

## LIX

Entering the shopping district, Raizo felt his own muscles tightening. *Damnit...so this has become my standard reaction to new places, eh?* he thought. *What a pain...and to think I haven't come here once in a damn month...*

"You seem rather troubled...maybe 'tis something you can confide in me?" Koharu asked, nudging his arm. "We've been more than just acquainted for so long now...you know I'd do whatever I could to help you if you desired for me to do so."

"It's nothing big," Raizo answered. "Honestly. It's just a bit of a gut reaction. I haven't been here yet, and I just don't know my surroundings too well. It feels uncomfortable. I feel...*vulnerable*," he admitted, placing his thumb against the guard of his sword, "and I really despise that feeling."

"I see," Koharu sighed. "So you're caught up on finding strategic positions for an emergency?"

"That's part of it, yes," Raizo replied.

"Uhh...you two?" Satomi interrupted, "I hate to break up your little conversation, but do either of you happen to know that group of...err...'fine gentlemen' that seem to be coming our way?"

Turning to face her, Raizo spotted a group of people approaching Elizabeth and Hikari. "Oh, fucking hell," he muttered. "Already?"

"Why, *hello there*," the leader of the group called out, stepping in the way of the Oshiro sisters. "Are two fine blonde beauties like you alone? Care to grab a drink with us?" he asked, gesturing to himself and the group of five guys behind him.

"I'm afraid I must refuse—" Elizabeth began calmly.

"Oh, don't flatter yourself!" Hikari cut her off, snapping at the group. "Who the hell do you think you are? Shove off! You're friggin' disgusting!"

"Well, *that's* no way to use that pretty little mouth of yours," the man replied. "Come, let's have some fun. You won't regret it, I promise."

"I said shove off," Hikari repeated.

"Oh, come on, don't make us use force," the man said.

"Fuckin' bite me," Hikari answered.

"Alright then," the man said calmly, Grabbing her by the wrist, he waved to his group with his free hand. Quickly, they moved in and three of them grabbed Elizabeth from behind and held her wrists still. Two moved to restrain Hikari's arms, and their leader smirked. "Don't get too cocky, kid," he said. "You should've taken the offer. I was *really* gonna buy you some snacks, y'know? But you went ahead and pissed me off...so I'm just gonna have *my* ffun and then we're gonna clean out your filthy mouth a little, got that?"

"M-mistress!" Koharu called, running forth.

"Stay back, kid!" the man called to her. "One more move and they're *both* gonna get hurt."

Koharu froze in her tracks, biting her lip.

"What do we do?" Satomi asked Raizo.

However, he didn't respond. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the scene before him. Looking towards Elizabeth and the men holding her, he felt his vision blur. In an instant, his world turned darker. He found himself in the middle of an empty alleyway. The men before him had changed from mere thugs to homeless drug addicts and rapists. And Elizabeth herself had disappeared from view, replaced by the silhouette of one woman who Raizo barely remembered, yet knew all too well.

*Mother...not this shit again*, he thought with exasperation. *No, I'll deal with this. I won't wait until after they're done this time...I'm gonna end this...right now!* he told himself.

*Precisely*, he heard his own voice say. *You must protect her—Elizabeth Oshiro—just as you once protected HER...*

"Yeah, I'm on it. *You* make sure Koharu doesn't do something stupid and get in my way," Raizo answered calmly, poking Satomi on the nose. "I figured this would happen," he sighed, "so I'm gonna tell you this: the easiest way to get people to leave you alone is to become unapproachable. And what better way to go about that than a public execution?"

"W-wait, what?" Satomi asked.

*Hurry up!* the voice inside Raizo's head ordered.

Before she could continue, Raizo had applied the slightest bit of pressure to the guard of his sword with his left thumb, and in a flash, the hilt of his blade shot into his open right arm. In a flash, he was by Elizabeth's side, causing the thugs to flinch. "Please excuse what you're about to see, Lady Elizabeth," he said. With an expert flick of his wrist, he planted a clean incision through the left eye on the man holding Elizabeth's right wrist. The man screamed out in pain, letting go. Raizo delivered a swift kick to his chin, and a loud snapping sound filled the air, signaling the breaking of his neck. He collapsed to the ground, his head tilted back at a horribly unnatural angle, blood spilling out of the hole in his skull where his eye once was.

*That's one down...and five more to go...five...five...five...more*, Raizo heard his own voice say.

With another swing, he sliced the head off the man holding Elizabeth's left wrist, causing the headless corpse to fall. Then, without missing a beat, he grabbed the skull of the remaining man, and with an effortless twitch of his fingers, another loud crack rang through the air. The man fell to the ground, his head horribly distorted, with his shattered skull no longer holding his flesh in a coherent shape.

*Three...three more...keep killing...keep going...this is perfect*, the voice told him. *No witnesses—none that would rat on you, anyways—and no security cameras...just forget everything and end this!*

*I know*, Raizo silently told the voice.

Having freed Elizabeth, he turned to face Hikari's captors. The two men holding her wrists had all but let go, their faces pale with terror. It looked as if they were ready to flee at any given moment. "What?" he asked. "Your lives have no value to me. So I'm going to end them. Now kneel and I'll consider making it painless."

The two men let go in an instant before running away. *What a pain*, Raizo thought. *I suppose EVERYONE needs a helping hand at some point, though.* "Satomi, could I leave them to you?" he called. Satomi nodded in response, pulling her guns out. "I'll be back in a minute," she answered.

Raizo turned his attention back to the leader of the group, who had backed away from Hikari but now held a knife in his hand, his arms trembling in fear. "Oh, what a pity," Raizo shrugged. "You should've taken a hostage," he said. He flicked his wrist once more, and his sword flew like an arrow through the air before slicing the man's arm off. He screamed in agony as he fell to the floor, writhing. Walking over, Raizo reached his hand out, pulling his sword back to him. He made three quick slashes across his foe's body and, looking satisfied with his bloody endeavor, walked off to leave the man to bleed out.

*Finish him!* the voice ordered.

Raizo smirked. *Hmmm...no, that's not my style. I'm a little more sadistic than that so...I'll leave him to suffer the pain.*

*You...you've grown soft*, the voice told him as it faded away.

*No, I haven't grown SOFT, I've just grown a little CRUEL in a different way*, Raizo thought with a chuckle.

"This part of the shopping district is mostly abandoned and there aren't any security cameras around," Raizo said as he took Hikari's hand gently, "so nobody will know who did this. The cops won't have any leads. And even if they did...I'd just have to get rid of them, right?" he laughed.

"D-don't joke about it!" Hikari cried. "This is murder!"

"Yeah. Six victims. I'm going to remind you that Satomi was never convicted even though we *know* she was the culprit behind the attack during my match against Kasumi," Raizo said. "The school covered that incident up, at least to some extent. And this...worst case scenario, they'll acquit me for lack of evidence. Or do you intend to turn me in?"

"W-well, no," Hikari admitted, blushing, "but still...you were able to *take lives* so naturally..."

"It's only natural when I'm protecting those I care about, young miss," Raizo answered.

Hikari's face turned bright red. "R-r-right...well, don't worry...m-m-my lips are sealed."

"Oh, my dearest Raizo!" Elizabeth called as she ran over to him, sobbing into his chest. "I was so scared!"

"I must apologize for having you witness such bloodshed once more, milady," Raizo replied, "but it was the only thing I could think of quickly. And yet, I've once again put you in danger, and even dyed your beautiful dress in such a filthy red..."

"No, no," Elizabeth cooed, "you did it to protect me, so how could I complain?"

"Allow me to purchase you a new dress in due time to compensate you," Raizo said.

"Come now, you don't need to be like that," Elizabeth smiled. "Although...if you say that you owe me a favor, then I can certainly find it in my heart to forgive you..."

"As long as it's something I can do, I'd be happy to," Raizo answered.

"Then let this whole matter be settled," Elizabeth giggled. "I was going to buy a new dress anyways..."

"Here, use this," Raizo suggested, taking the blazer of his uniform off. "It doesn't absorb liquid from the inside, you don't need to worry about dying it red. Use it to cover up the red bits for now. I don't need people suspecting anything."

"As you wish," Elizabeth winked, happily taking the blazer and slipping it over her dress and covering the red splotches.

From the side, Hikari watched in jealousy. *Damnit...why couldn't he have turned MY shirt red? Then maybe I could borrow his blazer...*