

III

"I'm excited to see how this turns out," said Elizabeth as she and Koharu, as well as some of their other classmates piled into the arena stands.

Raizo sat casually by the wall of the arena, with Hikari standing at his side. Opposite to them, Jiro and Fuyuko entered the arena. "Sorry to keep you waiting!" Jiro called.

"Let us have a fine first match," Fuyuko added.

"Yes, let is be fine indeed," Hikari answered. "So how do you wanna do this? Everyone goes in? Or do you want to keep this match between the puppets?"

"With all due respect," Jiro answered, "I'd prefer for the puppets to fight. I'm not much of a soldier, as you likely can tell."

"Fair enough," Hikari laughed. "Alright then, Raizo, go easy on her, alright?"

"That's not quite for you to decide, young miss," Raizo muttered under his breath as he stood up. "But nonetheless," he said, "let's make this an opener to remember!"

Reaching back, Fuyuko unslung a rifle. Carefully loading six bullets into the chamber, she looked up to face Raizo. "Please don't blame me if this hurts," she said.

"I won't, but I'd like to ask you to do the same," Raizo replied, a smirk on his face. Reaching to his side, he drew a sword. "Can you believe I had to put up with a stupid iron *katana* before I got this thing?" he laughed. "That thing's weight was totally off! Maybe I'm just suited to using a tamahagane, hmm?"

"A tamahagane, eh?" Jiro mumbled, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "You're into traditional Japanese samurai swords? Interesting."

"I'd say I'm pretty intriguing," Raizo answered. "Enough talk. We shall speak with our weapons."

"Amen to that!" Fuyuko laughed, raising her gun. "Well, I'm gonna go ahead!"

"Interesting," Elizabeth mumbled. "I think Raizo will win this one quite easily."

"Is that so, mistress?" Koharu asked.

"Yeah. With all due respect to Jiro and his puppet," Elizabeth replied, "I'd be surprised if they can even *hit* him this time..."

"Match, start!" Hikari cried. "Raizo, go! Win this thing!"

"You don't need to tell me that, I'm not a tool, woman!" Raizo retorted, annoyed. Turning to face his opponent, he was met with a blinding light. "Oi, the fuck?" he growled.

"Well said, friend," Jiro laughed. "Fuyuko is known as the Puppet of the First Star. Her powers revolve around manipulating light."

"Huh. That's neat," Raizo mumbled. "Well, take a shot, I guess."

"Will do," Fuyuko answered. Raising her gun, she aimed straight at Raizo's head. "Please know that it's nothing personal." After another moment of aiming her weapon, she pulled the trigger.

Raizo cracked a smile. As the bullet approached, a translucent copy of him, identical in every single way, appeared, leaning over to the side. The bullet passed harmlessly through his body, and the mysterious clone's smile grew even wider. It then seemed to dissipate into thin air. The whole thing happened in less than half a second's time, shocking Jiro and his puppet. "W-what?" Fuyuko cried, confused.

Raizo, noticing that the light had slightly dimmed, remarked that Fuyuko had lost her focus. Taking advantage of the situation, he twirled his sword and ran straight towards her. "My name is Raizo," he declared, "the Puppet of Infinite Planes; the one who exists, and yet doesn't exist."

Fuyuko, panicking, fired shot after shot. But, each and every time, multiple translucent copies of Raizo appeared, each leaning in a slightly different direction. And, each and every time, her shots passed through her target harmlessly. Noticing that she had run out of ammunition, she stepped back. Raizo, sensing her weakness, broke out into a mad sprint, digging the blade of his sword into the floor of the area, tearing up the hardened ground as he ran. A trail of dust and destruction followed him as Fuyuko desperately tried to reload, but before she could reach for a bullet, Raizo had already appeared right in front of her. Once again, dozens of clones appeared, each only translucent, and yet they held swords of their own. Raising his blade, Raizo took one mighty swing. The clones followed suit, and Fuyuko was faced with dozens of blades coming her way.

Raising her hands to protect herself, she forced her eyes shut and braced herself for the strikes that never came.

Opening her eyes once again, she saw the dozens of clones, their blades mere inches away from her, and yet none finished their swings. One by one, the clones faded into nothingness, until only one Raizo remained. "It's over," he declared. "I win." Lowering and sheathing his blade, he bowed deeply before Fuyuko. "Not bad at all. However, if something doesn't work the first time, chances are it won't work the next five times. The latter five shots were wasted. Try to bait your opponent by faking a reload. Most enemies won't count your shots, nor will they take notice of the fact that you only have six bullets in your chamber."

"Then...I can land a shot from point-blank when they think I'm helpless, correct?" Fuyuko finished.

"Took the damn words right outta my mouth," Raizo laughed. "You're clever. Do you take after Jiro, maybe?" Turning to Jiro, he chuckled. "Well? How was that?"

"Impressive indeed," Jiro answered. "You're pretty fast with that sword, despite its size."

"It took practice," Raizo admitted. "That was a good match though." He shook hands with both of his opponents.

"Say, how did you dodge Fuyuko's shots, anyways?" Jiro inquired.

"Well, my powers play with the multiple planes of existence," Raizo answered. "Full existence, incomplete existence, partial existence and nonexistence. In summary, one copy of me always fully exists; the question is *which*. All those little illusion-like clones are all in a state of partial existence; that's to say that they exist for me to switch to, but otherwise cannot do you any harm. However, right before I attack, the illusions switch to incomplete existence. That means a tiny fragment of them physically exists, but it's usually so small that it won't harm me even if you hit it, and yet it'll hurt if you are hit *by* it. In other words, when I attack, those clones can hit you but cannot be hit themselves. Otherwise, they cannot be interacted with physically."

"Therefore, ranged attackers and slower attackers are mostly, if not completely helpless against you," Jiro said.

"That's one way of putting it," Raizo answered. "I've still lost to ranged attackers and slow opponents before. However, I do have an advantage over them. It's a little tricky to beat an opponent who you literally can't hit." Turning around to face Hikari, Raizo smiled. "Any comments, young miss?"

"Hardly," Hikari answered. "Thanks for the match. It was good. I do hope we'll get to have rematch some time, hmm?"

"Certainly," Jiro answered.

Bowing, Raizo walked back over to his owner. "Let us be off, young miss."

"Yeah, yeah," Hikari mumbled.

"Damn," Raizo mumbled, sitting down on a pile of hay. "This stable is...comfy, at least. It feels like some kind of home..."

Thinking back over the events of the day, he sighed. *I should have been more careful in that match. No matter how sure I was about her ammo count, that Fuyuko could have tricked me and shot me right in the gut...though I'm not sure that'd keep me down. I can't die yet...I still have to find out about my purpose...about why I'm back...and why they chose ME...*

Rubbing his own forehead, he clicked his tongue in frustration. "And jeez, what was that dinner? Damn that Hikari...enjoying a steak all on her own and feeding me a few raw vegetables? And it wasn't even a friggin' salad! It was just half of a dirty carrot and a quarter of a cabbage! The hell?" He shook his head. *Does that woman hate me or something?* he thought. *I...really gotta make some more friends so I can actually bum a decent meal off someone every once in a while...at this rate I may really die of malnutrition...*

Sighing again, Raizo checked his watch. *I should sleep early*, he thought. *Tomorrow we're likely to have another match, and it may not be so easy next time...*

Nodding to himself, he lay down on the hay and slowly drifted off to sleep.