

“You heard me.”

“I had to come back here to change clothes and drop off my books,” Yoshi said with the barest hint of a pout. “I happened to meet the landlord, he seems like a nice old guy...”

“He’s usually a cranky bastard, but he was positively cuddly about you,” Shimada said thoughtfully. “Play your cards right and you could end up owning this place.”

“What? What do you mean? Are you throwing me out?” Yoshi said, alarmed.

“Not yet, but this place is too small for two, and it was never a permanent arrangement.”

Yoshi stared at him for a moment and then looked around the room. “You’re right,” he finally said. “This place is too small. And it’s kind of dark and depressing.”

“I’ve been very happy here,” Shimada almost snapped. It was a lie; he’d suffered greatly there and survived. “Where do you go to school anyway? The Polytechnic?”

“No, I’m a senior in high school.”

“How old are you anyway?” Shimada envisioned how much or how little Ikoma would laugh if he got arrested for harboring an underage—

“I’m eighteen. I missed a year, so I’m finishing now,” Yoshi said defensively. “And excuse me, but I have to do some homework before bed.”

Shimada didn’t ask to see his identification card to verify his age; he merely cleared the table, took a bath and read in bed while Yoshi diligently did his homework. Eventually the kid tidied up his books and stacked them neatly by his side of the bed. He disappeared into the bathroom, splashed around in there, and came out in his own pajamas: sweat pants and an oversized t-shirt. Shimada was wearing his version of that ensemble when Yoshi joined him in bed. “What did you mean if I played my cards right?” the kid asked.

“Nothing.” Shimada kept innocently reading.

“Something.”

Putting the newspaper down, he gave the kid an appraising look. “I think the landlord likes really young guys.”

“Ew!”

“Ew?”

“Yeah, ew! What makes you think I like creepy old guys?”

“You jacked off your neighbor,” Shimada said blandly.

“That was just busi—” Yoshi turned red as a beet when Shimada laughed at him. “It’s not funny, I was scared to death when I did that.”

He shuddered honestly. "I don't know if I like guys. I didn't like my neighbor and I don't think I like the landlord, but I like you."

"Wait until you get to know me better," Shimada deadpanned and turned off the light. "Go. To. Sleep," he said firmly when he felt Yoshi shifting toward him. The kid shifted away and he fell into a deep sleep.

He dreamed of Seiji, of waking up next to Seiji. He woke in the dawn light to find Yoshi watching him.

"Who's Seiji?"

"No one." Shimada rolled over.

Yoshi leaned over him. "Someone. Nobody moans someone's name like that if they're, um, no one."

"He was a guy I used to know." Shimada burrowed into his pillow.

Unfazed by these evasive maneuvers, Yoshi asked, "How well did you know him?"

"Really well." Shimada pulled the covers over his head.

"Like a boyfriend?" Yoshi asked, burrowing under the duvet. "Hey, Shimada-san, do you like guys?"

Shimada flung the covers off and faced his tormentor. "And what if I do?" he snarled. Yoshi leaned forward and pressed his lips against Shimada's. "Oh, don't do that..."

"Why not?"

"I might like it too much," Shimada said, pulling him close and kissing him back. "Ah, saved by the bell," he said disengaging with difficulty when the alarm went off.

"Hey!"

"Sorry, kid, gotta follow a politician around today," Shimada said, running into the bathroom and locking the door behind him. "You!" he yelled at his half erect penis and also at Yoshi banging on the door. "Settle down now! Both of you!"

Without hurting the kid's feelings or starting World War III, Shimada managed to ward off Yoshi and his sweet, wonderful, too wonderful kisses, that morning. The politician was an idiot, but an interesting one and Shimada convinced Ikoma to let him follow him up to Osaka. "Just to see if he says the same stupid things," was Shimada's pitch.

Ikoma was amused and handed over some travel money. "I hope Osaka isn't too close to Tokyo for you," he said to Shimada's back.

Dashing home to grab a suitcase and catch the train, Shimada ran into the landlord on his way out. "Oh, hello, I'll be gone for a few days, but Yoshi will—"

"Such a nice young man," the landlord said dreamily. "You know there's a larger place on the third floor you two could move into."

“Ah, well, I—”

“I’ll renegotiate the lease and only charge you a little more.”

“...How much more?” Shimada could never resist the right kind of deal and he knew the views from the third floor were nicer than his current room. The landlord named a sum, they haggled pleasantly, and a deal was struck. “But I won’t be back until the weekend—”

“Oh, I’m sure Yoshi-kun can handle the move,” the landlord said smugly. “This was his idea anyway. Happy traveling.”

In the cab to the station, Shimada refused to think about coming home—about coming back to the ro— oh fuck it, coming home to Yoshi in their new place. “Damn that kiss,” he thought to himself. “One moment of weakness and we’re moving in together.”

Following the politician up to Osaka was as boring as Shimada suspected it would be, but he ended up staying on it longer than he thought he would because there were several stops in small towns on the way to Osaka Shimada hadn’t planned on. Nevertheless, at every stop, in every speech, the guy said the same dumb things, was surrounded by the same thuggish bodyguards, and gave the same non-answers to variations on the same questions Shimada had asked him in Nagasaki. By the sixth or seventh speech—Shimada had lost count—he was bored enough to stand at the back and watch the crowd.

“This guy’s about the same as the one we have in the Diet now,” a voice murmured in Tokyo dialect beside him.

Shimada glanced over at a sharp dressed young man, not flashy, but his posture and hair were perfect. “You think?” he asked quietly in Tokyo-ese.

The young man raised his eyebrows and smiled. “I do,” he said as if they were standing in Akihabara, not Osaka. “Except for the bodyguards,” he went on. “They’re a little rougher than the usual.” He looked around them and lowered his voice. “I hear there’s drug money behind this political run,” he added.

“Ah, do you.” Shimada began to smell a rat; a big fat smear campaign rat.

The young man offered a business card with a polite bow. “Masa Ishii,” he said. “I’m with Shimada Miyagi.”

Staring at the card, Shimada could feel Ishii waiting for him to offer his card, when a scuffle between the politician’s bodyguards and some teenage boys broke out near the podium. The scuffle escalated into a brawl; Shimada melted into the panicking crowd in one direction, not failing to note that Ishii melted away in another direction. Same technique, different motives. Shimada was getting away, but he felt sure Ishii was heading toward something.

Shimada paused long enough on the edges of the escalating melee to make a few mental notes and get socked on the jaw. But enough was enough, even for him, and he caught the next train heading toward Nagasaki. Ikoma was suitably impressed when he walked into his office after a sleepless night writing up his notes on the train.

“Nice bruise and that suit needs pressing,” he quipped.

“I need a computer and some coffee first,” Shimada said, as he sat down at a vacant terminal and banged out his impressions of what became a small riot in Osaka. There were already stories circulating that the teenagers were in the pay of the rival candidate, but it still didn’t excuse the violence of the politician’s bodyguards. Shimada wrote his story with the angle that the riot was planned by the other side and intended to bring out the worst in the politician’s overworked bodyguards. The fact that the teens showed up at the end of a grueling campaign when the politician’s bodyguards would be at their most frayed suggested a smear campaign in the making. Shimada wrote his story as a human interest feature that bordered on an editorial. He used a pen name in the byline.

“I thought you didn’t like this politician guy,” Ikoma commented as he toned the writing down on his own computer.

“I don’t, but I don’t like Shimada Miyagi fixing an election that was fixing itself,” Shimada said between bites of the sandwich Ikoma got him. He hadn’t realized how hungry he was.

Ikoma looked up from his computer. “See anyone you know?” he asked.

“No, but I made a new friend.” Shimada dug Ishii’s card out of his pocket. “Heard of him?”

“No,” Ikoma admitted. “But your brother would never send a big name to do a dirty job.” He finished his editing and sent the file to be shoehorned into the next edition. “That was wonderfully inflammatory writing, thank you. I think I’ll keep you on sports and culture until the fuss dies down,” he said lighting a cigarette. “Any idea who Shimada Miyagi’s client is?”

“Could be anyone,” Shimada said wearily. “Anyone who doesn’t want the delicate political balance messed up. That politician was a brash idiot, he would have lost just from that. Now he’ll lose because my brother will smear him and the voters will think he’s something worse. Senseless, stupid, typical overkill.”

“I wish your brother’s firm would stick to advertising and stay out of politics,” Ikoma said. “I like their snack food ads.”

“Oh, that’s just money,” Shimada said, getting up and stretching. “Politics is for fun.”

“You could go to the police about what happened in Osaka,” Ikoma suggested. “I’d back your suspicions up.”

“All the tracks would have been covered by now,” Shimada said. “No one could ever prove the teens were paid by Shimada Miyagi to start that brawl. The money would have gone through three or four different hands before it got to them. And don’t forget, a member of Shimada Miyagi was observing the event. How could they be implicated if they had a man there?”

“Hey, at least you didn’t run into Takashi,” Ikoma said a little too casually.

“Yeah, well, he must be too far up the foodchain for my brother to send him out on a mere smear job like this one.” Shimada shrugged. “I feel dirty even thinking about it. I’m tired, I’m going ho– home, yeah, I’m going home.”

On the way to his apartment, the new one he’d never seen, Shimada could hardly believe he’d forgotten Yoshi had moved them into a new apartment while he was gone. It was early afternoon, so probably Yoshi would still be at school and might go straight to work from there.

Shimada was more relieved to be back in Nagasaki than he’d realized in Ikoma’s office. The streets, the shops, the rhythm of daily life crowded around him, relaxed him, welcomed him. The orchestrated blurring of the line between political event and street theater in Osaka had unnerved him. He’d spent so many years in Tokyo trying to tell the difference between art and presentation, truth and spin, love and manipulation that now anything beyond black and white, right and wrong, and good and bad freaked him out. “How spoiled I’ve become on simplicity,” he thought on the bus. “A wimp, almost, but I like it that way.” He was glad Ikoma had him covering sports and culture stories for the next few weeks. Much as he liked covering politics, running into a representative of his brother’s ad agency engaged in a dirty trick, one where innocent people got hurt, and not being able to do anything about it was more than Shimada could stomach.

To distract himself, he thought back to the kiss Yoshi gave him the morning of his trip, but suddenly all he could remember was that they had used Tokyo speech that morning without even realizing it. Or had they? The kiss and fumble were now secondary in Shimada’s mind; had he and Yoshi used Tokyo-ese or not that morning and if they had, why would they? He was so distracted by this he didn’t notice his landlord and an older man standing in front of his building.

“There’s Mr. Shimada,” the landlord said, looking like his usual sour and cranky self. He turned the full charm of this on his tenant. “I