





**Title:** *Sekai-ichi Hatsukoi ~ The Case of Yokozawa Takafumi, Vol. 6*

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After gargling thoroughly, Yokozawa Takafumi returned his toothbrush to the stand atop the sink. The blue brush was Kirishima's, the pink one Hiyori's—and the light green one was his own. Alongside the stand were two cups for rinsing: the pink one matching the toothbrush was Hiyori's own, while Yokozawa borrowed the enamel cup that Kirishima used.

He wiped his mouth with the towel draped over his shoulder before tossing it into the washing machine. Seeing as it was already past midnight, he decided to set the timer so that the wash would finish just as they woke in the morning. "I guess 7 AM will do it..."

The next day was a holiday, so they could afford to sleep in, but this never seemed to change the fact that he'd wind up waking around his usual time out of habit.

He'd initially been uncomfortable with the way so many of his personal items had found their way into the Kirishimas' home, but by now, he'd grown quite used to it.

To an onlooker, he probably seemed like he was dropping by with shameless frequency. He'd at first just come by now and then after being invited over for dinner, but ever since they'd started taking care of his sick cat, he'd now taken to spending the night as well. Kirishima and Hiyori had dragged Yokozawa and Sorata into their little family circle, and he'd never imagined how deeply he'd become involved with the pair.

The comfort of this home was likely due in large part to Hiyori's innocent nature. She hadn't been shy in the least on their first meeting, and even now afforded him her complete and utter trust. Even saying, "I'm home," when he stepped into the *genkan* had become commonplace.

It had taken him quite some time to learn the happiness of people accepting him unconditionally.

He wiped the fogged-up mirror with his hand, staring at his reflection. He'd be turning 30 next year...but it still hadn't quite hit home yet. Many had always seen him as older than he actually was, but lately he felt like he'd finally started to seem his age more, bit by bit.

But just because he was about to hit his 30s didn't mean he felt any particular sense of panic. It was only...he couldn't deny feeling a little disappointed that he hadn't grown into the adult he'd imagined he would as a child.

Ever since joining Marukawa Shoten fresh out of college, he'd been focused solely on Sales. He'd never been particularly good at coping with things right off the bat, but through hard work and stamina, he'd managed to learn the ropes, supplementing the areas where he'd been lacking. Now, in place of the reckless attitude he'd had when first entering the adult world, he felt like he had a better handle on his work. If pressed, he might even admit that this was a sign of personal growth.

He tried to keep on top of things, in an effort to ensure that his day to day activities didn't turn into "just going through the motions", but when he was this busy,



there were things he overlooked—and it frightened him.

It was November now, and the restlessness he struggled with had visibly increased, largely because on top of the end-of-the-year festival he was already overseeing, a campaign to celebrate the premier of the *Za Kan* movie would be starting soon. To pull this project off, he'd have to coordinate with not only the editing division but the animation division as well.

Projects kept piling up, one after the other, nipping at his heels, and while he was getting fed up with these seemingly endless days of pressure at the office, he still felt rather fulfilled.

But he was no longer young enough that he could get by with little sleep or rest, and taking care of oneself was an important part of being a contributing member of society. He couldn't afford to forget that his body was his greatest resource if he intended to keep on working for the next few dozen years.

He exited the bathroom and headed into the den, where he found Kirishima sitting with his second beer of the evening, watching television and having already finished his bath earlier.

"Drinking *again*?" Hiyori was spending the evening at her grandparents' place, so they'd eaten out, and Kirishima had enjoyed quite a bit of *sake* and *shochu* then.

"It's just a low-malt; this doesn't even count as booze. Don't worry; I've left plenty for you, too. We've got the day off tomorrow, so drink as much as you like."

"I'm fine." Kirishima had kept on urging him to drink more earlier, but he felt he'd had more than his fair share for the evening. But despite having drunk more than Yokozawa had, Kirishima showed no signs of being affected, which only served to irritate further. "But geez, you're like a damn *sieve*. How much does it take for you to get pissed out of your skull, exactly?"

Yokozawa headed to the kitchen, filling a glass first with ice and then water from the sink, before settling down next to Kirishima. After a long draw, he felt his parched throat finally quenched.

"I've never gotten *that* drunk since I stopped going crazy with the booze like I did when I was younger."

"Well don't over-indulge just because you won't get drunk. Even if you're a heavy-weight, you're still putting strain on your liver." Even people who didn't get tipsy or hung over still had their livers working to remove the alcohol from their systems, after all. Drinking practically every day would eventually cause the liver to start breaking down, and just because he wasn't a light weight didn't mean he didn't need to watch himself.

"Worrying over me?"

"Just letting you know the *general opinion* on the matter," he retorted in quick response to the amused question. Sure, he might've been worrying a bit, but he couldn't afford to let the man himself know this.

"Aww, don't be shy; just admit you're worried about me. But well—it's not like

I'm drinking every day, so I'll be fine. I just tend to go overboard a bit since it's so great spending time with you."

"Don't try to blame this on me."

"It was a compliment—be happy about it."

"Yeah yeah, *thanks*. By the way—what time is Hiyori getting back tomorrow?" He smoothly brushed aside the comment, changing the topic to keep Kirishima from hounding him too stubbornly. Kirishima didn't seem too pleased with this, expression flashing dissatisfied for a moment, but he soon gave up, going along with the shift in conversation.

"She said she was going to the zoo with my parents, so she'll probably be back some time tomorrow evening."

"Then that means I don't need to prep for lunch. Wanna head out somewhere for lunch, if it's just gonna be us. We should probably get some shopping in, too."

"Hey now, isn't there an option to cook *just for me*?" He pursed his lips, pasting on a deliberate pout. It was at times difficult to believe that such a childish man as Kirishima could be editor in chief of a popular shonen manga magazine. Surely none of his subordinates would ever believe Yokozawa if he told them about these moments.

"It's easier to just pick up something while we're out at the grocery store. If you insist on eating at home, all I can make you is some leftover fried rice."

"Then that's plenty; everything's tasty as long as you're the one making it."

"...Good grief, fine then. But just so you know, that 'anything's fine' attitude is really annoying." There was no one who didn't appreciate compliments on their cooking, but it was too embarrassing to just thank him for his words, so he wound up responding with his usual banter.

But it really *was* quite difficult coming up with a decent menu, and if it'd just been something for himself, he could throw together something simple, but he could hardly do the same when he was sharing the meal with someone *else* as well.

"Fine then—I *want to eat fried rice*."

"You don't have to make it sound so *forced*! Geez.... Oh yeah—I've gotta go into the office on Sunday. They need someone to help out with a literature autograph event."

"Autograph event? They're short-handed?"

"There's that—but it's one of the authors who's helping us put together the fair. I'd wanted to deliver my greetings directly, so I agreed to do it." The author was a veteran mystery writer who *loved* doling out fanservice, and every time they released a new piece, they participated in autograph events and talk events and such. One event planned for the fair involved authors from different genres discussing the business together, and while it would be some time yet before that talk show happened, Yokozawa was actually looking forward to it himself.

"Ah, I get it now. That reminds me, I'm gonna be involved in something literature-related soon—did I mention that?"

“I haven’t heard anything about it; something getting a manga release?”

“Yeah; have you heard about Oosaki Ryou’s piece being turned into a movie?”

“I feel like someone mentioned it recently, yeah. They’ve turned down all requests for cross-media entertainment so far, though, so getting this unexpected greenlight had the movie producer dancing a jig, apparently.”

“Yup. And they’re turning the piece into a manga, too, and going to serialize it in *Japun*.”

“Wow, that’s great. Sounds like it’ll be quite the topic of conversation.” Oosaki Ryou was a best-selling novelist with quite a broad repertoire of hits, spanning everything from young-adult mysteries to period pieces. Their readership included young and old, men and women alike, with a lot of hard-core fans, and while he couldn’t boast to owning *every* piece of the author’s, Yokozawa did have quite a few copies adorning his own bookshelf.

But despite their popularity, the author had never had any of their works cross over into other media—not because no one had ever suggested it, but because the author had refused to hear of it.

Movie versions of manga and novels tended to be met with mixed reviews; every reader had their own ideas of how it should be done, so it was no easy feat to find a cast or prepare a script that could satisfy *everyone*. With novels in particular, made of nothing but words strung together, everyone had their own image of the story.

And the higher the expectations, the more difficult it became to meet them. It was hardly rare for bold changes to result in great disappointment.

The author likely had high ideals and strong conviction; that they’d finally agreed this time must be evidence of how strongly they believed it could be pulled off.

“For the time being, at least, I’ll be in charge of churning out a single volume of the manga...”

“Why d’you look so concerned? Isn’t this a good thing? This author who’s never been interested in a movie version of their works has agreed to not just that but a *comic* version as well.”

“Well yeah, it’s just...the conditions they’ve set...” Kirishima’s expression grew solemn, being particularly evasive. Yokozawa didn’t understand why, but the guy really didn’t seem too excited about the prospect of his upcoming project.

“What, did they throw out some kind of annoying stipulation or something?”

“It’s not annoying, it just...makes me wonder why they accepted it in the first place—apparently they only agreed to the movie version if I would be in charge of the manga version.”

“What the heck’s with that? Do they know you?” Yokozawa certainly hadn’t been expecting that confession, and his expression waxed suspicious. He’d heard of authors demanding the participation of a certain director or actor in exchange for agreeing to a movie version of their work, but to designate the editor of a manga version? *That* was a

new one.

“No, I’m sure we’ve never met before, so that’s what’s nagging at me.”

“Maybe they’ve heard great things about you and just decided they wanted to work with you?” Kirishima was something of a celebrity in his field, after all; he was well known as the managing editor for a rather popular author, and one look at the works he’d had a hand in told you everything you needed to know about his abilities.

And it wasn’t just a matter of skill—his very physical appearance set tongues to wagging. He had graceful features, height in the upper 180s, long arms and legs, and a fit, firm body. Just walking down the street, the guy drew stares from men and women alike, and no few number of those women worked up the courage to speak to him. Ever since agreeing to an interview which included photos of himself, he’d become more well-known, and he could easily be called a celebrity in his own little corner of the working world. Yokozawa even recalled hearing that after his photos had appeared in a women’s gravure magazine, he’d actually gotten *fan mail*.

On top of that, he had an easy-going, sociable nature, which had earned him quite a few fans within their own company as well. Some of their female coworkers had even, at one point, tried to use *Yokozawa* to get closer to Kirishima.

“I guess we just have to hope that’s all it is...”

“What’re you so worried about?”

“I’m not really *worried*, per se...”

“You’ll be fine; what kind of person is this ‘Oosaki-sensei’ character, anyway?” Neither their gender nor age—much less their face—had ever been made public, and from what he’d read, he’d never noticed them speak much about their personal details in interviews. The mysterious author whose true identity no one knew had predictably become a hot topic of conversation for a period of time.

Yokozawa suspected they were a young man, given their style of writing, but there was no telling until he met the author in person. After all, there were plenty of male authors out there who used a gentler, more feminine writing style, as well as female authors who wrote dark, gritty pieces as well—and authors who seemed likely to be much older often turned out to be mere college students.

“I haven’t gotten the details from their editor over in the lit division, but we’ve got a meeting scheduled for next week, so I’m sure I’ll learn all I need to know about the author as well as why they’ve asked me to work on their piece.”

“Well whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not a *bad* reason, so you’re probably getting worked up over nothing.”

“I hope so; it’s just, they seem like a really...*particular* author, so I doubt making this piece into a manga will go off without a hitch. Sorry—but I’ll probably have to ask someone else to help you out with the winter fair stuff.”

“I don’t mind—just don’t stick me with some newbie who can’t find his way out of a paper bag.”

“I’m probably gonna ask Hitomi to handle it, so don’t you fret. And I’ll continue handling everything to do with *Za Kan*, so let me know if there’s anything you need.”

“Got it. That reminds me, when is the screening for the *Za Kan* movie?” The screening referred to the first promotional screening for the movie, when VIPs and staff were first allowed to see the finished product. It was also the last chance to run a final check on everything, but it would be more or less the final version.

“Middle of next week. They mentioned deciding hard dates some time this weekend. That guy’s actually made great progress, considering his nature, but I’m still scared he’s gonna screw it up somehow at the last minute.”

“But nothing seems off right now, right?”

“For now, yeah. We’re gonna run the final check early next week, so if you’ve got the time, drop by for the viewing.”

“It’s all right if I come?”

“You’re involved in the project, after all, so of course. You’re the one responsible for selling the damn manga.”

“Oh yeah, I guess I am.” Given that the manga and movie fell under different divisions, he did feel that he ought to practice some degree of restraint, but now that Kirishima had outright invited him, there was no reason not to oblige.

“Why not invite some of the others from Sales? We’ve got plenty of seats, and it’ll be nice to hear some thoughts from unbiased parties.”

“All right; I’ll ask around and see who’s free.”

“I’ll text you when we’ve decided on an exact time.”

“How does the finished product look, from your perspective?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see~ Though given that Yasuda’s reassured me he’s gone all out, I’m sure it won’t hurt you to keep your expectations high.”

Yokozawa gave a start at that name falling from Kirishima’s lips—Yasuda Gou. He was the anime producer in charge of the *Za Kan* movie. Yokozawa had spoken to him on two occasions thus far, but the guy marched to the beat of his own drum, leaving Yokozawa frankly a bit hesitant on how to engage him.

“Yasuda-san, huh... He’s as strange a character as the rumors make him out to be.” The reason he was so on-guard at the mere *mention* of the man’s name was probably because Yasuda had figured out the true nature of his and Kirishima’s relationship at their very first meeting. Those eyes, hidden behind glasses and fringed in long lashes, left one feeling as if he could see right through them to their deepest, darkest secrets.

“Yeah, you could say that. He certainly ranks high among Marukawa’s oddballs. But despite his eccentricities, he absolutely oozes talent.”

“I see...” Kirishima’s expression and wording clearly related how much he respected and acknowledged Yasuda, but while Yokozawa could—even as a casual viewer—recognize how amazing Yasuda was, based on his works, it was still quite rare for Kirishima to be so unrestrained in praising someone.



Yasuda was an eccentric phantom of a man—something Yokozawa had heard long before he ever actually met him—and everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. Of course, all of the works that received mixed media release were almost entirely pieces that were quite popular to begin with. Because they already had a confirmed following, plans for subsequent projects could proceed with confidence. But Yasuda also liked to proactively take on relatively unremarkable works that had never enjoyed any measure of popularity before, and spurning the doubts of others within the company, he'd elevated these pieces to great epics, shoving them into the spotlight.

The company president apparently had great faith in Yasuda's eye and skill and appeared to be letting him do as he would. Many of the rumors Yokozawa had heard over the years sounded rather far-fetched, but now that he'd met the man face to face, he was still bowled over by his good looks.

Yasuda was a contemporary of Kirishima's, which put him in his mid-30s, but he could have easily passed for someone in their early 20s, and his handsome features almost seemed as if he'd been *built* that way. He had silky black hair and pale porcelain skin, with a lithe body build and delicate features that would have been at home on any runway model. The way it was practically impossible to tell his age was somewhat reminiscent of a certain editor over in *Emerald*, too... Then, at their very first meeting, after realizing that Yokozawa and Kirishima were in a relationship together, he'd informed them that he was bisexual himself.

His astounding speech and conduct had left Yokozawa unable to do anything but gape in shock, but he was certain *anyone* would have reacted that way under the same circumstances.

"But he's a total failure as a working adult, y'know. He's selfish and egotistical and stubborn, and he never sticks to schedules or deadlines. I can't tell you how often I've had to run around and clean up after him." Kirishima's tone spoke heavily of personal experience; he was probably reliving even more of these escapades inside his mind than he actually spoke of. "And yet...unreasonable as he may be...I still put up with him for some reason. I guess you could say the strange inability for anyone to truly *loathe* him is another talent of his. There's seriously no competing with guys as blessed as him!"

"You've churned out your fair share of best-sellers, too." As far as Yokozawa was concerned, Kirishima was one of those 'blessed few' as well.

"I'm just lucky; I only come across these decent reads by chance—the authors are the ones with the real talent."

"You've got skills of your own." Surely he was being far too modest; no matter how talented the author, the editor—the very first reader—was the one who really pulled out the allure in their work.

"I suppose so; I like to think I lend a helping hand, at least."

"You do a hell of a lot more than 'lend a helping hand'."

"I like to do my homework for any job; I do some market research, some calculations, determine what sort of story readers are hungering for these days, what sort

of characters they'd like to see, and then I discuss my findings with the author. Though, granted—this is all part and parcel of being an editor.”

Kirishima was definitely a curious one; he could always be found with a book in hand in his limited spare time, and he was sure to check out popular anime and dramas whenever he found the time. If anything caught his eye, he would look it up immediately, and he placed great importance on meeting people, going out of his way to make new acquaintances. Whenever one of Hiyori's friends dropped by the apartment for a playdate, he would even ply them indirectly for hints on the latest fads.

This was likely how he anticipated the Next Big Thing; even if he wasn't 100% infallible on this point, he always managed to point himself in the right direction. Even Yokozawa, with his Sales background, could understand this intuition of his.

Keeping an eye on the marketplace was important for a salesman as well. Just by reading the numbers, he could predict to some extent what sorts of books would sell well in the future. As a greenhorn, he'd been groping about in the dark without much of a clue what was going on, but now he felt he'd gotten the hang of things. He could sense when a book was probably going to sell well—though this could also just be a product of experience.

“Geniuses are far removed from the reach of us ordinary folks. I'm just glad to be of service, in the meantime.”

“But *because* you've got good senses yourself, you're able to pull it off, don't you see?”

“Rather than any sort of ‘senses’, it's just a knack for taking an objective view of a given situation. Intuition has its uses, but being overconfident in your own abilities can also hamstring you. Something may suit your personal tastes, but if it doesn't appeal to readers on the street, they're never going to pick it up.”

“I see.”

“I mean sure, I take pride in my work, but when I see Yasuda's genius way of handling his job, there are definitely times I admittedly feel jealous. I mean, we're contemporaries, after all; that really pissed me off when I was younger, though I still admired him for it. But alas, if wishes were horses...”

“Yeah, I guess...” For a moment, Yokozawa felt a pang slice through his chest—but when he tried to contemplate the source of the sensation, Kirishima's voice distracted him.

“So, that being the case—unfortunately, after this weekend, we won't have the time to cuddle and flirt for a while.”

“*Huh?* What're you talking about? It's not like it can be helped—work is work.” He gawked openly at the way Kirishima's shoulders slumped as he let out a sigh. “For a while” would undoubtedly turn out to be a month at best; it was nothing to be so *dramatic* over.

“Aww, c'mon—would it kill you to act a *little* disappointed at least? Good grief, I can't believe you're giving me the same speech *Hiyo* did...”

“What’d she say?”

“It’s your job, so there’s no helping it, right?” Even today, she must have realized I was pretty busy and said she was going to spend the night at her grandmother’s place herself.”

“She’s pretty mature, that kid.” He had no difficulty imagining Hiyori saying that sort of thing, and he pasted on a wry smile. Perhaps because of her living situation, she could be quite mature at times. She’d probably chastised him with a serious expression on her features, too.

“She is, at that. Thanks to you, she’s growing into a fine young woman.”

“Only because you raised her right.” Kirishima had done splendidly as a single father, raising his daughter. While he depended on his parents for a lot of things, the reason Hiyori had grown into such an honest, hard-working child was undoubtedly because of the great example her father set. Despite his busy schedule, he carved out as much free time as possible to spend with his daughter.

“Right?? ...Is what I’d like to say, but for the most part, it’s my mom’s doing. I never could’ve managed it on my own.”

“She’s a girl, after all.”

“These days, *she* takes care of *me* more than the other way around. And her talkative nature’s something I can blame on my mother, too.”

“You run your mouth quite a bit yourself.” Yokozawa hardly ever won contests of verbal jabs against him, after all. Any objections he made were eventually turned around on him and, in his confusion, he wound up being forced to agree with any proposals on the table. Hiyori’s own quick thinking was likely inherited from her father—she had moments where she kind of spaced out, but by and large, she was a sharp child.

“You think? I always thought I was pretty normal.”

“You’re the *only* one who thinks that, trust me.” It was hard to tell if he was playing dumb or if he truly didn’t realize it; if Kirishima’s level of speech in a given day were the norm, the world would be a much noisier place indeed. “Still, without Hiyo around...it’s pretty quiet, huh.”

The apartment felt a little different when Hiyo wasn’t here; it was strange how, simply by her absence, it felt like another home entirely.

“True...but some time alone now and then isn’t so bad.”

“...Sorata’s here too, you know.” He couldn’t bring himself to just duck his head in agreement, firing back a retort to disguise his shame.

“Sorata headed into Hiyo’s room to sleep; wasn’t that nice of him? He really can take a hint.”

“He just likes her room, that’s all!” Cats were finicky, moody animals; they didn’t do things just because they thought their humans wanted them to. Quite the opposite, they more often than not completely ignored how inconvenient their actions might be.

For Yokozawa, though, he wished the cat were around right about now.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“Just...I thought, you know...I’d go brush my teeth...”

“You just brushed them earlier. Aren’t you a little young to be forgetting things?”

“.....” He’d groped for any possible excuse to leave the room—and that had been his undoing. Before he could come up with another reason, though, Kirishima drew in close, reducing the space between them.

“Don’t run away.”

“You’re too close!” Kirishima’s face suddenly so close to his own gave him a start; at this distance, he could clearly make out his irises: a soft, light tea brown. The same as Hiyori’s.

“You’re never gonna get used to this, are you?”

“I’m...just not good with sudden moves.”

“So you’re saying if I didn’t spring things on you, you’d be just fine? Then how about I give you fair warning next time?”

Kirishima leaned in another few centimeters, and Yokozawa responded by leaning backwards. “I keep telling you, you’re *too close!*” If he kept leaning back like this, he was going to fall flat on his ass.

“If I don’t move in close, though, I can’t kiss you.”

“Then how about you just *don’t do it?*”

“But I want to. Though I’m not too picky about the location.”

“Hey—don’t lift up my shirt!” He found himself shoved down onto the sofa with the t-shirt he’d just pulled on promptly shoved up. The shirt was one of the items of clothing he kept stored here with the Kirishimas.

“What, it’s not like it’s anything to be embarrassed about, right?”

“I don’t like the look in your eyes!” He lightly slapped away Kirishima’s hand and tugged the hem of the shirt back down. It wasn’t that he found the situation embarrassing, as they were both men, but when he stopped to think about what frame of mind Kirishima was appreciating him in, he just couldn’t keep calm. Plus, this was an ‘everyday space’—Hiyori played here, so he balked at the notion of doing anything in this sort of location.

“The look in my eyes?”

“Just, you look like...”

“What, like I’m entertaining *indecent thoughts?* God you’re an idiot; if we’re gonna do *indecent things*, then I kind of *have* to look at you that way. What sort of a saint are you, exactly?” Kirishima laughed, which only served to stoke Yokozawa’s ire further. There was nothing to be done about not being used to things he was *never* going to be used to, after all.

“Shut up! I’m saying that kind of suggestive shit is annoying, that’s all!”

“Your face is red as a tomato, you know.”

“Whatever.” The more he talked, the deeper the hole he was digging for himself. Despite his constant efforts not to say anything out of line that he’d wind up regretting, he tended to just snap whenever Kirishima riled him up.

“And it’s expressions like that that make me want to take advantage of you.”

“Uwah—d-don’t *tickle* me!” But Kirishima was attacking him on all sides, a broad grinning leer on his face. Yokozawa tried to restrain his hands to make him stop, but the guy kept wriggling free.

“Wow, you sure are ticklish... Like right *here*...”

“Sto—I said, cut it out...!” Despite his serious protests, though, Kirishiima seemed to have no intentions of halting his attacks.

“And...here?”

“.....!” Kirishima’s fingers brushed lightly over his chest, and he sucked in a tense breath—and Kirishima seized his opportunity.

“Gotcha!”

“Uwah!” His shoulders were sharply shoved, and he fell down flat on his back on the couch, his head finding cushioning against the armrest. It didn’t hurt, given the padding, but the jolt of the impact could have given him a nasty bump against the back of his head. “That was dangerous, idiot!”

“I held back; it didn’t hurt, right?”

“Don’t just climb on top of people!” Kirishima lay flopped on top of him, and he gave a great shove at his shoulder, spurning his kiss. It wasn’t that Yokozawa didn’t *want* to kiss him, necessarily, only that he didn’t want to let himself get swept away in the moment.

“You know, Yokozawa, this hand of yours is kind of in the way; mind moving it?”

“Do you not get it? I’m rejecting you.”

“You’re being awfully stubborn today. C’mon, a little bit won’t hurt, right?”

“Your ‘little bit’ is a hell of a lot more than just a little bit! Now cut it out!” Trying to dislodge him by hand was clearly not working, so he tried involving his legs as well. He braced his feet against Kirishima’s stomach, and with a shove, finally heaved him off.

“Hey now—using your legs wasn’t fair.”

“Shut up; that’s your opinion.” If he didn’t resort to such tactics, after all, he’d never be able to compete with Kirishima, so it was kind of unavoidable. It seemed it was high time the guy learned that he was sorely mistaken if he thought he would get his way every time they came to blows like this.

“Well, I’m afraid I must inform you that if you think you’ve turned the tables now...you’re quite wrong.”



“Huh? Uwah—!”

Kirishima grabbed the ankle nearest to him and gave a great tug, causing Yokozawa to bump his head on the arm rest once more.

“Hey, your toenails are getting kinda long.”

“I—I was just thinking I needed to trim them. Anyway—lemme go!”

“All right then, I’ll cut them for you.”

Yokozawa froze at the unexpected suggestion. “It’s fine! I can do it myself!” He would never have imagined things would work out like this; Kirishima just grinned down at him, in high spirits—as if he’d just had the *greatest* idea—in stark contrast to the panicking Yokozawa.

“This sure takes me back! I used to trim Hiyo’s for her all the time.”

“Don’t get carried away! Hey!”

Kirishima pulled out the box under the coffee table for storing small items and rifled through it until he found the nail clippers, all the while keeping a tight grip on Yokozawa’s ankle. “Now now, settle down. What if my hand should slip?”

“H-hey don’t say scary shit like that...” Kirishima’s words were clearly a veiled threat; even if the blade wasn’t exposed, nail clippers were still a bladed object.

“Don’t worry; I’m confident in my skills,” he boasted, full of confidence, but Yokozawa felt only apprehension.

“...Wait a minute, aren’t you stupidly awkward?!” Letting a guy who couldn’t even properly peel an apple to cut one’s toenails was just *begging* for trouble.

“Being awkward or not doesn’t matter when you’re just trimming someone’s nails.”

“The hell it doesn’t!” There was a world of difference between the soft nails of a child and the hardened ones of an adult. This was definitely not going to be as easy as Kirishima thought it would.

“So you don’t trust your lover? This is the sort of thing that can bring about discord in a relationship, you know...”

“...Whatever, have it your way.” He couldn’t see himself succeeding in changing Kirishima’s mind now, and rather than having finally prepared himself, it was more like the urge to surrender had sapped all his strength. The worst that could happen was that his nail would be cut to the quick.

However, he couldn’t bring himself to actually *watch* the deed being done, so he settled his head back on the arm of the sofa and turned his gaze up to the ceiling.

“There’s a good boy.”

“.....” He’d lost the will to fight back now, though, and just relaxed in defeat, exhausted. Soft *click...click...* snipping sounds filtered into his ears, but given that he wasn’t in pain (yet, at least), he supposed things weren’t going too horribly.

The last time he'd had someone trim his nails for him had been when he was a child—and the worry and embarrassing discomfort blended together, leaving him feeling quite conflicted. “Just...hurry it up already.”

“Don't rush me. Is there any particular length you prefer?”

“Not really. So long as they're not in my way.”

No, what bothered him was how—despite the fact that he was just clipping Yokozawa's nails—the way Kirishima was touching him was so...indecent. He was only holding his toes in position, but it was so embarrassing it was almost unbearable. Plus, he couldn't afford to thoughtlessly move his foot, and he desperately wanted to avoid Kirishima learning of yet another weak spot on his body.

“Hey, how big are your feet? Are you bigger than me?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Then I've got you beat by a half-centimeter.”



“I've got high arches and a wide sole.” He'd never had any issues with sneakers,

but finding leather shoes to fit his feet had always been a trial. Even if the length fit him, the width might be too tight, or the opposite.

“I see... Now that you mention it, you do look bulkier than me.”

“...Don’t touch me like that.” Kirishima had brushed his fingers gently over the sole, as if testing the thickness.

“Sorry—did it tickle?”

“You’re not *sorry*.” His words might have been ones of apology, but he had a broad grin on his features, which left Yokozawa with a very bad feeling. “Anyway—you’re done now, right?” On lifting his head, he checked to see that all ten toes had been cleanly clipped down, so he sought release from Kirishima’s grip.

But Kirishima remained firm. “No way; I haven’t filed them yet.”

“Huh? I’m not a *chick*. You don’t have to do that.” He couldn’t bear being stuck in this kind of position for much longer. He never did such annoying things as that usually, and while he did take care of his fingernails—being a salesman and all—he’d never been all that concerned with the state of his toes.

“If I just leave them like this, though, a nail might get caught on your sock.”

“That’s never happened even *once* before.” He always left them as they were after clipping and had never suffered from doing so. People invested in caring for their nails were free to do as they would, but he had no intention of filing them smooth himself.

“But it *might* happen. And I’ve told you I’ll do it for you, so don’t be shy.”

“I’m not *being shy*.”

“Come on.” His tone was gentle, but he still kept his grip firm about Yokozawa’s ankle. Despite what protests might come, he clearly had no intention of letting go, enjoying himself at Yokozawa’s expense.

He began to file away at the freshly trimmed toes with the emory board on the back of the clippers. Yokozawa simply watched warily, with Kirishima looking like he might start humming any moment now; what was he playing at?

“.....!” Kirishima released a puff of air over Yokozawa’s foot to blow away any shavings left behind by the filing, and while the sensation of his nails being filed down had been uncomfortable enough, the feeling of warm breath over the sensitive skin of his foot was unbearably itchy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He was done for if Kirishima thought he was reacting to his touch even the slightest, so he grit his teeth quietly and steeled himself—though his focus was shot now.

“Hey...is this maybe a sweet spot for you?”

“Like hell.”

“Really, now?” He slipped a finger between Yokozawa’s toes, rubbing the sensitive skin there, and Yokozawa reacted with a jerk

“Stop it—don’t mess around with other people’s bodies!” But it was too late now.

“Looks like I found someone’s weak point~ I never would’ve pegged you to have ticklish feet.” Kirishima was positively brimming with glee now, and Yokozawa grit his teeth in defeat, realizing he couldn’t refute the accusation. He’d completely forgotten he was ticklish there. But tickling feet was a childish game—not something grown men ought to be playing at.

“Try anything funny and I’ll kick your ass.”

“By ‘funny’, would you mean...something like this?” He leaned down to press his lips gently to the jutting ankle bone, and Yokozawa inhaled softly—if he said *yes*, then things would only escalate from here, but even if he denied it, Kirishima would likely not stop at this point. As he groped for a response, though, Kirishima gave a sharp tug on his foot, pulling his head from where it rested against the arm of the sofa and sending him toppling over.

“What the—*hell* are you doing?!”

“Well if I don’t spring things on you, then you won’t be a good boy and let me pin you, right?” Kirishima had his hands braced on either side of Yokozawa’s head, blocking out the light from the ceiling above and casting his entire field of vision into shadow.

“What about my nails?” The nail clippers were sitting on the coffee table now, and Yokozawa bit back the urge to complain *Who was the one who made up some cock and bull reason just so he’d have an excuse to fondle my feet?*

“That’s hardly important now.”

“That’s certainly not what you were saying earlier!” He could only gape in shock at the selfish whimsy with which Kirishima was carrying on. It was impossible to be angry given how unabashedly ridiculous the guy was behaving.

“I’m taking into account the *mood*.”

“No, you’re getting carried away!”

“Aww, you’re too kind.”

“*That wasn’t a compliment.*” This witty repartee Kirishima liked to engage in was utterly exhausting; Kirishima was probably enjoying the whole thing, so all it amounted to was a futile battle on Yokozawa’s part.

“Come on, things were just starting to get good... Show me a little love, will ya?”

“What part of this looks *good*...?” He’d been pinned down against his will—that certainly didn’t sound like things were ‘getting good’ to Yokozawa.

“Well you’re not *really* as pissed off as you’d like me to believe, right?”

“What’s that supposed to...”

“You know fully well your scary expressions won’t work on me—not with the way your cheeks flush at the drop of a hat at times like this.”

“—!!” At Kirishima’s comment, Yokozawa swiftly brought a hand up to shield

his face from sight—though at this point, he would've rather just scratched out Kirishima's eyes entirely.

“And what exactly are you hoping to accomplish, hiding your head like that?”

“.....!” Kirishima slipped a hand up the cuff of the shorts Yokozawa was wearing, kneading his thigh suggestively, and Yokozawa grit his teeth at the sensation akin to being ticklish once again rearing its head. “Are you...having fun groping my hard legs?”

“Of course I am. Doesn't it feel good?”

“No comment.”

“That's always your fall-back response when things aren't going your way. Though I don't suppose I mind all that much, since I interpret it as I like.”

“Ngh, don't...get so full of yourself...”

“It's just the two of us; I'm all but *expected* to be a little giddy,” he whispered gruffly, pressing his lips just below Yokozawa's ear, and a trembling shudder rushed down his spine.

“...Let's at least change locations. I don't want to do it here,” he allowed, finally giving in. If he couldn't get Kirishima to stop, he at least wanted to move to the bedroom. This was space he shared with Hiyori in their day-to-day lives—and he didn't want to do *this* sort of thing there.

“What, it's too embarrassing if we don't do it in a proper bed?”

“Yeah, sure, that's it.” The reason wasn't important—or so he thought, responding easily to Kirishima's question. But the expression Kirishima fixed him with in return said he wasn't satisfied with that reasoning at all. “...What's with that face?”

“It's no fun if you're not being fussy and embarrassed.”

Yokozawa fixed him with an expression of utter shock that Kirishima could admit something like that with a straight face. “You...are a *real* pain in the ass, you know that?” Any time he expressed his discomfort, the guy always told him not to be so shy—and yet now, when he was accepting things easily, he was ordered to *be embarrassed*? There was just no winning when you humored a man as inconsistent in his words and actions as Kirishima.

“Yeah, I think so too.”

“Don't say that with a straight face!” Yokozawa snapped in a sharp retort, and Kirishima let out a loud bark of laughter.

“But don't you think *you're* partly to blame as well, for going so easy on such an annoying guy as me?”

“Don't try to push the blame on me!”

“Aww, you're cute when you're angry~”

“—!!” He was at a loss for how to deal with someone like Kirishima, always ready with some witty comeback. But maybe it was times just like this, when he couldn't



bring himself to really blow up at the guy, that he was exactly as Kirishima described: far too easy on him. He finally gave up any further protests, exhausted.

“Nngh...”

It always seemed like, no matter how much he fought it, things always went Kirishima’s way in the end—and after much goading and coaxing, here he was, straddling Kirishima’s hips. “Hnngh...” He held his breath against the mounting pressure of something being forced into his body. Perhaps the reason it was still so hard going, after all this time and so many joinings, was because this wasn’t exactly a natural act in the first place.

The fact that they were cresting that hurdle in an effort to achieve physical pleasure, though, just went to show what lusty creatures humans were.

“.....!”

“We changed locations, just as requested, so let me hear that sweet voice.”

Kirishima gave his straining thighs a playful slap, and Yokozawa fixed him with an exhausted glare. The way he spoke all high-and-mighty grated *horribly*, and he struggled to recall just when Kirishima had found himself in a position where he had the right to make *requests*.

“*I’m...the one who...finally gave in here.*”

“What’re you talking about? *I* compromised for *you*. Well whatever; I guess we’ll just call that a difference of opinion.” He spoke as if he’d just concluded the matter one-sidedly.

“Why...do you always act *so damn* self-important...?”

“Can’t help it; it’s just my nature.”

“So contrary...”

“Hey, you gave up, right?; or else you wouldn’t let me fuck you after all that song and dance.”

“Wha...?!”

“So why don’t we stifle the conversation for now?”

“Huh?!” He opened his mouth to deliver a thorough tongue lashing to the irritatingly leering Kirishima—when a sharp thrust pulled a moan from his throat instead. He’d completely forgotten the position he was in; sure, he might have been the one looking down on Kirishima physically, but Kirishima was most assuredly the one in control of the situation.

How on earth had he let himself fall in love with such an *irritating* man?

People liked to go on about the ‘weakness of love’, and he did sometimes wonder if he’d made the right decision, but it was too late to turn back now.

“For the time being, focus on the task at hand.”

“Ah—*ah!* Nn...!” Kirishima began to thrust into him from below, and he lost all faculties of speech as the pleasure shuddering up and down his spine paralyzed his limbs. He was out of breath, exhausted now, and Kirishima took him by the hips and began to lift and lower him in swift succession. The stimulation seemed to wring from him a moan he would never have believed came from his own throat.



“Don’t clench up so tight.”

“Not...my fault...” He could hardly be expected to retain control over his body in such a situation. Spangles of pleasure shot up his spine with each punching thrust, but the sounds filtering from his lips couldn’t form coherent responses.

“Hey, that’s *your* body there.”

“Nngh...aah...!” Kirishima used the abdominal muscles he’d worked so hard to cultivate and increased the intensity of his upward thrusts, gripping Yokozawa by the hips to keep him from fleeing and pounding relentlessly up into his body.

He could only hold on and ride out the wave of punching thrusts, the generously applied lubricant contributing to the obscene squelching sounds echoing around the room.

“Try doing a little more work yourself; surely you’re not giving up *already*, right?”

“...Your funeral,” he growled, fixing Kirishima with a glare as he goaded Yokozawa on, and promptly collected himself, pulling his exhausted, pleasure-wracked body back into line, and began his counterattack.

As the week started, Yokozawa found himself with fewer and fewer opportunities to interact directly with Kirishima, until several days had passed without them speaking face to face at all. They texted and e-mailed, sure, but they hadn’t actually spoken in days.

Hiyori was spending the week with her grandparents, or on some evenings, Kirishima’s mother came to spend the night at their place, apparently. As such, Yokozawa couldn’t exactly pop in like usual, so he hadn’t been able to see Hiyori or Sorata of late either.

However, this was hardly unusual; even Kirishima, who made every effort to leave work on time each day, was swamped with work at the end of every month’s cycle. With the upcoming fair to worry about on top of everything, Yokozawa hadn’t a moment to breathe either.

“...Huh?”

He struggled to grasp what his boss had just told him—but the cogs in his mind had ground to a halt. He’d been called into his superior’s office under pretense of needing to ‘chat’.

Ignoring Yokozawa’s gaping confusion, the man continued: “This is all still under the table, you understand—nothing’s quite set in stone yet, but we’re confident you’re the man for the job. We’d like you to put those skills you’ve honed working in the Comics Division to better use elsewhere. So, that being the case, you should probably prepare yourself.”

“I...see...”

“Though of course, nothing’s going to be happening until at least after this fair’s over, so you shouldn’t worry too much over it for the foreseeable future. Just focus on

what's on your plate for now.”

“...Yes, sir...” he responded dully, leaving the office in a daze.

His mind was utterly blank—this had come completely out of left field. Pathetically enough, he still hadn't quite managed to wrap his head around what had just happened.

As his boss put it, they were thinking of changing up the division he was assigned to; he'd be moved from Comics, where he worked now, to the Literature division. Even if it wasn't set in stone just yet, the fact that they'd brought up the suggestion to him meant it was fairly close to being settled now.

And it wasn't exactly a *strange* idea; quite the opposite, in fact—it was stranger still that he'd *only* ever worked in Comics since joining the company.

“Literature, huh...”

He wasn't complaining about the position he'd be filling, by any means. It was only...he'd been involved in Comics for *so* long, so he couldn't shake the feeling that it'd be tough saying goodbye to the job.

There was nothing to think about; he only had one option. As an employee working for a company, he had no choice but to comply with its policies. He wouldn't always have the luxury of doing exactly the work he wanted to be doing. His salary was earned by doing his job as an employee of this company, so if Human Resources decided that he ought to be working somewhere else, he had a duty to do as ordered. Even if it wasn't a decision he was happy with.

On the bright side, at least he wasn't being transferred out of Sales altogether; as he saw it, Sales and Marketing were his calling. He could never have cut it in the Editing or Graphics divisions, which required some measure of creative talent, nor did he think himself fit doing deskwork in the production departments. A job that called for some legwork was definitely the best fit for someone who really threw himself into his work, like Yokozawa.

“Oh, welcome back, Yokozawa-san! What did the boss want?”

Yokozawa froze for a moment at Henmi's innocent question. “Huh? Oh, uh—just wanted to know how the fair preparations are going.” They'd discussed the fair, after all, so it wasn't lie—but it was probably best not to bring up the prospect of changing divisions with Henmi until things were settled.

“Just one more month until it starts! I'm getting dizzy from all the work that's left to be done, though. It's hard enough putting together a normal fair, but this time around we're involving everyone!” Genres typically held their own fairs separately at the end of the year, but this year, the entire company of Marukawa Shoten was cooperating to put together a fair—as dictated by the company president, intent on tearing down the divisions between genres. He wanted readers to be exposed to genres they might never have experienced before and had several ideas on how to go about such a grand endeavor.

However, while most idle onlookers might see the fair as a fun, flashy ‘festival’, for Yokozawa—responsible for putting the whole thing together—it was a source of

much trial and tribulation.

“I suppose; though, while I wasn’t sure we’d be able to pull it off initially, it seems to be coming together nicely. Gotta start putting my weight into getting *Za Kan* off the ground soon, though.” Along with the winter fair coming up, plans were already in the works for a separate promotion of back issues of *Za Kan* and its upcoming movie release. That, combined with the fact that a new volume would be released just before the movie came out, meant the campaign would be a showy one indeed.

This would be a great opportunity to take advantage of the movie’s release to increase comic sales; they’d slap a new cover on older volumes, run related promotions in the new volume and magazine, and dominate corners of cooperating shops. And it would be impossible to succeed with this plan without the aid of the editing department. Now that they’d secured agreements to cooperate from several bookstore chains, they were planning on going country-wide with the promotion—and production of posters and panels for the campaign was already underway.

“Oh yes! There’s that as well, isn’t there! They’re in the final phase of review for the movie now, aren’t they? I’m excited to see it in theaters!”

“They’ll have the advance premiere soon.”

“Are you going to see it?”

“If I can find the time, yeah.”

“That’s great! I sure would like to go, too...”

“Well lucky for you, I was told to invite some others from Sales, so pass the word around to anyone else who’d like to check it out.”

“Awesome! I’m really excited now!”

“Seems they’d like to hear some unbiased thoughts, so be sure to get a good look.”

“I’ll keep both eyes peeled as if I were a real film critic ready to write a scathing review! Oh, that reminds me—whatever happened with the plans for that promotion involving the new packaging and volume releases?”

“Nothing’s set in stone yet; everyone’s got their hands full prepping for the movie release. Though I’d really like to at least get some rough idea of their plans...”

The Publishing and Animation divisions were completely separate, which meant their Sales representatives were separate as well. Media mix involved cooperative involvement of multiple forms of media—which required working with divisions they’d never met before in order to get work done. That was easier said than done, of course, but the payoff was substantial.

“Shall I put together a few proposals myself? The target audience is readers of the original canon, correct? I don’t expect they’ll stray too far from there.”

“Yeah, you’re right; scrounge something up if you have the time. We can’t let this opportunity to boost sales slip by.”

“I’ll do my best!” Henmi returned brightly, brimming with confidence and

energy. He'd been something of an airhead (albeit a motivated one) when he'd first joined the company, but by now, Henmi was quite reliable, and Yokozawa reflected that he didn't really have much left to teach the guy.

"You've been in pretty high spirits lately; something good happen?" Reflecting back now, Henmi had seemed to be in a suspiciously good mood all week. He was always great at lifting spirits, but lately he'd been practically walking on sunshine.

"Oh, you noticed??" His eyes sparkled, and Yokozawa found himself walking right into his trap; he apparently was more than eager to discuss his personal life.

"Not so much *noticed* as...well, it was pretty obvious..." Yokozawa was starting to regret even asking; he should've just kept his big mouth shut.

"Actually...I got myself a girlfriend! I met her through a mutual friend, but she's just wonderful! We get along, we love the same authors—"

"All right, I've had enough of hearing you sing her praises already," he cut off, stopping Henmi before he got going on what would likely be a never-ending tangent.

Henmi dropped the subject with a pout. "Aww, you could at least hear me out a little..."

"Yeah yeah, some other time." They couldn't waste time on long conversations at the office; the workplace was exactly that: a place for doing *work*.

For a moment, Kirishima's face popped into his mind; a pang shot through his chest when he considered all of the ridiculous stunts the guy had pulled thus far, but at least it hadn't started to affect his job performance. As he saw it, though, the office was a place where one ought to avoid such extravagant displays, and he always made every effort to resist Kirishima's advances; it wasn't like he gave in *voluntarily*.

He then immediately realized, here, how desperately he was trying to excuse his actions, which only served to depress him even further.

"All right—but you definitely have to listen the next time we go out drinking!"

"Why on earth do you want to gab about her that much?"

"I dunno—I guess I just want others to share in my happiness?"

"Then *hell* no," he returned, immediately withdrawing his previous offer of drinks. Having just secured a girlfriend, Henmi seemed to be all but sprouting flowers from the top of his head.

"Ah, so mean!! You're the one who asked, Yokozawa-san!"

"I never said I wanted to listen to you drone on and on about your girlfriend." He'd asked what had Henmi in high spirits, sure, but he hadn't wanted any details really—and he didn't want Henmi getting the wrong idea.

"This isn't 'droning on', it's merely...an announcement!" The way he was speaking so seriously about things that most people only mumbled about while half asleep left little doubt: there was a whole damn *flower bed* sprouting up there. If he just left Henmi to his own devices, he'd settle down soon enough, so Yokozawa resolved not to engage in any idle conversation for the foreseeable future.

“Whatever—stop running your mouth and get to work.”

“Yessir~”

Realizing he needed to take his own advice, Yokozawa settled before his desk and opened up his e-mail program, finding he had unread messages seeking his confirmation on several matters. This, after only being away from his desk for a few minutes, even! He quickly scanned the lot of them, opting to reply only to the ones that were most important for the time being.

Among the unread messages was one from Kirishima; from the looks of things, it was a purely work-related e-mail, consisting of confirmation of minor items and reminders, but it was more than enough to bring back to the surface the stagnating feelings he'd been trying not to think about.

“.....”

Right now, his job was to sell comic books; even if he moved to Literature, he'd still be using the know-how he'd gained through this position to sell books. But despite understanding that brooding over the matter wouldn't change anything, he couldn't help the same thoughts running round and round inside his head.

For the reason he was so loath to accept this change in position...was because of his *feelings*. Despite knowing, logically, that there was nothing to be done.

What would Kirishima say, at a time like this?

He seemed on the surface to behave rather childishly at times, but on the job, he was the Editor-in-Chief who commanded and managed his editors. Here, he wore the face of a stern superior, a far cry from his personality in his off hours.

Perhaps he'd try to convince Yokozawa to accept everything... This was hardly something he needed to bother Kirishima with or come to him wanting to discuss, but if he could talk about it with him, he might be able to sort out his feelings on the matter somehow—

But as soon as he considered that, he immediately remembered Kirishima's current schedule. “...He's damned busy right now, isn't he...” He'd even told Yokozawa just last weekend that he'd be swamped for the foreseeable future with the upcoming movie release. Even Hiyori, a mere elementary school child, had offered to go stay with her grandparents. Now was not the time for Yokozawa—a grown man—to be *needy*.

“Did you say something, Yokozawa-san?” At Henmi's question, Yokozawa realized he'd been muttering to himself; perhaps this whole matter had been a greater shock to his system than he'd realized.

“It's nothing. Sorry—but I need to step away for a moment. If anyone calls, tell them I'll call back soon.”

“Will do.”

He then stood, leaving Henmi to look after things, and with his cell phone and change purse in hand, he headed to the break room on the third floor. If he'd thrown himself into work like usual, he would've forgotten about troublesome matters like this



by now—but *work itself* was the issue here.

“...Tsk.” He’d unconsciously started heading for the smoke room—before realizing halfway there he hadn’t brought his cigarettes with him. Or rather, that he was refraining from smoking for the time being. A large reason for his ‘break’ from smoking was health-related, of course, but more to the point, he was doing it out of consideration for Hiyori. It was uncomfortable barging into their home reeking of tobacco when even Kirishima didn’t smoke these days.

He hadn’t felt any real urge to light up lately, but today he was feeling particularly irritated, and hoping to take the edge off with some caffeine instead, he slipped a hand into his pocket to pull out his change purse. Pressing the button for black coffee, he waited for the paper cup to fill—when a nearby conversation caught his ear.

“Hm...?”

It seemed there was someone in the break room already. If it looked like they were doing something work-related, he probably ought to avoid disturbing them and find someplace else to relax. He peeped inside surreptitiously—then swallowed a sharp breath when he realized who it was. There, standing with paper cup in hand and chatting animatedly, were Kirishima and Yasuda.

“\_\_“

There was no logical reason to be so nervous, but his feet still froze in place. The pair seemed to have a rather peculiar air between them, which made Yokozawa loath to barge his way inside. If he wasn’t going to call out to them, then he ought to do as he’d initially planned and just find someplace else to cool his heels—but for some reason, he couldn’t tear his eyes from the pair.

He knew that Kirishima viewed Yasuda as nothing more than a coworker and contemporary, and while he did recognize Yasuda’s talent and often sang his praises, these were not particularly special feelings. Even now, they were only standing there together because of a work-related matter. He understood, deep down, that one’s public and private lives—work and personal matters—were separate.

“.....”

But...Yokozawa and Kirishima could only interact as they did, on a day to day basis, because of work; once Yokozawa changed positions...those interactions would dwindle down to nothing. He loved his job with Comics Sales, and it wasn’t simply the chance to interact with Kirishima that he liked—he genuinely enjoyed working with the man.

Working with Takano was a worthwhile endeavor as well, but Kirishima had age and experience on Takano, leaving Yokozawa with a completely different sense of accomplishment on a job well done. Honestly, he *really* didn’t want to give that up.

What he was feeling for Yasuda right now...was probably jealousy—jealousy over *that*. They had something between them that they mutually understood as contemporaries who’d joined the company together and interacted over the years.

“That reminds me—you’re doing the comic serialization of Oosaki Ryou’s piece,

aren't you?"

"You already know? That certainly spread fast."

Yokozawa missed his chance to make a graceful exit, unwittingly eavesdropping on their conversation. He knew it was impolite, but he couldn't help being a bit curious and so indulged.

"Everyone says I've got long ears; Oosaki-sensei went to college with you, right?"

"Wait, you even know *that*? I only just realized it myself talking with Chiba-san earlier!" 'Chiba' would be Oosaki's managing editor. From the sound of their conversation, it seemed Kirishima hadn't yet met with the author personally. Still, it was something of a surprise to hear that Kirishima and the author had met before; Kirishima certainly seemed shocked himself, but just how close *had* they been?

"You two must've been close, for Oosaki-sensei to ask you to head up the comic version personally."

"Not at all, actually; we had maybe one lecture together? So we saw each other on occasion, but outside of class, we never interacted at all. They never even came out drinking with us, so I had no clue what their plans after college were."

"So I guess you really are just former classmates, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I didn't really hang out with chicks all that often, after all."

"Wait—Oosaki Ryou isn't a man?"

"Assuming the real name I heard from Chiba-san was correct, she's definitely a woman."

"Wow, I never realized. Her debut pieces were pretty gritty suspense thrillers, so I just assumed. What sort of woman is she?"

"I know this is gonna make me sound like a jerk, but I honestly don't really remember what she looks like. She was kind of a bookworm—wore glasses, I think. I remember she always had her nose buried in a textbook."

"Huh? *That's* the closest relationship you two had, and yet she went out of her way to ask for you to head up her comic publication?" Yokozawa silently agreed with Yasuda's suspicion; this hadn't been a frivolous request, either. Marukawa had been *desperate* for approval for alternate medium releases of Oosaki's work—and Kirishima's involvement had been one of the stipulated conditions to obtain that approval. Truthfully, Kirishima had never had the option to turn the job down.

"It's baffling to me, too. Though I dunno—maybe she's just feeling a little nostalgic?"

"I can't imagine she'd bring personal requests into a work project just for *that*—hey, maybe she had a crush on you?"

"!!" Yasuda just casually blabbed the one suspicion that had been creeping at the edges of Yokozawa's mind, and his entire body froze at the blatant frankness with which the man spoke, holding nothing back.

“Nah, no way. I mean, we hardly ever spoke; I seriously doubt that’s the case.”

“Hey, everyone who’s ever tried to seduce *me* has been someone I’ve never even spoken to, you realize?”

“Please don’t even *think* to try and draw parallels between the two of us. Besides, everyone who throws themselves at you pretty much just wants to be your *slave*.”

“Brave words for a man who’s only pursued by loopy stalkers. Though I guess you’ve finally landed yourself a good one—but I have to admit, the fact that he’s a *guy* did throw me at first.”

Yasuda’s comments sent a shudder down Yokozawa’s spine; the ‘good one’ he spoke of was none other than Yokozawa himself.

Deciding he couldn’t eavesdrop on this conversation any further, he knocked back the rest of his now lukewarm coffee and turned on his heel to leave, annoyingly more on-edge than he’d been when he came.

“\_\_“

His mind was a mad mess—but what was he really getting worked up over? Even if he hadn’t had the issue of his change in work position to deal with, he still would’ve been discomfited by the topic of Kirishima and Yasuda’s conversation—and then of course there was the fact that he didn’t feel entirely comfortable with their relationship to begin with. He’d never exactly been a *calm* sort; he knew this. But still—had he always been this narrow-minded, jumping to conclusions?

It seemed nothing had changed in these months together with Kirishima, and he felt a pang of irritation at his complete and utter lack of composure. Maybe it would be best...to just place some physical distance between the two of them, to learn to better manage his public and private lives—so that he didn’t repeat the same mistakes he’d made before.

But as he stood there, arguing with himself, someone called his name: “Yokozawa.”

“!!” It was the fact that *Yasuda* had been the one to call out to him that shocked him the most. He turned, attempting to suppress his discomfort. “Did...you need something?” Facing him straight-on like this, he was reminded anew of just how handsome the man was—but he was finally starting to get used to it.

“What, do I need a reason to speak to you?”

“No, that’s not what I...”

“Well, as it happens, I *do* have a reason—mind if I have a word?”

“Huh?” he responded dumbly to the sudden request.

“C’mon, you can spare 10 minutes, can’t you? We need to talk, so come with me.”

“A—about what?”

“If you don’t snap it up, Kirishima’ll come.”

“!!” At Yasuda’s urging, he reflexively scrambled into the elevator.

As the doors closed behind him, though, he realized there had been no reason to rush to board—this forceful side to Yasuda reminded Yokozawa strongly of Kirishima.

The reason he’d slipped out of the break room trying to keep a low profile was simply because he hadn’t wanted to interrupt the two of them; he had nothing to be ashamed of.

The elevator slowly made its way upwards, and when he glanced at the panel, he realized the button for the 7th floor had been pressed—the level that housed the Film Department. As indicated by its name, this was the division in charge of handling movies and animation—and was naturally where an anime producer like Yasuda had his office.

Yokozawa had never had much cause to visit the 7th floor, so he wasn’t all that familiar with the area, in truth. Was Yasuda planning on taking Yokozawa to his office? He didn’t exactly like the idea of just going along with this whole thing quietly, but he *was* curious about what Yasuda wanted with him.

“So...what did you want to speak to me about?”

“Keep your pants on; haven’t you ever heard the saying ‘haste makes waste’? Just relax!”

“Is that the excuse you always give whenever you can’t meet your deadlines?” Generosity might be a virtue, but he was running on borrowed time at the moment, and while he didn’t mind sparing as much time as was necessary if this was only about him, he lost that freedom once others became involved.

Yasuda snorted softly at Yokozawa’s rather serious question. “I didn’t think there was anyone around with balls big enough to ask me that to my face. I’ve gotta say I really love how straight-forward you are!”

“I’m sorry—that was out of line.” Even if it were the truth, that didn’t give him the right to come out and *say* it. It was a bad habit of Yokozawa’s to just blurt out the first thing that came to his mind, and even if he didn’t mean to cause offense, he often did, all the same. In his early years at the company, he’d been known around the office as the “mouthy newbie”, diving headfirst into every situation with little thought to how others perceived him. Looking back now, he could tell how extremely forgiving his superiors must have been.

“Nah, nothing to apologize for; I know I’ve committed some atrocities in my past.” Yokozawa was actually more surprised he *realized* he’d committed them, rather than that he’d done so at all. “If you’ll permit me an excuse, though: I don’t miss my deadlines because I *want* to. It’s just, when I get in the zone, I tend to let time get away from me. I think I’ve gotten better about it lately, though.” He smiled easily, clearly unfazed by his admission.

*”And yet...unreasonable as he may be...I still put up with him for some reason. I guess you could say the strange inability for anyone to truly loathe him is another talent of his.”*

As he plodded down the hall after Yasuda, he recalled Kirishima’s words from

before; he could kind of understand where Kirishima had been coming from now. Despite practically being forced to go along with the guy, he couldn't manage to muster up any real anger with him.

"That's my desk there; pretty spic and span, huh?"

"Are you sure that isn't just because you hardly ever use it?"

"You figured it out then."

"Anyone with two eyes could figure it out." The Film Division's floor looked much like the Editing Division—a jumbled mass of confusion. For every desk whose surface was neatly arranged, there were others cluttered with documents piled high, ready to topple any moment now.

"Over here, Yokozawa." Yasuda led the way to a small conference room, likely used for impromptu meetings. "In here, we can have a nice relaxed chat without worrying about rubber-neckers."

"...Is this the type of conversation that might draw onlookers?"

"I guess that depends on how you look at it. You don't strike me as the type who likes having everything out there in the open, though." Yokozawa was starting to get the idea of what sort of conversation this was going to be, now, thanks to Yasuda's tone. He was probably planning on offering Yokozawa some candid advice on his relationship with Kirishima.

He hadn't come here to crack jokes with Yokozawa, and Yokozawa didn't have much time to spare himself, so he cut to the chase: "...So, what is it, then?"

"You really are an impatient one. Well, whatever—I'm pretty sure you've got some idea of what I want to talk to you about. It's Kirishima."

"!!" Yasuda could give Yokozawa a run for his money when it came to going straight for the meat of a topic.

"I don't think he noticed—but you were in the break room earlier, weren't you?"

"I just...I didn't want to interrupt..." Perhaps he'd brought up the subject of Yokozawa before precisely *because* he'd noticed him eavesdropping.

"I don't really care that you heard us talking, and I'm not going to give you any grief over it, so relax. I just don't want to get caught up in a lovers' spat, so I thought I'd make things clear."

"Huh?"

"I just want you to know you're barking up the wrong tree being jealous of me."

"What are you..."

"What, you thought it wasn't obvious? When you've got 'I'm super jealous!' written all over your face?"

".....!" He sucked in a sharp breath as realization that Yasuda could see right through him washed over him. He'd meant to immediately explain away his feelings, but the man was right: he was jealous.

However—it wasn't a jealousy born of his romantic relationship with Kirishima; it was simply that he envied Yasuda's ability to just naturally work alongside Kirishima. But lacking any clue as to how he might go about explaining these complicated feelings he was harboring, he buttoned his lips. Besides, regardless of how *he* felt inside, it was none of Yasuda's concern.

Whether someone's jealousy came from feelings of romantic love or longing and regret, it didn't change the fact that being the target of that jealousy was an inconvenience.

"I told you before, remember? It's not like that between the two of us; all we were doing was discussing work, and having you all moodily suspicious over me is just annoying."

"...I know." Humans, as a rule, loathed having others hit the nail on the head, and unable to bring himself to just nod politely, he spit the words out in a petulant tone.

"Then don't make that *face*. You know it only amuses him."

"This...it's not like that, this time..." Yasuda had known Kirishima for a long time and clearly understood him well; as he said, if Kirishima realized that Yokozawa was harboring feelings of jealousy, he'd tease him mercilessly for it, without a doubt.

"Then what *is* it?"

He couldn't stand Yasuda laboring under some misconception any further, and while he didn't like the idea of spilling his troubles to the man, he still managed to confess, "It's...not set in stone yet, but there's talk that...I'm going to be transferred. I might start overseeing the Lit division, and—"

"So it *is* jealousy, then! You're thinking you might not be able to work with him for much longer, so you're envious of the fact that I'm getting to work closely with him right now." Yasuda cut him off before he could get through his whole spiel, and the astuteness of his observations caused almost *physical* pain. His points were without fault, leaving Yokozawa nowhere to run.

That someone he wasn't even all that close with could see so clearly through him must mean his feelings were glaringly obvious right now. He'd thought by now he'd gotten a better handle on his emotions than he'd had in his younger years, but maybe he'd just been fooling himself.

"Have you always worked in sales?"

"I've been in the Comics Department ever since I started here."

"So then this'll be your first time working in a different genre. The fact that your jealousy's flaring up over *me* of all people might suggest some deep-seated worries about that. A job's a job, whether it's in Literature or whatever."

"I do understand that."

"So what're you worried about? Someone like you could surely handle himself no matter where he winds up."

"Worried...?"

“Worries about this new position, regrets about the work you’re doing right now, and jealousy over the people who get to hang around with Kirishima—it’s all mixing together, and that’s why you’re so confused. You need to get yourself in order—once you manage to get your emotions under control, you’ll be able to draw a nice line between your work life and personal life.”

“...” The blurriness that had been clouding his vision seemed to dissipate slightly with Yasuda’s advice. He never would have thought he’d wind up taking suggestions from Yasuda, but now that he thought about it, it really *did* seem rather simple. He’d only been blinded to the forest by the trees. “Are you...giving me advice?”

“What does it sound like?” Yasuda’s expression reflected his astonishment with Yokozawa’s blank confusion, clearly shocked he was so slow on the uptake.

“But—why would you go out of your way to tell me this?” That was his biggest concern, really. Truthfully, Yasuda had absolutely no obligation to do such a thing.

“Didn’t you hear me? I don’t want to get caught up in any funny business.”

“Surely you’re not the type of person to meddle *this* deeply in someone else’s affairs for just *that*, though.” Far from it, Yasuda actually seemed the type to *avoid* any unnecessary involvement in others’ business. If he simply hadn’t wanted to be dragged into a fight, all he needed to do was keep his distance. That way, even if anything flared up, he’d be well out of firing range.

“Well, if I had to say...I guess because I’m his friend?”

“Uh huh...”

“I mean—you realize how needy and demanding he can be, and how *annoying* that is, right?”

“.....” Words failed Yokozawa when he failed to see the point of Yasuda’s abrupt question; it was hard to determine if he ought to agree or disagree. Though Yokozawa considered *himself* rather annoyingly needy and demanding as well, and his ears burned with shame when it sounded like Yasuda was referring to *him* instead.

“He’s a handful, always poking his nose in others’ business. And while he’s never wrong in what he says or does, just because he’s in the right doesn’t mean the other party always *wants* it from him. I mean, sometimes it’s *more* annoying when he’s saying all the right things—you can probably relate, huh?”

“.....” He swallowed thickly, having thought the same things about himself.

“Realized now, have we?”

“We’re getting off topic.”

“Sorry, sorry. Anyway—that’s the kind of guy he is, so honestly at first, I couldn’t *stand* him, he was so damn annoying. But, those quirks of his are the whole reason I’ve still got my job here. So I’m pretty grateful to him, too. And that’s all to explain why I’m sticking my neck out and being nosy like this. Get it?”

“I...suppose so...” It seemed the friendship between the pair was even deeper and more solid than Yokozawa had initially thought. Kirishima had told him that Yasuda was

unreasonable and eccentric and utterly unreliable, but he clearly had a good head on his shoulders.

“Plus, it seems like he’s finally found someone he’s serious about—so I want things to go well for him. You two seem to click, so I want it to work out, for the long run. ...Wow, I sound like his sister about to give him away or something, huh? Aging tends to bring out the sentimentality, I guess—that’s no good!”

“Please don’t ask my opinion on the matter.”

“Oh yeah—you’re younger than me, aren’t you?”

“.....” He was dealing with a maelstrom of emotions right now, so it was difficult to muster a comeback. He couldn’t quite tell if he was grateful or not for this conversation.

“And just so we’re clear—I’m not the one you should be worrying about.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are lots of people out there after Kirishima—he’s a great catch despite having a kid, you know? He realizes this, of course, and tries to keep them at a distance, but he’s got his head in the clouds right now and has chinks all over his armor. It’s disgusting—you can just *see* the happiness oozing out of his pores.”

“.....” Yasuda’s wording was a bit harsh, but the man had known Kirishima for a long time—so he likely knew what he was talking about.

“And it’s all your fault, too—so it’s your responsibility to look out for him.”

“Be that as it may, I still can’t...” He hated having everything blamed on himself—but just as he was about to fire back a retort, he was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a third party, who entered the room following a short knock on the door.

“Yasuda? What’re you doing holed up in here—Yokozawa...?”

“Ki—Kirishima-san...” He hadn’t been doing anything *improper*, but he still felt guilty, and an uneasy chill ran down his spine.

“What’s brought you here?”

“Oh, just...” He groped for words, unsure of how to explain, and Kirishima rounded on him with suspicion clear in his expression.

“What happened? This guy isn’t trying to rile you up again, is he?”





“No—I was...” How was he supposed to explain the meeting? But as he stood there, bewildered by the question that automatically assumed something had happened between the two of them, Yasuda spoke up, tone offended.

“Hold up—why are you assuming that *I’m* the one who did something to *him*? Maybe *he’s* the one who drove *me* to tears!”

“Drove you to...” A cold sweat broke out within Yokozawa at Yasuda’s wording, sure to only rouse even *further* suspicion. No one unfamiliar with their personalities could be blamed for assuming that Yokozawa, with his dour demeanor, was the party at fault here.

But Kirishima quickly dismissed Yasuda’s pleas, wiping away Yokozawa’s worries without a thought. “You couldn’t get me to believe someone had made you cry even if the sun started rising from the west.”

“All right, I won’t deny that—but I wasn’t teasing him or anything!”

“Just because you don’t *think* you were doesn’t mean you weren’t! And—what’s Yokozawa doing here in the first place?”

“We happened to run into each other so I brought him here—that’s all.”

“As if this guy would ever find himself *happening* to pass by here. You probably dragged him up here, didn’t you?”

“Now now, let’s not argue semantics. No one likes the anal types.” Kirishima was usually the one arguing Yokozawa under the table, but apparently when he got into it with Yasuda, he was at something of a disadvantage. It was a rare sight, seeing *Kirishima* being the one on the defensive.

“No, *you* just aren’t anal *enough*—do you have *any idea* how often I’ve had to clean up your messes—”

“Ah, this could take a while—mind texting me the rest of the argument? You came here with some business, didn’t you?”

“I forgot to give you these documents so I brought them up for you.”

“Oh—thanks. Now, I’ve got another meeting to head to, so I’ll take my leave. You two play nice~” And with that, Yasuda snatched up the papers Kirishima held out for him and slipped out of the room, agile as a cat. Yokozawa couldn’t help but admire how smoothly he’d pulled off his escape.

“...Good god, that guy...”

“...So I guess there *are* some situations you don’t know how to deal with, huh?” It was refreshing, getting this peek at the real Kirishima, and Yokozawa stared unabashedly. Kirishima had confessed before that his usual self was nothing more than a facade, but he’d never expected to get such a good look at the raw Kirishima here.

“Shut up...” Kirishima’s expression waxed a bit ashamed as he found himself unable to hop back into his usual groove.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen you look like that.”

“Yeah? So what of it?”

“Oh nothing.”

“...So what were you two discussing?”

“Discussing...?” It seemed Kirishima wasn’t through with his inquisition. Caught off guard, Yokozawa’s gaze wavered; it would be far too shameful to confess to Kirishima that Yasuda had realized how jealous Yokozawa was and put a stop to it.

Kirishima might have had the high ground here, but Yokozawa still had his pride, so he groped for an excuse, realizing now that stuttering and hesitation had been a miscalculation on his part, only serving to deepen Kirishima’s suspicion.

He had no choice now but to try and fool Kirishima with lies until he was satisfied—he’d learned only recently that Kirishima himself could be *quite* jealous.

“...Is it something you can’t tell me?”

“No, just something there’s no *point* in telling. We were just shooting the breeze; told me to hang in there with the stuff I’m involved in.” He wasn’t being *completely* open about what they’d discussed, but he wasn’t lying at least. He just couldn’t bring himself to discuss the envy that Yasuda had pointed out.

“And you expect me to believe that he dragged you all the way up here just to *shoot the breeze*?”

“We ran into each other on the elevator and he brought me up here, that’s all. It was just a whim of his, probably. You should know better than anyone what a strange guy he is.”

“Sure—I also know that he’s the type to flirt with and tease people he’s fond of.”

“I told you, it’s not like that!” Far from it—after all, the reason Yasuda had spoken to him in the first place had been because of *Kirishima*. Apparently Kirishima just didn’t understand that.

“You’re not trying to cover for him, are you?”

“Why the hell would I do that? And—why are you so pissed about this anyway? This isn’t like you. Whatever—we’re good now, right. Because I’ve gotta get back to work.” Placing himself in Kirishima’s shoes, it wasn’t like he couldn’t understand the guy’s anxiety here. After all, he certainly hadn’t enjoyed seeing Kirishima and Yasuda alone together, the sight sending an uneasy shudder through his chest.

But he’d never once thought about pressing Kirishima for an explanation or attacking him for it. As Yasuda had pointed out—he *had* felt some jealousy welling up, but that was his *own* problem, not Kirishima’s or anyone else’s.

“We aren’t done talking.”

“I told you—there’s nothing to talk *about*.” He was bad at keeping a poker face, particularly when it came to Kirishima, who seemed adept at reading him, so he turned his back to keep his expression from showing—and Kirishima grabbed him from behind.

“What the—”

“Don’t leave yet.”

“Let me go—don’t pull this kind of shit at the office.”

“Don’t worry, no one’s coming in here.”

“That’s not the issue! How many times do I have to tell you that before it sinks in?” In contrast to Yokozawa, who wanted to draw a stark line between his public and private lives, Kirishima hardly made any distinction at all. Kirishima could easily slip between the two personas, though, and seemed to see no point in such separation. Getting worked up like this and losing what little mental control he had was sure to turn everything he attempted into half-assed results.

Given that they had to interact in the office on a number of points, he already spent a great deal of time here with Kirishima. Perhaps that was part of what made switching modes particularly difficult.

“Because you’re not answering my questions *honestly*.”

“God you’re a stubborn ass. I told you it’s nothing to worry—” But voices from outside interrupted his rant—possibly from people intending to use this little conference room. “Let me go!” he hissed, shoving free from Kirishima, and he quickly exited the room.

“Whoa—Yokozawa-san?”

“Sorry—didn’t mean to get in your way.”

The Film Department member—whose face Yokozawa vaguely recognized—openly gaped at the two of them, likely confused as to what two people from other departments were doing around here, all alone. He felt his irritation for the now-absent Yasuda rising, but there was no point in complaining now.

“All right, I’m off.” Fumbling an excuse here would just arouse further suspicion, so he abandoned Kirishima and hurried off with evident haste. He dove into an elevator that had luckily just let its passengers off and smashed the button for the second floor. “Good grief...” he muttered to himself once alone in the elevator. He envied Kirishima’s ability to remain unaffected by others’ thoughts and opinions—especially when Yokozawa’s own heart was still thudding a loud tattoo in his chest. “Guess I need to get more training in huh...” he mumbled in a bit of self-deprecation.

He was exhausted today, the massive emotional waves he’d been battered by having all but tapped him out. He’d had work he’d needed to get done, but had made no progress, leaving him stuck longer at the office with overtime than he’d planned.

“Guess I’ll just hit the sack...”

He returned the book in his hand to its space on the shelf; he wanted to get some reading in, but if he didn’t watch himself, he’d wind up pulling an all-nighter. Every time work picked up, he wound up losing any time to catch up on his reading. The commute to and from work tended to be his reading time, but when he was as exhausted as this, sleep took priority. Being sure to take good care of himself was the least he could do as a

working adult.

“...Literature, huh...”

The book he'd been about to read was one of Marukawa's titles—a book he himself would be trying to push as soon as his transfer went through. He wasn't particularly averse to the genre itself—even had some favorite authors—so he was confident that he'd be able to do just as good and fulfilling a job there as he was right now.

Ironically, he felt like the conversation with Yasuda earlier had helped him put his thoughts in some semblance of order. The reason he'd initially resisted the idea of transferring when it had initially been put to him by his boss was purely a personal issue, he'd realized.

It was ridiculously selfish and childish to simply not want to be parted from Kirishima—and yet that just went to show how important a part of Yokozawa the man was now. But if he was going to be so affected by their relationship that he wound up making stupid mistakes like he had when things had turned sour with Takano...then maybe a little space in the workplace was for the best.

He didn't want happenings in his personal life to adversely affect his work, nor vice versa. He just needed to set firm boundaries—which was easier said than done, especially considering how dreadfully awkward he could be.

It was times like this that he realized just how very inexperienced he was. Despite striving daily to be the kind of person he always aimed to be, it felt like he was being constantly reminded that he *wasn't* yet. He huffed a sigh—when a bright *pin-pin!* from the doorbell announced a visitor.

“...Who could that be at this hour?” A quick glance at the clock showed that it was past midnight, but as he sat there considering how suspicious it was to have a visitor this late, his cell phone started ringing.

“What the hell...” As he noted the caller's name, a sense of foreboding fell over him, and when he glanced through the peephole—there he saw Kirishima standing. He scrambled to open the door, bowled over by the unexpected guest.

“Yo.”

“What the hell are you doing at this hour?!” He knew that Kirishima was the capricious type, but there were *limits* to giving in to one's whims.

“I wanted to talk to you—face to face. We kind of left things up in the air earlier this afternoon, after all. I'm comin' in.” Without waiting to be invited inside, he pushed his way into Yokozawa's apartment, clearly feeling right at home. A plastic bag from a convenience store hung from one hand, and Yokozawa could see it held cans of beer and snacks. “Were you about to head to bed?” He must have noticed that the lights had been turned down in the living room and realized.

“I was. And it's not like you had to come all the way over here—a phone call would've sufficed, surely.”

“You'd just try and put me off if I called. That weird expression you had earlier's

got me curious now, like there's something you're not telling me.”

“.....” He seemed certain now that Yokozawa was hiding something from him. Kirishima flipped on the lights and settled comfortably onto the sofa—his pose clearly indicating he wouldn't be leaving until he was satisfied as he started to line up the beer and chuu-hi on the coffee table before him. “Weird expression?”

“That expression that said, ‘Hey! I’m hiding something from you!’”

“What’d you do about Hiyori?”

“Left on time whether they liked it or not, then had my mom come by after I fed her and got her ready for tomorrow.”

“Are you an idiot?! You managed to get off on time for once, so you ought to be spending time with *her!*” It wasn't like Kirishima to be so infatuated with a romantic fling he just started neglecting his home life.

“I couldn't help it! I couldn't stop thinking about you! Besides—when I told Hiyori I'd had a fight with you and was going to go make up, she happily saw me off. After getting pissed at me for being mean to you in the first place, mind you.”

“...You really *are* an idiot...” It seemed an apology to Hiyori was in order in the near future. They weren't exactly fighting, but he'd never meant to make her worry.

“Here, take a load off.”

“Don't give me orders in my own home,” he snapped, but reluctantly took a seat beside Kirishima, hating how he couldn't help but obediently give in even as he bristled with protests.

“Drink whatever you like; which snack should we open first?”

“I've already brushed my teeth...”

“So brush them again later,” Kirishima urged, popping open a beer can, and with little choice to do otherwise, Yokozawa reached for his own drink. The beers they downed in silent tension weren't refreshingly delicious at all, leaving only a bitter aftertaste.

Perhaps Kirishima was quiet because he was waiting for Yokozawa to speak. “...So did the Film Department people say anything to you after I left?” He sidestepped the big landmines, choosing instead to touch on something less sensitive. He *had* been curious about how things had gone after he'd slunk off.

“They seemed to understand when I explained that Yasuda and I had been in a meeting and he'd ditched me halfway through. It wasn't the whole truth, but at least it wasn't a lie. Though I didn't personally know all of the details *anyway*, so...” His tone carried a hint of complaint, and Yokozawa felt a wave of guilt building within.

He wished they didn't have to actually *discuss* anything, but he knew Kirishima would never accept that. “...All right, I'll talk—but just so you know, it's really not a big deal, all right? So...don't laugh at me.”

“As if I'd laugh.”

He fixed Kirishima with a dubious glare—then confessed what had caused him to be called up to Yasuda’s office. “It’s not...technically a transfer, but I might be changing the department I’m in charge of.”

“You won’t be involved with manga sales anymore?”

“I may wind up in Literature—my boss mentioned it to me today. It’s not set in stone yet, so I’m not entirely certain what’ll happen, but...”

“...And what does that have to do with Yasuda?”

“Nothing, really. Just—he caught me feeling down about the change and gave me a lecture, that’s all.” Kirishima ought to know better than anyone how sharp Yasuda could be at times.

He hoped the explanation would be enough to satisfy Kirishima’s curiosity—but alas, Kirishima then asked the one thing Yokozawa had been hoping to avoid: “...Why were you feeling down about it?”

“Why was I...” He groped for a response, unable to offer any immediate answer. Kirishima seemed so adept at reading others most of the time, but in moments like this, when it was *most* important, he could be so thick it *hurt*. He loved sticking his nose where it didn’t belong but lacked any delicacy or tact whatsoever. While Kirishima liked to think of himself as an average Joe, Yokozawa saw him as quite the eccentric, often finding himself quite at a loss to understand his whims. But then—value systems differed from person to person, and reconciling your ideals with a partner you could respect was crucial for human interaction.

“Is it...something you can’t tell me?”

“...Goddammit, you can be *so* annoying! Can’t you figure it out?! It’s because I didn’t want to lose the opportunity to work with you!” *He* should have been the one asking *why*—he really wished Kirishima wouldn’t force him to put these embarrassing truths into words. He’d probably just been playing dumb in an effort to force Yokozawa’s hand.

But when he finally brought himself to meet Kirishima’s gaze, he found the man gaping blankly, clearly having been blindsided by Yokozawa’s feelings.

“...What’s with that expression?”

“Oh—no, I mean...it was just like...’Oh...so that’s what it was...’. But—you haven’t gotten official word yet, right?”

“No.”

“Then don’t sweat it. Cross that bridge when you get to it—it might not even happen, right?”

“It’s possible—but my boss went out of his way to let me know. They might put it off for a while, but there’s almost no chance of it not happening *at all*.”

“*Almost* no chance.”

“...You really do like to look on the bright side of things, don’t you?”

“It’s one of my merits. And—wait, you *were* feeling down? Does that mean you’re back on your feet now?”

“Well—I couldn’t exactly brood over it forever. A job’s a job, and it’s not like we won’t be able to see each other outside of the office. I just got lectured for letting myself get gloomy over something so trivial.”

“So, he wasn’t seducing you, then?”

“Of course not! What would give you that ridiculous idea...?!” He openly gaped in shock at the trumped up worries Kirishima had evidently dreamed up.

“Well he seemed strangely fond of you, and you were staring holes through him the first time you met, so...” His tone suggested he hadn’t *seriously* considered this as a possibility, but he was clearly a little put-out. Kirishima reached for a chuu-hi—his second of the evening, Yokozawa realized—with a peevish expression on his face.

“I was only staring because I was *shocked*.” He’d been a bit captivated, admittedly, but not out of *attraction*—only out of appreciation. You didn’t come across someone as good-looking as that very often, and while Marukawa Shoten did seem suspiciously well-stocked with attractive men, Yasuda had seemed on an entirely different level, like he’d been carved from marble.

Anime producers were, as a rule, ridiculously busy, so their private lives tended to be a disorderly jumble—so the fact that Yasuda managed to look so ageless he could have even passed as *younger* than Yokozawa was worthy of admiration. But he hadn’t realized that Kirishima had caught that moment of captivation.

“That’s...really all it was?” He gripped Yokozawa’s shoulder with one hand, ducking down to peer deep into his eyes. If Yokozawa glanced away now, Kirishima would immediately assume he was lying, so he steeled himself, furrowing his brow, and stared right back.

“What would be the point in lying? Hell—I’m the one who’d like to have a few questions answered. Why would you think I’d fall for someone just because they’ve got a pretty face?” He knew there were things like ‘love at first sight’ for others, but he didn’t see that as ever happening to himself. Good looks could fan the flames of ardor, to be sure, but that alone wasn’t enough to get him to fall in love with someone else.

It was the other way around, in fact, for him: love for a partner in and of itself would likely be the catalyst to make him start noticing how attractive they were. Didn’t they say *love is blind*, after all?

“You wouldn’t?”

At more subtle prodding for affirmation, Yokozawa fixed him with a disgusted glare. “Again—*why are you asking that?*”

“Well—you like how my face looks, right?”

“Huh?! Why would you bring that up all of a sudden?!” His voice cracked at the unexpected question, and while he knew he was overreacting, he couldn’t keep himself together. He felt his face heating feverishly, knowing he wouldn’t be able to hide his feelings for much longer at this rate—he was as bad off now as if he’d just nodded in



affirmation.

“...You’re blushing.”

“Because you just open your mouth and babble stupid shit!” Truthfully, he *didn’t* dislike how Kirishima looked and could tell he had rather good-looking features. If asked point-blank if he liked them, he wouldn’t know how to respond, but given how worked-up he was getting, he supposed he must like them after all.

“...I never can get a straight answer out of you, can I?”

“I told you, this is just...” He didn’t know *what* he was trying to say anymore. He’d hoped to gloss over this matter, but he couldn’t figure out *how*. Even if he wanted to just hide his face, the way Kirishima was practically straddling him now made that quite difficult.

“Well, I like how *your* face looks.”

“Wha...” Kirishima brought his face even closer, shameful words practically dripping from his lips without pause and leaving Yokozawa unable to do much more than sit there, trembling, and bear the embarrassment. Perhaps this was Kirishima’s way of getting back at Yokozawa for worrying him so. One of these days, his heart was just going to give out in the face of so much *shame*.

“And of course, you’ve got a great body too.”

“Where the...hell do you think you’re touching...”

“Your ass—or, your thigh, I guess? Pretty nicely built...” The elastic waistband of his shorts gave way, allowing Kirishima to slip his hand deftly inside, and the soft rustling was almost ticklish.

“If you—wanna grope some muscles, then feel up your *own* stomach or something.” Kirishima was far more finely built, after all, and had quite a figure on himself. His normal clothing tended to make him look rather slender, but the reason he filled out suits and jackets so finely was because of how firmly fit his chest and back were.

“What’s the fun in touching my own body? It’s way more fun seeing you squirm like this.”

“You... Why not *think* a little before you speak?”

“Talking in circles gets us nowhere, though. But anyway—if that guy says anything to you again, you be sure to let me know.”

“Huh? I’m not some little kid, you know.” Kirishima’s phrasing made him sound like someone’s guardian, and Yokozawa felt himself snap when he recognized the tone as the same one Kirishima used with Hiyori.

“I worry *because* you’re not a kid. He seems to have taken a shine to you, for some reason, so it’s best to nip these things in the bud.”

“Best for *you*, you mean. And—dammit, either touch me or talk to me, pick one! You’re half-assing things here and...”

“Ooh, and we’ve received permission to grope! Though I thought doing both at once was a better use of our time.”

“*You...*”

“I trust you—but I still worry.”

“Huh...?” Yokozawa faltered at the suddenly serious confession.

“I can’t help it—I love you.”

No matter how many times he heard it, he would never get used to hearing those words. So brief a confession—just three little words, dealt so crushing a blow to his heart; it was fascinating.

Kirishima tucked his face against the crook of Yokozawa’s neck, continuing on: “Tell me these kinds of things straight away, all right? Geez, why does *he* get to be the one to solve all your problems...?”

“...Sorry.” If Kirishima had been the one to go to someone else for help in resolving some work-related issue, Yokozawa knew he wouldn’t have liked it at all. He would have felt crushed, thinking that he wasn’t someone Kirishima could rely on for matters like that. He’d been so fixated on maintaining his pride, he hadn’t thought about how his actions might affect others.

“There’s something else you’re worried about too, isn’t there? Gimme all you’ve got.”

“All right then, if you insist: Like I’ve told you time and time again—stop doing *that kind of thing* at the office.”

“‘That kind of thing’?”

Yokozawa felt a flash of irritation as Kirishima played dumb. “Touching me, or saying embarrassing things to me in public! Those aren’t the kinds of things you’re supposed to do in the workplace.”

“Yeah yeah, I know—I just get carried away.”

When Kirishima shrugged unapologetically, Yokozawa pressed, “You know—I’m *really* not good at this sort of thing. I can’t just flip a switch, and I suck at hiding my feelings. I *hate* how I’m on pins and needles all the time because of our relationship!” He carefully chose his words this time, instead of his usual ranting and railing. He *needed* Kirishima to understand that this wasn’t just a matter of being coy or shy.

“...Sorry. I may have been kind of inconsiderate on that point,” Kirishima responded, appearing uncharacteristically contrite.

“...I guess as long as you’re sorry for it.”

“You know, I am *seriously* head over heels for you—I never thought I’d fall for anyone ever again, and before I realized it, I found my gaze fixed on you. I felt like some lovestruck teenager who didn’t know what to do with himself—so all I could do was just *watch*.”

“H—hey, you sure you’re not drunk?” Yokozawa stuttered, taken aback by the

sudden confession. This was probably just pretty words meant to throw him off his game—but the punchline never came.

“I can’t *stand* the thought of ever letting you go. I...”

“—” Yokozawa gulped, silently waiting for Kirishima to continue—but despite waiting, and waiting, and waiting, he never finished. Quite the contrary—he wasn’t stirring at all. “...Oi, you didn’t just *fall asleep on me*, did you?” His tone had been half-joking, but no response came. He braced himself, wary that Kirishima was only feigning sleep to surprise Yokozawa, but the man wasn’t moving an inch. “Kirishima-san...?” he tried again, softly, after waiting a few moments.

He avoided using the man’s name directly in their conversations—mostly because it was...well, a little embarrassing. He knew it was just a *name*, but there was something of a hurdle to be surmounted in speaking it aloud.

“You can hear me, can’t you? Stop pretending to be asleep.” There was always the chance of dropping his guard and suffering an attack in response, so he had to tread carefully.



“.....”

“...You’re *seriously* asleep?”

“.....”

His questions and attempts at confirmation were only met with silence, though. It was only when he eventually caught the soft sounds of snoring that he realized he really *had* gone to sleep. He took hold of Kirishima’s shoulder and gave a gentle, experimental shake—but he still showed no signs of waking.

When he gave a rougher shake, Kirishima nearly slipped off of him entirely, and he scrambled to grip him tight about the shoulders, hauling him up again.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” It certainly wasn’t like Kirishima to fall asleep in the middle of a conversation. Once he woke, he’d surely regret it. “Geez...who’s the half-assed one here...?” he muttered bitterly to himself, though he wasn’t feeling particularly annoyed in truth. He’d clearly been exhausted enough to drift off in the middle of a discussion—and yet he’d still come all the way here.

He managed to slip Kirishima out of his jacket, intended to just let him sleep peacefully like this, and gently lowered him to the sofa. He’d probably feel it in the morning if he slept like this, but dragging a man Kirishima’s size all the way to bed was beyond Yokozawa’s ability. He pulled a blanket from the closet and draped it over Kirishima, stuffing a pillow under his head as well.

“You’re more trouble than Hiyo...” he muttered to himself, and on realizing that his lips were quirking into a soft smile, he quickly cleared his throat to hide the evidence.

The week seemed interminable, but at long last, Friday arrived. With overtime practically every single day this week, Yokozawa had found himself heading home on the last train and collapsing into bed, only to repeat the exercise when he came to the next morning.

While he’d made every effort to get into the office as early as possible each morning, he still had far more on his plate than he could handle. Those around him were trying to help as best they could, but everyone was already working their hardest, just as busy as he was, so complaining was useless.

If he could just make it through this month, things ought to settle down to some extent. Once the fair itself started, he’d mostly be working on support for the festivities.

For now, though, there were fortunately no events scheduled this weekend, nor would he have to come into work. Hectic as the weekdays had been, he could probably take it easy now. He’d be able to see Sorata for the first time in a week, and on Sunday, he had plans to go out with Kirishima and Hiyori, just the three of them. When he let himself focus on these things, he found that the fatigue didn’t bother him nearly as badly.

Apparently a piece of Hiyori’s that she’d drawn in art class had won an award in a ward-wide competition and was going to be on display at the Ward Office, so they’d decided to head down to the office to see it on Sunday.

Today, though, he’d go back to his apartment, with plans to finish up any housework he’d neglected by the next morning before heading over to the Kirishimas’ place the following evening. Thinking he might prepare Hiyori’s favorites for Saturday

night, he started to plan a menu out in his head as he stepped off the elevator.

He was currently making his way to the *Japun* editing division, with business involving handing over some sample materials for an advertisement as well as discussing promotional activities connected with the upcoming movie.

“—Crap!”

“Ah, I’m sorry!”

He’d ducked out of the way to avoid a collision with a passing coworker, swinging to the side, and wound up ramming his shoulder into a stack of boxes. The whole column had been in danger of toppling, when he managed to save it just in time.

“Are you all right, Yokozawa-san?”

“More or less. How about tidying up this place a bit, hm?”

“We’ve been meaning to get around to that, but...” The editor who’d addressed him gave a wry smile before slipping away. The editing floor was always a wreck—whether it was the shoujo manga division with *Emerald* or the shounen manga area of *Japun*. He supposed, though, that the literature division wouldn’t be all that much different in this respect.

There were posters plastered all over the walls here and there, and back issues of magazines were piled up into corners. Pretty much all of the desk tops were a sorry sight as well—and while Kirishima’s desk was reasonably tidy, there was still so much *stuff* on it.

Still, thanks to most of the manuscripts having been converted to data format now, much of the physical clutter had been reduced. However, that meant that overseeing the manuscripts still in physical form was a very important job in the editing division. These manuscript pages, drawn by the mangaka themselves, were naturally one of a kind, with no other original copies in the whole world. They were invaluable as far as the publishing house saw them—as well as the authors’ assets.

“Where’s Kirishima-san?” he asked Hitomi as he passed by, unable to pick him out on the editing floor. With his light hair color and trademark black-rimmed glasses, Hitomi always seemed at-ease, wherever he went.

“Oh, Yokozawa-san. I believe Kirishima-san should be returning from a meeting soon, but perhaps it’s run a bit long. Are you in a rush?”

Yokozawa flicked a glance to the whiteboard, noticing the word ‘meeting’ clearly scrawled next to Kirishima’s name there—though it should have ended some 20 minutes earlier by now.

“No, it’s not terribly urgent, so I’ll come back later. Sorry—but would you mind passing this to him?”

He’d wanted to speak directly with Kirishima, but he could always fire off an e-mail, and they’d have plenty of time to talk the next day as well. Kirishima seemed to have a meeting with an author scheduled for Saturday afternoon, but they’d agreed to have dinner together. Yokozawa would arrive at the station near their apartment building,

do a bit of shopping, and then head on over.

“Understood. But—Kirishima-san should be in the lounge, I think? He might be finished by now, so why not go check?”

“All right—I’ll poke my head in on my way out. If he’s holding the meeting in the lounge—would that make it in reference to the movie?” he asked, just in case—he wasn’t exactly eager to run into Yasuda again, after all, though his cowardice grated.

“No—they’re discussing Oosaki-san’s comic.”

“!!” He felt a jolt shudder through him at the unexpected name. Thankfully, Hitomi was caught up in reviewing the samples Yokozawa had just passed him and didn’t notice his discomfort.

“I believe their formal dinner is scheduled for a later date, but Oosaki-sensei was already here to meet with their literature manager, so they decided to get it over with via a last-minute meeting. It’s just a meet-and-greet, so he’d said he’d be done in a half hour, but I suppose they got caught up chatting...”

“...Yeah, probably...” He recalled Kirishima’s and Yasuda’s conversation from earlier, feeling a queasy sensation welling up in the pit of his stomach.

*“Hey, maybe she had a crush on you?”*

Yasuda’s powers of observation were always irritatingly on-point. He’d seen through Yokozawa’s and Kirishima’s relationship within only moments of meeting for the first time, and only a few days earlier, he’d noticed Yokozawa’s unresolved issues with jealousy and put a firm stop to them. Considering this, Yasuda may have been correct in his suspicions.

“Oosaki-sensei was apparently a former classmate of Kirishima-san’s back in college. That they specifically asked for Kirishima-san to work on their project must mean they were quite close, don’t you think?”

“No clue... I haven’t heard a word.” Aside from his eavesdropping, all he’d heard from Kirishima directly was that he’d been asked to head up the comicalization of Oosaki-sensei’s work—nothing more. He had to be sure to keep up appearances that he *hadn’t* heard something he’d only picked up in passing.

“Really? You seem like you know everything there is to know about Kirishima-san...”

“The hell I do!” He gave a start at Hitomi’s casual comment. The notion that even passing observers were starting to notice had him breaking out into a cold sweat.

“Eh—but, everyone knows you’re the person he’s closest with in the whole company, you know?”

“Yeah right. Yasuda-san’s known him a hell of a lot longer than I have—they’re contemporaries, after all.” He did feel a *slight* twinge of guilt, throwing out Yasuda’s name for purposes such as this, but if he’d responded honestly, that would have no doubt roused further suspicion. It had been a last resort.

“Oh yeah, those two started working here around the same time... I only met

Yasuda-san for the first time recently, but he's really quite beautiful! Line him up alongside Kirishima-san, and it's like seeing beings from another world..."

"Yeah, you can say that again..." His gaze went a bit distant along with Hitomi's. *Like beings from another world*—it certainly fit them, and when they stood together, it was definitely one hell of a sight. Perhaps the discomfort he'd felt, seeing the two of them alone together, had been because it had made him feel like something of an outsider, in that sense.

"They just *ooze* this aura that makes them impossible to approach, it made me feel like I was just some drawing on a page. But then—when he's with you, that's when Kirishima-san feels the most...I dunno, down-to-earth?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"No, just—it's not like he's usually really difficult to approach, but it's like...there's a filter over him, blocking part of him from view. Like he's deliberately creating a distance from everyone else, as their superior. And—I do understand that he does that for us, of course." Hitomi's thoughts were dead on target; he might come off rather gentle and amicable, but he was still one of Kirishima's subordinates and had sharp powers of observation.

"Well, he's an adult, so what can you expect?"

"But one time, I caught him standing with you, laughing *really* hard about something, and it was quite a shock—like, wow, even Kirishima-san can look like that when he wants to. It's proof of how much he trusts you."

Rashly denying the incident would only rouse suspicion of a shameful relationship, so despite the awkward feelings the comment roused within, Yokozawa feigned ignorance. "...I guess if you want to see it that way."

"Truthfully, at first—I found you *super* intimidating, but then I realized that just showed how serious you were about your job, and I didn't find you nearly as scary anymore. So while I understand it's mostly as an extension of my place under Kirishima-san, I'm really happy I get to work with you."

"Pretty words will get you nowhere, you know." Was everyone out to kill him with kindness today? Yokozawa was well accustomed to people being frightened of him, but having compliments heaped on him like this just left him ill at ease.

"I'm serious! Oh—right! I had something I wanted to ask you about the upcoming fair; do you have a moment?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." He was relieved to have some work-related conversation to distract himself with. He wasn't too good at talking about himself under any circumstances—be they compliments or curses.

"Now where did I leave it... Hmm—oh, there it is! It's this—about the rules for applying to win the present this time..." Hitomi fished out the document in question from a pile of papers on his desk and passed it to Yokozawa.

"Oh, that?" He glanced over the paper to confirm its contents. He knew from experience how easy it was to make mistakes at this point of the process, and pushing his

personal thoughts to the back of his mind, he forced himself back into work mode.

Hoping to be able to peek into the lounge area, Yokozawa stopped off on the third floor before heading back to the Sales floor. The third floor of their new building was where the lounge, meeting rooms, and break rooms were located, and Yokozawa often came to this floor when he had meetings with representatives of other divisions.

He spotted Kirishima immediately—he was seated at a table near the entrance to the room conversing happily with a woman with a bob cut. The woman was, in all likelihood, Oosaki Ryou. She was a far cry from the shy, glasses-wearing bookworm Kirishima had described, but time tended to change one's appearance.

The third person seated at the table next to Oosaki-sensei was her literature editor, Chiba. His plump physique was his trademark, and his knowledge of the best eateries in the city trumped even the most lauded gourmet magazines.

Hitomi had assured him that the meeting was over, but the trio didn't seem ready to disband any time soon. Giving up for the time being in light of bad timing, Yokozawa turned on his heel, intent on heading back to the Sales floor to just fire off an e-mail, when a voice stopped him.

“Yokozawa?”

“.....” This time it was Kirishima who'd spotted him, and Yokozawa bit back the regret that he shouldn't have gone out of his way to come *looking* for the guy—but it was too late now.

“Perfect timing. Got a moment?”

“Oh—sure.” It would've seemed suspicious to poke his head in and then claim that he was too busy to chat, so with a stiff nod, he made his way over to the table. The gaze of the other two meeting attendants upon him was heavy and uncomfortable.

“Oosaki-sensei, please let me introduce you—this is Yokozawa, he's in charge of comics sales here. He'll likely be the one who sells your own piece in the future.”

“...I'm Yokozawa of Sales. It's a pleasure.” In a panicked rush, he reached into his pocket to pull out his business card case. That moment of hesitation had been because he couldn't help but think about how he would probably be changing departments soon. If he transferred to Literature, he'd no longer have anything to do with comics sales.

But as Kirishima had reminded him, nothing was set in stone yet, so until the final word came, he was in charge of comics sales.

“And this is Oosaki Ryou-sensei. I believe I mentioned her before, but I'll be working on the comic version of one of her works.”

“I look forward to working with you—I'm Oosaki Ryou.” The woman who drew to her feet politely received Yokozawa's business card before bobbing a small bow. She looked him square in the eye, her manner smart without even a hint of timidity. This was indeed *that* Oosaki Ryou.





She wore her hair in a bob and was clothed in a pantsuit with a pair of high-heeled pumps and perfectly applied makeup—and Yokozawa’s eye was drawn in particular to her bright red lipstick.

“I’m looking forward to being able to read her works in comic form. Truthfully, I thought perhaps the story might be more suited to the shoujo manga genre, but in light of Oosaki-sensei’s wishes, we’ve decided to ask that it be serialized in *Japun* instead.”

Yokozawa had already heard that Oosaki-sensei had been the one to request the serialization in *Japun*, but not wanting to interrupt Chiba’s explanation, he instead offered a blithe response. “Oh, is that so?”

“And just between us, apparently Oosaki-sensei and Kirishima-san went to the same college! ...Though, you don’t seem all that surprised by this, Yokozawa-san...?”

“Ah, I actually heard about that earlier, up on *Japun*’s floor.” Thank goodness he’d already been briefed on this point by Hitomi. Even if he could feign ignorance, he wasn’t nearly skilled enough to pretend to be shocked by something he already knew.

“Chiba-san—you said ‘just between us’, but are you sure you haven’t been

babbling this to everyone you come across?”

“Oh no—of course not! It’s only—well, as he said! Yokozawa-san simply gets around! As expected from such a talented salesman!” Chiba explained following Kirishima’s question, clearly flustered. He clearly had no qualms about using Yokozawa to distract from the awkward revelation.

“I actually wanted to surprise Kirishima-kun with that information myself, and now you’ve gone and ruined my plan, Chiba-san.”

“I’m so sorry, it was just such an amazing coincidence that I got over-excited and...” He rubbed his head, clearly uncomfortable with the attention now.

“Honestly, though—until I heard from Chiba-san, I had no clue that Oosaki-sensei was *that* Oosaki-san, so I was shocked indeed!” Relief spread over Chiba’s features at Kirishima’s charge to his rescue.

“Perhaps—but I wanted to *see* you shocked! And you really didn’t notice, Kirishima-kun? Even though my real name and pseudonym hardly differ at all?”

“I hadn’t the faintest idea. I actually thought that Oosaki-sensei was a *man*, so it never crossed my mind.”

“Since I never show myself to the masses, everyone assumes that as well.”

“That’s likely due to the strong influence of your debut piece; they’re merely projecting the image of the stalwart protagonist onto the author.”

“Oh come now, I’m not nearly as drab as all that,” she protested, though she didn’t seem to wholly dislike the characterization. Getting a sense of unease from their conversation, he attempted to interrupt the chat with a casual question of his own.

“When you say they hardly differ at all—does that mean your real name is also ‘Oosaki-san’?”

“Ah, my real given name is written with the radical for ‘word’ on the left and the ‘kyou’ radical from Kyoto, as ‘Ryouko’. When I submitted my piece for the Newcomer’s Award, I hadn’t given any thought at all to my pen name, so I just took off the ‘-ko’ and wrote my name in katakana. It’s ridiculously simplistic, don’t you think? If I’d known I’d still be in this business for so long, I really should have thought up a better name!”

“I think it’s a fine name. Even names given a lot of thought can be difficult to read or too hard to understand, and then you risk it being hard for readers to remember you, so it’s actually quite useful from a marketing perspective.” Difficult names with a lot of character did stand out, but names that you could read at a glance and were easy to write tended to make orders go more smoothly.

“Ah, so that’s how you see things as a salesman, is it? Then perhaps it’s for the best I went with a simple name. I never intended to hide my gender, but perhaps it’s thanks to that pseudonym that I’ve been able to retain an air of mystery.”

Kirishima had described Oosaki as a quiet sort, but the woman before them now was certainly talkative. There were some who tended to speak *more* when nervous, but she didn’t seem to be forcing herself to fill in the gaps in conversation.

“So then, if you went to the same university, does that mean you two were in the same department?”

At Chiba’s question, a fond expression of nostalgia bloomed on Oosaki’s features. “Indeed; we attended the same lectures. I didn’t have much occasion to speak to him, but that was only because he was in a completely different league from me. He was popular among both men and women alike, a regular celebrity!”

At her praise, Kirishima smiled wryly and gently corrected, “I only happened to have a lot of acquaintances because I was a member of large clubs.”

“It’d probably be scandalous nowadays, but back then, there were tons of pictures of Kirishima-kun floating around amongst the female population! Some even said that he’d been scouted by a talent agency during the campus festival, and a lot of girls would’ve killed to be with him.”

“Someone’s certainly embellished the details; I only happened to give a small interview to a magazine for the campus festival.”

“Now don’t be shy—the very reason they wanted to interview you in the first place was because of how cool you were!”

“He’s still quite popular among the ladies here in the office as well. Right, Yokozawa-kun?”

Yokozawa panicked, not expecting to be drawn into the conversation at this point, and wary of Kirishima’s eyes on him, he responded innocuously, “Oh—yes. He’s quite caring for his subordinates, so a great many are fond of him.”

“He always took care of people even back during our college days. He’d hold study sessions to help his kouhai with their work and give them advice—everyone really relied on him.”

“You’ve certainly done your homework.” For someone who had claimed to never have opportunity to speak to Kirishima, Oosaki seemed quite knowledgeable on his history. ‘Celebrity’ though he might have been, was it really normal to know this much about another person?

“I spent a lot of time in the Library, so I often caught glimpses of those sessions. I was quite the bookworm back then myself, so I could always be found with my nose buried in a book. I was a dreadfully dull student, and I doubt Kirishima-kun even noticed me.” It seemed she’d been one of the fawning masses who had looked up to him during their years in college together. As she spoke about their time in university, her eyes sparkled with reminiscence.

Listening to her talk about Kirishima, though, made Yokozawa’s chest throb uncomfortably. Hoping to drag her away from the topic, he tossed out a question that had been on his mind: “Um, may I ask why you’ve gone out of your way to accept this media-mix offer now, when you’ve turned them down thus far?”

“Kirishima-kun actually asked me the same thing only moments ago. Well, it’s largely due to the fact that, when I heard the suggestion from my editor, it struck me as a very sound, well-thought-out plan, which put me at ease.”

“I see.”

“After discussing the situation with the producer and director, I realized how deeply they’d read my work, and I realized that I could rest easy with the job in their hands.”

“With that level of confidence, then I’m sure we can expect great things from the movie version.” Oosaki’s response was textbook—though the fact that it sounded so rehearsed may have been due to preconceptions on Yokozawa’s part.

At the very least, one thing was becoming clear: he did harbor some degree of jealousy toward this woman.

Despite what ulterior motives she might be hiding, though, a job was a job, and he hated the narrow-minded side to himself that couldn’t control his emotions despite recognizing this truth.

In stark contrast to Yokozawa, who even now was slipping into a mire of self-loathing, Oosaki’s expression was full of bright joy.

“And also—and this is a rather personal point, mind you—I really wanted to work with Kirishima-kun, since I’d always admired him. So having that dream finally come true has just thrilled me.”

Glancing over at her as she spoke, Yokozawa saw she had Kirishima fixed with a feverish gaze. No matter how you sliced it, those were the eyes of a woman head over heels in love. Given that even Yokozawa, dense as he was, could tell—it had to be glaringly obvious to any onlooker. Yasuda had been right on the money. And in light of how knowledgeable Oosaki was on the subject of Kirishima, she’d probably been in love with him since college.

“Then I suppose that would make Kirishima-san the savior of the film department. They’re over the moon at the opportunity to turn one of Oosaki-sensei’s works into a movie before any other company gets their hands on your work.”

“You exaggerate, Chiba-san! I’m sure the producer’s passion for the project was what appealed to Sensei the most. After all, the whole reason Oosaki-sensei’s agreed to let us draft her script is because you’re here, Chiba-san. Isn’t that right, Oosaki-sensei?”

“Eh? Oh—oh yes, of course!” Oosaki responded with a smiling nod to Kirishima’s prompt. Chiba began to scratch his temple, looking not entirely unhappy at being the center of attention.

“Oh no, not at all—I’m nothing... Though that reminds me, did you know beforehand that Kirishima-san was an editor, Sensei?”

“I’d heard through the grapevine back in college that he’d been conditionally hired at a publishing company, but nothing more beyond that. But then a few years ago, I happened to see an article interviewing him in a magazine, and it was there that I learned of his work as an editor.”

There’d been a period when both Kirishima and Ijuuin Kyou, the author of *Za Kan*, had routinely taken interviews together. The sight of an attractive mangaka and his editor together apparently appealed to readers, and all manner of magazines had asked to

do pieces on them. It was a chance for some great free publicity, so for a time, they'd enthusiastically agreed to the requests. Oosaki must have caught sight of one such article.

"I'd partly given up any hope, as literary fiction and manga don't exactly have much crossover, but when I was offered the chance to publish a comics version of my piece, I realized this would be that opportunity I'd been waiting for."

"It seems you've got high hopes pinned on you, Kirishima-san! Give it your best!"

"Well now I'm just worried as to whether or not I can meet those expectations of Sensei's," Kirishima responded lightly, giving a self-deprecating shrug of his shoulders.

"Oh, I by no means meant to pile on the pressure, so don't worry. By the way—why don't we dispense with the 'Sensei' and polite language and all? It feels so *formal* and *unrelaxed*..." Despite this being their very first meeting, Oosaki seemed quite straightforward. Perhaps she was aiming to close some of the distance between herself and Kirishima with this move.

"While I appreciate the thought, I'm afraid that won't do. Acquaintances though we may be, if I took such a blasé attitude with you, I'd be setting a bad example for my subordinates."

Yokozawa was bowled over by the response from a man who was known for being distressingly frank with everyone he interacted with. But now that he mentioned it, Kirishima *had* taken a rather polite attitude with Oosaki. Or putting it another way, it was like he'd erected a *wall* between the two of them.

This was different from the implication made by Hitomi earlier—Kirishima, as a superior, drew a line between himself and his subordinates, placing a certain amount of distance between them. But with Oosaki, he was treating her nearly as a complete stranger, so formal was he. Yokozawa had seen him interacting with authors often at autograph events and the like, but this polite attitude was something else entirely.

But despite feeling some hesitation when faced with a side to Kirishima he'd never really seen before, he nevertheless experienced a wave of relief. He ought to be ashamed of himself, getting jealous at a time like this, but he wouldn't deny his true feelings.

However, there was no guarantee Oosaki's feathers wouldn't be ruffled by the attitude. Women were dreadfully unpredictable creatures.

"...You've got a point. You're the editor-in-chief, after all. I suppose there's no helping it while you're on the job then—sorry for pressing!" It seemed she wasn't so childish she'd resort to throwing a tantrum; Yokozawa's worries seemed to have been unfounded.

"Sensei—we've got another appointment to get to. Shall we take our leave?"

"Oh, my apologies. Just got caught up in reminiscing. Well then, I expect we'll be working closely for some while yet, so I look forward to it." She held out her right hand, clearly hoping for a handshake.

"I'll do my best to meet your expectations," Kirishima responded placidly,

gripping her hand.

Yokozawa watched her exit the lounge area with Chiba, and felt a great weight lift from his shoulders. After being warned by Yasuda, he'd intended to apologize—but intention was all it remained. The reason he couldn't shake the feeling of irritation might have been due to his difficulty in balancing logic and emotion.

Regardless of any feelings Oosaki might have been harboring, this was *work*. Kirishima was unlikely to get swept off his feet by this woman, so he wasn't worried. It was just...those feelings stagnating in the muck tended to just come bubbling up and out. He thought he'd had a good handle on just how possessive he could be, but once he'd started seeing Kirishima, only then did he come to recognize this worry akin to panic.

He felt like previously, his temper had been the more fearsome of his emotions; he'd dealt with nothing but bitter emotions like frustration and irritation and resentment for so long. But just as he was about to drown in his own thoughts once more, something occurred to him: "Did you not need to see her off?" Kirishima usually saw clients off at the entrance.

"Today was kind of an irregular meeting; we weren't standing on ceremony, so it's probably fine. I really need to get back to the editing floor anyway." He glanced down at his watch and winced. Given the time, it was now a good hour after the ending time written on the whiteboard in the editing department.

"Do you have something you need to get done?"

"I have a few calls I need to make, but I've also got a meeting soon. Oh yeah—did you need something?"

"Huh?"

"You came down here because you needed something, right?"

It was only now that Yokozawa recalled his original reason for coming down here in the first place. He'd wanted to discuss some collaborative events for the movie, but it didn't look like he had time.

"I did have something I wanted to talk to you about, but it's not urgent, so we don't have to do it right now. I'll send you the details in an e-mail, so just let me hear your thoughts later." There was no need to bother Kirishima with such things just this very moment.

"Sorry for making you go out of your way; I've gotta run, though. I'll see you when we get off."

"Sure."

Kirishima then glanced down at a message that had just arrived to his phone and hastily made his way out of the lounge. Yokozawa watched him leave, then released a small sigh.

Maybe it'd been a mistake coming down here. If he hadn't seen how Oosaki interacted with Kirishima, he probably wouldn't be feeling so torn up inside right now. It seemed no matter how he tried to keep his cool, his heart still wound up in turmoil.

*Draw a line...*

He hadn't been *nearly* prepared enough for how difficult a task that was proving to be.

"Guess I'll need to double down on the training..." he muttered to himself, self-deprecatingly. As he stood there reflecting, though, a few editors wandered into the room, likely about to have a meeting. Not wanting to get in their way, Yokozawa took his leave as well.

Hiyori was just the tiniest bit dressed up today, sporting the new dress she'd had her grandmother buy her and a scrunchie binding her hair that had been a gift from Yokozawa. The three of them were driving, with Kirishima at the wheel and Yokozawa and Hiyori in the back, to the Ward Hall.

"You were up pretty early this morning; did you get enough sleep?"

"I went to bed early last night, so I'm fine! What about you, Oniichan? Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, thanks to you—I slept like a log." Perhaps it was just all of the exhaustion and fatigue finally catching up with them, but both Yokozawa and Kirishima had slept past the time they'd intended to wake. When they'd finally risen, the laundry had already been hung out to dry and breakfast was on the table. Yokozawa had protested that she should have woken them, but she'd returned that, "*Well you looked tired, so I wanted you to have a good night's rest,*" and his chest had clenched in admiration.

"Oh yeah—that trick you taught me worked wonders, Oniichan!"

"Trick'? Oh that." He'd simply told her that if she made sure to hit her pillow the same number of times as the hour she wanted to wake at, then she'd be sure to wake up at precisely that time. It was a little something his own grandmother had taught him as a child. He now recalled teaching the trick to Hiyori after she'd grown worried she wouldn't be able to wake up on time on days she needed to be up early for important events.

"I haven't overslept once whenever I've done that! And I taught it to all my friends too, and they said it really works!"

"That's great, then." It was probably just a form of self-suggestion, but if it worked, then it worked.

"What're you two talking about?" Kirishima called back from the driver's seat, evidently curious as to their conversation.

"I was just telling Oniichan that the trick he taught me really works!"

"Trick? Well isn't that just *adorable*."

"I just taught her something my grandmother taught me as a kid. It's not like I still do it myself." He didn't want Kirishima thinking he still relied on childish charms like that.

"Huh? You don't?"

"Adults can wake up properly on their own, so they don't need it." He couldn't

just blurt out to Hiyori that he refused to use such childish tricks at his age, so he passed it off as a matter of physical maturity. In truth, he'd just gotten used to waking up thanks to his trusty alarm clock.

“So how does this trick work, exactly?” Kirishima asked, and Yokozawa felt a strange sense of foreboding on the heels of the question. But he couldn't stop Hiyori from responding, so preparing himself not to overreact no matter what Kirishima came back with, he forced himself to remain calm.

“Well, you just slap your pillow the same number of times as the hour you want to wake up. If you wanna wake up at 6, then you hit it 6 times; if it's 7, then 7 times. And you really do just pop awake at that exact moment!”

“Wow, that *does* sound useful. Maybe I'll give it a shot next time.”

“Yeah, you oughta! It really works!”

“I'll try it out tonight, then.” Yokozawa couldn't bear the grinning leer Kirishima shot him through the rearview mirror, but he knew he'd be on the losing side if he let himself show any reaction right now.

“Eyes forward when you're driving.”

“I'm facing forward. I'm just wondering why you never told *me* about your amazingly effective little trick.”

“Because you don't need it. And hey—we need to make a right at the next light to enter the parking lot. Don't miss the turn!”

“Yeah yeah, I know.”

As they bantered, they finally reached the parking lot nearest the hall, and after Kirishima pulled into an empty space near the end of a lane, the three headed to the entrance together. The award Hiyori had won was for an art contest held among all elementary school students in the entire ward. The winning entries were now displayed in an exhibition room off of the Ward Cultural Hall.

This year's theme had been “Summer Vacation” apparently, and Hiyori had drawn a picture representing the time she'd spent with her maternal grandparents earlier that year.

“Do you get a certificate or anything?”

“They said I'm gonna get one from the school principal at tomorrow's morning assembly. It sounds nice...but it's gonna be kinda embarrassing, standing in front of everyone.”

“It's something you oughta be proud of, so puff that chest out and show off! If I didn't have work, I'd be there for that assembly in a heartbeat, but...”

“No way!! You'd better not come! That'd be even MORE embarrassing!” Hiyori frantically interrupted, desperate to keep her father from trying to come see her. There wasn't a child alive who wouldn't be mortified to have a parent show up at their morning assembly, even if it was to see them receive an award.

“So I'm not allowed to want to see my daughter's big moment?”



“*Want* to see it all you like, as long as you don’t actually come. Besides, you’re really busy right now, right? Forget about me and just focus on your job!” Hiyori had grown exceedingly skilled at dealing with Kirishima, given their daily interactions, and Yokozawa wondered if he perhaps ought to take a few leaves out of her book.

“Kirishima-kun!”

The unexpected call of Kirishima’s name brought their little trio to a halt—and given the ‘-kun’ tacked onto the end of ‘Kirishima’, it was unlikely they were calling for Hiyori.

“Eh? Oosaki-sensei?”

Finding Kirishima’s expression a bit suspicious, Yokozawa turned to follow Kirishima’s eyeline—and ran right into the smiling face of Oosaki, whom he’d just recently met, waving a greeting.

Today she was sporting a tight, knee-length skirt and a white blouse with voluminous sleeves, topped off with a beige trench coat. The large necklace decorating her throat and earrings dangling from her ears seemed to be of a matching design, and Yokozawa assumed the sweet scent that permeated her immediate surroundings to be her perfume. Her makeup as well seemed to be applied with even more care today than when they’d met previously.

He experienced a brief flash of suspicion, wondering if they’d perhaps *planned* to run into one another like this, but the notion was quickly dispelled, given the look of shock on Kirishima’s features.

“I got curious after hearing you talk about this the other day and decided to drop in. I recalled you said you were planning to come here on Sunday, so I thought I might run into you. And look, I have! I’m so happy!” She seemed in even higher spirits than when they’d met before, and unsure how they ought to act just now, he and Hiyori just looked on in confusion. “Oh, I’m so sorry! Have I caused any inconvenience...?”

“Oh no—not at all. I was only surprised, that’s all. Are you here to do some research today?” Kirishima’s look of shock quickly disappeared as he schooled his features, flashing a smile.

“Indeed I am. If I hadn’t heard you mention this art display, I probably wouldn’t have thought to use such a setting for my piece, so I’m truly grateful.”

“It was nothing.”

“It made me realize anew just how much I’ve forgotten about the past, even though I was once a child myself.”

“I was merely making conversation. If it inspired any ideas in you, then I’m sure that merely means it was something innately necessary to the story you were already dreaming up, Sensei..”

“You really are a modest one, aren’t you, Kirishima-kun? And—we’re not in a professional setting right now, so why not stop with the overly polite speech and ‘Sensei’?”

“Ah—I’m afraid I can’t...”

“Dad...?” Hiyori called cautiously, tugging gently on the hem of his shirt. She seemed to have been thrown off by the sudden unexpected appearance of Oosaki-sensei.

A look of realization flashed across his features, and he apologized to Hiyori. “Sorry, Hiyo.”

“Oh, is this your little lady? She’s even more adorable than I imagined!” Oosaki squatted down in place, bringing herself down to Hiyori’s eye-level. Hiyori, however, was being uncharacteristically shy and seemed unsure of what to do with herself.

“This is Oosaki Ryou-sensei, an author your dad’s in charge of. She’s here to use the art exhibition as research for her next piece.”

“Research? Is she a mangaka?”

“She’s a book author.”

“So you’re Hiyori-chan, huh? Hello there—I’m Oosaki Ryouko, aka Oosaki Ryou. I went to university with your father. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Oosaki gave both her pseudonym and real name, perhaps wanting to make an impression on Hiyori not as merely an author but a normal woman as well.

“Yes ma’am, it’s nice to meet you. Umm, I’m Kirishima Hiyori. Thank you for always taking care of my dad.” She ducked a small bow, just as she’d done the first time she’d met Yokozawa. However, her usual cheerfulness was nowhere to be seen. It wasn’t often that she came into contact with people like Oosaki, so perhaps she was just a bit nervous.

“My goodness but you’re well-mannered! Your father certainly raised you well.”

Hiyori returned an uncertain smile at the compliment, clearly in gloomier spirits than she’d been only moments ago. But as he stood there looking on worriedly at Hiyori, Oosaki noticed his presence and greeted him this time.

“Oh? You’re the sales associate I met the other day, aren’t you?”

“Ah—yes. I’m Yokozawa.”

“You must be close with Kirishima-kun! Are you of an age?”

“No, but he’s kind enough to associate with me.” It wasn’t the first time it had happened—they being mistaken for the same age at first glance. It wasn’t a matter to make a big deal over, though, so he brushed it off with a vague response. He had more important matters of concern—like what she was doing here in the first place.

“So, um...what brings you here...?”

“I decided to come after I heard from Kirishima-kun that Hiyori-chan had won an award for her art exhibit and that it would be displayed today. I’m actually thinking of writing a story involving an elementary-school-age protagonist, so I thought it might be a good opportunity to do a bit of research.”

“Research, is it...” If she was truly here only to do research for her novel, she simply should have wandered around on her own and then left. And yet instead, she’d

been waiting here by the entrance—suggesting beyond doubt that she'd *actually* been hoping to run into Kirishima. With any other author, Yokozawa probably wouldn't have been this suspicious, but recalling her attitude only two days prior roused worries. He kept his features even, but inside his chest, his heart was beating a furious tattoo.

"I've always wanted to write a boy detective story—so I'm digging around for some plot devices to use in that regard. If it's all right with you, I'd love to get your input later, Hiyori-chan." She seemed intent on tagging along with their group, and at the suggestion, Hiyori glanced up at her father uncertainly, but he seemed just as puzzled for how to deal with her—likely because, as an editor, he couldn't just abandon an author of his who was here doing research.

"Well, shall we go inside, for now?"

"Yes, let's; nothing will come of just standing around here gabbing."

Kirishima urged Oosaki toward the entrance, apparently having decided that he had no choice but to attend to her in such a situation. He cast an apologetic glance back at Yokozawa and Hiyori, bringing a hand up to his face and gesturing *I'm sorry* to the both of them.

Yokozawa took a hint and picked up his slack, settling his hand on the still unhappy Hiyori's head. "Shall we head in as well? We're here because we're excited to see your picture, after all."

"Yeah, let's go, Oniichan." Her smile was back now, and she tugged on the hand she gripped in her own as they stepped into the assembly hall. The atmosphere inside was very calm and laid back, and a receptionist manned a front desk.

"I haven't been to a place like this in ages. I wonder where the exhibition room is."

"There seems to be a bulletin board over there. Works by the upper grades are on the first floor, and lower grade-school children's works seem to be on the second floor." A stack of simple pamphlets quickly churned out on a copy machine sat before them.

"Ah, wait, I need to take some pictures! I hope I can snap some shots inside the exhibition hall too..." She frantically rooted around in her bag, pulling out a camera that she likely intended to use to shoot references. She pointed the lens at the reception desk and entryway, pressing the shutter fervently.

"Oniichan, let's go on ahead."

"You sure you don't want to wait and go together?"

"I don't wanna get in the way of his work. If we wait up where my picture is, then we'll still be able to see it together."

He couldn't leave her to wander about alone, tugging on his arm as she was, so he twisted in place and announced their plans to Kirishima. "Okay—hey, we're going on ahead." If he didn't make sure the guy knew where they'd gone, he'd surely worry when they just disappeared out of the blue. "Hey, you want me to trade places with your dad, Hiyo?" Oosaki might not like that, but *she* was the one butting in here, so she should be prepared to have to grin and bear it.

“It’s fine; I wanna see it with you.”

“.....” It wasn’t like Hiyori to make childish demands or be immaturity stubborn—in fact, she was quite good at putting up with situations she was less than thrilled with. However, this only served to make her current expression, as she tried to put up a brave front, all the more pitiful.

Today was meant to be her first outing in ages with her extremely busy father; she’d probably gotten up early enough to finish all the morning chores only because she was too excited to get back to sleep after waking. Oosaki’s appearance here meant she was no longer the main focus—when *Hiyori* ought to have been the one at Kirishima’s side, flashing a brilliant smile.

Kirishima was in much the same boat, having run himself ragged the whole week with this outing being the light at the end of the tunnel for him to look forward to. Yokozawa couldn’t imagine that he was at all thrilled with the way things were turning out.

“Oniichan, this one’s really good!”

“Yeah, it sure is. And it only got an honorable mention?” The piece she’d pointed to was a landscape fit to adorn a postcard, and Yokozawa was impressed at the level of detail he never would have expected from an elementary school student. In contrast, next to it was a portrait with a rather creative use of color. He hadn’t a clue what criteria had been used to rank the pieces, but they clearly hadn’t been selected based merely on “good” or “bad.”

“So where’s yours displayed?” The panel near the entrance was largely dominated by honorable mentions, crowded together, so the winning pieces might be further inside.

“I got second place, so I guess it’s a little further on.”

“Over there, you think?” He pointed toward a panel where the pieces were displayed with a bit more space between each one, almost certainly the winning pieces.

“Let’s go check it out, Oniichan.”

A few families were wandering about the exhibition room, and children younger than Hiyori chatted animatedly with their parents. Hiyori passed them by at a slight jog.

“This looks like the third-place winner.”

“Oh, this is my friend’s!”

“Yeah, you’re pretty close with them, aren’t you?” The name displayed beneath the piece was one he recognized. He’d learned most of her friend’s names through their conversations about how she was doing at school. “Ah, here’s yours. Pretty nice placement, if you ask me.”

“You’re right! I’m glad for it...but it’s kinda embarrassing too...” She was probably experiencing mixed feelings of pride and embarrassment—and Yokozawa wished fervently that they could have shared this moment with Kirishima as well.

“Is this from when you went on that trip by yourself?” The picture showed a small pony-tailed head peeking at fish swimming along a river bottom. The scrunchie tying the

subject's hair back was the same as the one Hiyori wore today. Even discounting his bias, Yokozawa thought it was a fine piece.

While the landscape from earlier was more skillfully created, Hiyori's had an undeniable draw that lured the eye in—that called to the soul. Perhaps she'd inherited that strong sense from her father.

“Yup. I drew the time when Grandpa took me fishing in this really pretty river. The water was so clean and clear you could even see the rocks on the bottom! But when I stepped in, it was so cold it shocked me!”

Hiyori's maternal grandparents lived far away and only got to see her twice a year. They'd likely been eager to share all sorts of experiences with their granddaughter when she'd gone to visit over summer vacation.

“It's got great composition—I feel like I'm staring into the water there with you,” he commented, and hearing his honest opinion brought a bashful smile to Hiyori's face.



“Really? I was thinking about how much I wanted to show it to you and Dad the

whole time I was painting it.”

“Well I can tell—and obviously the judges could, too. This more than deserves that second-place prize.”

“You think? I wish you and Dad and I could’ve gone together though... Oh, but then we’d have to leave Sora-chan all alone!”

“Yeah; he could probably handle himself for one night, but it’d be kind of sad putting him in a pet hotel for days on end.”

“Wish he could come with us...”

“You should make sure he gets to see your picture too. You’ll get it back when the exhibition’s over, right?”

“Oh yeah! You’re right! I can just show it to him!” At Yokozawa’s suggestion, her tone brightened. She seemed to be back in high spirits again, which sent a wave of relief washing over him.

“Sorry I took so long, Hiyo!”

“Dad!”

Kirishima situated himself between the two of them, taking in Hiyori’s painting. “So this one’s yours, huh? It looks great. You can really see the water flowing, and it feels like the fish could just leap up out of the water.”

“They actually did that, when I looked into the river like I showed here! I was so surprised I fell right onto my butt!” she explained, doing her best to relate the circumstances to her father.

“I can practically see it now. Is this the river you mentioned going fishing in?”

“Yup! I only managed to catch two, but Grandpa caught lots! We shared them with some of the neighbors, and they gave us stuff like watermelon and corn in return. I had some corn fresh off the stalk, and it was super sweet!”

“That does sound tasty. I bet if you drizzled some soy sauce on it and grilled it, it’d go great with a nice cold beer.”

“Don’t say stuff that’s got me wanting to go out for a drink right away...” Yokozawa groused, mouth watering just at the thought. Despite the late breakfast they’d had, he was starting to feel peckish.

“Oh wow, so this is Hiyori-chan’s painting? You’re quite skilled, Hiyori-chan!” Oosaki commented from beside them, taking in the picture now after running around snapping shots of the event.

“Th-thank you very much.” Hiyori’s expression stiffened a bit again, as Oosaki addressed her. It seemed she really wasn’t comfortable around the woman.

Yokozawa had never seen her so uptight and nervous around an adult before. She’d been trembling with nerves when she’d gone to meet an author she liked at an autograph event, but that had been quite different from how she was behaving now. Most of the adults in her life were teachers from school or neighbors and friends’ parents. She

did on occasion meet people involved in Kirishima's job, but this might have been her first time meeting someone like Oosaki.

Maybe it was just nerves from meeting such an avowed career woman as Oosaki. Yokozawa thought that he was far more intimidating on first sight, but Hiyori had taken to him straight away, from the moment they met.

"It's good enough to make me want to hire you to do a few insert images for my book. How about it, Kirishima-kun? Maybe I should ask Hiyori-chan to help out with the cover once I've finished the story I'm thinking of?"

"I'm sure she'd be flattered—but she's only in elementary school, and I think it might be too much pressure."

"She needn't put that much thought into it. I really think it'd be a hit... I'm going to take a picture of that emergency exit—wait for me?" With her camera in hand, she slipped around behind the panel to take a picture of the emergency exit hiding there. Perhaps she intended to use it in a plot twist.

While she was away, Kirishima quickly apologized in a low voice, "I'm really sorry about this. I never imagined it would come to this. She said she wanted to come check it out, but I just assumed she was being polite..." His expression was uncharacteristically grave, as he likely had merely intended to brag about his daughter as a subject of idle conversation.

"It's fine, don't sweat it. Not like you can help it, right? You can't just refuse her, seeing as she's an author, and you've already got a relationship as former classmates."

"Classmates though we might have been, we hardly ever even spoke. Plus she's changed a lot since back then; even knowing who she is now, it just doesn't really connect."

"You hadn't seen her since graduating?"

"She never even came to a reunion our class had years back, as far as I knew. Maybe she was there—but at the very least, we never spoke." The confusion he felt at the situation was palpable. "I'm sorry, Hiyo—this is hardly any different from a normal day on the job now."

"No, it's fine."

"It's good I finally got to see it together with you, though. It'd be nice if we could show it to your grandparents, too, but I feel like e-mailing them a picture just won't do it justice."

"Why not turn it into a postcard? You should be able to have just a few printed up," Yokozawa suggested. Getting a digital image through a simple e-mail was fine and all, but getting something they could actually hold in their hands would be a different feeling altogether.

"That sounds nice—I'll check it out."

"Plus if we make it a postcard, then we can send it straight to Grandma and Grandpa!"

“You’re pen pals with some of the kids you made friends with while you were there, right? Why not send them a response on one of the postcards?”

“Ooh, that might be nice too!”

Oosaki returned while the pair were animatedly discussing their postcard plans. “Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“Were you able to get some nice shots?”

“Absolutely. I can feel my creative juices flowing already.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Hiyori buttoned up again at Oosaki’s return, and just as Yokozawa was realizing that now was his turn to play conversation partner to Oosaki, an unexpected voice called out, “Oh, Hiyo-chan’s here too!”

“Yuki-chan!”

Hiyori’s mood lifted as she caught sight of her friend. Apparently Yuki was here visiting the exhibits with her family as well. She seemed to be Hiyori’s closest friend, as her name was frequently found on Hiyori’s lips.

“Oh, and hello to you too, Oniisan! So this is where Hiyori-chan’s picture was displayed!” Yuki was a very well-mannered young lady who always greeted Yokozawa politely when they met. Perhaps she’d taken after Hiyori, but she liked to call him ‘Oniisan’ as well, which frankly embarrassed Yokozawa a bit, and all he could do in return was duck his head a hair.

“We saw yours too, Yuki-chan!”

“Thank you for always looking after Hiyori, Kitagawa-san,” Kirishima greeted Yuki’s father. Yokozawa had encountered her mother a number of times, but this was his first time meeting her father.

“The same goes for me, with you always treating my Yuki well.”

“Did you see everything, Hiyo-chan?”

“Not yet—we’ve only seen the first floor so far.”

“Then wanna go together? Our dads are busy talking now.”

“Yeah, totally! Oniichan, can I go look with Yuki-chan?”

“I’ll come too—let me tell your dad where we’re going, so you two head on up to the second floor. And don’t leave the building, got it?” The building wasn’t very big, and if he chased after them, he’d quickly be able to meet up with them again, but he worried about letting them completely out of his sight—which brought a wry grin to his lips as he realized what an overprotective guardian he was becoming.

“Yessir~”

Yokozawa clapped Kirishima on the shoulder, letting him know their plans. “Oi, Hiyo and Yuki said they’re going upstairs, so I’m going with them.”

“Sorry, do you mind looking after them?”



“If you need anything, just call my phone,” he reminded, then headed for the staircase Hiyori and Yuki had taken upstairs. A number of pieces were also displayed along the stairwell wall, and after taking the stairs several steps at a time, he caught up to the girls just as they were alighting on the second floor.

“Hey, that lady who was talking to your dad—she was really pretty! Is she gonna be your new mom?”

“Eeh? No way, not at all!”

Yokozawa felt himself shudder at the mere mention of the word *mom*. Granted, when Kirishima and Oosaki stood together, they did give off an air of a happy couple chatting amicably—in fact, Yokozawa was the one who seemed like he didn’t belong here.

Having a man of no relation chaperoning two elementary school girls was suspicious, to say the least, and Yokozawa was reminded anew that, to a child’s eye, the sight of a woman close to Kirishima’s age standing alongside him seemed far more natural than Yokozawa in the same situation.

Not only Hiyori’s friends but also Kirishima’s acquaintances seemed to have generously accepted Yokozawa, but once Hiyori graduated from elementary school, the situation would likely shift. Perhaps it might become necessary to set some boundaries even in his personal life. Hiyori herself might be getting to the age where she really needed a motherly figure around. The reaction she had today might merely be evidence that something was bothering her.

“.....” Standing there turning the problem over in his own mind wasn’t clarifying Hiyori’s true feelings, though. All that he could safely say was that his very presence in their lives was unnatural.

“Well, they seemed really close...but I guess it’s something else? Oh, is she a relative, then?”

“No—I think she’s like...the author he’s managing right now?”

“Author? So she’s a mangaka?”

“No—just normal books. What was she here for today...umm...”

“Research?” Yokozawa filled in as Hiyori struggled to remember.

“Yeah yeah! She’s here doing research. She said it was because the main character of her next story is gonna be an elementary school kid. Wasn’t that it, Oniichan?”

“Yeah; she mentioned something about wanting to write about a boy detective.”

“Research huh... That sounds kinda cool! Wait—then, does that mean that your dad’s working today?”

“No, they just happened to run into each other at the entrance. Apparently she wanted to come check it out after hearing about the exhibition from my dad.”

“Oh, I get it! They were talking, so I thought maybe she’d come with you. ...Hey, are you not feeling well, Hiyo-chan?”

“Ah—no, no I’m fine! Umm, maybe I’m just hungry!” She forced a smile, but even her friend could see through her, divining that she wasn’t herself today.

“Here, I’ll give you some candy. You’ll feel better after you eat something sweet!”

“But...aren’t you not allowed to eat things here...?”

“It doesn’t say so, let’s just have a little bite! You’ll keep our secret, right, Oniisan?”

“Ah—sure, but just one.” He couldn’t exactly tell them not to, now, so he wound up giving his consent.

“Okay, one apiece!”

“Thanks!”

“You’re giving me one too?”

“It’s your bribe.”

“...You know some shady words,” he chuckled, grinning wryly at her expansive vocabulary. If they got caught, he would just take the blame on himself, and as he popped the little candy into his mouth, the bright sour flavor of lemon spread over his tongue.

Such a nostalgic flavor did indeed perk one right up.

“I’ll be waiting by the entrance.”

“Gotcha!”

Yokozawa took the girls’ coats from them as they scampered off for the restrooms, then started down the stairs. He was just about to enter the stairwell, though, when he heard voices speaking.

“I’m really glad I decided to come today. The atmosphere here just takes me back—I feel like I was able to remember some of what it was like to be a child.”

“So you think you’ll be able to use this for your piece?”

“I’m abuzz with ideas right now. I’ll have to jump right on my computer as soon as I get home.”

The conversation was between Kirishima and Oosaki. Yokozawa recalled that there had been a bench situated just beside the steps, and apparently that was where the pair were seated. All he needed to do was start down the steps and join them, but for some reason, he couldn’t move—this seemed to be happening a lot lately.

The two continued their conversation, unaware of their eavesdropper. “I’m quite certain Chiba-san will be thrilled.”

“Back to the prim and proper speech around me, are we?”

“I can’t risk being rude to you.” His words were gentle, but Yokozawa could feel the iron-clad will.

“Do you remember what I said the other day? I told you I’d hoped to be able to

work with you some day, right?”

“Indeed, I remember.”

“To tell the truth...I kind of had a crush on you back in college.”

“.....”

Her confession was exactly the sort of thing they’d expected. Oosaki, perhaps interpreting Kirishima’s silence as indication of his surprise, continued fondly reminiscing about their college year.

“You had no idea, did you? I wasn’t even on your radar back then, plus everyone knew you were head over heels for a girlfriend attending another school. So...I gave up on you back then.”

The phrase ‘back then’ stuck out.

“I was totally lame and frumpy in the past, remember? With the glasses and the braids and the long skirts. I didn’t even *own* any jeans, and I didn’t have the guts to wear a mini-skirt. That’s why I couldn’t bring myself to ask to be your friend.” She seemed to have had a complex of some sort in the past; Yokozawa could certainly sympathize. It took some balls to even walk alongside a man like Kirishima. If you didn’t drum up some confidence and refresh yourself, it was difficult to stand at his side.

“And that’s why I used the money I made from my debut’s award to give myself a complete makeover. I changed my glasses to contacts, went to a fancy beauty parlor, bought clothes at an upscale department store—even had a professional teach me the proper way to wear makeup. I made myself go out more—that’s how badly I wanted to change who I was. So—what do you think of me now? Pretty different, huh?” She kept her tone light, but her question was clearly serious.

Kirishima must have realized he couldn’t put off a response this time, and he chose his answer carefully before responding, “I can’t speak to whether before or now suited you better, but I will admit that I didn’t recognize you on first glance.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear you say that. The whole reason I accepted Marukawa Shoten’s offer was just to see you again.” Kirishima gave no comment. “But you’re a manga editor, right? I caught a glimpse of you at a party once, but you were surrounded by gorgeous mangaka and I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Ooh, that really got me down.”

That ‘party’ was likely the thanksgiving and reunion affair held at the end and beginning of the year, where the company expressed its gratitude to the writers and authors. Editors were expected to schmooze with their respective charges the entire time, and for someone like Kirishima, who was Editor-in-Chief of *Japun*, he had to pay his respects to not only mangaka but also staff involved with associated media, like directors and cast members.

At Marukawa Shoten’s galas, most of the female authors tended to flock to the editing team of the shoujo magazine *Emerald*, but Kirishima had his fair share of fans as well, and it was an annual tradition for authors to beg him for pictures. Popular for his amiable, sociable nature, he could always be found at the center of a crowd. Sometimes, a

line even formed as people waited their turn to chat.

The image of that night was probably stark in her mind—in her eyes, if she could've been one of those authors, she surely would have had the chance to speak to Kirishima. But then, she would've merely been another face in the crowd, so it was hardly the situation Oosaki could have hoped for, since she wanted Kirishima's focus on her and her alone.

“That's why I decided to go all out and make it so that we could publicly work together. If one of my pieces became a manga, then we'd have reason to see each other again. But there was no way I could just suddenly pop up and say ‘Please make my book into a manga!’, so I decided to write a new story that would appeal to younger readers and make it easier for us to work together.”

“I see—so that's why your latest work had a slightly different feel from your other pieces.”

“Yup—that's right. I never really read manga before, but I decided to do some studying and read a mountain of it. Then, I kind of got into it! That was when the offer for a movie version came along, and I thought, ‘oh FINALLY!’”

It was admittedly quite a feat for the piece she'd penned with the intention to make it into a movie to do so without a hitch. She'd said she'd done her research, but the fact that she'd been able to instill her own literary style in the work showed how much artistic sense she had.

Yokozawa couldn't help but admire her passion; did his own feelings for Kirishima even begin to compare? *'Of course not'*—came a small voice in the back of his mind.

His jealousy with Yasuda had been envy for a coworker, so it wasn't all that difficult to draw a firm line between his actions in private and those on the job. But Oosaki had mixed up her personal and professional feelings from the get-go; she'd *used her job* to make the love of her life her own.

She hadn't cared what it looked like to others, and that attitude of hers was confusing Yokozawa. After hearing her confession now, he hadn't the slightest clue how he was supposed to act.

“And you had no objections to branching out into other forms of media?”

“Well everyone else was calling for it; I just found it tedious, to be honest. I didn't trust anyone else enough to leave the grunt work to them, but if I took the time to review everything myself, then I wouldn't have any time left to write! But I know I can trust you, Kirishima-kun, so I'm not worried at all.”

So her heart had won out over everything else. How did Kirishima feel about this passion of hers? His opinions on the matter as a single man and as an editor would surely differ.

“I'm sure you understand what I'm trying to say, but just...let me get it out. I'm sill in love with you, Kirishima-kun. There were times when I tried to forget about you—but it's been over ten years now...and I just can't.”

“.....!”

Yokozawa could understand her feelings *painfully* well. The pain of continuing to hold on to feelings you know you'd be better off without was beyond description.

*You don't have to forget*—that was what Kirishima had told him, and the load on his heart had finally lightened. It's impossible to forget feelings that have already developed—but you can stop *remembering* them.

“I won't ask for your response right now. There's Hiyori-chan to consider, after all, and I'm sure you can't just jump into anything right away. I just...wanted you to know how I felt.”

“I'm sorry—but I'd like to refuse you right here and now,” Kirishima replied immediately, refusing her request outright.

“Eh...?” She seemed floored, likely having expected some manner of blithe, toothless polite response.

She thought she'd finally become a woman worthy of the man she admired, had created an environment where they might interact, and then confessed. They weren't a couple of fearless pubescent teenagers—they were mature adults. They didn't try to start relationships without some sort of *plan* in place, so she'd worked *so hard* just to finally see him again, and she likely thought she'd been remarkably patient in expressing her feelings for him.

But the previously bold and daring Oosaki...was now teetering on the edge of anxiety and uncertainty.

“Umm, is that...because we're meant to work together? If so, then we can just discuss things once we've finished this project. You can forget this conversation even hap—”

“That's not the issue,” Kirishima gently interrupted her increasingly desperate arguments.

Oosaki paused, waiting a moment in silence, then asked in a trembling voice, “...Is it because you still haven't forgotten your wife?”



Perhaps this was the *true* Oosaki, beneath the veneer. A shy young girl who liked to cloister herself away in a library behind a stack of books. It was difficult to transform who you were at heart.

“Forgetting her would be impossible.” Kirishima’s tone shifted to a more firm declaration as he placed a high wall between them.

Yokozawa was probably the one freaking out the most among the three of them. Now that discussion of Kirishima’s late wife was on the table, he was even *more* unsettled.

It wasn’t that he harbored any feelings of jealousy for the woman—but he didn’t feel unintimidated by her either, and when he stood at Kirishima’s side, in the position he knew *she* had rightfully earned, sometimes it weighed just a bit too heavy on him.

He knew Kirishima’s feelings for him weren’t false or fleeting—in this, he trusted implicitly. *Because* of what had happened in the past, they had the present they did now. And that meant the present of now... would one day become the past.

He didn't know what Kirishima was about to say—and while he did wonder, he was too frightened to eavesdrop any further.

“—”

The silence continued, and the first to break, unable to stay there any longer, was Yokozawa. He fled back up the stairs he'd just come down.

To put it simply, he was confused: So confused, he couldn't even tell what *exactly* it was making him feel uncomfortable.

“Huh? Oniichan? Didn't you say you were going down ahead of us?” He ran into Hiyori once he'd reached the second floor again.

“Needed to use the restroom myself.”

“Then I'll hold your bag! Dad and I'll be waiting downstairs.”

Now that he'd said he'd needed to use the bathroom, he couldn't leave without going in, so with little choice otherwise, he entered the men's restroom. Thankfully, it was empty, and after standing at the sinks in front of the mirror and taking a few deep breaths, he splashed a bit of water on his face to calm himself and scrubbed himself dry with a paper towel.

“.....”

No matter how the conversation went between Kirishima and Oosaki, Yokozawa had no right to make any comment. All he could do...was stand on the sidelines and watch quietly. He didn't want to blurt out something that might cause Kirishima even more trouble, after all, and while he didn't quite have the degree of control over himself he might have liked, he would still work to make a firm distinction within himself.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No, I should be the one apologizing for making you watch Hiyo all this time.”

Yuki and her parents were gone by the time Yokozawa returned. “What happened to your friend?” He'd hoped to avoid seeming more suspicious than he already did by delivering some manner of greeting to Yuki's father, but it seemed he'd missed his timing.

“They left already—but they said to say hi to you!”

“I see. Well tell them thanks from me as well.”

“Will do! I'll be sure to tell them later.”

“My apologies for keeping you waiting as well, Oosaki-sensei.”

“Oh not at all; I'm the one who barged in on your outing today, so I should be the one apologizing. But I really did have a wonderful time.”

The atmosphere between Kirishima and Oosaki seemed to have reverted to normal, and Yokozawa couldn't help but wonder how the conversation between the two had developed after he'd left. But he'd been the one who'd fled—and he'd been eavesdropping to begin with. There was no way he could ask, though he knew it wasn't good to let secrets fester between them like this.

“Kirishima-kun, do you have any plans after this?”

“Not particularly. We were thinking about grabbing lunch on the way home.” His tone was back to its usual tenor now; they’d planned for the three of them to share a meal together after the exhibition, but they hadn’t yet decided where to dine.

“Then why don’t we all eat together? I’d like to take the opportunity to ask Hiyori-chan all sorts of questions! It’s not every day you get to hear comments from a real-live elementary schooler, after all, so I’d love the chance to chat. And of course it’ll be my treat.”

“Oh, we can’t let you do that.”

“Then we could split the bill? I know an adorable little cafe nearby. I’m sure Hiyori-chan would love it.” With Hiyori being looped into the conversation now, it was getting harder for Kirishima to refuse her, and when Kirishima groped for a response, Oosaki took her questions to Hiyori herself. “How about it, Hiyori-chan? Would you like to go? They have the tastiest desserts there! And I’d love to be able to chat more with you and your father.”

Hiyori’s expression grew conflicted when Oosaki addressed her directly, and after a moment’s uncertain hesitation, she mumbled pathetically in a tiny voice, “...My tummy hurts...”

“Eh?”

“Did you get an upset stomach? That’s rare, for you to get sick.” The three adults went a bit pale with worry, and Kirishima squatted down to peer into her face for a closer look. Perhaps her quiet demeanor from before had been because she wasn’t feeling well, and Yokozawa kicked himself for not noticing.

Apparently Hiyori had often developed fevers as a small child, but once she’d started attending school, she’d rarely gotten sick. Indeed, Yokozawa could only recall one instance since he’d started dropping by the Kirishimas’ place that she’d been bedridden. This was the first time he’d ever heard her actually say her stomach hurt.

“It hurts...but I think I’ll be okay.” It was painful, seeing her try to force a smile as she put on a brave front for Kirishima. It showed how desperately she didn’t want to cause any trouble for her busy father.

“Hey now—I’m not telling you to put up with it; if you aren’t feeling well, we shouldn’t go out to eat. We can stop by the clinic on the way home, too. You’ll feel better once we’ve had a doctor take a look at you.”

“I’m sorry...” she apologized, voice tremulous with unshed tears.

“What’re you apologizing for? You can’t help having an upset stomach. There’s no reason you should force yourself if you aren’t feeling well.”

“Kay...”

“Oosaki-sensei, I’m sorry—but my daughter doesn’t appear to be feeling well, so we’ll be taking our leave today.” He dipped his head in a polite bow, and tucking back the flicker of his private side he’d just shown, he promptly returned to work-mode.



“It’s quite all right, please don’t worry. She shouldn’t force herself, so hurry back home. I’ll take my leave as well.”

“How will you be going back?”

“I was planning on taking a taxi, so I’ll just wait over there for a bit.” She pointed toward the taxi curb, and while it seemed that all of the cars were out at the moment, a quick phone call would have one pulling up to retrieve her in no time.

“Then I’ll stay with you until your taxi arrives.”

“I’ll be fine—you stay with Hiyori-chan. She’ll be worried if her father’s not with her, won’t she?”

“Why don’t I take Hiyo back to the car first, then?” Yokozawa had initially considered waiting with them as well, but he was keen to hear Hiyori’s thoughts in private. Hiyori had been looking at Kirishima this whole while like she wanted to say something, but given the burden of responsibility she felt, not wanting to cause her father any problems, she’d swallowed her complaints silently. She should feel fine, though, talking things over with Yokozawa, he suspected.

“...Sorry; I’ve done nothing but rely on you today...”

Kirishima decided to call Oosaki a taxi and see her off, so Yokozawa and Hiyori would head back to the car together. They could rest for a bit, now.

“No sweat, leave it to me. C’mon, Hiyo—hop up. I’ll give you a piggy-back ride.”

“N-no way, I’m fine! I can walk the distance to the car!” She shook her head from side to side, evidently a bit ashamed at riding on someone’s back in public.

“There’s no need to be shy around Yokozawa, you know that. Go on, have him carry you.”

“He’s right; don’t push yourself. Let people spoil you when you’re sick. Or would you rather I hold you like I did for your Field Day?”

“...I’ll ride on your back.” She must have weighed the options in her head and decided which was the less embarrassing of the two.

She climbed up onto Yokozawa’s back, and after confirming that she had her arms securely wrapped around his neck, he stood. “There we go. Okay—we’re heading back to the car first.”

They parted ways with Kirishima and Oosaki once again, heading for the parking lot. The tiny body clinging to Yokozawa’s back was warm but weak, and he was reminded anew that while she could go toe to toe with adults at times, Hiyori was still a child.

“Am I heavy, Oniichan?”

“Not at all; you’re light as a feather. You don’t have to worry about me—you’re the sick one, here. Actually, you can be even more demanding if you like. Like earlier, you really did want to see the exhibits with your dad, didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t ask that. Dad’s so busy with work...”

As he’d suspected, she had indeed held herself back today out of consideration for Kirishima’s position. “Then tell *me* instead. If your dad and I take on half the load each, I’m sure we can give you what you’d like.”

“But—you’re really busy right now too, aren’t you?”

“I suppose, but it’s the fact that I get to see you and Sorata on the weekends that keeps me going strong. Don’t you think I deserve to be able to give a little back? I’m sure your dad feels the same way.”

“You think...?”

“Absolutely,” he affirmed easily, and a smile blossomed over Hiyori’s face. Then, realizing that now was the time to ask, if he truly wanted to hear her thoughts, he continued, “...Hey, Hiyo? Did that lady from before make you feel uncomfortable?”

Hiyori had been uncharacteristically shy all day today, and Yokozawa suspected she just wasn’t very good at dealing with Oosaki’s type. He’d never seen her acting this nervous around her friends’ mothers or neighbors, so it was unlikely that she was bad at dealing with adult women in general.

Naturally, she’d never say as such herself—which was why Yokozawa asked. Plus, if Kirishima had been around, she wouldn’t speak her heart, worried she’d just cause her father undue trouble.

“...Yeah, a little...”

“You don’t see her sort that often. You didn’t know how to handle her, did you?” He kept his tone light, to keep her from getting too serious about the matter.

“That was part of the reason, yeah, but—I just got a bad feeling. It was my first time meeting her, though; it’s weird of me to feel that way, isn’t it?”

She never spoke badly about anyone, so the fact that she was voicing such negative opinions on Oosaki now suggested that she’d been jealous of the author, in a way.

“Not at all; your gut rarely fails you. Maybe you and Oosaki-sensei’s personalities just don’t click. I’m sure you have some classmates that, while you don’t dislike them, you just don’t get along, right?”

“Yeah, a few.” It seemed that, on top of wanting to give her father some space today, she’d been struggling with guilt over her negative emotions as well.

While Yokozawa envied her pure, innocent feelings, he felt obligated as the same time to offer some advice as an adult: “While it *would* be nice if everyone could get along happily, you’re gonna encounter a lot of people throughout your life, so what does it really hurt if one or two of them aren’t your type? You just need to learn to avoid them.”

“That’s all?”

“If you never have to see them, then you’ll never have to deal with the feeling that you don’t like them.”

“I see...”

Once she started her career, there would be times that she'd have to work with people she didn't get along with, but by the time she reached that age, Hiyori would hopefully be able to deal with them appropriately.

“Though I'm a terrible example—I tend to confront those types head-on.”

“You're not a bad example!”

“You think? That does make me feel better, knowing you feel that way. Look—we're here. Want to lay the passenger seat down flat so you can lie down?”

“No, I'd rather ride in the back.”

He let Hiyori slide from his back, then pulled out the remote key Kirishima had given him and unlocked the doors. “Want me to go get you some water?”

“No, I'll be fine. My stomach stopped hurting when I started talking to you.”

“You sure? You're not pushing yourself?”

“Yeah, I feel better now, really.”

“Then put this on, at least—it won't do for you to catch a chill.” He tugged off his pullover, laying it over her body.

“Thank you, Oniichan.”

“You're quite welcome.”

Perhaps stress had been the cause of her stomachache—that happened fairly often with kids. If Hiyori's mood lightened even the slightest bit by speaking with Yokozawa, though, then he was glad to have been of aid.

Her expression, however, suggested that she was still worried over something. Yokozawa slid in next to her, waiting patiently for her to break the ice.

“...Hey, Oniichan?”

“Hm?”

“That lady...she's not gonna be my new mom, is she?”

“?! Ah—no, no I...don't think so.” The sudden question had given him a start. He'd intended to be here to help *Hiyori* settle her feelings, but now *he* was the one feeling disoriented. Apparently she'd been more unsettled by Yuki's words earlier than Yokozawa had. The way she'd laughed off the idea must have been a bluff.

“Really? When Yuki-chan asked me if she was gonna be my mom, I thought maybe...”

Yuki could be a bit mature at times; he'd heard she had an older sister in high school, so perhaps that was why.

“I don't think you need to worry about that. You're the person your father cares about most.”

“But—don't you think he might fall in love with someone? He loves Mama, but

she's not here with us anymore, so..."

"....." Her words were quite awkward to take in...for someone who was secretly sleeping with her father. And some day, they'd eventually have to tell her about their relationship—but until that day came, he'd have to keep lying to her.

"Even at that wedding we went to a while back—a lot of the ladies there said I needed a new mom. I don't really want one, but I'm not sure about how dad feels..."

"Hiyo..." Children thought a lot more deeply about things than adults gave them credit for—worried about more things, too. Everyone experienced the same things in life as children—so why did they tend to forget about it with age? "If it bothers you so much, why not ask your dad about it?"

"I couldn't!"

"Why not? If I were him, I'd want you to tell me if you were worried about something like this."

"You don't...think it'll just cause him trouble?"

Yokozawa's chest clenched at her bravery, worried more about causing problems for Kirishima than about her own feelings. "You not talking to him will cause him more trouble, so if you really want to know something, I'm sure he'll give you a serious response."

"....." She fell silent at his suggestion. There was always the option of relating this conversation to Kirishima later in secret and having the man do some subtle follow-up of his own—but given how worked up she obviously was over this issue, she probably wouldn't be completely reassured until she'd confirmed with Kirishima herself. If she absolutely couldn't bring herself to discuss it, Yokozawa would have to take care of things himself, but he had faith she'd be able to pull it off on her own.

As he sat there, watching over Hiyori deep in thought, there came a soft knocking on the window. "Sorry to have kept you waiting." Kirishima pulled open the door on the opposite side, ducking his head in to check on them.

"Dad!"

"How's the stomach?"

"It doesn't hurt like it did before. I started feeling better when Oniichan carried me here."

An expression of relief washed over his face. "I see—that's great. Maybe his back acted like a hot pad?" His position had demanded he see off Oosaki, but that didn't mean he hadn't been worried about his daughter's condition.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I know that lady wanted us to go out to eat together..."

"What're you talking about? We can go out to eat any time; your body's way more important. Don't worry about it." He laughed off her apology lightly, but her expression remained sullen, and seeing the way she kept wavering between trying to say something before losing her nerve, Kirishima realized what the issue was. "...Feel free to tell me I'm wrong if I am, but...did you not want her to come with us, and that's why

your stomach started hurting?”

“It...it wasn't that I didn't *like* her, just...”

“It's my fault for not being able to keep my promise after saying we'd come see the exhibit together. I'm really sorry. You came here all excited, and I ruined the whole day.”

“No way! It's your job, so it's not like you could help it.”

“But today's not a work day. I really should have put you first, so I'm sorry I wasn't more thoughtful.”

“.....” Hiyori's eyes began to water as Kirishima gently massaged her head, testament to just how much she'd been holding back.



“Hiyo...?” Kirishima seemed thrown by his daughter’s teary eyes.

She finally found the courage to confess her worries, blurting out, “Hey, Dad? That lady’s not gonna be my new mom, is she?”

Kirishima’s display of shock at the question, completely out of left field, put Yokozawa’s to shame. “Why would you ask that all of a sudden? Of course not! No way, no how!”

“Really?” she asked, expression fraught with worry.

“Absolutely not—never!” At this complete and utter negation, Hiyori’s expression at long last melted into one of relief. As expected, in the end, hearing the words from Kirishima had done the trick. “Do you *want* a new mother?”

“I guess if *you* wanted one...” she returned after a moment’s consideration, her voice hesitant and soft. It was very *Hiyori* of her to still be trying to affect a stiff upper lip, even now.

Kirishima simply laughed off the suggestion, though. “How ridiculous! I’ve got you and Yokozawa and Sorata—and that’s all I need. Didn’t I tell you that before? I assumed you felt the same—but was I wrong?”

“No, you’re not wrong.” A grin blossomed on her features at his reassurance, and while Yokozawa experienced a moment’s panic hearing his name so casually mixed in with the rest, he was relieved to see that Hiyori hadn’t been bothered by it.

But if he let Kirishima keep mouthing off like that, things were bound to turn ugly, so he decided to suggest they head back home, cutting off further discussion. “Let’s get going—Sorata’s waiting on us, after all.”

“Right!”

“If you’re feeling better, want to buy some cake to take back on the way?” Perhaps Kirishima was hoping to ease the guilt of having worried his daughter by spoiling her some.

Still—even if she felt better now, she *had* been feeling sickly before. “Don’t you think we should give up on that for today?”

“Pudding’s good for the digestion, isn’t it? How about some of that?”

“...If it’s pudding, I’d rather have the pudding Oniichan makes.”

Yokozawa’s lips quirked up at the corners in response to Hiyori’s request as Kirishima sought her opinion. She really needed to make these childish ‘demands’ more often; that was her right as a kid.

“All right; I’ll make up a batch as soon as we get home. Wanna have your old man pitch in today?”

“Eh? Are you sure that’s all right?”

“I’m sure even someone as clumsy as him can’t mess up mixing milk and eggs together. If we make sure to teach him the proper method, he could even make it for you

when I'm not around.”

“You're sure I'll be fine?”

“We'll practice in order to *make* it fine.” Now was the perfect time to start making plans to put a little space between himself and the pair, after all. Hiyori had reacted particularly strongly to the earlier mention of a ‘mother’ in her conversation with Yuki—and that degree of resistance showed just how sensitive she was to the notion. Seeing all of those families visiting the exhibit together certainly hadn't helped improve her mood, either. She was still at an age where she wanted to be doted upon—so it was hardly strange for her to want a mother.

If Kirishima ever came across a woman of a similar type to Hiyori's mother, he might actually consider remarrying. With a woman like that, Hiyori wouldn't feel such a strong aversion—she'd probably be able to open up to her more easily, in fact. Then she might finally get the loving attention she wanted.

“.....”

He had no reassurance that his days spent with the Kirishimas would continue indefinitely. They might end some day—and they might not. No one could predict the future. But while he couldn't deny that he hoped such a day would never come, if he started preparing for that day, he might just make it out in one piece.

He didn't want to go out kicking and screaming pathetically like last time. While he maintained that he'd done what he did out of a genuine desire to see the other person happy, he knew he'd only wound up hurting them.

Having his heart broken before his very eyes had done some damage, but he'd also been struck by the acceptance that he'd never had a chance in the first place, and that all of his efforts had been for nothing. He never wanted to go through that again.

All he wanted was for the people he cared for to be happy. Seeing them with smiles on their faces, he'd learned, was his own brand of happiness. If he could learn to properly place space between them like this, he'd eventually be able to draw out ideal boundaries.

“Oi, Yokozawa. You sure you're feeling okay yourself?”

“Huh?”

At some point, Kirishima had slipped into the driver's seat and was peering at him in the back seat with a worried expression. “You were spacing out.”

It seemed he'd been so lost in thought, he hadn't realized he was being spoken to. Hiyori was staring up at him as well with an anxious expression.

“Sorry, just drifted off for a bit.” If Kirishima learned what he'd been thinking just now, he'd no doubt reprimand him for thinking stupid thoughts.

“Oniichan, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. I think I'm just hungry myself,” he bluffed with a wry grin.

“That settles it—let's get something to eat before going home. Japanese food should be easy on the stomach. You two settle in for a nap back there, and let me know if



you start feeling bad.”

“.....” He felt pathetic, but buckled his seatbelt beside Hiyori without further comment.

”I guess that about does it.”

Yokozawa had been engrossed in chores the entire morning: he’d taken care of his pile of dirty laundry, run the vacuum cleaner over the floor, and swept, and given his little-used bathtub a good scrubbing, making even the kitchen sink sparkle. Engaging in physical activity like this kept his mind from dwelling on ridiculous things—though perhaps, he considered, he ought to be thinking *harder* on them.

Spending time with Kirishima and Hiyori had become something of ‘the norm’ for Yokozawa, and days off spent alone now seemed to drag on and on. Even though a day off was his own to spend as he pleased, without concerning himself over others, he couldn’t help but worry.

Ever since that day, he’d lost his ability to maintain a proper distance with the Kirishimas. The harder he tried to keep any buffer he erected from seeming unnatural, the more awkward he came off. He couldn’t decide where he ought to make his cuts, how much space he should maintain, and before he realized it, another weekend was upon him.

“\_\_”

He needed to do as Yasuda had suggested and establish boundaries, to keep an appropriate distance between himself and the Kirishimas—that was ideal. But he’d been utterly bowled over by the oblivious Oosaki’s desperation.

How awkward he felt was frustrating, but there was nothing to be done about it. And perhaps it was more than mere awkwardness he had to contend with, but his *stubbornness*. Giving in was necessary on occasion, this he understood—he just couldn’t bring himself to actually *do it*.

Logical consideration of the situation suggested that it was only natural their little pieces didn’t all fit together nicely. If he could have, he would have liked to have conducted himself with more finesse, but it just wasn’t working out.

“God, I’m pathetic...” He was getting fed up with himself, now, the way he kept obsessing over the same thing. If someone else had come to him for advice on this same situation, he probably would’ve told them they had no choice but to fight back. And yet, despite knowing this, he couldn’t help the air of desolate gloom that settled over him, depriving him of any viable answers.

Why did emotions have to be so damned *difficult*?

What had Kirishima and Oosaki discussed after he’d left? Yokozawa had all but fled the landing when they’d started discussing Kirishima’s late wife, so he hadn’t a clue what they’d talked about after that. When he’d joined them later, they’d both looked as if nothing at all had happened. The fact that she’d invited them out for dinner, though, suggested that Oosaki wasn’t one to give up so easily.

Kirishima and Oosaki would be spending a fair amount of time from now on as

editor and author, and the media serialization of her works was a big project for the company. Oosaki would be above him, in terms of work relationships, and if she asked to meet him for a discussion of any sort, it would be difficult for Kirishima to turn her down.

Yokozawa understood there was no helping this. But, truthfully, that didn't make it any easier to stomach. He'd always assumed that he was prepared to gracefully withdraw should a proper partner for Kirishima appear—but they had to be a woman perfectly suited to be Hiyori's mother as well.

“\_\_“

Lost in thought, he was airing out his futon and changing the sheets when the intercom rang with a soft *pin-pon*.

“A delivery?” He'd ordered a book on the internet a few days prior when he hadn't been able to find it in the shops. Perhaps it had finally arrived. He didn't bother to check the arrival through the video screen, instead heading for the entrance with his signature stamp in one hand.

“Sorry for the wai—Kirishima-san?!” He pulled open the door, eyes going wide when he saw who waited on the other side. He quickly checked his mental schedule to see if Kirishima had been supposed to come over today, but he failed to recall any such promise.

“Yo.”

“What are you here for?”

“Oh, just stuff. I wanted to have a little chat—and figured it was time to enact my revenge from last time.”

“Last time...?” He thought he'd felt a sense of *deja vu*, only now recalling how, some evenings prior, Kirishima had arrived in a similar manner without warning. He'd run the conversation pretty much entirely on his own, then knocked Yokozawa down and promptly passed out on top of him. He'd apparently been pretty exhausted, as no amount of calling his name or shaking him had roused him.

“My one great regret in life is falling asleep on top of you.”

“You actually remember that?” He'd never brought it up before, so Yokozawa had assumed he hadn't cared. Apparently he'd just been waiting for the perfect opportunity to turn the tables.

Kirishima shoved his way inside, taking care to lock the door and chain it shut behind him. It almost seemed as if he was cutting off Yokozawa's escape routes, which was a little perplexing.

“What are you planning here?”

“You're confined to your quarters.”

“Confi...” He was shocked Kirishima was able to say such a thing with a straight face.

“You like to run and hide whenever you panic, so I figure I've gotta do this if I

want to ever have a calm, serious conversation with you.”

Apparently Kirishimam could see right through him, divining how he already wanted to flee the scene. If he admitted it, there would be no need to keep up appearances, but he couldn't help putting on airs. “I—I'm not going to run away!”

“I'm gonna take your word on that, got it?”

“Where's Hiyo?”

“Off to see a movie with Yuki-chan. She said she'd be back by 5, so we should head back around then too.”

“*We*? I'm not going over to your place tod—”

“And by the way, I told her that you and I were going on a date of our own.”

“Wha—don't screw around like that!” He went pale at Kirishima's flippant comment.

“Don't freak out; Hiyo just assumes I'm joking. Reacting like that makes it more suspicious, though.”

“Don't tell bad jokes like that.”

“But it's not a joke at all, so what's the harm? Oh, here: a souvenir.”

“What's this?”

“It looked tasty, so I indulged in an impulse buy. I decided against booze today; I'm sure I'd be fine, but I'd never live it down if I fell asleep just when things were getting good again.”

Yokozawa peeked into the plastic bag he'd been passed, finding fried goods inside—it seemed to be a croquette and menchi-katsu sandwich from the butcher's shop near the station. “This is just snack food to eat *with* booze.”

“So eat it with your dinner, then. Put on some coffee, would you? And not the instant stuff—I want a proper drip drink.”

“Someone sure is bossy today...” But despite the annoyance of Kirishima barging in the way he had, being able to retreat to the kitchen granted him a small respite to organize his thoughts, and as requested, he put some coffee on.

Usually, this kind of regulated process was enough to calm his nerves, but today he couldn't help the way his thoughts kept winding back to Kirishima, settled comfortably on the sofa. The coffee seemed to be flowing more slowly through the filter than usual.

What could Kirishima want to talk about? At the very least, he was clearly going to confront Yokozawa about his strange attitude lately.

When enough coffee for the two of them had been brewed, he filled two cups and headed back to the living room where Kirishima awaited.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

He settled down next to Kirishima, sipping his coffee in silence. Perhaps because he'd been in such a hurry to brew the coffee, the aroma was weaker than usual.

“.....”

“.....”

Kirishima failed to start a conversation, and Yokozawa was similarly incapable of saying anything. It might have been easier to just come out and apologize, but what was he supposed to apologize *for*? He felt regret that he'd behaved so awkwardly this whole week, but it didn't strike him as something he ought to express apology for.

While he stewed over how to broach the topic in his mind, though, Kirishima finally came out with, “...So is it Oosaki-sensei you're worrying about right now?”

“.....” Instead of responding in the affirmative, Yokozawa opted to just sit there in continued silence.

“Yeah, I figured. To be honest, I'd probably feel bad if you *weren't* concerned about her. You were listening when she and I spoke at the exhibition last week, weren't you?”

He inhaled sharply at the question. “Y—you knew?!”

“Yeah, but just me. I recognized the sound of you coming down the steps. I went out of my way to say more than I strictly needed to, just to make sure you overheard, but then you didn't bother to stay to hear the whole thing.”

“.....” His upset deepened as he realized that Kirishima had known the whole time he'd been eavesdropping.

“So how much *did* you hear?”

“About...about where Oosaki-sensei asked you if you couldn't forget your late wife...”

“You've gotta be kidding—after *that* was the important part!”

“As if I could have known that!” Most people would have gotten angry at being eavesdropped on, but Yokozawa had never imagined Kirishima would be pissed at what he *hadn't* heard.

“And that question was ridiculous to begin with; it's ludicrous to think you could possibly forget that you *loved* someone. Even if it's someone who cheated on you and broke up with you, it's not like you can erase the fact that you were in love. You can try not to remember, but you can't make it like it never happened.”

“...Yeah, that's true.”

The very existence of the past made you who you were now. If Yokozawa had never met Takano, if he'd never known how painful love could be, he might not be here with Kirishima now. Who you were...was a culmination of all the good and bad in your life.

“Oosaki-sensei didn't seem like she quite accepted that, though, so I told her that I had someone I loved and that I was dating them, so I couldn't respond to her feelings.”

“You *told* her?!”

“Calm down—I didn’t say it was *you*. And then, when she asked me if I was going to marry that person...I told her that I wanted to be with them for the rest of my life.”

“The rest of...” Yokozawa felt his face flush a deep crimson at the bold announcement.

“When we left, she asked me to let her still love me. And well, it’s not my business to dictate people’s feelings; saying no wouldn’t have made her feelings disappear, after all.”

“So then, she still...?” Despite having been thoroughly rejected, she had absolutely no intention of giving up, it seemed. She would probably continue to pursue Kirishima through their work together.

“It’s not something she needed to ask my permission for, though; in fact, frankly, it’s fucking annoying.”

Yokozawa was struck by Kirishima’s harsh phrasing, and his blood ran cold at the thought of *him* being on the receiving end of such words.

“Did you...actually say that?”

“I sure as hell did. If I’d left things vague, she might still harbor some vain hope, and there was no way I’d ever be able to respond to her feelings, so I didn’t want to leave any room for misinterpretation.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think you went a little far...?”

“I realize I was pretty harsh, but this isn’t just my problem alone.”

“Well, yeah...but still...” While Yokozawa agreed with Kirishima’s rationale, he couldn’t believe how calmly he was addressing the issue. This couldn’t have been the first time he’d been confessed to, and Yokozawa was amazed, grasping just how experienced Kirishima had to be with this type of situation. Despite the circumstances, he didn’t let his feelings waver, keeping a steady course in his love for one single person.

This realization left Yokozawa feeling like his heart was going to be crushed with emotion. “—“

He’d never meant to feel jealous of Oosaki, but the fact that he’d felt like her lesser showed how strongly he felt he couldn’t compete with her. She held a station he couldn’t hope to reach, and there’d been nothing he could do. It wasn’t a competition, and she wasn’t snatching Kirishima from him—nor did he want Kirishima to compare the two of them. It just *hurt*, that was all.

“And anyway, if she just wanted to stay in love with me, she should have kept her mouth shut and done just that. What the hell did she need the permission of someone who’s already got a lover for? There’s no way she couldn’t understand that no proper adult would go around making trouble for someone else like that!”

“Ah...” He finally realized what Kirishima was getting at. People were free to feel whatever they pleased, but once you involved someone else in those feelings, it was

no longer just one person's problem. Professing that you would "continue to care" for someone could be taken no other way than to assume that meant they would simply wait for the object of their affections to change their mind. She'd put herself forth as a partner to consider, to be compared with Kirishima's present partner.

"Those emotions might be pure if you keep them hidden inside your heart, but once you start making them known to others, that's when they become selfish."

"You've got a point..."

"I mean, I'm not deluding myself that romance is all sunshine and daisies; I know perfectly well there's a dark side, and I know that sometimes it helps to involve those around you. But I absolutely couldn't forgive her using *Hiyori* to further her intentions."

"!!" And now Yokozawa understood why Kirishima had taken such a harsh tone with Oosaki. The woman had kept clinging to faint hope, even after their discussion, and invited them out to dinner. Hiyori feeling sick had undoubtedly been because she'd sensed that Oosaki's efforts were fueled by self-interest.

"Of course, I'm angriest at myself for worrying the both of you with my indecisiveness," he admitted, scorn in his voice that spoke strongly of the regret he felt over his attitude.

"It's not like you could help it, given the position you're in. She's a really important author for the company."

"Even so, I should know my priorities. Who gives a shit about work if I can't protect the things most precious to me?"

"To think the day would come when I'd hear those words from your lips." He'd expected Kirishima to spout some drivel about how you couldn't call yourself a proper adult if you couldn't juggle your job and your family. He must've been *really* pissed at Hiyori being used against him like that.

"And just so we're clear: you're acting like this has nothing to do with you, but you *do* understand what I'm saying, right?"

"Huh?"

"I told you I want to protect the things most precious to me, and I've got this guy now who gets bent out of shape when a woman as beautiful and talented as her professes her love for me."

"....." Yokozawa lifted his head to find Kirishima staring down at him, as if watching over him. He wasn't being conceited just now; he knew quite well that Kirishima was talking about him. Perhaps Kirishima had seen through him, discerned just how unsettled he was by the situation, long ago.

"Things don't always work out the way we might want them to in relationships; that's just human nature. But whenever possible, I want to show that I care for you. I don't want to worry you, and I don't want you treating me with kid gloves either. I guess that's just my way of being selfish, though."

"~~~~!" Yokozawa's face was heating with emotion, his mind a bubbling pot

about to overflow, and he couldn't manage the words to respond to Kirishima.

"She asked me if it would've been better if she'd confessed to me sooner, but I'm confident that love isn't about who gets there first. Sure, maybe timing does have some influence on whether or not there's a spark between two people, but falling in love is more about *who* the person is, right?"

"Who the person is, huh..." Yokozawa muttered to himself—before a hand came up to slap him sharply on the back of the head.

"You're supposed to agree with me there! Or what—are you suggesting that you would've fallen for *anyone* who comforted you after you got your heart broken, even if it hadn't been me?"

"Hell no!"

"Yeah, I figured," was the leered response to Yokozawa's reflexive denial. Yokozawa grit his teeth, realizing he'd been played, but it hadn't been a lie. "Anyway—I've wrapped things up with Oosaki-sensei now, so enough with the worrying."

"You say that—but you're still managing her work, right? You'll probably see each other at meetings, and I can't imagine her giving up so easily..." From the way Kirishima had put it, Oosaki didn't seem the type to abandon hope just like that. Perhaps the strongest evidence of that was how she'd still invited them out for dinner despite being soundly rejected by Kirishima only moments before.

"I had her drop me as her managing editor."

He gaped at Kirishima's announcement. "Huh?! Are you sure that's such a good idea?!" Oosaki's sole condition for turning her work into a movie had been that Kirishima be in charge of the comics version. Everything could fall apart if Kirishima declined the position—and that would *not* be good for Kirishima himself, either.

"She agreed to it. It would've been tough on the both of us, after all. I'll still look over her storyboards and approve any actions taken—I mean, I do like the story itself. But I think she can handle things without me."

Still, even if she'd agreed to the move, that didn't mean she approved of it. But there was no way to be sure, so if Kirishima said he'd wrapped things up, then Yokozawa had no choice but to trust that he knew what he was doing.

"...Hey, so were you at least a *little* jealous?"

"...Who knows." He didn't want to admit it just now.

"C'mon, don't gimme that. You were feeling torn, so you ran off without hearing the whole story, right?"

"It's none of your damn business."

"What're you talking about? It's *only* my business! Now stop being so damn shy—throw me a bone and be honest once in a while." Kirishima began to rib him teasingly with an elbow, and Yokozawa's voice snapped with irritation.

"Enough, already! Fine! I was so jealous of Oosaki-sensei and Yasuda-san I could've exploded!"

Kirishima blinked slowly in response to his outburst. "...Why on earth would you bring up *Yasuda* now of all times...?"

"Ah." Crap, it'd just slipped out. Yokozawa's face grew even hotter than it'd already been at his slip of the tongue, and he was certain he was blushing red as a tomato for all to see.

Kirishima's shocked expression slowly took on a leer, though. "I see...so you were jealous of *Yasuda* as well, huh?"

"....."

"Does your jealousy have anything to do with why you were talking to him, perhaps?"

"....." Yokozawa bit back any reply; he knew if he opened his mouth now, Kirishima would just tease him further.

"Mhmm...I get it. He was teasing you because he could *tell* how jealous you were, then."

"I didn't say a word!" Yokozawa felt a shudder ripple down his spine at Kirishima's words, as if he'd been reading his very thoughts. He really wished Kirishima's instinct would stop being so damn *on-point* at times like this...

"You're a cinch to read, even when you keep your lips shut. Especially like now, when you're determined not to spill anything."

"....."

"So stop trying to hide things from me."

"Shut up. Well? You got a problem if that's what really happened, then?" There was no point in trying to hide how embarrassed he was about the whole situation any longer, it seemed, so he tried to change the subject.

"Nope. I'm nothing but thrilled, really. It means you love me enough to be jealous, after all."

".....!" Yokozawa swallowed thickly at Kirishima's mortifying grandiose proclamation. How could he just come out and *say* things like that without a hint of shame?

"All right, now all that's left is to get revenge for the other day!"

"Huh...?" Yokozawa gaped in confusion at the clenched-fist proclamation.

"You told me not to do anything by halves, right? So just lie back and leave everything to me. I'll be sure to *thoroughly* satisfy you." Kirishima returned simply, snatching away the mug in Yokozawa's hand and setting it aside.

"Stop drawing your own conclusions! And don't go getting horny in the middle of the damn afternoon!" He felt a flare of irritation at having his words from before turned back on him in this manner. He really wished Kirishima would stop interpreting everything as he pleased.

"We're just gonna finish what we started the other day, that's all. No need to



overthink it.”

Yokozawa huffed at the gentle, teaching tone in Kirishima’s voice, as if speaking to a child. “You’re ridiculous, getting all serious and solemn when you don’t plan on even giving me a *choice* in the matter.”

“Hmm, you’ve got a point. I could give you the option of whether or not to take a shower before we start?”

“Where the hell do you get off playing all high and mighty...”

“Because you’re defenseless when you’re pushed around like this, of course.”

“...!” The unyielding smile on Kirishima’s face shut him right up. It rankled, having to accept such a thing, but Kirishima spoke true—he really couldn’t fight back.

“So as I said—just sit back and let me have my way with you.”

“Wah!” A hand abruptly slipped around his hips, and Yokozawa found himself pulled back, embraced from behind by Kirishima, who held him chest-to-back. “Oi, didn’t you say I could take a shower first?” He knew there was no escaping now, but he at least wanted a bit of time to mentally prepare himself. Plus, he was soaked in a sheen of sweat from the chores he’d just finished.

“Your time for such decisions has long since expired.”

“That’s the same as not letting me decide at all!”

“C’mon, don’t be so stiff—have a thought for me and how I can’t bear to wait for you.”

“.....” Kirishima pressed a soft kiss to his nape, and Yokozawa inhaled sharply. He hated how eagerly he responded to the sensation of Kirishima’s lips brushing his skin on each word, and the warm breath of air on each exhalation. “...What are you doing?”

Kirishima’s fingers had slipped down to Yokozawa’s stomach, kneading the skin there. “Nothing, just...feels really good to just touch you...” He slipped a finger into Yokozawa’s navel, and the suggestive nature of the touch set Yokozawa’s entire body throbbing with anticipation.

“Stop groping me...”

“You don’t like to be groped?”

“It tickles...”

“You know, they do say that your ticklish spots tend to be erogenous zones as well... Ah, I get it—you mean you’d prefer to be touched *that* way, huh?”

“Hey—cut it—”

Kirishima pinched a nipple, and Yokozawa’s voice broke, prompting him to tend to both nipples at the same time, massaging the surrounding flesh as well. He was ruthless in his attentions, and Yokozawa quickly found himself overly sensitized.

“You sure you don’t mean *keep going* instead of *cut it out*? That mouth of yours really needs to learn to speak true...”

“Th—Kirishima-san, that hur...” Kirishima squeezed the pert little peaks between his fingers, wringing still greater responses from Yokozawa, then softened his attentions before quickly strengthening them again. This back-and-forth soon had Yokozawa huffing with effort.

The subtle shift from ticklish to sexually stimulating was entirely the fault of the man playing with him just now. There was even the rare occasion when his clothing would brush against his skin, and he couldn't help remembering Kirishima touch...the sensation of his tongue...

“You know you like it when it hurts... Or perhaps I should ask your *other* mouth how it likes this...?”

“You sound like some fucking old perv...”

“Well, the ‘old’ part I’m afraid I can’t argue with...”

“Stop changing the subject...!”

“Then just shut up and *feel*,” Kirishima whispered, taking care to ensure his breath ghosted over the shell of Yokozawa’s ear. The husky tone in his voice went straight to Yokozawa’s hips, arousing his senses like some magical spell. “How far did we get last time...?”

“I know...at least that we...didn’t do *this*—ah!” Kirishima’s fingers were heavenly; no matter where they touched, they always managed to draw a voice steeped in pleasure from Yokozawa’s throat. And yet—he still hadn’t touched the one place Yokozawa ached for him to. He longed for stimulation, and a throbbing vibrated through his core. “Dam...mit... Don’t—just touch there...”

“So you’d like me to hurry up and touch you someplace *else*?”

“Ah...!”

Kirishima’s fingers slipped under the hem of his pants, gently pulling Yokozawa’s cock free where it lay in his palm, hard and aching. He hadn’t yet laid a finger on it, but it still throbbed with need, and Kirishima blessedly took the insistent shaft in his large hands.

“It does indeed look like it wants to be touched—you’re hard as a rock...”

“Don’t...need narration...”

Kirishima swiped a finger over the tip with his right hand while massaging Yokozawa’s plump sac with his left, and his cock gleefully responded to the yearned for pleasure. He was so hard it *hurt* now, his cock begging for release. Kirishima’s ministrations were skillful indeed, though, and his touch felt more amazing than words could quite describe.

“Unh...nghn...mm!”

“Look, you’re leaking...So slick and wet now...!”

“I—*said*...!” But Kirishima gave a great tug, and with each up and down stroke, Yokozawa’s breathing grew more labored, no longer able to keep his hips from snapping up with sharp thrusts to meet his grip.

Kirishima knew each and every one of his weak points—he knew how he liked to be touched, how he would respond to that touch. He probably knew Yokozawa’s body better than Yokozawa did himself.

“Haa...ahn...!” Using the liquid oozing from the tip to slick his way, Kirishima redoubled his efforts, leaving Yokozawa helpless to do more than breathe even harder in the face of such an onslaught.

“Face this way.”

“Eh—hmn?!” Kirishima grabbed him by the back of the head, twisting him around to glance behind, and pressed a kiss to his lips. Yokozawa’s eyes flared wide at the audacity as Kirishima thrust a tongue between his lips, strengthening his grip on Yokozawa’s cock along with his violent kiss.



“Nnn—nnm...!!” His back arched, and he reached his first peak of the day as ribbons of milky white fluid spurted over Kirishima’s palm.

“Looks like it’d been a while for you...”

“Just—shut the hell up!” he snapped, despite knowing full well that his demand

would only rile Kirishima up further.

They eventually found their way into the bedroom, and when Kirishima realized he'd just changed the sheets, he remarked merrily, "Someone was prepared!" which rankled, but Yokozawa was still riding too high to really care that much.

"Yeah, it's definitely more fun being able to see your face..."

"...Maybe for *you*." He had no idea the expressions he was making in the midst of everything—but he was quite sure he would've been mortified if he *could* see it. Kirishima eased him onto the bed and began to hike up his shirt.

"You're red here—looks a bit swollen. You can see yourself, can't you? They seem to want to be touched even more..."

"You don't have to tell me!" The redness and swelling was, after all, Kirishima's fault entirely. "Ah—...!"

Kirishima pressed his lips to the red nipples he'd teased into hardness and suckled, and Yokozawa responded to the sensation of his tongue—completely different from his fingers. When he grazed his teeth over the sensitive skin, the feeling walked a fine line between pleasure and pain.

"...Hn, ah...!"

As he suckled on Yokozawa's nipples, Kirishima tugged down his jeans as well, grabbing the exposed shaft once more and giving a meaningful tug. His exquisite skill in seemingly every aspect of the bedroom robbed Yokozawa of all reason.

It was entirely Kirishima's fault, too, that his body had started to accept being taken during sex as if it was natural. He often considered turning the tables, but seeing the way Kirishima gleefully pressed him down left him bereft, willing to simply let the man have his way.

"Hnn...?!" Something chilly dripped onto him, and a bony finger pressed inside him.

"I keep telling you not to squeeze so tight."

"Sh—ut...up..." If he could help it, he *would* have. Kirishima thrust his slickened fingers in and out in broad strokes, and given how thick those fingers were, two inside him was already quite a tight fit.

"Ngh..."

"Does it hurt?"

"I'm trying...to bear it here, so just shut up..."

"Fine fine, you really know how to kill the mood..." he muttered a bit petulantly, and when Yokozawa fixed a glare on him, he finally buttoned up.

Truthfully, he really couldn't stand the sensation of having his insides stirred up like this. To keep from noticing the way those fingers squirmed like a living thing within him, he focused on gripping the sheets instead.

"Ready?"

“Don’t ask me that.” He couldn’t tell, after all, what it was like down there. The one who asked the question would be the best person to answer.

“Well don’t complain if it hurts, then.” Kirishima at last withdrew his fingers, after having thoroughly and stubbornly prepared him, and spread his legs wide with enough force to draw protests from Yokozawa’s body.

“Owowowow, stop stop! No further!!” He slapped his hands on the mattress, announcing he’d given in.

“I told you not to complain.

“You’re killing my joints here...!”

“Your body’s as stiff as ever I see.”

“I’m not gonna just magically get more limber!”

“You’d be surprised what a little daily stretching could do.”

“And why the hell should I have to do that?”

“For me?”

“.....” Yokozawa gaped at Kirishima’s brazen remark. There was no way in hell he’d ever be able to bring himself to stretch daily just for *sex*.

“...Crap, you’re out of condoms. Oh well.”

“Ngh—” Something hot and thick slowly began to slide inside Yokozawa, inching deeper and deeper. Recognizing that this was Kirishima’s cock touching him directly, brushing skin-to-skin inside him, wiped his mind blank. “Hng...ngh...”

He’d once thought it impossible that something of that size could possibly fit inside him, so it was almost frightening how *normal* an activity this had now become.

“You’re tight...”

“I said—*Shut. Up.*”

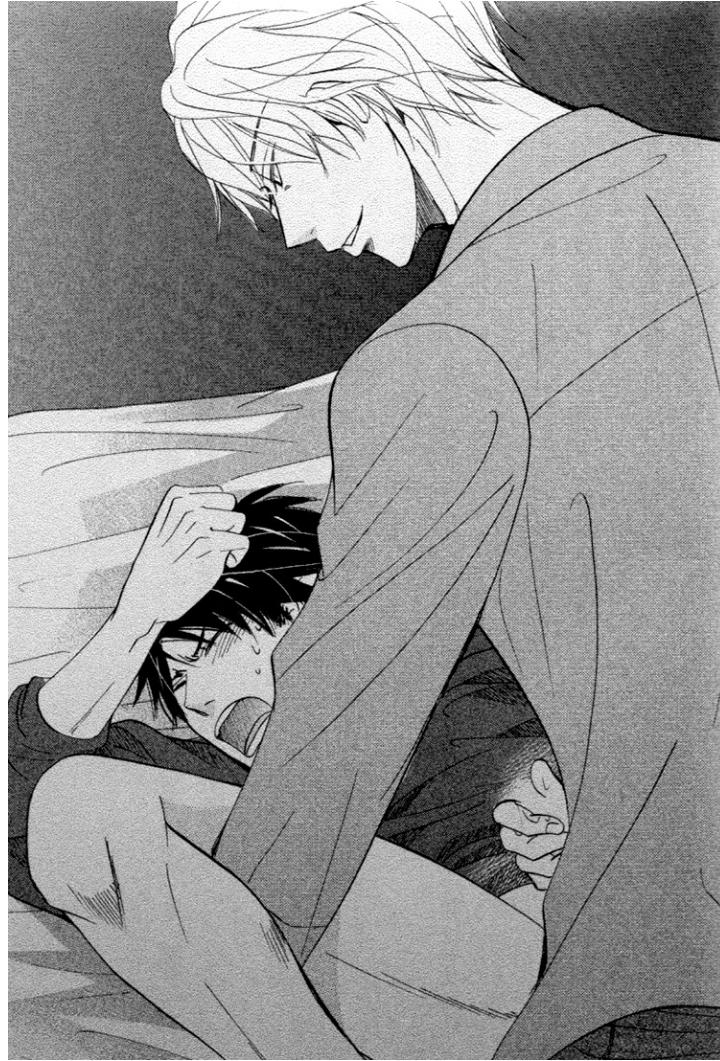
Kirishima gently drew his hips back, stopping just as he was about to fall out entirely. Then, at the same pace, he slid back into the eagerly twitching warmth of Yokozawa, who tightened around him firmly to keep him from escaping.

Kirishima continued this gentle pattern of thrusting and retreating, and each slide of his hips threw up a squelching, suggestive sound. It seemed ludicrous, the fact that it was *them* making those sounds.

“Yokozawa...relax a little. I can’t get to your good spot like this.”

“Don’t...ask the impossible...”

“You sure are a handful sometimes. Fine then—focus on *this*.”



He extended a large hand, gripping Yokozawa's cock tight and giving an amused tug, which drew a keening yelp from Yokozawa. "Ah—ah!!" Seizing his chance in the blink when Yokozawa's tension finally released, Kirishima gave a strong yank on Yokozawa's hips, drawing him close and drilling deep. "—nnah...?!"

Kirishima shoved a pillow beneath the raised hips, stabilizing his position, then leaned into Yokozawa using his hips. His joints protested being so forcibly stretched, but he was well beyond the point of being able to form words by now.

"Ah—ah...!"

Kirishima's breathing was labored as well by now, and his shoulders shrugged with the effort. The bed creaked with spastic movements, and the freshly changed sheets were now an utter mess. They would definitely have to be washed again, and Yokozawa vowed silently to make Kirishima help this time.

"Ha—ahn...ah!" Yokozawa's body shook, carried away by the shuddering force of their activities. Mercilessly driven onward, all thought soon fled him. The pleasure was terrifying; it sapped all pride, all reason, *everything* from him, leaving nothing behind but basic instinct and lust.

“Ah—!”

“...—!” With a shudder, Kirishima pumped his seed deep into Yokozawa, and after slowly drawing out, he flopped forward onto Yokozawa.

“Oi—you’re heavy, get off me!”

“We can stay like this for just a little bit, can’t we...?”

“...Fine, but just a little bit.”

He was well and truly whipped by Kirishima; perhaps this was what they meant when they spoke of the dangers of love.

Slipping his arms around the man before him, he slowly closed his eyes.

Yokozawa hadn’t been able to shake off his nervousness for a while now. When he’d arrived at the office that morning, he’d been met with a message from his boss’s secretary, requesting his presence. They’d told him that it would be some time yet before he received formal notification of his transfer, but it was possible plans had been accelerated.

He adjusted his tie and headed for his boss’s office.

“Good morning.”

“Oh, morning! Sorry to call you in first thing in the morning.”

“I see you’re in early yourself today, Sir.” He usually came into the office a bit later.

“Yeah; accidentally scheduled a meeting early, so here I am. Well, to get straight to the point—it’s not happening.”

“...Not happening?”

“I mentioned we might ask you to transfer to the Literature department, right? But now we’ve decided it’ll be better to keep you on with Comics.”

“Seriously?” was his eager response at the unexpected announcement.

“Yup; looks like you’re stuck here for the foreseeable future. That might change, but we’d like you to keep up the good work in the Comics department for now. Sorry to get you all flustered for nothing.”

“Oh—no, not at all.” He’d steeled himself for the worst—the actual outcome was almost disappointing. Naturally he was thrilled, though; he’d be able to keep working with comics, a job he enjoyed and wanted to continue, so of course he was happy—and relieved.

“And—this isn’t something we’ll have you do *instead*, mind you, but: we’ve decided to hold these publication-wide fairs regularly in the future, so next up will be one in the spring. I’d like you to be in charge of it.”

“Eh?! We’re doing that *again* in the spring...?”

“Yup. Looks like the President was pretty impressed by your work this time around, so he’s looking forward to what you’ve got prepared next time.”

“Sir—it’s almost time for your meeting.”

“Oh—is it? Sorry; I’d better be on my way.” His boss clapped Yokozawa on the shoulder and then exited the room with his secretary.

Yokozawa stood there in a daze for several long moments before muttering, “...Seriously...?” The issue that had been festering in his mind had fizzled away, and he felt lighter. But while his job might be safe for now, he’d lost all sight of an end to these harried, hurried days.

Still, he would now be able to continue working with Kirishima—that much was clear.

Even if he’d transferred to Literature, he might have been allowed to continue his work in the same capacity, but if he could flex his muscles in a field he enjoyed, then that was all for the better.

“Ah.” He bumped into Kirishima as he stepped back out into the hallway. Not having expected to run into him at a time like this, he faltered a bit.

“Oh, perfect timing. I was just about to head over to see you. ...What’s wrong? Your face looks weird.”

He hesitated a moment, wondering if it was appropriate to discuss the issue right now, but he didn’t want to catch any grief later for not telling Kirishima first, so he got right to the point: “I’m not being transferred.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. They said they want to keep me where I am for the time being. Instead, I’m going to continue being in charge of these publication-wide fairs it seems, so I don’t expect my busy schedule to change much for the foreseeable future.” Regardless, he couldn’t deny he was relieved.

“I see—that’s great.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“C’mon, you’re thrilled you get to keep working with me.”

“Something about the way you say that really pisses me off...” It wasn’t that he *wasn’t* happy, but it did irritate to have Kirishima himself boast about it. Perhaps there was no helping the urge to snap at him for getting full of himself.

“Just accept it already.”

“Whatever—what did you want?”

“Oh yeah. I came to discuss movie promotion plans. Wanna hit the lounge?”

“Sure.” He drew even with Kirishima, and they headed for the elevator hall, quietly musing how happy he was that this sort of everyday would be continuing for some time yet.

*fin*