

XXIII

"You let him do WHAT?" Mariko cried.

Elizabeth sighed and shook her head in dismay.

"Don't look at me like that," Hikari snapped. "Raizo said he had a plan, so I just left it up to him. It's not like he'll lose or anything."

"Yes, he will!" Mariko exclaimed. "Our faith in his abilities does nothing for him here! You're sending him in to fight for his *life* against two opponents that we know nothing about! How was this a *remotely* good idea to you?"

"Listen, just...it's under control, alright?" Hikari said. "Come on, we're heading to the arena to watch the match. I wanna get a front row seat to watch that Naoki guy get his ass handed to him."

"Where did we go wrong in raising you?" Elizabeth mumbled to herself.

Koharu tugged on her sleeve. "Mistress, we should go watch," she said. "If Raizo does have to fight, won't our support make him feel better?"

Kasumi nodded. "I wanna...see hubby kill someone," she said, rather excited.

Mariko gulped. "U-uhh...*right*..." she muttered, shuddering. *Damn, I think I just got a chill down my spine*, she thought.

"Glad to see you actually showed," Raizo said, chuckling to himself. He casually twirled his sword around. "I hope you remember our bet," he said.

"Yeah, I do," Naoki answered, entering the arena. Behind him, Noa marched in with a heavy assault rifle in her hands. "Do you intend to fight Noa with a melee weapon?" he taunted.

"Why not?" Raizo asked. "Don't you want an easier win?"

"Your funeral," Naoki threatened. "Literally."

"Is it?" Raizo laughed. "And I was *just* about to warn you to be careful...maybe I'm too nice."

Naoki grimaced. "Enough already. Where's Satomi?"

"In the stands," Raizo replied, pointing up towards her seat.

"Oh, really now?" Naoki mumbled.

"Let's get started already," Raizo laughed again. "My friends should just be arriving, so I have no reason to wait anymore."

"Then prepare to fucking die!" Naoki cried.

"Enough talk. We shall speak with our weapons," Raizo declared, tightening his grip on his sword. Opposite to him, Naoki drew a dagger and Noa raised her gun. "Let's go already!" Naoki shouted as Noa pressed the trigger on her gun.

"Shit!" Mariko cried as she bolted into the stands. "They're starting?"

"Wait for it," Elizabeth murmured.

In a flash, Raizo dashed across the arena and, in a single swing, cut the blade off Naoki's dagger, reducing it to nothing but a blunt grip. He smirked as he kicked his foe in the shin, sending him to his knees. "And there's the equalizer," Raizo said, dashing back towards Noa.

"What the—my weapon!" Naoki cried. "But I can't fight without it!"

"What a loser," Hikari laughed. "He let his guard down and Raizo just straight up destroyed his weapon!"

"Meaning it's now a duel between the puppets," Elizabeth said. "Very clever."

Mariko nodded. "Yeah, I suppo—oh, wait a minute, what's that Naoki guy doing?" she cried, noticing him walk over to the stands before Satomi. As she leaned forth, about to ask him what he needed, he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her into the arena.

"Holy crap!" Hikari shouted.

Raizo's clones approached Noa. She desperately parried his attacks with the barrel of her gun. Then, with one mighty swing, she punched the clones straight out of their invulnerable state, sending Raizo flying into a wall.

Getting back onto his feet, Raizo chuckled. "Not bad," he said. "Let me guess. You have a decent amount of tungsten in your composition, right? That lets you hit harder."

"How attentive of you," Noa replied sarcastically.

"So how'd you die? I hear that's part of what they take into account when deciding your composition," Raizo continued as he dashed in again, leaving a slice on Noa's arm before being punched away once more.

"What, are you a detective all of a sudden?" Noa snapped.

"Not quite," Raizo replied. "I'm just looking for a reason to spare your life."

"Listen, alright? Some guy accidentally fired his gun and the bullet ended up in my head," Noa said. "There's nothing I can do about it, but...jeez, I just wish that bullet hit someone else! What did I do to deserve this?" she cried, jabbing Raizo in the gut. Dropping his sword, he doubled over in pain. Forcing him down by the neck, she threw her gun aside and delivered punch after punch to his face. "I could've had a future! I could've gotten married! I could've become a doctor, or a lawyer, or whatever the hell I wanted, but no! Instead, some guy kills me the year after I move out to go to college! It's that ironic? How cruel life can be?"

Raizo finally managed to wriggle free of her grasp and kick her aside. "Yeah, it's ironic as hell," he replied, "that life could be such a blessing and a curse. But the fact that you haven't moved on yet is proof that you were just that petty person."

"THE HELL DO YOU KNOW?" Noa shouted, reaching for her weapon.

"I know you're as good as fucking dead," Raizo replied, reaching his hand out. His sword flew to his outstretched hand and, catching it, he made one swift cut. Noa

screamed in agony as he severed her hand. Delivering a powerful kick to his shin, she knocked him over and stood up again.

"You're just a kid!" she cried, punching him with her remaining hand.

"You...YOU KNOW NOTHING!"

Raizo tried to block the hits, but his face was already beaten and bloodied. He forced his eyes shut. *Damnit, he thought. And here I thought cutting off her hand would keep her down for a while! This sucks...it feels just like...THAT time...right. This is JUST like that time, right?* he asked himself. *I'm lying on the ground being beaten senseless...and the smell of iron...of BLOOD...all around me...yeah. I died like that. I died like this...helpless. This was the end of my first life...but I'll be damned if I let it be the end to this second one.* Steeling his resolve, he opened his hand once more. His sword returned to him, and he swung straight into Noa's side. "You're gonna die, kiddo," he laughed. She screamed in pain, her onslaught of punches stopping instantly as she tried to get away from the blade buried deep in her metallic flesh. Raizo smirked. "Gotcha," he said, twisting the blade. Virtually throwing Noa aside, he rose to his feet once more, his body covered in blood and bruises. "Yeah, this is how it ended," he mumbled. "Or, well, I think it was the other way around, actually."

"What're you...talking about, you psycho?" Noa cried, desperately pressing a hand against the giant gash along the side of her body.

"I wonder," Raizo replied, opening his eyes.

"Is hubby...alright?" Kasumi asked.

"What's going on with him today?" Koharu inquired. "Tis' strange."

"Oh...so *this* is happening," Elizabeth muttered. "I guess the psychiatrist was right...he has some trauma rooted deep in his head. I'll have to look into it," she reminded herself.

Raizo's eyes, normally a plain grey color, were now as red as blood. His pupils were dilated, and his iris was no longer round like that of a human being. Instead, they were reptilian, with a long but thin shape and black in color. "Now, good night, kiddo," he said, his face curling up into a smile. Dozens of clones appeared, each stabbing their swords into Noa, who could barely even stand. Her tormented cries filled the air as dozens of swords coated her body in cuts. In moments, she fell silent.

"Freeze!" Naoki's voice called.

His clones still relentlessly striking Noa's body, Raizo turned to his opponent who held Satomi in his arms. "Let my puppet go. Now," Naoki demanded.

"Or what?" Raizo laughed. "You're unarmed...and besides, you're *mortal*. I did say I'd take your lives when I win, didn't I?"

"What're you talking about?" Naoki demanded.

"Don't you see? You're disarmed completely," Raizo said. "And your puppet's been thoroughly defeated. I've won already. And if you think taking a hostage has any

value, what makes you think I can't just rescue her at the snap of my fingers?" he asked. "Listen. If you don't concede now, I'll kill your precious Noa and put your head up on a fucking pike!" he declared, stabbing his sword into Noa's body as his clones disappeared. With a flick of his wrist, he shattered the puppet's shredded body into tiny fragments of metal and picked up her scratched core.

Naoki bit his lip. He tightened his grip on Satomi, who struggled gently, too afraid to hurt him. *No...that's Noa he has in his hands...this isn't going according to plan! If I surrender now...maybe I'll make it out with Noa and I can try again! If I keep resisting, he'll kill Noa and then...then he'll come for me...and I'll die.* Sighing, he nodded. "Alright, fine! Fine! You can Satomi? Take her! Just...just give me Noa back!" he cried. "I'd rather have my partner than a sex toy!"

"Sex toy!" Hikari shouted. "So he was serious about making Satomi into a...a...damn that guy!"

"What an asshole," Mariko mumbled.

"Raizo!" Hikari cried to him. "Just kill that bastard already, and break his puppet into scrap metal!"

"W-woah, there!" Mariko protested. "That's a little extreme, don't you think? Like, what do you think this is? A fight to the death?"

"What do you think Raizo's plan was?" Hikari shot back.

"N-no way," Mariko stammered. "W-wait, so that really was *his* plan? I thought *you* sent him to do this!"

"Not a chance," Hikari replied, "but now, I'm kinda glad I let him go all-out."

Naoki gulped. "A-alright then, just...just give me the core!" he ordered.

Raizo smirked. "The winner should be the one who takes his prize first. And besides, how do I know I can trust you? Remember, my goal is to win Satomi back. I don't give a shit if you die or not."

"Fine!" Naoki cried, pushing Satomi forth. Raizo sheathed his sword and extended his right arm, wrapping it around Satomi as he held her close. Smiling, he held out his left hand which held onto Noa's core. Naoki ran forth, his arms outstretched. As he approached, he slowed down, moving his hands around the core. Satomi and Raizo watched attentively as he slowly went to take the core from Raizo's hands.

"Now, now, this'll be fine," he muttered to himself. "I don't need that slut anyway...no, I don't," he mumbled, assuring himself. His fingertips touched Noa's core.

Raizo's calm smile suddenly turned into a sadistic grin. Abruptly tightening his grip on the heavily damaged core, he crushed the last remnants of Noa in his bare hand. Naoki looked up in shock. Without hesitation, Raizo delivered a swift and powerful punch to Naoki's head, sending him flying into the arena wall. Drawing his sword, he casually threw the weapon towards where Naoki had landed, the blade

flying straight for Naoki's location. The sound of a deep incision filled the air. Satomi stood frozen in place, shock and terror plastered on her face. *What...just happened?* she thought.

Raizo sighed, pulling his sword back to him and sheathed it. "Let's go," he said, picking Satomi up in his arms and walking out of the arena.

"H-holy crap," Mariko mumbled. "I can't believe it. He actually...just killed that guy and his puppet."

"What? Did that change your perspective on him?" Hikari asked. "Listen, Raizo's not as nice as you think he is. He's had a rough past. There are moments when he literally can't control himself."

"Don't blame the poor guy too much," Elizabeth agreed, walking over. "I understand that it's hard to believe...and even harder to stomach. He *did* just kill two people without batting an eye, after all, but this was their bet. The contract Naoki was forced to sign made it perfectly legal for him to kill them."

"Yeah, but still," Mariko mumbled. "It's...gruesome."

"Raizo knew this could happen," Koharu interrupted. "In fact, 'tis my speculation that he didn't really intend to kill them. He just made them sign that contract because he intended to be a little more reckless...and he knew that because of that, he *may* lose control."

"I agree with that speculation," Elizabeth said. "He's seen many a psychiatrist before, and they all concluded the same thing: he has some sort of 'trigger,' and whatever it is, when it comes into play he completely loses control. It was impossible for them to find out exactly what he'd do, but as we've found out over time, whenever the trigger is activated, he goes into a rampage. The trauma gets to him."

"Raizo's not peaceful. He's not innocent. He's not happy," Hikari said. "He tries to be nice when he can because he knows that he won't have an option when and if his trigger is factored in. It...it *forces* him to kill. He rarely even tries to kill anyone...fight them? Sure. Hurt them? Maybe. But kill them? No, not unless absolutely necessary."

"And you're saying that whatever the trigger may be, it went off during that fight and he lost control completely, killing his opponents and taking Satomi as some kind of trophy?" Mariko asked.

"Err...yes to the first half of that," Hikari answered.

"And no to the second half," Elizabeth added.

"Raizo didn't take Satomi as a trophy," Koharu explained. "He did it because his goal is to protect her, and that's a prerogative given only to her at the very moment. In other words, 'tis' an exception to his 'kill' rule. He took her so he could cool down. He needs someone he won't kill around him in order to calm down from that frenzy."

"But now could he just lose control like that?" Mariko cried. "Alright, I'm not that mad, I admit it. That Naoki guy was asking for it, and he *did* sign the contract, but still! That's...it's really hard to swallow, y'know?"

"It'll make more sense once we figure out *exactly* what his trigger is," Elizabeth explained, "but chances are, it has something to do with his past, meaning he likely doesn't want to talk about it, even with us."

"On top of that," Hikari said, "it's likely that he *knows* what his trigger is. He only brings out these contracts when he thinks there's a good chance the trigger will go off, meaning he can imagine whether or not a situation would bring out the beast inside of him. This is his way of minimizing both casualties and legal issues."

"I...I see," Mariko mumbled.

"Hubby is...trying to give people warnings...and he tries not to kill..." Kasumi said. "Mistress shouldn't...blame him anymore. He's...trying his best..."

"I know, Kasumi," Mariko answered. "I'm not mad at him, really. I'm just a little stunned that...well, that he had such an animalistic side to him. It's kinda cool, sure, but we need to get it figured out. I mean, he clearly doesn't wanna be killing people left and right, so if this is burdening him, we should try and help him fix it, or at least control it. That way, he doesn't have to live in fear of becoming a monster...and he can save the killing for those who really deserve it."

"But how the hell will we find out what the trigger is?" Hikari asked.

"You said...hubby *knows* what the trigger is," Kasumi reminded her.

"So?" Hikari replied.

"I'll go ask then," Kasumi said. "Hubby will...be willing to tell me more...so maybe I can...find out *something*..."

"Holy crap, you're a genius, Kasumi!" Mariko cried. "Just...approach with caution. We don't know if Raizo has calmed down yet, and he doesn't have full control of himself right now."

Kasumi nodded. "I will," she replied confidently.

"That was...pretty crazy," Satomi mumbled, lying on Raizo's lap. The two had found a bench on the school campus and were sitting down, resting.

"I'm sorry," Raizo said, his eyes shut as he took deep breaths.

"For what?" Satomi laughed. "You *did* say you were gonna kill him...and besides, I *did* love him before...but he just wanted my body. At the end of the day...I'm left betrayed and disillusioned. And besides," she said, "you *saved* me. You showed me that there's still someone looking out for me. Someone who cares about me." She giggled. "And honestly, that's enough for me."

"You're not afraid I'll disillusion you too?" Raizo asked jokingly.

"I trust you," Satomi answered.

"Aren't you scared of me?" Raizo inquired.

"Yeah," Satomi replied, "but that means you'll have more to protect me with, so I don't mind." She smiled. "I don't mind *you* at all..."

"Nonetheless, I'm sorry for what I did today," Raizo said. "I...I couldn't stop myself. I just...I remember *that* time...and I just can't. I see blood. I feel blood. I smell blood. I *will draw* blood." He sighed. "I always go too far when I lose control...I have this little...'trigger,' y'know?"

"That a fact?" Satomi laughed, sitting up.

"Yeah. And I haven't really told anyone what it is," Raizo mumbled.

"Then how about making me the first one?" Satomi laughed. "Seriously. I'll hear you out. I mean, killing isn't exactly your *favorite* thing, is it?" she asked. "So tell me, and I'll help you. Because...well...I'll always be on *your* side."

Raizo smiled. "Sorry, but I can't. I'm just...not ready to tell anyone *everything*," he said.

Satomi sighed. "Alright then," she said, "but I'll keep waiting until you *are* ready. Then...I *want* you to tell me everything, okay?"

Raizo nodded. "Alright. It's a promise."

Satomi smiled. *Yeah...and I...I also promise to be by your side...no matter what*, she thought. *I'll always be here for you...because I...I think...I think I love you, Raizo...*