

VIII

Raizo opened his eyes. The familiar scent of the room in which he's been staying fills his nose. Making note of the smell of Kasumi's perfume at his left side, he smiled to himself. *I shouldn't...get used to this...and yet I can't help but do just that.* He chuckled. *I'm friggin' hopeless...*

"How do you feel?" Mariko's voice asked.

Raizo, looking to his right, saw her entering the room. "Honestly, I feel like I got shot four times," he said with a smirk.

"Yeah, very funny," Mariko sighed, sitting down at his bedside. "I suppose you remember what that Hikari decided to do?"

"Yeah, 'fraid so," Raizo answered with a slight nod.

Mariko shook her head. "Can I ask you a more personal question?" she inquired.

"Go ahead, doc," Raizo answered.

"O-oh, come on, I'm not a *doctor*..." Mariko mumbled, her cheeks turning red.

"A mechanic *is* a doctor to a puppet, y'know?" Raizo said. "An angel in white, so to speak. Err...wait, no that's a nurse...oh, you get the idea."

Mariko giggled. "Y-yeah," she answered, blushing. "Th-thanks...erm...right, as I was gonna say, do you...like Kasumi?"

"Say what?" Raizo asked in surprise.

"Y'know, like...do you think she's cute?" Mariko asked.

"W-well kinda, yeah, but what does have to do with—" Raizo began.

"N-nothing! Just curious," Mariko mumbled. "But...in that case, would you like to stay with me?"

"With...you? Like, stay here?" Raizo asked, confused.

"Yeah," Mariko nodded. "Instead of giving you back to Hikari Oshiro, we could negotiate a transfer. In other words, I'd try and buy you off her hands. She *does* have that new girl, after all. That girl herself is strong enough, isn't she? Why does Hikari need to keep you around? As someone to vent her frustrations on? As a toy for her own sadistic game?"

Raizo bit his lip. *Damn, that's...kinda true, actually. And she makes a tempting offer...Mariko's much sweeter than Hikari, and on top of that I'd be cuddling with Kasumi more often which, admittedly, is a huge bonus...but even so...*

"I...I'm not sure," Raizo mumbled.

"Take your time to decide," Mariko said, standing up. "Ultimately, if you choose to go back I won't stop you. However, considering you've been out of commission for 92 out of the last 168 hours thanks to her, I don't advise it personally."

Raizo nodded. "Thanks," he said. "I don't think the young miss will be that willing to give up one of her playthings though, even if it's just *me*."

"We'll see," Mariko sighed, heading to the door. "Get ready for your belated brunch, alright?" she called as she exited the room.

"Hubby...please stay," Kasumi's voice whispered into Raizo's left ear, drawing his attention back to her. She placed her chin on his shoulder, her hands massaging him. "You've finally...woken up again...please don't go..." she said. "Stay with me...hubby..."

Raizo sighed. "C-can we talk about this 'hubby' thing first?" he asked.

"Sure," Kasumi answered. "You don't...like it? Then...how about 'darling'? Or...perhaps...'master'? Is that...okay?"

"N-no, that's not the issue," Raizo said, shaking his head. "I mean to ask *why* you're calling me 'hubby.' I mean, I said it before, right? We barely know each other—"

"And yet hubby chose...to protect me..." Kasumi said, cutting him off. "When I was...alive...as a human...I didn't have...a full family. The person who...raised me...they later became the one...who killed me...at seven years old." As Kasumi spoke, her voice got louder, and she paused less. Her expression grew serious, and tears formed in the corners of her eyes. "Nobody loved me...nobody wanted me...but then mistress took me in and...protected me...and kept me warm..."

Raizo put a hand on her head, ruffling her hair gently as she continued.

"Nobody else would protect me before...but still...hubby chose to give me the love that...that nobody but my mistress would show me...despite barely even knowing me...and I liked that feeling very much...so I wanted to keep hubby safe too...and to be with hubby forever so I can always...be there..." Kasumi paused. She took a deep breath as tears began to flow from her eyes. "I love you, hubby..." she whispered, calming down.

Raizo gulped. *I see, he thought. So Kasumi's childhood was...rough. She was betrayed by the one who she thought loved her...and was cast aside and killed. Left to die, quite literally. When Mariko took her in, she was reluctant to open up because she was afraid to trust someone else, but Mariko proved to be someone who loved her, and that was enough for Kasumi. Then at the end of our match, when I put her safety above my own—an instinctive thing for me—she once again saw someone who'd care for her and who she wanted desperately to trust...I know that feeling all too well. She's been hurt before...and I don't want her to be hurt anymore. Maybe it's just me pitying her thanks to the parallels to my own life, but I...I do want to protect her. I do want to protect this fragile yet brave girl...*

His thought trailed off.

"Does hubby...not like me?" Kasumi asked, bringing him back to reality. "Does hubby...not want me?" She looked away dejectedly. "If so...I understand—"

Resolved, Raizo cut her off by wrapping his arms around her. He no longer reacted to the feeling of her naked body pressed against his own bare torso. Instead, he felt his own heart racing. At that moment, he knew he wanted to protect the girl in his arms. *No, in fact, he thought, I HAVE to.*

“That’s not it, Kasumi,” he said, raising her chin slightly with his thumb. “Listen, I won’t let *anyone* hurt you anymore, alright?” he said. “I’ll be with you...so...so if you’re alright with me, then just say the word. Say you’ll be with me, and I’ll stay by your side for life, alright?” He smiled. “I’ll protect you from now on, just like how Mariko has, and even more than that.”

Kasumi’s tears continued to fall, but her mouth curled up into a smile. “And I will...also protect hubby from now on...” she said. “I will...forever and ever...I will always love my hubby...so please hold me...and I’ll be with you...”

The two held their embrace, their arms wrapped tightly around each other. At that moment, their heavy metal bodies felt as light as air.