

## XXXV

Hikari approached Ayane, having regained some of her past zeal, and cleared her throat. "Hello, *commoner*," she began. "I—uhh...oh God, this is more difficult than I thought," she muttered.

"And here I thought she had gotten over that problem," Raizo mumbled to a giggling Satomi as they both walked over. Delivering a light chop to Hikari's head, Raizo sighed. "Alright, quick reminder, stop calling people 'commoner' all the time, especially when you first meet 'em. It's rude, damnit."

"A-alright," Hikari replied, a light blush appearing on her cheeks. *Oh God, he touched me!* she thought. *This is PROGRESS!*

"Are you *sure* she's feeling better, Raizo?" Satomi laughed. "I mean, the mistress seems a bit *out of it*, y'know?"

"Yeah, I realized," Raizo muttered. Turning to Ayane, he bowed. "I do apologize for my young miss' rudeness." he said. "Try again," he told Hikari.

"U-umm...y-y-yeah," Hikari mumbled. "I-I'm Hikari Oshiro. Nice to meet you."

"Err...right. Nice to meet you too," Ayane replied. "So do you...umm...need something?"

"Oh, I just wanted to see if you'd like a sparring match," Hikari answered. "I mean, you wanted a fair match, so I decided I'd make the offer. With all due respect, I don't really know how strong you are, so I'll just have to adjust accordingly."

"I suppose so," Ayane replied. "Very well. I accept. Can we go now, or is it mandatory for us to wait until after class?"

"Go now!" Chinatsu called. "You'll be doing me a favor and giving a metaphorical middle finger to the administration for keeping me up all fucking night."

"Fair enough," Satomi shrugged. "Let's take this *outside*, punk!"

Raizo chopped her head too, causing her to yelp with pain. "At least *try* to be courteous, idiot," he said.

"Hey, so *why* did we follow along exactly?" Mariko inquired, sitting down in the arena. "I mean, sure this is interesting, but what did we have to join the audience for?"

"That's a good question," Fuyuko mumbled. "I dunno. Honey?"

"Uhh...well, I kinda just got bored of sitting around," Jiro admitted, "so I grabbed Fuyuko and we just came here. Not sure about the rest of you though."

"I wanna see...if hubby kills someone again," Kasumi said, causing Mariko to shudder in fear for a moment. "Who the hell *are* you?" Mariko laughed.

"Bored," Kasumi answered.

"Figures," Elizabeth interrupted. "I'm surprised that girl accepted the offer though."

"Hmm... 'tis indeed strange," Koharu agreed, "but I'm sure Raizo will do just fine."

"Don't be so sure," Elizabeth bit her lip. "If this girl knows who they are, then she probably has some sort of strategy planned out, which could spell bad news."

Down in the arena, Hikari and her puppets stood opposed to Ayane and Izumi. "So, what'll it be? Two on two?" she suggested.

"Hmm...actually, sure. We'll take on *both* your puppets," Ayane replied confidently.

*A foolish choice on her part, Raizo thought, but still...we mustn't get complacent. An arrogant foe is the easiest sort to beat, after all.*

"Challenge accepted!" Satomi cried.

*Dumbass, Raizo thought, pinching the bridge of his nose.*

"I second that," Hikari nodded thoughtfully.

*Idiots, the lot of 'em, Raizo told himself. "Fine then," he said. "Then we shall fight."*

"Fine by me," Izumi said. "All the better for me. If this is a real match with puppets, I have no need to hold back. I'll beat you into hell and back!"

"We'll see about that," Satomi snickered, "right, partner?"

Raizo simply sighed. "Enough talk. We shall speak with our weapons," he declared, placing a hand on his sword, his thumb pressed gently against the guard of his blade.

Izumi unslung an assault rifle from her back and attached a bayonet from her belt with a loud snapping sound. "Let's get this over with," she said. "I don't have the patience for this."

Ayane also unclipped a gadget from her own belt. With the press of a button, it extended into a polearm before forming a lance. "Now, now, Izumi, no need to be mean," she scolded.

"It doesn't matter, mistress," Izumi answered sternly. "Why bother with this? Let's win and get out of here already."

"Wow, you're friggin' rude," Satomi muttered, pulling a pair of brass knuckles out of her pocket. "I guess this gives me an excuse to try these things out," she laughed. "They're pretty flexible considering their power. I got 'em a while back but never got to try 'em out."

"As long as you can shoot," Raizo said quietly.

"You bet," Satomi answered, pulling her guns out. "Someone ring the gong so we can start already!"

"This is going to be interesting," Elizabeth mumbled.

"I'm excited to see what they're gonna try," Jiro agreed. "Someone wanna ring the starting bell?"

"Way ahead of you," Mariko answered, casually twirling a large mallet. With a mighty swing, she slammed it into the face of a gong near the top of the arena, with sound resonating through the air.

"Game on!" Ayane cried, making a mad dash forward.

Izumi took a quick moment to aim before opening fire at Raizo, who only smirked as he easily parried each and every bullet from the assault rifle. His clones, appearing for fractions of seconds, twirled their blades and blocked each and every shot while he himself kept his left hand on his sheath, and his thumb on his sword's guard. Holding his right hand out in front of the blade, he took a step back in preparation. Then, breaking out into a sprint, he faced Ayane directly as his clones blocked the incoming bullets.

As they approached less than two meters away from each other, he stopped himself, making a pivot on his heel. A gunshot sound rang forth from him as he shot forth while applying pressure to his thumb, pushing the blade of the sword forth. He landed mere inches from a shocked Izumi's side, his sword gliding gracefully out of its sheath and into his right hand.

Attempting to react, Izumi turned, attempting to aim her bayonet in his direction, but a series of shots rang out from Satomi, breaking the locking mechanism and dropping the blade to the ground. Izumi leapt back, dodging Raizo's next swing only to be hit directly in the shoulder by Satomi's shot, causing her to cry out in pain.

Satomi twirled a gun casually, blowing out the smoke from the barrel. Turning to Ayane, she raised an eyebrow. The girl had resumed her dash, this time towards Satomi, but she only held her weapon with her right hand. Her left hand covered a bloody patch on her uniform as she ran. *I see*, Satomi thought, *so when Raizo dashed by her, he also landed a quickdraw...and the gash looks pretty darn deep too, judging by how much it's bleeding...she must be trying real hard not to collapse right now.* Sighing, Satomi raised a gun. *Oh well*, she told herself, pulling the trigger. *I already kinda see her plan here anyways.*

Ayane raised her weapon, barely managing to parry the bullet before approaching melee range. Jabbing the lance towards Satomi's gut, she made a lunge forth.

Satomi easily sidestepped the attack, placing one of her guns back in the holster. With one hand, she fired towards Izumi. With the other, she swung upwards in a mighty uppercut, her brass knuckles colliding with Ayane's stomach and sending the girl flying. *Damn*, she thought, *and that was me HOLDING BACK!*

"I see," Jiro mumbled. "So Raizo used a trick reserved almost exclusively for puppets to propel himself forwards. Combined with a perfectly-timed quickdraw, he managed to slash Ayane without even finishing his draw. As he landed, he made a big deal of the draw, attracting Izumi's attention. This set of moves not only bought Satomi cover, as Ayane couldn't immediately try and attack her thanks to the wound he inflicted, but also distracted Izumi enough for Satomi to land a clean shot, disabling Izumi's melee weapon."

"Clever tactic," Mariko said, "but what was the point?"

"Well, think about it like this," Jiro explained. "If Raizo's avoiding the lethal option, he should distract the opposing melee fighter. Since we already know he's not really afraid of firearms and bows and whatnot thanks to his power, it makes sense that he wants to disable all melee assailants fast. My injuring Ayane, he helps Satomi disable Izumi. This way, he can easily finish his ranged opponent off on his own. However, Satomi had both melee and ranged dominance, so he knows that an injured Ayane is more than manageable for Satomi, and since Ayane's not likely to expect much melee combat from a gunslinger...you see where this is going?"

"So in short, the entire thing is a mind game," Elizabeth said. "Raizo essentially took away all of their strengths and left their entire composition as a weakness."

"Bingo," Jiro nodded.

"Hubby is amazing," Kasumi muttered, her eyes virtually glowing with admiration.

"Well, *messing with people* has always kind of been his strong point," Koharu giggled.

"Somehow I think you don't get the double entendre behind that wording," Fuyuko said.

"What?" Koharu asked, confused.

"Oh, forget it," Fuyuko sighed.

Izumi desperately tried to fire at Raizo, whose clones moved back and forth, helping him dodge every bullet effortlessly. With a swift kick, he disarmed his wounded opponent and easily slammed her into the ground with a sharp jab.

"Well then? Finish me!" Izumi cried.

"What? Who said this was a fight to the death?" Raizo laughed, stepping back casually. "If it was, I'm pretty sure people would start calling me some pretty nasty names. I don't think I can do two of those deathmatches in the space of a few days without getting in trouble."

"What, are you a coward or something?" Izumi demanded. "Or am I not good enough or you or something? Do you wish to humiliate me or—"

"Jeez, what's with this nasty attitude of yours?" Raizo groaned. "Listen, this was supposed to be a simple match. A few injuries, sure, but nobody's gonna die. Quick being such a jerk already. At the end of the day, this is something of a method to make new acquaintances, not enemies."

"Yeah," Satomi nodded, walking over with Ayane in her arms. "Listen, the match is over. We've won. You can stop being so cold and—"

"Silence!" Izumi cried. "What right do you have to lecture me? Was this entire thing not just a ploy so you could laugh at us when you won? Why would you go ahead and be so friendly to a stranger? Besides, why couldn't your owner even take an introduction seriously? This is clearly some sort of joke!"

"You...have a really shitty sense of humor, I'll give you that," Raizo sighed. "Nobody's here to make fun of you, I swear. C'mon, let's go already," he said, offering her a hand.

"Oh, piss off!" Izumi growled, slapping his hand aside and picking herself up. Taking Ayane from Satomi's arms, she glared at them. "You know nothing about friendship...about being betrayed. What the hell *could* you know anyways? You're just a bunch of insolent kids," she said, turning around and stumbling off.

"What's her problem, anyways?" Mariko mumbled.

"I wonder," Elizabeth sighed. "It doesn't seem like that puppet's intent on making friends any time soon. If anything, it's like she'd rather remain their bitter enemy. And here I was, thinking my dear sister was going to make some progress towards becoming a better person, but to be stuck with *this* kind of classmate as the first friend she tries to make for herself...I can't help but pity her."

"Still," Jiro mumbled, "that was pretty rude of her. I dunno, this could turn out to be quite interesting..."

"So, what's the plan, young miss?" Raizo asked, walking over to Hikari. "Do you still wanna try being friends with that girl and her puppet, or shall we throw in the towel?"

"That's a trick question," Hikari answered with a smile.

"Yep."

"Let's throw in the towel then."

"Sur—say what now?"

"Just kidding!" Hikari laughed. "I'm not done yet! After all, after I succeed I want you to praise the *hell* outta me!"

"Huh. 'Just kidding,' eh?" Satomi mumbled as she joined them.

"Never mind that," Raizo said. "I say we figure something out about that Izumi. I'm wondering why she seems to hate this world. I mean, for God's sake, she acts like she's above us all or something. She doesn't seem to have any regard for others' feelings, even when they're trying to just make friends."

"So I was like *that* to people, eh?" Hikari mumbled, shuddering to herself. *Jeez, in hindsight, I kinda wanna go back and punch myself in the face*, she thought.

"Well...any suggestions as to what our next move should be?"

"I think Raizo's right about finding something out regarding Izumi," Satomi said. "She undoubtedly has *something* in her mind or her past that makes her act the way she does, and I kinda wanna dig it up."

"That's a good first step," Hikari said. "If we figure out the origin of a problem, then we can properly try and solve it, right?"

Raizo stared at her wordlessly.

"Wh-what?" Hikari asked. "Did I say something weird? I-is there a bug on my face or something?"

"No," Raizo replied casually, "I just thought you sounded...oddly *mature* just now," he mumbled.

Hikari's eyes widened. *W-w-was that a compliment? For me?* she thought excitedly. *Hell friggin' yeah! That'll show Elizabeth that Raizo still loves me!*

Looking in the direction in which Izumi had headed, however, the group noticed her collapsed on the ground. "Woah, didn't see *that* one coming," Raizo mumbled.