

## XVI

Kasumi walked into the stables, looking around. Pulling a pen and notepad out of her pocket, she scribbled down a few notes. *Conditions: crappy. Odor: animals. Lots of them. Hubby's bed: some pile of hay. Needs an upgrade*, Kasumi thought as her hand translated those words onto the paper.

Walking over to Raizo's side, she knelt down, putting her notebook and pen away. Stroking her lover's hair gently, she sat down beside him. He stirred, tilting his head and pressing his cheek against her leg. Kasumi smiled. "Good morning...hubby..." she whispered. Once again, Raizo moved, placing his hand on her leg and nuzzling her.

"Wake up, hubby..." Kasumi whispered, whistling a little tune to herself.

Slowly, Raizo opened his eyes to find his face against his girlfriend's leg. He chuckled. "Morning, Kasumi," he whispered.

"Hubby finally woke up..." Kasumi said excitedly.

"H-hey, can I ask you something?" Raizo inquired, slowly sitting up.

"What is it?" Kasumi asked.

"We may be in *that* kind of relationship now...but we're not really married yet, are we?" Raizo commented.

"Does hubby...mind the name?" Kasumi asked dejectedly.

"No, that's not it," Raizo replied honestly, "I was just thinking about it, that's all. If you like the name, I'm perfectly alright with it," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"Then I still...wanna call you 'hubby'...even though we're only just boyfriend and girlfriend...for now..." Kasumi giggled.

"Yeah," Raizo nodded. "I promise...once we've graduated, I'll make you my bride, and then I'll be your 'hubby' forever, alright?"

"Okay!" Kasumi cried, throwing her arms around him. "S-say, hubby...I wanna...y'know..."

Raizo chuckled. "Got it," he said, pushing her against the hay. "Sorry we don't really have a bed here...but I suppose we can make do."

Kasumi giggled and nodded, kissing him on the lips.

"God...I couldn't stop thinking about yesterday and ended up not sleeping a wink...damnit..." Satomi grumbled to herself as she stumbled out of the dorm.

"Maybe I'll go bug Raizo, see how he's holding up."

Turning in the direction of the stable, she looked over towards the clock tower in the distance. *That tower...it's really beautiful, huh?* she thought. *Made by the same craftsmen who worked day and night to forge the puppets and their mechanical workings...it's almost like magic.* She sighed. *Still over an hour until class starts, huh? Well, we'll make it then,* she told herself.

Entering the stable, she heard the sound of muffled moans and ragged breathing. Confused, she looked around, but saw nobody within. *Strange, she thought. Are the horses in heat or something? Is that even how this works?*

Going further into the building, the sounds grew louder. Satomi slowed her pace. *Can't let whatever—or whoever—is making that sound hear me, she thought.* As she paused to listen, she heard the sound escalate in volume before quickly growing silent. The surprised Satomi sped up her pace, walking to the back of the stable. Turning to her right as she reached the end, she noticed two figures lying in the hay. Her instincts kicked in as she immediately hid herself, peeking over the edge. *What the hell?* she thought to herself.

Raizo ran his fingers through Kasumi's hair, kissing her gently. Smiling, she pressed her naked body against his once more, and the two embraced tightly. "Hubby...when does class start?" she mumbled drowsily.

"Hey, don't fall asleep here," Raizo told her with a chuckle. "We've still got about an hour left, but that's not enough time for you to be napping, okay?"

"Okay," Kasumi whispered.

Closing his eyes, Raizo took a deep breath. However, the scent of the air seemed noticeably different. The normally pungent smell within the stables was pierced by the sweet scent of lavender. Pressing his nose against Kasumi's hair, Raizo confirmed that his lover bore no scent resembling the flower. Instead, she carried the light smell of strawberries, a scent that he had all but grown noseblind to thanks to her. His eyes narrowing, he reached for his uniform and threw it on. "Kasumi, get dressed," he ordered, his expression suddenly serious.

"Why?" Kasumi asked sleepily, reaching for her own uniform and getting dressed.

"Someone's watching us," Raizo said, picking his sword up from the side and unsheathing it. Silently approaching the nearest wall, he readied his blade.

*I can't believe it! Satomi thought. He noticed me? And what about the two of them? Were they just...were they—*

Before she could continue, a blade stabbed through the wall right beside her neck. In shock, she instinctively leapt away, revealing herself in the process. Turning to face Raizo and the now dressed Kasumi, her face turned bright red with embarrassment. *Oh, crap, she thought.*