

XX

Hearing the bell signal the end of classes, Raizo quickly stood up and grabbed his bag. Making a mental note that Satomi was lost in the middle of a daydream and that Hikari was snoring away, he headed towards the other end of the lecture hall and approached his girlfriend, who seemed to be on the verge of drifting off to sleep.

"Kasumi? Got a minute?" Raizo asked, tapping his lover on the shoulder.

Kasumi, turning around immediately at the sound of his voice, nodded enthusiastically, her sleepy expression virtually evaporating away. She stared straight at him, attentively watching his every movement. Raizo sighed. "Listen, we've got a bit of a situation and I'm gonna need some help with it."

"Awkward boner?" Kasumi inquired curiously, her eyes quickly moving to the lower half of his body.

"No, not *that* kind of situation," Raizo answered. "Just...come with me. This is important."

Nodding, Kasumi stood up and grabbed her bag. Mariko, however, stopped them. "Hey, don't go and make out behind the school or anything," she said jokingly.

"I'm afraid that's not what I was going for *this* time, miss Nakano," Raizo said, smirking.

"Then do you mind if I sit in?" Mariko asked. "I mean, if it's not personal, that is."

"Actually, I don't think that'll be a problem," Raizo nodded.

"What? You hosting a slumber party or something?" Elizabeth giggled, walking over. Seeing Raizo's serious expression, she sighed. "Guess not, huh? Well...what's bothering you, my dear?"

"Is there something you need help with?" Koharu inquired. "I mean... 'tis not a problem if you need us..."

"U-uhh...I guess that works," Raizo answered. "Let's get moving. I'll keep things brief. I know everyone still has a lot on their plates as it stands."

"Wait, Satomi knows that jackass?" Mariko asked, her voice just above a whisper. The group had relocated to Elizabeth's room, but they maintained their quiet conversation to prevent anyone from eavesdropping. Raizo had finished explaining Satomi's situation to his friends, and they were all clearly bothered by the notion.

"Yeah, she apparently knows him from somewhere," Raizo replied. "That's not a problem in and of itself, but considering his attitude towards women, I wouldn't put anything past him. Maybe it's just my bias, but when a desperate man gets his hands on an even more desperate woman, shit tends to hit the fan."

"Wait...seriously?" Mariko inquired.

"I can still remember bits and pieces of my life," Raizo nodded, "and I seem to recall a lot of people...hurting my mother when I was younger. My father passed

away when I was young, so he wasn't there to protect us for most of my life. That job...fell to me."

"Well, that's...disturbing," Elizabeth admitted.

"Listen, we're not here to discuss what I can remember about my life story," Raizo reminded them. "The point is, whenever you're nearby, keep an eye on that Naoki guy. Don't go out of your way or anything, but I'm gonna try and monitor him. If he doesn't do anything strange over a good chunk of time, then it's certainly possible that I've got the guy wrong and I'm overthinking it, but still..."

"I understand. 'Tis a grave issue," Koharu said. "I think we can do you this favor."

"Sure we can," Elizabeth agreed. "Besides, if you're wrong, nothing happens. We're not actively stalking that guy or anything, after all. And...knock on wood, if you're right, then we can do something about it."

"At the end of the day, we still gotta ensure that justice is served," Mariko said.

"Hubby...is working very hard...to help his friends..." Kasumi whispered, her face turning red. "It's...very attractive..."

Raizo sighed with relief. "Thanks, everyone. I really owe you." He bowed sincerely. *With this, I have a bit of a network, he thought. I really hope I'm just misunderstanding that Naoki guy...but Satomi isn't exactly the type to tell everyone all about her past...not that any of us are. I'm just worried that if something happens, she'll keep her mouth shut. I get she has her reasons—of course she does—but nonetheless I will protect her...and if that jackass is what I think he is...there's no way in hell I'd let him take advantage of my friend's feelings.*

Hikari sighed as she lounged around in her dorm room. Checking the clock on her wall, she noticed that it was already close to seven in the evening, yet neither of her puppets were back for dinner.

Concerned, she pulled out her phone. Pulling up Raizo's number, she pressed the call button. A short delay later, he picked up. "Yes, young miss?" his voice asked.

"W-where the hell are you, you moron?" Hikari cried.

"On my way back for dinner," he answered flatly. "I was busy. Business took a lot longer than I expected."

"A-alright, fine," Hikari said. "Just come back soon, alright? And find Satomi while you're at it. I have no idea where she is either."

Raizo didn't answer for a moment.

"Hello?" Hikari called.

"Young miss, if I may, please meet me at the front of the dorm. We need to discuss something. Now," he said.

Hikari, hearing the urgency in his voice, sighed. "O-okay," she answered nervously, "b-but why?"

"We have no time to discuss this. Meet me at the door. I'll be there in less than ten minutes," Raizo said sternly before hanging up.

“Wha—hey!” Hikari cried. *What the hell is going on?* she thought, confused.