

IV

Raizo stumbled a little as he entered the classroom. Ignoring his teacher's concerned glance, he marched to his seat and sat down with a deep sigh. *One week and I've already been reduced to this?* he thought. *Pathetic...*

"Hey, are you...doing okay?" Jiro's voice called out to him.

"Yeah, I've been...great," Raizo answered, yawning. "Just didn't get much sleep last night. The rain kept me up."

"Too loud, eh?" Jiro laughed. "Try a pair of earmuffs. It was pretty loud last night, but I myself didn't have too much trouble. My girlfriend helped me sleep like a log."

Raizo rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. "Girlfriend, eh? Y'know what, actually? You're always mentioning this girlfriend of yours, but nobody ever really gets around to meeting her. "

"Hmm?" Jiro raised an eyebrow in confusion. "But you *have* met her. It's Fuyuko, dude."

"It—wait, seriously?" Raizo asked. "Huh...I never woulda been able to tell, honestly. You two do a really good job of avoiding PDA..."

"Yeah...in class," Jiro answered with a chuckle, "but just on random parts of campus? Yeah, right. Not that I'm complaining."

"Huh. Well, you learn something every day, I suppose," Raizo mumbled.

"So what about you and Ms. Oshiro?" Jiro inquired.

"What, *me*? And the young miss? Ha!" Raizo replied with a dramatic laugh. "Not in a million years. I'm probably way below her standard, in any case. And besides, with her sharp personality, I have a feeling we'd never get along beyond what our relationship currently is. It's too complicated. If I get a girlfriend, I think I'd be into someone a little more submissive and gentle. Y'know, with more of a feathery touch."

"Hmmm...I suppose so. That *does* seem to match your style, after all," Jiro answered. "I suppose I'll have to tell Fuyuko to stop imagining you two as a couple."

"Err...God, is *that* what we came off as?"

"I'm afraid so, friend," Jiro smiled.

"Damn."

Sneaking a look at his watch, Raizo bit his lip. "Crap," he mumbled. "Class is starting. Let's chat later."

"Yeah," Jiro nodded. He waved to Fuyuko, who just entered the room, and headed back to his own seat.

Raizo sighed to himself. *Girlfriend, eh?* he thought. *That may not be such a bad idea...maybe she'll be there to comfort me after a long day. Perhaps she'll cook me a meal that consists of more than parts of unwashed, rotting vegetables and stale bread. Maybe she's let me take a nap with her lap as a pillow, so I can make up for the fact that thanks to Hikari's little "sleeping arrangement," I've been getting about three*

hours of sleep a night. Maybe she can give me a massage after these daily matches. Maybe—

"What the hell are you thinking about?" Hikari's voice asked, interrupting his thoughts. Raizo turned to face her. She had sat down beside him already, moments before the bell was due to ring. "I've been trying to get your attention for the last fifteen seconds or so! The hell is wrong with you today?"

Well, for one, YOU're what's wrong with me, what with the crappy food and lack of sleep and such, Raizo thought. *And second of all, you're a friggin' attention whore.* Resisting the urge to voice this thoughts, he managed to force a smile. "Good morning, young miss," he choked out.

"Now that's more like it," Hikari replied, puffing out her meager chest.

Raizo cracked a smirk at her movement. *That little action won't compensate for your meager B-cups, Hikari,* he thought. *And even if it did, those jugs wouldn't fix that shitty personality of yours.* At that thought, his smile grew wider, and he broke into a light chuckle as the bell rang, signaling the start of class.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the school day. All the students began to pack up and prepare to leave.

"So who's the opponent for today, young miss?" Raizo asked, standing up.

"I dunno," Hikari answered. "I don't feel ready to face Elizabeth right now...but I suppose we need some stronger opponents. After all, you have a perfect record. Seven for seven. I'm actually proud of you for once," she said.

"Thank you, young miss," Raizo said. *You fuckin' bitch,* he added to himself.

Before either could continue speaking, they heard the scream of a girl from across the room. Turning in the direction of the sound, they noticed a girl with dark black hair running over to another, shorter girl. The second girl pointed at her puppet, who had collapsed to the ground. The first girl knelt down, placing a hand over the puppet's chest. Moments later, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a syringe-like item and pressed it to the puppet's neck. The limb body jolted for a moment with energy, and the puppet immediately sprang back to life.

"Well, ain't that neat?" Hikari mumbled. "That girl over there's a mechanic," she said, pointing at the black-haired girl. "C'mon," she continued, taking Raizo by the arm and dragging him along as she walked over. As they approached the group, they noticed the shorter girl talking.

"...absolutely awesome, Mariko! Do you always have a defibrillator on you?" she asked.

The black-haired girl, Mariko, gave a quick nod. Her bright red eyes burned with passion. "I mean, you can never be too safe. Puppets who are overworked can easily run out of energy. The extra jolt travels well through their sormandium skeletons, thanks to the metal's conductive properties. Thus, a single shock is usually enough to get 'em up and running again if it's just an energy problem. A handheld defib is pretty reliable. If the core—a puppet's heart, that is—still beats, and

they just collapse randomly, they're likely out of energy. Try and keep your partner well-rested, 'kay?"

"Y-yes, ma'am!" the shorter girl replied. "Thanks so much! You're a miracle worker!"

From a short distance, Hikari clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. "Jeez, from this commotion, you'd think *Elizabeth* was the center of attention here," she mumbled under her breath. "I think I just found our opponent for today."

"That so?" Raizo asked. *That Mariko girl, she knows how a puppet will tick...so I could be in trouble here. And besides, if she's right about her previous diagnosis, then it's entirely possible that I'll collapse without doing much of anything...so I need to finish it fast if I intend on winning. Although, then again, Hikari's reputation is the last thing on my mind...I just need to win. I just need to be stronger...and one day become undefeatable. That's all I'll need...*

Walking straight over to Mariko, Hikari cleared her throat. "Good day, commoner. I see you have some professional capabilities..."

The hell? Raizo thought. *Is she literally picking a fight with someone she just met?*

As Hikari continued with her long-winded speech, the other students slowly backed away and began to spectate. Mariko, staring right back at her, maintained a small smile on her face as she listened to Hikari's rant.

Raizo smirked. *Clever girl, he thought. She's only PRETENDING to pay attention. In reality, she's almost completely dozed off, and is looking for the first chance she can to escape. Of course, I can tell that it isn't easy...I've been in that situation one too many times.*

"...so, all that being said," Hikari said, arriving at a conclusion, much to the relief of her classmates, "I'd like for you to be my opponent today. Of course, you'll be facing someone with a *perfect* record as of right now, so I understand if you're feeling nervous—"

"With all due respect, miss," Mariko suddenly replied, her smile unwavering, "my puppet Kasumi has also maintained a perfect record. What's more, unlike from what I've heard about you, miss Hikari Oshiro, I assist my puppet in her endeavors. If you think your petty idea of victory can outmatch our teamwork, then I'd be happy to prove you wrong."

Sick roast, Raizo thought.

"Fine then, I'll show you!" Hinari retorted. "I'll see you in the ring!"

A girl stood by the dorms, checking her watch. Her long, white hair blew gently in the wind. As the clock hit three o'clock, she turned to the door of the building to see a box that had been placed there. *Bingo*, she thought. Walking over, she took it and left.

Sitting down beneath a tree, she opened the box. Inside were four bullets, and a letter. Unfolding the paper, she skimmed over the few words written on it. "The

Oshiro family, eh? Interesting," she mumbled. Her crimson red eyes seemed to glow with bloodlust. "Alright. I'll see if I can take her down a peg or two," she mumbled, loading the bullets into a pair of scoped pistols. "I wonder who that girl's puppet will be facing today..."

Students sat in the stands of the arena. Voices of excitement filled the air.

Raizo, holding back a yawn, walked into the arena. Hikari followed close behind him. Opposite to them, Mariko entered the arena first, followed by another girl. The second girl, quite a bit taller than Mariko, had dark purple hair that flowed a little past her shoulders. Her eyes were tinted golden like the evening sunset. She wore a flat expression on her face, stoic enough to send shivers down Hikari's spine.

"Glad to see you actually showed," Mariko called out. Her puppet, Kasumi, bowed and reached back, unsheathing a single-handed sword, crafted in traditional medieval style, and unslinging a brilliantly crafted shield with a white surface. The lustrous jorgandium of the set of weapons was blinding.

"I could say the same to you!" Hikari replied, trying to mask her nervousness. Turning to Raizo as if she expected him to greet his opponents, she was met with his furrowed brow. He thoughtfully stroked his chin, as if contemplating what to do next. "Hey, do something!" she ordered.

"Hmm? Oh, of course, my apologies," he said, snapping back to attention. Bowing deeply, he expressed his regrets to his opponents. "I do hope you'll forgive my rudeness. My name is Raizo, and my young miss and I are honored to be your opponents."

Mariko raised an eyebrow, slightly amused. "Well, those two couldn't be more different, it seems," she mumbled to herself. "I wonder how they even got stuck together in the first place." Clearing her throat, she smiled. "Well, in any case, my name is Mariko Nakano, and this is my puppet, Kasumi. Let us make it a match to remember then, shall we?"

Hikari laughed. "Let's dance! Go do something, Raizo! I-I'll hang back. You won't need me for this! Y-yeah, that's it! You don't *need* my help!"

Raizo bit his lip. *Goddamn little brat*, he thought. Even so, with a flick of his left thumb, he unsheathed his sword. Catching the handle with his right hand as it shot out from its scabbard at the force of his flick, he drew the blade. "Enough talk. We shall speak with our weapons," he declared.

"Indeed we shall," Mariko said, unslinging a bow from her back. "Please know that I bear no grudge against you, dear puppet," she said, "but I must do this."

"Same here," Raizo answered, "so don't even hold back."

"Kasumi, give us some atmosphere!" Mariko ordered. As she finished speaking, Kasumi raised a hand. Mist filled the arena, clouding her opponent's sight.

Shit, Raizo thought. *I'll have to go off intuition. I hear them moving...I hear...I see nothing...but I...I hear...PREY...*

Gritting his teeth, Raizo listened carefully for footsteps. He closed his eyes, focusing on his surroundings. Sounds flooded his ears: the footsteps around him, Kasumi's sword cutting ever so slightly through the wind, his own breathing and heartbeat speeding up, and the sound of a bow being drawn back...

As the sound of an arrow being shot filled the air around him, he instinctively let his senses relax. Feeling his power taking effect, he summoned four clones, each translucent and standing in a different stance. He switched to one of the clones as he felt the attack approaching. The flurry of arrows passed harmlessly through his body. Hearing approaching footsteps, Raizo shifted his consciousness to another body, effortlessly dodging Kasumi's strike. His eyes opening, he scowled. His opponent was mere inches away. Tightening his grip on his sword, he shifted back to his real body and swung with all the clones. The blades struck Kasumi's shield as she desperately moved to block it. With a mighty push, Raizo slashed cleanly through the shield, leaving five holes in the protective piece.

Kasumi stepped back in surprise. Raizo, not missing a beat, continued his relentless attack, all while easily dodging Mariko's arrows. He counted to himself as he struck. He knew he was doing well. He knew Kasumi's trick had failed. She had tried to cloak herself with the mist, but his animal instinct was enough to detect her. He would win, and yet he heard a surprising sound in the distance. The sound of a gun being cocked.

His eyes widening in shock, by the time Raizo could react and try making another shadow of himself, it was too late. He felt a jolt of pain ringing through his right shoulder. Shooting a quick glance over at the injured spot, he noticed that it had been pierced, not by an arrow but by a bullet.

Taking advantage of her opponent's distraction, Kasumi gave him a strong bash to the head with her shield. Raizo stumbled, biting his lip. A second later, a second gunshot rang out, and he felt his leg being pierced. He winced as he fell. *Fuck...* he thought. He took a deep breath. As a third shot rang out, he raised his sword and sliced cleanly through the bullet, splitting it. The two halves landed at either side of his head. Desperately pushing himself back up, he parried another arrow from Mariko. Forcing himself to stand, he raised his sword again. "C'mon, I can...still go..." he said weakly, smirking.

Kasumi walked over cautiously, raising her heavily damaged shield. Seeing her nervousness, he made a mad dash forward, clones bursting forth. Strike after strike destroyed the shield, turning it into metal scraps. Raising his sword, Raizo took one final swing. "I can...STILL FIGHT!" he declared forcefully. However, before his sword could strike home, he felt an arrow piercing his right arm. Crying out in pain, he stumbled once more. Taking advantage of the situation, Kasumi raised her sword and knocked him back, following up by a myriad of slashes, as well as arrows raining down from her owner's ranged assault. Moments later, she stood, facing her opponent with her sword in hand. She tilted her head to the right in confusion.

The mist finally completely dissipated.

Mariko stood right behind Kasumi, with no arrow drawn. She, too, looked stunned.

Opposite to them, Raizo had forced himself back to his feet once more. He had one bullet wound in his left leg and another in his right shoulder. His body was covered in bloody slash marks, courtesy of Kasumi's onslaught. He had close to a dozen of Mariko's arrows sticking out from his body. And yet, he stood, a smile on his face. "I...can...still...f-fight..." he choked out, coughing up a little blood.

"No, you can't," Mariko said, her expression serious. "Just stop. You have nothing left to prove...you *will* lose if Hikari Oshiro continues to stand by and do nothing. And even if she tries to help...I doubt she'll come even close to doing what you've done. You may think I'm just flattering you, but you're beyond incredible. All that, and you're still standing to fight? And for that girl? It's remarkable, and foolish."

"Y-yeah...it is, but...I'm a...warrior," Raizo declared. "So...finish this...end it...let me go down...with honor...why don't you?"

Mariko sighed. "You are a worthy opponent, and a true warrior at heart. Your owner clearly isn't worthy of you."

"I...suppose...so..." Raizo mumbled.

"Kasumi, finish this with grace. It's the least we could do for a *real* opponent," Mariko ordered, glaring at a stunned Hikari. Yes, she thought, *I agree with that shocked expression on your face. However, unlike my own, it doesn't read "he's incredible for fighting so hard," but rather it seems to say "he's worthless for losing like this." That girl...is disgusting...*

Raizo's senses were at their limit. He closed his eyes, hearing Kasumi's footsteps as she approached him. He noticed the sound as she raised her sword, but also the sound of a gun being cocked once more. *Shit!* he thought. Summoning what's left of his energy, he straightened his back, his eyes shooting open in an instant. "Look out, damnit!" he cried, moving to the left.

One final gunshot, clearly aimed for Kasumi's head, instead landed upon his back. Raizo felt his eyes widen. The pain was incapacitating. Once again, he coughed up a few drops of blood, stumbling backwards.

Kasumi's expression went from a confused stare to a shocked gape.

Raizo felt his body getting heavier as he fell to the ground. He closed his eyes again. *I'm a puppet, right?* he thought. *I won't die...I can still feel my core...it's intact, so I won't die yet...and I can't...I haven't finished my job yet...I can't...die...*

He felt himself crack a small smile. *Right...that Mariko girl...said that overworked puppets...can pass out like this...yeah, that's...all this is. I'm just...tired. I won't die...not yet...*

The students in the stands wore expressions of surprise regarding the outcome and concern about Raizo's condition. Murmurs of "is he okay?" and "what happened?" filled the air.

"Hey, get up!" Hikari cried, kicking Raizo's damaged arm, ignoring the arrow sticking out from it. "You have to maintain my perfect record! Get the hell up!"

The puppet didn't react.

Kasumi knelt down beside Raizo. She gently stroked his face, carefully avoiding the cut on his cheek. "Why did you...save me?" she whispered to him, a tiny smile on her face. "You were hurt...but you still...saved me..." she continued. "And now...you're hurt even more...I'm...sorry..." she finished, nuzzling his forehead.

"Get the hell up already!" Hikari cried in frustration.

Mariko, clearly annoyed, glared straight at her. "Could you shut up already?" she shouted. "Face it, you've lost. It's not like you can take Kasumi and I on anyways. Not on your own, at least. Show some care for your puppet, damnit!"

"I needed to *win* this!" Hikari retorted. "I was *supposed* to win! Damnit!" she cried, turning around and storming out of the arena.

"Hey, get back here!" Mariko cried, scowling. Hikari ignored her voice.

Mariko, sighing to herself, turned back to Raizo's damaged body. Placing her hand on his chest, she checked for a pulse. "I can still feel the core," she declared, much to the relief of the crowd. She shook her head. "I can make the necessary repairs. If anyone sees that Hikari girl, tell her that I'm taking custody of her puppet until he has fully recovered from his injuries and has received an adequate review and upgrade, if needed. As a certified puppet mechanic, I am legally authorized to make this move if I deem it necessary," she said, "and right now his condition is critical, so I think it's the right call."

"We'll let her know if we see her!" many students called from the stands.

"Thank you. All of you, thank you," Mariko answered, bowing to the crowd. Cheers erupted from the stands.

"Kasumi, carry him back to my dorm room. We have more than enough space for him to rest there. I have a larger room that can accommodate six residents just for this sort of thing, after all," Mariko laughed. "He's a little too heavy for me to carry, being a puppet and all, so please?"

Kasumi nodded. Wordlessly, she picked Raizo's limp body up in her arms and followed Mariko back to the dorm room.