

“How can you bear to eat those things?”

Ah, how many times had he heard such a question before? He never *really* got why that question came up so much—it just did—and he accepted it as it came. Explaining his thought process was half the fun of trying out new things; the shock, the thrill, the uncertainty. It was like a miniature version of what skydiving was—a venture into the *unknown*

“Persimmons are... out of the grid. Most stores don’t sell them, so that must mean that they’re something that isn’t made to be catered to the crowd!” Tadano plunged his fork into the bowl of fruit salad and joyfully chewed through the forkful. “Mgmh. Did you know that depending on how you serve it, it tastes different?”

Daily dinners with Haida; his newest hobby. At first, it was something that he did when the hyena needed assistance in a time of need. Now, it was something that they partook in even when the problem was trivial at best.

“Yeah. Goes from rotten to just barely edible.”

The chitchat with his investors and business partners was mediocre at best. Haida? Now *he* had things to say. Even when they were completely off the mark, he spoke with such conviction and exuberance that it was impossible to not be enthralled by them. Even silent, his thoughts were written all over his face. Every bite earned a slight wince from him—like poking him with a hot stick.

That was the *other* half of trying out the bizarre; it lead to the most hilarious of reactions.

“Maybe it’s that you haven’t tried hard enough to find the good in it. Maybe if you mixed it with chocolate, or maybe even used it as a garnish in a stew.”

“Eugh!” He stuck out his tongue—all the while making faux gag sounds. “I have no idea how you even manage to come up with things like that. I don’t even wanna *know* what you eat in your free time.” While speaking, Haida couldn’t help but stare at the brandless white plastic bags that were piled up right on the very edge of the table. “Especially if it’s as weird as a persimmon salad...”

“Anything I can find. When I find the time, I just... go wherever.”

“Wherever? Do you mean that you, uh—”

“Yeah, ENI-O chooses the place for me.” Like *most* of his daily activities. Tadano boasted zero shame about the fact, which made Haida’s attempt at circumventing the topic all the funnier. To feel shame of automation never made sense to Tadano—it meant more free time to focus on the intricacies of everyday life. With so many unexplored nooks and crannies in the city, how could he refuse? “I’ve been releasing open betas of it for a while, and you look like you need it!”

“Maybe? It’s just that...” The hyena clamped up yet again fingers tapping against the table, there were so many words that he looked like he wanted to say, but nothing but awkward silence surfaced. “Crap, how do I put this—”

“I *know* that you think that it’s wrong or that it might send you somewhere that you wouldn’t like, but you gotta believe me, Haida!” Tadano reached for the smallest plastic bag on the pile. From the plastic box within, he retrieved a slice of white chocolate custard tart and a plastic coffee cup holding a nut milk-based drink. “I mean, this restaurant is nice and all, but they’d never sell stuff like these!”

“Yeah, I get that.” He clasped his hands together with fangs clenched, then took a deep breath. “It’s *actually* about that—”

“Yeah, just hold on for a second.”

Tadano held his finger up while sucking loudly on the straw. The sound of him sipping filled the otherwise silent booth as Haida stared at him with unbreaking eye contact. He made sure to get the most he could from the continued sip, and when he finally had to take a breath through his mouth, Tadano let out a refreshed ‘aah’

“See? I wouldn’t have been able to get that if I just stuck to the usual coffee shops. I even tasted hints of cinnamon there!”

“That’s good, but—”

“This is why I always bring my food here, you know? The affogato and flan they serve here are nice, but they don’t compare to... how do I put this.” He waved his hands around the air for a second before smacking them together once inspiration struck. “Oh! The texture. This tart here. You see it?”

“I do, but before you do that—”

“It *feels* homemade.” Tadano lightly squeezed the tart before shoving it in his mouth. “Mgh, the texture is something that you’d never see in a MoonBucks. It’s got a spongy and tangy feel in my mouth. It’s so great, even if it’s just an appetizer...”

“Just the appetizer? Tadano—”

“And that’s one of the best parts of this restaurant. Most of the time, you’re restricted to a single menu. Wouldn’t it be better to have all those menus you could ever want with this nice atmosphere?” Reaching for another box in the pile, Tadano took out and then held a plastic bowl overflowing with food; green cabbage—onions—mushrooms—and slabs of beef that were hot pot cooked with sugar, sake, and mirin for a wonderfully bittersweet aroma. “Like, you never get anything like this in a restaurant. It’s too... unorganized, too authentic. Like seeing someone in gaudy clothing, or wearing one of those friendship bracelets that little school girls make but stop wearing after one week.”

Tadano held his right arm up and lowered his sleeve as if to prove a point. With five bracelets bought off street vendors, he shuffled his limb to make all of the accessories jingle with their individual stuck-together knick-knacks.

“This is usually reserved for new years, but why restrict something nice to a date? It’s the same with so many other things. Things that I’ve tried out, so I *know* what I’m talking about. Eggnog, Turkey—”

“Tadano!” Haida screamed with a high-pitched break in his voice. “Shit, sorry! I just... Ugh, I’ve been wanting to tell you something the entire night, but then you start talking, and I’d feel like a jerk if I interrupted you, but since you do so *much stuff* you talk a lot, and *then* I have no time to—”

Tadano’s progressing giggling suddenly made Haida stop his word spew. He stood still with his arms still jerked around and mouth agape—the shock of it all being enough to snap him out of his anxiety spiral.

“Y-you could’ve just spoken over me! I—sorry. Sorry, give me a minute.” He pushed out the last bit of his laughter with a strained cough. “I think waiting for turns to speak is boring. No one takes the initiative to talk, so I just do it.”

“I... Agh, sorry. It’s just a force of habit to act all nice and proper. You gotta do it when you have a superior...” His new boss was definitely a saint compared to Gon, but everyone had buttons to be pushed, and those become *extra* sensitive when combined with the power trip of authority.

“More reasons to automate work, but that’s beside the point,” Tadano muttered. Some said that his comments were uncalled for whenever he offered them—that was another reason that Haida’s conversations were much more engaging; no need for silence by incomprehensible social rules. “What did you want to tell me? No hiding, I can tell when you’re lying.”

“Is it because you’re clever, or is it because I’m a bad liar?”

“Isn’t it more interesting to not know? It wouldn’t be beneficial for me to give out an asset either, Haida.”

“Ugh, fine! It’s just...” The hyena clenched his fist and shut his eyes tight for a few seconds. Then, he unclenched and opened his mouth like energy bursting through him. “Y-you’ve gotten big! And I’m concerned! Very concerned!”

Tadano tilted his head. “I haven’t gotten taller, Haida.”

“Oh my god, you’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

“Whatever do you mean, Ichiro?” He couldn’t help but smile at Haida’s sudden shift. The use of a first name was something so rudimentary that just worked on the hyena—however confusing may it be. “I have no idea what you could pooooossibly mean—”

“Fine! Y-you’re... fat!” He squeaked out the word like it had been physically stuck on its way up. He heaved forward—a dry throat and anxiety spiking up his chest all he had left after such an intense confession. “Sorry, but I had to say it. I didn’t want to at first, but then I was getting so concerned and—”

“*That* is what you wanted to say? You had me worried for a second!” Ah, how the news brought him relief. For a second, he was genuinely thinking that something concerning was eating Haida away. Something so little bringing so much strife—it could only happen to Haida. It was as humorous as it was pitiable. “You could’ve just told me in passing. You’re just pointing out a fact.”

“I guess? Most people get offended by it.”

“Really? Why would they?”

Looking down, there indeed was a layer of pudge adorning his once lanky body. Haida was thin, but his past self made the hyena look like the peak of fitness in comparison. His current body was... nicer to look at in a way. It helped that it finally got him clothes shopping now that his two favorite and most importantly *only* outfits no longer fit him.

His belly pushed forward a little, obscuring the slightest edge of the upper parts of his legs. It was soft and plush, like his own personal squishy stress ball. Sometimes, he’d poke at it—fascinated by the presence of something so soft being a part of him. To see a body morph so drastically was something that *enraptured* his fascination, and when something took hold of his mind, it would take exhausting everything about it to even consider letting the topic go.

“W-well, most people don’t like being called fat. It’s like telling someone with crooked teeth about their dental health. Just feels like rubbing salt in the wound, you know?”

“Why would it be a wound, though? I mean, aren’t most people above the middle of that BMI scale?” Looking at himself in the mirror every morning, he could easily compare himself to most of the people working in his company. Some of his business partners overtook him in size, but otherwise, he looked like the average salaryman. “That’s like being told that you’re under six feet and being mad. It’s normal, right?”

“I—maybe? I guess? That doesn’t matter, though! Aren’t you worried about health issues?”

“Well, I’m lowering my life expectancy every single time I enter my car, but you never get that worried when I go for a ride. I’m more likely to die from a car crash than from any health complications if you think about it.”

“But... That’s not how it works! I mean, it’s just not...”

“Come on, Haida. You’re probably going to end up just like this in a decade or two.” He knew from experience, and he certainly felt that the plump men that populated his offices were far happier than all of the fitness influencers that took sponsors from them. “As long as I stay active, I don’t really care that I’m bigger than average.”

“Ngh... Maybe? I dunno. It just feels slightly off.”

“And you don’t know how interesting the world of food is!” Tadano cheered. “A meal can tell a unique story. From the preparation to the presentation, it’s all part of a unique process.”

“Really? I don’t know, then again, with what I eat...” Instant ramen, packaged meals from the supermarket, and soup didn’t make for the most varied palette. “Whatever, just make sure that you pace yourself. It’d be nasty to see you get issues from getting so...”

“Fat? Come on, Haida. It’s just a word! It won’t hurt me, and it certainly won’t hurt you.” Tadano said, reaching for the cinnamon bun now that the conversation had lost its tense air. “For example, let me tell you about where I bought this cinnamon roll...”

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After seeing the internet cafe, Tadano realized that filling out his room could help stimulate his brain. The cramped space and the claustrophobia prevented his mind from meandering, but he certainly didn’t want to move out of his massive apartment. The convenience of being near so many restaurants was too much to give up. So, the best course was obvious; to fill out his room to the point that there was visual stimulation in every corner.

He still wanted to maximize efficiency, of course. He had been holding off on buying things unless he was one hundred percent sure that they would benefit him, which slowed things significantly. Still, progress was progress at the end of the day.

To start his redecoration, he went with a full-body mirror. It wasn’t even to check his image before work—the normalization of bedhead in the workplace still needed to be cemented across all of the company branches, after all. It was simply nice to acknowledge his own identity as a person. He knew his voice and he knew his mannerisms, but he didn’t really know himself appearance-wise—at least outside of press events and magazine photos.

“Hm, do I look good?”

Tadano didn’t really have standards for appearance, let alone preferences. Stripped down to his underwear, he could see all the changes that his body was going through far better than any photo could display.

His legs were far chunkier than he ever thought possible for him. They weren’t the sticks they were, but they still weren’t the giant slabs of meat like the legs of the investors he talked to Haida about.

Up from there, he moved up to his butt. Whirling to see his backside, Tadano was glad to see that the flat plain he had for a butt had grown to something more defined. His light blue briefs hugged his cheeks tightly—almost like a wedgie. For as uncomfortable as it was, it brought him a strange sense of catharsis.

“It’s nice to have something to boast. I heard that folks like people who are a little softer around the edges.” Like a teenage boy exploring his body, Tadano reached to touch his butt.

He had missed out on experiences like this thanks to his pursuit of automation, so this was like reliving the years he had missed. “Soft... Mgh, maybe I should get used to being soft. It’s nice.”

Belly; same as usual. It had grown a little bit, but not enough to be of note. His multiple layers made it easy for his belly to not stick out that much.

The same couldn’t be said for his chest, however. He had heard his female business associates complain about ill-fitting shirts for their breasts, and now, he could certainly understand their frustration better. His flat pectorals had gained mass faster than he thought. Sure, men still had the body to sport protrusions like these ones, but he didn’t expect it to come so fast.

“Wow, these things are crazy...”

Still curious, Tadano gently reached for his man boobs. With one on each hand, he gave them a light squeeze. The punch that it sent through his body made him quiver just a little, and like the overeager man that he was, Tadano couldn’t help but indulge just a *little* bit more.

Twisting around the mirror, Tadano continued squeezing his own body. It was like seeing someone else—someone who was much more attractive—behind the glass panel.

The posing—the twirling—the smile; it was almost like the many photoshoots investors pushed him to make for phony magazines. This time, however, it was... *enjoyable*. He could even picture the flash of the camera each time he changed positions. It was *him*; in his almost empty room with Sci-Fi Movies-themed underwear appreciating a body that would certainly drive his associates up the wall were they to discover it.

With money, you could do anything you wanted. That meant that actual displays of rebellion were rare with everyone willing to be your stepping stone. His laughter was as juvenile as his motivation, but how could he resist? He couldn’t remember the last time he was so invigorated without looking at a screen or consuming something—be it food or entertainment.

“I didn’t know you could have this much fun with your own body...”

Still enthralled by the sight of his own physique, Tadano curiously reached for the closet drawer hosting all the clothes. There was something unknown blooming in his mind, and it was pushing him to do something as perplexing as this. Like moving wholly on autopilot, actions were performed without any rhyme or reason. It was like holding the forbidden fruit of knowledge itself; completely in the dark of how he would feel after finishing whatever he was doing, but tempted by that uncertainty.

A pair of jeans and a graphic tee later, Tadano was amazed to see just how *tightly* they hugged his body.

His jeans wrapped around his legs like casing around German sausages. Looking at his backside, Tadano was bewildered but not surprised by the sight of his butt struggling to be contained by the pair of pants. Just moving made his buttcrack all the more visible, and he

didn't even dare to see how it would look if he was to bend down. Over it, a prominent muffin top overflowed from the waist down.

For his upper body, every single curve and roll was visible to the eye. Somehow, they stuck out even more than when he was checking himself out semi-naked. As if the sides of his stomach made it out to look as obnoxiously prominent as possible, the very bottom of his stomach peeked beneath his shirt.

"Mmh, how did this happen?" Large clothes did an excellent job of hiding most of his girth—perhaps too good of a job, considering that even he was confused about it. "This fit me a year ago."

Such a prospect would've been enough to at least make him cock his head in the past. Instead, he was left with a strange sort of pride. Doing a double take that he was *truly* about to do this, he then started rubbing circles around his belly. It was surprisingly soothing, was this pleasantness really at the tip of his fingers this entire time?

"I wonder if it would feel different if it was another person rubbing it..." Tadano hummed.

The relief was so strong that he couldn't resist letting out a sigh of relief—a *terrible* mistake, as his midsection expanded while inhaling air, the button that had been holding his pants together was sent flying.

"Oh." He said bluntly. "Well, there goes the fist of my new pants." His usual outfits had been given to random people in the street by now, considering that they were so diminutive compared to his frame that simply *putting them on* was impossible.

Hands on his hips, Tadano stared at the discarded button. Unlike the gleaming, perfectly polished buttons attached to clothes that were worth thousands of dollars, the button that failed to hold his busted pants had the rusty charm of the thrift stores that he had recently discovered and become fascinated by.

"Guess I can call this... a trophy?" Despite how *nonsensical* the sentence was, Tadano couldn't help but feel... right. Very right, *extremely* right. "Might hang this in my room. Works better than a gaudy poster..."

The first trophy that wasn't related to his body, and it ended up being a popped button. He couldn't help but smile.

"Maybe I could celebrate with some chicken barbeque..."