

It appeared that Yoshi'd worked up an appetite by the way he plowed into his meal. Shimada was hungry, too, and, thinking back over it, they'd pretty much stayed in bed all morning and only had snacks and blow jobs that day. This was the first real meal they'd had since yesterday. "I'll have to take better care of feeding him," Shimada thought, suppressing a smile.

"Hey, they have wireless here," Ikoma said, setting the laptop aside, but still where he could see the screen. "I sent it to the paper, so I won't have to rush off after dinner and you can take the laptop home with you," he added, finally eating his less-than-hot meal. "You're about the age of those kendokas today, Yoshi, are you going to university, too?"

"No, I don't have the grades or the money," Yoshi said. "I'm going to vocational school, though."

"For what?" Shimada asked, and got a wry look from Ikoma.

"Haven't talked about this, have you?" Ikoma asked.

Shimada ignored him and asked Yoshi, "For what?" again.

"Graphic design," Yoshi said. "If that's okay with you," he added somewhat defensively.

"It's fine, fine," Shimada said, feeling kind of stupid. "Better than, um, auto repair."

"Probably more money in auto repair, but tough on the hands," Ikoma observed with a smile. "But graphic design's a good field. You'll be able to get a job easily, I'm always hearing about places that need good designers."

Shimada was relieved when Ikoma and Yoshi started talking about layouts and computers and magazines they liked, it let his stupid reaction fade into the background. So, Yoshi wasn't going to university like he and Seiji did, so what? As long as they were happy, what difference did it make? Especially in Nagasaki where Shimada didn't have to live in his brother's shadow. And he thanked all the gods for that.

Two drinks past dessert, Yoshi asked what time it was. "Oh, Flounder will be hungry," he said.

"You're probably right," Shimada agreed, giving the waitress the high sign for the check. He had a different kind of hunger, and planned on going to bed with Yoshi immediately after feeding the cat.

"Flounder?" Ikoma asked.

"He's our cat," Yoshi said happily.

"You named your cat Flounder?" Ikoma looked from Yoshi to Shimada and got nods. "After the fish or verb?"

"Um, the fish, but the verb suits him, too," Shimada said, laughing.

“Does not,” Yoshi said, defending their cat.

Ikoma smiled at their happiness as he hijacked the check and gave the waitress his credit card. “No, no, it’s on the paper,” he said over Shimada’s protests. “You worked through the first part of dinner, it was the least I could do,” he added, acknowledging Yoshi’s polite bow and warm smile.

Shimada and Yoshi went home to an angry, but easily mollified with food, cat and a warm bed full of love.

The next afternoon Shimada dropped by the paper to pick up his assignments for the rest of the week. He also wanted to ask Ikoma what he’d thought of Yoshi.

“He’s adorable,” was Ikoma’s answer.

“Doesn’t he remind you of Seiji?” Shimada asked.

“No.”

“No? Not slightly?” Shimada asked. “He’s like Seiji in High School.”

“I only knew Seiji at university,” Ikoma said. “He was repressed where Yoshi is just a little shy. Seiji was fearful, where Yoshi is just young and unsure. You made Seiji crazy nervous, but Yoshi loves you like crazy.”

“Jun, I’m stunned...”

“That I noticed?” Ikoma asked. “I wanted to be a novelist once, budding novelists notice all kinds of things. It’s a hard habit to break.” It was obvious Shimada didn’t have a come-back for that, so Ikoma went on with a grim smile, “You and I have never talked about Seiji. I never liked him much, could never figure out why he stuck with you when he was so freaked out by you. It was weird.”

“Because he loved me?” Shimada said, inwardly cursing himself for making it a question.

“Then he had a strange idea of love,” Ikoma said bluntly. “And you’re different now, tougher and nicer somehow. I guess interviewing housewives and shopkeepers has done that to you.”

“Yeah, I was pretty high-strung back in Tokyo. Don’t make me remember. Writing ad copy for my brother was killing me,” Shimada admitted. “Thanks for helping me get set up here.”

“Like I had a choice the way you just showed up here,” Ikoma laughed. “But you’ve been good for the paper, so it’s all good. Speaking of Tokyo,” he said, peering at his computer. “I got an email from my cousin who has a little magazine there. He’d like to republish your article on that artist and gallery and is willing to pay Tokyo money for articles on Nagasaki culture. You game?”

“Money is money, forward the email and I’ll think it over,”

Shimada said. He got his story assignments and they parted in good spirits. It was only when he got outside that Shimada realized that everything Ikoma said about Seiji and Yoshi was dead on the money. “Damn,” he thought. “What was I thinking with Seiji? Was I just so scared of losing him, I crushed him and pushed him away? I’d never have the guts to ask him either.” But he managed to drive the past away again when he got home to Yoshi.

Much to his surprise, Shimada found Yoshi and his uncle, at the apartment. At least the futon was made and the place was tidy. They weren’t clean freaks, but they both did like order and clean surfaces, which pleased Shimada a lot.

“Oh...Mr., um, Mr. not Katayama,” Shimada fumbled. “C’mon, Yoshi, help me out.”

“Eijiro Ichimonji,” Yoshi said, or actually spat.

“Mr. Ichimonji,” Shimada said, hoping whatever it was, Yoshi wasn’t going to make it more difficult. “How nice to see you again. And a surprise, at that. I’ll make some tea—”

“I can’t stay, but I came to invite you and Yoshi to dinner at the café tonight,” Mr. Ichimonji said.

“Oh?” Shimada said politely.

“We have a table in the back for family,” Ichimonji went on. “Yoshi knows the way—”

“I—” Yoshi began.

“We’ll be there!” Shimada cut him off. He saw Ichimonji downstairs to the street. “What time should we be there?”

“Five-thirty,” Ichimonji said, his face unreadable. “Yoshi knows the way.”

“Well, so do I,” Shimada thought as he bowed politely to his lover’s maternal uncle. “So, okay, what happened?” he asked Yoshi back in the apartment.

“He cornered me after school—”

“‘Cornered you’?”

“Well, he walked me home,” Yoshi said, scowling at the coffeetable. “And asked me all kinds of questions about you and me and why I’m so happy. It was embarrassing.” He looked up when Shimada didn’t say anything.

“And?” Shimada said when he had eye-contact.

“He asked if you were sexually abusing me.”

“Huh,” Shimada said after a while. “Well, if your hotheaded cousin kills me, make sure Ikoma gives me a good funeral.”

“Ryu!” Yoshi flung himself into Shimada arms.

“Just kidding, kidding,” Shimada soothed him. “Sort of.” He

hugged him tighter. “You really are eighteen, right?” He felt a nod against his chest. “Of course if your family thinks I’m no good, none of that is going to matter.”

“We don’t have to go tonight, we—”

“Yes, we do.” Shimada brushed the hair out of Yoshi’s tense brown eyes and rubbed the crease between his brows. “This is your family.”

“I’d pick you instead of them!”

“Hopefully you won’t have to,” Shimada said, wishing he’d been so brave for Seiji. But he wouldn’t be here consoling Yoshi if he had. Or maybe he would; Seiji wasn’t the type to endure hardship and near-poverty for love. Of course, they never had the chance to find out: Shimada had caved into his mother’s request and lost everything he’d ever cared about.

But now he cared very much for Yoshi and this was worth fighting for. “Hey, it’s just dinner, and we better get with it,” he said, glancing at the clock.

Yoshi reluctantly rose to change out of his school uniform. “I wanted to spend the evening with you,” he said from the bedroom.

“Dinner’s at five-thirty. How much of the evening can this take up?” Shimada asked him.

“I have homework.”

“Good thing we still have the laptop!” Shimada said, locking the door behind them. “Cheer up, Yoshi, this is the easy part of the evening.”

Apparently the family was evenly split between the pro-Shimada and the not-sure-about-Shimada camps. The butcher-knife-wielding cousin was a fan of Shimada’s sports writing, his waitress-wife liked his culture stories, but Yoshi’s aunt and uncle were less interested in his newspaper career. The conversation at the family table tucked away in a corner of the kitchen ranged from local and national news to Shimada’s past in Tokyo and his present in Nagasaki. They even lightly touched on his religious beliefs, or at least ascertained that he was vaguely Shinto and Buddhist, as they were. This seemed to be a great relief to Yoshi’s aunt and uncle, but only elicited smiles and shrugs from the rest of the family. Overall, it was a nice evening. Shimada thought he got off lightly on the interrogation side of things and the dinner, which was even better than the café’s delicious noodles, was excellent. The café’s dinner rush started around seven and was intense for a Monday.

“You’ve brought us business, Shimada-san,” Mr. Ichimonji said as he cheerfully headed for the dining area.

“Thank you for dinner.” Shimada bowed to Mrs. Ichimonji.

“I’m so glad to meet Yoshi’s, um, Yoshi’s friend,” she said and went into the food preparation part of the kitchen. Yoshi’s cousin and his wife were already hard at work, so Shimada and Yoshi cleared and cleaned the family table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. They said a quick good-night to whoever had time in the bustling café to hear it and left by the back door, which opened into the alleyway in which Shimada had rescued Yoshi from Mr. Watanabe not so long ago.

“Ah, where we met,” Shimada said. “How romantic.” Yoshi sighed with obvious relief. Shimada hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath. “That went well, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Yoshi said, bumping his shoulder against him. He was startled, but didn’t resist, when Shimada put his arm around him.

“They’re nice people,” Shimada said. “They just want you to be okay and maybe even happy.”

“How can you tell?” Yoshi asked.

“They wanted to know who I am to you,” Shimada said, thoughtfully, remembering how isolated he and Seiji had been after university. Besieged almost, always careful not to appear as the couple they so very much were. They’d never had a dinner even remotely resembling this one. “If I were some crazy person, they’d be right to object to me. I’d even object to me.”

“Why don’t they just trust me?” Yoshi asked.

“I think they do, Yoshi,” Shimada said, getting bored with the subject. “You’re still living with me, right?”

“Oh...well, yeah...”

They were passing a convenience story. “Want some ice cream?” Shimada asked.

“Yeah!”

They ate it in bed later that night.

Their life together settled into a nice rhythm of school and work for Yoshi, writing and reporting for Shimada and as much time together as they could manage. Now that Yoshi had more financial support, his uncle only asked him to work three days in the café. There were regular family dinners there that included Shimada, who continued to endear himself to them. Yoshi’s family could not fail to be impressed that Yoshi had fallen in love with a fine person and they were deeply relieved that their cousin and nephew was able to be happy again.

Ikoma was happy, too. The paper was flourishing and readership was up partly due to Shimada’s writing. It was also partly due to the competition Shimada’s writing sparked in the paper’s other writers and the new writers who came on board to learn from them. Ikoma even had to clean up his writing to keep up with his flourishing reporter