

XXXVII

"You've gotta be kidding me, right?" Satomi laughed nervously. "I mean, like, that archetype is *too* fucking powerful..."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ayane asked, confused.

"Oh, forget it," Satomi sighed. "Didn't you say you were from the country? Raizo grew up in a village though, as far as he can remember. So...there's gotta be some kinda inconsistency with your stories, right?"

"You *do* realize there are villages out in the country, right?" Ayane asked flatly.

"Err...wait, really? Sorry, but I'm a city girl," Satomi sighed.

"Whaddya mean, ya damn varmint?" Ayane cried. "What, ya think yer shit don't stink? You don't gotta do a lick 'o work over here, do ya? Well, guess what? There's—"

"Did you just go all country bumpkin on me?" Satomi laughed. "That's cute."

"I thought you said you didn't swing that way," Raizo joked.

"W-woah there, don't go twisting my words!" Satomi cried.

"Listen, we ain't living as easy as you may think, alright?" Ayane said. "When we were kids, my family was also really poor. I never went to grade school, y'hear? Was all 'learn this by yerself' an' 'learn that on yer own' and whatnot. We lived on the streets, so I ended up meeting all sorts of kids...and some of 'em weren't the most *friendly* kind of folks...in a traditional sense."

"Wanna elaborate?" Satomi asked.

"Well...they...damnit!" Ayane cried. "Do I gotta—"

"Those kids probably did the same thing as those old asshats who...'bugged' my mother. 'Nuff said." Raizo answered.

"Jeez, you talk like a country kid sometimes too?" Satomi sighed.

"He's right though," Ayane said. "They'd go around with a hankerin' for nothing but sex. I'm talking about kids that just hit puberty, by the way. No inhibitions or morals, just...animal instinct. It's not that bad out there usually, unless you're out on the streets in the area where we lived. They'd go around looking for the youngest dames and sweet-talk 'em into going somewhere 'private' before assaulting them. It's gross."

"Damn, uhh...I'm not sure how to respond to that one," Satomi mumbled.

"You don't have to," Ayane sighed. "They tried that on me too. I was young and impressionable. I was naïve. And they...they tried to..."

"Alright, you don't have to keep going if you're not comfortable with it," Satomi said. "I'm sorry, alright? You didn't have it easy or anything, and I didn't mean to offend you..."

"It's not that," Ayane said. "It's just...*sad*. Thankfully, they never did get to have their way with me though..."

"Uhh...what?" Satomi asked.

"Well, take a wild guess as to who came to my rescue," Ayane laughed.

Satomi slowly turned to Raizo, who absentmindedly tapped away at his phone. "You...you're a little fucking playboy, y'know that?" she mumbled. Raizo looked up in confusion, only for Satomi to turn back to Ayane, ignoring him completely.

"Ever since then, I became more cautious of the kids in our local area," Ayane explained, "but more than that, Raizo and I became close friends. We would go out to play day after day, and that continued until we were in your early teens, like eleven or twelve years old...we were inseparable. Nobody would ever hurt me, because he'd always stop them. Even if it meant he'd get hurt himself...he'd fight to protect me. I thought...that we'd be together forever...I felt invincible, like I had a wonderful guardian angel by my side..."

"Holy crap, you *were* a playboy! You're actually a natural-born playboy!" Satomi cried, turning to Raizo, who looked up from his phone again in surprise. "Wh-what?" he asked, confused.

"I suppose you could say that," Ayane nodded, "but even my younger self knew I was in love...until he disappeared from my life out of nowhere. I remember going to our old meeting place one sunny morning, only to find a small letter telling me that he was moving to an orphanage. As it turns out, his mother had frozen to death and his father was...found murdered. The man never came home because he *couldn't*...and now Raizo was going to leave because there was no longer any home for him to return to. I searched for him all day, but never did find him. The letter left me with an address for the orphanage, so I talked to my parents. We did what we could, scavenging and repairing goods to sell, making money to build ourselves up."

"I suppose that's what happens when you have something to aim for, eh?" Satomi sighed.

"Indeed," Ayane nodded. "Eventually, my parents found employment. They worked hard and finally got us a home. It was a small apartment, to be sure, but it was finally a safe place for us to stay. They've been working ever since then, and that apartment is where they still live to this day. I started going to school, using my limited homeschooled knowledge as a basis off which I could work. I started learning more refined speech so people wouldn't judge me for talking like a country girl, and I started physical training too, since I didn't really do anything except a short jog every day and I was starting to put on pounds. I ended up with a lot more experience than my classmates too, since I had to conduct actual experiments to learn things, and so I did well in school."

"And that's more or less how you got *here*, right?" Satomi inquired. "Dosia sends out recruiting letters to middle-schoolers with really good grades. All you needed was a puppet and you'd be set."

"Yeah," Ayane nodded. "A while before I came here, I found a woman on the streets, sobbing to herself. As you may have guessed, that would turn out to be Izumi, a discarded puppet. Honestly, she didn't like me at first. She thought I was mocking her when I asked if everything was alright, and we didn't exactly 'get along.'"

However...after a while, we got closer. She told me about her life...about falling in love as a human, only to be dumped for being 'useless.' After countless attempts at love and happiness all ending in bitter failure, she...cut life short. She was brought back as a puppet, but then her owner discarded her too, for the same reason. She didn't want to be hated anymore, so she just left and never turned back. It took a while for her to befriend me, and we soon got to work on the legal papers that allowed me to claim ownership over her as my puppet. And after that, despite the delays, Dosia accepted me into the academy for my grades and work ethic."

"They paid for my transportation, so I bid farewell to my family and headed off to Dosia with Izumi, having their support rallied behind me. We got here about a week ago, but had to deal with a lot of papers regarding our late transfer," Ayane explained. "On my first day on the campus, I heard that two undefeated puppets were going to go head-to-head in a match, so Izumi suggested that we go watch the match to study up on technique. And when we got there..."

"Two weeks, eh? And undefeated—HEY! That's when you shot me!" Raizo cried, flicking Satomi's forehead. "I'm sowwy," Satomi murmured, putting on her most convincing apologetic expression.

"Yes, it was Raizo's match against another puppet. I recognized him almost immediately," Ayane giggled. "I asked a few students in the stands, and they told me that he was in class 2-E, which took classes in lecture hall 101. With a bit more asking around, I confirmed his identity as my dear Raizo...and I negotiated with the administration to transfer me into that class since they hadn't yet chosen a class for me to be placed into."

"Which explains why Ms. Saitou got no sleep last night," Raizo laughed. "Poor lady."

"I was truly curious what kind of owner my Raizo had found," Ayane continued, "but as it turns out, it was the daughter of a 'noble'...Hikari Oshiro. Their family runs an international oil company, right? Didn't they have two daughters? I hear the other one's nicer."

"Yeah, she's better from looks to personality," Satomi agreed.

"Hey, I thought—" Raizo began.

"DON'T. FUCKING. SAY IT," Satomi ordered.

"So, long story short, I decided to accept her challenge because I knew what my Raizo was capable of—more or less—and I...honestly expected less from *you*, sorry," she said to Satomi apologetically. "I thought Izumi would be enough to take on even my dear childhood friend, and that I could make short work of you but alas, it wasn't so simple."

"Wait, so you thought I was some kind of goofy idiot?" Satomi asked flatly.

"Err...*maybe*," Ayane admitted.

Satomi sighed. "You...oh, never mind."

"Anyways," Ayane laughed, "having gotten that whole introduction out of the way, I have an important question to ask my dear childhood friend."

"Huh? Me?" Raizo asked, having put his phone away at some point during her story. "Sure, what's up?"

Ayane giggled, blushing.

"Oh, shit," Satomi muttered quietly.

"Well," Ayane said slowly, "I was wondering if you'd...*marry me.*"