn you, Atobe, and your Insight.*

Atobe shrugged and then averted his gaze to the stage where Koharu and Yuuji were performing right now. Koharu suddenly blew a kiss in his direction and he raised his brow.

"Hey there, gorgeous hazel eyes, that's for you!" Koharu winked.

Yuuji pinched Koharu's nearest arm, "YOU CHEATER!!!"



Knowing he had no hazel eyes, Atobe turned to find Tezuka standing behind him slightly to his left. He saw the said man knitted his brows while the others tried to stifle their laugh.

At the same moment, Yukimura came over. "You should respond to that kiss, Tezuka." He just made the worst out of the situation.

That brought another tease from Seigaku's *tensai*, "Come on, Tezuka, you are a gentleman, aren't you?"

Momoshiro and Kikumaru couldn't hold in their laughter anymore. For that, they received a death glare from their captain and abruptly stopped although little giggles still escaped their lips. Tezuka sighed - he silently prayed someone would change the topic now.

As if his prayer was answered, Kite suddenly appeared with lots of gifts in his arms, a silver necklace with a moon pendant on his neck, and a silver bunny headband on his head. All eyes instantly fell on him and the lads were about to laugh when Tezuka curtly coughed. It was the least he could do to save Kite.


"Ah, you are finally here," Yukimura said and picked up three white sailor-like caps with a silver moon emblem in the middle.

Kite shifted his arms so he held the things better, "Who am I to blame? You were the one who got too fired up."

"But you were the one who challenged me," Yukimura simply answered. "Here for you, Mukahi, Kikumaru," he continued. "And this one is for you, Marui."

Kikumaru was ecstatic, like a child getting a Christmas present. "THANK YOU, YUKIMURA!"

"Yukimura, can't I have one of those?" Jirou pleaded.



"Sorry, but they only had three caps..." Yukimura inspected the rest in Kite's arms. He already decided to give the bunny headbands to Koharu and Yuuji, asides from Kite. Those cowboy hats would fit Tezuka, Oishi and Kawamura. Meanwhile, he himself intended to keep one of the wool scarves and give the other two to Fuji and Atobe. "Hmm... how about this neck pillow?" he finally offered. He could think of to whom he would give the other stuff later.

Jirou smiled widely. "Yeaayyy!! Thanks, Yukimura!!"

"Where did you get all of them?" Kawamura asked curiously.

Kite gestured his chin to the right side of the area. "From a game booth over there."

"And judging from all the gifts, there is a 97% chance you just earned the highest score there," Inui commented.

Yukimura shrugged. "I am not sure mine is the highest anymore since Sanada and Akaya were having their duel with Renji and Yagyu next, and probably Niou and Jackal after."

"Sounds interesting. If I go there now maybe I will get good data to defeat them." Inui smirked.


Marui looked enthusiastic. "These are Chocolates' official merchandise, right? I want them too!"

"Yosh, Oishi!! After my performance, let's play there!!" Kikumarū suggested cheerfully.

Oishi looked worried. "You should rest, Eiji, you will be exhausted then."

"Of course not, I have trained a lot to have better endurance," Kikumarū stuck his tongue out.

That reply suddenly brought memories to Gakuto - he also once got through



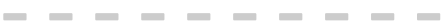
those extra practices just to make sure his stamina issue didn't bother Yuushi as part of their pair. *As his partner.* Suddenly Gakuto became very aware of that phrase - and he slowly smiled.

"C'mon, Mukahi! It's almost our time." Kikumaru tapped his shoulder.

"Ah, yes!"

"And don't forget to keep that smile." Kikumaru winked.

Gakuto brushed him off but failed to hide his smile.



Gakuto and Kikumaru finished their performance safely. Truth to be told, theirs was probably the best performance of the night. When they came down the stage, they heard a quarrel.

"Oshitari, you should give it to him directly."

"No, he is probably still angry with me, Oishi."

"If you never try, you'll never know, right? Besides, I don't think he is that angry with you."


"But, Oishi..."

At that very moment, Kikumaru clung to Gakuto's arm and pulled him to where the other two were standing.

"Heyho, Oishi, Oshitari!"

The said boys turned their attention to the two redheads.

"Eiji, Gakuto, congratulations! Eiji, here's your drink." Oishi smiled. "But, I'm sorry, I forgot to bring a towel." He scratched his neck.



"It's alright, Oishi, thank you. See you, Mukahi, Oshitari!" Kikumaru waved and quickly guided Oishi away, leaving the other two alone.

There was a silence - a little too long of one, before finally Gakuto broke it, "I better go. The concert is about to start anyway." He quickly walked past Yuushi, but the latter grabbed his arm.

"Here, your drink and towel."

Gakuto looked at the two things. When he didn't do anything, Yuushi opened the cold coke and handed it to him. Gakuto slowly looked up and was greeted by Yuushi's sweet smile. "I didn't poison it, I promise," Yuushi paused, "Or would you prefer I dry your sweat first?" he flashed a teasing smile while bringing up the towel.

Gakuto snatched the towel from him. "What...? Don't be ridiculous! I can do it myself."

"Of course you can," Yuushi smiled dearly.

Feeling heat creeping up his cheeks, Gakuto averted his eyes from the bespectacled boy and muttered, "Thanks."

"Let's go watch the concert then."



Darkness. That was the first thing that greeted them at the camp hall. A loud thud was heard instantly.

"Ouch..." Echizen groaned.

"Oh, it's you, Koshimae!"

"Geez, I've told you that's not my name."

Sanada stepped in further. "A blackout?"



"Seems so," Shiraishi agreed.

Jackal frowned. "We can't use the heater then."

"Geez, I'm freezing," Niou added.

They were reluctant to go inside but the cold wind outside gave them no choice. Almost all of the boys moved in closer, seeking warmth from each other. Someone suddenly brushed Gakuto's hand and only then he became aware of how close Yuushi was. He was about to push the taller boy away, but he didn't want to make a scene, so he decided to keep still. He silently thanked the blackout for hiding his reddened cheeks.

Kenya looked around. "Where is everyone?"

"They are in the living room." Akutsu suddenly appeared from the black corner surprising almost everyone.

"Geez, Akutsu, you want us to have a heart attack?" Akaya protested, and Akutsu gave him a glare.

Sengoku put his arm around Akutsu's shoulder, "You should have come, Akutsu, there were pretty girls everywhere."

Akutsu clicked his tongue and started to walk away.

"Wait, Akutsu, you can't just leave us in this pitch black," Hiyoshi yelled.

"Shut up! Just walk along the window! The moon is bright," Akutsu yelled back.

Atobe went forward, "Alright, let Ore-sama guide you all." Then he clicked his watch and it turned out the gadget had a torch.

"That's Atobe for you," Zaizen commented.

"Woah, look at that, Koshimae! Atobe's watch can be a torch, just like in the

manga of that detective boy with glasses."

Echizen rolled his eyes. "My name is not Koshimae."

Once they arrived in the living room, Tachibana and Kamio had already brought all the beanbags and blankets and arranged them around the fireplace. Meanwhile, Kai and Hirakoba passed out hot chocolate to everyone.

"Make yourselves comfortable. Ryoga, Mori, and Ochi are bringing the mattresses," Irie announced, which received mumbled thank yous from the others.

As if it was in their nature, the boys ended up sitting with their own school teammates. And now Gakuto was stuck in one seat with Yuushi.

"Why don't you get under the blanket? The hot chocolate didn't do much for your legs, did it?"

"No, I'm fine," Gakuto replied quickly. He was still afraid that having contact with Yuushi would bring back the flush on his face.

"It's alright. I don't bite." Receiving no reply from Gakuto, Yuushi sighed. "There's still room in here. How can you rest well while shivering like that?"

Gakuto suddenly thought about getting a cold, then reluctantly slipped himself under the warm blanket. Once he was underneath its warmth, he quickly pretended to fall asleep. Yuushi glanced at him and smirked. He slowly moved to Gakuto's ear and whispered, "Shouldn't we discuss our issue then?"

Despite the shiver crept up his neck from Yuushi's warm breath, Gakuto managed to reply, "Can't you see I'm tired?"



"No, I can't." Yuushi indeed could be very stubborn sometimes.

Without opening his eye, Gakuto replied, "I don't see any urgency to have this talk."

Yuushi sighed, "At least let me apologize." He peeked at Gakuto and found him still pretending to be sleeping. He continued, "Pardon me for not saying this clearly from the start. I actually really care for you. I want you to be stronger. This camp isn't Hyotei Academy. At Hyotei, you may be one of the best, but there are many powerful players here. And I don't want you to fail only because you look down on others - the same thing you did to the Chocolates that night."

Gakuto's eyes shot open and he turned to the boy beside him quickly. "I didn't..."

"I know, I know." Yuushi looked at him softly. "You were only telling the truth. However, don't see it from only your point of view. One might be born talented, like you and Kikumaru, but the others might get it through hard work. They performed safely tonight, right?"

Gakuto didn't say anything for a while. He looked lost in his thoughts.

Yuushi smiled. "Thank you."

"No, that should be my line." Then Gakuto looked up to the taller boy. "Thank you for keeping up with me despite all the trouble I made you go through. You should have picked a better partner."

Yuushi shook his head. "No, the only partner I want is *you*."

Gakuto fought the urge to smile since he didn't want to get his hopes high. Who knew - maybe Yuushi literally meant a tennis partner. He let out a small "Oh" instead. Then suddenly he remembered the cold drinks he received every practice. "How much do I owe you for the drinks?"



"Not a single penny."

Then there was silence between them. Suddenly Yuushi took Gakuto's hand in his under the blanket and looked at the smaller boy dearly. "I mean it. As *partners*."

Gakuto raised a brow.

Yuushi looked frustrated, "Do you want me to say it out loud?" Silence. "Alright, *partners* as in *a couple*. Got it?"

"Oh" was all that Gakuto could say before the words finally sank in and made him gasp - not too loud fortunately so he didn't attract attention. Gakuto opened his mouth and tried to say something but he stopped.

"It's alright, you can take your time." Yuushi squeezed his hand.

Gakuto still looked lost. "Are you sure? I mean, well... I..."

"I couldn't be more certain."

Then Gakuto slowly smiled, the most beautiful smile Yuushi had ever seen.

"Well, me too. *The only partner I want is you.*"








/// BY THE BREEZE OF THE OCEAN

BY A.I.

If there is anything I yearn
It shall be to gaze it with you
The white sandy beaches
Where I wish to detour to
Despite that, we are detained
In the midst of a battle
For a recognition, for a place
For an acceptance to the next level

Open those eyes
Beneath the glint of your glasses
And cherish this sight
It shall not be ephemeral
For we will return to reality in hours
Therefore etch it in your mind
The beauty of the ocean
And the breeze that follows



I still recall, clear as it is
The sea reflecting the sky, both azure
The scorch of the Okinawan sun
Burning the skin as we play our game
Our soles partially sunken in the sands
The faint scent of rosa-sinensis
Whose bush shakes as it is glazed
By the wind blowing gracefully

Your unkempt wavy brown hair
Blown by the breeze
I reminisce the time
When we dashed on the sand gleefully
Undeniably a serene kinder memory
Alas, reality is our fate
Therefore let us make haste
And settle the undone in front of us

I don't want to lose any bond we have
Though, as we age,
It shall undeniably prevail



Know no doubt that the beaches
Are alike nowhere else
In midst of errand,
I grab whatever's at the moment
Time, as we grow, shall never rewind
Extend that hand of yours, run with me
And splash ourselves in the water
Let the gale blow off our worries away
And unravel that seriousness of your back
I want this moment with you

"Wait!" I hollered as you grab my arm
You who seem to care not of responsibilities
I let you drag me to the deep
And I sink into your gaze
As I sink in the deep blue waters
I witness joy in your soul, as you swim hastily
And your chain with the engraved ring, never left your neck
An unforgivable demeanor, shall I say
Yet a heartwarming look you gave
I have no need to forbid

Perhaps, it is time we cherish the now

Our breath, though unsynced, held to our limit

Till it is time to reach afloat

We kicked ourselves upward

And we resurfaced

With our hairs, a flatten mess on our heads

I shook my head, removing droplets lingering

And I let the calm slowly embrace us

Hence we both laugh it out

Despite the leers of our peers onshore

The breeze made the heat from the Sun

Turn to a chilling sensation

Moments like these are worthy

Yet it didn't linger more than a day

As we are requested to return

With small paddles, our feet touched the sands

And the fun ends there

Not before we turned our heads

And witness vermillion rays



The epitome of sunset coming to night

No sooner did the coastal breeze come

The sand on our feet became instantly cold

A sign of one final glance

Before we come back to

Our designated space, destined by higher ups

And on the way back, caught a glimpse of the stars

"Make a wish now, Kite," though I doubt you will

A man of effort instead of hope

"Surely, Kai-kun," and I wished with you, unexpectedly

Unknown of each other's mind

We both know

Our need of each other's comfort

Now that we've grown, we may drift away

Like the breeze in our hometown

And even with our attire differed

And our knowledge diversified

"Surely we shall meet again"

"No matter the time, fate will allow us another encounter"



We make that oath
An oath of reuniting
As we link our rough hands
Each in silver chains and charm identical
Two friends, under the sun
Hair blown by the wind
In this serene beachside



/// BETTER TO BEG FORGIVENESS

BY LINK621

“How does one fit a six foot tall man into a backpack?”


Atobe rubbed his temples as he spoke. He knew he should have given this whole matter more consideration to begin with. Of course the Team Japan U-17 camp wasn't going to be keen on having a member of Team Germany there. But it was a bit late in the game to have this obvious revelation. Tezuka's plane had landed the night before and he was already on his way to the mountain camp as they spoke.

“I might fit,” Akutagawa offered, contorting himself into the backpacking bag that was (to his credit) probably large enough to fit his small frame. When just his smiling face and tuft of blonde hair was sticking out of the top, he looked up at Atobe. “Hey, Kaba-chan! Zip me up!”

Ever obliging, Kabaji knelt down beside the bag and zipped. Akutagawa almost fit perfectly, though Atobe could see his bright eyes peeking through the opening in the zipper. This was how Atobe was spending one of their last days at the U-17 camp in the final year that he would even qualify to attend... the same way it had gone basically every other year when they attempted to take all the participants camping. There had been several days of tent-swapping, arguing over what to pack, and well... this. Akutagawa being Akutagawa.

“Lovely,” Atobe said with a sigh, watching Kabaji easily hoist the backpack containing Akutagawa like it weighed no more than any other camping bag - with how little he weighed, it probably did weigh basically nothing. “Why bother packing?”

A muffled sound came out of the backpack in response.




Maybe the coaches wouldn't notice. After all, Echizen, Tanishi, and Oshitari's cousin had once stolen some booze from the camp without being caught. If those three could do it, surely Atobe of all people could find a way to sneak Tezuka into camp. It wasn't like he was disruptive by nature or would go out of his way to draw attention to himself.

Atobe was going through all of this trouble just to see Tezuka again outside of the context of the World Cup. It was his third year of high school and after this, he wasn't sure that he would see Tezuka again when Atobe went off to university and Tezuka continued to pursue his professional career in Germany. They had... things to talk about. They spoke over the phone fairly regularly, of course, but it never felt quite right to say these things on the phone.

But how to get Tezuka past the coaches?


It was then that Atobe had an idea - not a terribly *good* idea, but that was what he got for waiting until now to figure out the logistics of this crazy mess. He was going to need help from the inside.



"My Seigaku jacket?" Ooishi was diligently packing two bags working off a packing list. If Atobe had to guess, he would assume the poor man had been saddled with making sure Kikumaru didn't forget clean underwear for every day they were camping. "Sure. You can borrow mine. But... I don't mean to be nosey, but... why?"

Ooishi could be trusted. He was Tezuka's best friend. He surely wouldn't go snitching on Atobe for trying to bring his best friend to the campsite, right? Then again, he would tell Kikumaru. Kikumaru would tell Fuji. Fuji would tell Yukimura and Shiraishi. Yukimura would tell Sanada. Sanada would tell the coaches like the useless brownnoser he was.

Maybe not.



“It...” Now Atobe had to come up with a convincing lie. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll wash it before I return it.”

Nope. That was bad. Ooishi was side-eyeing him in that knowing way that suggested he was now inventing all his own reasons why Atobe would need it. Probably thought he was being some sort of weird stalker, which was not a terribly strange thing for Ooishi to think about Atobe since they had been through this little dance around Tezuka before. Ooishi had always been his most reliable source for information since he was always all too happy to talk about Tezuka.

Don’t look at me like that, just give me the jacket. Atobe was feeling increasingly like bolting which was why his expression and stance excluded more and more confidence with each passing second.

The exact moment Ooishi handed him the jacket, Atobe was gone.




They met at the bus stop outside the camp.

“Atobe.” Tezuka’s voice was exactly the same. Everything about him was the same as it had always been. Just... *more*. Somehow. He had grown a bit since they had last faced one another on court; his shoulders were broader, he carried more muscle on his frame, and his hair had grown out just long enough to weigh itself down so it wasn’t flying off his head in one direction.

Tezuka at least was not dressed in his Team Germany warm-ups to avoid being as conspicuous as possible, but did come dressed for tennis in white warm-ups.

“Tezuka.”

Before Atobe could say anything else, Tezuka commented, “I am admittedly surprised the coaches allowed this.”



Ah, yes. That lie that Atobe told. “Speaking of that - don’t you think it would be nice to wear your old jersey?”

“Hm?”

Atobe extended the Seigaku jacket which, he noticed belatedly, had the words “Ooishi Syuuichirou” sewn into the hem by the zipper. Tezuka did not carefully examine it, instead turning his dark eyes back on Atobe. If there was any part of him that never seemed to age, it was the eyes. Feelings he did not speak would be reflected in his eyes. The intelligence, the passion, the innocence that had always shone in his eyes fixed on Atobe now.

“...The bus will be here soon. Do you have your camping gear?” Atobe had to look away from Tezuka, making a show of looking down the road as though the bus was going to appear. In truth it was another thirty minutes until they were supposed to gather their camping gear and load up for the trip up the mountain, but there was always the chance the bus would arrive early or camp participants who cared about who they sat with on the bus would gather early.

“Yes.” Tezuka set down his backpacking bag that Atobe could not help but briefly admire. Atobe knew first hand that Tezuka spent a great deal of his free time camping, hiking, and fishing - his gear showed signs of age, but little sign of wear since it was already of the highest quality.

Tezuka slipped his arms into the Seigaku jacket which was not *quite* a good fit for his upper body. He was broader, more slender, and had longer arms than Ooishi. Honestly, it was quite fetching on him despite not being a perfect fit. This guy would be the best looking man in the room even if he was wearing a paper bag - and that included if Atobe himself was in the room, so he felt like this was a *significant* statement.

The cracks in Atobe’s plan were already starting to show.

“Tezuka-san!”



Shit. There was also that crack in his plan.

The youngest Fuji brother came to stand with them, dropping his heavy camping bag beside Tezuka's on the ground. "My brother didn't tell me you were going to be here." Atobe had not put two and two together until now, but of *course* Yuuta would know Tezuka. Tezuka and the older Fuji brother had been good friends for a number of years, it made sense that they would know one another's families even if it made the patient smile on Atobe's face begin to wither in disgust. Tezuka didn't know Atobe's family despite their many years of what could be technically qualified as friendship under the dictionary definition (probably).

"I did not tell him," Tezuka replied, zipping the Seigaku jacket to his collarbone and popping the collar habitually. "It is good to see you, Yuuta."

"Yeah, you too. Man, maybe you can distract my brother long enough to get him off my back..."

Right. Tezuka was obnoxiously popular. That... that could be a problem.



Though not a single coach seemed to notice that someone who was not supposed to be on the bus had boarded with them, all of Seigaku's old tennis team that were present at the camp had crowded into the back seat of the bus so that they could chatter excitedly with Tezuka. The back seat may have only been five seats wide, but it seemed not all of them objected to doubling-up. Or laying across laps.

Atobe stared straight ahead at the back of the bus driver's seat wondering why he was doing this to himself. He was rich. He could afford to just fly himself to Germany and whisk Tezuka off to some private island getaway and tell him everything. That at least would guarantee they would have a moment or two together to have such a conversation unabated by the constant



interruptions of the group of hooligans that were presumed to be Team Japan's top athletes.

"Yeah," Kuwahara said aloud from the seat next to Atobe, as though agreeing with his thoughts. Atobe glanced over to see that in the seat beside them, Akutagawa and Marui were excitedly picking through their mingled pile of snacks. This poor man did not stand a chance at keeping Marui's attention if there was sugar involved.

From the back of the bus was an excited exclamation of, "Wait! If Tezuka is here, where is Koshimae?" That was definitely the wild child of Shitenhouji just then realizing that Echizen wasn't with them.


Sighing, Atobe agreed, "Same."



The novelty of Tezuka had thankfully worn off by the time that the group arrived at the campsite and were setting up tents. Despite Atobe's best efforts, he was not able to convince Tezuka to share a tent with him (somehow in the time they were on the bus that honor had been bestowed upon Chitose of all people). But the coaches had wandered off to drink around a fire by their tents, so Atobe was at least off the hook for bringing someone who was not a member of the Japanese U-17 camp until morning.

"I'm sure I'm not who you wanted to share a tent with, Atobe-kun." Ever-perceptive Yagyuu had taken on the job of securing the tent to the ground, hammering in stakes, while Atobe was setting up the canopy over the flap at the front of the tent. While he was certainly not Atobe's first choice of tent mate, he wasn't offensive like some of the alternatives, either. He at least showered regularly and could keep his space neat and orderly.

"Honestly, better you than Niou," Atobe confessed. He would take sharing a tent with Yagyuu over dealing with "Niou's kingdom" any day of the week.




And it certainly could be worse. There was a fair deal of chaos happening at the tent where Amane and Konjiki were setting up. Konjiki was loudly fawning over Amane's muscles. Amane, it would seem, was delighted by the attention - periodically yelling across the campsite at Kurobane to show off how he was being fawned over by Konjiki.

Yagyuu paused in his work to agree, "Most things are." Another delighted squeal from Konjiki prompted him to add, "Most." They briefly met eyes in silent agreement that they actually had it pretty good with one another's company, all things considered. Yagyuu also wasn't likely to mind if Atobe snuck off in the middle of the night or in the early morning to speak with Tezuka if that was what it took to get a moment of his attention alone.

Atobe ducked into the tent to begin unpacking his sleeping bag and the necessities. Unsurprisingly, Akutagawa had gotten into the snacks he packed like a squirrel. Had he already gone through his own or given so many to Marui he ran out? Another in the never ending train of sighs slipped out of Atobe and he rested his bag into the crease of the tent. So much for a snack. Dinner would be soon, though, as well as his chance to speak with Tezuka.

After this was the World Cup which was honestly probably Atobe's last real chance to say anything to his long-time rival and friend. It was time to shit or get off the pot if he wanted to come clean about all those interactions they'd had over the years and the litany of jealous outbursts, unwelcome attention, and undue sense of propriety. The whole reason he had gone through the trouble of inviting Tezuka and sneaking him into the camp was for *this*, and yet here he was not able to have a full conversation with Tezuka since he arrived because of the chaos of the camping trip.

He glanced over his shoulder at where Tezuka and Chitose were sitting together outside of their tent talking too quietly to be heard at a distance. They had been one of the first pairs to construct their tent, likely because




Tezuka was a life-long camping enthusiast and Chitose never went home. Chitose was showing Tezuka something on his phone - pictures, probably. Atobe leaned to the side to try to catch a glance of what he was looking at, but...

“Atobe-kun - can you move over a bit?” Yagyu was waiting at the door of the tent, his bag dropped to the ground in front of him.

“Ah - yes. Of course.”

Atobe regretted not actually forming any sort of plan for what he would do when this day came.




Dinner came and went without Atobe getting any closer to speaking with Tezuka. He was crowded by some of Atobe's fellow team captains who were interested in talking to him about life in Europe. Atobe was considering making a huge scene to insert himself into the situation when, like angels descended from the stratosphere, he noticed a pair of campers wearing Yamabuki jerseys sitting near one of the campfires lighting sparklers. *Perfect.*

Atobe strode over to them, hands rested in his pockets, shoulders rolled back confidently. “Hey - *you.*” They both seemed to know he was addressing them. When they turned to him, he was fairly certain he should know their names (wasn't one of them the *captain?*) but neither of them had particularly recognizable features. He knew they were collectively known as the Jimis, but that wasn't something he could just *call them.*

The one with the spikey hair pointed to his nose. “Us?”

This was terrible. Atobe really ought to at least know the captain's name and which one it was. But... “Yes. Where did you get the sparklers?”



“Kite-kun had them,” Spikey replied, motioning over his shoulder to where a group of people in purple jerseys were gathered in a circle far enough from the camp to not attract attention. They were lighting the sparklers without use of a campfire but... honestly, they seemed like the sort that would be carrying a lighter.

“They probably snuck them in,” the one with the slicked back hair continued. “But, the coaches aren’t around.”

“I see.” Atobe glanced back to the circle of purple-clad teenagers. “Well, then, carry on.”

He heard Spikey mutter as he walked away, “We were going to without your permission...”


Atobe approached the first person in a purple jersey who broke from the herd - the tall guy with the white streak in his hair - who was rifling through a backpack to open a new box of sparklers for Higa to share. “I don’t suppose you have extras,” Atobe asked, hands on his hips.

The other boy stood to his full height easily towering over Atobe. Not that Atobe was easy to intimidate - it took Ochi Tsukimitsu to rattle Atobe and he was significantly taller than this kid, among other terrifying qualities. “Sure,” he said amicably, his tone at odds with his gaunt, haunted-looking face. He extended two boxes of sparklers to Atobe. “Come back if you need more.”

“...I will, thanks.”

“You’ll need this.” The tall boy extended his hand once more, this time handing Atobe a lighter. That was definitely something they were not supposed to have at the camp, but it was arguably a smaller secret than bringing someone from another country’s team.

Miffed, but not ungrateful, Atobe made his way back to where Shiraishi and



Yukimura were still bogarting Tezuka's time under the pergolas where the camping dinner of curry rice had been served. It was dark enough, now, that the stars were clearly visible above them and the sparklers that the others were using were forming arcs of light through the sky as they swung them around to write messages in the air.

Maybe I'll confess everything by writing it in the sky. Though it was much more Atobe's style to hire a skywriter if he was actually going to do something like that. Go big or go home.


"Tezuka," he said firmly, interrupting the conversation between the three. All three turned to face him. Shiraishi gave him an amused smile as though he knew exactly what was happening. Yukimura rolled his eyes. Tezuka... well, he was exactly as Tezuka always was. Atobe tossed his hair out of his face and continued, "I got sparklers for us."

To Atobe's surprise, that was all the more convincing it took. Tezuka nodded to Shiraishi and Yukimura apologetically. "Please excuse me."

Atobe was so unprepared for his willingness to come with him that he found himself spitting out, "Let's find somewhere to sit down and enjoy these." He did not bother to explain himself further or apologize for interrupting them before marching off toward one of the unlit fire pits where logs had been set up in a circle to serve as benches.

Once they were both seated, Atobe reached into the box to pull out two of the sparklers and lit the ends - handing one to Tezuka. The only light showing his face was the light from the sparkler itself that danced across his features, glimmered in the reflection of his glasses, and cast dramatic shadows on the collar of the Seigaku jersey. He was still wearing that thing... maybe he missed seeing himself in it as much as Atobe did.

"Tezuka." Atobe was starting to feel like the other boy's name was the only word in his vocabulary. He also really wasn't sure what else to say. How did



you tell someone that it was likely the last time you would see them before your lives would take you on totally different trajectories and you would be parted forever? It seemed that any words would be both foolish and inadequate.

“Hm?”

Atobe looked back to Tezuka's face with the quiet acknowledgement of his name to see something so rare, so beautiful, that his heart fluttered in surprise. A smile. A small, but genuine, smile graced Tezuka's lips as he looked back at Atobe. He had never seen him smile like this, let alone for *Atobe*. It erased any memory of what he might have said, and instead all he could seem to manage through his suddenly dry mouth and stammering tongue was, “Beautiful.”

It was beautiful. The starry sky, the dancing sparkler, the calm smile - it was well and truly beautiful.

Tezuka's eyes fell upon the sparkler, then back to Atobe. Something about his eyes changed - something Atobe had seen in those eyes beyond the innocence, passion, and intelligence, but only when Tezuka gazed upon Echizen or Ooishi or one of the other people important to him.

Fondness. Daresay more.

Words did not matter so much, anymore. That smile and eyes told Atobe everything he himself had been trying to find the words to say. Maybe it wasn't even the end when they both moved on from the tennis world - not if they still had smiles like this to share.

Content to move at Tezuka's pace, Atobe simply waited for their sparklers to go out and lit another - this time touching the tip of his sparkler to Tezuka's to light the second.

“The truth is...” Atobe explained, watching the sparks jump from his sparkler to Tezuka's. “I didn't get permission.”







/// IF YOUR LOVE WERE A FLOWER

BY WATERLINKEDGIRL

When the sun had sunk beneath the horizon and the only light in the room was the dim reflection of the spot on Yukimura's workbench, he finally heard the door of his housemate's room swing open behind him.

"Mm-nnnh~ Exercising first thing in the evening is the best!"

A smile made its way onto Yukimura's face at the familiar sound, the familiar sight. As always, he appeared in a new set of jogging clothes, fresh from the yoga routine he knew him to do when he woke up.

"Good evening. Did you sleep well?"

"Like on a bed of roses," Shiraishi laughed, moonlight on his hair in the glow of the night.

Yukimura leaned his arm on the back of his chair as he turned around in his chair to look at him better.

"I'm glad. Would you like breakfast, maybe?"

Brown eyes blinked.

"Are you offering to make it for me?"

Yukimura chuckled. "I'm feeling like it."

"Even though you know I can't repay you the favour..." Shiraishi let out a huff that was more of a laugh. "I'll stop by the 24-7 for you, as thanks."

Yukimura stood up to look Shiraishi in the eyes more closely.

"That'd be lovely... But you know you wouldn't have had to."

And with a final smile to him, Yukimura made his way to the kitchen.



Shiraishi was a mysterious fellow, Yukimura had decided. Getting up no earlier than the first rays of the moon, going out the door at night, and returning before the morning sun peeked over the horizon...

Shiraishi told him it was for his study and work, a night shift at a pharmacy lab, but Yukimura had started to wonder if he wasn't just allergic to sunlight. After all...

Blinds were one thing, but Shiraishi's room may well not have windows at all.

He told him it had to do with something about photosensitive chemicals... It wasn't something that Yukimura couldn't understand, he was well-versed in the workings and decays of dyes and paints after all, but to reverse his day-night rhythm for it...

Well, he supposed he should let it speak for Shiraishi's diligence. Probably.

"How was your day yesterday?"


Before he knew it, they were making light conversation at the table beside his workbench, Shiraishi enjoying a breakfast tea and Yukimura himself a late-night cup of chamomile.

"I'm glad you asked! You see, we were looking to see if the hogweed family's sap could be turned medicinal with the right treatment..."

"I've heard rumours the genus was named after Heracles using it medicinally, but I couldn't confirm them. In either case, with the giant hogweed's size..."

Shiraishi smiled.

"I didn't know that. That'd make it all the more fun if we did manage to make it useful. You know..."



Shiraishi started telling him about the various poisons of the plants in the genus, and how some were more dangerous than others. Yukimura didn't have a lot of stories to tell of them, himself, but different days would bring different plants, and he loved listening to his findings regardless.

Before he knew it, Yukimura found himself staying up much later than he should, time and time again, just to talk with Shiraishi a little longer.

"That reminds me..." Shiraishi looked past Yukimura, at his canvases hanging to dry. Yukimura followed his gaze to where the hues of a morning glory shifted between panels of daffodils and amaranths. "Your small atelier seems even more colourful than yesterday."

Yukimura chuckled, watched the way Shiraishi's eyes shifted in the dusky light as they went over each painting.

"I like flowers, after all. Like this, they can bloom a little longer."

"I've noticed..." Shiraishi whispered, pulling away his strangely longing stare from the paintings to Yukimura. "You planted lots of flowering plants in the garden, too. I'm glad it's well-taken care of."

Yukimura blinked. "You can tell without seeing the flowers?"

The chair creaked as Shiraishi pleasantly leaned back in it.

"I like reading plant encyclopedias on my off time. I've had enough time to learn plenty of beautiful flowers by their leaves, their stems and their buds."

Yukimura had had an inkling Shiraishi liked plants more than simply for their medicinal properties. It was almost obvious, but he hadn't dared ask since Shiraishi was a human of the night. Given his words, however, Yukimura could barely hold the excitement in his heart.

"Do you have a favourite flower?" Yukimura asked, soft and careful.



Shiraishi took a pensive sip of his red tea, and when he breathed out, an answer appeared on his lips.

"Foxglove, maybe... Monkshood is beautiful too."

There was fondness in Shiraishi's eyes, pleasantly amused, Yukimura leaned himself on his hand.

"Those are some unusual beauties. Usually, people would answer with roses."

A laugh left Shiraishi's lips.

"And that while there's much more interesting plants out there..."

Shiraishi set his cup back down on the saucer, the dark of moonlight falling in his eyes, over the curve of his crimson lips.

"Poisonous flowers... Don't you think they're beautiful?"

Yukimura smiled. He should have guessed it.

"I'm not the kind of person to like flowers for how easily they could harm me," Yukimura told him softly.

"But... The more troublesome the flower, the prettier it is. I don't dislike them, no, not at all." Yukimura placed his index finger on the rim of his cup, slowly tracing the edge as he looked at him.

"I'm glad," Shiraishi whispered, and with a gentle smile he brought the tea to his lips.

"I don't regret taking you to be the one to live in with me."

"How could I resist? An old and quiet neighbourhood, plenty of space for the price, and your only demand being that I take good care of the garden... It's



more than I could ever wish for."

"A lot of people had second thoughts when they heard about the garden and my working hours, though..."

Yukimura chuckled. "The garden is my pleasure, and I'm not bothered with your hours... Though I had expected someone older to be the owner."

A teasing smile came to be on Shiraishi's lips. "You would rather be living in with an old man?"

Yukimura laughed, shook his head. "I'm glad it was you."

"Same here. Thank you."

Calmly, Yukimura tilted his head. "Is that for the garden, or for the poisonous flowers?"

Piercing eyes connected straight to his.

"Both."

Yukimura raised his chin from his hand, and stretched it out to him. "Would you mind if I drew one, Shiraishi?"

Shiraishi blinked, before smiling softly. "Of course not."

"Then, do you have time next Saturday?"

Yukimura looked at him, resting his now free arm eagerly on the table.

"I do. Should I bring any clothes, or are they your pick...?"

"Casual is fine. What, you think I'm going to put you in a suit and a tattered cape?"

He chuckled, and before long Shiraishi laughed with him.

"It's been a while since I was painted, so I wasn't..."

"Unless you want me to pick out something I think may suit you, I won't force you into anything. Don't worry."

Shiraishi's slightly troubled face melted into relief, until it made way for something in between amusement and worry.

"Yukimura, isn't your tea going to go cold?"

"Ah!" Looking down at his no longer clouding tea, Yukimura laughed. "Perhaps..."

He brought the cup to his lips, and sure enough, the liquid had become much more lukewarm than he'd usually drink it. "That's a shame."

Yukimura looked at Shiraishi's half-finished cup, and a strange wistfulness filled his heart.

Somehow, he wished his chamomile would last him just a little bit longer.


"But that aside..." Yukimura put his other hand around his cup as well. "Can you tell me a bit more about the flowers you like?"

Shiraishi's smile was warm.

"Gladly."

The light of lanterns and the taps of his footsteps were the only things accompanying Shiraishi as he made his way through the streets of the city. Leaving the 24-7 with a bag of groceries slung over his shoulder, at the devil's hour, Shiraishi wandered in search of prey.

He wasn't even supposed to go out hunting at night, frankly speaking. It was



for a reason that he rented a room of his house to a human, and it was certainly not just for the garden. Yes, with someone living in with him, it would be all too easy to feed on them at night and make them not remember a thing afterwards, and the outside world would be nothing wiser...

Shiraishi sighed.

Yukimura should have been no different. At least, he was supposed to have been. Sure, he held off tasting his neck to see if he'd be able to take care of the garden. He wanted to gain Yukimura's trust.

That's why he'd been on the hunt, for the time being.

Then... why was it, that he was still hunting now? Why did he avoid biting him? Why, when he looked in Yukimura's eyes—

Shiraishi bit his lips.

Calm down, Kuranosuke. You'll find your hunger for him sooner or later. For now...

The scent of a lone woman came drifting on the wind. Ahh, how perfect.

"Excuse me, miss..."

In a matter of seconds he caught up with her, approached her, with the stealth of the dark.

"W-What? Who are you?"

She seemed wary. Strangers past midnight usually didn't bide well, he admitted. Though he was no true exception.

"Can I ask something of you?"

"No! Find someone else!" She turned around, and started walking away.



"I'm not going to harm you."

At ease in the dark, it took Shiraishi but a single step and the flicker of a street lantern to appear in front of her. He caught her chin, lifted it up with his free hand, until their gazes were aligned. And then, he changed his voice.

"Calm down."

It resounded low, reverberating between the buildings and the nightly street, timbre silky and entrancing. Shiraishi smirked. Hypnotic.

The red of his own eyes reflected in hers, which were steadily growing docile and dim.

"Good girl."

Cradling her chin, he whispered to her in the same tone of voice, to "Come." And she obliged without a breath of hesitation. He took her into an alleyway, outside the sights of the city, fangs bared and eyes red.

Arm would be easier to hide, sure, but he thirsted for her neck. He blamed Yukimura.

"Sorry. This will hurt a little."

He leaned into the nook of her neck, feeling with his lips for her pulse, and when he could feel her blood rushing under them, he bit.

A cry of pain accompanied the warm taste of blood filling his mouth, and even though his voice had put her to sleep she wanted to resist... It was a futile struggle, as the touch of his teeth quickly left her weak in her knees, as wax in his hands.

Heartbeat by heartbeat he indulged into the sweet ambrosia, taking his time for every gulp, every petal of the red rose of blood flowering on her neck,



and when he had his fill he released his fangs from her neck and licked the wound shut.

The girl slumped to the floor.

Shiraishi was by no means a messy eater, but it was hard not to bite too hard when you finally have a neck in your mouth. He wiped a trickle of blood from his chin, but when he looked the splatters of damage to his clothes were already done. Ah well. Nothing he couldn't wash out. As for her...

"You will make your way home from here," Shiraishi whispered lullingy, "and you will forget any of this has happened. You won't question the mark on your neck, but you will want to cover it. Can you do that for me?"

Slowly, she nodded. He smiled.

"Thanks for the meal."

Turning around, as he walked back into the streetlight, Shiraishi picked a stray drop of blood off of the plastic bag and licked it up.

That wouldn't do. Not with Yukimura.

Now, to get home before it gets light.




"Why did you want to paint me?"

Shiraishi was perched on the windowsill, moonlight and the night's wind of the opened window on his back.

Yukimura smiled.

"Why not?"

His brush went over a fabric Shiraishi couldn't see the surface of, over



Shiraishi's shape reflected on it. If it were other times, he may not have known what his mirror image looked like, but their material had changed from silver to aluminium and accordingly his own shape reflected in the bathroom.

And yet this image belonged to Yukimura alone.

"I thought you'd make a good light study, is my excuse. But honestly, I just wanted to."

Yukimura's chuckle was one he couldn't help but smile along to. There was something about Yukimura that pulled him in, something in his eyes that made him fall into his dance again and again and he couldn't regret it. They connected to his, lingeringly playful, before they shifted into something more like worry.

"Speaking of, you're... really pale."

"Is that so?" Yukimura was concerned for him like for a human, yet somehow, it gripped his heart.


"Do you get enough sunlight? Maybe you should consider a tanning bed of some sort..."

Shiraishi laughed.

"You don't have to worry. I take plenty of the supplements I need." That those were blood wasn't something Yukimura had to know.

"I see..." His voice rolled cautiously past his lips, but his smile was gently sharp. "Well, as long as you keep healthy there's nothing to worry about, right?"

Suddenly, Yukimura's gaze on him felt deep, intimately deep, and his unbeating heart skipped a beat. It wasn't different from before, and his



brush was still making strokes over the paper, yet he felt as if he was being laid bare by his eyes. It was almost as if Yukimura had the reins in hands, as if Shiraishi was no longer the hunter in their house. An illusion, for sure, but it was enough for a shiver to travel over his back.

That a human could make him feel this way... Shiraishi couldn't withhold a smirk.

"I've finished. You can come look, if you want."

When he noticed, Yukimura's gaze had softened to his usual strong and kind smile.

"O-Of course..."

Shiraishi got off the windowsill and took a look at the canvas.

This is... me?

"Beautiful..."

Yukimura chuckled. "You know you're saying that about yourself?"

Yet, there was a soft blush tinging Yukimura's cheeks.


Shiraishi's eye fell on the flower Yukimura drew into his hands.

"Is that... aconite?"

"Yes. You mentioned it, right?"

Shiraishi chuckled. "That plant is poisonous to the touch... I wouldn't be able to cradle it like that and come out of it alive."

"I have the feeling you could," Yukimura whispered, looking at Shiraishi past the waves of his hair. "Though of course it's only a hunch."



It may not be too far off, Shiraishi thought, as he bit his cheek to keep himself from reaching out to stroke those blue locks.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Shiraishi asked Yukimura instead, before that want could get the better of him. Yukimura chuckled.

"Of course."

While Yukimura was putting away his art supplies, leaving the canvas to dry, Shiraishi put on hot water. By the time Yukimura was done, Shiraishi waited for him on the couch with a cup of chamomile. It was late for Yukimura, after all.

It always surprised him how easy time went by when he was talking to Yukimura. Shifting from art to plants, to nothing in particular, they merrily talked through the sinking of the moon until Yukimura suddenly put his cup on the table.

"Hey, Shiraishi... You asked me to take care of the garden as part of the reason to live in with you..."

"Yes?"

"Doesn't it get lonely, when you can't see the flowers bloom?"


Shiraishi closed his eyes. "...Just a little. I do miss seeing the real things blooming."

A languid smile appeared on Yukimura's face.

"I thought so. You treat the plants in the garden so gently when I'm not looking, after all."

He embarrassedly put his hand behind his head.

"Y-You noticed..."



Yukimura laughed softly. "I heard you one night talking to the plants. When I looked you were checking the bindings of the fresh stalks..."

Shiraishi couldn't help but laugh nervously. He'd have to make sure not to tell the plants any weird things, then...

"I do what I can, but watering at night makes the roots rot... Though I do admit that your paintings help a little, regardless."

"I'm glad. I'll do what I can, too," Yukimura whispered.

Shiraishi tilted his head, but Yukimura shook his.

"Did you recognise which plant you bound up?"

It was as easy as that to bring the conversation back to where they'd been before. Cups emptied, and although Yukimura's responses were gradually getting slower and shorter, he was still happily listening.

At least, until Shiraishi suddenly felt a warmth against his shoulder.


"Yukimura...?"

He didn't answer. Eyes closed, Yukimura had peacefully fallen asleep against him...

Shiraishi had never seen Yukimura like this before. Usually, there was an air of sophistication about him, a gentle and indeterminable elegance, but now he was just innocently breathing, vulnerable, neck bare—

He quickly shook the thought out of his mind.

"Sorry to keep you up so long," Shiraishi whispered. He put one arm behind Yukimura's back, his other under his legs, and carefully he lifted Yukimura from the couch in his arms.



Shiraishi smiled softly when Yukimura's head leaned against his chest, adjusting his grip lightly, he carried Yukimura to his bed.

Pulling the blanket over the quietly sleeping Yukimura, he turned around one more time as he made his way to the door.

"Sleep well, Yukimura. See you tomorrow."

And with a final smile, he turned the light off.



Shiraishi found it strange how aromatic the garden seemed to be when he visited it this night.

"Is something wrong, Shiraishi?"

When he turned around, he saw Yukimura at the garden table, reading a book by the light of a candle, a small blanket over his shoulders.

"No..."

It was a sweet smell. Where did... Apparently Yukimura had noticed him searching, amused, he stretched his hand out towards him.

"Sit with me, Shiraishi."

Shiraishi smiled, and took the invitation. And right when he took place across Yukimura, his eye fell on a single flower blooming in the moonlight. Yukimura was softly stroking its petals.

"That isn't Datura, is it? Judging from the vine... Moonflower?"

Yukimura smiled, and nodded. "Moonflower, indeed. Do you like it?"

Shiraishi found himself mesmerised by the touch of Yukimura's finger on the pure white petal.



"Yeah... I hadn't thought you'd be able to grow it here."

"It'll wilt by winter, but I wanted you to see it."

Shiraishi smiled, the little blood he had rushing to his cheeks.

"In a way, it's what makes living things beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's a reminder to enjoy the things we have while they last..." Yukimura's hand left the flower, the shadows shifting pensively in his eyes.

"Shiraishi..."

A wind brushed the locks of Yukimura's hair. "There's been rumours among my art friends... Well, I've seen the marks myself, so it's more of a theory..."

Shiraishi's borrowed blood ran cold in his veins.

"Marks?"

"Yes. Two spots on the arm, right here," Yukimura let his fingers go over his own arm, until they roughly reached the radial artery. "Or," Yukimura reached up to his neck, "right here."

Shiraishi softly swallowed.


"A mosquito, no?"

"Perhaps... But I have my doubts. My friends, though, are joking there's a vampire roaming the streets at night."

Shiraishi tried his best to laugh. "That's ridiculous. Vampires don't exist, do they?"

Yukimura fell silent for a bit.

"I'm not so much of a romantic that I want to believe it. But it would make



sense, wouldn't it? Similar marks, appearing in the mornings after late nights, pale tiredness, and..."

He pulled on the blanket over his shoulder. "Every time I've asked someone about them, they seemed awfully unconcerned, as if they couldn't even force themselves to place question marks."

A soft laugh sounded through the garden. "It's mysterious, isn't it?"

Shiraishi raised one of his eyebrows.

"You think there's a human messing with you guys?"

"I don't know. I've asked my friends to tell me when they notice anyone with new marks. Perhaps I can figure out the culprit that way."

Yukimura's eyes stayed fixed on his as he spoke, and it took all of Shiraishi's composure to keep his smile intact.

"Good luck."

This...

is bad.



Shiraishi was tapping his pen against his lips at the study in his room, trying to distract himself from the burning thirst he felt with university work. The solution he had come to had been simple, in theory. He had to make sure that him going out didn't coincide with Yukimura noting a mark, which meant that he had no choice but to fast. He hadn't tasted a drop of blood in weeks.

Temptation threatened to take him whenever he caught scent of a human on his way home from the lab, and at the same time, it became more and more difficult to resist the neck of his housemate.



In the end, Shiraishi had no choice but to hole up in his room, no matter how much he wanted to talk to Yukimura again.

He knew he just had to stay inside until Yukimura's suspicion cleared, but it was getting harder each day.

His train of thought was interrupted by knocking on his bedroom's door.

"Shiraishi."

It was Yukimura... Shiraishi bit his lip.

"Yes?"

The door to his room opened, and Yukimura's shape greeted him in the light of the living room.

"Can you come with me for a bit?"

Shiraishi turned around on his chair and tilted his head. "For what?"

Yukimura placed his finger on his lips. "It's a surprise."

Shiraishi knew that denying him would only raise more suspicion.

"Of course." He followed Yukimura out of his room, and let him lead him through the house to... the garden door? What was there to—

A sea of red roses greeted him as soon as he stepped outside. No, those weren't roses...

"I planted these hoping you might like them," Yukimura said from by his side. "It would be a waste if they bloomed without seeing your eye."

"Red cereus..." Shiraishi whispered. The moon illuminated the seldom-flowering Queen of the Night, scattered between blooming bouquets of white, moon-kissed petals.



It was a breathtaking sight, and Yukimura adorned the middle of it.

Slowly he became aware of the soft piano of a waltz, breaking the silence.

"This is..."

"Shiraishi."

Yukimura stretched his hand out towards him, a sweet smile on his face.

"Can I have this dance?"

Despite his instincts, Shiraishi's legs walked forward, and he smiled back at Yukimura.

"How could I refuse?"

Reaching out towards Yukimura's hand, Shiraishi swallowed when it touched his own. Unlike his own, Yukimura's hand was warm, and yet it felt nothing but right. Yukimura's other hand rested on his hip, and Shiraishi took Yukimura's shoulder in his.

Close...

With a careful step they started a twirl through the reaches of the garden.

"You see red roses often, don't you?" Yukimura started. "Though the ones blooming at night are only for your eyes."

"I haven't seen them in a long time," Shiraishi answered. Yukimura didn't have anything over his shoulders today, his bare neck enticing Shiraishi's vision.

"On your way home, perhaps?"

Yukimura gave him a sharp smile, motions ever elegant. Shiraishi shook his head.



"This garden has the only flower I've laid my eyes on in much too long."

The next step they made, the distance between them closed a little, Shiraishi gripping further on Yukimura's shoulder.

"The roses of the street haven't quenched your loneliness, then."

Shiraishi laughed wistfully.

"No..." Yukimura continued, "You preferred aconite, didn't you?"

Yukimura's hand curled further around his back, the warm touch almost dizzying.

"I do. It's a dangerously beautiful flower."

He was pulled into a twirl, Yukimura's blue-purple eyes slightly higher than him as he dipped down.

"Who do you think suits it more?" Yukimura asked him.

"Who do you think?"


Even though he knew his answer, Shiraishi returned the question. Yukimura chuckled, a bright ringing passing his lips, and Shiraishi's heart would've stopped had it beaten.

Yes... Yukimura and that flower are one of a kind.

"I drew it in your hands, didn't I?"

Shiraishi smiled. Neither answer was truly wrong, after all.

Before he knew it, his hips touched Yukimura's. Yukimura's scent filled his senses, close as they were, and in a turn of inattention their foreheads briefly connected.



"If you were a poisonous flower, would you be nightshade, I wonder? Both its names fit you, even if you're not a donna."

Shiraishi laughed softly at Yukimura's suggestion.

"That sounds not too bad, coming from your lips."

With their faces only a few inches away, the tone of their conversation softened.

"I've heard rumours the taste of your flower is a sharp one," Yukimura whispered.

"They're true." Shiraishi's lips grazed past his cheek. "A deep ache, sharp, but you'd find yourself gasping for breath if you let it."

Yukimura's smile had a suggestive edge to it.

"Bitter? Sweet?"

"Not as much as you..." Shiraishi breathed.

Their chests melded together as their pass grew narrower and narrower.

"Would you think it's different from a red rose given on the street?" Yukimura's fingers slightly squeezed his hand where he held it in his, and Shiraishi could almost feel Yukimura's heart beat.

"Red roses are many's favourite, but..." Shiraishi looked into Yukimura's eyes. "Given so cheaply as gifts, I can't find as much love for them, as a flower."

"When given to a lover who knows how much it means," Yukimura whispered, "even such a simple gift can become the world."

Losing himself to the warmth of Yukimura's embrace, Shiraishi's fangs



pricked in his mouth.

Yukimura leaned in to whisper in Shiraishi's ear.

"You can take it."

Closing his eyes, his lips caressed Yukimura's cheek again, before he trailed down over his chin to kiss his neck. Yukimura gasped at the touch, and lost his footing. Before Shiraishi knew it, he was pulled with him, to fall onto the soft grass.

He opened his eyes to Yukimura's blue waves, strewn over the dark green of the moonlit halms under him. Though Shiraishi's hand had let go of his shoulder to brace their fall, Yukimura's hand still rested lightly on Shiraishi's back. Smile adorning his face, Yukimura reached his other hand up to cradle Shiraishi's cheek.


"Your eyes are beautiful. Just like a crimson rose."

Shiraishi leaned into the warmth of his hand, then down, until his lips found Yukimura's. Longingly Shiraishi kissed him, fingers tangling in his hair, and with no moment's hesitation he felt Yukimura kiss back. Yukimura's lips were soft and strong, fire overtaking his body, Shiraishi deepened the kiss to taste more of Yukimura's lips. Somehow, they felt like home.

When he let go, he was greeted by Yukimura's rosy cheeks, Yukimura's fingers caressing the faint heat in his own. Shiraishi nuzzled down, lips resting against Yukimura's warm skin.

"Well? Aren't you going to bi-aaaaAAAh..."

Eagerly, his teeth sank into the soft of Yukimura's neck. As he bit down, Yukimura's warm blood welled up inside his mouth, and he felt Yukimura's hand tighten on his back. So sweet...



Shiraishi took his time to savour the taste, indulgent hums passing his lips with every mouthful he took. And with every heartbeat that his teeth remained in Yukimura's neck, he heard Yukimura's hot breaths rise under him. It was enough to drive him mad.

Yukimura's head rolled slightly more to the side, purposefully spurring him on to bite deeper. There was little he could do to resist. Crumbling under the temptation, Shiraishi sucked slightly harder, a sweet noise escaping from Yukimura's lips.

The hand that had been on his cheek moved to the nape of Shiraishi's neck. Yukimura pulled him close, hips to hips, until he was firmly, warmly locked in his embrace.

A sigh passed Shiraishi's lips. Greedily he gulped down on the titillating taste of Yukimura's blood, seeking out Yukimura's gasps where he could, melting away in Yukimura's arms.

It was heaven. But...

He needed to stop here, before Yukimura would suffer come morning. With the touch of his tongue, slow and bitter licks, Shiraishi closed the holes his teeth had left.

A small trail of blood was left on Yukimura's neck when he pulled back, a red rose blooming on Yukimura's pale skin. Yukimura's cheeks were as red as his own, and Shiraishi had to take a few moments to catch his breath.

"It seems... you weren't lying..." Yukimura whispered. Breaths still deep, Yukimura looked as satisfied as he was.

"I told you, didn't I...?" Shiraishi gave him a smile.

Yukimura laughed hazily, reaching up to stroke Shiraishi's cheek once more.



"Don't dry yourself out too much next time. I'd hate to see my favourite belladonna wilt."

He overlaid Yukimura's hand with his own, basking in its touch for a second before he locked eyes with Yukimura again.

"Will you keep my secret?" Shiraishi asked.

"That depends," Yukimura teased. "Will you come bite me again?"

A fangy smirk making its way onto his face, Shiraishi placed a quick peck on Yukimura's lips.

"When you have blood to spare."

Yukimura chuckled, and reached up with his face to double the favour.

"I'd have no greater joy."










/// BITE ME

BY JUPE

Fuji knew that Inui was a vampire. He had figured it out from reading about them at the school's library in the middle of the night, though it was forbidden. He had all the classic marks of a vampire: deathly pale, couldn't go anywhere he wasn't invited in, no reflection... actually, he had yet to test that last one. He was hoping to now, having invited Inui for drinks in his study. He hoped the vampire would not see through his ruse and come willingly. Fuji had installed a large floor length mirror behind the huge oaken desk he used to take calls. He waited patiently at the desk, hands folded primly as he had a need for Inui to appear. It wasn't easy being the teacher of a magic school in Japan, the most premier magic school actually, and suspecting your new coworker was a creature of the night. Tamagawa, Inui's secretary, knocked softly at the door and poked his head in.

"Inui-san is here to see you," he said. That boy was a morsel and a half if Fuji ever saw one. He wasn't ready yet, not filled with enough evil in his heart. Too dedicated to the students, to helping others. That would change. Fuji had grand plans for Tamagawa to become his protégé, all starting with the generous job offer of secretary. Tamagawa was a bit useless with spells, but he was clever with theory with a smart, hidden look behind those brown eyes of his that said there was more to him than meets the eye. Fuji liked him because of that. He would be pleased to teach him all his ways, the art of dark spells, of concealed knives and clever riddles. Until then, he made an excellent cup of tea.

Inui appeared in the place Tamagawa had been, his long strides owing to his impossibly long legs. His usual glasses glinted opaque in the evening sun which spilled through the windows and the full moon cast enough light on the room that Fuji had hardly lit so much as a candle or two. Truth be told, the effect was somewhat romantic, though that wasn't the look Fuji was



going for. Really. It was all very mysterious and tense, until Inui made his way to the center of the red carpet floors (perfect for disguising bloodstains) and asked, "Yes, Fuji? You called?"

A smirk split Fuji's pretty features as he turned to face Inui. He wasn't quite at an angle where he could see him in the mirror yet but he knew he had gotten him. He gestured to the seat across from him, where Tamagawa had laid out fresh teacups a moment before. "A drink?"

Inui warily crossed over to the table and sat down, now directly in front of the gleaming mirror. Fuji frowned at the reflection as a second Inui lifted the elegant teacup gingerly to his lips and took a sip. "Delicious. What is this flavor?"

"Jasmine," Fuji answered, trying not to let a note of disappointment rise in his voice. Inui went on sipping daintily - at least the man had manners.


Inui set the emptied teacup down carefully and looked pleasantly in Fuji's direction who was still standing, arms crossed, at the open window which let in a faint, late summer breeze.

"Well then. What is it that I owe the pleasure of you calling me here today for?"

Fuji snorted, slumping into his seat. "Well, there were things I wanted to discuss. About the students."

"Yes? Which ones?"

"Momoshiro Takeshi and Kaidou Kaoru in particular." Fuji saw him freeze up at the second name and smiled a little to himself. "Ah yes, your little protégé. And his mortal enemy, or so it would seem. They've become a disturbance lately. Why, just recently Yukimura had told me that they disrupted his herbology class with their petty fighting and nearly deafened the class with a rogue Mandrake root. I'm sure you can see what a problem they've become."



"Yes," Inui said with some reluctance. "I admit their rivalry has begun to get out of hand in some ways. It's good to encourage competition among our dear students, but not when it threatens their lives and learning."

"So you see," Fuji began, "I thought of splitting them up, putting one in another house. I nominated Kaidou for my own house, and the headmaster seemed keen to agree. That boy has an awful lot of potential, he belongs in a place that will honor his... unique ambitions."

Inui's face fell, just a little. Kaidou had been in his house since he had entered the school, and was the darling of every potions class he took with Professor Inui.

"I see," said Inui softly. "So you mean to poach my students, is that it?"

"Not at all," Fuji was quick to say. "Besides, we wouldn't want any repeats of that awful Hanamura woman, don't you think? It's better this way."

"I agree," Inui murmured after a pause. "It was good that they fired her. Playing favorites is no way for a professor of this school to behave."

"So then you are all right with it? I'm relieved. I thought you might make trouble for me over it."

"Fuji, since when have I ever made trouble for you?" Inui laughed gently. "From day one I've been your biggest supporter here at this school, even when others had their doubts. Have a little faith in a guy, will you?"

"Of course. You're right, Inui, I apologize. How quickly I forget, once at the top, those who brought me there. But I don't intend to forget again." He leaned forward, legs unfolding underneath him as he leaned across his desk. One hand reached out, touching Inui's cheek.

"I hope that we can continue to trust each other, and work together splendidly." Inui held his breath, not daring to move. Finally, Fuji took his



hand away and sat back. "Now there's another matter I needed to discuss."

"Yes?" Inui swallowed, just getting his bearings back.

"Your potions class. I would like to sit in on one of these days. You know, coming up I was something of a potion aficionado myself. It would make my heart glad to see how your students are progressing."

"Of course," Inui said, relieved. "I'd be happy to have you sit in and observe, and I'm sure the students wouldn't mind at all. You are a very popular teacher after all."

Fuji smiled at the praise. "Don't sell yourself short, I'm told the older children said they never had a better potions teacher. Not since the last three ended in tragedy. Poor, poor, Professor Shudou. May god rest his soul."

"Amen," Inui croaked, peering into the last vestiges of his now emptied teacup. "Then if there's nothing else, I'll be on my way...?" He got up slowly and began to move to the door.

"Oh, Inui, wait." Fuji came out behind the desk bearing a small vial on a chain. He handed it to the puzzled Inui. "You may want to hang onto this. I hear rumors... you know, maybe there's no merit to them, but in any case... you should know this. It's goblin brandy, and a fine repellent of vampires. None of that garlic nonsense. I'm told there are rumors of a vampire lurking in the school, if not among the students then the staff... one should be careful, right?"

"Right." Inui swallowed and pocketed the little vial, staring hard at Fuji as if trying to suss him out. "Well. I thank you for your concern and kindness. Keep yourself safe as well, will you? No telling what sort of monsters lurk at night." With a small awkward wave, he was gone.

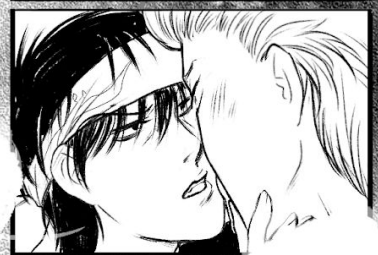
"Yes," said Fuji to the empty room. "No telling."



"Did you say something, Professor?" Tamagawa poked his head in.

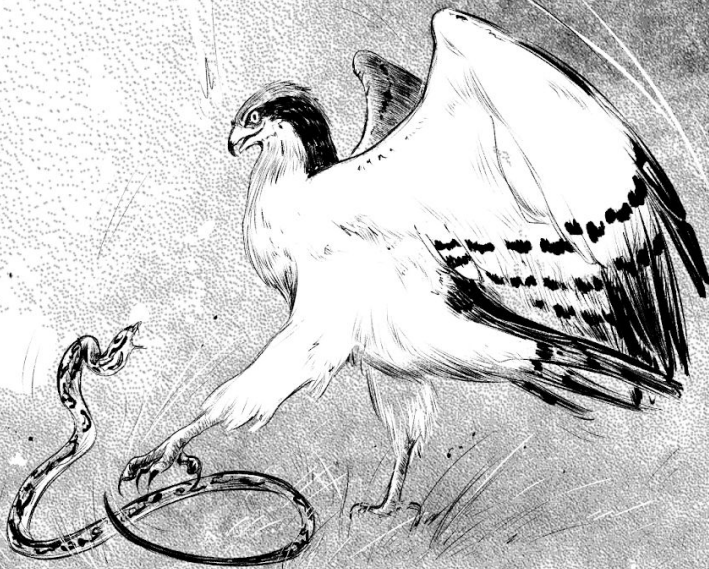
"No, Tama. Get back to your papers, if you would kindly." Tamagawa nodded and returned to his duties. Fuji smiled. Maybe that one would make a meal yet.





If you come back with
that damn bird again,
our relationship
iss-s-s over.

W-what?
Why?



Take a
guess-s-s?

Fucking
bird...





/// PINK DOLPHINS (DO EXIST)

BY SOLOSORCA

Golden sand scrunched under his toes, coating his damp feet. A wave washed in and swept around his feet with crystal blue water. Ryoma watched as it was sucked away, pulling away the sand.

He was on a beautiful island, completely deserted other than for himself and the gulls lazily swirling above his head. Dreamily, he turned and started walking inland to the thick jungle. The gulls and waves were soon drowned out, replaced by the hum of insects and cries of tropical birds.

It was like a maze, he kept meeting dead ends as branches clawed at his clothes. He beat his way through and suddenly emerged into... a theme park.


How had he not known this was here? The jungle hadn't been that big, surely he'd have been able to hear them from the beach! The thought troubled him for a few moments before he shrugged it off, distracted by the rollercoaster screaming over him.

He joined the crowd flowing along the path, past all sorts of rides that he'd quite like a go on, but couldn't separate himself. The disappointment didn't last long as he was ferried to the outside of a stadium and up the stairs into the semi-circular stands. The stadium surrounded an oval pool with a stage on the far side behind which the sea lapped against the concrete. A gate in the stage opened out to the sea, through which several dolphins swam through. Bright pink dolphins.

Ryoma had been to SeaWorld as a kid, he'd been sat on Shamu's back and laughed as a dolphin bit his dad who had been teasing it - he knew dolphins were definitely not *pink*.

But here they were, pastel pink dolphins racing each other around the pool.

He realised he was the only one standing and quickly took a seat as the trainer walked onto the stage.



To his utter surprise, the trainer was Tezuka-buchou! How did he not know that Buchou trained dolphins? It was such an obvious job for him and yet Ryoma had no idea!

Tezuka-buchou signalled and the dolphins leaped out the water and performed a front flip, the now setting sun dyeing the trailing droplets of water golden.

Ryoma got to his feet and walked down the stands. If Tezuka-buchou was in charge then he'd definitely let Ryoma join him - Tezuka-buchou always let Ryoma do what he wanted.

The world melted away as he climbed onto the stage and the dolphins jumped next to him, giving him an inquisitive look. Tezuka-buchou smiled as Ryoma walked up to him. Ryoma took his offered hand, taking his place by Tezuka-buchou's side.

"Tezuka-buchou," Ryoma murmured, his free hand landing on Tezuka-buchou's hip.

"Echizen." It was honey and velvet in Ryoma's ears, trickling down his body and rumbling in his chest. Tezuka-buchou's arm was around his waist, pulling him tight against his chest.

Ryoma felt lightheaded and felt as though he was sliding back out of himself, simultaneously in Tezuka-buchou's arms and above them both, watching the scene as though it were on a movie screen.

On the sea side of the stage, an orca leapt out of the water, crashing down into the sea as Tezuka-buchou leant in and kissed him.

Cotton candy coloured water washed over them and then they were floating under the pastel ocean, dolphins whirling around them. Tezuka-buchou was still kissing him, warm and soft.



A crash caused Ryoma to jerk awake. In the bunk below him, Kin-chan rolled over on the floor he was now sleeping on muttering something about takoyaki.

Ryoma groaned and buried his head in his pillow.

It had been a dream.

Of course it had, but Ryoma still felt a warm, soft, fluffy feeling in his chest.

Why couldn't Tezuka-buchou kiss him in real life? His face turned red and he was glad it was the middle of the night and no one could see him.


He was never going to get back to sleep now, his heart was beating too fast and his brain was too wired, constantly flashing back to the dream and making Ryoma feel warm and fuzzy and horrendously embarrassed.

Luckily, his roommates were all deep sleepers as he crept out of bed and across the room to the door.

The bright artificial lighting in the hall burnt his eyes and he squinted as they grew accustomed to it.

What time was it? It was definitely still dark outside, but without a clock Ryoma couldn't tell.

He wandered to the canteen and filled up a mug of green tea. It wasn't his favourite, but he wanted something warm and didn't have the energy to be bothered with making hot chocolate. He gazed out the black windows at his reflection, behind him, the backwards clock read ten to three. Ryoma couldn't decide whether this was a good or bad time. He had plenty of time to sleep but if he couldn't get back to sleep then there was a long time to lay awake and think about his feelings.



One thing bothered him about his dream. Kissing Tezuka-buchou was normal - he'd had plenty of those dreams. But, dolphins weren't pink. It had just been a dream and didn't need to make sense, but it niggled at Ryoma's brain.

"Tezuka-buchou," he muttered under his breath to take his mind off the dolphins.

He had thought his crush on him would have worn off when he left for America, but the opposite had happened. He'd turned up at this camp and realised his crush had turned into... whatever the next stage was.

Ryoma was young, but he wasn't stupid. After this camp, he and Tezuka-buchou would go their own ways, no doubt meeting occasionally at tournaments. Would it be any more awkward if Tezuka-buchou knew that Ryoma liked him? Probably not.

He gave his reflection a deep stare. He needed to tell Tezuka-buchou how he felt and then they could both move on in whatever direction. Together or apart.

Tea now drunk and feeling calmer, Ryoma went back to bed.



The next morning, he couldn't look Tezuka-buchou in the eyes. No matter how calm he'd felt last night, the feelings of excitement and nervousness skittered through his veins. This was made even worse when Tezuka-buchou came over to him after breakfast.

"Echizen," he said. "Good morning."

"Mornin'," Ryoma replied, fighting down the blush on his cheeks.

The pause could only be described as 'awkward' as Tezuka-buchou decided what he wanted to say and Ryoma waited for him.



“Are you free?” Tezuka-buchou asked, his face as inscrutable as ever.

“Yeah, sure,” Ryoma shrugged, Tezuka-buchou probably just wanted to play tennis or something. “Now?”

Tezuka-buchou nodded and Ryoma got to his feet and followed him out of the canteen.

To Ryoma's surprise, he was led straight past the tennis courts and into the wilderness beyond. The trees around them rustled in the wind and Ryoma realised just how very alone they both were.

“Buchou?” He asked, looking up at him. “Where are we going?”


“To see something special,” Tezuka-buchou replied, which was as good as useless, but warmed Ryoma's heart. Tezuka-buchou was taking *him* to see something special, not anyone else. Not Fuji-senpai or the monkey king. *Him*.

Maybe Tezuka-buchou thought he was as special as whatever he was taking him to see.

The path started to slope downhill, with rough stones steps cut into it where the slope got too steep. Ryoma's sense of direction was famously terrible, but he was pretty sure they were heading down to the sea.

He was mildly surprised when the path opened up and it turned out he was correct. The sparkling blue sea stretched out in front of him like in his dream. The wind was a lot colder than in his dream though and Ryoma felt the skin on his bare arms prickle as the air brushed past it.

“This way.” Tezuka-buchou motioned towards where the sandy beach turned rocky and Ryoma knew there were several caves. He fell into step again with Tezuka-buchou as they crunched across the sand. It could be considered very romantic, if not for the sand slipping into Ryoma's trainers that he knew would take months to fully clean out.



But it was just a minor gripe when he was walking next to Tezuka-buchou. He subtly moved closer and almost jerked away at the electricity that shot up his arm as their hands brushed. Tezuka-buchou's face didn't even twitch.

Did that mean something? Was it meaningless? Ryoma scowled, why couldn't he like someone who had more than two facial expressions - blank and annoyed? But would Tezuka-buchou be Tezuka-buchou if he had a range of facial expressions? Where would be the challenge and fun of learning to read his micro expressions if what he was feeling was written across his face?

I love him, the thought floated across Ryoma's mind before he could stop it. But it was true. It may be a childish first love kind of love, but it was love nonetheless.

As Ryoma was having his life changing realisation, they arrived at the rocks and started to clamber over them to wherever Tezuka was taking him. The cave that was their destination was bigger than the rest. Unlike a couple of the caves that they'd walked through where the sea just lapped into them, this one had a big trench that was permanently filled with sea water. They came in through the top of the cave and had to climb down a small cliff to get to the level next to the water. Ryoma overestimated how tall he was and found himself humiliatingly dangled off the rock, his feet kicking uselessly for any kind of grip against the slippery, green slime covered rock face. A strong pair of arms wrapped around his chest.

"Let go," Tezuka-buchou said *too close* to his ear, his voice soft and low. "I'll catch you."

"You'd better," Ryoma managed as his heart threatened to escape his chest through his throat. He let go and Tezuka-buchou held him in place for a few moments before lowering him to his feet. His arms stayed around his chest for moments longer, holding him strong and warm before he remembered



himself and let Ryoma go.

“It’s a nice cave,” Ryoma said, looking up at the cavernous dome above them. But Tezuka-buchou wasn’t looking at the cave ceiling, he was watching the water. Ryoma joined him, curiously watching the waves lapping against their rock platform.

After several minutes, Ryoma turned to Tezuka-buchou, who was still staring intently at the water. “What-“ he started but ‘what’ turned up as if on cue.

The sound of a dolphin surfacing was unique and unforgettable. The short, sharp ‘pfft’ as it exhaled followed by the quick sucking noise of inhalation.

“Oh wow,” Ryoma heard himself say under his breath as the dolphin eyeballed them both. Next to him, Tezuka-buchou pulled out a tennis ball and threw it into the water.

The dolphin pirouetted and chased after the ball, grabbing it before turning sharply with ease and bringing it back to Tezuka-buchou. It surged halfway out the water and threw the ball in the air which Tezuka-buchou caught easily.

“Your friend?” Ryoma asked, smirking.

“Your brother introduced us,” Tezuka-buchou replied and Ryoma frowned.

Ryoga had guessed about Ryoma’s crush on his captain very quickly and seemed to be taking it upon himself to play matchmaker. At least his methods were less insufferable than his Seigaku senpai’s attempts to set him up with Ryuzaki’s granddaughter.

“Who else knows?” Ryoma asked as Tezuka threw the tennis ball again.

“Tokugawa-san and I believe some of the other high schoolers. It sounds like



people come down every year to play with him.”

“Him?”

“Definitely him,” Tezuka-buchou said, a small pink flush on his cheeks and Ryoma decided he didn’t not need to know how he had found out.

“So Ryoga brought you down here?”

“He did. He also said that you like animals.”

“Animals like me,” Ryoma said, although he did like them as much as the next person, he seemed to have a way with them. Dogs and cats that would growl and hiss at strangers would come up to him and happily let him pat them.

The dolphin was no exception, he now threw the tennis ball at Ryoma, who caught it and threw it for him.

“Will he let us pet him?” Ryoma asked after throwing the ball a couple more times.

“I believe so.”

Ryoma knelt down after catching the ball once again and held out his hand. The dolphin held still and Ryoma was able to gently stock a finger against his soft, smooth skin.

“Have you ever met a dolphin before?” Ryoma asked, braving it enough to rub the dolphin with his full hand. The dolphin swam closer to get more pets.

Tezuka-buchou shook his head. “I haven’t before this camp.”

“My parents used to take me to SeaWorld a lot as a kid,” Ryoma said, beckoning Tezuka-buchou to kneel next to him. “They let you pet the dolphins and feed them and stuff. My dad decided to tease one and got his hand bitten. Come here, he likes it,” he said as the dolphin twisted over to have his



belly rubbed.

Tezuka-buchou did as he was told, crouching down next to Ryoma and eyeing the dolphin with some concern. "He's not going to bite me?"

"Of course not. Tezuka-buchou would never get bitten by a dolphin." He grabbed Tezuka-buchou's wrist and moved his hand over to the dolphin's belly. "Go on," he prompted. Tezuka-buchou lowered his hand and was gently stroking his fingertips across the dolphin's light underbelly.

"He's tiny compared to one of the dolphin's I've pet," Ryoma said when Tezuka-buchou started petting the dolphin properly. "When I was little I got chosen out of the crowd to sit on a killer whale."

Tezuka didn't seem to know what to say to that, he just stared at the dolphin, carefully stroking his side.

"Echizen," he said eventually, just as the dolphin - now bored - twisted around and shot off towards the cave mouth with one powerful swish of his tail.

"Bye then," Ryoma called after the dolphin. He suddenly felt very alone with Tezuka-buchou. As though the dolphin was a chaperone and now...

He looked up at Tezuka-buchou and realised just how close they were. He could see the flecks of golden brown in Tezuka-buchou's eyes and that Tezuka-buchou was staring down at him with a... soft look on his face.

"Tezu-" Ryoma started, unsure whether to move away or closer.

Tezuka-buchou made the choice for him.

The kiss was petal soft, more a brush of lips than a press.

Ryoma stared wide eyed as Tezuka-buchou pulled back with a look on his



face. Was it nervousness? Disappointment?

“I’m sorry,” Tezuka-buchou said and Ryoma suddenly realised that he was supposed to do something to show his feelings in return.

He grabbed Tezuka-buchou and pulled him back in.

This kiss was a press of lips. Chase and pure, but wonderful.

“I like you too,” Ryoma said as he pulled away and Tezuka-buchou gave him the most lovely smile.








They walked back to the camp together hand in hand.
























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