

Of Coffees and Corners

Von Junbi

Ninomiya Kazunari is fourteen years old when his mother dies in a *tragic accident*. In her autopsy report they write down she slipped and fell down the stairs as the cause of death.

What they don't know is that she was pushed by Kazunari's drunk father who had thrown a tantrum because she hadn't prepared his favourite dish for dinner.

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Ninomiya Kazunari is fifteen years old when his father beats him particularly badly. There is a wound on his head, and blood is gushing out. Kazunari barely manages to gather a few of his belongings before his father *literally* kicks him out of their by now old, cheap and dirty apartment. Kazunari doesn't even have his shoes on, and when he bangs with his fists against the half-broken metal door, blood trickling down his face, his father just screams back for him to *fuck off if he doesn't want to end like his mom did*.

Kazunari winces, his body aching, his eyes burning with tears. But he can't say whether he is about to cry out of just physical pain (he would almost call it one of his father's *hobbies* to beat him purple on a weekly basis, after all) or because this is the moment he has completely lost everything he has ever had in his life.

Kazunari doesn't dare to knock on the door anymore. His limbs are trembling when he turns away from the door, and he weakly walks down the corridor of the shabby apartment complex, down the old stairs and out of the big building until he is in the streets. It is in the middle of the night, it is cold, and all he has with him is a backpack, a photo of his mom and some pocket money she had given to him a few weeks before her death one year ago. He had kept it the whole year, never touching it, always hiding it from his dad just in case he might ever need it.

When his trembling fingers open the little metal box he has always hidden the pocket money in, he barely counts 3000 yen and realizes he won't get far with that.

Kazunari has no place to go, and he knows it.

He doesn't even know if his mother has a grave he could visit—he has never talked with his father about it after all. Not that he had ever talked with his father about *anything*; not that he would have ever listened. The only language this man had spoken to him was through violence, Kazunari thinks and rubs his swollen, reddened cheek. The back of his hand is immediately covered in dark red blood, and the sharp pain in his head reminds him that his father had banged his head repeatedly against the table top earlier this evening, out of pure anger. His left eye is darkened, too, but that is from last week.

That's it, he thinks bitterly. *My life is over.*

And he still doesn't even have shoes.

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Ninomiya Kazunari is sixteen years old when he is curled up into a tight ball against the wall of an old building, in a street pretty close to downtown. He never dares to sit down anywhere in the city centre—the part where all the shops and people are, where *life and happiness* is—no, he knows he would just be kicked out again sooner or later, or worse, get attacked by street gangs. But here, close to downtown but in a street a few people pass every now and then, he is mostly safe from those people.

There is a little paper sign in front of his feet he has written a while ago, and his opened metal box next to it. The 3000 yen are long gone, and that is why he is sitting here.

The sign reads *please help me, I'm hungry. Leave something—anything—but please help me* in a trembling child's writing. There are a few one-yen coins, a couple twenty-yen coins, and even one hundred-yen coin in the metal box. It makes Kazunari feel warm; if he is lucky, he can get two or three rice balls for the money down the street at the supermarket if he shows up five minutes before closing time. Three rice balls. That means one-week worth of food. His stomach grumbles loudly.

It doesn't solve any of his *problems* though.

He owns shoes by now—he has found them in the trash last year—but he still wears the same clothes he had worn the day his father had kicked him out: A t-shirt and a pair of worn out jeans. He has an old blanket wrapped tightly around his body to warm him up, but it doesn't save him from the cold wind, doesn't give him shelter during the cold autumn nights. *Soon it's winter*, Kazunari thinks, his eyes emptily focused on the dirty pavement in front of him. *Soon I'll face the possibly last challenge of my life. Let's see if I can survive a cold winter night in just a blanket and a t-shirt.*

Kazunari knows he'll lose the battle.

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Two days later when darkness has long since crept up the sky and chilled down the temperature significantly, making Kazunari tremble in his blanket as he's munching on a rice ball, slowly, *slowly*, trying to devour each and every bite, men pass him and one of them places his hand on Kazunari's shoulder, gently.

Kazunari freezes mid-chew. He looks up, his tired, dark eyes widened, and his body only trembles more. This has never happened before; people have never approached him like that, and judging from the dark suits they are wearing, they look like yakuza.

"You alone here, boy?" The man who has a hand on his shoulder asks. The other two start surrounding Kazunari until he can't see anything but black pants anymore.

Kazunari lowers the onigiri still pressed to his lips; swallowing down the rice in his mouth is hard. He can't quite speak yet, so he nods.

"How old are you?" Is the next question the man asks, and Kazunari doesn't know where this is going. Kidnapping? He wants to laugh bitterly because there is no one in the world who would pay anything for him. But he's so scared he can't laugh.

"Sixteen," he answers instead, his vocal chords rough. He barely speaks in his daily life for over a year already, so he is not used to it anymore.

"Living in the streets?"

Nod.

"Can't find a job?"

Nod.

"Wanna get out of here?"

Kazunari hesitates. Those men don't look any trustworthier than his father ever did, if cleaner. But then again, what does he have to lose? Kazunari wouldn't even be exaggerating if he said *nothing*.

So he nods.

"Get up then, from now on you're twenty-one. You'll get your ID tomorrow. What's your name?" The man pulls him up quickly, and Kazunari shivers when the blanket falls

off of his lithe frame.

“Ninomiya Kazunari,” he answers though. Now that he is standing, the men don’t seem awfully intimidating anymore, but they are still about two heads bigger than him. And each of them is far more than double his weight.

“Come with us then,” the man urges on, and while he is pulling Kazunari with them, the boy can barely grab his backpack before they take him around the corner into another street. “We’ll give you work and a flat to live in. Don’t worry. All you need to do is work for *us*, and soon you’ll be grateful we found you.”

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When Kazunari finds himself in an old, shabby one-room-apartment on the other side of the city, with a bed, a fridge and an own bathroom, he can’t believe what is happening. This apartment doesn’t look any better than the one he has lived in with his father a year ago, but at least he doesn’t freeze anymore to a point where he thinks he might die. At least he has a *bed*, and he most likely even has warm water to wash his dirty body with.

“You look pretty impressed, kid,” the man laughs at Kazunari’s reaction to the apartment while looking condescendingly down to the boy. Kazunari ignores it, because what is he supposed to say? After having lived a year in the streets, even such a dirty place is like heaven to him. And if it’s true—if it’s *all* true—then this is *his* apartment alone.

The man points to the bed. An old-looking phone is there, next to a pile of neatly folded casual clothes. “That’s yours,” he explains, “see it as a gift. To pay the apartment, though, you will have to work for us. The money you have left after paying the rent and the fee we charge you for allowing you to work for us, that’s yours. You need to buy your food with it, and some new clothes, and whatever else you might want. Your business.”

Kazunari nods again. He is not used to talking yet; he is not even used to being spoken to that much and has a hard time following.

“However,” the man continues, and suddenly his voice has a weird, almost threatening undertone, “Do not try to get away from this anymore. We asked you, and you agreed to work for us. Try anything funny, try and go against our rules and we make sure you’ll suffer a lot before we kill you. Is that understood?”

Kazunari feels like he is frozen on the very spot, and even though he has no idea what exactly this man is talking about, it sounds incredibly threatening.

Is there any reason I would want to go against your rules? Kazunari wants to ask. *Do you*

say this because many people you asked did back out of it? What do you want me to work as anyway?

But none of these thoughts leave his tightly pressed together lips. His heart is beating hard against his ribcage, and he can barely manage to nod when the man makes a sound pretty close to “do I have to repeat myself or did you hear me”.

“You get this night off. There is a task list on the pile of clothes you better fulfil, and an address where you’ll have to show up tomorrow afternoon. Your new work place. Your shifts will vary, but the one tomorrow is from afternoon till after midnight. Don’t be late, or you’ll regret it.” It sounds like the man has said all those things a million times already, like he is just playing a tape. Kazunari nods again and again—all he wants is for the man to leave so he can get a grasp on what is happening with his life right now, and he’s still scared.

The man leaves, and after he is out of the flat, Kazunari sinks down to the wooden floor, his body shaking. He doesn’t even know why, but tears are dwelling up in his eyes and slowly find their way down his dirty cheeks. It’s too much for him—*everything* is. His mother’s death, the abuse his father has put him through, the cold outside in the streets, this kind of living to the next day, never knowing what is going to happen. If there’ll be a tomorrow or not...

And even though he is in an apartment right now and everything is silent, even though he is alone and comparatively *safe*, he feels more awful than ever.

“Fuck,” he whispers without even noticing, his voice rough, and before he realizes it, before he can take *control* of it, Kazunari is already curled up tightly on the floor, sobbing loudly and heartbrokenly, tears streaming down his face more intensively than ever. He has barely ever cried—not when his mother died, not when his father beat him up, not when he had been going three weeks without food in the streets—but now, right now when his life is about to change *again* for the unknown, he just feels like all of it is too much for his shoulders to carry.

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- *Shower thoroughly with as much soap as needed.*
- *Shave—everywhere.*
- *Brush your hair.*
- *Use body lotion to make your skin smell good.*
- *Put on the fresh clothes prepared for you.*
- *Do not dare to show up at work without looking clean and good.*
- *Do not dare not to show up.*

When Kazunari finds the task list between his clothes the next morning, he doesn’t know what to make of it, but he doesn’t care either. Last night he couldn’t make

himself shower anymore because he had just been so *tired*, but now he actually really wants to shower, and if the task list says so, it's a good coincidence. He doesn't know what to think of the shaving part, but then again his body hair has always been sparse, so shaving the little bit he has isn't much of a bother either.

In reality, Kazunari's sixteen-year-old child-brain provides, he knows very well why he has to shave and why he has to *look good*, and he can already guess his new work.

There is a new message from *Boss* on his cellphone when Kazunari comes out of the bathroom, freshly showered, shaved, covered in lotion and smelling like summer flowers (or so it seems to him, considering the last time he has had a warm shower with soap is a bit ago). It only enhances his fears though.

»4PM. Don't be late. Don't back out, or you're dead.«

Kazunari doesn't even know why he stays so calm when those words cut through his body like knives. Most other, *ordinary* people would probably have gone crazy. But what with Kazunari's life never having been easy, never having been ordinary, the boy barely flinches. He won't back out. Not that the thought of this particular kind of work excites him, not at all. But he doesn't have anything to lose, and he doesn't want to die. He wants to keep the apartment, he wants to live. And if living means working for these men, then so be it. At least for now.

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"Stand straight. Yes, like that. Yamada, take a photo of his face now. We need the ID to be done in a few hours already."

Kazunari tries to look as straight into the camera as possible, not moving an inch.

"Name?" Yamada asks when he is done and notes a few things down.

"Ninomiya Kazu... Kazu what?" His boss shrugs.

"Kazunari," Kazunari says.

"Fake the rest, take any random birthdate, height, eyes, hair, whatever, doesn't matter. Black, brown, 165, summer."

Yamada nods and writes it all down quickly. It seems like he does nothing else all day, Kazunari thinks. Then he leaves, and Boss (Kazunari still doesn't know his name, so he

calls him Boss considering that is the name saved into his phone) leads him to the next room. It looks like a hotel room, only a bit cheaper.

Kazunari hasn't seen much of the world and he is inexperienced at just about *everything*. But he isn't stupid, he has noticed this is a love hotel the moment he had entered it earlier. A certain kind of love hotel—one of those people like his father would come to, skim through a catalogue with pictures of people, point one face out and go up with them into a room to pay them for any kind of bodily favours.

Boss makes sure to remind Kazunari again not to dare back out, and then he leaves.

When ten minutes later the door opens again and another man, much more casually dressed, old, sweaty and smelly from a day's worth of work, enters the room and goes straight up to Kazunari, he knows how this is going to end. Even though he is just a child—his mind still not any more mature than the one of a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old teenager—and he doesn't even know how *it* works.

Tears are burning in Kazunari's eyes, but he doesn't cry, having long since learned not to show his emotions anymore. But when the man pulls him close and lets his hands wander down the boy's torso in *that* way, Kazunari almost throws up.

"What's your name, boy?" The man sultrily mumbles, bending down, his lips brushing against Kazunari's ear.

"K-Ka... zu... n..." Kazunari breaks off, his voice shaking too much, and the man hums.

"Kazu, then. Get rid of your clothes and get on the bed," he says, gently pushing Kazunari into the mattress and starting to open his own pants.

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Kazunari shakily stumbles into his apartment at 3AM in the morning—he doesn't remember anymore how he even came here—and almost tears the clothes from his body, his legs trembling as they carry him into his tiny bathroom. He sits down in the bathtub immediately and lets the hot water flow, just *flow*.

It is that very moment the world breaks down on him, and he cries. The water is too hot and burning on his skin, but he doesn't feel it. Kazunari has never cried as much in his life as he has in the last two days, and right now he wishes to simply drown in his own bathtub.

Seven men all in all have visited him during the evening, and the moment Kazunari closes his eyes that are overflowing with tears, he can almost feel every single dirty, rough, old hand on his body again.

How fingertips would trace his naked body, how they would play with his nipples, slide down his sides, touch his butt-cheeks, pull them apart. Touch him *there*, right between his legs. Make a smug comment about how *smooth* Kazunari is. Stroke him. Lick him. And then they'd spread his legs, they'd take a condom out of the drawer next to the bed, put it on, cover their length with lube, and—and—

Kazunari is sobbing so much his whole petite frame is shaking terribly, and he blindly searches for soap, grabs it, and starts washing his body furiously all over. His face, down his neck, his back, his arms, his hands, the skin between his fingers—yes, those fingers the men, his *customers*, would demand Kazunari to wrap around their cocks and rub up and down, again and again and *again*—his chest, his belly, his penis, his balls, *everything* he could possibly reach there, and his legs.

After that, Kazunari's hands tremblingly reach out for the showerhead and pull it down, and he immediately washes off all the soap again, frantically and desperately rubbing at his skin until the soap is all washed off.

But they would make Kazunari take a cock into his mouth too, and suck on it, lick it until they would reach their orgasm. In Kazunari's mouth—and they would make him swallow it all. The boy can still taste the utterly disgusting, bitter taste of cum in his mouth, and he quickly reaches for the soap again, rubbing it all over his tongue, still crying and wincing at the absolutely bitter taste before choking and spitting the bubbles out. His eyes are burning even more from the gross taste of soap, and he washes his mouth out repeatedly until the taste is gone, and he's crying and sobbing, heartbreaking sounds of pain leaving his throat. He just can't stop anymore.

Three hours later, Kazunari is still scrubbing frantically on his skin and the piece of soap has been reduced to half its size. His tears have slowly ceased, *and still*, Kazunari thinks, *I'm so dirty. My body feels so filthy, so dirty...*

So worthless, he ends his thoughts after a long break, and he bites his lower lip in order not to start crying again. Worthless and filthy. That's exactly what he feels like, and not even three hours of washing and scrubbing can make the feeling go away. Not even that much amount of soap can make his used body feel clean again.

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Ninomiya Kazunari is nineteen years old, and he is working as a prostitute seven days a week.

Now he calls himself just *Nino*, because he has tried to get rid of his old name as much

as possible and refuses to call himself *Kazunari* anymore since that has become the name customers would call him in bed.

Three years have passed, and he is officially twenty-four now, when in reality, he has just turned nineteen a week ago. He still washes himself an hour or longer every day when he comes home from work, but the filth and worthlessness still stick to his body. They never leave—the disgusting feeling of being nothing but a cheap and low whore has merely intensified over the course of the past years.

But Nino has got used to his life by now. He has no friends—doesn't try to get to know anyone—he lives alone, still in the same dirty, shabby apartment, and even though he literally works his butt off eight to sometimes fifteen hours a day, he barely manages to pay off his rent and the high fee the company that protects him demands.

The competition not only amongst the whores in the love hotel he works at but also amongst the prostitutes of the whole district is high, and the prices for any kind of service, from vanilla sex to sick kinks, have by now sunk drastically. Back then, when he had started, Nino can still remember how a man would push a five thousand yen note into his hand after a blowjob. For a fuck, he'd get almost double as much. Sometimes men would book him for a whole night and do things to him Nino refuses to think about longer than half a second—but those would easily pay thirty or forty thousand yen. Of course, he would have to hand it all over to his boss and would just get a significantly lower amount of the money for himself, but nevertheless, it had been... better.

And now? Last week he had given a man a blowjob *with* deepthroating and *without* a condom for two thousand yen.

Nino smiles almost ironically when he thinks about it—in the end, out of those two thousand yen, five hundred had ended up in his own pocket.

Five hundred. For a blowjob. Nino shivers.

He knows the men he works for exploit him and another whole bunch of young boys, but they make sure to constantly remind them not to leave if they want to live on. Otherwise Nino *would* have left a long time ago, but like this, under such circumstances he simply can't.

And that is why he doesn't even think about any of this anymore in general. He lives from one day to the other, he works his ass off, he does whatever anyone wants him to do. After work, he usually drops by a conbini and buys some food on sale, goes home, washes himself, eats and sleeps. Sometimes, he'd fish out a newspaper or two from the previous days from trash bins and read them at home if he doesn't want to sleep immediately, but that's all.

Recently, Nino tries to save up some money so maybe, just maybe, at some point in the future he can buy himself a PlayStation or a Nintendo, but considering how little money he gets, he knows he'll still have to wait quite a while before he can afford it.

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In contradiction to his usual daily routine though, Nino doesn't go home right after work on this particular day. He feels incredibly tired, but he has worked all morning and afternoon, so going to bed right now is silly—it's barely 6PM after all. That's why Nino drops by a coffee shop and buys himself a coffee, drinking it on his way home. He feels filthier than usual considering he hasn't even showered yet, but since he doesn't touch anyone anyway, it doesn't matter.

Nino just walks around a corner when he runs into a man—or, well, the man is so fast and hectic, it's rather *him* who runs into Nino—and it's so sudden the boy loses the grip on his coffee and spills it all over his t-shirt while stumbling back. He can get a hold on the wall of the building right next to him and saves himself from falling down to the ground completely, but still he hisses painfully at the burning hot liquid running down his chest.

"Fuck," he grunts and looks down at himself before looking up again to the culprit who has caused the misery. "Did you *really* have to do that?" Nino asks, obviously pissed, "You have any idea how expensive washing is? I planned on wearing this for another day. Can't you look where you're going or are you blind?!"

The man in front of him is clearly older than him by at least five years, if not even more. He is that salary man type of guy, only his suit looks so much more expensive, he has a modern haircut, glasses on, and a badge is shining on his chest. Nino doesn't know what it means though, but maybe it's a recent fashion trend he has no idea of. There's so much even in the "recent" media industry Nino knows nothing of, after all.

The man looks apologetic, and he immediately bows deeply. Now Nino also notices a huge, expensive-looking leather bag the man carries in one hand.

"I'm really sorry, I didn't pay attention to where I was going, I should have been more careful," the man apologizes with a soft voice and bows deeply, again and again, and Nino snorts.

"Stop that bowing already, it's fine," Nino hears himself grumble out. It looks too stupid to him that such a man—a man with a fine job, probably, leading a successful life, someone who is so much higher in the social hierarchy than Nino is—would apologize to scum like him with several perfect ninety-degree-bows.

The man stops bowing and looks up now, taking in Nino's ruined shirt.

"I can buy you a new one," he offers immediately.

Nino almost bursts into laughter.

"You don't wear your clothes twice when you're rich, huh?" He asks back with risen eyebrows, still giggling a little, "You just buy new clothes when they get dirty. Yeah, right."

The man blinks, confused, and then he seems to understand.

"Oh, no," he shakes his head, "I didn't mean the t-shirt. I thought I could buy you a new cup of coffee."

Nino looks dumbfounded for a moment, and he feels his ears grow hot from embarrassment.

"That's the least you should do after having ruined my shirt," he answers sharply and crosses his arms in front of his chest. The by now cold coffee feels just a little bit uncomfortable against his skin.

The man smiles, and Nino thinks he's really, weirdly, charming.

"I know a café just around the corner, they have bathrooms too. You can clean your shirt there," he speaks further, and Nino blinks. Suddenly he realizes the man is about to invite him for a coffee—nothing strange, especially not after this very man has just ruined his shirt—but Nino realizes he has never been invited to anything ever before in his life. In fact, he hasn't *talked* to anyone outside of his job for years now. It feels strange, and Nino doesn't even notice how his head nods without his consent.

"Ah, then let's go," the man continues, and Nino is glad for it because he realizes he has no idea how to put his own thoughts into words right now. They contain *worthlessness* and *are you crazy, you cannot possibly spend time with a stranger* and *who knows, maybe he was just on his way to the love hotel and if you had the night shift tonight, he might be your next customer*. Nino swallows.

When the man has walked a few steps and realizes Nino is not following, he turns around with a frown on his face.

"Or are you madder at me for this than I thought?" He asks, sounding truly concerned, and bites his lower lip. *Such plush lips*, Nino catches himself thinking, and he has a hard time not letting his cheeks turn pink.

"I'm still pretty mad at you, Mister Rich-Man-Who-Only-Wears-His-Clothes-Once, for ruining my *designer t-shirt*," Nino playfully bites back to cover up his helplessness in this situation, and then gets moving. He can't believe what is happening, but even though the cold coffee on his shirt makes the fabric stick to his chest uncomfortably, he feels good.

The man just grins at Nino's remark and starts to walk side by side with him.

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The interior of the café looks expensive. It's tiny and old and just *adorable* in a way, and while the other man sits down at an empty table in the corner and places his leather bag on the ground next to him, Nino goes to the bathroom and washes the coffee out of his t-shirt. He is lucky because the coffee hasn't dried yet, so even though by the time he is done cleaning it the whole t-shirt is completely drenched, the coffee is at least gone. Nino sighs quietly because he had imagined tonight being so much different than this—and still, here he is, in the tiny bathroom of an expensive café, drying his t-shirt under the hand dryer until it is somewhat wearable again.

When Nino walks back to their table ten minutes later, the man is still there, and two cups of freshly brewed coffee are sitting on the table together with the newspaper the man has obviously placed there to read. When Nino sits down at the table, however, the man looks up and puts the newspaper away with a smile before pushing one cup of coffee over to Nino's side of the table.

"I already ordered. I thought you'd not want to wait too much longer to make me pay you back for ruining your shirt," he explains, and Nino finds himself drawn to those cute, pouty lips again. *If men like him came to the love hotel more often*, Nino thinks quietly, *the job would sure be at least a little more bearable*.

He just nods in the end and pulls the cup of coffee closer, inhaling its relaxing scent.

"I'm sure you paid ten times more for this than I did for my coffee earlier," he can't help but say, taking up the little cookie in a plastic wrapping that is placed right next to the cup.

The other man just shrugs and takes a sip of his own coffee.

They don't talk for a little while and Nino starts nibbling on his cookie before taking a sip of his coffee, too, and his assumption turns out to be true: This is possibly the best coffee his tongue has ever tasted, and he shivers a little from the intense flavour.

It's weird, though, Nino thinks. Here he is, sitting with a rich man at a table of an otherwise rather empty, tiny café, the man is a total stranger to him, his own shirt is still wet, and they drink coffee together. All of it is just so *weird*.

"I'm Ohno Satoshi, by the way," the man suddenly introduces himself and cuts through the (comfortable, Nino has to admit) silence. Nino looks up from his cookie and sees how the man is holding out a hand to him. Yeah, right, they hadn't even introduced themselves to each other yet.

Nino smiles hesitantly, realizing once more how unfamiliar it feels to him to actually interact with people. He takes the hand though and shakes it, surprised at how the other man's handshake—*Ohno's* handshake—is rather firm.

“I’m Ninomiya—” Nino hears himself say in return, but then he freezes. No, he is not Ninomiya Kazunari anymore, and he doesn’t even want to think of his name like that. Not when all he can think of when hearing *Kazunari* is prostitution.

“Ah, nevermind,” he quickly corrects himself and grins helplessly, “Just call me Nino.”

If Ohno finds Nino’s reaction weird, he doesn’t show it. All he does is smile fondly and shake his hand once more, this time more gently.

“Nino, then,” he answers, the name rolling off his tongue so easily it makes Nino feel a little excited because he isn’t used to anyone calling him *Nino*, “Nice to meet you.”

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Nino doesn’t know anymore how all of this has happened, but somehow he receives an SMS three days later, and it’s from Ohno. Neither does he know why he has given him his number nor whether this has been a good decision or not. Not to mention the damn SMS has woken him up, and his alarm clock says he could still be sound asleep for another three hours before he has to go to work. But how could Ohno know that he often works the night shift and thus sleeps through the whole day?

Sighing, Nino forces his tired eyes to focus and opens the SMS.

»Hi, Nino! I hope I’m not disturbing you? I’m having a meeting with a client right now, and it’s very close to the corner where we met a few days ago. I figured you might work somewhere near that? Anyway, I should be done in about two hours and I’m really hungry. Want to go for some ramen later? Ohno«

Nino only notices the smile that has crept up and spread all over his face when he is done reading the message, and he blinks again before tiredly rubbing over his face. To be perfectly honest, he had already kind of forgotten about Ohno. Not that he doesn’t like him—that’s not the case at all—but Nino just doesn’t want to let anyone into his life. Knowing people, having feelings of any kind for people equals being vulnerable, and Nino’s life is shitty enough as it is. He doesn’t need to become any more vulnerable; he doesn’t need to suffer any more than he already is.

But then again, he had really enjoyed spending the hour or so in the café with Ohno. They had talked about everything and nothing—they hadn’t even talked *much*, but Ohno had been kind to him in a way that makes Nino want to bathe in it, even now. Of course he hadn’t shown it though; in fact he had tried to be as bratty and nit-picky as possible, but Ohno hadn’t seemed to mind at all, had never taken any personal offence, and... well, now he has just asked him out for ramen again—way to show he seems not to dislike him, right?

Not analysing the situation any longer, Nino just types something his sleepy brain provides as a clever answer in response.

»You pay?«

There is silence for about a minute, then his cellphone makes that annoying beep again. Nino hasn't changed its ring tone since he got it, and by now he thinks it's really about time.

»Since you asked so nicely, I might as well try and not resist your charm. I can pay. Ohno«

Nino grins. But he isn't done yet.

»You spoiled me with that expensive coffee, though. You better take me to a good ramen place and make it worth my time.«

Not that his time is worth anything, Nino thinks. On bad days, he might not earn himself more than thousand yen an hour. But that's not the subject right now, and he'll certainly not tell Ohno.

»I'll run into you at that corner again at 5PM. And take you to the best ramen place I know. Ohno«

Nino catches himself thinking that Ohno is somewhat cute, but he quickly dismisses that train of thought again.

The lights of his alarm clock hurt in his eyes when he checks the time. It says 14:26. He might as well sleep another two hours before going out. His late shift starts at 18:30, so there'll still be some time to spend with Ohno in-between.

»You don't always have to add your name to your messages. My cellphone shows me whom they are from, you know. See you later then.«

This time it takes a little longer for Ohno to answer, and Nino doesn't even know why he's waiting for it. But he does, ignoring how tired he is. When it arrives a few minutes later, Nino instantly pushes the button to open it, and rolls his eyes.

»Okay. P.S.: Better don't bring any coffee or I might ruin your clothes again. Ohno«

"Do you even read what I write? You're such an idiot," he mutters to the cellphone, but his lips still quirk up into a little smile. For a second, he even thinks about writing back *I'll make sure to bring some. Nino* or something equally as dumb, but he decides against it and turns his cellphone on mute. He then rolls over to the other side of his small bed, yawns loudly and closes his eyes. He is still smiling when he falls asleep.

Ohno *is* cute.

*

Nino had been partially joking when he had written *take me to a good ramen place*, but when Ohno almost bumps into him (again) at 5PM at their corner and leads him to a skyscraper and up the elevator to the eleventh floor, Nino realizes Ohno is taking him seriously.

Half an hour later, both of them sit at a table made for two people only, kind of couple-like, and slurp their ramen. Nino has always been a messy eater, but Ohno isn't any better, and once they are done eating (Ohno has emptied the whole bowl while Nino is full after barely half of it) and look up into each other's faces, both of them start laughing simultaneously.

"What," Nino makes, pouting, "You look even worse than me. Didn't your mom show you how to eat properly?!"

Ohno pouts too, and thanks to his naturally pouty lips, he looks way more convincing than Nino, "No, but apparently yours didn't either," he retorts, but his eyes are smiling.

Only Nino's aren't anymore. His stomach convulses painfully, and what with all the ramen in his belly, it hurts even more.

No. She didn't, he thinks bitterly, and his eyes flash dark. He isn't used to people speaking about this, isn't used to making *casual smalltalk* with people he knows for such a short time, isn't used to people saying such seemingly harmless things regularly to him, hurting him. That's because people don't talk to him regularly in general, and so Nino isn't used to other people not knowing that his mother is dead.

He suddenly feels so hurt he doesn't even realize his facial expression freezes. But Ohno notices immediately, and his smile fades. His mouth opens as if he is attempting to try and say something, but then it closes again. Maybe he feels insecure; maybe he

is afraid he might touch upon another sensitive topic without even realizing if he tries to say something now.

Nino doesn't know what's going on in Ohno's mind, but he knows Ohno meant no harm when he made this comment, and as much as his stomach convulses at the memory of his mother, covered in blood, curled up at the end of the stairs in their house, he shakes it off.

"She's always been a good cook, but she never minded when I ate like a pig. She said it's cute," he finally manages to answer and pulls himself together, "But apparently you don't find it cute. Well, fine with me. I can be tons of cute, all for myself, I don't need any Mister Too-Rich-To-Wear-Clothes-Twice to make me compliments." Nino snorts exceptionally exaggeratedly and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

Ohno is smiling again now, and even though he looks sorry, looks like he maybe wants to ask why exactly Nino seemed so hurt just a second ago, he doesn't.

"I only have five suits," he says instead, "And I wear them multiple times."

"*Only five,*" Nino cocks his head back and looks over to Ohno in an *are you being serious* manner. "Like just one of them *doesn't* cost you a million yen."

Ohno shrugs, and Nino can't help but laugh.

*

»Also, I do find you pretty cute. Tons of cute. Even with your face full of ramen. Ohno«

Nino would probably have smiled at the message he receives a few hours later from Ohno, when they have long since said goodbye to each other and have both gone their separate ways.

But what with being banged hard and mercilessly into the mattress without much preparation, all Nino can think of is pain and disgust and *you're tearing me apart if you keep on squeezing my hips like that*. But he doesn't utter a word, and the only audible sounds are his customer's deep and throaty grunts each time his balls hit Nino's ass with a lewd slap.

Nino limps home that night, hissing at every step, and trembles from physical pain as he curls up in his bathtub and lets the hot water soothe his body at least a little. He doesn't think of checking his cellphone anymore.

When Ohno asks him out again the next day, Nino refuses, saying he has work. Truth is, he might have had time, but his abdomen still hurts so much he can barely walk, and he would not be able to explain his limp to Ohno if they met.

*

Two months later, Ohno is treating him for a piece of cake and a coffee in their favourite café. They've been meeting regularly, if not that often, and Nino has to admit he has grown incredibly fond of Ohno Satoshi, the man in the suit who treats him for a coffee or ramen. However, even though Nino likes to be treated, it's certainly not the fact *that* Ohno is treating him that makes Nino like him so much.

No, instead he has started liking Ohno for their conversations and for how Ohno seems to truly care about *Nino*. About the boy who barely looks seventeen, who has bags under his eyes that reach down to his knees, the boy who is skinnier than is probably healthy. The boy who has never told anyone much about himself, the bratty boy who can do nothing but complain and steal your money—and occasionally your food.

Ohno always sounds so genuinely interested, and he always smiles that cute smile. Sometimes, he has a hard time understanding Nino though, especially when Nino is being ironic. But Nino likes that too—if he's being honest, there is nothing about Ohno he doesn't like. He makes Nino happy, and by now the meetings with Ohno have become an important part of his life. *The happiest part of it*, Nino adds silently in his mind as he is chewing on a piece of cheesecake.

"You look happy," Ohno says, and only now Nino notices the other man has been watching him.

Nino smiles. "That's because I *am*," he answers.

Ohno grins. "Because I make you happy?" He implores, wiggling his eyebrows. It looks a little funny, especially because there's still a crumble of cookie stuck on Ohno's upper lip. Nino finds himself wanting to kiss it away.

"Because the *cheesecake* makes me happy," Nino corrects him immediately, "It is more delicious than you could imagine."

Ohno only looks a tiny bit disappointed, and then he smiles.

"Only in fact I *can* imagine, because I've eaten it before. Not to mention I *bought* it for you, so how am I not supposed to be the reason for your happiness?" Ohno asks

further, but he doesn't sound too serious.

Nino feels beaten, but only for a second.

"Your *money* is the reason for my happiness, to be exact," he corrects Ohno again with a sly grin, and he doesn't even feel sorry when he shoves another forkful of cheesecake into his mouth right in front of Ohno's eyes.

"Which *I* work for?!" Ohno almost whines desperately, because Nino is so hard to convince, and Ohno *knows* how much Nino loves to have the last word in a conversation. *Always*.

But this time Nino decides to be nice, and nods. "You could say so," he admits with a little smile, only one corner of his lips pulled up.

He also notices how Ohno's eyes immediately focus on his lips, and they stay at the same spot for too long for it to be coincidence. Nino knows that kind of glance; his customers look at him the same way. But, Nino tells himself, maybe that's normal. Maybe that's not only how customers look at whores they find exceptionally pretty, maybe that's also how a person looks at another person they find attractive. Maybe this is a compliment.

Ohno's eyes tear away from his lips again before Nino can think of a clever remark.

"What does that badge mean anyway?" He wonders out loud instead when he has swallowed down the mouthful of delicious cheesecake. Ohno blinks, and Nino pokes at his chest to point out the obvious. "That one," he continues, "You always wear it. Like you're proud of it or something. Like it's fashion. Is it fashion? I don't care much about that." He's sitting here in all the pride of his two-years-old, second-hand-shop Bon Jovi band t-shirt, after all. Of course he doesn't care about fashion.

"I *am* proud of it," Ohno confirms, and for a moment he almost looks playfully offended with that little pout on his face. But then Nino remembers Ohno always has this adorable pouty face on. "It's a lawyer badge you get when you graduate and can officially work as a lawyer. Didn't I tell you about my job yet? I work as a lawyer. I have my own office, too, it's going pretty well. That's why I also have changing working schedules all the time, just in case you wondered." Ohno shrugs, and he is smiling shyly.

"And that's why you can buy five one-million-yen-suits and just shrug it off, too," Nino says monotonously, not missing a beat.

Ohno shrugs again, very nonchalantly this time. "And that's why I can buy you cheesecake," he ends his explanation. It makes Nino smile.

And then he feels silly, because here he is, a nineteen-year-old male prostitute without parents, a boy who has lived in the streets for over a year, and he is meeting with a *lawyer* for over two months already. With such a rich person, with a man who would probably not even acknowledge his existence if he just knew what his job is.

Suddenly Nino feels a little sick, like he is lying to Ohno. He never has, in fact, really lied to him, but he has also on purpose never mentioned his job either. And right now he feels like if he were to truly reveal who he really is, Ohno wouldn't want to see him anymore. He would feel offended even, he would probably demand Nino to pay him back for the cheesecake (and everything else Ohno has spent money on for Nino), he would call him a liar and then he would leave. And never come back.

Nino bites his lips and pushes the plate with the half-eaten cheesecake away. How could he ever think that Ohno likes him for being *Nino* when Ohno doesn't even know the *real* Nino? And how could Nino ever think about their relationship to each other—however one might classify that—to be real when he is living a life of lies?

"Don't you want your cheesecake anymore?" Ohno pulls Nino out of his train of negative thoughts, but this time it doesn't help. Nino quickly checks the time on his cellphone and then gets up.

"Talking about your work just reminded me of my shift, which starts pretty soon, so I better leave," he explains. He isn't lying even though his shift starts only in an hour. But Nino doesn't feel like being with Ohno any longer. Not right now, not when he feels like he is betraying him.

Ohno gets up rather fast too, and places the money for their food in the bill tray on the table.

"I'm done working for today anyway. Let me walk you to your work?" He suggests, his eyes a little bit hopeful. Nino knows Ohno doesn't want their time together to end yet, and he feels the same about it. But he can't. And he cannot possibly let Ohno walk him to the love hotel he works at either.

Ohno helps him into his jacket without being prompted to, and Nino's heart convulses painfully.

"Not today," he answers quietly, just when he can feel Ohno's warm hands on his shoulders. Ohno lets his thumb carefully slide over Nino's shoulder once, twice, three times.

"Why not? I have time," Ohno mumbles back, and only now Nino realizes how close Ohno is standing behind him. He can feel the other man's breath against his neck. The thumb doesn't stop caressing his shoulder, and Nino bites his lower lip until it hurts.

"Because..." He doesn't have an explanation. He just doesn't, except for the fact that he's a prostitute. Nino turns around instead, hoping that if he can look Ohno directly in the eye, Ohno would just understand. Understand without words, like he often does, that Nino just *can't tell him*.

But this time it's different. This time, when they look into each other's eyes, Nino feels his whole body tingle. Ohno looks at him with such *care* and *fondness*, his eyes asking him to *please let him walk Nino to work because he likes him, because he wants to spend*

more time with him.

Maybe they also ask for permission to hold hands while walking to his work place.

Nino swallows again and again, and he is grateful his adam's apple isn't half way as prominent as Ohno's is, even though Ohno's has often made Nino want to mouth it and suck on it.

"Another time, okay?" Nino whispers, his voice too weak to speak more loudly. The breath he had felt on his neck a second before is on his cheek now, and for a second Nino catches himself wanting to just bend forward and make their lips brush together.

He is crazy.

"Another time then," Ohno echoes, and Nino notices just in time how Ohno is, in fact, bending forward right now, doing exactly what Nino had imagined a second ago.

Only it won't happen, only it *can't* happen, what with them being in a café with people around—what with Nino being a *whore*.

So he turns away in the last second possible, and Ohno's lips meet his cheek. Nino pulls away immediately, the touch of Ohno's soft lips against his cheek burning into his skin, and then he rushes out of the café.

Did they just—? What had just happened—?

Nino's brain refuses to work anymore, and he can't hear anything over the loud sound of his heart beating hard and fast against his ribcage as he is running down the street, away from the café, away from Ohno, just *away*. All he knows is Ohno Satoshi had just been about to kiss him, and for a second Nino had wanted to kiss Ohno more than anything else in the world as well.

His heart is definitely beating like mad because Nino feels so panicked and helpless, he reassures himself.

But also maybe because he is a little bit in love.

*

»Sorry for earlier. I didn't want to freak you out. I didn't even know what I was doing. Do you still want to meet me or should I not write you again? Ohno«

When Nino finds the message on his phone, it's already 3AM in the morning. He has worked all evening and night, and even after a long bath his muscles still feel sore. His body is hurting and all he wants is to sleep forever. The meeting with Ohno just won't leave his mind, and it seems Ohno feels the same. The message had already been sent ten minutes after Nino had rushed out of the café—it seems Ohno really regrets what he has done.

Nino finds himself asking himself whether Ohno regrets it because of Nino's seemingly negative reaction to it or because Ohno had really just lost control and hadn't even *meant* to kiss him in the first place. Nino hopes it's the first option.

»Didn't I tell you not to always write your name at the end of the message? I know you are the one sending them! My phone tells me, you know!«

Nino doesn't care that it's 3AM in the morning. Ohno probably has his phone on mute either way and is sound asleep because he has work early in the morning. Ohno always has work, usually at least until five; sometimes even until ten in the evening. That is why they can't meet more than a couple times a week, and Nino really hates it. But then again, his own schedule isn't better, so he has never dared to complain.

An answer comes within two minutes.

»I'm sorry. Ohno«

Nino opens his mouth and is just about to ask his cellphone if it is joking—if Ohno does this on purpose, really, because no one is just that stupid. But barely twenty seconds after the initial message, the next one arrives.

»I mean—damn. Sorry. It's kind of an automatic thing.«

Nino can't help but smile. Really, he can't. It's 3AM in the morning, he is curled up into his old, uncomfortable bed, his body is aching, but he can't stop smiling. It's 3AM in the morning and *still* Ohno is answering him instantly.

"How crazy are you?" Nino whispers. And he knows that if Ohno were with him right now, he'd say *not any crazier than you are*.

»Don't you have work tomorrow? Why are you still up?« Nino writes instead. He doesn't have to wait long for Ohno's answer.

»Because I couldn't stop thinking of you—I mean of how I possibly ruined everything. But you are talking to me. Does that mean you're not mad?«

Of course I'm not mad, Nino thinks.

»*Of course I'm still pretty mad at you, Mister Rich-Man-Who-Only-Wears-His-Clothes-Once*,« he writes, echoing the words he had said to Ohno during their first meeting as well. He can almost *hear* how Ohno must probably be laughing quietly in his bed when he reads the message.

They are still exchanging SMS at 5AM when Nino decides to tell Ohno to finally go to sleep. Nino can stay up, it's fine what with him being able to sleep until 6PM the next day, but Ohno probably has to get up in two hours already. Still, Ohno asks him out for dinner tomorrow, and Nino doesn't think twice before agreeing.

*

The next weeks pass by fast, and Nino finds himself enjoying life a little bit more. Their first meeting after their almost-kiss had been just a little awkward, but only for five minutes. And then things had been back to normal.

From then onwards, even though Ohno had never tried to kiss him again, he would just touch him the tiniest bit more. Nothing special—only his hand would sometimes linger on Nino's shoulder for a second longer than necessary, or their shoulders (or hands) would accidentally brush against each other on the way to the café.

Nino enjoys those little touches even though he doesn't plan on initiating anything more intimate than that. In fact, those touches never *come* from him in the first place, simply because his mind is still stuck on the *profession* he works in, but when the touches come from Ohno, he enjoys them too much to draw away.

After another whole month has passed, Nino can honestly admit to himself that he has fallen in love with Ohno, and as hopeless as it is, there is no use denying it. He has never been in such a situation before though, and Nino has a hard time dealing with it. Usual things suddenly start feeling special and sometimes awkward, and he feels guiltier about his relationship with Ohno than ever. They have known each other for more than three months now, after all, and still Ohno doesn't know what Nino works as—he doesn't know the *real* Nino.

It is starting to eat Nino up to a point where he can't sleep sometimes, and often enough he finds himself with his cellphone in his hand, just about to send an SMS to Ohno.

»I've never told you,« he writes, »I'm sorry, Ohno. I'm a person you'd never want to meet with on a daily basis if you just knew who I am in reality. I'm not the nice boy next door. I don't even have a family, I've lived in the streets for so long it's embarrassing to admit, and I'm a prostitute since I've been 16 years old. I know you wouldn't want anything to do with me if you just knew all that. I'm a pathetic liar, I pretend to be someone I'm not, I'm wasting your time. I'm sorry, Ohno. I'm sorry. I love you.«

But he never sends it, *can't* send it. Nino is too egoistic to let go of the only piece of happiness that accidentally bumped into his life three months ago at their corner; he doesn't want to lose the only light guiding him through the darkness that is his life, doesn't want to lose the only person that keeps his life together. He doesn't even know anymore how he had functioned before he had met Ohno—and now he can't imagine a life without him anymore. Even though he knows he can never be as close to Ohno as he wishes he could be, all he needs are those meetings; all he needs is Ohno to cheer him up with a smile when some customers have been particularly rough on him the night before.

But his conscience refuses to play this game any longer, refuses to keep this lie alive.

*

"When does your shift start today?" Ohno asks absent-mindedly as they are slurping their ramen at Ohno's favourite ramen place. Nino has never asked about the price for one bowl of this delicious ramen before, but he is sure it's pretty expensive.

"In an hour," Nino answers without thinking much about it.

Ohno has emptied his bowl by then, and like always Nino can't manage to eat more than half of it.

"Is... today *another time*, then?" Ohno implores, hesitantly, after a while, his forehead pulled up into a soft frown. Nino is busy wiping his mouth clean, but he freezes in the movement when he realizes what Ohno means.

He wants to walk Nino to his work.

This is the moment you better just admit everything and be done with it, a cruel voice in the back of his head hisses. Do you want to continue lying? Do you want to continue wasting Ohno's time when he has always been kind, friendly and honest to you? Doesn't he deserve to know the truth and move on from you because you're not worth it?

Suddenly, the slight pain in his abdomen that comes from last night's sex becomes a lot more apparent, and Nino bites his lip.

He can't. He just can't tell Ohno the truth.

"How about I walk you home instead, Oh-chan? You've never shown me where you live," Nino tries to change the topic, and he gives his most charming smile.

Ohno is kind of taken aback by the sudden, new nickname, and Nino's cute smile does the rest: It works. Ohno forgets.

"Sure," he mumbles with a sheepish smile, "It's not that far away."

"But I won't let anyone see me walk side by side with someone who has noodles all over his face," Nino grins and frowns, his head cocked to the side. Ohno blushes immediately and lifts one hand to his mouth, realizing a tiny piece of noodle had been stuck to his chin for a while now.

"Oh," he makes stupidly and cleans himself up. "Maybe I should really ask my mother how the eating thing works again."

Nino grins. "You better."

*

When they leave the ramen restaurant half an hour later and enter the elevator, Nino feels his body tingle again. He knows very well that no, nothing will happen, he won't even want to go into Ohno's apartment and all of this is just an excuse so he doesn't have to talk about his work. But when he looks up to Ohno who is standing so *close* to him, his body just continues tingling like it doesn't care about Nino's opinion whatsoever. The elevator is small and half of its wall is made of glass; Nino can look outside while they are riding down to the ground floor. It's dark outside already, and it's raining a bit.

We could do so much in here right now, Nino thinks, but he doesn't dare to break the silence.

There is a warm hand on his hip, and when Nino turns around to look at Ohno questioningly, the other man is looking right at him, deeply, his eyes saying so, so much. The elevator ride feels like it takes forever and Nino can't draw his own eyes away from Ohno's. There is so much in them: Promises, hope, understanding, fondness, care. *And love*, a tiny voice in the back of his head whispers. Ohno's breath is on his face again, and they are *so close*.

"Nino," Ohno says, his voice a little deeper than usual; it sends shivers down Nino's

spine. Ohno's other hand settles on Nino's neck, softly, warmly, carefully, and he is just about to pull Nino closer when the elevator makes *ping* and the doors open immediately. Nino and Ohno drift apart within a split second and leave the elevator, past an old couple that had been waiting for the elevator and ignoring how both of them give them weird glances.

None of them speaks about it when they leave the building and Ohno opens his umbrella without being prompted to. Nino doesn't have one, though, only the hood of the hoodie he is wearing, which he pulls up immediately, but Ohno just softly pulls him close and lets him walk next to him, under the umbrella. Now their shoulders touch constantly, but even though Nino feels a little embarrassed about the incident in the elevator, he enjoys the closeness, the *warmth* radiating from Ohno.

"I can give you my umbrella when we're at my apartment so you don't get all drenched on your way to work," Ohno says to break the silence.

"Oh, it's fine," Nino immediately declines but Ohno just shakes his head. "It's not, you might catch a cold."

Nino shrugs. It's not the first time he has caught a cold. He just doesn't have money to buy himself a proper jacket that protects him from the cold of autumn and winter. Ohno would notice that soon, too, if they continue their meetings (Nino refuses to call them *dates* even though it's glaringly obvious), but for now Nino can still brush it off. He can say things like *I didn't expect it to be cold today* or *I couldn't find my other jacket when I went out*. Ohno never doubts him.

The rain gradually increases, and when they reach Ohno's apartment complex after fifteen minutes, both of them are already partly drenched because of the wind that blows all the rain right into their faces. Ohno stops in front of the entrance door, and Nino does, too.

"So..." Nino makes, helplessly, not quite knowing how to say goodbye. Usually they would part at their café or the ramen restaurant, but this is different.

Ohno turns to him and looks him directly in the eye, just like he had done earlier in the elevator. Nino shivers; they are still under the umbrella and, again, *so close*.

"Will you eventually tell me what you work as?" Ohno asks unexpectedly, and his question cuts through Nino's body like a knife. He winces a little, and looks up to Ohno with widened eyes.

"What...?" is all he manages to say, his voice wavering.

"You're hiding something from me, aren't you?" Ohno continues though, his voice steady and deep, his eyes not leaving Nino's face for a second.

Nino feels exposed, and like all the securing straps that keep his life glued together are being pulled apart. The solid foundation of his life that is Ohno crumbles, and breaks down.

This is it, he bitterly thinks, and he can't stand Ohno's eyes anymore. *This is it. It's over. If I tell him now, he will probably slap me in the face and tell me not to ever bother him again.*

What choice do I have though?, his brain talks on. Nino's eyes start burning, and he realizes he is about to start crying—the first time after about three years of not ever shedding a tear. He has become vulnerable, and he knows it. For the first time in the last three months he regrets having got to know Ohno Satoshi.

"I fucked up, shit," Nino eventually whispers and presses his lips together. He takes one step back, away from the shelter of the umbrella and into the rain, but he doesn't care. What does *anything* matter anymore once he has told Ohno the truth and Ohno will leave his life, taking Nino's heart with him?

When Ohno doesn't react, Nino swallows hard, his eyes stuck to the ground. "I lied to you," he continues, his voice trembling, "There... there is something you don't know."

Nino looks so broken, so helpless and endlessly vulnerable right now with one of his arms desperately squeezing the other, standing in the rain, all wet. But still Ohno seems to be oblivious of it all.

"You're not twenty-four?" He asks softly, with a little chuckle. "That's pretty obvious though, isn't it? Sometimes I feel bad because you cannot possibly be older than sixteen, but still I meet with you—"

"That's not it," Nino harshly interrupts. "I mean—yes, I'm not twenty-four. But I'm nineteen, so that's fine."

"Okay," Ohno answers calmly. He is still smiling, and for the billionth time Nino just wants to kiss those damned, pouty lips. But it won't happen anymore. Not now, not ever. *Don't you remember?*, the voice in his head speaks up again, *all the countless dicks you sucked with your filthy mouth, and still you dare think of kissing Ohno? You're disgusting.*

Nino can't take the voice in his head anymore, he can't take it how much he lied to Ohno, and he can't take how much he has lied to himself—how he has so often imagined being with Ohno, knowing it could never happen.

"I'm a whore," he unceremoniously says.

When no reaction comes, Nino swallows hard. "A slut. A prostitute. Men pay me to suck them off, or to fuck me. Daily. For three years already. That's the truth; you've been meeting with a prostitute all this time."

Nino doesn't hear the rain around him anymore; he doesn't feel the cold water on his skin. All he feels is emptiness and cold, and his heart that is beating harder than ever against his ribcage as if it wanted to jump out of it.

And there is still no reaction from Ohno.

To be honest, Nino rather wished Ohno were screaming at him. Wished Ohno were grabbing him, shaking him, beating him, showing anger. Or just go away, or do something, *anything*, as long as he'd just *react*.

But nothing comes, and that is even worse. Nino barely manages to turn his back to Ohno before the first hot tears run down his cheeks, and the sobs he swallows down are shaking his whole body bitterly.

"I should have told you the very day we met," Nino cries quietly now, his hands curled into tight fists, and he constantly tries to wipe his tears away. But it's no use—they continuously run down his pale, hollow cheeks and just won't stop. "I'm sorry I wasted your time, I know you thought, I was—*someone*. Someone worth your time when I *wasn't*, I—I—" Nino's voice breaks, and he presses the sleeve of his hoodie against his mouth to suppress any sobs. "I'll never bother you again, Ohno-san, I'm sorry," he manages to choke out and then just goes away, away from the man who means the world to him, away from the man who fits him so perfectly, whom he could be *so much more* with. But it just isn't supposed to happen in this life.

But Nino has barely managed to walk a few steps when there is a tight grip on his wrist, and Ohno pulls him back. Nino is trembling—he doesn't know what it means. Has Ohno just taken a little more time to get angry?

Nino doesn't dare to turn around.

"Ah," Ohno makes eventually, his voice still calm and warm. "Ah," he repeats. "It all makes sense now."

"*What* makes sense?" Nino bitterly whispers back, but Ohno doesn't answer to his question.

"So, I can buy you then?" He asks instead.

If Nino has thought before his world had been breaking down, this is officially the moment it *really* breaks. The words tear his heart apart before his brain has even processed the meaning of this, and Nino's whole body just freezes instantly in shock.

So, I can buy you then?, his brain echoes.

I can buy you then?

Ninomiya Kazunari is nineteen years old when his heart gets irreparably broken.

Nino forgets how to breathe, and he can almost *hear* his heart break into a million little pieces Ohno mercilessly stomps on until nothing but dust is left.

He wants to buy him. Ohno wants to buy him and fuck him just like any other customer—that's how Ohno reacts to this new piece of information.

Because I didn't give into his advances quickly enough, Nino's brain supplies, and he is so shocked, so hurt, so *broken* that he can't even sob anymore. That is all Ohno has ever wanted from him, it seems, and now that Nino has revealed his true profession, Ohno simply wants to quicken up the procedure.

All of it—all the feelings Nino had thought were between Ohno and him, all the looks, all the *care and fondness* Ohno had shown him—is a lie. Every single minute of it. Nino wants to laugh bitterly because Ohno has spent so much money on him—if that's all he has ever wanted from him, he could have saved himself a lot of money by simply asking.

But it's his own fault. All of it is. He should have known that letting anyone into his life would only bring more misery. Nino is crying so hard by now it's embarrassing, but he still has his back to Ohno, so he can't see it. Only the constant, tight grip on his wrist reminds him of Ohno's presence. He doesn't turn around; he couldn't stand looking at Ohno right now at all.

"Sure," Nino finally mumbles out, his voice so, so broken. "I'm not even expensive. The rivalry amongst us whores is so high the prices constantly get cut. You can have a blowjob for a thousand yen. Or pay me five thousand yen for an hour—you can do whatever you want to me then except for anything that causes permanent damage to my body." Nino's voice is dead and he isn't sure if it's rain or tears that are covering his field of view completely. It's probably both.

You could even have had it all for free, Nino bitterly adds in his thoughts. *If you had just continued like that, you could have talked me into it. And then dump me in the streets like the whore that I am after you're done.*

"As long as you just pay me, because knowing me doesn't mean you get it any cheaper," he immediately speaks up against his thoughts, trying to somewhat protect his pride so he won't mentally break completely.

Ohno has been silent all the time, but now he breathes out, and, weirdly enough, it sounds like he's trembling too.

"I'll pay you as much as you want me to, Nino," Ohno whispers, and his voice sounds all but steady anymore. The grip on his wrist loosens, and the next time Nino opens his eyes, the umbrella lies upside down on the pavement next to them and Ohno has turned Nino around. He is pressing the younger man tightly into his chest, pushing Nino's face into his suit, and Nino is too shocked, too helpless, too broken to react. He just lets it happen.

"As much as you want me to," Ohno repeats quietly, "As long as you just stay with me from now on and don't go back to that job. Don't go back to what destroys you, Nino. Stay with me. Please. Just—just stay. Let me help you."

There is nothing Nino can do to stop his mind from exploding; there is nothing he can do to stop himself from mentally breaking down, finally, after all those years—and he just helplessly clings to Ohno, his fingers tightly buried in the expensive suit, seeking out protection and shelter he hasn't had anymore since the day his mother was killed.

"Are you crazy?!" he sobs out almost inaudibly against Ohno's chest, "Why would you—didn't you listen?! I—I'm a prostitute, didn't you hear me?!" Nino is just about to start hitting Ohno uncontrollably with his fists against his chest over and over again by then—he's just that broken, just *that* out of it—but Ohno catches his fists and continues to just hold him, tightly, gently, to his chest.

"I'm in love with you," Ohno simply explains, his voice soft as he is burying his face in Nino's wet hair. Only now Nino notices how Ohno seems to be crying too—or where do those *warm* raindrops that are falling into his hair come from?

For a long time, they just stand there, in the rain, completely drenched, and neither of them moves an inch. Nino has by now wrapped his trembling arms around Ohno's torso, too, and they are just hugging. Nino snuffles quietly at some point, calming down slowly, and he feels Ohno kiss the top of his head.

"Let's go inside and warm up or you'll catch a cold for real. I can lend you clothes," Ohno says and slowly unwraps himself from Nino's tight and desperate grip. Nino snuffles more, but nods, and Ohno takes up his hand and squeezes it tightly. He absent-mindedly takes up the abandoned umbrella too with his other hand.

Nino follows him slowly into the building, his head spinning and hurting from all the crying.

"Lend me clothes? You mean, you'd still share your clothes with me even though I'm—?"

"Of course," Ohno interrupts before Nino can speak out the nasty name of his profession.

Nino hesitates.

"Would you share more with me? Like, say," he squeezes Ohno's hand and looks at him—he looks pretty pitiful with his eyes all reddened from crying, "Like, say—say your apartment," he finishes rushedly in an insecure whisper when they enter the apartment complex and head to the elevator.

Ohno just smiles, and while they are waiting for the elevator, he takes Nino's face in both of his hands and eventually bends down to kiss him.

"I would be very happy to share more with you—like, say, my apartment," he mimics

Nino's choice of words and giggles quietly against Nino's lips before kissing him properly, and Nino just melts into it.

Ohno's pouty lips fit his own so perfectly after all, and even though they taste a little salty from tears (Nino doesn't know if he tastes his tears or Ohno's), the kiss makes him feel all warm inside. Their lips move softly against each other, and when Ohno's tongue carefully pokes against his mouth, Nino immediately opens it.

This feels like heaven, Nino decides, and even though his life isn't perfect by far—even though there are still numerous problems that need to be taken care of—he decides to talk them through with Ohno later. For now, he just kisses, kisses, *kisses* those plush lips and pushes Ohno's tongue back into his mouth only so he can roam and explore Ohno's mouth instead. He sighs into the kiss, fully leaning into the warm grip of Ohno's hands around his face, and with a quiet *ping* the elevator doors close again, with Ohno and Nino still both standing outside. But neither of them minds.

"But," Ohno breathes against Nino's lips when they part for air, and can't help but hungrily lick over Nino's lips before continuing, "Only if—if you, I mean—do you even—like me?" He helplessly stutters out, a slight blush on his cheeks, and Nino can't help but laugh at Ohno's cuteness. So happily and honestly that it is contagious; and soon Ohno is smiling at Nino too.

Of course I do, Nino thinks and smiles brightly.

"Of course I do," he speaks out loud then, his body tingling, "In fact I think I'm kinda in love with you too."

Afterword:

I thought a lot about what kind of job to give Ohno. Just to make one thing clear: Of course Ohno is NOT Naruse Ryo. He is Ohno Satoshi. In the beginning, I just made Ohno be a "rich working person" to make the dialogues between Nino and him be more interesting. But later I thought that I don't plan to write the fic out too much-- I just wanted to end it after Ohno and Nino found each other and are happy with each other, however, Nino still has the big problem in form of yakuza in his life, and they wouldn't just let him go. But making Ohno be a talented and influential lawyer would make the whole thing a whole lot easier: I wanted to give the reader the impression that even after this fic is over, Ohno will help Nino get out of his business, and due to his job, he manages to legally get Nino out of there without any problems (maybe he'll even manage to take down the whole yakuza group). So that's why I've made him be a lawyer-- just in case anyone wondered.