

XV

"Are you kids serious right now?" Chinatsu cried as Elizabeth and Hikari entered the lecture hall behind their puppets. "Where were you? What the hell were you thinking?"

"I suppose Raizo spilled all the details," Hikari mumbled.

"Yeah, he did, and *you* are in some serious trouble. What's all this even about?" her teacher demanded.

"Miss, I *do* apologize on both my sister's and my own behalf," Elizabeth answered. "We were caught up in a little sibling 'spat,' and lost track of the time. I sincerely request your forgiveness, at least this time around."

Chinatsu sighed. "Well, whatever, just sit down already. You're interrupting the class, in case you haven't noticed. Oh," she added, "and if this ever happens again, you've *both* got detention, regardless of whose fault it is."

"Yes ma'am," Elizabeth nodded, bowing in unison with Koharu before heading toward her seat. Hikari, on the other hand, glared at her. Raizo sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Let us be going, young miss," he said in the most patient voice he could muster. "Ms. Saitou is in the middle of class."

"Y-yeah," Satomi agreed, "we should go take a seat already."

Hikari rolled her eyes and walked off towards her seat. Raizo sighed once more, and Satomi shrugged apathetically. "Well, at least she went without arguing," she mumbled.

"Yeah, I can agree with that," Raizo said, following after his owner. "At one point a few years back, I had to try for close to ten minutes to convince the young miss to sit back down at a party her family was hosting."

"Ouch," Satomi giggled as she followed his footsteps towards their seats.

Raizo stretched his neck as he walked out of the arena. Class had ended, and he and Satomi had been training together since they got out of the lecture hall. "That was...interesting, to say the least," he said with a sigh.

"And by interesting, you mean I punched you right outta your comfort zone, eh?" Satomi asked with a laugh.

"Yeah, yeah," Raizo mumbled. "Unfortunately, if training could solve *that* issue then I'd be more than ecstatic, but in my case I think it's safer to try and dodge the punches rather than to stop them from ripping me outta the plane."

"Probably," Satomi said, "but I still think it's pretty cool when you try. There's always something oddly attractive about guys who actually make the effort to get better at, well, whatever it is that they're trying to get better at."

"Nice sentence," Raizo said sarcastically.

"Oh, quiet, you," Satomi laughed. "Hey, about earlier today," she said, "why...do you think Hikari would suggest getting rid of you?"

"That's a no-brainer," Raizo said, his expression turning serious. "It's because I'm weaker than you. Simple as that. The young miss desires victory. No more and no less. Therefore, it makes sense that she'd try for a puppet who can help her achieve those goals. In all honesty, I don't think I've ever been more than a tool in her eyes. It all makes sense if you think about it. She's never treated me that well in the past because she thinks I'm weak. And to an extent she's right."

Satomi stopped walking, his words ringing through her head. *She's... "right," huh?* she thought.

Raizo, sensing that his partner was no longer walking, abruptly stopped as well. "As far as the young miss is concerned, you're strong. That's the only thing that matters. I'm weaker than you—not just you, actually. Weaker than any other...to the point where she expressed complete bewilderment at times when I managed to maintain a perfect win record prior to my match with Kasumi, miss Nakano's puppet."

Satomi could only stand in silence. *Weak?* she pondered. The word echoed through her head. *He's...but he's...*

"She didn't really need me. She picked me because she didn't see what Koharu could do. There's been more than one occasion where she wished she picked Koharu instead of me, actually. Not that I blame her. She had her own goals, and I have mine. They don't exactly coincide either; it just so happens that completing my own mission means I can help her along the way. She can try to scrap me. I'll see if she can."

"Your...goal?" Satomi asked. "What do you even...I just don't get it. What the hell motivates you two? And what does that have to do with your relationship?"

"Listen," Raizo said, his expression turning grim. "There's such a thing as knowing *too much*. You'll find out in time, if it becomes necessary. And if it doesn't...well, it's best if you don't know everything. Just know that the young miss—that Hikari Oshiro desires power and recognition. And me? I need something else entirely, but the process of helping her up onto that podium will help me grow to be strong enough to confront my own past. And when that day comes," he said, his expression relaxing, "well, that'll be the day that we part ways...for good." And with that, he turned away and headed off towards the stables.

Speechless, Satomi watched her partner leave. *His past? What the actual hell?* she thought. *And weak? Him? After all this?*

She took a deep breath. "You can't be serious!" she shouted, reaching out and taking his hand. Raizo, turning back to face her in surprise, found Satomi pulling him over and hugging him tightly. "Don't you fucking kid with me!" she said. "You're strong enough to take a beating and a slew of shots from me and stand up again, aren't you? That's more than I could say for myself...hell, you nearly got me with a single cut before. And you decided to challenge your past, right? And here we all are, running away from our previous lives when you're running right into the fray! If you

call that weak, then the strong can't possibly exist! I know it!" she shouted, tears forming in her eyes as she continued.

"L-listen, Satomi—" Raizo began.

"No, *you* listen! Listen to *me*, and listen to *yourself*! Do you even realize what you're freakin' saying? Are you nuts?" Satomi shouted back. "I don't *care* what happened in the past! The thing is, you're strong enough to confront it! You think you're weak? Ask those people who've desperately been trying to escape their inner demons when you've been making your past your bitch! Ask those people who you've beaten with dignity and honor, those who respect and look up to you as the very symbol of strength and courage! Hell, ask us—ask me! Your *friend*..." she said between sobs. "I don't care what the hell Hikari Oshiro says...*you are* strong...stronger than anyone else I know...and even if that's not enough for you, then go ask those people...and I swear they'll tell you the same damn thing..."

With a sigh, Raizo put his arms around her, hugging her tightly as she continued to sob. "I...I get it," he said slowly. "But...even so, I'm still not strong enough for my *own* desires. As far as I'm concerned, I still have a long way to go, and I will continue to push myself because this is what I've decided to do." He smiled. "And besides...I have people to come home to now, don't I?" he said. "I have...friends. Allies. People who'll look out for me, right?"

Wordlessly, Satomi nodded as she gripped his shoulders tightly, tears still streaming forth from her eyes.

"Then I'll say this," Raizo declared. "I *am* still weak...but I'm going to change that. I'm gonna push forward even more than before. I'm going to win it all one day..."

"Yeah," Satomi answered, a smile finally forming on her face as she wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. "And, y'know what? At the end of the day...I may *physically* be stronger than you, but I don't think I could do any other thing that you've done...and besides, I still have too many things to learn from you to count...so never say that Hikari can just scrap you like that... 'cause she can't. I won't let her. We won't let her...so instead, let's get stronger together, okay?"

Raizo nodded. "Alright...partner."

Raizo lay on a pile of hay in the stables. Though it was getting late, the only thing he could hear was Satomi's voice, and her words reverberating through his mind. *Huh. "Together," eh?* he thought. *Yeah, that sounds nice.*

He chuckled. *But she's right. I have friends now, like Satomi, and like Jiro and Fuyuko, and even miss Nakano...and on top of that, I have Kasumi, who I'd promised to protect and to stay with...I can't just recklessly run around chasing one single goal anymore. I need to think ahead...because I have a life other than my past now,* he thought. *I do indeed have people to come home to...and I intend on doing so. After all, he added to himself, there's no way in hell I'd just let someone kill me...no, never again. Not even if it's Hikari—my owner—who wants me scrapped...no way I'm going down without a fight.*

Having confirmed his ambitions, Raizo sighed to himself. Closing his eyes, he felt himself finally relaxing as he drifted off to sleep.

"You're late," Hikari said as Satomi entered her own dorm room. "I came by for a little visit, and you're nowhere to be found? Unbelievable!" she said.

"I apologize, mistress," Satomi replied.

"Say, lemme ask you something," Hikari said. "Do you...think there's any reason I should keep Raizo around? Give me your honest opinion. Should I just scrap him? Or maybe sell him to someone else? It's not like a need such a pathetic machine anyways," she snickered.

Hiding her hand behind her back, Satomi clenched a fist. Taking a deep breath to calm herself down, she spoke. "I don't believe you should scrap him, mistress. Above all else, I think he's a talented partner and a good friend...and at the end of the day I don't really want to lose him. That's...that's what I think," she declared, her tone serious. *And besides, she added to herself, after our conversation earlier, I'm more convinced than ever. I think...I think what I feel for Raizo isn't just friendship or even admiration...I think it's something more...so I can't just let him go...*

Hikari, oblivious to her puppet's thought, nodded. "Fair enough. And I suppose the extra power couldn't hurt," she laughed. "Well then, I'll hold onto him for now, but if he becomes too useless, I think I'll just sell him off. It makes my life easier that way, I hope you understand."

"Y-yes, mistress," Satomi replied, a slight hint of anger in her voice.

Hikari, still oblivious, stood up. "Well, in any case, go bathe and head to bed. I'll call Raizo back to my room and tell him you convinced me to keep him around," she said. "Maybe then you can squeeze a favor or two outta him," she said.

Satomi, annoyed, turned to face her owner, a fake smile plastered on her face. "S-say, do you two *really* share a room?" she asked.

At the question, Hikari froze. A moment later, she spoke. "W-why of course we do! N-now naturally, I make him sleep on the couch or something like that...but y-yeah!" She laughed nervously. "A-alright, I'll be going now," she declared, exiting the room before Satomi could ask another question. *What is up with her?* Satomi pondered.

Damnit, that was close, Hikari thought, walking towards her own dorm room. I guess she bought my "apathetic owner" act. But then again, I can't act too suspiciously...she'll suspect something...and if she finds out that he doesn't really sleep in my room or anything...no! I can't let it happen! I can't...let anyone else have my Raizo!