

II

"Now," Hikari said, "it's time for us to go and reach the pinnacle of high school life: becoming the most popular girl in school!"

"I'm not sure if this occurred to you yet, young miss," Raizo replied flatly, "but if *that* is the pinnacle of high school life, then I've failed by default. May I remind you that I'm male?"

"Yes, I know," Hikari laughed, "and so you're going to help *me* reach that pinnacle. There's something in it for you too, y'know? By association, you may also have a few adoring fans!"

"Errr...is it too late to back out of this plan?" Raizo chuckled.

"Of course it is, you ignorant fool!" Hikari cried. "It's been too late to back out for years! Like, ever since you became the Oshiro family's puppet!"

"So I'm five friggin' years too late, eh?" Raizo sighed. "Oh, and just on a side note, you're screaming in the middle of a classroom, young miss."

"I—oh, so I am," Hikari mumbled, looking around in embarrassment. Across the room, she spotted her sister already beginning to socialize with a few of the girls in the class. "Damn," Hikari cursed under her breath, "she got ahead of me *again*. That cheeky little—"

"Hey there!" a voice called, interrupting her thought.

Turning around, Hikari found herself face to face with a boy. Just a little taller than her, he had wavy, dark green hair, reminding her of a darker version of cartoon seaweed. He had brighter, emerald green eyes and wore a smile on his face. "H-h-h-hi," Hikari managed to choke out. Turning her head slightly to the left, she looked to her puppet for help, only to see a girl standing beside him, chatting away. She had bright blue eyes and dark, black hair. *Damn!* she thought. *Plan B has COMPLETELY failed!*

Finally noticing his distressed owner, Raizo stood up. Finishing his brief conversation with the girl, he walked over to Hikari's side. "And how may I be of service, young miss?" he asked.

"U-umm..." Hikari mumbled.

"Good answer. I'll be going back then. Wouldn't want to keep my new acquaintance waiting, now would I?"

"W-wait! I...uhh..."

"Need help introducing yourself?" Raizo asked, looking over at the boy facing Hikari, who smiled back at him. Turning back to his owner, he shrugged. "The guy seems nice enough. He's trying to be friendly, so the least you could do is properly give your name."

"B-but I..." Hikari muttered.

With a sigh, Raizo faced the boy once more. "I do apologize on my young miss' behalf. You probably already know this, but her name is Hikari Oshiro, and she's the younger twin of the Oshiro family. My name is Raizo, and I'm the puppet in

her service." Finishing his introduction, he bowed. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Straightening his back again, he smiled and offered a hand. The green-haired boy, nodding, reached out and shook his hand.

"The girl I was just talking to...Fuyuko is your puppet, is she not?" Raizo asked casually.

"Ah, very observant," the boy answered. "You're right." Turning to face both Raizo and Hikari, he bowed briefly as his puppet, Fuyuko, walked over and reached out to him, wrapping her arms around his waist from behind. With a chuckle, the boy took her hands in his own. "My name is Jiro Kawasaki. I'm not exactly what you'd call a soldier, but I'm a strategist. It's a pleasure to meet you, Raizo and Ms. Oshiro."

"L-likewise," Hikari replied nervously.

"Well, it looks like my dear sister has already found a friend, hasn't she?" Elizabeth's voice asked. Looking to their right, the group spotted her walking over, waving with a big smile.

"That would be correct, Lady Elizabeth," Raizo answered, bowing as she approached. "I presume milady has been adapting to this school well?"

Elizabeth giggled as she reached out to him, giving him a gentle pat on the head. Raizo lifted his head once more once she finished, turning to Koharu and giving her a friendly hug. The two embraced for a brief moment. Koharu smiled contentedly, ruffling Raizo's hair a little as she pulled away. He chuckled to himself.

Elizabeth, turning to Jiro, gave a little bow. "Thank you for helping to take care of my little sister. I truly do appreciate it," she said with a radiant smile. "I'm Elizabeth Oshiro. As I said before, you may feel free to just call me 'Lizzie.' It's my preferred name, honestly."

"V-very well," Jiro answered. "My name is Jiro Kawasaki. Please, just call me Jiro. It's only fair." Turning to Raizo, he smiled. "And you too. My Fuyuko doesn't do well with strangers, so I do owe you some thanks for helping her. That makes us friends, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose it would," Raizo answered. "Let's get along, Jiro."

Hikari, off to the side, pouted to herself. *Why am I the only one who isn't getting popular?* she thought. *What the hell is this? Why is it that when Elizabeth shows up, things stop going my way?*

"Young miss?" Raizo called, interrupting her thoughts.

"W-what?" Hikari asked, her tone slightly annoyed.

"Lady Elizabeth was just asking about the first match this week. She was wondering if you'd like to face her in combat again, or if you'd prefer trying to fight someone new and forgo the benefit of knowing some of your opponent's moves," Raizo explained.

Hikari bit her lip. *The catch is, of course, that Elizabeth also knows a bunch of MY moves already... so it may be safer if I fight someone else. But I...I also need to assert some dominance...and yet I have to win my first fight too, and Raizo may go*

easy on Elizabeth...damnit, why does he like her so much? If he likes her, why the hell doesn't he just MARRY her?

As she continued with her own turmoil, Raizo struck up a conversation with Jiro and Fuyuko. Elizabeth, sighing in exasperation, shrugged and joined in. Moments later, the group heard Hikari cry "I've got it!" Turning to face her, Raizo looked straight into her eyes with a serious expression. "So, what'll it be, young miss?"

Hikari sighed. "I'll refrain from fighting my sister this time. I-I'll learn more from a different opponent. Y-yeah, that's it! A learning opportunity!"

"Sure, keep telling yourself that," Raizo mumbled.

"I suppose there's no helping it, then," Elizabeth sighed.

"Then how about we act as your first opponents, Ms. Oshiro?" Jiro suggested, patting Fuyuko on the back. "It'll be a nice way to get acquainted properly. A friendly match. How about it?"

Hikari, thinking for a moment, suddenly nodded. "Alright, you're on!" she declared confidently.

"Don't get too cocky, kiddo," Raizo mumbled as he watched from aside.

"Will miss Hikari be alright?" Koharu, Elizabeth's puppet, asked him. "And...will you be okay?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to be fine," Raizo replied, "but as for the young miss..."