

All new translation by
j-novel club

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Runner's High:

Tomaru
Renren

Worst One:

Kurogane
Ikki

Tomaru gathered
mana in her fist and
circled behind Ikki,
aiming to take him
down with a single
blow powered by
her supersonic
acceleration.

“Take
this!”



Ayatsuji
Ayase

"Then I
guess we'll
be able to
play to our
hearts'
content!"

A few minutes later,
Ayase and Stella
came out of the
changing room.

Crimson Princess:
Stella
Vermillion





Fifty-Fifty:
Misogi
Utakata

"We really
underestimated
you."

Scharlach Frau:
Toutokubara
Kanata

"Come on,
let's duel.
I know you've
got a Device
too!"

Sword Eater:
Kurashiki
Kuraudo

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Prologue: A Distant Memory

“Are you sure I should go all out?” the girl hesitantly asked the aged, white-haired man in front of her. The two of them were standing in a dojo that was dyed orange by the light of the setting sun.

The man laughed heartily and replied, “Ha ha ha, looks like someone’s gotten cocky. Even if you don’t hold back, you won’t be able to beat me.”

“But Dad, you’re not as young as you used to be, and...”

“Which is exactly why I need to pass this technique down to you now, before I grow too old to hold a sword.” The young girl’s father hefted his wooden sword and pointed it at her. “I’m not a Blazer, so the only way I can help you grow stronger is by teaching you the sword. I devoted my entire life to developing the technique I’m about to show you. No one else has ever seen it before, and I’m sure it’ll come in handy even in a battle between Blazers. Now, draw your blade, Ayase.”

The old man’s eyes were glimmering with kindness and warmth. There was no way Ayase could refuse. Not when he was looking at her like that. She couldn’t bring herself to reject his love, even if it meant he’d be hurt.

“That’s not fair, Dad...”

Overcoming her trepidation, Ayase armed herself with the power of her soul. Her Device was a striking ruby-red katana that gleamed like blood in the sunset light. She held it with both hands and charged at her father. And just as he’d requested, she swung it down at him with all her might.

That’s all in the past now. I’ve lost everything. I was unable to protect a single thing, and now, nothing remains. Nothing except for that one scene from the distant past, burned into my memory forever.

Chapter 1: Apprenticeship

“It’s time for the seventh match of the day! Coming out of the blue gate, we have Kurogane Ikki, the Rank F Blazer who defeated one of last year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival representatives, Rank C Kiriara Shizuya, in his debut battle! Since then, he’s remained undefeated, racking up an impressive eight-win streak! On top of that, he’s won all but his first match without taking even a single hit! But today, our beloved Worst One will be facing his biggest threat since he took down the Hunter!”

The commentator went on.

“And from the red gate, we have the Rank C second-year Tomaru Renren, also known as Runner’s High! She’s part of Hagun Academy’s student council and is one of the favorites to earn a spot in the Festival! Just like Kurogane, she’s won all eight of her battles so far! Furthermore, she was ranked the third-strongest student in our school last year! Will Tomaru be able to defend that title today, or will Kurogane once again prove to the world that martial might can overcome supernatural powers?! Yanagida-sensei, how do you think this match will play out?!”

“You took so long with your intro that I fell asleep halfway through.”

“Thank you for your input! Now, let the battle begin!”

The buzzer signaling the start of the match rang, and the crowd let out a cheer.

In the ring below, the two knights faced each other down while maintaining their distance. On one side was Kurogane Ikki. He was wearing his usual uniform and holding his Device, Intetsu, comfortably in one hand. On the other was Tomaru Renren. She was wearing a windbreaker over a standard gym uniform, and her Device was a pair of brass knuckles.

Though the match had begun, Renren stayed where she was, hopping lightly from foot to foot. She smiled amicably at Ikki and said, “I saw your battle with

the Hunter, Kurogane-kun! That was an exciting match!” Her voice was lively, matching her energetic demeanor perfectly.

Ikki smiled back and replied, “Why, thank you. It’s an honor to be praised by the school’s third-strongest knight.”

“Aw, come on. Don’t be so stiff. We’re the same age, aren’t we? But you know, if you can fight so well, how come you ended up repeating a year?”

“Aha ha, well, some stuff happened.”

“If you say so. Well, whatever the reason, it’s a damn shame. It would have been so much fun to have a strong guy like you in my class, Kurogane-kun.”

“If you’re just looking for strength, isn’t Saijou-san in the same grade as you?”

“He’s not good enough. That knucklehead relies *too* much on strength. He can’t even touch me. Though I guess you won’t be able to either, Kurogane-kun. If you struggled with someone as weak as the Hunter, you’ve got no chance of beating me.” Tomaru’s smile turned into a feral grin. “I’ll show you what it means to be the third-strongest in the school!”

A second later, she vanished. But this wasn’t the work of a stealth skill like Area Invisible. The sound of her kicking off against the ring’s stone floor rang out loud and clear for Ikki to hear. He could also hear her cutting through the air at blistering speed.

Even when he strained his eyes, all he could see were the afterimages she was leaving behind. Tomaru hadn’t vanished, she was just moving so fast that it looked like she had. This was her unique Noble Art.

“There it is! Tomaru’s Mach Greed! It looks like she’s trying to end this match quickly!” the commentator bellowed.

Tomaru’s Blazer power let her accelerate endlessly. The deceleration that naturally occurred due to air resistance and other physical forces didn’t apply to her when she ran, and unless she came to a stop, she would continue to gain speed.

“I looked into you ahead of time, but I’m still amazed by how fast you can go,” Ikki said, genuinely impressed.

“Seeing it in person’s totally different than seeing it on a screen, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. My eyes can’t keep up. I guess the reason you were talking to me at the start of the match was to build up acceleration with those hops of yours?”

“Bingo! My power’s only weakness is how long it takes to rev up, so I did some warm-up steps to get my starting speed up to five hundred kilometers an hour. And this is just the beginning! My Mach Greed gets even scarier once I pass the speed of sound!”

Tomaru was running laps around the ring, even running along the walls surrounding it, and was getting faster every second. She was truly defying all known laws of physics.

Once she hit twelve hundred kilometers per hour, she broke the sound barrier, becoming literally supersonic. Naturally, she was too fast for the human eye to perceive. Even Ikki, with his enhanced kinetic vision, couldn’t track her anymore.

“As you can see, I don’t just pull a cheap disappearing act like the Hunter! Not only is it impossible to see me, but with how fast I’m going, you won’t be able to catch me either! You struggled so much against someone who was *just* invisible, so there’s no way you’ll be able to beat me!”

“So if I *do* manage to catch you, will you admit defeat?”

“Ha ha ha! Sure, why not?! Not like you’ll be able to! Sorry, Kurogane-kun, but your dream of entering the Seven Stars Battle Festival ends here! Take this!” Tomaru gathered mana in her fist and circled behind Ikki, aiming to take him down with a single blow powered by her supersonic acceleration. “Black Bird!”

Tomaru’s fist created a sonic boom as it rocketed toward Ikki’s unguarded back at a speed surpassing Mach 2. Not only had she been moving too fast to follow with the naked eye, but her punch was also too fast to react to, much less dodge or block. Tomaru was certain of her victory.

“What a moron,” Kurogane Shizuku said with a sigh as she watched the battle unfold from her spot in the spectator stands. Ikki’s sister was a Rank B knight who’d recently been awarded the nickname “Lorelei” for her propensity to defeat enemies by drowning them in water. Getting to her feet and looking

down at the ring, she muttered, “The reason Onii-sama had so much trouble with the Hunter wasn’t that he couldn’t see him.”

A second later, Tomaru came to realize her mistake.

What?! She watched in disbelief as Ikki turned to look directly at her, making it clear he’d been able to follow her despite the speed she was moving at. *N-No way! How did he react in time?!*

The next instant, Ikki moved out of the path of her supersonic fist. Her punch sailed through the air, and she passed by Ikki, unable to slow herself down. He grabbed the collar of her windbreaker as she did. Utilizing her own speed against her, he spun her around and slammed her against the ring’s stone floor.

“Gah!” Tomaru gasped in pain as her back smashed into the floor.

“Looks like I win,” Ikki said plainly.

Tomaru said nothing. She couldn’t understand how Ikki had been able to see her or how he’d managed to grab her. But she knew she’d been defeated. Once she stopped, the acceleration provided to her by Mach Greed was reset. It was a skill that required her to constantly be on the move. Building up speed again would take some time, and it was clear that the samurai staring down at her wouldn’t give it to her.

Accepting her defeat, Tomaru nodded meekly and announced her surrender.

“Wh-What an anticlimactic finale!” cried the announcer. “The academy’s third-strongest student, the fearsome Runner’s High, has been defeated by Kurogane Ikki! This marks his ninth win in a row! It looks like, for the first time in history, we might actually have a Rank F knight be one of our school’s representatives in the Seven Stars Battle Festival!”

“No way!”

“Even Tomaru-san couldn’t stop him?”

“What the hell is with that guy?! How come a monster like him is Rank F and repeating a year?!”

“H-He’s so cool...”

The spectators all shared their thoughts.

“Well done, Ikki. That’s another flawless victory under your belt,” Alisuin Nagi said, applauding Ikki as he walked out of the ring. They then turned to Shizuku, who was standing next to them, and said, “He didn’t even need to use Ittou Shura.”

“Why would he, Alice? The only reason Onii-sama struggled against the Hunter was because Area Invisible was a perfect stealth Noble Art and he used a bow to fight from long range. No matter how fast someone is, the moment they enter Onii-sama’s range, their fate is sealed. That’s how good of a swordsman he is.”

At Ikki’s level of skill, he was able to take down anyone who got within his sword’s reach. Regardless of whether they were fast or slow, visible or invisible, his honed sixth sense enabled him to react to anything they might do. Tomaru had lost because she’d underestimated Ikki’s powers of observation.

As Ikki made his way back to the blue gate, a red-haired girl walked out of it and smiled at him. “That was a good fight, Ikki.”

“Seeing as I had to dislocate my right shoulder to earn that victory, I think I could have done better. Anyway, good luck, Stella.”

“I won’t even break a sweat against someone of that caliber,” Stella replied, brimming with confidence, and stepped into the ring.

“All right, everyone, don’t go anywhere! The much-anticipated eighth match of the day is about to begin! First up, we have Hagun Academy’s one and only Rank A knight, the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermilliooon! Much like her roommate, Kurogane Ikki, she’s won every single one of her eight matches! Not only that, but each of her opponents has surrendered after witnessing her blazing flames without even trying to fight her! You can’t get a more perfect record than that! But today’s opponent might just give her a run for her money!”

As Tomaru walked through the red gate, a giant of a man with a buzz cut walked past her and into the ring.

“Vermillion’s opponent is Hagun Academy’s very own raging bull, the Destroyer, Saijou Ikazuchiii! He’s a Rank C knight and a member of the student council, but more importantly, he’s ranked the fourth-strongest student in our

school! Just look at that! He doesn't seem the least bit intimidated as he steps into the ring! He's glaring at her like an equal instead of cowering nervously like all of Vermillion's past foes! Apparently, in a recent interview, he told the school newspaper, 'A true Japanese man never runs from a challenge!' and it looks like he's more than ready to back those words up! Will we finally get to see the Crimson Princess fight for real?! Both fighters have manifested their Devices, and...there's the buzzer!"

"Raaaaaah!"

"Whoa! The battle's just started and Saijou is already brandishing his Zanbatou! Just lifting it has created a gust of wind so big you can feel it in the spectator stands! That's one hell of a Device Saijou's got!"

"I'm curious, do you know what my power is?" Saijou asked Stella as he twirled his Zanbatou above his head.

"I don't. Unlike Ikki, I don't investigate my opponents beforehand."

"Hmph. I guess being Rank C means I'm not worth a famous Rank A's time."

"It's not because I'm overconfident. Both this battle and even the Seven Stars Battle Festival are training to make a stronger Mage Knight. However, for training to be useful, it needs to simulate real-life conditions. When you're up against terrorists, you won't know what their powers are ahead of time. I need to be able to fight effectively regardless of what surprises my opponents throw at me. That's why I don't investigate them."

"I see. I must say, I'm impressed by your mettle. Few first-years have such a splendid resolve. However, I'm afraid your noble-minded intentions have backfired on you!"

Saijou stopped spinning his Zanbatou around and pointed it at Stella. It was far bigger than her Lævateinn and was oozing mana, which meant that Saijou had already activated his Blazer ability.

"My ability increases the weight behind my slashes the more I swing my weapon! In other words, the time I just spent spinning my Zanbatou already charged it up enough that each swing is backed by ten tons of weight! It was foolish of you to let me charge my power to its maximum potential!" Saijou

charged at Stella and swung his massive blade down on her. “Crescendo Axe!”

With all of the extra weight accumulated in Saijou’s blow, his sword could cut through even boulders.

“It doesn’t matter how powerful your swing is if it doesn’t hit,” Stella replied calmly.

Indeed, that was precisely why Saijou was ranked lower than Tomaru Renren. Though his Crescendo Axe was a much stronger single hit than anything Tomaru could muster, his Zanbatou was a very slow and bulky weapon. In fact, he was a very easy mark for a speed-based fighter like Tomaru. And while Stella couldn’t reach Tomaru’s ludicrous speeds, she was quite fast herself. She could dodge a swing like this with her eyes closed.

“But I’ll block it anyway!” she shouted, and there was a loud metallic clang as her Lævateinn stopped Saijou’s Crescendo Axe in its tracks.

“Wh-What?!” Not only did Stella block Saijou’s Zanbatou, she even forced it back, proving herself utterly superior in a contest of strength. “N-No way!” He stared in shock as he was overpowered.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t been present for Stella’s duel with Ikki, so he didn’t know just how powerful Stella’s blows could be. He’d only ever seen her battle through blurry videos that had been uploaded online, which had made it difficult to properly analyze her capabilities. In truth, Stella was also capable of unleashing blows that could shatter boulders.

“Remember this, Senpai.” Stella grabbed the defenseless Saijou by the collar and drew him close. She grinned viciously and said, “Blasting through all sorts of powers and fancy tricks head-on is what it means to be a Rank A.”

Flames burst from Stella’s hand, burning Saijou’s collar to cinders and blasting him a dozen meters up into the air. He landed on the stone ring with a painful crunch and lay there, unmoving. The point-blank flame blast had knocked him out cold.

“That’s the end of the match! The winner is Stella Vermillion!” the referee shouted, confirming that the battle was over.

“A-Another overwhelming victory for Stella Vermilliooon! Saijou was the first

person to brave a proper battle with the Crimson Princess, but he was burned to cinders in an instant! This is the might of a world-class Rank A knight! Our freshmen this year are all crazy strong! This might finally be the year Hagun Academy takes home the Seven Stars Battle Festival crown!”

Ignoring the cheering crowd, Stella casually strode out of the ring.

A month had passed since the start of the selection matches to see who would represent Hagun Academy in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. With summer right around the corner, the student body’s attention was focused on the three freshmen who, so far, boasted undefeated records in their selection matches: Kurogane Ikki, the Worst One; Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess; and Kurogane Shizuku, the Lorelei.



“Congratulations, Onii-sama.”

As Ikki left the fifth training field, where his match had taken place, he felt something bump into his waist. Looking down, he saw Shizuku’s jade-green eyes staring up at him. Alisuin was standing a few paces behind her.

“Thanks, Shizuku. But please don’t hug me in public. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“That’s okay. You’re very cute when you’re embarrassed, Onii-sama.”

“Alice, is it just me, or are my words going over Shizuku’s head more and more lately? Are we just out of sync because we spent four years apart?”

“Heh heh. The four-year gap *does* have something to do with it, at least.”

“Aaah! Shizuku’s hugging Ikki again!” Stella shouted, running over to Ikki.

Shizuku turned to Stella, her angelic smile immediately turning into a grimace. “God, you’re so noisy. You’re not five anymore, so stop screaming all the time.”

“I’m only screaming because you’re doing weird things to Ikki again!”

“What do you mean, ‘weird’? As you can see, I’m simply enjoying some normal physical intimacy with my brother. There’s nothing weird about that. We’re just very close siblings. Isn’t that right, Onii-sama?”

“Y-Yeah,” Ikki replied. “But you really are a bit too close, so could you please let go?”

“See? Even Onii-sama agrees with me.”

Shizuku ignored the parts of Ikki’s statement that didn’t fit her narrative.

“Did you even listen to the rest of his sentence?! There’s a limit to how much you can twist someone’s words!”

“Whatever could you be referring to? Besides, think about this logically, Stella-san. It’s true that I’m hugging Onii-sama, but I’m not hugging him that tightly. And even if I was, if Onii-sama truly didn’t want my loving embrace, he could easily pull me off. The fact that he hasn’t means he doesn’t dislike it. Isn’t that right, Onii-sama?”



Shizuku looked up at Ikki with puppy-dog eyes. He obviously couldn't bring himself to shake off such a cute creature.

"Y-Yeah. I would never pull you off me."

"Ikiiii!"

"I can't say no when she looks at me like that! It's not my fault!"

"There you have it. This is consensual, so you have no right to complain, Stella-san."

"Y-Yes I do!"

"Oh? And why is that?"

"B-Because..."

"Don't tell me you're going to say it's because you're his servant again. If you really *are* his servant, you shouldn't be complaining about what your master's sister does. Think about it. Even though your parents are the actual leaders of your country, your citizens show respect to you as well, right? So in the same vein, you need to respect your master's family as well. Or do the members of the Vermillion royal family think they're special and deserve special treatment?"

"That's not..." Stella trailed off, unable to truly speak her mind.

Ikki, of course, understood what she wanted to say. After all, on that night one month ago, they'd gone from roommates to lovers. Stella was a princess, however, so there would be complications if she made their relationship public. Ikki knew that as well, which was why, after discussing it with her, the two of them had agreed to keep their relationship a secret for now.

Still, it was clear that Shizuku was also romantically pursuing Ikki, and naturally, Stella couldn't stand that. Really, no girl would be happy to see another woman flirting with her boyfriend. But the frustrating thing for Stella was that she couldn't just come out and say that she was Ikki's girlfriend.

Shizuku gave Stella a disappointed look and said, "Coward."

"Uh, Shizuku?" Ikki asked, confused.

“Never mind. Come on, Onii-sama. Let’s go.”

“Hrngh...”

Stella could only watch helplessly as Shizuku dragged Ikki away.

“Mrr!”

Her teary expression was honestly kind of cute.

“Grrrr!”

Wait, she’s growling now?!

“Um, Sh-Shizuku? On second thought, it’s too embarrassing to link arms with my sister.”

Fearing for his safety, Ikki gently untangled himself from Shizuku. Shizuku pouted a little, but she let him go.

“Very well. I wouldn’t want you to hate me, after all.”

“I could never hate you, Shizuku,” Ikki replied immediately. Nothing could happen that would make him hate his kind, loving sister.

Shizuku smiled upon hearing that. “Thank you, Onii-sama. But you know...” She glanced around to make sure no one was nearby, then said in a much softer voice, “If you’re too kind to others, you won’t be able to make any progress.” It seemed she had already sleuthed out Ikki and Stella’s relationship.

She does have a point...

It had already been a month since the two of them had started going out, and their relationship hadn’t progressed in the slightest. On the contrary, it had regressed. Now that they were a couple, Ikki was even more self-conscious around Stella, and that made him act overly considerate toward her. He wanted to get closer to her, both physically and emotionally, but he wasn’t sure how to go about it.

What’s even the right time to say something like that? Should I, like, tell her I want to talk and make a big deal out of it? Or should I just bring it up casually in the middle of a normal conversation? I wish I knew what the right answer was.

Ikki had no prior relationship experience and thus had a hard time figuring out

when the right moment to make a move was. Unfortunately, Stella had no relationship experience either, so she was struggling with the same problems. The two of them had set off into the stormy sea of love without a compass to guide them; it was only natural that they'd gotten shipwrecked so soon.

Maybe Shizuku's right, and as the man, I should be taking the lead here.

However, because Ikki was scared Stella would hate him if he came on too strong, he couldn't work up the courage to be more proactive. As a result, he hadn't touched Stella at all this whole month.

Haaah... I feel like we should at least be able to kiss by now.

It saddened Ikki that they were further apart now than they'd been before they'd started dating.



"Ah, look over there."

"It's the Crimson Princess. Lorelei and the Worst One are with her too."

"Those three look so...dignified."

"Stop trying to sound cool. Those two girls might be strong, but I'm pretty sure that Rank F failure just happened to get lucky."

"Do you seriously still not believe that he's as strong as everyone says he is?"

"Oh yeah, did you hear? Stella Vermillion and Kurogane Ikki beat the two members of the student council who're ranked third and fourth strongest in the school!"

"Seriously? So the only people that might stand a chance against them are the student council president and Scharlach Frau?!"

"Those two are way stronger than everyone else, but unless those freshmen get unlucky, they probably won't even face off against them before the qualifiers are over. I've heard even Lorelei has a perfect nine-win streak."

"We've got a lot of crazy new students this year. Do you see that tall guy next to Lorelei? He's super strong too."

"Don't call Nagi-sama 'that tall guy'! He has a splendid nickname you should

be using! Black Sonia!”

“Yeah, don’t be rude to Nagi-sama!”

“O-Okay. My bad.”

“With all these promising freshmen, maybe we actually have a shot at winning the Seven Stars Battle Festival this year?”

Ikki could feel people staring at him from every direction as he walked back to the main school building. After a month, it had become clear who the favorites to be selected as Hagun Academy’s representatives were. Everyone was interested in these four people, who still held undefeated records, and they were especially interested in Ikki. His win streak had shocked all the students at Hagun Academy.

Despite being a Rank F whose Blazer abilities were truly atrocious, he’d been defeating more powerful knights one after another. People had initially doubted their eyes, but now that he’d reached nine wins in a row, everyone had been forced to accept that Ikki really was just that strong. Only a few stubborn people still vehemently denied that he was as strong as his record suggested and believed that it was all some kind of sham.

Admittedly, while most knights had come to recognize Ikki’s strength, they were still bewildered by it. They were mostly interested in seeing just how far he would be able to go. But Stella, for one, was happy that people were finally starting to respect him.

“Heh. Looks like even the most dim-witted students are starting to notice how strong you are, Ikki.”

“Of course they are. Onii-sama is the most wonderful man in the universe. It’s about time the rest of the world started to realize that. But I must say, the change has been quite stark. So many people come to hear your lectures during lunch breaks now.”

“Yeah, I was pretty shocked when even third-years started showing up.”

The lectures Shizuku was referring to were ones that Ikki had started giving to his classmates after they’d begged him to teach them martial arts. He taught swordsmanship, of course, but also how to wield a spear and even a bow. Ikki

had practiced every single martial art so that he could better see through his opponents' moves and read them, which was why he could instruct them on such a wide variety of weapons.

Though Ikki's specialty is still swordsmanship, most students don't have enough of a foundation in martial arts to be taught proper techniques anyway, Stella thought. He's mostly just been teaching the basics.

In the beginning, only a few of Ikki's classmates had attended his lectures, but as he racked up wins, more and more students came to understand the value of martial arts. By now, however, people from different classes and years were also showing up to his lectures. A month ago, that would have been unthinkable.

"Though recently, something even crazier happened to me," Ikki said, thinking back to a week ago. He'd been hoping this particular situation would resolve itself if he just ignored it, but unfortunately, it seemed that wasn't happening. As a matter of fact, it was quickly becoming impossible to ignore.

"What, Onii-sama?" Shizuku asked, worried.

"Well, I think I have a stalker."

"Whaaat?!"

Stella and Shizuku both gave Ikki an incredulous look.

"S-S-Stalkers are those people that follow you around day and night and sneak into your room and send you envelopes with lasers inside them, right?!"

"I believe you mean razors, Stella-san. I don't think you can put lasers inside an envelope," Alisuin corrected gently.

"I guess you could say emails are kind of like laser envelopes," Ikki mused with a smile.

"Shut up! It was a slip of the tongue, okay?! Anyway, that's not important right now!"

"Indeed. Could you tell us more about this stalker, Onii-sama?"

"Well, I started noticing that someone was watching me about a week ago. And I've noticed the same presence staring at my back an awful lot since then.

From the looks of it, you've sensed them too, huh, Alice?"

"I have. But since you seemed to be ignoring them, I assumed the best course of action was to not mention it."

"At first, I figured that if I ignored them, they'd stop eventually, but that doesn't seem to be working."

"Did you do something to make someone hate you?" Alisuin asked.

"Hmm. Not that I know of, at least," Ikki replied.

There wasn't much hatred in this mysterious stalker's gaze, so Ikki doubted they had a grudge against him.

"Maybe they're someone who has a crush on you, then?"

"Oh yeah, I guess that's possible. I've heard most stalkers' obsessions stem from love and not hate."

"You *have* become a rather famous knight, Onii-sama. And you're especially popular with the ladies. Perhaps you made eye contact with one of them and they thought they were destined to be your lover. Or maybe you said some kind words to a fan and they fell for you immediately."

"Ikki does suck at dealing with girls," Stella said with a nod.

"Precisely. He's the kind of person who'll gladly agree to a handshake if someone asks. That's why women think they can walk all over him," Alisuin added.

Stella shot Ikki a withering glare. It was true that Ikki's gentle demeanor made him very popular with the female students. Many of them had started coming to Ikki's matches to cheer him on. Unfortunately, however, he wasn't doing a great job of dealing with them.

Shizuku mercilessly shot down any of her fans who dared to speak to her, while Alisuin had the social skills and tact to treat them nicely but still firmly keep them at a distance. Ikki lacked both Shizuku's coldness and Alisuin's social graces, however. He couldn't bring himself to be cruel to those who'd come to support him, and if someone called out to him, he would stop to chat and even shake hands with anyone who asked. He'd nearly been late for class multiple

times because he kept entertaining his fans for far longer than was wise.

It was entirely possible that his misguided kindness had caused one of his fans to transform into a stalker. Stella, at least, believed that theory, though Ikki wasn't convinced. While he sensed no hatred from his stalker's gaze, he also didn't sense any particularly strong positive feelings either. If anything, he felt like he was being observed by a camera that was devoid of emotion.

"It's one thing if they want to be part of Onii-sama's fan club, but I won't allow any of those pests to get close to him. They need to know their place. I'll torture them if I have to."

"What exactly are you planning on doing with that feather duster, Shizuku?"

"I'm going to capture that stalker and tickle them until she repents."

"That's a surprisingly cute form of torture. I wasn't expecting that from you."

"I'll be tickling their eyeballs, of course."

"Whoa!" Ikki, Alisuin, and Stella all gave Shizuku a terrified look.

"Speculating what they might be after won't get us anywhere. We should just ask them," Ikki said, turning around.

"Ikki, are they stalking you right now?"

"Yep. They've been watching me ever since my morning jog." Ikki could feel that same gaze he'd sensed all week coming from a thicket off to the side of the stone walkway they were on. He took a deep breath and said in a loud voice, "Hey, you, hiding in the bushes over there! Why have you been following me this whole time?"

"Hawawawawaaah?!" Ikki's would-be stalker let out a strangled scream. Though they didn't seem to harbor Ikki any ill will, it wasn't normal to follow someone around for a week.

Curious to see who would come out, Ikki waited patiently. A second later, a beautiful girl with straight black hair crawled out of the bushes. She was holding leafy branches in both hands.



“Awawawah! I-It’s not what you think! I-I just— Waaah!”

It seemed as though she hadn’t realized that Ikki had been on to her this whole time. She looked around wildly, then turned on her heel and started running. Sadly for her, there was a pond right behind the bushes she’d been hiding in.

“Eeeek! Bwah?!”

She tripped over one of the low rocks surrounding the pond and fell in head-first. There was a sickening thud as her forehead slammed against its bottom. A few seconds later, her body floated back up to the surface, where it lay unmoving.

“Hey, are you— Okay, you’re definitely *not* okay! Alice, help me carry her out of the water!”

“Oh my, this doesn’t look good.”

Ikki and Alisuin ran over to the pond.

“Th-That pretty girl is Ikki’s stalker?!” Stella exclaimed.

“I may get to use this feather duster sooner than I anticipated,” Shizuku muttered, glaring at the unconscious girl. Both Stella’s and Shizuku’s instincts were telling them that this girl was dangerous.



The young girl found herself sitting in a dark, cramped room. The only light was coming from a single dingy desk lamp. Looking around, she discovered that she was surrounded by four scary old men who were glowering intensely at her.

“Fess up! You’re the girl who was stalking Kurogane Ikki, aren’t you?!”

“We caught you red-handed, so don’t think you can talk your way out of this!”

They turned the lamp to shine directly into her eyes, blinding her.

Terrified out of her wits, the girl nevertheless protested, “Y-You’ve got it all wrong! I wasn’t stalking him, I was just—”

“No excuses!”

“Eek!”

“We know you’ve been following him around for a whole week!”

“If that doesn’t qualify as stalking, I don’t know what does!”

“Forget it! This interrogation is getting us nowhere! Let’s just torture her!”

“P-Please, have mercy!”

“Hwuh?!”

The girl’s eyes snapped open, waking her up from her nightmare. She found herself staring at a nice, clean white ceiling. The sharp scent of antiseptic hit her nostrils, and she realized she was lying on a bed in the infirmary. She sighed in relief.

Thank goodness. It was just a dream.

“Let’s start with dripping hot wax on her skin, then we’ll whip her, then we’ll rip her fingernails out, then we’ll tie her up and stone her until...”

The girl turned around and saw a silver-haired girl whispering horrifying things into her ear.

“Then we’ll burn her at the stake, waterboard her, nail her to a cross, put her in a stockade, slice open her stomach, and— Oh, you’re awake.”

“W-Were you talking about me just now?”

“No, I think you were just having a bad dream.” The girl—who was, of course, Shizuku—poked her head out of the bed curtain and spoke to someone on the other side. “Onii-sama, she’s awake.”

Upon hearing that, Ikki, Stella, and Alisuin pulled the curtain back and walked over to the girl’s bed.

“My, you woke up rather quickly considering how big that nasty lump on your head was. I suppose we have Shizuku’s healing powers to thank for that.”

“We’re not allowed to use iPS capsules for anything other than injuries we get during official matches, so it’s a good thing she was around,” Ikki said in response to Alisuin. Then, he turned to his stalker. “How are you feeling? Does your head still hurt?”

As everyone filed in, the girl finally pieced together what had happened. After hitting her head on the bottom of the pond and passing out, she'd been carried here to the infirmary by Ikki and his friends.

"N-No, I feel fine. Thank you very much for treating me." She raised herself into a sitting position and bowed to Ikki and the others.

For a stalker, she was awfully polite. However, she was unable to meet anyone's eyes, instead keeping her gaze fixed downward.

"It's partially my fault for scaring you, so I'm glad you weren't seriously hurt. But, um...why are you avoiding looking at us?"

"P-Personal reasons. D-Don't worry about it," the girl said, her voice trembling. She was fidgeting constantly, and it was clear that she felt guilty about *something*. Naturally, though, that something was what Ikki and the others were planning to grill her about.

"If you're feeling all right, then there's a few things we'd like to ask you. First of all, can you tell us your name?" Ikki asked kindly.

"A-Ayatsuji Ayase. I'm a third-year."

Oh, she's older than me. That's a surprise.

Ikki had been under the impression that she was younger because of how clumsy she seemed, as well as how she kept fidgeting nervously like a small animal. Regardless, if she was actually older than him, he figured he should speak to her with a bit more respect.

"Ayatsuji-senpai, would you be willing to tell us why you've been— Um, Senpai?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Is it really that hard to even look in our general direction? Is something the matter?"

Ayase had gone from staring at the ground to looking at the wall directly behind her. The muscles in her neck were straining as she twisted them as far as she could.

"I-I'm sorry, but please don't mind me."

“That’s a pretty tough ask considering I’m talking to the back of your head right now! Is there something special about that wall?”

Ayase finally gave in and said in a very quiet voice, “I-It’s because...I’m embarrassed.”

“Come again?”

“I-I’m too embarrassed to look a boy I don’t know in the eye.” Upon closer inspection, Ikki noticed that Ayase was blushing to the tips of her ears. “How can you stay so calm when talking to a girl you just met, Kurogane-kun? How come you’re willing to look me in the eyes?”

“Uh, I guess I just grew up thinking it was normal to look someone in the eye when talking to them?”

“‘N-Normal’? Wow, that’s crazy. I could never do that. I know it’s rude, but when you stare at me like that, I just can’t bring myself to meet your gaze. I’m sorry.”

I never thought I’d be complimented on my ability to look at someone when I’m talking to them.

Ayase did occasionally shoot glances in Ikki’s direction, so it was clear that she was putting in the effort to meet his gaze. Her embarrassment won over each time, however, and she quickly went back to staring at the wall. Ikki had never met someone so shy before.

Well, this is awkward. I was hoping to talk to her face-to-face since it’d be easier to tell if she’s lying about anything that way.

As Ikki contemplated what to do next, Stella and Shizuku suddenly stepped forward and glared at Ayase.

“In that case, you should have an easier time talking to a fellow girl, right?” Stella asked in a threatening voice. “So tell us, Senpai, why were you following Ikki around? What do you want?”

“Well...um...”

“There’s no need to ask. A girl would only stalk a boy—or vice versa—for one reason. It’s because you’re lusting after Onii-sama, isn’t it?”

“Is that true?!”

“N-No! I promise that’s not it!”

It seemed Ayase neither held a grudge against Ikki nor had a crush on him.

But then what exactly does she want with a guy like me, who was stuck repeating a year? Wait a second...

Ikki noticed something on Ayase’s palms as she held up her hands to defend herself against Stella and Shizuku’s verbal barrage. They were heavily calloused in the way hands only got from having swung a practice sword tens of thousands of times.

The moment he saw that, he had a revelation.

Her last name is Ayatsuji. Between that and those calluses, she might just be...

“Um, Ayatsuji-senpai? Do you happen to be related to Ayatsuji Kaito?”

Ayase’s eyes widened in surprise, and she turned to face Ikki for the first time since waking up.

“Ayatsuji Kaito is my dad, but...h-how did you know that?”

“I saw the calluses on your hands. They’re the kind only a swordsman has. Plus, you’d have to have trained pretty hard to be able to keep up with me and Stella during our daily jogs. And since your last name is Ayatsuji, I figured there might be a connection. But I never knew he had a daughter, let alone that she was going to the same school as me.”

Confused as to why Ikki sounded so happy, Stella turned to Alisuin and asked, “Hey, Alice, who’s Ayatsuji Kaito?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“He’s not a Blazer, but he’s famous in the world of swordsmanship. In fact, he’s so famous that he’s earned the nickname ‘the Last Samurai,’” Shizuku explained.

“Since Blazers don’t pay much attention to martial arts, it’s not surprising you haven’t heard of him, Alice. But there isn’t a swordsman out there who hasn’t heard the name ‘Ayatsuji Kaito.’”

He had won every major swordsmanship tournament imaginable, from the Tenryuu Games and the East versus West Tournament to the Musashi Cup and the Ten-Dan Competition. The man was such a profoundly skilled swordsman that back in his heyday, he'd captured numerous Blazer criminals despite having no powers of his own.

"The layer of mana that protects Blazers when they fight is sturdy enough to repel even bullets, so normally, a regular sword wouldn't be able to harm them in the slightest. But Ayatsuji Kaito's swordsmanship was so superb that he was able to slice through that protective barrier. It's honestly a shame he wasn't born a Blazer. That said, most Mage-Knights hated that a non-Blazer could be so strong, which is why his fame didn't spread very far in the Blazer world."

"So why do *you* know about him, Shizuku?" Stella asked.

"Unlike a lot of other Mage-Knight families, the Kurogane family has a deep respect for traditional martial arts."

Shizuku had despised the rest of her family for driving away her beloved brother, so she'd stopped attending the martial arts classes held in the Kurogane manor, but even she had heard about the Last Samurai. Naturally, Ikki, who'd devoted himself to the way of the sword, knew even more about the illustrious Ayatsuji Kaito.

"When I was younger, I studied swordsmanship by watching recordings of Kaito-san's matches. In middle school, I even went to his dojo to ask for a practice match."

"You did?"

"Well, they turned me away at the front gate, saying they didn't accept random match requests. But I'm glad to have the opportunity to meet his daughter. How's Kaito-san doing these days? I haven't seen his name in the news in a while," Ikki said excitedly.

Ayase's expression clouded over.

"The truth is, he got injured during a match... He's in the hospital right now."

"Oh... I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be insensitive."

“I-It’s fine. If anything, it makes me happy to know that someone as amazing as you admires my father, Kurogane-kun. In fact, my dad has something to do with why I’ve been following you around this past week.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“My father was the one who was teaching me the Ayatsuji Sword Style, but after he was hospitalized, I had to keep practicing on my own. And recently, I’ve fallen into a bit of a slump.”

It seemed Ayase was agonizing over the fact that she couldn’t properly execute her father’s techniques.

“Then, about a week ago, I started hearing rumors about you, Kurogane-kun. People were talking about how there was an eccentric first-year who used swordsmanship techniques to defeat his opponents. So I thought that if I talked to you, maybe I could find a way to improve my swordsmanship. But...” Ayase’s voice grew smaller and she once again averted her gaze. “B-But the only men I’ve spoken to are my father and a few of his disciples who I’ve known my whole life, so I wasn’t sure how to approach a boy closer to my age.”

“Wait, so you were following me around for a whole week because you couldn’t figure out what to say to me?”

Ayase nodded timidly.

“I realize how pathetic it sounds, but yes...”

Damn. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone this shy.

Stella and the others were similarly shocked to hear the real reason Ayase had been stalking Ikki.

Ignoring their surprise, Ayase once again bowed to Ikki and said, “I-I’m sorry for following you around all week, Kurogane-kun! I understand why you might think I’m a creep, but I promise that I won’t get close to you ever again! So please don’t call the police!”

“I wasn’t planning on calling them in the first place.”

If anything, Ikki was excited to meet someone else who was interested in swordsmanship since it was a dying art. And Ayase was the disciple of the

famous Last Samurai to boot. He was burning to know what her swordsmanship was like.

“Uh, Ayatsuji-senpai? If you’d like, how about we train together from now on?”

“Huh?”

“We’re both swordsmen, so it’s possible we might be able to give each other advice on how to improve our technique. Besides, I want to see the Last Samurai’s sword style in person if possible. The recordings had fixed angles, so there was only a limited amount of information I could glean from them.”

“You really want to train with me?!” Ayase beamed, leaped out of bed, and squeezed Ikki’s hand with both of hers in gratitude. “Thank you so much! I can’t believe it!” She looked Ikki directly in the eyes as she said that, but a second later, she realized what she’d done and jumped back a good three meters, blushing to the tips of her ears again. “Ah, s-sorry! I can’t believe I just shook your hand like that without even asking!”

“Ha ha ha, it’s fine. I don’t mind.” Compared to Shizuku, who’d kissed him immediately upon seeing him for the first time in four years, or Stella, who’d come into their bathroom in her swimsuit and offered to wash his back, this was nothing. “If you’d like, we can start right away. My match is over, and I was planning on training until dinnertime anyway.”

“I’d love to. Also, you don’t have to use honorifics with me. You’ll be the one teaching me, so if anything, I should be calling you ‘Sensei.’”

“I don’t think I deserve that honor. Especially since I’m not sure how much I’ll be able to teach you.”

“That’s not true. Earlier, you said we’d be able to give each other advice, but I know full well that I’m not experienced enough to teach you anything useful, Kurogane-kun. You don’t need to try and make me feel better.”

Ikki smiled awkwardly, realizing Ayase had seen through his poor attempt at showing consideration. While it was true that there was much he would be able to learn from watching her, she knew he wouldn’t need her advice to figure those things out. After all, Ikki could steal most techniques just by watching

them. There was no point in pretending to be humble; it would just come across as unpleasant.

He smiled and decided to meet Ayase halfway. “All right, I’ll drop the ‘senpai,’ but at least let me use regular honorifics with you. It’ll feel weird otherwise.”

“Okay. And thank you again for agreeing to teach me.”

And so, Kurogane Ikki’s stalker turned into his disciple.



After school, Kurogane Ikki always went to the wide-open area next to the forest behind the school building to train. The towering trees provided a nice amount of shade, and the cool earth was much more pleasant to tread on than warm concrete. It was the perfect place to work up a sweat during the hot and humid Japanese summer.

Ikki’s training routine started with a light warm-up, after which he would do practice swings with Intetsu. From there, he would go through the forms he knew, and then he would finish up by shadow dueling an imaginary opponent.

Next to him, Stella practiced her swordsmanship with Lævateinn. Shizuku and Alisuin sat on a nearby bench, training their mana control by pouring their mana into specially constructed clay and trying to shape it into various forms without using their hands.

During these training sessions, the four of them didn’t speak much to each other. Even Shizuku and Stella, who often bantered with Ikki, spent their time focusing solely on their training. That was how their training sessions *usually* went, anyway. But three days ago, a new member had joined their little group —Ayatsuji Ayase.

“Hah! Haaah!”

Ayase let out a spirited yell as she swung her Device, Hizume, at Ikki. The blazing scarlet katana traced a perfect arc as it cut through the air.

She looked like a completely different person from the timid, cowering girl that Ikki and the others had seen in the infirmary. Her expression was taut, and her gaze was laser-focused on the opponent standing before her. When she

was practicing the blade, her shyness around boys vanished completely. She truly was a sword fighter to her very core.

At Ikki's suggestion, the two were sparring, with Ikki holding back just enough that they were roughly on equal footing. Over the course of their training sessions, Ikki had managed to get a good grasp on the caliber of Ayase's swordsmanship.

Unsurprisingly, she had solid fundamentals. Ayatsuji Kaito had made sure his daughter had a good grasp of the foundational principles of swordsmanship. Her physical strength and stamina were also high enough that she could keep up with Ikki and Stella's morning jogs. Furthermore, she had perfected the basic stances and forms. The form demonstration she'd given Ikki yesterday had been on par with one a master swordsman would give.

Her footwork and sword strokes were polished as well. It was obvious that she'd practiced all these things thousands upon thousands of times. On top of that, she knew how to adapt her forms and stances for actual combat. During their sparring matches, Ikki had launched numerous tricky attacks in an attempt to pick apart the weak points in Ayase's forms, but she'd always adapted her techniques to expertly counter him. She had mastered the forms of her sword style, but she wasn't overly reliant on them.

Her swordsmanship was spectacular, and her technique spoke to the years of hard work and practice she'd put in. At the same time, however, Ikki could see exactly why she'd stopped making progress.

"Ayatsuji-san, stop for a second."

"Hmm?" Ayase immediately halted her slash, her blade inches away from Ikki's torso. "What is it, Kurogane-kun? I can keep going for a while yet."

She gave Ikki a questioning look. Though she still had trouble meeting his gaze when they weren't sparring, at the very least, she wasn't turning her head in the complete opposite direction anymore. Three days of training together had done a lot to ease her out of her shell.

"From what I can tell, the Ayatsuji Sword Style focuses primarily on countering your foe's attacks, right?"

“Uh, y-yes. Were you able to figure that out after sparring with me for just five minutes?”

“I never had a proper teacher, so I had to learn by watching other people and stealing their techniques. Anyway, after sparring with you for a bit, I think I’ve figured out why you’re in a slump.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yeah. The reason you feel like you’ve hit a wall is because your technique isn’t getting any closer to your father’s, correct?”

Ayase nodded excitedly.

“Yes, that’s exactly it! No matter what I do, I can’t make my movements as sharp as Dad’s, even though I remember them all perfectly.”

“That’s because you’re going about it wrong.”

“Huh?”

“You’re trying to emulate Kaito-san, which is causing your growth to stall.”

“Are you trying to say that my dad taught me incorrectly?”

A smoldering rage began to burn in Ayase’s eyes. She clearly didn’t like hearing her father and teacher get criticized.

She must really trust her dad.

Ikki was honestly a little jealous of how much Ayase loved and respected her father, but he brushed that aside and shook his head.

“No, no. That’s not what I mean. Kaito-san is clearly a superb swordsman and teacher. There’s no doubt about that.”

“Then why is it a mistake for me to try and emulate his movements?”

There was a simple reason for that.

“Because your genders are different.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“A lot. It means your skeletal structures aren’t the same, and neither are your musculatures. The kinds of movements that draw out the full potential of the

male body aren't the same as the kinds that draw out the full potential of the female body. And the more polished your technique gets, the more noticeable these differences become."

"Oh..."

The anger drained from Ayase's eyes as understanding dawned on her. Ikki wasn't insulting Kaito. In fact, it was because Kaito was such a good teacher that there was a problem at all. Unfortunately, most swordsmanship styles had been created by men for other men, so even most master swordsmen didn't notice this particular issue.

"I think I know how you should adjust your movements to make them more optimal, Ayatsuji-san. But if you take that much pride in Kaito-san's style, in my opinion, there's no need to force yourself to change up your technique. It might create some mental dissonance, which would be more damaging to your performance than these minute movement issues. If you're attached to your father's teachings, that's perfectly fine. Especially since once you internalize these movement optimizations, it'll be impossible for your body to go back to moving like it used to."

Right now, Ayase was forcing her body to conform to a man's style of swordsmanship. As a result, her power and speed were lower than they could be. If she let Ikki correct her form, her movements would undoubtedly become smoother, leading to a direct increase in strength.

However, because of how much she'd already trained and built up her body, once she internalized those movement optimizations, she would never be able to return to her old form of swordsmanship. Her newly formed habits would prevent that. Since there was no turning back, Ikki wanted her to think carefully before making her choice.

Ayase spent a few minutes in silent contemplation. It was clear from her expression that she was extremely conflicted. Eventually, though, she made up her mind and said in a determined voice, "Please teach me! I want to become as strong as possible!"

Of course, Ayase still had a lingering desire to perfectly emulate her father's techniques, but her drive to grow stronger had won out. Ikki could tell that her

resolve was firm, so he didn't bother asking if she was certain.

"All right, I'll do everything I can."

He gave Ayase a reassuring smile, then grabbed her arm.

"Fwaaah?! K-Kurogane-kun?!"

Surprised by the sudden contact, Ayase blushed and let out a strangled scream. Ikki, however, had gone into serious teacher mode and barely even noticed. If he let stray thoughts interfere with his instruction, it would cause irreparable damage.

An instructor couldn't afford to make mistakes. At least, that was what Ikki believed. As a result, he was so focused on what he was doing that he wasn't at all embarrassed about the physical contact.

"I'm going to adjust your posture slightly into the correct form. I realize this might be embarrassing for you, but please bear with it."

"O-Okay, I'll try..."

Ayase was as red as a beet, but she gritted her teeth and resisted the urge to step away.

Ikki hadn't broken a sweat while sparring with Ayase, but he was focusing so intensely now that sweat was beading on his brow, and his expression was deadly serious. Ayase could tell just how much care he was putting into teaching her. There was no way she could tell him that she was too embarrassed to keep going through with it, so she bit back her discomfort and entrusted her body to him.

"I'm only going to be moving your limbs by a few millimeters. Focus on remembering these new positions."

"Okay... Mmm."

Ikki delicately adjusted Ayase's stance, touching her arms as if they were made of glass. He lowered her shoulders slightly and brought her arms closer to her body. Then, he crouched down and grabbed her thigh, pushing it out a little to widen her stance.

"Hyah..."



“Women have much more flexible joints than men. Especially their hip joints, since their pelvises are wider to assist with childbirth. That increased range of motion lets them make far wider lateral movements than men. This is an advantage that only women possess, and if you learn to properly utilize the extra flexibility in your hip joints, you’ll become a lot faster than you are now, Ayatsuji-san.”

As he lectured her, Ikki traced his fingers from Ayase’s thigh to the back of her knee, highlighting the various muscles that she should be focusing on.

Ayase trembled, doing her best not to succumb to the embarrassment. Ikki did feel sorry for her, but he didn’t let that affect his concentration in the slightest.

“Perfect. This is more or less the ideal stance for you,” he said, relieved that he’d been able to complete his work without any mistakes, as he looked up at Ayase. Unsurprisingly, she was still blushing. “I know I’m the one who did this to you, but...are you okay?”

“Yesh...”

Tears were welling up in her eyes.

“Um, sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have done this after all.”

“N-No, it’s okay! I’m the one who asked you to, Kurogane-kun. Don’t feel bad!” Ayase wiped her tears and forced a smile onto her face. “Besides, your hands were very gentle...and large. They reminded me of my dad’s.”

“Ha ha, I never thought someone would compliment these messed-up hands of all things.”

Since Ikki had been practicing swordsmanship since he was a kid, his hands were heavily calloused as well. After all, he’d kept doing practice swings even when his hands had bled and his blisters had popped. His hands were far from elegant.

However, Ayase shook her head and said, “They’re not messed up at all. I think they’re cool. I like guys who earnestly give their all toward something.”

“Huh?”

Ikki gave Ayase a dumbfounded look.

“Ah...” Seeing his reaction Ayase realized what she’d just said, and started panicking. “Um, I didn’t mean anything untoward by that! I promise! I just think you’re a cool person, that’s all!”

“G-Got it. You don’t need to look so flustered. Besides, if you move around too much, you’ll mess up your stance.”

Ikki calmed Ayase down and adjusted her stance back to the correct one. He’d expended a lot of energy in getting her stance right; it would be a waste if he had to do it all over again from square one.

“Hmm... But Kurogane-kun, this stance still feels a little restrictive.”

“It’s different from the one you’re used to, so it’ll feel off for a while. You need to use it repeatedly until it gets ingrained into your muscles. For now, just focus on maintaining it while moving around in a fight.” Ikki picked Intetsu back up and stood to face Ayase. “Try hitting me with that same counter you were about to before I stopped you. Remember to keep your elbows tucked in, your knees at the right angle, and your legs farther apart than usual as you do. Those are the three most important aspects to keep in mind.”

“G-Got it.”

Ayase brandished Hizume, her expression stiff. Sensing that she’d started to concentrate, Ikki swung Intetsu down at the same angle and speed as he had earlier.

“Whoa?!”

Ayase parried and countered in the same way she had earlier, and was amazed by just how much faster her sword strokes were because of the slight change in her stance. She looked down at Hizume in wonder, then stared up at Ikki.

Phew. Looks like I made the right adjustments. Though Ikki had been confident in his assessment, there was still a part of him that had been worried he’d made a mistake somewhere.

Until now, when Ayase had blocked or parried, she’d mostly used the strength

of her arms to do so. But that had been wrong. If she possessed the muscle mass of a man, it would have worked better, but because she didn't, she'd ended up tensing her entire body whenever she blocked since her arm strength alone wasn't enough. As a result, her counters had come out a little slower than they should have.

The adjustments Ikki had made allowed Ayase to use more of her lower body to absorb the impact of a blow. Since her hip and leg joints were more flexible, she could use her lower body to more easily disperse that force, meaning she'd only need the strength of her leg muscles to stop an opponent's attack. She wouldn't need to tense her whole body, letting her move to counter much more smoothly. That was how much of an impact a minor stance shift could have.

"W-Wow! This is amazing, Kurogane-kun!" Ayase beamed and grabbed Ikki's hand, shaking it vigorously. "I spent two years agonizing over my lack of growth, but you were able to point my issues out immediately! You're amazing, Kurogane-kun! I'm going to call you 'Sword Professor' from now on!"

"I'm just glad I didn't mess up teaching you."

I hope she doesn't actually call me "Sword Professor."

The students who came to listen to Ikki's lunchtime lectures weren't skilled enough in martial arts for him to give them in-depth teaching like this. This was the first time he'd tried giving personalized instruction to anyone. While it had been a nerve-wracking experience, seeing Ayase jump for joy like a little kid made him feel like the effort had been worth it.

Whoosh!

He'd actually been more nervous than he was before his matches, and it had been ten times more exhausting than regular training, but it had also been that much more rewarding.

Whooooosh!

Now that I think about it, becoming an instructor might not be a—

Whoosh whoosh whooooooosh!

“Um, Stella?”

“Yes, Sword Professor?”

“You’ve been sending a lot of powerful wind gusts our way. Is there a reason for that?”

Ikki turned to Stella right as she sent another gust of wind flying into his face. She was swinging Lævateinn with earth-shattering force, an extremely miffed look on her face.

“Well, sorry, Sword Professor. I’m just annoyed that a certain pervert was all over a girl’s thighs while pretending to teach her about swordsmanship, so my swings got a little out of control. Incidentally, since you’re so into thighs, would you like to correct my stance too?”

“Uh, s-sure.”

Intimidated, Ikki dutifully nodded and walked over to Stella.

I don’t really want to critique Stella’s swordsmanship, though.

Stella’s style of swordplay involved mowing down opponents with sheer force. Her sword was one of strength. It was the polar opposite of Ikki’s style, which he’d developed precisely because he was so weak. He couldn’t give her any helpful advice.

Even so, he knew that if he didn’t agree to Stella’s request, she’d be irked for days. Thus, he reluctantly walked over and started observing Stella’s practice swings. But while he might not have wanted to do it, he still took it seriously and did his best to find things that could be improved.

Hmm?

Though Stella’s swings appeared rough at first glance, as Ikki looked closer, he noticed that she was very deliberate about the position of her waist, her knees, and even her toes. Her form was so perfect that none of her overwhelming power was wasted—every last bit of it was transferred into her swing. She was probably just swinging in the way that felt natural to her, but her innate athletic sense was so great that she was unconsciously adjusting her movements to be optimal. Not only were her Blazer abilities Rank A, but her martial abilities were

too.

Ikki wasn't arrogant enough to believe he could find any points of improvement in Stella's form.

"You're amazing, Stella. Your form is so perfect that I don't know what you could do to improve it."

"Whyyy?!"

"Whoa! I'm trying to compliment you! Why are you so mad?!"

"I can't believe you're this dense, you morooon!"

Though Ikki's eyes were able to perceive even the most minute movements when it came to martial arts, his powers of perception were useless when it came to understanding a woman's heart. That was just what happened when you spent most of your life thinking of nothing but how to get stronger.



"I can't believe him, fawning over Senpai like that!" Stella grumbled, walking over to the bench to take a short rest. She'd chased Ikki away and was in a foul mood, evidenced by her pouty expression and puffed-out cheeks. Shizuku, who was sitting on the adjacent bench and training her mana control, looked at Stella and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Maybe he's just not interested in groping your fat thighs," the silver-haired girl said.

"Th-They're not fat! Sure, they're kinda big, but that's because of how much I've been training!"

Shizuku just harrumphed and turned back to her clay, which she'd shaped into an extremely detailed figure of Ikki. It looked so much like him that Stella kind of wanted one for herself.

"Now, now. Calm down," Alisuin said in a placating voice. "Stella-chan, your swordsmanship is so honed that Ikki has nothing he can teach you. That's all there is to it."

"Mrr..."

Alisuin was, of course, completely correct, and Stella knew that. She'd known all along that she didn't need Ikki to teach her swordsmanship. But that hadn't made it any easier to watch him eagerly teach someone else. Especially when that someone else was a girl.

Am I just petty? Would Ikki get this mad if I started caressing another man's arms or chest? Wait, what am I thinking?! I don't even want to do that in the first place! The only guy whose arms and chest I want to touch is Ikki!

Stella felt disgusted just imagining herself squeezing another man's arm. Dispelling those thoughts, she turned to Shizuku and asked, "Hey, Shizuku, doesn't this bother you too?"

"Doesn't what bother me?"

"I mean, Ikki's all over another woman right now."

"Don't be ridiculous. Onii-sama's just teaching Ayatsuji-senpai proper forms. And unlike a certain horny bitch, she's not trying to seduce him every chance she gets. Why would I have a problem with her? I'm not a rabid dog," Shizuku said, sounding genuinely unconcerned by Ikki and Ayatsuji's burgeoning friendship.

With her answer given, she took an acrylic paint set out of her bag and started painting the Ikki figure she'd made. She was a surprisingly skilled painter, even if her putting that skill to use had nothing to do with her mana control training.

"I can't believe you're saying that when you keep snapping at me."

"Well, I am." She made a "deal with it" gesture toward Stella, which, naturally, only served to piss Stella off. Then, her tone grew more serious. "Stella-san. You appear to be misunderstanding something."

"What do you mean?"

"You seem to be under the impression that I want Onii-sama all for myself, but that couldn't be further from the truth. My love for him isn't so selfish. All that matters to me is that he's happy. It doesn't have to be me that brings him that happiness. If someone else can accomplish that, I'll gladly step aside and give them my blessing. But only if they're someone who can truly make him happy—someone who'll never betray him or make him sad."

Stella was surprised by Shizuku's admission. She'd thought for sure that Shizuku wished for a romantic relationship with Ikki as well.

"Though I doubt there's anyone other than me who can do that," Shizuku added, flashing Stella a provocative grin. She then looked over to where Ikki and Ayase were still sparring.

"Onii-sama's been having a lot more fun since Ayatsuji-senpai joined our group," she continued. "Me and the other students in his class aren't strong enough for him to give us in-depth lessons in martial arts, and you're *too* strong for him to be able to teach you anything meaningful, Stella-san. He was probably a little disappointed he didn't have anyone to teach, so personally, I'm glad Ayatsuji-senpai is here. It's cute seeing him get so fired up about teaching other people."

"You're surprisingly mature for a midget, Shizuku."

"Meanwhile, you've got the emotional range of a five-year-old despite having a very mature body. Oh, and super fat thighs."

"They are *not* that fat! You're just too thin!"

When she thought about it, Stella realized that she, too, was happy seeing Ikki happy. But at the same time, she wanted to be the person who could make him the happiest. She wanted to be his number one.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. Ever since they'd started dating, just being around Ikki had made her nervous and self-conscious, so they hadn't done anything even remotely romantic. It was especially bad when they were alone together at night. Whenever their eyes met, she would freeze up and awkwardly look away. Likely out of consideration for her, Ikki did his best not to come on too strongly either.

In truth, Stella didn't hate this awkward phase they were in. It was kind of heartwarming in its own way. But she was beginning to think it was about time they progressed their relationship. Besides, she'd heard that boys didn't like girls who made them wait too long.

I'd hate it if Ikki said something like, "Maybe it'd be better if we went back to our old relationship. It's not like we've done anything in this past month that a

real couple would do, right?"

Just thinking about it nearly brought Stella to tears. If Ikki were to actually say that to her, she'd probably break down.

On the other hand, she wasn't sure if the girl should be the one taking the initiative. She didn't want Ikki thinking she was shameless, after all. And since she kept imagining the worst possible outcome, she found herself unable to take a single step forward.

Worst of all, if Ikki was the one to take the first step instead and ask if they wanted to take their relationship further, she wasn't confident she would say yes. She knew better than anyone how contrarian that was, but were she to find herself in that sort of situation, she was certain she'd use her status as a princess to make excuses and weasel her way out of it.

"Haaah..."

Why is it so much easier to throw myself into a battle than into the arms of the man I love? How do other couples manage to do this? How did Mother and Father manage to do this? Where do they all get their courage from?

Stella stared absently at the setting sun as her thoughts spun around in circles.

I...really want to kiss Ikki... she finally thought, sighing for the umpteenth time this month.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Alisuin Nagi

■PROFILE

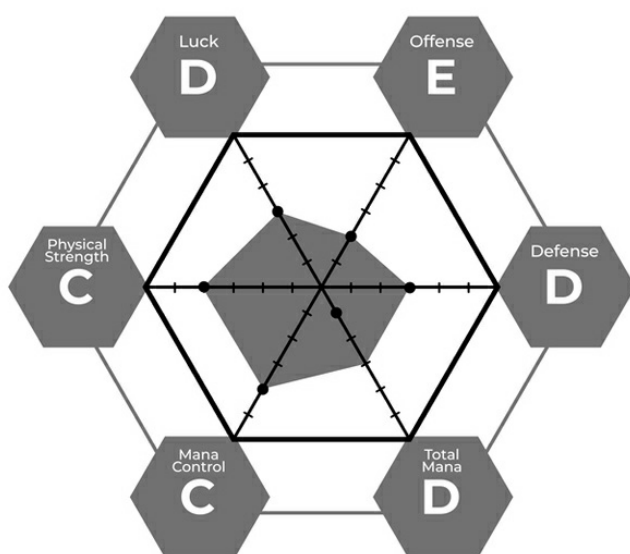
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 1-4

Blazer Rank: D

Noble Art: Shadow Walk

Nickname: Black Sonia

Summary: A woman born into a man's body.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

A lanky boy band hottie who clocks in at over 180 centimeters tall! But he calls himself a woman! That being said, there's a lot of girls out there who find that a plus instead of a minus! In fact, they say that makes Alisuin easier to talk to than a regular guy! For all you guys out there who want to become popular, why not consider copying Alisuin's approach?!

**you have to be hot to make it work.*

Chapter 2: The Witching Hour

“Let’s go to the pool tomorrow.”

That was what Ikki had told Ayase yesterday at the end of their training session. He had just chalked up his tenth consecutive victory, but he wasn’t inviting her to the pool to have fun.

Though Ayase hadn’t noticed it, the constant training had taken a big toll on her body, and signs of exhaustion were beginning to show. Ever since she’d adjusted her stance, she was using muscles she hadn’t used or trained before, and they were reaching their limits. Ikki had therefore decided to make today a rest day. Fortunately, the pool was the perfect place to rest and recover while still getting valuable training in.

“So, you’re coming too, Stella?” Ikki asked, turning to Stella while he waited for Ayase by the main gate. She was wearing a white dress that fit the summer vibe perfectly.

“Obviously. If I take my eyes off you, you’ll start sexually harassing Senpai again.”

“I’ve never once done that.”

“Liar. Are you saying it’s normal to touch another girl’s thighs?”

“I had to do that to correct her stance. Besides, I was so focused on making sure I didn’t mess anything up and ruin her martial arts forever that I didn’t even have time for lewd thoughts.”

Stella had been irritated for the past few days, and Ikki wasn’t so dense that he couldn’t figure out why. She didn’t like that he was spending so much time with Ayase. He didn’t blame her; he’d be annoyed if she suddenly got super friendly with a different guy too. After all, she was his girlfriend. But while he understood Stella’s feelings, he still needed to defend his honor.

“Stella, I promise I have no romantic interest in Ayatsuji-san,” he explained.

“Please believe me. I really am just teaching her as a fellow swordsman. Everyone has times where they need someone to teach them so they can get stronger.”

There hadn’t ever been anyone to teach Ikki. All the adults who should have been mentoring him had instead gotten in his way. He knew better than anyone how painful it was to have to overcome hurdles all on your own, which was why he wanted to be there to help anyone who was struggling in a similar way.

“I’m helping Ayatsuji-san because I want to be able to help people who need it, not because I like her. I swear it on my soul. The... The only person I love is you, Stella.”

“Ikki...”

Stella blushed and looked up at Ikki. He noticed there was still some uncertainty in her eyes.

In her head, Stella knew that Ikki really didn’t have any romantic feelings for Ayase. The man she’d fallen in love with wasn’t such a faithless flirt. Still, she couldn’t help but worry. For all intents and purposes, their relationship only existed on paper. They hadn’t actually done anything to signify they were boyfriend and girlfriend.

Stella’s pink lips quivered, almost as if they were seeking something from Ikki.

Of course. How could I have been so thoughtless? If I can prove that I meant what I said to her that night with actions and not words, then maybe Stella won’t be so worried. I...

Ikki leaned in close, drawn toward Stella’s lips.

“Sorry I’m late! It took me forever to find my swimsuit!”

“Waaah?!” Ikki and Stella shouted in unison, jumping away from each other.

“Hmm? Why do you two look so flustered? You’d think you were a couple having a secret tryst or something.”

She really hit the nail on the head!

Ayase was surprisingly perceptive, and Ikki and Stella both broke out into a cold sweat.

“I-It’s nothing! Right, Ikki?!”

“Yep! We were just surprised, that’s all!”

“Hmm?”

Ayase gave the two of them a curious look. It seemed she hadn’t actually figured out that the two of them were dating; it had just been an analogy. Ikki quickly brushed the topic aside and herded the two of them off toward the pool.

That was close. If word got out that they were dating, it would be a huge scandal. Ikki resolved to be more careful about picking the right time and place to flirt with Stella. *Though I wish Ayatsuji-san had come just a bit later...*

That was the first time there had been a good atmosphere between them since they’d started dating. If Ayase had been even a minute later, Ikki could have finally kissed Stella. Lamenting the missed opportunity, he sighed to himself and shook his head.



Hagun Academy had a large campus, so naturally, there was a pool on the school grounds. Two of them, in fact—each one a hundred meters long. However, the first pool was closed for cleaning, and the school’s director and former third-best King of Knights fighter in the world, Shinguuji Kurono, had reserved the second one for a special lecture she was giving today. As a result, Ikki and the girls had decided to go to a heated indoor pool at a nearby sports gym.

Ikki changed into his basic black-and-red swim trunks and waited by the poolside for the two girls. A few minutes later, Ayase and Stella came out of the changing room. Ayase was wearing a two-piece sports swimsuit with a relatively modest design, which matched her shy personality. While her suit lacked sex appeal, since Ayase had been practicing swordsmanship since she was a child, she had a toned physique that was quite attractive.

Stella, on the other hand, was wearing a far more eye-catching swimsuit. It was different from the one she’d worn when washing Ikki’s back in the bathroom. This time, she was wearing a black string bikini. The highly revealing

swimsuit barely covered her voluptuous breasts, which threatened to spill out of their inadequate covering with every step she took. It also accentuated her hips, which were incredibly alluring as well.

She had a body type that wasn't often seen among Japanese people, which made her beauty stand out all the more. It was honestly baffling to Ikki how she managed to look so soft when he knew for a fact that her muscles packed more power than most bodybuilders'. Frankly, it defied all laws of reality.

To top it all off, even the way she walked was eye-catching. It was probably because, as a member of the royal family, she'd been trained to have proper posture and gait. She wouldn't have looked out of place modeling for Paris Fashion Week.

Wow. Stella really is beautiful.

Ikki let out a sigh of admiration, and he wasn't the only one. Everyone else at the pool had stopped to stare at the foreign bombshell too. And since Stella had been interviewed by multiple news outlets before, it was possible some of the people here recognized her.

Stella ignored the onlookers' stares and walked straight over to Ikki.

"Sorry we took so long. Guys really do change fast."

Ikki could feel everyone immediately turn to glare at him.

"What?! Don't tell me both of those super hotties are with that guy!"

"You've gotta be kidding me. Why are they with that plain-looking loser?"

"Don't you know the birth rate's going down in our country?! Save some girls for the rest of us!"

"I'm gonna kill that fucker!"

I hope I don't die in an unfortunate drowning accident today, Ikki thought to himself, cold sweat pouring down his forehead. Meanwhile, Stella looked around curiously.

Ikki had gotten so used to living with her that he'd forgotten she was still a princess. This was probably her first time coming to a regular indoor pool used by commoners.

The pool they were at was only fifty meters long, so it was even smaller than the ones at school. There were ropes dividing the play area from the area designated for swimming laps. It was still early June, so there weren't too many people here, but it wasn't deserted.

"This pool is surprisingly large," Stella mused.

"Aren't you a princess, Vermillion-san? Surely you have an even larger pool at your house," Ayase said.

"Nope. Though our bath is about this big."

"Wow! That's royalty for you!"

"Well, that's the large bath our servants use. The one me and my family use is smaller. There's no point in having a huge bath for a small number of people, right?"

Thinking back on it, Ikki realized that Stella had never actually seemed all that put off by the living conditions at Hagun Academy. The only thing that had really surprised her was the existence of instant coffee. The Vermillion Kingdom was a relatively small nation, so perhaps even royalty lived modestly there.

"I'm glad it's not too crowded here, though. I've heard facilities in Japan can get so full that people are packed together like sardines," Stella said.

"It's not quite pool season yet, so it's relatively quiet still," Ikki explained.

"Then I guess we'll be able to play to our hearts' content!" Stella eagerly took out a beach ball.

"Sadly, we didn't come here to play."

"Huh? Then why did you want to come to the pool?"

"I could ask you the same thing, Stella..."

"Mrr. I even went to all the trouble of bringing this ball."



“All right, we can play after today’s training is done. But for now, can you put the ball away?”

“Fiiine. But you better play with me later.” She reluctantly handed the ball to Ikki, who placed it off to the side.

Did she really come here just to have fun? I’m pretty sure I told her we were coming here to train...

“By the way, Kurogane-kun, what kind of training are we going to do today? Swimming laps?”

Ikki turned to Ayase and shook his head.

“No. Honestly, even though I keep saying this is training, today’s course is pretty light, so I shouldn’t really call it that. After days of practicing your new stance, your body’s too exhausted for anything intense.”

“What are we doing, then?”

“Nothing, actually.”

“Huh?”

“Just chill underwater like a jellyfish.”

“D-Does that even count as training?”

“It does,” Ikki said flatly. “For one thing, holding your breath for as long as possible trains your lung capacity. In drawn-out battles, the side with lower lung capacity will have their muscles switch to anaerobic respiration first, which will inevitably lead to a loss. Stamina is just as important as strength for swordsmen. But that’s just a side benefit of this particular exercise.” There was a far more important goal Ikki had in mind with today’s training. “Once you try it, you’ll understand. When you go underwater, you can feel your body more keenly.”

“Huh?”

Confused, Ayase cocked her head to one side. The gesture was actually kind of cute.

“I want you to float underwater with your eyes closed and relax completely.

Don't think about doing anything with your muscles, don't worry about trying to process any visual information, and just focus on the sound of your own body."

"I don't really get what that's supposed to do, but I guess I'll give it a try."

Ayase still didn't understand how Ikki thought this would help her, but she had no reason to doubt him. She sucked in a deep breath, then dived underwater.

A swordsman of Ayatsuji-san's caliber will probably figure out the point of this exercise right away.

Judging by what Ikki knew of Ayase's lung capacity, he expected her to stay down there for a full three minutes her first time.

"I'll go put this beach ball back in the locker so it doesn't get in the way."

Ikki went back to the changing room, beach ball in hand.



The moment Ikki left, Stella found herself extremely bored. She'd barely interacted with Ayase, and the two had completely different styles of swordsmanship. There wasn't much for the two of them to talk about. Even if there was, she didn't want to interrupt Ayase's training with idle small talk.

I'm so bored...

In an attempt to occupy herself, Stella decided to try the same training Ikki had asked Ayase to do. She took a deep breath and dived underwater.

Her lung capacity was greater than even Ikki's, so holding her breath proved to be a simple task. If she wanted to, she could probably stay underwater for ten minutes, which was nearing world-record tier.

It's quiet...

While there weren't many people at the pool, there were still others around. The sounds of swimmers kicking and children splashing had been bouncing around the pool area since Stella had exited the changing room. But underwater, those sounds vanished. Additionally, her field of vision was nothing but blue, making it seem as if the world itself had grown distant.

Stella closed her eyes, and immediately, the sound of her own heart reached her ears. Normally, there was enough ambient noise that she couldn't hear her heartbeat so clearly. She could even feel the flow of blood within her veins and the electric signals her brain was sending to the rest of her body.

“When you're underwater, you can feel your body more keenly.”

This was what Ikki had meant when he'd said that, though Stella had known as much from the start. She was used to focusing her attention inward, on the sensations of her own body. Doing so helped consciously mold the workings of your body to optimize it for what you wanted. For example, when you swung a sword, there was a world of difference between just swinging the arms holding the sword and being aware of everything from the positions of your thumbs to the way signals reached the arm muscles via the brain to the way your muscles would contract in response to those signals. The latter naturally led to a much faster and much more powerful swing.

It was only possible to have that level of fine-tuned control if you understood your body on an incredibly deep level. Ayase didn't have that understanding yet. If she did, she wouldn't have been sticking to inefficient stances this whole time in the first place, since she would have innately perceived those movements as suboptimal.

Thus far, Ikki had been adjusting Ayase's form to what would be optimal given her condition on that day. However, a person's condition changed from day to day, even within a day. She would only be able to make those improvements on her own once she knew her body well enough to make the necessary minute adjustments without Ikki's help.

While this training was absolutely necessary for Ayase, Stella didn't really need it at this point. She'd trained so much that she could make those adjustments subconsciously. That was why even when she'd done that half-assed swing the other day to try and get Ikki to give her advice, she'd still ended up instinctively adjusting her stance to make it as optimal as possible.

But even that isn't enough, Stella thought, opening her eyes and looking up at the water's surface. She'd believed she'd trained harder than anyone else and pushed her body to its absolute limits, but Ikki had proved her wrong. His Ittou

Shura was a crystallization of what it really meant to push oneself to the limit.

Stella couldn't do something like that yet. She didn't have enough control over her body to squeeze out every last drop of strength and fight at peak performance for one minute. That was why she lagged behind Ikki when it came to technique. She had more lung capacity, more explosive power, and even more muscle strength than Ikki, but she'd still lost. Ikki had just put more effort into every waking moment of his life. That was all there was to it. The best way to describe it was that he was living his life as if he were underwater, but far deeper than Stella was right now. Despite being on dry land, he'd dived to a place so deep that no sound or light reached it.

That's the world Ikki lives in... If she was able to reach that realm, perhaps she'd be able find something new within her.

Stella slowly closed her eyes again. Once more, all light vanished, and the sound of her heart beat against her ears. The only thing here was herself.

In a world of silent darkness, Stella envisioned an outline of her own body. But the outline alone wasn't enough, so she dived even deeper. She strove to reach the realm where the Uncrowned Blade Master ruled. Feeling herself drawing close, she stretched her hand out toward it.

"By the way, Vermillion-san, are you and Kurogane-kun dating?"

"Blagragh?!"

She choked on a mouthful of water just before she could reach it.



"Cough, cough! Owww... My nose stings."

Stella pinched her nose, tears streaming from her eyes. It galled her how pathetic she was. She'd been trying to reach a level of concentration that surpassed all else, and yet not only had she heard a voice from above the surface, but she'd let it distract her as well. There was no way she'd be able to reach Ikki's level like this.

I mean, Ikki can even cut off his hearing and sight if he needs to. In fact, that's the bare minimum you need to be able to do if you want to master something

like Ittou Shura.

Stella was once again reminded of just how far away the goal she'd set for herself was.

"I-I'm sorry, Vermillion-san. Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine."

"But I guess if you're that flustered, then..."

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?! There's no way the second princess of the Vermillion Kingdom would date a commoner like him!"

"So you really aren't dating?"

"Of course not."

"Then it wouldn't be a problem if Kurogane-kun and I started dating, right?"

"What?!" Stella let out a shrill scream. "H-Hold on! I thought you just wanted Ikki to teach you swordsmanship, Senpai! Didn't you say you weren't interested in him before?!"

"I wasn't at first. But I mean, Kurogane-kun is so gentlemanly and cool. He even agreed to teach a stalker like me, and despite being younger than I am, he seems so mature. He's a great teacher too. He's one hundred percent my type. I've even been able to meet his gaze while talking to him recently, so if he's single then I think I—"

"Y-You can't!" Stella shouted, unable to bear it any longer. "Absolutely not! No way! Ikki is *my* boyfriend! You can't have him!"

She slapped at the water like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum. She didn't want to hear another word, and to avoid having to, she splashed loudly enough to drown Ayase out.

"I knew it!" Ayase said with a grin after seeing Stella's tearstained glare. At that moment, Stella realized she'd been tricked.

Sh-Shoot! I really did it now!

"You two were gazing so lovingly into each other's eyes this morning, I thought that might be the case."

“Urgh... I didn’t know you were such a sly girl, Senpai. I thought you were more of an airhead.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re very rude, Vermillion-san?”

“It’s your fault for tricking me. Anyway, please keep it a secret. It’ll be a problem if word gets out.”

“Don’t worry, I understand. You’re quite famous, after all.”

“Wait, does that mean everything you said before that was a lie?”

Ayase nodded.

“Well, I do think Kurogane-kun is a wonderful person, but I’m not romantically interested in him. I would be betraying all the hard work he’s put into teaching me so earnestly if I didn’t focus solely on improving my swordsmanship. And besides, I had a feeling you two were dating this whole time. I’m so jealous. I wish I could get a cool boyfriend too.”

Ayase blushed a little and cupped her cheeks with her hands, her eyes sparkling. Stella was somewhat taken aback by her reaction.

“And here I thought you hated men, Senpai.”

“That couldn’t be further from the truth. I love boys.”

“Senpai, don’t say that so loudly. There’s at least six guys around us who just perked up.”

“Anyway, I don’t hate men, I’m just so self-conscious around them that I get easily embarrassed. My roommate even told me I was a pervert after hearing about my fantasies.”

That’s the first time I’ve ever heard someone admit to being a pervert so openly.

“But still, that’s so nice. I wish I could have an amazing whirlwind romance like you...”

“Why not just go for it?”

“I-I can’t! I mean, I really want to, but if a shy girl like me went out with a boy, I’d die of embarrassment. That’s why I’ve been sticking to romance manga and

novels instead.”

“Must be tough being that shy.”

“By the way, does this mean you guys have sex and stuff when you’re alone?”

“Bwugh?!” Stella coughed, utterly blindsided by how casually Ayase had dropped that question. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Where did that come from?!”

“I want to know what real couples are like!”

The way Ayase advanced on Stella with sparkling eyes reminded her of a certain reporter in her class. This whole time, she had thought Ayase was just a swordsmanship nut who only cared about training, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. She was just as interested in romance as any girl her age.

“We haven’t done anything like that yet! You’re supposed to wait until after marriage for that!”

“Really? All the girls in my shojo manga didn’t bother waiting, so I thought it was normal.”

“Wait, really? Is s-s-s-sex before marriage the new norm?!”

“You’re asking the wrong girl. I’ve never had a boyfriend, so how would I know?”

Good point.

“Anyway, the point is that you haven’t had sex with Kurogane-kun yet, right, Vermillion-san?”

God, she really has no tact!

Now that the cat was out of the bag, though, there was no point in beating around the bush. If anything, Stella figured opening up to Ayase about her fears might help her find some peace of mind. She ducked down until only her head was above the water and said in a tiny voice, “Y-You could say that. The truth is, I actually want to take our relationship even further, but...”

“Why not tell Kurogane-kun as much, then?”

“If I could be honest with him, I wouldn’t be agonizing over this so much.”

“Well, why can’t you?”

“I mean, isn’t it indecent for the woman to ask for these kinds of things?”

“Is it? I feel like it’s only natural to want to kiss and have sex and all that with the person you love. If anything, wouldn’t it be less healthy for your relationship if you weren’t sexually interested in Kurogane-kun?”

Now that you mention it...

When it was objectively pointed out to her like that by a third party, Stella realized how foolish she was being. In retrospect, it made sense that she would want to forge a deeper relationship with the man she loved. In this, there was no difference between men and women—except for one thing.

“But everyone wants to take these things at their own pace, and if I come off too strong, maybe Ikki will think I’m a shameless woman and start hating me and—”

“Even if we assume Kurogane-kun does want to take things slower than you, do you really think he’s the kind of shallow person who’d hate you simply because you’re more interested in sex than he is?”

“O-Of course not!”

“Then why not just be honest with him?”

“Because... Huh.”

Ayase was completely right. There was no reason Stella couldn’t just be honest with Ikki. It boggled her that she hadn’t realized this earlier.

Maybe this is what they mean when they say love is blind.

Ayase gave Stella a serious look and said, “You should treasure the time you have with the person you love. All living creatures have to die eventually, which means that at some point, you’ll have to say farewell to Kurogane-kun.” A tinge of sorrow colored Ayase’s expression as she said that.

“This is the first time you’ve actually felt like an older, reliable senpai,” Stella said, deeply impressed.

“Also, this is just how it looks to me, but I’m pretty sure Kurogane-kun wants to take your relationship to the next level too.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You probably didn’t notice because you were looking around the pool, but when Kurogane-kun saw you in your swimsuit, it was obvious he was thinking naughty thoughts. It was really funny. I’d never seen him make a face like that.”

“What?!”

How could I have missed that?! What a blunder!

As Stella lamented her misfortune, Ikki returned to the pool.

“Oh, did you already run out of breath, Ayatsuji-san?” Ikki asked, noticing Ayase had resurfaced.

“No, I just wanted to discuss something with Vermillion-san.”

“Ah. So, how did the training go? Were you able to get a better sense of your own body?”

“Yes. I understand the purpose of this training now. Which is why I’d like to focus alone for a while if that’s all right. I’ll be over there if you need me.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Oh, also, it seems Vermillion-san has something important she wants to discuss with you.”

“Whaaat?!” Stella screamed, taken by surprise.

Ayase leaned in close and whispered in Stella’s ear, “It’s my way of apologizing for monopolizing your boyfriend the past few days.” She winked and swam off to a different corner of the pool.

I don’t need this kind of apology!



After Ayase swam away, Ikki and Stella moved to an empty poolside bench.

“So what’s the important thing you wanted to discuss?” Ikki asked.

“Um...” Stella looked down, her face reddening.

Her hesitation was understandable. While Ayase had given her a good, logical reason to be honest with Ikki, feelings didn’t operate on logic.

Why had Stella been worried that Ikki would hate her if she told him she wanted to take their relationship further? Why hadn't she realized it was obvious Ikki wasn't the kind of person who'd hate her for that? Now that she was face-to-face with Ikki again, the reason was obvious to Stella. It was because she was embarrassed, plain and simple. She would come up with excuses in her mind to avert her eyes from that simple fact, all while wishing Ikki would take the initiative instead.

There's no way I can say something as embarrassing as "I want to kiss you" to Ikki!

"Stella?"

"Ah, s-sorry! The important thing I wanted to discuss was..." Ayase had cut off her only path of retreat, so she had to say something now. "O-Oh yeah, it's about my swimsuit! What do you think of it?!"

"You look really good in it. It suits your figure perfectly," Ikki said, not blushing in the slightest. His expression was as gentle as always, but that in and of itself struck Stella as odd.

Ayase had told her that Ikki had been practically drooling over her when he'd first seen her in this swimsuit. There was no way he should've been able to stay so calm when asked directly what he thought of it. It felt like he was just saying the safest thing he could to make it through.

"The truth is, I have something important I want to discuss with you too, Stella."

"You do?"

That's a surprise. What could it be? Does he want to know what I think of his swimsuit too? Hmm, how should I respond to that?

Stella thought Ikki looked cool no matter what he was wearing, but whether or not she'd be able to honestly tell him that was another question entirely.

"I've been wondering, is it okay for us to keep on going like this?"

"Huh?"

"I've been thinking about it this whole time. For the past month, we haven't

done anything really romantic, and it's been bothering me."

Stella felt as though her heart was freezing over. Those were the exact words she'd feared he would say. Just thinking about it had been terrifying, and now, she was hearing them from Ikki's mouth in real life.

At the same time, a cold realization dawned on Stella. *I knew it. He's not satisfied with our half-assed relationship.* But he'd been putting up with it for a whole month.

I guess he finally ran out of patience with me. I deserve it, though.

After all, Ikki had Shizuku, as well as a beautiful new disciple. Hell, even Kusakabe and the other girls in his class would go out with him if he asked. There were plenty of girls who had a crush on him. What reason did he have to keep going out with a girl who wouldn't even let him touch her?

"So I was thinking we should have a proper conversation about our relationship."

Stop.

Stella knew what words would come next. *"Maybe we should go back to our old relationship."* But she didn't want to hear them. She couldn't bear to let Ikki say them. And so, she cut in before he could finish.

"A-Actually, the thing I wanted to talk about wasn't my swimsuit! I wanted to talk about our relationship too!" She turned away from Ikki, unable to look at his face. "I-I guess it's impossible for a princess and a commoner to go out after all! There's too much separating us! Besides, you probably want someone like Senpai, whose thighs you can fondle, instead of a girl like me who won't even let you hold hands with her!"

"Wh-What?! Hang on, Stella, what are you talking about?!"

"I-I'm talking about b-bweaking ub! You don't need a woman who won't even let you touch her, right?!"

"Huh?!" Ikki's jaw dropped open in shock. He had no idea why Stella was suddenly saying these things. "I've never once thought that! Please calm down! We can talk this through!" he exclaimed, pale-faced. He gently placed a hand on

Stella's shoulder to try to turn her toward him.

"Don't touch me!" Stella shouted, brushing his hand away. As she did, he saw a glittering drop fall from her cheek.

Is she crying? A-Anyway, I need to find out why she's suddenly saying we should break up.

Ikki tried to calm himself down, telling himself that if they both got worked up, nothing good would come from it. Unfortunately, even his self-control wasn't enough in this situation.

"If I've done something to displease you, please tell me so I can apologize. I'm begging you."

"You're the one who's displeased with me."

"That's not true! What even made you think that?! I've never once said anything like that!"

"You don't have to! I can tell!"

"Well, you're wrong! Now calm down!"

"I am calm!"

"No, you're not! Why do you think I hate you?! The only reason you'd think that is if you hate me!"

Ikki was so shaken that he was starting to spout illogical things as well. Considering Stella had mentioned breaking up completely out of the blue, though, it was understandable. His feelings for her were just that strong. At this point, the two of them were straight-up screaming at each other.

"N-No way! I love you Ikki!"

"Well, I love you more!"

"Liar! I definitely love you more! When I asked you what you thought of my swimsuit, you just gave me a safe answer! I bet you're not even attracted to a cold girl like me anymore because I won't let you touch me! I bet when Senpai said you were ogling me when you saw my swimsuit it was actually *her* you were staring at!"

“What?! That’s bullshit! Stop spouting nonsense or I really *will* get mad!”

“You’re already mad!”

“Because you keep making baseless accusations! I would never stare at another girl when the girl I love is wearing such a cute swimsuit!”

“Then why did you give me such milquetoast impressions?!”

“It’s true that I wasn’t honest when you asked, but that’s...that’s because I *couldn’t* be! You think I could say that you look so hot I can’t tear my eyes off you?! You’d probably hate me if you found out how much of a pervert I am! Besides, you’re one to talk! You keep saying you love me, but you haven’t let me touch a hair on your head this whole month!”

“Yeah, because I was thinking the same thing you were! If the girl says she wants to kiss and do naughty things, she’s a harlot! I didn’t want you to be disappointed with me, Ikki!”

“Then why are we even fighting about this?!”

“I don’t know!”

At long last, the two of them realized they had no reason to be arguing.

“Wait...” they both said in unison.

“Um, excuse me, you two. There are other people here, so could you save your flirting for somewhere more private?” the lifeguard requested, finally getting an opportunity to speak up.

“Ah!” the two of them exclaimed in unison, blushing to the tips of their ears. Looking around, they saw that the lifeguard was grinning at them, while the rest of the people at the pool were staring at them like they were zoo animals.

“I-I’m terribly sorry!”

“My apologies!”

The two of them scurried off to the other side of the room where the kiddie pool was. This section was deserted since most parents didn’t bring their younger kids to the pool until later into the summer.

There was a fountain in the middle of the kiddie pool that shot water out in

an umbrella shape, and Stella and Ikki hid behind the curtain of water it was spewing out. Not only did that make it harder for others to see them, but it also dampened sound, so people wouldn't be able to hear them as easily either. Only the two of them would know what they did inside this fountain. However, being alone together made them even more embarrassed.

"Ikki, don't look at me right now..."

"Sure. I don't want you seeing my face right now either, so this works out perfectly..."

Now that they'd calmed down a little, it was starting to hit them just how ridiculous their earlier argument had been. Nothing would change if they just stood there awkwardly forever, though, so Ikki worked up his courage and called out to Stella.

"Um, Stella?"

"What is it?"

"How about we both say the thing we want to do most with each other at the same time?"

"Okay."

And while their argument had been ridiculous, it hadn't been pointless. After all, it had taught the two of them how much they desired each other.

"I want to kiss you," they said simultaneously.

After a moment's silence, they burst out laughing, then finally turned to look at each other. The awkwardness was gone now, and Stella slowly closed her eyes, waiting expectantly for Ikki to kiss her.



There were still tears clinging to her eyelashes, and Ikki gently wiped them away before cupping her cheeks with his hands. She stiffened up slightly at the contact, her eyelashes quivering in slight trepidation. But she didn't pull away. Instead, she forced herself to relax, surrendering herself to his touch.

Moved by her courage, Ikki leaned in and kissed her. It was a quick kiss in which their lips barely touched, but it left both of them blushing furiously. Even if it could barely be called a kiss, it was nevertheless a real, genuine kiss on the mouth.

People kissed their friends and family on the cheeks, but they only kissed their lovers on the mouth. At long last, the two of them had crossed that line and become a true couple. Ikki had proved to Stella that his confession a month ago hadn't been mere words.

"Hey, Ikki?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you hate wanton girls who beg to be kissed?"

"There isn't a man alive who'd hate that kind of girl. If anything, *I* should be asking *you* that. Do you hate guys who're always thinking lewd thoughts when they look at you?"

"I do. Unless it's you, Ikki."

Now that they'd taken that first step, there was no need for them to hold back any longer. They kissed again, much more passionately this time.

"Mmm..."

While they didn't go so far as to entwine their tongues, their longing for each other was clearly conveyed. And so, despite its tumultuous start, today was a day they would never forget.



By the time the three of them left the pool, the sun was beginning to set. They hadn't eaten anything since morning, so they decided to grab dinner in the city before returning to their dorms. Ikki asked the two girls if there was anything they wanted to eat, but since neither was in the mood for anything

specific, he took them to a nearby family restaurant.

Fortunately, all three of them were able to find something they liked on the menu. Ikki ordered a large kitsune udon, Ayase picked the salmon meal set, and Stella got three orders of steak and four orders of grilled vegetables.

“Y-You sure can eat a lot, Vermillion-san,” Ayase said, looking at the seven plates in front of Stella.

“Look, I need to eat this much or I won’t have enough energy,” Stella replied a little defensively. She didn’t stop eating, though.

“I’m amazed you’re still so thin despite how much you eat. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Ayase watched in awe as Stella took bite after bite, wolfing down her food with surprising speed. In truth, she did need that many calories to keep her highly toned body running at peak performance.

After a few minutes, Ayase smiled and said, “You know, you don’t really feel like a princess, Vermillion-san.”

“*Munch munch*. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t mean that in a bad way. It’s just, you’re very easy to talk to, and the way you eat is just like us. I thought royalty would have fancy table manners or something.”

“I have actually learned how to eat properly in a formal setting, but this is just a regular restaurant.”

Stella glanced around the restaurant. It was dinnertime, so the place was fairly packed. The sound of cutlery clacking against dishes, waiters taking and delivering orders, and children laughing or whining or pouting filled the air. As Stella had said, this was a casual restaurant where you didn’t particularly need to eat politely. If anything, using table manners meant for a formal setting would have just made her stand out here.

“Truly mastering a skill means knowing the right time and place to use it. That applies to both table manners and swordsmanship,” she explained.

“Ha ha, you got me there.” Ayase smiled despite the fact that Stella had

pointed out her immaturity. “I learned a lot today. No, over the past *few* days. Ever since I started training with all of you, I’ve grown so much. I’m still not strong enough to use the technique my dad passed down to me, but I feel like I’ve gotten a lot closer to his level. Thank you so much for everything, Kurogane-kun.”

“It’s all thanks to your own hard work, Ayatsuji-san. The insights I gave you are things you would have realized on your own eventually, and I’m sure you’d be able to use your father’s final technique even without my help. I just gave you a little push is all.”

“Perhaps, but it was important that I learned all of this now rather than later.”

“Because the selection matches are going on right now?”

“Yes. I’m a third-year, which means this is my last chance to appear in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. I need to make it through the selection matches no matter what. I need more strength now so that I can reach the Seven Stars Battle Festival and reclaim what was stolen from me.”

Hmm? Ikki noticed that there was a smoldering rage burning in Ayase’s eyes. A rage so fierce it was almost palpable. And combined with that rage was a deep hatred directed at something—or someone. *What on earth happened to her?* Before he could ask, a man walked up behind him.

“Ha ha. It really is you, Ayase. I thought I recognized that face.”

“Ah?!” Ayase’s eyes widened in shock.

Ikki turned to get a better look at the man. He was tall—probably 180 centimeters. His hair was dyed, and he was wearing stylish sunglasses that failed to hide his piercing glare. Though Ikki and the others were sitting in the nonsmoking area, he had a cigarette in his mouth, and he was wearing a flashy red coat. He didn’t have a shirt on underneath the coat, so everyone could see the tattoo of a grinning skull on his chest. Ikki recognized him as the same ill-mannered man he’d seen laughing loudly in the smoking area when they’d walked in.

“Aha ha, to think I’d run into you here. What a coincidence. We missed you since you haven’t been stopping by recently.”

“Hey, Kuraudo, who are you talking to?”

“Hurry up. I wanna go to the arcade.”

“Hmm? Whoa, that’s Ayase-chan, ain’t it?”

“We hadn’t seen you in a while, so we were getting worried about you. Gya ha ha.”

“Oy, the great Kuraudo’s speaking to you. Don’t just ignore him!”

“You think you’re better than him, huh?”

The ten or so young guys he’d been sitting with walked over as well, crowding around Ikki’s table. All of them looked like gangsters. Though it seemed they were acquaintances of Ayase, she was pointedly not looking at any of them. Instead, she was looking down at her plate, biting her lip.

Seeing her obvious distress, Ikki decided to take action.

“Excuse me, but you’re bothering our friend. Could you please leave?”

“Huh? Who the hell do you think you are?!”

“Shut the fuck up or I’ll kill you!”

Kuraudo’s companions started glaring at Ikki, but Ikki ignored them. He was aware that there was only one person here who mattered, and so he kept his gaze fixed firmly on Kuraudo.

Kuraudo gave Ikki a curious look, then asked something unexpected. “You a swordsman?”

“You can tell?”

“Ha. Yeah, sure can. There’s something different about you.” He walked over to the neighboring table and picked up an empty glass and a beer bottle. “My bad, bro. Didn’t mean to interrupt your meal. Just thought we could have a chat since I haven’t seen her in a while.” Kuraudo filled the glass with beer and slid it over to Ikki. “Here, take this as a token of my apology.”

“Ah, thanks.”

In truth, Ikki wanted to point out that the beer wasn’t his to share, but he decided to avoid riling him up and causing a scene. As he reached out toward

the glass, however, Kuraudo smashed the bottle against his head.

“Ikki!”

“Kurogane-kun!”



The beer bottle shattered, causing shards of glass to fly everywhere. It had been a powerful enough blow that Ikki’s head slumped down onto the table.

“Ha ha ha! If you’re a swordsman, then you shouldn’t let your guard down, moron!”

“Aha ha! Good one, Kuraudo!”

“You’re the best, man!”

“You better watch out! Piss Kuraudo off and he’ll kill ya!”

All of Kuraudo’s followers cheered while the nearby customers started screaming. Meanwhile, Kuraudo tossed the broken bottle aside.

“There’s nothing I love more than trashing swordsmen like you. Come on, let’s duel. I know you’ve got a Device too!”

As he said that, Kuraudo summoned a bone-white sword that had jagged teeth like a saw. It was a Device. The emblem on his coat signified that it was part of the Donrou Academy uniform. Donrou, like Hagun, was a Mage-Knight training school in Tokyo, which meant that Kuraudo, like Ikki, was a Blazer.

“You bastard! I’m gonna burn you to a crisp!” Stella shouted, her crimson hair glowing like a blaze as she concentrated her mana and raised her hand high to summon Lævateinn.

“Don’t, Stella,” Ikki said, grabbing her arm. He got to his feet, acting as if nothing had happened. “It’s not worth making a scene over. His hand just slipped a little, I’m sure.” He smiled at Stella as a trickle of blood ran down his face.

“Wh-What are you saying?!”

“Besides, all that happened to me was a small cut and my clothes getting wet. There’s no reason to start a fight over this.”

Ikki did his best to calm Stella down. If the school found out that Stella had materialized her Device and fought without permission, they would almost certainly expel her. That was why he was trying to smooth things over.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

The guys surrounding Kuraudo burst out laughing, mistakenly thinking that Ikki was a coward for trying to avoid a confrontation.

“God, what kind of loser tries to laugh off getting a beer bottle smashed over their head?!”

“Looks like you’re too scary for him, Kuraudo!”

“Gya ha ha. Now *that’s* pathetic!”

“Ha ha ha, I’ve never seen a swordsman who was such a coward before. Where are your balls, man?” Kuraudo said with a contemptuous sneer. Ikki didn’t reply, however. He just maintained his neutral smile, waiting for this whole thing to blow over. Then, Kuraudo spat on him.

“Grr!”

Stella was even angrier now, but Ikki held on to her arm tightly, keeping her from jumping at Kuraudo.

“What a bore,” Kuraudo sighed upon seeing that even that had failed to get a rise out of Ikki. “I’m done wasting time on a coward like him. Come on, guys. Let’s go.” He turned on his heel and started heading for the exit.

“See ya, loser!”

“Aren’t you glad Kuraudo doesn’t bully the weak?”

“Yeah, lucky you for being such a wimp. Aha ha ha ha.”

After they left, the store manager hurriedly ran over to Ikki’s table and started apologizing profusely to the three of them.

“I’m terribly sorry! Are you all right, sir?! I’ll call for an ambulance right away!”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing serious. Could you just get me a first aid kit if you happen to have one?”

“O-Of course! Right away, sir!”

The manager ran to the storage room to grab the first aid kit. Meanwhile, the wait staff apologized to all the other customers for the commotion. For his part, Ikki was just glad that he'd managed to resolve things without causing a scene. He wiped away Kuraudo's spit with a napkin.

"You look like a puffer fish, Stella," he said, looking over at her. She was pouting so hard her cheeks were puffed out to twice their size.

"Is it so wrong to be mad?! Those bastards just said whatever the hell they wanted and left! Also, why did you purposely let that piece of shit hit you in the first place?!"

"I figured that it might make him mad if I dodged. If we started fighting here, we'd be in big trouble with the school."

"That's...true, but you could have handled those guys even without Intetsu, couldn't you?"

"I'm not so sure."

"Really?"

"That guy in the middle with the skull tattoo's pretty strong. Taking him on unarmed would be tough."

"Oh, it definitely would be. He made it to the quarterfinals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival last year, after all."

"Huh?!"

Ikki and Stella turned in surprise toward the young boy who'd suddenly joined their conversation. The reason they were so stunned was that he'd appeared right on top of their table without warning. There had been no sound to signal his approach, and neither of them had seen or sensed anyone coming closer either. The boy had curly, dull gray hair with matching dull golden eyes. Though he looked young enough to be in kindergarten, he was wearing Hagun Academy's uniform. He flashed Ikki an insincere smile.

"Aha ha. Man, you have some seriously bad luck," he said. "To think you'd catch the eye of the Sword Eater, Kurashiki Kuraudo, of all people. He's the famous mad dog of Donrou Academy who picks fights with whoever he wants

whenever he wants. You made the right call, though, Worst One.”

“Eheh heh, indeed. That was a wise decision on your part.”

A tall woman walked over, and unlike the boy, she made absolutely sure that her approach was noticed by Ikki and the others. She was carrying a parasol even though they were indoors and wearing a wide-brimmed hat. The hat covered her eyes, but her shapely chin and long, wavy blonde hair made it clear that the rest of her features were beautiful too. She was also wearing a pure white ball gown that wouldn’t have looked out of place at a royal wedding.

Despite her graceful appearance, Ikki and Stella felt goose bumps rise on their skin just from looking at her. She was wearing nothing but white, yet to both of them, her dress seemed like it was soaked in blood. The reason was that the scent of blood clung strongly to her. No amount of perfume could mask it. Ikki could tell at a glance that she was no normal girl.

She’s the real deal.

“Had you started fighting here, we would have been obligated to subdue you and report you to the school,” the girl said in an elegant voice. It was strange to hear such a soothing tone from a girl who reeked so strongly of blood and death.

Instantly on guard, Stella turned to Ikki and asked, “Ikki, who are these guys?”

“Members of Hagun Academy’s student council. That’s the vice president, Misogi Uakata-san, and that’s the treasurer, Toutokubara Kanata-san.”

“You’re Toutokubara?!”

Even Stella, who didn’t pay much attention to the school’s gossip, had heard about Toutokubara Kanata. The Scharlach Frau was a Rank B Mage-Knight and considered the second-strongest Blazer in Hagun Academy. Her overwhelming might was so famous that despite being a student, she’d been called upon by various agencies to participate in live operations with them. She’d been part of raids to destroy Rebellion bases, and had also taken down various other criminal organizations.

“Guess we can skip the introductions,” Uakata said. “Man, you really saved us a lot of trouble, Kurogane-kun. The Sword Eater’s goaded tons of people into

unofficial duels, wrecked half of the dojos in the city, and just generally caused a bunch of trouble. Dealing with the aftermath of one of his rampages would have been a pain in the ass. Thanks for saving us the time and effort of dealing with him. We really underestimated you.”

“That we did. I can see why Renren-san lost to you now. Your appraisal of the situation—and of the Sword Eater—was perfect. And I’ve come to understand why the Demon Princess holds you in such high regard. Her assessment was more accurate than I realized.”

“Aha ha, you can say that again. Anyway, mind letting me take a look at your wound? I can heal it for you,” Utakata offered.

“That’s okay, thanks,” Ikki replied. “I can treat it on my own.”

“No need to be shy. Just let your senpai take care of everything. Pain, pain, go awaaaay.” As he said that, Utakata touched the back of Ikki’s head. “There we go, all healed.”

Ikki’s skin stitched itself back together in an instant, and the minor internal bleeding from Kuraudo’s blow was healed as well.

“Whoa...”

Ikki blinked thrice in awe. The wound had been shallow since he had adjusted his positioning slightly to ensure the force was dispersed evenly across his skull. But even so, the speed at which Utakata had managed to heal it was unbelievable. When it came to mana control, Shizuku was as skilled as most Rank A Blazers, but even she would have taken more time to heal that injury.

It feels more like he made the injury itself disappear rather than healing it, though. At the very least, Utakata had used more than just a simple healing technique to patch Ikki up.

Misogi Utakata’s nickname was Fifty-Fifty, but Ikki honestly had no idea what his Blazer abilities were. Either way, there was clearly more to him than met the eye.

“Aha ha ha. You don’t need to turn those scary powers of observation onto me. I’m not taking part in the selection matches.”

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. You even healed my cut for me.”

“Aha ha, no worries. That’s the right mindset for a knight to have. If anything, it’s reassuring to know we’ve got youngsters like you to shoulder the school’s prestige in the future. Anyway, you’re all healed up now, so we’ll be leaving. Let’s get going, Kanata.”

“As you wish, Vice President.”

“Don’t stay out too late, you hear?”

Utakata and Kanata walked out of the restaurant, and Ikki let out a long sigh as he stared out the window at the setting sun. *Is this why they call dusk the witching hour?* They’d run into pretty important people one after another in a short span of time. However, something was eating away at Ikki that was more important than all of the people he’d just met.

“Hey, Ayatsuji-san.”

“Ah!” It seemed she’d been expecting Ikki to ask her about the people from earlier, and she immediately averted her gaze. But Ikki didn’t balk.

“What’s your relationship with those rowdy-looking men?” Kuraudo and the others had known Ayase by name, and she wasn’t a skilled enough knight that people were doing TV interviews with her like they were with Stella. It was obvious she had some kind of history with Kuraudo, and it probably wasn’t anything good. Her expression made that much clear. “If you don’t wanna answer, I won’t force you to. But the way you reacted when they said your name made me worried. If you’re in some kind of trouble, I might be able to help you out.” As Ayase’s friend, Ikki wanted to help her.

After a moment’s hesitation, Ayase opened her mouth to answer. “The thing is—”

Just then, Ayase’s and Ikki’s student handbooks beeped at the same time, informing them they’d received an email. Annoyed by the bad timing, Ikki nevertheless checked his inbox. The email was from the Seven Stars Battle Festival Selection Match Committee. Considering Ayase had gotten a notification at the same time, he had a sinking feeling that he knew who his next opponent was.

His hunch proved correct. “Kurogane Ikki-sama, your eleventh selection match opponent will be Ayatsuji Ayase-sama from class 3-1,” the email read.

This is the worst timing possible.

He had no doubt Ayase had also gotten an email telling her she’d be fighting him. Indeed, the blood drained from Ayase’s face as she read through the one she’d gotten.

“Um, sorry! My roommate needs something urgently, so I’m going to go help her!” she said as she finished reading.

Ikki didn’t even have to read her facial expression to know that was a lie. She probably just found it awkward to be with him now that she knew they’d be dueling.

“Sure, no worries. See you tomorrow.”

Ikki decided not to press her any further. While he was still curious about Ayase’s relationship with Kuraudo, it wasn’t worth making her feel uncomfortable just to find out. He’d ask again after she’d had some time to process her feelings.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow...”

She left enough money on the table to pay for her order, then ran out of the restaurant.

“She looked really pale. I wonder what happened,” Stella said, curious. Ikki silently showed her the email he’d gotten. “Oh man...”

“I guess this is what they call fate. I would’ve liked to avoid fighting her if possible, though.”

“Come to think of it, Senpai mentioned she needed to enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival to reclaim something that had been stolen from her, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You won’t lose on purpose just to help her, will you?”

“Do I really seem like the kind of person who’d do that?”

Stella smiled and shook her head, relieved.

“Nope. I guess I didn’t even need to ask.”

She knew full well that Ikki wasn’t the kind of man to do that. Regardless of who he was up against, whether it was Stella herself or even Shizuku, Ikki would fight fair and square, giving it his all. It was the proper thing to do as a knight. But even so, it was unfortunate that he had to face off against Ayase, of all people, in his next match.

I know she said, “See you tomorrow,” but I don’t think Ayatsuji-san will be coming to our training sessions for a while.

As Ikki had feared, he didn’t see Ayase the next day.



“Man, that guy was a riot.”

“I can’t believe there are weaklings like him out there who still call themselves swordsmen.”

“I know, right? Crazy that he didn’t say anything even after Kuraudo spat on him. What a loser.”

“You said it, Misato. But I guess not fighting Kuraudo’s probably the smarter choice.”

“Kah ha ha, true that. When you know you can’t win, you’re better off not fighting!”

The hoodlums cackled to each other as they smoked in their usual hangout, a dojo that was in a horrendous state. They were still talking about the boy Kuraudo had taunted at the family restaurant earlier.

“Ha ha, you guys really think he’s that weak?” Kuraudo asked from his perch a bit farther away from the others. He looked up at the moon through a hole in the roof and took a sip of the sake he had with him.

“Course we do. There’s no way that pansy could beat you, Kuraudo!”

“Yeah, he’s not even worth fighting. Hell, if you want, we’ll take care of him for you.”

“Gya ha ha! Come on, don’t bully the weak. Besides, if we take it too far, the

fuzz'll get on our asses again."

Kuraudo's followers started cackling again, but he didn't join in.

"Heh." He gave them a disdainful glare, then turned to look back up at the moon.

Idiots. You don't get it at all.

He thought back to the look Ikki had given him. There hadn't been any fear in his eyes. Just an icy cold calm. All Ikki had been thinking about was how to get through with the least amount of commotion.

Kuraudo knew that Ikki had taken his attack on purpose too. A man who could give him such a penetrating glare couldn't possibly have failed to see that attack coming.

"You're one hell of a guy. I guess cheap taunts won't be enough to get you in the mood. Heh."

Well, whatever. A guy that strong's bound to show up in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. I'll save crushing him for then.

Kuraudo downed the rest of his sake in one gulp. His blood was boiling now that he'd found another worthy opponent after so long.



Three days had passed since the kerfuffle at the family restaurant. Ikki hadn't seen Ayase even once since then, and their match was scheduled for tomorrow.

"In the end, Senpai never showed up," Stella sighed, lamenting Ayase's absence.

"Oh? And here I thought you would find that agreeable, Stella-san. After all, you were so envious of the attention Onii-sama was giving Ayatsuji-senpai," Shizuku said with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, shut up. That might be true, but it's still lonely without her around."

"You really are a selfish woman... Though in a way, that's one of your strengths," Shizuku added under her breath.

"What did you say?"

“I said your thighs are too fat.”

“They are not!”

Ikki watched the two of them argue, idly twirling his student handbook in his hands. *I can't tell if they're supposed to be good friends or bitter rivals.* As he mused about the nature of their relationship, he noticed Alisuin walking over to him.

“She hasn’t been replying to any of your texts?” she asked, looking down at Ikki’s handbook.

“Nope.”

“Really?”

Ikki looked up at Alisuin. Though she was smiling, there was a searching look in her eyes.

“Why are you so suspicious of her?”

“It’s only natural, don’t you think? While we don’t know the full details of her situation, we *do* know what her goal is. She wants to take part in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. That means she can’t afford to lose to you in tomorrow’s match.”

Only six people would be chosen as representatives to fight in the Festival.

Ikki had heard from his homeroom teacher, Oreki, that there would be twenty selection matches at most for each student. With the match count that low, it wouldn’t be surprising for more than a few people to come out of the qualifiers with perfect records. In other words, even a single defeat meant you were out of the running.

“However, I’m sure she knows full well that she has no chance against you in a fair fight,” Alisuin continued. “There’s no way she wouldn’t notice the difference in skill between you two after learning from you. In which case she’s bound to try something underhanded to win. Am I wrong?”

“Sharp as always, I see.”

Ikki shrugged his shoulders and tossed his student handbook to Alisuin. A text from Ayatsuji Ayase was displayed on it. It read: “Kurogane-kun, I have

something important I need to discuss with you alone. There's something I need your help with. Could you meet me tomorrow at 3 a.m. on the roof of the main school building?"

"I got that this morning," he explained.

"It sure sounds like a trap of some kind."

"Ha ha, I know, right? But it's definitely not a trap."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I trust Ayatsuji-san. She's not the kind of person to pull such a cowardly trick. While we only spent a few days together, I understand her well enough to know that about her."

From what Ikki could tell, Ayase was a firm believer in hard work and as straitlaced as they came.

"Besides," he continued, "she told me she liked my hands." Someone who was willing to cheat to win a match would never give such sincere praise. Ayase wasn't the kind of person who would spit on the hard work of others, and Ikki doubted she would throw away her pride as a knight just to achieve victory.

"I'll go meet her."

Ayase was Ikki's friend, and she needed his help. He couldn't refuse her invitation. If he was the only one she could confide in, then he needed to be there for her.

"You're dazzlingly bright, you know that?" Alisuin said with a bitter smile. Though Ikki was sitting right next to her, at that moment, she felt as though he was somewhere far beyond her reach.

"I am?"

"Yes. At times, I get jealous of how Shizuku and Stella-chan can so openly display their love for those close to them, and of how much trust you put in others, Ikki. It reminds me of how ugly my own heart is. I've long since lost the ability to have such unwavering faith in people."

Alisuin shook her head lightly, then said in a sterner voice, "But it's because I'm so twisted that there are things only I can notice. I realize it's not my place

to tell you what to do, but I think you should be prepared to cut ties with Ayatsuji-senpai entirely. There's no telling what lies beneath a person's outer facade. If you get too shaken up by what happens, you'll end up losing a battle you could have easily won. Just like what almost happened in your battle with the Hunter."

"Come to think of it, you're the one who warned me before that battle too, Alice. Don't worry, though. I already know what's most important to me, and nothing can shake my determination to reach my goal." As he said that, Ikki looked over at Stella. He'd promised to duel her again at the Seven Stars Battle Festival finals. "I will never break my promise to her, no matter what happens."

"Heh. I see you didn't need my advice. My apologies for bringing up such an unpleasant topic, then."

"I don't mind, and it wasn't unpleasant at all. Though I suppose the one thing that *did* bother me was that I have this wonderful friend who's always giving me great advice at critical moments, like right now or before my battle with Kiri-hara-kun, and you said she had an ugly heart. I won't stand for that, Alice."

Alisuin looked momentarily taken aback, but then she smiled and said in a joking voice, "Aha ha. If you keep saying such nice things to me, I might really fall for you."

"Please don't joke about that."

Since Alisuin was purposely trying to put on a cheerful front, Ikki decided not to pry any further into her affairs. He could tell that she wouldn't say any more on the topic anyway. That being the case, he decided that it was best to focus on the person he could help right now.

As the sun began to set, Ikki looked up at the roof of the school building. She wanted to meet him there at 3 a.m.

Will I be able to give her the help she needs?



Ten minutes before the appointed meeting time, Ikki silently got out of bed and left his room, doing his best not to wake Stella. He strode across the deserted hallway and headed outside. Using the light of the moon to guide him,

he went to the main school building and beelined for the window he'd unlocked earlier in the day. Once there, he crawled through the window, his heels clacking loudly as he landed on the ground.

It was creepy seeing this normally busy building so deserted. He walked up several flights of stairs, then opened the heavy iron door that led to the rooftop. The pale white moon was quite bright tonight, allowing Ikki to see the full expanse of the dreary, gray concrete roof. It was surrounded by a tasteless chain-link fence. A gust of wind blew past—one that was surprisingly cold considering summer was right on the horizon.

Ayatsuji Ayase was standing at the other end of the rooftop, her back leaning against the fence. She was wearing a plain yukata.

“Yo. Haven’t seen you since we went to the pool, Ayatsuji-san.”

“Yeah... I’m sorry for skipping out on our training sessions even though I’m the one who asked you to teach me.”

Hmm?

Ikki noticed that there was something off about the way Ayase was acting. She was looking right at him, but her eyes looked empty, as if they were unfeeling glass beads. Recently, she’d been able to meet Ikki’s gaze more often without blushing, but even on the day they’d gone to the pool, whenever the conversation had died down and their eyes had met, she’d still awkwardly looked away. Ikki had figured it was just natural for someone who wasn’t used to men to act like that. That was precisely why he found it odd that she was able to meet his gaze so easily right now.



It wasn't so strange that it was worth pointing out, though, so Ikki decided not to mention it. After all, that wasn't what he'd come here to discuss.

"It's fine. It must have been weird knowing we'd be dueling each other next."

"Thanks for not getting mad. Also, thank you for coming alone like I asked. But are you sure you should be going out by yourself at night to meet a girl when you already have a girlfriend?"

"Oh, you knew? Well, just don't tell Stella. She'd throw a fit if she found out." Ikki shrugged and started walking toward Ayase. "So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

Ayase fell silent. Ikki couldn't tell if she was having trouble putting what she wanted to say into words or if it was for some other reason. Her glassy eyes gave nothing away, making it impossible for him to read her thoughts. But standing there and not saying anything would accomplish nothing.

"If you're having trouble saying it yourself, mind if I ask you something instead?" Ikki changed tactics, but Ayase stayed quiet. He decided to interpret her silence as a yes and cleared his throat before asking, "You mentioned before that something important had been stolen from you. Was it Kurashiki Kuraudo who stole it from you?"

Ikki didn't miss the glint of surprise that shone in Ayase's eyes for a second.

"What makes you think that?"

"Just a hunch based on what I saw. When we were eating, you had a murderous look in your eyes when you said you'd reclaim what had been stolen from you. And you had that same murderous expression when the Sword Eater showed up."

At that time, Ayase had been biting her lip and looking down at the table, but the hatred in her expression had been the same as when she'd told Ikki and Stella she'd get back what had been taken from her.

"You also mentioned that you need to enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival to reclaim that stolen thing," Ikki continued. "Which means that whoever stole it from you is likely a knight who's going to be there this year. The Sword Eater

made it to last year's top eight. Unless you have a weird selection system like what Hagun Academy is doing this year, each school's representatives are usually the ones who performed well the previous year. Putting those two together, it's highly likely that the Sword Eater stole something from you, and that you want to duel him to get it back. Am I right?"

Though he phrased it as a question, Ikki was already certain he'd made the correct deduction.

"Heh. You really can see right through anyone, Kurogane-kun. Now that you've figured that much out, there's not much point in hiding it," Ayase answered, proving that Ikki had indeed been correct. "You see, the reason I called you out here today was because I wanted to ask you something."

"Go on."

"I heard from Vermillion-san in the changing room that you promised to duel her again in the Seven Stars Battle Festival finals."

"I did. Well, assuming we can both make it that far. But we did swear an oath to fight again for real someday."

"If, before you reached the finals, you found yourself up against an opponent you just couldn't beat no matter what, what would you do?"

"Huh?" Ikki cocked his head, not sure why Ayase was asking all this. *What does my promise with Stella have to do with her?*

After thinking about it for a few seconds, Ikki realized Ayase had asked because she was currently in just that sort of situation. Ikki had to keep winning to fulfill his promise, but Ayase, too, needed to win no matter what to reclaim what had been taken from her. Their reasons for fighting were different, but their unyielding desire to win was the same.

I guess she wants to know what kind of mindset I have going into tough matches, then? While Ikki wasn't sure what exactly Ayase was hoping to gain from his answer, it didn't change what that answer would be.

"I'd fight fair and square with all of my might," he said firmly.

"Even though you know you have no hope of winning?"

“You can’t say for sure it’s hopeless until you actually fight. Besides, even if I’m doomed to lose, all I *can* do is fight with everything I’ve got.”

During his fight with the Hunter, Ikki had been on the verge of admitting defeat. With Stella’s help, though he’d been able to remember what he’d been fighting for. The wounds that came with a loss were certainly painful, but they would eventually heal and Ikki would be able to fight again. However, the wounds that came from losing to yourself lasted a lifetime. So even if Ikki knew his defeat was assured, he would go into the battle with his head held high and fight to the bitter end. That way, he could take pride in what he’d done. Thanks to Stella, he’d never lose sight of that fact again.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Ayase said in a voice as cold as ice. “Righteousness is worthless if it doesn’t produce results.”

“Huh?” Ikki replied, taken aback. He hadn’t expected Ayase of all people to advocate for victory no matter the cost.

Why would you say that? This was so different from the kind of person he had assumed her to be that he was at a loss for words. To make matters worse, he noticed that she was sneering at him. He’d never seen her make such a disparaging expression.

Two questions came to Ikki’s mind. *Is this really Ayase? Or is this the real Ayase?*

Still sneering, Ayase said, “If you ask me, I think you should find a way to bring your opponent down, no matter what dirty tricks it takes!”

“Ah!”

She summoned a glowing crimson blade into her right hand. A second later, the sound of two quick cuts echoed through the night.



“Wha—”

The moment he heard those cuts, Ikki was on his guard. It was obvious Ayase had used her power to sever something. The question was, what? Ikki honed his vision and focused on his surroundings. He cut out color and sound, allowing his

brain to concentrate solely on sight.

It took only a moment to figure out what had been cut. The section of fence Ayase had been leaning on started to tilt backward, meaning she'd cut that part of the fence out. However, there had been the sound of two cuts when she'd slashed only once. Her power must have had something to do with that.

What's she planning? Why did she just cut away that part of the fence?

Confused, Ikki watched as something even more unbelievable happened. Ayase fell back along with the severed bit of fence. The school building was four stories high, and she was falling from it headfirst.

"What?!"

Though Ikki was utterly stupefied, he didn't let his shock prevent him from acting. He couldn't understand what Ayase was trying to do and he wasn't sure whether this was intentional or if her powers had somehow gone out of control, but none of that was important right now. He immediately activated Ittou Shura, and his body was enveloped in a pale blue glow. Then, he dashed toward the hole in the fence and jumped off the edge of the roof.

As soon as he spotted Ayase, he started running down the wall to reach her faster. With the help of Ittou Shura, he was easily able to catch up to her before she hit the ground. He grabbed her right hand and pulled her close.

All right, I got her! But what do I do now?!

At the rate they were going, they'd hit the ground in another second or two. Since he'd accelerated until he was moving faster than the speed of freefall by running down the wall, it was too late to stop himself now. He spent a precious second considering his options, then spotted something out of the corner of his eye—the pond in the courtyard where Ayase had nearly drowned a few days ago. It was about thirty meters away from them. That was a long distance to cover, but it was their only hope, so Ikki forcibly twisted himself in midair and kicked off the wall with all of his might.

"Raaaaah!"

The force of his kick created huge cracks that ran down the entire length of the four-story building, and a few of the nearby windows shattered. It was as if

the school had been hammered by a wrecking ball. Thankfully, it provided enough thrust to propel Ikki and Ayase over to the pond, and the two of them fell into it with a huge splash.

“Pwah! Hah, hah, haaah!”

That had been the closest call of Ikki’s life. Had he been even a millisecond slower, Ayase would have died. His body was still shivering from the sheer terror he’d experienced, knowing that even a single misstep would have been fatal. His entire body felt cold, and not because of the water.

However, it wasn’t just fear that was making Ikki shiver right now. He was furious as well. As he pulled Ayase out of the pond, he shouted, “Wh-What the hell do you think you’re doing?! If I hadn’t caught you, you would have died!”

It was unusual to see Ikki this mad. However, Ayase just laughed.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! It’s fine. After all, I knew you’d save me, Kurogane-kun.”

“What?!”

Ayase pushed Ikki’s hand off of her and got to her feet. She stared down at him and said with a grin, “And now you’ve used up your Ittou Shura.”

Shit.

“That was your plan all along?! To force me to use Ittou Shura?!”

“Yep.”

“Y-You risked your life for that?!”

“I told you, I’m going to do whatever it takes to win. If that had been your answer too, I thought I might be able to bribe you into losing. But I figured it wouldn’t. That’s not the kind of person you are, Kurogane-kun. You’re righteous to a fault. So this was the only option I had. I’m already weaker than you when it comes to swordsmanship, so there’s no way I could beat you if you used your trump card in our duel. That’s why I had to find some way to seal it.”

Ayase kept talking.

“I’ve heard you can only use Ittou Shura once a day, and our duel is in ten hours. You won’t be able to recover enough to use it again in time. Now, I have

a shot at victory. I may not be even close to as good a swordsman as you, but with my Blazer powers, I might be able to beat you if you don't have your trump card."

Ikki ground his teeth in frustration. Ayase was absolutely correct; Ittou Shura used up every last ounce of strength he possessed. In other words, it drained him of his mana. Now that he'd used up all of it, he wouldn't be able to activate Ittou Shura again until his mana regenerated. This was certainly the best way to seal his ultimate move.

Did I misjudge Ayatsuji-san? Was I wrong about her all along?

Ikki had thought Ayase was an honest person who valued hard work. But she'd just cheated to get an edge for their upcoming duel, which was one of the greatest taboos for a knight. Was this the real her? Had it all been an act when she'd told Ikki she was proud of her father's swordsmanship, and when she'd been overjoyed that she'd started getting closer to his level of skill?

"You know, when I first saw your palms, Ayatsuji-san, I was happy. It had been encouraging to learn that there was another swordsman in this school."

"I do thank you for training me. Now, I'll be able to use the strength you gave me to defeat you."

"I was certain...you weren't the kind of person to do something like this."

"You overestimated me. Don't blame me for having some idealized version of me in your head."

"Ngh! Ayatsuji-san, I don't know what the Sword Eater took from you, but what you did is an insult not just to me, but to Stella, Shizuku, and every other knight who's trying to make it into the Seven Stars Battle Festival too! Will you honestly be happy getting whatever was stolen from you back if it means tarnishing your pride like this?! Will you be able to hold your head high after everything's over?!"

"That has nothing to do with you, Kurogane-kun." Ayase coldly shut Ikki down and turned her back to him. "It doesn't matter what you say. I'm going to defeat you in our duel. I *have* to."

With those parting words, she walked into the darkness of the night. Though

she hadn't gone very far, she seemed miles away to Ikki. And before long, she'd gotten far enough that he couldn't even see her silhouette anymore.

"There's no telling what lies beneath a person's outer facade. If you get too shaken by what happens, you'll end up losing a battle you could have easily won."

Ikki thought back to Alisuin's warning. She'd been right. If Ikki let himself get shaken by this, his swordsmanship would be dulled. In that case, he needed to accept that his friendship with Ayase was over. He needed to move on and forget all about her.

But is that really the right call?

"Ngh."

Ikki dropped to his knees, unsure whether it was because the recoil from Ittou Shura was finally hitting or because of how betrayed he felt.

"Damn it aaall!" he cried, pounding his fist against the grassy lawn.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Ayatsuji Ayase

■PROFILE

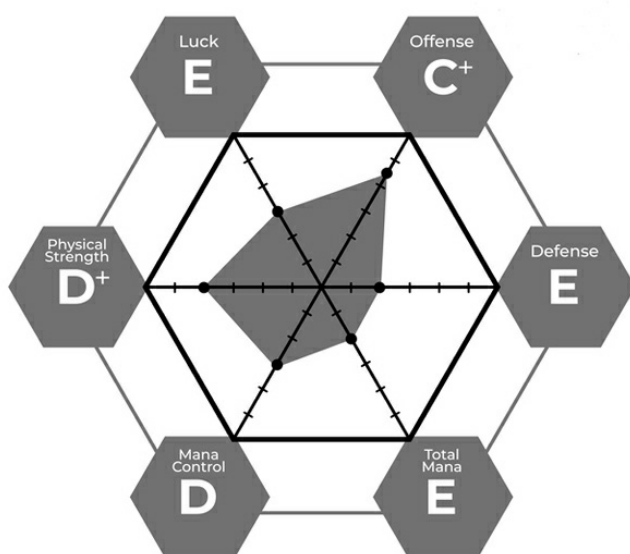
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 3-1

Blazer Rank: D

Noble Art: NO DATA

Nickname: NO DATA

Summary: The Last Samurai's only daughter.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

A weird girl who was stalking Kurogane-senpai for a while. To find out what was up, I decided to stalk her too. It was a fun stalking conga line! Unfortunately, the only scoop I was able to find was that Kurogane-senpai took Ayatsuji-senpai on as his disciple. Rumor has it that her powers have more to do with controlling a specific concept rather than one of the primal elements like Stella-chan and Shizuku-chan.

Chapter 3: Ayatsuji Ayase

The morning of her duel with Ikki, Ayase woke up at 9 a.m. After her meeting with him, she'd gone back to her room and immediately fallen asleep. The meeting combined with all of the preparations she'd needed to make ahead of the duel had left her exhausted.

As she blearily crawled out of her bunk bed, she found a letter from her roommate on the bedside table. It read: "You told me not to come see your match, so I won't. But if there's something bothering you, know that you can always come to me. You've been looking down recently, and I'm getting worried about you."

"I really am a horrible woman..." Not only had she betrayed her biggest benefactor, but she had also been worrying her roommate.

"Will you honestly be happy getting whatever was stolen from you back if it means tarnishing your pride like this?! Will you be able to hold your head high after everything's over?!"

"Tch..."

Ikki's words were still ringing in her ears. She was in an awful mental state even though she had an important match coming up that she couldn't afford to lose. She needed to get back into top condition as soon as possible or she'd end up losing to Ikki despite her meticulous preparations. Deciding to use her remaining time before the duel to calm herself down, she started walking to a certain location.



Ayase went to the station next to Hagun Academy and rode the train for about fifteen minutes. She got off at a station next to a pure white building that contrasted starkly with the cloudless blue sky. The sign in front of the building read "Shishido General Hospital." It was the closest major hospital to Hagun Academy.

Her destination was room 515. She navigated her way through the hospital with ease and opened the sliding door to that room. Inside was a single bed and a small folding chair atop which sat a beautiful middle-aged woman.

The lady turned at the sound of the door opening and said in a surprised voice, “My, if it isn’t Ayase-chan!”

“Hello, Aunt Suzuka.”

“Good morning. Why are you here so early? What about school?”

“I don’t have to go today. Students aren’t obligated to attend classes on days they have a duel, so I thought I’d come here instead.”

“Huh. This new director of yours sure is interesting, what with the selection matches and the new roommate system.”

Ayase’s aunt nodded in approval as Ayase explained yet another one of Kurono’s new policies. She got up and walked over to the bedside.

“Nii-san, your cute little daughter’s come to visit,” she said to the man lying on the bed. His cheeks were gaunt, and his skin was cracked. His arms were thinner than a twig. This man who looked more like a mummy than a living person was Ayase’s father, Ayatsuji Kaito.

“Hello, Dad,” Ayase said as she walked over to his bedside as well. However, Kaito didn’t respond. His eyes were closed, indicating that he was in a deep sleep, as he had been for the past two years.

“Well, I’ll head down to the café and let you two have some alone time. How long do you plan on staying for, Ayase-chan?”

“My match is in the afternoon, so I’ll leave by noon.”

“Gotcha, I’ll come back by then. See you later.”

Ayase’s aunt waved to her and walked out of the room. She was always cheery whenever Ayase saw her. Ayase wished she could share some of that energy with her father.

No, that’s not right. In the past, Dad was a lot more—

“Ah...nh...”

Suddenly, a quiet noise interrupted her thoughts. Kaito's withered lips trembled a little as they struggled to form the shape of a word.

"Dad..."

He was always mumbling something in his sleep. It wasn't even remotely clear enough to be made out properly, but even so, Ayase knew exactly what those lips were trying to convey. *"I'm sorry."*

"Ngh!"

Ayase gritted her teeth in frustration. Ever since that day, Kaito had been apologizing to her. For not being able to protect her. For not being able to entrust his final technique to her. His consciousness was forever trapped in the events of that rainy day.

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"Remember this, Ayase. No matter what happens, never lose sight of your honor and your pride. Our swords carry the power to kill people. And your powers surpass what normal humans are capable of. That is exactly why, when you wield them, you must do so with honor and conviction. Without that, your swordsmanship and your powers are nothing more than base violence. You must always act with decorum, protect the weak, and punish evil in all its forms. Never let your power get to your head, and fight fairly against any opponent you face. You must become a knight who can hold her head high and be proud of herself."

That was what the Last Samurai, Ayatsuji Kaito, had always taught Ayase. He had done his best to impress upon her the responsibilities borne by those who possessed great power. In part, it was because Ayase had been born a Blazer that he had wanted to teach her the way of the sword. Not just martial arts techniques, but the very lifestyle that martial artists pursued. His hope in doing so had been that she would properly master her powers and not stoop to becoming a haughty fool who looked down on those weaker than her.

Kaito had been far from gentle when it had come to teaching his daughter. In fact, Ayase's training had been so severe that, at times, she had felt it was too much. But even so, she had loved the virtues that Kaito extolled. The honorable strength that he had wanted Ayase to possess was something she had wished

to attain as well. She had loved how dignified her father had looked when he was swinging his sword. More than anything else, she had loved the way he patted her head and lavished her with praise whenever she got better.

Her entire world had been just her, her father, and the ten-odd disciples that were part of his dojo. It had been by no means a lavish life, but it had been warm and filled with happiness. Ayase had desired nothing more than for that life to continue forever. But that dream had been ground to dust by just one man on that rainy day two years ago.

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It had been two months since Ayase had enrolled in Hagun Academy, and the rainy season was just beginning. On a particularly cloudy day where even the wind smelled of rain, Ayase decided to head to her dojo after classes instead of returning to her dorm like usual. She grabbed her umbrella and walked out of the school gate. She often returned to the dojo to learn swordsmanship, as the school didn't teach any martial arts.

Around the time Ayase entered middle school, Kaito's doctor had discovered that he was suffering from a heart condition that couldn't be cured even with modern medicine. Since then, he'd stopped actively sword fighting. The last time he'd picked up a sword had been when Ayase was accepted into Hagun Academy. He'd wanted to pass the final technique he'd created on to her.

At this point, his body had deteriorated to the point where he couldn't swing a sword even if he wanted to. However, there were other disciples at the dojo who'd spent years practicing the Ayatsuji Sword Style. Though they were few in number, they, much like Ayase, had been learning from a young age. They were all master swordsmen in their own right.

The strongest among them, Sugawara, was still nowhere near as strong as Kaito, but he was a lot stronger than Ayase. Three times a week, Ayase would go back home to train with him. She wanted to become strong enough to use the ultimate technique that her father had taught her as soon as possible, which was why she was still training so frequently. But on that day, when she walked through the front gates of her dojo, she ran into an unfamiliar figure who didn't belong in her tiny world.

“Huh?”

This newcomer was a tall young man with dyed blond hair and a cigarette in his mouth. His eyes gleamed like a hungry wolf's, and he was wearing a Donrou Academy uniform jacket. It was unbuttoned to reveal his bare chest, which bore a skull tattoo. It was clear just from his appearance that he had nothing to do with the honorable world of martial arts.

Ayase involuntarily took a step back. She was already nervous around boys, and this one looked particularly intimidating.

“Ha ha.” The young man, Kurashiki Kuraudo, chuckled. “See ya later.” With that, he turned on his heel and vanished into the city.

Who was that guy? What was someone as uncouth as him doing at my house? Furthermore, the fact that he was wearing a Donrou Academy uniform meant that he was a Blazer. Most Blazers had zero interest in traditional swordsmanship. *Maybe he came to ask for directions?* Confused, Ayase stepped through her house's front door.

“That piece of shit!” she heard someone shout as she was walking toward the dojo. It was Sugawara, Kaito's head disciple and her longtime friend.

Worried, Ayase picked up the pace and ran into the dojo. People weren't sparring like they normally would be at this time of day. Sugawara and the six other disciples who'd come today were all grinding their teeth, their expressions furious. Kaito sat in formal seiza at the head of the group, deep in thought.

“What's going on? What happened?” Ayase asked Sugawara.

“This guy dressed like a thug barged into the dojo a few minutes ago and demanded we duel him with the ownership of the dojo on the line.”

“So, he's one of those dojo crushers I've heard about.”

“Yep. But Sensei's in poor health right now. Not to mention that practitioners of the Ayatsuji Sword Style are forbidden from engaging in duels where you wager things.”

Ayase knew that as well, of course. The Ayatsuji Sword Style existed to

protect people. That was what Kaito was always saying. Its techniques weren't meant to be used for needless conflict or to show off one's strength. As part of that, practitioners of the Ayatsuji Sword Style were forbidden from participating in private duels.

"Sensei rejected his challenge, but..."

"That asshole called Sensei a washed-up, cowardly hack! And then, he even spit on his face!"

"That damned thug. Just because he has superpowers, he thinks he's better than the rest of us!"

The disciples vented their anger one after another. They'd all been learning from Kaito since they were young, so they all looked up to him like he was their father. Watching him get insulted like that had been unbearable.

Naturally, Ayase felt the same way. Just hearing that someone had spit on her father made her blood boil.

"Shit. He left shoe marks all over the dojo. I can't believe he didn't bother to take them off before walking in. If Sensei was still in good health, he would have taught that stupid shit a lesson he wouldn't forget."

"You shouldn't think like that, Nitta," Kaito said suddenly, breaking his silence. "Even if I weren't ill, I wouldn't have accepted his challenge. The Ayatsuji Sword Style exists to protect people. We do not swing our blades to show off our strength. Though we no longer live in an era where it's the sword that protects people, you must never forget that."

"M-My apologies, sir! I won't make that mistake again!" Nitta bowed to Kaito.

"Good. Now, as punishment, I want to see one thousand practice swings from all of you!"

Kaito clapped his hands, dispelling the gloomy atmosphere that had settled over the dojo. His disciples scrambled into position and started doing their practice swings.

"All right, Ayase-chan, go get changed," Kaito then said. "We'll train you up well so you don't become a Blazer who gets drunk on their own power like that

guy is.”

“Will do!”

Ayase breathed a sigh of relief as she walked over to the changing room. But as she did so, the faint scent of cigarette smoke hit her nostrils. She was reminded that Kuraudo had defiled this dojo, wrapping his tendrils around the everyday life she held so dear. It felt like an ill omen, and the next day, she found that her premonition had been correct.

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It was raining hard the next day too as Ayase made her way to the dojo.

“Hello, everyone! Huh?” Upon opening the door to the dojo, she found that only her father, Kaito, was there. “Is everyone else running late, Dad? I’m usually not the first one here.”

“Seems like it. But this is the first time all of them have been late at once.” While his disciples had occasionally been late for various reasons, they’d never all been late at once like this. Even so, neither Kaito nor Ayase had any reason to think this was more than a coincidence. “I’m sure they’ll show up eventually. Until they do, how about I give you a personalized training lesson? It’s been a while.”

“I’d love that. But no swinging your sword, okay? You’re still sick.”

“You’re such a worrywart, Ayase. Don’t worry, I’ll just watch. All this rain has been making my bones ache anyway.”

Ayase settled into the stance required to unleash the ultimate move that Kaito had taught her when she’d been accepted to Hagun Academy. She held her wooden sword at eye level, widened her feet, relaxed her shoulders, and lowered her center of gravity. Then, she did her best to recreate the movements she’d seen her father make on that day. Slowly, steadily, she traced an arc with her sword.

“Stop,” Kaito said within seconds, holding out his hand. “It’s important to relax your shoulders, but you still need to keep energy flowing through your arms. Tighten your wrists, but don’t tense them up too much. You need to keep your posture as natural as possible.”

“Th-That’s really hard to do.”

“Perhaps, but it’s what you *must* do to use this technique. I suppose I have no choice, I’ll show you an example.”

Kaito reached out toward one of the wooden swords hanging on the wall rack.

“Ahem.”

“...”

“Ahem!”

“Fine, fine, I won’t swing a sword. Happy now?” Kaito raised his hands in surrender, unable to bear the weight of his daughter’s judging gaze. “Good grief, you’re just like your mother. She’d glare at me like that too whenever she didn’t want me doing something.”

“I learned that glare from her, so of course it’s just like hers. She told me to do this whenever you’re about to do something stupid.”

“I can’t believe I’ve been whipped by not just my wife but also my daughter.” Kaito sighed and circled behind Ayase. He reached over behind her back and covered her hands, which were still holding the practice sword, with his own. “Your wrists need to be angled like this. The important thing to remember about this technique is that you need to maintain an offensive stance throughout it.”

As he explained the inner workings of his final technique, Kaito adjusted Ayase’s stance. His hands were rough, callused, and far from gentle.

Dad’s hands are so big. However, Ayase loved those rough hands of his. Now that I think about it, it’s been ages since he taught me like this.

“Hee hee.” The realization made her happy, and she grinned.

“What are you smiling about?”

“Nothing important. It’s just...you haven’t taught me like this in ages. I’m happy you are again.” Ayase leaned back into Kaito’s chest, rubbing her cheek against him. She could hear his steady heartbeat. “It’d be nice if these times could last forever,” she whispered.



Kaito said nothing. He couldn't. After all, both he and Ayase knew that he didn't have much time left to live. Though his heart was still going for now, it was slowly but surely getting weaker. That was why he'd tried to pass his final technique on to her before she was ready to learn it.

I wonder how many years he has left.

Ayase had already mentally steeled herself for his death. But she fervently hoped that his final moments would be warm and peaceful.

Unfortunately, that wish was about to be cruelly shattered. The door to the dojo slid open, and Ayase and Kaito turned to see which of his disciples had been the first to arrive. It was Sugawara, Kaito's top disciple.

"S-Sugawara-san?!"

Ayase paled when she saw him. His head and torso were wrapped in bandages, and he looked half dead.

"What happened to you?!" Kaito shouted, rushing over to him.

Teary-eyed, Sugawara dropped to his knees and pressed his head against the dojo floor. "Sensei...I'm so sorry!" he choked out between sobs. It was obvious something serious had happened.

"Raise your head, Sugawara. You clearly didn't get those injuries from falling down the stairs. What happened?"

"Th-The guy who showed up yesterday beat the shit out of us."

"What?!"

"He ambushed the seven of us on our way home from the dojo last night. He just came out of nowhere and started swinging a wooden pole at us! That guy's crazy! He was literally trying to bash our heads in with that thing! We had no choice, so we fought back, but..." Sugawara trembled. "But we didn't stand a chance! He wasn't using his Blazer powers or even protecting his body with mana, but the seven of us combined still couldn't land a single hit on him!"

Upon hearing that, Ayase gasped. Sugawara and Kaito's other disciples had all been training in swordsmanship since they were children. Despite that, they hadn't been able to lay a finger on Kuraudo even without him using his Blazer

powers.

I didn't realize he was so strong...

“Even though you’ve been teaching us the sword for years, Sensei, that punk beat all of us! I’m so sorry for failing you!”

“You have nothing to apologize for! More importantly, what about the others?! Are they okay?!”

“Nitta’s family is rich, so he got treated in a capsule, but the rest of us got sent to the hospital.”

The use of iPS capsules wasn’t covered by health insurance, so it cost quite a bit. As a result, everyone except Sugawara and Nitta was still unconscious at the hospital. According to the doctors, a few of the disciples had been injured so badly that their arms might never fully recover.

After he explained all of that, Sugawara looked up at Kaito. Tears streaming freely from his eyes, he said, “Sensei, we stuck with the Ayatsuji Sword Style because we respected you and wanted to become like you. But... I don’t want to say this, but...if we were beaten so easily, what was the point of all those years of training?!”

“Ah...”

Ayase was at a complete loss for words. Sugawara no longer looked like the strong and reliable instructor she knew him to be. His eyes were clouded over with fear and despair. His heart and soul had been shattered so thoroughly that he would never recover.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think any of us will be able to work up the courage to wield a sword again...”

Sugawara pulled seven letters of resignation out of his pocket, his hands trembling. Like him, the other six disciples had also had their hearts and souls broken beyond repair.

This is so cruel... Why would he do something like that? How could he do something like that?

Ayase had been walking the path of swordsmanship together with Sugawara

and the other six disciples since she was a child. She couldn't fathom why someone would want to crush their spirits like this.

Just then, the unfathomable man who'd perpetrated this atrocity appeared at the dojo entrance.

"Ha ha, now *that's* a riot."

"What?!"

Kuraudo's timing was impeccable. "Guess I bullied you guys a little too much if you're giving up on swordsmanship," he said.

"A-Aaaaah!" The moment Sugawara spotted him, he let out a high-pitched scream and ran to the far corner of the dojo.

"Oh, come on. I'm not that scary, am I?" Kuraudo guffawed as he watched Sugawara run, then stepped into the dojo with his shoes still on.

"S-Stay away from me! Aaah!"

"S-Stop it! Can't you see you're scaring him?!"

Ayase moved protectively in front of Sugawara, unable to stand by any longer. But before she could say anything else, Kaito placed a hand on her shoulder and stepped forward, glaring at their unwelcome guest.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"The same thing as yesterday," Kuraudo replied.

"I believe I refused your challenge already."

"I figured I'd get a different answer if I came back today. Ha ha."

"I see, so you crippled my disciples just to get a rise out of me."

"Yep. Though I wasn't able to get to that girl over there yesterday."

"Why?" Kaito asked simply.

"Huh?"

"Why would you do this? You're a Blazer, aren't you? You should have plenty of opportunities to let loose at the Seven Stars Battle Festival or whatever matches your school holds. Why do you wish to fight me so badly?"

“What kinda question is that, old geezer? Did retirement dull your spirit *and* your blade?”

“Ah!” Kaito’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Ha, whatever. I’ll tell you the reason. It’s a simple one. I just wanna show off my strength. To everyone who catches my eye, both Blazers and regular people!”

Kuraudo gave Kaito a wolfish grin, and Ayase could contain her anger no longer. “You hurt so many people for such a stupid reason?!” she screamed.

“‘Stupid’? It’s not stupid at all. I just wanna fight strong guys and crush them under my heel. What’s so bad about being honest about how I feel?”

“Screw that!” Ayase wouldn’t let this man have his way. “It doesn’t matter how many times you come here! Our answer won’t change! A ruffian like you who just wants to show off isn’t welcome here! You don’t deserve to see our swordsmanship! Dad, let’s call the police!”

However, Kaito shook his head. “No, I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” he said in a soft voice. “The Ayatsuji Dojo will accept your challenge. We will fight with wooden swords, and the first side to land two valid hits will be the victor. Use of magic is not allowed.”

To Ayase and Sugawara’s shock, he accepted Kuraudo’s challenge.

“D-Dad!”

“S-Sensei?!”

The two of them went pale.

“Please don’t, Sensei! Your heart won’t be able to handle it!”

“That’s right, Dad! You can’t fight in your condition! If you absolutely insist on accepting his challenge, then I’ll fight in your place!”

It was expected that Ayase would try to dissuade her father, but even Sugawara, who’d been cowering in fear just a second ago, had worked up the courage to try and talk Kaito out of fighting. However, Kaito just smiled and said, “I appreciate the concern, you two. It makes me proud to know I have such loyal disciples. But that’s precisely why I have to do this.”

Sugawara's earlier words flashed through Kaito's mind. *"What was the point of all those years of training?!"*

"This young man needs to pay for what he did to you!" Kaito shouted. He couldn't entrust this task to anyone else. It was his duty to defeat Kuraudo with his own two hands. He glared at Kuraudo, his eyes shining with unshakable resolve.

Upon seeing that, Ayase fell silent. She knew nothing she said would reach her father now.

"Fine," she eventually said. "If you're going to be this stubborn, I won't stop you. I'll serve as the referee and see this match through to its end."

"Thank you."

"You better win, Dad..." she added, the words sounding like a prayer.

"Oy. If you're done yapping, let's get this party started. I'm tired of waiting," Kuraudo said in a brusque voice.

"Very well," Ayase replied with a frown. She threw a wooden sword at Kuraudo.

"Ha ha, what a violent woman."

"The rules are as my father outlined earlier. You will fight with wooden swords, and the first to get two valid hits will be the victor. Magic is not allowed. Understood?"

"Don't need to tell me twice. There's no point if the match isn't on equal footing."

Kuraudo grinned, revealing his teeth. His gaze was focused solely on Kaito. Meanwhile, Kaito had his eyes closed, probably to help him focus on the battle to come.

Once it was clear both sides were ready, Ayase stepped forward and said, "Face your opponent and...begin!"

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"Ha ha, here I come!"

The moment Ayase gave the signal, Kuraudo rushed at Kaito. He brought his sword down with blistering speed, aiming for the top of Kaito's head. There was no technique to his swing, and his stance did nothing to help transfer the power of his charge into his attack. He was relying solely on the strength of his arms like an amateur would.

Still, his swing was extremely fast, even to Kaito's trained eyes. He immediately realized that blocking it head-on would be dangerous. He shuffled backward, placing himself out of the path of the blow. The wooden sword passed inches from his nose and hit the tatami floor hard enough to break it.

"What monstrous strength!" Ayase exclaimed. She was unsurprisingly worried that such a mighty blow had just barely missed her dad's skull.

However, Kaito had kept his dodge narrow on purpose. Evading lethal swings with the minimal amount of movement was a fundamental skill that swordsmen needed to master. By keeping yourself close to your opponent, you put yourself in a better position to counter.

Having unleashed such a powerful swing, Kuraudo wouldn't be able to immediately switch to a defensive stance. That left a brief opening that a master like Kaito could take advantage of to deliver a lethal blow. Furthermore, the Ayatsuji Sword Style specialized in counterattacks. The moment the tip of Kuraudo's sword touched the ground, Kaito shuffled half a step forward.

"Hah!"

With a spirited yell, he brought his sword down, aiming for Kuraudo's head in the same way that Kuraudo had targeted him a second ago. And his swing was far more elegant—and far faster—than Kuraudo's had been.

The difference between their attacks was striking. Though illness might have weakened Kaito, it was clear that he still retained much of the prodigious skill that had earned him the nickname "the Last Samurai." Compared to an amateur like Kuraudo, his swings were far more potent. Kuraudo wouldn't be able to dodge such a polished strike. And yet...

"Ha ha ha!"

Kaito felt his palms tingle as Kuraudo swiftly brought his wooden sword up to

deflect his swing. The force of the parry was so great that the bones in his hands creaked.

“You look surprised, old geezer. Did you think that attack was gonna hit?” Kuraudo taunted.

“Yes. I didn’t think you could block it,” Kaito replied. It really had come as a surprise that Kuraudo had managed to block him. He was too experienced a swordsman to let that shake him, though.

He has good instincts.

Kuraudo had read that Kaito would go for a counter and prepared for it. That was how he’d been able to react so quickly. But that was hardly an issue for Kaito. Having one attack blocked was no problem at all. He still had plenty of tricks up his sleeve.

“My turn! Take this!” Kuraudo yelled, swinging his sword down in the same arc as before.

There was so much raw power in this attack that Kaito’s sword would break if he tried to block it. Even so, he chose to meet his foe’s sword with his own. Not because he didn’t have enough time to dodge, but because Kuraudo would read him again if he tried to counterattack after a dodge.

The moment the two swords clashed, Kaito deftly twisted his wrist before his wooden blade splintered, diverting much of the force behind Kuraudo’s blow to the side. Kuraudo’s stance crumbled as his blade was repelled, leaving him open once more.

Blocks and dodges were very simplistic methods of defense. True martial artists went a layer deeper and crafted more nuanced defensive techniques. What Kaito had done was parry by redirecting the force of Kuraudo’s blow. Rather than match Kuraudo’s strength with his own, he’d simply used the boy’s strength against him. That had allowed Kaito to not only protect himself but also place Kuraudo in a vulnerable position. And this time, he didn’t miss his mark.

“Haaah!”

Before Kuraudo could react, Kaito slammed his wooden sword into Kuraudo’s

torso. That was undoubtedly a valid blow.

“Torso blow! One point to Kaito!” Ayase called out. But her words barely registered with Kaito.

What is this sensation? he thought, panting. There had been something strange about the impact he’d felt in his palms when his sword had struck home. *Why do I feel so uneasy?*

“Nice one, Sensei! If I didn’t know any better, I’d say your illness is cured!”

“Dad, you’re amazing! I can’t believe it!”

Kaito smiled at his disciples, hiding the worry he felt. He then turned back to look at his opponent. Kuraudo was rubbing his ribs as he got back to his feet.

“Ha ha. Now *that’s* what I wanted to see from the Last Samurai. That’s the first time I’ve ever taken such a heavy hit. But is this all you’ve got? ‘Cause if so, you’re dead, old man.”

Despite getting hit, Kuraudo was still raring to go. He glared at Kaito, his eyes shining with a ravenous, insatiable thirst.

“Of course not. I’m just getting started, brat,” Kaito replied.

“Good. Then it’s time I went all out!”

Kuraudo once again charged at Kaito at top speed. His third swing was the same as his first two, an overhead blow aiming for Kaito’s head.

He just doesn’t learn! He has good fundamentals, but he’s an amateur when it comes to swordplay!

Kaito had genuinely been impressed that Kuraudo had managed to block his first counter. That was why seeing the boy rely on brute strength over and over again disappointed him. Kuraudo certainly had more toned muscles and could exhibit far more strength than Kaito, but that alone wasn’t a threat to a skilled swordsman.

I’ll end it here! Kaito once again shifted into a counterattack stance. He’d parry Kuraudo’s blow just like last time and put an end to this duel.

Ayase and Sugawara were equally convinced Kaito would be able to finish

things with this next attack. But then, Kuraudo suddenly changed the direction of his sword swing, moving so fast his arms were just a blur.

What?!

A second later, the sound of Kaito's ribs cracking echoed throughout the dojo.

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Kaito dropped to his knees as Kuraudo's sword slammed home. Though it was a shoddy swing, it was nevertheless a valid hit. Ayase wasn't able to stay calm enough to call it out, however. After all, her father was on his knees and coughing up blood. An awful lot of blood at that. His internal organs had clearly been damaged.

Ayase paled and ran over to Kaito. "Dad! Are you okay?!" she cried.

"Stay back!" Kaito ordered, coughing up another lungful of blood. "This match isn't over yet! If you can't remain an impartial judge then get out of the dojo!"

"Who cares about the—"

"Ayase!" Kaito shouted, a mist of blood spraying from his mouth. Though he'd scolded Ayase many times in the past, she'd never heard him yell like this before. It was a violent shout that struck fear into her heart. "This is my duel! Do not interfere!"

"D-Dad?!" Ayase was stunned by the anger in his voice.

"Don't worry! I'll...win this!" Kaito stumbled to his feet, a trickle of blood still spilling from the corner of his mouth. His eyes were focused solely on Kuraudo. Burning with passion, he took the initiative and charged for the first time. "Here I come, braaat!"

"Ha ha! It doesn't matter how many times you come at me! You'll never be able to hit me!" Kuraudo declared as he brought his sword up, blocking Kaito's blow head-on.

The battle from that point on was horribly one-sided. Kaito was too gravely injured to put up a fight. Moreover, he hadn't swung a sword in years. He was out of practice, and it showed. With each exchange, he was pushed farther and farther back. Kuraudo's swordsmanship had no grace or technique to it, but the

sheer violence in his blows was overwhelming Kaito.

Though Kaito was managing to fend off Kuraudo's relentless assault, he was unable to launch any manner of counterattack. To add insult to injury, Kuraudo decided that he would finish Kaito off with the same move that had gotten him his first point: a diagonal slash to the torso that came from below. Kaito quickly dropped into a defensive stance, planning to parry it, but like before, Kuraudo changed the trajectory of his sword at the last second. With inhuman speed, he brought his sword up high and swung it down at Kaito's head.

It was unbelievable how quickly he'd managed to go from a low diagonal slash to a downward overhead swing. His speed was clearly superhuman, but if there was some special trick to it, no one watching could figure out what it was. Regardless, Kuraudo's blade came down mercilessly on Kaito's unguarded skull.

"What?!"

This time, it was Kuraudo's turn to be surprised. Though he'd been aiming for the man's head, Kaito had managed to twist away at the last second, and his sword came down on Kaito's collarbone instead, shattering it. That didn't count as a valid blow, meaning the duel was still on.

"You can't call that a proper hit, brat!"

"Ha ha ha! Stop struggling, you old geezer! You've already got one foot in the grave!" Kuraudo kicked Kaito in the stomach, putting some distance between the two of them. He then rushed forward again, swinging his wooden sword with reckless abandon.

Though the last blow hadn't counted as a valid hit, it had still sapped away Kaito's strength. His movements were sluggish now, lacking the crisp precision they'd had at the start of the duel. As a result, Kuraudo's sword got through Kaito's defense multiple times, breaking more of his bones and battering his organs. The floor of the dojo was covered in his blood.

But despite it all, Kaito continued to prevent Kuraudo from getting another clean hit in. He was covered in wounds from head to toe, yet he continued to get back to his feet and duel Kuraudo.

Why?! Ayase couldn't understand why her father was doing this. His defeat

was inevitable. *Why doesn't he just surrender?! Why does he keep getting back up?!*

"Stop... Please, just stop..." She could only watch helplessly as her father was beaten to a bloody pulp. Kuraudo's wooden blade was slick with Kaito's blood.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

He laughed maniacally, bathing in the blood he was shedding. All Kaito could do now was weather the blows. This could no longer be called a duel; it was just a one-sided slaughter.

Ayase's vision was so blurred with tears that she couldn't make out what kind of expression Kaito had on his face. In fact, she wasn't even certain her father was still conscious. *I have to stop this. I have to stop this duel now or Dad will die!* But while she knew that, she couldn't move. Even as her father's blood stained her clothes and one of his teeth flew past, scraping her cheek, the way he'd shouted at her earlier had left her rooted to the spot.

"Stop! Please stop! You can have the dojo, please just stop hurting my dad!" she shouted. That was all she could do since her legs refused to move.

Sadly, her words didn't reach the two combatants who were locked in a deadly struggle. Kaito refused to give up, and Kuraudo continued showering him with blows.

"Hah!" Suddenly, Kaito unleashed one last-ditch attack. He raised his sword to eye level and charged at Kuraudo. "Raaaaah!"

"Whoa!"

Kuraudo's expression stiffened as he sensed something dangerous from the old man who should have been on the verge of death. Regardless, he stood his ground and brought his own sword down in an attempt to smash Kaito's skull before Kaito's attack landed.

Kaito saw the blow coming, but he didn't slow down in the slightest. He kept his sword in the same position, rushing forward like a bolt of lightning. He spared no thought for defense. At a glance, it seemed like a foolish, reckless charge.

That stance!

Ayase knew what he was trying to do. He was attempting to unleash the final technique that he'd spent his entire life devising. It was his only way out of this hopeless situation. But in his battered state, with his heart not working properly, there was no way he'd be able to use it.

"Stoop!" Ayase shouted, knowing it would do no good. A second later, Kuraudo's wooden sword slammed into Kaito's head.

"Ah..." That was the second valid hit. As soon as it landed, Kaito crumpled to the floor with a wet thud. "Aaaaah!" Ayase ran over to him, screaming incoherently. She called his name over and over, but he didn't respond. The only thing that came out of his mouth was more blood. "N-Nooooo!"

"Hmph, what a letdown. I thought you'd put up more of a fight."

Kuraudo dropped his wooden sword in front of Ayase. It was stained dark with blood, and chipped and cracked all over. As she looked down at it, Ayase's fear and worry transformed into a burning rage. Kuraudo had battered her father so badly that his sword had nearly shattered from breaking too many bones.

"You monsteeeeer!"

Ayase summoned Hizume to her side and charged at Kuraudo. However, Kuraudo grabbed her arm before she could take a single swing and lifted her into the air.

"Calm your tits, girl. I'm not interested in fighting a weakling like you," he said.

"Get your hands off me! Let me go!"

"Besides, don't you have something more important to take care of than fighting me?" Kuraudo asked, then threw Ayase onto Kaito's limp body.

"Ngh!" Upon looking down at her father again, Ayase recalled what her priority was. "Sugawara-san! Call an ambulance! Right now!"

"O-Okay!"

Ayase's words snapped Sugawara out of his stupor, and he hurriedly pulled

out his phone. Meanwhile, Ayase turned back to her father and tried to stabilize his condition as best she could. Kuraudo spared the two of them one last uninterested glance, then walked out of the dojo.

“Get your stuff out of here by tomorrow. This place belongs to me now, don’t you forget it,” he said as he left.

Ayase bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, but she said nothing. Just then, Kaito let out a raspy gasp and said, “I’m...sorry...”

“Dad!”

Kaito continued softly mumbling apologies, but his eyes remained closed.



On that day two years ago, Ayase had lost everything. Kuraudo had taken the dojo, and since then, she hadn’t seen her father’s other disciples even once. Kaito had slipped into a coma due to his injuries as well, and he showed no signs of waking up. His consciousness was still trapped in the hellish day of his defeat. As he slept, he continued to mutter “I’m sorry” over and over. He hadn’t been able to protect his disciples, and the Ayatsuji Sword Style he’d intended to pass onto Ayase had been stolen from him along with his dojo.

Dad might not make it to the end of the year...

The doctor had told Ayase as much. She’d been prepared for his death from the moment she’d learned that his heart condition was terminal, but she couldn’t stand to let him pass away while he was still trapped in an eternal nightmare. That was the one thing she refused to let happen.

She’d challenged the dojo’s new owner, Kuraudo, to duels countless times over the past two years in order to reclaim the dojo her father had risked his life to try to protect. However, it was impossible for her to defeat someone even her father had lost to. Not that she’d even been given the chance to try. Kuraudo had treated Ayase like a mouse he was toying with, finding excuses to refuse her challenges and coming up with unreasonable conditions for her to meet if she wanted to fight him. At first, he’d enjoyed showing off how unsightly her desperate demands for a duel were to his friends and turned her into a laughingstock. Eventually, though, he’d gotten bored, and now, he just

turned her away immediately. The only way Ayase would even get a chance to fight Kuraudo was if she participated in the Seven Stars Battle Festival and fought him there.

Since both she and Kuraudo were third-years, there was only one Seven Stars Battle Festival left for them to fight in. On top of that, there was the possibility that her father wouldn't even survive to see the next year, so this upcoming one would be her last chance. If she failed to beat Kuraudo, her father would forever be trapped in the darkness of his defeat.

She refused to let him die like that. That was why she would do whatever it took to win and earn her spot as one of Hagun Academy's representatives. Results were all that mattered. She knew that what she was doing wasn't right, but she didn't believe it was wrong either. If someone weak needed to beat someone strong no matter what, they couldn't afford to fight fair and square. It was harsh, but that was reality.

"I'll reclaim my dojo no matter what. Even if it means Kurogane-kun hates me for the rest of his life," Ayase said to her comatose father. All she wanted was to make it so he no longer had to apologize.

As she looked down at Kaito, she reaffirmed her resolve. The path she had chosen was not a righteous one, but she would waver no longer. It didn't matter if it came at the cost of her dignity—of her honor as a knight. She would win no matter what it took and get her dojo back. That was all that mattered to Ayatsuji Ayase.



"Sorry for the wait, everyone! It's finally time for the first match at the sixth training field! I'm Isogai, a third-year with the broadcasting club, and I'll be your announcer for this match! We also have the homeroom teacher for class 1-1, Oreki Yuuri, here to provide some deeper analysis! You look surprisingly energetic today, Oreki-sensei!"

"It's only the first match, so I've got some stamina left in me. By the third match, I'll be the pale-faced Yuri-chan everyone knows and loves, coughing up blood everywhere. Don't worry, though, kids, I brought some extra blood transfusion packs to get me through the day!"

“I guess that means today’s matches are going to be quite bloody, eh? Okay, enough bad jokes, let’s introduce our combatants!” the announcer shouted excitedly. “Coming out of the blue corner is the Rank F everyone’s been raving about, first-year Kurogane Ikki! So far, he boasts a perfect ten-win record!”

Ikki had built up quite a fan base among a subset of female students, and they burst into cheers as the Worst One made his entrance.

“Wow! That’s a lot of cheering! Looks like Kurogane’s gotten pretty popular!” the announcer said.

“He sure has a lot of female fans,” Oreki added.

“He’s got a real underdog story going for him, considering he’s still Rank F despite being so strong. I can see why he’s built up a fan base!”

“Having spent time with him as his teacher, his popularity doesn’t really surprise me.”

“Just a few weeks ago, he was a no-name dropout who’d had to repeat a year, but now that Hagun Academy’s management has changed, the Worst One has finally been given a chance to show off his real strength! With how honed his combat senses are, it wouldn’t come as much of a shock if he ended up being one of our school’s representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival! But enough about Kurogane! Coming out of the red corner, we have his opponent, another combatant who’s racked up ten wins in a row—the Rank D third-year, Ayatsuji Ayase!”

Ayase appeared a few seconds after Ikki, her long black hair flowing in the wind.

“In an odd twist of fate, she’s trained in swordsmanship as well, just like Kurogane,” the announcer continued. “In fact, she’s won all of her matches so far on the strength of her swordsmanship alone! According to the Hagun Academy newspaper club’s Kusakabe Kagami-san, she even took lessons in swordsmanship from Kurogane! In other words, today’s match will be a battle between master and disciple! Will the student manage to surpass her teacher in the coming battle, or will Kurogane emerge victorious once more?!”

“*Cough, cough.* Today’s battle is going to be a tough one for Ayatsuji-san,”

Oreki said.

“Indeed. Unlike Kurogane, who’s been matched up against dangerous foes like the Hunter or Runner’s High, Ayatsuji has only fought Rank E knights thus far. Her ten consecutive victories are due at least in part to the fact that she’s been lucky enough to have only fought weak opponents.”

“What kind of Blazer is she?”

“Unfortunately, we have very little information on Ayatsuji. She didn’t participate in any official matches in the past two years, and as I mentioned earlier, she’s defeated all of her previous opponents in the qualifiers with swordsmanship alone, so we haven’t seen what her Blazer abilities are. Perhaps that hidden trump card will be what lets her overcome Kurogane! Now then, it looks like both fighters have reached their starting positions!”

Ayase and Ikki were standing in the center of the hundred-meter-wide arena, about twenty meters apart from each other. As the announcer had mentioned, the two of them had spent some time training together. But the two of them weren’t looking at each other like they were good friends.

That’s quite a bloodcurdling expression, Ayase mused as she looked Ikki in the eyes.

Indeed, Ikki looked grimmer and more foreboding than she’d ever seen him. He was obviously mad at her. After all, this kind of underhanded trick was considered an unbelievably shameful act among martial artists. However, Ayase didn’t regret her actions. She’d resolved to go down this path no matter the cost.

If anything, this might work in my favor.

Ikki hadn’t had enough time to regenerate all of his mana, meaning he wouldn’t be able to use Ittou Shura. Furthermore, it was clear that he was tenser than normal, likely because he was letting his emotions cloud his judgment. Even Ayase could tell that his stance was a little off. If he was too angry to keep his cool, he wouldn’t be able to fight at peak efficiency.

Because Ikki was far stronger than her, she had to do everything in her power to bridge that gap in some way. That being the case, Ikki being mad worked out

for her. Especially since she'd laid a trap for him in this arena. She had come here at midnight before the match to set it up.

If he's lost his cool, he might actually fall for my trap.

"All right, everyone, say it with me! Let's go ahead!"



The buzzer signaling the start of the battle went off, and Ikki immediately sprinted toward Ayase. He kept his body low and used the strength of all of his muscles to propel him, not just his legs. Ayase could tell he was trying to end this as quickly as possible. She hadn't even brought Hizume up, which meant she wouldn't be able to block his first swing. But that was only if she treated this like a battle between regular swordsmen. The two of them were Blazers!

"You fell for it!" Ayase shouted, and Hizume began to glow red. A second later, blood spurted from various cuts that suddenly appeared on Ikki's body.

"Gaaah!" Ikki screamed in pain and slowed down considerably.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What on earth was that?!" the announcer exclaimed. "Kurogane suddenly got sliced to ribbons! How did Ayatsuji do that?!"

"I-Ikki-kun?!" one of Ikki's fans cried, worried.

"What?! How did the Worst One get cut like that?!" another shocked spectator asked.

No one watching was able to figure out what exactly Ayase had done. However, it was clear it wouldn't have been possible without a Blazer's powers, meaning it had to have been a Noble Art.

My ability lets me reopen any cut that I made with Hizume.

That meant even the smallest scratch could become a bone-deep cut through repeated application of her power. And that was just what it did to people.

Ayase's ability functioned on anything, including the air itself. Any cut she made on the empty air could be reopened whenever she wanted, creating a small vacuum that cut anything occupying that space at that moment. She'd dubbed this Noble Art "Windscar." Before her meeting with Ikki, she had come here and made a bunch of empty slashes with Hizume all around the sixth

training field, turning it into a minefield.

I've made over a hundred scars all over the arena. It doesn't matter how good you are at seeing through people, Kurogane-kun! You won't be able to stop attacks you can't see! And look, you already fell into my trap once.

This was, of course, against selection match rules. It would have been fine if she'd set up this minefield during the match, but laying traps beforehand was not allowed. Even so, because her vacuum cuts were invisible, it was extremely difficult for anyone to figure out what she was doing. She'd been worried a skilled Blazer like Oreki might be able to see through her trick, but so far, she hadn't tried to stop the match.

I can get away with this! Ayase cheered to herself. If she'd managed to outwit Oreki, she was confident no one would realize she was cheating.

The cuts made by Windscar's vacuums were a byproduct of her power, not a direct result of it. That meant she couldn't deepen cuts made with them. Moreover, the cuts themselves were quite shallow since the vacuums weren't very big. However, if she landed even a single glancing blow on Ikki with Hizume, her victory was assured. As long as she had a cut of any kind to work with, she could keep reopening it until it reached bone, making it a debilitating injury. Ayase's plan was to wear Ikki down with Windscar, then land a single hit on him directly with Hizume.

As long as I can do that, I'll win!

The question was, when should she go in for the decisive blow? Ikki was a superb swordsman. Having studied under him for a few days, Ayase understood that better than anyone. If she misjudged her timing, *she'd* be the one getting cut down. Her earlier surprise attack had managed to stop Ikki in his tracks, but it hadn't actually weakened him in any meaningful sense. His stance was steady, and he was ready to counter anything she threw at him.

Not yet. I won't be able to beat him in an exchange yet. Besides, if I don't make a move, Kurogane-kun will definitely disengage.

His charge had been stopped and he'd been cut up. He likely wanted to back off and reorient himself.

“Oho, it looks like Kurogane is backstepping away! I imagine he wants to regroup and figure out the secret behind Ayatsuji’s magical slashes before committing to another attack!” the announcer explained.

Got you!

“Gah?!”

“What the?! This time, Kurogane was cut from behind! Just what is Ayatsuji’s Blazer power?!”

Ayase had perfectly crafted a prison of ghost slashes she could turn into vacuums at any moment. No matter where Ikki went, he was trapped.

After being slashed from behind, Ikki dropped to one knee. That was the opening Ayase had been looking for.

Now’s my chance! She wasn’t sure she’d get an opportunity like this again, so she immediately charged forward.

“Kurogane’s on his knees! And it looks like Ayatsuji’s pressing the attack! This isn’t looking good! Kurogane won’t be able to make use of his swordsmanship if he’s not on his feet!”

Ayase could have just used her ghost slash prison to slowly whittle Ikki down until he was completely exhausted. It was fear that had driven her to try to end the match this quickly.

Kurogane-kun managed to beat the Hunter, after all.

Not only had Ikki beaten Kirihara, but he’d done so despite being gravely injured and without actually seeing through the Hunter’s Area Invisible. To the very end, Ikki had been unable to see Kirihara, yet he’d still figured out where Kirihara was hiding and defeated him. His powers of observation were truly terrifying. Ayase wouldn’t be surprised if he managed to figure out the location of her Windscar traps just by observing her.

Normally, something like that would be impossible, but she wouldn’t put it past Ikki. That was just the kind of guy he was. While a protracted battle had initially seemed like it was in Ayase’s favor, if Ikki managed to get his emotions under control, she was the one who’d be in danger. Ikki’s true strength didn’t

lie in his superb swordsmanship or honed physical abilities, but in his ungodly powers of observation and unflappable mental fortitude.

That's why I need to land a hit on him now! It's fine even if it's just a scratch, but this is my only chance to get him!

"Haaaaah!"

"Ayatsuji's going for the kill! Look at that ferocious shower of blows! Kurogane's blocking them for now, but it looks like that's all he can manage while on his knees! Is he going to be able to weather this attack, or will Ayatsuji manage to overpower him?!"

Isogai continued giving the play-by-play.

"Wow! Even with his disadvantageous footing, it seems like Kurogane's blocks are getting steadier and steadier! Intetsu is an impregnable fortress, not letting a single one of Ayatsuji's slashes through!"

Ngh!

All Ayase needed was a single scratch, but none of her attacks could reach Ikki. Despite being on one knee, Ikki was managing to ward off her slashes with just a few deft flicks of his wrist. She could see why the nickname "Uncrowned Blade Master" was slowly catching on; his swordsmanship truly was something else. Even as he fended off Ayase's flurry of blows, he managed to find an opening and get back on his feet.

"Hah!"

"Wow! After weathering Ayatsuji's ferocious assault, Kurogane's back on his feet! And now, he's going on the offensive!"

Ikki raised Intetsu high and swung down with all his might. It was a surprisingly haphazard slash that relied more on power than finesse, but Ikki had a reason for starting with such a basic attack.

The announcer might have believed as much, but this was not a counterattack. Having to block while on his knees had messed up his internal rhythm, and now that he'd regained his footing, this attack was meant to give him some breathing room to get his rhythm back. It was slow, but it was heavy

too. If Ayase dodged, that would give him some space, and if she tried to block, he'd be able to bat her away and secure some space. Either way, it would work out for him.

However, Ayase was able to see through his plan.

Not so fast!

If Ikki still hadn't gotten his rhythm back, this was a perfect opportunity for her to get her one hit in. The Ayatsuji Sword style specialized in counters, and countering a sloppy blow was what Ayase excelled at.

If Kurogane-kun was in top form, I wouldn't be able to counter any of his attacks. But this swing has no technique behind it! Normally, Ikki's slashes were too polished and controlled to counter. Attempting to do so would just lead to Ayase getting hit. This, though, was nothing more than an empty threat that Ikki was throwing out to put some distance between them. Sure, there was force behind the blow itself, but it wasn't the least bit intimidating. *I can counter something like this!*

Ayase held Hizume up at an angle and expertly parried Ikki's powerful swing. As Intetsu slid off her angled blade, she gathered her strength in her toes and pushed herself forward. Ikki was knocked off-balance since all of his power had been redirected, and Ayase swung Hizume at his exposed flank.

You're mine! But to her surprise, Ayase felt Hizume slam into something hard and unyielding instead of soft flesh. *He blocked that?! But how?!* She'd redirected Intetsu to the outside, meaning Ikki shouldn't have been able to bring it back in time to block. Looking down, she saw that Ikki had blocked not with his sword's blade, but rather its hilt.

"What a move! Ayatsuji thought she'd managed to counter Kurogane's swing, but he blocked her counter with his hilt! That's some quick thinking!" the announcer cried.

"Kurogane-kun did something similar when he fought Stella-chan," Oreki noted. "If you can't block with the blade, block with the hilt instead. Kurogane-kun's double-layered defense is exceptionally hard to break through."

Argh! I totally forgot Kurogane-kun could pull off unorthodox blocks like these!

Ayase wanted to scream. Ikki's focus was unshakable. *But wait, how can he be so focused if he's lost himself to anger? Unless—*

“Ah!”

Ayase stole a glance at Ikki's face and gasped. There wasn't a trace of the fury he'd initially shown. He was looking at her with calm, collected eyes, carefully analyzing her every move and not letting so much as a twitch slip past him.

Did he just look angry at the start to bait me?!

A chill ran down Ayase's spine. She immediately leaped backward, putting a good deal of distance between her and Ikki. She'd been expecting an immediate follow-up attack from Ikki, but he made no move to chase after her. He just quietly stood there, watching her.

Did I misread him? Either way, I need to rethink my plans. She still had plenty of Windscar traps set up. Though she didn't want to drag this fight out, rushing to end things was liable to cause her to lose. This called for a more cautious approach.

“Thank god,” Ikki said suddenly, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Huh?” Ayase had no idea what he was referring to. *Is he glad I put some distance between us again?*

“I'm glad to see you're exactly the kind of person I thought you were, Ayatsuji-san.”

Ikki smiled, and Ayase's mind went blank.



Upon hearing Ikki's words, Oreki Yuuri, the teacher who was analyzing and officiating his match, smiled. She'd called him in at the start of the school day to hear why he'd damaged school property.

“Sensei, during the match you're going to be officiating, my opponent is going to cheat,” he started by saying.

“Bwuuurgh?!” She spit out her coffee, spluttering so hard that she gave herself a nosebleed. “Um, what?! I'm going to take care of this nosebleed, but in the meantime, please explain what you mean!”

Ikki went on to explain everything that Ayase had said to him last night, and that she'd tried to kill herself by jumping off the roof, so Ikki had been forced to use Ittou Shura and damage the school building to save her.

"A-Are you serious?" Oreki asked. If what Ikki had said was true, she was obligated to punish Ayase. The girl wouldn't be expelled for her actions, but she would definitely be disqualified from participating in any more selection matches. "B-But how do you know she's going to try and cheat during the match?"

"When she cut the fence, she didn't actually swing her sword, but I still heard the sound of two sword slashes. Based on that, while I'm not sure exactly how she does it, I think it's safe to assume Ayatsuji-san's power has something to do with freely being able to create slashes anywhere, or perhaps recreating old slashes. In that case, she's almost certainly set up multiple traps in the sixth training field where we'll be fighting. She attempted suicide just to seal Ittou Shura, so she's definitely going to try everything she can to win *during* the match too."

"It's true that someone who'd go to such lengths won't play fair in a match, but, hmm... If she truly attempted suicide just to hamper your chances in the upcoming match, that's a big deal."

"But my word alone isn't proof, is that it?"

"Pretty much. I trust you, Kurogane-kun, but a verbal accusation alone isn't enough to get a match canceled. Thank you for telling me, though. I'll keep an eye out during the match. If I catch her cheating, I'll suspend the match immediately. So don't you worry. You just—"

"Actually, I wanted to ask you to do the opposite. Don't stop the match even if you catch her cheating."

Oreki was so shocked that blood started spurting from her nose once more. The blood loss was enough to make her dizzy, and she staggered a little as she got up and grabbed more tissues to plug her nose with.

"What on earth are you saying, Kurogane-kun? If you don't want me to stop the match, why did you tell me all this?"



“I mean, you asked me why I damaged the school building, so I had to explain the situation. Besides, knowing you, Oreki-sensei, even if I hadn’t said anything, you probably would’ve noticed Ayatsuji-san cheating. And then you would’ve stopped the match. I don’t want you to do that.”

“But why?! If she gets disqualified for cheating, it’ll be your victory! Surely you’ve realized by now how important it is to rack up as many victories as possible.”

“I have. From the looks of it, only those who go undefeated will be chosen as representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

“That’s right. I’m going to be blunt, that’s basically the director’s criteria. Do you really want me not to stop the match despite that?”

“Yes. Please, Sensei.”

Oreki didn’t understand what was going through Ikki’s head. He craved victory more than anyone else. She’d known him since he took Hagun Academy’s entrance exam. In fact, she’d been his examiner.

Ikki was the most motivated prospective student she’d ever seen. It pained her heart to know he’d lost a year because of how despicable the adults around him were. And now that he’d finally been given a fair chance, she’d expected him to do everything in his power to rack up as many wins as possible. Yet there he’d been, bowing his head and asking her not to disqualify his opponent despite the fact that she was about to commit the greatest sin a knight could.

“Can you at least tell me why?”

“Because I want to believe.”

“Believe what?”

“Ever since I met with Ayatsuji-san last night, I’ve been thinking. I could do what Alice advised me to and cut all ties with her. I could let her get disqualified for cheating and guarantee my victory. But I’m not sure that’s the right thing to do. Even after thinking about it all this time, I’m still not certain, but there is one thing I’ve come to realize.”

“And that is?”

“I don’t want this to be the end of our friendship. That being the case, the only thing I can do is continue to believe in her until the very end. Believe that this isn’t who she truly is, and that she’s been driven to such drastic measures for a good reason.”

Ikki had seen the pure, childlike delight on Ayase’s face when she’d gotten a bit closer to mastering her father’s swordsmanship. He remembered how she’d said she liked his rough, callused hands. He refused to accept that all of that had been a lie.

“That’s why I decided to trust that the real her isn’t the side of her I saw last night, but the person I came to know in the past few days.”

Desperate people did desperate things. In doing so, they often lost sight of themselves. Ikki had experienced that himself, so he understood it very well. When people were stuck in that rut, the only thing that could break them out was help from a third party—one who cared about them. If Ayase was feeling as desperate and helpless as Ikki had been when Stella had saved him, then she definitely couldn’t hear the screams of her own heart either.

“I want to help her. So please, Sensei. Give me one last chance to determine for myself who she truly is.”

Sheesh. You can’t call yourself a knight if you refuse a request like that.

To always be sincere even to your opponents was what an ideal knight should strive to do. Oreki believed that as well, which was why she’d granted Ikki’s request.

She had, in fact, realized how exactly Ayase had cheated the moment Ayase had used her first Windscar, but she hadn’t called for the match to be stopped. She’d decided to entrust the girl’s fate to the hands of her friend Kurogane Ikki. Thus, she watched on quietly, knowing that interfering would mean slighting her proud pupil’s resolve.

Be sure to save your friend, Kurogane-kun.



From the start, everything had been going according to Ikki’s plan. He’d known Ayase had set up traps all over the arena, and he’d also known that

she'd try to end things quickly because she was afraid of a long, drawn-out duel. He'd purposely thrown himself into her traps to lure her into attacking, all so he could communicate with her through swordsmanship.

I should have just done this from the start.

Ikki couldn't believe how stupid he'd been. He was so dense that it had taken him an entire month to realize what his girlfriend had been thinking. It was utter folly to believe he could have understood Ayase just by talking to her.

In the end, it was through the sword that he communicated best. It was only through the sword that he could see through to a person's true nature. And now, he'd caught a glimpse of Ayase's.

"Thank god. I'm glad to see you're exactly the kind of person I thought you were, Ayatsuji-san."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that you can't help but feel guilty after doing something you think is wrong."

"And here I thought you'd finally learned. Aha ha ha. I can't believe you'd say that after I've cut you up so badly. There *is* such a thing as being too nice for your own good. You know that, right?" Ayase gave Ikki the same cold sneer she had on the rooftop last night.

"I'm saying it because it's true." That fake sneer failed to faze Ikki. After all, a person's swordsmanship didn't lie. "Your attacks, your footwork, your rhythm, and even your breathing are all messed up. Forget what I taught you, you're not even making use of the techniques you learned before you met me. Even your prized counter was unbelievably sloppy. That's why I was able to block it so easily. No matter how much you try and act like you were bad all along, you can't fool me. You're honest to the bone."

Ikki went on.

"Mind, body, and technique. You need to master all three to become a true swordsman. With your mind in such disarray, you can't even bring out half of your real strength. Ayatsuji-san, you're a more honorable person than you realize."

“Th-That’s not true!” Ayase’s voice went up a few octaves. “I’m not wavering in the slightest! I realized two years ago that no matter how honorably you fight, if you lose, you still lose everything! Honor and dignity are meaningless if you don’t have the strength to protect them! Your ideals are meaningless if you can’t produce results! That’s why I’ll win at all costs and reclaim what was stolen from me!”

It sounded to Ikki like she was trying to convince herself more than she was trying to convince him. In her desperation, she’d closed her ears to the cries of her heart. What she was doing was no different than what he’d done when fighting Kirihara.

“In that case, there’s only one thing for me to do.” It was Ikki’s job to open her ears and let her hear those cries. He pointed Intetsu at Ayase and declared, “Using everything I have, I will restore your honor!”



“It looks like Kurogane’s getting ready to charge again!” the announcer shouted. “He doesn’t seem scared of those invisible slashes anymore! Has he figured out the trick behind them?! Or does he just think he can end this match quickly enough that it doesn’t matter?!”

Ayase immediately took another few steps back to widen the gap between them. But while she appeared outwardly calm, her thoughts were a mess.

I don’t really believe what I’m saying? Ha! As if! Ayase refused to believe that was true. I have to go this far to get my dojo back and put Dad at ease! My resolve won’t waver! No matter what Kurogane-kun says, I’m not deceiving myself! Actually, he’s probably just saying that to mess with me! Ayase kept telling herself that to avoid having to think too deeply about her feelings. Besides, even if part of me does think this is wrong, I still need to win!

There were now thirty meters separating Ayase and Ikki. Windscar traps had been set up throughout that entire length. Ayase already had a good idea of Ikki’s top running speed, and she was ready to activate the next set to hit his vitals.

“Here I come, Ayatsuji-san,” Ikki said, then leaned forward and began sprinting.

Now!

Immediately, Ayase used Hizume to activate the Windscars she'd left right in front of where Ikki was. The vacuums created by her phantom cuts were primed to slice through his neck.

"Wha—"

But to Ayase's surprise, Ikki moved far faster than she'd anticipated, passing through her Windscars before the vacuums could form. His speed was on par with when he was using Ittou Shura.

"That speed never ceases to amaze me! It looks like Kurogane's finally activated his trump card, Ittou Shura!" Isogai announced.

B-But how?! I saw him use it last night!

"No, that isn't Ittou Shura," Oreki explained, her commentary helping to clear up Ayase's confusion.

"Huh? What do you mean, Oreki-sensei?"

"He's simply using mana to propel himself forward like everyone else does."

I forgot about that!

At that moment, Ayase realized how shallow her plan had been. By expelling mana from one's body, a Blazer could accelerate to inhuman speeds. It was a very basic form of body strengthening that pretty much all Blazers could do by default, including Ayase.

"Kurogane-kun has an exceptionally small mana pool, so he doesn't normally use mana for propulsion. He'd run out after one or two uses if he did. But just because he *doesn't* use that technique doesn't mean he *can't*. It seems that, for whatever reason, he can't use Ittou Shura right now, so he's decided to use what mana he has for acceleration instead."

Just as Oreki had said, there was a difference between "doesn't" and "can't." Ikki rarely used techniques that involved mana because his mana pool was so low. However, since he hadn't recovered enough mana to use Ittou Shura again, there was no reason for him to conserve what little he *had* regained, so he'd used it to speed himself up. That was allowing him to go as fast as he did when

using Ittou Shura, though only just this once.

I'd been so focused on Ittou Shura that I'd forgotten he could use mana on other things!

Due to Ayase's fatal mistake, Ikki had already closed enough of the distance between them that she wouldn't be able to activate any of her Windscars in time. He'd seen right through her.

But it's not over yet! Ikki was in striking range now, which meant she'd be forced to cross swords with him, possibly for more than one bout. As long as she could survive one slash, though, she'd be able to widen the gap between them again. And this time, he wouldn't be able to surprise her because he'd be out of mana. All she had to do was block his attack, or at least blunt it enough that it didn't incapacitate her. *If I can just hang on, then I'll be able to make a comeback!*

With a spirited battle cry, Ayase swung Hizume down at Ikki, hoping to force a response. But to her surprise, her blade sliced through empty air.

"What?!" She'd been certain Ikki was right in front of her, and yet her sword had passed harmlessly in front of Ikki. *Did I misjudge the distance between us? No, that can't be right. He was definitely in range!*

As she watched, the Ikki she thought she'd cut vanished in a misty haze, and another Ikki appeared behind it. Ayase could not comprehend what she was seeing, and her mind went completely blank. Her confusion was understandable, as Ikki had used one of the seven original techniques he'd developed himself. By using exceptionally advanced footwork, he'd created an afterimage that had seemed like it was running ahead of him rather than behind him.

"Fourth Sword Style: Flicker Mirage."

Ayase was defenseless after missing her attack, and Ikki swiftly swung Intetsu up at her.



"He does it agaiiin! That's a clean hit from Kurogane!" the announcer declared, and the spectators exploded into cheers. "Ayatsuji's on her knees! But

wait, she's not bleeding! Could Kurogane have..."

"*Cough, cough.* Yes, he swapped his Device into phantom form the moment he cut through her."

"So all he did was sap her energy and not actually deal a finishing blow?"

"Correct."

"But why would he do that? Does he have some credo about not harming women or something?"

"Definitely not. He didn't hesitate to cut me when we fought once before. I suspect he was aiming to sap her stamina from the very beginning. His goal in this battle is more than just victory, after all."

Oreki muttered the last sentence quietly enough that it wasn't picked up by her mic. She looked down at the ring and watched Ayase put her hands on the ground and try to raise herself back onto her feet.

Trembling, Ayase glared up at Ikki and asked, "What are you playing at?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb! Why didn't you cut me?!"

"Because I didn't need to. You already can't fight anymore."

Are you trying to humiliate me to get back at me?!

Furious, Ayase put as much strength into her arms and legs as she could. Since she'd been cut by a Device in phantom form, her body was unscathed. It was true that she'd lost some of her stamina, but she'd been training in swordsmanship since she was young. She had far more stamina than the average Mage-Knight, and as a matter of fact, she could keep up with Ikki and Stella on their morning jogs. A little exhaustion wouldn't be enough to knock her out of this fight.

"Huh?"

Despite her having a lot of energy left, she couldn't seem to direct any of it into her muscles.

"Why..." If she didn't get up, if she didn't win this match, she'd lose

everything for good. Even though her father's fate depended on her, she couldn't muster the strength to stand up again.

Do I care that little about my dad?

No matter how much she berated herself, she couldn't reignite her resolve to keep fighting. At that moment, she realized that deep down, she was repulsed by the idea of continuing this disgraceful match any longer. The very core of her being was rebelling against the actions she'd taken to set up this unfair match.

I see... So this is how I truly feel...

When people were backed into a corner, only those who believed in something could find the strength to keep going. Until now, Ayase had easily been able to push herself whenever things had looked tough. No matter how harsh her father's training had gotten, she'd kept swinging her sword until her hands were raw and bloody. She'd been able to do that because she'd been proud of what the Ayatsuji Sword Style stood for and believed in the ideals it espoused. That, in turn, had given her the strength to believe in herself. But now that she'd gone against those ideals, the foundation that supported her resolve had crumbled.

"You're right, Kurogane-kun." She really didn't have the strength to get back up. "I've lost."



"Wow! It looks like Ayatsuji is throwing in the towel! That's the end of the match! Kurogane has racked up yet another win, making for eleven straight victories! He's defeated some big names to get there too, like the Hunter and Runner's High! It's almost guaranteed that he'll be one of our representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival now!"

Ayase smiled sadly as she looked at the cheering crowd.

"I'm so pathetic. I didn't have what it takes to throw away my principles, but I didn't have the resolve to stick to them either," she said. She couldn't stand how half-assed she'd been about everything.

"That's not true at all," Ikki stated firmly.

“Huh?”

“It’s true that you made mistakes, and for a while, you lost sight of yourself. But at the end of it all, you still hadn’t thrown those principles away. That’s not a flaw, it’s something to be proud of.” He held a hand out to Ayase. “Ayatsujisan, please tell me, what is it that the Sword Eater stole from you? What drove you to such drastic measures?”

“What will you do when you find out?”

“I’ll get whatever it was back for you.”

There wasn’t the slightest bit of hesitation in Ikki’s voice. Ayase knew without a doubt that if she told him, he would fight Kuraudo on her behalf. And it was precisely because she realized this that she couldn’t tell him.

“No. This has nothing to do with you, Kurogane-kun.”

She couldn’t let Ikki fight that monster. She didn’t want to see the kind boy who’d already done so much for her get hurt for her sake. Especially not when she’d been so wishy-washy.

It’s bad enough that Dad had to suffer at his hands. I don’t want that to happen to anyone else. Ayase pursed her lips, making it clear that she wouldn’t be swayed.

“Fine,” Ikki said, “then I’ll just investigate it on my own.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll tail you day and night and ask everyone who has even the slightest connection to you what they know.”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’ll find out for myself, and then I’ll steal everything back for you. Since you stalked me before, it’s only fair that I stalk you back. You don’t have any complaints about that, right?”

There’s nothing fair about that at all! You’ll just be helping me again!

“Why...” Ayase’s voice shook, and tears started spilling from her eyes. “I betrayed you, Kurogane-kun. I did something horrible to you, so why? Why are

you still trying to help me?”

Ikki looked her in the eyes and said simply, “If a friend of mine is crying, do I need a reason to want to help them?”

Ayase gasped in surprise. In that moment, Ikki reminded her very much of her father, Kaito the Last Samurai. Kaito had worn the exact same expression when he’d stood up to fight for the sake of his injured disciples. And like Kaito, Ikki didn’t draw his sword if someone insulted him or spat in his face. If someone hurt those close to him, however, he wouldn’t hesitate.

How could I have forgotten?

At some point, Ayase had lost sight of the fact that *this* was why she’d admired her father so much and why she’d trained so hard to become more like him. She looked down at her hands. They were covered in rough calluses and by no means pretty. They were the rough hands of a swordsman—the same hands as her father’s and Ikki’s.

That’s right. I picked up the sword because I wanted to be a cool swordsman like my dad.

She’d been so caught up in trying to reclaim her dojo that she’d forgotten why she’d started practicing in that dojo in the first place. Kuraudo’s might had been so overwhelming that she’d convinced herself she needed to do whatever it took to win. But now, she’d finally remembered what it was she believed in, and she balled her hands into fists. She had made her decision.

“Kurogane-kun...please help me!”

This was no time to be turning back on her father’s teachings, on her beliefs, and pretending she was the tragic heroine of some soap opera. If she truly wanted her dojo back, she needed to ask her strong, far too kind friend for help and trust that he would emerge victorious. Thus, Ayase took Ikki’s outstretched hand.

“That’s just what I wanted to hear,” Ikki said with a smile, then gave her hand a firm squeeze.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Tomaru Renren

■PROFILE

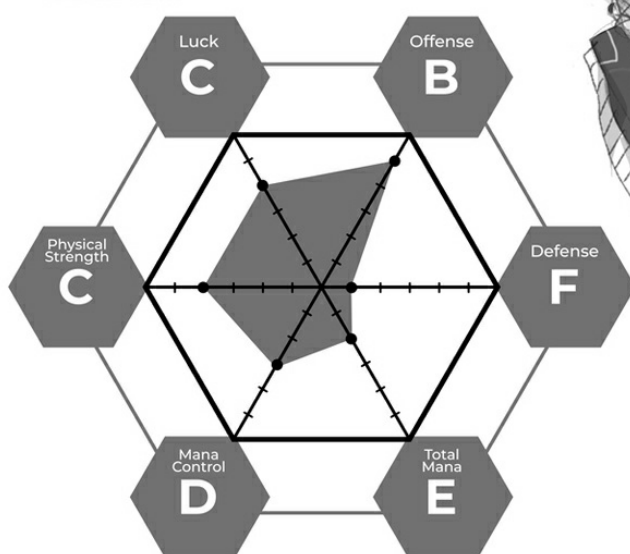
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 2-2

Blazer Rank: C

Noble Art: Mach Greed

Nickname: Runner's High

Summary: Head of general affairs for the student council.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

"Looks like she actually got such a runner's high that she forgot how to fight."

Toutokubara: "She's the weakest of the student council members."

Toudou: "She's a disgrace to the student council, losing to the Worst One so easily."

Kusakabe: "I made all that up."

Chapter 4: Showdown! Worst One vs. Sword Eater

Late that night, Ikki went to the forest clearing he and the others usually used for training. Under the pale moonlight, he materialized Intetsu and started going through some forms. There was no wind, so the only noise was that of his blade slicing through the air. His swordplay was beautiful; it looked almost as much like a dance as it did a martial arts form. After a few minutes, though, he suddenly stopped and turned around.

“Is that you, Stella?” he asked, wiping sweat off of his brow.

Stella stepped out of the shadow of the trees, her fiery hair clearly visible even in the dim light. She frowned at Ikki and said, “You’re still here? If you don’t stop soon, you won’t get enough sleep for your duel tomorrow.”

The duel she was talking about was the one he was planning on challenging Kuraudo to. After Ikki’s match with Ayase, she’d explained to him and Stella what had happened two years ago. She’d told them everything, going into painful detail about how her father, Ayatsuji Kaito, had been defeated.

Once he’d learned the truth, Ikki had promised to challenge Kuraudo to a duel and try to win the dojo back. Tomorrow’s fight would likely be a far tougher one than his match with Ayase had been. Accordingly, it would be best if Ikki turned in early so he could be in tip-top shape for the battle. Ikki understood that as well, but he was too nervous to sleep.

“Was it that much of a shock?” Stella said, curious.

“Yeah,” Ikki replied. “Kaito-san was someone I really looked up to.”

None of the adults in the Kurogane family had been willing to help Ikki, so famous master swordsmen like Kaito had been his true teachers in a sense. Ikki had seen as many of their matches as he could and devoted himself to analyzing their movements and techniques so he could replicate them. They were the

foundation from which he'd built up his own swordsmanship.

That was why Ayase's story had shaken him so deeply. While Kaito might have been weakened due to his illness, it was still unbelievable that he'd been beaten so one-sidedly. Especially in a duel where magic use had been forbidden, making swordsmanship all that had mattered.

"Kurashiki-kun must be one hell of a guy if he managed to beat him," Ikki mused.

"Feeling nervous?" Stella asked.

"With who I'm up against, it's hard not to."

Kurashiki Kuraudo was Donrou Academy's best fighter. He had made it all the way to the quarterfinals in last year's Seven Stars Battle Festival. In fact, he was famous enough that Ikki had been able to dig up a lot of information on him from just a cursory online search.

His Device, Orochimaru, could freely expand and contract thanks to his unique power, allowing him to fight effectively at both close and long range. When his opponents were far away, he would extend his sword at lightning speed, and even if they dodged his initial jab, he'd continue to hound them to the far corners of the ring. If they ever closed the distance against him, he'd shorten Orochimaru to the length of a shortsword and overwhelm them with a series of quick slashes. It left him with no blind spots when it came to swordplay and allowed him to strike opponents at any range.

While this ability, which he'd dubbed "Skull Serpent's Blade," wasn't particularly flashy, it was quite powerful. It would be especially tricky for someone like Ikki, who relied primarily on swordsmanship to win fights, to deal with. In fact, it was what had earned Kuraudo the nickname "Sword Eater." He truly was the bane of swordsmen everywhere. But even so, the fact that he had defeated Kaito in a duel where magic hadn't been allowed meant there was more to him than just Skull Serpent's Blade.

"Though I guess I knew from the start that this wouldn't be easy," Ikki said with a shrug. When he'd first seen Kuraudo at the restaurant, he'd immediately realized that the man was no ordinary Blazer. However, that wasn't what was making Ikki so nervous. "Hey, Stella. When you heard Ayatsuji-san's story, what

did you think?”

“I felt sorry for her, having her life ruined by that rabid dog.”

“Was that all, though? I—”

“It’s okay, you don’t need to say it,” Stella muttered. “I’m pretty sure I was thinking the same thing as you. It’s why I only felt sorry for *her*—no one else.”

“I see. I guess I should’ve known you’d figure it out too.” Ikki smiled at her. It made him happy that she could read his mind so well, and that she felt the same way.

“But you don’t care what the truth is, do you, Ikki? It doesn’t change what you need to do.”

“Yeah, you’re absolutely right.”

Nodding, Ikki returned to practicing his forms. Both his body and mind were in perfect condition. All that remained was to see if it would be enough to beat Kuraudo. Win or lose, though, the truth of what had happened on that day two years ago would be made clear to Ayase tomorrow.



After classes ended the next day, Ayase led Ikki and Stella to her old home, the former Ayatsuji Dojo.

“Man, this scenery really takes me back,” Ikki muttered as he looked at the old-fashioned houses lining both sides of the road.

“Oh yeah, didn’t you mention that you came to our dojo once, Kurogane-kun?” Ayase asked.

“Yep. One of Kaito-san’s disciples told me they didn’t accept unofficial challenges and kicked me out.”

“That must have been when you were still in middle school, then,” Stella said. “You told me you did all your dojo touring around that time.”

“Yeah. I was a real wild child back then. I traveled all around the country visiting dojos and challenging their students to matches.”

“You never cease to amaze me, Kurogane-kun. But wasn’t that dangerous? I

feel like if a middle schooler tried to challenge a dojo, the martial artists would think they're being too cocky and try to teach them a lesson."

"That did actually happen to me a bunch of times. All the martial artists in the dojo would gang up on me and beat me half to death. But I was the one being rude and challenging them out of the blue like that, so I can't really blame them. Plus, it's an ironclad rule among martial artists that any challenger who's going dojo hunting has to accept whatever unreasonable conditions the dojo sets."

Ikki had known that what he was doing was dangerous, and indeed, he'd had over a dozen brushes with death during his dojo tour. But he'd wanted to do whatever he could to get stronger, regardless of the risks. No one had been willing to help him on his quest to become a knight, so he'd experienced as much as he could and absorbed every bit of useful information he could from those experiences.

I didn't go and beat up any students to force the dojo master to fight me if they refused at first, though. I wasn't that desperate.

As Ikki shared more tales of his past, Ayase led the group off of the main road and onto a dilapidated path that cut through the forest. At the end of it was a large house surrounded by a low wall.

"This...used to be my house," Ayase told them.

The building was in such disrepair that it looked like it had been abandoned for decades. Some of the roof tiles were missing, and many of those that weren't were cracked. The wooden pillars that supported the front gate were blackened with rot. The grounds around the dojo were littered with empty cans, cigarette butts, and candy wrappers. Worst of all, the white wall surrounding the dojo had been sullied with vulgar graffiti.

"This is some really crappy graffiti," Ikki said with a shake of his head. "I've seen graffiti artists who can make magic with spray paint, but this is just pathetic."

"Really? Out of everything, it's the graffiti that gets you?" Stella asked. "Though this really is awful."

Ayase bit her lip, struggling to contain her emotions. It was only natural to be furious about your precious home being treated this way.

I have to win her dojo back for her, no matter what, Ikki thought. His resolve now stronger than ever, he took a wooden sword out of the bag he'd brought with him.

"Kurogane-kun, how do you plan on getting my dojo back with just that?"

"Simple. Bust down the front door and challenge them for it."

After hearing Ayase's story, Ikki had been surprised by how proper Kuraudo's methods had been. While it had been borderline criminal to attack the dojo's students to force Kaito to accept his challenge, he'd fought fairly under the rules Kaito had set. For better or for worse, Kaito had agreed to bet it all on a single duel, and Kuraudo had won that duel fair and square. Complaining about the result would be akin to besmirching Kaito's name.

"That's Ikki for you," Stella said with a shrug.

"I suppose that's the simplest method," Ayase replied. "But please be careful, Kurogane-kun. The Sword Eater is truly strong. Dad might not have been in top shape because of his illness, but he was still way stronger than me or any of the other students, and even he lost to that man."

"I know. Even if he hadn't defeated Kaito-san, he's still Donrou Academy's best fighter. There's no way I'd underestimate a guy like that." Ikki took a deep breath. "All right, let's go."

Steeling himself, he headed toward the Ayatsuji Dojo's main gate. There were five or so thugs hanging out in front of the crumbling gate, chatting about something or other. One of them was the same guy with a shaved head that Ikki had seen at the restaurant the other night. These guys were undoubtedly members of Kuraudo's crew.

"Sorry to interrupt, but can I talk to you guys real quick?" Ikki said, walking up to them.

"Whaddaya want?!" one of them answered in a gruff voice.

Why do guys like this always default to intimidating everyone they see?

“Wait, aren’t you the guy we saw at the restaurant?!” Ikki seemed to have left an impression on the bald guy, as he’d recognized him immediately.

“No way. This is the guy you told us about?”

“Yeah. Even after Kuraudo bashed his head in with a beer bottle, the fucking pussy just sat there!”

“Ha ha ha! He *does* look pretty weak. Kid’s wearing a Hagun uniform, but is he really a Blazer?”

“Hmm? Hold up, isn’t that Ayase-chan behind him? Whoa, who’s the red-haired chick?! She’s smoking hot!”

One of the lackeys spotted Stella and started walking over to her, a vulgar grin spreading across his face. She glared at him like he was a cockroach, and her hair started to glow, with tiny sparks shooting out of it.

Uh-oh.

Before Stella could turn the boy into a charred corpse, Ikki grabbed him by the shoulder. Though he’d done it out of kindness, the other thugs narrowed their eyes at him.

“Oy. Get your hands off me, pussy.”

“I was just saving you a painful trip to the hospital. Anyway, I came here to ask Kurashiki-kun for a duel. Can you take me to him?”

Ikki decided to cut to the chase before one of them accidentally pissed Stella off too much and got their just deserts. The thugs looked at Ikki in shock for a few seconds, then burst out laughing.

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“You serious, bro?” one of them asked. “A pussy like you wants to duel Kuraudo?! No fucking way!”

“Do you even know the meaning of the word ‘duel’?”

“Gah ha ha ha! Man, my stomach hurts from laughing too much.”

“Heh. Hey, kid. Hate to break it to ya, but Kuraudo isn’t interested in weaklings like you. How ’bout I fight you instead? Hell, if you manage to beat

me, I'll take you to him."

"Whoo! Go get him, man!"

One of the boys had summoned a Device that looked like a Swiss Army knife and was provocatively tapping Ikki's cheek with the flat of the blade.

Oh, these guys are from Donrou too. That's convenient, Ikki thought. He then grabbed the thug's wrist and gave him a bloodcurdling grin. "I'm glad you're making things easy for me."



"Anyway, that brown-haired loser was so persistent, I ripped his pants off and threw 'em into the road."

"Gya ha ha ha ha! Seriously, dude?!"

"No way! Gah ha ha!"

A group of boys were cackling as they sat on the floor of what had once been the Ayatsuji Dojo. As always, they were talking about who they'd beaten up, who they'd swindled, and who they'd slept with.

I can't believe they don't get tired of talking about the same shit every damn day, a bored Kuraudo said to himself while lounging on the sofa he'd brought into the dojo and puffing on a cigarette. He didn't feel like joining them in their inane conversation. They were good enough pals, but he truly couldn't understand how they found such mundane activities so exciting. *I wish Donrou would start doing the selection matches Hagun started this year.* That would at least spice up his everyday life a little.

Sighing, he looked up at the evening sky from a hole in the roof and blew a cloud of smoke up toward it. Two years had passed since he'd taken this dojo. *Maybe it's about time I sold the place off and moved on...*

Suddenly, one of his buddies entered the dojo and made a beeline straight for him. "Hey, Kuraudo," the guy said, his face surprisingly pale.

"What's up? You constipated or something?"

"Remember the guys we ran into at that restaurant the other day? You know, the two who were with Ayase-chan?"

“Yeah. What about ‘em?”

“I thought I’d seen them somewhere before, and yesterday, I finally remembered.”

He took out his student handbook and showed it to Kuraudo. There was a thread titled “The Crimson Princess, a Rank A knight, loses to the Rank F Worst One in a huge upset during a mock battle!” on the screen with an attached video. Naturally, it was a video of Ikki and Stella’s duel.

“I went and asked one of my friends at Hagun, and he told me this kid actually beat Runner’s High! Apparently, some people are calling him the ‘Uncrowned Blade Master’ or some shit too. So, uh, I was wondering...did we accidentally piss off some seriously strong dudes?”

Kuraudo’s friend broke out into a cold sweat as he imagined what retribution might be coming. However, Kuraudo didn’t look fazed at all.

“Heh.” He let out a small chuckle as he watched the video, his lips curling up into a wolfish grin. “That explains it. I figured those two weren’t your average dudes, but I didn’t realize they were this strong.”

Excitement welled up inside him. He was suddenly full of energy and needed an outlet to vent it.

This sounds like it might be fun.

He’d assumed that he wouldn’t find any fights that truly made his blood boil until the Seven Stars Battle Festival, but it seemed Hagun had some promising newcomers. Now that he knew this, he debated whether to just head straight to Hagun and challenge them to a fight or use Ayase as bait to draw them here. But before he could make a decision, he heard footsteps approaching the dojo.

“Hmm?” The footsteps were light and rhythmic—the kind someone with a proper martial artist’s gait would make. Whoever this was, it wasn’t one of his cronies. “Ha. Looks like things are about to get interesting.”

“Huh? What’re you talking about, Kuraudo?”

The footsteps came to a halt, and the door to the dojo slid open. The trio that entered consisted of exactly who Kuraudo had expected to see: Kurogane Ikki,

Stella Vermillion, and Ayatsuji Ayase.

“Sorry for the sudden visit,” Ikki said.

“Blegh, even the inside’s filthy. I can’t believe you guys live like this. Did you all grow up in landfills or something?” Stella added.

“Wh-Who the hell are you guys?!”

“They’re the guys we saw at the restaurant!”

Kuraudo remained seated on the sofa, ignoring his friends’ panic. His gaze was fixated solely on Ikki, who’d stepped into the dojo with a plastic bag in one hand and a wooden sword in the other.

“What a coincidence. I was just thinking about paying you a visit,” he replied.

“Really? Well, I’m glad we didn’t miss each other.” Ikki’s tone was light. He didn’t seem at all intimidated by the fact that he was on Kuraudo’s home turf.

Yeah, this guy’s definitely got guts.

“So, what’d you come here for, coward?”

“Surely you’re smart enough to be able to figure that out. I’m here to get this dojo back for Ayatsuji-san.”

“Ha ha ha! Now *that’s* a riot. Piss off. I dunno what that bitch told you, but I won this dojo fair and square in a proper duel. If you’re a real swordsman, you know what that means, right?”

“Of course. I’m not asking you to just hand it over.” Ikki walked over to the sofa Kuraudo was sitting on. “Kurashiki-kun, I challenge you to a duel,” he said, pointing his wooden sword at Kuraudo.

“So you’re dojo hunting.”

“It’s the same thing you did. You’re not gonna run away from a challenge, are you?”

Oh, so now you’re the one taunting me?

Ikki seemed like a completely different person compared to when Kuraudo had seen him in the restaurant. Kuraudo had no idea what had caused such a change of heart in Ikki, but this was exactly what he’d been looking for

regardless. He grabbed the tip of the wooden sword.

“Heh. Fine, I accept your challenge.” He squeezed so hard that the sword’s point shattered. “But just like when I took this dojo, you’re gonna have to abide by the dojo owner’s rules. I want you to beat my thirty friends here before I’ll let you fight me. And you gotta do it alone.”

“Works for me. These two just came here to watch anyway. Besides, it’s only polite to follow the rules of the dojo owner.”

“Nice, you know all about martial arts customs. Gimme a sec, I’ll call the guys over.” Kuraudo took out his student handbook and called one of his friends who was hanging around outside.

“No need for that,” Ikki told him.

“Scuse me?”

“I thought you’d ask me to defeat your friends first, so I already took care of everyone I met along the way.”

Ikki upended the plastic bag he was carrying. Nearly two dozen Donrou Academy student handbooks clattered to the ground. One of them was ringing, meaning it belonged to whoever Kuraudo had just dialed.

“It’s just the seven in here left,” Ikki said with a cocky grin, purposely trying to get a rise out of Kuraudo.

“Y-You bastard! Don’t underestimate us!”

“We’ll tear ya to shreds!”

Upon hearing that their friends had been beaten, the rest of Kuraudo’s comrades materialized their Devices. Before they could act, though, Kuraudo glared at them and said, “Back off, you lot.”

“You sure, Kuraudo?”

“Th-There’s no need to be scared of this guy! We can take him!”

“Back off. You’re in the way.”

“Eek!”

Kuraudo’s comrades paled, terrified by the ferocious glint in his eye.

All of these guys combined still won't be enough to put up a fight. No reason to waste time.

“Never mind, I’m changing the rules. I’ll give you the duel you want. No holds barred, Devices and magic allowed. First guy to die loses.” Kuraudo called forth his Device, Orochimaru. It was a bone-white sword with jagged edges that looked more like a saw than a proper sword.

Normally, student knights weren’t allowed to use their powers outside of campus. There were, however, a few exceptions. If they were caught up in an incident of some kind, they were allowed to use their powers for self-defense and to help others. They could also use their powers for an officially sanctioned dojo match. This, of course, counted as the latter, so Ikki had no reason to refuse Kuraudo’s terms.

“Thank you for accepting my duel, Sword Eater.”

Ikki dropped his broken wooden sword and summoned Intetsu to his side. The moment he did, Kuraudo felt goose bumps rise on his arms.

Oh yeah, this guy's the real deal. He hadn’t felt this much excitement since his match against the Last Samurai. *This is why I love fighting swordsmen. You just can't get this feeling of tension by fighting losers who rely on their powers for everything.*

Ikki’s sharp gaze, his practiced stance—everything about him gave off a powerful, terrifying aura that got Kuraudo’s blood boiling. Outside of the Seven Stars Battle Festival, he rarely got to enjoy this sensation.

“Let’s get this show on the road!” he shouted, elated. Then, he leaped to his feet and charged at Ikki.



Kuraudo strengthened his legs with mana and dashed toward Ikki at lightning speed. Despite being proficient at any range, he’d decided to start with a close-quarters fight.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

Once he was close, he swung his sawblade down with all his might. It was a

haphazard swing full of openings—the kind of attack an amateur would make. Blocking it should have been easy for Ikki. Kuraudo’s blow was so haphazard, in fact, that it was more like he was swinging a club than properly wielding a sword. And yet...

His attacks are really sharp despite those sloppy movements! Intetsu creaked from the stress of blocking each of Kuraudo’s careless yet accurate and heavy blows. Each swing jarred Ikki from head to toe. *There’s so much power in each blow!* It felt like he was being bludgeoned by a wild bear. There was no style or technique to Kuraudo’s attacks, but their sheer power made them threatening. *But your lack of technique is making you slower than you would be otherwise!*

After blocking three attacks, Ikki shuffled a few steps back to dodge Kuraudo’s horizontal slash. The tip of the jagged blade whooshed mere inches past his nose. Since Kuraudo was swinging his sword around with just one hand, the missed horizontal slash left his torso wide open.

Now!

The reason Ikki had dodged Kuraudo’s slash by just a hair’s breadth was so that he could quickly counterattack. Thus, the moment that opening presented itself, Ikki slashed at Kuraudo’s chest. But to Ikki’s surprise, Intetsu met cold, hard steel rather than soft flesh.

“What?!”

The smiling skull tattoo on Kuraudo’s chest mocked Ikki’s vain attempt at getting the first hit in. Though Ikki’s timing had been absolutely perfect, Kuraudo had still managed to get his sword back in time to block the counter.

“Ha ha! Too bad, kid,” Kuraudo taunted, sticking his tongue out.

It was unbelievable that Kuraudo had been able to block Ikki’s perfectly timed counter. So much so that what he’d done should have been impossible with normal human reflexes. In other words, Kuraudo must have predicted that Ikki would counterattack in exactly the way he had and primed himself to move his sword back ahead of time.

No, wait, that’s not right either. Don’t tell me... An extremely unsettling possibility crossed Ikki’s mind.

“Haaah!”

Unfortunately, Kuraudo didn't give him time to dwell on it any further. With just the strength of one arm, he pushed Intetsu back, and Ikki along with it. Ikki was sent flying far enough back that he was now in spear range rather than katana range. Normally, that would mean neither person could reach the other with their sword and both would be regrouping to prepare for the next bout, but Kuraudo could fight at any range.

“Chase him down! Skull Serpent's Blade!”

The Sword Eater wasn't restricted by the length of his sword because he could freely change it. Orochimaru extended forward like a snake, reaching out to pierce Ikki's chest.

“Ngh!” Ikki reflexively blocked the jab with Intetsu.

“Ha ha, I'm not done yet!”

Kuraudo retracted his blade, then swung it laterally at Ikki like a whip. At this range, he could one-sidedly beat down on Ikki, who was limited by Intetsu's reach. That meant Ikki would be forced to stay on the defensive.

“Urgh.”

Every one of the Sword Eater's attacks chipped away at Intetsu, sending sparks flying through the air. Before long, Ikki's arms started to grow numb from the repeated impacts.

“Hell yaaaah! Get him, Kuraudo!”

“Turn that fucker into mincemeat!”

Kuraudo's friends started cheering him on. Meanwhile, Ayase turned pale as she saw that Ikki had no choice but to continue defending.

“At this rate, it's only a matter of time before Sword Eater breaks through Kurogane-kun's guard! He has to back up!”

“There's no point,” Stella replied. “Even if Ikki backed up, that guy could just extend Orochimaru farther. If anything, the farther away Ikki gets, the worse it'll be for him.”

“So Kurogane-kun’s already at a disadvantage?”

“Yes. Though he’s not the kind of man to let a minor issue like this stop him!”

Stella was right on the mark, of course. After all, she understood Ikki better than anyone.

After blocking a few more attacks, Ikki crouched low, focused his energy into his legs, and leaped forward. Kuraudo wasn’t just going to let him approach without a fight, though. This distance was ideal for him, as it let him attack without fear of being counterattacked. He swung Orochimaru at Ikki, trying to stop him in his tracks.

The snakelike sword bore down on Ikki, its fangs aiming straight for his skull, but he simply ducked even lower and maintained his speed. He looked more like he was crawling along the ground than running, and he could only maintain such a low posture without losing speed thanks to his exceptionally well-trained core muscles. Orochimaru passed harmlessly over Ikki’s head, and he swiftly closed the distance between himself and Kuraudo.

“He did it!” Ayase exclaimed, clenching her fists excitedly.

“Ha ha!” the Sword Eater laughed in response. He wasn’t so weak that he’d let an opponent close in after they’d dodged just one attack. Orochimaru’s tip twisted around like the head of a snake and started moving toward Ikki’s unguarded back instead.

“H-He can change the direction he lengthens his sword in too?!” Ayase shouted.

Indeed, the truly scary thing about Kuraudo’s power wasn’t that he could expand and contract Orochimaru freely, but that he could freely manipulate the blade’s movements as well. In his hands, the sword became a living snake that could attack from any angle at any time.

Kuraudo was certain that Ikki believed he’d safely dodged the attack and wasn’t paying any attention to his rear. That was why it came as a shock that Ikki had read him perfectly.

“I thought you might try something like this, Kurashiki-kun.”

“What?!”

With a deft sidestep, Ikki dodged the stab aimed at his back. As was always the case, Ikki hadn't only been defending when he'd been stuck outside of his optimal range. He wasn't the kind of knight to ever *just* defend. Any time Ikki went on the defensive, it served a greater purpose.

While he'd been defending, he'd observed Kuraudo's attack patterns, what kind of combination attacks he liked to use, and so on. He'd analyzed everything there was to know about the person known as Kurashiki Kuraudo using his Perfect Vision. Ikki's observational skills had been powerful enough to let him analyze the Hunter, who'd been literally invisible, so analyzing a wild beast like Kuraudo had been a simple task.

For his counterattack, Ikki had chosen a stab, which was the fastest possible attack one could unleash with a katana. He aimed right for Kuraudo's heart, which happened to be right in the middle of the tattoo skull's forehead. Since Ikki's dodge had taken him by surprise, Kuraudo was wide open. It would be impossible for him to react fast enough to bring Orochimaru back or dodge. Ikki was confident his strike would land this time. And yet, the instant before Intetsu made contact, the skull tattoo vanished from his field of view.

Huh?! Ikki couldn't comprehend why he'd suddenly lost sight of his opponent. Could Kurashiki-kun actually have vanished? No, that's not it.

Ikki's heart began to pound, and his instincts warned him that he was in grave danger. *He's below me!* His sixth sense had told him where his opponent was lurking, which had allowed him to deduce that Kuraudo must have dropped to the ground at the very last second to dodge his thrust.

Kuraudo grinned as he watched Intetsu stab through empty air and swung Orochimaru up at Ikki from the ground. “Haaaaah!”

“Ngh!”

Ikki just barely managed to bring Intetsu down in time to block the upward swing. It was a bad block that didn't effectively disperse the force of Kuraudo's blow, and Ikki grimaced as his shoulder nearly dislocated. But more than the pain, what bothered Ikki was what this exchange had taught him about Kuraudo.

I was afraid that might be the case!

Kuraudo got back to his feet and once again showered Ikki with blows. This time, though, Ikki's breathing was out of sync because of his earlier thrust. He couldn't afford to make any risky moves, and so he decided to focus on defense until he got his breathing back in rhythm. He raised Intetsu over his head to block Kuraudo's downward swing, but the moment before the two swords made contact, Kuraudo's blade blurred and vanished.

Shit!

Ikki leaped back with all his might, not caring that it would ruin his stance. A second later, Orochimaru sliced *horizontally* through the spot Ikki had been standing in a second ago.

"Gah!" Ikki nearly tumbled to the ground because of how sloppy his backstep had been, and he staggered backward as he tried to rebalance himself.

Stella and Ayase both gasped as they watched Ikki right himself. His uniform had been ripped open at the stomach. Because he'd already jumped backward, the force of Kuraudo's slash had simply pushed him farther back. If he hadn't backstepped when he did, his guts would have been all over the dojo floor right now.

"Ha ha, I'm impressed you managed to dodge that your first time seeing it," Kuraudo told him.

"Wh-What did he just do?" Stella muttered.

"Kurogane-kun..." Ayase said in a worried voice.

"That was so close!"

"You almost had him, Kuraudo!"

"But still, this wimp's no match for you, huh?!"

"Get that motherfucker!"

On one side of the crowd, there was confusion, and on the other, elation. It was clear from both groups' reactions which fighter had the overwhelming advantage. However, Ikki wasn't concerned about what the peanut gallery thought.

“I see now. That explains everything.”

There was something far more important weighing on his mind. He’d considered this possibility from the moment Kuraudo had blocked his first perfectly timed counter. And unfortunately, it seemed the worst-case scenario was indeed what he was dealing with.

“This is what let you beat the Last Samurai, isn’t it?” he said softly.



“When I heard the details of your duel with Kaito-san from Ayatsuji-san, there was something that didn’t make sense to me. Why was it that Kaito-san got beaten down so one-sidedly? Sure, his illness might have weakened him, but he was the same Last Samurai whose swordsmanship was the stuff of legends. I can’t imagine he would lose so badly when fighting under rules that let him use that swordsmanship to its fullest extent. There had to have been a reason you were able to overwhelm him the way you did.” Ikki had figured from the start that whatever it was had to be the biggest factor in Kuraudo’s strength, not any of his Blazer powers. “And now, I know exactly what that reason is.”

This factor was the explanation behind how Kuraudo had managed to dodge and block attacks he shouldn’t have been able to react to, and how he was able to change the angle and direction of his own attacks so quickly. He had another supernatural power besides his Blazer abilities.

“What’s the reason?! Did he cheat?!” Ayase shouted, leaning forward. She, too, had been confused as to how her father had lost so badly. She was convinced that Kuraudo had pulled some kind of underhanded trick, but Ikki shook his head in denial.

“No, he didn’t cheat. This is no sneaky trick he’s using.”

“Ha ha, sounds like you might actually have figured it out. Go on, say it. I’ll tell you if you’re right,” Kuraudo said with a grin.

“The reason Kurashiki-kun is so strong is because of his reflexes.”

“His...reflexes?” Ayase parroted.

“You’re talking about the same reflexes we all have, right, Ikki?” Stella asked.

“Half yes, half no. Technically, yes, I mean the same reflexes that every human is born with. But remember, people all have different reaction times affecting how quickly their reflexes activate. It takes time for a person to perceive something, understand what they’re perceiving, and then act based on what they’ve perceived. For normal people, that reaction time is around 0.3 seconds. If you’re, say, an Olympic sprinter, you might have trained that reaction time to be as low as 0.15 seconds. Generally speaking, though, no matter how hard you train, you can’t get your reaction time lower than 0.1 seconds. At least, that’s how it is for normal people. But if you look at how quickly Kurashiki-kun manages to swap from offense to defense, his reaction time is around 0.05 seconds.”

Stella and Ayase both gasped in surprise. Ikki and Stella, who’d both trained as if their lives depended on it, still had reaction times of 0.13 seconds. In other words, Kuraudo’s reaction time truly was superhuman. In the time it took Ikki to consciously commit to a single action, Kuraudo could commit to two or three.

“It’s thanks to his superhuman reflexes that Kurashiki-kun can dodge attacks we’d consider undodgeable,” Ikki continued. “It’s also how he can throw out those crazy feints by changing the trajectory of his swing way later than any normal person can. That’s why his sword looks like it’s disappeared every now and then.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Bingo!” Kuraudo exclaimed. There was no technique to his swordsmanship, just raw speed and violence. But those alone were enough to let the Sword Eater crush everyone in his path.

A person’s reaction time determined the speed of each and every one of their motions. As a result, simply having a faster reaction time than everyone else gave Kuraudo the ability to destroy any swordsman, no matter how hard they trained or how polished their technique was. Even the best-planned surprise attack was still so slow that Kuraudo could react to it after he saw it. On the flip side, no matter how sloppy Kuraudo’s swings were, he could simply change the direction he was attacking from as soon as he saw his opponent start to guard. It was like playing rock paper scissors against someone who always got to go after you.

That was the Sword Eater’s true strength. Technique, experience, feints—all

of them were meaningless in the face of his natural gift. Not only did Kuraudo have superhuman reflexes, but he also had the muscles to take advantage of those reflexes, allowing him to attack and defend as quickly as he could react. This speed was what had given birth to the technique he'd dubbed "Marginal Counter."

"You're the first person to ever see through my Marginal Counter after seeing it just once! I'm honestly impressed, Worst One. You really are one hell of a guy. But even if you've seen through it, you can't do anything about it, can you?!"

Ikki's expression darkened. Kuraudo was right in that his Perfect Vision was useless against someone who had him beat when it came to reaction time. Even Ittou Shura only enhanced his physical abilities; it didn't increase the speed at which electrical signals traveled to and from his brain, nor did it hasten his brain's processing power. There was nothing Ikki could do to break through Kuraudo's Marginal Counter.

"Ha ha, looks like I'm right. That's because my Marginal Counter isn't really a technique. It's just a special trait I was born with. There's no secret method to beat it with. Also, this isn't even the fastest I can go with it!" Kuraudo rushed forward, slashing at Ikki so quickly that it was as if two slashes were coming at him at once. "Twin Fangs!"

With just his one sword in his right hand, Kuraudo managed to slash horizontally at Ikki from the right and the left at nearly the same time. Logically speaking, it would be impossible to block both attacks unless Ikki was wielding two swords. If he blocked one, Kuraudo would just immediately flip his sword to the other side and cut through Ikki.

There was only one thing Ikki could do. He backstepped away, hoping to avoid both attacks entirely. As long as he was out of range, it didn't matter how fast the attacks were because they'd still miss. But of course, the Sword Eater had the power to freely adjust his sword's length.

"That same trick won't work on me again!" Kuraudo shouted, and he extended Orochimaru to the point where it could once again reach Ikki. No matter how far Ikki ran, he couldn't escape the jagged blade.

The two slashes converged, aiming to bisect Ikki. Just before they reached

him, though, Ikki took action. There was a loud clang and a shower of mana-infused sparks as he blocked the slash coming from the right. But that, of course, meant the slash coming from the left would reach him before he could react. He would be sliced through regardless. And yet, there was no spray of blood as Kuraudo's jagged sword reached Ikki from the left side. Instead, there was another shower of sparks from Ikki blocking that one as well.

"What?!" Confused, Kuraudo looked down at the sword in Ikki's hands. "You little..." he muttered, immediately understanding what his opponent had done. Ikki was holding Intetsu not by the hilt but by the base of the blade. Doing so had shortened his reach, but in exchange, it had increased the speed he could swing it around with.

"I see, he's using Intetsu like a kodachi instead of a katana! Nice one, Ikki!" Stella cheered.

"Kurogane-kun can use kodachi techniques too?!" Ayase asked.

"Shizuku's Device is a kodachi, and he's good enough to teach her swordsmanship, so of course he can!" Stella knew just how much Ikki despised giving people misguided instruction, which meant that if he was willing to teach Shizuku the kodachi, he had to be a master in his own right.

Indeed, Ikki had trained in all manner of martial arts, not just swordsmanship. He'd even practiced archery and hand-to-hand combat. If something had seemed like it would be even remotely useful in helping him grow stronger, he'd given his all in acquiring it. He'd used every spare second available to him to train in anything and everything. He knew better than anyone how weak he was, after all.

He'd also been sure to commit every single thing he'd learned to memory so that he could pull those techniques out at any time. It was this level of dedication and training that had built up his powers of observation to the point where he'd been able to pinpoint the Hunter's position based solely on the angle and force with which his invisible arrows had struck Ikki. And it was this vast amount of training Ikki had put in that had made it possible for him to block Kuraudo's unreasonably fast series of attacks. Unlike a proper katana, a kodachi had much shorter reach and therefore much lower offensive power.

Because of how quickly it could be maneuvered, however, it boasted excellent defensive strength. By reducing the time it took for Intetsu to move from place to place, Ikki had managed to keep up with Kuraudo's inhuman reaction time.

"You're not the only one who can manipulate their reach, Kurashiki-kun," Ikki said with a smile. After blocking Kuraudo's dual slashes, he dashed forward to counterattack.

"Ha ha ha."

Kuraudo smiled as he watched Ikki continue to struggle despite the overwhelming difference in speed between the two of them. Swapping sword styles midbattle was something a knight who relied on their magical powers would never have come up with, and Kuraudo was truly impressed by Ikki's determination and adaptability.

But that's not gonna be enough to win, kid. Not nearly enough. While swapping to a kodachi grip had been a good move, it couldn't overcome Kuraudo's superhuman reaction speed. *I'll teach you the difference between us!*

Kuraudo had made it to the quarterfinals of last year's Seven Stars Battle Festival. That meant he was one of the eight strongest knights in the country. The one thing he'd learned from fighting the monsters who lived in that realm was that strength had nothing to do with polished technique or the determination to fight for one's friends. No, true strength came from something far simpler and much uglier: pure, violent, overwhelming might.

"Haaaaaaah!"

"What?!"

Not just Ikki, but even Stella and Ayase, who were watching the fight from a distance, were stunned. As Ikki was rushing forward, Kuraudo fired off four consecutive slashes at once.

He can go even faster?!

Ikki had not been prepared for that. But even so, he still managed to block the slashes targeting his neck and left armpit. The other two slashes hit their targets, though, gouging a cross across his chest.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Ikki!”

“Kurogane-kun!”

“It’s fine! I can still keep going!” Ikki shouted through gritted teeth. There was a tremendous amount of blood spilling from the cuts, which had reached all the way to his sternum. However, he managed to stay on his feet through sheer willpower, refusing to fall to his knees. He kept his gaze fixed firmly upon his opponent the entire time.

“Hmph. You rode the force of my slashes to back away just enough to avoid a fatal injury. You’re a clever little bastard. But your little tricks won’t be able to help you anymore!” Kuraudo extended the bloodstained Orochimaru like a whip. Not giving the gravely injured Ikki so much as a second to recover, he launched a relentless series of slashes from far enough away that he was safe from all counterattacks. “You can’t do anything from that distance, which means I can cut you up all I want!”



The first time Ikki had managed to slip past Kuraudo’s Skull Serpent’s Blade, Ayase had been elated. When he’d blocked Twin Fangs with kodachi techniques, she’d been certain he was moments away from victory. But every time, the Sword Eater had managed to thwart his offense and push him back into a corner. It was like watching a nightmare. Kuraudo kept responding to every curveball Ikki threw at him.

Everyone at Hagun Academy thought Ikki was guaranteed a spot as one of the school’s representatives in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. He’d even managed to beat the Crimson Princess in a duel without getting so much as a scratch. Without a doubt, he was the strongest close-range fighter Ayase had ever met.

But he hasn’t been able to accomplish anything at close range in this fight!

Ikki’s Perfect Vision was useless against Kuraudo’s Marginal Counter. Even Ittou Shura wouldn’t help since Kuraudo could still react to any moves Ikki made while it was active. If anything, it would make things worse because it might put Kuraudo on guard and make him focus on defense.

Ittou Shura was a pure expression of Ikki's determination and will—a technique that used up everything he had to break through a hopeless situation. But that meant he couldn't cancel it halfway or tweak it to be weaker but last longer. If Kuraudo focused solely on defense, Ikki would be hard-pressed to break through in just one minute. After all, no matter how powerful his attacks became while Ittou Shura was active, Kuraudo could still react thrice as fast and deflect whatever Ikki threw at him.

There's nothing Kurogane-kun can do... Even now, he was narrowly managing to defend against Kuraudo's onslaught while the puddle of blood at his feet continued to grow. Ayase gulped as she watched Kuraudo beat mercilessly down on him.

This man really is unbelievably strong! So this is what it means to be one of the best eight fighters in the nation?! I underestimated the Sword Eater's full strength! Are all the best fighters in the Seven Stars Battle Festival monsters like him?! Ayase couldn't see any possible way for Ikki to win this fight. Kuraudo's sheer might was enough to crush whatever techniques and skills Ikki threw at him.

As she watched, some of Kuraudo's attacks started landing glancing blows on Ikki, wounding him even further. Ikki had barely been keeping up with Kuraudo's Twin Fangs by using kodachi techniques, but the blood loss and exhaustion were starting to dull the speed of his sword. The only silver lining was that at this distance, an elongated Orochimaru moved too slowly for Kuraudo to throw out four slashes at once. But even so, Ikki's arms and thighs were slowly getting cut to ribbons.

At this rate... Ayase thought back to how her father, even after being beaten to a bloody pulp, had refused to back down until he'd finally collapsed. Ikki was in the exact same position right now.

"No!" She couldn't bear to watch it happen again. "Vermillion-san, you have to stop the match! At this rate, Kurogane-kun will be permanently crippled, or worse!"

"If I stop the match, you won't be able to get your dojo back."

"That's fine! Kurogane-kun's safety is more important to me!"

“I see. But I won’t be stopping the match.” Stella folded her arms and watched impassively as her boyfriend was slowly shredded in front of her eyes.

“Why not?! Kurogane-kun’s your boyfriend, isn’t he?! You love him, don’t you?! Do you see a way for him to turn this around or something?!”

“I don’t. If I were fighting that skull bastard, I’d simply overwhelm him with pure firepower. But Ikki can’t do that. He doesn’t have a single means of attacking from long range. And since he can’t match his opponent’s reaction speed at close range I can’t think of any way he can make a comeback. I’m honestly shocked at just how strong the skull bastard is.”

Stella’s voice was even. But upon closer inspection, Ayase noticed there were tiny red splotches on her white uniform. She was gripping her arms so tightly that her nails were drawing blood. In truth, Stella was using every ounce of willpower she possessed to hold back the urge to run to Ikki’s side right this instant.

“It seems he really is worthy of being one of the country’s best fighters,” Stella added. “I’ll admit, he’s quite strong. If this keeps up, Ikki will lose.”

“I don’t understand. If you know that, why won’t you stop them?!” Ayase screamed.

“How could I?”

“What do you mean?!”

“Just look at how much fun Ikki’s having.”

“Huh?” Confused, Ayase turned to look at Ikki. What she saw shocked her.
He’s smiling?!

Though he was covered in blood and barely able to stay on his feet, there was a smile on Ikki’s face. It wasn’t the gentle, reassuring smile he always gave Ayase and the others either. His teeth were bared in a feral grin.

“Come to think of it, he smiled like that when I brought out Karsalitio Salamandra too,” Stella recalled.

“Why? Even though he might die, even though he’s covered in blood, why is he smiling like that?”

“Because he’s enjoying himself, obviously.”

Ayase was unable to comprehend Ikki’s state of mind. She couldn’t because she hadn’t experienced that kind of harrowing life-and-death struggle before. Stella had, though. And Ayase realized that her father, Kaito, probably had too.

“Hey, Senpai,” Stella said casually. “When Ikki and I heard your story about what happened, there was something that didn’t make sense to us.”

“What’s that?”

“Was the Last Samurai truly overcome with regret when he lost to that skull bastard?”

“Huh?! What are you saying?! Of course he was!” Ayase protested hotly. “If that monster had never shown up, we could have continued enjoying our peaceful, happy lives! Dad wouldn’t have fallen into a coma, we wouldn’t have lost the dojo, and his disciples wouldn’t have had their spirits broken! That man ruined our lives! Dad *absolutely* regrets not being able to beat him!”

“That’s just how *you* see it, Senpai.”

“Wha—”

“Think about it. Your father was the most skilled swordsman in the world. People called him the Last Samurai. Do you think a master martial artist like him would be happy to slowly waste away, too sick to even be able to properly wield a sword? Did he truly find those days to be fulfilling enough that he wished for them to last forever? If I were in his position, I wouldn’t be able to live like that, that’s for sure.”

“Ah...”

“It’s true that the way that skull bastard forced your father into a fight was despicable. But I suspect your father was happy that there was someone out there who wanted to challenge him so badly he’d go to those lengths. Especially if the alternative would have been to sit there and wait until his sickness took him.”

No, that can’t be true. Dad was always smiling when he was with us. He found plenty of meaning in passing his techniques down to his disciples and—

“This is my duel! Do not interfere!”

“Ah!”

Ayase gasped as her father’s words flashed through her mind, and realization dawned on her. She’d always wondered why her father had been so mad when she’d tried to step in and stop the fight, and now, she understood. She also understood why he’d kept fighting even though he knew defeat was inevitable and all that awaited was more pain.

At long last, she understood Kaito’s true feelings. For so long, she’d convinced herself that her father had been forced to accept a duel he didn’t want to and then fallen into a coma while filled with regret because he’d failed to protect his students, his daughter, and his dojo. But that wasn’t true. Though he had certainly fought to protect those things, that hadn’t been the only thing driving him to fight.

In the heat of the moment, what had given him the strength to keep fighting despite all odds wasn’t something as admirable as love or honor or virtue. No, it was something far simpler, far cruder. He’d just wanted to keep fighting the powerful foe in front of him. He’d wanted to beat the opponent who seemed so utterly insurmountable. It was that violent yet innocent desire that had been pushing him forward. After all, that had been the fight Kaito had been waiting for. He’d believed that it was much better to fight with everything he had left and burn away what remained of his life in one glorious instant than to slowly waste away to illness.

I see now. The reason you keep saying “I’m sorry” isn’t because you’re apologizing to us.

Ayase understood now that, in truth, Kaito was apologizing to Kuraudo. Despite Kuraudo’s impure motivations and questionable methods, he had considered Kaito, a sick man who wasn’t long for this world, a worthy opponent whom he wished to face at all costs. However, Kaito’s heart had given out before he could demonstrate the full power of the Ayatsuji Sword Style to this young man, and he was apologizing for failing to live up to Kuraudo’s expectations.

I can’t believe you, Dad. Those might have been your last words, and you used

them to apologize to the guy who ruined our lives? Ayase had always thought her father was a mature, reasonable man. But as it turned out, he was actually a huge ball of ego who so deeply hated to lose that winning mattered more to him than his family. *But I guess that also means you were happy at the very end, doesn't it?*

Suddenly, a loud clang echoed across the dojo as Ikki's and Kuraudo's blades clashed with much more force than usual.



Silence followed the conspicuously loud clash as both sides lowered their swords. Ikki was panting heavily, exhausted from defending against Kuraudo's relentless assault as well as the blood loss from his numerous wounds. However, he wasn't the only one out of breath.

"Haaah, haaah, haaaaah."

Though Kuraudo was unhurt, his face was flushed and he was panting just as heavily as Ikki. It took Stella only a moment to figure out why Kuraudo, who ostensibly had the advantage, looked just as spent.

"I get it now! This is Marginal Counter's weakness!"

"Wh-What do you mean, Vermillion-san?!"

"Take a close look at that skull bastard's face."

Ayase dutifully focused her attention on Kuraudo's face. His forehead was slick with sweat, to the point where it was running down his cheeks. "Oh! It uses that much more stamina!" she said, realization dawning on her.

"Correct. It's simple when you think about it. Because Marginal Counter lets him react faster than the average person, he's taking more actions than the average person in the same amount of time. That means his stamina drains faster. Ikki figured that out immediately and let himself get cut up on purpose to deplete his opponent's energy."

Kuraudo had come to the same realization, and he gritted his teeth in frustration. *Clever little shit, aren't you? I thought I was fighting on my terms, but you got me good, you little bastard!*

Though he'd been gravely wounded and too far away for his blade to reach, Ikki had nevertheless seen through Marginal Counter's weakness and decided to fight Kuraudo in a battle of attrition. As Stella had said earlier, Ikki was never content to *just* defend. He was always looking for a way to break his opponent down while defending, and he had numerous tricks up his sleeve to accomplish that.

This kid's the real deal. Kuraudo felt a chill run down his spine. Meanwhile, Ayase was ecstatic.

"Kurogane-kun's amazing! I can't believe he found a way to fight back when he couldn't even reach his opponent! He might be able to win this after all!"

She pumped a fist into the air, but Stella shook her head, her expression grim.

"I'm not so sure."

"What? Why not?"

"Ikki probably turned this into a battle of attrition because he had no other choice. He picked this strategy because he realized he couldn't beat Marginal Counter at close range. After all, blocking all those attacks drained him too, especially because he's injured. Instead of him having won the fight, it's more like a draw at this point." Considering how hopeless Ikki's situation had been, the fact that he'd fought his way to even footing was a feat in and of itself. However, this meant that neither side held a decisive advantage. "I can't say for sure who's going to win, but I'm certain it'll be decided with the next attack," Stella said confidently.

"Holy fuck. You're tougher than a cockroach," Kuraudo spat, struggling to catch his breath.

"Haaah, haaah... Sorry, I just hate to lose. Besides, it's been ages since I've struggled this much against another swordsman. There's no way I can let such a fun duel end so quickly," Ikki replied with a grin.

"Ha ha. You're calling this fun? Ha ha ha ha ha. Man, you're fucked in the head."

"I don't want to hear that from you."

“Ha. Well, sorry to ruin your fun, but this duel’s gone on long enough!” Kuraudo took a deep breath and straightened his back. Raising Orochimaru high, he said, “I’ll end it with this next attack.”

“I was thinking it’s about time we ended this too,” Ikki replied, his grin growing wider even though Kuraudo had just declared that he would kill him. He brought Intetsu up to eye level and held it straight out in front of him, the tip pointed at Kuraudo. Both sides were readying their killing blow.

“But first, can I ask you something?” Ikki asked suddenly. There was something he absolutely had to know before this battle was over.

“What?”

“Was the sword master we *both* admire smiling like this at the end too?”

Kuraudo looked taken aback for a second, but then he grinned too and said, “Ha. Do you even have to ask? Of course he was loving it! That was a duel for the ages! He’s the fucking Last Samurai, not some wimp!”

Ikki had fervently hoped that was the case. “I see. Thank you,” he answered. As he did, he charged at Kuraudo.



Blood spilled from Ikki’s countless wounds as he leaped forward. Every inch of his white uniform was dyed red, and he barely had the strength to keep fighting. Despite that, this dash was just as fast as his last one.

This guy’s really something else!

Kuraudo couldn’t help but be impressed. Out of respect, he decided to meet Ikki head-on with everything he had. He shortened Orochimaru to the length of a short sword, sacrificing reach for speed in order to hit Ikki with the fastest attack he could possibly muster. This was his ultimate technique, a series of slashes so fast that only someone who could use Marginal Counter could unleash it.

“Yamata no Orochi!” He swung Orochimaru at Ikki from eight different directions with so much speed that it looked like all the slashes were happening simultaneously.

The bone-white blade was like an eight-headed serpent as it bore down on Ikki. He hadn't been able to defend against four slashes at once, so it stood to reason that eight would obliterate him. And yet, he didn't slow down in the slightest. He charged headlong into the serpent's fangs, his blade still held at eye level with its point trained firmly on Kuraudo. At a glance, it seemed like suicide, charging forward without even trying to block the slashes.

No, wait! This guy's... Kuraudo sensed that there was something special about Ikki's stance. Furthermore, the piercing look in Ikki's eyes sent shivers down his spine.

Kuraudo had felt this sensation only once before—at the very end of his duel with Ayatsuji Kaito. Though he'd been on the verge of death, Kaito had attempted something. He'd settled into the same stance Ikki was currently in, making it look as though he'd abandoned all thoughts of defense. To this day, Kuraudo still wasn't sure what the Last Samurai had been trying to do, but his instincts had warned him that he was in danger. He'd felt intimidated by the old man with one foot in the grave who looked like he could barely move anymore. And now, once again, his instincts were telling him that he needed to get away. However, he refused to back down.

Bring it on! Thanks to the enhanced reaction time Marginal Counter gave him, he could switch to defending if he wanted to. But he boldly pressed his attack. *Like hell I'm stopping now!*

This was exactly what Kuraudo had been wanting to see for the past two years. The continuation of the duel that had been tragically cut short. It was possible that Kaito would recover or that Ayase would improve her swordsmanship enough that it would be worth fighting her in her father's stead, and he had waited in this dojo because he'd been clinging to those faint hopes. So now that Ikki was finally giving him what he'd been wishing for, there was no way he was going to chicken out.

"It was worth waiting two years for this!"

The two knights clashed, crossing past each other as they did.





Blood spurted from Kuraudo's torso with enough force to stain the dojo's ceiling. He'd been cut from his right shoulder to his left hip, deep enough that bone was showing through the gash. Ikki, meanwhile, was unscathed. It should have been impossible for him to have dodged or blocked all of Yamata no Orochi's slashes, but his only injuries were the ones he'd already sustained.

In truth, Ikki hadn't blocked or dodged any of them. And yet, somehow, Orochimaru hadn't cut him. Only Ayase understood why.

Th-That was...

She had seen this technique once before. It was the Ayatsuji Sword Style's ultimate technique, which Kaito had shown her the day she'd been accepted into Hagun Academy. As he'd requested, she'd slashed at him with all of her might, and though she'd been certain Hizume had cut through him, he'd been unhurt. There had been no resistance in her arms, as if she'd cut through a flower petal rather than a person.

Afterward, Kaito had explained the technique to her. The Ayatsuji Sword Style focused on counterattacks, but parrying an enemy's attack slowed one's counter. You had to swap from a parrying stance to an offensive stance, and that took time. Kaito had been searching for a way to launch an immediate counterattack, and this technique was the result of his efforts. You maintained an offensive stance the entire time and parried your opponent's attacks with your body rather than your sword.

That was the true nature of the Ayatsuji Sword Style's ultimate technique. By honing one's focus to the point that they could sense everything around them, a person could use footwork and minor changes to their stance and positioning to parry attacks without the use of their blade.

"That's the Ayatsuji Sword Style ultimate technique, Celestial Counter!"

But why does Kurogane-kun know how to use it? Dad said I was the only person he ever showed it—

"Oh."

Ayase suddenly thought back to what Ikki had said while they were eating at the restaurant. *"It's all thanks to your own hard work, Ayatsuji-san. The insights I gave you are things you would have realized on your own eventually, and I'm sure you'd be able to use your father's final technique even without my help."* He wasn't the kind of person to make baseless claims. As someone who'd studied under him for a while, she understood that very well.

"Don't tell me he'd already figured out what the technique was from the time he started teaching me!" Ayase exclaimed in surprise.

"That's the power of his Blade Steal," Stella said simply.

"Huh?"

"It's what Ikki calls his ability to read his opponent's fighting style and copy their techniques. He got me with it too."

Indeed, though Ayase had never actually used Kaito's final technique in front of Ikki, he'd managed to discern what it was all the same. Ayase had so faithfully stuck to her father's teachings that he had been able to see the pinnacle of skill she would one day reach.

Stella smiled as she looked over at Ikki. This was why she admired him so much. Despite how strong he already was, he was never satisfied. He looked for ways to get stronger at all times, turning even chance encounters into opportunities. It was this undying thirst to improve that had led people to call Kurogane Ikki "Another One."

"Man, I'm going to have to work even harder to keep up with you," Stella said quietly, her voice full of admiration.

"Graaaaah!"

Kuraudo suddenly let out a roar, locking his knees and keeping himself from collapsing. He was hurt so badly that it was a wonder he could stay standing, and it was clear he was keeping himself going through sheer willpower. There was an even bigger pool of blood at his feet than there was at Ikki's, but he refused to drop and accept defeat.

I can't believe he's still standing, Ikki thought, looking up at Kuraudo in awe.

“I see. So this is what that old man was trying to pull,” Kuraudo muttered. Upon closer inspection, Ikki noticed that there was no fighting spirit left in his eyes. “Ha ha. That’s one hell of a move.” He smiled wistfully, thinking back to the duel he’d fought with Kaito two years ago. Then, he straightened his back and turned to look at Ikki. “What’s your name, Worst One?”

“Kurogane Ikki.”

“Kurogane, huh? We’ll finish this at the Seven Stars Battle Festival.” With that, he turned on his heel and started heading for the door. It seemed he really was done fighting for now.

As he reached the doorway, Ikki asked, “Kurashiki-kun, what about the dojo?”

“It’s yours. I don’t need to wait here anymore,” Kuraudo replied with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“W-Wait up, Kuraudo!” one of his followers said, chasing after him.

“Come on, you lot! We’re leaving!” he ordered.

“O-Okay!”

The rest of them hurriedly filed out after Kuraudo. As soon as they all left the dojo, one of them shouted, “Whoa! You okay, Kuraudo?!”

“Holy shit, he’s out cold!” another exclaimed.

“Someone call an ambulance!”

“That’ll take too long! I’ll drive him back to school!”

“Stay with us, Kuraudo!”

Ikki put Intetsu away with a shake of his head and let out a small sigh. “I guess he didn’t want to look weak in front of his opponent. What a stubborn guy.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” Stella said, sweeping his feet out from under him.

“Bwah! Wh-What did you do that for, Stella?”

“If you don’t have the strength left to stand either, then stop trying to act cool.”

“Urk.” Ikki was indeed so exhausted that he couldn’t even get back on his

feet, much less walk. He awkwardly averted his gaze, unable to argue back against Stella. “So you noticed...”

“Of course I did. Who do you think I am? Anyway, why do you have to get so beat up every time you fight?! If you had a technique like that up your sleeve, you should have used it sooner!”

“You’re asking for the impossible there. That was the Last Samurai’s strongest technique. There’s no way I’d be able to use it perfectly the first time, especially in the middle of a duel. I had to tire Kurashiki-kun out enough that his slashes got a little slower or I would have been cut to ribbons.”

“Then you should have at least fought in a way that didn’t involve getting hurt so badly. Sheesh...” Sighing, Stella handed her bag to Ayase. “Senpai, I brought a first aid kit, so can you patch Ikki up for me? You spent your whole life at a dojo, so you probably know how to use this thing better than I do. I’ll call a teacher to pick us up in the meantime. We can’t really take this guy on the train when he’s covered in blood and can barely stand.”

“O-Okay!”

Ayase took the bag and started taking out bandages and disinfectant. She worked swiftly while Stella walked over to a corner of the dojo and pulled out her student handbook to use its phone function.

“Thank you, Kurogane-kun,” Ayase said, squeezing Ikki’s hand in gratitude. “Thanks to you, I was able to learn about my father’s true feelings. I thought I knew him better than anyone, but it turns out I didn’t understand him at all.”

“That’s not true,” Ikki said with a shake of his head.

“Really?”

“The only reason I was able to win today was because of how faithfully you’d memorized your father’s teachings. I doubt there’s anyone in the world who knows Kaito-san better than you. You are without a doubt the Last Samurai’s true successor.”

Is that really true? Though Ayase wasn’t certain, at the very least, she wanted to believe it was. Thus, after a short silence, she said, “In that case, I need to get a lot stronger, otherwise I won’t be able to truly call myself Dad’s successor. If

nothing else, I need to become strong enough to beat the Sword Eater on my own.”

There was no hesitation in Ayase’s voice. When she’d been lost, Ikki had helped her find her way. And now, she would never again lose sight of what mattered most to her. Ikki was reassured by the look in her eyes, and he gave her a gentle smile.

“I look forward to that day.”

From the bottom of his heart, he hoped the future Ayase wished for would come to pass.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Kurashiki Kuraudo

■PROFILE

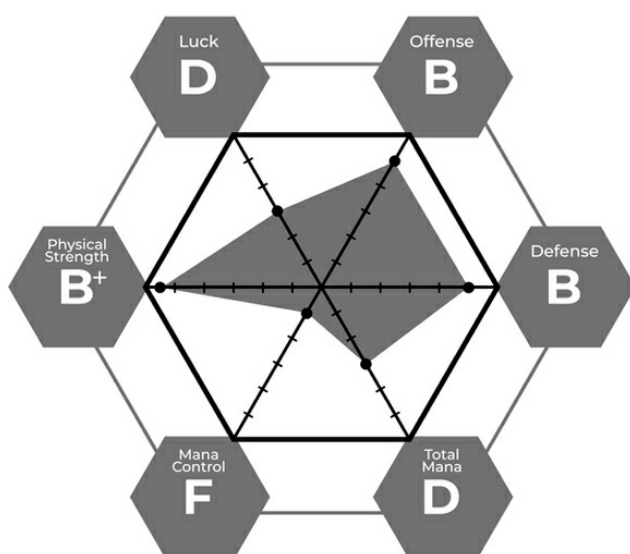
Affiliation: Donrou Academy Third-Year

Blazer Rank: C

Noble Art: Skull Serpent's Blade

Nickname: Sword Eater

Summary: Leader of a gang of thugs.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

A mad dog who tries to beat up anyone who looks strong, Blazer or not. Apparently, he's destroyed over a dozen dojos, and he'll do whatever it takes to arrange a match with someone he wants to fight! But when it comes to the actual duels, he always fights fair. He gets along surprisingly well with Kurogane-senpai and Stella-chan. According to some of his friends at Donrou, he's started training super hard to be able to beat Kurogane-senpai in the upcoming Seven Stars Battle Festival. I bet he'll be way stronger by then!

Epilogue: A Frosty Smile

“Worst One Defeats Donrou Academy’s Strongest Knight, Sword Eater, in a Dojo Battle!” That was the headline emblazoned on the school newspaper the day after Ikki’s fight with Kuraudo. There were even pictures of the battle that had been stealthily taken by Kusakabe.

Soon after hearing Ikki and Ayase’s conversation during their match, Kusakabe had sensed that something big would be happening, and she’d been tailing them ever since. As a result, she’d followed the two of them and Stella to Ayase’s old dojo and had managed to snap photos of the duel through the windows. Ikki and the others hadn’t been able to sense her presence at all, and when they’d asked her how she’d done it, she’d replied, “Any self-respecting journalist needs to be good at tailing people!” Ikki was truly in awe of just how good Kusakabe was at the task.

No matter how it had happened, the news was causing quite a stir throughout Hagun. Kuraudo was Donrou’s strongest knight and one of the eight best student Blazers in the country. The fact that Ikki had managed to beat him proved that his previous victories had been no fluke. Even the staunchest of naysayers were now forced to admit that Ikki really was strong.

Furthermore, there were now heated discussions among the student body as to whether or not Ikki was stronger than Hagun Academy’s top knight, student council president Toudou Touka, whose nickname was Thunderbolt. No one knew who’d first posted a forum thread questioning whether or not Ikki might actually be stronger, but regardless, that was all anyone was talking about.

“Thunderbolt made it to the semifinals, not just the quarterfinals. She’s *gotta* be stronger, right?”

“Nah, the Worst One would win.”

“No way, dude.”

“He’s got a shot, I think.”

“Hell no.”

“Hell yes.”

The arguments only got more heated over time, and after a week had passed, everyone was hoping Ikki would get matched up against Touka so the debate could be settled once and for all.



One evening, a week after Ikki’s battle with Sword Eater, Ikki and Stella were resting on a bench after finishing their daily training. Ikki had just received a message from Ayase telling him that her father had finally woken up from his coma.

“Really? Senpai’s father finally recovered?!”

“Seems like it.”

“Talk about perfect timing.”

“Yeah. Ayatsuji-san seemed pretty excited too. Here, look.”

Ikki showed the message to Stella. “Dad’s awake!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” it read.

“That’s a lot of exclamation points. Can’t really blame her, though. I’d be happy too.”

“I’m glad she’s doing well.”

Ikki hadn’t seen Ayase since the day of his duel with Kuraudo. After they’d gone back to school, Ayase had said, “I ended up relying on you for everything, Kurogane-kun, so the least I can do is stick to my principles and end things properly.” Then, she’d gone to the teachers to tell them she’d cheated during her match against Ikki. Because she’d admitted to it herself, and thanks to Oreki taking her side, she hadn’t been expelled. She had, however, gotten suspended for ten days and, of course, disqualified from entering the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Hence why Ikki was so glad to be hearing from her.

“Though if her father’s awake, that means she’s going to have a hard time looking after him. Especially once she comes back to school,” Stella mused.

“True...” Kaito’s body had surely deteriorated significantly during the two

years he'd been asleep. He would likely have a tough time during rehabilitation. His heart condition meant he didn't have long to live either way, so Ayase would want to spend as much time with him as possible. "I doubt she'll be coming to our training sessions anymore," Ikki added, a forlorn expression on his face.

"It'll be lonely without her."

"Yeah, but that's just how it is sometimes." It was honestly a miracle that Kaito had woken back up at all since the doctors had said he might not live to see the new year.

"They might not have too much time left together, but I hope they get to enjoy what time they do have," Stella said.

"Yeah."

The two of them looked up at the evening sky. After a few minutes, Ikki's student handbook started ringing. He looked down and saw that the name shown on the caller ID was none other than "Ayatsuji Ayase."

"Oh, now she's calling me. Hello?"

To Ikki's surprise, it was a gruff old man's voice on the other end. "So you're Kurogane Ikki-kun, hmm? I've heard all about you from my daughter. Hurry up and marry her so you can take over the do—"

Thud!

"I can't believe this is the crap you're spouting after finally waking up! Sorry about that, Kurogane-kun! Dad said he wanted to thank you, so I let him call you. I didn't realize he was just trying to mess with me."

"Ha ha ha ha. No need to hide it, Ayase. I can tell you like this Kurogane-kun. Your old man can see right through you. When you were talking about him, you looked just like your mom did when she was telling other people how cool I was!"

"Waaaaah! Shut uuup!"

"No need to get so embarrassed. Now that I'm awake again, I can even attend your wedding if you set it up quickly—"

“Go back to sleep for another two years!”

“Bwagh!”

“K-K-Kurogane-kun, ignore everything he just said, okay? Bye!”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

“Maybe Kaito-san will live a lot longer than we expect,” Ikki said after a brief silence.

“What a coincidence. I was just thinking the exact same thing,” Stella replied with a smile. “I guess this is a happy ending, then?”

“For sure.”

Ayase had gotten her dojo back, and Kaito had even woken up from his coma. While it was a little sad that Ayase wouldn't be joining Ikki and Stella's training sessions anymore, it wasn't like they'd never see each other again. And though Ikki felt like he'd just been getting led around the nose ever since the restaurant incident, now that it was all over, he was satisfied with the results.

“Still, our training sessions will be quieter with one person missing,” Ikki noted.

“And today, we're missing *three* whole people,” Stella replied.

“Yeah.”

Ayase naturally wasn't here, but Shizuku and Alisuin hadn't shown up either.

“Alice misses days sometimes, but it's unusual for Shizuku not to be here,” Stella said.

“You're right. Maybe she's not feeling well?”

“I don't know, but it means we're alone.”

There was a pause, and Stella suddenly placed her hand atop Ikki's. Ikki turned to her and was surprised by how clear the longing in her eyes was. After that day at the pool, they hadn't shared much physical affection, but they'd at least become more open with each other about their emotions. As a result, Ikki knew what Stella wanted right now. As the sun began to sink beneath the horizon, he leaned in close to kiss her.

“Stella...”

“Ikki...”

“Oh, Ikki...”

“Hwuh?!” The couple turned around upon hearing a third voice. There, they found Alisuin watching them intently.

“Hmm? Aren’t you two going to kiss?”

“Waaaaah!” Both of them screamed in surprise and fell off the bench.

“A-Alice?! What are you doing?!”

“Oh, I was just thinking that since the mood’s so nice, maybe we could get a threesome going.”

“Absolutely not!” they both shouted.

“Just kidding. You two are so cute when you’re embarrassed. Aha ha ha.” Alisuin wiped a tear from her eye. “But I’m surprised. After a month of being so awkward around each other, you managed to get so close in such a short amount of time that you’re willing to have sex out in the—”

“W-W-W-We’re not *that* close yet!” Stella screamed.

“Oh, I see. Well, at least you’re willing to beg your boyfriend for kisses now. That’s still a huge improvement.”

“Wait, you knew we were dating?” Ikki asked.

“I had a feeling. And now I know for sure.”

“Rgh.”

Stella frowned. Alisuin was quite popular on campus, and she thought it might be bad that someone who talked to so many people had found out the truth. She shot Ikki a questioning glance to see if there was any way they could talk their way out of this. Of course, with the cat out of the bag, it was impossible. However, Ikki didn’t think Alisuin was the kind of person who’d spread gossip like this, so he felt like he could trust her with the truth.

“So, Alice, the thing is—”

“Don’t worry, I know. I won’t tell anyone.” Alisuin put a finger to her lips and gave Ikki a playful wink. She understood the situation without him having to say a word. Ikki could see how Shizuku, misanthropic as she was, had come to trust Alisuin. “But I *will* be sure to watch your progress every step of the way.”

Never mind. I never should have trusted you. I hope someone puts jalapeños in your dessert.

“I guess the one silver lining is that Shizuku isn’t here right now,” Stella said with a sigh.

“I know, right? Actually, Alice, how come she’s not with you?”

“Shizuku told me she’d be training alone today. I just came a bit late because I lost track of time while playing UNO with my fans.”

She’s training alone?

“Huh, that’s a surprise. I never thought Shizuku would ever willingly choose to spend *less* time with you, Ikki.”

“Her next opponent is someone she has to thoroughly prepare for, after all.”

“Wait, Shizuku’s next opponent’s already been decided?” Ikki asked.

“Hmm? Did she not tell you two?”

Ikki looked over at Stella to see if she knew, but she just shook her head.

“Alice, who’s she fighting that she has to take this seriously?” he asked.

Alisuin frowned and replied, “I regret to inform you that Shizuku’s next opponent is our school’s strongest knight.”



At roughly the same time, there was a large battle playing out at the sixth training field. The arenas were used for selection matches throughout the day, but after 5 p.m., they were opened up to the students to use as they saw fit. They were required to keep their Devices in phantom form, but otherwise, they could hold all sorts of sparring matches with whatever rules they liked.

Since anyone could come here and let loose, even students who weren’t participating in the selection matches sometimes showed up to fight whoever.

Thus, there being a large-scale battle at a training field in the evening was nothing new. The one being held today was different, however, because of how quiet it was. There were no hot-blooded clashes taking place throughout the arena, which was covered in ice.

“Wh-What the hell is with that girl?” one of the spectators in the stands muttered.

“She’s a monster...” another said.

All of the fighters in the ring were also frozen over, save for one.

“She really...took on fifty people all by herself...”

About ten minutes ago, a single first-year had walked into the training field and said that she wanted to fight everyone there all at once. The students practicing had gladly joined in, thinking they’d be able to teach a cocky first-year a lesson, but instead, she’d trounced all of them. That girl was, of course, Kurogane Shizuku, who’d recently been given the nickname “Lorelei.”



“This isn’t even enough to work up a sweat...” Shizuku sighed as she looked at the icy wasteland she’d created. She’d thought that fighting fifty Blazers at once would at least provide a bit of a challenge, but she’d dispatched every last one of them with ease.

Is Hagun really this weak of a school? Fighting these guys is only going to add to my stress, not reduce it.

“I’m sure *you* won’t disappoint me, at least,” Shizuku said, looking down at her student handbook. It was open to the email informing her of her next selection match opponent. That opponent just so happened to be the school’s strongest knight and the woman who’d made it to the semifinals of the previous year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival: class 3-3’s Toudou Touka.

Finally, a real challenge.

Shizuku’s lips curled into a feral grin. She’d been getting tired of holding back so that she didn’t permanently scar her pathetically weak opponents. She’d been longing for a fight where she could go all out and not worry about crippling her foe.

I guess I’m just like Onii-sama in this sense. Ideally, I would have liked to fight Stella, but I suppose Toudou will make for an acceptable substitute.

Indeed, Touka was strong enough that Shizuku might not win even if she gave it her all. But that was exactly what she wanted. She wanted a chance to finally unleash her full strength—to earnestly try to break the enemy before her.

“Aha ha ha ha ha!”

Though the air around her was freezing cold, her body was burning with white-hot excitement. Normally, she always kept her cool, but just this once, she let her passion run free and laughed with reckless abandon.

Afterword

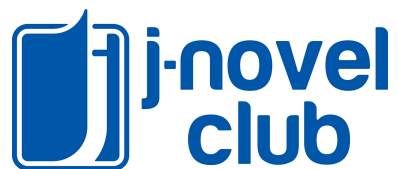
Hello, everyone. Riku Misora here. Thank you so much for reading the second volume of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*.

How's everyone's summer been going? I hope you've all managed to stay healthy. As for me, I ended up getting heatstroke. It was a truly harrowing experience. I was shivering from cold sweats even though it was hot, and I couldn't even walk straight. Luckily, there was a hospital nearby that I managed to stagger over to, but then I collapsed in the waiting room. I made a full recovery, thank goodness, but I never thought I'd be one of those people they talk about on the news who end up not taking enough precautions and getting heatstroke. Make sure you drink plenty of liquids if you're outside for long periods of time in the summer, everyone. Of course, it's going to be October by the time this book reaches you, but that's beside the point.

Anyway, let's get back to *Chivalry*. The next volume's going to be the big climax of the selection matches. All the weaklings have been weeded out, so it's only going to be hype matches from here on out. We're going to see the best of Hagun Academy's student council, and the Kurogane family is going to start getting in poor Ikki's way again. It's going to be a volume of trials for him, that's for certain. Will he manage to overcome them all and win a spot in the Seven Stars Battle Festival? Find out in volume 3!

Last but not least, I'd like to extend my gratitude to everyone who helped make this book into what it is today. First off, a big thank you to Won-san for his godlike art. Sorry for making such perverted requests like asking you to emphasize Stella's boobs on the cover and to rip off some of that part of her uniform, but thank you so much for doing it! I'm also grateful to all of my readers for sticking with me, of course. Thank you so very much.

May we meet again in volume 3.



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Chivalry of a Failed Knight: Volume 2

Originally published as RAKUDAI KISHI NO CHIVALRY 2

by Riku Misora

Translated by Ningen Edited by Adam Haffen

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