

The Yakuza

Murata spotted the one he wanted. He could see him at the counter through the crowd. A big guy, built. He was hunched over the bar on his elbows, his back jutting out. The lines of sweat on the two ridges of muscle along his spine made it easy to see the black and red tattoos through his light summer shirt.

Donkey wasn't the type of bar people went to out of choice. It sat just outside the Takahama city limits, a concrete rectangular solid on a lonely strip of Route 27 out of Maizuru, running along the coast, past Obama, Mikata and its five Great Lakes, on to Tsuruga and Fukui. The mama-san was a weathered Obama divorcee of about forty-five. The two hostesses were her daughters.

Truckers liked it. The big gravel parking lot was one of the only places on this stretch of coastal haul route they could leave their rigs without the cops jumping all over their asses, give them some time to hunker down with one of the bar girls over a couple of brews and maybe cop a feel if she was in a good mood.

Murata walked up to the bar, no swagger, and sat down next to the yakuza. "Draft," he said quietly to the mama. She set a full-headed mug on the counter.

The yakuza and the mama went back to their conversation. The yakuza owed several hundred dollars on his bar tab. The mama was smiling one minute, pouting the next. Whining how times were tough. The yakuza was ignoring her, the money part, but grinning. A love hotel was more what he had in mind. The mama was playing on it, coming on, pulling back. She might consider it. He *was* her type of man. Only she'd have to see the cash first. No, on second thought, be holding it.

Murata hated yakuza. Hated them ever since Kabuki-cho. The way they looked, their loud clothes, mascara-line mustaches, those ridiculous "punch" permanents. The way they threw their weight around. They were parasites who preyed on innocent people. His idea of a good time was going to a bar, picking a fight with one or two and beating the living shit out of them.

He sipped his beer. The guy was from around here, no two ways about that accent. But not Obama. Mizuno-gumi out of Maizuru? Murata checked the crowd for others; yakuza never went

anywhere alone. He didn't see any likely suspects, unless they were in the bathroom or making a phone call. Or the guy was waiting for them here.

"Put tonight on my tab," the yakuza snorted. "I'm good for it."

The mama puffed out her cheeks.

Murata swiveled on his stool and waited for the yakuza to notice. He finally looked over, still grinning. "Hey asshole," Murata growled, "pay her or get the fuck out."

The yakuza swept the beer bottles and glasses off the counter and jumped off his stool, arms clenching. Murata watched for the move. In the sudden silence he could hear cars honking in the distance.

"No fighting!" yelled the mama, running out from behind the counter and wedging herself between them.

The yakuza glanced at a table not far from the counter, calmer now. "You talk big punk," he said, almost friendly. "You got the rocks to say that outside?"

"Let's go find out, scumbag."

Puddles of rainwater still stood in the potholes from the shower that afternoon as Murata followed the yakuza out the door and into the gravel parking lot. The full moon lit the rows of four twelve-wheelers, cabs rimmed with rows of lights and decorated with dragons, samurai and carp—the same designs found on yakuza bodies.

"Over here," the yakuza called, nodding toward the side of the building. "Nobody in our way. Come on."

"Fuck you, old man." Murata took his time, putting distance between the two of them. He was waiting for something. Just as he rounded the building, it came.

From the corner of his eye he saw two shapes edging out the front door. Murata sighed and shook his head. He knew the yakuza wasn't alone. He slipped his right hand into his pocket, through a set of silver-plated brass knuckles.

Ten minutes later, Murata walked back into the bar. His shirt was half untucked and his right pants leg was wet from the knee down. "Gimme another beer," he said as he climbed up on the stool. "Then call an ambulance."

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The chassis crawled toward Murata like a multi-eyed creature from outer space. It stopped in front of him as the conveyor belt clanked to a halt, the tubes in the circuit board staring at him. He had thirty seconds to take a capacitor from the box next to him and solder it to the board. Murata's hands moved swiftly. The conveyor belt came to life with a jolt, the next multi-eyed monster already moving his way.

The calendar on the wall was half full of "X"s. Eight and a half weeks in this sweatbox. Ten hours a day, six days a week. Job didn't pay shit. He had heard about something called a "minimum wage" in the United States. Nothing like that here. This place was worse than prison.

His hands worked mechanically, almost by themselves. It had almost been easier on the inside. He *had* to be there. But this was different. Here, there were no guards or bars to stop him. Which made him feel even more trapped.

Outside, he heard car horns over the drone of the machinery. He turned and looked out the two-foot square window in the corrugated aluminum wall. In the parking lot outside were five cars, his friends hanging out the windows.

"Hey, Yasu!" they screamed. "Come on!"

This was the third time this week they'd come for him. His parole officer had gotten him this job when he got out. But now, his parole time was up. He had walked off the job before, several times, but the plant foreman had stepped in to prevent him from getting fired. Lucky for him. Because as shitty as the work was, he needed the money. His wife had had a baby boy the day after he got out.

He came back to the reality of the assembly line with the sound of the conveyor belt moving again, a capacitor in his left hand and the soldering iron in his right. He stared at the next chassis creeping toward him, glanced at the calendar on the wall. It was too much. He laid the soldering iron down, tossed his apron next to it and started walking.

Murata climbed in his rusting, dented Nissan and followed his friends back to Obama. Decent wheels were the first thing he'd buy soon as he came into some money. Wasn't right, his boys driving better rides than he could afford. Back inside the city limits, Nishi eased his souped-up Mazda to a stop in front of the Purple Garden coffee shop, the local hangout for young toughs.

"Took you long enough," laughed Nishi, his arm around Murata's shoulder as they stepped onto the sidewalk. "I seen some guy runnin' out the door, wavin' his arms like crazy as we's pullin' outta the lot." They were almost in the door when Murata heard a car pull up to the curb.

He turned to see the plant foreman getting out of a light blue Isuzu sedan. Guy must have followed him from the factory. Murata motioned his friends inside the coffee shop as the little gray-haired man stepped onto the sidewalk.

"What do you think you're doin'?" he said with a pained expression, like a father reprimanding his son. "I'm takin' enough heat on your account as it is."

Murata dropped his eyes to the sidewalk. The foreman had played square with him, hadn't treated him like scum. "Look, I'm sorry," he said. "I just ain't no factory worker."

"What'll you be if you keep hangin' out with *that* bunch?" he said, nodding toward the door. "You stick with those characters, you'll end up in something you won't be *able* to walk away from."

Murata waited several seconds, weighing his options. "Well, least it won't be on no assembly line," he mumbled and walked inside. He shuffled to the back booth, where his friends were waiting for him, and sat down. "Well, that's over."

Nishi slapped him on the back. "All right! Now we can get back to business as usual!"

The bell on the door jingled. Murata looked up. A swarthy man in a black leather jacket was walking in with three others who resembled him in both clothes and build. Murata's face became serious and he nodded.

"Hey kid. Heard you were out. Here, come 'ere," the swarthy man called, tilting his head to motion Murata over. His name was Shibata. He had spent ten years in the Jinbokkai organization of Kobe, working his way up from pachinko parlor handyman and bouncer to senior soldier with a voice in executive council meetings.

Shibata was now one of the bosses of Obama. He had started with a construction company and expanded into gas stations and pachinko parlors, some as far away as Kyoto. His tastes ran to expensive cars, alcohol and women. Shibata kept several mistresses around town, more than one with his illegitimate child or children.

“How’s the wife and kid?”

“Doin’ okay.”

“What you up to?”

“This an’ that. Not a whole lot.” It felt like Shibata was sizing him up, staring past him until he brought his hands together.

“Friend a mine’s gonna be in town tomorrow night. Important man in Kobe. Pro’bly stop by the Otani, get somethin’ to eat an’ thought you might like to come along.” Apparently Shibata had made up his mind.

Murata still despised yakuza. Bastards’d put a shiv in your back just for the hell of it. He’d run into more than his share in prison. Outnumbered, this time he listened to their stories, watched them in action. He heard about the danger, especially during gang wars, when they risked their lives just walking down the street. Heard that, like him, they had no one to depend on for survival but themselves. Heard how, in a yakuza family, performance was the only thing that counted. That and loyalty to the boss.

He also had a lot of time in the joint to think. What was he going to do when he got out? Now there was more than just himself to think about—like a wife and kid. He was a Korean in Japanese society, rural society. Not much further down the food chain than that. The only jobs open to him were in construction, pachinko parlors or coffee shops.

Now that he was out, Murata was beginning to see that he did the same things yakuza did, had been for years. Only they made a better living at it.

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Sometimes the cop almost wished something would happen. That was the only time anybody in this town paid any attention to you. He was twenty-five, been a patrolman on bicycle duty four years

now. He'd grown up here. But things changed once you put on a police uniform. People didn't say, "Hello," any more. Obamans didn't want anything to do with cops, except when they needed one.

Up ahead he spotted a group of five men swaggering down the sidewalk. They had their backs to him, but he could make scum like that anywhere. The loud suits, the permanents, the swagger—yakuza. Just then one of them looked across the street, showing his profile. Shibata. Should've known. The cop made sure he remembered the faces of the others as he rode by. Might be important later.

"Ooooi!" came the call from behind him.

The cop squeezed the brakes. What the . . . one of those sons of bitches yelling at him?

The men on the sidewalk stopped, too, looking at each other. Until a hulking figure ambled over to the curb.

"Hey," Murata sneered, stopping at the edge of the sidewalk. "My friends here'n me're on our way to grab a cup a coffee. You look like you could use some. It'd be on us, cop salaries bein' what they are and all."

The cop stared hard at Murata. So he was finally getting in with the big boys, huh? Just a matter of time, punks like that. Only, the kid was a fucking bull. The cop remembered the aftermaths of several fights, two-on-one, sometimes three. The kid left them battered and bleeding. Anybody else, he'd run him down to the station. But there was no telling what this crazy bastard might do. You get messed up, the kid does time. What was the percentage in that?

"Sorry, some other time," the cop said, leisurely pedaling off. "Right now I'm on duty."

"Yeah, sure, next time," Murata called. "Hey! Regards to the chief!"

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"You see the look on that cop's face?" Shibata laughed as he poured Sasaki another cupful of saké. "He's got five years on Yasu an' the kid's pullin' his chain. I used to do the same thing. That was back after the war, when I came to Tokyo to help put down the Korean uprising. Shoulda seen 'em run," Shibata chuckled, "all over Nihonbashi."

Sasaki was looking at Murata. "You always talk to cops like that?" He'd heard about the kid from Shibata. Head of the young toughs in the area, most years older than him. He had absolutely no fear

of cops, talked to them like they were scum. From what he'd seen today, it looked like he had heard right. The cop on the bicycle sounded like he was kissing his captain's ass. Sasaki was Shibata's former *oyabun* and one of the highest ranking Jinbokkai godfathers in the Kansai area. He was always on the lookout for promising newcomers.

- *oyabun*: The boss of a yakuza gang or crime syndicate.

"They ain't nothin' behind that badge," Murata mumbled, lowering his eyes to the table as he refilled Sasaki's glass with beer. He kept out of the conversation, speaking only when spoken to. It wasn't his place to shoot off his mouth in a gathering like this.

Sasaki carried himself with the air of a gentleman. He dressed well but not flamboyantly. His full head of gray hair, in an Ivy League cut, went well with his demeanor. Authoritative but distinguished, more the Ginza executive type than mobster. He stood out from Shibata, the loud, blustering ex-sailor.

Shibata was drunk. "Look at that," he slurred, leaning toward Murata as he slid off his wristwatch. "Two thousand bucks it cost me. Pure gold, and diamonds. Same goes for liquor, cars . . . women, too. Gotta be the best."

Murata glanced at Shibata, then Sasaki. Up to now, he'd seen Shibata with guys lower down the gangland totem pole. Now, even with his former boss, he's running his mouth like Sasaki was a nobody. Didn't Shibata know the meaning of respect for his own godfather?

"I'll take care of that little matter we talked about soon as I can get to the bank on Monday," Shibata blustered. "That soon enough?"

Sasaki's eyes showed surprise as he stared at Shibata, the eyes penetrating, the features set. Murata could see he was affronted at Shibata talking business in front of rank-and-file soldiers and a kid who owed them no loyalty. "Yeah, that'll be fine."

Murata sipped his saké, averting his eyes. There was only one thing that would bring Sasaki, Shibata's former godfather, to Obama. He needed money. No wonder he didn't like Shibata announcing it. Otherwise, none of this made sense.

Sasaki stood up to leave.

"What time will you be heading back tomorrow?" Shibata asked him.

"I was going to catch the three o'clock express. Why?"

Shibata turned to Murata. "Yasu, why don't you take Mr. Sasaki back to Kobe?"

Murata nodded directly to the godfather. "Be an honor."

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Sasaki kept his eyes on the scenery outside for most of the three-hour drive. He didn't nod off once, as if he wanted to be ready just in case. He didn't mention Shibata or anything about Obama. The only thing he said the whole trip was, "No, thanks," when Murata asked him if he needed to stop. For his part, Murata hadn't smoked a cigarette the whole trip.

Finally, as they crossed into the city limits, Sasaki turned to his driver. "What're you doing for work these days?"

"Not much."

"You ever consider joining a family?"

"No, not really."

"Shibata told me you just got out of the slam. What were you in for?"

"Assault and battery."

"You don't say much, do you?"

"Not when it's not my place."

Sasaki grinned. "Except to cops?"

Murata looked down and mumbled, "That's different. I can't stand cops."

Sasaki liked what he saw. This Murata kid knew the meaning of respect. Sasaki had seen enough up-and-comers to know this was not some Neanderthal capable of little more than maiming anything on two legs.

"This is it," said Sasaki, motioning to a building on the left. "You can leave the car over there, in front of that vacant lot. Listen, why don't you come in for a while, have something to drink, take the edge off."

That night, Sasaki took Murata drinking in one the most expensive sections of the Kobe water trade. In every club they visited, all the hostesses and male staff came to pay their respects, bowing low. Sasaki ordered watered-down whisky-and-waters, slipping them slowly, never showing the slightest signs of intoxication. When he wasn't talking to Murata, his eyes scanned the surroundings, never letting his guard down. Murata hardly touched his drinks. If something unexpected went down, he would be the impromptu bodyguard.

"So, what do you think? About all this I mean," Sasaki asked as they left the third club of the evening. "Interested?"

"I'd really have to give it some more thought," Murata demurred.

"Take your time, but I think training would do you good. Plus I know you'd be valuable to the organization. If I give the word, you're in." Sasaki let it go at that—never tipping his hand how much he wanted Murata. Then, at the end of the night, Sasaki put him up in a high-end hotel.

Murata was impressed. With Sasaki's stylish clothes. With his good-looking women. With the attention he received whenever he walked into a room. Murata stopped by Sasaki's house in the morning to pay his respects. Sasaki came out to meet him at his front gate, something he never expected of an established godfather.

"Thank you very much for your kindness," Murata mumbled. "It was an honor to be of service."

"Thank you for your trouble," returned Sasaki, stepping through the gate onto the sidewalk.

"Come back if you need anything."

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Five miles out of Obama, Murata stopped the car in front of a two-story apartment building. He walked up the rickety metal staircase covered with sheets of translucent corrugated plastic to the end of the walkway and knocked on the last door.

It opened, a young, large-breasted woman appearing in the doorway. "I didn't expect you," she said as she threw her arms around Murata's neck.

"I only got thirty minutes," he said, slipping out of his trousers.

Kazuko had been Murata's mistress for three months. She liked his rugged manner the first time she saw him on the assembly line at Wakasa Electric. She liked the way he stalked in and took her. She felt secure when she was with him. She knew about his wife and son, but she didn't care.

Murata did.

Kazuko unbuttoned her blouse. "That's all right."

"Yeah, well get used to it. I can't be spending as much time around here as I have been. Some old bitch saw you in the car the other day and told my wife. I told her I was just takin' some broad home from work, but she said people were already talkin'."

"I just want us to be together."

Murata looked at her on the bed as he kicked off his gossamer-thin long underwear. He didn't want to cut off the affair. Kazuko was a great piece of ass. But with the pressure he'd been getting from his wife with all the gossip going around, he had decided he could no longer keep his mistress in Obama. The problem was, he had nowhere else to keep her.

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For an instant, Sasaki's eyes flickered with surprise. There, on his doorstep, unannounced, stood Murata and some woman he had never seen before. Murata looked at him but said nothing, moving his weight back and forth, hands deep in the pockets of his sharkskin suit. The woman kept her eyes on the concrete steps.

Sasaki backed into the entrance hall, motioning them in. "This a social call?"

Murata looked at his feet. "You, uh . . .," he mumbled, "you said to come see you if I needed anything."

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Murata's wife thought she was going to go nuts. The big lug was sprawled out on his back in the futon, snoring like a faulty chain saw. She had been under the covers with her hands over her ears since 11:30. Now it was hours past midnight and she hadn't dozed off once.

Somewhere between the bursts of congested air she heard the telephone ringing. Thank God. Maybe she could go to sleep before he began again.

Murata awoke with a snort. He rolled over, groping for the black box, invisible in the dark, then fumbled with the receiver until he got it to his ear. "Who the hell is this?" he snarled into the mouthpiece.

"What do you mean 'Who the hell is this?'" Kazuko shot back, crying. "You stick me here alone with a pack of hoodlums coming and going at all hours of the night. I have to get up and wait on them. Not only that, I have to do all the washing and cleaning. I don't hear a word from you. And then you ask me, 'Who the hell is this?'"

Murata was wide awake. From the other half of the futon his wife popped her head out from under the covers. "Who is it?"

Murata covered the receiver with his hand. "Go back to sleep."

"Answer me!" sobbed Kazuko on the other end.

"Do you know what time it is?" Murata whispered. He wanted to ring the stupid broad's neck, but for now he had to placate her.

"Do you have any idea what I'm going through?"

"What do you mean? Did somebody try somethin' funny?" Murata hissed. He turned away from his wife and submerged under the covers. She snuggled up, slipping her arm around him from behind.

"This whole place is funny! I'm going crazy!"

"Calm down, will ya?"

"Calm down?! *You* calm down in a place like this. And you haven't called once!"

"I haven't had a chance."

"Well, this is your *last* chance. If you don't come soon, I'm leaving!" There was a loud click and the phone went dead.

"Who was that?" asked Murata's wife. "She sounded upset."

"Uh, Shinsuke's mother. He didn't come home last night and she's worried. Go back to sleep." Murata returned to the pillow, staring into the darkness. "Oh, yeah. I gotta go to Kobe tomorrow."

From her chair, Kazuko looked over at the figure on the couch. "Was that okay?"

Sasaki nodded. "Perfect."

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"He's here!" announced Kazuko, beaming as she rushed into the kitchen.

Sasaki looked up from his coffee. One day, that *was* fast. Maybe Murata wasn't as cool with women as he was with cops. He'd seen guys like that before. Never back down from a fight, but up against a broad Anyway, it was still too early to tell.

Nobody had been more surprised to find Murata at his door with Kazuko. A young punk, not even in the organization, unloading his mistress for "safekeeping" on a godfather he'd met once in his life? Sasaki had never heard of anything like it. But it was a sign. He wouldn't have put himself in this position if he wasn't curious. After all, he had to know nothing was free. Maybe their night out had got him thinking. Good. There wasn't much in the whole of backwater Fukui Prefecture to match what he'd shown Murata. The phone call from Kazuko had been his idea. He'd only been wrong about one thing: he thought it might take several more to get Murata to Kobe.

As on his first visit, Murata came planning to stay a couple of days. Smooth his mistress's ruffled feathers, then back to Obama. Get on with his life.

Sasaki had other plans. He saw in Murata was someone who could be very valuable to his organization. Now, it was time for the next step.

Several hours after Murata's arrival, a long black Toyota President sedan pulled up outside. "Get your coat," Sasaki ordered. Murata knew from the voice he was no longer a guest. Sasaki disappeared into his study. Minutes later he was back, holding a .22 caliber Beretta.

He looked straight at Murata. "You ever use one of these?"

"Sure," Murata replied matter-of-factly, sticking the piece in his belt. He had never *seen* a real pistol before.

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The ten-yen coin clinked into the pay phone as the party on the other end picked up. "Yeah?"

"Nishi? That you? It's me, Yasu. Just called to see what's goin' on." The phone booth was steaming. Murata cracked the door and began shoveling more coins into the change slots.

“Hey man, when the hell you comin’ back? We coulda used your help in a big way on a couple a capers last month.”

Three months had passed. Murata liked the work at Sasaki’s. He accompanied the godfather as an insurance bodyguard—in addition to his regular entourage—every time he left the house. Business or pleasure, for the first time Murata was meeting yakuza from within the context of an organization—as professionals, not punching bags. Bowing his head to them. Realizing they had a job, too.

“You?! Bowing to yakuza?” Nishi blurted. “Never thought I’d see the fuckin’ day. So anyway, what the hell *are* you doing? And what’s this guy Sasaki like?”

“He’s okay.” Murata liked Sasaki and respected his ability as a godfather. He was a skillful negotiator with businessmen and yakuza alike, and fair to his men.

“How long you gonna hang around down there? You sure you’re not gettin’ yourself into somethin’ you can’t get out of?”

“Be here a while. Just the quarters’re a little cramped, that’s all.” Murata was waiting for an opportunity for Kazuko and him to get out on their own. An apartment, a place to themselves—didn’t have to be big or fancy. “Hell, can’t even fuck in privacy.”

“What’s stoppin’ ya?”

“Money.”

“I thought godfathers were rich.”

“Not this one. His girlfriend works at a toruko.”

Sasaki did give him spending money, but not much. He didn’t need it as long as he was at Sasaki’s; he was at the godfather’s side almost every minute of every day. Kazuko, now working at a waitress in a family-owned coffee shop, was also giving Sasaki’s girlfriend part of her salary to help with the household expenses.

“No shit. Why don’t you go somewhere else, switch families?”

“I’m here. Besides, I can’t just up and leave now.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Well, I . . . I owe him too much.”

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“Two coffees, Mr. Sasaki? Coming right up,” the waitress beamed, then scurried away toward the kitchen.

“Take your time,” Sasaki said graciously, then turned to Murata. “Yamazaki should be here any minute.” He pressed his palms together, slowly bringing his fingertips under his chin, remaining silent for what felt like minutes. “Listen, you’re almost twenty-two,” he said. “What’re you gonna do with your life?”

The question caught Murata off guard. “I never really thought about it.” He remembered the day he arrived in Kobe with Kazuko. That was ten months ago.

Sasaki looked at Murata with a paternal expression. “A training position just opened up in Noguchi’s family. Interested?”

Noguchi ran the gang in charge of guarding the head of the Jinbokkai syndicate, Sasaki’s godfather, Toru Mishima. It was a family of fighters, and the hardest one under Sasaki’s control to get into. The offer itself was an honor, especially for one so young.

Murata shifted positions in his chair. He didn’t want to commit to anything he couldn’t get out of, but he needed to give Sasaki an answer. And refusing this offer would mean he and Kazuko would have to move on. It wasn’t that he had any complaints about the work. The constant tension was exciting. If you fucked up in this business, you didn’t get a second chance. That part he liked.

What he didn’t like was pushing ordinary people around. He could hurt someone he didn’t like, but people who hadn’t done anything? Leaning on store owners for protection money. Strong-arming people out of their homes so a client could put up a building. Then there were the drugs—amphetamines. It was just business, Sasaki explained. But could he get used to it?

Murata remained silent for several seconds. He could feel Sasaki’s eyes. There was something holding Murata, something even he himself wasn’t fully aware of until now. Ever so gradually, with knowing hands, Sasaki had bound him tight in the silken threads of obligation, Japanese style.

“Uh, yes. Yes, sir.” After being at Sasaki’s all this time, he couldn’t find a polite way of saying no.

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Toshiaki Noguchi grew up on the streets of Okayama, a thirteen-year-old in the chaos and devastation after World War II. His career in the mob began outside a bar one night, when two yakuza were beating up his brother. Noguchi drew a knife from his tattered jacket pocket and stabbed one in the leg. The wounded yakuza's godfather happened to be watching, and stopped his two soldiers from killing young Toshiaki. Instead, he took him into the organization. For his part, Noguchi owed his oyabun his life.

That was over twenty years ago. Now, he headed his own family of over a hundred soldiers. Noguchi was of the old school, the world of giri and ninjo—where human feelings took a back seat to obligation.

He had heard about this kid Murata. Heard how strong he was, with a firm sense of loyalty and responsibility. Heard that he was prime protégé material, the kind of young recruit that was quickly disappearing in today's world of fast money and crumbling yakuza honor. The problem was, Sasaki wanted Noguchi to let both Murata and his girlfriend move in with him and his woman. He didn't like the idea.

Murata's first meeting with Noguchi changed everything for both godfather and recruit. Noguchi was the first yakuza Murata felt a real connection with, the first person he wanted to emulate, the first godfather he would follow without question into any situation, any fight. And Murata was the first yakuza recruit Noguchi felt was worth training the way he would a younger brother.

Noguchi offered Murata the job as his live-in bodyguard. Murata accepted. The job description was simple. Murata did everything with Noguchi: eating, bathing and sleeping. He also accompanied the oyabun on his daily rounds. Once inside another yakuza office, guard duty often meant sitting at attention for hours at a time while Noguchi talked business. But it was the constant threat of danger that held Murata's interest. For better or worse, he'd come a long way from Wakasa Electric.

As he proved himself and gained his godfather's trust, he was given other duties, including solitary assignments. When not with Noguchi, his orders might include anything from handling gambling

bets, bouncing at a family-owned bar, confiscating a stash of amphetamines or recovering money for a family client to rearranging the gray matter of people who happened to be in the way.

That was the business of being a yakuza. Then, there was the training. One of Murata's most important jobs was learning to "read the belly" of his oyabun. Anticipating Noguchi had to become second nature—understanding how he thought, what he wanted and when he wanted it, without having to ask. That required close attention to the boss' every look, every gesture, every grunt. It meant putting Noguchi and Noguchi's life before himself and his own, which in turn necessitated a bond of absolute mutual trust. Murata had to be willing to lay down his life for Noguchi in a heartbeat, confident that Noguchi would spare no effort in seeing his death properly avenged.

Murata's two years of training with Noguchi were both a settling and stormy transition from street punk to seasoned soldier, as he internalized the yakuza code of behavior and chivalry and externalized a lot of violence. Yet this violence was of a new and mature, if more sinister, variety. He learned to unleash it or not according to the end to be attained, regardless of personal likes and dislikes. He made his power a tool, instead of merely a weapon. Under Noguchi's tutelage, Murata acquired the discipline to look at the greater picture, to calculate the effects of his actions and how they would reflect on Noguchi and the family.

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Noguchi wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Hey, Yasu, feel like a nightcap?" he asked, flapping his undershirt to cool his midsection. "This heat is killin' me. Why don't we stop by Wonder, that new place just around the corner? This game sucks anyway." Tokyo's Yomiuri Giants, with six consecutive Japan Series Professional Baseball Championships under their belt, were drubbing Osaka's Hanshin Tigers, a Kansai favorite, six to one in the bottom of the eighth.

"Sure, if you'd like to." Murata instinctively jumped up to fetch Noguchi's shirts and trousers. He threw on his own drinking clothes, grabbed his piece from under the kitchen sink, and sprung to open the door and hand Noguchi his two-foot shoehorn at the entrance.

"Hey, I know that character," Noguchi whispered to Murata as they walked in, directing his eyes toward a yakuza sitting alone at the counter. The guy turned at the sound of the ringing bell over the door,

and he and Noguchi eyed each other as the new customers reached the carpeted booth area. “Why don’t we sit at the counter,” Noguchi said, changing directions. “Him and me got some business to talk.” Noguchi sat next to the yakuza, motioning Murata down next to him.

Noguchi traded silent nods of recognition with the yakuza, then called for two drafts. The bartender set two big mugs on the counter.

“Hey, we gotta talk about that Yano Building thing down in Nagatori-ku,” said the yakuza.

Murata looked the yakuza up and down, memorizing the details for future reference. The Yano Building. That name rang a bell. He remembered a conversation several days earlier, Noguchi mentioning a yakuza connected with the Yano Building as someone he might have to “deal with” in the near future.

“What’s the rush?” Noguchi interrupted, the held out his mug. “Kanpai. We can get around to business soon enough.”

“Who said I wanted to drink with you, old man?” the yakuza sneered. “We hear you been movin’ in on our territory. You wanna fuck with us? You’n your punks won’t last the week.”

Noguchi didn’t flinch, but Murata was already moving. He knew Noguchi didn’t like to start trouble if non-violent means were an option. Now, with the guy playing the hard-ass, not to mention the personal affront to Noguchi, Murata had his orders without a word being said. “Hey scumbag,” he growled.

The yakuza turned, scowling, then raised his eyes as Murata towered over him. “What the . . . ?”

Murata brought his beer mug down in a savage thrust on the yakuza’s head. There was a sickening crack as the point of impact exploded, a geyser of blood spurting to the ceiling. The yakuza slumped into Noguchi’s lap. Noguchi caught the limp body and with Murata’s help propped him on the counter, watching in amazement as red spots dotted the counter—the foot-wide splatter of blood on the ceiling dripping from ten feet over their heads. As the gushing blood slowed to a steady flow, the resulting crimson pool overran the counter and began spreading over the floor.

The hostesses screamed and ran for cover, customers stormed the door. The bartender yelled, "Girls, take the rest of the night off," as he came running out from behind the counter. He waited for the bar to empty, then agilely pulled down the shutter and locked the door.

Noguchi's clothes were smeared with blood, his cheek splattered from the initial explosion. "Call an ambulance," he barked to the bartender, then turned to Murata. "Why the hell didn't you *tell* me you were gonna hit 'im?"

Murata didn't answer. Noguchi wasn't mad, but offering excuses was not an option. "I'll go back to the apartment and get you a change of clothes."

"Never mind that," Noguchi said, looking at the unconscious body and the blood caking on the floor. "I don't want you around when the cops start asking questions."

"I'll take my chances," Murata mumbled, already on his way out the back door.

"Bring me some towels, quick!" Noguchi barked at the bartender. "Then go grab a taxi." Noguchi was wrapping the yakuza's head with face towels when Murata returned with his change of clothes.

"I thought I told you . . ." Noguchi began, then fell silent. He changed into the new outfit, then signaled Murata to help him carry the yakuza to the waiting taxi. "You go back to the apartment and wait!" The tone left no room for interpretation. This time, follow the fucking order.

Noguchi and the bartender rode with the yakuza to the hospital. Hours later, when the godfather returned to the apartment, he looked relieved as he sat down at the kotatsu and stared into the TV. "Sucker's gonna live, or so they tell me," he announced, "though the doc did say he woulda been dead in another five minutes."

Murata already had a cold beer waiting. "What'd you tell the cops?"

Noguchi grinned. "We get the SOB to the hospital and they tell me to wait for the cops. So here comes this detective, looking all pissed off, and he starts comin' on strong. 'What the hell happened here? You fuck this guy up?'"

Noguchi lit a cigarette, obviously enjoying the story. "So I tell the cop, 'Not me officer. I witnessed the whole thing. Damndest thing I ever saw. Guy's walking in the door and next thing you

know, the friggin' shutter falls right on his head. We loaded him into a taxi and brought him here right away.'" "

Murata had no regrets about cracking the guy's head open. But it was one thing to spill brains, and another to spill them on the boss' suit, so to speak. He had acted intuitively, but with insufficient attention to the consequences. In short, without proper planning.

Murata bowed deeply to Noguchi. "I'm sorry I got you involved. Next time I'll be more careful."

Noguchi paused a moment to look at him. "You know," he continued, rubbing his chin, "I'm gonna have to be more careful 'bout what I say to you. You're a fuckin' bomb."

The name stuck.

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It was Noguchi who Murata came to regard as his only oyabun in the true sense of the word, the man he owed his loyalty and life to. Noguchi impressed Murata so profoundly with his personal bearing alone, he found himself wanting to join the organization of his own accord. Murata was the first to admit he owed everything he valued to his oyabun. He was quite proud to be one of the old school, and had his years of tutelage under Noguchi to thank for it. But the bond between godfather and soldier became even more irreversibly cemented a year after joining the family.

Yakuza, like social animals everywhere, are greedy for advancement, improving their lots in life. The average syndicate soldier would have puffed out his chest when Noguchi informed Murata that Sasaki planned to promote him, along with fellow soldiers Miyasato and Yamazaki, out of Noguchi's family to the rank of *shatei*, or senior soldier, in Sasaki's organization. All the more so as such an occasion warranted much yakuza pomp and ceremony to officially commemorate an irrevocable mutual promise signified by drinking saké from the godfather's *sakazuki*¹, or saké cup, in front of the entire family to seal the pact.

As things stood now, as Noguchi's soldier, protocol required Murata to go through Noguchi to voice his opinion to the Boss. If he accepted, if he joined Sasaki, he would have his own family and a seat

¹ *sakazuki* More than just a drinking cup, in Japanese crime syndicates "sakazuki" indicates the hierarchy of saké sharing.

at executive meetings and general assemblies. At the same time, he would become Noguchi's *kyodaibun*—that is, his equal.

Murata respectfully refused the promotion in front of the entire general assembly. Noguchi was his *oyabun*, he said. He did not need two godfathers. The yakuza language he used was, "*jingi ga hazurete iru*,"² like throwing away your own father. But there was more he didn't say. On a personal level, he felt accepting the promotion would be an insult to Noguchi. More important, however, he balked at a position of conflicting loyalties and obligations. Because as Sasaki's soldier, if the Boss ordered him to take action against Noguchi or his interests—in a worst-case scenario, to kill him—he'd be obliged to carry out those orders.

A buzz of muffled whispers raced through the shocked assembly. Such a refusal was unheard of. Most yakuza were only too glad to accept such a prestigious new position. But the real issue was, soldiers *couldn't* turn down promotions. The yakuza code forbid it because it meant going against the godfather's wishes. Miyasato and Yamazaki wasted no time in accepting their new posts—all with the proper show of solemnity and gratitude.

Sasaki, however, who had recruited and groomed Murata, not only accepted his decision, but instructed the assembly to treat Murata as his own *kobun*³. Soon after, in recognition of his ability, Murata was named *wakashugashira*, the officer in charge of Noguchi's junior soldiers, as well as one of the official personal bodyguards of Toru Mishima, the godfather of the entire Jinbokkai syndicate—quite an honor for one so young.

Murata never regretted not accepting Sasaki's *sakazuki*, and not because of the awe and respect he commanded from fellow syndicate members from that day forward. There was never any question as to his course of action. For him, it was simply a case of right and wrong.

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Japanese hoodlums are famous for their lack of little fingers—or, more accurately, the portion from the second joint. A missing pinky is as clear a giveaway as a full body of tattoos when it comes to

² *jingi ga hazurete iru* (An act that goes) against the code of conduct or "morals" of gangsters and gamblers.

³ *kobun* A gang member who has pledged his loyalty and support to his boss, or *oyabun*.

picking mobsters out of a lineup, and sufficient evidence to deport any Japanese going through Hawaii customs on the first plane out.

The practice of *yubitsume*, or “finger-shortening,” dates back to samurai days. Its significance is tied to Japanese swordsmanship. Samurai gripped their sword hilts tightly with the bottom three fingers of each hand, and slightly looser with the thumb and index fingers. The little finger’s grip was the tightest—rendering a pinky amputee unable to grip his sword properly and weakening him in battle. Today, finger-shortening is used almost exclusively by the yakuza world as a demonstration of sincerity or resolve, usually in the form of apology or punishment—as in the genuine absence of intent not to repeat the offense. A fingertip, for instance, is a requisite offering to one’s godfather if a yakuza decides to leave the organization or commits some misdeed for which the entire family suffers.

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“Kanpai!” said Sasaki, raising his glass toward the center of the long rectangular table. Seven others echoed the toast as they touched glasses. Sasaki, Noguchi, Shibata, Murata and two each of Murata’s and Shibata’s men were seated around a table of crab, *sashimi*⁴ and other delicacies—the props for an evening of convivial imbibing about to get underway.

Murata had been back in Obama several days on temporary leave from Kobe when he received a call from Noguchi saying he and Sasaki would be arriving the following day. They would be coming to see Shibata on business, then staying on for several days to relax.

Noguchi was recuperating. He had been in bed with a kidney ailment for almost a month. The worst was over, but he was still weak and thin. His doctor had ordered extreme moderation in alcohol for the duration of his convalescence, and he was faithfully adhering to his prescribed regime.

Shibata, under no such stipulations, was well lubricated two hours into the evening. “Drink up! Drink up!” he cajoled, the voice loud, the face bright red, swaying, slurring his words. “Just one more.”

“I’m afraid I can’t tonight,” Noguchi replied. “My doctor said take it easy.” Declining politely but firmly.

⁴ *sashimi* A Japanese delicacy consisting of fresh raw seafood sliced into thin pieces and dipped in soy sauce.

“Aw, what the fuck does he know?” Shibata grunted. “Come on, it ain’t gonna kill you. Besides, you sure you didn’t get that way from a little too much bad medicine?”

The reference was to amphetamines. Noguchi let Shibata fill his ceramic saké cup, then put it down without touching a drop.

No one seemed to notice the comment. Sasaki’s expression remained unchanged. But Murata, who was engaged in another conversation, wheeled around for a look at his godfather. Noguchi’s features were little different from normal, except the tight jaw muscles and narrowed eyes. Trafficking in such commodities was one thing, but actual indulgence was to a yakuza’s shame—at least to old schoolers Noguchi and now, Murata. By now, Murata could read Noguchi’s belly well enough the know his godfather was boiling, even though he would never cause a scene in front of his godfather, Sasaki.

Shibata chortled and poured Sasaki another thimbleful of saké, the remark forgotten. Not by Murata. He did not intend to let Shibata or anyone else insult his oyabun’s honor. The relationships involved, however, were too complicated to break Shibata in two and have it end then and there. Murata was an extension of his oyabun, who was, in turn, an extension of *his*, Sasaki. And Shibata was a former soldier, current business associate and, more important, creditor of Sasaki’s. As a godfather, Noguchi was responsible for the actions of his men. The unauthorized use of violence by Murata would demand not only one of his own fingers, but possibly even one of Noguchi’s, as a fitting apology.

Unless, of course, Murata apologized in advance.

He slid over the tatami to the edge of the raised platform, “I just remembered some business I gotta take care of,” he mumbled, slipped on his loafers and walked out.

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Nishi had been through every girlie magazine in the stack twice. The boredom was killing him. This was the part of yakuza work he hated—phone duty. No more beer in the icebox, either. But he couldn’t leave the office, even for five minutes. Murata’d kill him. He lay down on the couch, reaching for the Shukan Post on top of the stack—third time around.

He was studying a pictorial of “D-Cups in Japan” when the door flew open and Murata stalked into the apartment holding a brown paper bag. Nishi sat up with a start.

“Go get a brick,” barked Murata, a steely burst. He moved quickly to the kitchen, grabbing the cutting board hanging over the sink and two handkerchiefs from the kitchen closet. Laying them on the dining room table, he pulled a thick meat cleaver out of the brown paper bag and washed the blade. He wiped it dry, then ran his thumb lightly over the edge. A thin line of blood appeared.

Nishi’s eyes widened as he returned, a dusty red brick in hand. Murata sat at the table, arm outstretched, jaw muscles bulging. He laid the knife blade just in front of the first joint of his little finger, parallel to the table. It had to be before the joint or later, at the hospital, they’d take off down to the second one.

“Hit this,” he said, in the same steely tone, eyes fixed on the blade. In the past, severing a fingertip was performed by the person himself, with a sword—that is, a very sharp blade. It was almost impossible to do the job alone with a knife. But tonight, who had time for ceremony?

Nishi still hadn’t moved.

“Hit it!” he bellowed.

Nishi positioned himself and took a deep breath. Raising the brick to shoulder height, he brought it down full force.

There was a sharp metallic click, then a dull thud as the knife met the board. Murata gave a small grunt. His fingertip lurched slightly forward, blood flowing freely from both sides of the cut. He sat momentarily transfixed, gazing blankly at his finger in two parts on the table.

“You all right?” Nishi asked.

“Huh?” he said, shaking his head. He quickly wrapped his stump and its former final half inch in separate handkerchiefs. The pain pounded throughout his entire arm. Yet he was strangely detached from it, as if it weren’t his. He was calm, maybe calmer than he’d ever been in his life.

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Shibata’s voice could be heard over the rest as Murata strode down the hall to the banquet room. The party was in full swing, faces red with laughter and saké. Murata saw Noguchi smiling, arm extended, pouring Sasaki another refill.

The laughter died away slowly as Murata stood silently in front of Noguchi, his face as white as a performing geisha's. Seconds later, movement stopped as the participants noticed the blood-saturated handkerchief on his left hand and the crimson package which, with his right, Murata silently laid before his godfather.

"What the hell you do?" demanded Noguchi. He knew what Murata had done. What he didn't know was why.

Murata faced Sasaki. "I couldn't stand by and listen to some drunk insult your honor without making sure he doesn't do it again." Speaking politely now.

The soldiers sat motionless. A tear gathered in the corner of Noguchi's eye.

Shibata turned as pale as Murata, then leaned over to Sasaki from his adjacent cushion. "Do something!"

Murata had made his public declaration of confidence in Noguchi and paid the price in advance. What was about to happen could not be construed as wanton violence. Now, in plain view of all, he started for Shibata.

Sasaki, in the position of highest authority, found himself caught in the middle of two factions, neither of which he could ignore. "Call him off!" he yelled at Noguchi.

Murata, accustomed to following order from superiors, froze without thinking.

But Noguchi sat unmoved. Murata had cut off his own finger to clear Noguchi's name. In return, the old-school yakuza was ready to defy his own godfather.

Sasaki jumped to his feet. "You!" he roared, thrusting his index finger at Shibata. "Come with me!" He turned and stalked into the next room. Shibata scrambled after him. The door slammed shut.

Sasaki emerged ten minutes later. "Noguchi!" he thundered. "Get in here!" Brooking no opposition now.

Noguchi silently got to his feet and disappeared inside.

No one spoke, the remaining members staring at the food, the silence making the time pass slower. Murata sat down on the edge of the platform, blood dripping from the saturated handkerchief on his left hand to a small puddle on the floor.

Finally, the door opened and Noguchi appeared. His face was calmer as he stepped over to the tables, his eyes on the tatami. It was only after he sat down that he raised them to Murata.

"I don't know what to say," Noguchi began, his voice quavering, the words coming with effort. "There's no way I can tell you what this means. Shibata made a full apology, and he'll be backing it up with money. In a second he'll apologize to you, too. You're the one who deserves it." He looked past Murata. "But after that, it's over."

The pain in Murata's arm seemed to swell. He had cut off his fingertip to right a wrong, and Shibata had weaseled out of it. He could wait and get Shibata another time, but that wasn't the point. Murata was a yakuza; there was no place for a personal vendetta. It was the way things were. He knew Noguchi understood. Now Noguchi was ordering him to back off.

Murata nodded.

Shibata appeared in the doorway with Sasaki. He looked lost, an amnesia victim trying to remember his name, as he motioned Murata to an open space next to the table.

Murata mounted the tatami platform. The two faced each other, sitting on their heels, backs straight. Eyes fixed on the tatami, Shibata bent his body forward several degrees. Custom dictated the offender begin by touching his head to the floor. But Shibata was twenty years older than Murata and losing face by this mandatory apology. He was also out of danger.

"I was too hasty in saying what I did," he began, his voice barely audible. "I didn't mean it as an insult. I'm sorry."

Murata cleared his throat. "Maybe so, but a yakuza lays his life on the line for things like that—the way things are said." The words hissed through clenched jaws. "You ought to know that."

"You're right. I'll be careful in the future. It won't happen again. I'm sorry."

Murata gave a grunt of acceptance. Then he excused himself to have his finger treated at the Emergency Room of Obama City Hospital. As he eased into his loafers, he felt a hand touch his shoulder. When he turned he was looking into Sasaki's piercing eyes.

"Tonight you became a real yakuza."

Murata stared at the floor. "Thank you," he mumbled as he walked out. He felt uneasy receiving praise for something he saw as his only course of action. But it required no special means of communication to know he had one very happy oyabun on his hands. All nine and two-thirds fingers of them.