

VII

"Hubby...do you wanna...sleep together?" Kasumi asked.

"I...uhh...don't think that would be a good idea..." Raizo began.

"Having...sex, you mean?" Kasumi inquired flatly.

"W-well, yeah."

"Why not?"

"Because—wait, you're *seriously* asking me that?" Raizo cried.

"Umm...yes?" Kasumi answered, tilting her head in confusion.

"L-listen," Raizo sighed, "at the end of the day, we barely know each other...and you're offering to have sex and you're calling me 'hubby.' I'm seriously concerned—"

"It makes me...happy that hubby is...concerned for me," Kasumi whispered, pressing herself against him yet again.

Raizo sighed again. "Please stop that," he said sternly.

Kasumi looked away, her cheeks flushed. "Do you...not like me, hubby?" she asked with a dejected look on her face. "Is my body...not to your...liking? Does hubby prefer...bigger girls like mistress? Or...smaller ones like...hubby's own mistress?"

Raizo bit his lip. "Well, I won't deny that I *do* like 'em bigger, but—"

"Then please enjoy," Kasumi said, cutting him off as she slowly massaged his body. "Hubby can just...relax..."

"Actually, Kasumi, relaxation will have to wait!" Mariko cried, bursting back into the room. "I hate to interrupt your massage, Raizo, but we need to get going. You're not fully recovered yet, but Dosia's security force has seen a suspicious individual on school grounds by the cafeteria. The person may, according to your description of their potential weapon, be the one who attacked you. The security force, however, isn't sure how to approach. You're quite a powerful puppet from what we've gathered, so if *you* went down, it's hard to say what may happen to our human security force, and mobilizing their puppets will take a bit. We've been ordered to hold the assailant off until reinforcements arrive. Think you can help us out?"

"Of course, miss Nakano," Raizo answered, "I'd be glad to." Detaching Kasumi from himself, he reached down to ensure that his underwear was still on. After confirming the presence of his undergarments, he leapt out of the bed and threw his uniform on. Kasumi slowly crawled out of bed after him and got dressed.

Mariko pulled out her phone and dialed a short number, slipping on a pair of sunglasses as she walked. She wore a black leather jacket over her school uniform, ignoring the heat beneath the sun. "Hello? It's me," she said. "Yeah, we're here. Give me instructions," she said. Listening to the voice at the other end, she nodded. "Got it. Yep...leave it to us for now. Please hurry...thanks."

"So what's going down?" Raizo asked, strolling along beside Kasumi.

"It's as they suspected. Assuming your deduction regarding the attacker's weapon are correct, it's quite likely that this person is the perpetrator. For God's sake, she has *no* documentation that allows her to be on school grounds."

"I see," Raizo sighed. "Well, it's friggin' payback time!" he chuckled, patting his sword's scabbard, slung at his side.

"I shall not...let hubby get hurt..." Kasumi whispered.

"W-woah there," Raizo said, "this person's pretty dangerous, alright? Don't be concerned for me, I can easily dodge their bullets if I can see where they're shooting from. The problem is, I have no way of protecting *you* from—"

"THERE YOU ARE!" a voice cried out to them, cutting Raizo off.

Turning her head to the left, Mariko clicked her tongue in frustration. "Damnit," she mumbled, "I hoped that bitch wouldn't come looking for me *now*, of all times..."

"What the hell were you doing to *my* Raizo?" the voice demanded.

"Miss Oshiro, I have already told you that I've done nothing wrong. I have the legal right to take custody of him in cases when he required repairs, and he was severely damaged in our match," Mariko said, clearly trying to hide her apathy towards the girl before her.

"And whose fault do you think *that* is?" Hikari cried angrily. She shook her head as she approached, and sighed. "Well, whatever. He's clearly fixed, right? So give him back!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Mariko answered. "He's still recovering. It just so happens that there's something we *require* him to do. Were there another option, I would never had brought him out so soon."

"He's walking fine, and clearly can use a weapon if I'm guessing the nature of your excursion correctly," Hikari said, "and that's enough. Give him back. Now."

"If you think that's enough to constitute a full recovery, then you're an idiot," Mariko said sternly. "Besides, even if he was ready to go back, I still need him for this one operation. Consider it a rental. I'll even pay you back for this if you insist on it."

"I don't want your damn money," Hikari replied, "I want my puppet back. Period."

"Raizo, would you like to go back now, or would you prefer to finish this operation?" Mariko asked, tuning to him. "It's your choice. You're also welcome to stay and continue to recover if needed after the operation is done. I leave the decision up to you."

"Well, my answer died quite a while ago," Raizo answered casually. "Screw recovery—"

"Exactly!" Hikari cried. "Err...well, no, not quite, but you get the point!"

"—I'm not going back until I find who shot me and cut them into a bloody mess!" Raizo finished.

"Yeah!" Hikari cried. "Cut 'em into a—wait, NO! You're supposed to come home! With ME!"

"The choice has been made," Mariko said, turning and walking off. "Let's get this done quickly," she sighed. "Then you can choose your next course of action," she added, winking at Raizo.

"I will return in due time, young miss," Raizo said, following after her. "I assure you of that."

Kasumi wordlessly followed behind him.

Hikari, stunned, blinked twice. "W-wait! If you're that desperate to go, I'm coming too!" she declared, chasing after them.

"I'd prefer if you didn't," Mariko answered. "This isn't a match in the arena. Our opponent is tough enough. Adding someone you have to protect is just unnecessary."

"But I can help!" Hikari cried.

"WILL YOU?" Mariko shouted, her expression turning frustrated. "In our match you sent your puppet to fight his foes alone. You stood by and watched as gunshots rang through the air. You didn't so much as ask him if he was okay after he fell, and you never thought to help or protect him then...SO WHY THE HELL WOULD THAT CHANGE NOW?" she demanded.

Hikari stopped. She looked dazed and confused. Silence filled the air.

"You're a real spoiled brat, you know?" Mariko said coldly, turning away from her. "Let's get this over with," she sighed, gesturing for the puppets to follow her.

The white-haired girl sighed as she straightened her back, looking around. "You can stop hiding now," she said, "I know you're there. You don't have any puppets with you and you're too scared to face me in person. Correct?" she asked, her crimson eyes filled with rage.

There was no response.

"Oh well, I tried," she said, pulling out her gun and firing a shot into a nearby bush. A moment later, a man's body fell out, his head pierced by a single bullet. "Run," she ordered. "Run away like you should."

Three more men got up from behind other objects on the school campus. Pulling out their guns, they prepared for a firefight.

"Oh, how stubborn of you," the girl laughed. "Too bad none of you are any fun...but I don't wanna draw *too* much blood, lest I get the government on my tail. Then I'll be like that famed killer puppet, wouldn't I?" She sighed. "That wouldn't be good for my reputation. No, not one bit." She fired off three shots, easily destroying the guns in the security force's hands. "Go home now, please," she said.

"She what?" Mariko cried, picking up the pace. "Damnit...get them out of there! We're almost at the location!" She sighed, hanging up. "Why did this bitch have to appear at the *other end* of the school? Why the goddamn *cafeteria*?"

"What happened?" Raizo demanded.

"The assailant shot one of the human officers on the security force. He's unfortunately deceased. Got killed instantly; the shot landed right between his eyes. The others have remained but have not engaged," Mariko explained.

"Mistress...are we...strong enough?" Kasumi asked.

"Of course we are," Mariko assured her. "Right?"

"Damn straight," Raizo answered, giving her a thumbs-up. "Say, where'd the young miss head off to?"

"She's been following us, albeit slowly. Seems to be trying to hide," Mariko said.

"Alright then, we'll deal with her later," Raizo sighed. As they turned the corner, they spotted the remaining three officers backing away slowly. To the far left, a body lay on the ground. Even further than that, a girl with streak white hair and bloody red eyes stood, a pair of guns in her hands and a smile on her face.

"Freeze!" Mariko cried, drawing back her bow with an arrow ready to fly.

Kasumi reached back, bringing out her sword and a brand new shield. Stepping forward, she bent her knees as if she was ready to run in at any moment.

"Oh? It seems more people showed up that I expected," the white-haired girl said.

Raizo bit his lip. *What the hell?* he thought. *I was expecting some sorta battle-hardened assassin, but she's...just a girl, and not much older than us, I'd say.*

"Why are you here?" Mariko demanded.

"Let me ask my own question first," the girl replied. "Are you Hikari Oshiro?"

"Thankfully not," Mariko answered, shooting a glance backwards, spotting Hikari hiding in a bush not too far away. "What do you want with her?"

"I have a message from my most recent employer," the girl declared. "However, I don't like the thought of staying for much longer, so just tell her that my employer said this: 'Get off your high horse. You're not in the land of the rich anymore. Stop being such a snob.' That's all."

Hearing this comment, Hikari ran forth from her hiding spot. "Who're you calling a snob?" she cried.

The girl shrugged. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger," she joked.

"Says the one who shot first," Raizo said, rolling his eyes.

"Oh? *You're* still alive? Cool," the girl giggled. "Y'know, actually, you're pretty handsome now that I get a good look at you."

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Raizo snapped.

"Well, I best be on my way," the girl said, turning to walk away.

"Hold on," Hikari said. "What exactly are you? Like, a hitman or something?"

"That would be correct," the girl answered.

"I see," Hikari mumbled.

"Frankly, I don't give a damn," Raizo said. With a flick of his left thumb, he pushed against the guard of his sword, causing it to fly out. Catching the hilt with his right hand, he drew the blade. "You're not going anywhere 'til I say so."

"Oh?" the girl raised an eyebrow. "And you think you can fight me? Now? I doubt you've fully recovered."

"Whatever," Raizo said, dashing forth.

The white-haired girl narrowed her eyes. Aiming carefully, she fired off a shot.

Raizo effortlessly dodged it, his shadows bursting forth one after another.

Positioning himself, he swung with the power of ten separate swords.

The girl smirked. Putting the gun in her right hand away and balling her hand into a fist, she swung at him.

"Is she crazy?" Mariko laughed. "That's not gonna hit! Those clones seem to be untouchable!"

"Unless..." Hikari mumbled.

The girl's fist connected with the first clone. As Raizo's eyes widened in surprise, she continued her swing. The punch sent the clones reverberating through the air before being absorbed back into Raizo's original body. The girl slammed her elbow down on top of him, throwing him into the ground.

"Hubby!" Kasumi cried, raising her sword and running over to him.

"No, no, not yet," the white-haired girl said, wagging a finger at her. With the gun in her left hand, she fired off a few shots, causing Kasumi to pause and raise her shield. Lowering it a moment later, she noticed that the girl had appeared before her. "Now, go back," she ordered, delivering a punch to the shield. The impact sent a shockwave through the air, throwing Kasumi back a few meters into the wall of a building.

The white-haired girl, walking back over to Raizo, smiled. "I really wish we could've been friends," she said, her voice soft and sincere, yet threatening and cold. "Your technique is pretty cool, honestly. However...partial existence is a strange thing. If you hit it hard enough, you can drag it into incomplete existence and use the tiny existing fragment that you create to damage the user. It's been used before, albeit rarely. It's the hamartia of all puppets with powers based around existence, you know?" She giggled. "Never thought I'd meet one though...and certainly not such a good-looking one."

"Yeah, yeah," Raizo mumbled.

"Now, now," the girl said, taking his sword and tossing it aside. "You won't be needing *that*." She smirked and placed a hand on his cheek. "It's kinda sad that I gotta kill you, but oh well." Placing her other hand on his neck, she began to squeeze with bloodlust in her eyes.

Raizo bit his lip. He curled his fingers, as if he were trying to make a fist but was too weak to finish the motion. The girl smiled. "Relax, and I'll make it hurt a little less." Removing her hand from his cheek, she reached back swiftly and caught the arrow flying straight at her head.

"Damn," Mariko mumbled, "and I thought that was perfect timing..."

Hikari stood in silence beside her.

"Hey! I thought you said you could help!" Mariko cried, turning to her. "See? This is exactly what I was talking about!"

"Listen, you—" Hikari answered, turning back to her.

The two girls began to argue again.

"And there goes your help," the white-haired girl laughed, turning back to Raizo. "Any last words?" she asked.

"Y-yeah..." Raizo choked. "Never...ask...that question..."

"Why?" the girl asked.

Raizo smirked. Suddenly, the white-haired girl felt a stabbing pain in her chest. Instinctively letting go of Raizo to grab whatever had impaled her, she found that his sword had cut cleanly through her stomach. Screaming in agony and terror, she reached out to the blade. "Wh-what the hell?" she cried.

Raizo laughed. "Too easy," he said, making a quick motion with his hand. The blade tore out from her body, leaving a clean cut between her stomach and the right side of her body. Delivering a punch onto the bloody gash, he forced the girl off.

"Don't be so sure!" the girl cried, suddenly pulling out a gun. Raizo's eyes widened as he realized his mistake. He was open, and he couldn't react fast enough. The girl fired a shot into his stomach and gave him a clean uppercut, knocking him aside. Firing three more shots into his body, she sighed. Putting her weapon away, she walked over to his side. "I think you're still alive. If so, I suppose you should survive." She smiled. "You've got some really interesting powers, y'know? Maybe I won't kill you after all...even though you *did* cut me pretty bad..."

Before she could continue, she felt an arrow being pressed against her head. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't just let fly at point blank right now," Mariko demanded.

"I can't," the white-haired girl replied, closing her eyes.

"Then I will," Hikari declared, walking over and shoving Mariko to the side. "You said you were a hitman of sorts, right?"

"Yeah, what about it?" the girl asked.

"Listen. I, Hikari Oshiro, need the strongest puppets out there. Nobody's been able to defeat my Raizo in a *fair* fight before. That said, I have a proposal for you. We won't kill you *and* I'll get you acquitted of all your crimes thus far. On top of that, I'll cover your hospital bill. In exchange," she said, smirking, "you'll work for *me* from now on."

"WHAT?" Mariko cried.

The girl looked at her. "Real offer?" she asked.

"I gain nothing from lying to you here," Hikari commented.

The white-haired girl nodded. "I see. Well then, in that case I'll take you up on it. From today forth, I shall serve you, miss Oshiro," she said. "Of course, that means you'll be paying to get me out of all my jail time *and* to cover my hospital bills."

"Consider it done," Hikari said. Turning to Raizo, she sighed. "You have a new partner from today on, got it, idiot?"

Raizo, barely opening his eyes, sighed. "Y-yes...young miss," he choked out. The white-haired girl smiled and gave him a pat on the head. "Well, isn't this just wonderful!" she laughed. "Well, Raizo...let's get along, okay?" she cooed, poking him in the cheek and getting up. "Now, where's the infirmary?"

Mariko, stunned, stepped back. "What're you looking at me for?" she asked Hikari.

"Well, you'll be treating my Raizo for a few more days, right?" Hikari asked. "Might as well fix up my *new* puppet as well. I'll pay you, so don't worry about *that*..."

"Y-you—" Mariko began.

Hikari waved as she walked off. "Just drop 'em off for me *together* once everything's ready, okay?" she said. "And gimme the bill. A *real* bill, not some overpriced bullshit," she added. "I'm getting the paperwork done today, so don't go thinking about foul play or anything."

As she walked off, Mariko bit her lip. *That bitch...all she cares about it power! This puppet hurt Raizo so badly...TWICE! And still, she pays to have her repaired AND acquitted of all charges? And for what? The power? Hikari Oshiro...truly, you disgust me...*