



It's Not Love

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Presented by Silra Gou and Ikue Ishida

dmg
Novel

A Digital Manga Guild Publication

PARENTAL ADVISORY
**EXPLICIT
CONTENT**
PARENTAL ADVISORY



"I don't care if it's just this once. Love me."

"Don't. I don't like this."

"You don't like kissing and you don't like dating. You make love like you're attacking me. You're a dick."

Siira Gou

Born June 9th, Gemini

Blood type A.

My family traditionally celebrates Christmas at Tokyo Disneyland.

Ikue Ishida

Sagittarius, blood type O.

I like using hand warmers but I'm a little worried about burns.

It's Not Love

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Oshiro ducked through the doors of the high-rise hotel's bar and peered into the interior of the trendy establishment. The lighting, muted for atmosphere, was so dark his glasses were next to useless, reminding him that he needed to replace the lenses. He wasn't worried about the expense or the hassle of getting new lenses. He'd considered asking an ophthalmologist friend for laser surgery instead of getting a new prescription, but in the end Oshiro preferred the way glasses framed his face.

"Over here, Kenji! Why are you looking over there?"

He turned his head towards the familiar, cheerful voice and spotted Akimi Shiratori, clad in a dark, navy-colored suit, waving at him. Oshiro grumbled under his breath about the subdued clothing, which made his friend difficult to see in the poorly-lit room.

Heading over, he saw Yoshiaki Zaizen, another friend, seated next to Shiratori. In stark opposition to Shiratori, Zaizen wore an expensive leather jacket. *I should have looked for Zaizen instead*, Oshiro mused in hindsight, then shrugged and took the seat on Shiratori's other side.

"Check out my new business card," said Shiratori, angling a white card toward the candlelight.

"New business card? Did you move to a new firm?"

"Akimi Shiratori, Lawyer, Matsumae Law Firm.' Nothing new here," said Zaizen. The business card had a silky texture, but the text was the same as Shiratori's previous cards.

"No, look at the paper. Did you see *American Psycho*? The scene where they show off their business cards?"

"Oh, yeah."

In the movie, the psychopathic main character showed off his business card, but was upstaged with a more elegant card owned by one of his friends. Oshiro had laughed at the scene, dismissing it as a ridiculous competition between narcissists as the cards all looked the same to him. But it seemed that Shiratori saw it differently and had been inspired.

"Yoshiaki, that's a cool jacket."

Zaizen's sleek leather jacket had a fur lining. He was still wearing it, and Oshiro realized that he must have just arrived also. Zaizen wasn't the sort of man to keep wearing a warm jacket in a hot room.

"Isn't it? It's Armani."

"I thought you only wore Armani suits," Oshiro said. Zaizen claimed that he wanted to look like a gigolo, even when wearing suits. Oshiro didn't know how or why, but Zaizen had been brainwashed into believing that wearing an Armani suit would make women think he was dangerous and sexy, like Richard Gere in the classic 1980's film *American Gigolo*.

"I'll be taking it off soon."

Shiratori unzipped Zaizen's jacket and peeked inside. "Disappointing. You're

wearing a boring black shirt,” he chuckled. Shiratori paired his suit with a navy tie patterned with small red dots. He was the shortest of the three, but at five foot nine inches, taller than the average Japanese man. “Anyway, isn’t this card cool? The paper’s different from the ones I had before. Now I know why those guys obsessed over their business cards.” Shiratori gestured with his card again, watching it in the candlelight.

Oshiro only quirked the corners of his mouth and called over a waiter.

“Laphroaig please. Make it a double.”

“Show-off. Like you actually like Scotch,” smirked Yoshiaki. His favorite was bourbon and water. “Where’s your shochu?”

“I admit that the awamori one of my patients gave me was delicious. Too bad none of the bars around here carry it.” Oshiro wiped his hands with one of the warm, damp towels provided by the waiter, remembering that patient. She was an Okinawan actress and was convinced a slight alteration to her nose would give her the edge she needed to outperform her rivals. Oshiro ensured that the bridge of her nose was a touch higher than it was before, but he couldn’t care less whether or not such a subtle piece of cosmetic surgery gave her the success she dreamed about.

“Aww, I guess no one’s interested in you?” Shiratori said to his business card.

“Goddamn it, all right,” Zaizen said. “Yes, your card is perfect, very professional. Font? Let’s see, it’s not a regular Mincho, is it? The card stock’s definitely made from one hundred percent virgin pulp; recycled paper doesn’t have this kind of glistening brightness.”

“Yoshiaki, you liar!” Shiratori laughed out loud. No one would guess that he was a twenty-eight year old lawyer from the way he behaved right now. With his baby face, he might even pass as a college student.

Zaizen, in contrast, had a sexy, masculine aura. He was a gifted athlete and a member of the college’s sailing team, and often surrounded by adoring female fans. He followed his parents’ footsteps into the automobile business after college and now dealt in luxury imports and classic cars, but still sailed on occasion; it was the reason why his skin was tanned, even in winter.

Looking at the other two, Oshiro wondered why he always hung out with them. He had other friends, and thanks to his job and his mother’s connections, he even knew celebrities, but he almost always drank with these two guys. One of

them would casually set up a date and location, usually a small, sophisticated bar like this one, and they'd chat about various mundane topics for hours.

"Kenji, how's Mama doing?" Shiratori asked, as if he were Oshiro's little brother. All three referred to Oshiro's mother as "Mama."

"She's fine."

"I want to see her. Why don't you bring her along sometimes?"

"I don't know if she could make it, she's busier than I am."

Oshiro's mother, Hanae, was a famous cosmetic surgeon. She'd heavily advertised in women's magazines about the importance of cosmetic surgery to improve the looks even before the practice became popular and widely accepted. Because of her tireless campaign for surgically-tweaked charms, she now owned multiple clinics and appeared on TV programs as a beauty consultant.

In her relentless pursuit of attractiveness, Hanae chose her husband, an internationally acclaimed skier, based on how she imagined her child's features would look. He died in an accident before he ever saw his son. Oshiro felt that her experiment in creating the most beautiful child possible had failed. Hanae hoped her son would inherit his father's prominent nose line and his mother's delicate features to soften the harshness, but Oshiro came out resembling his maternal grandfather instead, sporting a stern face that gave a cold impression to others. Oshiro didn't like to take his glasses off because he hated his face.

"Maybe I'll have another shot." Shiratori waved his empty glass, ice clattering inside it. Oshiro couldn't tell in the dim lighting, but he was sure Shiratori's cheeks were already red.

"Don't. Go with ginger ale." Zaizen said as he got a cigarette out. His bright eyes showed no signs of intoxication. He lit up with a Zippo lighter, closing his eyes as if he was having an orgasm.

Oshiro envied Zaizen. Hanae must have wanted a child more like Zaizen: a muscular six foot one, friendly, always relaxed and social. Even Oshiro thought he was good-looking.

"Stop bossing me around. I can drink another one. Excuse me, I'd like a champagne cocktail, please," Shiratori called to a passing waiter.

"And you go for the sweet stuff again. I'm telling you, you'll get diabetes."

Shiratori always chose sweet cocktails despite constant mockery from Zaizen

about choosing girly drinks. But feminine qualities helped Shiratori succeed in his career. His gentle, understanding nature made him an ideal consultant for women seeking legal advice, and by now his clients were mostly women, with cases ranging from divorce proceedings to victims of stalking.

“Kenji, have any good stories to share?” Shiratori asked, flicking Zaizen’s lighter off and on. Zaizen was the only smoker of the three, so Shiratori was wasting his lighter fluid.

“If I’ve got any, I wish someone would let me know.”

“Stop being so secretive. I’m pretty sure you’re hiding one or two girls from us.” Oshiro refrained from snapping to Zaizen that everyone else seemed private only because Zaizen was so open about his relationships.

“A girl, huh....” Oshiro's thoughts drifted back to a girl he’d recently fucked. She’d slapped him in the middle of sex, yelling that he was incompetent. The pain on his cheek was the only vivid memory he had of her.

No, Oshiro realized. He also remembered the sexual rush that overwhelmed him when he hit her back.

“*American Psycho*, hmph,” Oshiro muttered to himself. He didn’t like the movie. Seeing the young, wealthy protagonist escalating into madness reminded Oshiro of what could happen to him, and he didn’t need that resemblance played out on film.

“The way those guys obsessed about their business cards was insane, but man, their obsession over their suits was crazy, too. I mean, the only brands I own are New Yorkers and Takeo Kikuchis. But I’m pretty sure his are made to order through Mama’s connections.” Shiratori pointed at Oshiro.

Oshiro looked down at his suit. He’d never really cared about fashion since he was a child. He just wore whatever Hanae told him to wear.

“Do you know what Yoshiaki did when we went to see a movie about Armani in Roppongi? He wore Armani from head to toe; it was embarrassing to walk next to him. I think people thought we were advertising the movie.” Shiratori laughed heartily as he recounted the event. He went to the movies frequently, often inviting the others to come along. Oshiro was lucky if he made it to one out of every three outings.

“You look like you’re having a good time.” A young man stepped up to their table and sat the chair next to Zaizen. Oshiro looked at him. He could tell that the

young man was beautiful, even in this dark room. His eyes were sharp, like those of a bird of prey, the profile of his nose was sharp and strong, his chin thin and pointed. His lips were full for a man but not excessive; they curved up at the corners even when the man wasn't smiling.

"Excuse me, you're...?" Shiratori asked with a vague smile.

"Did you forget me? Kakeru."

"Oh, yeah, I know you. I can write with you, draw with you, and bukkake you." Zaizen joked, repeating all the homonyms he could render from the young man's name.

"Yoshiaki, you're a pervert," Shiratori laughed out loud. He was overexaggerating to not appear nervous in front of a stranger; at least, that was how Oshiro read his actions.

"What's up, Kakeru?" Zaizen asked.

"Not much. Excuse me, a Moscow Mule, please," Kakeru ordered from the waiter.

Oshiro observed Kakeru. He wore a leather jacket on top of a button-down shirt with skinny jeans tucked into short, studded boots. His hair was distinct: long and layered in a unique style. The only people Oshiro knew who could pull off a fashion like that as naturally as Kakeru was were models or celebrities who knew how to pose in the spotlight. Oshiro wondered if the young man was a past client of his or Hanae's.

For some reason, Oshiro couldn't remember the faces of his clients after he fixed them. He wondered if it was because the characteristics that made each person unique disappeared after cosmetic surgery.

Kakeru's face was perfect, almost too perfect by Oshiro's standards. His features were symmetrical. Even his eyebrows were shaped identically, a feature almost impossible without surgical intervention. Oshiro thought that if he was the surgeon who'd done the fix, it was a job to be proud of.

"Is he one of your clients?" Shiratori asked Zaizen, glancing at Kakeru as he drank his sweet cocktail. Kakeru looked slightly taller than Shiratori, so he must be a little over five foot ten. They were about the same height when they sat, so Shiratori probably wasn't too happy about that.

"Are you really over eighteen? Did you buy a car at my place?"

Like Oshiro, Zaizen didn't remember the faces of every customer who purchased

a car at his dealership. Everyday sales were conducted by his talented group of associates, and the only customers Zaizen dealt with personally were his former sailing teammates and celebrities. Unless Kakeru was a famous celebrity or a son of one, it was unlikely that Zaizen had even met him.

“I have my license but I don’t have a car yet.”

That disproved any hypotheses about Kakeru being one of Zaizen’s customers.

“Akimi, was he your client? Anyone come in with a complaint about a female stalker recently?” Zaizen took another cigarette from his pocket and



retrieved his lighter from Shiratori.

“I remember my clients’ faces, unlike you two. He’s not mine.”

“Really?” Kakeru asked.

The three men looked at each other. None of them spoke up to claim Kakeru’s acquaintance, and an eerie sense of unknowing lingered over them.

“Ah, I see. You’re one of Kenji’s mom’s clients,” said Zaizen, settling for the most plausible answer.

Kakeru neither confirmed nor denied it, and the conversation stopped there. Just as the three friends became restless, waiting for the next plausible theory, the waiter brought out the next round. Kakeru gulped down half of his drink as if it were alcohol-free. They watched him.

Oshiro was the strongest drinker of the three, but he never got inebriated. Zaizen was strong, too, but notorious for the things he’d do when drunk. His level of drunkenness was usually a signal for the three men to go home. They all lived in the city, so they could catch a taxi even if the trains had stopped for the night. Usually, the friends drank casually for hours, like today. No need to go to karaoke or to a lavish club where women would come up and flirt with them. Every so often they ran into other people they knew, but this was the first time none of them knew the self-proclaimed acquaintance. “I get it. You’re just a drunk guy wanting attention,” Zaizen said aloud.

“Is that really what you think?” Kakeru placed his hand on Zaizen’s thigh. “You’re not taking your jacket off tonight?”

“Yeah, whatever. You interested in guys?” Zaizen removed his jacket. His tight, black T-shirt strained over his muscles.

“Your chain’s hiding.” Kakeru lifted out the gold chain hiding under the collar of Zaizen’s T-shirt. It glittered in the candlelight. “Why don’t you wear silver instead? Or maybe white gold. Gold makes you look older.” He wrapped his fingers in the chain and tugged on it lightly. A hint of lust in the way he spoke made Shiratori and Oshiro silent; they instantly understood that Kakeru must be someone Zaizen once slept with.

Zaizen dated widely, but never seriously, mentioning a new girl every time the three met. He claimed he was only interested in sex, so probably his partners were the same.

“So that’s it?” Shiratori said, coldly.

“What do you mean, that’s it?” Zaizen was confused about Shiratori’s suspicion. He was used to intimate contact with naked men thanks to his aquatic sports experience and felt no sexual excitement or disgust at Kakeru’s touch.

“You went for him because all those girls couldn’t satisfy you?” There was an apparent distaste in Shiratori’s voice.

Oshiro watched Shiratori with reserve. Shiratori was jealous, but whether that originated from the fear of Kakeru breaking up their friendship, or envy towards Kakeru's openness about his gayness was beyond Oshiro's imagination. He didn't want to delve into the third possibility. That would make things complicated; nothing good resulted from a friendship when romance was involved. The only reason the three men managed to keep their long friendship drama-free was because romance was something they left behind when they met. Shiratori was like a little brother to Oshiro and Zaizen. All three were the same age, but in college Shiratori studied intensely and didn't have time to go out and party. Oshiro and Zaizen loved to see Shiratori beam with delight whenever they taught him things he didn't know.

Yes, things had been going well for them for this long, and Oshiro didn't want any drama jeopardizing their friendship. Disdain about Zaizen's carelessness towards sex stirred within his mind. "I knew you screwed almost anyone, but guys, too? Didn't know you were that desperate."

Zaizen finally realized what they were suspicious about. "What? Me? With him? Come on, give me a break." He pointed at Kakeru with his cigarette and looked the other way. "Sorry, I guess we weren't the ones you were looking for. Bye." Oshiro was determined to get rid of Kakeru now, not wanting a stranger ruining his night.

"Yoshiaki, Akimi, and Kenji. Am I wrong?" Kakeru asked confidently. "Anyone could have learned our names by overhearing our conversation. Go find someone else if you're looking for someone to drink with. Don't disturb us."

"You're a car dealer, a lawyer, and a plastic surgeon," Kakeru said without hesitation, proving that he knew them slightly better than a few hours' eavesdropping at the bar.

"So that's why you never talk about girls. He's yours, huh?" Zaizen's words prompted everyone to look at Oshiro. Strange how the conversation now turned into guessing who'd slept with Kakeru. In a way it was unavoidable; Kakeru had an aura that stimulated one's sexual desires. "I'm not into men."

"Oh? So everyone denies sleeping with guys or having fantasies about it? You're all liars," Kakeru smirked. "I know you're bored. Why don't we have some fun?"

"Not that bored," Zaizen chuckled, with an awkward smile.

"You drink together a lot, but you never bring your girlfriends? Is sex a taboo

subject at this table?”

“Nothing’s off the table. We just talk about stuff we like to talk about.”

“So doing it with a guy is something you don’t want to talk about?”

“Shut up! Yeah, I’ve slept with a guy before, but there’s nothing interesting about it.” Zaizen raised his voice, his words tumbling over one another.

“Oh? You’ve done it before? That’s something you haven’t told us; when did it happen?” Shiratori’s face was flushed, but he spoke as if he were more drunk than he looked.

“Shut up. It wasn’t funny in the least.” Zaizen lit another cigarette. He was losing his calm.

“Then why don’t we do something that’ll be a good story to tell in the future?” Kakeru leaned on Zaizen’s shoulder and placed his hand on Zaizen’s thigh again. It worried Oshiro that Kakeru shot a glance at Shiratori while making his advance.

“Like what?” Zaizen asked, oblivious to Shiratori’s rising annoyance.

“Want to bet?”

“Bet? So you want money?” Zaizen said with a hint of disappointment.

Oshiro slumped his body against his chair with a sigh, downing his scotch.

It was true that all three men were bored. Their careers were successful and they spent their free time doing what they liked. Zaizen would hook up with girls and Shiratori would go to the movies.

Oshiro led a busy life. He slept so hard that he never dreamed. On his days off he’d go shopping with either Zaizen or Shiratori, catch a movie, or visit an art museum. At night, the friends would go out drinking.

They had neither exciting encounters nor devastating losses. Days passed uneventfully; even a low libido ceased to be a problem for any of them.

None of them were lonely. They all had family and friends they could rely on when needed, and they each possessed enough money to buy anything they desired.

Boredom.

They were bored with their mundane lives. Kakeru alighted on them like a bird descending onto a pond, throwing up splashes and ripples in the calm surface.

“Not money,” Kakeru said. “You’re betting me.”

“Why would we need you?” Zaizen laughed. Shiratori also laughed, but that

wasn't enough to deter Kakeru. He smiled. "Listen." He poached a cigarette from Zaizen's pack and placed it between his lips, waiting for Zaizen to light it. Reluctantly, Zaizen lit the cigarette.

Kakeru exhaled white smoke. "Each one of you will date me for one week. Sex can be involved if you'd like. Whoever I chose as the best date wins."

"You're the prize?"

"Yeah. You can ditch me afterwards if you just want to be the winner," Kakeru continued on, well aware that Zaizen showed an interest in the game he proposed.

Oshiro signaled for a waiter. He assumed Shiratori would call off the ridiculous game momentarily. "Excuse me, I'd like a refill."

"Can I have a Salty Dog?" Kakeru said, finishing off his drink.

"I'll go with the same one I had earlier. Akimi, you? Ginger ale fine?"

Shiratori didn't object this time. He had a guarded expression, as if he was debating something to himself.

Oshiro hoped one of the others would change the subject, because he couldn't think of a decent topic. Kakeru's seditious presence overwhelmed him, so he couldn't think properly.

"Yoshiaki will win, anyway."

Oshiro blinked, surprised to hear Shiratori speak like that.

"What's this? Giving up already?" Zaizen asked.

"It's not worth gambling when I know you'll win. There's no fun."

"Need a handicap? Come on, man, it's a joke. I don't want him." Zaizen pointed to Kakeru.

"There you go again. You *were* planning to win."

Oshiro had no idea what to say to stop them. He couldn't imagine Shiratori wanting Kakeru either. Shiratori would fare better with a mature and experienced woman or a very young girl, possibly a high school student. Even if he had a taste for men, his and Kakeru's personalities didn't mesh. Shiratori would do better dating a man in his forties if that was the case.

Looking at both of the others at the table, Oshiro dismissed Zaizen as a possible candidate for Shiratori. They first met in college, during their sophomore year. The school's administrative board was embroiled in a scandal at the time, so the student council held protest rallies and meetings against the college. The three

young men served on the council as representatives of their departments. After the furor died down, they continued to hang out together as friends, but in all these years they'd never considered each other as possible dating partners.

Were there romantic feelings between Shiratori and Zaizen that Oshiro was unaware of? Had either one of them looked at him in that light?

Oshiro could shrug these thoughts off as nonsense if it weren't for Shiratori, who hadn't been acting normally since Kakeru showed up.

There was nothing strange about Zaizen's strangely competitive nature rising when there was some sort of contest involved, but Shiratori was different. He was always quiet and slightly indecisive. He usually wouldn't be interested in a stupid betting game like this unless others egged him on. He wouldn't be openly jealous, either. Even at parties where Zaizen was surrounded by women, or Oshiro was laughing with a different group of friends, Shiratori remained calm and always had a smile on his face.

But now Shiratori was competing with Zaizen for a boy neither one of them knew or admitted knowing.

"Hey, sex isn't the only indicator of a good man. You're usually harsher towards your own sex than your opposite. Don't you think it's more rewarding for your masculinity to be acknowledged by other men?" Kakeru looked at Oshiro as he spoke.

"Sorry. Not interested in this silly game, and I don't care if I'm a better or worse man than these two. Will you stop bothering us and leave?" Oshiro was reaching his limits; Kakeru was intruding on them more than Oshiro could bear. He was opening his mouth again, when Shiratori interrupted. "Kenji, that's a bad habit you've got."

"What?"

"Stop acting like you know everything."

"What the—"

"You're just afraid that you won't be number one."

Oshiro stared at him. This was not something Shiratori would say, but then again, Oshiro only thought of Shiratori as his and Zaizen's carefree little brother.

"Akimi, don't play his game."

"Why? Yoshiaki's going to try to win no matter what. You're just running away because you don't want to lose. I...I don't think I have a chance either."

Kakeru smiled at him. "I don't think so. You have a chance to win, too. I think a cute man who's older than I am is charming."

"Okay. So I do have a chance. Then I'm in." Shiratori announced his participation in the game faster than anyone would have thought. Zaizen couldn't just sit there and watch if that was the case. "Fine, I'm in too. Even if we're competing for a guy, it'd be a bummer if I lost to Akimi."

"There. You're already have a winner's attitude." They laughed at each other, but Oshiro couldn't.

"I pass. I have no interest in guys and I don't care about my manliness."

"You can't, Kenji. No skipping. Why don't you give your best all the time?" Shiratori grabbed Oshiro's arm, preventing him from leaving. There was a dangerous glow in his eyes. Oshiro yanked Shiratori's hand off of his arm. "Stop it."

"Why? It'll be fun. You get to date someone pretty like him for a week. He's willing to go out with me. It's not something you can experience often."

"Akimi, are you serious?"

"I am. At the very least I won't have to hunt for someone to go with me to the movies. Thank you, Kakeru, I'm looking forward to this." Shiratori stuck out the very hand Oshiro had yanked off his arm to Kakeru. Instead of shaking that hand, Kakeru caressed it and brought it to his lips. "Me too, Akimi." His voice became low and sweet.

"Hey, don't forget me. I'm looking forward to it too, Kakeru." Zaizen drew Kakeru closer to him and gave him a kiss on the lips. Oshiro just shook his head.

"Oh, there's one rule with this game. During the game, you're not allowed to meet or talk to each other."

"Why not?" Zaizen asked. He wasn't happy about that.

"If you guys contact each other, the final person will have an advantage. Let's make this game as fair as possible."

"Fair, huh."

"Go ahead and choose the order you'll date me. The winner will be announced one month from now, same date and place. Got it?"

"It'll be lonely, not being able to see each other for a month." Shiratori said.

"It won't matter. We're friends. We'll pick up where we left off next month," Oshiro said. He made up his mind not to participate so he cared less. The three

men hadn't been out of contact for so long as a month, so Oshiro thought this might be a good time to reflect on their friendship. Life would go on even if Oshiro didn't see his friends. His schedule would only be affected a little bit. What would most likely change was how he spent his days off, but that could be easily solved: he'd go to the gym instead, as he needed to get in shape.

"Kenji, choose your position." They drew lines on a paper napkin so each one could write his name. The other side of the napkin was folded over.

"I'll take whichever's left."

Kakeru wrote "Kenji" on the last blank line and traced a mark from each name down to the designated number. Despite his lack of interest, Oshiro watched to see what the order would be. If he came first, he needed to figure out what to do with Kakeru tomorrow, something he wished to avoid.

"It's done. Yoshiaki, Akimi, and then Kenji, in that order," Kakeru said. He was enjoying himself. There was none of the nervousness in his demeanor that should have been there if he were going to have sex with three different men during the next month.

Watching the other three talking excitedly about the results, Oshiro wondered when they would learn the answer to the ultimate question: none of them knew who Kakeru was or what his motives were. But nobody asked. No one seemed to care anymore, at least not now. Oshiro didn't ask, either.

Zaizen sat in his second-floor office in the dealership his father owned in Akasaka, navigating multiple browser windows on his computer. Zaizen Motors usually sold new imports, but when a client requested a pre-owned luxury or classic car, the job was handed over to Zaizen. If a customer requested a specific make and model, Zaizen had to figure out where he could obtain that exact car. "Looks like another weekend at the auction," Zaizen thought. He'd intended to take a trip to the coast this weekend, to the Hayama harbor where he berthed his sailboat, and dreamed of taking her out past the breakwater without worrying about selfish customers. "I wanted to go sailing," he grumbled again.

Zaizen liked the winter ocean. He enjoyed the company of his fellow sailors during the summer, but he was fonder of the winter waves and the thrills of navigating in cold winter gusts.

He hadn't taken either Shiratori or Oshiro to the sea since graduation; he'd

invited them several times, but each time they'd cancelled due to work or other appointments. "Those guys need to learn how to take a break," Zaizen grumbled some more. He scanned the list of search results; there were no Porsche 924s in the price range his client had specified.

The door opened. Assuming it was a client, Zaizen stubbed out his cigarette, but Oshiro stepped into the room.

"Oh, it's you. What's up? Aren't you supposed to be in the operating room?"

"I don't perform surgery on Monday, just counseling and prep." Oshiro sat down on the red guest chair. Created by a European designer, its presence stood out in a room decorated mostly in black and silver. Oshiro's black turtleneck sweater and houndstooth check jacket matched the room's scheme, making it look like a painting. "Didn't you think it was odd, Yoshiaki?"

"Think what was odd?" Zaizen asked, fixed on the computer screen, unconcerned about making Oshiro wait while he finished trawling websites for a suitable Porsche. Zaizen scrolled through yet another list and still didn't find the right car. Irritated, he was pulling out a new cigarette when he noticed Oshiro at the window looking at the showroom below. "Hey, man, spill. Did you come here for a reason? Are we grabbing a bite somewhere?"

"Sure. Are you taking that game seriously?"

"Game?" Zaizen, his mind still awash with work, didn't have a clue what Oshiro was talking about.

"Yesterday, at the bar."

"Oh, that. I'm pretty sure he was just a drunk kid pulling a prank. Good looking for sure, but still a guy." Zaizen said. He had no reckoning beyond that. Oshiro continued to stare down at the showroom.

"You haven't wondered how he knew us or why he came up to us?"

"Not really. We're pretty well-known, you know. Probably someone at the bar told him who we were."

"Do you think it's just that?"

"I bet he doesn't remember a thing about last night. Here we go, a Porsche 924. Wait, this one's red? Oh, great, now I have to paint her black." Zaizen printed out a web page with information about an upcoming dealer auction. He routinely bought cars at auctions to fix up, then sold them on to clients, but had to attend in person to ensure the vehicle was in a good enough shape to be

repaired within his budget. “There goes my weekend. Guess I won’t make it to the harbor, thanks to a twenty-year-old Porsche.”

“You okay with that? Aren’t the weekends included in the week-long date?”

“Geez, Kenji, you really believed what he said? Or do you prefer men? Was he your type?” Zaizen couldn’t understand Oshiro’s obsession with the boy. Nothing unusual about strangers barging in and saying crazy things at a bar, especially if they were young. Oshiro ought to know better than to take it seriously.

“Would you really date him if he showed up?”

Zaizen laughed out loud. “Sure, why not?” He stood and walked to the wall where he stowed his stock of pamphlets, pulling one out and dropping it on the table in front of Oshiro. “Give this to Mama. She wanted a Mercedes-Benz SLK; the one that converts into an open car in twenty-five seconds flat.”

“She bought a Mercedes just a couple weeks ago. The—”

“An AMG! She said she doesn’t drive it. There’s already a designated driver for that one.”

Oshiro’s mother, Hanae, often popped up in their conversation. She looked as if she was in her thirties, even though she was almost sixty. Zaizen’s mother seemed young for her age, too, but didn’t have the mysterious aura that Hanae did. Zaizen also rarely discussed his family and what little he said mostly concerned his father, president of the company.

“Yoshiaki, why don’t you go hang out with Akimi if you have time to burn with that kid?” Oshiro asked.

“What does Akimi have to do with this?” Zaizen asked with a stiff smile. He didn’t like that Shiratori was the one who signed up for this game. He should have told Shiratori right then not to take it seriously, but his competitive nature got the better of him.

Zaizen checked his reflection in the glass window. A gray Armani suit today, which he thought fitted him better than it did the models in the Armani catalog. Outside, the sun had set. Flags portraying the different auto models the dealership sold fluttered in the winter wind. Zaizen thought that once he stepped out of the building, he’d shiver in the cold, dry air, and a hot pot dish sounded good for dinner. “It looks cold outside. Do you want to eat nabe?”

“Why do you keep changing the subject when I mention Akimi?”

“We’ve been friends for eight years. Why does my relationship with him have to change now?”

Oshiro kept staring outside, arms crossed. Zaizen knew that when Oshiro was uncomfortable with a subject, he avoided looking at the speaker, so kicked Oshiro’s leg to get his attention. “If you like Akimi, just say it.”

“I like him, but only as a friend. As a matter of fact, I don’t have that sort of emotion for anyone.”

“Then just change your heart to have some affection.”

“I told you, I don’t see him in that way. But I am a little worried about him. You saw how he acted last night.”

Oshiro still avoided looking at Zaizen, keeping his eyes on the dealership floor below. Zaizen finally looked in the direction Oshiro was staring and smothered a gasp. A young man wearing a white designer coat and a knitted hat stood near the store entrance: the intruder from last night.

“Damn you. You knew he was here all along.”

“I was wondering when you’d notice.” Oshiro slightly raised the corners of his mouth. Zaizen knew that it was the best smile Oshiro could offer and kicked his leg again.

“Stop it. I’m wearing velvet today. It’ll show if it gets dirty.”

“Huh, so you finally learned the names of fabric you’re wearing. Velvets tend to get thin around the knees; don’t wear it two days in a row.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t own many clothes.”

“Get Mama to buy some more. Oh, wait, I forgot you’re making enough money yourself now. Go buy some on your own next weekend. Better not be Armani, though.” Zaizen stood up and knocked on the window. Kakeru noticed the two and smiled, waving back. Zaizen gestured with his hand to come up. “Great, now you’re inviting him. You are a true flirt.” Oshiro stood up from his chair, pamphlet in hand.

“You’re leaving now?”

“I don’t plan to bother you guys. Besides, there was that silly rule.”

“Kenji, what exactly did you come here for?”

Oshiro brushed his pants off as if Zaizen had kicked him with a dirty shoe. “Be careful with him. Don’t get yourself screwed instead.”

“Thanks for the advice, sir.”

Kakeru arrived at the head of the staircase. “You’re not supposed to be here, Kenji. I thought I made it clear you weren’t to meet for a month,” he said as Oshiro passed him on the stairs.

“The game hasn’t started yet,” Oshiro said as he disappeared below.

Zaizen raised his hands and shrugged.

Kakeru smiled at Zaizen. “You look good in a suit. I guess anything would look good on a guy like you.”

“I like your clothes too. That coat’s nice.”

“It’s Emporio Armani.”

“Oh,” Zaizen said. That was one of the lines in the Armani brand that Zaizen loved. Emporio Armani was said to be designed by Giorgio Armani’s daughter. It targeted younger customers than the other Armani lines aimed at, and was well suited to Kakeru. Zaizen couldn’t help but be a little jealous about Kakeru showing up wearing Armani when he was well aware of how much Zaizen loved the brand.

“How old are you, Kakeru?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Are you a student or do you work?”

“I go to art school.”

Zaizen nodded. He didn’t much care about what field of art Kakeru studied; he looked like an art student, and that was enough for Zaizen. “I was planning to eat out tonight. Is it cold?”

“It is. Touch me.” Kakeru moved alongside of Zaizen and took his hand, holding it to his cheek.

“Wow. You’re cold.”

“Let’s go eat something warm.”

“I want to go somewhere that serves a good soup or risotto.”

“Do you like bouillabaisse? I know a good restaurant for that.”

This wasn’t any different than other dates Zaizen had gone on. They’d go to a famous restaurant for dinner, then once their physical hunger was sated, they’d go to his house and enjoy themselves. The dating period was only a week long, but he could do anything during that time. No reason not to take advantage of it.

He could have sex every day for the entire week, yet he was still reluctant.

Zaizen had lied when he first entered this game: he'd never had sex with a man.

Four days had passed since the bizarre dating game started, and now it was Thursday.

Oshiro was in surgery on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, reserving Fridays for post-surgical counseling. He'd grown up watching Hanae work and adopted her schedule. He performed the more complex procedures, leaving simpler surgeries, such as double eyelid blepharoplasty, to be carried out by his staff. Minor procedures were more profitable, but he didn't feel any accomplishment from them compared to the intrinsic rewards he received from performing reconstructive surgery and other major operations. But he knew how people would react if they heard him say such a thing, so he kept those thoughts to himself.

Oshiro packed his belongings, mind fixed on heading home now that he'd finished his day's work. He had no plans for the evening once he arrived home, but at least he'd be able to relax more than he could at the office for one simple reason: he wouldn't have to deal with all the women on staff. He couldn't bear the way some of them flirted with him.

His phone rang, and he checked the caller ID before answering. It was Shiratori. "Akimi, you're breaking the rules. We're not supposed to talk for the next three weeks."

"Yoshiaki's dating that guy?" Shiratori asked. "No wonder he wasn't picking up when I called."

"You're the one that got us into this mess, and you're dating him next week. What are you going to do?"

There was a slight pause. "Let's not talk about that just now. Are you free tonight, Kenji?"

"Sure, I just got off work."

"All right. Let's meet at the usual place."

"Okay." Oshiro agreed with relief that now he had something to do tonight instead of going home and killing time. As he passed one of his office assistants on the way out, she asked if he was leaving for the day. Unable to ignore her because of his position, he smiled faintly and wished her good night. His mother owned three clinics in Tokyo, located in the Hibiya, Aoyama, and Roppongi districts; Oshiro operated out of the Hibiya location. It was the oldest office of

the three, but Hanae, CEO and founder of the practice, rarely worked there now, spending most of her time at the newest office in Roppongi, entertaining herself with the flamboyant patients that had become her newest clients. Once all the fanfare about the new office subsided, she'd start rotating between the other locations.

A railway bridge spanned the street in front of the clinic. As a commuter train clacked across the bridge, Oshiro could see all the men and women in their suits crammed inside the boxy cars. He passed beneath several more bridges before reaching his destination. The bar the three friends frequented was known for its superficially Asian decor, and gave Oshiro an illusion of stepping into an Japanese restaurant operating in a Western country. Even on a Thursday night, it was busy. Oshiro went ahead and ordered a shochu for himself, as it would take some time for Shiratori to arrive from Akasaka, which meant Oshiro had a few minutes to kill until he showed up. It was boring but not meaningless; different than drinking alone without a companion to share the experience.

The waiter had supplied a glass but Oshiro knocked the shochu back straight from the bottle, its distinct, hard taste proof of the high alcohol content. He didn't intend to eavesdrop, but he could overhear nearby conversations. Rants about co-workers, a lover's infidelity, rumors, slanders...it seemed the only way the inhabitants of this city gained satisfaction and enjoyment was at the expense of others. Oshiro was glad that he'd never had to see Shiratori and Zaizen that way. All three were beginning successful careers. They specialized in different fields so they had no need to compete with each other or compare themselves to feel superior or feed their egos. At least, they'd had no need to do so before Kakeru appeared.

"Hi. Sorry, did you wait?" Shiratori slipped into the bar, his breathing labored. He must have come straight from work as well, as he was wearing a black coat with a dark navy suit underneath.

Shiratori had worn brighter colors and patterns in college; Oshiro and Zaizen ribbed him for looking like a girl in his plaid coat. Come to think of it, Shiratori hadn't worn that coat since he graduated.

"Weren't you planning to meet Yoshiaki first?" Oshiro asked.

"I was. But I have to honor the rule if he's with Kakeru." Shiratori scrutinized the menu before he ordered his drink. He was the most picky about food of the three

friends. “Do you have tuna kama today? And also a wasabi hitashi, yuba roll, and the sautéed cow tongue,” he ordered from the waiter.

“Yoshiaki’s not here today. Can you finish all of that?”

“Oh, right. That’s it for now.” Shiratori typically ordered new dishes from the menu to sample them, and Zaizen would polish off the leftovers. “Too bad you almost never eat out, but I can’t blame you for that because of the amazing housekeeper you’ve got.”

“Come over some time. Yasumi-chan wants to see you too.”

“Sure.”

Oshiro grew up in a single-parent household, always with a housekeeper. The current one was by far the most unique and extraordinary of all the caretakers who had raised Oshiro.

“You sure it’s okay to have me here and not Yoshiaki?” said Oshiro.

“I don’t mind. Although I don’t think you’ll be much help,” Shiratori said as he sipped his oolong tea cocktail, smile fading. Oshiro reasoned that Shiratori’s baby face probably meant that he had a hard time being taken seriously in court. Because of his boyish features, his words tended not to carry the weight they ought to. His skin and his hair were paler than the average Japanese, and the light hues accentuated his youthful countenance, making him look innocent and naive.

An attorney’s job was potentially dangerous, depending on what kind of cases he or she took, which was probably why Shiratori now focused on family law. Many talented and experienced female attorneys specialized in the field, and Oshiro could imagine female colleagues picking on Shiratori just to provoke a reaction.

“What are you smiling about?” Shiratori asked.

“Just imagining you being harassed by your senior colleagues.” “That’s part of my job. You can’t work there if it bothers you. There’s already a bunch of associates there with enough experience to open their own law firms if they want.” Despite his innocent look, Shiratori had been the most passionate of the three in their fight against the board’s corruption during college, and he always volunteered to speak at the podium. Shiratori had a fierce side that Oshiro rarely witnessed.

“Can I say something before you talk?” Oshiro asked.

“Sure. What?”

“It’s about Kakeru. Which one of us knows him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think anyone cares, and it doesn’t matter anymore.” Despite his words, Shiratori showed signs of caring: after all, he’d been trying to contact Zaizen even though Zaizen was on a week-long date.

“Didn’t you think it was odd that he knew us but we didn’t know him? Do you think he really had some sort of relationship with one of us before? If that’s the case, I can tell you right now that it’s not me.”

“It’s not me either. It’s got to be Yoshiaki.”

“I don’t know. I don’t recall him spending much time with guys. There were always girls surrounding him.”

Shiratori started to tick his fingers off one by one. It took a moment for Oshiro to realize that he was counting the number of girls Zaizen had taken out in the past few months.

“If it’s not Yoshiaki either, than what, exactly, is his motive? Am I just overanalyzing?”

“Maybe. Yoshiaki really doesn’t care what gender you are as long as he can have some fun.” Just then, the waiter arrived with the food, and Shiratori let out a heavy sigh. “Help me finish this. I don’t want to waste it.”

“Sorry, can’t.” Oshiro couldn’t bear eating from the same plate as someone else. He managed to eat at Chinese restaurants where the dishes were first divided among all the diners family-style, but if there was even a suspicion that someone else’s utensils had touched the food, he couldn’t eat it.

Similarly, Oshiro detested kissing. Licking someone else’s genitals was out of the question. He couldn’t even force himself to touch his lips to a woman’s breast.

“I honestly don’t care about his motive. If it starts to get out of hand, I’ll file criminal or civil charges against him. There’s nothing to worry about; it’s just a game. I think all of us needed a little excitement in our lives.”

“Are you seriously saying that? You don’t feel anything even if Yoshiaki’s sleeping with a guy right now?”

Shiratori stopped, chopsticks frozen mid-air with his tuna pinned between them. The pink meat of the tuna peeked from underneath the skin, steaming gently.

“It’s none of my business. Kenji, are you worried about it? Is that why you keep asking me about them?”

“Stop lying to yourself.” Oshiro poured shochu into his glass and downed it. “Or

is that more convenient for you?"

"Why are you asking me this? Kenji, what's wrong with you? If I liked Yoshiaki, his dating so many girls would've driven me nuts by now. No."

"It doesn't make you jealous because Yoshiaki sleeps with women like he's playing a game. No feelings or thoughts about a future together. He changes girls like he changes his clothes. Nobody feels jealous about a piece of clothing."

Shiratori set down his chopsticks and tapped Oshiro's arm. "Let's stop talking about this. It's not why I asked you to come."

Shiratori was avoiding the topic again. "Fine," Oshiro said, slightly annoyed. It'd been some time since he started suspecting that Shiratori had feelings for Zaizen. Zaizen liked Shiratori as well, but it was always a friendship that included Oshiro. He thought that it might have been because of him that the other two hadn't grown closer; that they felt sorry for Oshiro when they left him by himself. Maybe Zaizen dated all those girls to hide from his true feelings. Maybe it was just his sporting nature and a mere case of brotherly love, but Oshiro couldn't help feeling that there something sparked between them when Zaizen was with Shiratori.

Oshiro wouldn't feel lonely or jealous even if the other two became close. He knew that he wasn't capable of loving anyone. He'd have sex. He might marry, if there were advantages to doing so. But he'd never develop an emotional attachment to his wife, or anyone else for that matter.

So Oshiro had begun to wonder whether his friendship with Zaizen and Shiratori hindered a potential relationship between the two, but unfortunately that was idea was put on the back burner when Kakeru showed up in their lives.

"What did you want to discuss?" Oshiro asked.

"It's a woman."

"Woman? Yeah, that would be something Yoshiaki specializes in."

"She's a client I helped with a divorce. She won and got the alimony she wanted. It's just...she invited me to dinner."

If Yoshiaki was around, he'd happily have dispensed advice on handling the situation. He'd comfort Shiratori and tell him not to get close to her. Shiratori could then reassure himself that Zaizen cared for him.

"At first, she said she just wanted to thank me. I discussed the matter with Matsumae and she said to tell the client that it was just part of our job and there

was no need for her to thank us that way. You wouldn't go to a dinner with one of your patients either, right?"

"Of course not. That's just asking for trouble," Oshiro sighed. Zaizen might think that Shiratori's behavior was cute and the sort of thing you'd expect from a little brother, but it annoyed Oshiro how naive he could be. "She just divorced her husband and now has time to herself. There's a young, well-to-do, fairly successful man right in front of her. I don't see why she wouldn't pounce."

"I know. That'll be a job hazard if I continue specializing in family law. I'm not so naive that I don't recognize it or know how to avoid it."

"Then why are you bringing it up?"

"She's starting to escalate. At first it was just a dinner invitation that I politely refused. Now, I can't answer my phone anymore, and she's starting to follow me everywhere I go." Shiratori nervously glanced behind him, checking the other customers in the bar. There were no tables or seats occupied by a single woman. Shiratori let out a breath and drained his cup of oolong tea before tucking into his dinner. "Aren't you the expert in dealing with stalking cases?"

"The judicial system can't act unless there's physical evidence of a crime," Shiratori sighed. "She's started sending me presents too. I send them straight back without opening them. It's really annoying and I want this thing to end." Shiratori lowered his voice but Oshiro could detect a hint of excitement creeping in. He simply nodded and kept listening. "So I've come up with a master plan. Kenji, be my boyfriend. I think she'll give up if she thinks I'm gay."

Oshiro burst out laughing.

"What was that for? I put serious effort into this plan!"

"Oh, I'm sure it's a good plan. It's just...that role isn't meant for me." Oshiro wanted to yell at Zaizen to hurry up and come to the bar. Who else would be able to play that role better than Zaizen? If Oshiro agreed to this request, he'd prevent the two from ever growing closer. "I'm calling Yoshiaki."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Shiratori put his hand over Oshiro's phone. "Don't. That's against the rules. They would think I interrupted them."

"Don't you want to interrupt them?"

Shiratori shook his head. "They'll think I'm jealous."

"Who cares what they'd think about you? Kakeru is nothing but a kid bored out of his mind. Zaizen will forget him and come to you in a heartbeat if he knows

you're in trouble. You know that."

"Kenji, come on. I'm asking you."



"Stop avoiding the question. I don't mind doing it, but it won't solve anything for you or Yoshiaki." Oshiro felt frustrated. He was tired of being the good guy in the friendship. He wished he didn't have to deal with friends and the responsibilities that came with having them. Why couldn't people handle their own issues?

"Kenji, you're wrong. I don't like Yoshiaki in that way." Shiratori still denied it. Maybe Oshiro was paranoid: were Shiratori and Zaizen just friends, as they claimed? He couldn't tell. "Well, next week you'll be dating Kakeru. He can be

your boyfriend.” It seemed the most logical, hassle-free solution.

Shiratori frowned. “We don’t know if he’ll really come. He’ll probably stay at Yoshiaki’s if they fall in love.”

“And how can you be so confident about that if you never liked Yoshiaki in that way?” Oshiro started to lose his patience. The conversation wouldn’t have been so constrained if Zaizen was here. He’d have come up with a quick, clean resolution that would satisfy everyone.

Oshiro needed Zaizen to be here now. He didn’t have the patience to babysit Shiratori.

“Kenji, sorry I asked you to come. You don’t want to listen to me anymore, do you?” Shiratori’s shoulders drooped. “He...Kakeru was really good-looking. Yoshiaki might really get fired up with him. Maybe that’s the reason why he never had a serious relationship with all the girls he dated. Maybe he really is gay.” Shiratori denied he had feelings for Zaizen, but talked about him as if he did. His indecisiveness rubbed Oshiro’s nerves raw.

“What do you think Yoshiaki is doing right now?” Oshiro said in a low voice. “They probably went to an expensive restaurant for dinner and are driving around town in his Ferrari or Porsche. They’ll probably go to Hayama on the weekend and sail. And in bed he’ll pull out ‘little Zaizen’ and they’ll have the most passionate time of their lives.”

“Kenji, stop.” “Why? Because you don’t want to know? Just admit that you’re jealous.”

“I’m not.” Shiratori spoke with a tremor, and he looked as if he was about to cry. “I don’t like spending time with guys who aren’t honest about themselves.” Oshiro knew he was a hypocrite but couldn’t help saying it. He paused to see if Shiratori would point the hypocrisy out, but he got a different response than he expected.

“You don’t understand, Kenji. I gave that hope up a long time ago. I want to be friends with him at least, so I’ve done my best to forget that I ever felt that way. Kenji, please, if you’re my friend don’t talk about Yoshiaki in this way.”

“So you gave up.” Oshiro said in a low voice.

“He said he’d only have sex with girls. But if he was able to sleep with with Kakeru, then I guess he never really saw me in that way. That’s it. Kenji, sorry I asked you to come here today. Let’s go.” Shiratori grabbed the receipt and took

it to the cashier without waiting for Oshiro, leaving most of his food untouched. It was unlike Shiratori to leave without taking at least one bite from each dish he ordered. Oshiro realized he'd crossed a line. His eyes landed on the large briefcase Shiratori carried with him; it must contain all the case files he planned to look over tonight.

The cold, northern wind bit at them once they stepped outside, and Shiratori quickly wrapped a white wool scarf around his neck. "That time of year again. Can I use some of your lip balm, Kenji? I've tried others, but the one you sell at your clinic's the best."

"I guess it is that season." Oshiro said. His house was in Shinagawa while Shiratori lived in Daikanyama. The trains were still running, and they were about to head to the station when Shiratori caught Oshiro's arm.

"Kenji, don't look back. Just a quick glance."

"What?"

"The woman in the gray coat. It's her."

"So she's following us." Oshiro glanced back and saw the woman. She was further away than he expected, but the woman in the gray coat was certainly trailing them.

"She recently became obsessed. She probably followed me from my office and won't stop until I reach my house."

"Do you need to come to my place, Akimi?" Oshiro silently cursed Zaizen again. If only that mysterious brat hadn't shown up, Zaizen could have given Shiratori all the comfort and safety he needed.

"It's okay. She seems to be satisfied and leaves once I reach my house. I'd have solid evidence that she's stalking me if she left any messages on my phone afterwards, but she's not that dumb. She hasn't done anything that will convict her."

"That's rough."

"The only people I could think of to discuss this matter was Matsumae, you, and Yoshiaki. Sorry."

"Stop apologizing." Oshiro stopped at the intersection. He grabbed Shiratori's arm and shoved him into the closest taxi, then jumped inside himself and commanded the driver to drive fast. When he glanced back, he saw the woman in the gray coat running frantically, a dazed look on her face as if she was

possessed.

“Women are ominous creatures,” Oshiro murmured to himself. Despite all the surgeries he’d performed on so many women, there still was an ambiguous quality to them that he just could not understand.

Oshiro took the taxi home after dropping Shiratori off at his house. As the taxi pulled up to his house, Oshiro could see that the iron gates were still open this late in the evening. The exterior lights illuminated the mansion’s facade, revealing its magnificence compared to the neighboring houses, a testimony to Hanae's career success.

Oshiro opened the front door, and called, “I’m home.” The foyer connected to a large hallway similar to an old European stately home. A large stoneware vase with winter flowers was positioned adjacent to the entrance, to meet anyone who stepped into the house.

“Good evening. Would you like something to eat?” A man in a black suit entered the foyer to greet Oshiro. He wore his long, black hair pulled back into a low ponytail to accentuate his perfectly symmetrical face, and his voice and face betrayed no emotion, lending him a doll-like quality.

“Yes, please Yasumi-chan. I haven’t had dinner yet. Akimi told me to say hi to you.”

“How is Akimi doing? He hasn’t visited here in a while.” Despite the level tone, Oshiro diagnosed a hint of concern in his voice; he knew this only because he had lived with this man for years. Yasumi-chan—Yasumichi to give him his full name—became the family’s housekeeper when Oshiro was in high school. He'd bankrupted himself paying for extensive reconstructive facial surgery to achieve the perfect appearance he longed for, and in desperation begged Hanae to hire him so he could make good his debts to her. Yasumichi remained the housekeeper ever since, and although he had paid off his original bills years ago, he was still bound to the Oshiros because every time he found a wrinkle in his skin, he would beg Hanae, in hysterics, to remove it immediately. Oshiro knew Yasumichi would never leave this house even if he was offered the opportunity to do so. He'd become accustomed to the extravagant lifestyle the Oshiros enjoyed. Oshiro once saw a photograph of Yasumichi before he had his procedures done, which showed a man with a nondescript face, hair parted and

combed to one side. At the time, Yasumichi was employed by the government at a modest salary in the district registration office. He'd never have had the opportunity to live in a house as luxurious as the one he was living in right now if he stayed in his former job, and he'd never give it up now that he had achieved it, even if he 'd realized the lifestyle by working as a domestic servant in someone else's home.

"Yasumi-chan, I'm hungry," Oshiro said, as he'd habitually done since high school.

"What did you drink tonight?"

"Shochu."

"Then we shall go with jyumen."

Irrespective of the way he came to be hired, Yasumichi was an excellent caretaker. He kept the house spotlessly clean, and all the rooms were discreetly scented. He asked very little from the family, despite everything he did for them. He never requested a pay raise or to own a cat. He was always there for the family, even after eight o'clock in the evening. At times he went above and beyond the normal duties of a housekeeper to provide comfort.

"Kenji, you seem low today," Yasumichi said. "Is there something bothering you?" "No, I was just wondering about what, exactly, friendship is. I feel like maintaining it is more complicated than not having it." Oshiro followed Yasumichi into the dining room. The room's design was all white except for a set of black dining-room chairs. He could see into the adjacent kitchen with all its shining appliances precisely oriented to resemble a showroom from an interior design magazine.

Vivid red apples occupied a white bowl, standing out in the monochrome room. Oshiro picked up one of the apples and bit into it without bothering to rinse it first. He experienced a sensation like arousal when his incisors dug into the skin of an apple, but he could not kiss another human. He was afraid of the act and avoided it. If he ever did find a person worthy of loving, he wondered if he would sink his teeth into that person like he did with the apple. His mind flashed back to the girl he'd fucked. She'd asked him to go down on her, but the idea disgusted him, and he'd said so. That was when she slapped him. Oshiro wondered if he should have bitten her until she bled instead of slapping her back.

"Did you fight with Akimi?" Yasumichi asked, putting noodles on to boil. Oshiro

had no idea where Yasumichi obtained his ingredients, but they were always top grade and worthy of being served in a first-class restaurant. Hanae must have felt fortunate to find such a talented housekeeper; she was always ready to offer Yasumichi the most up-to-date procedures at her clinic whenever he found a wrinkle or other defect on his body.

When Oshiro was young, he once wondered if there was a romantic understanding between his mother and Yasumichi, but realized later that passion could never develop between them. Hanae took many lovers; she often spent the night at a man's place and rarely returned home. If she wasn't with a man, she was likely to be found at a host club, competing for male attention against other rich women. Yasumichi, on the other hand, preferred to live quietly. Their personalities were not compatible in the least.

"I wish I was like you," Oshiro said. "You seem to be satisfied without being social."

"True. My mirror is the only friend I need."

Oshiro gazed at Yasumichi's back as he tended the noodles. Yasumichi looked like the subject of a painting. His black-clad figure contrasted picturesquely with the white kitchen and noodles.

Oshiro couldn't tell what Yasumichi meant when he said those words. He only knew that he would someday have to tend to Yasumichi's needs, when Hanae retired from her career.

"Kenji, are you lonely? Why don't you find a lover?"

"No thanks. Friends are tedious. A lover would be worse."

"You know Mama will never become your lover, no matter how long you wait."

Oshiro bit into his apple again. It had tasted sweet, but now had a bitter note.

"Who'd want to be her date?"

"All right. I was only checking."

The face Shiratori made when he confessed his love for Zaizen unexpectedly crossed Oshiro's mind. Shiratori denied it until the very end of the evening, when he admitted his emotions, and said that he'd given up any hope long ago. Oshiro pondered whether he should confess to Yasumichi that he did at one point want to be his mother's lover, but that the fantasy was broken when he was three years old. Instead, he bit into the apple again.

Yasumichi laid an empty plate in front of Oshiro. "Put the apple here. You should

eat the noodles before they soften too much.”

“Thanks,” Oshiro said, taking the noodle bowl. A large umeboshi, a mitsuba leaf, seaweed, and sesame seeds floated in the pale soup. “Thank you always for the fine food, Yasumi-chan.”

“My pleasure.”

Oshiro broke up the umeboshi and stirred it into the broth before he started eating. The soft noodles felt refreshing as they slid down his throat. Yasumichi was the one who'd taught him the delight to be found in eating. Previous housekeepers hadn't been bad cooks, but Yasumichi had a gift for creating dishes to satisfy both body and soul. Yasumichi also taught Oshiro how to live a fulfilling life. That was probably the reason Oshiro didn't feel an urge to marry: he'd already achieved his ideal life. A marriage could only destroy the peace Yasumichi had provided for him in this house.

“Kenji, would you like me to come to your room later?” Yasumichi asked, using their secret code.

Oshiro shook his head. “No, thanks. Not tonight.”

Yasumichi even volunteered to comfort Oshiro with his mouth when he needed it. Oshiro respected and admired Yasumichi for how much he provided. He knew that he, himself, could never do the same for anyone.

“Right, it's Monday,” Shiratori sighed. Next year was creeping up on the city steadily, rushing people to finish what was left of this year, but in reality it was an illusion, just a matter of replacing this year's calendar with next year's, and life wouldn't change at all.

Shiratori had spent the weekend in Kansai on a business trip and returned on the bullet train early this morning. The husband of this particular client refused to pay his child support, and she was determined to have him pay or else drag him back to court.

He could have returned home late Sunday night, but he felt uneasy about it. The woman stalking him would probably be lurking in the shadows, watching his house, waiting for his return. The thought of her staring from the dark alleys was enough to overrule that idea.

He finished his work early, so as to leave on the dot. As he poured himself a final cup of coffee in the office kitchen, Kakeru crossed his mind. “He's a cute

boy. Yoshiaki will like him,” Shiratori said to himself after looking around to ensure nobody could hear him.

Zaizen had been there for him when Shiratori failed his first bar exam. He felt like everything he’d worked for over the past several years had gone to waste, and he couldn't help but cry when Zaizen offered a friendly shoulder. That was when his emotions got the better of him, and he admitted his feelings to Zaizen. Shiratori didn't recall the exact words Zaizen used, just that Zaizen repudiated him, saying he couldn't have sex with a man.

Shiratori could only rejoin by claiming that he was upset and not of sound mind.

Shiratori always had an inferiority complex about Zaizen and Oshiro. Both men were taller than Shiratori, with broad, masculine shoulders. They were also more worldly. Shiratori didn't mind being their little brother while they were in college, but he couldn't continue to act like that if he wanted to be seen as an equal. He now had a career like the others, but although Shiratori passed his second exam and received his license to practice law, he felt as if they had gone further in their careers, leaving Shiratori behind.

Even worse, Oshiro had no reservations about exposing those vulnerable parts of his past.

Coming down to it, Shiratori was the one who'd incited the three into joining this weird dating game. He wasn't behaving in character that night; he had doubts about relying on his friends in front of a young and handsome stranger, and in that moment bluffed himself. That evening, he’d originally intended to confer with Zaizen and Oshiro about his stalker, but then Kakeru had shown up. Shiratori might even have missed his final opportunity to redefine his relationship with Zaizen.

“I wish I was still young,” Shiratori said. If he was younger, maybe the same age as Kakeru, he'd have been able to muster up enough confidence to confess his feelings to Zaizen again. But he wasn't young anymore. His closet was stuffed with dark-colored suits, and his wardrobe was dominated by white shirts and boring ties. All his shoes were black leather now, paired with dull black or gray socks. The colognes he wore now were unobtrusive compared to the scents he applied in the past. He used to favor brightly colored sweaters and shirts, but they’d been shoved into the back of his closet. For a change, he'd given jeans a

trial, but the thick fabric felt cumbersome binding his legs. He hadn't even checked out New Balance and Nike's latest styles in years. Since he became a lawyer, he hadn't purchased anything red. Red was his favorite color and as a student he used to wear it all the time.

His clothes changed, and his tastes in fashion had altered as well. His profession defined a mold for what a young lawyer should be, and he was hammering himself into it.

In a few years he'd forget about the feelings he had for Zaizen and it would settle into a normal friendship. At least, that was what he hoped would happen.

The day faded into night. Shiratori realized it was raining when he saw the lights from the nearby buildings blurred by raindrops streaking the glass. He went to open the window to take a closer look at the rain, but hesitated when he spotted the pink umbrella in front of the office. It was his stalker. "Great," Shiratori muttered. The front door was the only exit to the building, so he couldn't leave without running in to her, and she'd most likely ask him out for dinner again. Shiratori grabbed his phone and punched in Oshiro's number. "She's outside. What should I do?" Although he rejected her every time, she showed up every couple of days and invited him to dinner. She used the same old excuses for bumping into him: on the way home from a shopping trip, or her friend had canceled their dinner at the last minute and her night was open. It gave him the creeps that she claimed to run into him by accident, when in reality she camped outside the building for hours waiting for him.

Oshiro replied that he'd be there soon.

Oshiro never turned down his friends when they needed him. He came across as a cold fish, but Shiratori knew his heart was in the right place; his pride wouldn't let him admit the slightest hint of his emotions.

Shiratori downed his coffee and hastily organized his desk to be ready for morning. He was ready to go down to the lobby and wait for Oshiro when an associate came into his office. "Shiratori, someone's wanting to see you."

"Okay." Shiratori grabbed his coat and bag, ready to meet Oshiro, only to be greeted by someone unexpected. Kakeru had altered his appearance from the way he looked that night at the bar. He'd combed his hair into a conservative style, and toned his clothing down—he now wore a gray suit beneath a coordinating raincoat, with a red tie appropriate for his youth. "I forgot it was

today,” Shiratori said.

“Yeah, it’s been a week.” Kakeru, looking elegant in his suit, smiled at him.

“So your week with Yoshiaki ended.” Shiratori thought he'd feel jealous towards the youth who'd slept with Zaizen, but what he felt instead was emptiness. He didn't have the experience or confidence to spend a week with someone he hardly knew. His job was demanding and he usually just wanted to go to the movies or watch a DVD at home by himself if he had spare time. “I’m sorry,” he said to Kakeru. Kakeru was too young and beautiful for him to date. Shiratori was already selfconscious about his looks: the last thing he wanted was a beautiful lover that would remind him of his shortcomings. “I’ll pass,” he continued. “I was drunk and wasn’t in my right mind, and I should have listened to you rather than play the game. I’m sorry I treated you like a trophy.”

“A trophy?” Kakeru asked.

“Yes, as the prize for the game. I’m sure you came over to our table because there was something on your mind, but we just ignored it. Besides, this is how I am. I can’t entertain you like Yoshiaki did.”

Kakeru merely smiled, exhibiting no intention of accusing Shiratori of forfeiting the game.

Shiratori now realized why Oshiro was adamant about finding Kakeru's motives in proposing a game that could potentially put himself in danger. It was suspicious that no one knew Kakeru, even though he was familiar with their names and occupations. There must be some sort of connection between the four. Maybe it was because of a guilty conscience, but Shiratori wanted to hear Kakeru’s testimony, if he was willing to give it. Oshiro stepped into the office.

“Oh, you’re here,” he said.

Kakeru furrowed his eyebrows disapprovingly. “You again? What's the matter, did you forget the rules?”

Oshiro was dubious of Kakeru since the beginning. Shiratori thought that Oshiro was the only one who saw this game in a clear light.

“No, that’s not it. I asked Kenji to be my bodyguard tonight. It’s a little complicated; why don’t we all go to dinner? I’ll tell you once we’re there.” “It’s okay. I’ll leave.” Oshiro turned around.

“Why? It’s just dinner.”

“There’s that silly rule. Kakeru, you be his bodyguard for the week.” Oshiro’s

tone of voice sounded as if Kakeru had been his friend for years.

“Bodyguard?” Kakeru asked, tilting his head.

“You’re a man. I’m assuming you’re somewhat strong. Escort Akimi home every day this week.” Oshiro headed for the elevator.

“Kenji, wait, I’m sorry. I’ll confront her if she keeps stalking me—”

“Stop apologizing, it’s not your fault. And don’t you dare talk to her. What are you going to do if she has a knife? Rely on us while you can.”

“Thanks....”

Kakeru witnessed the exchange silently. Oshiro stared back at Kakeru. “She’s standing in front of the building. I got a good look at her, but I think she might give up if she saw Kakeru. You guys better act like a couple to convince her.” With his piece said, Oshiro got back into the elevator.

“Great,” Shiratori said. He had no idea how to pretend to be lovers, especially since he’d been fixated on forfeiting the game.

Also...Shiratori was still a virgin. He couldn't imagine being in a casual relationship that involved sex.

Tokyo was brilliant with Christmas decorations, and holiday songs chimed from every street corner: in the Omotesando neighborhood in Harajuku, in the Yebisu Garden Place complex in Ebisu, in the Roppongi Hills complex, at the Caretta Shiodome, and on the island of Odaiba in Tokyo Bay. A frantic but joyous atmosphere permeated the city during the winter holidays.

Oshiro, this evening attending the Society of Plastic Surgeons' holiday party, examined the large Christmas tree in the hotel lobby. He dreaded the parties he was obligated to attend during the winter season.

He always spent Christmas with Zaizen and Shiratori. Even Zaizen, normally surrounded by women, reserved that day for his two friends. Each year they did something different; once they reserved a restaurant for themselves and had a magnificent dinner, another year they visited Zaizen’s vacation home in Hayama and partied all night. They'd also thrown a party at Oshiro’s house, for which Shiratori and Zaizen dressed up as Santa Claus and a reindeer. Oshiro remembered Hanae's delight during that party.

They celebrated Christmas together so none of them had any need to lament being single on a romantic holiday, unlike the rest of Japanese society. It was the

norm for them. Or at least, that was how it had been: they hadn't planned anything for this year so far. Oshiro considered that they might just have gotten too old for bachelor parties.

Oshiro tugged at his cummerbund, trying to loosen it a bit. The holidays were almost the only time he wore his tuxedo, but he dreaded getting an entire new one tailored just because he'd gained a few pounds. He thought about starting to run in the morning, but decided otherwise—he tended to lose his appetite on the days he had to attend dinner parties, so he wasn't going to gain any more weight, at least during this holiday.

He found Hanae in the crowd, pleased she was wearing a conservative kimono instead of the sort of gown she usually wore on these occasions. It embarrassed him when she wore low-cut clothing that showed off her cleavage at her age.

Oshiro stepped out of the room for a moment to give Zaizen a call, expecting to reach his voice mail again, but Zaizen answered the phone.

“Why haven’t you been answering your phone?” Oshiro asked. “Were you honoring that stupid rule?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t have answered now but you've been insistent. What’s up?”

Oshiro gladdened at the cheerful voice on the other end of the line. Zaizen's voice always had a reassuring tone. “Listen Yoshiaki, there’s a woman stalking Akimi. I had Kakeru escort him to and from work last week, but I need you to do it starting tomorrow.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“You didn’t answer your phone.”

“You should’ve called my office.”

Oshiro laughed. He could tell Yoshiaki was furious. “You brought it on yourself. This is the last time I’m ever going to intervene between you guys. Hurry up and get married, for Akimi’s sake!”

“Wait, what? Get over here and explain this.”

“I can’t. I’m at this stupid event at the Imperial Hotel. It’ll be a while before I can escape.” It was about time for Hanae to request he accompany her for a formal meet-and-greet with the other members of the society, a ritual always performed at these parties. She'd introduce Oshiro to her peers, and they'd either praise Oshiro for being an excellent heir or subtly inquire whether he was

still single. Oshiro knew that they were making a mental list of their relatives and acquaintances that might be a perfect match for him. There were unwritten rules within this society that he had to follow if Oshiro wanted to succeed in his career. The members competed for each others' patients at work, but not at this party. Instead, the surgeons congratulated each other on their work and praised themselves for contributing to the success of the industry. Or at least that was what they said out loud.

Zaizen sighed. "Fine, I'll escort him. Geez, why can't he just tell her to get lost?" "We don't know if she's carrying a knife and his job makes it complicated for him to rebuff her. We're hoping she might give up if she thinks he's gay."

"Him being gay, huh."

"Yeah, him being gay." Oshiro ended the conversation there and shut off his cell phone. He was not in the mood to answer if Zaizen called back.

The high-pitched voice of a soprano singing an aria met Oshiro when he returned to the party. It was ridiculous to see her introduced as the most beautiful singer in the world when in reality her face and body were superficial, perfected through surgery. A waiter approached, balancing champagne flutes on a serving tray. It must have been a while since they were poured; all the champagne had lost its sparkle. Oshiro asked if the hotel had any scotch, but the list of brands the waiter gave him were surprisingly mediocre. He settled for champagne. "You're not eating?" someone called to Oshiro from behind. He turned around and spotted a young man that he knew wasn't invited to this party. "Why are you here?" he demanded. Kakeru balanced a plate overloaded with hors d'oeuvres. At the sight, Oshiro put his hand over his mouth, nauseated from confronting food from the large, communal dishes on the buffet that had been pawed over by all the attendees.

"Why don't you have some?" Kakeru asked.

"I don't want to look at it."

"No? It's good."

Oshiro shook his head. He resented Kakeru carelessly eating in front of him.

"Why are you here?"

"I didn't know security was this lax. The guards let me in when I told them I worked at the Oshiro Clinic."

"I'm not asking *how* you got in; *why* are you here? It's a day early."

“Akimi told me to come. He said you're probably bored out of your mind at the party, so I should be your guest.”

“Akimi wouldn't say that.” Oshiro wasn't going to call Shiratori just to validate the story. As much as he refused to admit it to Kakeru, it was true that Oshiro was bored. “Is Akimi safe by himself tonight?”

“He's with family. His sister and niece are visiting.”

“So you went to his house.”

“Yeah, like you told me to do.” Kakeru summoned a waiter for a drink. He took a flute of champagne, but Oshiro stopped him and handed him a glass of orange juice instead.

“Why are you giving me this?” Kakeru asked.

“You're underage.”

“No I'm not. I'm twenty-one.”

“Stop lying, Kakeru Yamanobe. You're still in high school.”

Kakeru emptied his glass. He wasn't fazed by Oshiro dropping his real name.

“You knew?”

“Don't condescend to an adult. Yoshiaki and Akimi may have been nice enough to play along with your silly game, but I'm not.”

“How did you find out? Did you get a private detective or something?”

“Yes, and that was money I didn't need to spend.” Oshiro hired a detective to follow Kakeru after he left Shiratori every night. He was able to ascertain the youth's identity, but his motives were still unknown. “Why are you here in the first place?”

“I wanted to see what kind of party it was. Besides, Akimi doesn't want to be with me anymore.”

“Did you do it with him?” His words came out labored.

“Why are you asking so many questions? Why do you even care if I slept with Akimi? Isn't there anything fun to do here? I'm tired of hearing that old lady sing.” Kakeru lifted the hand in which Oshiro held his champagne, and sipped from Oshiro's glass. The action stood out in a crowd primarily made of elderly guests. “Quit it. Behave.” Oshiro glared at him.

“But it's boring. Let's do something fun, Kenji!”

“Shut up. You crashed this party, and I'll have the guards kick you out of the hotel if you don't stop this nonsense.”

“Why are you so mad? It’s not like you.” Kakeru lowered his head slightly, and looked up at Oshiro through his lashes. The gesture made him look small, even though he was close to Oshiro's height.

Oshiro blocked Kakeru from his mother’s line of sight. “Go home and study. You’re still a senior at Hibiya High School. You’ve been absent from school a lot, and are on the verge of not graduating. Don’t think you can do anything you want because your father is an engineer working abroad and won’t know about it.”

“You really did do your research! Do you want to know my weight and height, and maybe my grades?”

“I don’t care about that. I only want to know why you keep messing with us.”

Kakeru rested his head on Oshiro's shoulder. People were watching them, and Kakeru’s balance was too stable for Oshiro to pretend he was drunk.

“I don’t care about you or your game. Go away and stop bothering us.”

Kakeru fell silent, then smiled maliciously and took off running through the crowd, straight to Hanae.

“Wait! Get back here!” Oshiro ran after him.

“Mama, Mama!” Kakeru leaped onto Hanae, who stood talking to other guests.

“My, I didn’t know I had such a cute son.” Hanae had too much class to make a scene, and simply patted his back as if he were a child.

“Kenji’s mean to me. He brought me here but he keeps ignoring me.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry to hear that. And by the way, who are you?” Hanae asked, staring at Kakeru.

“Who do you think I am?”

“Did I fix your face? No, it looks too natural for that. Were you born with it?”

“Mama gave me a compliment. Thank you!” Kakeru hugged her again.

Oshiro could sense the suppressed chuckles running through the crowd. “That’s enough, Kakeru. I’m sorry Director, he just had too much to drink.” Oshiro never addressed Hanae as “Mama” in public, only speaking of her as his superior.

“Is that so? Well, you’re a cute drinker. Just make sure to not cause any problems.” She kept staring at Kakeru as she spoke, as if she were examining his face to calculate how much profit she could make from him.



“No, he’ll probably cause trouble, so I’m taking him home. Excuse us.”
Oshiro left the room before Hanae could tell him that he didn't have to leave with Kakeru. “Come on, Kenji. I haven’t had my dessert yet. That cake looked delicious.”

“Stop behaving like a kid!”

Kakeru was behaving in a way beyond Oshiro’s comprehension. He’d seen how Kakeru acted at the bar and at this party, and he didn’t want to know what Kakeru would do if left unattended.

“Stop whining and get a move on!” Oshiro dragged Kakeru to the cloakroom to retrieve his coat. The attendant brought two coats, and that was when Oshiro realized that Kakeru had entered the hotel right behind him, close enough to

convince the attendants that he was Oshiro's guest. "You little con artist."

"Stop calling me 'you.' Use my name."

"Oh, then *Kakeru*, shall I call your father in South America and inform him that his son is acting up and needs his supervision?"

"What's wrong with you today, Kenji? You're not acting like yourself. Am I so hot that you lose your cool?" Kakeru twirled around the Christmas tree in the lobby, coattails flapping in the air. Hotel guests walking by stared in awe at the dancing youth.

Oshiro wiped the sweat from his forehead. It was rare for him to perspire like this. Kakeru stirred raw emotions that laid dormant in his psyche for years. He was used to being irritated at Shiratori, but he hadn't ever felt as furious as he was right now. He also felt intoxicated, like he'd had too much to drink. He caught Kakeru and dragged him out to the taxi queue.

"This is it?" Kakeru asked.

"This is it. Go home."

"But there's no one at my house. It's boring!"

A yellow taxi pulled up in front of him, the back door swinging open automatically, remotely triggered by the driver.

"Get in!" Oshiro shoved him onto the back seat.

Kakeru clammed up once he was inside the taxi. The driver waited for directions. He couldn't leave without knowing where to go, and Oshiro hadn't memorized Kakeru's address.

The driver finally turned around. "Sir, where are you headed?" Kakeru refused to answer, and the driver looked at Oshiro.

"I'm sorry. To Shinagawa, please." Defeated, Oshiro climbed into the taxi beside Kakeru. The only address he could give the driver was his own.

Oshiro'd left the report of the investigation into Kakeru's identity in his bedroom. He needed to retrieve it before he could drive Kakeru home.

Kakeru goggled at the mansion as he clambered out of the cab. "You live in a big house. It's the best one out of you three."

"Why do you care?" Oshiro asked. Zaizen lived alone in a condo, while Shiratori lived with his parents and a sister who worked at a large bank. Both lived in substantial homes, which only looked miserable when compared to Oshiro's.

"You don't need to take your coat off. We're leaving soon."

“Why? It’s almost midnight. It’ll be Monday before long.”

“I don’t plan on you being here after midnight.”

Yasumichi greeted them with a slightly confused look as they entered the front door arguing. “Good evening. You’re early tonight. Isn’t the party still in session?”

Kakeru stared at Yasumichi for a moment as if to examine him, but then gave a friendly smile. “Is she your sister? I didn’t know you had a beautiful sister like her.”

“Excuse me, but I am only a worker employed at this house....”

“And Yasumi-chan is not my sister.” Oshiro didn't add anything since he didn't know how else he could describe Yasumichi. He took off his bow tie, feeling his appetite return now that he was home.

“Kenji, your coat. And you?” Yasumichi asked as he opened the coat closet next to the door.

“You don’t need to take his. I’m driving him home right now.”

“You? Driving? You shouldn’t. You drank on an empty stomach.” “It’s fine. I’m not drunk.”

Kakeru ignored their exchange and handed his coat to Yasumichi, who received it with a slightly reluctant look. Kakeru looked around the entrance. “Is Kenji's room upstairs?”

“Put on your coat.”

“Shut up.” Kakeru peeled his suit jacket off and dropped it on the floor of the entrance hall. He yanked off his bow tie as he climbed the stairs and tossed his slacks on the banister.

“Idiot! What is he thinking?” Oshiro ran after him. A shirt thrown from the second story landed on his face. He almost lost his balance as he hastily untangled himself. *Why am I in this situation?* Oshiro grumbled to himself. Anger boiled up inside. Everything was Kakeru's fault. He hated the party. He knew Hanae would criticize him for leaving early, and he loathed that even more.

Oshiro spied two small, black pools of cloth in the hallway once he had gotten up the stairs. It took a second to identify them as socks. A little farther away he saw underwear lying in the hall. Kakeru, now naked, ran to each room and opened the door. “Stop it, you brat!” Oshiro yelled as Kakeru opened the door to Hanae’s bedroom. The sweet smell of her perfume spilled out of her powder

room and closet. Kakeru next opened the guest room door, but the only thing that emerged was a musty smell from lack of use. Kakeru left the bathroom door wide open. The door that led to the roof was also swinging open, its hinges creaking as the door swayed.

“Kakeru!” Oshiro yelled. The door at the far end of the hall led to his bedroom. Kakeru flung it open and ran inside, and this time he didn't come out. “That’s enough!” Oshiro entered his domain and found Kakeru lying supine on his bed. His skin, flushed with excitement, stood out in a room defined by black and white. “You idiot, what are you thinking?” He drew in harsh, ragged breaths, cursing himself for his lack of exercise. “Get off my bed. Get out of my house!”

“Nope. I like this house. It’s nice.”

“That’s not something for you to decide.” Oshiro pulled off his cummerbund, and threw his tuxedo jacket over Kakeru. “You slept with Yoshiaki and Akimi. What are you planning to do here?”

“Stop being so insistent; let’s just have fun. What do you like to do? I’ll do anything.” Kakeru writhed sensuously on the bed. His body was as beautiful and artistic as his face, with perfect classical proportions. Oshiro wrestled his inner turmoil, watching the young man. The rage growing inside him had also awakened his desire.

“Come on, Kenji. Come.” Kakeru was still on his bed.

“Get out. Or else—”

“Come on, kiss me.” Kakeru spread his arms wide.

“I don’t like kissing!”

“I’m good at it. I can teach you?”

“I’ll vomit if I kiss.” His head throbbed; Oshiro couldn't tell if it was from anger or passion. He hadn't experienced such strong emotions in years. Nothing in his past compared to what he experienced right now.

“You don’t like kissing?”

“Yes, I hate it. And I hate you. Why did you come into my house and lie on my bed? You slept with my friends and now you seduce me. What is wrong with you? What did we do to you?!” He remembered Zaizen and Shiratori as they were in college: the superstar of the sailing team who always had a reassuring smile, and the quiet student protester in the red tartan coat. Oshiro loved them. He loved them more than anyone else.

“You wanted to sleep with Yoshiaki and Akimi,” Kakeru said. “You wanted to be in the middle and have a threesome.”

“No!” It was not love. There was no passion. They were close friends, and there was nothing beyond that. It would have remained that way forever if only Kakeru hadn't pushed his way between them. Kakeru was metastasizing through everything that Oshiro knew and trusted.

“Or did you want to sleep with your mama?” Kakeru smirked. That was more than Oshiro could take.

He stripped off his dress shirt and clenched it between his hands. He didn't care if Kakeru saw his body. He had other priorities. He mounted Kakeru.

“What are you doing?!”

Oshiro seized Kakeru's hands and tied them above his head with the shirt. He accomplished the move so quickly that Kakeru had no time to resist.

“Stop! What is wrong with you? Is this your thing? You pervert.” Kakeru tried to laugh it off, but his voice trembled. He must not have realized that Oshiro would commit such an act.

“Why did you come to us? I'll let you go if you tell me the truth.”

“It's just a game. I'm the prize. That's it.” Kakeru stared straight into Oshiro's eyes.

Oshiro loathed seeing the youth's face so close. He took off his glasses, and in an instant his vision blurred. “I don't need any prizes. You're the one that wants one. You wanted someone to sleep with.”

“Yeah, that's right. I want a rich, young guy who'll be nice to me. Anything wrong with wanting that? I'm not asking a lot from you—I'll do anything for you too.”

“Then shut up!” Oshiro grabbed Kakeru's chin and pushed him back into the bed.

“Ow, Kenji, it hurts! Stop!”

“Shut up!” Oshiro wrestled his pants off with his free hand. His penis was stiff, its blood vessels dilated. He let go of Kakeru, using both hands to roughly separate Kakeru's legs, and positioned his body for the act.

“Ow, ow! Stop it! No!” Kakeru struggled to get free. Oshiro penetrated deep into Kakeru. He knew exactly how painful it was without lubrication.

“No!”

Oshiro slapped Kakeru's face. “Shut up, shut up!” Red flashed in the back



of his eyes as he hit Kakeru.

He heard the voice of the girl who had slapped him in his mind. She'd called him a dick. He was fine with that: this was the only way he could achieve orgasm.

"Stop it! I said, stop!" Kakeru screamed, fear and pain in his voice. The sound aroused Oshiro even more. He had no need for affection or fondness for his partner; dominating and subduing his partner excited him. He wondered at times how Zaizen and Shiratori would react to his dark side. Zaizen would probably accuse him of cruelty, while Shiratori would try to convince him to go see a psychiatrist. Neither of them would ever understand Oshiro. And certainly his mother wouldn't.

The only person likely to understand him was Yasumichi. Despite his aggressive compulsions, Oshiro was struck with guilt every time he performed a violent act. Only Yasumichi could alleviate his pain, by giving him oral sex. Yasumichi said that Oshiro needed to express himself more, that this was why he was always sad. It was masturbation by proxy. The first time Yasumichi helped him was in

high school. But what Yasumichi offered was not enough to truly satisfy Oshiro. He needed the aggression, no matter how distressed he became in the aftermath.

Oshiro sighed heavily and raised his head, restraining himself to lengthen the moment as far as he could bear. Kakeru'd stopped resisting and lay there, silently. Oshiro's penis throbbed from the constriction and lack of lubrication, but his satisfaction was good. And then he saw Kakeru's penis lying flaccid against his torso, reminding Oshiro that he was the only one actively participating in the encounter. This was the first time he considered what his partners might be experiencing while he was fucking them. "I told you to go home. You asked for this," Oshiro said weakly.

This was sex just for himself, masturbation by proxy. It wasn't love. No passion involved. He just required someone to be in pain while he ejaculated. He finished the act as he asked himself why this was the only way he could achieve pleasure and satisfaction. "Untie me," Kakeru requested.

Oshiro had forgotten that he'd tied Kakeru's hands. His sight was still blurry but clear enough to remind him that this was reality. He was in his bed, on top of a young man. The dress shirt binding Kakeru was one he donned a few hours ago to attend a party. Everything in the room was familiar, except for Kakeru. Oshiro untied him and lay down beside him with his back turned. "Go home. I'll pay for the taxi," Oshiro mumbled without turning around, afraid to confront Kakeru. He knew well that he would be overcome with depression at seeing Kakeru enraged and disgusted.

"No, I want to stay here." Kakeru maneuvered his body closer to Oshiro, resting his face on Oshiro's back.

"Nothing here will please you. I can't entertain you like Yoshiaki or listen to you like Akimi. I will only hurt you."

"What if I say I still wanted to be here?" Kakeru slipped his hands around Oshiro in a hug. Oshiro slapped the hands that bound him and tried to get loose. "Stop it, the game's over."

"It hasn't started yet. It's not midnight."

Oshiro looked at the clock. It was still before twelve, and the day was still Sunday.

"Kenji, you look good without your glasses."

Oshiro remained silent.

“I thought you were chubbier, too. You’re in better shape than I thought.”

“Don’t say anything you don’t mean.” Oshiro sat up, running his fingers through his hair. He didn't want to see if Kakeru was aroused. “Go take a shower and clean yourself. There’re some medicine in the bathroom drawer.” He hoped Kakeru would punch him and storm out of the room, because then Oshiro would be able to laugh at himself, saying *This is what I deserve*.

Kakeru sat up also. “You think I’m mad?”

“I don’t care what you are.” Oshiro shook his head. The cigarette stench from the party bothered him. It wasn't just his hair, his entire body felt filthy.

Oshiro dragged his feet into the bathroom. The first thing he did was to throw up everything he’d ingested since he entered the party; luckily there was only champagne inside him. He felt somewhat relieved when his stomach was empty. It felt as if he had also vomited away the emotions he experienced during and after the party.

“Are you all right? Should I rub your back?” Kakeru stood at the bathroom door, worried. With that face, he really did look like an eighteen-year-old boy.

“It’s all right. It’s fine now.” Oshiro stepped into the shower stall. He turned on the hot water, but cold sputtered out first.

“You should drink some water. I’ll get some from the kitchen if you don’t like tap water.”

Oshiro was amazed at Kakeru’s sweetness and care. He couldn't believe Kakeru could act in such a way after being violently raped. “Get in. You need to wash yourself.” He surprised himself with the offer, as he'd never showered with anyone before. The stall was small, and they couldn't avoid bumping into each other. Still, he allowed Kakeru inside the booth, watching him duck under the now-hot water.

“Body soap...awesome, it’s Bulgari!” Kakeru used it to lather his body and hair. In the steam, without his glasses, Oshiro could only guess what Kakeru was doing. He reached his arm out, only to pull it back when his fingers brushed Kakeru. With his depth perception hindered, Kakeru was closer to him than Oshiro realized.

“Wash my back?” Kakeru asked.

He had a beautiful back. Without his glasses, Oshiro couldn't tell if Kakeru had

any scars or birthmarks, but he could feel the shape of the scapula and the straight line of the spinal column running down his entire back. Oshiro thought maybe he should enjoy watching his partner in the shower like normal couples do. He might have done so, but he only knew how to have forceful, violent sex. Oshiro took a sponge and hesitantly dabbed at the boy's back. This was the first time he had ever even bathed with someone else.

Kakeru turned around, dissatisfied. "Do it harder. Why are you so gentle now? I know how rough you are."

"I'm not gentle." Despite his words, Oshiro scrubbed harder. He didn't have the courage to wash the area where he'd violated Kakeru. "It wasn't what you'd imagined, was it? I told you there wasn't anything fun for you here."

"Sure, whatever. Stop pretending you don't like me."

"I'm not pretending." But Oshiro was less sure of himself now. If he really hated Kakeru, he would have thrown him out of the house, with Yasumichi's help if necessary. None of this would have happened. He wouldn't be in the shower with Kakeru, still washing his back. "I like you Kenji." Kakeru said, with his back still to Oshiro. Oshiro could only guess if Kakeru were lying or not. "You're wrong. You don't know anything about me."

"I don't care." Kakeru turned around and hugged Oshiro. "I don't care if it's just this once. Love me."

"Don't. I don't like this."

"You don't like kissing and you don't like dating. You make love like you're attacking me. You're a dick."

"Yes. I'm a dick." Oshiro choked on the words.

"You're a sad and lonely dick. That's why I want to be here." Kakeru squeezed him tighter. "Kenji, were you ever so lonely that you almost died from it?"

"No," Oshiro lied. Loneliness had been a part of him for as long as he could remember. That was his norm and there were no sentiments attached. Maybe there were in the past, but those emotions were thrown out with all the other toys he used to own as a child.

"I have. I lay in my bed for three days, waiting to die, but I got too hungry. That's when I quit." Kakeru released Oshiro and smiled. It was the same smile he wore when they first met at the bar, a light and carefree face that had never known loneliness.

Kakeru was leaving the house! Oshiro was adamant about that. So why was Kakeru seated at the dining-room table wearing Oshiro's pajamas? This was not according to plan.

Yasumichi smiled at Oshiro as he entered the kitchen. "I'm happy that you two stopped fighting." Oshiro regretted telling Kakeru that Yasumichi would feed him if he was hungry. Kakeru had gone down to the kitchen while Oshiro tried to fix his spoiled clothing.

Oshiro inhaled a sweet aroma. His appetite had crept back since he returned home, his empty stomach reminded him.

"There are baked apples. Would you like some ice cream on the side?"

"Yes, please," Oshiro said. Yasumichi served the apples as Oshiro took his seat. Hot apples and cold ice cream blended into a delicious harmony on top of the plate.

"It looks good," Kakeru said. "No wonder you didn't eat anything during the party. This definitely makes up for the dessert I missed."

"Kenji doesn't like to eat outside the house. He'll throw up if you make him. He's very sensitive." Yasumichi said, pouring them lemon-scented herb tea. It was unusual for Yasumichi to speak so openly to a first-time guest.

"Sensitive? Is that the reason why you don't kiss?"

"Kakeru, don't ask questions if you want to stay here this week."

"It might turn out to be longer."

"It'll end. I'm not your playmate." Oshiro was at a loss why Kakeru remained in this house after he had been rejected repeatedly. If Oshiro was in his position, his pride would have been devastated by now. Or maybe there was a reason why Kakeru could not quit his game? Curiosity crept into his thoughts about how Zaizen and Shiratori had spent each of their weeks with the young man. "How was Yoshiaki?" Oshiro asked, scooping up a spoonful of ice cream. The herb tea he sipped beforehand helped his empty stomach tolerate the cold dessert. "I'm sure his sex was excellent. That's what he's known for."

Kakeru did not answer, merely sliced his baked apple.

"Akimi's probably a virgin. Did he cry when you penetrated him?" Kakeru didn't answer that question, either.

"Did they buy you any presents?"

"Some clothes and DVDs," he answered diffidently.

“That sounds like stuff they would give. Don’t expect to receive anything from me.”

“I won’t. The food’s good.”

“Okay.”

Minutes ticked by quietly. It wasn’t midnight yet. Children were in bed by now but most adults would still be up watching the television or sitting in the living room, killing time. A significant number of people in the city would be having sex right now. Whether in a hotel, an office, or their own houses, they were enjoying themselves right at this moment. Then there were those who paid to obtain loveless pleasure. What Oshiro did to Kakeru was not much different than what a man would pay a prostitute to do to channel his sexual desires. Oshiro, surprised, realized that he was feeling guiltier about Kakeru the longer he was with him.

Oshiro could have chosen not to have sex with Kakeru, but had lost against his overpowering urge to do so. “Kakeru, will you promise me one thing?”

“What?”

“After our week is over and we return to the bar, tell us why you asked us to play this game.”

“You want to know that bad?”

“Yes.”

Kakeru finished his dessert fast, leaving only traces of melted butter and ice cream on his plate. He looked around. “Do you have any cigarettes?”

Yasumichi poured him a second cup of tea. “This house is smoke-free. If you wish to smoke, please go outside to the smoking area in the corner of the garden.”

“You’re strict.”

“You should take this opportunity to quit. It's bad for your skin.” Yasumichi stared at Kakeru's face. His own face, which was almost always untroubled, now showed signs of jealousy. He said in a low voice, “May I ask something?”

“Sure.”

“Were you born with that face?”

“Yeah.”

“If I had a face like yours, my life would have been very different.”

Oshiro thought to intervene, but he had no idea what to say. It was unusual for Yasumichi to say such a thing, much less to a stranger.

“Having a face like this isn’t all it's cracked up to be, you know. Why do you think I’m here in the first place?” Kakeru said in a matter-of-fact tone, indifferent to Yasumichi's words. Kakeru wasn't here for love, nor was he here to gain sympathy. But, oddly, he would come into the house of a man he barely knew and offer sex.

Even Oshiro knew that wasn’t something a normal, lively eighteen-year-old young man would do if he had a choice.

Kakeru ignored him when Oshiro told him to sleep in the guest room. He lay on Oshiro’s bed, hugging a pillow.

Oshiro said, “I can’t sleep if you’re here. Go to the guest room.” “Why? We already had sex once; there’s nothing wrong with sleeping in the same bed after that.”

“What's wrong about sleeping in different beds? There are millions of couples that sleep in separate rooms.”

“No, I want to sleep here.” Kakeru shucked his borrowed clothes and burrowed under the covers.

“Why are you naked in my bed? You should know by now what kind of sex I like. Do you want to go through that again?”

“I always sleep without my clothes. Your sheets are soft and comfortable, Kenji.” Kakeru said, ignoring him. He beckoned to Oshiro to get in with him.

“Fine. I’ll sleep in the guest room!” Oshiro stormed out of his bedroom and into the guest room, but he ended up tossing and turning. He had to be in his own bed to rest soundly. Feeling miserable, he returned to Kakeru. “Why did you come here? If you want to mess with me, I think you’ve achieved your goal already.”

“Let’s sleep. There’s nothing complicated about that. Besides, you’ll be warm and relaxed if you sleep with another person.”

“Who do you sleep with at home?”

“No one. You’ve researched my family. My dad’s abroad and my mom remarried some guy.”

Oshiro sat on the edge of his bed. The high-quality mattress didn't sink in, despite the weight of two adult men. “Why don’t you go to your mom’s place if you’re lonely?”

“Why should I? She’s living with both of that guy’s daughters. She told me that’s

why she didn't take me. You know, those girls? Ugly as hell." Oshiro listened to Kakeru talk about his family with a wry tone.

"I was in elementary school when they got divorced. Remember that fad where girls painted their faces dark? Her daughters did that. They didn't take baths and they talked like idiots. They were so dumb."

"Still, she'd have taken care of you. Wouldn't you like to have the attention?"

"I'd rather have an older guy if that's the case. I don't trust women."

Oshiro couldn't tell if those were Kakeru's true feelings. Many women older than Kakeru would love to have the attention and affection of an attractive youth like him. Any of them would gladly open her front door to an abandoned boy and take him under her wing.

"Do you really hate me that much, Kenji? Am I not good enough for you? I like you the most out of you three."

Oshiro couldn't take those words at face value, since Kakeru had lied so many times to him and his friends during the course of this dating game.

"I don't care if it's just an act. Can't you love me for a week? That's all I ask."

Kakeru reached his arms out and encircled Oshiro's chest. He gently pulled Oshiro down so they were lying beside each other. "Why don't you like being kissed? Can I kiss you if it's not on your lips?"

"Stop it. I don't like people touching me to begin with."

"Even here?" Kakeru slid his hand down to Oshiro's groin. His fingers were too experienced for an eighteen-year-old. He'd been trained, but by who?

"I'm not a substitute for someone else. I can't love you; you won't get anything in return. Go find someone that will love you instead, Kakeru. Why did you say it's only a game when you're acting so desperate?"

Kakeru paused his caresses. "You're really good at catching onto these things. Maybe we're alike."

"No, we aren't."

Kakeru slid down Oshiro's body. He lowered Oshiro's waistband enough to take Oshiro's penis into his mouth.

"How can you put something filthy like that in your mouth?" Oshiro asked. Standard sex didn't disgust him because it was involved two organs designed for secreting bodily fluids, but the mouth? That was different. He couldn't understand how people could use this bodily orifice, designed for ingesting food

and communicating, in a sex act that involved licking an organ used for excretion. Despite his disgust, he felt no disdain when Yasumichi performed the act on him. Perhaps that was because Yasumichi was more of a mother figure to Oshiro than his equal. He was there for Oshiro when Hanae was not. Yasumichi was legally male, but he cared for Oshiro as a mother cares for her young child. He was part of the family, not a stranger.

But that wasn't the case for anyone else who touched his penis. For him, sex was conducted solely with the genitalia, no other organ involved. Not too put too fine a point on it, Oshiro just needed an orifice in which to stick his penis. But it had to be natural, not artificial. He felt miserable performing the act alone in his bed with a plastic toy. It was more satisfying with a partner, and that was the only reason he had sex.

Kakeru closed his eyes, gently nibbling and sucking at Oshiro's penis. Oshiro once heard that the mouth was also prone to causing sexual arousal. It was something he'd hoped not to experience. Contrary to his wishes, his body was responding to Kakeru's ministrations, and his penis swelled, rubbing against the back of Kakeru's throat. Kakeru drew his brows together in surprise.

Oshiro's arousal mounted at the sight of Kakeru wincing in front of him. Anyone, no matter how beautiful he is, will make a distinct facial expression when performing a sex act. Kakeru's expression was nothing like the face Kakeru wore outside of bed. It must be his way of abasing himself to Oshiro, showing that he was an obedient dog that would do whatever Oshiro required. He would make any face Oshiro wanted to see.

If Oshiro did the same in return it would be an equal relationship—there would be no master or slave, only two lovers madly in love with each other. Oshiro wondered if someone like that would appear before him one day. If he could find his soul mate, he might be able to overcome his fear of kissing. But right now, Kakeru was not that person. He was merely a young man who'd jumped into his arms on a whim. The only way Oshiro knew how to treat him was as a toy he'd been given. Oshiro pulled his penis from Kakeru's mouth, making a face at the slurping noise as his penis emerged. He didn't like the fact Kakeru was enjoying this. This was Kakeru's, and only Kakeru's, moment of pleasure.

"Get on all fours like a dog!" Oshiro shoved Kakeru down into the mattress, regaining his dominant position. Then he noticed that Kakeru was also erect. His

penis was twitching, waiting for additional attention, but what Oshiro did was to penetrate Kakeru again without preparing his anus for insertion. He ignored Kakeru's erect penis.

“Ow! Kenji, it hurts! Please, do it slower. It hurts.”

“Shut up!” Oshiro slapped Kakeru's buttock. His handprint flushed red, livid for a second before the skin returned to its usual paleness.

“No, please, use lotion or something, at least. I’m not asking you to lick it! Please, Kenji, I don’t want this!”

His begging aroused Oshiro even more, who continued his act while Kakeru cried.

“Kenji, please. No, don’t, it hurts. Please, no more! Kenji!”

Kakeru tried to escape but there was only so far he could crawl before hitting the headboard. With nowhere else to escape, Kakeru could only lie there until the thrusting was over.

Strangely, Kakeru seemed to be enjoying the act. He held his penis in his hand and stroked it in rhythm with Oshiro's thrusts. A sweet note sounded in his voice, despite his pleading cries.

Kakeru was just an inch or two shorter than Oshiro, thin but not scrawny. He should be strong enough to at least put up a fight: Kakeru was acting a role Oshiro desired he play. Oshiro confirmed his suspicions when Kakeru ejaculated at the same time Oshiro thrust deep. Oshiro climaxed a few seconds later. In contrast to his pleading, Kakeru was probably not in as much pain as he sounded like. He was experienced in sex with men; he must have pretended to try to escape, whereas in reality he was positioning his body to achieve maximum sensation. Oshiro's mistrust was endless.

Oshiro returned to his senses when he saw the wet spot on the sheets. “Don’t stain my sheets!” He shoved Kakeru off his bed and rubbed the stain with tissue. That wasn’t enough, and he used the pajamas Kakeru had worn.

“You worry about your sheets more than me? You really are a jerk.” Kakeru said, looking up at Oshiro from the floor.

“Go take a shower, or wipe clean with toilet paper if you don’t want to take a shower right now. Get it out of your body. It’s not good to leave it inside,” Oshiro quickly instructed, without turning towards Kakeru.

“Don’t you have a condom? You were so in the moment that you forgot to use

it?”

“I don’t have any,” Oshiro reluctantly admitted. It reminded him how little consideration he'd had for his previous partners. “Get up! You’ll stain the floor. Go wash yourself now.”

“So I can sleep with you tonight?”

“Sure you can. Now go!” Oshiro kept rubbing his sheets. Yasumichi would wash the sheets and clean the floor, and Oshiro didn't want Yasumichi to know he had sex with someone else. Kakeru was like an adult DVD a teenage boy had purchased and didn't want his mother to find. Unfortunately for Oshiro, there was no hiding the fact that something was going on between the two from the moment he, who always slept alone, allowed Kakeru to stay in his room



overnight. Kakeru dutifully went into the bathroom. Oshiro thought to change

the sheets, but remembered that Yasumichi kept the spares in the utility room, on the first floor. He didn't have the courage to walk downstairs in the middle of the night to retrieve them without waking someone up, so he laid a bath towel over the stain instead. It wasn't a large stain, and the bed would dry soon.

It was different than not wanting to touch because it was disgusting. Oshiro was afraid to look at the stain, because it told Oshiro that he was not the only one enjoying the sex. Kakeru wasn't a living orifice for Oshiro to masturbate with; he was a live participant in the act.

That scared Oshiro.

Kakeru returned to the bedroom, still wet from his shower, and climbed into bed. "Kenji, you really are ADD. How clean do you have to be?"

"You're still wet. Go get a towel."

"There's one right here." Kakeru rolled around on the towel Oshiro used to cover the stain. "Kenji, come on. Let's sleep together."

Defeated, Oshiro lay in his bed next to Kakeru. Kakeru hugged him. "Get off. I can't sleep with someone clinging onto me."

"But I can't sleep without someone next to me." Kakeru clenched the fabric of Oshiro's pajama top and curled inside his arm, against his body, resting his head on Oshiro's chest. He looked like a child sleeping with a teddy bear in his arms. He nudged his legs between Oshiro's. Oshiro felt the heat emanating from the young man's body. This must be how other people felt when sleeping with someone. Oshiro used to have a large teddy bear that he cuddled at night as a small child. It was about the same size as he was when he was small. One day, the bear disappeared from his room. Oshiro traced through his memories, remembering how his room gradually transformed from a kid's room into an adult's. Hanae didn't put much value in memories or mementos from the past, tossing out everything in a room when she changed its decor. The bear must have been a victim of such a cleansing.

No, that wasn't what happened. Oshiro squinched his eyes shut. He asked for it to be thrown out after he learned how to masturbate. Oshiro loved that bear, and he didn't want the bear to witness him perform a vile act.

Zaizen changed cars as often as he changed partners. He had his favorite makes, but always drove the newest models, and never drove a single car long enough for it to require maintenance. He needed his environment to change

constantly. Because of that, Zaizen was surprised that he remained friends with Shiratori and Oshiro this long after college. He hung out with other friends, but he spent more time with these two. Maybe it was because Zaizen didn't have to worry about how he acted in front of them. He could be himself, and they accepted him for who he was. He thought their friendship might stay on this even keel for the next twenty, or even thirty, years.

Nothing wrong with drinking and traveling with friends: his male friends did that without a second thought. Others had girlfriends or wives, but they still managed to maintain their friendships. He didn't know why he was so selfconscious about it.

Zaizen drove a red Opel Astra tonight. It was a small car, the most effective kind to maneuver though the narrow streets of Tokyo. He parked it in a metered lot and walked to the Matsumae Law Firm, where Shiratori worked. He scanned the perimeter while waiting for Shiratori, as he wanted to spy who the stalker was with his own eyes.

The firm was located in the heart of the Akasaka district. The HQ for one of the main TV stations in Japan was nearby. People entered and exited the numerous restaurants and bars lining the street. He observed the continuous wave of humans flowing in front of him, observing their clothes and mentally critiquing them. That was when he noticed a woman in a gray coat standing, waiting for someone. She resembled the woman Oshiro described, although duller than Zaizen had imagined. A young woman in her early twenties sailed in front of the standing woman, who didn't even look at the girl.

"Well, Shiratori does look like a nice fellow," Zaizen muttered to himself. Everyone loved Shiratori's winning smile. His friendly nature made him approachable, but at the same time he fought passionately for his ideals, so unmoved by threats that there were times when even Zaizen was taken aback.

Zaizen couldn't befriend anyone unless he admired a trait of theirs. Zaizen respected Shiratori's tenacious nature, and admired Oshiro for his calm, objective demeanor. Zaizen knew that he was lazy: he'd taken a job at his father's company because it was convenient, and he didn't study hard to gain admittance into a higher-ranking school. He'd used his athletic scholarship instead to get into his desired schools.

He was lucky, growing up in a privileged household that allowed him to sail. His father kept a boat in Hayama that he could sail as much as he liked. His parents assumed that Zaizen would work at his father's company after graduation, so he was allowed to do whatever he wished as a student. As a result, he went sailing more often than he was in school.

Zaizen never had to work hard in his life: he was a gifted sailor, his studies were never a priority, and his job was waiting for him when he graduated. Everything had been laid out in front of him, and that was why he sometimes felt inferior to his two friends. They'd earned their business licenses by their own merit, and Shiratori even had the courage to try again after failing the first time. Zaizen was proud of his friends, but at the same time envied them.

"Yoshiaki, what are you doing here?" Shiratori asked him as he exited the building. Shiratori didn't know that Zaizen would be picking him up starting today, because Zaizen had felt awkward about calling him.

"Kenji told me about what's been going on with you. Why didn't you tell me in the first place?" He could tell that his voice sounded harsh.

"You didn't answer your phone when I called you," Shiratori mumbled back.

Both fell silent for a moment.

"Do you want to go eat?" Shiratori asked. That was their usual greeting. Zaizen didn't bother with cooking once he started living on his own, which wasn't a problem because he was always out and about with some woman or another and they'd eat together in a restaurant. On the nights Zaizen didn't have a date, Shiratori or Oshiro would propose a restaurant to eat at.

"Let's go. My car's parked over there." Zaizen laid his hand on Shiratori's shoulder. He thought that with his Armani jacket, passers-by might assume that he was a yakuza or someone associated with organized crime harassing a hapless lawyer on his way home. "Is it the woman over there?"

"How much do you know?"

"Kenji told me everything. Why didn't you call me? You could have called my office."

"I was just following the rules." Shiratori moved a little closer to Zaizen. A week had passed since a guy had started taking him home, but the woman was undeterred. She might have become more confident, only seeing Shiratori with

other men. Shiratori sighed. "I guess faking being gay didn't work."

"Guess so. She probably thinks she's the one special girl for you. You'd be surprised how distorted their perception of the world can be." Zaizen fought the temptation to glance back at the woman. He led Shiratori by the arm to the parking meter where he'd left the Astra.

"Did you change your car again, Yoshiaki?" Shiratori asked as Zaizen checked the numbers on the parking meter. "What happened to your Audi?"

"That one's for work, this isn't. Do you like it? I thought red was your favorite color."

"Well, yeah."

Zaizen smiled and pressed his key fob. The Opel Astra blinked its headlights twice before unlocking itself. The seats were still too cold to take off their coats.

"I thought this was new, but your ashtray is already dirty." Shiratori started wiping the ashtray with a damp towel as soon as he climbed in and buckled his seat belt. Zaizen lit a cigarette while Shiratori cleaned.

"I know you'll just be getting a new one in a couple of months, but you need to keep it clean. Your girlfriends will complain if there's ash all over the front seat."

"You're the first person to ride in the passenger seat."

"It's too dirty for you to be the only one smoking."

"Feel free to clean it." Zaizen checked the rear view and exited the lot. He caught a glimpse of the woman jumping into a taxi in his side mirror. "She really is on a mission."

"What do you mean?" Shiratori missed the woman reflected in the mirror. Zaizen gestured behind them with his cigarette.

"She's planning to follow us by cab. Is she rich?"

"For now. She got a decent amount of alimony from her ex-husband. He was almost twice her age and they split because of his affairs."

"So, Mister Attorney, how do you feel about the money you awarded her disappearing because of you?"

"Don't remind me about that!" Shiratori cried.

"There's only a handful of drivers that really know their way around Tokyo. Let's see if this one can keep up with me." Zaizen turned on the music, driving the car in sync with the beat of the music. Shiratori checked road signs every time they sped through an intersection. Eventually, he turned the volume down.

“You’re heading out of the city. We’ll be in Yokohama if you keep driving like this.”

“Why don’t we go even farther? I haven’t taken you there in a while.”

“Where?”

Zaizen didn't respond.

Shiratori stared outside, trying to guess their current location and destination. Every few minutes he checked the mirror to see if they were still being followed, but the driver must have given up pursuit as the yellow taxi was nowhere to be seen. Shiratori sighed deeply and nestled back into his seat. He listened to the familiar song playing on the radio. “I didn’t know you listened to Eminem. You weren’t interested in white rap when I first asked you to go see one of his movies with me.”

“I felt bad about it. This is my way of making it up to you.” Shiratori would have been delighted on any other day, but tonight both of them were acting uneasily. Zaizen turned the volume down again. “So, how was it? Did it hurt?”

There was no reply. “You once said that ejaculation was painful. I’m surprised you were able to go farther and sleep with him.” Zaizen lit another cigarette, gazing straight down the road in front of the Astra.

“What about you? He was cute, I’m sure you enjoyed his company.”

Zaizen ignored the question. “Did you do it? You did, didn’t you?”

Shiratori shook his head. “I opted out. We didn’t do anything.”

Zaizen tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the music, trying to hide his excitement. “Nothing? Seriously?”

“Kenji told him to be my bodyguard and he was just that. He’s really a good kid. He said he’s enrolled in an acting school.”

“What? He told me he was going to art school.”

They looked at each other, then laughed. Shiratori opened the window to let in the night breeze, which brought a slight taste of salt into the air in the car. The Haneda Airport was nearby; Shiratori watched planes rising into the night sky. “Great. No wonder my colleagues poke fun at me for being a goodygoody. I need a more critical eye.”

“I wonder if he also lied about being twenty-one?”

“Possibly. I don’t think it matters anymore, though. He seemed like a little brother.”

By now, Shiratori must have figured out where they were heading. They were on the way to Zaizen's Hayama vacation house. If the woman hadn't chased them in a taxi, Zaizen wouldn't have driven this far from Tokyo, but her persistence gave him an excuse to be alone with Shiratori.

"I felt bad for just having him walk me to and from work, so I took him to the movies and dinner on a couple of nights. And I gave him few DVDs that I recommended he watch. That's all."

"That's all?"

"Yes, that's it." Shiratori rolled up the window. The smell of salty air trapped inside the heated car reminded him of the summer beach. "What about you? He was nice. I'm sure you'd be able to sleep with a guy if it was someone like him."

"I didn't."

"No way. You don't have to hide it from me. Just say it."

"I really didn't sleep with him. The first night we had dinner. The second night I took him to an Armani store and bought him some clothes. That was it; I



didn't see him after Wednesday." Zaizen breathed a sigh of relief once he had gotten the information out there.

"Maybe it was because he was a guy? That's a shame, he really had a pretty face."

"Hey, I don't go out with just any girl. It has to be someone who knows it's nothing serious and that there's no strings attached." That was how Zaizen

dated. He'd never gone out with someone who was high-maintenance or required many commitments on his part. "If I did it with a guy, people really would think I didn't care as long as I had sex."

Shiratori had no response.

"When I was all alone with him, it hit me right then that this wasn't right. I couldn't do it. There was no love. I didn't pay him to do this. I shouldn't have said I'd play the game that night."

"Yes, I felt bad for him too. Like Kenji said, we should have looked into his motives first."

They fell silent, remembering the week each spent with the youth. With Zaizen, he was an art student who wore Armani suits. With Shiratori, he was a quiet actor in training. They didn't yet realize that Kakeru was giving them what he thought they wanted.

"Do you think Kenji will sleep with him?"

"I've never seen him dating a girl. Maybe he really does like guys more. To tell the truth, I thought there was something going on between him and Yasumi-chan," Zaizen replied in a cheerful manner, changing lanes to pass a car.

"Yasumi-chan's only a surrogate for Mama. I don't remember there being any romantic relationship between the two. Besides, Yasumi-chan is over forty years old."

"What the devil?!" Shiratori smiled. Zaizen smiled back, glad that Shiratori had returned to his normal self.

"I thought Yasumi-chan liked Mama more than Kenji, but I don't think that's the case either. Yasumi-chan is a total narcissist. I don't think he can love anyone but himself."

Shiratori's expression softened when they talked about the people in their inner circle. It also reminded Zaizen how long it had been since they'd met. "What about you, Akimi? Forget the stalker for a minute; isn't there anyone you're interested in?"

"Feel free to laugh. I have no one, none." Shiratori clicked through the CD changer. Most of the CDs were imported rap artists. Surprised to find a female soprano on one of the tracks, Shiratori selected it. She was singing the *Ave Maria*. Shiratori assumed Zaizen kept the song in his collection in case he was on a date. "I don't care. I'm satisfied with my life as it is. You and Kenji are my best

friends, and that's all I ask."

"Best friends, huh." Zaizen had a tendency to get emotional when he listened to the *Ave Maria*. Now, he was remembering the day Shiratori failed the bar exam. He cried a long time before quietly confessing that he liked Zaizen. Zaizen had no idea how to respond, since he'd never seen Shiratori in that light. He panicked and rejected him. Shiratori apologized few days later, claiming that he was not himself that day.

Friendship was a useful excuse for their relationship. Zaizen dated lots of women, as if to show Shiratori how masculine he was. He thought it would be a good way to forget about the incident.

But nothing had changed for two years, since the day Shiratori told him. Zaizen was still single, without a stable romantic relationship.

They passed Yokohama and drove along the coast. Sagami Bay was dark and quiet in the winter night. No ship lights could be seen across the water.

"We drove pretty far tonight. Let's get something tasty to eat, since we came all the way to Hayama. Good thing Kenji's not here, he wouldn't eat anything. I don't think he'd survive if Yasumi-chan didn't feed him." Shiratori lowered his voice. "Are you sure you can drive back tonight, Yoshiaki?"

"We can stay at my place for the night."

"No, we shouldn't."

"Why not? We came out this far." As long as he had a destination in mind, Zaizen would someday sail to it, no matter how far off his bearings he got. It occurred to him that he'd been losing his heading all his life, until now. If he checked his navigation, he might find his destination closer than he'd imagined. It was just that Zaizen had never tried to read his chart.

His harbor suddenly became within arm's reach, once he changed his destination to Shiratori.

Zaizen wanted to make love to Shiratori. He felt that it was the least thing he could do for the one who had always loved him. Yet, a part of him was frightened. If Zaizen lost this friendship because of his actions tonight, he knew he would cry every time he heard the *Ave Maria*.

Shiratori leaned on the balcony railing, gazing out over the sea. Zaizen's vacation house was built on a cliff overlooking the harbor. Narrow stairs carved into the rock face led down to a thin strip of road adjacent to the rocky shore.

The marina where Zaizen docked his sailboat and his father's cabin cruiser was a further five-minute walk. Zaizen would have wanted to sail if it weren't a weeknight. "Damn, it smells like fish in here. Dad must have been here yesterday," Zaizen grumbled as he dried his hair with a towel after a quick shower. He thought that was the reason Shiratori was outside on the balcony.

"Look at the stars. They're beautiful. I don't think I've seen a night sky like this in years."

"Akimi, come inside. You'll catch a cold."

"Okay." Shiratori felt unsettled. This was the first time since that day that they were alone in a room by themselves. They were always in public when they hung out together, and otherwise they were in the company of Kenji or other friends so Shiratori could distract himself from Zaizen. Tonight, they were alone. They were at Zaizen's vacation house in Hayama, and Shiratori was borrowing Zaizen's pajamas. Zaizen left the front of his pajama top unbuttoned. It was hard for Shiratori to keep his eyes off the bare, muscular chest in evidence.

"Want to drink something?" Zaizen dug through the small refrigerator in the living room. Shiratori perched on one end of the three-person sofa.

"What do you want, Akimi? I think I've only got hard cider if you want something sweet."

"Cider's fine."

"Hey, found some Wild Turkey."

Zaizen brought over his bourbon and the hard cider, and plopped down next to Shiratori on the sofa. A chair sat beside the sofa, and Shiratori got up and moved to it.

"What, Akimi?"

"It's just, you smoke." Shiratori knew that that was a weak argument for avoiding him. He just didn't want to sit so close to Zaizen.

"Why are you acting weird around me, Akimi?"

"I'm not." If it wasn't for Oshiro, Shiratori would have been fine being alone with Zaizen right now. He wouldn't have to relive those emotions. Once was enough rejection, and he didn't think he'd be able to maintain the friendship if Zaizen rejected him again.

"Akimi, come back. I won't smoke if you don't want me to." Zaizen waited, seated on the sofa. Shiratori shook his head.

“Are you afraid of me?” Zaizen lowered his voice, smile vanishing, and his face grew stern. That expression brought all the nights Shiratori had cried alone to mind, the nights he realized his love would never be returned.

“What would you do if I told you I slept with Kakeru? Would you run?” Zaizen's voice shook. “You really are going to run.”

Shiratori was silent.

Once Zaizen was confident that Shiratori was rooted to the spot, he stood up and approached. Shiratori leapt up when he saw Zaizen advancing.

“Stop moving.”

“Stop chasing me.”

“Stay.”

“No.”

Shiratori retreated. Zaizen followed, chasing him around the small living room.

“Akimi! What is it, are you scared of doing it with me?”

“Do? Do what? What are you talking about? So this is what happens when you sleep with him? You’re the one that said you’d only have sex with women. Stop feeling sorry for me!”

“When did I feel sorry for you?”

“You’re feeling sorry because I’m still a virgin! Forget it, I have my own principles and I don’t sleep with anyone like you!”

“Your principles!” Zaizen mocked him. Shiratori shrugged his shoulders. “Laugh if you want, I don’t care! I don’t want to sleep with someone I don’t like. I don’t care if I remain a virgin the rest of my life if otherwise I had to sleep with someone I didn’t love!” The chase picked up. Shiratori could only think of darting towards the door at the first opportunity. But even if he reached the door, there was only the front entrance and four bedrooms outside the living room, nowhere for Shiratori to hide.

“You’re the one that asked first!” Zaizen said.

“You rejected me! I thought I would lose your friendship as well. Why are you saying this now?” He snatched up a leather pillow and threw it at Zaizen. “It’s Kenji, right? He set this up!”

“Yeah, damn right it’s Kenji. He said I should hurry up and get married for your sake. What's that supposed to mean? You’ll be happy if I do that?”

“Yes, I’ll be happy. Get married and go cheat on your wife. I’ll defend her in court

when she divorces you.”

Zaizen leapt forward and grabbed Shiratori’s shoulder. Shiratori knew he couldn't fight back and win, so he stopped, shaking his head, and appealed to Zaizen. “Let’s stop this. What’s the use of arguing right now? I wasn't in my right mind when I failed the bar exam, and I’m not in my right mind now, either, with that woman stalking me. Yoshiaki, please. I don’t want us fighting over this.”

“I’m not going to apologize about what I said two years ago. I didn’t know how to react because it was so abrupt.” Zaizen, behind him, hugged him tightly, refusing to let go. Shiratori felt relief that he didn't have to meet Zaizen's eyes.

“It’s been two years and we haven’t changed at all. If you told me that you found a boyfriend, I probably would have just congratulated you. Might have been a little jealous.”

“No, we’ve changed. We’re older now. We can’t just do anything on a whim anymore.”

“So you’re saying you liking me was a passing whim.”

“Yes, just a whim. I wanted to become like you. You had everything I didn’t and I looked up to you because of it. No, it wasn’t love. It’s not love.” Shiratori covered his face. His emotions hadn’t changed, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit it out loud.

“So it’s too late, huh. I started thinking about you, that night. I thought you were just a friend until then. But you changed me just by saying that to me.” Zaizen tried to turn Shiratori's body around to face him. Shiratori placed his hand on Zaizen’s.

“No, we can’t. You can’t. You won’t be able to do it with me. Yoshiaki, let’s not. I appreciate your feelings, but let’s just remain as friends.”

“When I was hanging out with Kakeru, I asked myself why I was okay with Kakeru but not with you. I didn’t want to lose my friendship with you, either.”

Shiratori now faced Zaizen. Zaizen lifted his chin. If this were a movie, it would be the perfect moment for a kiss. Preparing for the worst, Shiratori squeezed his eyes shut.

“Hey, come on, relax. You’re all stiff.”

Shiratori realized he was nervous.

“The only difference between a friend and a lover is whether there’s sex involved. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll just remain friends. If it does work out...”

“It won’t. It can’t.”

“If you’re going to be stubborn, I’m going to be too.” Zaizen kissed him.

There was no awkwardness to their first kiss. In the back of his mind, Shiratori wondered why. Because they were the lips of someone he knew well? He had always watched Zaizen’s lips as the friends ate and laughed together, and they were familiar to him. Zaizen was probably a good kisser, but unfortunately Shiratori had no other experiences to compare this one to. And yet, he believed that it was the best kiss ever. With his eyes closed, he could keep his composure, but the moment they opened, he knew reality would hit. He was with a man who'd been his best friend for years. They'd laughed and played together, and now that man was kissing him.

“Um, that’s weird. I thought a kiss would be more exciting. I guess it’s not?” Shiratori blurted out the moment their lips separated.

“Hey, don’t say that. I’m all nervous here. I never thought I’d be doing this with you. I mean, you know everything about me,” Zaizen laughed. Some of their nervousness had disappeared with the kiss. It was a relief to feel that their relationship probably wouldn't change even after they slept together. Even if sex didn't work out, there was a sense that they could laugh it off and return to being best friends.

“Let's get naked and go to bed.”

“I don’t want you looking my body. I'm out of shape.”

“I know. I’ve seen you a lot.”

“True.” It took a minute for Shiratori to answer. Since the time the three friends were students together, they'd visited hot springs and gone skinnydipping in the ocean. “Akimi, I’ll be nice. I know you know that.”

“I know. I’ve known that all along.” Zaizen guided Shiratori into the bedroom. The small room with its bed, and the quilt on the bed, was the same as Shiratori remembered from years ago. He looked around. “I remember the first time we came to this house. Kenji and I dragged you to this bed when you passed out.”

“Did you? I don’t remember.” Zaizen pulled down the comforter, then started removing his pajamas. He looked down at his crotch. “Um, I don’t know what happened. It’s not like me to be this awkward.”

“It's okay. I don’t mind just sleeping next to each other and talking. Besides, I’m not big on sex like you.”

“Damn, that hurts. Well, there’s not much I can do about that reputation now.” Zaizen threw himself onto the bed, his cock remaining unresponsive. “Will you turn off the lights? That’s the least I ask.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, I don’t like my body.”

“Go to the gym or hire Dr. Oshiro. That’ll fix it, simple enough. But your heart won’t change that fast. It can’t.” Zaizen tried his best to comfort him, and Shiratori appreciated the effort. He undressed in the dark and lay down next to Zaizen. The sound of waves breaking in the harbor below echoed in his ears. “Huh, that’s weird. Maybe that wasn’t enough alcohol. I know I haven’t had too much. Why isn’t it up with me?” Zaizen said quickly, trying to hide his embarrassment. Shiratori hugged him. “It’s okay. Let’s just listen to the waves and sleep. I’m perfectly fine with that. I’m just thankful that you’re doing this for me.”

Zaizen timidly stretched his arm around Shiratori. Shiratori lay alongside him, quiet and still. “Weird. I feel like I’m out in my boat on the sea. It’s really soothing.” Zaizen patted Shiratori, who nodded and closed his eyes. “I’m happy you didn’t sleep with Kakeru. That would’ve killed me.” He heard no response from Shiratori. Zaizen wasn’t yet ready to perform, so he kept talking. “I probably cared about you more than anyone. It’s been the norm just to hang out together and be there when you needed me. I think this is the first time we weren’t in touch for more than three days.”

Feeling awkward for being the only one talking, Zaizen crooked his head towards Shiratori, to hear his breath ebb and flow peacefully, sound asleep.

“Hey, really? Get up.” Zaizen was about to shake Shiratori’s shoulders when he saw how peaceful his face looked. Zaizen smiled. “You little kiddo, you really were that much in love with me?”

Shiratori’d stayed a virgin all this time. That was the answer: Shiratori saved himself for Zaizen. Only one thing left for Zaizen to do. “I love you Akimi. This is the answer I couldn’t give you two years ago.” He gently kissed Shiratori’s forehead before covering both of their bodies with the comforter, then drifted to sleep, the distant sound of the breakers in his ears.

They slept together, furred in each other’s arms, until early morning when Zaizen realized in his half-awake state that his body wanted release. He took the

spermicide out of the drawer of the nightstand. He'd kept it to use as a contraceptive, but never thought it would be useful in this situation. He was about to say so, then realized it would break the moment. "May I?" The words that came out of his mouth instead were less awkward than the words he'd swallowed.

"May you what?"

"This is probably going to be cold. I'm just prepping you." Zaizen squeezed the gel onto his fingers. He didn't like how practical his actions were. It felt unromantic, but he told himself that he was doing it for Shiratori's comfort. They didn't assume energetic body positions or speak erotically to each other. It was all done in silence. Shiratori lay there, half asleep, allowing Zaizen to gently push his fingers inside him.

"You're right, it's cold." Shiratori could feel the fingers sliding into him. He'd prepared himself, but couldn't help feeling the slight discomfort of having



something nudging into that place. He kissed Zaizen to distract himself. It was not a graceful kiss.

Zaizen said as softly as he could, hoping to soothe Shiratori's fears, "It'll go in, but tell me if it's too much."

“Okay. Uh, mm...ouch!” Shiratori had thought of sex as something more romantic and clean. This was the first time that he experienced the pain associated with sex. He clenched his teeth, swallowing his plea for Zaizen to stop.

Zaizen rested his head on Shiratori, avoiding looking at his face. Only his heavy breathing showed how much he was into the act. “Hold on. This should make you feel better.” He cupped his hands around Shiratori’s cock, but was unsure of how to caress one that wasn't his own. “Is this good?”

“It is. I feel it.” Shiratori closed his eyes, trying to focus on the sensations he was experiencing in the front. That helped his cock respond to Zaizen's encouragements. “Can I go ahead?” Zaizen laughed. “You don’t need to ask.”

Shiratori released himself in the hands of Zaizen. Zaizen must have been reassured after seeing Shiratori orgasm; until this point he'd been accustomed to arousing the opposite sex, but not his own. He thrust himself deeper into Shiratori with no hesitation. Shiratori felt a different kind of pain once he was penetrated more deeply. Zaizen started to rock his hips, harder with every thrust. Shiratori clamped his lips, trying not to release a sound, believing a man shouldn't make so much noise. Despite his efforts, a small cry crept out of his vocal cords. Soon, his voice could be heard in the darkness of the room, mixed in with the calls of the sea birds flying above the shore. Finally Zaizen moaned softly, releasing himself inside Shiratori.

Their sex was far from passionate, but it was satisfying for both. After two long years, they finally regained their mutual trust.

“What are we going to say to Kenji?” Zaizen asked.

“Just act like we always do. He’ll notice either way.”

Zaizen was about to get up when Shiratori held him back for a kiss. They kissed, and a soft chuckle from both sides followed. “Oh good God!” Shiratori cried the next instant, shoving Zaizen off of him.

“What? Is it about me not using a condom? Don’t worry, I’m clean, I’ve been tested.”

“No, there’s a trial! Matsumae’s letting me attend with her! I need to get back to Tokyo, fast!” He jumped out of bed. “Yoshiaki, we have to get back. It starts at nine!”

“So I guess nothing really changed.”

“Great, I don’t have a spare shirt. Please tell me my suit isn’t wrinkled, it's a very important trial.”

Zaizen narrowed his eyes in amused satisfaction, watching Shiratori scuttle into the bathroom. It was a huge relief to know that everything was still the same.

Oshiro got new glasses. He'd also renewed his prescription for the ones he wore in surgery, and declined laser treatment again. His world was now subtly distorted, his footing unstable, as if he were walking on clouds. He knew that this would continue until he became accustomed to his new glasses.

It takes time to acclimatize. Oshiro didn't know how long it took for his clients to familiarize themselves with their new reflections. He wondered if they were able to discard their old identity that easily, like it had never existed. Then again, unless it was a major reconstructive surgery, most of the clients' features remained the same as before. Any real change was an illusion, a false hope that the world had altered just by adding another crease to the eyelids or stuffing silicone into the breasts.

Oshiro respected his mother highly. She convinced her clients that their world would change because of a simple alteration to the face. Her persuasion helped her succeed in this field, and Oshiro believed that nobody else could be as excellent a counselor and surgeon as she was. He wished she could counsel him, too, on how to create that new impression on the world. His normality had changed with the new glasses, and would take time to accept.

“Oh, there. Yes, right there,” Hanae said. It was rare for her to sit at the dining-room table, and rarer for her to be home before Oshiro. She’d come home in the evening instead of attending parties the past few days. And strangely, she often sat out in the dining room instead of locking herself in her room. Right now, Kakeru stood behind her, massaging her shoulders. “Ah, ouch, yes, perfect. Oh, ow.”

It seemed painful, but she was enjoying the massage.

“I’m home,” Oshiro said. The dining room was lively with color. Hanae wore a sweater knitted with gold and silver yarn, and Kakeru had donned a bright blue knitted sweater and jeans splashed with various colors. But it wasn't just their clothes making the room vibrant. The two were a picture of mother and son.

“How come Kenji doesn’t like kissing, Mama?” Kakeru asked. His eyes fixed on

Oshiro, hands still massaging Hanae.

Oshiro was glad that his gray suit and Yasumichi, in his black attire, remained unchanged.

“Well, sweetie, he’s a plastic surgeon. He slices open lips and modifies their shape. If you perform that operation day in and day out, it’s hard to view that part of the body in a sensual manner. It's just one more lump of flesh that needs to be fixed.”

“Oh, okay. I get it now. Thank you, Mama.”

“Kenji is very sensitive. He couldn’t eat when he was a small boy.”

Oshiro sat at the dining table, smiling cynically at the two. Hanae had never cooked him dinner a single day in his life, and her theory of why he disliked kissing was wrong.

When Oshiro was a young boy, their housekeeper was an old woman with rotting teeth who hated to see food wasted, and she ate any food he left on his plate. Ever since he watched her finishing his leftovers, he couldn't touch any food someone else had touched. The image of her masticating his food with those disgusting teeth haunted him. He grew to despise the mouth, and the thought of using lips to kiss or perform a sexual act nauseated him.

If he went to a psychologist, she’d most likely tell him that he suffered from an Oedipal complex; because he was deprived of love or the physical contact he deserved when he was a child, he therefore had formed a hatred towards the lips. She would diagnose him as if she had been there witnessing his childhood.

Oshiro couldn't care less how others analyzed his behavior. He was satisfied as long as he could have sex, an act which did not necessarily require kissing. As long as there was an orifice he could penetrate, it didn't matter. That orifice didn't have to be Kakeru, but here he was, still here at Oshiro’s house.

Today was Friday. In two days, Kakeru would vanish, but if Kakeru chose him as the winner, this twisted relationship would continue. Oshiro wished it would end soon; he didn't want to lose himself in this game any more.

“Kenji, dinner’s ready. Will you be changing your clothes before then?”

Yasumichi walked up to him. Oshiro sensed there was something different about him. Yasumichi had never been so forward in his demeanor, keeping a low profile in the house.

“What’s on the menu, Yasumi-chan?” Oshiro asked.

"Fried pork with winter melons, and I have an apple gelato for dessert," Yasumichi said with pride. Unnatural for him to sound boastful.

"Do you still have some of the yakisoba from lunch? I liked that."

Kakeru's presence was causing the change in Yasumichi. Praise is an addictive substance: once given, the recipient craves more. Before now, Oshiro was only one who praised Yasumichi. Kakeru hadn't left the house for a week and constantly praised Yasumichi's skilled cooking and housekeeping.

"Kakeru, go to school. You can't graduate at this rate."

Kakeru ignored Oshiro and stared into the kitchen, waiting. He hadn't told Oshiro why he ditched school. As a matter of fact, Kakeru spoke very little about himself.

"Kakeru, you should go to school. It'll be hard to find a job if you don't take your studies seriously," Hanae chided in a motherly fashion.

"Don't worry, Mama. I'm smart, I can pass the college entrance exams. I'm thinking about going into medicine. Will you hire me if I do?"

"Of course. But I don't know how your clients would feel having a surgeon prettier than they are. They might be jealous," she said laughingly.

A pang twinged in Oshiro's chest. He felt similar ones when he saw Zaizen's cocky grin or witnessed Shiratori pursue his faith in justice. It was a familiar culprit: jealousy.

Oshiro hadn't had physical contact with Hanae in several years. He'd never massaged her shoulders or snuggled up to her, even as a child. Kakeru was different. He touched her without hesitation. He slept beside Oshiro last night, but tonight he might sleep next to Hanae, and the possibility was enough to nauseate Oshiro.

"Mama, shall I serve dinner?" Yasumichi paused, waiting for praise. Oshiro lost his appetite at the sight. Everything was distorting around him. His quiet, mundane life began to crumble the moment Kakeru invaded his home. Oshiro left the table; he couldn't bear eating with them.

"Kenji, where are you going? It's dinnertime. I'm hungry." Kakeru approached and rubbed against Oshiro like a contented, purring cat. An unfamiliar emotion rose inside Oshiro, with a sweet yet bitter taste like the complex flavor of a tart apple. He understood why people thought the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was an apple: its bittersweet taste echoed what Oshiro felt right now.

Decayed, it would taste horrible, but freshly plucked from the tree, it was luscious and addictive. The urge to taste more of the fruit paralleled how he felt about having sex and loving his partner. That was a taste to which he did not want to become addicted. He chose not to risk it and refused to eat the apple in the first place.

“Kenji, Kenji, I was lonely when you were gone. Don’t you have the day off tomorrow? Let’s be together the whole day.” Kakeru put his arms around Oshiro’s neck and kissed him on the cheek. He kissed Oshiro every moment he could.

It might have helped if Oshiro could have felt the kiss as given by loving flesh. Instead, he felt like someone had tossed a filthy alley cat with its fur standing on end at him. “Stop it.”

“But you like me, don’t you?”

“Let go of me, I’m going to take a shower. Go ahead and eat without me.”

“No, I want to eat together, ” Kakeru pouted. He'd behaved like a child since he began living with them; he looked more adult when he was with Zaizen and Shiratori. Neither Yasumichi nor Hanae minded Oshiro's relationship with Kakeru. They didn't care that he and Kakeru were the same gender, and they spoiled Kakeru with love against Oshiro’s wishes.

“You look like you should be working in a sleazy massage parlor. You should have been a girl.” Oshiro briskly climbed the stairs to his room. He knew he'd hurt Kakeru with his words, but he had to draw the line: Kakeru’s motives were still unknown, and for whatever reason, he was trying his best to be irresistible to Oshiro. He'd already wormed his way into the rest of the household. And two days from now, he'd vanish, leaving behind an empty feeling and a silent house. Oshiro couldn't bear that. “Kenji, it’s good to eat with others. You won’t always be able to; why don’t you enjoy it while you can?” Kakeru pleaded, trailing Oshiro up the stairs. “Then *you* enjoy it with the rest of your company,” Oshiro snapped. He knew the core of his jealousy lay in wanting to be like Kakeru. Hanae complimented Kakeru's looks. Kakeru knew how to make himself the center of attention. He had sex with whoever he liked, and criticism rolled off his back. Oshiro had started to lose his footing in this household, but he couldn't change himself. Only a few options were left for him, and they all pointed towards falling in love with Kakeru.

“Kenji, let’s go to the museum in Ueno. I think there’s a mummy on display, but I don’t remember for sure. I want to see if it’s still there.” Kakeru wrapped his hands around Oshiro’s arm and dragged him back to the dining room.

“I haven’t gone to the museum for years,” Oshiro said. He frequented the art gallery in Ueno but not the museum, as he found no value in observing at relics from the past. “Why do you want to see the mummy?”

“No one knows who he was. But everyone sees him and feels a connection to him. His dead body’s been showcased like an object, and I just want to pay some respects to him.” It was hard to imagine the clinical tone in his voice emerged from the same young man who behaved boyishly around Oshiro. “I want to go with you. Please?”

Oshiro caved. “Fine. Tomorrow.”

The day after tomorrow would be Sunday. The Monday afterward would bring the familiar tranquility Oshiro had known for years. He hoped his appetite would return on Monday, when he would again eat his dinners alone.

Each district in Tokyo showed a unique face. Ueno had always been a place for commoners. Memories of bygone days were still present, unlike the newer, modernized districts of Roppongi and Shiodome. Ueno Station sat in the middle of a lively, congested area, but a few short blocks away a peaceful park relieved the Tokyo bustle, encompassing the Tokyo National Museum, the National Museum of Western Art, and the National Museum of Nature and Science. “Which one are we going to?” Oshiro asked, pointing between the Tokyo National Museum and the Science Museum.

“The one with the mummy,” Kakeru answered.

Oshiro didn't know which museum housed the mummy. As the Science Museum was closer, they went in and Oshiro asked the docent behind the desk

if there was a mummy on display. She replied that it was in the Tokyo National. “You’re interested in the weirdest things,” Oshiro said, as they headed toward the museum’s entrance. Kakeru hopped along behind him, hands tucked deep inside the pockets of his white coat. Jostled by the Saturday crowds, Oshiro methodically observed each of the artifacts on display. He was staring at the shakokidogu clay figurines that were one of the main attractions of the museum when he began to wonder if Kakeru was really interested in looking at the

objects. Glancing over, he saw Kakeru focused on the exhibit text.

Oshiro realized how stimulating it was to do things out of the ordinary for him. He was fascinated to see the exact artifacts in front of him that he'd read about in books. "There's the mummy," Oshiro said. They'd finally reached the hall that housed the mummy. The body of the blackened figure was wrapped in strips of yellowed linen and displayed inside its open coffin. Despite his previous insistence on visiting the mummy, Kakeru avoided his gaze as they approached. "What are you doing? Didn't you come to see this?"

"No, this wasn't what I wanted to see. I thought it was something different." "Are you frightened of it?" Oshiro chuckled. Kakeru's eyes bored into his. "You're silly. You're acting like a kid." Kakeru might be afraid of mummies and paranormal creatures. It was amusing to see Kakeru in that light since Oshiro had never once been afraid of the supernatural.

"Kenji, do you know where the soul goes when the body dies?" Kakeru asked. He kept his eyes on Oshiro, his demeanor serious.

"Heaven, or so they say, but personally, I don't think so. Once you die, everything ends right there." Oshiro had graduated from medical school and witnessed many deaths in the hospital during his residency. There was nothing spiritual for him about the body failing.

"I wonder where the soul goes if the body is still preserved," Kakeru said.

"Look into theology or the liberal arts if you're interested in those matters. I'm not. A human body is nothing but flesh and bones." Oshiro believed beauty was only on the surface of the skin. He didn't understand how some people could be deceived into the belief that altering a layer of skin would bring them success. He saw irony in the fact that his life was sustained by feeding such people's narcissism. "I thought you wanted to see this. Too bad it wasn't what you'd expected."

Kakeru lowered his gaze to the smile on Oshiro's face. "You have a nice smile. You should smile more often."

"I laugh if I find something amusing or funny. I don't often do so. That's all."

"But you're amused right now."

"It's because you're afraid of the mummy." Oshiro laughed again, expecting Kakeru to protest. Instead, Kakeru tugged Oshiro close to his chest.

“My name isn't Kakeru. It's Sho.”

“Sho? Oh, yes, you can read the kanji in your name as either ‘Sho' or 'Kakeru.' Was that your joke all along?” Oshiro thought it was ridiculous: “Kakeru” sounded like the word for “gambling.” “What do you want to do now? Do you want to go to the science museum? It's got dinosaur fossils.”

A tour group streamed into the room, surrounding the mummy. Oshiro started walking. He didn't want to be part of the commotion or overhear ignorant people discuss the mummy. The group lost interest in the exhibit sooner than he expected and followed him out of the exhibition hall, so Oshiro hurried his pace toward the exit. Some of the conversations in the group had nothing to do with the museum's exhibits, instead concerning their daughter-in-law or a sick relative. Oshiro stood aside to avoid the hubbub, letting the group pass by.

“Kakeru?” Oshiro looked around, seeing no sign of the youth. Assuming Kakeru was still in the exhibit hall, he waited. Kakeru would probably come running after him, especially if he was scared of the mummy. But Kakeru didn't come out. Oshiro wondered if Kakeru was observing the mummy closely now that the tour group had left, and waited a little longer outside the hall. Kakeru still hadn't emerged. Maybe he got caught in the moving crowd and didn't realize the moment he and Oshiro were separated. Oshiro searched for Kakeru in the other areas of the museum, but didn't find him. Nor was he in any of the restrooms.

Kakeru was hard to miss, given his height and that white coat. His face was easily recognizable, to boot. But Oshiro had lost him; Kakeru was nowhere to be found. Oshiro exited the museum, hoping Kakeru waited for him outside. He stood around near the entrance for over ten minutes. The warm winter sun cast shadows in the evergreen trees. Crows circled overhead, their shadows gliding across the ground. A gaggle of small children followed a lady with a flag in her hand, their book bags bumping up and down as the children walked. Their high-pitched voices mingled with the caws of the crows above. Oshiro scanned the area, but there was still no sign of Kakeru.

“Kakeru,” Oshiro whispered. Kakeru disappeared as abruptly as he'd appeared before Oshiro and his friends. “I mean, Sho. No, never mind, it doesn't matter anymore.”

Oshiro gave up and started towards his car, parked in the train station's lot. Part of him expected Kakeru to be by his side until tomorrow. Oshiro thought the

date was to last through Sunday, but Kakeru had vanished. The game itself was probably just that; a game not meant to be taken seriously. Zaizen and Shiratori had probably forgotten about the youth's existence by now.

Normality would return. It was that simple.

Oshiro trudged to the parking lot, vaguely hoping Kakeru was there, waiting for him and demanding to know where he'd been. No one stood beside his BMW. The hood of the car shone, sunlight reflecting off of it.

He remembered after he started the engine that he'd planned to go to the art museum. Part of him said to go anyway, since he'd driven all the way to Ueno. Another part of him didn't see the point in visiting it alone. He switched on the radio, but none of the songs caught his attention. He switched to playing music from a CD instead, and Sade's throaty voice filled his car. He gazed at his surroundings as he drove and idly thought the song didn't match the feel of Tokyo. He had to keep his mind focused on something, or else he was afraid grief would overwhelm him. He glanced at the passenger seat, where Kakeru sat a few short hours ago. Kakeru had toyed with the GPS unit, sung songs Oshiro didn't recognize, critiqued the fashion of pedestrians, read signs they passed out loud, and watched the cars in the other lane. It was a noisy drive. All that had faded away.

Kakeru was an illusion, a dream. He never existed and therefore there was no reason to be sad over his departure.



Oshiro arrived home, and parked the BMW carefully in the garage. He opened the front door and entered, noting with surprise that he was expecting Kakeru to greet him. He mounted the stairs heavily towards the dining room. No one met him there.

A white bowl filled with apples waited on the kitchen counter. That was a

constant, having been there even before Kakeru entered his life. Oshiro took a small apple and bit into it without washing it, and cringed at the unexpectedly sour taste.

"You're home." Yasumichi came down, noticing Oshiro eating the apple. "That variety is a kogyoku. It's too tart to eat on its own; they're for baking."

"It's okay. The first apple probably tasted the same." Oshiro doggedly ate until the only thing left of the apple was its core. His glasses unexpectedly fogged up. He dropped the apple core on a plate and rubbed his eyes.

"Where's Kakeru?" Yasumichi asked.

"He went home." That was the case. Kakeru had returned to his real identity as a high school student.

"All right. When will we see him again?" Yasumichi entered the kitchen to prepare tea for Oshiro. Oshiro shook his head in reply.

"I got these apples because Kakeru said he liked apple pies."

"That sounds delicious, but I don't think he'll return."

"Kenji." Yasumichi paused amid his preparation and looked at him. "Were you in love with him?"

"No, it wasn't love. This isn't love."

"No, it was."

"No, it can't be. It was nothing like that." Oshiro felt like a boy who'd lost his pet. He didn't want Yasumichi to see how upset he was, but at the same time Oshiro knew he couldn't hide his emotions in front of him.

"You're finally acting like a real person, Kenji." Yasumichi stepped out of the kitchen, and patted Oshiro on the back. "There's nothing to be ashamed of. It's normal, it's okay to feel this way. You were in love, that's all."

Oshiro dreaded this outcome. Kakeru's mission against him had succeeded. "I'm an idiot getting screwed by a boy his age."

"No, you're not. No matter how stupid it looks from the outside, you were able to love someone like a normal human being. Kenji, it's okay. Don't be harsh on yourself."

Oshiro nodded. He had to absolve himself of his foolishness for falling in love. It wasn't friendship or affection. It was neither a game nor an obligation. It was simply love. That was all. "He's not here anymore. That's just it." Oshiro squeezed Yasumichi, then buried his face in Yasumichi's shoulder. His glasses

were in the way.

Oshiro seriously thought about getting laser treatment for his eyes.

The year wound to a close, and people rushed to finish their work before taking a week-long break for the holidays. Oshiro didn't have to travel back home to see family and considered spending the holidays abroad with his friends, but abandoned the idea when he realized Zaizen and Shiratori would probably have planned their days off by now.

Oshiro entered the bar in the high-rise hotel where everything had started a month ago. The holiday parties clamored inside, louder than usual. Oshiro scanned the crowd for Shiratori. His eyes had gotten used to his new glasses, and he'd stopped tripping into his surroundings. He spotted Shiratori's usual dark blue suit and headed over, but realized right before sitting down next to him that it was the wrong person.

"Kenji, did you get new glasses?" a man in a red sweater called to him from the other side of the room, waving his hands. Oshiro didn't recognize Shiratori at first; he hadn't seen Shiratori wear red in years.

"What's this, Akimi? Are you working as Santa Claus this holiday?" Oshiro smiled at him.

Shiratori grinned back. "What do you want to do for Christmas? We haven't planned anything yet. Do you think it's too late to reserve a restaurant?" He took a guidebook out of his messenger bag, a change from the conservative large black bag he normally carried. "Where's Kakeru? Is he coming?" Zaizen asked. He signaled for a waiter to take Oshiro's order. Noting that Zaizen had his hand on Shiratori's shoulder, Oshiro observed the two. Their general demeanor was the same as before, and Zaizen wore his usual black T-shirt under a sports coat. The only thing different was Shiratori's appearance. "Do you want scotch?" Zaizen asked.

"No, let's go with champagne for an early Christmas. Any brands you recommend?"

The waiter smiled at Oshiro's request, crinkling his eyes. "We have several bottles of Marquis de Sade."

"Champagne from Sado? I didn't know Niigata produced champagne." Zaizen joked.

“No, it’s a champagne created by one of de Sade’s descendents,” Oshiro said.
“One bottle, please.”

The waiter bowed and retreated to prepare the drinks.

“What’s on your mind? Is there something to toast to?” Zaizen smiled at Oshiro, waiting for Oshiro to make his victory speech.

“Do you want to go to Hawaii or Europe for New Years?” Oshiro asked. Zaizen and Shiratori cast sidelong glances at each other, confirming Oshiro's diagnosis that something had changed between the two.

“Sorry, not this year. By the way, where is Kakeru?” Zaizen asked again.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You mean you just let him go?” Zaizen must have been expecting gossip from Oshiro; he looked unsatisfied with the response he received.

“I’ll tell you when the champagne comes out.”

“So something worth telling did happen!” Shiratori’s eyes shone.

Oshiro nodded. “Akimi, why don’t you order something to eat? Zaizen will finish the rest.”

“True. Let’s see, what about smoked duck? There’s also shrimp toasted in. ...” Zaizen looked over the menu Shiratori held in his lap. They sat distinctly closer today.

The waiter brought the bottle over in a champagne cooler, and asked Oshiro to confirm the bottle was what he had ordered before opening it. A woman was carved into the neck of the bottle.

“Are you paying for this?” Zaizen asked Oshiro.

“Yes, it’s on me. You better enjoy it.” The waiter gently uncorked the bottle. Oshiro declined to taste the champagne and asked for it to be poured into three glasses instead.

“What are we toasting to?” Shiratori asked.

“Hmm, let’s see. How about to lives that never go the way we want them to?”

“Did you copy that from the movies, Kenji? That was really embarrassing,” Shiratori said with laughter, raising his glass. The others followed.

“My life is going in the direction I want it to go. But for your sake, cheers.” Zaizen said. He leaned against Shiratori. Oshiro smiled.

“I don’t know which way my life is going right now,” Shiratori said. “I hope it's

pointing in the direction I want it to.” Oshiro gave a small toast to himself, chuckling at himself for his misfortunes. Once they’d each taken a sip, he removed a file folder from his bag. “Now, gentlemen, this is the report of an investigation by a private detective. Is the name Yuhei Hatomura familiar?”

The two nodded.

“Yeah, I sold him a classic Lamborghini Countach last year,” Zaizen said.

“He caused an accident, and the woman riding in his passenger seat at the time sued him,” Shiratori said.

“And I operated on her for the money she won in the lawsuit.” Oshiro looked at the other two. Hatomura crashed his car while he was driving with an actress. Her face was scarred, and she sued Hatomura for subsequent damages to her career on the stage and screen. Shiratori defended her in court, and with her settlement, she paid Oshiro for reconstructive surgery. The whole mess ended three months ago.

“What about it?” Shiratori asked Oshiro instead of reading the report laid in front of him. Oshiro watched the bubbles rise from the bottom of his flute for a moment before he poured a second glass.

“Yuhei Hatomura committed suicide about a month ago.”

“What? Why?” Zaizen perked his head up.

“He was a spendthrift living beyond his means, and was deeply in debt. But that's not what I’m here about. Yuhei Hatomura had a cousin on his maternal side, Sho Yamanobe. The kanji for 'Sho' is the same as 'Kakeru.'”

“Oh!” Shiratori exclaimed. “But why did he come to us?”

“You'd have to ask Kakeru about that. His father is an engineer working overseas and his mother left them when he was little. For a while, he lived with Hatomura.”

The three looked at each other. Shiratori opened his mouth. “Did he want to avenge Hatomura?”

“Maybe he thought I sold him a lemon?” said Zaizen.

“Or he thought the lawsuit was unjust.” Shiratori and Zaizen looked at each other quizzically.

“And to top it off, I performed surgery on the woman Hatomura abandoned him for.” Oshiro drained his glass. The champagne had a sharp taste, more delightful than he'd expected. “Kakeru might know from Hatomura that the three of us

always hang out together. You introduced us to him, Yoshiaki.”

“That’s right, he contacted me after the accident, asking if I knew a lawyer and a plastic surgeon I’d recommend.” Zaizen grabbed the report out of Shiratori’s hands, and started to scan the page.

“I wasn’t a reliable attorney, though. He should have just avenged me. The accident and the payment wasn’t your fault, either of you. Besides, how was he going to avenge Hatomura?”

Zaizen opened his mouth before Oshiro had the chance to explain. “He wanted to make us fall in love with him and break up our friendship as a result.



I knew something was wrong. He introduced himself to me as an art student,

but to Akimi as an actor in training. That little brat, he even changed his clothes and personality depending on who he was meeting.”

“Did you fall in love when you slept with him?” Oshiro asked. His voice sounded awkward, but the two didn't notice it in their heated conversation over the report.

“I didn't do anything. I had to fix up an old Porsche that week for a famous actor. I wasn't about to risk my reputation to have sex with a kid.”

“I had that stalker to deal with, so we didn't do anything, either. I went to the movies with him, but that was it. He just walked me home like you told him to.”

“And of course, you didn't do anything. You were suspicious to start with, and you hired a detective.”

Oshiro smothered a laugh at Zaizen's assertion. He poured some more champagne into his glass before the waiter could arrive to refill it, and held the glass up to his friends. “Thank you, you two. You're my best friends.”

Shiratori almost jumped out of his seat. “Wait, what? What is this, Kenji? What happened to you?”

“Please tell me you didn't sleep with him!” Zaizen pushed his chair back from the table.

“Yes. Every night.”

Zaizen covered his face with his hands.

“I kept telling myself that it wasn't love, but it came out just like that. If that was a facade he'd prepared for me, I fell right into his trap. I don't know how he found out what kind of person I wanted in a partner, but he was good.” Home had returned to its normal quiet since Kakeru vanished. Hanae partied all night. Yasumichi sequestered himself in his room most of the day. Oshiro took his lonely supper and slept on bedsheets free of wet spots. There was no one to cuddle when he suddenly felt cold at night. He worked mechanically during the day, implanting hopes into clients who wished for some part of their body to change their lives. He didn't drink alcohol on the nights preceding an operation, but those nights felt dreadfully long.

His appetite returned, but his sex drive had withered.

“Well, I did think you liked guys more than girls. You never talked about wanting a girl and you're high maintenance. And to top it off, you're horrible at conveying your feelings towards women.” Zaizen said. His words were sarcastic, but there

was a warm smile on his face.

“Did he do any damage to you or your property?” Shiratori asked, concerned. They were the best friends Oshiro could ever hope to have.

“No damages. The only one I can think of is the price of this champagne.” Oshiro wanted to salute the life that would not turn in the direction he wanted to go. Why did he fall for Kakeru when Shiratori, Zaizen, and Yasumichi knew and understood him better? Why was he madly in love with Kakeru when he knew there was a malignant motive behind his actions? He even fell for the aftereffects when Kakeru suddenly disappeared. “I wonder why he wanted to go see the mummy. We went to the museum in Ueno the final day. Maybe it reminded him of Hatomura’s suicide.” Oshiro removed a small clipping from a newspaper article from the folder. It read: *Yuhei Hatomura, age twenty-six, committed suicide in his car by pouring gasoline on his car and setting it ablaze. The body was charred black.*

No wonder Kakeru couldn't look at the mummy. The blackened body lying in the coffin must have reminded him of the charred remains of Hatomura.

“He was smart kid. When I told him that I didn't like my appearance, we had a deep conversation about the body and the mind. He sounded like he'd gone through a lot because of his face.” Shiratori reflected on the week he spent with Kakeru. He was a good listener; he must have talked with Kakeru the most of the three. “Strange. If he wanted to avenge Hatomura, he could have done a lot of things, given the circumstances I was in. But he really was a good kid.”

“True. It sounds a little odd, but he behaved like a puppy trying to find a new owner.” Zaizen agreed.

Oshiro had insulted Kakeru for wanting to be loved by everyone, including Yasumichi and Hanae. He thought Kakeru was just being promiscuous. Zaizen's metaphor cleared his motives up.

“What? Sho Yamanobe’s a senior at Hibiya High School? He’s eighteen?” Surprised, Zaizen looked at the report again. “What was he doing living with a twenty-six-year-old cousin? A boy toy? Must have been; his clothes were way too expensive for a kid to buy on his own. Plus, he seemed to know how to choose good clothing when I took him to an Armani store.”

“You mean he was trying to find a new sugar daddy, not look for revenge? Wait, do we look that old?” Shiratori glanced down at his red sweater and checked

jeans.

"We're old men to him? That hurts." Oshiro burst out laughing, and laughed for a long time.

"Kenji, come back," Zaizen said comfortingly. "It's not the end of the world to get screwed by a kid. I mean, you've got no experience in maintaining a relationship. It's not like you'd been pursuing just one guy like Akimi either. That's what you get for being so self-centered all these years."

Shiratori blushed at the remark.

"No, I'm not that depressed. I know I'm self-centered, that won't change. Anyway." Oshiro reached for the bottle again. Less than half a glass remained; a single bottle wasn't enough for three people to drink. Zaizen grabbed the bottle out of his hands and gestured to the waiter. He pointed his finger at the bottle when the waiter arrived tableside.

"We'd like another bottle of this. Put it on my tab."

"Wait, so we're all buying drinks? That's unfair, I haven't been drinking any."

"Oh, excuse me. Can you open the bottle at the counter first so you can make a champagne cocktail for him?" Zaizen pointed at Shiratori. "Make it extra sweet."

"Oh, may I also order food?" Shiratori got his menu out and confirmed each item in his order with Zaizen. They looked like a cute couple.

Oshiro smiled. "Looks like you two are getting along well. I guess his presence did help."

"Don't bring that up right now, I'm drinking." Zaizen glared at him.

Oshiro smiled cynically. He asked Shiratori. "So, how was it? Did it hurt?"

"No comment!" Shiratori hid his face behind the menu.

"Come to think of it, the kid had it tough," Zaizen said, changing the subject.

"Whatever his reasons were for living with Hatomura, he was abandoned, and then Hatomura died. I don't blame him for seeing us drinking like this and wanting to screw one of us."

Oshiro looked around the bar. He tended to forget his surroundings when he was with these two, but they probably looked untroubled to any observer. Kakeru must have watched them and thought they were three rich and successful men enjoying their life.

The words Kakeru uttered the first night crossed his mind. He'd asked if Oshiro had experienced grief so strong that he wanted to die. Kakeru stopped waiting

for death after three days when he couldn't ignore his hunger any longer. Oshiro didn't know when Kakeru had experienced those feelings. It might have been fairly recently, when he was rejected by Hatomura or when Hatomura committed suicide. Either way, Kakeru had searched the streets for something. Was he looking for someone to replace his cousin, or did he want to use his physique and skills for another reason? Oshiro would never know.

"Excuse me, do you have any apples?" Oshiro asked a passing waiter. The waiter smiled without a sign of discomfort at the interruption, and nodded. "We do. How shall I bring it to you?"

"Like it was in heaven."

"Excuse me?"

"Just a whole apple. You don't need to cut it."

Humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden for eating an apple. But apples appear as ornaments on Christmas trees. He did not know nor did he care if those two things were related, but one thing he did know was that every time he ate an apple, he would think of Kakeru.

Shiratori and Zaizen ended up hosting a Christmas party at Oshiro's house, and kept him in the dark about the details. All he knew was that he was to wear a black suit and tie, and not to complain about the number of guests present. He was also strictly instructed not to leave his room the day of the party until Shiratori came upstairs to escort him into the living room. A white Christmas tree, decorated solely with red apples and small, blinking lights, held court in the middle of the room, surrounded by guests. All of whom, Oshiro was surprised to notice, were men. "What's this? A bachelor party?"

"Or your mom's harem. That's what Yoshiaki calls it. Some are Yoshiaki's sailing friends and the rest are people we met at a gay social club."

"A gay club? When did you guys meet them?"

"Well, things happened in the past few weeks."

Hanae waved at Oshiro. She sparkled in a white, floor-length gown, laughing merrily, surrounded by large men in black suits. Nearby, two clowns with balloons in their hands stood guard along with two costumed characters, one a gorilla and the other a pink rabbit. "I'm astonished all these people fit into this room," Oshiro remarked. Plastic champagne glasses formed a pyramid beside the staircase. From the top of the stairs, Zaizen readied himself to pour the

champagne over the pyramid. He smiled at Oshiro when their eyes met and flourished the large bottle in his hands.

“All right, lady and gentlemen, the unluckiest guy in the world has joined our party. Let’s crank it up!” Yoshiaki commenced pouring the bottle into the uppermost glass in the stack. The champagne trickled steadily, overflowing from glass to glass, filling them all as it ran. Yoshiaki had to lean out quite far to aim at the top glass, so Oshiro and Shiratori held him steady to prevent him from toppling over the railing. “Oh my, look at how much it’s dripping from Yoshiaki’s pony!” one man rang out in a deep voice, somehow managing to shriek like a young girl at the same time.

“Yes darling, pour it all in!” called another.

“Yoshiaki, I know you have a lot of connections, but where and how did you meet these people?” Oshiro asked.

“Don’t mind them, some of them are my clients. They’ll probably become your clients too, if you'd like,” said Zaizen.

“I feel bad that Yasumi-chan has to clean all this up after the party,” said Oshiro, but then he noticed how pleased Yasumichi looked, picking his way excitedly through the crowd and tidying as he went, and revised his thought.

“I brought all the nice-looking guys I could find, Oshiro. Feel free to pluck any of them.”

Oshiro slapped Zaizen's ass. “Stop it! Don’t do this just because you guys are in love!”

“It tastes amazing!” someone cried from below.

Oshiro chuckled. Every year they spent Christmas together, but this was the most uproarious and merry party they'd attended by far. Once all the levels of the pyramid were full, each person took a glass. The costumed gorilla and rabbit also raised their glasses but their costumes prevented them from drinking. Feeling sorry for them, Oshiro whispered to the rabbit. “Go drink it in the kitchen upstairs. No one will notice if you take your head off there.”

The rabbit nodded. He was a large rabbit, almost the same height as Oshiro, although the upright ears made him look taller.

Shiratori handed the rabbit a basket filled with cigars, candies, and chocolates, then pulled Oshiro by the arm. “Come, Yoshiaki will introduce you to the guests.” Oshiro followed him. He recognized some attendees already, so he only greeted

the guests he didn't know. After a short introduction and exchange of business cards, they chatted about their work and interests. It felt like speeddating to Oshiro, but he bore up well under his responsibility as host, although once he realized that the rabbit held his basket out to the guests as a signal to end the conversation, the greeting ritual ran more smoothly. He just had to step aside for the rabbit after a token amount of time if he didn't like a guest.

Each of the men attending the party had a successful career. Some made Oshiro uncomfortable with their frank interest, for as much as Oshiro was gratified by sex without love, he couldn't imagine himself sleeping with anyone here today. His mind was still on Sho, but his pride forbade him to go visit Sho when he'd been deserted at the museum without a farewell. It was even harder to visit him after what he'd learned about Sho and his relationship with Hatomura.

Oshiro told Sho that he couldn't be a substitute for someone else. If Sho believed in the existence of spirits, he must still be haunted by Hatomura. That must be why he abandoned Oshiro: how he could date someone else when the shade of Hatomura still followed him?

The clowns, both expert entertainers, commenced making balloon animals and other objects. Hanae giggled like a young girl, holding a balloon filled with other, smaller balloons. Zaizen, the life of the party, was deluged with hugs from many of the guests. Shiratori eyed them, his face livid with jealousy. Oshiro smirked at the possibility of those two having their first fight as lovers.

Tiring a bit, Oshiro scavenged what was left from the basket that the rabbit held. He didn't smoke, and neither did he like candy or chocolate. "Hmm, I don't know what I should eat." Oshiro smiled at the rabbit. "Aren't you hot in that?"

The rabbit shook his head. The costume was old, the fur missing in patches. An image of the large teddy bear Oshiro used to own crossed his mind, and he laughed quietly to himself. It occurred to him that he should distract Shiratori before he started any drama with Zaizen. He turned to walk that way when the rabbit tugged at his sleeve. "What is it? You can have the rest of those gifts."

The rabbit shook his head. He cupped his hand and brought it to his mouth. "Oh, you want something to drink?"

The rabbit nodded. Oshiro led him up the stairs to the dining room located above the living room. "What do you want to drink? Will you get in trouble if you drink beer tonight? I've got mineral water." Oshiro poured some water into a cup, and

handed it to the rabbit. The rabbit placed the cup on the countertop. He struggled to take off his head. Oshiro stared at the person inside the rabbit.

"Merry Christmas," the rabbit said.

Oshiro chuckled. The man in front of him was Sho Yamanobe, the eighteen year old Hibiya High School senior.

Sho untied the towel he'd wrapped around his head underneath the bunny head, and wiped sweat off his face before drinking the water.

"This is why I can't have Yoshiaki plan any parties," Oshiro said. Yoshiaki forced him to greet all the men, only to find out at the end that the rabbit following him was Sho.

"Yoshiaki told me to take off my head if I found anyone I liked," Sho said as he smiled. His eyes were fixed on Oshiro's.

Oshiro didn't know what to say. He selected an apple from the bowl on the corner of the kitchen counter. About to take a bite, he decided against it at the last second, and placed it carefully back in the bowl. "Go back to the party. There's a lot of rich men down there."

"It's all right. I'm hot, Kenji. Help me unzip this." Kakeru gestured at the zipper running down his back.

"Don't take it off. That's against the party rules."

"Where am I supposed to take this off?"

They stared at each other until Oshiro looked away. "I'm not going to be his substitute."

"There was nothing romantic between me and Yuhei. When Mom left, Dad couldn't take care of me so he had me live with Yuhei. He was my cousin; I thought I'd be fine. Guess he had other intentions."

"But you cried for him."

"Yeah. I was mad at you three, too."

"See? You loved him."

Sho shook his head. He was a smart youth who knew how to lie. Oshiro steeled himself not to be deceived by a flamboyant story. Instead, Sho spoke in a clinical tone, unemotional.

"I cried for Yuhei because I was mad at him. He died in a selfish way. He didn't give me the chance to get revenge."

"Revenge?"

"I was hoping I'd succeed in life, come back to Yuhei, and make him bow down to me. You guys pushed him off the edge before I got the chance."

"But you cried for him."

Sho tilted his head. He didn't understand what Oshiro was referring to at first.

"Oh, you mean the three days I waited to die? Well, uh, oh, so I guess you cried when I left?" He embraced Oshiro, then leaving his arms around him, lifted his head and waited for a kiss. "Kenji, you're mistaken. I let him have sex with me, but that was it. I didn't love him. He took care of me and bought me gifts. That was the compensation."

"That doesn't change the fact you were selling your body."

"What else was I supposed to do? I was a kid, I didn't have anyone else. My parents weren't there."

Oshiro wondered if he would ended up in a similar situation if Yasumichi had been like Hatomura. But Yasumichi was a caring man; he would never do anything Oshiro didn't feel comfortable with. If Yasumichi had preferred the kind of sex Oshiro did, Oshiro would have grown into a very different person.

"Kenji, were you jealous? You were jealous about my past, weren't you? Kenji, tell me."

"Stop it." Oshiro didn't want to kiss here. He struggled to get away from Sho.

"Kiss me, Kenji, please?"

"I'll puke."

Sho pinned Oshiro against the kitchen wall. The rabbit costume was fluffy, but Oshiro could make out a small hump near the groin. Hesitating for a while, Oshiro grabbed Sho by the jaw and brushed his lips against Sho's.

"You kissed."

Oshiro remained silent.

"A deeper one, Kenji."

"No, I'll vomit if it's anything worse than that. Why are you always making me do things I hate? Show some consideration, sometimes!"

Sho ignored him, hugging Oshiro and mashed his lips onto Oshiro's. Oshiro clenched his lips tight. "Stop doing things I don't like to measure how much I can tolerate you. The game's over."

"Shut up, and get over it. The body's nothing but a vessel to hold the soul. What's wrong with vessels touching each other? You stick your body inside mine

and it's not okay the other way around?"

"Was that why you wanted to see the mummy? So you could tell me that?"

"I figured you'd rather kiss my lips than that mummy's after you saw it. Mine are more puffy and soft." Sho led Oshiro's hand to his groin. "Come on, let's do it."

"Not here." His bedroom door had no lock. Oshiro climbed the stairs, but instead of going to his room, entered the study and climbed another set of stairs to the loft. "I always thought that this place would be the best place to hide, but I never once played hide-and-seek. Were you good at that game?"

Sho ran up the stairs ahead of him. "I thought it'd be more stuffy in here. It's clean."

"Blame Yasumi-chan." Oshiro bent his head as he crossed the room, to keep from banging it on the ceiling. He opened a window at the far end. Frosty winter air swirled into the room. Through the floor, they could hear the party heating up downstairs, Zaizen rapping a Christmas song. "Sounds like they're having a good time. Sure you don't want to go back down?"

Sho ignored Oshiro's question. "Help me unzip this." Oshiro slid the zipper down the rabbit's back, only to discover that Sho was naked beneath the fake fur. "Yoshiaki told me that if I found someone that I liked more than you at this party, I couldn't let you know that I was here. I'd have to take my costume off outside the house."

"There's nothing here for you."

"I disagree. You were the only one that stayed with me the whole time. Yoshiaki and Akimi were both nice, but that was it."

Both Zaizen and Shiratori forfeited the game. Oshiro was the only player that actually played it. He wondered why. His pride didn't allow him to admit that he was attracted to Sho from the beginning.

Sho slid the costume down over his narrow hips. "By the way, it was when my mom abandoned me that I cried for three nights. She said she couldn't bring me with her because my face would cause tensions in her new marriage. Seriously? I'd have given up if it was my behavior, but my face?" He reclined on top of the bunny costume. "I'm sure Mom knew that Yuhei liked boys, and she still let me live with him. Wonder what her motive was?"

Oshiro sat on the floor beside him, hoping his suit wouldn't pick up too much dust. "It's like Snow White; the witch is her biological mother in the original

tale.”

“Oh, okay.” Sho lay there with his eyes closed. Oshiro thought that he'd dozed off before realizing that Sho was just playing a role.

“Get up and stop playing Snow White, Sho.” Oshiro looked out of the window. The stars shone in the clear night sky. Humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden for a single apple. Generations passed, and a single human couple bore a child from God. Apples appeared again, on the night that child was born. “Get up, I’m not going to wake you up with a kiss.”

The loft was growing cold. Oshiro stood up and closed the window. He refused to admit to Sho that he cried the day Sho vanished. He didn't want to allow Sho to take the lead in this relationship and feel superior, at least not so early in the relationship. But the naked body that lay in front of him was tempting, the end of his erect penis dripping in response. This must have been the same feeling the first humans felt when they saw the apple. “I’ll never kiss you.” Oshiro removed his jacket and placed it in a corner so it wouldn't get too dusty, then unbuttoned his suspenders and slid off his pants. “No, I won’t kiss. Never.” Oshiro lay down on top of Sho, still lying there. He gazed into the youth’s face, before lowering his eyes to Sho's throat, then sinking his teeth into Sho's neck. Oshiro didn't think he bitten too hard, a little softer than the force he'd use biting into an apple. Sho snapped his eyes open and punched Oshiro.

“Ow! What was that for?!”

“Cry more, that’ll get me fired up,” said Oshiro.

“You pervert!”

“You’re the one that knew about it and came back.” The biting had been more gratifying than Oshiro'd thought. He grabbed Sho's wrist and bit into it as hard as he could. He was using his mouth, like a kiss would use his mouth, but he was still afraid to kiss Sho.

“Kenji, I don’t like this. Kiss me instead.”

“No.” He flipped Sho onto his stomach. They had always performed sex without much preparation, but tonight Oshiro bit into Sho's smooth back first.

“Ow, stop, Kenji, stop it.”

Oshiro knew Sho pretended that he was in far more pain than he actually was. He was performing a role to keep Oshiro interested. Both knew they were similar. They'd experienced lonely nights as a child. They knew the warmth of

sleeping beside someone as adults. There was a natural attraction between them. Oshiro penetrated Sho, who let out a sweet sound and opened his legs wider. Oshiro held those legs in his arms and thrust deeper into Sho. Sho gasped when Oshiro bit his shoulder. Oshiro grabbed his arm, then slowly inched his fingers down Sho's abdomen to his genitals.

Sho called his name in the midst of his sweet whimpers. Kenji stroked his hands up and down Sho's shaft even more, an act he had never done to a partner.

“Kenji, yes, yes!”

“You’re like an apple.” Oshiro turned him around so they were looking in each other's face. He moved his hips faster.

Sho slipped his fingers down Oshiro’s bare chest. He whimpered. “Kiss me. If you love me, then kiss me. I’ll let you bite me all you want but not until you kiss me.”

Oshiro bent down, and kissed him. It had the taste of sin, the taste of the apple. Oshiro lost his garden of solitude forever with this kiss. He now had to experience the pain and suffering involved in loving a partner. There would be jealousy and contempt. He might even become over-possessive. But the joy and happiness of sharing his life with someone was stronger than the pain.

Sho used his tongue to arouse Oshiro. Oshiro used his hips to satisfy Sho. They loved each other until both met their climax.

The party wound to a close as the sky lightened into dawn, and the guests left for their homes.

“Yoshiaki, get up! Help me out here!” Shiratori kicked Zaizen, snoring on the floor with his shirt unbuttoned, dead to the world. “You drunk!” Shiratori crossed his arms and glared at his sleeping partner. The party was fun, but some



things he would not tolerate. If Zaizen woke up without remembering a thing, Shiratori was going to explode.

Three days ago, Shiratori and Zaizen visited the address listed in the detective's report. Sho lived on the second floor of an old apartment building. Shiratori couldn't believe that the flamboyant youth he'd met lived in this dump. Sho was home when they knocked on the door and seemed surprised at first, but flashed his usual blithe smile. "Can we talk outside? I don't want you seeing the mess in here."

Shiratori couldn't help but feel sorry for him. This wasn't a place for a boy to mature into a healthy, confident adult. Sho lived alone in the apartment, his

father still abroad despite the approaching holidays. “What are you doing?” Shiratori asked, as softly as he could.

Tickled, Sho smiled. “Studying. I’m poor so I have to go to a public college.” “Okay. Is Christmas Eve open?” Shiratori continued. Christmas was a time to be together with family and friends, not to celebrate alone. He looked over at Zaizen.

“We don’t care about who won or lost the game. It’s just...it’s a little sad to have it end like this after we got to know each other.” Zaizen handed Sho a sheet of paper that listed the details for the Christmas party. “We’re throwing a party and we want you to have fun as well. Kenji’s been a little depressed since you left. Will you cheer him up?”

“Sorry, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

The two stared at each other, searching for an answer.

“Sorry for all the lies. I’m sure you’re mad at me.” Sho said, evading the question.

“We’re not mad at you. It was fun, and there were things we were able to resolve because of you.” Shiratori took Sho’s hand. “Everyone’s sad that you’ve gone. Yasumi-chan and Mama want to see you again. Will you come to the party?”

“Thank you, but I can’t see Kenji.”

“Why?”

“I fell in love.” His voice broke. He winced, trying not to cry.

“Why can’t you see him if you fell in love?” That was Zaizen's entire reason to see his partner. They would meet every day and make love.

“Don’t act like you don’t know, you know why I went for you three. I wanted to have fun and be pampered. I’ll let you have sex with me, you give me gifts. That’s all.”

“You’re honest.”

“Yeah. What’s wrong with getting attention? Come on, I’m nothing more than that.”

“Then find another sugar daddy at the party. But there are some rules.” That was when Zaizen told him about the bunny costume.

The bunny costume lay empty in the corner of the room. The gorilla and the

clowns left once their time was up. Either Zaizen or Shiratori had to go return the rabbit costume later today since Sho hadn't returned to the party before they left.

Shiratori was happy that Oshiro hadn't come back down the stairs during the party, which was over when Oshiro led the headless rabbit down to the living room, friends and family bombarding them with questions. They merely smiled. Shiratori was glad their plan had helped restore those two's relationship.

"Akimi, would you like to sleep in the guest room today? I'll help carry Yoshiaki if you're planning to take him up as well," Yasumichi offered when he saw Shiratori attempt to rouse Zaizen.

"I'll help too. Yoshiaki's heavy." Sho had been vacuuming, and stopped the vacuum cleaner to offer his help. He was wearing a spare shirt of Oshiro's.

"It's okay, take him outside if you're going to carry him. He needs to learn his lesson." Zaizen allowed other men to touch his body during the party more often than Shiratori was comfortable with. Although it took place during a party where alcohol was involved and thus couldn't be taken too seriously, Shiratori couldn't ignore the possibility that Zaizen's future casual dating targets might now include men.

"Kenji! Help us carry Yoshiaki!" Sho called.

Oshiro was taking ornaments off the Christmas tree, and stepped down from the chair he was using as a stool. "I'll help, but I believe Zaizen needs to learn his lesson." He stared down at his friend sleeping on the floor. "He's a great friend, but he needs to pay for making Akimi worried. Sho, help me take off his clothes."

"Why me?!"

Oshiro stripped Zaizen to his boxers. He grabbed a marker from the toolbox Yasumichi had left in the corner of the room, and proceeded to draw a tie on Zaizen's bare chest, a watch around his wrist, and a belt circling his waist. Sho burst out laughing. "I didn't know you were the sort of person to do that!"

"I've always been mean. I'd draw a pair of glasses on his face if I'd witnessed him myself."

The four laughed, and hauled Zaizen up the stairs to the guest room.

"Did you like our Christmas present, Kenji?" Zaizen mumbled in his sleep, slurring his words. "We got you a big rabbit. We looked for a bear, but we couldn't find

one.”

“It’s fine, I like the rabbit. Thanks.”

“You better. We can’t be the only ones in love this Christmas.” Zaizen opened his mouth in a grin.

“Yeah, sure. If that’s the case, thank Akimi instead. He’s the one that’s been there for you, even when you’re drunk and partying. You better not make Akimi cry again.”

Shiratori blushed. He lost his grip and Zaizen’s body toppled, hitting the railing.

“Ouch!” Zaizen moaned, but he didn't come fully to consciousness. He continued talking in his sleep. “Akimi, I love you.”

“Yoshiaki, shut up. Shut up and sleep!” Shiratori blushed again.

“Nah, it’s not love. It’s much more than love. Akimi, I—”

“You drunk bastard! Just shut up!” Shiratori dropped the leg he was carrying, which hit the stairs.

“Fine, I’ll carry him.” Oshiro grabbed both of Zaizen’s legs. A thought occurred to him. “I wonder how many years we’ll be carrying Yoshiaki like this?” He looked at Sho, carrying one of Zaizen’s arms. “I wonder if you’ll be helping out next year?”

“Maybe if you improve your kissing skills,” Sho teased with a smirk.

“Don't count on it,” Oshiro replied. He kissed when carried away by ecstasy, but he still wasn't inclined to do it on command. He preferred biting instead.

Postscript

Thank you for reading! I think this book will be in the stores at Christmas, so I tried to write a story involving the holiday.

I like Christmas. Even though I'm not Christian, I still like it; it might be because I like parties in general. Christmas is a time for gifts. Of course, food and wine is also on my list, but I like to focus on gift-giving first. I believe that a gift can be anything, even a single card, as long as it's from the heart.

I grew up in a household that didn't believe in Santa, so I wanted to make sure my children grew up with that dream, and every year it's thrilling and fulfilling to place a present beside their beds while they're asleep. This ritual is always the best Christmas present I receive every year. Maybe that seems weird, but you all know the excitement of giving a present to someone. It's the same thing.

The champagne Marquis de Sade really does exist and de Sade's descendants produce it. I plan to open a bottle of it at Christmas this year.

Lastly, I would like to thank Ikue Ishida for her beautiful illustrations. For all my readers and my editors, I hope this book will become a small Christmas present.

Siira Gou

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It's Not Love

*"Let's play a game.
Who can make me fall in love?"*

Kenji Oshiro, Yoshiaki Zaizen, and Akimi Shiratori are three young, successful professional men who have been close friends since college. But secrets will be revealed and emotions laid bare as their carefree friendship is disrupted by a mysterious young man named Kakeru, who proposes a dangerous game!

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