

“Oh, look at the time!” Shimada managed to derail the conversation, grab the check and make a gracious exit before he had to refuse to disclose Flounder’s name.

Things were going so well, Shimada didn’t want to jinx it by visiting his parents. But it was his opinion that when things were going well it was the best time to do difficult chores. And seeing his parents might be tough. He hadn’t really had any direct contact with them in two years, they probably knew he was back in Tokyo and were annoyed that he hadn’t visited them yet. Well, he would schedule his visit close to Christmas Day when he would have Yoshi to cheer him up after it.

A weekday late morning seemed safe enough: Daitaro would be at work, Daitaro’s horrible wife and two sons would be occupied elsewhere, so no chance of running into them. Shimada’s parents liked peaceful mornings so they scheduled appointments for the afternoon and early evening hours. Having thus carefully laid his plans, Shimada felt great confidence as he rang the doorbell of his childhood home on Christmas Eve morning.

His father opened the door, looked stern but ushered him into the living room. His mother was less composed: she cried out his name and flung herself into his arms. This softened his old man up and he exchanged smiles with his younger son. “So, you’re back, I see,” the elder Shimada said.

“Yeah,” Shimada said, prying his mother off him. They talked about their health for a while; his mother assured him that she was completely recovered from her hysterectomy, his father was still walking several miles a day, but Shimada had long ago figured out that that was to get a break from his mother. It was a relaxed, almost normal conversation after a period of familial stress. As far as Shimada was concerned it was a complete success. Shimada even had the patience to hear what elite private school his horrible nephews had gotten themselves tossed out of lately.

“So, how’s Daitaro’s magazine working out for you, Ryuu?” his father asked pleasantly.

“Daitaro’s magazine...?” Shimada was nonplussed.

“You know, dear, Perspectocity,” his mother said, she looked so happy. “We’ve read every issue since you started writing for it. We’re so proud of you!”

Shimada turned his full attention on his father. “What do you mean by ‘Daitaro’s magazine’?” he asked in a flat voice. “Masao Naganuma owns it.”

“Yes, yes, Daitaro doesn’t own it, but since you won your award, he’s been pouring money into it,” his father said, slowly and carefully

because all the color had drained from his son's face. "Didn't you know?"

Shimada's knees buckled and he fell heavily on them. "Oh my God, why is he doing this?" he appeared to be asking God directly because he had his eyes screwed shut.

"Dear, he said he wanted you to move back to Tokyo," his mother said, leaning forward in her chair, but unable to reach him.

"Why?" Shimada asked, eyes still closed, but he was aware that his father had knelt down and was supporting him on one side.

"Um, I—" his father began.

"So you'd leave all that silliness in Nagasaki behind and get married," his mother said, as if this were a great idea.

Shimada opened his eyes. "Silliness?" He frowned into the middle distance and then sighed. More composed, he looked from his smug mother's face into his concerned father's face. "What have you got against gay people?" he asked.

"Nothing really," his father admitted. "I kind of liked Seiji."

Unasked, his mother yelped, "I want more grandchildren!"

"You do know you just canceled each other out, don't you?" he asked, continuing to address his father.

"That's marriage for you, son," his father grunted as he helped him to his feet. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm not sure, but, dad, I am sure of one thing." Shimada clapped his father on the shoulder. "If you liked Seiji, you'll like Yoshi, too. And hopefully someday mom will get over it." Ignoring his mother's outraged squeak, Shimada bowed deeply to his parents and left their home.

Once in the street, he found his way to a park he'd played in as a child. He called Takashi's cell phone. "Did you know?" he demanded when Takashi picked up the call.

"Know what?" Takashi said neutrally.

"That Daitaro's been funding Perspectocity to lure me back to Tokyo?!" There was silence. "Takashi?"

"Hold on, Ryuu," Takashi said. Ryuu could hear him moving and then, "'Have you been funding Perspectocity to lure your brother back to Tokyo?'" There was a brief muffled answer, then Takashi said, "This is the meanest or second meanest thing I've ever seen you do, Daitaro. Excuse me." More silence and then a door closing. "Ryuu?"

"Still here," Shimada said, sitting on a bench by the deserted sandbox. "He didn't deny it, did he?"

"He's fucking proud of it!" Takashi yelled, furious. "I'm sorry he's your brother, but I'm glad he's not mine."

Shimada thought that didn't make much sense, but was essentially positive and supportive. He drew a long breath and sighed. "Oh fuck."

"What are you going to do?" Takashi asked, sounding calmer.

"I don't know, but I can't keep working for that bastard now that I know what's going on," Shimada said in a hollow voice. "In a few days, the apartment in Nagasaki is gone, I've got a year lease on the one here, Yoshi's enrolled in school here...oh God, what a huge fucking mess."

"Ryuu, if there's anything I can do—"

"I'll need a job when I get back," Shimada said, his voice firming up. "Writing, editing, but not in advertising. Say hi to Seiji for me. I'll see you on New Year's Eve at the airport."

The next call Ryuu made was to Masao Naganuma to quit his job. After that, he turned his cell phone off. If Yoshi called, he'd call him back, but Yoshi knew he'd be home in the next day, so Yoshi, who hated talking on phones, likely wouldn't call. Everyone else could go to hell.

When Takashi came out of the broom closet, Daitaro was waiting for him. "He's hysterical, right?" the elder Shimada brother asked.

"Not really," Takashi said coldly.

"You're hysterical."

"No, but I'm upset about this," Takashi admitted. "I was hoping we could live in peace now, but you're not past trying to run your brother's life."

"He's not doing such a great job, Takashi," Daitaro said, coolly examining his fingernails. "I did him and that stupid rag, Perspectocity, a favor. And is it appreciated? No, hell no. It's not easy being a nice guy around here."

Takashi slumped against the broom closet door and briefly considered just going back into it. But their new designer dress account clients were just getting off the elevator, so that option was out. "What?" He'd not heard Daitaro's question.

"I said, did Ryuu say what he was going to do?"

"Uh, no, no, he didn't," Takashi said, hoping he sounded convincing. "Hey, boss man, we're on." He smiled charmingly in the direction of the reception area.

But Daitaro was fumbling with his cell phone. "I'll be right there," he said.

Not that he was listening, but before he was out of earshot, Takashi heard Daitaro say in a deeply shocked and hollow voice, "He quit his job on Christmas eve?" And this almost made Takashi laugh. Nonetheless, it did make it easier for him to smile through the meeting with Daitaro, who seemed slightly dazed.

Shimada's trip to Nagasaki was uneventful. He continued to ignore his voice mails and text messages. There were several from Seiji and Ikoma, but none from Yoshi, so he didn't bother to look any further. Yoshi's welcome home kiss was as warm and sweet as ever. "I have no future, but my present is unbeatable," Shimada said sadly to himself. Over Yoshi's shoulder, he made eye contact with Flounder, who almost seemed glad to see him. "I hope you still feel that way on New Years Eve after a plane ride to Tokyo, buddy."

"Mr. Ikoma came by this afternoon," Yoshi said, taking Shimada's coat and bag.

"What'd he want?" Shimada sat next to Flounder on the couch.

"To talk to you." The kid sat next to him and started petting Flounder in a distracted way. "He said he'd try to get in touch with you in a day or two." He looked up from an annoyed cat that he was petting too hard. "Did something happen?"

"Yeah." Shimada sighed and figured there was no point in avoiding the inevitable. "I quit Perspectocity yesterday--"

"You--?"

"--because Daitaro was financing it," Shimada continued. "It was a trap to get me back in Tokyo. I guess everyone thought I'd leave you here in Nagasaki." He looked up, expecting to find emotional devastation before him, but there was the usual loving smile, maybe more so.

"I never thought that," Yoshi murmured, snuggling into his arms.

"Neither did I, but there are certain parties in Tok--"

"Who? Seiji?" Yoshi sat up and demanded. He was a charming combination of fierce and cute like that.

"Ah, no," Shimada said. "This is something Daitaro cooked up for my parents."

"How do you--?"

"I went to see them yesterday and they thought I knew Daitaro was financing the magazine's rise to fame or whatever," Shimada said. "I think my father might be okay with me being gay and happy instead of miserable and more miserable. My mother remains firmly entrenched in the pro-heterosexuality camp."

Yoshi sighed and leaned back into Shimada's arms. "I guess we'll work it all out in Tokyo."

"Yosh, it's not going to be easy," Shimada said. "I don't have a job, a few contacts, but it's still going to be rough. It might be better--"

"What might be better?" Yoshi was frowning again.

"If you stayed here."

"Then they win," Yoshi spat and tried to get up, but Shimada

restrained him. "Let me go."

"Yoshi, just give me a little time—"

"Like you said to Seiji?" Yoshi stopped struggling, but Shimada had already let go of him.

"I..."

"I'm not going to let you go, Ryuu," Yoshi said, almost coldly. "I'll do whatever I have to do to stay with you. I can work, I don't have to go to school, I even got a little money from my uncle for graduation." He named a sum that would cover a little over a month's rent in Tokyo or a few months of groceries if Shimada would take his money, which he wouldn't. "I can't go back to being the way I was before I met you. I won't go back to that." He leaned his head against Shimada's shoulder; he was shaking but not crying.

Shimada put his arms around him, but inside he was very still and felt like crying. "I can't go back to the way I was before you, Yoshi," he said when he thought he could control his voice. "You brought me back to life."

"You brought me back to life, too," Yoshi said, smiling only with his eyes. "I was so lonely, so empty before you loved me."

"It'll be rough in Tokyo," Shimada said. "But we'll work it out."

"As long as you're with me, Ryuu, I can do anything," Yoshi said, hugging him.

"Sorry about your school."

"Oh, it's okay," Yoshi said, looking around for Flounder, who'd made a hasty exit when the yelling started. "Maybe there are scholarships or grants or something to help pay for it next year. Don't worry." Locating the cat sitting by the kitchen, he patted his leg for Flounder to come to him. "Oh, but don't tell my family what happened when we visit them this week, they'll freak out."

"I wasn't planning to tell anyone on our round of good-bye visits," Shimada said, staring at the unmoving cat. "Ikoma must know, but everyone else can find out someday in the distant future when we've hit the big time."

"Hell, yeah!" Yoshi gave him a big wet kiss and then looked at Flounder again. "What's wrong with that cat?"

"It's dinner time, isn't it?"

"Daitaro, Daitaro, Daitaro," Seiji chanted as he paced their suite in Niseko. "He's like a curse Ryuu can't shake off." Takashi hadn't told him what had happened with Ryuu until they were in the air on their way to Sapporo. Seiji had been wondering why Ryuu wasn't returning his calls, but hadn't a clue what a disaster Daitaro had