

XXXIII

Satomi hung her head, sitting on the couch with a gloomy expression.

"Well, nothing we can do now," Raizo mumbled, ruffling her hair. "Once those two get started, almost *nothing* can get them to stop bickering. Koharu sat beside Satomi, giving her an understanding pat on the back. "No worries, 'tis alright," she said. "That girl *is* a handful, after all."

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" Hikari demanded, grabbing her sister by the collar of her uniform. "What, do you think you can just go and sway *my* puppet with pity? Sure, Raizo's a big 'ol softie, but that doesn't mean you can use that kindness to take him home and have your wa—"

"For your information, *dear sister*," Elizabeth replied, clearly trying to hide her anger, "I was giving your puppet a *half-decent meal*, which is more than I can say about whatever it is you feed him. Heck, I heard that you once left him with no more than a stale slice of bread instead of a proper breakfast!"

"Th-that *counts* as a proper breakfast," Hikari protested. "I-I think."

"Hardly!" Elizabeth snapped. "I don't see the issue with what I did. Why should I let Raizo go home and eat whatever poison you prepare for him when I can make him a perfectly good meal myself? And especially after today, I...I couldn't possibly let him return without at least offering a meal. And can you blame him for accepting? I don't think any *sane* man would ever choose your treatment over mine!"

"Well, he's not sane, damnit!" Hikari cried. "He's fucking mad!"

"Hey, watch your mouth!" Elizabeth demanded.

"MAKE ME!" Hikari shouted back. "Listen up. Raizo may be strong, but that's IT. He's just some mad machine! He's been forged and reforged until he was the perfect combat tool! If anything, he's made for the entertainment of the masses and for *my* glory. He's a *tool*. Why the hell should I treat a broken, crazy murderer of a tool like a human? Tell me!" she screamed.

"I-I...you...I can't even believe you!" Elizabeth said. "You...I can barely even call you my sister any longer. How could you? A puppet...a machine, sure, but still...someone who has devoted themselves to serving *you* and keeping *you* of all people happy...and yet you still treat them like complete, utter sh—"

She cut herself off.

"I just can't deal with you anymore. Name your price," Elizabeth demanded.

"What do you mean?" Hikari asked, stepping back.

"I'll even trade you my entire inheritance. I want Raizo," Elizabeth said sternly. "In fact, no—I'm taking him, and that's that. You can name a price, or else we'll duel for him. I'd gladly do that."

"There's no way in hell I'd let you take him," Hikari said. "He's crucial to my success. Or is it that you're jealous of my power now, sister?" she inquired. "How *petty* of you."

"Oh, I'm the petty one?" Elizabeth cried. "How dare you? You're the one who's obsessed with power and victory. I don't need that! I just don't approve of your treatment of those who care about you and support you! You don't *deserve* his care! And besides, he doesn't even like you!" she added. "Why in hell's name would Raizo prefer *you* over *me*? Or, heck, over *anyone else in this room*? Why would *you* of all people be the one he cares for the most?"

"Who cares?" Hikari replied. "I am what I am, and you've gotta deal with it. You think Raizo doesn't like me? Fine, then let's hear it from the man himself!" Turning to Raizo, she smirked. "Come on! Who is it in this room that you like the best? Which one of us?"

Raizo froze. "Shit," he muttered, "they remembered I was here."

"Should've run away while you had the chance," Satomi joked.

"Just be honest," Koharu nodded. "Come on, we can take it."

"Yeah!" Hikari cried. "Tell them how great I am! I order you!"

"You can't do that, *sister*," Elizabeth snapped. "You want to know which one of us Raizo really likes the most, right? So we have to hear his honest opinion."

Satomi sighed. "Alright, y'know what? Fuck this. I'll go ahead and tell you the answer," she declared. "Raizo likes *me* the best in this here room. Then it's probably Lizzie, and then Koharu."

"What?" Hikari cried. "You idiot! What about me?"

"You're not even on the list," Elizabeth said. "It's obvious. Who would he even consider you remotely likeable with how you treat him? Get the hell off your high horse."

"Impossible," Hikari replied, waving her hand casually. "He *does* like me best. He likes me more than any girl in the world!"

"Are you blind?" Satomi shouted. "Don't make me fucking laugh. You wanna be his favorite? You've got a *long friggin' list* of people to get past! What about Mariko? She's a mechanic *and* she's super pretty! Or Kasumi? They've been in love for God knows how long, and you never even realized!"

"W-what?" Hikari cried. "Y-you're just kidding! There's no way *my* Raizo would even fall for such a lowlife—"

"ENOUGH!" Raizo interrupted, standing up abruptly. "This discussion has gone on long enough. Sit down. ALL OF YOU!" he commanded.

Koharu sighed. "Mistress," she called to Elizabeth, "you'd best listen."

Elizabeth nodded in response, slowly sitting down on a nearby sofa.

Satomi took a deep breath and sat back down, leaning back in her seat. "Let's hear it. Tell her everything. If anything goes wrong, we'll hold her down or something."

"I'll do that myself," Raizo replied.

"How dare you?" Hikari shouted. "I OWN YOU. That's enough, shut the hell up and—"

"You have no right to insult my woman," Raizo interrupted her forcefully. "I love Kasumi. You got a fucking problem with it?"

Hikari froze. "Y-you...you what?"

"I love Kasumi," Raizo repeated. "I've held her close. I've pledged to protect her. I've seen both her childish and mature sides." He paused, taking a breath. "And I love Satomi too. I've shielded her from the darkness in her past. I've watched her sleep peacefully and smile cheerfully. I've been there."

"S-s-so what?" Hikari demanded. "You can't love anyone more than you love me! Why should you?"

"Koharu's my oldest friend, as far as I can remember," Raizo continued, ignoring her protest. "Ever since I met her, she's been giving me advice. We've had our moments, our ups and downs, but I care about her."

"And?" Hikari demanded. "For what reason would you love her more than me?"

"Lady Elizabeth has been your perfect counterpart," Raizo said, still ignoring Hikari's complaints. "When you're rude and careless, she's attentive and gentle. When you're indecisive and immature, she's resolute and has long blossomed into a proper woman."

"N-no...this can't be real...you...you're supposed to love me the most," Hikari said to herself, falling to her knees. "You're supposed to only look at me...you're supposed to be *all mine*," she whispered. "I...I'm supposed to be the one for you..."

"Then start by becoming a loveable woman," Elizabeth snapped. "Instead of being such a selfish, spoiled brat, learn to be altruistic and considerate!"

"SHUT UP!" Hikari shouted. "I don't give a shit about what *you* of all people think! You're not...DAMNIT!" she cried, sobbing. Picking herself up slowly, she ran over to Raizo and cried into his shoulder. Clutching onto his uniform. "Y-you don't *really* h-hate me, do you?" she asked, a gleam of hope in her eyes. "I still...I can fix this...I can be better, so please don't hate me," she begged. "Please don't say you hate me..."

Raizo hesitated. "I...I...I don't *hate* you, young miss," he replied, sighing. "And...I'm sorry. I was rude."

Hikari continued to sob as Raizo slowly put his arms around her. "Please tell me how to fix myself," Hikari pleaded. "I...I can't do this anymore...I need you to fix me," she whimpered. *Besides, she told herself, he still loves me, right? As long as he loves me...I can try to make him love me the MOST...I'm still gonna be his favorite...*

Raizo sighed. "You need to change, young miss," he said.

"I-I can do that!" Hikari cried suddenly. "Y-yeah! I can do it!"

Raizo shook his head. "It takes time, young miss. That's enough for today. You've already had enough of a shock. Let's head back to your room. Sleep early, and you'll be able to think rationally tomorrow, alright? Come on."

"B-but—" Hikari began.

Satomi rolled her eyes, standing up. "Raizo's right, y'know? Come on. We're going back," she said, grabbing Hikari and picking her up, carrying her out of the room.

Raizo groaned. "Crap," he muttered.

"This is good," Koharu assured him. "Miss Hikari will have to change eventually, and this will benefit her in the long run."

Elizabeth nodded. "My sister may become redeemable after this," she said. "Come, let's finish dinner, and then you can head back," she said to Raizo. Heading towards the kitchen, she paused. "S-say, have you really been in love with that Mariko girl's puppet?"

Raizo sighed. "Yes, Lady Elizabeth," he said.

"A-and Satomi too?" Elizabeth continued, turning back to face him.

Raizo nodded. "I couldn't help it."

"Well, polygamy is legal now, so it's not a problem in that sense," Koharu reminded him.

"Yeah, I guess," Raizo mumbled. "Enough, Let's eat."

Elizabeth nodded. *So that's how it is, she thought. So even if he's been taken...maybe I can still...*

Koharu smiled. *I see...so Raizo still has room in his heart for more women then...perhaps I can make good use of this information, she thought cheerfully.*