

government. Shimada's paper and the Japanese State Department took a very serious interest in the matter, which had become an international incident. While Seiji did what he could from his government job, Takashi, Yoshi, Daitaro, Renge, Jun Ikoma, hell, even Kenbo, worked every angle they could think of to get Shimada out of the jam his apparently alarming questions to a Saudi official about his dead Filipina maid and the thriving sex slave trade between Saudi Arabia and the Philippines had gotten the reporter into. Takashi was touched to discover how many friends Shimada probably didn't realize he had in Japan. Ultimately, the Saudis decided he was more trouble than he was worth, and after three days in a cell with his translator at the main jail in Riyadh, banned them both from the country forever, escorted them to a New Delhi-bound plane and stood guard until it took off. In New Delhi they were met by an underling from the Japanese embassy, who put them on the next plane to Tokyo. In Tokyo, Shimada filed a story even his paper said was too much speculation, but Interpol was very interested in it. As far as Shimada was concerned, his involvement ended with Interpol's entrance, but the paper, after paying him as if he'd filed a major story, which translated to Shimada as a bribe to be good and stay local, kept him on the east Asia beat, mostly in Tokyo, until the name Ryu Shimada ceased to cause diplomats to break out in flop sweats.

"Jupiter Li's interesting enough to try to be where he is and see if anything happens. That's something we newspaper people do on a regular basis," Shimada said. "We're funny that way."

"You mean that's what they do when they can't fly to foreign dictatorships and get in trouble," Takashi said, and smiled at Shimada's laugh. "I see. Well, I certainly wouldn't want to get involved with a girl in a crowd like that," Takashi said coolly. "That could be my way out of this mess."

"I don't think old Yoko's making much progress getting in with the In-crowd," Shimada said thoughtfully. "Especially since Li's been in Tokyo splashing money around, living large and chasing Koji Kawazu's ass since his second film came out."

"Koji wasn't bad in it," Takashi observed. "The film I mean, not his ass. It was a nice little urban gay artist in love with an urban gay married salaryman ill-fated romance story. Rather sad, but Seiji and I enjoyed it. I seem to recall you and Yoshi liked it as well."

"Yeah, we did. Yeah, it was nice I happened to be in town for both premieres, wasn't it? Even though I hate those kind of things, unless it's a news story. Thank the gods Yoshi's second film sank without a trace," Shimada observed. "And that he just can't act."

"I thought Yoshi was great in 'The English Speaking Escort'," Takashi said. "So did you."

"He was great, but he had a lot of time during the play's run to get good," Shimada said. "He didn't have that kind of time to get it together for the second film. He's not a good movie actor. I don't think he's much of an actor at all."

"Maybe it wasn't the right role," Takashi allowed. "I mean, he was playing a gangster's boyfriend and it was supposed to be a comedy, and there was that cool car chase, which was the best part, and then that awful shoot-out at the end and everyone, except Yoshi's character, dies, and—"

"Takashi, please don't make me remember," Shimada said, rubbing his temples. "Renge's trying to negotiate him out of the third film. Looks promising, keep your fingers crossed."

"He had some good moments—"

"Yes. He was cute in places," Shimada said firmly. "And this is not what I asked you here to talk about."

Takashi sighed. "As you must realize, I'm under a lot of pressure in all this," he said. "Daitaro is on me, my family likes Seiji, but now they wonder if it's a permanent—"

"Does he know that?" Shimada asked.

"Oh, God, no, my parents haven't seen Seiji since the Yamada clan contacted them about my character," Takashi said. "I never hid our relationship from my parents. They like Seiji very much. I even told my mother I was in unrequited love with him when I was."

"Yeah, before it was requited," Shimada said wryly, signally for another round of drinks.

"So, moving right along," Takashi continued briskly as he was sensing a certain tension in the air. "There's pressure at work, pressure from my family, and a certain amount of tension at home. It's like Seiji believes me when I say it's all a show, but then again, here you are."

"I'm here because Yoshi is worried about Seiji," Shimada said, trying his excellent new martini. "He might not be showing it to you, but according to Yoshi, Seiji is anxious and depressed about the miai. And it would be awkward for me if you and he broke up for any reason."

"We're not going to break up," Takashi snapped. "But why would it be awkward for you? Do you want him back?"

"No. And that would be awkward."

Takashi put down his drink. "Do you really think he'd want you back? After everything?" he asked, stunned and not looking at Shimada.

“Takashi, I don’t know what he’d do,” Shimada said, sadly, not looking at Takashi or the waitress because the last thing they needed was more liquor. “I thought I’d be with him for the rest of my life and he didn’t want that. So as far as I’m concerned, there’s no telling what he’ll do if he feels threatened enough or hurt enough or any of the feelings he had when he decided to dump me for you, just when I was ready to dump everything for him.” He sighed and took a sip of the martini he didn’t really want anymore. “So, if you can wiggle out of this miai, do so. I think this is more of a make or break than you realize. When is it, by the way?”

“Thursday,” Takashi said, pushing his vodka tonic away from him. “Unless I can, as you say, wiggle out of it. And it’s not a miai, it’s just a, a meeting or something.”

“Yeah, right. I guess Thursday’s the night Yoshi said he was going out with Seiji, now that I think about it,” Shimada said. “I wasn’t invited, but I suppose I’ll live. Where are fashionable not-a-miais held these days anyway?”

Takashi named an elegant hotel that catered to a more mature, traditional type of Japanese. “Do you know what they’re doing that night?” Takashi asked.

“I dunno, food, shopping, movie, galleries, whatever they do on normal nights out,” Shimada said. “That’s another aspect of this mess: I’d hate to see Yoshi lose one of the few real friends he has in Tokyo. He’s pretty much surrounded by posers, losers, creeps, leeches and miscellaneous weirdoes lately. I really need Renge to get him out of that third film so he can go back to being a normal kid. The modeling jobs have tapered to nearly nothing, which is also great. I figure Yoshi can take a year off, go to school and we get back on track after this period of distraction.”

“Well, some of it was fun,” Takashi said, with a smile for Ryu and waving his American Express card at the waitress.

“Yeah, kind of. Hey, I’ll get this,” Shimada said, holding up his VISA card.

“No, I’ll get it,” Takashi insisted.

“Thanks, Takashi, I said I’LL GET IT,” Shimada said, raising his voice a little.

They eventually flipped a coin, and Shimada was allowed to put the tab on his paper’s generous expense report to keep him happy in Tokyo, as opposed to Takashi’s generous client-love Shimada Miyagi credit card, and all was well in the Hourglass Bar that afternoon.

The Hotel Arcadia, which Daitaro had chosen for the miai Takashi

refused to admit was a miai, and hadn't been able to wrench himself free of, let alone wiggle out of, had a huge sunken bar and lounge in the middle of its lobby. Rather incongruously for such an elegant hotel, it was called the Impala Bar. Usually the Impala was a serene deserted sea of plush chairs, little marble-topped tables, tasteful lighting, and a long, long mahogany bar with a few well-dressed travelers scattered around it. One of the younger members of PRCK Architects had once suggested to the hotel's owners that his firm remodel the lobby, but this idea was politely rebuffed. The puzzled youngster later learned that the hotel really didn't want more traffic in the lobby than they already had, they were very happy with the reliable stodginess the hotel had achieved over the decades and they were loath to tamper with what they considered their own kind of perfection.

On the dreaded Thursday, Seiji didn't bother going home after work. He couldn't bear the thought of watching Takashi put on a kimono for the miai that Takashi refused to admit was a miai. It was upsetting to Seiji that Takashi was in so much denial about what was really happening, he wasn't bothering to fight it. Seiji was in denial, too. He didn't want to know a thing about the when, the where and the how of the proceedings on Thursday, beyond that it was on that date and he wanted to be elsewhere, having fun, if possible. He would have liked to support his lover in all this mess, but Seiji found it impossible to support someone who didn't realize or wouldn't admit how much trouble he was actually in. Takashi had never been in this kind of situation, with Daitaro pushing from one side and all of heterosexual Japanese tradition pushing from the other. How could Takashi survive all that pressure? Ryu had caved in, and, in some ways, Seiji now saw that Ryu was stronger than Takashi. Ryu had left everything behind when he left Tokyo after Seiji left him. Not only had he survived and grown stronger, he'd thrived, triumphed and found a new love, a wonderful person, and they were happier than he and Seiji had ever been. That had never bothered Seiji before—that Ryu and Yoshi were happier than he and Ryu had ever been—but now that he felt on shaky ground with Takashi, it was gnawing at him. Not gnawing at him a lot, but just here and there, and then there was suddenly all this weird guilt for everything: hurting Ryu, rebounding on Takashi, envying Ryu's love for Yoshi while being friends with Yoshi. It all made Seiji just want to run away and sleep...forever, just sleep, and never have to worry about waking up. Seiji was so nervous all Thursday afternoon, fidgety and his stomach in knots, he almost cancelled whatever it was Yoshi wanted to do that night to distract him from what Takashi was doing that night.

“I hope you don’t mind if we meet Koji for a drink later,” Yoshi said when they met at a bar downtown. He was wearing a sleek black leather jacket, tight black jeans, a grey silk jersey t-shirt and dark magenta colored Italian loafers. Seiji felt elderly and dowdy next to him in his plain business suit and tie. “Koji’s worried about you, he wants you to have fun tonight.”

“Does everyone in Tokyo know about tonight?” Seiji said, sipping a little more of his humongous margarita.

“I guess I mentioned it,” Yoshi said sheepishly. “Or maybe he mentioned it...I can’t remember now. Doesn’t matter, anyway, we don’t have to go if you don’t want—”

“Oh, no, I’d like to go,” Seiji said quickly. “I, I appreciate what you and he are doing for me. It makes me feel less alone in all of it, sort of.”

“Oh, Seiji, it’s going to be all right, don’t worry,” Yoshi said. He put a lot into it because he wasn’t sure he believed it himself.

“When did you see Koji?” Seiji asked. “I thought you two had gone your separate ways after the film.”

“We pretty much did,” Yoshi admitted. “Koji runs with a pretty fast crowd now, but I guess he figures you have to be nice to the people on your way up because that’s who you’ll meet on your way down. At least that’s what someone said to me at the party for Koji getting cast as the star of ‘The Occupation Boy’.”

“Oh? What’s it about?” Seiji asked.

“I’m not sure, I didn’t stick around very long,” Yoshi said, looking at his watch: they had another hour to kill. “I got sick of saying I was considering several projects when people asked me what my next film was. And the producer and production company of Koji’s new film are American so everyone was speaking English and it really wears me out to try to speak and understand English for more than an hour.”

“I bet Ryuu loved it,” Seiji observed. “He loves speaking English.”

“He wasn’t there. He was on a story or hanging out with his newspaper friends,” Yoshi said, somewhat sadly. “He didn’t want to go with me. I guess I don’t blame him. It was kind of a weird evening.”

“Oh? How so?” Seiji asked.

Yoshi sighed, he didn’t want to mention that the party had been at Papa Elysium’s, where he’d gone with Takashi, Daitaro and Koji one night, nor that Daitaro and Norboru Suzuki the architect had been at Koji’s party and had even had what seemed like an argument over Koji. It had been one of the main things that drove Yoshi home after an hour in that creepy crowd Koji currently had around him. “Just lots of high-