

XXXIV

Chinatsu stumbled into the lecture hall, dark bags hanging under her eyes. "Crap," she mumbled to herself.

"Mistress, are you *sure* you don't need a vacation?" Marie inquired, following her in.

"I'm fine, alright?" Chinatsu grumbled, yawning as she sat down at her desk. "I just need a...little nap...yeah, a nap," she declared, her face hitting the desk as she immediately fell fast asleep.

"What the heck happened here?" Raizo's voice asked. *God, I get into an argument with Hikari three days ago, come into class on a Monday morning and find my teacher looking like she died over the weekend...jeez,* he thought.

Marie turned to see him enter the lecture hall, his bag casually slung over his shoulder. Hikari walked beside him, having recovered from her fit the night before. Right behind them, Satomi trudged in, evidently still tired. "I could ask you the same thing," Marie declared. "What the heck happened to Satomi?"

"She and I stayed up trying to calm the young miss down," Raizo replied. "It...uhh...*may* have been my fault."

"Huh. 'May have,' you say?" Marie giggled.

"Eh. Raizo actually slept, though," Satomi said, rubbing her eyes. "As it turns out, G cups make for good pillows."

"*That*, they do," Raizo laughed.

Hikari looked over at him bashfully, twiddling her thumbs in silence. *I wonder...how can I make his unconditional love for me multiply?* she asked herself.

"Let's go," he said, taking her arm and pulling her along casually.

Hikari gasped a little, reluctantly following him.

"Uhh...is she feeling okay?" Marie inquired.

"Yeah, just a little shaken," Satomi replied. "In a nutshell, she finally realized that treating a man like crap isn't exactly the best way to get him to like you."

"Amen to that," Marie nodded. "I don't think most guys are that kind of masochists."

"You never know," Satomi laughed, heading off to her seat.

Mariko and Kasumi entered the lecture hall, followed by Jiro and Fuyuko. Raizo waved to his girlfriend and gave Jiro a fistbump as he passed by. He watched intently, awaiting Elizabeth's arrival. Just as the bell was about to ring, she sprinted into the room with Koharu chasing after her, her uniform neat but her hair still a mess. "S-sorry, I didn't sleep too well last night," she briefly explained to her teacher.

Chinatsu raised a thumb, her face still glued to her desk.

Elizabeth giggled and headed off to her seat.

At the sound of the bell signaling the start of class, Chinatsu slammed her hands onto her desk, standing up forcefully. "Alright class, we're not learning SHIT

today 'cause I'm tired outta my mind, but I'm still showing up so the administration doesn't cut my pay. Serves 'em right to start paying me for slacking off after yesterday. They told me a new transfer student, who was originally gonna be in the hall two rooms down, insisted on being transferred to this class. Which is fine and all, since she gave 'em a damn week's notice first, but guess when those assholes told me? They called me at friggin' two in the morning and I've been working on paperwork ever since!" she cried.

The class laughed.

"Oh, you punks think this is funny, do you?" she demanded. "How 'bout I give you a surprise essay at two in the morning, eh?"

Everyone fell silent.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, you virgins!" Chinatsu cried.

"U-umm...mistress, *you're* still a virgin," Marie reminded her. "That and I'm pretty sure a good chunk of the class *isn't*."

"Whatever, technicalities, right?" Chinatsu shrugged. "Point is, I'm tired as shit, so I'm just gonna let our new student introduce herself and then you all have the day to do whatever. As long as it's quiet, that is. I'm gonna take a nice, long nap," she concluded, plopping her face back onto the desk.

The door to the lecture hall opened and a girl walked into the room. The boys' voices and cheers immediately exploded forth.

"HEY, QUIET!" Chinatsu cried, immediately silencing the commotion.

"Morons," Raizo mumbled.

Off to the side, Jiro sighed. "Why is it that these guys make a ruckus whenever there's a new girl? I don't get it..."

"Well, you *don't* get it because you're not single," Fuyuko reminded him. "I mean, I *hope* I'm doing a good job as both a puppet and a girlfriend."

"Oh, you're doing wonderful, dear," Jiro replied, kissing her gently.

Satomi poked Raizo in the arm. "Hey, hey," she whispered, "kiss me too!"

"Not now," Raizo replied sternly.

Hikari turned to him. "S-say," she said, "I know this is kind of an odd time, but do I really have *that many* flaws?"

"Young miss, I'd like for you to improve upon yourself for your own future and legacy," Raizo replied. "I highlighted the problems I believe you have. It's up to you whether or not you wish to change."

"N-no, I can change!" Hikari declared. "I'll be better, I promise, so please don't be upset at me..."

"Huh. This more gentle side of you is cute," Raizo muttered. "Don't force yourself. However...I think you're already starting to get better."

"There's the *dere* in 'tsundere,' amiright?" Satomi joked.

The group stopped talking as they noticed the entire room finally settle down completely. The girl at the front of the room, who had waited patiently for her chance to talk, smiled. Her blue eyes matched those of Hikari and Elizabeth, but her long hair

was a light brunette. "Hi there!" she said. "My name is Ayane Tanaka. I'm a country girl, and I bring with me my puppet, Izumi," she declared, gesturing towards the door. A second woman, much older than Ayane herself, entered the room and bowed.

"Wow, she is...*not* a schoolgirl, is she?" Marie joked.

"She's 23 years old, technically," Chinatsu informed her quietly, her voice muffled by the desk. "Been a puppet for seven year now."

Izumi's eyes gleamed with a bright yellow tint, and her hair was a bright shade of blue, braided neatly into a long ponytail. She silently scanned over the room, a distinct glare forming on her face.

"Wow, that glare is *fierce*. I think she's hot," Satomi said.

"So you swing that way too?" Raizo joked.

"Wha—NO!" Satomi protested.

Ayane smiled. "We hope to get along with everyone!" she said. "A-and, well, I know we're supposed to have quite a few matches, so I do hope you'll all go easy on me," she laughed.

"Sorry, but not a friggin' chance," Raizo mumbled to himself, smirking.

"You intend on facing them?" Satomi asked.

"Indeed," Raizo nodded. "Young miss? What do you think?"

"HELL YEAH!" Hikari cried, her timid mood disappearing instantly.

"Well, that was fast," Raizo laughed. "Though I don't blame you. Nothing like a good fight to raise your spirits."

"H-hey, by the way," Hikari interrupted, "if I *do* change...will you care for me the same way you care for the rest of them?"

Raizo sighed. "It's not for *me*, young miss. *My* opinion shouldn't matter. It depends what the *world* sees. I want you to maintain your confidence and strength, but lose the arrogance and selfishness, got it?"

"A-alright!" Hikari said enthusiastically. "I'll...I'll do it!"

"These things take time and effort," Satomi sighed.

"Then I'll work for as long as I have to in order to be recognised by Raizo!" Hikari declared. "We'll start by teaching that girl that things aren't so damn easy here! C'mon, we're gonna issue our challenge!"

"And there she goes again," Raizo sighed as Hikari ran off.

"It'll take time for her to change," Satomi said. "But still, even though we were kinda mean yesterday...if she really changes for the better then she'll benefit in the long run, right?"

"Yeah," Raizo nodded. "Tough love, Satomi. Tough fucking love."

