

**Yokozawa Takafumi no
Baai, Vol. 1**



Title: *Sekai-ichi Hatsukoi ~ The Case of Yokozawa Takafumi, Vol. 1*

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1.

First loves never last—I knew that from the very beginning.

He had at least understood that there was no ‘romantic love’ in the feelings held for him. Showing him his weaknesses, taking advantage of him...that was all simply depending on him as a close friend.

And yet, the reason he couldn’t cut away his lingering affections...was because he still held out some small hope. He didn’t have to be his lover—it was enough if he could just be the most important person in his life. It would have been more than enough...if he could just stay close by his side.



He could hear the sound of rain falling outside.

The rain slapped loudly against the asphalt, the sound seeming to resonate sympathetically with his own irritation. The rain had been falling for quite some time tonight, and yet even the mud-darkened water swirling outside couldn’t wash away the blackness soaking through his heart.

He glanced up at the television in the *izakaya* he’d ducked into for shelter from the weather and noticed a warning for strong thunderstorms. He’d initially planned on heading home once the rain let up, but the rain which had started falling in the early evening was certainly showing no signs of stopping, and he realized he’d long since lost the moment to leave the bar safely.

...Or well, perhaps that was just an excuse he told himself. In truth, he likely only wanted to put off returning to that room filled with memories of *him* for as long as possible.

And it wasn't so bad while he was emptying glasses of sake in the midst of his despair, but right now he could feel a roiling sickness in the pit of his stomach—hardly surprising; there was no way he wouldn't be feeling the effects of drinking that much. On the bright side, he didn't have a headache. He furrowed his brows at the discomfort and tried to roll over, subsequently noting a strange sensation against his cheek.

“Where... am I?”

Slowly pushing himself up off the gently springy mattress, Yokozawa Takafumi knit his brows in confusion as he took in his surroundings, a room he'd never seen before. It was neither his own house nor that of any of his friends. The simple aesthetic spoke of a business hotel—and yet he had no recollection of checking into a hotel. The last thing he remembered was settling in at the *izakaya* because the rain hadn't stopped yet...

“I can't remember...”

Sifting through his fuzzy memories, the one thing he was able to recall were the words of the bartender, worried that he was drinking too much. At any rate, he had to get rid of this hangover and fast, or he wasn't going to be able to use his head at all.

He'd never gotten this drunk before in his life; after all, it had always been his job to look after a certain someone who liked to get shit-faced himself. He'd never so much as *imagined* that he would wake up one morning and not be able to remember anything.

Shaking his head wildly, he regained a bit of sense and blinked several times in rapid succession while massaging his sleep-heavy eyelids with his fingers. It was in that moment that he sensed something strange about the bits of himself that he could see.

“.....”

While he didn't recall stripping, for some reason he was completely naked. He hardly ever slept in the nude to begin with, and curiosity led him to lift up the comforter.

“?!”

Realizing he wasn't even wearing any underwear, he grew flustered and quickly covered up his lower half.

Perhaps he'd just gotten drunk and stripped of his own volition, throwing his clothes about. Telling himself this, he glanced around the room, but was unable to locate even a single sock, let alone his suit itself.

Finding his boxers had just slipped under the bed, he stretched out an arm to grab them and slipped them on under the covers, breathing a sigh of relief. There was a world of difference in ease of mind between having at least one piece of clothing on and wearing nothing at all.

He had also noticed one other thing when he'd surveyed the room: the sound of the shower running. Apparently he'd interpreted the sound of the shower from the bathroom as the sound of falling rain in his dreams.

But that was hardly the problem: that he could hear the shower running...meant that someone was using it.

He'd never in his life brought a casual acquaintance to a hotel like this. Quite the contrary, he was firmly against having relationships with strangers. And yet, when he paused to consider the state he'd been in the night before, he had to admit it wouldn't have been all that strange if he'd been that careless...

As he sat there worrying on endlessly, the sound of the water running suddenly stopped.

“.....!”

He held his breath and prepared himself to confront whatever woman was about to come out of that bathroom. While he didn't know why they'd come there with him, he knew he had a responsibility as a man to accept the consequences of his actions.

Yokozawa ran through a dozen patterns and simulations in his mind—but his thoughts ground to a halt when the person who stepped out of the bathroom, dressed in a robe, was in fact a *man*.

“Oh, you're awake. How's that hangover?” The man mopping at his wild hair that dripped with water from the shower and speaking with an air of

nonchalance was none other than the editor-in-chief of Marukawa Shoten's featured magazine *Japun*, Kirishima Zen.



With perfectly balanced and arranged long, almond-shaped eyes and thin lips, his composed expression made it quite evident he hadn't just woken up.

Yokozawa did his best to try and force his blanked-out mind to restart, releasing a trembling voice. "...Wh—why are *you* here...?!" He couldn't wrap his mind around why on earth he would be here, in this hotel room, stark naked with someone he normally hardly ever spoke to outside of work.

Kirishima maintained his cool in the face of the dumbfounded Yokozawa. "What's with that? You trying to say you don't remember anything about last night? Take a hint from your surroundings and I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"My—surroundings?"

Under any other circumstances, his ire would've risen at the arrogant way Kirishima addressed him with those thin lips, but right now he had no such leeway. Were this a manga or a TV drama, this would've easily been concluded as a plot device where two people get drunk and wind up sleeping together—but that typically involved a man and a *woman*, and they were both men here.

...But while he wanted to reject that idea outright on those grounds, his powers of persuasion were lacking just now on account of the fact that he didn't remember *anything*.

In Yokozawa's mind, he'd always known that he *wasn't* gay—and yet the person he'd held an unrequited love for all these years had been a man. It stood to reason, then, that the hurdle towards homosexuality for him was substantially lower than for complete heterosexuals.

For now, the top priority was remembering what he'd done the previous evening, anything at all! He frantically scoured his hazy memories and drifted back to just when he'd left the office.

Yesterday had been the absolute worst day of his life.

After having a stop firmly put to the love he'd held onto for so long, unable to give it up, he'd sulked his way into an *izakaya* on the way home from work. Downing drink after drink with little thought to the taste, simply

wanting to get drunk, he now recalled how Kirishima had happened to wander into that same bar.

“Kirishima-san...what are you doing here?”

“Was looking for a place to get out of the rain and figure I’d grab a bite while I was at it...but, hey—aren’t you hitting the bottle a little hard there?”

“Course not. What—you alone? Then here, grab a seat. Hey—can I get another one of these? Or, wait—no, make that two more.”

They’d rarely shared a drink together like that, even if they met outside of work, so perhaps he’d just been a bit lonely and looking for some company. Regardless of what he’d been thinking when he’d done it, Yokozawa had forced Kirishima into taking the seat next to him. Perhaps realizing that it was futile to reason with a drunk, Kirishima sat down and joined Yokozawa in his pity party.

He recalled how they discussed how well the sales of one of the newer authors were going, griped about how reprints weren’t coming fast enough, complained about a rather popular author coming down with something and having to put off their manuscript, all of these bits of discord that they normally kept bottled up inside he now spilled forth freely.

But after that...he couldn’t remember anything.

“So you really don’t remember at all?”

Lifting his head at the rather shocked comment, Yokozawa found that Kirishima had finished getting dressed while he’d been deep in thought. As the final touch, he was slipping his watch onto his arm. Gazing upon such a well-composed figure as his, Yokozawa grew suddenly self-conscious, considering his own sleep-ruffled hair, stubble-lined jaw, and the fact that he was still very much naked.

“Yeah—it’s no wonder, if I really did drink that much.”

When he spoke the excuse, Kirishima threw him a suggestive glance and teased him with a reprisal of his own words from the night before. “Really, now? After you told me ‘course not’ when I asked you if you’d been drinking a bit too much?”

“That was...” While he did faintly recall saying something to that effect, it was rather underhanded to bring up the idle musings of a drunk man here. Still, Yokozawa had no place to object here.

“...Well, I suppose salarymen do occasionally have days where they just want to get pissed. But pulling others into it as well is something of an inconvenience, so try to be a bit more careful in the future.”

“I know that well enough without having you tell me, thank you very much.”

“Take advice your elders give you without the back talk.”

“What—what are you doing?!” Kirishima had reached forward and was ruffling Yokozawa’s hair roughly—and the moment he moved to brush the hand away, a memory floated through his mind at the feeling of those fingers threading through his hair.

This wasn’t the first time he’d been touched by those fingers—he could sense it. Memories of the skin were proof that you had interacted with another person.

He didn’t want to accept it...but they’d probably done *that*. Yokozawa could feel his body heating up bit by bit as he drew his own conclusion. It was too frightening to go so far as to imagine in any detail what had happened; no matter how you looked at it, it was clear this was not a pretty picture.

“...What’s with you getting so quiet all of a sudden? Started remembering last night a bit, have we?”

It was no use crying over spilled milk. What mattered most to Yokozawa just at this moment was simply the matter of had he been on top...or bottom.

He didn’t feel any particular discomfort or strangeness, so they couldn’t have gone all the way. And while he couldn’t picture himself getting involved with Kirishima of his own accord, he was even less inclined to picture himself being pushed down.

But more than that, it was quite a shock to realize that Kirishima even swang that way. They weren’t close, so of course they knew nothing of each other’s private lives—but noticing that he wore a ring on his left

ring finger, Yokozawa assumed he was married. Had they *really* done something together?

“...Can I ask you something?”

“Depends on the question.”

Realizing that unless he asked directly he'd never get a proper answer, Yokozawa got right to the point: “Are you gay?”

“Aren't you?”

“Of course not!” The reflexive negative response was due to the fact that he really had never thought of himself as gay before. After all, he'd only ever fallen in love with *one* person of the same sex. So in all truth, he'd never really figured out if he did like men in general, or if it was just Takano.

When they'd first met, Yokozawa had had a girlfriend. But he'd always felt more comfortable spending his time with Takano than with his girlfriend, and shortly after devolving into only meeting up now and then, the whole thing had dissolved naturally. Since then, he'd never had a steady relationship. Others had fallen for him often enough, but he'd never made any moves of his own volition.

“What's with that response? You were griping last night all about how you'd just gotten your heart broken by another guy. Do you have any idea how many times I had to hear you go on and on about the same thing?”

“I said that?!” At Kirishima's words, his blood ran cold. Shit, how much had he said? This could be big trouble if he'd spoken Takano's or Onodera's names aloud...

“You seriously don't remember anything, do you? You were downright annoying, going on about how *I could've made him so much happier than that guy* and *Don't you think so, too??* But—anyways, don't get too worked up. You never said his name.”

“I didn't?!” It was pathetic, the way he had latched onto Kirishima's comforting words.

Perhaps he'd had a look of desperation on his face, for Kirishima huffed while watching Yokozawa closely, “You don't have to ask me while

looking so damn tragic; it's the truth. You never said who the guy was... But, given how worked up you are, I can probably guess that he works at the office, huh?"

"Th...that's...of course not." A chill ran through him at the sharp deduction, and he pasted on a poker face and lied through his teeth. He had to applaud himself for being able to get that shit-faced and still not breathe a word.

"But—it was a guy, right? The person you've had feelings for all this time."

"That's..." He couldn't remember how far he'd spoken the previous evening, but given the confidence with which Kirishima was saying these things to him, it was unlikely that he was asking leading questions.

"This isn't one of those books Sapphire spits out, you know, so don't try to tell me *Oh the person I fell in love with just ~happened~ to be a man*. There's no way you'd have romantic feelings for another guy without something there to begin with. If you weren't gay—you wouldn't be worrying this much anyways."

Seeing the way Kirishima's shoulders shook with repressed laughter as he teased, Yokozawa unthinkingly raised his voice. "Wör—who said I was trying to—and, why the hell are we talking about me?! I asked *you* a question!" While he'd hardly meant to be worrying over it, not being able to remember anything put him in an awkward position. If this whole affair turned out to be true, he was going to die of embarrassment.

He fully understood that he was being goaded on by cheap teasing, but he somehow couldn't control himself when dealing with Kirishima, leaving his emotions to rise to the forefront.

"Why, I never realized you wanted to get to know me that much. And actually—I'm fine either way. I'm attracted to strong-willed types, regardless of gender."

Meaning for him, this entire thing was no big deal at all, therefore leaving Yokozawa with no way of determining what was truth and what was fiction.

"You sure you don't go for guys? You were probably a total jock at an all-boys' school."

“What the...” Yokozawa felt humiliation well up within him, sensing that he was essentially being told *any guy will do for you*. But while he understood that if he raised his voice and let his emotions get the better of him, he’d just be brushed aside, he still wanted to get in just *one* good retort, and sarcastically responded, “And what about you? So anyone’ll do for you? That’s pretty damn low, making a move on a drunk guy.”

“What’re you going on about? You’re the one who was clinging to me begging me not to leave you alone.”

“There’s no way in hell I’d ever do something like that!”

At Yokozawa’s snapped objection, Kirishima smoothly returned, “You really wanna say something like that when you can’t even remember? If you’re so sure that’s not what happened, dig around in your head a bit more and *then* talk.”

“.....”

Cutting Yokozawa’s words off with a finger under his chin to force him to look up, Kirishima spoke with a coldness to his voice. “I love taking prideful guys like you down a peg or two.”

“Stop fucking around! Don’t get so full of yourself!” Yokozawa let himself ride the wave of anger and tried to shove Kirishima down, grabbing at him. But before his fingers could find purchase on the man’s collar, he found his arm wrenched to the side and instead *he* was pushed down onto the bed on his stomach.



“I’m afraid I can’t condone such violence.”

“Ow—ow ow ow, dammit! L—let me up!” He groaned in pain at the move Kirishima had pulled, never having imagined he could have been so easily pinned down as this, and the more he struggled, the sharper the pain felt.

“You really shouldn’t underestimate people, you know; you never know what kind of tricks those who appear weaker than you might have up their sleeves.”

“I don’t need your lecture—let me up already!” Given the skill with which he’d accomplished the act, the guy probably had some sort of martial arts background—but Yokozawa really didn’t care one whit about that at the moment.

As he struggled impatiently despite the pain, Kirishima at last released his hold.

“Guess the wild bear of the sales department was all bark and no bite, huh? You’re quite a ways away from being able to take me down.”

“*Dammit...*” Sitting back up, Yokozawa began to rub at his painful joints and glared up in retribution at Kirishima, who looked down upon him with his hands on his hips. While he may have seemed slender clothed as he was, going at it as they just had it was obvious that he had quite a body on him.

The chest beneath his jacket was tough and solid, with no slack to be seen, and his clothes had been well tailored to smartly show off his sturdy figure. To go after this guy when he was outmatched in words and body...was digging his own grave. He could do little more than sit there quietly, shaking in humiliation.

“I’ll also add that looks have nothing to do with anything, so don’t try to play dirty. That goes for both men *and* women.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying what’s on the inside is what counts. Oh—and by the way, your suit’s hanging in here.” Kirishima knocked on the closet door. “You should take the opportunity to just sleep in til check-out. Your head’s probably still fuzzy from the alcohol, right?” He’d taken the trouble to hang up Yokozawa’s suit...it was a small nicety.

“And what’re you doing?”

“I’m headed back to my place for a bit. I’ve paid for the room already—so all you have to do when you leave is return the card key.”

Leaving together would’ve been awkward, to say the least, so Yokozawa counted himself lucky that Kirishima was leaving first; he got tired just *thinking* about the sight of them lining up at the checkout counter together.

But at that moment—a single question invaded his sense of relief: “...Oi, wait a minute. What happened with yesterday’s tab?” Yokozawa didn’t recall leaving the bar or even pulling out his wallet—but given that he was sitting here as he was right now, it must mean that he had either paid and not realized it...or skipped out on paying altogether.

“Isn’t it obvious? I paid it. You were so far gone you couldn’t even walk straight; it was hard shoving your big ass into a taxi.”

“Then maybe you should’ve just *left me alone*.” If he’d done so, then Yokozawa wouldn’t be here listening to him complain and none of this would’ve happened in the first place. While he realized none of this could be helped now, he still couldn’t help regretting it. ”

“Not like I had any choice, you know? I happen to like that bar—I’d have been pissed if I got kicked out cause you went and made an ass of yourself there.”

“Oh, well then I *do* apologize.”

Hearing this monotone apology, Kirishima whipped out his wallet and pulled out a long receipt. “Hand over your part of the bill.”

“I was going to! You think I *want* to have to owe you anyth—...wh—what the hell is this amount?!” A set of numbers greater than he could have imagined were lined up at the bottom of the bill he snatched from Kirishima; it was a whole order of magnitude greater than he typically spent out drinking. He’d spent more out drinking in one night than he typically did in a whole *month*.

Noticing the way Yokozawa’s face had gone white, Kirishima took the opportunity to explain the extraordinary amount. “You were ordering nothing but the really pricey stuff, you know. *That’s* why I told you to take it easy.”

“.....”

While Yokozawa desperately wanted to ask why he hadn't tried harder to stop him, he understood that it hadn't been Kirishima's place to do so in the least. And even if he *had* tried, Yokozawa likely wouldn't have listened.

"I'll let you save face: let's split the bill evenly. I make more money than you anyways."

"I don't need your pity! I'll pay for whatever I ordered!" It was Yokozawa's policy to take care of himself with his own two hands, even if that required a bit of work. But unfortunately, Kirishima saw right through him and chuckled lightly.

"Stop being so stubborn. You went white when you saw that receipt! Now be a good little boy and do as I suggest."

"You..." It was humiliating being seen through like this, but truthfully, his wallet was really going to take some damage from this until payday. Still, he wanted to settle this debt properly. If they'd been closer, they could've just settled this the next time they met, but his relationship with Kirishima extended no further than the fact that they worked in the same company.

Unfortunately, he didn't have enough cash on him to pay in one lump—he had no choice but to owe Kirishima for this.

"Just—wait until payday, would you? Once I've got the money, I'll be sure to pay you back in full."

"I told you half was fine, didn't I? Do you seriously not want to owe me anything *that* much?"

"I just don't want you going out of your way for me is all!"

"I see... Well, it's nice that you've got such a strong sense of responsibility. I suppose I'll take you up on your offer then. Oh—and I forgot one more thing. You'll be working as my servant for a while."

"...*Excuse* me?" Yokozawa found himself unable to keep up with the sudden shift in topic and blinked several times in quick succession.

Seeing his puzzled expression, Kirishima explained slowly, as if giving directions at work, "I'm saying that, for the time being, you're not to go against anything I say."

“And—*why* exactly do I have to do that?” He couldn’t understand a word this guy was saying. Even taking into account the context of their conversation thus far, he could find nothing foreshadowing this.

“Because you’ve chalked up one hell of a debt. Dragging me into your drinking party, making me listen to you bitch, then making me pay the tab and look after your drunk ass...that *alone* is a lot.” With no room to object, Yokozawa could do little more than sit quietly. “Plus—I’m sure you don’t want these embarrassing pictures to get out, right?”

“...‘Embarrassing pictures’...?” From his words, it was impossible to understand whose pictures they were and just how they were embarrassing—but it still sent a chill up Yokozawa’s spine.

“You sure are slow—the ones I took of you last night, of course.”

“Wha—*when* did you take those?!”

“I’m sure you can figure it out yourself. You work for a publishing company; try using a bit of imagination.”

“Stop fucking around—delete them! Right now!” He leapt up from the bed and reached for the cell phone in Kirishima’s hand, trying to snatch it away, but Kirishima smoothly stepped to the side out of his way and left him making a fool of himself.

“Why on earth would I do such a wasteful thing as that? If you want me to delete them, then just do as I say without protest. I’ll delete them when I’m done playing master-and-servant with you.”

“What the hell are you thinking...?!” He never would have suspected that someone holding such a position as Editor-in-Chief would stoop so low as to threaten someone like this.

“Who knows? You really think I’d reveal my ulterior motives just by you asking? Well—I’m off. Have fun dreaming about how embarrassing you looked~”

“Wa—wait! OI!!”

But Kirishima was gone, leaving him with only those teasing words. Yokozawa couldn’t even chase after him, as he was still naked.

“...This is absolutely horrible,” Yokozawa whispered in a soft groan, left alone in the quiet room sitting in bed with nothing but his underwear on.

The storm from the previous evening appeared to have let up now that it was morning. The sky after the storm was a light blue, and in ironic contrast with the sunny skies above, Yokozawa’s midsection squirmed with nausea from the hangover.

Kirishima had urged him to sleep in until just before check-out time, but he wasn’t so insensitive that he would’ve been able to just laze about in that condition. He’d hopped in the shower to shake off some of the fatigue, and barely an hour after Kirishima had left, Yokozawa also checked out.

The suit he found hanging in the closet had been nicely dry-cleaned for some reason—but there was no telling what people in the office would think if he showed up wearing the same suit he’d left in the day before. Given that he also needed to feed his cat, he decided to drop by his apartment first before heading into the office.

On the way, he stopped by a drug store and picked up a turmeric energy drink, downing the contents while understanding that it would be some time before it kicked in.

“Achoo!”

The man walking in front of him had been sneezing for quite some time now. Was the cold going around again? Perhaps the reason he was feeling like utter crap wasn’t due to the alcohol but was in fact the start of a cold. Resolving to drink some of the antifebrile he kept in his desk for just this reason, just in case, he reached a hand out to forcibly hold the elevator doors open as they started to close.

“Wait, I’m getting on!”

“Ah... G—good morning...”

“!!” The person who’d boarded before him was none other than the newbie from the *Emerald* editing department, Onodera Ritsu. He was also the person Yokozawa *least* wanted to see right now. Yokozawa grimaced and faced forward. “Oh. It’s you. Don’t make me look at people I don’t want to see first thing in the morning.”

“...I’m sorry...”

Granted, Onodera probably didn’t want to see *him* either; it was rarely a pleasure to confront one’s love rival. Unable to stand the silence which stretched between them, Yokozawa broke it of his own volition. “You’re here early for an editor. Are you just *that* slow at work?”

But Onodera didn’t respond to Yokozawa’s sarcasm with his usual fervor. “That’s not it. I just have to turn in the project proposal for the next volume. I figured sooner was better...”

“You know, it’s not like you have to be so gung-ho about a job you don’t even like. Shouldn’t you be writing up your request to transfer to literature first?” This was neither sarcasm nor teasing; he truly did feel that if it was a job he hated, then there was no need to continue it.

Not everyone could do what they loved for a living, sure; but it was still possible to find worth and meaning in such a career. They weren’t sheltered little children, so if it was impossible to change his feelings for the line of work he found himself in, then to continue it was disrespectful to both the job and his coworkers.

“Ah—umm—! I really...do feel that I’d like to try my hand as a manga editor!” Onodera jumped in, cutting off Yokozawa, and his breathing grew somewhat labored. “I know I still have a lot to learn, so I’d appreciate it if you could help teach me as well. E—even though, to be honest, I don’t really get along well with you. Takano-san says you really know your way around the business.”

To think that the day would come when Onodera would say something like this to him of his own accord...perhaps pigs would fly today. When the guy had entered the company, it had seemed like he’d looked down on the manga division, but since being assigned to *Emerald*, perhaps his way of thinking had changed.

...And it was probably all thanks to Takano’s influence.

The pain he’d put off as being just part of the hangover came back lancing through his chest. The half-healed scar in his chest ached with a throbbing pain. In an effort to cut away that scar by his own hand, he sniped back arrogantly, “Of course I do! But it’s way too early for someone like you to be begging tips off of me!”

Onodera took a small breath, and Yokozawa suddenly felt ill, realizing he'd spoken the same words as Kirishima had earlier. Perhaps just because he wasn't feeling well, having to face Onodera like this made his scolding words even harsher. Realizing that it wasn't wise to crush his spirit when he finally seemed to actually have some fire to him, he softened his next words to Onodera, who had recoiled next to him. "Well, though I don't want to, I will admit: You do your job well."

"!!"

Onodera was clearly shocked at Yokozawa's words. The elevator stopped at the 3rd floor, and the doors gently opened. Throwing a glance back at Onodera, Yokozawa stepped off onto his floor. Even though the *Emerald* editing offices for the shoujo manga division were on the 4th floor, Onodera stepped off with him. "That proposal—it was well done. You can move ahead with it."

"Eh?"

"But if you can't pull it off, then it's worthless. I'm doubtful as to whether or not you'll actually be able to do so, but I'll cooperate. Because it's my *job*."

His eyes went round, and he bowed, flustered. "Ah, right! I look forward to working together!!"

"And one more thing." He *had* to know—this one thing, he *had* to confirm. If he let this chance slip by, they would never have the chance to talk alone like this again, and he didn't *want* to anyways. He took a deep breath and tried to keep his voice as even as possible as he spoke. "Are you in love with Masamune?"

"!!"

Takano had told Yokozawa his feelings on the matter himself the previous day, letting him know full well that he had absolutely no chance of cutting in. But he still didn't know how *Onodera* felt.

The guy seemed as if he had at least some fleeting interest, but he *had* to confirm whether or not they resonated with Takano's own.

After a long, almost painfully heavy silence, Onodera nodded shortly, his face bright red. "... Yes."

Yokozawa let his eyes slide shut, then opened them again slowly. “However you feel... If you hurt him, I won’t hesitate to take him back. Just keep that in mind.”

He left Onodera dumbfounded where he stood and headed into the sales offices. He sensed the elevator doors behind him open and close again. He stalked across the completely empty floor and slumped into his chair. Lifting his palm to his forehead, he whispered weakly, “...What the hell am I doing...?”

That hadn’t been a declaration of war at all; he’d simply wanted to give Onodera a little push. If he’d really intended to actually take Takano back, then those words were just going to backfire on him.

Perhaps he’d given the guy a hand because he’d sensed that Onodera was really, truly serious. The hesitation and faltering had disappeared from his expression.

Something...had happened between them the previous night, it was almost certain.

“...Maybe someone like that suits him more.” For a guy who tended to overthink things and get depressed beyond belief, dating someone seemingly weak but with pure, uncomplicated feelings like Onodera might...actually work out in the end.

He just wanted Takano to be happy. Precisely *because* he knew how bad things had been before, Yokozawa wanted this more than anyone else in the world. While *he* had wanted to be the one to make the guy happy, it couldn’t be helped so long as Takano himself didn’t feel the same way.

“...Time to get to work.”

It wasn’t like him to sit here wallowing heartbroken forever. If he could just immerse himself in his work, then surely the pain in his chest would eventually fade.

Lifting himself up and making the back of his chair squeak in protest, he opened up his laptop and turned on the power.

None of his coworkers wanted to get closer to Yokozawa than was absolutely necessary, given how he’d been working like a demon since that

morning. However, as he had no inclination to make small talk just now anyways, he considered this all for the best, and after finishing his out-of-office work, he'd immersed himself in paperwork for the remainder of the day.

"....*Dammit.*"

Every time he moved his arms, his starched undershirt tugged at him tightly, reminding him of that morning that he just wanted to forget. Given that he could hardly complain to someone else about having to see a workplace superior in his bathrobe, he was left to anguish alone.

In an attempt to forcibly remove the images from his head, he threw himself into his work, taking care of each piece of business one by one. He'd already finished preparing the paperwork for the print-run decision meeting at the end of the week, and given that it'd been decided to add in another run of the back issues for a series about to release a new volume, the stock shortages should have been taken care of.

"All that's left...is that project proposal, huh..."

Yokozawa's department dealt, by and large, with promoting comics sales—and their most important project of the moment was *Za Kan*. Not only were plans under way for a movie version, but they also had to ensure that sales of both the new volume as well as back issues went well. Selling books was the very *duty* of the sales department.

Quite a bit of money went into putting out a movie, and with the increase in staff came an increase in labor and overall costs. If they couldn't rake in a net revenue exceeding those costs, then there was no point in all the promotion going into it. In order to keep a series popular with the fans, you had to constantly bring in new ones.

Regardless of whether a series was selling well or not, the sales department were always the ones getting told to *Sell more!!* To carry out that mission, they were kept working like dogs day and night. And while he admittedly barely had room to even breathe this way, it was a job Yokozawa felt quite suited for.

He'd chosen to work in the publishing industry for the simple reason that he loved books. Given that he'd never wanted to be involved in the *making* of books, as with authors or editors, he'd initially intended to work

for a regular trading firm. However, one day, he'd happened to catch a television spot describing work in the sales department for a publishing house and changed his ambitions completely. After all, it was no difficult task to go out and meet with people, and if he was going to have to sell things to people, he may as well sell them something he himself liked—that was how he viewed it.

It had only been instinct at the time, but even now he felt that he'd made the right decision. He felt that he was doing worthwhile work, and working at a place like Marukawa Shoten, which was full of workers with strong personalities of their own, was easy even for a strong-willed person such as himself.

“...Hm?”

In putting together all of the paperwork from the individual departments, Yokozawa realized that he still lacked the data regarding the promotional materials to be used in the campaign starting the next month. The sales department was responsible for ordering and putting together all of the point-of-purchase items and posters and the like, but without the raw images from the editing department, making such orders was impossible.

Yokozawa called out to a man seated diagonally across from him, a subordinate who'd just gotten off the phone. “Oi, Henmi! Have we gotten the promotional materials data from the people at *Japun* yet?”

“No, not yet. They were supposed to get it to us this week, but...”

“‘This week’? Do they realize it’s *Friday* now? Don’t tell me they’re planning on bringing it in Sunday night or something, right? Get over there and see if you can’t light a fire under their asses. Nothing’ll get done by a simple phone conversation.”

“Y-yes sir!” Henmi quickly stood from his chair at Yokozawa’s scolding; perhaps because he was worked up, Yokozawa had been harsher than usual.

Reflecting that he’d better support the guy with this project from here on out, Yokozawa let his gaze wander around the floor—and was startled to find Kirishima standing at the entrance to their offices.

“Geh!”

Henmi, who'd just been on his way to the *Japun* editing offices, panicked and rushed over to greet Kirishima. "Kirishima-san! This is quite a surprise! You rarely come down to the sales department. I was just on my way up to see you!" Others around them appeared equally curious as to just why Editor-in-Chief Kirishima had come all the way down to the sales floor.

"Just brought by the data for the promotional materials. Sorry it took so long. Some of our people had meant to bring it over a while back, but it wound up getting buried under some other documents and we just unearthed it now." He handed a data CD to Henmi.

"Thank you, and I'm sorry to have had the editor-in-chief himself bring it all the way here..."

"Nah, I was on my way anyways."

"On your way?" Henmi sounded audibly confused at Kirishima's words. No surprise, as there was little likelihood he could guess what Kirishima's true reason for coming could be.

Yokozawa had a very bad feeling and turned his back to avoid meeting Kirishima's gaze, instead pretending to focus on his computer screen. But naturally there was no way something like that was going to keep him from being noticed, and Kirishima easily found him. "Oh *there* he is. Yokozawa, come on—we're going drinking."

"?!"

The entire floor broke into murmurs at Kirishima's invitation, unable to believe that Kirishima had come all the way here just to invite Yokozawa, with whom he'd clearly never had any relationship outside of work, to go out for a drink. Indeed, given that they'd gone at it rather heatedly a few times during meetings, several had in fact thought them to dislike one another.

Strolling over to Yokozawa's desk, he repeated his invitation again for good measure. "Did you not hear me? I said *let's go get a drink*."

"...I've still got work to do." He made a small attempt at resisting, but Kirishima just snorted derisively.

“Huh? There’s no way you of all people haven’t met your quota on time. What the hell have you been doing all day?”

“Shut up! This is *next week’s* work!” As soon as he’d let the words fall from his lips after getting riled up, he realized he’d been goaded on. The expression on Kirishima’s face as he grinned down at him was irritating beyond anything.

“Then do it *next week*. These guys’ll be able to work better without a loudmouth like you here anyways. Right?”

Henmi, who’d been watching the both of them with unguarded interest, responded in a flustered manner as Kirishima suddenly turned the conversation to him. “Eh? Ah well, that’s...” That he didn’t outright deny the implication...meant that he agreed with it, at least in part.

When Yokozawa directed a harsh glare at Henmi, Kirishima reached forward and ruffled his hair roughly. “What the—hell are you doing?!”

“Stop giving your underlings a hard time. It’s just cause you’re making such a scary face is all! Cut them some slack. Now hurry up and get your shit together and let’s get out of here.”

“And why on earth would I go out with *you*?” Tired of playing this game in front of such a large audience, he unthinkingly let out his true thoughts. But Kirishima remained cool even in the face of Yokozawa’s unpleasant expression.

“Aren’t you a little young to be going senile? Don’t tell me you’ve *already* forgotten about this morn—”

“...!” Yokozawa loudly pushed his chair back in an effort to cut off Kirishima’s words. He’d never suspected that Kirishima might threaten him like that in the office of all places. Cutting in before he could say any more stupid things, Yokozawa raised his voice and spoke. “Ah! Oh *that’s* right! We were supposed to have that chat about the campaign!”

“*Exactly*. So glad you remembered!”

Yokozawa seethed at the shameless smile the guy pasted on; but if he let himself blow up here, there was no telling what sorts of rumors might sprout up. “Well, shall we go, then?”

He'd never used expressions like this even while making the rounds on business. If he'd known this sort of thing might come up, perhaps he would have worked more on his forced smiles. Yokozawa brushed past Kirishima out the door and left the office, fleeing the curious gazes of his coworkers.

“Well? Delicious, right?”

“... Yeah, it is.”

Taking a sip of the Hokuriku *sake* Kirishima offered him, he had to admit it was delicious enough to make his eyes pop out. The bouquet like flowers that wafted through the nose and the sweetness that spread across his tongue were both top-notch, and the aftertaste left him feeling refreshed. It was frustrating to agree so easily, but delicious things were delicious, regardless.

After enjoying a light meal, Kirishima had taken him here to this bar specializing in Japanese *sake*. The place had a completely different atmosphere from the usual haunts he frequented with the other sales department folks and customers. Even the little bowl they received their snacks in was of fine quality, and the employees all conducted themselves with the utmost politeness, lacking the usual pushiness noted in chain restaurants; it was a comfortable place to spend time.

“You’ll be turning 30 soon; try learning how to drink properly while you still can.”

“I hardly ever drink like that, I’ll have you know.”

“Heeeh...is that so?”

“Yes, that’s so! And anyways, I’ve still got a good two years before I hit 30.” Feeling as if Kirishima wasn’t going to believe him, his tone rose in strength, and realizing that he’d raised his voice, he quickly glanced around the room. Thankfully, they’d been seated fairly far inside, and it didn’t seem that any of the other customers had noticed.

“Those two years’ll fly right by.”

“Shut up.”

Kirishima simply sipped his sake happily, enjoying watching Yokozawa get riled up. Realizing that it was useless reasoning with Kirishima, Yokozawa faced front again and raised his Edo-faceted glass to his lips. He savored the mellow flavor on his tongue and took in the rest of the bar.

The clientèle seemed to be comprised mostly of men older than Yokozawa, though there were a few women there alone. With warm, indirect lighting, the dim bar had a rather chic feel to it and was quite cozy. In the past, he'd avoided these kinds of bars that dealt with high-priced *sake* because they didn't suit him, but a place with this sort of atmosphere he probably wouldn't mind coming back to alone. He wondered who Kirishima usually came here with.

"...So are you having fun, dragging me to this kind of place?"

"I really wanted to see your grumpy face."

"You've got a really twisted personality, you know."

"I actually get complimented on my personality rather often." Yokozawa felt himself start at the way the corners of Kirishima's lips lifted whenever he smiled.

He spoke viciously, doing his best to avoid getting sucked into the atmosphere surrounding Kirishima, who seemed to be purposefully trying to get him to frown. "I'm sure your subordinates have a hard time getting work done under a boss like you."

"There's no way I'd ever do anything cruel to my cute little underlings. I'm sure they're a hell of a lot happier at least than those poor sods under you."

"That's not—!" *True*...he tried to say, but then recalled Henmi's earlier reaction. If his attitude was actually sucking the life out of those around him, then that was hardly a good road to be walking down.

Not everyone was super competitive. For every hard-worker who could soundly speak his mind, there was another who suffered under the stress.

"Your guys are doing good work over there; let them know it now and then. It's a world of difference just saying little things like 'good work today' and 'thank you.'"

“...n’t think I understand that already?”

“You understand it but you still don’t *do* it, right? Not much longer and the only one who’ll be willing to put up with your *tsundere* shit will be your lover.”

“Who’re you calling a *tsundere*?!”

“Though you’ve got hardly any *dere* to you, I’ll admit.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Quickly losing the drive to keep up with him, Yokozawa shifted and turned the other way, feigning distraction by downing his drink. The taste was great, and it slipped down his throat smoother than water. If he wasn’t careful, it’d be all too easy to drink too much of this.

Kirishima noticed him staring bitterly at his empty glass. “Want some water?”

“I’ll be fine; I’m not downing them at the same speed I was yesterday anyways.” He should be fine if he quit right about now. He wasn’t a lightweight to begin with; it was only that he’d drunk far more than usual the previous evening. “Anyways, why are you being so damned persistent with me?” Until just now, he’d been distracted with being irritated with the way Kirishima flaunted himself, but when he stopped to think about it, it was rather strange.

He had to have companions his own age in the company; there was no reason to invite Yokozawa out like this. And drunk though he may have been, he hadn’t needed to make a move on a guy most of the company knew as a ‘wild bear;’ if he felt like it, Kirishima could surely snag most anyone he wanted.

He couldn’t understand the reasoning behind going out of his way to make someone who had absolutely none of the charm Kirishima did come along with him just because they’d happened to meet at a bar and he’d seen Yokozawa at his weakest.

“Didn’t I tell you? I like messing with prideful guys.”

“You just keep babbling stupid shit, don’t you? And if you’ve got a thing for prideful guys—our company’s full of them, if you haven’t noticed. Why’s it gotta be me? Why not, I dunno...like, Takano...” He

unthinkingly had torn open his own wound with his words. There was no way he wouldn't suspect something now that he'd brought up that name here of all places. Praying that Kirishima wouldn't notice the way he was shaking inside, he hesitantly glanced over.

"Takano? Nah, he's no good. He may be prideful, but he's more sensitive than he looks; feels like he'd go down with one hit. He probably wouldn't be able to give much of a challenge if I really went after him."

"....."

He had to admit, he was impressed with how good a judge of character Kirishima was. Just as he said, Takano definitely had a sensitive side to himself. He could put up a good bluff, but once he got down it was for the long haul, and he wasn't good at picking himself back up. But in that same vein, if he let you get close to him, he'd open his heart to you and trust you no matter what. Granted it had been far more obvious back when they were in college, and on entering the workforce and growing up, he seemed to have mellowed out some. But his basic elements still hadn't changed in the least.

"I don't go for greenhorns like that who're still full of themselves."

"Hey—you *do* know he and I are the same age, right?" He understood that he tended to look older than he actually was, but if Takano was a greenhorn, then surely he was as well. He couldn't agree with Kirishima's point.

"I'm talking about on the *inside*. Though well—I guess he was able to get *Emerald* back on track *because* he has that young sensitivity to him. But you've got your own good points to you; you don't have to be so sensitive to the fact that you're the same age."

"I—I'm not *sensitive* to it—!" He seemed to have gotten the idea that Yokozawa saw Takano as a rival. While it was leagues better than having him realize that Takano was the guy who'd rejected him, it still irritated.

"Really? Well, I will admit you're something of a greenhorn yourself, the way I see it. I wouldn't mind teaching you everything from head to tail, though, if you want."

"... Yeah, it's not just your personality that's twisted, your hobbies are too."

“I happen to think I’m a rather good judge of character, personally.”

“Look who’s talking.” While he didn’t want to put himself down, *per se*, he couldn’t fathom what about his hard-assed self was interesting to this guy. If he was really intent on dragging someone around with him, wouldn’t it have been better to find a meek little subordinate of his own?

“You know, for a guy who’s got such a big attitude usually, you sure have a low opinion of yourself. You’re good at your job and you’re not bad on the eyes. Have a little more self-confidence, would you?”

“Wh-what the hell is that? You’re grossing me out here.” He grew flustered at being flattered so suddenly. He couldn’t help feeling like praise falling from Kirishima’s lips was actually a trap somehow.

“I can see you’re not used to being complimented. You don’t have to *blush*.”

“I’m *not* blushing—!”

“Hmm? You’re not really convincing anyone with a face that red.”

“Stop saying whatever comes to mind! Anyways, how the hell can you tell if someone’s sexy or not in a dim bar like this?”

“You got me there.” Kirishima shrugged his shoulders at Yokozawa’s point. Yokozawa sighed, fed up with the way he still looked like he was enjoying himself somehow. They’d never interacted much outside of work together before anyways, but he still would never have imagined Kirishima to have such an easy-going personality.

Inside Marukawa Shoten, he was known as a major hit maker, having helped release more hits than anyone else in the company, and Yokozawa had always imagined him to be much more of a workaholic—but the real thing was quite different.

“...I’m going to the toilet.”

“Didn’t you just go? Maybe you’re older than you think~”

“Shut up!” Kirishima saw him off with an easy smile, and with a feeling of unease, Yokozawa slipped into the bathroom situated further inside the bar.

He stood in front of the clear mirror, not a smudge on it, and sighed deeply. He tended to lose his temper quickly when it came to Kirishima. He knew he hadn't been drinking that much tonight, but for some reason, he couldn't keep calm next to that guy. Whether it was because he was someone who'd seen Yokozawa at his weakest or perhaps because he was just an uncomfortable presence to be around in general, he couldn't tell. He'd always felt a sense of unease about Kirishima before, but as they'd never had to share space for very long outside of meetings, he'd never been able to figure out what exactly it was that threw him off.

But even without knowing *why* he felt this way, there was still a way to deal with it. All he had to do was distance himself from the man in question. If he could do that, he could escape from this constant irritation as well. "...Easier said than done, though."

It wasn't as if he was doing this of his own volition; he was being jerked around by Kirishima himself. Which meant he could only wait for Kirishima to grow tired of teasing him. No matter how he looked at it, it always came back to that. Against an opponent who ranked above him in years and company standing, someone he couldn't win against with words or physical strength, it was futile to rebel any more than he already had.

"*Dammit...*"

At his wits' end, he couldn't help but be irritated. Cursing softly, he turned the faucet on full blast and splashed his flushed face. He could feel some composure return in the wake of the chilly water, and he mopped his face with a handkerchief he pulled from his pocket. Taking a final breath, he exited the toilet.

"Your sleeves are wet, you know. Dry yourself off properly before you come back."

"Don't touch me." He slapped away the hand Kirishima had reached out to him with and proceeded to wipe off his sleeves with the handkerchief he'd just returned to his pocket.

"You don't have to be so worked up; I'm not gonna bite. Aren't you being a bit oversensitive?"

"No, I'm *not*."

“Really, now?” The suggestive way he smiled at this grated, and the fact that for some reason he couldn’t tear his eyes away from that look, that *face*, gave Yokozawa pause.

“Well, shall we get going? I can’t spend *two* nights away from home, after all.” Kirishima took his bag in hand and slowly slipped out of his chair. Seeing the action, an employee arrived shortly with the coats they’d checked.

“Ah—wait! I’ll get the bill this time.”

“I already paid.”

“Huh?! Oi—wait a minute! There’s no reason for you to treat me!”

“You young things are way cuter when you let us treat you, you know.” Kirishima breezed out the door and started up the steps to ground level without glancing back.

Yokozawa called out to him, arguing loudly as he chased him down. “Like I care about being *cute* or not! At least split it down the middle! You paid for the hotel too, didn’t you? I don’t want to rack up any more debts to you!”

“But you’re broke right now, aren’t you? Don’t push yourself.”

“That’s not the point!” True, he wasn’t entirely confident in how much he had in his wallet right now, but he sure as hell wasn’t shameless enough to let Kirishima treat him without a fight.

“Well, if you’re so intent on paying—I suppose I’ll let you.”

He felt relief flood him at finally wrangling a concession from Kirishima. “Fine—how much is—” As he pulled out his wallet to check how much he had on him, his necktie was grabbed and he was jerked forward. “——?!”

His eyes bugged out in shock, and a tongue thrust its way between his lips, tracing along his teeth. Feeling the inside of his mouth thoroughly explored as he trembled beneath it, he sharply stilled his own tongue. His mouth was ravaged, leaving him unable to even breathe properly, and there seemed to be no end to this passionate kiss that felt as if it were driving him insane.



“Nn...nnn...!”

Kirishima’s kiss was amazingly good—so much so that he felt he was about to faint. Even if he’d wanted to push the guy away, his will was

completely paralyzed and his body refused to move, as if he were bound up tight.

A band of drunken partygoers passed by, cheering loudly, and still their lips remained joined.

“...ha!”

When at long last the kiss was broken, his body was flooded with a dull paralysis, and he found himself unable to remain standing on his own. He leaned his body against the wall on which hung the bar’s signboard and complained with his still-numb lips, “What the hell are you thinking? In a place like *this*...!” He forcibly wiped his wet lips with the heel of his hand but was unable to erase the faint sensation left behind on his lips and tongue.

Kirishima snickered at the red-faced Yokozawa. “So you’re saying it would’ve been fine somewhere else?”

“*Like hell*. I can’t believe you’d pull a dirty trick like that—!”

“*Dirty?* You’re not being very convincing, considering the fact that you can’t even stand on your own two feet right now. You’re a grown man—so stop whining like a little girl. You’re not gonna try and tell me that was your first kiss or something, right?”

“*Who* said...!” Yokozawa’s face grew a shade redder at this teasing. With anger and humiliation blended together, the blood was rushing to his head, leaving him unable to piece together a proper sentence.

“Well you just looked so innocent, I thought maybe... But if it wasn’t, then all the better. It’d be a shame if I’d stolen your first kiss from you, after all.”

“.....!!”

“Ah, well I’m this way—you’re taking the subway, right? Don’t take any shortcuts this time and head straight home, young man~”

“I don’t need you telling me what to do!”

“With you getting all riled up like that, it just makes me wanna tease you more—and you don’t want that, do you?”

“Why you—!!”

He knew he was being toyed with; he probably seemed like a perfect plaything to someone like Kirishima. It hurt to admit it, but every time he opened his mouth, it just sounded like the howling whine of a dog that’d lost a fight.

“Well, be careful heading home. Oh—and one more thing.”

“What *now*?”

“Thanks for the *meal*.”

“...I’m so getting you back for this.” Like a minor villain in a movie, he spit the jeer at Kirishima, who turned his back and walked away leaving behind his irritating words with a roguish smile. It had been all he could come up with at that moment, a fact that was rather shameful. Shaking with anger, when he realized that he’d yet again let the guy see him in a weak state, he had no choice but to embrace the humiliation.

“Fucking around like that...” His palm felt warm where he’d made a fist, and his racing heart was probably due to his seething rage. Bottling up his indignation, he turned his back and jogged away.

Be sure to check out the sequels, Volumes 2 and 3!