

The first thing Azure heard as he stepped out of the bedroom was the sound of keys clacking fast and repeatedly. The cat scratched the top of his head and yawned, looking to the side beyond the open door that leads to their home office.

He saw the figure of his boyfriend, a tall husky wearing a pair of rectangular glasses who typed away at his laptop, his eyes glued to the screen. Shoichi seemed to be utterly bare outside of the boxer briefs he wore to cover his decency and the glasses on his face. The dog reached for a cup that exhaled steam and the pleasant smell of coffee, noticing the cat standing by the door right then.

"Morning," he said, sipping his drink and smiling pleasantly. "there's hot coffee in the kettle if you want some."

Azure nodded, his mind still foggy from sleep and having trouble catching up or even making full sentences.

"How long have you been up?"

"Oh. Not long," Shoichi laughed, turning his attention back to the screen of his computer. "Since 5 AM. Some work needs to get done by the end of the week, and I couldn't make myself relax until I got it finished."

"You're going to work yourself into an early grave if you keep that up," the cat sighed, going inside the office and giving his boyfriend a quick good morning kiss. "Seriously, cut that shit out. It's Christmas week for God's sake."

Shoichi laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck and leaning back on his chair.

"I know, I know. I just hate leaving stuff half done. I don't want to start the new year with this looming over my head."

Despite his dissatisfaction, the cat bit his tongue, recognizing that his boyfriend had a good point. He nodded slowly, scratching his chest and sauntering off to the kitchen to get himself a cup of coffee.

It was almost surreal to think about... the two had begun living together on a trial basis a while ago, trying to decide whether they were ready for that level of commitment.

*And now its been a full year,* the cat mused to himself as he felt the pleasant smell of coffee wafting through the air while he poured himself a generous cup of it. *Hard to believe how fast time went by.*

Now he got to wake up every day to the husky's face on the bed along with him... or at least in the home office since he often woke up to see Shoichi already working first thing in the morning.

*He still needs to learn how to chill a bit,* the cat mused to himself, a bitter smile across his face. Once he'd acquired his coffee, Azure decided to follow the husky's example, heading into the office and sitting on his desk.

"Hmm? Are you going to work too?" Shoichi glanced up from his computer's screen, curiosity flashing across his eyes.

"Might as well. Not like I have anything better to do," the cat answered briefly, turning his laptop on and watching the screen come alive as the whole thing booted up. "I'm still going to keep an eye on the time, though. If I let you go as you want, then we'll end up missing the office party tonight."

"Right, right. I'd almost forgotten about that," Shoichi mused to himself, scratching his neck as he thought over it. "Do you think there's any chance we can skip?"

"Zero."

"Yeah, I sorta figured..."

Sighing, Shoichi got back to his work, becoming lost again in the little world inside his mind and tuning out everything around him as he usually did. Whenever he began working, he'd have a completely different look in his eyes. Sharp and serious. That demeanor looked so foreign on the man when one became close enough to him to realize just how much of a goofball he was.

*His concentration is scary,* Azure thought to himself, a proud smile spreading across his face.

Of course, not all were roses. Since the two had decided to live together, they had to come clean about their relationship to the office. Luckily neither of their jobs were threatened over it, but Shoichi still bore the brunt of the head supervisor's wrath that day. Something about the impropriety of maintaining a romantic relationship with a subordinate. As a result, Azure was moved to a different department, barely having any chances to interact with his boyfriend at work.

His new role had him handling zoning complaints. He had to trudge through hundreds of pages of data, cross-referencing information with other departments, and searching for ways to solve any conflicts that might arise between the general population.

*Ugh, not this woman again. What is she even complaining about this time?* He thought to himself, clicking his tongue in annoyance. *If you believe your neighbor is infringing on your private lot, then build a friggin wall to separate the terrains. What's with all this petty crap?*

Thankfully, there was no danger of him ever having to deal with these people face to face. A lot of the complaints he had to deal with were already incredibly petty on their own since, sadly, there wasn't anyone to filter which ones got passed along to his department before they reached them. People could just go online and complain about anything they wanted with no repercussions.

*Like this one right here. 'Neighbor pet dog barks too loud.' That has nothing to do with the zoning department!* Sighing, Azure leaned back on his chair, rubbing his eyes with a pinching motion and groaning loudly.

"That bad?" Shoichi piped up from his desk, asking a question in an emphatic tone.

"They really need to remove the option to make complaints online," Azure shook his head sideways, groaning as he spoke, looking at the list he still needed to get through before he could be done with this stack. "For every legitimate complaint, I get ten that make no sense."

"Hrm... that might be something to bring up during the next quarter's review," the husky stroked his chin, his throat echoing an audible, guttural sound. "Can you write that down for me, so I don't forget?"

"Sure."

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"I don't know how I feel about this..." Azure murmured, crossing his arms and clutching them close to his body for comfort and coming to a stop just before their destination.

The chilly outdoors air nipped through their exposed fur, snow crunching softly and delicately under their feet. Azure and Shoichi stood by the other side of the street to their office building. The lights shining through the glass doors, inviting them with tender offers of warmth and comfort. Yet, they continued standing in the cold, watching coworkers going in and out of the building from a distance.

Neither of them was dressed for this kind of temperature as, outside of the scarves they wore, they had only the outfits they'd picked for the party. Shoichi wearing a navy blue sleeveless vest on top of a white dress shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows, a fashionable red tie popping from the otherwise muted colors and tucking inside neatly under his vest. In contrast, Azure wore a black blazer alongside dress pants, forgoing a tie altogether.

"What's wrong?" Shoichi cocked his head inquisitively to the side.

"Telling your boss we were dating was one thing. Even if there was some gossip over it, it was more or less easy to deal with. Going to a party together as a couple, though..." the cat bit his lower lip, now feeling suddenly unsure despite his earlier confidence. "There's a good chance at least some people will be put-off by us being so forward about it."

"Forward? We're only going to a party together. It's not like we're going to be hugging or kissing the entire time. That'd be a real lack of decorum no matter if it's a gay or straight couple," Shoichi smiled bitterly, putting his hands on his boyfriend's shoulders and trying to gently knead and squeeze in an attempt to be encouraging. "We're going to have to field indelicate questions no matter what, but wouldn't you rather own up to it and show people that you're proud of yourself instead of skulking around?"

Azure sighed, leaning back onto the husky's large body until his back touched the taller male's chest. He thoroughly enjoyed the attention, though he dared not show it. Part of him couldn't help but feel a little self-conscious doing something like that in public right in front of their place of work, but, for good or for bad, the streets were pretty much deserted at this time.

"You sure seem a lot more confident about this than I am," the cat smiled, his chest and throat rumbling softly with a purr.

"Heh. I'm glad if it looks that way, but I'm just as worried as you are. Society might be more welcoming in general nowadays, but you can never guess how the individuals around you will react," he chuckled, a nervous laugh to try and stifle his own self-consciousness. "So long as *you* don't have to go through anything unpleasant because of it, then I'm already happy."

"Oh? You mean like getting transferred to one of the worst departments because you and I are dating?" Azure looked up at his boyfriend, a smug smile on his face.

"Right... yeah... already screwed the pooch on that one, huh?" Shoichi groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose and smiling wryly.

"It's alright, big guy. I can deal with that sort of stuff. I'm tougher than you give me credit for," the cat teased, poking Shoichi's stomach with a hearty chuckle.

"Oh? Does that mean we can head inside then, Mr. Tough Guy?"

"Uhm... right. Yeah, I suppose we can go," Azure took a step back, his smile faltering, glancing nervously at the building one more time.

"We could also blow off the party and go do something else if you'd rather not," Shoichi spoke in a lower tone, his voice sweet and encouraging while he carefully watched his boyfriend with kind eyes.

"I'm... No, no, we shouldn't miss the party just because of that. Besides, that might look bad on both of us at work later..." the cat laughed dryly, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "I think I should be fine now. I was just feeling insecure for a little bit, that's all."

"Then how about we head inside? My fur is thicker than yours, so I'm pretty used to the cold, but you must be freezing."

Laughing, Azure proudly puffed his chest, a cocky smile across his face.

"I'm from Seattle, babe. I can handle the cold just as well as you can."

"Is that so? Well, *Seattle Boy*, your lips are turning blue. I'm guessing it's meant to do that?" the husky raised an eyebrow, staring at his boyfriend with the corner of his lip curved ever so slightly up with amusement.

"I-it is?!"

Shoichi chuckled, placing a hand behind his boyfriend's back and gently pushing him along, guiding him to the entrance. The automatic doors slid open with a soft whirring sound, a wave of warm air blowing out along with it, the two men feeling a shiver running up their bodies due to the sudden change in temperature. A lone receptionist stood by the front desk, greeting the two with a polite smile.

They rode the elevator up into the thirteenth floor where the party was being held. The cramped little metal box was cold to the touch and barely big enough to cram four people inside despite an advertised capacity of six.

Once it finally came to a stop, the doors opened to a large salon that was entirely packed with people. White sheets were placed on the tables with a wide assortment of finger foods and bottles laid neatly on top, plates upon plates of different meats, sushi, canapés, and more. The office's bright yellow lights somehow created a warm atmosphere against the cold blue sky visible outside through the windows, making the place seem like a haven of warmth and comfort.

Stepping inside, Shoichi and Azure quickly removed their scarves, placing them carefully atop a few hangers made available by the entrance for that very purpose. Thick and heavy winter clothes were left behind while the guests all strutted around, showing very professional looking

dresses and suits, a big contrast between the flashes of colors worn by the women while most of the men stuck to blue and black.

"It's definitely not as loud as last year's," Azure remarked with a smirk, remembering the loud music that rang through everyone's ears during the last party, so loud that it almost forbade conversation entirely. His sensitive ears were grateful for the toning down of sound pollution as he wouldn't have to worry about being in pain from it. "Wait, is it just me or were there way more people back then too?"

"Office had to terminate the employment of most outside contractors. That was about a third of our staff," Shoichi muttered dryly, walking to a nearby table and grabbing himself a glass of sake while his boyfriend followed.

"Wait, what?! Aren't *I* an outside contractor?" the cat's eyes flew wide open, staring at the husky with his mouth agape.

Shoichi shrugged. "Yes. You're among the top performers, though, so your job is safe for now. I was battling for you to become a direct-hire, but that... Uhm... kinda took a setback once they found out we're together," he winced, taking a sip of his drink and letting out a loud sigh. "I'm still working on that in the background, though. Once you become a government worker, it gets incredibly harder for them to let you go."

Azure nodded, his eyes still wide. "I wish you'd have told me about that. I didn't know my job situation was so precarious..."

"Don't worry about that. I'm not letting them fire you, love," Shoichi smiled softly, reaching out with his hand to gently squeeze Azure's arm.

*That's a nice thought and all, but you don't really have enough influence to keep that from happening,* the cat somberly thought to himself, feeling as if his chest was suddenly sinking inside his body.

"Hello there, you two. Did you just get here?" approaching the table was a middle-aged raccoon. She wore a form-fitting, knee-high peach dress and small sparkling earrings with a matching necklace around her neck. Walking up to the two with a glass of champagne in her hand, she greeted them warmly with a smile.

"Ah, Setagawa-san, it's nice to see you. Yeah, we just got here," Shoichi smiled back, nodding. "The party looks to be lovely this year too. It's definitely a nice break from work."

"I'm willing to bet you were still hard at work today despite the holidays, weren't you?" she smiled warmly, taking a sip from her drink and watching the two from the corner of her eye. "You seem a little nervous. Is something the matter?"

Setagawa was Shoichi's direct supervisor and one of the top dogs in the office, so to speak. Despite her easygoing attitude during party's and happy hours, the woman tended to be very blunt and strict whenever they were on the clock. She was, in fact, the one who disciplined the two when they came clean about their relationship, with Azure still recalling the scary look she had on her face back then.

*I'm never going to get used to this happy hour culture in Japan...*

"Hm... I guess we might be a little nervous?" Shoichi crossed his arms, awkwardly rubbing the side of his shoulder with his free hand, the corner of his lip twitching. "It's only been two months since... you know."

"You shouldn't worry so much about that," the raccoon smiled, adjusting her glasses as she spoke. "While our office parties are very lax, we have no intention of fostering a difficult work environment. If anyone gets too drunk and gives you too much grief then... well, they'll be properly dealt with. I'll personally make sure of that."

*Scary. The fact that she can say that with a smile on her face is too scary!* Azure swallowed, a nervous chuckle echoing on the back of his throat.

"I... Wow, I really appreciate you saying that Setagawa-san," Shoichi blinked a few times, surprised at the support coming from his boss more than anything else.

"You were so harsh on us when we came out that I thought for sure you had something against us." Azure blurted out, his eyes wide open, unable to comprehend the sweet disposition that he was now being presented with.

"Don't get me wrong, Blues-kun. I had to do something back then because we just can't have a supervisor dating one of his subordinates. That's an HR problem waiting to happen. It doesn't mean I have any personal problem with your relationship," Setagawa giggled, shaking her head sideways. "I think the two of you look good together. I wish you both a lot of happiness and I'm glad you were able to come to the party as a couple this year."

With a wink, the raccoon walked away, stopping by a few steps away to chat with some other employees on the way, leaving Shoichi and Azure gaping, unsure how to respond to such words.

"That was... nice?" Azure frowned, cocking his head to the side.

Shoichi nodded, drinking down the rest of his sake with a single big gulp. "It was... and yet it's left me feeling like I need another drink."

"I'm with you on that. Do you think there's any beer here?"

"Pretty sure there will be some in the fridge," Shoichi sighed, grabbing the bottle of sake and pouring another swig of it in the small porcelain sakazuki cup he held in his hand, quickly bringing it to his lips and drinking half of it at once. "Make sure you don't drink too much."

Azure leered at his boyfriend with a bored, deadpan expression. "You're the one with no tolerance for alcohol. I shouldn't be the one getting told that," he reached forward to grab the sake bottle. "I'm taking this before you go overboard you drunk dog."

"Hey!" Shoichi attempted to protest, falling on deaf ears as the cat promptly walked away without giving him much attention.

Azure walked across the office, greeting a few of his coworkers as they stop him along the way to chat and share a few words, most of them merely wishing him happy holidays. Reaching for the refrigerator, he grabbed himself a can of cold beer inside, opening it with a satisfying 'pop.'

"Ah, Bruzu-kun," A sweet female voice calls out from behind him, the cat spinning around on his heels to meet the smiling face of a light gray furred Alpaca – Shoichi's personal assistant with whom he'd interact a few times before.

Even now, having already lived in Japan for a few years, he continued to be amused by the way his name was pronounced. "Good night, Amemiya-san. I didn't think you'd be showing up today. Didn't you just come out of maternity leave a few weeks ago?" he smiled politely, engaging the woman in conversation.

"Yes. My husband insisted we come today. Said we needed to get out of the house more often." She giggled cheerfully, crossing her arms and holding them close to her body. "What about you? Are you doing alright? No one's been giving you a hard time, have they?"

Azure shook his head. "Nah. No one's even brought it up at all. I guess I was worrying over nothing."

"That's good. Urata-san had been really worried about any negative repercussions. He's even asked me to keep a good ear around any office gossip just to report it to him so he could deal with it as quietly as possible," placing a hand on her cheek, the alpaca sighs deeply, the glasses sliding a little down her snout. "I really hope he's not stressing himself out too much."

"I... didn't know that. *Have* you reported anything like that to him?"

"Oh. No no. Luckily there hasn't been much to report. A few people were surprised, but I haven't heard anything malicious. Then again, Setagawa-san has had a lot of influence over hiring the past decade or so, and from what I've heard, she can't stand any kind of discrimination."

"Huh... I didn't know about that. I guess it's pretty impressive that someone like that would climb to such a position of power."

"Oh, but she has zero scruples when she's on the clock and will do and say absolutely anything to increase productivity, so she's definitely not someone you can mess with."

*Ah... I should have seen that coming...*

"Either way, just make sure you don't get on her bad side, okay?" the alpaca calmly dismisses a genuine concern with a wave of her hand. "So long as you don't cause any problems, she's going to keep batting for your sake."

*Even if you tell me that, that's a little...*

"Ah, right. I was only supposed to leave for a little bit to get myself a drink. I can't leave Shoichi all alone!" Suddenly snapping back to reality, Azure looks around the room for the husky's towering figure, not finding him anywhere that he can see. "Sorry, Amamiya-san, I'm gonna be leaving you for now."

"That's alright. You two have fun. I need to get back to my husband too," with a sweet smile, the alpaca waves at the cat as he power walks away.

The lobby is even more packed with people as more and more guests arrive. Azure is stopped multiple times on his search for his boyfriend by coworkers wanting to chat or catch up.

Trading a few words before excusing himself, the cat continued to traipse around the floor, searching for the missing husky.

Finally, he came across an unlocked door to a now-empty office that had been left ajar. Peering inside, he saw Shoichi standing by a corner, staring at a wall with his hands shoved deep inside his blazer's pocket.

"Babe?" he hesitantly called out, the husky turning around to face the doorway. "You alright? Why did you walk off all on your own without telling me?"

"Oh, sorry. I just wanted to be alone for a bit," Shoichi tried to smile, but the frown on his face was transparent. "I was a little overwhelmed. A lot of people coming up to me to wish me luck with our relationship and whatnot. It got a little exhausting."

"Hmm... Does that have anything to do with you already being drunk?" Azure smiled, walking up to his boyfriend and reaching out with his hand to cup the husky's cheek. "Your face is totally red."

"... Maybe just a little bit?" Shoichi grabbed the cat's hand, turning his face to the side to press his lip against it while looking away. "I rarely get the chance to drink. Give me a break."

"Jeez. What am I going to do with you, you drunk dog?" Azure chuckled, taking advantage of their current privacy to press himself against Shoichi's chest, sniffing his boyfriend's neck and nuzzling against it. "You've been a lot more worried about our situation that you've been letting on, haven't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I ran into Amamiya-san."

"Tch... of course she blabbed."

Azure laughed, standing on the tip of his toes and pulling Shoichi's face into his, locking lips for a brief second. He could feel the lingering taste of alcohol on the husky's breath, but it didn't matter to him. Just getting to kiss him right now was worth it.

"Thank you for worrying, babe, but I'm a big boy. You don't have to look out for me like that."

"... What if I want to?" the husky mumbled, his face growing even redder by the passing second.

"Then I'm gonna have to look out for *you* to make sure you don't burn yourself out." He whispered softly, leaning in for another kiss. "I love you."