

## V

Raizo slowly opened his eyes. Raising his right arm, he checked his shoulder. The bullet hole had fully healed. *Huh. Neat, he thought. Thank God zelaborium can regenerate...how the hell does that work, anyways?* He sighed. *Oh, who gives a damn about THAT? I'm alive...that's what matters. I was right...my core's still powering my body, and as long as it does...I'll never give in. I will keep going...I have to. It's the only way I'll find out exactly who I was...and find out why I was brought back. Why me, and not someone else? And most importantly of all, I must find the one who killed me.* Rubbing his eyes sleepily, he yawned. *I'll find them...and I will have my revenge. That's a promise, damnit!* he thought. *So I must get stronger...so I'll be able to win when that day comes...*

The sound of the sheets being ruffled brought Raizo back to reality. *W-wait, personal vendettas aside, where the hell AM I?* he thought. Using his free right arm, he touched his immediate surroundings. He was lying in a soft bed beneath the covers. Turning his head to his right, he spotted a nightstand. On the nightstand, there was a beautifully decorated lamp and a large pitcher of water, and an empty glass beside it. A label reading "drinking water" was attached to the pitcher. He cracked a smile. "Well, what do you know...there's clean water here...even if it's tap water, it would be an upgrade." He sighed. *Yeah, an upgrade from the trash Hikari provided me with...I had to manually strain the water to filter it a little...*

Attempting to move his left arm, Raizo noticed that it wouldn't budge. *Strange,* he thought. *I know I got shot in the left leg...but I didn't even take an arrow in my left arm...just a few cuts, and that should already be healed by now, so why can't I move it?* He shrugged. Suddenly noticing the warm sensation from his left side, he bit his lip. *I'm gonna regret this, aren't I?* he thought. *Oh well.* Tilting his head to the left, he ended up face-to-face with someone else. "Holy—" he cried.

"Holy...what?" a sleepy voice interrupted.

The figure beside Raizo finally stirred. Noticing the heat leave his arm, he tried moving his left half, noticing the he once again could control his arm. Blinking twice, he carefully looked at the person lying at his side. Her dark, purple hair was no longer neatly combed. Instead, it was messy. Her golden yellow pupils shone almost as brilliantly as the sun outside the window behind her. She smiled. "Good morning..." she whispered.

Raizo lay still for a moment. Slowly raising his left arm, as if to affirm that he once again could control the limb, he pinched himself on the cheek. Blinking again, he noticed that the girl was still beside him, and that he was still in the bed. "Err...miss Kasumi, may I was what you're doing?"

"Waking up..." Kasumi replied, rubbing her eyes sleepily. Stifling a yawn, she pressed her hand against his chest gently. "Hubby's heartbeat...feels nice..." she mumbled.

"W-wha—" Raizo began.

"Why, good morning!" a voice called. Turning his head back to the right, Raizo noticed Mariko walking in. Her black hair and bright red eyes seemed dark, yet also comforting and welcoming. She resembled a mother greeting her child.

"G-good morning...miss Nakano," Raizo answered, a hint of confusion in his voice. "If I may ask, what happened?"

"After you passed out, you mean?" Mariko asked, approaching the bedside and pouring a glass of water from the pitcher. Handing him the glass, she sat down on the bed. "Well, let's see. You fought, but before the battle ended, you moved to block a bullet for Kasumi, ultimately preventing a clear headshot but heavily damaging your own body. The shot narrowly missed your core. Thankfully, it's no longer in the same place as a human heart, but I did a quick inspection. That's how I know where it's located." She smiled. "Don't worry, I won't use that against you. That's illegal. I *am* still a professional, after all."

"I see," Raizo answered, sitting up slightly and taking a sip of water. "And then?"

"We carried you back here and you underwent a complete inspection. I removed all the arrows from your body, as well as that last bullet which got stuck, annoyingly enough. You've been unconscious for the last 65 hours, thus missing 2 days of school. No worries though, Ms. Saitou has been informed, so you've been formally excused. As for today, it's a day off. It's kind of strange to have a break on a Thursday, but the school was closed today for an investigation."

"Let me guess," Raizo said, "it has something to do with the shooting during our match."

"Very perceptive," Mariko nodded. "That said, I have a few questions of my own for you."

"Ask away," Raizo said. "You helped me. It's the least I could do in return."

Mariko smiled. "Nonsense. You *did* save my Kasumi, after all. And she seems to have taken quite a liking to you," she added, pointing to Raizo's left. Turning his head in the direction of her finger, he noticed Kasumi clinging to his left arm, a little smile on her face. Her bare body was pressed against his own torso from the side.

Raizo gulped. He slowly turned back to face Mariko. "Th-this...uhh..."

"Don't worry," Mariko giggled. "When I first met Kasumi, she wouldn't talk to me at all. However, once we got closer, she started to speak, and eventually we could actually hold full conversations. At that point, she started combing my hair every morning. In your case, though I don't think you're talking normally with her yet, she seems to be willing to speak to you. And furthermore, she doesn't seem opposed to sharing a bed with you. In the nude, no less."

"Err...yeah," Raizo answered nervously.

"Relax," Mariko laughed. "Now, back on track. There's an investigation going on at the moment, and I've agreed to help in any way I can. Part of that is asking you a few questions. Our match was erased from the records on the grounds of sabotage. I'm sure you have a lot to ask too, but focus on my questions for now."

"Certainly," Raizo answered.

"So could you *tell* you were being shot at? And if so, how?" Mariko asked.

"Of course I could tell. Not that I noticed in time, that is. I could hear it. When Kasumi unleashed all of that mist, I couldn't see a thing, so I resorted to letting my animal instincts take over and listened. I heard your steps, and I heard your bow being drawn. I dodged based off the direction from which the sound came," Raizo replied truthfully.

"Wha—holy crap! That's amazing!" Mariko cried. "And you did that entire fight based off instinct and brute strength?"

"Yeah, that and some sheer force of will," Raizo chuckled. "I heard the gun being cocked, but it was pretty far away, so by the time I heard it, it was already too late to dodge. The person may have been reloading or switching weapons between the second and third shot, and again between the third and fourth. That delay gave me time to process, so I could parry the third shot."

"Interesting...you mean to say it could be a sniper?" Mariko asked.

"I can't say for sure," Raizo replied, "but somehow I doubt it. Whoever it was seemed intent on sabotaging our match. They either wanted Hikari to lose, or they wanted it to be a draw where both puppets were left unable to fight. Regardless, they were able to make some nice, lengthy shots but were also relatively inaccurate. If I were in their position with a sniper rifle, despite having minimal training with guns, I should be able to take both puppets down with two shots, and save the other two for their owners. That said, an experienced gunman would likely make short work of all four of us without a problem."

"So do you think it could have been an amateur?" Mariko asked.

"Here's my reverse-ask: what was the bullet that got stuck in my body made out of?" Raizo inquired.

"A mixture of jorgandium and lead," Mariko answered.

"Which is expensive as all hell," Raizo said. "That means whoever did it is either rich or experienced, but if they're really that rich they'd hire an experienced sniper instead, so it's the same story either way."

"So what're you getting at?" Mariko asked, confused.

"I'm saying that the attacker *did* use a gun, but *not* a sniper rifle," Raizo explained. "The one who hired them likely couldn't quite afford a real sniper."

"Not a sniper?" Mariko cried.