

XLIX

Ayane continued to watch her guest intently. Glancing quickly at the clock, she felt a twinge of disappointment. *It's been half an hour already, so why isn't it taking effect?* she asked herself. *Did I remove them too soon after all?*

"Y'know," Raizo said, stretching his arms, "I dunno if you're messing with my head or something, but thanks to you constantly bringing up sleep, I think I do feel a little tired. Maybe I just haven't been getting enough rest lately," he muttered, glancing at Ayane out of the corner of his eye.

She was fixated on him, her worried expression plastered on like a mask that concealed her excitement. Raizo pretended to yawn a little, causing her to almost crack a smile. *Gotcha*, he thought. "Since you're offering and all, do you mind if I just lie down here?" he asked casually.

Ayane blinked for a moment, as if in shock. Then, she immediately smiled and nodded enthusiastically. "W-why of course, my dearest! Come, make yourself at home and lie down. Would you like a massage too? I wouldn't mind..."

"No, no, then it'll feel like I'm just taking advantage of your kindness," Raizo chuckled as Ayane stood up and helped him lie down on the couch. Pulling a nearby chair over, she sat down again and brushed his hair gently. "It's really no trouble at all," she whispered, "and if anything, I *want* to do it. I want you to relax, my dearest...to feel *comfortable*..."

"Ayane...tell me a little about the 'us' from *before*," Raizo said as he closed his eyes. "I honestly don't have any memories of back then, so I'd like to at least know what it was like...so I could continue to be your 'childhood friend,' if this even counts..."

"Oh, my most beloved," Ayane cooed, "I'm so glad you'd be willing to take me back as your dear friend! I was starting to worry that, with all those women around you, you'd lose interest in me..."

Well, I mean, Raizo thought to himself, *if you're talking about it in terms of romance you're technically a little late to the party, but I'm not gonna say that.*

"We were the best of friends," Ayane said, starting her story, "and we were absolutely inseparable. For a child who wasn't even twelve years old yet, you were rather tall, quite brutish and curt, but also courteous, charming and elusive in your own way. In all honesty, you were a playboy through and through, though you yourself may never have realized it. We'd always go out and explore the local area, even discovering a little 'meeting place.' It was this tall, beautiful sakura tree far from the dangers of our world...we'd be there every day, playing games and telling stories. Even when we met as kids though, you always had a particular scent all about you. At the time I couldn't figure out what it was but...but it was just the smell of blood, wasn't it? You were always coated in the stench of blood. And it was absolutely wonderful. It terrified me, but it also calmed me to know that someone so strong and brave was there to protect me...God, I sound like a complete psycho, don't I?"

"Nothing wrong with that," Raizo said casually. "I'm a psycho too."

Ayane laughed. "Can you tell me something? Why do you assume you protected me all the time? I mean, was it just friendship? Could it have been something else?"

"The 'me' that could have answered that died five years ago," Raizo replied, his voice turning more serious. "I am who I *am*, not who I *was*. At the end of the day, I'd like to think I did it because I was doing as I liked, but honestly I doubt it was the case. Maybe the old me did have feelings for you. Or maybe it stemmed from a desire to protect *females* in general, like with my mother. Honestly though, it doesn't matter," he concluded, "because the current me protects people that he cares about for the sake of protecting them. I do as I please and won't let anyone stop me." He paused and chuckled. "After all, is it so wrong to want to protect those precious to you? Why should anyone have the *right* to stop me?"

Ayane looked longingly into his eyes. "And who do you have to protect now?" she inquired. "Your owner perhaps? Sure, the law says so."

"I'll gladly kill *her* if it ever becomes necessary," Raizo replied, "but in all honesty I hope to avoid such an outcome. If I'm being totally transparent here, she's the least of my concerns. After all," he sighed, "she has a knack for *avoiding* trouble, or at least avoiding dealing with it personally."

"Then who?" Ayane asked.

"I have many friends whom I hold dear," Raizo said. "It doesn't matter *which* of them is in danger. I'll put my life on the line for something I believe in, and I believe in protecting my allies."

"It sounds like a lot more than that," Ayane mumbled, her fingers tensing up ever so slightly. "Might you...have a lover already?" she asked casually.

"Well, aren't you pushy?" Raizo sighed. "What would you do if I said yes?"

"We'll have to see about that," Ayane replied flatly.

"Then yes, I do," Raizo said. "I have women I love—ones that I love more than anything in the world."

"Umm...*ones*? With an 's' at the end?" Ayane asked, raising an eyebrow. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything," Raizo said. "I'm telling you that I have *three* beautiful lovers who I intend on protecting."

"Protecting? From *what*?" Ayane asked.

"Who gives a fuck?" Raizo snapped, beginning to losing his patience. "Throw a meteorite at 'em and I'll split it in half. Send an army after 'em and I'll turn the streets into a crimson canal. Turn the world against 'em and I'll destroy the fucking world with my own hands if that's what it'll take."

Ayane paused. "I see," she said. "So you couldn't even contain yourself and made not one, not two, but *three* women swoon over you? It certainly sounds like you. I must admit, I'm jealous. *Very* jealous. And I suppose you're going to tell me

that I'll always be your 'dearest friend?' A way of declining my confession without ever saying it to my face?"

"Err...that wasn't the plan, actually, but do you *want* me to?" Raizo joked.

"Certainly not," Ayane replied.

"Then instead, let me say this," Raizo sighed. "I don't want to be your friend anymore."

"W-W-WHAT?" Ayane cried in shock. "B-but..."

"Let's change things up a bit," Raizo said, sitting up. "Let's stop being friends. Let's be something *else*..." he said, leaning over to her. "Something more...intimate." He smiled. *Fuck*, he thought, *they're right. I'm a fucking playboy.*

Ayane's hands quivered as they slowly moved to grasp his shoulders. Leaning in even closer to him, she blinked for a moment. "Is this...*real*?" she whispered.

"Only if you let it be," Raizo replied, "but even then, nothing in this world is *free*, y'know?"

"Then I'll give myself to you," Ayane answered sternly, "in heart, body and soul."

"That's not enough," Raizo said.

"Then I'll give you everything I own," Ayane continued.

"That's not enough," Raizo repeated.

"I'll give you Izumi too."

"That's not enough."

"I'll give you...my *life*, if you desire it."

"That's not enough."

"Then say the word, and it's yours," Ayane concluded. "I don't care how greedy you are. Just say it and it shall become my law...as long as I can be your lover—even as *one of* your multiple lovers—it's alright with me..."

"You've offered me everything *except* for the one thing that matters," Raizo said. "Nothing in this world is free, so let me tell you what I want from you."

"Speak," Ayane replied.

"I want to be able to *trust* you," Raizo said. "Let me get to know you again. From the beginning. I've already said it, haven't I? I am who I *am*, not who I *was*. It doesn't matter what the old me felt. That boy is dead. He's dead and won't ever come back. So let's start over, and if you can win the current *me* over...then let's stop being friends, and instead be lovers. Otherwise, let us not be anything at all."

"All or nothing, hmm? A tempting gamble," Ayane replied. "But what if I refuse this deal?"

"Then we can remain as no more than friends. Forever," Raizo answered.

"Think of it as a little 'game,' if you will. If you pick the safe option, there's no risk and a small reward. You maintain your friendship, although it'll be with the new me. I think it qualifies as a tiny, but still considerable, reward. On the other hand, you can play for keeps. High risk, high reward. All or nothing."

"And how long will I have to win you over?" Ayane asked.

"I'll give you exactly one month. Starting tomorrow," Raizo said.

"I can do that," Ayane nodded. "Fine then. I'll take your gamble, and I *will* become your lover."

"We'll have to see about that one, now won't we?" Raizo chuckled, standing up. "I think I'll be going then. It's getting rather late. Oh, and one more thing," he added as he began to head for the door, "using an anesthetic on me is a pretty good way to make me hate you," he chuckled. Saying so, he opened the door and slipped out.

Ayane watch him leave in bewilderment. "How'd he...even *know*?" she mumbled to herself.

"Who cares?" Izumi's voice interrupted. The puppet had entered the living room from one of the bedrooms in the dorm. "I don't see why you trust that man so much. He said it himself: he's not the same man he used to be. Why would you go so far for him?"

"This is *love* we're talking about, Izumi," Ayane sighed. "It's...*peculiar*. I can't possibly explain it. Nobody can. It's all a matter of interpretation. If you were born a good six years earlier, and if we'd so many years earlier...you might just have fallen head over heels for him too."

"Don't be ridiculous," Izumi mumbled, looking away. "There's no way I'd fall for someone like that..."

"Suit yourself," Ayane sighed. "I'm just saying that love is unpredictable. I don't blame you if you end up in love with my beloved too. Just...try not to get in *my* way at night, alright?" she joked, winking.

"D-don't say that!" Izumi cried. "You know I'd never—"

"I talked to the nurse," Ayane said, cutting the puppet off. "That *Satomi* girl...as it turns out, her punches are *extremely* powerful. If she hadn't held back, she could've easily killed me in a single hit."

"So?" Izumi asked.

"So *Raizo* was the one who took a full-force hit *for* you. According to miss Marie, that could have shattered his bones if he didn't position himself *just* right. And yet, he was willing to take the risk. For you. Someone who's essentially a complete stranger. He was willing to try and protect you, despite how thoughtlessly rude you've been, because he's just that kind of person. He may say he isn't the man he *used to be*, but I don't think that's fully true," Ayane said. "After all, you can't change someone's human nature. And Raizo...new or old, I know he's just that kind of wonderful man on the inside, and that much will never change. And as long as it doesn't..."

"You'll keep loving him, correct?" Izumi inquired.

"Indeed," Ayane nodded. "On a side note, you should go thank him later. And apologize for how rude you've been to him thus far. When it comes down to it, he did protect you. I think you should at least respond to it in kind."

"Y-yes mistress," Izumi answered, once again averting her gaze and feeling her cheeks grow flushed.

"It's alright to let yourself fall in love, even if it's with *my* Raizo," Ayane said, standing up and turning towards her bedroom. "You can trust a man who'd risk his own safety for *you*, even in spite of how *you*'ve treated everyone thus far. That kind of man is rare to come by," she declared as she walked off.

"Yes mistress," Izumi repeated, her eyes looking down towards the ground. *Love, hmm?* she thought. *Interesting...*