

went off down the hall. Bells were ringing and there was a general migration in the same direction as Kurogane had gone. Yoshi felt a pang that he wouldn't be roaming around this school, sitting in classrooms and learning graphic design. But he had other pressing things to do, so he shrugged off his pang and went up one flight to reason, beg, or battle with the Business Manager to get his deposit back. He, Yoshi Katayama, was a special case and he would be victorious.

As it turned out the Business Manager had better things to do than argue with a determined teenager, so he wrote a voucher for Yoshi's deposit and the cashier grudgingly paid it. Yoshi took it as a good omen and went to the cheap clothing store where he was promptly hired, mainly for being cute and because they were horribly shorthanded just then. He began working that very afternoon.

Around nine that night, he got a call on his cell, but he was so busy, he had to let it go to voicemail. He wasn't able to check it until there was a lull half an hour later. It was Shimada wondering where the hell he was. "I got a job! The store closes at ten, so—"

"Where is this job?" Shimada asked. "Hold on, I'm writing it down. I'll be there to walk you home, you're too short to be roaming around at night by yourself."

"Heh, sez you," Yoshi laughed. "Wow, more customers! See you later!"

Shimada got to the cheap clothes shop a little before ten and was brusquely told they were closed. "I'm not here to buy," he snarled back. "I'm here to walk Yoshi Katayama home."

"Hey, dingleberry! Close the shutter! It's closing time! Let's go!"

From where he was standing, Shimada couldn't see who was yelling, but the clerk could and yelled, "Yes, Mr. Fugiwara!"

"And who's that? We're closed! Get out!" A scrawny old man came out on the mezzanine and stared down at Shimada, who stared back at him.

"He's the new guy's bodyguard," the clerk said, running off into the cavernous store.

"Bodyguard, eh?" Fugiwara snorted. "I guess he's cute enough to need one." He looked around the vast floor of his establishment. "Hey, Yoshi! Your bodyguard's here! Go home! You can learn to close tomorrow!"

Yoshi came out of the maze of shelves and smiled brilliantly at Shimada. He had his coat, so they headed for the door. Shimada put his arm around the kid's shoulder as they went out. Behind him he very faintly heard Fugiwara say, "Bodyguard, huh?" and punctuate it with a snort.

“What kind of place is that?” Shimada asked when they were on the street. After the overheated maze of the store it felt good to be in the open air again.

Yoshi shrugged. “Just a shop, I guess. I’ve never done retail before.”

“That guy seemed nuts—”

“Which guy?” Yoshi asked.

“The one yelling from the balcony,” Shimada said.

Again, Yoshi shrugged. “I only talked to him for five minutes and he hired me. That was lucky, right?”

“I hope he doesn’t get the wrong idea,” Shimada grumbled.

“About what?”

“About you. And stop shrugging.”

Yoshi stopped mid-shrug and laughed. “He seems okay,” he said. “And if not, you can beat him up. He’s only more than twice your age.” He smiled up at the noncommittal noise Shimada made. “But isn’t this lucky I got a job so quick? Aren’t you glad?”

Shimada pulled him closer. “Very.” Listening to Yoshi’s day, Shimada was by turns pleased that he got his deposit back from the school, somewhat alarmed by the photographer Kurogane’s forwardness, and intrigued by the chaos of the cheap clothes store. “Sounds like a madhouse.”

“It was and there was a huge delivery, so I spent part of the day stocking shelves,” Yoshi said.

“What are they paying you for all this?” Shimada asked.

“Oh...I forgot to ask.”

The next day, Yoshi was soundly teased about his “bodyguard” and told what his hourly wage was. It was the minimum sum Kurogane had advised him to negotiate. Shimada said that sounded all right, and when he showed up to walk Yoshi home, he got a warmer welcome than the night before. Cries of “The bodyguard! The bodyguard!” rang through the store, and Mr. Fugiwara didn’t bother to make an appearance. Shimada was relieved that this part of their life was settled. Yoshi wouldn’t bring in a lot of money, but he would be busy and not have time to brood over how much Shimada was working.

On nights when Shimada was working, he sent Takashi to walk Yoshi home. The building that housed the SM offices was two train stops away from the shopping center; many of the clerks from the building went over for the cheap restaurants and shopping, so it was not inconvenient for Takashi to work late and then walk Yoshi home. Seiji often joined him on these jaunts, which were pleasant. Takashi didn’t get as warm a welcome at the shop as Shimada usually did, but he was

impressed by the camaraderie of the place. Yoshi had merely smiled at his naiveté since it was obvious Takashi had never had a job anywhere near a cheap clothes store in his life.

Although he liked being walked home by Shimada, Yoshi really thought it was stupid that Shimada asked Takashi to walk him home. Yoshi was too polite to complain to Takashi, he informed Shimada that nothing ever happened and that he, Shimada, was just being a mother hen. Then one night Takashi couldn't make it so he asked Seiji to walk Yoshi home. The whistles, kissy noises and calls of "Kitty!" "Baby!" "Cutie!" were almost deafening. Yoshi and Seiji exchanged nervous looks.

"I guess because it's Friday..." Yoshi said.

"Ah," Seiji answered looking around nervously.

"Here kitty kitty kitty!" Their path was blocked by a middle aged drunk.

On the verge of flight, Seiji and Yoshi were startled by a voice behind them.

"Oh, there you are, Yoshi-kun!" An elderly man stepped between them and the drunk, who lost interest and wandered off.

"Oh, Mr. um, I forgot your name," Yoshi fumbled, shaking from the adrenaline rush.

"Kurogane," he said and bowed to Seiji, who nervously bowed back. "You know, there's a bus not far from the shop."

"This has never happened before," Yoshi said.

"Thank you for the rescue, Kurogane-san," Seiji said, and Yoshi chimed in with his belated thanks.

"You're very welcome, but you could have easily gotten away from him," Kurogane said with a smile. "I'm glad I was here, let me walk you to the bus." When they were in a better lit part of the shopping district, Kurogane asked how the job was going.

"Really well," Yoshi said.

"Fugiwara thanked me for sending you," Kurogane said. "Ask him for a raise next week. He should be in a good mood by then."

"Oh, why more than now?" Yoshi asked.

"I'm working on some ads for him," Kurogane said. "That's why I'm down here, we're meeting to discuss the photos for the project. He's always in a better mood when ads are running and business is flooding in."

"It's pretty crazy now," Yoshi said.

"Well, in a shop like that, survival depends on volume," Kurogane said sagely. "Fugiwara's been in business a long time, he knows what sells, but the volume can never let up. Ah, here we are."

“Thank you very much,” Seiji and Yoshi said with cute bows.

“Now, next time it’s just you two, turn left out of the front door of the shop and there’s a bus stop two blocks down,” Kurogane said. “That bus will take you to where you can get this bus. It’s a little out of your way, but much less annoying than walking by those dark bars and shops.”

Yoshi assured him that they could get the bus by themselves, but Kurogane waited until they were on the bus before he left. This bus required Yoshi and Seiji to take a circuitous route and change to another bus to get within three blocks of Yoshi’s building. “We were closer at the bus stop but I didn’t know how to tell Mr. Kurogane that and I didn’t want him to walk us all the way here.”

“He was a nice old bird,” Seiji said with a smile. “Thank goodness he was there.”

“I guess we’re really that cute,” Yoshi said, and, now that the danger, real or imagined, was over, they had a good laugh about it.

Seiji declined a cup of tea and Yoshi waited with him until his taxi came. Back upstairs, with Flounder purring in his lap, Yoshi decided that he and Seiji could have handled the situation, but it was nice that Mr. Kurogane had been there to rescue them. And after explaining the alternate bus stop situation, Shimada agreed that Yoshi could get home on his own when Shimada wasn’t there to walk him home, and it was worth the price of the bus fare.

Although this new arrangement relieved Takashi of his escort duties on nights when Shimada couldn’t get there, it didn’t stop him from showing up occasionally to take Yoshi to lunch, which was nice of him and nice for both of them. They had very little in common, but Yoshi was a good listener and Takashi liked to talk, so Yoshi got to hear more about Daitaro and the Shimada-and-Seiji break up than Shimada ever told him. This wasn’t why Yoshi never mentioned these lunches to his lover; his lover was far too busy for idle conversation and when Shimada was home and not completely exhausted, Yoshi preferred making love to talking.

The days eventually got warmer and Mr. Fugiwara bought several pallets of cheap ugly nylon pajamas in garish colors. The clerks got used to them, but customers coming upon the pyramid display shied away from them in alarm. Fugiwara then deployed them all around the store in hopes that if they looked unusual or unique, they might sell. They didn’t sell, and they didn’t sell, and they didn’t sell, and the store became minutely quieter, something Fugiwara blamed on the pajamas. There were too many to dump, no one to dump them on, and this was probably why he’d gotten so many for a song. But refusing to admit it

was a bad buy, Fugiwara went on the offensive. He photocopied some home-made flyers and sent out his cutest clerks to hand them out in the shopping district. Unfortunately there was a picture of the pajamas on the flyer and, cute as they were, the clerks were hard pressed to get anyone to even take a flyer, let alone come to the store and buy anything. The next day there were ten percent off stickers to put on the flyers, but still no takers. On the third day, Mr. Fugiwara was out of the store, but left strict orders that the flyers were to be handed out as usual. Yoshi decided a little marketing was in order; possibly some of Takashi's advertising talk had worn off on him. He put on a pair of the least ugly pajamas in a size too large and marched bravely into the mid-day lunch crowds with his flyers.

The effect was positive: Yoshi handed out a lot of flyers and got a lot of compliments. He even ran into Takashi, who was on his way to offer Yoshi lunch.

"Why are you wearing pajamas?" Takashi asked, nonplussed.

"The store has to sell them." Yoshi handed him a flyer. "Come buy some."

Tentatively reaching out to feel the sleeve material, Takashi frowned. "What's this made of?"

"Plastic," Yoshi said, handing flyers out around the ad man. "You don't have to wear them, just buy them and throw them away or give them away. We're desperate people, Takashi, the boss will have us out here forever if some of these PJs don't sell soon."

Takashi began to laugh helplessly. The thought of Yoshi roaming around in pajamas forever handing out flyers was absurdly funny. "All right, all right," he said when he could control himself. "I'll buy some pajamas, but have lunch with me first."

"In these pajamas?" Yoshi asked. "Forget it!" He had to raise his voice because a crowd had formed and unfortunately he was out of flyers. The sudden interest in pajamas was acute and had a slightly dangerous feeling to it. Yoshi edged closer to Takashi for whatever protection that might afford him.

Luckily a familiar voice rang out from the middle of the crowd. "Now, now, folks, there's some nice young men over yonder you can get flyers for these very pajamas from. Not, however, the ones Yoshi-kun is wearing." Mr. Kurogane and his camera edged into the center of the crowd and the onlookers began to disperse.

They dispersed even more when Mr. Fugiwara caught sight of Yoshi in pajamas and started yelling. "What the hell are you wearing those pajamas for?"

"Hey," Takashi said, sounding pissed off.