



TENIRABI ZINE

Tenirabi Zine is a collaborative fanzine put together in celebration of the second 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 23 contributors, as well as some in-game screenshots.

Tenirabi Zine © 2019-2020

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

Tenirabi Zine was published digitally January 2020 in the United States of America.

This zine was organized, edited, designed, and compiled by Dusty and Tidbitte with help from Teru and Whit.

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.

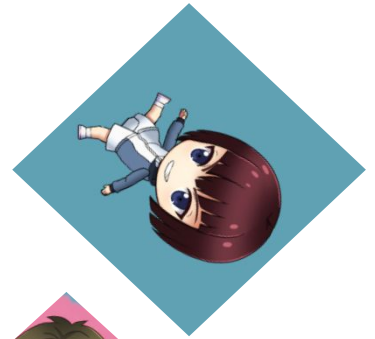
◆ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Tenirabi Zine Team would like to acknowledge Dusty for initiating, organizing, editing, designing, and laying out the zine, as well as Tidbitte for joining the crew later in the game to help with organizing, communicating with participants, editing, and finalizing the layout. An immense thank you to Teru for initiating past zines, showing us that it is in fact possible, and for taking on some editing work, and to Whit for helping with additional editing. Thank you so very much to all volunteer fan-translators and fandom archivists who opened up the Tenipuri world to us English speakers - especially to Holy for her Tenirabi Card Gallery and translations which have been incredibly helpful for keeping up with the series and its iterations.

Of course, this zine would not have been made possible without our contributors who shared their time, talent, and creativity with us. A big thank you to you all!

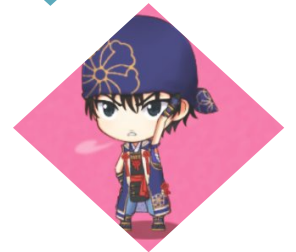
Last, but not least, to Konomi-sensei for creating a world and roster of characters we've come together to love and celebrate.

Cheers!



ARTWORK

TEZUKA <i>Matchas</i>	9
ECHIZEN RYOGA <i>Draw</i>	10
ATOBE <i>maplemintea</i>	11
FUJI S. <i>Ayamicchi</i>	13
TACHIBANA/KAMIO <i>Teru</i>	14
NIOU <i>Yukiko Otomiya</i>	15
KAIDOU/ECHIZEN RYOMA <i>Nicki</i>	17
KIRIHARA/ZAIZEN <i>Whit</i>	18
SHIRAISHI/OSHITARI K. <i>NAGIKORI</i>	19
HIGASHIKATA/MINAMI <i>Mio</i>	21
KIKUMARU/OISHI <i>RobinPastries</i>	22
OCHI/MOURI <i>Aaya</i>	24
SANADA/YUKIMURA <i>RyuuYuu</i>	25
AKUTAGAWA <i>maplemintea</i>	26
KIRIHARA: COSPLAY <i>Electrolimes</i>	28
OSHITARI Y./MUKAHI: COMIC <i>Dusty</i>	29



WRITTEN WORKS

32.....	MORNINGSTARS ft. Ootori/Shishido <i>Jupe</i>
40.....	ANNIVERSARY ft. Tezuka/Echizen <i>Orca</i>
48.....	MESSAGE IN THE WIND ft. Fuji & Kikumaru <i>Nagisa Umibe</i>
65.....	A HALLOWEEN NIGHT TO (NOT) REMEMBER ft. Mitsuya/Yamato <i>Puffcat</i>
72.....	HAZE ft. Shiraishi/Yukimura <i>Waterlinkedgirl</i>
88.....	OCEAN EYES ft. Sanada/Atobe <i>Anne Marie Frye</i>
104.....	THE WAY TO HIS HEART ft. Chitose/Tachibana <i>Miyun</i>
122.....	THEY TOLD ME I WAS A WINNER ft. Akutsu <i>Tidbitte</i>

MYSPACE GALLERY

ARTIST CREDITS

MATCHAS

Twitter: [@saltymatchas](https://twitter.com/saltymatchas)

NAGIKORI

Tumblr: nagikoriizayoi.tumblr.com

TERU

Twitter: [@terundoru](https://twitter.com/terundoru)

AYAMICCHI

Instagram: [@ayami.cchi](https://www.instagram.com/ayami.cchi)

DRAW

Instagram: [@drawingdreams101](https://www.instagram.com/drawingdreams101)

YUKIKO OTOMIYA

Twitter: [@YukikoOtomiya](https://twitter.com/YukikoOtomiya)

WHIT

Twitter: [@koishikute](https://twitter.com/koishikute)

Tumblr: shabondama.tumblr.com

NICKI

Twitter & Instagram: [@nickiindaeyo](https://www.instagram.com/nickiindaeyo)

MAPLEMINTEA

Twitter: [@maplemintea](https://twitter.com/maplemintea)

RYUUYUU

Twitter: [@maketewanaran](https://twitter.com/maketewanaran)

Instagram: [@sa_sakumas](https://www.instagram.com/sa_sakumas)

Deviantart.com/[beruchan50jones](https://www.deviantart.com/beruchan50jones)

PixivID: 2708158

MIO

Twitter: [@tenimio](https://twitter.com/tenimio)

ROBINPASTRIES

Twitter, Instagram & Tumblr: [@RobinPastries](https://www.instagram.com/RobinPastries)

AAYA

Twitter: [@meteodrive](https://twitter.com/meteodrive)

ELECTROLIMES

Twitter: [@electrolimes](https://twitter.com/electrolimes)

DUSTY

Twitter: [@dustyartsy](https://twitter.com/dustyartsy)



◆ AUTHOR CREDITS

JUPE

Twitter: [@noonbase](https://twitter.com/noonbase)

Ao3: [godtrash](https://archiveofourown.org/users/godtrash)

ORCA

Twitter: [@solosorca](https://twitter.com/solosorca)

NAGISA UMIBE

Twitter: [@setsugekka1](https://twitter.com/setsugekka1)

Facebook: [Nagisa Umibe](https://www.facebook.com/Nagisa-Umibe)

Wattpad: [Lunetta11](https://www.wattpad.com/user/Lunetta11)

PUFFCAT

Twitter: [Puffcat16049](https://twitter.com/Puffcat16049)

WATERLINKEDGIRL

Twitter: [@waterlinkedgirl](https://twitter.com/waterlinkedgirl)

Ao3: [waterlinkedgirl](https://archiveofourown.org/users/waterlinkedgirl)

ANNE MARIE FRYE

Twitter: [@annemfrye](https://twitter.com/annemfrye)

Ao3: [annemfrye](https://archiveofourown.org/users/annemfrye)

MIYUN

TIDBITTE

Twitter: [@tidbitte](https://twitter.com/tidbitte)

Ao3: [tidbitte](https://archiveofourown.org/users/tidbitte)



ART







Happy 2nd
Anniversary,
Tenirabi!





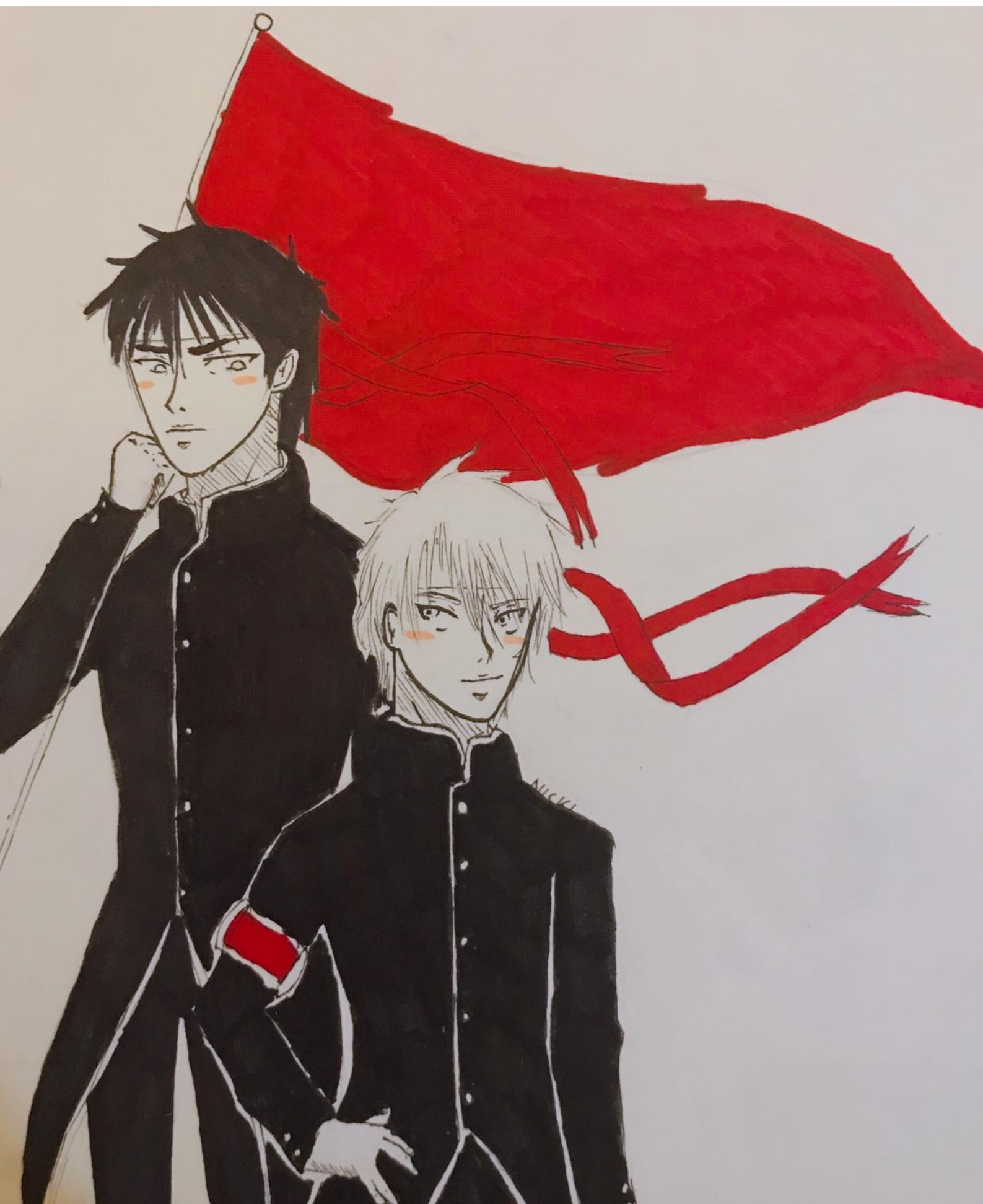


AYAMICCHI





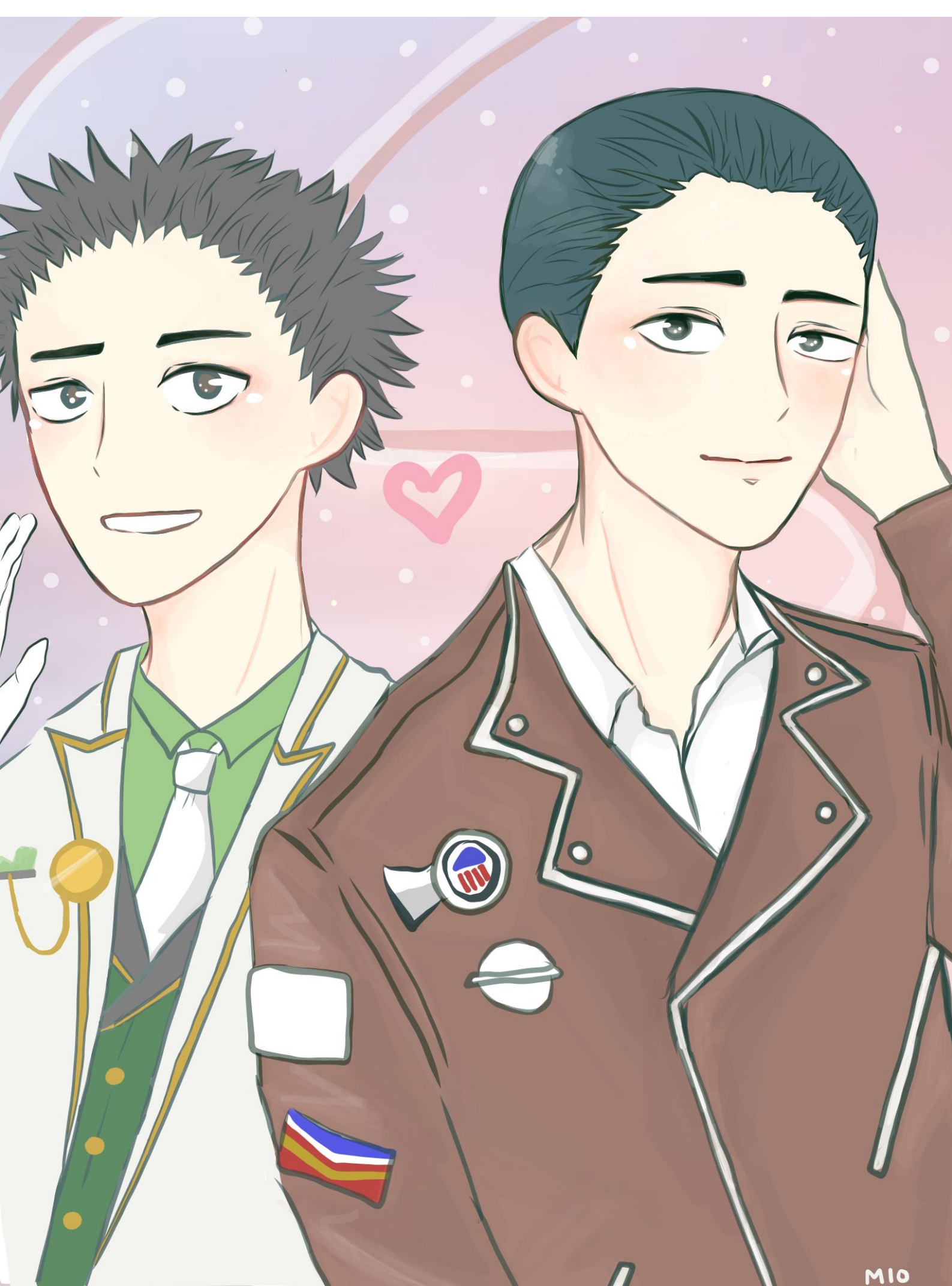












MIO





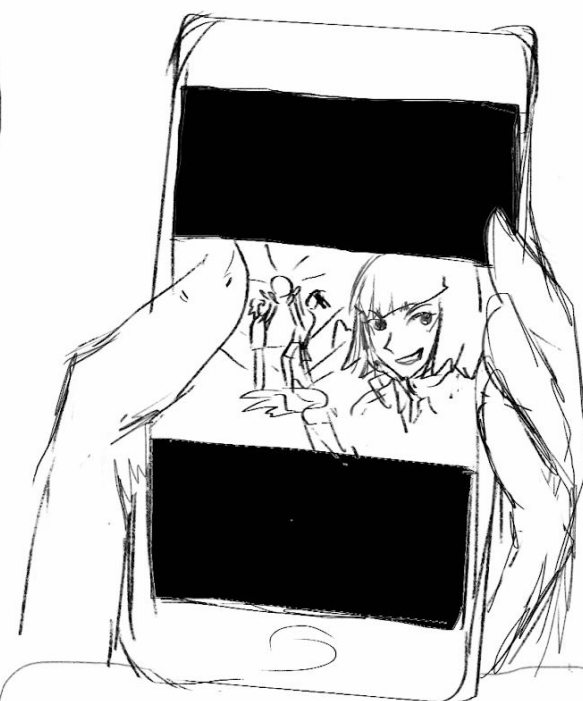












SHUT UP.
I thought it was cool.





Waaah I was gonna post that!



I wanted it to be better than the first one.

At least I tried...

And uh, it's not. Sorry!





FICTION



MORNINGSTARS

A story by Jupe @noonbase on twitter, godtrash on AO3



Morningstars

By Jupe

On the edge of space, on the border between what's real and what isn't (after all, what is the edge of space but an arbitrary imaginary line, as space itself is never ending and impossibly infinite) there lived a young star. That's right, he was as alive as you or I. A breathing, shining, thing, that looked something like a human being when he wanted but that wasn't quite right. He was a burning ball of light and fire, that warmed everything he touched, but nothing could ever get too close without burning up. This made him terribly sad and lonely, stuck being alone for the rest of his foreseeable days. Until he exploded and eventually turned inside out into a black hole.

The future was not bright.

But as he hovered in the sky, pondering and being wistful, he watched life go by on the nearby planets. His warmth allowed living things to flourish and grow, and many civilizations rose and fell. He watched it all from his safe distance, particularly that of a nearby planet called "earth."

Creatures known as humans came to be on that little blue planet, scurrying around to and fro and fighting great wars over petty things. He watched it all happen, wishing he could help them somehow, but knowing there was nothing to be done.

That is, until one day, he spotted a creature in peril. A small animal, that the earthlings called a dog. It was young and frail, and drowning in a small lake. He was desperate to save the poor thing, but he couldn't. If he used his other form and went to earth, his aura would still burn everything around him. He couldn't save the dog. Just as he was fretting over this, he saw a human streak past. They dived into the water without hesitation, swimming quickly to where the dog was and

grabbing it in their arms. They swam one-handed back to land, the other clutching the dog tightly. They crawled back to the shore, where the animal's tearful owner was reuniting gratefully with their pet. The dog panted, wagging its tail, and gently licked its savior's face. The hero in question grinned.

"It was nothing." He said to the cheering onlookers. He looked a little bashful in the face of all the attention. "Anyone would have done the same." But the boy was amazing. The wayward star watched him with admiration and love in his heart for these beings called humans, but for this youth in particular. He was handsome, with boyish looks but long, beautiful silky brown hair pulled back in an elegant style. He was incredible. The star shyly drifted on, thinking what it would be like to befriend such an amazing person.

He dwelled on it in the days that followed, sometimes sneaking a peek at earth to see what the human was up to. He was almost always in motion, running or swimming or playing games. His hair caught the wind and the early afternoon sunlight and it was breathtaking. The star had to tamp down the feelings caught in his chest. He barely knew this person, and they were a human anyway. There's no way he could even meet with him, let alone become friends. He tried to put it out of his mind, but the image of the young man came unbidden to his mind in his dreaming hours. He finally swallowed up his fear, and descended to earth.

As he landed gracefully in the middle of a wide open field, the grass ignited and it was alight. Panicking, he tried to extinguish the rapidly growing flames, flattening them with a rock to stem the tide. He took a deep breath and centered himself. No more flames exploded into being. He could do this. He could be calm.

He made his way to the little two-story house where the human lived, his heart already knowing the way. He came to the door and didn't know what to say. What could he say? Hi, so I'm a celestial body, and I've been watching you like a creepy stalker for some time and I saw you save that dog. Wanna be friends? It was too strange. No one would believe such a story. Steeling himself, he straightened up and knocked on the door before he could change his mind.

He heard feet shuffling in the house, coming to answer, and he panicked again. He turned and bolted before the door could swing open. "Hello?" A woman's voice called. He ducked around the corner before she could see him. Why had he done that? What was he even planning to say? He had no idea. He flattened himself against the wall and took a few deep breaths. Then he locked eyes with someone and froze.

There was the boy, licking a popsicle, backwards cap on his now very short, choppy looking hair. Bug-eyed, he stared at the object of his dreams. He blinked.

"What was that about?" The boy said, eyebrow raised. "You cut your hair." The star blurted.

"Huh?" He reached up and touched the newly shorn strands absently. "Yeah. Wait. Do I know you?"

The star shook his head rapidly. "Uh. No. Well, not exactly. I saw you save that dog at the beach the other day. Uh. It was my cousin's dog." He lied quickly, wincing. "I decided I wanted to thank you."

"Oh." He blinked. "That's not necessary." He mumbled, shuffling awkwardly. "Anyone else would have-"

"But you did." He interrupted, breathless.

"Yeah." The boy shrugged, and paused. "I'm Shishido, by the way."

"Ootori." The star said quickly. They looked at each other. "Um. Can I treat you to lunch or something?"

"You don't have to." The other boy said. "But. If you wanna."

"Great." Ootori said, mouth dry.

Lunch was awkward, as expected. Ootori watched the boy across from him scarf down his food as he made excuses not to eat. He was at a loss for what to say. Hello, I love you, even though we've only just met. Mostly it was silent between the two. But Shishido didn't seem to mind.

"You're pretty weird." He said as Ootori paid for both of their meals. "I don't think most people would get so worked up over it. Especially since it wasn't your dog."

"I wanted to save it." Ootori says suddenly. "But I can't swim."

"Oh." The other boy frowns. "Why go to a lake if you can't swim?"

"Everyone else was going." He replied, a wry smile on his face. "You didn't make fun of me for not knowing."

"Why would I do that?" The boy downs his drink, then offers: "Maybe I could teach you."

Ootori nearly chokes at that. "Uh. Sure. If you want." I'd just evaporate the water if I got in, he thinks. That would be a hard one to explain away.

"So, how about this Saturday? I go to the public pool that's near here a lot. It's pretty nice."

"All right." Ootori says nervously, "it's a deal."

"Great." He grins. "Thanks for lunch. See you then, Ootori."

"Yeah." He says faintly as the boy starts to go. Then he stops, eyes narrowed. "Hey I just thought of something..."

Please don't ask how I knew where you lived, Ootori prays silently.

"The pool's closed this saturday." He lets out a silent breath of relief.

"Wanna go today, instead?"

He blinks in response. "Now? I don't have... my swimsuit."

"You live nearby? You can go get it, I'll be back at my place."

"O-okay." He says.

Some time later, without really knowing why, he is at the edge of the pool and on the precipice of what feels like sure disaster. He kneels by the edge. Shishido has already jumped in.

"Come on." He wheedles, waving at Ootori who stands sheepishly to the side. "It feels great."

"Alright." He tips one toe in, wincing. Shishido laughs at him. "It's not that cold."

"Uh, yeah." Nothing seems to be happening, so he lowers himself down from the ladder the rest of the way in. He's so tall that it barely comes to his navel. Shishido pouts. "No fair, being so tall." Ootori has to chuckle at that.

"Hey, not my fault you're short." Shishido splashes him. He flinches, afraid that the water will turn to steam when it touches his skin or the water around him will start boiling the humans in the pool alive. But no such thing happens. It's just all right.

"So." Shishido clears his throat. "What made you want to come see me? Really?"

He swallows. "I told you, I wanted to thank you. That was all."

"You're weird." Shishido laughs, but he doesn't pry further. They have a nice swim together, and nobody gets hurt.

Except his heart, which is on the verge of exploding.

It is early evening and the pool is closing. They are packing up to go. "So, will I see you again sometime?" Shishido asks. "I didn't really get to teach you much."

"I'm still nervous about the deep end." Ootori says. "Next time, maybe."

"Yeah, next time." Shishido grins. "Here." He hands him a slip of paper. "My phone number." He says, giving Ootori a little wave. "Let's do this soon."

"Yeah." Ootori says, taking the paper gingerly and holding it like a precious object. He doesn't say that he doesn't have a phone because he is an interdimensional star creature, and waves back. "See you."

"By the way." Shishido stops, and turns. "You? Aren't subtle at all. I can tell you're new at this whole being around humans thing. You gotta be more discreet. Less twitchy. Humans don't like that. It's been a while for me, so I know. For anyone that knows what you are it's obvious. But humans? They'll just think you're up to something. So be careful."

Ootori feels his jaw drop. He sees the shimmer now for the first time, like a halo of light that encircles the other boy, who smirks at him. "You couldn't tell? See, I've gotten good. Lifetime of practice. Anyway, come by here tomorrow, if you want. I'll teach you everything you need to know. Just call me your faithful senpai." And with a flash of light he is gone.

Huh, Ootori thinks. This whole time he'd been here thinking that the object of his affections was human. He really was a fool, it seemed. He'd been played. No wonder he hadn't asked why he knew where to find his house. He had seen him coming a mile away.

He looks down at the paper with a faint smile on his face. It says:

Ootori (if that is your real name)

It was fun. Come back and see me. I bet it's been a long time since you've been around your own kind, huh? I'll be in the Albion Galaxy. Look for me in the night sky, at the east. I'll be waiting.

-S



ANNIVERSARY

A story by Orca @solosorca on twitter



Anniversary

By Orca

The soft, tinny 'thump thump thump' drifted out from Echizen's headphones as he sprawled on the antique sofa, eyes shut, nodding slightly to the beat. Tezuka fiddled with his gloves, making sure they were on properly. Around them, other members of the Prince of Tennis Talent Agency milled around, getting ready for the First Anniversary Party filming. They would be flirting and dancing with 'a special guest', who was technically the viewer, but for them would be a camera.

It wasn't as if Tezuka was nervous. He had lost all his nerves about being filmed in the first month of Prince of Tennis. Anyway, acting like a prince guiding a lady through a party was far easier than authentically portraying mad tennis moves. But he hated waiting. He wished he could be like Echizen and relax without worrying about crumpling his outfit. Echizen could somehow manage to look better in a crumpled outfit than a pristine one. He, unfortunately, looked good in anything.

Tezuka's eyes mutinously glanced over to Echizen. His hair was pushed back out of his eyes, making him look even more handsome than usual. His traitorous eyes slid down the gentle curve of his nose and landed on the soft, pink lips.

Stupid. Tezuka scolded himself, pulling his eyes away to the set designers pushing a piano into place on the other side of the glittering ballroom.

Extras were starting to arrive now, men in smart black suits and ladies in fantastic dresses in all the colours of the rainbow. Tezuka and his friends were in light grey suits, so to stand out against the crowd.

"Echizen," the director called, "we need you over here."

Tezuka's eyes took control and he couldn't help but stare as Echizen pushed himself up and stretched. They traced themselves along his

taut arms and down his neck. Tezuka's lips pined, betraying him as well as they wished to be pressed against that beautiful skin. Down Tezuka's eyes went further, down to the tight dark collar and the knot of his blue tie. Tezuka's fingers twitched, it would take much to hook his finger behind the knot and drag it down, give his lips access to more skin.

He realised Echizen was staring at him.

"What?"

"You shouldn't sleep on set," Tezuka said sternly, hoping to cover his momentary weakness.

Echizen got to his feet, smirking infuriatingly, "really? Well, I guess I let my guard down."

"You did.

"Echizen!" The director shouted.

"Coming, coming," Echizen sighed. He gave Tezuka one last knowing look and then left to film his scenes.

With somewhat a sigh of relief, Tezuka sat in Echizen's vacated seat. It was warm and Tezuka put a stop to all thoughts of it being 'Echizen's warmth'.

He distracted himself watching the filming. Echizen, despite being, well, Echizen, managed to play the prince part well. His abrasive personality gave him the veneer of royalty. His good looks helped.

Tezuka was proud to have Echizen in his acting team. He could be a brat at times, but when it came to it, he was professional and got the job done. Which he was doing now. Echizen didn't flub any of his lines and smoothly got through the opening portion of the film as he

welcomed the POV camera to the party and guided her through the crowds until Atobe cut in to say his lines.

When Echizen came sauntering back, he gave Tezuka a wink that made his insides go all mushy.

The grand piano was in the corner of the hall, in front of the band, its body gleaming. Tezuka sat on the red velvet stool, and stretched his fingers. When this whole event was dreamt up six months ago, Tezuka was sent to revive his middle school piano skills.

A recording of Tezuka playing the piece in a proper studio would be played over the footage, but it was a matter of pride that he got it right on the video. At least one of the fans must be able to play the piano and it would break the illusion if they noticed something wrong.

“Off you go Tezuka,” The director said. Tezuka lay his fingers onto the keys and began playing.

He soon forgot that he was being filmed, focusing only on his fingers dancing across the ivory. As he got to the chorus, the band came in, adding grandeur. The footage would be intercut with the main character dancing with various actors, all complementing how pretty she was.

There was movement out of the corner of Tezuka’s eye and he glanced over to see Echizen coming to lean on the piano. Tezuka’s finger almost hit the wrong key as his heart rate sped up.

Focus, he told himself sternly. No one would notice if Tezuka messed and and certainly no one would care. But Echizen was watching him. He was the captain of his team and he had to show he was worthy of the position. Echizen’s respect was hard won as the person with the

most acting experience. But he respected Tezuka. And that was enough. Or, it should be.

He could feel Echizen's intense stare on him- it was almost off putting.

Echizen turned the page of Tezuka's music. He needn't have, Tezuka knew had committed the piece to muscle memory, but from the corner of his eye, Tezuka could see the director giving them a thumbs up.

Oh. Echizen was just playing to the camera.

The thought sunk like a lead weight in Tezuka's chest.

Oh.

Why would Echizen like him anyway?

Oh.

Tezuka's hand jerked onto the wrong key and he winced at the note as if it were a gunshot. He was being stupid.

The piece came to an end and Tezuka hurried off, making an excuse about wanting some air when Echizen opened his mouth to ask something.

The cold night air bit at Tezuka's cheeks and fingertips and he shivered. It was a good distraction from the torment in his heart.

You never wanted to date anyone, he told himself, that's why you became an idol! It was a benefit.

But Echizen and his gorgeous eyes and smirks had come in and shattered everything. Tezuka wasn't one for describing things as unfair. Life was never fair, it was up to you to do your best and not let your guard down. But Echizen? Echizen was unfair.

He paced up and down, partly to keep warm but mostly out of frustration with himself. This was the behaviour of a teenage girl in a shojo manga, not a proud and rigid idol. He needed to snap out of this!

Back in the ballroom, the filming of the dancing had begun. Tezuka walked back through to find Atobe waltzing with a short staff member with a camera strapped to his forehead. It would be amusing if Tezuka's brain and heart weren't ripping themselves apart. He spotted Echizen and his stomach flipped. He forced himself to look away before Echizen caught his eye.

Thankfully, Echizen was called to cut in and take over the dance from Atobe. Although Tezuka couldn't stop the twinge of jealousy at the self insert girl who got to dance with Echizen.

During rehearsals, Echizen had practiced with Tezuka

"You need to dance with someone smaller to practice," he'd said matter-a-factly as he'd pulled Tezuka into hold.

He'd been really warm, Tezuka remembered. So warm Tezuka had come close to melting in his hands. Echizen had stepped on his toes a lot too, which looked to be happening on the dance floor too. The poor staff member.

Tezuka's feet moved him closer and closer to the dance floor, unable to take his eyes off Echizen's bad-but-pulling-it-off-beautifully dancing.

A creak took Tezuka's eyes up to the ceiling to the sparkling chandelier, a crystal mountain hanging from a thread.

In a moment of sudden clarity, Tezuka knew exactly what was going to happen. The chandelier had just started falling when Tezuka started running out onto the dance floor. Silence engulfed him, his entire focus on getting Echizen to safety. He had no idea where the chandelier was when he reached the dancing 'couple'. One arm wrapped around

Echizen, the other pushing the staff member away as hard as he could. He stumbled forward, pulling Echizen with him, as sound returned in a monumental shattering of a tonne of glass smashing into a wooden floor.

Tezuka fell to the floor, using his body to shield Echizen from the shards of glass searing through the air around them. He hugged the other man tight as the crashing and screaming continued around them.

And then. Silence again.

Tezuka's ears were ringing, his heart pounding. He was suddenly away of thousands of pin pricks of pain all over his back and legs.

"You are such an idiot!" The voice cut through the pain. He looked down and saw Echizen glaring up at him, tears in his eyes. He cupped Tezuka's face in his hands. "Idiot!"

It was like being given a gold medal.

Tezuka was sent straight to hospital. Miraculously, no one was seriously injured other than Tezuka who'd had glass stabbed all over his back. It took hours to remove them all and Echizen was by his side the entire time.

"I can't believe you did that," Echizen said again as the doctors left, leaving Tezuka bandaged and full of pain killers.

"I couldn't let you be hurt," Tezuka replied. "It would have killed you."

"*You* could have been killed!"

That hadn't crossed Tezuka's mind at all. He just couldn't imagine a world without Echizen. "I'm your captain."

Echizen's hand found his own, it was just as warm as when they'd danced. He looked suddenly scared, an unnatural expression on the young superstar's face. And then his warm, soft lips were pressed against Tezuka's.

Tezuka's brain shut down, unable to process this. Did Echizen like him too? Was this just a 'thank you'? Echizen was raised in America after all-

Echizen pulled away and the heartbreaking look on his face kicked started Tezuka's brain

"No, come here," he said, squeezing Echizen's hand and using his free hand to rest on his waist.

Echizen was immediately back in his personal space, his lips pressed against Tezuka's. This time the kiss was passionate and messy, they only had minutes before the doctors returned and they'd have to stop touching each other. Echizen's hands were in Tezuka's hair, stroking and tugging so that his mouth was at the right angle. Their teeth clacked together and Echizen laughed softly as he repositioned their faces.

"You like me?" Tezuka asked when Echizen finally pulled away.

Echizen rolled his eyes, "I've been making that obvious for months. I thought Fuji was lying when he said you hadn't noticed!"



MESSAGE IN THE WIND

A story by Nagisa Umibe @setsugekka11 on twitter, Nagisa Umibe on facebook, and _Lunetta11_ on wattpad



Message in the Wind

By Nagisa Umibe

For reasons that Fuji had yet to understand, colors were never enough to capture the way his heart regarded the sky. Vivid as they were, to capture the features of the sky in mere colors felt too narrow, too inadequate for him—and so he began attaching an aspect that his romanticist self was most familiar with; sentiment. Since then, whenever his eyes turned to the sky, there would always be emotions attached to it; at times it was vibrant cobalt, at others nostalgic orange, and other times, when the day felt heavy, sorrowful gray would settle upon the sky.

That day, when the sky had assumed the shade of melancholic amber and magenta upon faint blue, he was reminded of a series of strange dreams that had been haunting his sleep. He couldn't remember them clearly—the imageries were always vague despite his attempts to ascertain them—but he remembered vividly the feeling that they invoked. What he didn't expect was that he would find it in the sky, settling upon it so naturally as though a fragment of dream had followed him to the land of the waking.

His mornings usually began with a series of musings that would orbit his mind until coffee hushed them down. Lately, however, he began noticing that even the caffeine had stopped giving him its usual touch. Perhaps in search for a way to calm his mind, he assumed a habit of watching the sky, hoping its vastness could contain his restless heart. He would wander around the training camp in the morning or after each training session, and every time he found himself arriving at the same place.

Even as the sky changed, the court where he had faced Tezuka for the last time felt unchanging, constant; a place frozen in time, suspended by stray sentiments that had yet found resolution.

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you.” A light, cheerful voice brought him back to reality, snapping him out of his musing. He turned toward the source to find Kikumaru approaching, concern written all over his face. “Fuji, are you okay?”

“I’m okay. Don’t worry,” Fuji replied, beaming a reassuring smile toward the redhead.

Kikumaru merely hummed as a response; he had expected this kind of reply from the brunette. Stopping right as he reached Fuji, he began again, “You’ve been spacing out a lot lately. I’m worried.”

His perpetual smile unfading, Fuji responded, “Really? I feel fine, though.”

Gently a morning breeze passed by; the grass and the leaves trembled as it caressed them. Though the air was scentless, its cold embrace reminded the pair of teenagers of the approaching autumn. A comforting silence fell between them, replacing their conversation with seconds of wordless musings. Turning toward Fuji, whose focus was once again directed toward the sky, Kikumaru regarded his close friend’s expression.

He had lied; in truth, there was never a need to search for Fuji. He already knew where he would find his friend, and true to his prediction, he indeed found him there, in the same place where Fuji had bid his final match and a tearful goodbye to Tezuka. Something had changed within the brunette that day. It was subtle, almost unnoticeable, but Kikumaru was sure of it—finding marks of it within the reflection in Fuji’s blue eyes. He considered for a moment before asking, “You sure you’re okay? You know you can always tell me—”

“I’m okay,” Fuji interrupted gently. After a brief pause, he abruptly asked, “Eiji... have you seen a blue bird around?”

“Blue bird...?” Kikumarū raised an eyebrow. “No, I don’t think I have.”

“I thought so too. You see, I saw one in my dream. I thought it’d be nice to see the actual thing.” Chuckling, Fuji continued, “We should head back now. It’ll be breakfast time soon.”

Turning away, he patted Kikumarū’s shoulder lightly—another gesture that the redhead immediately recognized as reassurance—before heading for the dorm. Kikumarū’s gaze trailed his figure, watching until his eyes could no longer follow. He then regarded the azure heights above, searching; attempting to understand.

Fuji had always been a secretive person, never one to speak of his sentiments openly. He didn’t find it surprising that the brunette chose not to share with him whatever it was that bothered his mind.

Nevertheless, Kikumarū couldn’t help but wonder of the sky reflected by those blue irises; of what had caused the reflection to be crushingly melancholic.

— — —

There was something about the library—its quietness, its serene air, the purposeful way everything was arranged—that made Kikumarū feel as though the place was frozen in time, constant and unchanging. When he entered, he found that no one else was in the library sans for the bookkeeper that was silently drowning in the pages opened before him. It was truthfully rare for him to visit the library; as much as the place felt comforting, it was simply never meant to contain his burst of energy. Walking in it invoked the sensation of being in another

world altogether—encased, yet filled with countless stories and wisdom.

Unfamiliar with its arrangement, he walked from one alley of bookshelves to another, eyes darting between titles—from the historical record of the Three Kingdoms to the biography of Tokuda Shusei; a collection of Nordic mythologies, which almost made him stop in his tracks; a volume on arithmetics, its title enough to give him a headache; and finally, when he arrived at the flora and fauna section, his eyes immediately locked onto the encyclopedia of birds sitting on the shelf. He had just taken the book and skimmed through the pages when a gentle voice called to him, greeting,

“Oh? It’s fancy meeting you here, Kikumaru.”

He lifted his eyes from the book, turning his gaze to meet Yukimura’s violet orbs. A smile was plastered on the young man’s face, and Kikumaru saw him holding a book on gardening.

“Yukimura! What a coincidence. There’s something I want to ask you,” Kikumaru began, eyes lighting up.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do you think it’s possible to find a blue bird in Japan?”

“A blue bird...?” Yukimura considered for a moment before asking, “Ah, were you perhaps referring to the sialia genus?”

“Sia... huh?” Kikumaru, unfamiliar with the topics of science, couldn’t quite grasp what Yukimura meant.

The violet-eyed youth simply smiled, replying, “It’s a type of bird native to the American continent, commonly known as the bluebird. Named so for its blue feathers.”

“Native to America, eh... Would that mean it’s unlikely to find here?”

“Normally, yes. But what is it? Is something the matter?”

It was Kikumaru’s turn to give consideration to that, as he himself had no idea what he was looking for. He was chasing after a blurry image, vague and intangible, and he might have been looking for it in the wrong places. Nevertheless, he wanted to try. He had to.

“Yukimura, would you happen to know the symbolism of seeing one in a dream?”

Taken aback by the question, Yukimura replied, “I... do, yes. In fact, the bird symbolizes quite a few things.” He shifted his gaze toward a shelf nearby, regarding the hundreds of titles embedded upon covers of varying colors. Taking one off the shelf—the Japanese edition of John James Audubon’s “The Birds of America”—he opened it and continued, “I saw one in a dream myself.”

“You did?” His curiosity piqued, Kikumaru asked, “What did it mean to you?”

Yukimura skimmed over the pages, stopping when he found the image of the bluebird. Tracing the image with his fingers, flashes of reminiscence from the days he struggled against the illness returned; of the despair and excruciating pain that seemed endless, and the hands that had supported him through it all. “For one, it symbolizes ‘hope’.”

Hope. Kikumaru's mind wandered to his memory of the morning, when he had found Fuji's lone figure standing on the tennis court. "Hope..."

"Did you see one in your dream, Kikumaru?" Yukimura asked.

"Huh?" Pausing, Kikumaru replied, "Oh—no, not me. A friend did."

"I see. And you're helping this friend out?"

"Helping, eh..." He sighed. "I don't know if I'm even helping. To be honest, I'm not good with this kind of thing."

Yukimura chuckled. "In that case, I can help you."

Soon they were seated at a table with piles of books framing their figures. Pages with pictures of birds, opened wide before them, became subject of interest as the pair discussed the bluebird; its scientific information, symbolisms, meanings, anything they could get their hands on. As time marched on and the discussion flowed, a part of Kikumaru pondered on the new found sentiments that filled him—when he found himself sitting idly in the library to find what little he could about something he was completely unfamiliar with, all for the sake of someone else.

Never had he gone through such lengths simply to understand someone whose mind was on a different wavelength than his own. He knew, at that moment, that he would be willing to go even greater length—even further—for him.

For Fuji.

Though Kikumaru hardly noticed it at first due to the hectic training schedule, the world had slowly transformed outside. The shade of emerald green, having arrived alongside the brilliant summer, quietly surrendered its vibrancy to the warmth of yellow, red, and brown. Scorching heat had begun to dissipate from the air, turning the wind mellow and comfortable. Clouds, white and light and free, traversed the azure heights above without care for the world below, and Kikumaru envied how carefree they were. How liberated.

“It will be autumn soon,” Yukimura said as they passed by numerous trees on their way back to the dorm.

“Now that you mention it... Don’t you feel like time has been moving so quickly lately?” Eyeing the tree leaves, a slight discomfort began to come by Kikumaru. Change, for one, was always something that he found difficult to become accustomed to. “To think summer was just yesterday...”

“The more we do, the faster time moves. We often don’t pay much attention to the passage of time when we’re occupied with something,” Yukimura replied. “Our training here has been so intense that we don’t even realize the subtle changes in the season.”

Sighing, Kikumaru put his hands behind his head and said, “This sucks. I don’t like this kind of change at all. Sometimes it’s like my time is being stolen away from me and I don’t even know it.”

Yukimura looked at him. “You don’t like changes, Kikumaru?”

“Not that I dislike it, but...” No matter how much he tried to brush it aside, the image of Tezuka’s back on that day was burned within his mind, still as vivid as the moment he saw him leave. “The thought of

seeing the things that we've grown so used to being around change, it's scary."

"Tezuka, is it?"

The question came so suddenly, without warning, that Kikumaru was taken aback. "How—?"

"Absence isn't easy to deal with. Even when your teammates say nothing, I can feel how much Tezuka's absence is affecting all of you." He gripped at the jersey hanging from his shoulder. However delicate or fleeting, the certainty brought by such a presence was a pillar to some, but also their undoing. He, too, had experienced first-hand how terrifying and discomfiting sudden absence and changes were.

"I guess it's just too hard for us to pretend that nothing's changed at all. Tezuka's such a huge influence to us that it feels... strange when he's not there, you know?" Rare as it may have been, melancholy filled the redhead's voice. "And some people began to change after he left. It's unsettling."

"Let me guess. The friend you mentioned before, the one who dreamed of the bluebird—it's Fuji, isn't it?"

Kikumaru's dark blue orbs widened, once again caught off-guard by how transparent he was to the captain of Rikkaidai. "You're scaring me, Yukimura. Are you an *ESP* or something?"

"The truth is, I can feel it myself. Fuji has barely mentioned Tezuka since that day, but both I and Shiraishi know something is off about him. Subtle, but..."

"It's there, right? Like you can't really see the change, but it's definitely there," Kikumaru said.

Yukimura nodded. "Perhaps the one being affected by Tezuka's absence the most is Fuji."

"Yeah..." Kikumaru's shoulders dropped. "He seems so absent-minded lately, like he's not really there. He won't tell me anything even when I ask. All I have is the clue about some random dream he's been having." He turned his gaze upwards; the sky above, though broad and clear, was beginning to feel like an encasing dome. "If only I could find that bluebird, then surely..."

Another breeze passed by them, leaving swift, cold kisses upon their skin. Kikumaru didn't think much of it, but when a pale blue feather fluttered by, riding the wind as it moved past them, he moved by instinct. He ran forward and jumped, reaching his arms out to the feather, and captured it midair. When he landed, he opened his shaky palm only to find out the feather was fake.

"*Whoa—!* Hey, that's mine!" Mukahi's familiar voice echoed through the air; turning towards its direction, Kikumaru saw Hyoutei's own redhead jumping from one tree to another, landing without much trouble beside him.

"Huh? You mean this blue feather?"

"Yeah, it's mine. Thanks, and sorry about that," Mukahi sheepishly said as he took the feather from Kikumaru's hand. "It's actually a part of my keychain, but the tip broke and the wind blew it away. Just my luck."

“Mukahi, did you find it?” Atobe called from a distance, and Kikumaru saw that the king was accompanied by Ooishi; an unusual combination, though not uncommon given the nature of the camp.

Mukahi waved the feather in the direction of the approaching youths. “I got it! Man, this one’s been with me for a long time, I wouldn’t want to lose it. Thankfully Kikumaru here caught it.”

“Now that you mention it... Say, Mukahi, do you have more feathers like that?” Kikumaru asked.

“Huh, you mean blue like this one? My folks at home shipped a box of them here to cheer me up when I told them of our hellish training at the mountain, heheh. Though I guess I don’t really need that many.”

Eiji... have you seen a blue bird around?

Within seconds, ideas poured into Kikumaru’s mind—as did flashes of the conversation he had with Fuji that morning, and the discussion of the bluebird with Yukimura in the library.

“Mukahi!” Kikumaru shouted suddenly, making his companions jump, “Can I have those spare feathers? I’ll get you another box later, promise!”

Mukahi blinked a few times before asking, “Huh? Sure, you can, but for what exactly?”

“What’s going on, Eiji?” Ooishi tilted his head in confusion.

Yukimura’s lips curved into a smile. The conversation they held earlier in the library was more than enough of a clue. “Ah, so that’s how it is... That’s a wonderful idea, Kikumaru.”

“Right? I knew you’d get me, Yukimura~!”

“Would any of you care to enlighten me?” Atobe asked, equally as confused as Ooishi.

Kikumaru turned to them, eyes lit up with excitement. “I’ll need your help, everyone. You see...”

— — —

Gold and orange descended upon his skin, leaving warm touches where the ocean wind had embraced parts of him—even the ones that were hidden and in pain. Watching the sun begin its descend to the horizon, the sky filled with feverish shades of nostalgia, and a faint smile painted Fuji’s face. In his hand was a white letter, written by a certain someone who now awaited him by the shore. As the sound of waves accompanied him toward the destination, the sentiments that weighed down his heart slowly released, making each of his steps feel lighter.

The comforting scent of the ocean greeted him when he finally reached the shore, prompting him to take off his shoes and let his bare feet feel the white sand beneath. Now fully enveloped by the sunset’s embrace, he closed his eyes, feeling the gentle wind toying with his hair.

If only time would stop now... if only this serenity would last forever.

“Fuji.” A voice greeted him; still his eyes remained closed, for he recognized the voice too well that no further confirmation was needed.

“Eiji,” he breathed.

A warm hand took his, grasping it gently. It was only then that he opened his eyes, turning toward the one who greeted him—and met a familiar pair of deep blue orbs. Something within the redhead was suspended by time, Fuji mused, when he saw the way the setting sun's warmth fell upon his figure. As though a canvas, Kikumaru's white suit reflected the shades of the sky, turning it into a lovely orange under the sunset.

“What's the occasion, Eiji?” the brunette tilted his head, though a part of him couldn't help but smile.

“You'll see. Come,” Kikumaru replied, leading Fuji by hand to a location nearby. Fuji's wondering was soon answered when a set of well-decorated tables came into full view. He held his breath as he regarded the setting; adorned by roses and feathers of blue and white, and cradled by the distant warm light, the place was like another world altogether.

“Eiji, this is...”

“What do you think? Pretty, isn't it?” Kikumaru beamed a wide smile at him. Perhaps out of excitement, or perhaps in part due to the embarrassment of doing something uncharacteristic of him, a faint shade of red colored his cheeks.

“Pretty can't even begin to describe it. This is... breathtaking.” Sentiments began to overwhelm Fuji once again, this time more delicate, gentler, enough to wash away his worries. “Did you do this for me?”

Kikumaru's smile turned into a grin. "The meal will turn cold if we don't begin soon, so shall we?"

Fuji chuckled and followed after the redhead. He found it amusing how thorough Kikumaru had prepared everything; from the dining utensils so gracefully arranged to the plethora of delicacies, all his favorites, equally well-prepared. Seeing the extent of Kikumaru efforts to prepare everything, he silently thanked his companion. Now seated, he reached out to one of the feathers and plucked it effortlessly, marveling at its color.

"Blue feather... to think you'd remember what I told you this morning." He regarded the feather closely. "Thank you, Eiji. But you really didn't have to go this far just for me."

"You are not 'just'. You're someone important to me," Kikumaru replied firmly. When Fuji lifted his gaze to regard him, he nearly drowned by the intensity in the redhead's eyes. "Listen, I... can't find the bluebird here. It's apparently rare in Japan, or so I heard. But at least..." He paused for a moment. Fuji watched him closely as he continued, "If the bluebird can't be the messenger of hope for you, then I will."

Silence overcame them, their brief conversation replaced by the sound of the waves. "Eiji—" Fuji stopped when Kikumaru's cheeks turned completely red, and not from the sun. "Pfft!" He broke into laughter, both amused and delighted by the unexpected surprise his dearest friend had prepared for him.

"D-don't laugh! I had to muster everything in me to say that embarrassing line, you know?!"

"I know, I know." Soon Fuji's laughter settled, replaced by a warm smile. "Messenger of hope... that has a nice ring to it. Really, Eiji, I don't know how to thank you enough."

It was Kikumaru's turn to hold his breath, taken by the beautiful smile before him. "If you're happy, then I'm happy. And, um... I have another thing to say. It's equally embarrassing, so don't laugh, okay?"

Fuji nodded, though his smile turned into a look of bemusement. "I'm listening."

Taking a deep breath, Kikumaru began, "I know that the past few weeks have been difficult for you, because... Tezuka's not here anymore." He paused, taking a moment to consider Fuji's reaction. The brunette was still listening intently, and Kikumaru was relieved to see that he didn't seem downcast. "I know I'm not the best person there is when it comes to comfort, but I want you to know that no matter what, you will always have my support. Even as everything changes... even as you go through changes."

Fuji didn't reply immediately. He turned to regard the setting sun, watching how the star turned a reddish color as it drowned further into the horizon. "So you notice."

"If it's okay with you, I'll help you practice," Kikumaru said. "I'm not as strong or skilled as Tezuka, but I'll help in any way I can."

"You know, Eiji," Fuji suddenly said.

"Hmm?"

“The bluebird symbolizes many things, among it hope. Another one is—” He was abruptly cut when a swift gale passed by. A shadow moved past them from above—

Their eyes widened when they saw it. As though a miracle, as though an answered dream, a single bluebird soared above, riding the movement of the wind. Its small figure, backdropped by the golden sky, was akin to a herald; bringing a message clear and loud, and giving shape to vague sentiments that were once astray. And, it left something for them.

Slowly a feather descended, trembling and fluttering as it brushed the air. When it reached them, Fuji instinctively opened his palm—upon which it settled gently. Words were suddenly not enough, completely absent from Fuji. He stared at the blue feather in his hand, as real as the moment they were enveloped in.

“Fuji, that was...” Kikumarū’s voice broke the silence, “That was *amazing!* Did you see it?! Hey, I’m not dreaming, am I?”

Fuji, still overcome by silence, held the feather close to his heart. “Eiji,” he began.

“Fuji?”

“Thank you... for everything.” The brunette lifted his head, revealing in full a pair of sapphires that were now filled with determination. “I will overcome my weakness. However far the road ahead, I will surely reach that new height.” Opening his palm, he showed the feather to the young man before him, continuing, “Fuji Shuusuke will be reborn. This, I promise you.”

Though unspoken, messages from the sky reached him that day, arriving in many forms; from the bluebird that miraculously appeared before them, to the presence of dear ones that supported his heart when it slowly crumbled. He had felt lost, astray, and without a path when his guidepost left him. Now, however, he understood what he had to do.

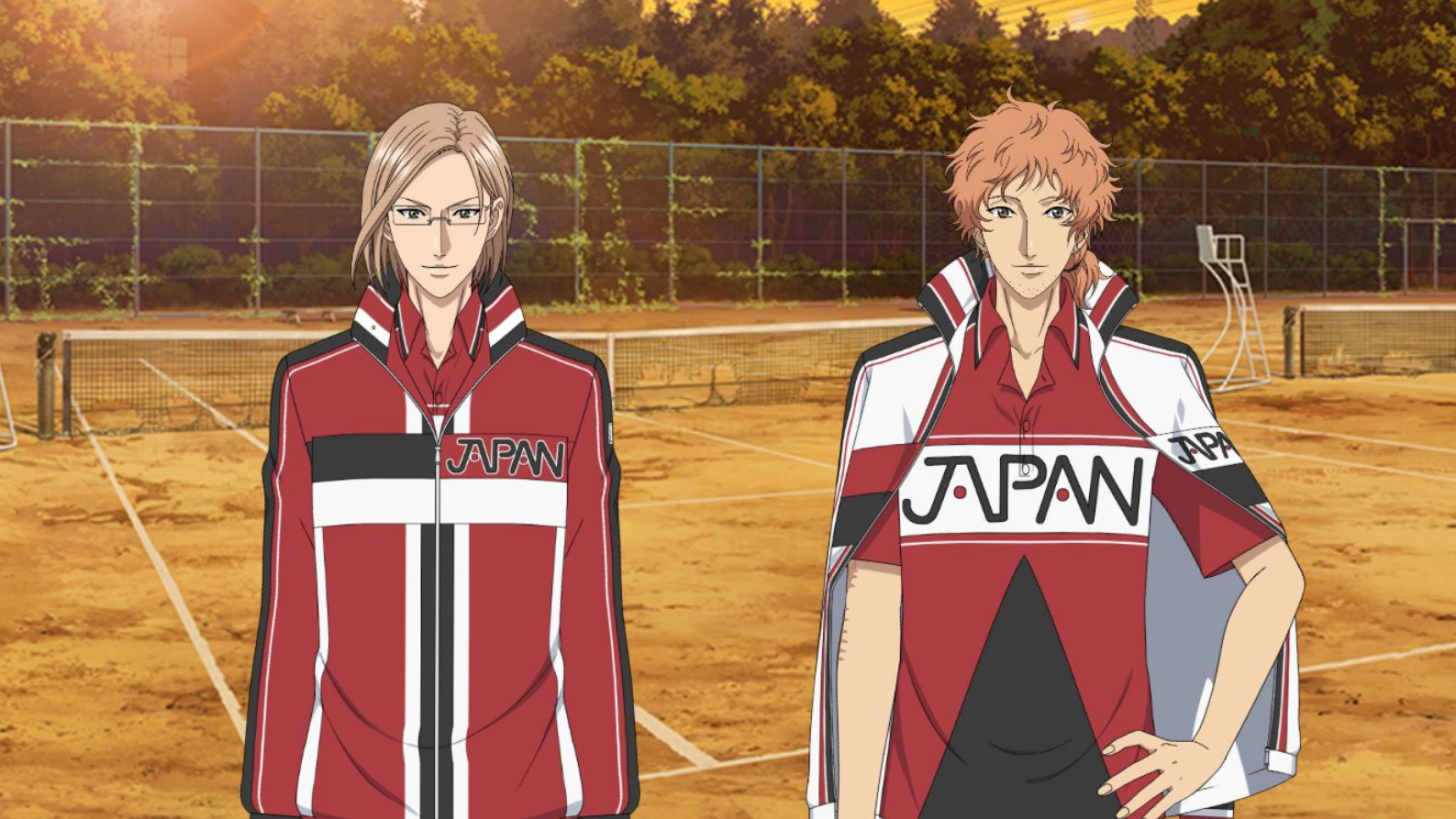
“If it’s you, I know you’ll be able to do it! I’ll support you in any way I can! See, even the bluebird is supporting you!” Kikumaru’s reply, filled with excitement so genuine and pure, made Fuji chuckle.

“Eiji... do you know another thing that the bluebird symbolizes?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Enlightenment, growth, and...” His lips curved into a smile. “New beginnings.”

When the time would come for him to rise again, the world would see a new version of him.



A HALLOWEEN NIGHT TO (NOT) REMEMBER

A story by Puffcat @puffcat16049 on twitter



A HALLOWEEN NIGHT TO (NOT) REMEMBER

By Puffcat

Ugh...

Akuto made only an attempt to open his eyes, wincing at the graininess of the sleep sand that cracked apart when his eyelids fluttered. His heartbeat pulsed obnoxiously across his entire scalp and beneath his skull, a persistent punishment for going out the night before.

Gods, what a mistake... I'm too old for this.

At last, Akuto managed to formulate a coherent thought as he licked his lips, which were every bit as dry as his sluggish tongue. From that feeling alone, he knew his morning breath could probably knock a buzzard off a dung wagon.

Somehow, Akuto's graduate colleagues had convinced him to go out with them the night previous, on *Halloween* of all days. They hadn't managed to get him to dress up, but he did remember throwing back a horribly garish shot made of green, orange, and purple jello. And that was his most recent memory. Which meant that shot could not have been his last.

But that was the past, which could be dealt with later. Currently, Akuto was more concerned with the present. Where was he? It must be in his apartment, he could hear the clock in the tiny kitchen ticking away if he strained his ears. But the too-saggy feeling beneath his stomach and knees told him he was likely sprawled across the old couch he'd poached from his parents' house. It was a truly awful shade of mauve, but it was free, which had trumped the ugliness, especially to a graduate student with no money to buy even a used piece of furniture.

He rolled onto his side, and the old frame groaned tiredly beneath him. It may be hideous, but it was a perfectly comfortable place to sleep off a hangover.

Which, as Akuto's head continued to *pound* behind his eyes — so much that he felt they might be bulging out in time with the cadence of his heart if you looked at them closely — he realized was much, much worse than any hangover he'd had in his life. Not that he was prone to excessive drinking, mind you, but still.

It felt as though his head had been used as a landing strip for Air Force One.

Dragging his hand up from where it dangled off the side of the couch, limp fingers brushing against the rug, Akuto felt for his glasses, hoping that they were on his face. But rather than slim metal frames, all he got were wet fingertips poking haphazardly between his eyes and across the bridge of his nose.

Hold on. Wet...?

Surprise moisture was *never* a good thing to wake up to, especially when one had no recollection of the previous night's events, and Akuto's eyes snapped open to stare at his hand.

He was expecting drool, or water, or some other sort of bodily fluid.

All would have been preferable to what he found. Even the fluid.

For Akuto awoke to a hand drenched in blood. And it wasn't just his hand, either. His wrist, his arm, his entire body was soaked through with it in great swathes across his rumpled clothing. There was so much that it had dripped onto the floor, forming a slick, oozing puddle of ruby liquid.

With a shriek, Akuto leapt up from the couch, splitting headache forgotten as he surveyed the mess before him. His stomach twisted in

knot after knot as he wracked his brain to remember what had happened.

But he didn't have to ponder for long. Even if *he* didn't remember, there was one individual who surely would.

"Yamato...!"

For a moment, it looked as if Akuto was yelling at the wall, completely alone in his apartment. But as the shout faded away, a soft hiss began to emanate throughout the room, as if someone were extinguishing the vestiges of a dying campfire.

"You called, Mitsuya?"

The man that had appeared before him out of thin air lounged easily on the couch, fiery hair tousled and unruly, almost obscuring his sharp, playful eyes. The barely concealed delight behind those scarlet irises told Akuto that Yamato knew exactly what he had been summoned for, and was completely unapologetic about every last bit of it.

"What the fuck is this!"

Akuto hated to yell, and hated to curse even more, but the hangover combined with the *literal* bloody mess he had awoken to was, at the moment, overshadowing both of those filters.

The demon, for his part, didn't seem perturbed in the least, instead choosing to smile handsomely at Akuto, pointed tail curling in his lap.

"Don't be angry, my darling. No one is in any trouble. Well," Yamato gestured to the scarlet stains all over his clothing, "besides that fellow at least. But worry not, he won't be missed."

Akuto wanted to grab his supernatural freeloader by his stupid horns and toss him off the back balcony and into the dumpster in the alley below.

“You possessed me without permission!”

Yamato had the gall to shrug. “You know what yesterday was, it’s one of the most sacred days of power for demons. I wasn’t about to let you deprive me of having a little fun!”

“Listen,” he hissed, eyes narrowed at Yamato, “I’ve put up with a lot from you. Loose souls in my Tupperware, portals to the underworld in my toilet, and terrifying nightmares of past atrocities *you’ve* committed. But I will NOT be your murder puppet.”

Akuto advanced toward the couch, and jabbed Yamato in the chest. “I had no say in you being bound to me, but you *will* respect me, at least as a vessel if nothing else...!”

Yamato, who had never seen his dear host so infuriated, resisted the urge to shrink back. Even in anger, his beauty was something to behold. And also slightly scary. He tried to contort his expression into one of sheepishness as best he could.

“My moon, you know I think you far more than a lowly vessel for me to inhabit...”

Akuto couldn’t help the way his breath slowly let out as a tanned hand cupped his cheek. The softness of the demon’s tone, combined with the endearment both eased his anxiety and quelled his anger. He closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

“You betrayed my trust.”

Ah, there it was, Yamato thought, as his chest constricted. That ever elusive feeling of guilt that most demons didn’t even think it possible to experience. Oh, how wrong they were.

“And you must know,” said Yamato, voice gentle, “I did not do so to hurt you. But All Hallow’s Eve belongs to the wicked, and it is in my

nature to hunt. You may have what's left of my heart, but my will remains my own."

And this Akuto knew too, as much as he hated to acknowledge it. Yamato was, at his core, a force of evil. That he let Akuto have *any* say in their bondage was a blessing.

"Just... just tell me. I don't want to lose myself like that without knowing it's going to happen." That was all he could ask for, he supposed. Asking for the possessions to stop was an impossible wish.

At that, Yamato nodded, and reached out to tug Akuto down onto his lap. "To be fair, I doubt you would have remembered even if I had told you." He grinned, fangs flashing. "You were absolutely smashed, darling. So much that your body wouldn't even cooperate when I tried to make a clean kill. It was such a messy affair, that's why I wiped your memory."

Akuto groaned, resting his still aching head on Yamato's shoulder. "Is that why everything hurts more than usual? You've been rearranging things in my brain..." it should have felt invasive, but mostly he was just glad now that he would never remember whatever had gone on last night.

"Mm, and it wasn't easy." Yamato pressed a kiss to Akuto's hair. "The smarter you are, the harder it is to alter the memory."

Akuto huffed. "Flattery will get you nowhere. I'm still processing the fact that I killed someone last night. But even more disturbing is the fact that I'm not nearly as distraught as I should be, or concerned for the life I took away..." He closed his eyes, fatigue quickly replacing the myriad of emotions he had just felt in succession, with alarming speed.

Smiling fondly, Yamato adjusted Akuto's arms so that they draped over his shoulders before standing with ease, his human firmly in his hold.

“Let’s get you to bed, Mitsuya. You’ll feel better after some proper rest.”

“You...have got a mess to clean up...” Akuto muttered into the demon’s chest. “And we aren’t done talking about this.”

Rolling his eyes, Yamato flicked his wrist dismissively, and the blood vanished from the floor, the couch, and most importantly, Akuto. “Yes, yes... you can scold me all you like when you wake up.”

And he was sure he’d hear quite the earful, when his lover had time to recover and properly collect his thoughts. But for now, Yamato simply laid the tired, already dozing man in bed, and pulled the blankets up over his shoulders.

A demon lord, tucking a human into bed. Yamato smirked to himself. His existence certainly had taken a turn for the strange, hadn’t it?



HAZE

A story by Waterlinkedgirl @waterlinkedgirl on twitter and on ao3



Haze

By Waterlinkedgirl

A deep adrenaline droned through Yukimura's veins.

The battlefield was hot, signed by the mirage of the searing sun. His senses sharpened to it, to the heat burning on his skin as if it were glowing coals. The faint screams of those who opened fire and those who fell victim alike, of his lungs fighting to take in enough of the summer air to keep up.

The quiet rush of the trigger under his finger, with which he had opened fire dozens of time, and would a dozen more.

But... Things were looking dire.

Marui had already fallen, unable to defend from three guns from two sides, and he himself had only narrowly avoided an ambush set up by Oshitari, projectile razing past his ear.

No matter how he looked at it, he was outgunned.

Stealth. Stealth was vital.

As swiftly, quietly as he could he let his bare feet carry him, away from the center stage with the cannons in the midst of the onslaught. Cover to cover, sneaking under all lines of sight.

It was no behaviour for someone of the champion Rikkai, but if he wanted to secure dominance again, he couldn't veer recklessly into battle. Tact, too, was an important virtue in his name, he knew that better than anyone else.

And he'd make use of it as much as necessary.

Keeping his eyes and ears on the motions of the others, he sought for a less fleeting shelter while they were distracted with hunting each other down. A wall, a space, a haven out of sight...

His eye fell on a narrow ridge between the castle and the pool, a corner for cover against the spray of fire. That's it.

It was a bit of a long run, longer than he'd have preferred to stay uncovered, perhaps longer than he could afford to stay uncovered--

As expected of someone like himself, he'd managed to stay dry, avoiding supersoakers and water cannons alike. The only water on him was the sweat on his forehead and on his back. He intended for it to remain that way.

So he ran, watergun in hand, hardly hanging on to his grace as strongest player in the middle school circuit just to make for that one sliver of safety. Metres and metres, step after step, over the field. He ran, knowing that that very drumming of feet might betray him, nonetheless.

And finally he passed the corner.

Back against the plastic of the wall, August sun burning in his face, Yukimura tried to calm his breath. Much to his fortune, the wall opposite the pool was deeper than the corner itself, leaving aside from the geometrical cover also a small buffer, a small pillar to hide behind. He'd have time to regroup here for a bit, hopefully.

The pillar on his left hand stole his sight as much as it did his opponents', however, he had his ears to his advantage. Sharpening them to pick up his surroundings instead, he closed his eyes.

A brief moment of respite, to rest his burning muscles, to clear his mind to find the next step.

His hearing flashed to the splashing of water nearby.

It couldn't be-- here?!

Instinctively, his index finger went to the trigger of his water gun.

Surely they couldn't be ambushing them from the water, they couldn't be that bold, right? And besides, Marui and the rest were supposed to be over at the plaza--

He pointed it at the place he last heard the splashing from. Who was it?!

The surface broke. Holding on to his prized composure, instead of making the rash decision of firing before he knew who was popping up from underwater, he held his trigger until he could make eye contact.

A rain of droplets descended on familiar dark blond hair. His gun lowered.

"You know that shirt is totally gonna go see-through, right? Seiichi." Shiraishi leaned on the edge of the pool, arms folded over one another.

In an instant, the tension that had resided in his shoulders disappeared. He closed his eyes, let out a breath. When he opened them again, he put his finger to his lips.

"Ssh. You'll betray where I'm hiding," he whispered.

Shiraishi wasn't in the game, he was one of those that had chosen to cool themselves in the pool rather than with honey lemons in the boulevard. Or, rather than those like himself. By all means, he shouldn't have to pose any danger.

"You're hiding?"

The corners of Shiraishi's mouth softly curled up as he leaned his head on his hands.

He shouldn't have to, but the look in Shiraishi's eyes...

"Regrouping," he corrected.

Shiraishi chuckled. "Other than that, are you doing well?"

"As you can see," Yukimura pulled his sweater closer over his shoulders, "I am. I've emptied this boy three times already."

He held up his gun.

"Not on yourself, I presume."

One of Shiraishi's arms stretched loosely over the ground, not quite far enough to reach him. He looked at him, at the sweater hanging lightly over his shoulders.

Yukimura laughed. "Why would I?"

Shiraishi hummed, let his body go from the edge. "So that's the game you're playing," he whispered.

"Of course."

Upon that remark, Yukimura's attention swiftly shifted back to the game, head turned, ears focussed on localising the others. Ootori was far, Marui and Ohmagari perhaps a bit closer, but--

He heard the sound of water splashing at his feet. When he looked, Shiraishi's hands raked up the water of the pool, an arm's length away from the edge. Playfully still, but enough to drizzle his ankles.

"Kura, don't, you'll make me wet--"

Shiraishi laughed, arms tentatively halting in midair.

"I thought I'd join for a bit. If you're relying on others to shoot at you, why shouldn't I help?"

Now that Shiraishi'd taken a bit of distance, Yukimura could see clearly, very clearly into his open vest. He had to look away from the show of cleavage, lest it'd distract him...

But the glimmer in Shiraishi's eyes told him that he'd noticed.

"You're misinterpreting something here. I'm in this game to win, Kuranosuke. Which means, I have no plans of getting wet."

Shiraishi frowned at him. "But you know not getting wet is defeating the purpose of the game."

"I don't care if it should be my purpose to lose. If I have to take the hard road to win, then let it be so."

And win, he would. It's why he had absolute confidence in his white shirt.

Shiraishi fell silent, thumb on his lips. His gaze was intense, fixed on the lines of Yukimura's torso, simmering still but almost with a hint of sadness, worry. Yukimura wondered if he was imagining Yukimura losing... It'd have to be, with that fire in his eyes. Though there was nothing for him to be worried about, he should know that.

Yukimura smiled. "Have some confidence in me, Kuranosuke."

"I do." Shiraishi said that, but it didn't clear the sentiment from his eyes.

He saw Shiraishi's gaze fall on his hair, which Yukimura knew was vaguely sticking to his face.

Once again Shiraishi leaned on the edge of the pool, shoulders pulling the jacket tight enough to his skin Yukimura could imagine looking through it.

"Hey, Seiichi," he whispered, purred, "It's much cooler in the water. Won't you join me?"

There it was. The question he'd been waiting for.

Yukimura smiled, walked over to him.

"Perhaps you should listen better?"

He knelt down, one arm resting on his knee, the other resting the barrel of his gun under Shiraishi's chin. His voice, lowered to a sultry whisper.

"Only *after* I win."

As much a promise as a warning.

Yukimura lifted Shiraishi's chin with his water gun, barrel slowly sliding over the soft of Shiraishi's skin as he tilted his chin with it. And with every notch he raised it, he saw the volume of Shiraishi's breaths rise, up until their lines of sight met and he was tenderly fingering the trigger.

Lips slightly parted. Something he could best describe as sighs, languid breaths, rose cheeks. A smirk, slowly curling into the corners of Shiraishi's mouth.

Shiraishi gently traced the barrel with his fingers, his hand slowly travelling up its length, down, up.

"And what do I have to fear from that?" he whispered breathily. "I'm already drenched, you know?"

Yukimura chuckled.

"You should know the answer."

Shiraishi's fingers turned to its bottom, softly pushing it further up against his chin.

"Don't I?"

Gently, the backs of his fingers grazed over the barrel, up to caress Yukimura's hand, to cradle it. His thumb on Yukimura's index finger, challenging him to shoot.

"I wonder..."

He felt his heart beating in his chest.

With the cool of the water lingering on Shiraishi's fingertips, the electricity of his hand around his, Yukimura couldn't deny it was tempting. But...

Paradoxically, it was the sun searing on his skin from above that reminded him he had a game to win, before he could give answer to Shiraishi's sweet invitation. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his free hand, quietly slipping his hand out of the hot and cold hold.

It was too early to give in to his desires.

"Unfortunately it's not now for you to find that out," he whispered. Yukimura swallowed, looking up at the azure sky above. His ears picked up the noises of the waterfight, the engages, not too far from the center stage. He closed his eyes. There were plans forming in his head, but only shreds of them remained as the warmth of the sun took away his breath.

Only now he became aware that his breaths were deeper than usual. He let the summer air fill his lungs, then let it out in a deep sigh to calm his breath, and once more he ran the ball of his hand over his forehead.

"I can't yield just yet."

Along with his head, he lowered his hand, briefly holding the glimmering lines of his palm in his vision. A slight frown made it in the lines of his face. His hand closed.

He wondered how much time it'd take before he could win.

Letting out a sigh, he put his hands on his knees, lifting himself off the floor on the way to his warpath.

A wet warmth tightening around his wrist halted him in his rise.

Shiraishi's hand pulled him as he swam away from the edge of the pool. Towards him, closer to him. Guided by the tug of the bandaged hand on his right arm, the pull of Shiraishi's eyes, Yukimura was hovering above the surface of the water.

Brown eyes caught his. Warm eyes, not scorching like the sun above but more like the honey glazing the lemons of the boulevard. Surely, they covered the same taste as well...

His arms opened through the water. Drops of water glittered in Shiraishi's hair, lips curled into a reaffirming smile, a smile tinged with mischief.

He's going to fall.

The surface of the water broke in a curtain of bubbles around him, around them as they sank in the cool water of the pool. Shiraishi's hand no longer held on to his wrist, instead he saw its shadow move past the corner of his eye, his purple-blue hair grazing Shiraishi's bandage.

And as he sank, Shiraishi caught him in his chest, arm on the small of his back.

It took but a tap of a foot on the floor to lift the two of them into the air again.

A quick gasp, to make up for lost air, and his feet as well touched the tiles of the pool.

Dismayed he shook out his hair, before brushing it from his face.

His own arms were free to do that, but Shiraishi's were occupied; his right around his middle, his left thumb reaching for his cheek. Arms, very conveniently in the water.

"What," Yukimura whispered, smile on his face, "do you think you're doing?"

Where he had been on a warpath before, right now, he quite felt like performing a massacre on the one before him. An idle thought, he knew, as he wouldn't be able to bring himself to hurt him, but Shiraishi would pay. One way or another.

However....

Even in the face of his bloodlust, as if he hadn't noticed-- no, because he had noticed, Shiraishi's lips and voice were tinged by a mirthful smirk.

"See? I told you it was gonna go see-through."

And Shiraishi's hand lowered to the collar of Yukimura's shirt.

In an instant, Yukimura became aware of Shiraishi's bare chest, against the shirt now clinging to his midriff. It was warm, and familiar, but it didn't take much for Yukimura to deduce just how much Shiraishi could see of his skin from its touch.

Almost subconsciously, Yukimura's hand went over the wet skin of Shiraishi's chest, fingertips on the edge of nails. He felt compelled to do a lot of things, however his composure kept him in check.

He lost. Shiraishi made him lose.

Anger and frustration boiled through his body. He held on to those feelings as he quietly pressed his fingertips against Shiraishi's heinously soft skin, he tried to, but for some reason it felt like a weight had fallen off his shoulders... Though that was likely his sweater, now floating around somewhere in the water.

He raised his free hand up to Shiraishi's cheek, a preface to his fury. Shiraishi, however, closed his eyes, eagerly leaning into Yukimura's touch.

"What do you think you're doing?" he repeated, not managing to convey as much of his earlier anger.

Shiraishi chuckled, slowly opening his eyes again as he overlaid Yukimura's hand with his own.

"It's not good staying in the heat for so long... I'm just thinking of your health."

Quietly his hand slipped away from under Shiraishi's, as much to his own regret as of his, fingertips travelling leisurely down over his jaw. Yukimura put his finger on Shiraishi's lips.

"Just that?"

Shiraishi smiled. "It's the truth." It was a whisper, breathed against Yukimura's index resting against his lips. "But if I said I didn't have ulterior motives, I'd be lying."

Hot and soft, Shiraishi's lips brushed over the tip, tingling his skin. Wet, and gentle, as light as a kiss.

Nonetheless, Yukimura felt the urge to resist, to address, and dipped it down over his bottom lip.

"I really don't appreciate you doing things like this without asking," he whispered.

"Both of us know you'd have said no."

Shiraishi's voice rang clear, a sturdy cool piercing the heat of earlier, before softening again. "Seeing you force yourself like that... I don't want to watch you get hurt."

Shiraishi's hand reached towards Yukimura's own cheek. "Much less over a game you don't even seem to have fun playing."

Yukimura blinked.

"Don't even'--"

"Am I wrong?" he asked, softly.

Yukimura was left without a retort.

"...I was going to win," he said, though it was less of an argument and more of an affirmation of Shiraishi's truth. He was going to win, with the same sovereignty he held in tennis, until he could taste the sweet of victory. But...

Shiraishi gently scooped water up to drizzle into Yukimura's hair, his neck. It was cool, and while it rubbed his loss in, it felt incredibly nice. Shiraishi hummed in affirmation.

"You were sweating too much. If you'd gone out for another round as you were, the heat and the effort would have put you in danger."

Yukimura had been endeavouring to win, but at the same time, the victory conditions weren't exactly defined, other than to avoid losing. And losing...

At this rate, even if he won, it would have been Pyrrhic at best. He knew that much.

Shiraishi raised his hand again from the water, his thumb moving to caress Yukimura's cheek, fingers resting under his jawline.

"Besides," Shiraishi's voice rolled lowly, a flirty smirk on his lips. "I'd rather see you do something I know you'd enjoy a bit more."

He felt warm fingertips travel down over his neck to his collarbone, where they traced its lines over and beside his shirt. Before he could speak up again, he had to swallow a sigh.

"And what exactly makes you think I had that particular desire when you pulled me in?"

Shiraishi smiled. His fingers trailed to his shoulder, over his arm, until they curled around the hand still lingering over his jaw. Guiding his fingers between his own, he moved them, turned them, until they rested under his chin.

"Just a hunch."

The underside of Shiraishi's chin was soft as he trailed his fingers over it, cradled it in his hand. Shiraishi had put Yukimura's hand on the trigger, tempting him once more to pull it.

Leisurely abusing his opened jacket, Yukimura let his free hand go over the lines, and bumps, of Shiraishi's chest. He was here now, he thought, as his fingertips shifted over the breathing of Shiraishi's midriff. He was here, Shiraishi's arm still around his waist, a warmth melding the heat of their bodies together.

It was now up to Yukimura to call the shots. His thumb ran over his chin, over Shiraishi's lips, in soft and slow arcs meant at the very least to tease.

"You aren't in the wrong," Yukimura posed, "but that doesn't mean it was right."

A quiet smile spread across Shiraishi's face, as he slightly tilted his head under Yukimura's caress.

"Then make me pay for it."

One eyebrow raised.

"You know if I really wanted to do that, that'd involve leaving you here?"

Shiraishi laid his hand on the side of Yukimura's head, fingers through his locks, to stroke his dripping hair. His nose briefly nuzzled Yukimura's, before he moved back enough for him to see his eyes glimmer in mischief.

"But would you have fun that way?"

Yukimura smiled. His thumb stalled its motion and instead went to rest on Shiraishi's chin.

"No..." he breathed, closing his eyes, "I suppose I wouldn't."

Yukimura pulled Shiraishi's face closer, and leaned in.

"Um..." They startled, pulled away before their lips properly touched. "I heard a big splash, are you alright?"

Ootori stood at the edge of the pool, slightly away from the ridge near the castle. Figures behind him, running and laughing. That's right, he'd been playing a game...

"I'm alright," Yukimura half-whispered.

"That's good to hear." Ootori smiled at him. Yukimura knew he'd noticed him standing far too close in Shiraishi's space, but he made no remark about it. "When you didn't come back I thought you might've hurt yourself falling..."

"I landed soft," he remarked, his voice coloured slightly in amusement for its meaning. He shot a glance at Shiraishi, whose arms he was still merrily partaking in.

Ootori laughed nervously, before tentatively speaking up again.

"Are you still in?"

Yukimura blinked. He was asking him if he wanted to join again? Even though he'd...

Softly, Shiraishi's hand caressed his hair, even now. Yukimura knew he'd let him go if he wanted to, but for now he felt his gentle touch wherever his skin heated his own, warm up to his eyes.

He saw his water gun, lying idly on the ledge he'd been standing on. Beyond his arm's reach.

"No. I've won."

"H-Huh--"

"It's fine, Ootori-kun." Completely soaked, he wrapped his arms around Shiraishi, resting his right on his shoulders.

"I've won." He smiled.

"But..."

Whatever point Ootori wanted to make, it was swallowed when Yukimura trailed over Shiraishi's neck with his fingers from where his arm had curled around it, slowly, sensually.

"Alright. If there's anything that comes up..."

Yukimura smiled. Ootori really was too sweet for his own good.

"I'll call you if I need you."

Ootori smiled and nodded. "Anytime is fine. Then, I'll be taking my leave."

"Watch your back," Yukimura told him.

Very quickly, Ootori looked over his shoulder, Oshitari not too far off from where he was standing. He might have closed his heart, but that didn't make him invisible.

"Thanks!"

And the moment Ootori turned around, when Shiraishi was still distracted, he leaned forward and opened Shiraishi's lips with his own. Shiraishi was barely able to mute his yelp, knowing Ootori was still within earshot, but a breathless hum escaped nonetheless as Yukimura deepened it. It took Shiraishi not a second more to melt into it, though. Lips softly sliding along Yukimura's, catching him in a push and pull stronger than the waves on the water, it was Yukimura's turn to try to keep his breath in check.

And when Yukimura leaned back, lips briefly disconnecting, Shiraishi leaned forward to return the favour again. Just as he hoped. His left foot as pivot, a pull of the arm around his shoulders, Yukimura took advantage of that momentum to turn the two around.

With increased vigour, Yukimura chased Shiraishi with his lips, deeper into his arms, closer. A step forward as Shiraishi took one backward, a push when Shiraishi pulled, until Yukimura's arm unfolded from his back and they finally came to rest at the nearest wall.

Hand on the cold tiles, right at Shiraishi's middle, and the second he felt Shiraishi's back hit the wall their tongues tangled with each other. It was a deep kiss, searing hot and only broken by pants, breaths.

His role in the waterfight above the surface was over, but now... Yukimura pressed his hips tighter to Shiraishi's, cornering him to the wall when Shiraishi's leg slipped between his own. Smirked, when Shiraishi pulled him closer with the hand still in his hair. He let his hand go over his abs, stroking them with the tips of his fingers before quietly slipping beneath the surface. Shiraishi broke to gasp.

Now it's time for a different kind of 'waterfight,' he supposed.



OCEAN EYES

A story by Anne Marie Frye @annemfrye on twitter and on ao3



Ocean Eyes

By Anne Marie Frye

"What do you think of us going out together on vacation?"

Atobe stopped his hand midway in bringing the sports drink bottle to his mouth, his eyes giving a questioning gaze to the group of Seishun Gakuen Tennis club members huddled on the courts beside them.

"That sounds great!" Momoshiro exclaimed, eyes gleaming with excitement.

The response was followed by another in agreement. After sharing more details about their vacation, the team bid goodbyes as they went to their respective rooms to rest.

"Y'know, the beach sounds great." Atobe stopped his urge to smack Hyotei's tensai for whispering so closely. "It's been a while since we've gone to a beach, Atobe."

"Oshitari, I told you not to do that." Atobe said in a gritted tone, annoyed at Oshitari's tricks. "And yes, it has been a while indeed. Think we could make our team agree."

Oshitari chuckled, hoisting his racket between his arm and stomach. "Well then, captain, how about we hold a meeting too?"

— — —

"*Buchou!!!*" Sanada nearly spit out his tea at the loud disturbance that is Akaya. The second year dashed madly towards their table, a wide grin displayed on his lips.

"Akaya! *Tarundoru!* Do not run and shout in the dining room!" Sanada had the urge to punish Akaya but refrained.

"Oya? Akaya, why the rush?" Yanagi inquired.

Akaya, despite Sanada's presence, slammed both of his hands on the table causing it to jiggle. Yukimura and Yanagi were unfazed. "Seigaku and Hyotei decided to go on vacation!"

"Oh? A vacation huh?" Yukimura's gentle tone had a hint of amusement and curiosity as Akaya blabbered on about the newfound information.

"I wanna go!" Akaya finished his 'report', eyes sort of pleading at his captain.

"Oh well, have you been a good boy?" Yukimura teased in a motherly tone, in turn making Akaya pout. "Of course I am, buchou!"

Renji gave the scene an amused smile. Sanada continued to sip his oolong tea in silence.

"Sanada?" Just when he thought he could rest in peace. He knew that tone. That certain teasing tone.

"Seiichi?" He mentally scolded himself for showing an ounce of fear as he faced his captain.

"Do you mind if you escort Akaya? I would love to go but I'm advised to take a rest tomorrow." People would normally see Yukimura's pleading as innocent, but with Rikkai tennis club members, they knew better than to disobey.

"Of course, I'll look out for him." Sanada sighed in defeat and sipped his tea to calm his nerves. Akaya could be heard rejoicing.

— — —

"Oh?" Atobe and his team were on their way to the beach, but seeing four people clad in yellow jackets and track pants stopped him in his tracks.

"Oya? Isn't that..." Oshitari murmured.

"Sanada-san." Choutaro interrupted.

"What are they doing here?"

"They probably heard Seigaku's plan too."

"That aside, we should catch up to them." Atobe normally wouldn't dash, but he surprisingly did.

"Oi, Sanada!" Atobe caught up to them. The Rikkai players were shocked at his appearance.

"Going to the beach?" Atobe slowly came into a halt, speaking casually.

"Hm. Apparently, we're invited but unfortunately not all of us were available. I'm here to accompany Akaya and others." Sanada tugged his cap, avoiding Atobe's gaze.

"Hm~ So that makes you a babysitter huh?"

"Right!? Sanada-san kept on denying but he's really sui---mmpphh!?" Sanada cupped his underclassman's mouth to stop him from talking further. Marui and Jackal tried their best to not give in and laugh at Akaya's predicament.

"Apologies for the hyper attitude of Akaya."

"Oh, it's no bother Sanada." Atobe chuckled.

Sanada's heart fluttered at the rich voice Atobe emitted. He had to admit, Atobe was beautiful. Everything about him was perfect. Atobe, sensing the stare Sanada was giving, did the same thing and they stared at each other for a while. Unfortunately, the moment was ruined when...

"Oh! A cat!" Jirou cried. The group followed his gaze and saw the cat dashing away.

"Looks like a high class cat to me." Atobe shrugged. *Just when things were getting romantic...*

"The cat ran in the direction of the beach." Oshitari commented.

"I hope we see it again!" Jirou ran, leaving his group behind.

The mixed group continued to walk, occasionally throwing comments on things they saw while on their way, or sharing the latest gossip in the tennis circle. It was not long before they reached the beach, the pristine sand and aquamarine water stunning them. The beach was lively with various tennis players with Jirou chasing and preparing.

"Atobe." Tezuka approached the group, giving them a nod of acknowledgement.

"Tezuka. Seems that your team is enjoying the beach."

"Ah. You came too, Sanada."

"Hn. Unfortunately, only the four of us were able to go. Yukimura and the others are training."

"Understandable. This way, we'll set up the necessary things."

With everyone's help, everything was done neatly in record time. That only left the main part.

"We also invited Shitenhoji!" Kikumaru beamed.

"I can see that." Tezuka said and stared awkwardly at the comedy duo flirting.

"Just me, Koharu, and the sea..."

"So romantic, Yuu-kun~"

"Did you forget that we're right here?" Zaizen sighed.

"The only thing my eyes can see is Koharu~" Yuuji proclaimed. But his statement backfired when sand got in his eyes. "Ouch!"

— — —

Sanada felt out of place. *Just what urged Yukimura to make me go to the beach? Sure, I love beaches. But...*

He gave up thinking of possible reasons. He decided to just find Tezuka. Luckily, Oishi and Kikumaru were near. He approached them, hoping that a decent answer would come up by asking them.

"Oishi. Where's Tezuka?" he asked.

"Ah, he's fishing on the docks if I'm correct."

"Yeah, saw him with Fuji going there." Kikumaru piped in.

After thanking them, he went to the docks where Tezuka could be fishing. He reached the said dock but was surprised to see not only Tezuka and Fuji, but Atobe too.

"Kabaji, put the bait on the hook." Atobe ordered while setting up.

"Usu."

"How is everything?" Tezuka peered at Atobe's side.

"Couldn't be better." He replied. "Fly fishing is one of my specialities, but today I'll do it the classic way just for you, Tezuka."

'Just for you, Tezuka'?

Sanada clenched his fist. An unknown yet familiar feeling raged inside him. Hearing Atobe say those words set him on fire. Sanada couldn't quite put words to what he's feeling, so he ended up staying quiet as the two captains competed to get the most fish.

— — —

Sanada left them after their competition. He tried to quell his mind. Overthinking wouldn't be good.

"Are you upset about something, Sanada?"

Sanada nearly had a heart attack, he was a tad bit thankful that it was Tezuka instead of anyone else. "What are you talking about, Tezuka?"

Sanada noticed the light twitch of Tezuka's lips.

"I noticed you when we were fishing. You're unusually quiet."

"I find silence comforting." He defended his unusual earlier behaviour.

"Except that you aren't comfortable. I'm your friend, Sanada." He adjusted his glasses, gazing back at the horizon.

Sanada contemplated before speaking. "Say, what if... the one that you love, loves someone else?"

The silence lasted for a minute. "Tezuka?" Sanada got curious and glanced at his rival only to see that Tezuka was staring at him wide-eyed. "Tezuka!?"

"S-sorry Sanada. I let my guard down." Tezuka rubbed his forehead. An expression of disbelief displayed.

"Am I that weird today?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Then, who is this person that you love?"

Sanada avoided Tezuka's gaze. Afraid that he'll be able to guess just by looking at his eyes. "Not going to tell."

"It's fine. I actually had the same experience until finding out that my feelings are reciprocated." Tezuka did a few couple of paces, a small smile gracing his lips. "I can't advise anything useful because it might have different outcomes but, it's still better to confess and be rejected than stay quiet until it eats you up."

"You mean..." Sanada doesn't want to believe what he's thinking.

"Is it... Atobe?"

"Ah? Wha---"

"There you are, Tezuka." Fuji interrupted.

"Sanada, it's..."

"Sorry Sanada, Oishi's looking for him. Let's go." Fuji grabbed his captain's hand and tugged him towards where Oishi was.

Sanada held a look of hurt and sorrow. *As expected of Atobe. He wouldn't notice someone like me at all.* He said to himself as he watched the two getting far.

— — —

"Fuji, where's Oishi?"

Fuji didn't talk, but smiled mischievously at Tezuka's confusion. "I'm kidding."

"Fuji!" Tezuka sternly replied.

"Ma, ma, Tezuka. As much as I want you to help Sanada. I think this will be the best option."

"By tricking him that it was Atobe that I love? Won't that not only hurt him but also you?" Tezuka grabbed both of his shoulders firmly but not to the point that it would hurt him.

"Tezuka, I won't. And I know you." Fuji smiled, this time with no teasing.

Tezuka resigned to his fate. "I just hope he'll be okay."

— — —

"Bandana-kyun~! Let's view the sunset together~" Koharu held a look of passion while chasing Kaido who was screaming in pure horror.

"You two should definitely watch the sunset together!" Momoshiro teased Kaidoh.

It was already sunset, yet all of them were still full of energy. Except for Sanada.

"Sunset viewing..." If only Atobe was beside him.

"Oh, Sanada."

Sanada twitched. *No, this can't be happening.*

"Earth to Sanada?"

"I heard you." Sanada steeled himself and slowly faced the person he wanted to avoid.

"Fancy seeing you here." Atobe was drenched. Head to toe. His hair was still the same, minus the fact that it became shinier, adding more charm to his overall appearance. Sanada couldn't help but find it enchanting.

"Likewise." he gave a short reply, avoiding Atobe's ability of teasing.

"Oh? That's rare of you, Sanada." Too bad, Atobe won't give him peace.

"Are you here to ruin my life?" He knew he shouldn't have said that, but he wished Atobe didn't approach him. He'd only hope for nothing. His feelings wouldn't be reciprocated. He didn't want to get his hopes up just because Atobe liked teasing him.

"Sanada..." Atobe, surprisingly, stopped and stared at the man who held a sorrowful look.

"Atobe, please look after Akaya and the others for me. I'll be going back." Sanada gripped his bag and was about to go back when a hand grasped his. The warmth of Atobe's hand soothed his stressed self.

"Sanada. What's wrong?" Atobe was confused and concerned. Sanada wished it wasn't for him.

"I'm sick."

"Let me check." Before Sanada could protest, Atobe reached for his forehead. "You don't have a fever. Are you really serious?"

"No."

"Sanada?"

"Leave me alone." Sanada removed his hand from Atobe's grasp and walked briskly. Atobe was stunned for too long.

"Sanada!" Atobe was having none of it, he ran towards the retreating figure, determination fueling him.

"Sanadaaaa!"

Atobe tackled Sanada. They ended up sprawled in the sand. Sanada too shocked to move, shouted "What are you doing Atobe!?"

"Stop doing that!"

"What!?"

"You! Avoiding me!" Atobe sat atop Sanada's abdomen, tears slowly streaming down his cheeks. Sanada mentally scolded himself. Crying didn't suit Atobe.

"Atobe..."

"Can't we at least talk? I wanted to help you for a while now Sanada. I may not know what it is exactly, but you have a problem. I just know." Atobe fought the urge to choke up while delivering his thoughts.

They stayed like that for a few minutes and then Sanada urged Atobe to stand, to which Atobe complied and stood up. Sanada brushed the sand off his jersey and held Atobe's hand.

"Let's talk in a secluded place."

It was almost night when they found a place to talk. They sat atop the rocks and viewed the setting sun.

"Aren't you going to call your members at least? This might take long." Sanada was worried. *Besides, I think it's better this way that you don't know what I feel.*

"Nah, I already told them to go first. They're probably on their way now to the camp." Atobe shrugged. "Now, would you mind telling me what's been on your mind?"

Sanada shouldn't have been surprised. Atobe's insight was not a joke. "I love someone." There was no reply. "Are you surprised too?" Sanada didn't glance at Atobe, but guessed.

"No, that's normal of course." Atobe raised a brow.

"Well, to be honest, I don't want to tell him how I feel. This might be cowardly of me, but I'm afraid of rejection."

"Well, everyone is. Me too." Atobe stood up, looking more directly at Sanada.

"Then, who is this person that you like?"

"You don't want to know."

Atobe stopped his urge to let out an irritated sigh. "Stop being so stubborn here Sanada. We all know you love someone and that it's Yukimura."

"What?"

"Don't 'What' me Sanada Genichirou. He's your childhood friend. He's beautiful. He's a tennis prodigy. Of course you love him."

"Atobe!" Atobe stopped his ramblings, his heart racing too much because of what he was feeling.

"It's not Yukimura. I know you're all annoyed that I always follow Yukimura. But I'm not attracted to him like that." Sanada decided to stand and face Atobe. "He's my friend. That's all."

"Then..?"

Sanada gathered his thoughts and boldly inched towards Atobe. Fully prepared to get slapped or rejected. "It's you."

"I know you'll only look at Tezuka, hell, you even reciprocate his feelings. I'm giving up, yes. But my feelings will always be the same, Atobe. I love you. And that won't change." Sanada said it.

Atobe was stunned. Sanada took it as a sign to go back. "Let's go back to camp. They're probably--"

"No."

"Atobe?"

Atobe was angry. And hurt. "You're giving up on me?"

"Yes. You are already with--"

"Have you asked me or Tezuka?"

"What? Tezuka confirmed it."

"What? Tezuka wouldn't admit things like that!"

Both of them were now confused. "Ah, that reminds me. He was about to say something when I assumed that you are, ah, his lover but got interrupted by Fuji."

Everything clicked now to Atobe. "It was Fuji's plan."

Sanada, confused as ever, inquired, "Pardon?"

Atobe laughed. Not the villainous way, not his usual laugh when facing opponents. It was one of those laughs that held genuine happiness. And Sanada couldn't help but fall more for Atobe.

"Sanada. No, Genichirou." Atobe's confidence came back, slowly approaching Sanada until their bodies were touching. Sanada's more well-built body was attractive. "May I speak?"

Sanada was very nervous. He could only reply with small 'yes'.

"I love you too." Atobe wasted no time wrapping his arms around Sanada's neck and giving him a kiss. The latter was too shocked to kiss back as he slowly move his lips to urge him. Atobe licked his lower lip, making Sanada dip him for a bit and deeply kiss him back. They stayed lip-locked for a while, tongues caressing each other. The two wanted for the kiss to last longer but due to the lack of air, they slowly let go.

"Well, don't be afraid now, Genichirou. It looks like the one that you love loves you back." Atobe said breathlessly and gave a smirk. He quickly changed it to a small smile. "I was sad about you giving up on me, you know?" Sanada recovered from the shock. Tears slowly shed from his eyes. "Atobe."

"Keigo, please?"

Sanada engulfed Atobe in a warm embrace "Keigo. Thank you."
Sanada must have been imagining but Atobe's eyes looked more like
an ocean when sparkling.

— — —

"Want to stay at the beach house?"

They were walking side by side, the full moon casting them the soft
glow. The only thing that could be heard were the waves and air of the
sea.

"Keigo, first of all we don't--"

"Oh yes we do have money, I also contacted our team mates. They're
safe and sound, don't worry Genichirou." Atobe poked his chest.

"You're ridiculous, Keigo."

"I was expecting praise but that's passable." Atobe stole a kiss and ran
towards the beach house, Sanada following him.



THE WAY TO HIS HEART

A story by Miyun



The Way to his Heart

By Miyun

1.

"Ah, Tachibana, aren't you going to rest up for tomorrow?" Kamio asks, once he finished his dinner at the speed of light.

"Wow, with the way you eat, I'm surprised once again by how you didn't choke and die. But there's nothing to be surprised about anyway, I see you eat this fast all the time back in school. How do you eat so fast? Do you actually absorb the food? Are you actually a plant and didn't tell any of us? Can plants play tennis? Huh, I guess it would make sense that you're a plant –"

"Shut up! I'm a human, man, all flesh and blood! Anyway, Tachibana?" Kamio interjects.

"Don't mind me, Chitose told me to wait up for him, we wanted to discuss his latest research."

Looking around, Kamio did not see the tall geta-wearing boy anywhere around the cafeteria. And by the looks of it, neither did Tachibana.

"Well~ We're heading off to bed then. Hope you get some well-deserved rest after your talk with Chitose!" Kamio says as he pulls Ibu away from the table before bidding Tachibana a good night.

Kippeï waves at the boys until they leave his line of sight, before resting his arm on the table and letting out a big sigh. He peers at the clock in the corner of the cafeteria. It has been about two hours since their promised meeting time and he was starting to feel hungry as well.

He stares resolutely at the cafeteria's entrance, imagining Chitose entering with a relaxed gait, apologies falling out of his mouth, but all he sees are the other players leaving for their evening activities. Hours of waiting patiently rendered him impatient and he strengthens his resolve to locate that promise breaker. He marches down the hallway resolutely and finally storms into the room he knows Chitose is in.

"Oi! It's already been two hours; how long do you plan on making me wait?"

"Wah? Has it really been that long? Ah, but I'm still in the midst of my research, I'm close to making a breakthrough! Did you know—" However, Chitose was interrupted by his stomach growling.

Tachibana laughed, "Come on, you big goof! Your research can wait till after you've had dinner." And he drags Chitose to the cafeteria, only to find the food packed up for the night.

They stand at the entrance, silent, before breaking into laughter.

"You should've just let me continue with my research," Chitose says.

Tachibana punches his shoulder mockingly, "And let that brilliant brain of yours shrivel up due to malnutrition? Never."

"OK, you win! Whatcha gonna whip up for me, Mr. Chef Kippe of 10 million recipes?" Chitose asks as he sees Tachibana rummage through the kitchen refrigerator.

"How does fried rice sound?" Tachibana asks as he reaches for the ingredients for that exact dish while looking over expectantly at Chitose. Without hesitation, Chitose nods and they begin cooking.

Working in sync, they had dinner prepared smoothly and quickly. In the blink of an eye, the fruits of their labour came to fruition and it was time to eat.

"As expected of Kippeï, even though it only took 15 minutes, it still tastes so good!"

Tachibana shakes his head indulgently, saying nothing, and spoons some rice onto his own plate. He tucks into it, and the room begins to be filled with Chitose rambling about what new discoveries his research has come up with.

2.

Tachibana noticed that his juniors were not at their peak conditions nor were they talking to one another during their practice one afternoon. Troubled by both these observations of their behaviour, he began to wrack his brain, trying to come up with ideas of how to get them to make up.

He thought to himself, "If only I could trick them into going somewhere and make them talk out their issues," before realising it might be his only shot at getting them to talk and decided to do just that.

"Chitose did say that Tooyama was pestering everyone in Shitenhouji about wanting to eat takoyaki and there *is* a takoyaki pan in the cafeteria..."

And thus, he decided that he would make mountains of takoyaki for his juniors to help them get along again.

To put his plan into action, he went to the cafeteria kitchen to prepare the batter and fillings for his takoyaki. After wrapping everything up and putting them away, he left for afternoon practice.

"Hey Shinji, I'm getting pretty hungry, you wanna hit the cafeteria for dinner?" Tachibana led Ibu straight into his trap. Kamio was sitting at their usual table, tapping his fingers to the beat of his rhythm.

"Tachibana, what...?"

"Both of you are going to sit here and talk about what happened. You were not performing your best at practice today and it showed," Tachibana noticed that his juniors faces fell.

"Learning how to speak up is essential to improving your teamwork. I don't want you guys to have another fight and leave it till it affects you and the rest of the team. You still want to go to Nationals next year right?"

Ibu and Kamio nodded their heads vigorously and looked at each other hesitantly.

Tachibana took that as his cue to leave for the kitchen, giving his two juniors a chance to hash things out between them.

He greased the takoyaki pan and got to work. Soon, he had two heaping plates of takoyaki waiting to be served. After placing the finishing touches on the takoyaki, he made his way out of the kitchen and to the table his teammates were sitting at.

"Dinner is served! I hope both of you took things seriously and talked through your issues."

"Yes, Tachibana! We sure did!" Kamio being the first to speak out and reach for the food.

"Yeah, it's annoying to talk to him but I still do it anyway. Kamio with his too loud voice, always shouting about his rhythm annoys me to no end but its my fault for being friends with him, I guess... Maybe-"

"Shut up and eat the food, Shinji!"

Tachibana smiled. He sat at the table with them and picked up a piece of takoyaki. While chewing on said food, he saw that Tooyama's eyes lit up with joy at what was on their table.

3.

"And, cut!" the director called and immediately, cheers and applause erupted from the set.

"Thank you for your hard work, everyone. Please have a good rest tonight!"

Tachibana and Chitose bid goodbye to the rest of the cast members and left the set. This was their first time being calefares for anything and they were pretty excited to see the end results.

"Kippe, now that all this is over, can I be rewarded with some of your cooking for working hard and not slacking off?" Chitose asked with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Eh, I'm pretty tired though," he gave a pointed look to the tall boy next to him.

"Huh... I geddit, I geddit. I'll help out a little!"

Both boys got back to the camp and made a beeline for the kitchen. Tachibana checked the leftovers, there was rice, seaweed and some tuna mayonnaise - perfect for rice balls.

The boys put on the gloves and they start preparing their supper. Taking rice, placing a small amount of tuna in the middle, shaping them into triangles and wrapping it with some seaweed, Tachibana and Chitose worked in comfortable silence.

"Yours are a weird shape, Chitose!" Tachibana laughed when he saw the deformed rice balls Chitose made.

"Come on! Not everyone can shape rice as perfectly as you, Kippe!"

They continued to pester each other while placing the finishing touches on their own rice balls, and finally, they indulged in their late supper.

Food tasted best on an empty stomach, surrounded by your closest friends.

4.

"Ah Fuji, these photos look great," Kenya exclaims while looking through the photos at the speed of light.

"Thank you, I had a lot of fun taking these photos," Fuji laughs, before placing more of them on the table.

Kamio nods in agreement as he rustles through the piles of photos. Suddenly, he nudges the boy beside him.

“Tachibana! Here’s one of you,” Kamio exclaims, handing the photo over.

Tachibana leans over and chokes, he did not know that anyone else witnessed that moment.

“Fuji, when did you take this photo? I thought you were only taking pictures of Kamio and Oshitari?” he asks, but Fuji just chuckles. Tachibana continues to stare at the photo and remembers what was happening prior to that moment in time.

An alarm goes off and Tachibana sets aside his knife as he goes to check on a dish that is in the oven. He smiles to himself when he sees that it is exactly as the recipe describes. He grabs his oven gloves, pulls out the dish and sets it on a cooling rack before going back to chopping his vegetables.

Out of nowhere, someone calls out to him. Tachibana pauses his chopping again and looks behind him. Chitose enters, yawning. Tachibana just ignores him and continues slicing.

“Kippe, I’m hungry,” Chitose whines, resting his head on Tachibana’s shoulders, and then opening his mouth, as though awaiting something.

Tachibana sighs and forces a piece of carrot into Chitose’s mouth. “Maybe if you came for lunch on time...” he lectures.

Chitose chews the carrot next to Tachibana’s ear, swallowing it. “The sun was nice today, so I accidentally fell asleep under a tree,” he explains, before opening his mouth for more.

Tachibana pushes Chitose off his shoulder, before dragging him over to the stove. He uncovers a lid on a pot and turns on the stove, heating it up.

“I made this as a test recipe to feed Kamio and Oshitari since they’ve been working so hard. See if you like it too,” Tachibana says, before picking up a spoon and dipping it into the boiling pot. He brings the spoon up to his mouth and blows on it, and then offers it to Chitose, who accepts it gladly.

Chitose smiles around the spoon. “It’s good,” he says, and requests for more. Tachibana just laughs and continues feeding him.

However, unbeknownst to them, a soft click goes off behind them as it is drowned by their chattering.

“Kippeï, what are you looking at?” a voice comes from behind him, everything is feeling like déjà vu. And immediately, Tachibana is startled out of his memories.

Chitose leans over Tachibana’s shoulder and picks up the photo.

“Oh, this. Make that again for me Kippeï,” is all Chitose says before wandering over to his teammates and looking at the photos in their hands.

5.

Kippeï knocks on Chitose’s door, stands back and awaits a reply. However, nothing but silence greets him. He frowns, knocks a little louder, and bellows, “Chitose, are you ready to head to the supermarket?”

Yet again, he receives nothing but silence.

Immediately, he gets worried, and tries to open the door. Thankfully, it was not locked and he barges in. In the doorway, he spots Chitose lying on his bunk with his back facing the door. Tachibana walks up slowly, and he sees Chitose looking at images of their shared hometown.

“Chitose... Are you feeling okay?” Tachibana asks.

Chitose flips over, sighs and shakes his head. “Kippe, it’s nothing. Just feeling a bit homesick... Let me change and we can go to the supermarket okay?”

As Chitose tries to sit up, he is stopped by Tachibana pushing him back down. He looks at Tachibana questioningly, and Tachibana shrugs. “No... Just stay in bed and rest,” was all he said before he leaves the room.

—

“Tachibana! Give me the shopping list! I’ll find everything for you as quickly as possible!” Kamio exclaims.

"Kamio is so noisy... He really should learn how to shut up and just do things quietly sometimes. What if we get kicked out from the store and we get banned and we'll never get to eat Tachibana's food again. Kamio, do you hate Tachibana's food that much, huh?"

“Thanks so much for the help, Kamio and Shinji,” Tachibana interrupts, not wanting them to get into a fight, and the two boys’ faces light up. They grabbed a shopping basket and went off to locate the items.

Tachibana heads towards the meat section and picks up what was requested by some of the other campmates. However, out of the corner of his eye, he sees horse meat sashimi. He walks over quickly and without even thinking, places several packets of it in his baskets.

Finally, the three boys meet up at the payment counter and out of nowhere, Kamio asks, "Horse meat sashimi? What's that?"

Tachibana just replies, "It's a popular dish from Kyushu," before paying for everything.

—

Chitose stirs after hearing his phone go off. He squints and first looks at the time, it was past dinner time. Next, he sees a notification from Kippeï.

"Come down for dinner already," reads the text.

Chitose, wanting to ignore the message, tries to close his eyes and head back to sleep. However, his stomach grumbles and he forces himself out of bed, not looking forward to Tachibana's concern.

When Chitose arrives at the dining hall, it is close to empty, just a few people lingering around and engaging in casual conversation. He then hears someone calling his name, and when he looks up, he sees Tachibana waving him over. Chitose waves back before sauntering over.

As he reaches the table, he stops in shock. Laid in front of him was a small spread of some of his favourite dishes, and featured most prominently was horse meat sashimi.

"Kippei..." he whispers, before plopping down on the seat opposite Tachibana.

"I know this isn't much but I hope this helps with the homesickness," Tachibana says, offering Chitose a pair of chopsticks.

Chitose nods slowly, reaching out for the chopsticks and digging in quickly.

Tachibana laughs and sits at his tea while watching Chitose stuff his cheeks with food.

Suddenly, Chitose looks up and looks intently into Tachibana's eyes. "Kippei... Thank you..."

Tachibana just shakes his head, before placing more food onto Chitose's plate, gesturing for him to continue eating.

6.

"Yo Chitose! We're gonna go get dinner, do you wanna come with?" Kenya asked.

"Aaah, Kippei was telling me that he was gonna cook something as a reward for his Fudomine boys though... Pass pass! Unless y'all wanna join us?"

"Eeeeeeh! But you always join Kippei for dinner, we're your teammates right?" Tooyama whined.

"That's true. You should join us once in a while, Chitose." Shiraishi said as he placed his bandaged arm on Tooyama to keep him from pestering Chitose too much.

"Talking about dinner, doesn't Tachibana cook for you a lot, Chitose? That's so romantic~" Konjiki swooned. "I also want someone that would cook delicious meals for me after I slave at work all day."

"Koharu! Are you cheating on me? Do you want to die?" Hitouji clung onto Konjiki. "I can cook, I can clean, I make our outfits! I'm the whole package!"

"Y'all are gross." Zaizen commented, side eyeing Konjiki and Hitouji, while scrolling through the comments on his latest blog post.

"But, yes Chitose. Tachibana is very nice and takes care of you. Have you done anything to reciprocate?" his captain asks.

The tall boy thought about it. What had he done for Tachibana when the other kept looking out for him when he got too engrossed in his research, when he woke him up from his naps so he could avoid getting punished because he missed practice, and all the delicious food he missed after they went their separate ways.

"Uh, no...?" Chitose replied Shiraishi's question hesitantly.

The rest of his teammates (except Tooyama, who looked around in confusion) shook their heads at him in disappointment.

Looking serious, Konjiki was the first to speak up, "well, you've got to start thinking of something then!" Then twirling around (Hitouji throwing confetti and sparkles in the background) he squeals, "A girl's heart is difficult to understand but have no worry, I'm here and I'll help you out on this quest of LOVE!"

"... Kippeï is not a girl though."

"That's not the point! The point is that we'll help you think of ideas for you to do something nice for Tachibana!" Kenya clapped Chitose on the back.

"Hey! I'm hungry, can we go already?!"

"Can't be helped, I guess. Compulsory team meeting after dinner." Shiraishi announces and pushes Tooyama out of the door, towards the cafeteria.

—

After a great dinner of pot-au-feu, Chitose was dragged away from the Fudomine table for the team meeting.

Once they all settle down, Shiraishi starts by saying, "Since Tachibana has been cooking for you, you could reciprocate by treating him to dinner! After all, what guy doesn't love food?"

Tooyama nods excitedly, "What's his favourite food? Is it TAKOYAKI?!!!"

Kenya adds, "How about eating outside of the camp?"

"Wow! How romantic, Kenya! Wish someone would take me out of the camp~" Konjiki piped in.

Chitose shows them his empty wallet.

"Ah..." the air in the room dropped.

"Oh! Chitose likes sleeping under trees right?~ You could have a picnic!" Tooyama who is the king of romance states.

Showing the team the screen of his smartphone, Zaizen says, "the weather is supposedly good at these times at these locations near the camp."

"Instead of eating out, we could use the ingredients in the cafeteria to cook a great meal for two!" Kenya added.

Chitose ponders over the idea, it sounded foolproof to him. What could possibly go wrong?

Turns out, only a few of his team members were capable of cooking. Shiraishi, Kenya and Hitouji being those who were useful, whereas the rest were destructive in the kitchen. The rest of the team was chased out of there in a flash.

With a recipe that all of them found online with the help of Zaizen, they got to work in realising their goal. They delegated roles to get their tasks done efficiently - Shiraishi on preparing vegetables, Kenya on cooking the perfect rice and Hitouji and Chitose were in charge of marinating the beef strips and frying a nice egg.

It all came together nicely as the rest ran in with a nice picnic mat and said that they've found the spot Zaizen was talking about while they were in the kitchen.

-

"Let's go, let's go!" Tooyama dragged a confused Tachibana behind him.

He was ambushed while on the way back to his room, after his afternoon practice. Tooyama had pestered him into following him, all while shouting about how hard Chitose had worked that day and how the team was doing.

“Shitenhouji is so lively, it's good to see Chitose getting along well with them.” he thought to himself.

He found himself being escorted to a park where he sees Chitose napping under a tree, with a small spread next to him. Tooyama pushed him towards where Chitose was and kicked Chitose awake, “Kippeï is here! Enjoy your date!”

Chitose startles awake and sees a confused Tachibana and his teammates running away.

“What’s up with this and with them?” Tachibana gestures to the mat and the bowls set up with utensils beside them.

“Ah, Kippeï... Well,” Chitose sits up and rubs the back of his head in embarrassment, “The guys thought I don’t do enough for you when you keep taking care of me at the camp. So they helped me prepare this surprise for you.”

Tachibana was touched and speechless. Well, not really.

“Wow, what happened to the guy who could burn water?” he punched Chitose’s arm.

“Shut up, that was two years ago!” Chitose pat the spot next to him, under the tree, beckoning for the other boy to sit there.

After placing the beef bowl in Tachibana's hands and handing him some chopsticks, the pair began eating the food.

"Yo, this ain't half bad! Good job, me!"

"Yeah, it's good! Guess I got to make something as thanks to your team too."

"Make takoyaki, please. Kin-chan couldn't shut up about how good yours were after he had them."

"Haha, will do."

And they continued conversing while digging into their delicious food.

-

"Thanks for the meal!" both boys clapped their hands and began cleaning up after themselves.

Holding the basket with their rubbish, they embarked on the way back to the camp.

"Thank you for everything you do for me, Kippe. I know I suck at taking care of myself so... I'm glad that you're around to care for me."

Tachibana smiled and clapped the taller boy on the back, "Why're you getting mushy now?" but when Chitose looked at him, he had a small smile and a hint of pink on his face.

Chitose's heart started pounding loudly, and he clears his throat before reaching out for Tachibana's hand. To his surprise, Tachibana allowed it and squeezed it as hard as he could. It was a sign of their

relationship after all. They were violent kids and it showed when they were made to play doubles together back in Shishigaku. Both boys walked hand-in-hand back to the campsite. When they arrived at Tachibana's room, they were reluctant to let go.

"Let's do this again. I had a lot of fun," they said at the same time. They looked at each other incredulously before breaking out into matching grins. Finally, they went their separate ways, both their stomachs and hearts full.



THEY TOLD ME I WAS A WINNER

A story by Tidbitte @tidbitte on twitter and on ao3



They Told Me I Was a Winner

By Tidbitte

Preface in Whispers

Maybe one day,
I'll be brave enough
to share more
of my vulnerable self to the world

Without so many
locks,
passwords
and secret handshakes.

Off Hours

I find myself at my best and at my worst at about twelve midnight to three in the morning. For as long as the sun isn't out yet. There's a certain 'ness' that I experience and am witness to when these parts of the day hit.

There are a few things that contribute to that enigmatic “ness.” It's this quality of rich silence—the sort that is filled with dormant life and bits of active life. It's being aware that just about everyone you know is asleep and you feeling awake as ever. It's thinking about the fact that people you've never met are asleep, and knowing that there are quite a few folks you've never met who are awake, just like you. It's knowing all of this with a heightened sense of consciousness, and paying mind to the fact that many of them live lives all their own.

It's noticing the way stray light from outside seep into your room through the blinds. Zoning in on street lamps illuminating concrete pavement. Knowing with your insides that solitude is distinct

from loneliness. I can only really give a list of fragments. You get a lot of this “ness,” roaming around the streets at night. And a lot of it too over here at this camp, weirdly enough.

It's been a while since I've done my usual crack-of-dawn rounds through the city. Old habits die hard, though. I sleep at night now, at a kind of regular hour now, in part because of the rigor of the training these coaches have us do. But I still wake up at 4am, and in lieu of downtown Tokyo, I walk in and around the grounds. Half the time, I hear one of the older kids hitting balls at the wall. Sometimes I hear that weirdo with the mushroom hair talking to that other weird-haired kid about UFO's or some shit. They make a lot of noise in that room, and the anal kendo guy with the eyepatch and the baseball cap routinely tells them to shut up.

A few months ago, I wouldn't have believed you if you told me I'd be at a sports camp, bunking with a bunch of dorky-ass tennis nerds. It's still surreal to me, and I still want to toss half these little shits over a cliff. They're still way too irritatingly into this. But I think I'm starting to get it a little day by day. I don't know. You tell anyone I told you that, and I'll end you.

The most peace I get around these parts is when I get some hot oi-ocha from the vending machines and have it before the rest of these losers wake up.

When 7:30am hits, the PA goes off, telling us all to get out of bed, and get going. This small town's worth of kid tennis players—all out of their assigned beds. You start to hear groans, conversations, footsteps and the showers running simultaneously.

Hard to figure out if this setup is more like prison or the military. This far into it, I can tell you, I'm fairly sure it's a cult.

After the showers, the barrage of noise slowly makes its way to the cafeteria. I like being there before everyone arrives, because it's quiet, and I mostly have the place to myself. Coffee is out as early as six, and I've had two cups of that stuff before people start coming in. The daily papers are out and on the racks by 8:30. Today, the headline says that a new site has been found for the Defense Ministry's missile testing.

At 8:30 too, breakfast is carted out. Usually, it's a sundry of different things from pancakes to grilled fish. There's a dispenser of miso soup at the end of the table with dried tofu and seaweed at the sides. Almost all of this is eaten by the time breakfast is done and over with.

I'd never say it out loud, but it's a bit of a relief that some of the people I know are here. It's one thing if you're by yourself around Tokyo at night, and a completely different thing if you don't have an out at the end of the day and have to actually LIVE with these motherfuckers.

The usual Yamabuki suspects take their seats where I'm at, starting with Taichi and Sengoku. Minami and Higashikata. Toay, they're going on about how this whole setup is extravagant. On another day, in another situation. Everyone's talking about this same thing across all the different tables. And the same soundbites and topics circulate continue to get passed along to different conversation partners over the courts when we split up. In any other place, situation and time, I'd be tired as hell of hearing the same thing over and over. But I get it. I'm thinking about it too.

I did the math in my head, and I can't believe they're spending all this money on us, sometimes. It's fuckin' weird to me. All that yen

on all these kids playing tennis. Taichi tells me, we've only recently had a couple Japanese tennis players win big, since The Samurai. What a stupid fucking name. They would have called him the Sumo Wrestler if he was fat, I bet, or some other shit. I overheard that this camp is new too, about the age of a toddler, give or take. Checks out, but it's still a big what-the-fuck. Just how much of a demand is there for tennis winners among the public that these sponsors and the government are pumping this much funding into all of this? There's hundreds of us here. Not everyone's going to turn out to be a pro. Not even everyone on the actual U-17 team.

Towards the middle of breakfast, this whole cafeteria boys choir is belting it all out, all with the accompaniment of the clanging of plates and utensils punctuating the harmony. Some of the guys put aside their dirty plates early to get a head start on practice. Can't imagine being that enthusiastic about it.

Minami and Taichi are laughing about something, don't know what about. At this point, they're in their own sphere. Sengoku breaks the silence he's uncharacteristically been in this whole meal.

He leans over and says.

"Can you believe we're all here right now? It's something else. We're so lucky."

Luck Lottery

I was good at most anything I did right off the bat. Things were easy. School was easy, I ranked number one a few exam seasons, once out of spite. Coming out on top was part of my day-to-day regardless of whatever the competition ground was—karate,

snowboarding, motocross, you name it. Old man Banji put me on the tennis team after seeing me fuck around on the courts for ten minutes. Almost as if he forgot I was about to sock him in the face too.

I had no interest in any of the tennis shit, whatsoever. Bored the shit out of me.

Then one day I lost to a little kid who'd been training all his life. I quit after that. Told myself that was done. At the time I felt satisfied with tennis.

One of my teammates and yeah, I guess you can call him a friend, Sengoku, was ace second to me. He worked hard to be at the level he was. Harder than I ever did. If you asked me to give my two cents about all that a few months ago, I'd tell you it was a royal waste of time. But I didn't give him too much shit for it. Not even then.

Much like Taichi, Sengoku imposed friendship, albeit with a different brand of eagerness and a little more finesse, really. Short exchanges in the locker room eventually gave way to me accompanying him around Tokyo as he'd gawk at girls. Taichi would be present before sunset, but would leave when self-imposed curfew struck.

Sometimes Sengoku and I would just sit by the benches, and he'd yap on about this or that, much the same way Taichi would. Lighthearted fare, usually.

Every so often, he'd get a chuckle out of me, which would result in a segment about the fact that I do indeed laugh.

Once, in response I said,

“Everyone takes a shit too, Sengoku, you, me, and that one chick you wouldn’t shut up about earlier. In case you didn’t know that.”

“You can crack a good one too, it looks like.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“You’re lucky as hell, Akutsu.”

“I’m not lucky, I’m just good.”

“Yeah man, but you’re good without even trying. And that’s lucky. Not all of us are that lucky.”

The way he said this—there was that same jovial tone he always had. But something was veiled there, and I could sense that, even just seeing him say this from the corner of my eye. And I never forgot.

It wasn’t the first time I heard that. I’d been told that plenty of times. But that one time—that’s what rises to the surface of my memory each time my mind decides to open that godforsaken Pandora’s box. Maybe because it was the first time I ever felt any sort of a pang of guilt, however faint.

I carry that with me still. And it gets heavier each time I remember.

Just the Usual

All the dishes and utensils have all been sorted neatly on a series of wheeled shelves by the kitchen. Plates on one side; chopsticks, spoons, knives and forks in another. They’re so neat you’d

think it was a stack of wholesale restaurant for trade from a distance. Everything uneaten is discarded into the bins, also neatly arranged. Taichi has let me know that they turn the organic waste into fertilizer at a nearby botanical garden. I've painted a picture in my head of the town nearby with all the information he's volunteered. A lot of the time, I'd rather be wandering around checking out the area than be here.

At this hour, Taichi and some of the other freshmen who are here are midway into kitchen cleanup. Meanwhile, the rest of us are lined up under the glare of the morning sun doing burpees and pushups, brainless work where I spend my time in thought. Some morning, sometime ago, I saw a documentary about prisons. This mass workout looks a whole lot like an aerial shot of inmates exercising. We're as neatly arranged and laid out as the dishes in the kitchen, freakishly in sync throughout the whole thing, lookin', like I said earlier, like a fucking cult. Really, this whole thing might as well be, the way the coaches handle this whole operation.

Things got real ugly when they had all of us get a ball or get the hell out. I'd never seen so many guys crying all at once. I'd never seen so many people run after a ball so desperately either. The looks on people's faces. It was pathetic, grotesque and also sad. Much as I find the clamor disgusting, I still felt a little sorry for the ones who had to leave. They certainly wanted to be here much more than I do. There's something abhorrent about these coaches spending all this money to get people here only to have them spend even more carting people back. What the hell is the point other than to peddle fear and have everyone grasp at their place here. Like Sun Tzu just killing off a soldier in front of everyone to keep them in line. I fucking hate it. Taking away power and agency like that. I can't stand it. But maybe I feel this way now because I'm at the receiving end of it. I peddled in the same tactics not so long ago.

This place makes me sick. But somehow, I feel like I need to be here at the same time.

I feel like I sold out somehow, and I feel angry about it. I hate myself a little because of it.

A whistle's shrill shriek cuts through the air signaling us to get on the courts.

They Told Me I Was a Winner

"Your son is immensely gifted. He's going to get far."

"Jin performs immensely well in class. He's the top student. You're a very lucky mother."

"You're incredibly talented, but you need to focus."

"He has so much potential, but he needs to learn how to control his temper."

"You're a talent that only comes once every ten years."

Verbal accolades are a dime a dozen. My mother has a couple of photos of me in the living room. I was ten years old, and I had just won a race. I won first place. With number two and number three so far behind, they looked like twigs in the frame. The second photo is of me with ten or so medals on my neck and a couple of trophies from some multi-part elementary function. This is how life had always been for me.

I never wanted to be a winner, I just won shit. I just came out on top. What frame of reference do you have of anything other than your

norm, when all you know is your norm. So I never wanted to be a winner, but I sure as fucking hell didn't want to be a loser either. And then one day, I fucking lost. That's when it hit me that I did want to be a winner, just not anywhere near as badly as others who lost more.

"You won't take another point off of me." What a fucking clown. You don't walk into match so cocky expecting to have your ass handed to you. But then it happens. It happens once at the hands of a kid. It happens a second time at the hands of two guys who are your seniors. Makes me wonder what all the other guys I beat felt at my own hands. I never thought it would happen to me.

Teachers, parents and whoever the hell—they tell us over and over again to be grateful, and to not take shit for granted. All these lessons—you read them, you know them as words said or written. But you only start to realize how true they are when your whole body and being learn them when life just sets the dogs on you.

Then you realize you're not as big as you think you are. The rest of the world, time, space and other people dwarf you. The world isn't in the palm of your hand, it never was. You were always in it. The frame of the picture you have of yourself expands exponentially, and you start to see yourself as the mere peg in the machinations you truly are.



MYSPLACE GALLERY

