

All new translation by
j-novel club

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Chivalry of a Failed Knight





**“Karsalitio
Salamandra!”**

Her blade blazed as
brightly as the sun.
In the face of such
overwhelming heat,
Kurogane Ikki
smiled.



“Shizuku, wh-what
are you doing?!”

“Isn’t it obvious?
I’m **kissing** you.”



Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Prologue: Morning of Meetings](#)
4. [Chapter 1: The Prodigy and the Failure](#)
5. [Chapter 2: A Visitor from Home](#)
6. [Chapter 3: Rebellion](#)
7. [Chapter 4: Debut Battle](#)
8. [Epilogue: Oath under the Moonlight](#)
9. [Afterword](#)
10. [Bonus High-Res Illustrations](#)
11. [About J-Novel Club](#)
12. [Copyright](#)

Prologue: Morning of Meetings

After finishing his morning run, Kurogane Ikki made his way back to his dorm room. When he opened the door, he found a half naked girl inside.

Huh?

She had wavy crimson hair that resembled a fiery blaze. Her face was stunning, and her ruby-red eyes were open wide in surprise. It was clear from her features that she wasn't Japanese. The black lace underwear she was wearing highlighted her curvaceous body and contrasted sharply with her skin, which was as white as snow.

She's beautiful.

Ikki could think of no other words to describe her appearance. She was so breathtaking that she reminded Ikki of the paintings of goddesses he'd seen. He was captivated, but her beauty was so divine that he didn't even feel any lustful thoughts.

But why is a girl like this in my room?! Did I accidentally go into the wrong one?

However, the placard in front of the door had clearly marked this as room 405 of building 1. The small six-tatami room with a bunk bed in the corner also looked very much like Ikki's room to him. In which case, it was the girl who must have come into the wrong room.

"Ee—"

A strangled noise escaped the girl's throat. She then sucked in a huge breath, preparing to scream.

This isn't good. If she screams, it's definitely going to look like I'm the one in the wrong here since I'm the guy.

"Hold on a sec! I get why you're mad. Even if there was nothing I could have done to prevent it, I won't make excuses and pretend I didn't see what I very

clearly saw.”

Ikki purposely didn't point out whose fault it was that the two of them were currently in this tragic situation. He understood how horrifying it must be for this girl to be seen half naked by some random guy she didn't know the first thing about. As a man, it was his responsibility to make things right.

“So I'll strip too! That'll make us even!”

“Stoooooop! You perveeeeert!”

Unsurprisingly, that caused her to scream anyway, shattering the peaceful morning silence.



Chapter 1: The Prodigy and the Failure

Blazers. Those who can manifest the power of their soul into a weapon—a Device—and harness mana to use all manner of strange powers. A mere one in every one thousand people was a Blazer, making them a rarity.

In ages past, they were called witches or sorcerers, as they could wield powers that couldn't be explained by science. The strongest among them could alter the very flow of time, while even the weakest could strengthen themselves well beyond regular human limits.

They were human, but they possessed superhuman powers. Mundane weapons and traditional martial arts couldn't hope to stand against their might. Police forces and armies around the world relied on the strength of Blazers.

However, with great power came great responsibility. And the Mage-Knight System existed to teach Blazers that responsibility.

To become a Mage-Knight, a Blazer had to graduate from an internationally recognized Blazer school. Only then would they receive the title of Mage-Knight, as well as a formal license allowing them to freely use their powers.

There were seven such schools in Japan, and Tokyo was home to one of them: Hagun Academy. Its campus was massive—the size of ten Tokyo Domes laid out next to each other. Students spent their time there as trainee knights, polishing their skills and striving to become the best Blazers they could be.

Right now, Kurogane Ikki was sitting in Hagun Academy's director's office, which he'd been dragged to by the dorm monitor. Unsurprisingly, someone had come to check out what was going on after the girl had screamed, and Ikki had been unable to provide an adequate explanation on the spot.

"I see. You thought to atone for seeing her in her underwear by stripping yourself," the director, Shinguuji Kurono, said with a sigh after hearing Ikki's explanation for what had happened. She was sitting across from Ikki in a leather chair, a cigarette in her mouth. She was a striking woman, and the black suit she

wore fit her perfectly. “Are you a moron?”

“I thought it was a fair and gentlemanly idea, personally,” Ikki fired back.

“It’s a certain kind of gentlemanly, that’s for sure.”

“I wasn’t trying to be a gentleman pervert, okay? Though looking back on it, I guess everything was so sudden that I wasn’t really thinking straight.”

“So, to sum it up, you were so smitten by her naked body that you started getting naked as well?”

“That’s not strictly wrong, but could you please not word it in such a suggestive way? You’re making it sound like I’m a rapist.”

“Think about it from her perspective, Kurogane. She was changing in the dorms, which are pretty empty during spring break, when a man suddenly barged in and started taking his clothes off. What would *you* think?”

“That he’s a rapist...” Ikki shivered as he thought about how his actions must have looked to her. He sighed. “I can’t believe I did something so rude to Stella-san on her first day at school. I hope she doesn’t come to hate Japan because of this.”

“Oh, you know Vermillion, Kurogane?”

“Nah, I only just remembered who she is. I was so flustered when I ran into her that I completely forgot.”

Indeed, the girl who Ikki had run into was Stella Vermillion. She was the second princess of the Vermillion Kingdom, a small European country. It had caused quite a stir within the school when people learned that she would be enrolling in Japan’s Hagun Academy.

Ikki still remembered the newspaper headline that had announced her arrival: “A Once-in-a-Decade Prodigy! The Second Princess of the Vermillion Kingdom, Stella Vermillion (Age 15), Enrolls in Hagun Academy with the Highest-Ever Entrance Exam Score!”

“She’s an honest-to-goodness princess, and she even scored top marks on the entrance exams. That’s pretty impressive.”

“She’s certainly top-class. All of her stats are well above average, and she has

thirty times as much Aura as the average new student. She's a genuine Rank A Blazer. A far cry from a certain Rank F whose stats are so low that he was forced to repeat a year. Isn't that right, Worst One?"

"Oh, give me a break," Ikki frowned, but he didn't deny what Kurono had said. He couldn't. Kurogane Ikki's total amount of Aura—of magical power—was only a tenth of that of an average student.

"This is a bit of a problem, though. I had Vermillion come to school before the start of classes because there was a bunch of paperwork I needed to take care of for her admission, but I didn't think something like this would happen. If we don't handle this properly, it might escalate into an international incident. I realize you're not to blame here, Kurogane, but I'm going to need you to take responsibility for this anyway. It's not fair, but if you're a man, you should show some mettle and prepare yourself."

"Why is it that people always play the 'man' card when they want you to do something unreasonable?" Ikki asked with a sigh.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Excuse me."

The door swung open, and Stella Vermillion walked into the room. Unlike earlier, she was wearing clothes. Specifically, the Hagun Academy uniform. The blazer was stylish, but it had relatively muted colors. Those dull colors served to emphasize her blazing red hair, though, and the uniform suited her nicely.

Furthermore, her boobs were big enough to be noticeable even through her uniform and were pushing up the ribbon that was tied to her blazer. For a moment, Ikki was reminded of how they had looked when she'd been in just her underwear, but those thoughts fled his mind when he saw her expression. She must have been crying, as her eyes were red and swollen as she glared at him.

"I'm sorry," he said instantly. A guy was never supposed to make a girl cry. Even if what had happened wasn't his fault, the fear Stella had felt when he'd walked in on her had been genuine. "It was an accident. I never meant to peep on you while you were changing. But the fact remains that I did, so as a man, I'll take full responsibility. Feel free to do with me what you wish, Stella-san."

“How honorable of you. Is this the samurai spirit I’ve heard so much about?”

“I’m just awkward with my words,” Ikki replied with a wan smile.

Stella’s expression softened and she smiled faintly back at him.

“Heh heh. To be honest, I was quite shocked at first. Thinking I had run into a molester on my first day in Japan, I began to wonder if this country was nothing more than a disgusting den of monsters. I considered turning this into an international incident, but thanks to your sincere apology, I’ve changed my mind. As royalty, it’s important that I be tolerant of others.”

She had none of the hostility she’d been exuding when she’d entered the room. Ikki had expected her to be haughty and difficult just because she was a princess, but he was forced to reassess. She seemed like a genuinely nice girl.

“Ikki,” she continued. “Out of respect for your gallantry, I will let this slide if you cut open your stomach in ritual suicide.”

Never mind, I shouldn’t have been fooled.

“Hold on just a second here! You want me to kill myself?!”

“You were rude to a princess, you know. You should be grateful it’s ending with such a simple death. By all rights, I should have you tied to a pole and stoned to death by the commoners.”

“So you want to torture me on top of killing me?!”

“And I’m letting you die an honorable death instead. Can you not feel the kindness flowing out of me?”

“Not when you want my guts to be flowing out of me!”

“Ha ha ha. You’re a funny guy, Kurogane,” Kurono said, laughing.

“Don’t just sit there! Help me out, Director! You’re an educator, aren’t you?! How can you let students die in your school?!”

“Kurogane—if your death will buy us peace with the Vermillion family, wouldn’t you say it’s a small price to pay?”

“You can’t put a price on human life! Especially not a price that low!” Ikki was willing to make amends, but this was unreasonable. “Um, S-Stella-san? Is there

really no other way to get you to forgive me?”

“Hmph. Why do you look so unhappy? I thought Japanese men considered committing hara-kiri an honor.”

“I’m a regular kid born in the modern era, not a samurai! I even listen to hip-hop and rap, yo!”

“Now that’s just cringe,” Kurono said, still laughing.

“If you’re not going to help me, then just shut up!” Ikki exclaimed.

Sensing Ikki’s reluctance, Stella’s expression grew stern.

“You’re the one who said I was free to do whatever I wished with you! If you’re a man, then you should keep your word!”

“It was a figure of speech! I didn’t mean you could do *literally* anything!”

“All I’m hearing are excuses, Kurogane. What happened to taking responsibility?”

Screw that! I value my life more than some international scandal!

“I-I just saw you in your underwear! That doesn’t warrant killing me!”

“‘J-Just’?! U-U-Unbelievable! You pervert! You sullied an unmarried princess’s skin with your filthy gaze, and *that’s* what you have to say! I wouldn’t even show that much skin around my own father!”

Stella’s eyes blazed with rage. It wasn’t just her eyes either; the air around her started to heat up, and her body began emitting a crimson glow.

Oh yeah, the newspaper article mentioned her powers too. If I recall correctly
—

“That does it! A perverted, rude molester like you deserves to be burned to a crisp! Serve my will, Lævateinn!”

A burning aurora of light erupted from Stella, and a flaming greatsword appeared in her hands. This was her Device, a physical manifestation of the power of her Blazer soul.

Devices had been referred to as different things across different cultures and eras—holy swords, demonic tools, sacred treasures, cursed bows—but they

were, at their core, magical weapons. It was through these Devices that Blazers used their unique powers, known as Noble Arts. And the Crimson Princess's power was the ability to summon flames that burned everything before her.

"Prepare to die, pervert! I'll vaporize you until not even your atoms remain!"

"A-Are you serious?!"

"Accept your fate!"

Stella swung her blazing sword down, and Ikki immediately moved to defend himself.

"Come to me, Intetsu!"

Kurogane Ikki, the Rank F knight, also called forth his Device, a katana made of jet-black steel. He blocked Stella's first attack with it.

"Resistance is futile!"

"So hot?!"

"Of course it is! My Lævateinn is powered by my Noble Art, Dragon Breath! Its temperature reaches three thousand degrees Celsius! You may be able to fend off my claws, but my dragon's breath will scorch you all the same!"

"What monstrous strength..."

Gritting his teeth, Ikki jumped back and put some distance between him and Stella.

"Aha ha ha ha. You fool. There's no escape for you in a room this small. I'll burn you to cinders and erase the very fact that you sullied my honor from this world!"

"Wait! Calm down! You're making it sound like I did something horrible, but I didn't actually do *anything*!"

"Liar! You turned your l-l-lewd gaze to my bare skin!"

"It's true that I saw, but I wasn't thinking anything perverted! I was just stunned by how beautiful you were! That's all!"

"Fwuh?!" Stella blushed, her anger momentarily forgotten. Ikki, however, thought he might have accidentally made her even angrier. "Wh-Wh-What are

you saying, you idiot?! T-Telling an unmarried woman that she's beautiful... This is why everyone says commoners have no tact!"

The inferno surrounding Lævateinn died down to a few flickering flames. Stella's hostility vanished with it, and she started fidgeting bashfully. The anger in her eyes was gone, replaced by uncertainty. It was at this point that Ikki realized she was embarrassed.



Who would've guessed. I figured someone as pretty as Stella-san was used to being called beautiful.

Regardless, the fact that Stella's anger had abated meant Ikki still had a chance to resolve this situation peacefully.

"Anyway, this only happened because you accidentally came into my room to change, so please don't make me kill myself over this."

At that, Stella's expression grew stern again.

"Don't spout nonsense! *You're* the one who barged into *my* room! I got the key to that room from the director herself! There's no way I'd mistakenly go into the wrong one!"

"Huh?"

Hang on. Now that I think about it, I did lock my room before leaving. So even if Stella-san had mistaken my room for hers, she shouldn't have been able to get in. But she was definitely inside. Why? According to her, it's because she got the key from the director.

"What's going on here, Director?" Ikki asked, confused.

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha..."

"Director?" Stella asked as well.

Kurono's laughter grew even louder.

"Ha ha ha. Sorry, that's on me. Things were getting pretty interesting, so I felt like letting you guys stew for a bit. Anyway, it should make sense to you guys now, right? Kurogane, you know that it's two students per room in Hagun Academy's dorms. Neither you nor Vermillion mistook which room was yours. In other words, the two of you are roommates," Kurono finished with a grin.

"Whaaaaat?!" Stella and Ikki shouted in unison.



"Wh-What do you mean, Director? I have to share a room with this p-pervert?!"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Stella Vermillion. Do you have a problem with

that?”

“Absolutely!”

“I agree,” Ikki said, chiming in. “I know the dorms are two people to a room, but I don’t recall them being mixed gender.”

“They weren’t until I became the director of this school last year. Kurogane, I believe I’ve already explained what the school’s policy will be going forward.”

“You said something about how you wanted to prioritize results over everything else, right?”

“Correct. I’m a fan of meritocracy. In recent years, Hagun Academy has been faring poorly compared to Japan’s other six knight schools. We’ve been losing at the Seven Stars Battle Festival every year too. You know, the annual festival where all of Japan’s knight schools compete to see which has the strongest students. The reason I was appointed director of this school was to turn our lackluster record around.”

Kurono went on.

“Assigning roommates according to ability is the first step of my plan. Your class ranking and gender don’t matter. I want people who are close in skill rooming together. I believe that will foster the spirit of friendly competition in our students, and inspire them to strive for even greater heights. People tend to get more fired up when they’re pitted against people at their skill level. And that is why you’re roommates.”

Kurono puffed her chest out as if she was extremely proud of this plan she’d come up with. However, Ikki still had questions.

“In that case, why are you pairing *us* up? Stella-san’s a top-class Blazer, isn’t she? Why do you want her rooming with the lowest-ranked student in the academy, the guy who had to repeat a year?”

“Wh-What?! You’re repeating a year?!”

“Unfortunately, yes. My overall ranking is F.”

“Y-You mean to say you think a Rank F is close to me in ability? Wh-What is the meaning of this, Director?!”

“Heh. Well, the two of you are a bit of an exception. Bluntly speaking, there’s no one even close to as skilled as you, Vermillion, and there isn’t anyone as unskilled as Kurogane. There’s no one who’s a proper match for the two of you, for completely opposite reasons. As a result, you were both left over after I’d sorted the students, and I figured the simplest solution would be to stick the two of you together. Happy now?”

“As if I could accept that!” Stella slammed her hands down on Kurono’s desk. “B-Besides, it’s not right for a man and a woman so close in age to live together! What if something happens?!”

“Oh? Just what kind of ‘something’ do you expect to happen when a healthy boy and girl of the same age live together, Vermillion? Do tell.”

“W-Well...I...”

“Stop acting like a perverted old man,” Ikki said, coming to Stella’s aid. He couldn’t bear to watch her squirm in embarrassment.

“I’m just joking,” Kurono said with a flippant smile. “But I’m not joking about you two being roommates. That’s final. There are a few other boy and girl pairs besides just you two as well. If I made exceptions for all of them it would defeat the purpose of this policy. Incidentally, Vermillion, don’t think I’ll give you special treatment just because you’re a princess. If you don’t like how I do things, you’re free to drop out.”

Stella winced upon hearing the words “drop out.” She’d traveled all the way from another continent just to attend this school in Japan. Ikki had no idea what her reasons had been, but it was clear she wanted to study here.

“Fine.”

After a long silence, Stella was finally forced to surrender to Kurono.

“Are you sure about this?” Ikki asked gently.

“I-If that’s what school policy dictates, I have no other choice,” Stella replied glumly. “But if I have to room with you then I have three conditions!”

Stella raised three fingers in front of Ikki. Though he was also unhappy with the policy Kurono had dictated, that didn’t mean he had to listen to everything

Stella said.

That being said, I am a year older, and a guy, so if her conditions are reasonable, I guess I can cooperate.

“As long as you’re not going to ask for anything crazy like, ‘he has to be tall,’ ‘he has to make a lot of money,’ and ‘he has to have graduated from a top school.’”

“Don’t worry, they’re simple conditions I’m sure even you can manage.” Stella lowered a finger with each condition she spoke. “Don’t talk to me. Don’t open your eyes. And don’t breathe.”

“So you still want me to die.”

“Accept those three conditions, and I’ll allow you to live in the space outside my room!”

“And then you’re kicking me out anyway?!”

“What’s wrong? Can you not follow even these three simple conditions?”

“Like hell! Those conditions are insane! At least let me breathe!”

“Absolutely not! I just know you’re going to try and sniff my scent while pretending to just breathe, you pervert!”

“I’ll breathe through my mouth! That way, you’ll know I’m not trying to sniff your scent!”

“No! You’ll try and taste my breath with your tongue, you pervert!”

“I didn’t even consider that! What kinds of imaginations do princesses have?!”

“Drop out if you don’t like it! Then I’ll get a room all to myself!”

“Now you’re just being unreasonable...”

“Good grief. You guys just keep arguing back and forth. How about we do this? The two of you fight a mock battle, and the winner gets to set the rules for how you two use the room. They say a true knight carves out their fate with the blade, right? I take it you two have no objections to this?” Kurono said, unable to stand their bickering any longer.

It would be much faster to just let them duke it out and let the stronger one have their way. It was also how knights generally tended to resolve their differences.

“Sure. Sounds fair to me. You okay with that, Stella-san?”

Ikki agreed immediately, then turned to Stella to see what she thought.

“Wh-What?!”

Stella stared at Ikki in shock.

“Huh? Are you *that* against it?”

“N-No, I have no issue with settling things with a battle, but...you do realize what you’re saying, don’t you?”

“Did I say anything strange?”

“You’re a Rank F! A failed knight who couldn’t even go up to the next grade! There’s no way you’ll be able to defeat a Rank A knight like me!”

Ikki finally realized the source of Stella’s surprise. It was true that his stats were so low he hadn’t met the minimum criteria to go up a grade, whereas Stella was a once-in-a-decade prodigy who everyone had high expectations for. She probably thought it was reckless of him to agree to decide things with a battle.

Ikki just smiled awkwardly and said, “Maybe not, but you don’t know how a match will end until you actually fight.”

He’d accepted that talking wouldn’t solve this problem. Stella wasn’t going to budge on her conditions, and he wasn’t interested in dropping out. He had his own reasons for wanting to become a Mage-Knight.

Since a peaceful resolution wasn’t possible, they had no choice but to settle things with a match. When he explained as much to Stella, she snapped.

“Rrrggghhh! Now I’m mad! You commoner! Not only did you peep on a princess while she was changing, but you actually think a failure like you can beat me?! I’ve never been this humiliated in my life! This country sucks!”

Stella glared at Ikki, her eyes blazing with rage.

“Fine. Let’s do it. Let’s fight. But now that you’ve made a fool out of me, I won’t let you bet something small like who gets to decide the rules of our room! The loser has to serve the winner for the rest of their life! No matter what humiliating commands the winner gives, the loser has to obediently follow them like a dog! Got it?!”

“H-Huh?! I-Isn’t that going a bit too far?”

“You can’t chicken out now. This is your fault for making me get serious. In fact, forget about this being a mock battle; now, we’re having a full-fledged duel!”

“Sounds like you’re both up for it. I’ll get you guys permission to use the third training field.”

“D-Director?! Please don’t decide that unilaterally!”

Sadly, Ikki’s protests were too little, too late.

“Hmph! Prepare yourself!” Stella said, stomping out of the room. She was almost certainly heading for the third training field.

“How did this happen?” Ikki asked with a sigh. “Why didn’t you stop this, Director? Now, I...”

“Heh. I take it you don’t want to be her slave?”

“Of course not. But I won’t like this regardless of whether I win or lose.”

“Regardless of whether you win or lose, huh? You saw her strength just now, didn’t you? Those flames scorch anyone who gets close. Just being near her will prove overwhelmingly difficult. Her strength is the real deal. There aren’t too many Blazers out there with such purely offensive abilities, and even fewer who have such mastery over them. The rumors haven’t exaggerated her power one bit. Yet even after seeing it up close, you still think you can win. You really are a fascinating boy.”

“She’s someone I’ll have to beat eventually. You should know that best of all, Director. After all, you’re the one who told me that if I emerge victorious in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, I’ll be able to graduate regardless of my stat grading. She’s going to participate for sure, so the only difference is whether I fight her

now or later.”

“If you understand all that, then why are you hesitating? All you have to do is win. If you do, you can ask her to make the few concessions you want and then call off the whole master-servant relationship. That’ll solve everything, right?”

Kurono patted Ikki on the shoulder and left her office. Once he was alone, Ikki let out his umpteenth sigh of the day.

Well, I guess she has a point. I just need to win.

Ikki knew that wouldn’t be easy, of course. Stella was one of the most formidable foes out there. Having briefly fought with her in this very room, he knew that very well.

Stella’s strength was overwhelming. Her Aura was overflowing, and in response to her emotions, could suddenly explode into a burst of light that scorched the very air. Compared to her, Ikki’s mana was practically nonexistent. He was an ant going up against an elephant. Their magical strength was so incomparable that they couldn’t even be measured by the same scale. However...

No matter how desperate the situation seems, I knew I’d eventually be going into a fight I couldn’t afford to lose or flee from.

Ikki had long since prepared himself for this. Ever since the day he’d seen that person’s smile and decided to walk down this path.

“Guess I just gotta do it,” Ikki muttered, walking out of the director’s office. He headed toward the dueling ground, where he would have to cut open a path with the blade of his soul.



Since Mage-Knights often made up the bulk of a nation’s military might, they were expected to have high combat capabilities. This was not only so that they could perform adequately in wars between countries, but also so they could deal with Blazers who misused their powers. They were often tasked with putting a stop to the many terrorist and criminal organizations, such as Rebellion, that frequently caused problems all over the world. For this reason, Hagun Academy had numerous dome-shaped training fields. Each one consisted

of a circular arena one hundred meters in diameter encircled by rows of tiered stands.

Kurogane Ikki and Stella Vermillion faced off in the third of these training fields, standing about twenty meters apart from each other. Shinguuji Kurono was serving as the referee, and she stood between the two of them.

There were a number of people in the spectator stands as well. Some of them were people who'd been training here until the duel had been announced, and others were students who'd heard the rumors that a match was about to be fought and had come to see. There were even a few second-and third-year students in the stands. All told, there were about twenty spectators, which was a large number considering this was a match happening during spring break, when most students weren't on campus. Of course, they were all here to see how strong the super rookie who'd arrived with much fanfare really was.

"She must be the Vermillion family's famous Crimson Princess."

"She's a hottie!"

"Her hair is so pretty. The way it looks like it's on fire is amazing."

"But who's she fighting?"

"Wait, isn't that Kurogane, the guy who had to repeat a year?"

"Seriously? Why's she fighting someone like that? Stella-san's a Rank A prodigy, isn't she?"

"No clue. Hey, were any of you second-years in his class last year? Do you know what kind of knight he is?"

"I was, but he didn't meet the minimum stat requirement to participate in the practical lessons, so I've never actually seen him fight."

"Holy shit. He's so weak he wasn't even allowed to practice? He doesn't stand a chance."

"Man, this is gonna be boring. The princess will just crush him in one attack."

Stella grinned as she heard what the peanut gallery was saying.

"The more I hear, the worse of a knight you seem. You'd probably be better

off giving up on becoming a Mage-Knight and just living life like a normal person.”

“Probably. But like I said, you can’t tell the outcome of a match until you actually fight.”

“You realize if you lose you’ll be my servant for life, right?”

“Sure do. But that’s only if I lose, so all I need to do is win.”

“So, you really think you can beat me.”

“That’s why I’ve been working this hard.”

Ikki gave Stella a wry smile, but he made no move to back down. He’d already resolved to see this through. However, that just irked Stella even more.

Working hard, huh?

“As long as I put in the effort, I can defeat anyone, even a prodigy.” Stella hated mediocre people who believed that kind of nonsense. Especially because whenever she defeated those people, they would always say something like, “I tried my best, but I just couldn’t win against your talent.” They all spoke as if they were the only ones working hard, implying that she had won thanks to talent alone and wasn’t putting any effort in. It pissed her off.

It wasn’t as if she’d been strong from the start. In fact, the exact opposite was true. When she’d been younger, everyone had told her it would be impossible for her to become a knight. Her magical power had been so strong that she’d burned herself whenever she’d tried to use it. Her father, her mother—everyone she’d met had been convinced that she’d never become a knight.

Stella hadn’t given up, though. She’d known she had what it took to become a top-class knight. For a small kingdom like Vermillion, strong Blazers were an extremely valuable asset. During World War II, it had been the national hero known as Samurai Ryouma who’d led the tiny nation of Japan to victory. Small nations needed exceptionally powerful Blazers to hold their own against major world powers.

Stella’s magical power had been so great that she’d burned even herself with it. However, that meant that if she learned how to control it, she’d be strong

enough to protect the people of her country. That was why, despite everyone's opposition, she had continued to train relentlessly.

After three years of hard work, she had finally managed to master her Dragon Breath. During those three years, she'd burned herself horribly countless times. She'd contemplated giving up countless times. But she was here now because she'd kept going and had never given up.

That's why I hate it when people wave off my skills as "just talent" and call me a prodigy!

"The mock battle will now begin. Blazers, manifest your Devices in phantom form."

"Come to me, Intetsu."

"Serve my will, Lævateinn!"

Summoning one's Device in phantom form meant that it could not physically harm other humans, but instead sapped their stamina upon landing a hit. Stella pointed Lævateinn at the man in front of her and swore to herself, *I'll crush you.*

You can't beat a prodigy. I'll prove that we're special. Hard work isn't enough on its own, and I'll destroy you so thoroughly that you'll regret ever thinking it was!

"Good," Kurono said. "Then let's go ahead!"

Thus, the battle between the school's Number One and its Worst One began.



"Haaaaaaah!"

The moment the battle began, Stella rushed forward and swung her blazing greatsword down. At first glance, it looked like a crude swing that relied solely on her strength, but there was a lot more finesse to it than met the eye.

A greatsword could only be swung in wide arcs, though. Ikki correctly read the trajectory of Stella's attack and swiftly moved to block with Intetsu.

"Ngh?!"

In the middle of doing so, however, he stopped and backstepped away. A

second later, Lævateinn slammed into the ground. The hit sent a shock wave through the entire training field.

“Well done. You would have been cut apart if you’d tried to block that.”

“That’s some insane offensive power. I guess you were holding back when you attacked me in the director’s office.”

“Of course I was. If I’d gone all out in there, the building would have been leveled.”

Stella smirked and prepared to launch a follow-up attack. Meanwhile, Ikki once again backstepped away to gain some distance. If he tried to take her blows head-on, his arms would get ripped off.

Stella’s weapon was a greatsword, a heavy weapon that delivered slow but powerful strikes.

Ikki had the advantage when it came to speed, and he knew he had to make full use of it. At the very least, that was what standard combat theory said about fighting people who used weapons larger than your own. But standard theory wouldn’t help against someone with Stella’s monstrous strength.

“I can’t believe you’re so slow,” Stella said, dashing forward.

“Rrgh?!”

To Ikki’s surprise, she was able to match his speed.

“Did you think you had the upper hand when it came to speed? Too bad. I know how to do more with my mana than just attack with it. If I concentrate it at my feet and then explode it in one big burst, I can accelerate much faster than you. Plus, since I have thirty times as much Aura as the average Blazer, I don’t need to calculate how much I use in every single one of my actions like you do. I can keep this up for ages and not have to worry about running out. You can’t beat me when it comes to power, and you can’t beat me when it comes to speed!”

Stella Vermillion was like a super mobile heavy tank with an unlimited amount of fuel. Ikki could only smile helplessly in the face of such overwhelming might.

So this is what Rank A Blazers are like.

The winners of past Seven Stars Battle Festivals—which Ikki was hoping to become this year—had mostly been Rank B or C Blazers. Reaching Rank A while still attending a Blazer school meant you were far more than just a mere student. Every Rank A Blazer had gone on to leave their mark on history as a great hero of some kind or another. Ikki could see why everyone said that Stella was the kind of prodigy that only appeared once in a decade.

Stella swung down again, much faster than before. Though Ikki knew her blows could shake the entire training field, he lacked the speed to get away, so he reluctantly lifted Intetsu to block.

The sound of metal clashing against metal echoed across the arena in a rhythmic pattern, sounding almost like music to the spectators.

“Whooooa!”

The crowd let out a cheer. They were, of course, watching Stella’s Lævateinn trace fiery arcs through the air over and over and over. She’d clearly practiced her swordsmanship a great deal.

Most Mage-Knights didn’t bother learning proper swordsmanship, or any other martial arts. They found it more efficient to spend their time honing their magical abilities, as that tended to make them much stronger. It was also what both school and society expected from them. Magical abilities were valued, with a Mage-Knight’s rank being wholly unrelated to their physical capabilities.

However, only mediocre Blazers thought physical prowess was unnecessary for a Mage-Knight. Every history-making Mage-Knight had mastered both martial arts and their magical abilities. They always pursued strength in all of its forms, trying their hand at anything and everything that might make them stronger and then incorporating it into their fighting style as they strove for greater heights.

Stella Vermillion was one such person. She’d been the champion of the Vermillion Kingdom’s national swordsmanship tournament and was a master of her family’s Imperial Sword Arts. She danced with the grace of a butterfly, but her sword swings were sharp enough to continually push Ikki back. He had his hands full just parrying her blows as he was slowly but surely forced to retreat.

“I knew this would happen. That flunker’s getting overpowered.”

“Yeah, it looks like he can barely keep up with her.”

“It’s just a matter of time before he loses.”

Things were playing out just as the crowd had expected, and they were losing interest in the fight. In contrast, Stella Vermillion was beginning to feel uneasy.

What’s going on here?

Each of her blows was strong enough to send shock waves through the ground. She should have been able to crush Ikki in just one swing. It made no sense that he was still here, still fighting. On the back foot, perhaps, but still fighting nonetheless. He shouldn’t have been able to block any of her attacks with the paltry amount of mana he possessed.

Despite being in an advantageous position, cold sweat started to bead on Stella’s forehead. The crowd seemed to think Ikki was being pushed back and that it was only a matter of time before he lost, but Stella knew better.

He’s parrying all of my attacks!

“Haaaaah!”

With a spirited yell, Stella once again brought Lævateinn down on Ikki. He blocked with Intetsu, but naturally, he couldn’t handle the full force of her blow. Instead, he let that excess force push him back, putting him safely out of range of the full brunt of the attack.

He did it again!

To an amateur, it might seem as though Ikki was being overwhelmed by Stella. But in truth, he was skillfully redirecting and neutralizing the power of her swings.

The flexible, softer style of defense he was using sounded easy enough to do, but it was unbelievably difficult to put into practice. If he put too much strength into his block, the power of Stella’s swing would shatter his arms, but if he put too little in, he’d be cut down before being able to back off. The perfect amount of force, the perfect angle, and the perfect timing were all needed for it to work. Missing even one of those three elements in even one of his blocks would mean instant defeat for him. Yet the samurai Stella was dueling was pulling off

that godlike feat over and over again with a calm expression on his face.

As the reality of that sunk in, Stella began to feel the first stirrings of fear. Her instincts were warning her that her opponent was far more dangerous than she'd initially assumed.

"Seems to me all you're good at is running away!"

Trying to ignore her growing dread, she taunted Ikki. However, he didn't rise to her provocations. The weak smile he'd had on his face before was gone, replaced by an eerily serious expression. His attention was focused solely on Stella's movements.

I can't stand that gaze of yours!

Stella felt as though he was seeing through her clothes, through her skin, and observing the tensing and relaxing of the muscles underneath. He was observing her every action, letting not even the most minute details escape his notice.

Not only did Stella find that unnerving, but she also realized that Ikki was trying to analyze her Imperial Sword Arts by observing her movements.

"My swordsmanship isn't so basic that you can see through it after a few minutes!" she shouted.

"Actually, I already have."

"Huh?!"

Suddenly, the flow of the battle reversed. Nearly five minutes had passed since the start of the duel, and for the first time, Kurogane Ikki went on the offensive.

Ordinarily, that would have been tantamount to suicide. No matter how skilled Ikki was, going up against Stella head-on was like trying to take down a tank with just a sword. Everyone expected him to get overpowered by Stella's might. But that wasn't what happened.

"Ngh!"

Despite the fact that Stella had far more firepower than Ikki, she was forced to take a step back when he struck.

The reason for that lay in the kind of sword swing Ikki had unleashed. It had been an exact replica of the Imperial Sword Arts that Stella had been using.

“Impossible! How can you use that?!” The moment Stella asked that question, a certain terrifying possibility flashed through her mind. “Don’t tell me...you’ve been stealing my techniques while we’ve been fighting?!”

“Pretty much. I’ve always been an outcast and no one wanted to teach me anything, so I had to learn how to steal other people’s techniques just by watching them. I got pretty good at it too. I can usually figure out most sword styles after fighting someone for a minute or so.”

A person’s swordsmanship reflected their thoughts, their form reflected the path they’d walked thus far, and their breathing reflected their ideals. Tracing all of those back to their roots allowed Ikki to discern what skills they could use, how they might combine those skills, and how they planned to react to his movements and attacks. To Ikki, doing that was as simple as breathing.

“Once you understand your opponent, you can come up with sword techniques that are superior to theirs,” he finished.

What was the best way to completely seal away your opponent’s techniques? The answer to that was simple: create techniques of your own that were based on your opponent’s but that had been fine-tuned to remove any of the drawbacks you saw in their swordsmanship.

It was the way of the world that the new superseded the old. New forms and techniques understood the flaws of the old ones and found ways to compensate for them. As a result, Ikki was able to take the initiative in any situation once he’d dissected his opponent’s style.

“Coming up with better versions of my opponent’s techniques in the middle of battle is what I call my Blade Steal. Your swordsmanship is quite polished, Stella-san, so it took me two whole minutes to analyze and steal all of your techniques. Then, it took another thirty seconds to think of better versions of them. But now, I’ve mastered them all. It’s about time I start my counterattack.”

“H-Hey, is it just me, or is the princess getting pushed back?!”

The spectators watched in shock as Stella was slowly but surely forced onto the defensive.

Stella herself was the most shocked of all. Ikki had done more than just prove himself the better swordsman. He'd stolen her prized techniques and then, on top of that, devised *better* ones. She could tell by how sharp his swings were that he'd spent ages polishing his fundamentals, which was how he'd been able to so quickly analyze the deep history behind her sword style and make even her best techniques his own. His powers of observation were terrifying.

The scariest thing of all, though, was that Ikki had accomplished all of this without using any mana whatsoever. Surpassing Stella's Imperial Sword Arts and parrying her fierce offensive were both things he'd accomplished with physical abilities alone.

He's strong! Just how much do you have to train to be able to accomplish something like that?!

Stella was forced to admit to herself that this man was better than her when it came to swordsmanship. His experience far outweighed her own.

But the fact that she was willing to accept when she was outmatched was one of her strengths. Indeed, Rank A knight Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess, was someone who accepted her weaknesses and overcame them. She wouldn't let herself be bested here. If Ikki had seen through her swordsmanship, she'd simply use that to her advantage.

Stella raised Lævateinn high and prepared to swing down. Ikki saw the tensing of her muscles and immediately brought Intetsu up to block at an angle that would completely neutralize her downward swing. Her preparatory movements alone had given Ikki enough information to calculate the angle and the strength of her downward swing.

However, Stella had expected him to read her. That was why, this time, she'd set up a trap for him.

You're mine!

Grinning, Stella leaped back instead of swinging down. If Ikki was reading her moves, she'd turn that against him and hit him with a feint. This was the first

time Stella, who'd been on the offensive for most of this fight, had retreated, but she knew doing so would work precisely because Ikki was taking the initiative now that he could read her.

Ikki's block met only empty air. In that instant, Stella swung Lævateinn horizontally, aiming for his unguarded flank. She had not used such an attack before, and she knew the sudden change would be too fast for Ikki to respond to. Intetsu's blade was too high up for Ikki to bring it back down in time. But to Stella's immense surprise, Lævateinn did not cleave straight through Ikki.

"Your swordsmanship is getting sloppy," Ikki said plainly.

"Wha—"

Stella looked down and saw that Lævateinn had been stopped inches from Ikki's torso.

H-How?!

She'd changed the pace and style of her attacks. She'd even set up a feint. Plus, she knew it was physically impossible for Ikki to have gotten Intetsu's blade back down in time. And yet, he'd blocked her anyway. As for how, she now saw that he'd used Intetsu's hilt. He'd blocked her swing using the few extra inches of it that weren't covered by his hands.

Just how good is your kinetic vision?!

"You lost the mental battle and started rushing toward victory. Attacking while retreating isn't your style. Even I can block a slash that weak without having to redirect it. Your makeshift attempt at improvisation proved to be your downfall."

Ikki knocked Lævateinn aside and swung Intetsu down at Stella.

"Haaaaaaah!"

The edge of his blade made contact with Stella's unguarded shoulder.



"Did he win?!"

"That was a clean hit. It's definitely over."

“No way... I can’t believe a Rank A like Stella-san lost to him.”

“She must have let her guard down. There’s no other way she’d lose.”

“No, wait! Look!”

The spectators’ gazes focused on Stella’s right shoulder. Intetsu’s blade was resting against it, but she appeared completely unhurt. Ikki’s full-power strike hadn’t damaged her in the slightest.

“I figured this would happen,” Ikki said, gritting his teeth in frustration and leaping back before the latent heat rolling off of Stella could burn him.

Blazers enveloped themselves in mana when fighting, which meant they could only be harmed by attacks that also contained mana. In essence, they had a barrier of mana around them.

Ikki’s total mana capacity was exceedingly small, however. No matter how skilled he was at fighting, he lacked the most vital quality a Blazer needed. Because his mana pool was so small, he couldn’t push through the layer of mana Stella naturally exuded.

“Aura” was the term used to describe the total amount of magical energy a Blazer possessed, and they needed it to utilize their supernatural powers. It was the one thing that couldn’t be improved with training or effort.

People claimed that a Blazer’s Aura was proportional to the weight of their innate destiny. They believed that those destined to do great things were granted the power to do so at the moment of their birth. Fate was inescapable, they said, and there was nothing one could do to fight against or change the fate they were born with. In other words, the difference in talent between Ikki and Stella was what blocked his path to victory.

“I can’t believe I’m going to have to settle for such a lame victory...”

“So you *did* know that my Intetsu wouldn’t be able to harm you, Stella-san.”

“Of course. That’s exactly why I challenged you to a sword fight. I wanted to prove that it wasn’t just my mana that was superior to yours, but my swordsmanship as well. That I wasn’t just someone who was born gifted. But it seems I won’t be able to... All right, I’ll admit it. The only reason I’m going to

win this fight is thanks to my natural talents.”

Ikki was strong. He wasn't like the other people Stella had fought, who'd talked so casually about working hard. The effort Ikki spoke of held far more weight.

Had Ikki possessed a normal amount of talent as a Blazer, or even a little bit less than normal, Stella would have been defeated by his last attack. Regrettably, though, he lacked even that.

If, after their match, Ikki said that he'd only lost because Stella was born gifted, she wouldn't look down on him for it. He'd earned the right to say that. That was how strong he was.

“You've earned my respect. I'll grant you the honor of defeating you with my full strength,” Stella said, and leaped all the way back to the edge of the fighting ring. She was inches away from the wall that separated the spectator stands from the arena.

For a moment, Ikki was confused. Stella had just said she'd defeat him with her full strength, but she'd retreated as far as she could. But then, he realized what she was doing, and a shiver ran down his spine.

“Flames of purgatory, pierce the azure sky above!”

She raised Lævateinn high, and the fire surrounding her sword grew hotter and brighter, becoming a flaming pillar of light. The pillar melted through the dome's ceiling and continued rising up to the heavens.

“Wh-What the hell is thaaat?!” one of the spectators screamed.

“Damn! Look at those flames! Is she even human?!”

The blade of light and flame was over a hundred meters long, and it blazed as brightly as the sun. Its light spelled certain doom for anything in its path. This was the ultimate Noble Art of the Rank A knight known as the Crimson Princess.

Stella had no intention of fighting Ikki in a proper sword fight. She wasn't so conceited that she believed she could beat him in that particular realm. His swordsmanship was far better than her own. She had accepted that, which was why she had chosen to use the vast talent she'd been unfairly gifted with to

burn the entire battlefield to cinders.

“It’s over. Stop struggling and accept your defeat. You’ll be happier that way.”

Though her words were harsh, Stella’s tone was respectful. She honestly thought that someone who’d honed their skills to such an extent would excel in any field they chose to apply themselves to. Except, of course, as a Mage-Knight, because they were so sorely lacking in talent as a Blazer.

Stella would grant Ikki a complete and utter defeat. For his sake, she would force him off the path of a Mage-Knight.

“Karsalitio Salamandra!”

Stella swung the massive sword of light down, destroying everything in her path.

“Oh shiiiit!”

“Ruuun! Run or you’ll get burned too!”

The spectators started fleeing the arena.

“Good grief... This isn’t the kind of technique you should bring out to beat just one guy,” Kurono grumbled with a shake of her head as she watched the training field get turned to wreckage.

In the face of such overwhelming heat, Kurogane Ikki smiled.

“You know, my sister told me that a lot too. ‘You could do anything other than become a Mage-Knight, Onii-chan, so why not set a different goal for yourself?’ The two of you might have a point. It’s true that I don’t have the aptitude to be a Mage-Knight.”

The minimum requirement Kurogane Ikki needed to fulfill to become a Mage-Knight was to achieve victory in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Most would consider it utter folly to even try. Ikki himself knew how difficult such a feat would be. In fact, he understood it better than anyone else.

“But I can’t back down. Becoming a Mage-Knight is my dream. If I give up here, I’ll be betraying the oath I made to myself—the promise that made me who I am today. That’s why I spent a lot of time thinking. What does it take for the weakest to win against the strongest? What do I have to do to stay true to

my dream and see it through? Here and now, I'll show you the answer I found."

Ikki pointed Intetsu at Stella and declared, "Using everything I have, I'll overcome you, the very symbol of what it means to be the strongest!"

A second later, Ikki's body and Intetsu's blade began emitting a pale blue light. It flickered like a flame, and for a moment, Stella thought his Blazer powers were related to fire, just as hers were. She quickly realized, however, that it was the light of his mana having grown strong enough to be visible.

Is he...amplifying his mana?! No, that's not possible.

There was no way for a person to change the amount of mana they had been born with.

What's going on, then? I don't understand. I've never heard of anyone having a Blazer power that lets them amplify their mana either.

All Stella knew for sure was that Intetsu, which was glowing quite strongly now, was cloaked in enough mana to defeat her if Ikki landed a solid hit.

But so what?! It doesn't matter what your power is! Nothing can withstand the might of the sun! I just have to hit you once, and this battle's mine!

The distance between Ikki and Stella was a bit over sixty meters. No matter what Ikki did, her giant pillar of light would reach him before he could get to her. That was the only logical conclusion.

But the world's weakest knight had just declared that he would overturn that logic.

"What?!"

Right before the blazing pillar cleaved through Ikki, he vanished. Or rather, he jumped out of the way so quickly that it looked like he'd disappeared.

"Ah?!"

Stella's eyes widened in shock as her sword passed through empty air.

What did he just do?!

She didn't let her shock dull her movements, though, and immediately swung again at Ikki.

Karsalitio Salamandra was a blade of light and heat that had no mass. Accordingly, despite being over a hundred meters long, Stella could swing it fast enough that no human should be able to dodge it. However, Ikki dodged her second swing and her third, darting around the battlefield at lightning speed. He was so fast that her eyes couldn't keep up with his movements, and neither could her sword. After a few seconds, he'd accelerated to the point where she couldn't see him at all.

"Ngh, what on earth is that power of yours?! How are you able to move like that?!"

"This is my Blazer ability. Just like how you can control flames, Stella-san, I have a skill of my own."

Ikki's ability allowed him to double his physical strength.

Among the various abilities Blazers possessed, strength-increasing ones were considered the weakest. This was because Blazers didn't need to amplify their physical abilities in the first place. Through mana reinforcement, they could make their attacks much stronger, and similarly, they could increase their speed by using mana to propel themselves in whatever direction they wished.

That was, in fact, what Stella had done earlier to match Ikki's speed. And she'd done more than just double her speed and strength with her mana—she'd amplified them sixfold.

In other words, body strengthening was an ability made obsolete by something every Blazer could do by default. In a way, it was a fitting ability for a Rank F knight like Ikki.

"No way! There's no way you can move that fast just by doubling your physical strength! Besides, body strengthening shouldn't also increase your mana output!" Stella screamed, still swinging her sword around.

Ikki's mana had increased to a level where it was visible to the naked eye, and he was moving so fast that Stella couldn't even see him half the time. There was no way he'd only doubled his physical attributes. His strength and speed were ten times what they'd been before.

As he continued dodging the sword of light, Ikki smiled proudly and said,

“True. But that’s because I’m not using it in the usual way. I happen to be using my ability at full power.”

“What?! Determination alone can’t make you stronger!”

“Ah, but this isn’t just determination. I meant it literally when I said I was using it at full power.”

“Huh?”

“So, there’s something that always bothered me. Let’s say you want to run a hundred meters as fast as you can. Even after your sprint, you’ll have some energy left over. I always found that strange. If you’d truly used up everything you had to run those hundred meters at full speed, then after you were done, you’d be so tired you’d pass out, right?”

Obviously, the reason that didn’t happen was that humans were living creatures. All living creatures instinctively tried to preserve and prolong their life. They subconsciously limited how much of their energy they used up at once. Thus, no matter how determined someone was to use up everything they had in a fight or a race or anything else, their instincts wouldn’t let them use literally everything. Their brain would subconsciously reserve enough energy to let them continue performing the functions necessary to keep them alive.

This was something hard coded into all living beings. As a result, humans were incapable of using more than half of the total amount of stamina, muscle strength, and mana they actually possessed. But what if someone had found a way to remove that subconscious limiter through sheer willpower?

“You can’t possibly...” Stella trailed off, awed.

“That’s right. I haven’t increased how much mana I have. I’ve just removed my subconscious limiters and can use up all the power I normally wouldn’t have access to!”

Ikki knew better than anyone just how little talent he possessed as a Blazer. He also knew that hard work alone wouldn’t let him surpass prodigies. After all, prodigies worked hard too. It was the height of disrespect to assume someone prodigious was getting by on natural talent alone. At the very least, that’s what Ikki believed.

However, that meant the gap between him and the gifted would never shrink; it would only grow. After all, effort paid off more for talented individuals than it did for normal people. If he wanted to bridge that gap, he would have to do something truly insane. He would have to become the very incarnation of battle.

Ikki hadn't averted his eyes from that fact, and after considering the problem, he'd arrived at a singular solution. With how poor his natural abilities were and how difficult it was to overcome true prodigies, he knew he couldn't ask for too much.

What he'd found was a way to fight at full strength for a minute. It didn't matter what happened to him after that. As long as he gained enough power in that one minute to be stronger than anyone, it was enough.

That was the solution Kurogane Ikki had devised to let him, the weakest of all knights, defeat even the strongest knight. He would pour every fiber of his being into that one minute, amplifying his mana output and his physical strength dozens of times over. Such was the Noble Art he had created for himself.

"Ittou Shura!"

Ikki finally reached Stella, and in that instant, the battle was decided. He slashed through her with Intetsu, moving so fast she didn't have time to defend herself or even scream.

"Ah—"

Her knees buckled under her, and her consciousness began to fade. Whenever someone was dealt a fatal blow with a Device in phantom form, they blacked out like this. With Ittou Shura, Ikki had defeated the Crimson Princess in just one slash.

As Stella fell to the ground, she faintly heard Kurono shout, "The match is over! Kurogane Ikki is the winner!"

The few spectators who hadn't run away stared dumbfounded at the failed knight standing victoriously at the edge of the arena.



“Nh...”

White light hit Stella’s eyelids, forcing her awake. When she opened her eyes, she noticed that the ceiling was surprisingly low.

“Finally awake, Vermillion?”

Stella turned and saw Kurono sitting in a chair next to her bed, smoking a cigarette.

“Where...am I?” she asked groggily.

“Your room. You passed out from exhaustion after being hit by a killing blow from a Device in phantom form. There was no need for a doctor or iPS capsule, so we just brought you to your room and let you rest.”

Kurono blew out a puff of smoke.

Isn’t smoking prohibited in the dorms?

However, Stella didn’t bother reprimanding her.

“That battle really happened, then,” Stella said in a heavy voice. She’d hoped it had just been a dream, but sadly, this was reality.

Stella had lost. She’d been defeated so thoroughly that she didn’t even feel like making excuses for it.

“So, this is what losing feels like,” she said with a sigh. “It’s been so long that I’d forgotten.”

“Don’t let it get to you. Kurogane even managed to beat me in a fight—though I did give him a handicap. He’s not the kind of guy you can beat at your level of strength.”

“He beat you, the famous World Clock who was once ranked the third-strongest in the world? You can’t be serious.”

Just how strong is he? Well, I guess I saw his strength firsthand.

No normal person could force themselves to expend every fiber of their being to fight at full strength for a minute. It took incredible determination and resolve. Ikki had truly become a Shura, the Asura of Buddhist legend.

Oh! Come to think of it, what happened to him after that?

“Director, is he all right?”

Kurono nodded in response.

“He’s fine. Well, he’s in a lot worse shape than you, but he’ll live,” she replied, looking up at the top of the bunk bed.

Stella crawled out of her bed and looked up as well. Lying on the top bunk was Ikki. He was wearing a tank top, and his face was incredibly pale. If it wasn’t for the fact that she could hear his faint breathing, she would have thought he was dead. That was how lifeless his body looked.

Ittou Shura was a Noble Art that used up all of Ikki’s energy, including what his body would normally hold back to keep him alive. After a minute passed, he was left so weak that he could barely breathe. It was only natural that he’d ended up this way after beating Stella.

“He did leave himself enough strength to limp back to his room and change out of his uniform. If he couldn’t even do that then his Noble Art would be too unwieldy to use. Kurogane’s able to make minor adjustments to how much of his energy he’ll be using up.”

“‘Minor’ sounds like the key word there.”

Despite having left himself some energy, Ikki was clearly in no state to fight.

Ittou Shura was a double-edged sword. If Ikki missed the right time to use it or failed to defeat his opponent in the allotted minute, he’d be completely helpless afterward.

But he managed to defeat me with such an unstable ability.

“Just who is this man, Director?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb! I can’t think of anyone else who’s capable of moving so fast my eyes can’t keep up! Is he one of those famous Japanese ninja?!”

“Definitely not.”

“Regardless, it makes no sense that he’s a Rank F knight who had to repeat a year! What’s going on?!”

“I get what you’re saying, but Rank F is a proper assessment of his abilities. After all, the ranking system measures nothing but your capabilities as a Blazer. Your actual combat capabilities, which include your swordsmanship and martial arts skills, aren’t taken into account. Considering all of those things are meaningless in the face of a Blazer’s Noble Arts, it’s a reasonable decision.”

Skilled swordsmanship was indeed worthless when pitted against the supernatural abilities of a Blazer. Even a master swordsman who could cut through an iron bar in one slash was powerless in the face of Stella’s blazing sword that burned as hot as the sun. Any mundane swordsman would simply be reduced to ash. As a result, swordsmanship and martial arts ability were only useful in battles between Blazers of similar strength, and even then, their utility was considered marginal.

“That’s how society currently evaluates Blazers. Right now, no system exists to properly evaluate Kurogane’s strength. And aside from this one thing Kurogane excels at, his other abilities are, frankly, pathetic. I’ve never seen a Blazer with such little talent. If you’re the type of prodigy that only comes around once every decade, then he’s the type of *failure* that only comes around once every decade. That’s how bad his Blazer talents are. Since you fought him, you must have noticed that as well. His first full-power slash couldn’t even scratch you, and he landed a clean hit.”

“Well, I suppose that’s true. But I still don’t see why he was forced to repeat a year.”

“Why not?”

“I’m royalty, so I know very well just how valuable strong Mage-Knights are to a nation. And since academies like these are tasked by their governments to raise Mage-Knights, they should also value strong individuals. Therefore, it’s absurd that you would force someone that skilled at combat to repeat a year simply because he didn’t have enough class credits.”

In recent years, groups with extremist ideals, such as Rebellion, had started popping up, so strong knights were in high demand. It was an absolute waste to fail someone like Ikki. When Stella said as much, Kurono smiled bitterly and, with a resigned sigh, replied, “Heh. Good grief, you really know how to ask the

tough questions.”

“So there’s some other reason he was forced to repeat a year.”

“Yeah. The crap about not having completed enough credits is just an excuse the school came up with.”

“What for?”

“Vermillion, does the name ‘Kurogane’ sound familiar to you?”

“Why would I bother learning about a commoner fami—” Stella cut herself off, suddenly realizing that she did, in fact, know of a person with that last name. “Wait, he’s from Samurai Ryouma’s family?!”

“That’s right. Everyone knows about Samurai Ryouma, the hero who led Japan to victory in World War II. His full name is Kurogane Ryouma. He’s Kurogane Ikki’s great-grandfather. Ryouma isn’t the only prominent Blazer to have come out of the Kurogane family either. They’re a famous, highly influential family in Japan who’ve been around since the Meiji era. They have a lot of pull in the Blazer world, and they’re the ones who pressured Hagun Academy to fail Kurogane. ‘Kurogane Ikki is an outcast who ran away from home. Make sure he never graduates.’ Those were the orders the school was given.”

“But why would they...”

“To protect their precious reputation. If word got out that a Rank F flunker came from their family, it’d sully their prestigious family name. In today’s Mage-Knight society, rank is everything. The school’s previous director agreed to the Kurogane family’s demands and instituted a minimum rank system where your overall stat rating needed to be above a certain level or you wouldn’t be allowed to take part in practical lessons, all just to keep Kurogane from being allowed to attend classes. It was this unfair system that hadn’t even existed until last year that forced Kurogane to repeat a year.”

“They...” Upon hearing that, Stella was overcome with indignant rage. “What kind of parents—what kind of teachers would allow such a thing?!”

“Unfortunately, there are a lot of shitty adults out there who’ll happily let such injustices slide. Of course, I have no intention of letting this continue. The

first thing I did after being appointed the new director was get rid of all the trash who tried to ruin Kurogane's life. That didn't bring back the year he lost because of their meddling, though."

The director continued speaking.

"But despite having been barred from classes, that man didn't waste the time he had. He'd been chased out of his home, had his one chance to become a knight unfairly snatched away from him, and was called a hopeless failure by everyone around him, but Kurogane never stopped believing in himself. He didn't run away from his weakness, and at the same time, he remained confident that he could reach the same realm as those everyone lauded as prodigies. He continued fighting against the unfair hand life had dealt him, and after putting in an unfathomable amount of effort, he finally found the strength he'd been seeking. By continuing to believe in himself and his own worth, by constantly striving to improve regardless of what others told him, he was able to defeat even you, the Crimson Princess who everyone hails as the prodigy of a generation. For just one minute, he was able to make himself the strongest knight. He's one hell of a guy."

"..."

Stella knew all too well just how hard it was to continue believing in yourself no matter the circumstances. But unlike Ikki, she had at least been born with talent. She'd known that as long as she could learn to master her flames, her strength would be a huge boon to the Vermillion Kingdom. That was why she'd been able to keep going without giving up.

Ikki, on the other hand, truly had nothing going for him. He had a pitiful amount of mana, and even his Noble Art was nothing more than body strengthening, the weakest type there was. That alone would have been bad enough, but all of the adults around him had also actively gotten in the way of his goal.

How did he manage to keep believing in himself this whole time?

"What's driving him to go so far?!"

"No clue. You'll have to ask him that yourself if you wanna know. But I have high hopes for Kurogane. I honestly believe he can reach the top of the Seven

Stars.” Kurono put her finished cigarette in a portable ashtray, then turned to Stella. “Vermillion. When you came to see me this morning, I asked you why you chose to study abroad. Do you remember what you told me?”

“Of course. I said I don’t think I’ll be able to realize my full potential if I stay home.”

Indeed, that was why Stella had chosen to study abroad. All of the people around her had extolled her as a prodigy, and she felt that if she’d stayed with them, she’d eventually start believing that about herself. She’d get conceited and start thinking that she could do anything, beat anyone, simply because she was a prodigy. She’d become overconfident and lose the drive to keep improving.

That was her worst fear. She couldn’t afford to become complacent. In order to become a knight who could protect her beloved homeland of Vermillion, she needed to become as strong as possible.

Stella had come to Japan to find knights stronger than her. She wanted to face tougher opponents, defeat them all, and become the Seven Stars Sovereign.

“In that case, Stella Vermillion, I recommend you spend this year trying your hardest to follow in Kurogane’s footsteps. I guarantee it’ll be a valuable experience for you.”

“I still don’t know him at all...” Stella muttered, unable to give Kurono a proper response. “All I know about him is what you’ve told me, Director.”

“Right.” Kurono nodded and started walking out of the room. As she turned the doorknob and opened the door, she stopped and said, “Why not see for yourself what kind of man Kurogane is, then? Like I explained earlier, Ittou Shura takes up all of the user’s mana and energy, leaving them utterly drained. Kurogane can only use it once a day, and once he’s activated it, he can’t stop it. He won’t wake up for a while. Oh, there’s no need to worry, though. He’s at death’s door, but he won’t die. Anyway, when he finally does wake up, you can talk to him and see if you want to room with him or not. If you’re still against it after that, come talk to me. Seeing as you’re a VIP and all, I’ll get a one-person room specially prepared for you.”

Kurono then headed out the door, leaving Stella alone with Ikki.



Stella looked up at the upper bunk, her thoughts turning to the earlier battle.

I know I'm not weak.

She wasn't so conceited as to think she was the strongest Blazer in the world, but she was definitely stronger than most. At the very least, she wasn't so weak that she'd lose to the average Blazer. In other words, Ikki was far from average.

Stella was curious as to what the source of his strength was. She wanted to know what had given him the determination to continue believing in himself despite the numerous hardships he'd faced.

"Kurogane Ikki..."

She felt a strange sensation in her chest as she murmured Ikki's name. This was the first time she'd felt so strongly about wanting to understand another person. She was burning to learn more about the boy sleeping in the bed above her. So much so that she didn't feel like waiting for him to wake up.

Spurred on by her curiosity, Stella climbed the ladder to the top bunk. Ikki was still fast asleep, but he'd apparently rolled over at some point because his back was now turned to Stella. It seemed he'd recovered quite a bit, as his breathing was regular and his skin was no longer deathly pale. Stella let out a sigh of relief.

"Ikki..."

She spoke his name again. But he was still in a deep sleep and didn't stir. He was sleeping so peacefully that she couldn't bring herself to forcibly wake him. Besides, she herself was still a bit exhausted from having had all her stamina drained.

Maybe I'll go out for a brisk walk while I wait for him to wake up.

Just as she thought that, her eyes subconsciously focused on the upper part of Ikki's back, which was exposed because of his shirt's wide collar. She found it hard to believe that it was so broad and sturdy considering that it belonged to the guy who'd given her such a weak smile. It wasn't actually that big, since Ikki's build was more lean than muscular, but it looked like it was as hard as

steel and appeared much larger than it really was.

J-Just touching it a little should be fine, right? He's not even facing this way.

Stella justified her actions to herself, then slowly stretched an arm out toward Ikki. She gently pressed her hand against his back.

"Wow..."

She could feel his pulse through her palm. His back was firm and surprisingly hot. But after touching it, she realized that likening it to steel had been the wrong metaphor. His body pulsed with vitality, and steel could never feel so *alive*. If anything, his back was more like a sturdy tree trunk that had sunk its roots deep into the ground.

So this is what a man's back is like...

While Stella was engrossed in feeling up Ikki's back, he suddenly rolled over again, trapping her right arm underneath him.

"Mmnnn..."

"Eep!"

This is bad!

If Ikki woke up right now, Stella wouldn't be able to think of a believable excuse for what she was doing. On top of that, Ikki was surprisingly heavy, and extricating her arm was proving difficult. She could yank it out, but that would probably wake him up. Moreover, if she pulled too hard, she'd lose her balance and fall off the ladder.

I guess there's no other choice.

Stella clambered up onto Ikki's bed as quietly as she could, then gently brought her left hand under his head. As slowly as she could, she lifted him up a few centimeters—just enough to pull her right arm out.

"Ngh!"

Ikki suddenly grunted, and Stella gasped.

"Zzz..."

Th-That was close...

Cold sweat poured down Stella's back as she finally freed her trapped arm. She then looked back down at Ikki's sleeping face.

"I can't believe he still hasn't woken up."

He did use up everything he had in that fight, so I guess it makes sense, but...

Stella gulped as she realized that she could do whatever she wanted and he wouldn't wake up. Her gaze dropped to Ikki's stomach, which was fully exposed. His shirt had rolled up a little while he'd been tossing in his sleep.

So this is a man's stomach...

She'd seen them before, of course, but she'd never touched one.

I wonder how it feels?

"Wait, what are you thinking, Stella?! You're an unmarried woman, and a princess at that! I-It's indecent to have such a keen interest in a man's body, especially when he's not even your boyfriend!"

Wait, maybe it's not indecent? It's not as though I'm thinking anything lewd here.

Kurogane Ikki was the first person who'd ever defeated Stella. She merely had a genuine, knightly interest in what kind of body he had. At least, that was what she told herself.

"B-Besides, you saw me in my underwear first, so this just makes us even, right?"

That was far from sound logic, but Stella convinced herself that it was good enough. Then, letting her curiosity take over, she straddled Ikki and stuck her hand under his shirt. She gently pressed her fingers against his solar plexus, marveling at the sensation.

"So this is...what a man's body is like..."



This was the first time she'd ever examined a man this closely. She'd been too flustered to pay attention when he'd started stripping after seeing her naked, but now, she noticed that his body was exceptionally toned. It was very different from her own, and she could see the results of his constant training reflected in his physique. His muscles even felt different to the touch.

"Haaah...haaah..."

Her curiosity grew stronger, and her mind swam, her breaths coming in heavy gasps. Stella couldn't stop herself now even if she wanted to.

"Poke."

She timidly poked Ikki's abdomen, watching as his toned muscles repelled her finger. Just by feeling them, she could tell his muscles were flexible, yet still tough. She'd never touched anything quite like them before. She could sense the immense amount of energy coiled in those living fibers.

"Wow..."

Stella could tell that Ikki had followed a strict, properly thought-out training regimen to sculpt his body into that of a warrior. As a knight herself, she trained hard as well, so she knew just how difficult it was to obtain such a honed physique, and how much harder it was to maintain it.

She no longer doubted what Kurono had told her. It was clear that Ikki had never once given up on himself, no matter what others had said. His body was proof of that. But now that Stella knew Kurono hadn't been overselling Ikki, she was even more interested in him. She wanted to know just what kind of person Kurogane Ikki was.

The more she learned about him, the more her interest grew. Thoughts of him filled her mind, and she felt a strange tingling sensation she couldn't quite place. It wasn't one she disliked, though.

"What's gotten into me?" Stella asked herself, sighing. She traced her fingers up Ikki's torso, feeling the bumps and ridges along his skin.

"That's what I wanna ask. What are you doing, Stella-san?" Ikki asked, giving Stella a bemused look. He hadn't expected to wake up to her straddling him and

caressing his skin.

“Eeeeeek?!” Stella screamed and leaped off of Ikki.

“Wait! The ceiling is low, so if you try and get—”

Ikki’s warning came too late, and Stella slammed her head against the ceiling. She yelped in pain, lost her balance, and tumbled to the floor.

“S-Stella-saaan?! Are you okay?! It sounded like you hit your head really hard!”

“I-I’m fine! I just fell onto some tomato juice that was on the floor!”

“You’re not okay at all! That ‘tomato juice’ is spilling from your body, Stella-san! Wait right there! I’ll treat your injuries!”



“There we go,” Ikki said as he finished cleaning up Stella’s wound with a first aid kit he’d pulled out of his drawer.

“You’re surprisingly good at this.”

“I’ve been living alone since I was in middle school, so I had to learn how to take care of most things by myself.”

I couldn’t bear staying in that house for a second longer, Ikki thought to himself with a small sigh, and Stella gave him a searching look.

“The director told me about you, Ikki.”

“She did?”

“She told me how your family—and how this school—treats you.”

“She... I can’t believe she goes around divulging personal information like that. Sorry. You probably didn’t want to hear such a depressing story.”

“That doesn’t bother me at all. More importantly, I want to know something.”

“What’s up?”

“Why are you still trying to become a knight despite facing such harsh opposition?”

“Why do you want to know that?”

“I-It’s not because I want to learn more about you or anything, okay?! Don’t get too full of yourself! I was just curious why a crappy Blazer like you with barely any mana and no talent would try so hard to become a knight! That’s all!”

“It’s almost refreshing how blunt you are.”

Well, I guess it’s not something I’m trying to hide.

His reasons were a bit embarrassing to say out loud, but if Stella really wanted to know, Ikki didn’t mind telling her.

“There’s someone I admire. And I want to become like them.”

“Who? Wait, is it Samurai Ryouma?”

He was the most likely hero someone from the Kurogane family would use as a role model. Ikki had expected Stella to mention him as well.

“Yep, that’s right. As you know, I never had any talent as a Blazer. To my parents and relatives, I was the unwanted child of the family. For generations, the Kurogane family has produced outstanding Mage-Knights, so a talentless kid like me was a stain on the family name. I wasn’t allowed to attend the mana control lectures even children from the branch family got to go to, and I wasn’t allowed to sit with everyone else during the big family gathering that happened every year. They always locked me in my room.”

“Since you can’t do anything, don’t do anything.”

Those were the words Ikki’s father had said to him when he’d turned five years old. They were also the last words he’d ever said to Ikki. In fact, from that day on, Ikki’s father hadn’t even deigned to look at him. And since he was the head of the family, everyone else had followed suit.

The entire clan had acted as if he simply didn’t exist. It had been suffocating. At times, Ikki had wished he truly could disappear forever.

“But that was when Ryouma-san spoke to me.”

Kurogane Ikki remembered that snowy day like it was yesterday. It had been New Year’s, and his family had come together for their annual gathering. Naturally, he had found the atmosphere oppressive. Even staying in his room

had been painful since he could hear the cheerful voices of everyone in the living room. As a result, he'd slipped out of the house and headed to the nearby mountain.

But then, he'd gotten lost.

As the sun had begun to set, the temperature had dropped rapidly, and the light snowfall had transformed into a blizzard. However, no one had come to rescue him. That hadn't come as a surprise; who would have bothered to go looking for someone who didn't exist?

Ikki had known that even if he froze to death out there, neither his parents nor his relatives would have cared one bit. In fact, things would have been easier for them if he was gone. The one person who might have been sad if he died was his younger sister, but she was the only one. It had galled him. Not his lack of talent, but the fact that he couldn't even believe in himself.

It was then that a large old man with a white handlebar mustache—Kurogane Ryouma—had appeared before Ikki. Ryouma had looked down at the crying boy in front of him and said, “Never let go of that feeling, boy. That bitterness is proof that you haven't given up on yourself.”

And that was not all Ryouma had told him.

“Listen up. You're just a little boy right now, but when you grow up, don't end up like those pathetic adults who're satisfied with something as basic as having been born talented. Don't become one of those boring adults who give up and tell themselves they're fine with where they are because it's the best they can do either. Become the kind of cool adult who doesn't let any of that crap get to him. Humans can do anything as long as they don't give up. After all, we made it all the way to the moon even though we don't have wings.”

Ryouma had then brushed the snow off of Ikki's head and taken him back home.

“That made me really happy,” Ikki said. “It was the first time in my life anyone had told me it was okay not to give up on myself. Of course, even as a kid, I knew what he'd said was just lip service. He wasn't going to be able to actually guarantee anything for me.”

But even so, Ikki had been happy. Those words had been enough to grant him salvation.

“That’s why I decided right then and there that if I had to grow up, I was gonna grow up to be an adult like him. If I ever find someone in a similar situation to me, I don’t want to be like my father, who just told me to give up; I want to be able to tell them it’s okay not to give up, that talent is only a small part of who we are. I want to be able to pass down the words I received from Kurogane Ryouma to someone else. But in order to do that, I can’t stay as I am now. I have to get stronger. I need to be as strong as my hero or my words will ring hollow. They’ll sound like the bitter regrets of someone who couldn’t accept their fate. That’s why I want to become a Mage-Knight. That’s why I won’t ever give up. And if I want to become as strong as Kurogane Ryouma, then I have to at least become the Seven Stars Sovereign.”

“I see. So that’s your dream, Ikki,” Stella muttered.

“Let me guess, it sounds unrealistic?” She awkwardly averted her gaze, confirming Ikki’s suspicions. Stella truly believed Ikki’s dream was a beautiful one, but she didn’t think it was achievable. “It’s fine. You don’t need to say anything. You don’t need to look so apologetic either. I realize how impossible my goal sounds. But you know, Stella-san, if you had a dream you wanted to achieve at all costs, would you give up on it just because other people kept telling you it was impossible?”

“Ah...”

Stella’s ruby eyes widened as understanding dawned on her. She was quiet for a moment before she burst out laughing.

“Heh. Aha ha ha ha ha ha! No, I suppose I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t give up no matter how many times I got burned. Literally.” Stella had realized that she was just like Ikki. “I get it now. You’re absolutely right. Who cares about whether it’s realistic or not? If you can’t achieve your dream even after giving it your all, then it just wasn’t meant to be. But deciding something’s impossible without even trying? Well, that’s just not us, now is it?”

“Exactly. It doesn’t matter whether you have any talent or if everyone around you says it’s impossible. That’s no reason to give up on yourself. Especially since

we're both such sore losers."

"I didn't think I'd ever meet someone who hates losing even more than I do," Stella replied with a chuckle that was half exasperation, half joy. After a few seconds, she raised her hands into the air and said, "All right I give up. I was trying to fit you into the 'prodigy versus talentless' dichotomy instead of looking at the real you. There's no way I could have beaten you with a half-assed attitude like that, especially since you hate to lose so much. You win, Ikki."

Stella felt as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders as she said that. She realized now why Kurono had wanted to put her together with Ikki. He was indeed someone who possessed the same spirit as her, and he was even stronger than her to boot. He was someone she could—no, someone she *should* learn from. She was certain that in trying to do so, she would grow much stronger.

From the bottom of her heart, Stella was glad that she had met Ikki. After all, he was exactly the kind of person she'd traveled halfway across the world to meet.

Ikki saw genuine understanding in Stella's smile, and it warmed his heart. He was glad his words had reached her and that she was willing to see him for who he was.

"All right. Now that that's settled, let's get to the most important topic, Stella-san."

"Hmm? What's that?"

"I mean, I won our duel, didn't I?"

"Yes, of course. I hate losing, but I'm not such a child that I won't accept when I've been beaten."

"That makes you my servant, then, right?"

"...Huh?" Stella blinked in surprise, looking like a deer in headlights.

"That was the deal, wasn't it? The loser has to serve the winner for life, obey all of their commands, and so on?"

"Asofjasiklgh?!"

Stella blushed to the tips of her ears, then a second later went completely pale. So much had happened that she'd completely forgotten about their wager.

"So, since I won, I'd like—"

"Th-Th-Th-Th-That was just a f-figure of speech, you know?! I know I went too far, so, uh..."

"Hmm, what should I order you to do first? You did say the loser would do *anything* the winner asked, right?"

"A-A-A-A-A-Anything?! I-I-I-I-I mean, I did say that, but that doesn't mean *literally* anything! There are limits, okay?!"

Stella backed into the corner of the bed and pulled the sheets up to cover herself.

What happened to being someone who was mature enough to accept their losses?

"Oh? Does that mean you're going to go back on your word, Stella-san?"

"Urk."

"Well, if you insist, I suppose we can cancel that promise. Man, I never knew Vermillion's royalty were so fickle that they can't even keep their promises."

"Ah..."

"I'm disappointed."

"H-Hold it right there!" As Ikki had expected, Stella rose to his cheap provocations. She crawled out of her bed and glared at Ikki, tears forming in her eyes. "I never said I wouldn't keep my word! G-G-G-G-G-Go ahead, ask for whatever you want! I'll be your slave or even your dog if that's your desire! If you want to do lewd things to me, just say the word, you pervert! I hate you!"

"Why are you getting mad at me?! *You're* the one who proposed this deal!"

Well, I guess I might have teased her a bit too much.

Ikki had just wanted to teach her that she shouldn't bet herself so cheaply, especially with her being a girl, but it seemed he'd taken things too far. He

hadn't actually intended to make her his servant or anything, so he was starting to feel a little sorry for her now.

"Okay, here's my first and only command, Stella-san: be my roommate."

All he wanted was to share this room with her.

"Wait...th-that's it?"

"Yep. After fighting you, I got the feeling that the two of us would get along. More importantly, I want to get to know you better, Stella-san. I said it was a command, but really, it's more of a request."

Just like how Stella wanted to know more about Ikki, Ikki, too, wished to learn more about this girl with such a dazzlingly beautiful soul. He could feel that they were kindred spirits.

"Fwah..." Stella had, of course, been thinking the same thing, so her brain short-circuited when she heard that. "I-I-I-I can't believe you... How can you say 'I want to get to know you better' to an unmarried girl? And a princess, no less. You said it so casually too. You really have no tact."

She blushed to the tips of her ears again and bashfully looked away. However, Ikki mistook her embarrassment as anger and said, "Uh, I-I guess you don't want to, huh? Sharing a room with a guy is pretty out there. I get it. Sorry I asked for something so weird. Um, we can go to the director and beg her to give you your own room, then. I'm sure she'll listen if we both ask, so—"

"Wait!" Stella grabbed Ikki's sleeve as he made to walk toward the door. "...it."

"Huh?"

"I-I said I'm not against it!"

"Are you sure?"

"L-Let me make this clear right now: I'm only doing it because you're ordering me to, okay?! I don't want people thinking the Vermillion royal family is full of liars, is all! I-It's not like I want to get to know you better too or anything!" Stella stammered, looking anywhere except at Ikki.

Though her choice of words was quite roundabout, her intentions got through

to Ikki. Knowing she did want to room with him made him happy.

“All right, then I guess we’re roommates, Stella-san.” Ikki held his hand out for a handshake.

“Only because you’re insisting. Hmph.”

Stella still refused to meet Ikki’s gaze, but she shook his hand. Her hand was much smaller and much warmer than Ikki had expected.

Just as the two of them finished squaring away their domestic affairs, the dorm bell rang, signaling that it was eight o’clock.

“Crap,” Ikki said. “I slept for longer than I should have. Well, this sucks.”

“Was there something you needed to do before eight?”

“The dorm cafeteria closes at eight. Now I have to figure out something else for dinner.”

Curfew is at nine, so I could run to the store and get groceries. My muscles still hurt after using Ittou Shura, though, and I don’t really feel like cooking.

Ikki was worried he might cut his finger off by accident while chopping vegetables with how shaky he was. As he crossed his arms and lapsed into thought, Stella spoke up.

“H-How about I cook you dinner?” she asked in a cheerful voice.

“Huh? You mean it?”

“I mean, you *are*...my master...sort of, even though I’m loath to admit it. It’s a maid’s job to make sure her master is fed, right?”

“Can’t we just scrap the whole master-servant thing?”

“A-Absolutely not! Royalty keeps their word no matter what! So stop complaining and let me serve you!”

I don’t think I’ve ever met such a haughty maid. That being said, it would be nice to eat a girl’s cooking.

Ikki was still a guy when all was said and done.

“All right. I’ll come to the grocery store with you. I can at least carry a few

bags for you, Stella-san.”

“Mrr.”

H-Huh? Did something I just said put her in a bad mood? Why is she frowning at me like that?

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Calling me ‘Stella-san.’ You’re my master. Plus, you’re older than me, so you don’t need to use honorifics. Just call me ‘Stella.’”

“Uh, I don’t know if I can do that. I mean, you *are* a princess and all, Stella-san...”

“Weren’t you the one who said you wanted to become friends with that very princess?”

“Geh.”

“Friends don’t use honorifics with each other.”

Okay, you’ve got a point there, but...

“If we’re friends, that means we shouldn’t have a master-servant relationship, right?” Ikki asked.

“Our promise and us being friends can coexist.”

“Uhhhhh...”

“Anyway!” Stella pointed a finger at Ikki. “Call me ‘Stella’ or I won’t ever respond to you.”

She sounded a little mad, but also a little embarrassed. Honestly, Ikki found her expression cute. He still wasn’t sure if it was okay to drop honorifics with a princess, but he was the one who’d said he wanted to become her friend. It would be wrong of him to purposely try to create distance between them by being overly formal.

“Fine, Stella,” he sighed. Despite ostensibly being the master, Ikki felt like he was the one acquiescing to all of Stella’s demands. He’d signed up for having one hell of a maid.

“Good. Now let’s go, Ikki! I still don’t know how Japan works, so you better escort me properly.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Upon seeing the happy smile she gave him after he’d dropped the honorifics, Ikki knew he’d made the right choice. He smiled back at her, glad he’d done as she’d asked.

Chapter 2: A Visitor from Home

It was a chilly early April morning. Two figures could be seen near the entrance to Hagun Academy, which boasted a vast, sprawling campus. One of them was Kurogane Ikki, who was wearing a tracksuit and looked barely out of breath as he took a swig from the sports drink he'd filled his water bottle with. The other was Stella Vermillion, who was also in a tracksuit, but she was a good distance behind Ikki and panting heavily. She was trying to reach the entrance gate Ikki was at, which marked the finish line for the day's running session.

In order to maintain his stamina, Ikki ran twenty kilometers each morning. Stella had decided to join him in his routine after she'd moved in with him three days ago, which was why she was out running as well.

However, Ikki had an extremely demanding training schedule. He knew his mana was hopelessly low, so he was trying to make up for that by doing as much physical exercise as he could. He would alternate between sprinting and jogging his twenty kilometers, pushing his cardiovascular system as hard as he could.

On her first day, Stella had tapped out halfway through. On her second, she'd thrown up. On her third day, Ikki had initially slowed his pace down to match hers, but she hadn't let him get away with it. *"You don't need to coddle me!"* she'd shouted, looking ready to bite his throat out if he dared to take it easy on her. He'd gone back to his usual pace, and this time, Stella had managed to follow him all the way to the end, though she was quite a ways behind him.

Stella really is amazing, Ikki thought as he watched her stagger up to the gate.

Despite the vast amount of magical talent Stella possessed, she'd trained her physical fitness enough that she could still somewhat keep up with Ikki's exacting training regimen. He could tell that she hadn't just relied on her talent; she'd put in an inordinate amount of effort to get to where she was now.

"Haaah! Haaah! I made it..." Stella panted as she caught up to Ikki.

“Well done.”

“Th-That was...nothing.”

It was impressive that Stella was still trying to put up a strong front when she was so exhausted that she couldn't even muster the energy to wipe the sweat off her face. Ikki waited for her breathing to slow down a little bit, then poured out a bit of his sports drink into the water bottle's cup-shaped lid.

“Here, have a drink.”

Stella stared at it hesitantly.

“Wait...isn't that an indirect kiss...?”

“What's wrong? Oh, my bad. I guess you don't want to drink from the same cup a guy has, huh?”

“I-I never said I didn't want to! If anything it's the opposite.”

“Come again?”

“I-I-I-I-It's nothing! Just hand it over, you moron!”

Stella's face was already flushed from the exercise, but she blushed even harder as she downed the sports drink.

Wow, she even drank from the same spot I did.

She'd done it so quickly that Ikki hadn't even had time to warn her. He turned away apologetically, unaware that she'd done it on purpose, and stared at the school's gates. There was a large placard in front of them informing students that the opening ceremony would be held today.

“It's finally time for the new school year.”

This moment held a lot of meaning for Ikki. Last year, he hadn't been given any opportunities to learn, and it had passed by without him being able to go to a single class. But this year would be different. Shinguuji Kurono was the director of Hagun Academy now, and she believed in giving every student a fair shot. Ikki was excited to finally get the chance he'd been waiting so long for.

“You look really happy, Ikki,” Stella said as she passed the water bottle lid back.

“Do I? Well, the truth is, there’s someone I’m looking forward to seeing.”

“That someone better not be a girl.”

Huh? Why does she sound so hostile?

“I-I mean, it *is* a girl, but—”

“Goodbye.”

“Wait! Hold up! Put Lævateinn away and listen to me! The girl is my younger sister!”

“Your sister? Come to think of it, you did mention having a sister when we were fighting.”

“Yeah. I heard she enrolled here this year too. I haven’t talked to her since I left home four years ago, so I’m excited that I’ll be able to again.”

Ikki still remembered his silver-haired sister tottering after him wherever he went, her twintails bouncing with each step. She’d been a crybaby who got lonely easily and was always begging for attention. But while Ikki’s father, mother, and other siblings had all abandoned Ikki after they’d learned he had no talent, she’d continued talking to him like normal.

As far as Ikki was concerned, his sister, Kurogane Shizuku, was his only real family. It had been four years since he’d last seen her, so he was curious about how much she’d grown.

“I can’t wait to see her.”

“I need to ask just in case, but...your sister isn’t, by any chance, not related to you by blood or anything, is she?”

“No, she’s my biological sister. Why?”

“Then you’re forgiven.”

Forgiven for what?

Ikki had no idea what Stella was going on about, but he had a policy of not digging too deep into things he didn’t understand. He turned back to the opening ceremony sign, thinking about the coming days. Very soon, the battles to determine who got to represent Hagun Academy in the Seven Stars Battle

Festival would begin.



“Woo-hoo! Congratulations on getting accepted to Hagun Academy, new studeeents!” The young woman standing at the teacher’s podium opened a party popper in the direction of the students, a huge smile on her face. “I’m Oreki Yuuri, and I’ll be class 1-1’s homeroom teacher. This is my first time being a homeroom teacher, but I’m sure we’ll get along swimmingly! In fact, I’d love it if you all called me ‘Yuri-chan’! No need for formalities here!”

Ikki had been mentally preparing himself for the days of fighting that would begin soon, so he was taken aback by his teacher being so cheerful and energetic.

“Dealing with her seems like it’ll be exhausting,” Stella, who was sitting in the seat next to Ikki’s, muttered.

“Aha ha, I know what you mean. But she’s a good teacher.”

“You know her?”

“A little, yeah.”

“Er, since this is everyone’s first day, there’s no classes today! But I do have one thing I need to tell all of you about the selection matches you’ll be fighting to decide who’ll represent us in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Could you all take out your student handbooks?”

Ikki took a small LCD tablet out of his breast pocket. These tablets, issued to students at Hagun Academy, served not only as identity verification, but also as wallets and portable phones. They could even connect to the internet.

“Good. Now, if you recall, the director mentioned in her opening speech that your ability rating played a part in whether or not you were chosen to represent our school in previous years. But this year, that system is being abolished! We’ll now be determining our representatives based on everyone’s combat records! All students are allowed to participate in the selection matches, and the top six record holders will be chosen as our representatives! Hooraayyy for violence! The Selection Match Committee, which organizes and oversees the selection matches, will be sending emails to all of your terminals to let you know what

days you'll be fighting. Make sure you double-check that schedule and show up to your match on time. If you're late, it'll be marked down as a forfeit, so be careful!"

"Sensei," Stella said, raising her hand.

"No, no, no," Oreki replied, wagging her finger. "You have to call me 'Yuri-chan.'"

"Y-Yuri-chan, then."

"Yes? What is it, Stella-chan?"

"How many selection matches will we have to fight in?"

"I can't go into details just yet, but everyone's going to be fighting in at least ten matches. Once things get started, assume you'll have one match every three days."

Ikki breathed a small sigh of relief upon hearing that. He could only use Ittou Shura once a day, so if he were forced to fight consecutive battles, he'd be in trouble. But while this was good news for Ikki, the rest of the class didn't look pleased.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Man, what a pain. That means I won't have any time to hang out with people."

"I don't even wanna go to the Seven Stars Battle Festival in the first place."

The other students sounded decidedly unhappy with this system. It was understandable, considering most of the students had no real interest in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. The participants fought with their weapons out in true form rather than phantom form. Injuries were commonplace, and occasionally, people did die.

Few people were so driven to get stronger that they'd be willing to participate in such a dangerous event. In fact, most students were far more concerned with graduating safely, becoming a Mage-Knight, and finding some stable, well-paying job.

"Will there be any penalty for losing our fights, or for abstaining from fighting

altogether?” one of the students asked.

“Nope. There’s no penalty, and it won’t affect your grades if you lose. They’ll get a slight boost if you win, though. And if you don’t want to participate, you don’t have to. When you get the email from the Committee, just let them know that you’re not interested in the Seven Stars Battle Festival and would like to withdraw. You’ll be removed from the pool of fighters and won’t have any further matches. However...”

Oreki glanced over at Ikki, then smiled gently and added, “I realize this new system might seem cumbersome to some, but personally, I think it’s splendid that everyone has an equal opportunity to earn their place. After all, this means every one of you has the opportunity to become the Seven Stars Sovereign if you want it badly enough. I’d like it if you all set that as your goal and participated. I’m sure it’ll be a valuable experience for each of you.”

Ikki bowed his head in thanks. He had first met Oreki back when he’d been taking Hagun Academy’s entrance exam. She’d been his examiner. It was because she’d valued his abilities so highly that he’d been accepted into the school.

As he thought back to that day, he suddenly remembered something.

Oh, I almost forgot. Doesn’t Oreki-sensei...

“All right, everyone, let’s give it our all this year! Say it with me! We’re gonna — *Blaaaaaaugh!*”

...have a really weak constitution? Ikki finished his thought just as Oreki started vomiting blood.

“Y-Yuri-chaaaaaaaaaan?!”

“Ah, don’t worry, everyone. She’s fine,” Ikki said, helping Oreki get back onto her feet. “She’s just really sickly all the time.”

“That sounds like we *should* be worried! Didn’t she just vomit blood?!”

“*Cough, cough.* It’s okay, kids. Just like Kurogane-kun said, I’m fine.” Oreki smiled weakly at the other students in an attempt to reassure them. “I’ve been coughing up a liter of blood a day since I was a child...”

“That is *not* okay!”

“*Cough, cough!* Well, I’ve survived twenty years like this, so it’s no big deal. Heh heh, impressive, isn’t it? I’m sturdier than I look.”

“Please don’t be proud of that. Uh, I’ll take her to the nurse’s office, so could someone clean up that blood puddle?” Ikki said, addressing the class.

“Sure, I’ll take care of it!”

The girl with peach-blond hair who’d answered nodded at him. He then draped Oreki’s arm over his shoulder and started half carrying her to the nurse’s office. As they walked, Ikki suddenly asked, “Oreki-sensei, is the reason you were acting so hyper today because you wanted to congratulate the new students?”

“*Cough! Cough!* Yes. It’s their first day at school, so I wanted them to feel proud that they’d made it here. That’s why I pushed myself so hard...”

Yeah, I thought so. It was exactly the kind of thing Oreki, who was kind to a fault, would do.

“Oreki-sensei, I don’t know how to say this nicely, but...”

“What?”

“I think everyone just thought you were cringe.”

“Sadge...”

Ikki felt bad for Oreki, but that was precisely why he’d told her the truth. It was for her own good. She, like all people, needed to act her age if she wanted to be respected.



“Sensei said everyone’s free to go home for the day,” Ikki announced as he returned to the classroom, relaying Oreki’s message to the other students.

Guess I’ll go look for Shizuku. If a repeat student like me sticks around for too long, I’ll just ruin the mood.

Ikki could feel the other students’ gazes on him. Since Oreki had collapsed, the class hadn’t gotten around to doing self-introductions, but Ikki suspected

that everyone had already heard he was repeating a year. He could tell from the looks everyone was giving him that they didn't know how to approach him.

I did sort of take charge back there. Maybe they didn't like that.

Thinking that might have been presumptuous of him, Ikki got to his feet, ready to leave. As he did, a female classmate suddenly grabbed onto his arm.

"Seeenpai!"

"Whoa?!"

"Wha— Wh-What are you doing, Ikki?!" Stella cried.

"Why are you asking *me* that?! Um, e-excuse me, but who are you and what do you want?"

"Whoops. I was so excited to finally get to talk to you that I forgot my manners." The peach-blond, glasses-wearing girl—the same one who'd volunteered to clean up the classroom while Ikki was taking Oreki to the nurse's office—stuck out her tongue as a cutesy way of apologizing. She let go of his arm and said, "My name's Kusakabe Kagami. I'm a huuuge fan of yours!"

"I have fans?"

Blazers were generally well-known figures. Proper Mage-Knights and student trainee knights alike tended to get a lot of attention from the press, so long as they were strong like Stella. All of the Seven Stars Battle Festival matches were streamed worldwide via the internet, even.

Oftentimes, people enrolled in a certain school because they'd become fans of one of the currently attending students after watching those live streams. But Ikki hadn't participated in any major events and thus shouldn't have had any fans.

"I don't think I ever did anything to make myself famous... Are you sure you have the right person?"

"Come on, Senpai, don't play dumb. Surely you haven't forgotten this."

Ikki had no idea what Kagami was talking about until she pulled out her student handbook and showed him a certain recording. He definitely hadn't forgotten, considering it had only been a few days since that particular event.

“This is our duel, isn’t it?!” Stella exclaimed as she came over to look at the display as well.

“Wait, did you and Stella-chan not know? Do you two never go online, or what?”

“Pretty much. I’m not good with computers...” Ikki replied.

“I don’t spend any time online either. In fact, I don’t even own a computer,” Stella said.

“Well, that would explain it. Anyway, Senpai, your duel with Stella-chan got uploaded online right after it ended, and it caused a huge stir. Practically everyone in school must have seen it by now. Isn’t that right, guys?” Kagami asked, turning to the other students. They all nodded in unison.

“Yeah, I saw the video.”

“Tons of blogs have been writing articles about it. The people who haven’t heard about your duel are definitely in the minority.”

“I saw that video too. I actually wanted to ask you about the duel, but it was hard to say anything since you’re older than us and all... Aha ha...”

Wait, is that why they were all staring at me?

“Sorry if I made you guys feel uncomfortable. But we’re all classmates here, so feel free to talk to me about anything,” Ikki said with a smile.

“You mean it?!” half of his classmates shouted in unison.

“Whoa?!”

Suddenly, all of the girls in the class swarmed Ikki.

“Thank goodness! I’m glad you’re such an easy person to talk to, Kurogane-san!”

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you ever since I saw that match!”

“Me too! You were so cool!”

“Um, Kurogane-senpai, would you be willing to train me? I want to improve my swordsmanship and become strong like you!”

“Hey, no fair! I was gonna ask him to train *me*!”

“H-Hold your horses, everyone. I did say you could talk to me about anything, but don’t crowd me all at once, please.”

Ikki backed away from the crowd of girls swarming him. He wasn’t used to this much attention, and he wasn’t interested in fooling around with a bunch of different women either. He would’ve much rather spent that time training. On top of that, he’d definitely never been this popular with girls before. As a result, he wasn’t sure how to deal with the looks of admiration and respect they were all giving him.

“Heh heh, are you really that surprised by your popularity, Senpai? Just so you know, you’re going to be the center of attention at this school for a while. According to the data I’ve gathered, you’re especially popular with the girls!” Kagami told him.

“W-Wait, why?”

“Because you’re super strong. All the girls aiming to become Mage-Knights love strong guys. Plus, even though you’re so strong, you’ve been nicknamed the Worst One, which makes you cool and mysterious. The biggest reason, though, is that you’ve got a cute face.”

“I-I don’t really think that’s true...”

“You have no idea how much that awkward smile of yours tugs at our maternal instincts,” Kagami explained, and all of the girls nodded in agreement.

Th-They seriously think I’m cute? I know I don’t look all that manly, but I’m not sure how to feel about being called “cute” by girls younger than me...

Ultimately, if Ikki had to choose between being loved and being hated, he would prefer to be loved. He just wasn’t sure he wanted this particular brand of affection. As he was struggling to think of what to say, Kagami suddenly grabbed his arm again.

“K-Kagami-san?!”

“By the way, Senpai, I have a request for you, since you’re so popular. Surely you’re willing to listen to a cute kohai’s heartfelt plea, right?” She looked up at

Ikki with puppy dog eyes.

“Wh-What is it? I don’t mind helping... Assuming I can, of course.”

“Yaaay! Thanks a ton! So, the thing is, I was thinking of starting up a newspaper club, and I wanted to write an article on you to put on the front page of our first issue! I was thinking of titling it ‘What an Upset! A No-Name Blazer Utterly Dominated the Much-Talked-About Super Rookie!’”

You shouldn’t say that when Stella is right there, you know. Ikki glanced over at Stella, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

“Well, look at you, Mr. Popular. Go ahead, let her interview you, *Senpai*.”

She did not look the least bit happy. Granted, most people would be pretty angry if they heard that someone wanted to write an article about how they’d been defeated. Either way, though, Ikki didn’t have the balls to agree to Kagami’s request after seeing Stella’s expression.

“Sorry, but I’m not really good at interviews, so...”

“No problem. I’ll ease you into it.”

However, Kagami didn’t back down. In fact, she squeezed Ikki’s arm even tighter, pressing it against her boobs.



“Uh... H-Hey, Kusakabe-san...”

“No need to be so formal. Just call me ‘Kagami.’ We’re practically friends already, after all.”

I’ve only known you for five minutes. I guess it’d be rude to say that, though.

“Kagami-san, could you please let go of me? They’re pressing against me.”

“Oh? Whatever could you be referring to?”

Kagami gave Ikki a confused look, but when she saw where he was looking, it all fell into place. After realizing the source of his discomfort, she grinned wickedly and said, “Nope. I won’t let go until you agree to let me interview you.”

She squeezed even tighter, sucking Ikki’s arm into her cleavage.

“Aaaaah?! ”

“I want to know *all* about you, Senpai,” Kagami whispered sweetly into Ikki’s ear. He knew this was all a trap to get him to agree to the interview, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t working.

Sh-She’s so cute.

When all was said and done, Ikki was still a guy with a guy’s desires. Of course he was happy to have a cute girl fawning over him.

Even though he knew he was being taken advantage of, Ikki’s expression relaxed as he was overwhelmed by Kagami’s charms.

“Hold it, Ikki!” Stella stepped forward and shouted, unable to watch any longer. But before she could give him a good scolding, someone interrupted her.

“Hey, Senpai. We’ve got something we wanna discuss with you too,” one of the boys in the class said, his voice dripping with unbridled hostility.



A group of five boys pushed past the girls and stopped in front of Ikki.

“Looks like you’re pretty popular, Senpai,” the biggest of the five said in an

intimidating voice. “But that doesn’t mean you can act like you own the place. This is a classroom, so save your flirting for somewhere else.”

He glared at Ikki. It was obvious that he didn’t like the way Ikki was hogging all of the girls’ attention.

“What’s your problem, Manabe? Are you jealous?”

“Don’t get mad at him just because you’re not popular with the girls, you loser!” The girls tore into the guy called Manabe.

“What was that, you bitch?! Don’t you *dare* insult Ma-kun!” another one of the boys snarled.

“Okay, let’s just calm down, everyone,” Ikki said, holding out his hands in a placating gesture. While this wasn’t his fault, he was technically the cause of it, so he felt that it was his duty to settle things peacefully. He bowed to Manabe and said, “I’m sorry if I upset you. You’re right that I shouldn’t have caused such a commotion in the classroom.”

“Hah. Don’t pretend to be the good guy here. We all know you’re a hack.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“You might have fooled these stupid bitches, but you ain’t fooling me. There’s no way a Rank F can beat a Rank A. I bet you used some underhanded trick to win just so you could become popular.”

“I most certainly did not. Your accusations are disrespectful to both me and Stella.”

“You really trying to say you beat a Rank A fair and square? Gimme a break. If you’re really that strong, then how about you try and beat all of us, Senpai.”

The five boys surrounded Ikki like hyenas circling their prey. All of them except Manabe manifested their Devices.

“Are you guys crazy?! If the teachers find out you took your Devices out in the classroom, you’ll be expelled!” Kagami shouted.

“Shut it, slut! If you don’t wanna get hurt then get outta our way!” Manabe snapped back, and his four followers brandished their Devices. It was clear from their bloodthirsty expressions that they hadn’t manifested them in phantom

form either.

However, Ikki remained as calm as ever.

“Kusakabe-san is right. Fighting here is against school rules. While we’re still trainee knights, the school we belong to gets to decide when and where we’re allowed to use our powers. If you insist on fighting me, let’s go to a training field. I’ll gladly spar with you until evening.”

This was Ikki’s way of showing kindness to Manabe and the others. Frankly, he had no reason to fight them, and he’d gain nothing by doing so. Instead of dealing with these guys, he just wanted to go look for his sister. The only reason he’d agreed to fight them was because he thought he’d be doing his underclassmen a service by helping them with their training.

“You motherfucker...”

Manabe was so angry now that veins bulged on his forehead. Despite Ikki’s best attempts to be civil, he’d made the wrong statements without realizing it.

Manabe and the others hadn’t actually been looking to spar, or train, or anything of the sort. They’d wanted to terrify the guy they thought had cheated his way to a victory just to become popular with the girls and make him beg for mercy. Therefore, Ikki saying he’d be willing to fight them at a training field had just added insult to injury.

“Don’t get cocky, you piece of shit! You’re just a flunker who had to repeat a year! Get him!”

Did I say the wrong thing? Ikki thought, cocking his head to one side.

Unfortunately, it was too late to resolve things peacefully. The four boys rushed at Ikki, their Devices raised high, while the girls screamed and rushed out of the way.

Ikki let out a tired sigh. Now that things had come to this, he had no choice but to use force.

“Senpai! I’ll tell the teachers you only acted in self-defense, so teach those guys a lesson!” Kagami yelled, urging Ikki on. While Ikki was thankful for her support, he wouldn’t need her to testify for him.

“Nah, there’s no need for that.” He simply wouldn’t let this turn into a true battle between Blazers wielding Devices.

“Hyah!”

Ikki shifted all of his focus onto his eyeballs. He had no need to see in color right now, as that information was unneeded. To that end, he shut off his eyes’ ability to process color.

The world turned monochrome, and Ikki transferred the mental energy his eyes and brain had been using to see color into enhancing his kinetic vision. Everything around him suddenly looked like it was moving in slow motion.

What Ikki was doing didn’t require any special superpowers. It was a simple heightening of his concentration that any human could do with enough training and determination. When put in extreme situations, humans tended to activate this power subconsciously, and all Ikki had done was bring that power under his control. Of course, in his case, the ability to do so was an inherent necessity. Without it, he never would have been able to develop a technique that let him use up all of his body’s energy over the course of one minute.

In this slow-moving, monochrome world, Ikki examined his surroundings and analyzed the situation. His opponents were coming at him from four different directions.

The fastest is the guy with the katana who’s coming at me from the front.

Ikki thrust his right hand forward and used the back of his hand to push his foe’s blade aside. He didn’t put a lot of force into it, only using as much as one would to pull aside a curtain, but that was enough.

“Wha—” The boy with the katana gasped as his blade passed harmlessly to Ikki’s side. Ikki then tripped him with the tip of his foot.

“Waaah!”

Unable to keep his balance after having his pivot leg swept out from under him, the boy with the katana crashed into the boy with a longsword who’d been coming at Ikki from behind. The two of them slammed into a nearby desk and fell to the ground in a tangled heap.

“You bastaaard!”

“Diiie!”

The two boys to either side of Ikki came at him next. One of them was wielding an iron club, and the other an axe. They were both aiming for Ikki’s head, which made them easy to deal with.

“Hup.”

Ikki bent his knees and ducked. A second later, there was the clang of metal against metal as the two boys’ weapons clashed. Both of them had swung at full power, so the recoil was immense.

“Gyaaah!”

They screamed in pain as the force of each other’s blows traveled down their arms, numbing them. That just left their leader.

“G-Goddammit!”

Manabe’s earlier confidence had vanished, and he looked clearly shaken after having watched his four comrades get taken down with consummate ease. Panicking, he summoned his own Device, a large-caliber revolver. It was a rare type of Device to see from a Blazer living in the Far East.

Manabe pointed the gun at Ikki and pulled the trigger. However, in the time it took for the hammer to come down, Ikki made his move. He grabbed an eraser from a nearby desk and flicked it straight upward with his thumb. It bounced off the ceiling and landed in the space between the revolver’s hammer and percussion cap, preventing it from firing.

Manabe let out a wordless scream as he stared at his now-useless Device. Meanwhile, Ikki rushed forward and clapped his hands right in front of Manabe’s face. The idea was to scare the boy; Ikki had no intention of actually attacking him.

“Eek!”

Fortunately, the intimidation tactic had worked. Manabe crumpled to the ground, looking up at Ikki with fear in his eyes. Ikki, a Rank F Blazer, had just defeated five Blazers armed with their Devices with just his bare hands. And he

hadn't even broken a sweat doing it.

Manabe and the others had lost the will to fight, and Ikki saw no reason to torment them any further. As he'd promised, he hadn't let an actual battle break out.

Flashing the five of them the awkward smile Kusakabe had said triggered the motherly instincts of all the girls, he said, "We're going to be in the same class for a whole year, so let's try to get along, okay?"

Manabe nodded blankly, too afraid to say anything.

He and his friends weren't the only ones who'd been stunned by Ikki's display of strength. The rest of the class was also at a loss for words. They had just watched Ikki take down five Blazers with his bare hands, after all.

"Hey, uh, Stella? Is it just me, or is the atmosphere kind of tense?"

"It sure is. That's what happens when you put on such an overwhelming display of force."

"'Overwhelming display of force'? But I held back as much as possible to make sure no one got hurt."

"And this is what happened when you held back as much as possible. Can you really blame the rest of the class for being shocked?"

Stella let out an exasperated sigh. Before she could say anything else, though, the sound of someone clapping from outside the classroom distracted her. She and Ikki turned to see a small girl with short, silver hair and jade-green eyes standing by the classroom door. There was something ephemeral about her, but that only made her more beautiful. Her pretty pink lips formed into the shape of a smile.

"That was a truly splendid display of strength. Those weaklings never stood a chance, Onii-sama."

The girl's voice had a lilting, musical quality to it. But it was what she'd said that grabbed Ikki's attention: "Onii-sama."

"Is that you...?"

Of course, there was no need to ask. Her face, her voice, and even her

hairstyle were different, but there was only one person in the world who called Ikki “Onii-sama.” Within the grand Kurogane manor, there had been just one person whose presence had put him at ease: his younger sister, who’d always followed him around wherever he went.

“Shizuku...”

“Yes. It’s been a long time, Onii-sama.”



“Shizuku!” Overjoyed to see his sister for the first time in four years, Ikki ran over and took Shizuku’s hand. “Wow, it really is you! It’s been so long! You’ve grown so much! I didn’t even recognize you!”

“It has been four years, after all. It would have been stranger if I *hadn’t* changed.”

“Aha ha, yeah, I guess so! But I’m really happy to see you again! I didn’t think *you’d* come find *me*, though! I was actually just about to go look for you when this whole commotion started. Anyway, sorry, that’s not important right now. You just showed up so suddenly that I got excited.”

There were so many things Ikki wanted to talk to Shizuku about. He wanted to apologize for leaving their family’s home so suddenly and tell her about everything that had happened since then. He also wanted to let her know how glad he was to see her again. But he had so much to say that he’d started tripping over his words.

“Hey, Ikki, is she your sister? The one you told me about this morning?”

“Oh, yeah! She is! Let me introduce you.”

Stella’s question had helped Ikki collect his thoughts and calm down enough to speak normally again. But just as Ikki turned to Stella, Shizuku tugged on his sleeve, causing him to turn back around.

“Onii-sama, I missed you so much...”

She placed a hand on Ikki’s cheek, then tenderly pressed her lips against his.



“Mmpf!” Ikki exclaimed in surprise.

“What the heeeeeeck?!” Stella and the rest of Ikki’s classmates shouted.

“I-Ikki?! Wh-What the heck are you doing?!”

“I-I-I-I don’t know what’s going on either!” Indeed, Ikki was more shocked than anyone by his sister having suddenly kissed him. He pulled Shizuku off of him and shouted, “Shizuku, wh-what are you doing?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m kissing you.”

“I got that much! That’s why I’m freaking out! What I mean is *why* did you kiss me?!”

“Kisses are a sign of affection. Even lovers, shallow and fragile as their bonds are, do it all the time. So it’s only natural for siblings, who share the same flesh and blood, who are held together by bonds stronger than steel, to do the same. If anything, it would be unusual for them *not* to. Also, I’ve heard foreigners kiss each other as a form of greeting all the time.”

“W-Wait, is that true? Am I the weird one here, Stella?”

“Definitely not! Don’t get swept up in her lies! Besides, even Europeans don’t greet each other with mouth-to-mouth kisses! And none of them kiss their siblings! Do any of *you* guys kiss your siblings?!” Stella asked, turning to the rest of the class.

“Nope.”

“I sure don’t.”

“Honestly, just thinking about it makes me wanna hurl.”

“Huh. Shizuku, I think *you’re* the weird one, according to popular opinion.”

“Eheh heh. I don’t see the problem here, Onii-sama. Others have their own customs, and we have ours. I imagine everyone here simply has a strained relationship with their siblings. Truly, we live in sad times. However, we’re different, Onii-sama. In fact, a kiss alone isn’t enough to express how much I’ve longed to see you these past four years. Even sex would only be the tip of the iceberg.”

“Like hell it would!” all of the students in Ikki’s class shouted in unison.

“Y-You can’t just say that, Shizuku! Girls shouldn’t casually throw around words like ‘s-sex’...”

“Heh heh, I was just kidding. You’re so cute when you’re blushing, Onii-sama.”

Ikki broke out in a cold sweat as Shizuku smiled bewitchingly at him.

Wh-Who is this girl?

The Shizuku Ikki remembered had been a shy girl who easily got embarrassed. How on earth had she turned into this?

“At any rate, leave such trivial concerns behind, Onii-sama. I want to connect on a much deeper level with you.” Shizuku once again wrapped her arms around Ikki’s neck. Her jade-green eyes had been locked on him and only him this entire time. “We have to make up for four years of lost time.”

“Uh...”

She brought her pink lips close to Ikki’s, planning on kissing him again.

Ikki knew this was wrong. He knew this wasn’t how siblings should act. But he couldn’t move. Shizuku’s gaze held him trapped in place, unable to do anything.

“Stoooooop!” Just before their lips connected for the second time, Stella pulled the two of them apart. “Earth to Ikki! Why are you getting in the mood too?! Get a grip!”

“S-Sorry! Thanks, Stella! You’re a lifesaver!” Ikki said, looking relieved.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Shizuku said, taking her eyes off Ikki for the first time since coming into the classroom. It seemed like she’d only just now registered Stella’s existence.

“That’s what I want to know! What do you think you’re doing to Ikki?!”

“Are you referring to the kiss?”

“O-Of course I am! What else would I be referring to?!”

“And here I thought you might have something worthwhile to say.” Shizuku sighed. “I’m free to do whatever I please with my big brother.”

“Ikki! Your sister’s messed up in the head! I thought you said she was normal!”

“Look, I’m just as surprised as you are. In fact, I’m kind of scared of her now...”

“I notice you keep trying to interfere with my quality time with Onii-sama. You must be the Princess Stella everyone’s talking about, right? Why do you care so much about how we commoners express familial love?”

“No one in the *world* expresses familial love with a deep kiss like that!”

“Like I said, I don’t know how other families are, but this is how we do things.”

“No family with common sense would *ever* do something that crazy!”

“What an annoying girl. Listen up. Even if we assume there’s merit to your argument and it’s strange for me to kiss my brother, why do you care that we’re a strange pair of siblings? It has nothing to do with you.”

“Urk.”

“This is between me and Onii-sama. A princess from some backwater European country should keep her nose out of our affairs.”

“Ngh...”

Stella faltered, unsure of how to argue back. It was true that she technically had no right to interfere. Setting Shizuku straight was Ikki’s job, since he was her brother and all. It certainly wasn’t her problem. But she couldn’t just stay quiet.

“Onii-sama, if we stay here, it looks like that nosy princess is going to keep getting in the way. Let’s go somewhere quieter to enjoy our reunion.”

It was clear that Shizuku saw Ikki as more than just a brother, in which case Stella absolutely couldn’t allow the two of them to be alone. She steeled her resolve and muttered, “It *does* have something to do with me.” She could tell she was blushing. “It has *everything* to do with me, and I don’t want you kissing Ikki!”

“Huh?!” Ikki turned to Stella in surprise. After all, she’d just declared that she didn’t want Ikki kissing another woman.

Does that mean...Stella has...

“After all, Ikki’s my master! I can’t have the world thinking he’s a hopeless, perverted siskon!”

“That’s your reasoning?!”

“Talk about the scandal of the century!” Kagami cried excitedly. “I have to get our first headline changed ASAP! ‘Struggle in My Arms! An Imperial Princess Was Locked in Her Room for Seventy-Two Hours by Her Roommate and Subjected to All Sorts of Unspeakably Lewd Acts!’”

“Wait, is Kurogane-san that kind of guy? He looks so gentle, though.”

“Wow. Maybe he’s one of those super playboys who just *acts* nice.”

“And he forced the princess to be his maid? Damn. He’s got some hardcore fetishes.”

Oh no. Stella’s just making things worse.

“W-Wait, Stella! Are you sure you want to be saying all this in front of other people?!”

“I-It’s the truth, isn’t it?! We bet our entire lives on that duel, and you beat me. Whether I like it or not, that means I belong to you in both body and soul! We’ve basically become one! That’s why everything you do matters to me! Plus, it’s a maid’s duty to keep her master on the right path!”

“I told you we can just scrap that promise!”

“No! My pride as royalty won’t allow it! Besides, you already gave me your first order, didn’t you? ‘Sleep in the same space as me.’”

“What kind of person are you trying to make me out as?! I didn’t word it in such an immoral way!”

“But that *is* basically what you said, isn’t it?!”

I mean, yeah, but...

“Is that true?” Shizuku asked, her voice as cold as ice.

Ikki silently turned toward Shizuku, shivering a little.

“Is what she said true?”

Her expression was completely devoid of warmth.

Holy shit, she's scary...

“Answer me, Onii-sama. Is what she said true?” she asked a third time.

Ikki wanted to say it wasn't. He knew if he didn't deny Stella's assertion, the situation would only get worse. However, Stella was telling the truth, and Ikki wasn't one to lie.

“W-Well, Stella's twisting the nuance of what I said to make it sound a lot more evil than it was, but she is basically telling the truth, yes.”

He was too honest for his own good. Unfortunately, it was the honest who always suffered in life.

“I see... So it's true... Heh. Heh heh heh.”

“Shizuku?”

“You liar.”

Shizuku's lips curled up into a smile.

“Gah?!”

It was the most terrifying smile Ikki had ever seen.

“Why would you lie to me, Onii-sama? I know you'd never do anything that would make me sad. You'd never say anything that would hurt me. I know you.”

“Um, Sh-Shizuku-san?”

“Oh, I get it now. That woman must be blackmailing you somehow. You're only lying because you don't want to make me worry. Of course that's why. Thinking about it logically, that's the only reasonable explanation.”

“Wait. Listen to me, Shizuku.”

“Onii-sama, you poor thing. This is why I was against you leaving the family home. You're so cool that I knew other women would be attracted to you. And look, this stupid titty monster's seduced you.”

“I'm begging you, Shizuku. Just calm down and listen to me.”

“It’s okay, Onii-sama. I know this isn’t your fault. You’re just too wonderful. So much so that everyone wants you. It’s all this woman’s fault. It’s all this woman’s fault! *It’s all this woman’s fault!* But don’t worry. I’ll free you from her right now. Splash, Yoishigure!”

“H-Hold on a second, Shizuku! This is a bad idea! Put the weapon away and listen to me! I’m not being blackmailed, and— Hey, are you listening?!”

Shizuku had summoned her Device, a kodachi called Yoishigure, causing Ikki to pale.

“Now, now. Of course I’m listening to you, Onii-sama. I would never miss even a single one of your words. That’s more impossible than the world suddenly spinning in reverse. Aha ha ha ha, you’re so silly, Onii-sama. It’s okay. I won’t lose. It’s true that I’m only Rank B, but my element is water—fire’s greatest nemesis. But thank you for being worried about me. I love you, Onii-sama.”

“You’re clearly *not* listening! We’re just talking past each other now!”

“Serve my will, Lævateinn.”

“Wait, why are you getting ready to fight too, Stella?!”

“Sorry, but unlike you, Ikki, I’m not nice enough to show mercy to anyone who’s summoned their Device. If it’s a fight she wants, then it’s a fight she’ll get.”

It was clear that neither Shizuku nor Stella was paying any real attention to Ikki. Their gazes were firmly locked on each other. Nothing Ikki said could stop them. Each one knew they needed to defeat the woman in front of them or they’d lose Ikki.

“Everyone, follow me into the hallway. If you stay here, you’ll die,” Kagami said, leading the evacuation. She’d adapted to the situation quickly, like a good journalist should.

While the classroom emptied, Stella and Shizuku continued glaring at each other.

“I must say, your Device is quite tiny. Much like your chest,” Stella said.

“And your Device is as flashy and inelegant as those pointlessly massive

udders of yours. It suits you perfectly.”

“Ah, there’s nothing more pitiful than the jealous words of the poor. It’s fine, though. I forgive you. After all, my heart is as big as my chest.”

“Fatty.”

That ended up being the final straw that made Stella snap.

Oh boy. There’s nothing I can do anymore.

Knowing there was no avoiding tragedy now, Ikki shrugged in defeat and stepped out into the hallway.

“You’re dead!”

The girls’ battle ended up blowing the classroom to bits.



Naturally, the destruction of an entire classroom did not go unnoticed by the teachers. After a brief discussion, they decided that the two parties responsible would be suspended and confined to their rooms for one week.

No one had expected the school’s top two new students to get suspended on their very first day. Such a huge scandal made for great gossip, and Kagami had decided to have Stella’s and Shizuku’s suspensions be the headline on the front page of her newspaper. Ikki was glad she’d shelved the idea of interviewing him for now, especially considering the tentative title she’d come up with for that article, but he had a much bigger problem now.

“She wasn’t like that before...” he muttered, not yet over the shock of discovering what kind of person Shizuku had become. He was back in his room for the evening and had been sighing nonstop.

The Shizuku he remembered had been a shy, easily embarrassed girl. She’d followed Ikki around everywhere and hid the moment anything remotely startling happened. But she’d transformed, becoming what he could only call a seductress.

“You didn’t seem to mind, though, Ikki,” Stella said, still in a foul mood. “As a matter of fact, you looked like you were enjoying it.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes it is. If I hadn’t stopped her, you would have let her kiss you again.”

“Hrk.” It was true that if Stella hadn’t intervened, Ikki would have gotten kissed again. “I-I couldn’t move. It wasn’t like I *wanted* to get kissed again. I was just so overwhelmed by how mature Shizuku had become that I...”

“Oh, okay, so you were so captivated by how beautiful your sister had become in the four years you hadn’t seen her that you couldn’t move.”

“Now hold on, I didn’t say that!” Ikki still thought of Shizuku as nothing more than his little sister. He didn’t even want to see her as anything else, and especially not as a woman. But then he’d seen her for the first time in four years, and she’d grown up so much. On top of that, the passionate, fevered gaze she’d leveled at him had made it hard to resist her allure. The moment he realized that, he knew he couldn’t lie to himself, much less Stella. “But you might be right.”

“You siscon.”

“Geh.”

“Pervert.”

“I can’t even deny it.”

What’s wrong with me? Maybe I’m just backed up? Sure, I haven’t seen her in four years, but that doesn’t mean I should be getting turned on by my blood-related sister.

“Where are you going?” Stella asked as Ikki suddenly got to his feet.

“I need to take a shower and cool my head a bit.”

Today’s events had caused Ikki severe mental damage. He decided he should just clean himself up and go to bed.



“I can’t believe him...”

Stella scowled as she watched Ikki go to the bathroom.

What do you mean, “you might be right”? You’re supposed to deny those

accusations!

“He even told me I was pretty...”

It irked Stella to no end that Ikki’s affections were being stolen away by his little sister, of all people.

Besides, he even said he wanted to room with me and get to know me better, so how come he hasn’t made a move yet?!

Stella was ready for him anytime. In fact, she woke up before Ikki each morning and made sure to fix her bedhead. And every night, she mentally prepared herself for Ikki to engage in the ancient Japanese tradition of yobai and join her in her bed.

That doesn’t mean I want him to do lewd things to me or anything, though! Absolutely not! If he tries, I’ll kick him out! An unmarried princess like me would never do something so untoward! But...

She was fed up with Ikki making zero advances on her.

“You told an unmarried girl she was pretty! And that you wanted to get to know her better!”

You can’t just say those things and then not do anything else!

Ikki was literally blue balling Stella right now. It was high time she demanded why. Especially since he’d locked lips with his sister today and said that he might actually find her attractive.

“Ah, jeez! Ikki, you moron! Sissons like you should just die!”

Stella punched her pillow repeatedly, tears welling up in her eyes.

What if Ikki isn’t interested in me as a woman? What if I’m not his type? What if he likes slender, petite girls like Shizuku?

If that last part was true, Stella was in trouble. She wasn’t very tall, but she definitely had assets. Until now, she’d been proud of her body, but if Ikki was so much of a siskon that he’d also become a lolicon, she’d never be his type. That was the one thing that she couldn’t let happen.

“Okay.”

Stella steeled her resolve and made a brave choice.



“You siscon.”

“I wonder if she hates me now...” Ikki sighed to himself, sinking into the bathtub as he thought back to what Stella had said.

“Pervert.”

“Ughhh...”

There was no guy out there who wouldn’t get depressed if a younger girl called him a pervert. It was exceptionally painful because it was Stella who’d called him that.

As a knight, Ikki respected Stella Vermillion greatly. Despite her immense talent, she hadn’t let it get to her head and had continued to train tirelessly to reach even greater heights. If he’d been born with as much innate talent as her, he wasn’t confident he would’ve been able to work half as hard.

He also thought she was an attractive woman, which was precisely why he was so down. He admired Stella both as a knight and as a man, so he didn’t want her to think he was a creep. He needed to clear his name as soon as possible.

“Maybe I should have a proper talk with Shizuku tomorrow...”

Wanting Stella to have a better impression of him was a part of it, but also, Shizuku wasn’t a child anymore. He had to make sure she understood that she couldn’t do those kinds of things to her brother. As the older sibling, it was Ikki’s duty to set her straight.

Moreover, she’d grown up to be such a cute girl. It would be a waste if she missed her chance to snag a good boyfriend because she was lusting after her own brother.

Just as Ikki made up his mind, the door to the bathroom slid open.

“I-I’m coming in, okay?”

Stella walked in, wearing nothing but a swimsuit.

“...Huh?”

Something was terribly off about this situation. Ikki was completely flabbergasted by it; it was like he’d found a whale in a pond.

Wait, I know. Stella wearing a swimsuit is what’s weird here. This was a bathroom, after all. It made no sense to wear your swimsuit in a bathroom. *If you’re embarrassed about being naked, you should just wrap a towel around—*

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! What the heck am I thinking?! I mean, the swimsuit is weird too, but that’s not the problem here! Why are you in the bathroom, Stella?! What the heck is going— Ack?!”

Ikki was so flustered that he slipped off his stool and fell to the ground.

“Wh-What’s the problem? Surely it’s not *that* surprising.”

“Yes, it is! Seriously, *what* is going on here?! Why did you come into the bathroom when I’m taking a bath, and why are you wearing a swimsuit?!”

“Y-You can’t tell?”

“Absolutely not!”

“I-I thought I could wash your body for you...”

Ikki’s head started to spin. He couldn’t tell if the heat had gotten to him and he was seeing things or if this was actually real.

Stella’s offering to wipe me down? Ha ha ha, this can’t be happening. What is this, a visual novel?

“Sorry, Stella, I think I’ve been in the bath too long and the heat’s making me hear things. Can you repeat what you just said?”

“I mean...I’m your maid and all, right? It’s my...duty to clean you up. Yeah, that’s it.”

“I see. Maids sure have it rough, huh?”

Wait, what?!

“H-Hold on a sec! I never asked you to do this!”

“A true maid does even the things she isn’t asked to! D-Didn’t Hideyoshi

warm up Nobunaga's shoes for him even when he didn't ask?! This is the same thing!"

"How is that the same at all?!"

"Whatever! This is my duty as your servant, so hurry up and sit down!"

"I can't make you do something like this, Stella! Besides, even maids don't go this far for their masters! First Shizuku, and now you?! How come all the girls around me are so willing to throw away their chastity?!"

"Look, I said I'm doing this, so I'm doing it! Now sit down! Or else..." Stella's hair began to glow, and the bathroom started heating up. "...I'll boil you alive!"

Ikki knew she wasn't kidding.



Stella, a princess of the Vermillion Kingdom, knelt next to Ikki, who was wearing nothing but a towel over his waist, and started scrubbing his body.

How did things end up like this? I feel like I'm losing my mind. Or maybe I already lost it and this is just a hallucination.

If anything, Ikki would have preferred that to be the case.

"You better keep your promise, okay? This is the only time I'll allow this kind of nonsense. From tomorrow on this stops," Ikki said, trying to sound assertive.

"I-I will. J-Just so you know, I'm not doing this because I want to either. It's only because I lost to you and became your maid."

If you don't want to do this, you can just stop.

But Ikki knew it was pointless to say anything. He'd already told Stella that she didn't have to do this, but she'd been adamant. According to her, this was something she considered an essential part of being Ikki's maid, and she wouldn't back down until he let her wash him at least once.

He had no idea why she was being so stubborn about this, but since her pride as royalty was somehow on the line, he couldn't really say much. Especially since he was the one who'd won their duel and crushed her pride the first time.

Anyway, it's just for today. I just have to get through this and then I'm free.

Despite what Ikki kept telling himself, though, he couldn't help but shoot glances at Stella in her swimsuit. He knew he shouldn't, but his baser emotions were ruling over him. He pretended to avert his gaze while peeking at her whenever he could. She was revealing even more skin than she'd been when he'd seen her in her underwear the day they'd met.

Ikki already thought she was beautiful, and now, he was able to get a clear look at her figure. She had a long, slender neck and a thin waist, but her hips were decently wide, and her white legs were perfectly shaped. But it was her boobs that caught his attention most of all. They were so big that they barely fit in her bikini top. Her twin peaks were emphasized even through her more modest school uniform, but in her bikini, they bounced a little every time she moved. Blood rushed to his head every time he caught a glimpse of them.

I can't...take this much longer...

Ikki couldn't avert his gaze or close his eyes. He was better at controlling himself than most guys his age, but he was still a healthy sixteen-year-old boy. He couldn't help but have indecent thoughts about the beautiful girl right next to him. And so, grateful that Stella hadn't noticed yet, he continued to sneak glimpses of her perfectly sculpted body.

Stella really is beautiful...

She was, of course, a very attractive girl, but her body was ideal for a knight as well. Her lean muscles didn't detract from her feminine beauty, and Ikki could tell there was a lot of power packed into her small body.

He knew that she must have gone through extremely harsh training to get a body that strong. It would have taken a will of iron to keep training that hard despite having enough talent to render training unnecessary. Her body was a physical symbol of her unwavering determination and unbreakable spirit.

Truly...stunning...

This was the first time Ikki had found a woman's body this beautiful. It was also the first time he'd felt the urge to touch one. Of course, he knew Stella would never allow that—or so he thought.

He's been staring at me this whole time... In truth, Stella had noticed

immediately that Ikki kept stealing looks at her.

Women were a lot more sensitive to men's gazes than men realized. It was like a sixth sense they had. And that sixth sense had informed Stella that Ikki was utterly captivated by her.

"Phew..."

The heat of his gaze was enough to make her feel hot too. She could sense as he looked from her neck to her collarbone, her breasts, her stomach, and her thighs. It felt as if he was gently caressing her with her eyes.

It's so embarrassing...I can't think straight...

However, Stella didn't tell Ikki to stop. In fact, she was relieved. This was proof that Ikki found her body appealing. At least, appealing enough that he was staring. In the same way that her heart skipped a beat when she examined his body, he, too, got excited when surveying hers. That made her unbelievably happy.

I haven't lost to his sister just yet.

"Okay, I'll wash your back next."

Stella finished scrubbing Ikki's torso and circled around to his back. She wasn't ready to scrub his lower body clean just yet. It was too soon for that.

"O-Okay. Um, thanks."

Ikki also didn't comment on the fact that Stella had skipped his lower body. Hell, if she had asked him to remove the towel, he would have smashed through the wall and run away at full speed.

All that's left is my back. After that, it'll be over.

Since he couldn't see Stella's body anymore, this was much easier to deal with. It did itch a little whenever she scraped against his back, but that was still better than when she'd been caressing his chest and stomach. He could handle this. He could clear this strange trial he'd found himself undertaking. And then, he could forget it all forever.

Ikki would never talk about what had happened today, nor would he even think about it. The night's events would be sealed away in the deep recesses of

his memories, never to be recalled. However, the very moment he resolved to do that, another trial presented itself to him.

“Hey, Ikki,” Stella said in a quiet voice.

“Yeah?”

“Um, there’s something I want to ask you, if that’s okay...”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Do you...like girls’ breasts?”

Ikki felt as though he’d been hit over the head with a hammer.

“Wha— Wh-Why would you ask s-s-s-something like that all of a sudden?!”

“I mean...you’ve been staring at mine this whole time.”

Aaaaah! She knows! She knows I was looking at her! Oh god. I want to crawl into a hole and die. I need to disappear forever.

“I-I’m sorry! I know I shouldn’t have been looking, but...”

“Y-You don’t have to apologize. I just want to know.”

She wanted to know the answer to her question: did Ikki like girls’ breasts? But Ikki would have rather disemboweled himself than answer that. There was nothing more embarrassing than admitting your fetishes to a girl you’d been ogling.

This is too cruel. What god did I anger for this to happen to me?

He agonized over what to say for a good while, but in the end, he knew there was no escape.

“I do...” he managed to barely croak out.

“...I see.”

...

.....

.....P-Please say something!

“So, um, Stella?”

Unable to bear the silence any longer, Ikki finally spoke up. As soon as he did, two objects, each much softer and much bigger than a sponge, pressed against his back.

“Hrrrmpf?!”

The sensation caused Ikki’s brain to short-circuit. Even though his back was a blind spot, meaning he had no way of seeing what was going on behind him, he knew from that alone what was squished against his back right now.

“S-Stella, did you just—”

“Hnnngh!”

The moment Ikki addressed her, Stella jumped to her feet and ran out of the bathroom. He caught a glimpse of her face as she left, and he could tell that she was blushing to the tips of her ears.

“Wh-What the heck was thaaat?!”

Are all girls this impossible to understand, or is it just Shizuku and Stella?

Ikki couldn’t understand a single thing that had happened that day. Regardless, he knew for a fact that he would never forget the sensation he’d just felt.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Kurogane Ikki

■PROFILE

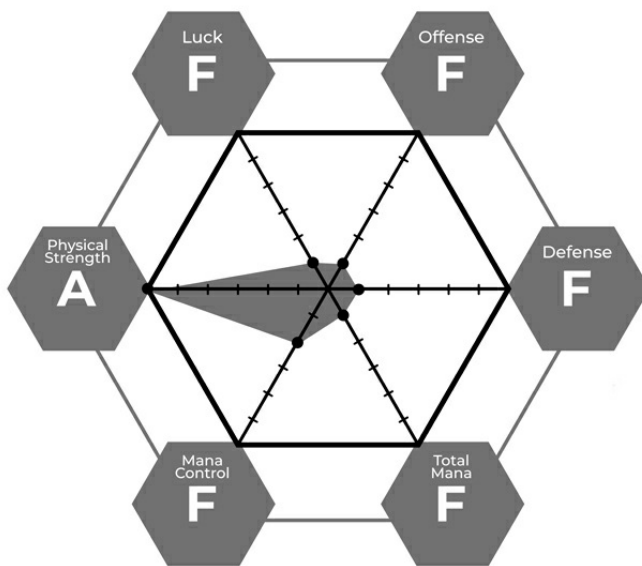
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 1-1

Blazer Rank: F

Noble Art: Ittou Shura

Nickname: Worst One

Summary: An unconventional Blazer who's mastered the blade.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you look at his stat spread? Pretty lopsided, right? It kinda makes the graph look like a pointy needle. Ikki's Ittou Shura takes his already ridiculously high physical prowess to new heights, letting him fight on par with much stronger Blazers! Also, he's got a really cute face!

Chapter 3: Rebellion

There was a man Kurogane Shizuku loved. He'd been with her throughout her childhood, and in a world full of scary adults, he was the only one who had smiled kindly at her. He was, of course, her older brother, Kurogane Ikki. The reason she'd kissed him when they'd reunited after four years was that she loved him.

She hadn't always seen him in a romantic light. In fact, until four years ago, her love for him had been normal, familial love. Her feelings had only started to change when he'd left home.

It wasn't as simple as her realizing after he'd left that she'd loved him romantically all along, though. When Ikki had run away four years ago, no one had bothered to look for him. Not his parents, and not even Shizuku's eldest brother. It was then that she'd started to realize how Ikki had been treated by the rest of her family. Even before he'd left, everyone had been pretending like he didn't exist.

When she'd realized what he'd been subjected to, Shizuku had been disgusted by how willfully ignorant she'd been. She'd never noticed the pain Ikki had been carrying with him beneath the gentle smiles he'd shown her. How could she have failed to understand what he was going through until after he'd gone? She'd spent more time with him than anyone else.

Burdened with regret, Shizuku had soon grown to resent her family. Not only had they ignored Ikki for no reason beyond his lack of talent as a Blazer, but even after he'd left the house and cut all ties with his family, they were still trying to get in the way of his dream solely because they felt it would be shameful if someone bearing the Kurogane name became a Rank F Mage-Knight. It was disgusting.

Thus, Kurogane Shizuku had come to a decision. It didn't matter if it was taboo. If Ikki's father, mother, and brother wouldn't give him the love he deserved, that was that. She alone would give Ikki the love he'd never gotten;

their help was unnecessary. She would grant him the love of a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a friend, and a lover all at once. She would love him more than anyone had ever been loved before.

It was precisely because of her twisted resolve, however, that she was now faced with a big problem: Stella Vermillion, the girl who claimed to be her beloved Ikki's servant. It was obvious to Shizuku that Stella had a crush on Ikki.

They both loved the same man. Stella had turned her promise to Ikki into chains that bound him to her, and it vexed Shizuku. Furthermore, Stella had realized the depth of Shizuku's love for Ikki and was doing everything she could to get in Shizuku's way.

Today, both of their suspensions had finally ended. Shizuku had thought to invite Ikki out to a movie to celebrate, but that eyesore of a woman had gotten in the way and demanded that she come as well. Shizuku was pissed. Stella had said, "I still don't know Japan very well, so I want you to show me around," which had been perfectly sound reasoning, so naturally, Ikki had agreed. And Shizuku couldn't stand that he was being deceived by that woman so easily.

None of it was Ikki's fault, of course. He was perfect. It was all that vixen Stella's fault. Shizuku would make her pay for stealing away her brother.

"That fucking bitch," she muttered as she stepped out of the bath.

"Oh my. I see you're in a bad mood today as well," her roommate, Alisuin Nagi, said as they ran a comb through Shizuku's wet hair and started blow-drying it. "Did something happen between you and the princess again?"

"Yes," Shizuku replied in a despondent voice, not minding that Alisuin was combing her hair.

Shizuku tried to be as polite as possible to her beloved Ikki and even to Stella, but around Alisuin, she didn't care about how she spoke. She didn't currently look composed and graceful either; she was puffing her cheeks out and pouting like a spoiled child.

"Heh. Girls in love sure have it tough," Alisuin said, smiling when they saw her expression reflected in the mirror. They knew that she was in love with her brother. She'd told them herself. Honestly, though, she wasn't sure why she

had.

In the years since Ikki had left the house, she'd grown to dislike men and women alike, becoming a bit of a misanthrope. She'd been distrustful of people from the start, and that distrust had only worsened once Ikki was gone. Seeing parents who didn't even love their own child had made it hard for her to believe that anyone else she met was by default a good person.

And yet, she'd told Alisuin about her love for her brother, which was something deeply personal to her. She'd done so just one week after meeting her new roommate too.

I suppose I just enjoy talking to Alice.

Alisuin let Shizuku say whatever she wanted, was a surprisingly good listener, and shared in her joy when she was happy about something. Best of all, they didn't pry about things she didn't want them to. She only had older brothers and thus could only speculate, but she imagined that if she'd had an older sister, they would have been someone like Alisuin. That was probably why she was so comfortable telling them things she kept secret from others.

"Hey, Alice."

"Yes?"

"Is it weird to be in love with your older brother?"

The moment she said that, Shizuku regretted asking such a stupid question. Of course it was weird. She didn't need to be told as much. But she'd let herself get spoiled by Alisuin and was secretly hoping they would give her a different answer.

"If we're talking about what's socially acceptable, then yes, it's weird. Most people would call it immoral. But I'm sure you know that already, don't you, Shizuku? If you love him despite that, then I believe that love of yours is a pure and beautiful thing."

As Shizuku had expected, Alisuin had immediately picked up on what she really wanted.

"Sorry for asking such a weak-willed question, Alice."

“Oh, don’t be. Everyone needs words of encouragement now and then. If I was able to put your mind at ease, that’s more than enough. Words are meant to be used to support others rather than insult them. Plus, I truly do believe that your love is something wonderful that you shouldn’t be ashamed of, Shizuku. Most people could never be so devoted to another person.”

“Thank you. It’s not that I’m ashamed of my feelings, though. I’m just worried Onii-sama won’t accept them.”

“As long as you persevere, he will. Right now, he still thinks of you as his sister, and it will be quite difficult to make him see you as a woman instead. In that respect, the princess has the advantage, since she doesn’t need to clear such a high hurdle.”

“Ngh...” Alisuin’s objective analysis hit Shizuku hard.

In truth, Shizuku wasn’t all that twisted of a person. She knew full well that it would be hard to get Ikki to accept her feelings. But that was precisely why she knew she’d have to abandon all notions of common sense if she wanted to force her way into his heart.

For now, her plan was to spend so much time with him that she’d eventually be able to overwrite his perception of her as his sister into that of a potential girlfriend. If she couldn’t manage that now, when the four-year gap since their last meeting was making it harder for him to gauge how to approach their relationship, then she was doomed.

However, the brute-force approach could only work if Ikki actually found her attractive. She was also worried her constant advances might be annoying her brother. If so, it was possible he’d stop loving her as even a sister if she went too far. Shizuku was constantly plagued by such worries, to the point that she was on the verge of crying each night.

“Don’t look so glum. The princess has her own hurdles to overcome, like her social standing. Besides, there’s no man alive who doesn’t like an assertive woman. Especially one as cute as you, Shizuku,” Alisuin said in a reassuring voice.

I’m not so sure...

As a girl, Shizuku didn't really understand how men thought. But if Alisuin said that was how men were, she would believe them. At the very least, they understood men better than she did.

"Thanks, Alice. I feel better now."

"Anytime. That said, I do think kissing him the moment you saw him was a bit *too* assertive. I realize you had to do it to keep your own resolve from wavering, but now, you've put your brother on his guard."

"I do regret that..."

"As long as you understand. You have to take your time with men. Peel away their inhibitions one by one slowly. At any rate, leave your outfit for tomorrow's date to me. I'll pick out the cutest clothes you've ever seen."

"Thanks. As long as you're with me, Alice, there's no way I'll lose to that woman."

If Stella was determined to use her promise with Ikki to worm her way into his heart, then Shizuku would take full advantage of her position as his little sister. There was no way she'd hand him over. She was the only one who could understand his pain. The only one who knew what injustices he'd suffered at their family home. She couldn't leave him in that woman's care.

In fact, Shizuku didn't trust anyone else to love Ikki the way she did. She was convinced that everyone else in the world only cared about themselves. But she would never betray her brother. She would never do anything that would sadden him. She'd stay by his side no matter what, and her feelings for him would never wane. That was what she'd sworn to herself when Ikki had left, and that was why she was here now.

That woman could never go this far for Onii-sama.

Shizuku had been depressed ever since Stella had ruined her date plans, but her eyes now burned with defiance. Alisuin's words had given her strength, as they always did.

"I can do this," she said resolutely.

"That's the spirit. All right, all done."

Alisuin turned the dryer off as they finished combing. Shizuku shook her head a little, and her silver hair fell neatly around her. They were far, far better at hair care than she'd ever been. That was why she gladly let them handle her hair rather than taking care of it herself.

I hope I can do something to repay Alice eventually. Is there anything I can do that they can't, though?

Shizuku cocked her head to one side as she thought. After a bit, she finally came up with something.

"Oh yeah. Hey, Alice. Do you want to come with me to the movies tomorrow?"

"Is that okay? Are you sure you want me third-wheeling your date?"

"It's fine. The moment that woman got involved, it stopped being a proper date."

"Heh heh. Fair enough. Then I suppose I'll take you up on that invitation. I *have* been wanting to meet this brother of yours that you speak so highly of."

Good. They're happy I asked.

Now all Shizuku had to do was message Ikki and ask him if it was fine. He was bringing his own roommate, though, so she doubted he'd have a problem with it.

"I'm quite looking forward to tomorrow now. If he's truly as amazing as you claim he is, maybe I'll gobble him up myself."

"Huh? What did you just say? Sorry, but I must have misheard, so can you repeat that? It almost sounded like you had a death wish."

"I'm sorry, I didn't think you'd take my joke so seriously. Please put Yoishigure away. I won't do anything."

You had better just be joking, Alice. For your own sake.

If they weren't, Shizuku would have to cut them down, regardless of how helpful their advice might have been.



The morning of the much-anticipated movie date, Kurogane Ikki and Stella Vermillion waited outside Hagun Academy's main gate for Shizuku and Alisuin. Neither of them was wearing their school uniform today. Ikki was dressed casually, in a T-shirt and jeans, and Stella was wearing a stylish white blouse and a brightly colored cardigan.

"They're late. What's taking them so long?" Stella asked.

"If we were in the same dorm, we could have all left together," Ikki replied.

Ikki and Stella were housed in the academy's first dorm building, while Shizuku and Alisuin were in the second. The two dorms were on opposite sides of the campus and had the main school building between them, which was why they'd decided to meet up at the main gate. However, it was well past the appointed meeting time, and Shizuku still hadn't shown up.

"I'm sure they'll come soon. But I gotta say, I'm surprised you're so excited for this movie, Stella."

Ikki thought back to how fervently Stella had insisted that she would come as well when Shizuku had invited Ikki out to go see a movie.

"I mean, I can't leave you and Shizuku alone together in a dark movie theater. It's too dangerous."

"What's so dangerous about it?"

"The fact that you don't notice the danger is the biggest problem here! Did you already forget what happened on the first day of school?!"

"Oh yeah..." Ikki couldn't forget that even if he wanted to. It had been his first kiss, after all. "She did apologize to me the next day, though. She said, 'I was so moved after seeing you for the first time in four years that I let the excitement go to my head. I'm sorry.' I'm sure she just thinks of me as her brother and won't do something like that again. That first day was an exception. I'll be fine."

"I'm pretty sure she just backed off a little because of how weirded out you were..."

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"I said you're a hopeless siskon."

“N-No I’m not! I mean, I do love my sister, but just as family! She’s related to me by blood! Just because we haven’t seen each other in four years doesn’t mean I’ll suddenly be attracted to her!”

“Really? You won’t get stunned by Shizuku’s beauty anymore?”

“I won’t.”

Lusting after your own sister was wrong.

I absolutely can’t let that happen again.

It was true that Ikki had made that mistake once already, but it depressed him that Stella doubted him so. He sighed at how untrustworthy he seemed. Just then, Shizuku finally arrived.

“Sorry I’m late, Onii-sama.”

“Ah, Shizu—”

“What were you doing that you took...”

Ikki and Stella both stopped midsentence, their jaws dropping open.

“It took me more time than I expected to get ready.” Shizuku bowed her head in apology. She looked ten times prettier than usual.

She was dressed in a gothic lolita outfit that accentuated her small stature and silver hair, making her look like a doll. The outfit suited her far better than her school uniform did. It emphasized all of her charms.

However, Shizuku had always liked these kinds of outfits even as a kid, and Ikki was used to seeing her in them. Thus, normally, seeing her in such nostalgic clothes would have helped reinforce the idea that she was his little sister in his mind, making sure he wouldn’t find himself accidentally attracted to her again. But she had done one extra magic trick to ensure that didn’t happen.

Sh-She’s beautiful...

She looked so dazzling that her surroundings seemed colorless in comparison. Ikki had just said he wouldn’t be stunned by Shizuku’s beauty, but he was once again captivated. As a result, it took him a few seconds to realize why it was that she looked so different today: she’d put on makeup.

There was eyeshadow lining her eyelids and she was wearing lipstick. She'd also curled her lashes, and whatever she'd done to her hair made every silver strand look perfect. That was what made her seem like she was literally sparkling.

The most amazing thing about her makeup was that it highlighted her natural charms as opposed to painting them over. Ikki was forced to see her not as his sister or as a child, but rather as a woman.

"Th-That's cheating! There's no way an amateur like you could give yourself a makeover like that! Did you go to a stylist?!" Stella exclaimed.

"I'm not a rich princess like you. I don't have the money for that. My roommate did it for me."

"What?"

"Is that the same Alisuin-san you said would be coming with you today?" Ikki asked, curious.

Shizuku had told Ikki her roommate's name when she'd asked if she could bring them along. Ikki recalled her describing her roommate as "a reliable older sister."

"Yes. They should be here any minute now." Right as Shizuku finished saying that, her roommate arrived.

"You need to slow down, Shizuku. What if you trip and ruin your makeup?"

Ikki and Stella turned to look at the newcomer.

"Huh?"

Both of their expressions hardened like stone. The pro-level makeup artist Alisuin, whom Shizuku had described as an "older sister," looked very much like a guy.





“Eheh heh, it’s nice to meet you. Thank you very much for inviting me out today. I’m Shizuku’s roommate, Alisuin Nagi. I don’t particularly like my name, so please call me Alice instead.”

Alisuin’s outfit matched Shizuku’s in style—monotone with a visual-kei aesthetic—which suited their tall, lean stature very well. They removed their bowler hat and bowed before smiling warmly at Stella and Ikki and holding their hand out for a handshake.

“Um, n-nice to meet you too.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance...”

The two of them awkwardly shook Alisuin’s hand, unable to hide their confusion.

“Wh-What the heck is going on here?” Stella whispered to Ikki.

“Don’t ask me,” he responded, also keeping his voice down.

Both of them had assumed Alisuin was a girl, but this person clearly looked like a man. A slightly effeminate man, perhaps, but undoubtedly a man. They were taller than Ikki, probably standing over 180 centimeters tall.

“They sound and act like a girl, though. Is this a special Japanese joke? Should I be laughing?”

“I have no clue.”

“Heh heh. Look, Shizuku. The two of them are stunned by my beauty.”

“That’s one hell of a way to interpret our reaction!” Stella and Ikki shouted in unison.

“Um, Alice-san?” Ikki then asked hesitantly.

“No need for honorifics. I dislike formality.”

“Alice, then. Um...are you a cross-dresser?”

“Nope. I’m simply a woman trapped in a man’s body.”

“Wh-What’s the difference between the two, Stella?!” Ikki whispered

furiously, turning back to his companion.

“Why are you asking me?”

“Are you surprised?” Shizuku asked, noticing Ikki and Stella’s confusion.

Ikki scratched his head awkwardly and replied, “A-Aha ha ha. Yeah, I guess. I knew people like Alice existed, but this is my first time meeting one, so I’m not really sure how to act. Sorry.”

“Eheh heh. No need to apologize. I’m used to it. Shizuku wasn’t bothered at all, though, you know.”

“A person’s gender doesn’t matter much to me,” Shizuku said flatly, and Ikki was honestly moved by how easily his little sister could accept people different from her.

She’s grown even more mature than me in the time we’ve spent apart.

He definitely wanted to become more like her and be willing to accept people for who they were.

“I don’t care whether you’re a man or a woman. I hate all people equally,” she added, and Ikki instantly felt like taking back everything he’d just thought.

Someone please heal my poor sister’s shattered heart.

“Sure, you don’t see people like Alice often, but she wants people to treat her like a girl, so that’s what I’ll do. I’d prefer it if you could do the same, Onii-sama, Stella-san.”

“I’ll do my best...” Ikki said.

“Heh heh. I appreciate the sentiment, but you don’t have to force it. I don’t want things to be awkward between us.”

Alisuin was clearly quite used to this treatment, as she smoothly provided Ikki with an out.

“Well, anyway, we’re all here now, so let’s head to the movie theater,” Ikki said, shelving the topic for now.

“Yeah,” Stella agreed. “There’s no point in just standing around.”

“We still have some time before the movie starts, so we can take our time

heading over, Onii-sama,” Shizuku noted, looking up at a nearby clock. She then deftly wrapped her arm around Ikki’s. She’d done that often enough when they were kids, but Ikki was still surprised.

“Whoa!”

She was much prettier than usual today, which made it hard for him to be so close to her. His earlier resolve to not be attracted to her was already beginning to crumble. But before he could ask her to let go, she said, “Eheh heh. It’s been so long since we last walked arm in arm like this, Onii-sama.”

“Uh, yeah... I guess it has.”

When he saw Shizuku’s nostalgic smile, Ikki couldn’t bring himself to pull away. Here she was, seeking physical contact with her brother *as* her brother, and he’d been about to ask her to let go just because he was having trouble seeing her as his sister. Of course, he didn’t realize that was exactly what Shizuku was aiming for.

Stella, however, was not about to let this slide.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I’m simply spending some quality bonding time with my brother. We used to walk like this all the time when we were kids. Isn’t that right, Onii-sama?”

“Oh, um... Aha ha, I guess technically we did...”

“I-In that case, I’ll also—”

“I thought you might say that, so I brought something for you. Here’s your collar. Enjoy bonding with your master in the proper way.”

“My, how thoughtful— Did you think I’d actually take that?!”

“But a mere servant isn’t allowed to walk side by side with her master. You’re the one who got in my way, saying that as his servant you needed to set him straight. Surely you won’t deny being his servant now that it’s inconvenient for you. Or is that all the Vermillion royal family’s promises amount to?”

“Ngh!”

“Well, if you really want to, I suppose you could hold hands with Onii-sama.

He does have two of them, after all. But I can't imagine any reason you'd want to hold hands with a guy unless you had special feelings for him. Stella-san, could it be that you—"

"A-Absolutely not! I only became his servant because I lost to him in a duel! That's all there is to it!"

Stella's pride wouldn't allow her to admit that she'd backed herself into a corner. Naturally, Shizuku was taking full advantage of that.

"Then I guess you don't need to hold his hand," she said, shooing Stella away.

"Grr..."

"Come, Onii-sama. Let us be off."

"O-Okay..."

"What was that about not being stunned by her beauty, you stupid siscon? Pervert," Stella spat as Ikki and Shizuku walked arm in arm.

Will I be able to survive a day together with both of them? Ikki thought worriedly.



There was a large shopping mall relatively close to Hagun Academy. The movie theater Ikki and the others were going to, Cinemaland, was on the fourth floor—the top floor—of that mall. However, the group didn't head straight there. As Shizuku had said earlier, there was still a decent amount of time before the movie started.

The only things on the fourth floor were the movie theater and a gift shop for that movie theater. At Alisuin's recommendation, the four of them first decided to kill some time in the food court.

"Mmm! This crepe is delicious!" Stella exclaimed, biting down on her dessert. Alisuin had recommended this particular café, and it had proved to be a huge hit.

"I had always avoided crepes since they seemed needlessly expensive, but this is quite good," Shizuku said, working her way through her own crepe.

“See? The café here doesn’t skimp on the cream, so its crepes are delicious. I wouldn’t recommend their ice cream, though. If you want good ice cream, the Raskin-Bobbins on the third floor is better,” Alisuin suggested.

“You sure know a lot about this area,” Ikki commented.

“I investigated the food options here ahead of time. Us girls love our sweets, so I wanted to pick out the best places.”

“If you want tasty sweets or fashionable clothes, Alice is the best person to ask. If there’s anything in particular you’re looking for, Stella-san, she’ll know.”

“Well, I’m not sure I know any shops that sell clothes royalty might wear, but I can definitely point you to all the good dessert places. In fact, we can tour them all today, if you’d like.”

“Really?! That sounds great! What other shops are good?!”

“There’s another café in this mall that makes a divine tiramisu...”

Ikki watched on from a distance as the girls excitedly discussed the various sweets they wanted to try. He wasn’t really comfortable butting into girl talk like this. It didn’t help that he wasn’t much of a fan of sweets either.

Alice seems to really be fitting in, though.

Even Stella, who’d been taken aback at first, didn’t seem to care all that much about Alisuin’s gender anymore. She was already closer to Alisuin than she was to any of the other guys in their class.

Maybe it’s easier for girls to accept people like Alice? Though I guess he’s also quite handsome, so he’d be popular with girls regardless.

As he quietly sipped his iced coffee, Ikki noticed that there was a bit of whipped cream on Shizuku’s cheek.

Uh-oh. It would’ve been a problem if that ruined her makeup.

He’d been surprised by how much prettier makeup had made her, but seeing her smear cream all over her face reminded him that she was still his baby sister, and his nervousness vanished. In a way, he was thankful that she was still so clumsy.

It'd be a waste to let her stay like that after she went to all the effort of dressing up for today.

“Shizuku, let me see your face real quick.”

“Hmm? What is it, Onii-sama?”

As Shizuku turned around, Ikki reached over and wiped the cream off her face with his finger.

“There was some whipped cream on your cheek. You should eat more carefully. You don't want to ruin your makeup, right?”

Ikki stuck his cream-covered finger in his mouth without a second thought.

“Hrrrngh!”

Shizuku blushed brightly and hid behind Alisuin. She'd always had a habit of hiding behind other people when embarrassed, and Ikki was glad that at least that part of her hadn't changed.

“Oh my. I didn't realize you were only confident when initiating and crumbled when the tables were turned, Shizuku.”

“Sh-Sh-Sh-Shut up, Alice! I-I was just caught off guard, is a-a-a-a-all!”

Ikki smiled gently at Shizuku. “You just had some whipped cream on your face. It's nothing to get embarrassed about.”

“I don't think that's what has her blushing. You're more dangerous than you look.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Eheh heh. That's not for me to say.”

Ikki gave Alisuin a puzzled look, but before he could inquire further, Stella started coughing from right beside him.

“You okay, Stella? You didn't catch a cold or anything, did—” As he turned around, Ikki saw that Stella had enough whipped cream on her face to give her a Santa Claus beard.

“What's wrong, Ikki? You look surprised. Is there something on my face?”

“The only thing that’s surprising is that you haven’t noticed!”

“I-If there *is* something stuck on it, could you wipe it off for me like you did with Shizuku?”

“There’s too much of it for me to get with my finger. One sec, I’ll go find a towel.”

“Ah, wait!”

Before Stella could stop him, Ikki ran off and asked a waitress for a towel.

“Er, Stella-san? Are you an idiot?” Shizuku asked, looking flabbergasted.

“Why, I think it’s cute how awkward she is. I almost want to root for her too now,” Alisuin said with a smile.

“Sh-Sh-Sh-Sh-Shut up! I didn’t do it on purpose to get Ikki to wipe my face or anything! My hand just slipped! Really!”



Once everyone had finished their crepes, they chatted for a bit longer, and soon enough, it was time for the movie.

“We should start heading up to the fourth floor,” Shizuku said, and they all got to their feet.

It was only at this point that Stella finally asked, “By the way, Ikki, what kind of movie are we watching?”

“I actually don’t know.”

He’d finally reunited with his sister after four years, so he’d accepted her invitation to go to the movies without bothering to find out what movie they were going to see.

“What did you even come here to do, then?” Stella asked.

“I don’t think you have any right to ask *me* that.”

“I’m here to keep an eye on you two, that’s all. So, Shizuku, what movie are we going to see?”

“A normal old romance film.”

“I knew it. Thank god I came along.” Stella had expected as much, and she let out a small sigh. “And what’s it called?”

“How I Fell in Love with My Sister. Rated R-15.”

“There’s nothing normal about that at all!”

“It’s a perfectly sweet, pure love story. As long as you ignore that the couple are siblings.”

“I can’t believe you’re calling such an immoral premise a pure love story! Just how brazen can you be, inviting your flesh-and-blood brother to go see that with you?! I knew you were crazy, but I didn’t realize you were *this* crazy!”

“I don’t want to be called brazen by someone who yells for her whole class to hear that she’s someone else’s slave.”

Shizuku had a point, but Ikki still didn’t particularly want to see this movie with his sister.

“Sh-Shizuku, let’s pick a different movie.”

“Aww. But why? What’s wrong with this one?”

“Everything.”

How can you not see the problem with watching a movie about falling in love with your brother when you’re going to the movies with your brother?

“A-Anyway, we’re not watching this one, and that’s final!”

“Mrr. If you insist, Onii-sama, I suppose we’ll watch a different one. What looks good?”

Shizuku brought up Cinemaland’s homepage on her student handbook and showed everyone what was playing.

“Oh, this one looks nice!” Stella said. *“Karuna, Princess of the Desert.* It’s an animated film about a princess who gets kidnapped by a group of bandits but ends up falling in love with their leader. It sounds very romantic and—”

“Rejected,” Shizuku said, cutting her off.

“Why?!”

“I don’t want to watch a movie about some slut who’ll spread her legs for any random scoundrel she comes across.”

“It’s better than some gross movie where the girl sleeps with her own brother! Especially if that one got an R-15 rating!”

“Good grief. At this rate, we’ll never settle on a movie,” Alisuin said with a shake of her head. “How about we compromise and watch *Boys’ Lost Paradise* instead? It’s also rated R-15, by the way.”

“*What kind of compromise is that?!*” Stella and Shizuku shouted in unison. For all their bickering, they got along surprisingly well.

“You girls sure are picky. All that leaves is an action movie, I suppose.”

“This place doesn’t seem to have a lot of movies showing,” Ikki said, joining the discussion.

“That’s because it’s a small theater,” Alisuin explained.

“But I guess everyone can enjoy an action movie, so might as well, right? What do you two think?” Ikki asked, turning to Stella and Shizuku.

“Mrr. It’s a shame, but if that’s what you want to watch, Onii-sama, then I suppose we can.”

“Fine. I like action movies too, so I guess it works.”

“All right, then it’s decided. Fortunately, the next showing is in just a few minutes,” Alisuin said.

“By the way, Alice, what’s the title of this action movie?”

“*Gandhi: Liberation of Rage.*”

“What kind of movie is that?!” Shizuku, Stella, and Ikki all exclaimed at once.

They all looked at the title poster, which showed an extremely muscular monk shouldering a machine gun with flaming buildings as a backdrop. The tagline read: “A fool once said that forgiveness is strength. I know now that he was wrong.” It certainly was an eye-catching poster.

Despite how strange the movie seemed, it was the one the group had decided on, so everyone started riding the escalator up to the fourth floor.

As they reached the third floor, Ikki suddenly said, "Sorry, guys. I need to run to the bathroom real quick. Can you grab my ticket for me?"

"I think I'll come with you," Alisuin said, following after Ikki.

"Okay, we'll get both of your tickets, then. You can pay us back later," Shizuku replied.

"Make sure you get back before the movie starts. We don't have much time left," Stella added.

"Yeah, we'll hurry."

"Hey, Shizuku! Save me a seat next to Ikki!" Alisuin said, smiling cheerfully.

"Onii-sama, I'll buy tickets for the three of us."

"I'm sorry! I was kidding! It was just a joke!"

Stella and Shizuku continued up the escalator while Ikki and Alisuin headed for the men's room.

"Yay. We're finally alone," Alisuin said with a grin.

"Um, am I supposed to be happy about that?"

"Wait, you didn't say you were going to the bathroom because you wanted to spend some one-on-one time with me?"

"No!"

"Heh heh. I know. I'm just joking. It's funny seeing your reactions."

"Sorry... I still don't really know how I should act around you. I've never met anyone like you before, Alice."

"Just think of me as a normal girl."

Yeah, that's not happening.

"Don't worry," they added, "I'm not into straights."

"S-Straights'?"

"Basically, I'm not sexually attracted to you."

"O-Oh, I see. That's reassuring."

“But it’s true that I wanted to speak with you alone. Shizuku’s told me a lot about you, and I want to learn what kind of person you are.”

“Same here. I’ve heard a lot about you from Shizuku, so I was interested in you too.”

“Oh? My, now *that’s* unexpected. In that case, how about we deepen our bonds by watching *Boys’ Lost Paradise* together?”

“Not that kind of interested! Anyway, you’ve probably already noticed, but Shizuku’s super shy. She doesn’t open up to people easily, especially not to guys. That made me wonder what kind of person you were.”

“But I’m a girl.”

Ikki stared at Alisuin.

“Don’t give me that look. Are you picking a fight?”

“Not really...”

Is he being serious? I honestly can’t tell.

Ikki was having a hard time understanding the person known as Alisuin. He decided it was best not to pry too deeply into things he didn’t understand, though, and changed the subject.

“So, what did Shizuku say about me?”

“That’s our little secret.” Alisuin pressed a slender finger against her lips. At this point, Ikki decided it wasn’t worth commenting on her gender. “That being said, she had nothing but praise for you. The picture of Kurogane Ikki she painted was one of a truly wonderful person. After meeting you today, I’m inclined to agree with her opinion of you. But it’s precisely because you’re exactly as I imagined that there’s something I’m curious about. Is it all right if I ask something personal?”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“You weren’t able to participate in any battles last year because your family interfered, right?”

“Y-Yeah. I was forbidden by the school from fighting. That included both

classes and mock battles.”

Ikki was surprised Shizuku had divulged even that to Alisuin. A family matter like this wasn't something she'd talk about with just anyone. At the very least, while she was still living under the Kurogane family's protection, she wouldn't tell anyone she didn't trust considerably.

“The director changed the school's policy this year, though, so I'll be able to now,” he added.

“But it was only a stroke of good luck that saved you. What if the school hadn't replaced its director? Or what if the new director hadn't been sympathetic to your cause?”

“It wouldn't have made a difference to me. I'd still do what I could. When I first learned I'd need to repeat a year, I didn't know that a new director was coming.”

“You didn't think it was a waste of time to stay?”

“Not at all. I imagine you know this already, Alice, but all of the teachers at a knight school are professional Mage-Knights in their own right. Even if I wasn't allowed to fight, I'm sure some of them would be able to get a good grasp of how strong I am. Plus, every knight school wants nothing more than to produce a student who goes on to become the Seven Stars Sovereign. All I would've needed to do was make sure the teachers realized that I had the potential to do that. As long as I became strong enough that they wanted me there more than they feared my family, it'd be my win. That's why I was willing to keep at it, no matter how many years it took.”

Ikki was aware that, right now, the school's relationship with the Kurogane family was worth more to them than he was. The only way for him to change things would be if he made himself so valuable that the school picked him over his family. That was the rationale that had kept him going despite the nearly insurmountable obstacles his family had placed in his way.

“Still, I'm really grateful to the director,” he continued. “After all, if there's an easier path available to me, there's no reason to pile on extra hardships.”

“I understand completely.” For the briefest of moments, an odd expression

flitted across Alisuin's face. Ikki only caught a glimpse of it, but he recognized it as pity. "Ikki...you've grown far too accustomed to pain."

"Alice?"

"I can only speak from my experience, so I don't know if what I've seen applies to you, but in my opinion, strength is all about endurance. The more hardship you can bear, the stronger you'll become. That's all there is to it. But as you pile those hardships upon yourself, your heart grows heavier. Unless you can release all that pent-up stress somewhere, eventually, the burden will grow too large, and you'll crumble beneath it. It's because of this that when it starts to become too much, the heart cries out. Anger, sadness, frustration—all of these stem from the desire to vent your pain to others and have them understand what you're going through. Sometimes, those feelings manifest in peaceful ways, while other times, they come out in a violent burst of emotion. You, however, have had to take on so many burdens that you can no longer hear the cries of your heart."

A heavy silence fell between the two of them as Ikki pondered Alisuin's words. Honestly, he couldn't understand what she was getting at in the slightest.

"I-I don't think that's true for me," he finally said.

If nothing else, he was certain he still felt sadness and frustration and the like. He wasn't oblivious to his own emotions. However, Alisuin shook her head.

"No, you definitely can't hear them. You wouldn't be able to stay so calm if you could. You wouldn't be able to give others such kind smiles."

I guess it's true my life has been far from smooth sailing so far. But I think Alice is overthinking things here.

Despite Alisuin's grave expression, Ikki could only smile awkwardly back at her and shrug his shoulders.

I suppose it's impossible for my words to reach him right now, Alisuin thought with a small sigh. The two of them had only just met that day, after all. They'd need to learn more about each other before her words would have any weight.

Even so, Alisuin had felt compelled to say them now. At the very least, she'd

wanted to drive an inkling of self-awareness into Ikki. Both because he was someone Shizuku cared deeply about and because, though she'd only known him for a very short time, she herself liked this man.

Giving Ikki an encouraging smile, she said, "Someday, I hope you meet someone who'll listen to the pleas of your heart that you've become unable to hear. As your friend, I truly am praying for your happiness." She then kissed the silver rosary hanging from her neck.

Ikki wasn't sure how to respond to someone else praying for his happiness. *Should I be thanking him?* Of course, that wasn't important right now, but it was all he could think about.

To Ikki's own surprise, however, Alisuin's words resonated somewhere within him. And while there was no outward change, he felt as though he'd come to a deeper understanding about himself.

"Ah!"

Just then, Alisuin's expression stiffened, and he started looking around, alarmed.

"Alice?"

"Ikki, follow me."

Alisuin grabbed Ikki by the arm and started running.

"Huh?! Wh-What's happening?!"

"I'll explain later! Just run!"

She dragged him into the bathroom they'd already been heading toward.

Maybe he can't hold it any longer? But the moment Ikki thought that, the sound of shattering glass echoed in his ears.

"Ngh?!"

A second later, there was gunfire, followed immediately after by screaming.



Two men dressed in all black and wearing gas masks ran into the bathroom Ikki and Alisuin were in.

“This men’s bathroom is the last place left. I’ll check the stalls; you wait here,” one of the men said.

“Do we really have to check every single one? That sounds like a pain,” his partner replied, sounding annoyed.

“H-Hey.”

The annoyed one pulled out an M4 carbine and unloaded a whole magazine into the bathroom stalls’ doors before his partner could stop him. By the time the deafening gunfire faded, all of the doors were riddled with holes. No one inside those stalls would have gotten through unscathed, but there was no blood pooling on the bathroom floor.

“All right, looks like this room’s clear.”

“Don’t just start shooting! Our orders were to take the civilians hostage!”

“Look, I just wanna let loose. Besides, there’s no blood, which means there wasn’t anyone in here anyway. So there’s no problem. Gah ha ha ha.”

“Don’t blame me if Bishou-san has you executed for this.”

The two men strode out of the bathroom, one of them laughing. All that remained was the smell of hot lead and the destruction the bullets had caused. But then, Ikki and Alisuin suddenly poked their heads out of the shadow cast by the fluorescent lights. The way they broke the surface of it made it seem as if they’d dived inside.

“Phew. Looks like they left,” Alisuin said, stepping out of the shadow completely. He had a dark gray dagger in his hand. “As you can see, my Darkness Hermit has quite the useful ability.”

“The ability to control shadows does seem pretty powerful,” Ikki replied.

“Unfortunately, it’s not much help in matches since the arenas tend to be fully lit and have no obstacles to cast shadows.”

Ikki had realized that as well. It seemed like a power more fitting for an assassin than a knight, who was supposed to fight fairly in open daylight.

“The school’s not going to be happy if they find out you used your Device off school grounds.”

“Considering the situation, I’d say it was warranted. Either way, no one will know as long as you stay quiet, Ikki.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tattle.”

Alisuin held her free hand out toward Ikki, who was still mostly submerged in the shadow. He took it, and she pulled him out.

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver.” Ikki was grateful to Alisuin not just for pulling him out, but for helping him escape the enemy’s notice as well. “Who were those guys?”

“Rebellion.”

“What?!” Ikki was surprised by both the answer and the fact that Alisuin had given it immediately.

Rebellion was the most famous criminal organization in the world. They believed that Blazers were the chosen people and that all other humans were inferior. They wanted to destroy the current society, where Blazers were meant to protect those who didn’t have powers, and become the rulers of a new world order. In the pursuit of their twisted idea of paradise, they’d already taken countless innocent lives.

“I didn’t expect to run into the most famous international terrorist group here, of all places. How could you tell they were Rebellion, though?”

“An incident much like this one happened in my old hometown. They were wearing the exact same equipment back then. Anyway, I’m worried about Shizuku and Stella-chan.”

“Same, but there’s something we need to do before we look for them.”

Ikki pulled out his student handbook and dialed the emergency contact number that was entered into every handbook by default. A second later, a familiar face showed up on the tablet’s display: Hagun Academy’s director, Shinguuji Kurono.

“I’m aware of the situation,” she said immediately, saving Ikki the trouble of explaining. It seemed Rebellion’s operation was serious enough that those outside the mall were already aware of it.

“Good. That’ll save us some time. Please permit Kurogane Ikki, Stella Vermillion, Kurogane Shizuku, and Alisuin Nagi to use their Blazer powers outside school grounds.”

“Permission granted. You are free to use your powers.”

“And now, all that pointless bureaucracy is taken care of,” Alisuin said with a smile.

“Director, could you tell us what you know of the situation?” Ikki requested.

“Rebellion is behind the attack. They have around twenty or thirty members at the mall, all of them armed. They’re demanding a ransom fee for the hostages, and it looks like they want to steal whatever they can from the mall itself too. It’s one of their usual raids to get more war funds.”

“Have there been any casualties yet?”

“There’s a few people who hurt themselves in the initial panic to flee, but no one’s dead or seriously injured. Judging by the security camera footage we’ve been given, Rebellion’s taken around fifty people hostage. They’re holding them all in the food court.”

“Does she mean the food court we were just in?” Alisuin asked, turning to Ikki.

“Yep. That big, open area.”

“That’s within the range of my Shadow Walk. I can take us straight there.”

“Sounds good. We should go somewhere we won’t be spotted and assess things. I’m sure Stella and Shizuku are being held there too.”

Ikki knew that neither of them would abandon the hostages. The odds were good that they’d hidden the fact that they were Blazers and were now mixed in with that group.

“I’m sure you’re already aware, but the hostages’ safety is our top priority. Don’t do anything reckless,” Kurono said.

Ikki nodded, then turned off his handbook so it wouldn’t ring at an inopportune time.

“All right. Let’s go,” he said, turning back to Alisuin.

“Leave it all to me.”

Ikki held his hand out to Alisuin, and she took it. A second later, their shadows turned into black puddles, and the two of them jumped in.

Ikki held his breath as he waded through the pitch-black passage Alisuin had created for them. Shadow Walk was a skill that connected shadows to each other, and the only person who could navigate them was the wielder of Darkness Hermit, Alisuin. She led Ikki by the hand, ensuring he didn’t get lost in the maze of shadows.

“We’re here,” Alisuin said after a minute, bringing them both out of the shadows. She’d taken him right next to a pillar on the third floor, which had a perfect view of the food court below.

The two of them peered down at the food court and saw a group of hostages surrounded by ten or so men dressed in black, just as Kurono had said.

“Ikki, look over there.” Alisuin pointed to where Shizuku was hidden among the crowd. “I don’t see Stella-chan anywhere, though.”

“No, she’s there. The girl with the wide-brimmed hat next to Shizuku. She probably grabbed that to disguise herself since she’s famous.”

“Come to think of it, she *was* in the newspaper headlines. At any rate, this is looking quite dicey.”

“Yeah. The Rebellion members are too close to the hostages. If we rush in, they might manage to kill a few before we can subdue them. Not to mention that we don’t know where the rest of them went.”

“That’s true. We don’t know what the other ones might be up to. For now, I think all we can do is wait.”

Even if the Rebellion squads reconvened, there would still be a lot fewer terrorists than there were hostages. If they tried to flee the mall with the hostages in tow, that discrepancy would slow the process down considerably. Ikki and Alisuin’s best chance to strike would be during their escape attempt. Both of them realized as much, which was why they were okay with just

observing for the time being. But the situation took a sudden, unexpected turn.

“Don’t hurt Mommyyy!”

“Kh?!”

A young boy suddenly ran at one of the Rebellion members.

This isn’t good!

Unfortunately, neither Ikki nor Alisuin could do anything to stop him, and he thrust his ice-cream cone at the soldier. All he succeeded in doing, however, was staining the man’s pants white. Rather than harming the terrorist, the “attack” merely enraged him.

“You braaat!”

The man mercilessly kicked at the boy’s face.

“Augh!”

“Shinji!”

A woman in her midtwenties broke out of the ring of hostages and ran to the boy. She was presumably his mother. Her belly was swollen, indicating that she was pregnant, but the speed at which she ran made it hard to believe she was carrying another life inside her.

“Outta the way, you bitch!”

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! But please forgive him! He’s just a boy!”

“Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” another one of the soldiers shouted, coming over to see what the commotion was.

“This brat stained my pants! I’m gonna fucking kill him!”

“If you’re an adult, act like one, you fool! How many times do I have to tell you not to harm the hostages?! If you wanna fuck up and get slaughtered by Bishou-san, don’t drag us into it! That guy’ll kill us all if you piss him off!”

“Oh, shut up! We’ve got a bunch of hostages here! Who cares if we kill one or two of ’em?!” The enraged man shook his comrade off and pointed his rifle at the kid.

“Nooo! Please, I’m begging you!”

“Too bad! That brat stained *my* pants! Pigs like him shouldn’t even be allowed to touch members of a superior race like us! He gets the death penalty!”

The man pulled the trigger without hesitation. As the bullet was fired, the woman, despite being pregnant, tried to cover her son with her body, but doing so was meaningless. A shot from such a high-power rifle would pierce right through her and kill her son as well.

But the bullet never reached its target. Stella had appeared between the two hostages and the Rebellion soldier and burned it to ash.



“I should be the one to go. They’ll figure out my identity eventually regardless. But don’t worry. As royalty, I’m a valuable hostage. They won’t kill me without a good reason. You just hide and prepare to make a move if the opportunity presents itself, Shizuku,” Stella had said to Shizuku before leaping out and melting the soldier’s bullet. Her sudden appearance caught the Rebellion soldiers off guard.

“You’re a Blazer?!” one of them exclaimed.

“Die!”

They started firing wildly at her, but the storm of lead didn’t pose any sort of threat to someone as powerful as Stella.

“Empress Dress!” She cloaked herself in a raiment of flame, which vaporized the bullets before they could reach her.

“Aaaaahhh!” However, the hostages immediately started screaming when they heard the barrage of gunfire.

Because the M4 had such a small barrel, it wasn’t very accurate. It was entirely possible that a stray bullet would hit one of the hostages.

“*Calm down!*” Stella shouted in a commanding voice, loud enough to be heard even over the deafening gunshots.

“Gh?!”

The soldiers who'd hastily jumped into action at the sudden appearance of a Blazer stiffened up and stopped firing. They looked like children waiting to be chastised for acting out.

"I don't intend to fight you all here, so calm down and listen," Stella said, inwardly heaving a sigh of relief.

At least everyone stopped panicking.

Though she was just an exchange student here, Stella was a member of the Vermillion Kingdom's royal family. As a result, she was well-informed on Rebellion's goals and activities. She also knew how their combat squads were organized.

Based on their ideals, one would assume that Rebellion was an organization made up entirely of Blazers, but the majority of its members were what were known as Aspirants—non-Blazers who nonetheless believed in the new world order Rebellion wanted to create. The Blazers in the organization were called Apostles, and there were far fewer of them. Essentially, this meant a small number of Blazers commanded an army composed primarily of non-Blazers.

Stella could tell the Rebellion members here were all Aspirants. In other words, the Apostle who led this group was with the detachment that had gone to search the mall.

A squad of this size shouldn't have more than one Apostle attached to it. I wanted to wait until they showed themselves before making my move, but...

Revealing herself had meant forfeiting the initiative to the opposing Blazer. However, the situation had demanded that she act, so she had.

She glared at the Rebellion soldiers and said, "Let me negotiate with your leader on behalf of these hostages."

"D-Don't act so high and mighty, girl! Who do you think you are?!"

It seemed the soldiers still hadn't recognized her. She took off the oversized hat she'd grabbed right as the commotion had started.

"I am—"

"Oh my, my, my. I didn't think we would have royalty in our midst."

Before Stella could announce herself, someone interrupted her. She turned around and saw a man with a tattoo on his face walking over, the other ten Rebellion soldiers following behind him.

The man grinned, his tattoo twisting into a grotesque shape. “If it isn’t Vermillion’s second princess. Hee hee hee.”

“A black coat embroidered in gold... That’s the uniform of an Apostle. I take it you’re the leader of these fools?”

“Hee hee hee, you’ve certainly done your research. That’s right. I’m Bishou. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Princess.” Bishou bowed respectfully to Stella, then turned to glare at the squad of men that had been guarding the hostages. “Hey! What are you dumbasses doing?! How hard is it to just do what I say?!”

“Eep.”

“I said not to cause a scene, didn’t I? I said not to harm the hostages, *didn’t I?*!”

“W-We tried to stop Yakin, but he wouldn’t listen!”

“So, you’re the one responsible, huh, Yakin?”

“I-I can explain! That brat over there got my pants dirty, so—”

“Huh?! Don’t lose your cool over something so— Actually, wait.” Bishou fell silent as he lapsed into thought. After a few seconds, he suddenly chuckled. “Hee hee hee.”

“B-Bishou-san?”

“Yakin, I feel you. Having your pants ruined musta sucked.” Bishou’s attitude did a sudden one-eighty, and he patted his subordinate on the shoulder. “But don’t worry. It’s our job as the chosen people to look after you honorary citizens.”

Bishou took a pistol out of his pocket and leveled it at the boy.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” Stella shouted.

“Why, that should be obvious, Princess. The brat needs to face the

consequences of his actions. Everyone's gotta learn sometime that you can't just do whatever you want and not pay for it."

"I thought you weren't going to hurt the hostages!"

"Only if they didn't kick up a fuss. But this brat sure did. Sure, he's just a kid, but that don't change the fact that what he did's a sin. He sullied the honor of one of our honorary citizens here. He needs to be punished for that. And the punishment for such a serious crime is death. Only punishment can lead to redemption—that's my motto."

Bishou tightened his grip on the trigger.

"Ah!" Stella didn't hesitate. She could tell he was serious about firing. Thus, she summoned Lævateinn and charged at Bishou. "Haaaaah!"

Bishou sneered in response.

Was he baiting me in?

Even if he was, it didn't matter. Stella would cut him down before he was able to manifest his Device. Right now, the only thing he was armed with was a single pistol. That pistol couldn't hope to stop the might of her Lævateinn.

She swung down with all her might, intending to cut through Bishou along with his pistol. But to her utter astonishment, Bishou raised his free left hand and blocked her sword with just his index and middle fingers.

"What?!"

"Hee hee hee. Such a shame. You're fast. Strong too. I can see why you're Rank A. But unfortunately for you, the world is a lot bigger than you realize."

Stella was speechless. No normal person could block her full-strength swing with just their fingers. Her sword should have sliced right through and cleaved his entire arm in two.

On the off chance his fingers possessed superhuman might and he could block her sword with his bare hands, the flames coming off of Lævateinn should have burned his arm right down to the bone. And yet, he seemed unaffected by both the weight and the heat of Stella's blade.

How is this happening?

Before she could puzzle it out, Bishou drove his fist into Stella's stomach.

"Gah!"

The force of the blow brought Stella to her knees. Bishou's attack had been powerful enough to drain her stamina even through the powerful defense that was her Empress Dress.

How...? He didn't seem like that strong of a Blazer!

Blinking back tears of pain, Stella looked up and spotted the answer to her question on Bishou's hands.

"Those rings!"

He was wearing rings that were glowing bright crimson on each of his middle fingers. At first glance, they looked like mere accessories, but Stella could tell they were his Device.

"As you can see, my Device comes in a pair. These are my Judgment Rings, Crime and Punishment. The ring on my left hand interprets any attempt to do me harm as a crime and absorbs its strength. Then, with the ring on my right hand, that strength is converted into mana, which I can use to administer punishment to my foes. Hee hee hee. The stronger my foe, the stronger I become."

"I see. So that punch had my full strength behind it."

Stella understood now why it had brought her to her knees.

"You shouldn't charge in until you understand what your opponent is capable of, Princess. Hee hee hee."

"You're the one...who forced my hand."

"Hee hee hee. Sorry about that. I couldn't afford to take any chances seeing as I was up against the Crimson Princess. You understand. But I gotta say, you're real noble, Princess. You coulda just stayed hidden, but you revealed yourself just to protect this brat. You're the perfect model of royalty—a true ruler and all that. Out of respect for your courage, I'll give you the chance to spare this brat's life."

"What do you want?"

“Oh, nothing special. Everyone’s familiar with this method of atoning. If you’ve done something bad, just apologize. All I ask is that you do so in the brat’s place. But you gotta strip and kneel at my feet to show your sincerity. Bwa ha ha ha ha!”



“Rgh!”

Ikki, who was watching everything from the floor above, was seething. He wanted to jump down right now and slice Bishou to pieces.

But I can’t!

If he leaped into the fray, the hostages might get hurt in the ensuing melee. That needed to be avoided at all costs.

“Hee hee. I won’t force you to, of course. A mere commoner like me wouldn’t *dare* to order royalty around. So, if you don’t wanna apologize, just say no. The brat’ll be the one to pay if you do, though.”

You scumbag! Ikki bit his lip hard enough to draw blood, barely managing to suppress his rage.

Bishou knew Stella wouldn’t refuse, which was why he was purposely giving her the option. He just wanted to humiliate her as much as possible. And just as Ikki had expected, she did, in fact, agree.

“Very well,” Stella said through gritted teeth, dematerializing Lævateinn. “But in return, promise me that you won’t lay a hand on the hostages.”

“Of course. I’m a man of my word. I won’t hurt them, as long as the police pay the ransom we demand and grant us safe passage.”

“You better not.”

Stella slowly got to her feet, her legs trembling. She still hadn’t fully recovered from that punch. However, her hands, which were clenched into fists, were trembling for a completely different reason. Ikki knew she must be feeling humiliated.

“Bwa ha ha! Can’t believe we get to see a princess’s strip show!”

“Hell yeah! Nice going, Bishou-san!”

“C’mon! Get naked! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Stella’s face reddened at the prospect of showing these bastards her bare skin, but she nevertheless began slowly taking her clothes off. She started with her cardigan, exposing her slender shoulders. Next, she dropped her skirt, revealing her bewitching legs. And finally, she unbuttoned her blouse from the bottom up, laying bare her stomach. When all was said and done, she was left wearing nothing but her white lace underwear.



“Whoa! Her tits are massive! Is she really just a high schooler?!”

“Holy shit!”

“Bishou-san, can I take some pictures?!”

“Shut your traps, you one-pump chumps. The real show starts here. Hee hee hee.”

“Khhh!”

Stella trembled as the men openly ogled her. It was then that Ikki noticed that tears were spilling down her cheeks. Upon seeing that, he finally snapped. He couldn't bear to sit around and do nothing any longer.

Stella!

“Calm down.”

However, Ikki didn't jump down and attack Bishou. Rather, he couldn't.

“Guh.”

His body wouldn't move. It felt as though something was pinning it in place. He looked down and saw that Alisuin had stabbed her Device, Darkness Hermit, into his shadow. He'd been hit with her Shadow Bind Noble Art, which pinned a person in place as long as their shadow was pierced by Darkness Hermit.

“You need to keep your cool, Ikki. Surely you realize what'll happen if you charge in now.”

“But...if I don't go now, Stella's—”

“It's okay. I have a plan,” Alisuin explained, and Ikki stared at her in shock. “Right now, Shizuku's laying the groundwork, so give me just a few more seconds.”

“She is?”

“Yes. She's covertly using her mana to craft a water barrier around the hostages.”

Ikki looked back down at the main hall and strained his eyes, trying to see the flow of mana.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Of course you don’t. Shizuku’s Rank B and not quite as strong as Stella, but she has better mana control than anyone else in our year. In fact, hers probably outclasses some Rank As.”

“Ah!” Ikki once again looked at Alisuin in surprise.

Mana control was a stat that measured how well a person could manipulate their Aura. Those who had extraordinary mana control could do with just two or three units of mana what other Blazers needed ten or more to accomplish. Furthermore, they could mask their mana usage and make it difficult for their foes to discern what they were doing.

Kurogane Shizuku was a Blazer who excelled at mana control above all else.

“If someone on Shizuku’s level wants to hide what they’re doing, no one will be able to spot their mana.”

“Then how are you so sure she’s making a barrier?”

Alisuin wordlessly showed Ikki her student handbook. She’d put it on silent mode but hadn’t turned it off. The screen showed a message she’d received from Shizuku.

“I’m erexting a barriwr, I’ll give yoi a sihnal omce it’s don.”

It was short and to the point, and also filled with typos. She’d probably typed it out as fast as she could while trying to keep what she was doing hidden from everyone else. Despite the typos, though, the message was clear.

Shizuku!

Ikki nearly jumped for joy. A second later, Shizuku gave everyone the signal.

“Pure Wave Lotus!”

A barrier of water suddenly appeared between the hostages and the Rebellion soldiers, allowing Ikki to spring into action.



“What?!” Bishou shouted as the watery dome finished forming around the hostages. Only a Blazer could have done something like that, which meant there

had to be another knight here aside from Stella. “You fuckers really have a death wish, don’t ya?! Fuck the hostages up, everyone!”

Following Bishou’s order, the Aspirants all started firing at the water barrier. The hostages screamed and dropped to the ground in response, covering their heads with their hands. But none of the bullets made it past the cascading waterfall barrier that was Shizuku’s Noble Art, Pure Wave Lotus.

It was common knowledge that if someone fell into a body of water from high up, the water felt as hard as concrete. The cause of that phenomenon was water’s surprising resilience to impact. Thus, if something as fast as a bullet hit a solid body of water, the equal and opposite reactive force would pulverize it. And that was something normal water could do. This water, however, was bolstered with Shizuku’s magic, making it far tougher. There was no way a soft material like lead would ever punch through her barrier.

Furthermore, Shizuku wasn’t the only one who’d started moving.

“Hah!”

The moment the barrier had gone up, Ikki had activated Ittou Shura. He jumped down from the floor above and headed straight toward Bishou.

“Tch! You had friends up there too?!”

However, Bishou was a veteran terrorist who’d fought his way through numerous deadly battlefields. He immediately noticed Ikki’s surprise attack and prepared to intercept him by raising his left hand. That was the hand he’d used to block Lævateinn just a few moments ago—the one on which he wore Crime, the ring that could absorb any attack.

The nature of his ability allowed him to neutralize even earth-shattering blows like the ones Stella could unleash. Compared to Stella, though, the only thing Ikki had going for him was speed. His blows were much weaker, which meant they wouldn’t be able to overwhelm Crime’s absorption powers. Bishou would absorb the force of Ikki’s strike and throw it back at him using his Punishment ring. However, that plan would only work if Bishou managed to successfully block Ikki’s attack with his left hand.

“Huh?”

Bishou stared in shock as his left arm suddenly went flying. A spray of blood spurted from the stump, staining the mall floor.

Bishou could only neutralize attacks he could see and react to. But Ikki had swung Intetsu so quickly that Bishou hadn't been able to follow it with his eyes, let alone defend. This high-speed slash, which surpassed the kinetic vision of any human, was one of the seven original techniques that Kurogane Ikki had developed.

"Seventh Sword Style: Thunderclap!"



"I'll take care of the grunts. Meanwhile, you subdue that vulgar monkey, Ikki."

That was the battle plan Alisuin had conveyed to Ikki, and he had indeed managed to subdue Bishou. He'd used Thunderclap to cut off Bishou's left arm—and his Crime ring with it—and with his reverse stroke, he'd lopped off Bishou's right arm as well. Regardless of what other powers Bishou's Device might have held, he was powerless if that Device was separated from his body.

"Gyaaah! My aaarms! You bastard!"

"Oh, shut up."

"Eek!" Bishou's rage vanished the moment he saw Ikki's expression.

"I held back, you know. Considering what you did to Stella, you deserve to have your legs chopped off too. You'll get them all back anyway once they stick you in an iPS capsule."

"Urk."

Ikki shot Bishou a glare as cold as ice, then looked over at the hostages. All of them were fine, which meant the plan had been a success.

"Nice work," Alisuin said, walking up and patting Ikki on the shoulder.

"Did you finish up on your end, Alice?"

"They'd already been taken care of by the time I got here. That girl truly is amazing."

Hmm?

Ikki gave Alisuin a puzzled look, then noticed that all of the Rebellion soldiers were lying on the ground. Standing amid their prone bodies was a lone figure.

“Stella...”

Her blazing hair splayed out behind her, and she was clad in a dress of flames. She held Lævateinn in her hands, the flaming sword gleaming brightly. Despite the physical and emotional damage she’d endured, the moment the fighting had broken out, she had immediately jumped into action and mowed down the Rebellion soldiers.

She’d taken care of them so quickly that Alisuin hadn’t even arrived in time to help out. That had been the optimal choice considering the situation, but what was truly surprising was that she’d had that much strength left after taking Bishou’s punch, which had been powered by her own mana. Ikki could see why Alisuin was so impressed.

“I’ll let the people outside know what the situation is. You go to her,” Alisuin said softly to Ikki.

“Thanks.”

She’s definitely pushing herself!

“Stella!”

Ikki ran over to Stella and hugged her as she turned around.

“Fwah?! Wh-What are you doing?!”

Stella was taken aback by the sudden embrace, but Ikki didn’t care. He held her tight, hiding her exposed skin from any onlookers. He couldn’t let this brave and gallant girl be embarrassed any further.

“I’m sorry... If only I’d come sooner, you wouldn’t have had to be humiliated like this.”

“Ikki!”

Ikki’s feelings got through to Stella, and she surrendered herself to his warm embrace. The moment she relaxed, her entire body started trembling. Ikki purposely avoided looking at her face, but he didn’t loosen his grip in the slightest.

“Onii-sama,” Shizuku said, walking over to the two of them.

“Thank you, Shizuku. If you hadn’t erected that barrier, we would’ve been helpless. Was anyone hurt?”

“Of course not. I would never slip up like that.” Shizuku scowled, offended that Ikki would even ask such a question. She then thrust her hand out at Stella. Held within it were all of Stella’s discarded clothes. “I gathered them up for you. Surely you’re not planning on walking around in your underwear forever?”

“Th-Thank you. Though I’m surprised you’re being nice to me.”

“How rude. Who do you think saved your hide? Honestly, how reckless do you have to be, jumping out without a plan in mind?”

“Geh...”

Stella averted her gaze, unable to meet Shizuku’s glare.

“But...I respect what you did,” Shizuku added, her expression softening.

“Huh?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to save that mother or her child. Now I know there are other people in the world who are willing to risk their lives for complete strangers.”

“I-It wasn’t anything special, really. Besides, it’s only thanks to your barrier that we were able to resolve things without casualties. You’re pretty amazing yourself.”

Both Shizuku and Stella looked away, unable to maintain eye contact. They’d been at each other’s throats until now, so they probably found it awkward to praise each other. Even so, it was undeniable that they respected each other a bit more now.

I hope this leads to them getting along bet—

“Oh, that reminds me. Can you use healing techniques, Shizuku?”

“Of course I can. Don’t tell me you were hurt in that earlier exchange, were you, Onii-sama?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I was hoping you could heal him.” Ikki pointed at Bishou. He

was bleeding heavily enough that he'd die of blood loss if they left him alone.

Humans were made up primarily of water, so the only Blazers who could use healing abilities were those who possessed high-level water skills. "You don't have to stick his arms back on," Ikki continued, "just stop the bleeding. Can't have him trying anything funny."

"Understood. We wouldn't want you to become a murderer, Onii-sama."

"He should be powerless now, but be careful any—"

"Nobody move!"

"What?!"



A shrill scream pierced the air. It had come from the middle of the group of hostages. Ikki and the others turned around and saw a young man in a red T-shirt holding a pistol against an older woman's temple.

"H-Help meee!"

"Stay right where you are, you brats! Move, and I blow this hag's brains out!"

"Shit! Did one of them disguise themselves as a hostage?!"

"Hya ha ha ha ha ha ha! You dumbasses weren't the only ones hiding among the hostages!"

"Bishou..."

The grin on Bishou's face made it clear that he thought he'd won. The only thing on his mind now was how he was going to torture these kids for making a fool out of him.

"Hey, you! The pip-squeak in the goth-loli dress!"

"'P-Pip-squeak'?!"

"Yeah, that's right, you. I heard you can heal people. Get over here and fix my arms! Hee hee hee. If you don't, then we'll just have to..."

The old woman let out a squeal of terror as Bishou trailed off and looked at her. The gun was still pressed against her temple.

Dammit!

Ikki ground his teeth. Ittou Shura was still active, but at this distance, it was possible the Rebellion soldier would pull the trigger before Ikki could stop him.

“Get the fuck over here, you bitch!”

“Onii-sama...”

“We don’t have a choice. Do as he says for—”

“No, there’s no need for that.”

A man’s voice rang out inside everyone’s heads, interrupting Ikki. It felt as though he was speaking directly into everyone’s minds. A second later, there was a soft whooshing noise, and countless beams of blue light shot past Ikki.

“Aaaugh!”

“Gyaaah!”

They pierced through Bishou and the soldier who was holding the woman hostage, rendering them truly powerless.

“What the?! What just happened?!” Stella shouted, surprised.

Isn’t that...

Ikki recognized both the voice and the skill the owner of the voice had just used.

“Heh. Good grief. You ended up needing my help after all. I didn’t really want to butt in, though, since I don’t like stealing other people’s thunder.”

The air in front of Ikki began to shimmer, and right after, sections of the air began to crack and flake off like scales. A single boy appeared out of the crumbling space. He held a bow-shaped Device in his hands and looked to be around the same age as Ikki and the others.

“How? How did I not even sense your presence?” Alisuin muttered. She’d sensed Bishou’s attack ahead of time, but she’d completely overlooked the existence of this boy. But that was precisely what his power was, so it was only natural that she hadn’t noticed him.

Ikki, on the other hand, wasn’t surprised. After all, this boy was his former

classmate.

“Long time no see, Kirihara-kun.”

This boy was Kirihara Shizuya. The year prior, he’d been Hagun Academy’s top first-year student, as well as one of the knights who’d been chosen to represent the school in the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“It sure has, Kurogane Ikki-kun.” Kirihara smiled slightly and added, “I didn’t know you were still enrolled here.” He gave Ikki a condescending look.

“Mrr.”

Stella and Shizuku both turned to scowl at Kirihara. They couldn’t really insult him, though, since Kirihara had just saved their skins.

“Kirihara-kuuun! I was sooo scaaaared!”

Seven girls burst out of the crowd of hostages, pushed Ikki and the others out of the way, and ran over to Kirihara. They were all his girlfriends, who’d come to the mall with him.

“I’m sorry you went through such a scary ordeal because of how weak my kohai are. But don’t worry. Everything’s all right now.”

“We knew you’d save us, Kirihara-kun!”

“Aaahn. You were so cool, Kirihara-samaaa. Knights are sooo strong.”

“I don’t like this guy,” Stella muttered as she watched the gaggle of girls fawn over Kirihara.

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever agreed with you,” Shizuku responded.

A few seconds later, the police, who’d been tipped off by Alisuin, rushed into the food court. They started securing the hostages and taking the Rebellion soldiers into custody right away. The situation was resolved in short order, and peace returned to the mall.

“Ugh.”

Just then, Ikki staggered as the fatigue that came from using Ittou Shura hit him.

“Onii-sama!”

“Ikki, are you okay?!”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. I just need to rest for a bit and I’ll be able to walk again.”

“You should sit down.”

Alisuin led Ikki to a nearby bench. As she did, the police officer in charge came over to the four of them.

“Excuse me, but you four are the students who resolved this incident, right? I’m going to need to take your statements, so could you follow me to the police station?”

“My, did you ever come at a bad time. I’d like to let Ikki rest first if possible, so —”

Alisuin turned toward Kirihara, who was still surrounded by his seven girlfriends.

“I already wiped your asses for you. I’m not obligated to deal with boring police shit too.”

Kirihara was clearly uninterested in helping any further. He turned back to the girls around him and started talking about where they should go to relax after that harrowing ordeal.

“It’s okay, Alice. I should be able to recover a little bit if I rest in the police car.”

“Ikki, you don’t need to force yourself.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not like I’m injured or anything, so...” Ikki forced himself to his feet, the exhaustion showing on his face. He then turned to Kirihara and bowed to him. “Thank you for your help, Kirihara-kun.”

“No need to thank me. It’s the duty of the strong to help the weak.”

Stella and Shizuku scowled again, but their highest priority was getting Ikki somewhere he could rest, not arguing with this playboy. To that end, Stella lent Ikki her shoulder and slowly guided him to the police car. As they left, however, Kirihara decided to get in a last parting shot.

“I gotta say, Kurogane-kun, I’m surprised you’re still trying to become a knight

with that pathetic strength of yours.”

Stella could take it no longer.

“Will you stop already?!”

“It’s okay, Stella.”

“No, it’s not! I won’t stay quiet and let him walk all over you!” Stella pointed at Kiri-hara and shouted, “You’ve been talking a big game, but Ikki’s way stronger than you! As someone who fought him, I’m sure of it! You wouldn’t even be able to touch him in a fight!”

Stella was only able to say that because she didn’t know what Kiri-hara’s powers were. She also didn’t know about the unbelievably huge wall that separated him from Ikki. But he, of course, did.

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

To him, Stella’s claims were laughable.

“Wh-What’s so funny?!”

“Oh, just the fact that you think this failed knight is stronger than me! Aha ha ha ha! Oh god, my sides. It seems Kurogane-kun’s made himself look quite cool, so I suppose I’ll enlighten you to the truth: he’s a coward who was too scared to fight me in the past.”

“What?”

It was inconceivable to Stella that Ikki would ever flee from a challenge. She turned back to Ikki, and to her shock, he didn’t deny Kiri-hara’s accusation. He just stared quietly at Kiri-hara, his expression unreadable.

Regardless, the Ikki Stella knew would never back down from a fight, so she turned back to Kiri-hara and shouted, “Liar! That’s not possible!”

“Heh heh heh. Why are you so confident that he’s stronger than me anyway, Vermillion-kun?”

“Isn’t that obvious? He’s the only knight who’s ever bested me!”

“In that case, shall we make a bet, Vermillion-kun?”

“What kind of bet?”

Kirihara turned from Stella to Ikki.

“On whether or not you’re right. The truth is, there’ll be an opportunity to determine without a doubt who’s stronger very soon. Kurogane-kun, you turned your student handbook off, right? You should turn it back on.”

After a moment, Ikki wordlessly turned on the tablet. A second later, he received a new email in his inbox. The sender appeared to be the Seven Stars Battle Festival Selection Match Committee. It read: “Kurogane Ikki-sama, your first selection match opponent will be Kirihara Shizuya-sama from class 2-3.”

“Ah!”

“That’s right, your first opponent is me, one of last year’s representatives in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Kirihara Shizuya, the Hunter. At any rate, since we’ll be dueling soon enough, we’ll be able to see whether or not Vermillion-kun’s right. If, by some miracle, you manage to beat me, I’ll take back everything I said and apologize for insulting you. But if I win, Vermillion-kun has to become one of my girlfriends.”

“Come on, Kirihara-kun, don’t be rid—”

Before Ikki could say anything else, Stella stepped forward and declared, “Fine by me. I’ll take that bet.”

“What are you doing, Stella?!” Ikki couldn’t believe his ears. “Don’t take the bait! This bet is pointless! I don’t even *want* Kirihara-kun to apologize to me!”

“*You* might not, but *I* do. I won’t stand for people calling the knight who bested me weak!”

It wasn’t in Stella’s nature to back down when challenged. And so, she accepted Kirihara’s bet despite Ikki’s warnings.

“Then it’s settled. Heh. Easy wins normally bore me, but now, I’m looking forward to this. See you on the dueling grounds, Kurogane-kun. I’m sure you know this already, but you can’t stand up to me with that piddling Aura of yours. Better prepare yourself to taste crushing defeat. These selection matches aren’t mock battles, you know. They’re proper duels. Do try not to get yourself killed. Aha ha ha.”

Kirihara walked off with his posse of girls, utterly confident that he would emerge victorious. Stella, Shizuku, and Alisuin scowled at his back as he retreated.

“Hmm. He has a pretty face, but his personality ruins it,” Alisuin murmured.

“I hate him,” Shizuku said plainly.

“Hmph. I bet Ikki will wipe the floor with him. After all, he managed to beat me. Isn’t that right, Ikki?”

Stella turned expectantly back to Ikki.

“I’m not so sure... He’s probably the worst opponent for me to go up against.”

“Ikki?”

Unlike Stella, Ikki knew what Kirihara’s Noble Art was, which was why he couldn’t confidently say he’d win. He knew how much of a challenge it would be to overcome Kirihara’s abilities.

Shortly thereafter, Stella, Shizuku, and Alisuin were also notified of who their first opponents would be. The three of them would each have their first match on Monday, while Ikki’s battle with Kirihara would take place on Tuesday.

This would be Ikki’s first official battle, and it would be far different from the mock battles he’d participated in thus far. In this fight, he would quite literally be putting his life on the line.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Stella Vermillion

■PROFILE

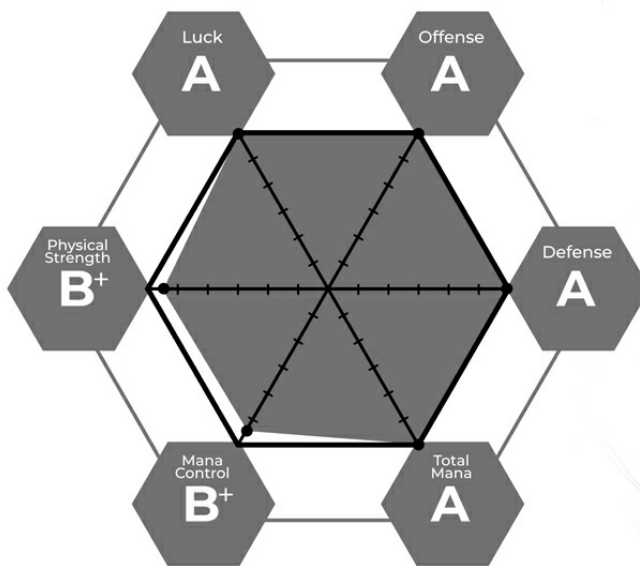
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 1-1

Blazer Rank: A

Noble Art: Dragon Breath

Nickname: Crimson Princess

Summary: A European princess who traveled halfway across the world to find powerful foes.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

Just look at those stats! No wonder she scored higher than anyone else on the entrance exam! She's the definition of an all-rounder! Plus, her total mana might be the highest of any knight in history! It apparently recovers super fast too, so she never has to worry about running out of gas! She sure would be a scary opponent to go up against! Her only real weakness is her lack of adaptability from barely ever having encountered opponents who could give her a tough time!

Chapter 4: Debut Battle

A day had passed since Rebellion's attack on the mall, and a new week had begun. That meant the battles to determine which six students would represent Hagun Academy in the Seven Stars Battle Festival had also begun.

"Today's battles are about to begin! The one fighter everyone should have their eyes on today is Rank B Blazer Kurogane Shizuku, the great-granddaughter of *the* Kurogane Ryouma!"

One of the members of the broadcasting club was hyping up Shizuku, who had gotten the second-highest score on this year's entrance exams.

"Her opponent will be Suga Shigenobu, the Rank C knight who defeated Donrou Academy's Seven Star Battle Festival representative Azuchiyama Michiyuki in the interschool tournament last winter! He's also a favorite to become one of this year's representatives for our school! Will this veteran third-year be able to crush the promising first-year, or is it time for a new star to rise?! There's the starting sig—whoa! It looks like Suga's already making his move!"

The twin swords in Suga's hands began to crackle with electricity.

"Sucks to be you, super rookie! Lightning is the most effective element against water! Bad luck for you that you got paired up against me for your first match! White Lightning!"

Suga swung both swords down, sending two waves of lightning flying toward Shizuku. But Shizuku was undaunted and stood her ground.

"Pure Wave Lotus."

She used her Noble Art to erect a waterfall barrier around her. Water was a conductor of electricity, however, so Suga was certain Shizuku's barrier would offer her no defense. And yet, the electric waves fizzled out when they crashed into it.

"What?!"

“H-His lightning didn’t work! Oreki-sensei, what do you make of this?!” The announcer handed the mic over to Oreki, who was also sitting in as a commentator.

“Cough, cough. That’s because...it’s ultrapure water...”

“What’s that?”

“Most people...assume that water conducts electricity. But that’s not actually true. It’s impurities in the water like ions and microbes that are conductive... Water itself is actually highly resistant. In other words, purified water acts as an insulator rather than a conductor... Ultrapure water is the most purified water can be, so electricity can’t pass through it.”

“I see... Wait, but then how come other water-aspected Blazers don’t use that trick?”

“It’s not that they don’t, it’s that they can’t. Removing impurities from water is like trying to sift for gold dust in a desert. You need an exceptionally high level of mana control to do it. If another knight tried to do what Shizuku’s doing, they’d fry their brain. *Cough, cough.* She’s certainly shown us all why she ranked second on the entrance exams... *Hack, wheeze.*”

“Whoa! That’s the third time you’ve coughed up blood today! Are you okay, Oreki-sensei?!”

“I-I’m fine, don’t worry. I just need another injection and I’ll be right as rain. Ahhh, that feels so goood...”

“Oreki-sensei, you shouldn’t say stuff like that while you’re injecting drugs, even if those drugs are medicine! Are you sure you’re okay?!”

“Better than fine... If anything, I’m glad I’m sick since it means I get to take one of these every day.”

“Sensei, that’s what we call an addiction!”

Though the commentary had gotten derailed, Suga now understood that electric attacks were ineffective against Shizuku.

“Shit. I need to put some distance between us and—”

“How are you going to go anywhere with your feet like that?” Shizuku asked.

“Huh?!”

“Wow! Look at that! Suga’s feet have been encased in ice! He won’t be going anywhere unless he can break free!”

“Water Prison Bubble!” Shizuku pointed Yoishigure at Suga and fired a ball of water thirty centimeters in diameter from its tip.

The ball hit Suga squarely in the face and stayed there, enveloping his entire head in water. He desperately clawed at the bubble of water, but unsurprisingly, his fingers just helplessly slogged through the water. It was impossible to grab at something that wasn’t solid, after all. His struggles grew weaker with time, until finally, he let out a gasp.

“Gah...”

As water entered his lungs, Suga’s arms fell limply to his side. Shizuku then released him from the water bubble, and he collapsed to the ground.

“Suga Shigenobu is down for the count! The winner is Kurogane Shizuku!” the referee shouted, signaling the end of the match.

“And it looks like Kurogane Shizuku has clinched her first victory! Her superior skills allowed her to splendidly overcome the typing disadvantage!” the announcer shouted.

“It wasn’t that hard a fight,” Shizuku muttered. She looked up at the stands and saw Ikki waving happily to her. After giving him a small wave back, she looked up at the giant billboard hanging above the arena to check the time.

I guess her fight should be wrapping up now too.



At around the same time, another battle was playing out in the seventh training field. This one had four times as many spectators as the fifteenth training field, where Shizuku had fought her battle. The reason it did was that this was where Stella Vermillion, the once-in-a-decade prodigy who everyone was calling the number one rookie, was fighting. Furthermore, this was her first official match.

“You can do this, Momotani!”

“No one can beat you in a close-quarters fight!”

“Show that princess what us third-years can do!”

“The crowd’s cheers are overwhelmingly in support of Momotani, the fighter everyone likens to a heavy tank! Looks like he’s still the most popular guy in school! Will we once again see him knock his opponent out of the ring using his signature move?! He’s one of the rare Blazers whose Device—Goliath—manifests as armor instead of a weapon, and his full-power charge is truly something to behold!”

Stella’s first opponent was Momotani Takeshi, a towering giant of a man who stood a full 190 centimeters tall and was beloved by everyone in the school. His Device was a full suit of armor that covered him from head to toe, and the moment the gong had rung to signal the start of the battle, he’d crouched low and prepared to charge. However, he still held that pose and was showing no signs of actually beginning his charge.

“What’s wrong, Momotani?! Blow her away like you have everyone else!”

“She lost to a Rank F! You’ve got this!”

The cheers and jeers of his classmates did not reach Momotani’s ears.

How the hell am I supposed to beat someone like this?

Momotani was cowering before the ocean of flames Stella had conjured. She was dressed in a fiery cloak, and there was a ring of fire all around her as well. The flames’ heat was so intense that it was roasting him through his armor even though he was more than ten meters away.

Now that he was face-to-face with her, he could feel the immense amount of energy Stella passively radiated. Trying to go up against that would be like throwing himself into a burning building.

“It seems like you understand the situation a lot better than the carefree fools in the stands,” Stella said, taking note of Momotani’s expression. “This is a real battle. Unlike when we’re fighting with our Devices in phantom form, you *will* get burned if you jump into these flames. Think very carefully before acting.”

Stella had seen right through him, and Momotani’s shoulders slumped.

“I forfeit.”

“H-H-H-H-Holy crap! Momotani has forfeited the match without taking even a single step!”

“Bwa ha ha! Man, that’s lame! But it was a smart choice,” a tiny teacher in a red kimono said, cackling. She was sitting in the commentator’s booth alongside the announcer. It was hard to tell if she was praising Momotani or making fun of him.

“What do you mean by that, Saikyou-sensei?”

“I mean that there’s no way Momotani could’ve won! If someone told you to jump into a volcano, would you do it? You wouldn’t! But still, it’s pretty lame to give up without even taking a single step! Aha ha ha ha!”

“Um, S-Saikyou-sensei? You don’t have to be so harsh...” the announcer said, looking down at Momotani sympathetically.

“Bwa ha ha ha. Man, that girl’s hella scary. I’d run away from her too. In fact, I think I’ll do that right now.”

Saikyou got to her feet and ran out of the announcer’s booth.

“Hey, wait! Saikyou-sensei, there’s still matches left today! Jeez, who invited her to be today’s commentator?!”

What sloppy commentary, Stella thought, letting out a small sigh as she stepped out of the ring.

“Oh! We’ve just received word that Kurogane Shizuku, who was fighting in the fifteenth training field, has defeated third-year Suga Shigenobu!” the announcer said as Stella made her way to the exit.

Well, I didn’t expect her to lose to such a weak opponent anyway.

“This year’s freshmen are quite strong! They utterly dominated the veteran third-years they were matched up against, winning their debut matches without taking a single scratch! We might actually stand a chance at winning the Seven Stars Battle Festival this year!”



“Congratulations, Stella,” Ikki said as Stella returned to the dorm.

“H-Hmph. It’s only natural that I’d win.”

Despite her tone, Ikki could tell from her expression that she was happy to be praised.

“I heard your opponent surrendered without a fight.”

“That’s because I made my flames burn even hotter than normal.”

“It’s a shame I couldn’t be there. I wish I could have seen it.”

“I wish you could have seen it too...” Stella muttered.

“Hmm? What was that?”

“N-Nothing! Anyway, it’s not your fault. Me and Shizuku’s matches just happened to be in the same time block. But you better come watch me next time!”

“Of course. By the way, how come you’re back so late?”

“The battle was such a disappointment that I went to the gym to blow off some steam.”

“I see. But I’m glad you, Shizuku, and Alice all won your first matches.”

Alisuin’s battle had taken place right after Shizuku’s, in the same training field. She’d defeated her opponent, a Rank E second-year, within ten seconds of the battle starting. Though her powers weren’t suited to duels under the open sky, she was strong enough to have been chosen as Shizuku’s roommate.

“I saw how versatile Alice’s powers were during the Rebellion incident, but it’s still surprising just how nasty his offense can be. He doesn’t have much firepower, but he’s got a lot of tricks up his sleeve. Now that I think about it, that’s probably the kind of fighting style you’d have the most trouble with, huh, Stella?”

“I don’t intend to lose to anyone, regardless of my compatibility with them. Anyway, shouldn’t you be more worried about yourself right now, Ikki?”

“Aha ha, I guess so.”

Smiling awkwardly, Ikki turned back to the TV. He’d been watching a certain

video while waiting for Stella to come back to their room. It was a recording of one of Kirihara Shizuya's fights from the previous year.

"This video still? You've been watching it over and over since last night."

"Yeah. I'm trying to get an idea of his breathing patterns while I still can."

This video was one of the research materials he'd borrowed from Kusakabe Kagami, the president of the newspaper club. Specifically, it was of Kirihara's first battle in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. His opponent seemed to be standing stock-still while he walked clockwise around them, shooting freely at them from all angles. They weren't doing anything except glancing around in confusion as arrows of light pierced them from all sides. Eventually, they slumped to the ground in a bloody mess, defeated.

Even though Kirihara was right in front of his opponent's face, they were unable to do a single thing. The reason for that was because they couldn't actually see him.

"He can completely erase his presence with his Area Invisible, hiding his scent and making himself invisible. It's the perfect stealth technique, and he can use it thanks to his Device, Oborotsuki. It's a tricky ability to deal with."

"I can't say I'm a fan of his fighting style." Stella looked disdainfully at the TV screen. It wasn't a very pleasant battle to watch, so Ikki could sympathize.

Honestly, it was more like a hunt than a battle. Kirihara never left the safety of his camouflage and was able to shoot down his prey without ever exposing himself to danger.

"But it's the right way to fight if you have a power like that. Thanks to his fighting style, he hasn't gotten hit even a single time in his battles over the past year. When all's said and done, Kirihara-kun's strong."

"Wait, that doesn't make sense. He said he entered the Seven Stars Battle Festival, but he wasn't last year's Sovereign. Doesn't that mean he lost at some point?"

"Yeah, he lost his second match. But only because he withdrew from the battle."

“Why?”

“He won’t fight anyone who can overcome his Area Invisible. Sure, it’s a powerful ability, but there’s a surefire way to hit him regardless: wide-range attacks. Kirihara-kun will never battle a knight who can hit everything in the arena with their powers. For example, you could probably cover the entire ring with flames, right, Stella?”

“Oh yeah, I guess that makes sense. It doesn’t matter how invisible you are if there’s nowhere safe to run.”

“Exactly. That’s why he’d definitely forfeit if he got matched up against you. It’s not a very knightly thing to do, but it’s precisely how he got the nickname ‘the Hunter.’”

“Hmph, what a lame nickname. He only fights opponents he can beat, and on top of that, he plays with them before finishing them off. He’s a coward.” It was one thing to just stay somewhere safe using his stealth abilities. That was, after all, how his power worked. However, it was clear from watching the match on the TV that Kirihara was purposely avoiding vital areas with his shots so that he could torment his foe for as long as possible. “But...I see why you said he would be the worst opponent for you to face.”

“Yeah, he’s like my kryptonite.”

The only way to overcome Area Invisible was to attack the entire arena at once. Ikki had no way of doing that, though. His swordsmanship was peerless, he’d trained himself to peak physical fitness, and he knew all sorts of martial arts techniques, but ultimately, he could only attack at close range. The reach of his katana was the full extent of where he could hit with a single strike.

To make matters worse, Kirihara’s Device, Oborotsuki, was a bow. It was a given that Kirihara would have the initiative since he had a long-range weapon.

Furthermore, Ikki could only use his trump card, Ittou Shura, once a day. It also only lasted for a brief sixty seconds. He would have an exceedingly hard time dealing with Kirihara, who was skilled at running away.

“Will you be okay, Ikki?” Stella asked as she watched Kirihara’s defeated opponent get carried out on a stretcher. She couldn’t help but think about the

possibility that Ikki would end up in the same state tomorrow.

“Are you worried about me?”

Ikki’s question made Stella blush.

“Why would I ever be worried about *you*?! What I’m worried about is that if you lose, I’ll have to become that asshole’s girlfriend! It’s bad enough being your maid, but I absolutely never ever want to be that guy’s woman!”

“You’re the one who made that bet, so please don’t try to make it my fault. I tried to stop you.”

“Mrr... But...I couldn’t stand that he was making fun of you...” Stella muttered the last bit so quietly that Ikki didn’t hear her.

“Hmm? But what?”

“I-It’s nothing!”

Stella averted her gaze bashfully. While Ikki hadn’t been able to make out what she’d said, he could tell that she was fervently wishing for his victory.

“Hmm. Well, I don’t need him to apologize, but if I lose, people might start thinking you’re weak because you lost to me, and I definitely don’t want that. So I’ll be sure to win.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“I do,” Ikki replied without hesitation. “I’ve figured out how to beat his Noble Art.”

Last year, Kiriara had been the top first-year. His accomplishments had been impressive enough that he’d been chosen to be one of Hagun Academy’s representatives at the Seven Stars Battle Festival despite just being a first-year. But at the same time, he’d never made it past the second round of the tournament. If Ikki couldn’t even beat him, he had no hope of reaching the pinnacle of knighthood. After all, the six students with the best records in the selection matches would be chosen as representatives this year.

Oreki had told everyone there would be more than ten battles per person. In that case, the absolute maximum number of battles someone could fight would be around twenty, which was still a small enough number that more than a few

knights would have perfect win streaks. Ikki suspected that he'd be out of the running if he lost even a single battle. Were that to happen, the chance he'd finally been granted after years of patience would go to waste.

"I'll win this for sure. I promise," Ikki said confidently, making that oath more to himself than to Stella. His expression seemed to reassure her, and she nodded.

In truth, before Stella had returned to the dorm, Alisuin Nagi had called out to her. Alisuin had been concerned that Ikki might be getting nervous before his first match and had told Stella to help him relax if she could. But after hearing Ikki just now, Stella was sure he'd be fine. He wasn't the least bit afraid of the coming battle, and if that was the case, his victory was assured. After all, Stella knew better than anyone just how strong he was.

"Good. He's thrown down the towel, so you have to beat him now."

"I think you mean, 'thrown down the gauntlet.'"

Stella's Japanese was quite fluent, but she occasionally messed up sayings here and there.

"Anyway, we should go get dinner, Ikki. I'm starving."

"Yeah. I've gotten all that I can out of this video, I think. Let's go."

"Japanese people always eat tonkatsu curry before important matches, right?"

"Er, not really. I'm just going to eat udon for dinner like I usually do."

The two of them walked over to the cafeteria, chatting about less important matters. And just like that, the day before Ikki's first match ended rather uneventfully.



"I'm sorry, Kurogane. I don't think I can be your friend anymore."

"Whuh?!"

Ikki's eyes suddenly shot open. It was still well before dawn, but he'd just had

a terrible nightmare. He unclenched his fists and noticed that his palms were slick with sweat.

Why did I suddenly have a dream about what happened last year? And why now, of all times? Those words were still ringing in his ears, and Ikki didn't feel like he'd be able to fall back asleep. *It's too early to go jogging, though.*

Deciding he needed some fresh air, Ikki quietly climbed out of the top bunk, taking care not to wake Stella, and walked out of their room. It was the end of April, and the predawn air had a brisk chill to it that felt great against his sweaty skin.

"Seriously, why did I remember that whole ordeal *now*?" Ikki mused to himself. He had no idea why his subconscious had sent that dream to him.

"I heard the director's gonna get mad at us if we talk to him."

At some point, rumors of that nature had started spreading about Ikki. He had been the only student not allowed to attend classes. The ostensible reason had been that it was dangerous to teach someone so lacking in power, but that had just been an excuse. Anyone who knew the school's teachers would have been able to tell as much just by looking at how they'd reacted to the news. Regardless, claims that hanging out with Ikki would reflect negatively on one's grades had spread, so people had begun to avoid him.

"Come to think of it, that particular episode happened right there, didn't it?"

Ikki looked out at the grassy courtyard from the hallway window. It was around the time that everyone except his roommate had stopped talking to him that a certain individual had called out to him while he was eating lunch on that lawn one afternoon. That individual was Kirihara Shizuya. He'd been the up-and-coming rookie of their year and had managed to become one of the school's representatives in the Seven Stars Battle Festival despite being only a first-year.

Even back then, Ikki hadn't been particularly fond of him. Most students had kept their distance from Ikki mostly to avoid trouble with his family. Kirihara, however, had gone out of his way to treat him horribly. He had never attacked Ikki physically, but he'd constantly insulted him in public and spread rumors that tarnished his good name.

At first, Ikki had wondered why Kiri-hara had it out for him since he didn't think he'd done anything to get on Kiri-hara's bad side. And the truth was that he hadn't done anything wrong; he'd just so happened to be the one person in the school no one would stand up for. There'd been no need to fear retaliation of any kind for picking on him, and Kiri-hara was one of many people the world over who loved to take advantage of that.

In other words, Kiri-hara had always been an asshole to Ikki because he'd always been an asshole in general. When he'd approached Ikki that afternoon, Ikki had known it would be bad news—and he'd been right.

"It'll take a lifetime to get the teachers to acknowledge your strength just by doing what they say and being a good little student. You know that, right? So how about you and I duel instead?"

If Ikki beat one of the representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival, the school management would be forced to accept that he was worthy of being a knight. On the surface, Kiri-hara's suggestion seemed like a good one, but Ikki knew he couldn't accept it. Battling without a teacher's permission was against the school rules. If Ikki took even one step out of line, he knew the director, who had strong ties to the Kurogane family, would expel him on the spot.

Naturally, Ikki's expulsion was exactly what Kiri-hara had been after. As a matter of fact, there had been multiple teachers around when Kiri-hara had confronted Ikki, all of whom had been working with the director. Not one of them had thought fondly of Ikki, and they had likely even encouraged Kiri-hara to challenge him. Realizing that, Ikki had refused and tried to go somewhere else. However, Kiri-hara had stopped him.

"Come on, don't be so cold. We're classmates, aren't we? I'm worried about you."

Kiri-hara had then brought out Oboro-tsuki and shot Ikki. Not only had Ikki refused the invitation for a duel, he hadn't even prepared his own Device.

"Man, that was a real shocker..."

What Kiri-hara had done had been a surprise, but what had been even more shocking was that no one had reprimanded him. Neither the students nor the teachers had stepped in to say anything to Kiri-hara. That was when Ikki had

realized just how alone he was at the school.

Indeed, the teachers had been hoping that Ikki would take Kiri-hara's bait so they could expel him. The Kurogane family had told Hagun Academy not to let Ikki become a full-fledged Mage-Knight, and expelling him would have been the fastest way to accomplish that. Ikki had known that, of course, which was why he'd refused to summon Intetsu despite the dozens of arrows Kiri-hara had shot him with. Dodging could have potentially been seen as accepting Kiri-hara's challenge as well, so he hadn't tried to do that either.

After a while, Ikki had been shot with so many arrows that he'd lost consciousness. But since camera footage had proved that he'd never shown any intention to fight, the teachers had been unable to formally punish him. Meanwhile, Kiri-hara had gotten off with a stern warning, confirming that he had indeed been in cahoots with the previous director of the school.

"Man, looking back on it, that year really was the worst."

That had just been the start of Ikki's tribulations. The harassment had only gotten worse from there.

In the beginning, there'd been a few students who'd pitied him. They'd been swallowed up by the oppressive atmosphere Kiri-hara and some of the teachers had created, though, and had at some point started treating the bullying like it was a normal, accepted part of life. In the end, even Ikki's roommate, the one friend he'd made at this school, had left him.

At the time, Ikki hadn't even been mad. He'd just felt sorry that he'd caused his roommate so much trouble. The two hadn't spoken since then, and Ikki had decided that he wouldn't be the one to change that. And while his now-former roommate had been a nice guy who wouldn't have been able to ignore Ikki striking up a conversation with him, he'd gone on to the next grade while Ikki had gotten stuck repeating a year. As a result, they were less likely than ever to see each other.

"But still, why did I have that dream?"

All of that was in the past now. Ikki had stopped being bothered by it to the point that he'd forgotten most of what had happened until he'd had that nightmare.

So why? Is it because I talked to Kiri-hara-kun again recently? Well, no point in worrying about it.

None of it mattered anymore. The old director had been kicked out, and there was no longer anything barring Ikki's way. All he needed to do was produce results.

Suddenly, the sun peeked over the horizon, and warm, golden light illuminated Ikki's face. He squinted a little. It was the dawn of the day of his duel. Today, he would be tested to his very limits.



During the period the selection matches were being held, students only had morning classes, with the afternoons and evenings devoted to battles. Ikki's duel would be held at 1:30 p.m., which was one of the earlier time slots in the day. Since he wasn't sure he would be able to digest a proper lunch in time for his battle, he had a bottle of jelly nutrition supplement instead. Once he was done, he headed to the fourth training field, where his match would be held, together with Stella, Shizuku, and Alisuin.

It was still 1 p.m., and the match set to take place before Ikki's was well underway. Fighters needed to report to the waiting room ten minutes before their match, so Ikki still had twenty minutes to kill, and watching a few other matches with his friends wouldn't be a bad way to do just that. In fact, that was what Stella and Shizuku had been planning on doing.

"I know it's early, but I'm going to head to the waiting room."

"Huh? You don't want to see any of the other matches?"

"Nah, I want to focus on my own battle." Ikki was already beginning the process of adjusting his condition and mindset to best deal with Kiri-hara's attacks. He didn't want that delicate process to get disturbed by watching other people's battles. "I'll see you guys later."

"I believe in you, Onii-sama. I know you can win this," Shizuku said calmly.

"Like I said yesterday, you already beat me, so you better not go and let this loser beat you," Stella added.

“Be careful out there,” Alisuin said, looking concerned.

Ikki nodded to the three of them, then headed to the waiting room.



“Kurogane Ikki, from class 1-1. I’ve verified your identity, so you can have your student handbook back.”

The lady at the receptionist’s desk had held Ikki’s student handbook over a computer terminal and filled out a small form, then handed his student handbook back to him.

“Since this is your first battle, I’ll explain the rules. Just like the battles in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, these are one-on-one duels with your Devices summoned in their true forms. There is no time limit, but you can forfeit at any time. Changing your Device to phantom form in the middle of the battle is not allowed. Because of that, in rare cases, these duels can be fatal. Naturally, the teachers and staff are here to make sure that doesn’t happen, and the referee will step in if things look dangerous, but be aware that anything can happen in a duel and there’s no guarantee you’ll survive.”

With Ikki now aware of the terms of his involvement, the receptionist went on to ensure that he accepted them.

“If you still wish to participate despite the risks, then please press ‘Yes’ on your student handbook. Otherwise, please press ‘No.’ Know that if you decline even once, you will not be allowed to participate in any further matches and will lose the right to become one of Hagun Academy’s representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

Ikki, of course, pressed “Yes” without hesitation.

“Bwa ha ha! That’s the spirit, kid.”

“Huh?”

Ikki turned around and saw a small woman wearing a white kimono with a red, floral-patterned haori over it. The kimono was clearly too big for her, and though she had the features of a small child, she was no student. Ikki knew her as well.



“You’re...Saikyou Nene-san, right?”

“Oh? You’ve heard of me?”

“I think everyone in this school has heard of the famous Demon Princess. You represented Japan in the Olympics last year, and you’re also a member of the KOK top league.”

KOK stood for King of Knights, which was a high-profile Blazer competition that was held regularly. It was the most-watched sport in the modern day, and companies paid upward of three trillion yen per year to secure exclusive broadcast rights for it.

The top league was, as the name suggested, the most competitive league in the sport, and every trainee Mage-Knight knew of the most famous player in all of East Asia.

Saikyou was also famous for being a slob at home, which was something tabloid programs loved talking about at every opportunity. However, no one ever said it to her face.

“What’s a pro like you doing here?” Ikki asked.

“I came here to meet you, Kurogane Ikki-kun,” Saikyou replied.

“What for?”

“Well, I wanted to see what the Rank F Kuu-chan—that’s Shinguuji, by the way—has been hyping up so much is like.”

“Okay... But I thought outsiders weren’t allowed on school grounds.”

“No probs. I’m not an outsider. After Kuu-chan fired all the useless idiots, she needed new staff to replace them. Since we’re friends, I’m helping her out and teaching whenever I’ve got spare time. I even got my teaching license and everything.”

“Oh, I see.” Ikki had heard about how Kurono had purged all the teachers who’d been cooperating with the old director, so it made sense that she’d needed new people to fill those posts.

“Besides, teaching here lets me snap up all the cute little boys— Oh, wait, I

shouldn't have said that. Pretend you didn't hear anything."

"G-Got it."

"Bwa ha ha. I'm a fan of smart, brave boys like you. Since you're only allowed to fight with your Devices in phantom form until you get to high school, there's a lot of kids who chicken out when they have to fight for real for the first time."

In a real duel, it was inevitable that people would get hurt. The KOK league that Saikyou was part of often had matches where people lost arms or legs. Ten minutes or so in an iPS capsule was more than enough to heal those wounds, but unsurprisingly, many people still balked at the thought of entering such a harsh and bloody world. In that respect, Ikki could see why new students would sometimes hesitate before agreeing to a real duel.

"It's real cool how you just hit 'Yes' without a second thought," Saikyou added.

"Pain is something I've been prepared for since the moment I decided I wanted to become a Mage-Knight."

"Most people chicken out even when they think they're prepared. No wonder Kuu-chan's got high hopes for you. Actually, now that I get a closer look, you've got quite a cute face, boy."

In a split second, Saikyou had gone from being a good two meters away from Ikki to being right in front of his face.

"Whoa." He was so amazed someone had been able to close in on him so quickly that he didn't have time to react.

Saikyou pressed herself against him and looked up into his eyes. "What do you say to coming to my room tonight for a few special les—"

"What the hell do you think you're doing to my student?" Kurono Shinguuji said in a menacing tone, stomping into the waiting room. As always, she was wearing a suit.

"Whoa, it's Kuu-chan. You really gotta stop popping up behind people like that. I almost killed you by accident."

"As if you could ever kill me. Anyway, what are you doing here? I thought you

were supposed to be the commentator for the fourth training field?”

“Oh, yeah. All the matches there were so booring, though. There’s some time before the next one, so I took a bathroom break and decided to check up on your favorite little protégé.”

“H-He’s not my favorite!” Kurono smacked Saikyou on the head, then turned to Ikki, looking a little embarrassed. He’d never seen her so flustered before. “Sorry about that, Kurogane. I hope we didn’t break your concentration.”

“I-It’s fine. That was a little unexpected, but I’ll be all right.”

“I’ll put this gremlin back where she belongs, so don’t worry about anything she said. Get back to your commentator’s seat, you shameless wench!”

“Okay, I get it! Just stop pulling on my kimono already! This thing’s expensive, you know!”

Kurono dragged a reluctant Saikyou out of the waiting room. As they left, Ikki called out to Saikyou. “Sorry, but I’ll have to decline your invitation. I plan on having a party with my friends tonight to celebrate my first win.” He once again stated his intention to win this duel.

“Bwa ha ha ha. Well, if you’ve got plans then you’ve got plans. But in return, you better make your match an interesting one since I’ll be commentating on it.”

Saikyou grinned and pointed at Ikki, then trotted after Kurono, her tengu geta clacking against the floor.

She’s...a hard person to read. However, Ikki had been able to tell even from their brief meeting that she was strong. *I didn’t even notice when she closed the distance between us.*

That was the first time someone had been able to get close to Ikki without him noticing. She’d clearly used some kind of special walking technique. He had no idea what martial arts school taught a technique like that, though.

“Wait, this isn’t the time to be thinking about that. I need to concentrate on my upcoming match.”

While the ability to close in on someone you were staring at without them

noticing did pique Ikki's curiosity, it was clearly too complex a technique to master and use in combat right away. In that case, he could think about it later. Right now, he needed to focus on the battle ahead.

Ikki stepped into the waiting room and glanced around. There were a few lockers and benches in the room, and a full-length mirror on one of the walls. Other than that, it was as plain as plain could be. However, the small door on the far side felt far more menacing than its appearance suggested. The reason it did was that beyond that door was where Ikki's first official battle would be held.

I've finally made it this far. At long last, Ikki had taken the first step toward becoming the Seven Stars Sovereign, the greatest of all student knights.

The journey to this first step had been a long and painful one. He'd lost his family, a year of his life, and all of his friends. But he'd refused to give up and kept pushing forward despite all odds, and as a result, he was standing here today.

On the other side of that door was the arena where Ikki would fight Kirihara. The time had finally come to see whether Ikki's hard work would bear fruit, or if it had been for nothing.

Thump.

"Huh?"

Ikki's heart began to pound.

What...the heck?

His vision grew blurry, making everything look like a pastel painting.

What's happening to my body? What's happening to me?

Ikki couldn't figure out what was going on, but he noticed that he was extremely thirsty.

Oh yeah, water. If I just drink some water, I'll be—

He grabbed the water bottle he'd brought with him and started to unscrew the cap. But his hands weren't working properly, and as he took off the cap, he lost his grip on both it and the bottle. They fell to the floor, spilling water all

over his shoes.

I gotta wipe that off. But with what? Wait, what am I even doing? Anyway, I need to get some water before—

“First-year Kurogane Ikki-kun. Second-year Kirihara Shizuya-kun. Please make your way to the arena. It’s time for your match.”

“Whuh?!”

The announcer’s voice snapped Ikki back to reality. He looked up at the clock and saw that it was 1:30 p.m. Even though he was certain he’d arrived early, it was already time for his match.

How long have I been standing here for?

“Ngh...”

Could it be that I’m actually nervous? Okay, calm down.

Ikki put a hand to his heart and willed himself to take deep breaths. He’d spent ages watching videos of Kirihara’s battles and had memorized his opponent’s movements and breathing patterns. He’d also analyzed the strength of Kirihara’s arrows and what angles he preferred to fire from. Furthermore, he’d come up with a plan to break through Kirihara’s Noble Art, Area Invisible. Having already simulated the battle in his head numerous times, he knew his body would be able to do what he needed it to.

It’ll be okay, I just have to do what I practiced. And then, I’ll win.

If he could win here, it would justify all the suffering he’d endured up until now. It would mean none of it had been a waste. Willing his heartbeat to calm down, Ikki told himself that his efforts *would* be rewarded, then headed toward the door.



“All right, everyone, that wraps up our third match of the day! The fourth match will begin shortly, and I see we’ve got quite a crowd! Looks like everyone wants to see how this battle’s going to go! I’m Tsukuyomi from the broadcasting club, and I’ll be commentating on this match along with our special guest, Saikyou Nene-sensei!”

Tsukuyomi continued the prebattle introductions.

“Now, let’s meet our fighters! First up, we have one of last year’s representatives in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, Kirihara Shizuyaaa! Not only was he selected as a representative while still a first-year, he absolutely dominated his opponent in the first match of the tournament, a third-year from Bunkiyoku Academy who was considered one of the top contenders for the championship! His policy is to never fight battles he can’t win, and as a result, he’s won every match he’s fought! He’s done so while remaining completely unharmed too, earning him the nickname ‘the Hunter’!”

Kirihara waved to the crowd as the announcer introduced him. Many of the girls in the stands squealed with joy as he looked their way.

“As always, Kirihara’s very popular with the ladies. And it’s no wonder! Just look at how handsome he is!”

“I prefer my boys a bit more on the wild side, though...”

“No one cares what your preferences are, Saikyou-sensei.”

“Rude.”

It seemed Tsukuyomi was holding a grudge over the fact that Saikyou had abandoned her commentating duties halfway through the previous day’s matches.

“And now, let us introduce the Rank F knight who’s going to be the Hunter’s opponent! Despite his ranking, it would be dangerous to underestimate him! This particular Rank F combatant is the very same Kurogane Ikki who defeated Rank A Stella Vermillion, the famous Crimson Princess, in a mock battle! So, is his strength the real deal?! Or is he truly the Worst One as everyone believes?! We’ll find out today!”

Ikki bowed to the spectators and made his way into the ring.

There’s so many people watching...

This was the first time he’d fought in front of such a large crowd, and that made it even harder for him to stay calm. He felt as though he was occupying a stranger’s body—as though he was disassociating from himself. It was like there

was a fog over his brain, causing him to struggle to think properly.

“I didn’t think you’d actually show up,” Kirihara said arrogantly. “Even though you ran away the last time I so kindly offered to duel you.”

“The situation was different then,” Ikki replied.

“Was it, now? Well, whatever. Seeing as you entered this arena, I take it you’re prepared for what’s to come?”

“Do you really need me to spell it out for you?”

“No thanks.”

The two of them stood at their respective starting positions.

“Come to me, Intetsu.”

“It’s time to hunt, Oborotsuki.”

Ikki and Kirihara both manifested their Devices. A jet-black katana appeared in Ikki’s hands, while a jade-green bow appeared in Kirihara’s.

“Let the fourth match of the day begin!”

The starting signal accompanied Tsukuyomi’s shout, and immediately, Kirihara vanished.

“Kirihara’s already brought out his Area Invisible! It’s impossible for anyone to spot him with the naked eye now!”

“That’s quite the troublesome ability. If you don’t have any wide-range attacks, it’ll be hell to deal with,” Saikyou mused.

“That’s right. The opponent Kirihara faced in last year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival was a close-combat fighter who specialized in short-range finishers, which was why he was defeated so handily. The question is, does Kurogane have any wide-range attacks of his own? That will likely be the deciding factor in this battle!”

Once the Hunter had safely retreated into his forest of invisibility, he nocked an arrow and drew. Since it was impossible to see him, Kirihara knew that Ikki wouldn’t be able to stop him, so he took his time perfecting his aim. After a few seconds, he loosed directly at Ikki’s back.

“Right there!” Ikki shouted, swiveling on his feet and batting the arrow away with Intetsu.

“Kurogane blocks! Even though he can’t see his opponent, he was able to block their arrow!” Tsukuyomi exclaimed.

“That’s not all. Watch,” Saikyou said with a smile.

As she’d predicted, Ikki didn’t stop at just blocking Kirihara’s arrow. He started dashing toward the location the arrow had been shot from, calculating Kirihara’s position by using its trajectory. He’d been able to do so because though Kirihara himself was invisible, his arrows were not.

You can tell where an archer is based on where their arrow comes from. That’s Area Invisible’s weakness!

As long as Ikki was keeping an eye out for the moment the arrow was loosed, he’d be able to pinpoint Kirihara’s position. The trajectory told him the direction, and the force behind the shot told him the distance. This was the strategy Ikki had come up with to overcome Area Invisible.

“Hiyaaah!”

Ikki swung Intetsu down at where he was sure Kirihara was. However, his blade sliced through mostly empty air. The only indication that he’d grazed anything at all was the slight scrap of a uniform that suddenly appeared and fluttered slowly to the ground.

“Phew. That was close. It’s gotta take a lot of focus to not only block my arrow but even figure out where I was from that shot. Especially since I fired from your blind spot. Do you have a third eye or something?” Kirihara said, his voice sounding like it was coming from all over the place thanks to the effect of his Area Invisible.

“Not at all,” Ikki replied humbly. But despite his words, he was feeling confident.

I can do this!

He hadn’t expected to get so nervous right before the match, but it seemed that even with his concentration slightly rattled, his plan would work. He’d

catch Kiri-hara for sure with the next shot.

Heightening his focus, Ikki waited patiently for the second arrow.

“Oof, that’s one scary glare. Is that really how you should be looking at your former classmate? We spent a year together, remember?”

“Of course it is. Right now, we’re in a duel.”

“Hmm. So you actually think you can beat me, huh, Kurogane-kun?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“Aha ha ha ha! Fair enough, I suppose. I thought being forced to repeat a year might have given you a reality check, but it looks like there’s no cure for stupidity after all. You haven’t changed one bit. You really, *really* piss me off.”

Kiri-hara’s tone grew deadly, and Ikki correctly surmised that he’d nocked his next arrow. He focused all five of his senses, prepared to deal with a shot from any direction and any angle.

“If you have a problem with me, then shoot me down. If you can, that is.”

Ikki purposely taunted Kiri-hara, hoping to lure him into attacking. The moment he shot, Ikki would activate Ittou Shura and cut him down before he had a chance to run. He would end this battle here and now!

“Heh. You sure are pumped up. I admit, your swordsmanship’s pretty good, Kurogane-kun. Unfortunately for you, tricks like that only work on incompetent mortals. For the chosen new race, for Blazers, *power* is everything! A Rank F like you is barely any better than a regular human! Do you honestly believe you can break through my Area Invisible?!”

“I won’t know until I try.”

“All right, have it your way. Try beating this!”

A second later, a hole opened in Ikki’s thigh, and blood started spurting out of it.

“Huh?” It had happened so suddenly that it took a few seconds for the searing pain to register in Ikki’s brain. “Gaaah!” But while the wound hurt, Ikki was more surprised than anything.

What just happened?!

Ikki was confident his focus had been honed enough that he would have managed to react to any attack. And yet, here he was, injured without having even noticed the arrow coming for him. He managed to get a grip on himself before he started panicking, then looked down at his thigh.

“Ah!” Upon checking his wound, he saw that there were drops of his blood floating unnaturally in the air, as if they were coating some sort of invisible object. He reached down with his hand and felt something there—a long, thin rod of mana. “Don’t tell me...” This was the worst possible scenario, and unfortunately, it was also reality.

“That’s right. I’ve upgraded my Area Invisible. Now, I can even make my arrows invisible. Do you see how hopeless this is for you now? You won’t be able to perceive my attacks until they’ve already hit you!”



“This isn’t looking good,” Alisuin muttered darkly, furrowing her brow.

“No, it’s not. Onii-sama was planning on using those arrows to guide him to Kiri-hara’s position, but now, he can’t do that. And since the arrows are invisible, he can’t defend or dodge either,” Shizuku replied softly.

“I can see why he was chosen as one of last year’s representatives. He has no openings in his offense or defense. Area Invisible is quite the Noble Art.”

“No, that’s not the problem!” Stella interjected, shaking her head at Alisuin.

“Stella-chan?”

“It’s true that Area Invisible is stronger than we gave it credit for. I’m surprised he can do that too. But the bigger problem is that Ikki’s acting weird!”

“What do you mean, Onii-sama is acting weird?”

“Think about it! Why didn’t he rush Kiri-hara the moment the battle began?! If he knew his opponent could turn invisible, then his best chance at victory would have been to use Ittou Shura immediately, when he knew for sure where Kiri-hara was! He should’ve ended the battle as fast as possible!”

Shizuku gave Stella an exasperated look.

“Did you learn nothing from the terrorist incident? Jumping recklessly into battle against another Blazer is suicide. Besides, Onii-sama’s style is to read his opponent and analyze and steal their techniques before going on the offensive. That’s how he beat you, remember?”

Stella shook her head and replied, “No, you don’t get it! I know Ikki observes his opponents and only uses his trump card when he’s certain he can win, but he already knew his opponent could turn invisible! And do you realize how taxing it is to constantly be on your guard from an attack that could come from any direction at any time?!”

“Ah!”

That finally made Shizuku realize what Stella was getting at. It certainly was mentally exhausting to have to be on edge, knowing a single slip in concentration would mean getting hit by an arrow. A protracted battle was the last thing you wanted in that situation. A quick rush at the start of the battle seemed reckless, but on closer examination, that was indeed the best plan of action against a fighter like Kiriara.

“So why didn’t he do that?” Stella muttered, gritting her teeth.

“It’s not that he didn’t. He *couldn’t*,” Alisuin replied.

“What do you mean?! There’s no way Ikki wouldn’t be able to make that kind of deduction!”

“Right now, Ikki’s so nervous that he wasn’t able to notice something so obvious.”

“No way! He didn’t look nervous at...”

Stella trailed off, realizing that he had indeed shown signs of nervousness earlier. Yesterday, he’d told her, “I’ll win this for sure. I promise.” That in and of itself had been strange. He wasn’t the kind of person to make such bold claims before a fight. At the very least, he hadn’t done so during her duel with him.

“Maybe not, but you don’t know how a match will end until you actually fight.”

His words back then had been far more subdued. Though he’d been aiming

for victory, his tone had made it clear that he understood how dangerous and unpredictable battles were.

Now that I think about it, maybe Ikki made himself sound so confident because he was trying to convince himself he wasn't feeling the pressure of the upcoming duel.

"It seems you've finally noticed as well. But don't blame yourself for not realizing it until now, Stella-chan. After all, Ikki himself hasn't even realized how he's feeling."

"He hasn't?"

"Nope. Ikki is so used to being hurt that he can no longer hear the cries of his poor, abused heart. Considering how many hardships he's had to endure just to be able to stand on this stage and participate in an official battle, though, I suppose it would be stranger if he'd managed to stay normal throughout it all."

"Ah!"

As Stella thought about what Ikki had been through, her expression darkened. During his first year here, no one had understood him, and no one had supported him. Instead, everyone had done the opposite and barred his path forward. It wasn't just here at school either. Ikki had been suffering like that his whole life. The only thing that had kept him going was the belief that a chance to prove himself would eventually come.

Because he'd pinned so much on that one chance, now that it was finally here, he saw it as a trial that would judge whether he was fit to walk down this path. Defeat here would mean all of his hard work had been for nothing. It would mean the pain he had endured and the hardships he had suffered were meaningless. And worst of all, Ikki had been matched up against the worst possible foe in his very first match.

Of course he'd be nervous...

No one could possibly stay calm under such immense pressure. In retrospect, it was obvious that Ikki had just been grinning and bearing it.

How did I not notice? I was by his side the entire time, and yet... Stella thought regretfully. Sadly, it was too late now.

Just as Alisuin had feared, the stress that had built up inside Ikki all these years had boiled over, and it had done so at the worst possible time.

“Regardless, now that Ikki has lost his means of tracking the Hunter down, there’s no way for him to attack. Prepare yourselves, you two. This isn’t a battle anymore. It’s become a hunt.”



“Now that’s just mean...” Tsukuyomi muttered, sounding disgusted.

Ten minutes had passed since the start of the match. Ikki was standing in the middle of the ring, bleeding from his arms and legs, keeping himself upright by using Intetsu as a crutch.

Once Kiriara had started firing off invisible arrows, Ikki had been completely at his mercy. The only reason the match hadn’t ended yet was that Kiriara had been targeting Ikki’s limbs rather than any of his vitals. Not out of pity, of course. It was clear to everyone watching that the Hunter was toying with his prey.

“Saikyou-sensei! There’s no point in letting the battle continue any longer! Please, stop the match! I can’t bear to watch this any longer!” Tsukuyomi pleaded after turning off the mic.

Saikyou said nothing. She just continued staring intently at the arena, her expression more serious than it had been during any other match thus far.

“Mrgh...”

Realizing that Saikyou wouldn’t budge, Tsukuyomi reluctantly turned the mic back on and returned to commentating.

“Though Kurogane magnificently parried Kiriara’s first arrow, all of Kiriara’s subsequent attacks have been invisible, and Kurogane has been unable to react. Despite how one-sided the match has become, Kurogane still shows no signs of surrendering... Does he perhaps have some plan in mind?”

Can’t say I do. Ikki thought with a wry smile. His one plan had been ruined when Kiriara had started firing invisible arrows. *I got complacent...*

In retrospect, it should have been obvious that Kiriara would be stronger

than he'd been last year. If he'd been thinking straight, Ikki would have realized that his best plan of action would have been to attack right at the start of the battle, before Kirihara's stealth powers could help him. The fact that he was only figuring this out now made Ikki realize just how nervous and rattled he'd actually been.

Looks like Alice was right after all. That nightmare I had this morning was probably another sign that my heart was crying out in pain. I just didn't realize it then.

Ikki had gotten so used to putting up a strong front that he'd been blind to his own emotions. There was nothing more pathetic than that.

It's a little late for me to be realizing that, though. Oh well, what's important is what I do next. Now that I'm finally being honest with myself, let's go back to square one and come up with a new plan. How am I supposed to catch the invisible Hunter?

"Heh heh heh. I can't believe you still haven't given up. You're so crazy, I'm actually impressed."

"If I was the kind of person who gave up when things weren't going my way, I wouldn't have stayed to repeat a year."

"That's true. All right, out of respect for your determination, I'll give you a handicap. I'll tell you where I'll shoot next. Do try your best to dodge. Here we go. First up is your left thigh."

"Gah!"

"What's wrong? Your movements are sluggish. Right shoulder next!"

"Ngh!"

"Come on, at least *try* to dodge! Right ear!"

"Agh!"

"Even a turtle's faster than you, Kurogane-kun! Where'd all that spunk you had earlier go?! I know you can dodge better than that! Left shoulder! Right thigh! Right hand! Left calf! Left knee! Small intestine! Stomach! Liver! Kidneys! Large intestine! Duodenum! Aha ha! If you don't start dodging, you're gonna

die at this rate!”

“Gyaaah!”

Kirihara had finally started targeting Ikki’s organs, and Ikki dropped to his knees.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! God, you’re pathetic! Look at your ugly mug, Kurogane-kun! Come on, give me a smile. You gotta try harder than that. After all, you’ve got a reason to be trying, right? Since you won’t be able to graduate if you don’t win this match.”

“Huh?” one of the spectators muttered, shocked. The others all looked similarly surprised.

“Wh-What does he mean, Kurogane won’t be able to graduate if he loses?”

“I thought our participation didn’t affect our grades?”

“Hold on, I bowed out of the selection matches because my teacher told me they wouldn’t.”

“Ah, sorry, guys,” Kirihara said with a grin. “Didn’t mean to give you the wrong idea. Don’t worry, he’s the only one whose graduation is hanging in the balance. Since Rank F Kurogane Ikki-kun’s abilities are so weak, he won’t be able to get enough credits the usual way. Apparently, though, the new director gave him another option: she’ll let him graduate if he manages to win the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

For a moment, the entire arena was silent. But a few seconds later, all the spectators burst out laughing.

“Pwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“H-He can graduate if he becomes the Seven Stars Sovereign?! You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“There’s no way a Rank F could ever manage something like that! Man, the director’s one harsh lady!”

“Don’t tell me that idiot down there actually agreed to that condition?!”

“Gah ha ha! That’s so insane, I almost pity the guy!”

“It’s only his first match and he’s already getting beaten up this badly! There’s no way he’ll ever make it to Seven Stars Sovereign! Gya ha ha ha ha ha!”

All of the spectators were jeering at Ikki now.

Becoming the Seven Stars Sovereign meant proving that you were the strongest student knight in all of Japan. The majority of past ones had been Rank Bs, with the occasional Rank C also having reached the top. There had been Rank A Seven Stars Sovereigns as well, but it was exceedingly rare for student Blazers to reach Rank A, so they were few and far between. Regardless, it wasn’t the kind of title a Rank F, someone who was well below average in terms of Blazer power, had ever earned.

Thinking about it logically, it was a ridiculous dream. However, to many of the spectators’ surprise, Ikki’s classmates came to his defense.

“That’s not true! Kurogane-san is a really amazing knight!”

“Yeah! We saw him take down five Blazers with their Devices out while he was barehanded!”

“Besides, he beat Vermillion-san, a Rank A! There haven’t even been that many Rank A Seven Stars Sovereigns! If he can beat her, that means he’s strong!”

“Moron. Don’t you know that whole fight was staged? Everyone on the internet agrees that there’s no way it was real.”

“You’re the moron. Why would a princess agree to fight in a fixed match? She’s got no reason to do that.”

“God, you’re so ignorant. That Rank F is the son of the head of the famous Kurogane family. They’re one of the world’s top Blazer families, and they’re filthy rich to boot.”

“Yeah, I bet the Kurogane family offered the Vermillion Kingdom a boatload of money to stage that fight so they could make their son look like less of a loser. Everyone knows the Vermillion Kingdom’s poor. They’d take the deal.”

“Th-That can’t be true.”

“What really can’t be true is a Rank F beating a Rank A. I dunno why you’re

defending that guy, but try using your brain for a second.”

The voices of Ikki’s classmates were drowned out by the indignation and insults of the other spectators.

“There’s no way a spoiled brat who relies on his family name to get ahead in life will ever become Seven Stars Sovereign!”

“He’s a disgrace to knights everywhere!”

“Stop trying to look cool when you’re just a Rank F loser!”

The rumor that Ikki’s family had paid off the Vermillion Kingdom to make Ikki seem stronger than he really was had been started by a random poster on an anonymous message board. They had, of course, done absolutely zero research before irresponsibly throwing their opinion out there.

Naturally, there was no way the Kurogane family, who’d tormented Ikki his whole life, would have so much as lifted a finger to help him. And even if they had, a single noble family didn’t have the influence to buy out royalty, even if Vermillion was a small kingdom. However, the spectators all believed this ridiculous theory to be true. It was more comfortable for them that way.

The majority of student knights were either Rank E or Rank D. They envied the so-called prodigies, believing that those prodigies were on a higher level—one that average people like them could never reach. To them, a Rank F knight was one of the few people they could safely look down on. An existence that gave them a sense of security and relief because they knew they weren’t the lowest on the totem pole.

Not only did these average people need someone beneath them to feel secure, but they also needed those higher-ranked knights they worshipped as prodigies to be truly special. After all, they had given up on ever beating a Rank A knight, so it was unacceptable that someone ranked even lower than them could accomplish what they’d convinced themselves was impossible. That was why everyone was willing to accept such a flimsy theory and bash on Ikki.

Ikki gritted his teeth as he listened to the spectators’ jeers.

That really stings...

He didn't particularly crave the acceptance of his peers. In fact, he couldn't say he cared what the other students thought of him, so the insults to him didn't bother him much. But it hurt to hear Stella be disparaged. And what vexed him more than anything was that it was his own weakness that was making everyone think Stella had been bought out.

"Boy, this crowd's merciless. But, well, that's what you get for dreaming beyond your station," Kirihara said while continuing to loose arrows at Ikki, who'd fallen to his knees. "How about you accept reality? There's no way a guy like you, whose Noble Art is just shitty body strengthening, can overcome my Area Invisible. The truth is, a person's worth is decided the moment they're born. Hard work doesn't mean jack shit when compared to natural talent. It's just pathetic watching a weakling act like he'll ever accomplish anything. Don't you guys agree?!" Kirihara directed that last statement at the crowd of spectators.

"Yeah, Kirihara-kun's right!"

"Just give up already! You're making it look like Shizuya-kun's bullying you!"

"Drop out, you hack! You only got this far because of your parents!"

"A failure like you shouldn't even be fighting in the first place! No one wants to watch this pathetic display!"

Egged on by Kirihara, the crowd continued to pelt Ikki with insults. But the fact that Ikki could barely move was a painful reminder of how true some of those words were. He truly was powerless right now.

I guess I do look pretty pathetic right now, huh?

He had no idea how to overcome Kirihara's Area Invisible. It didn't just make him invisible, it also completely erased his presence, including smell and sound. Only the noises he wanted heard were audible. As a result, it was impossible to tell when an attack was coming until it had already hit you.

Ikki couldn't think of a single viable strategy to use against someone like him. It was sheer stubbornness that kept him in the fight. Not that it would amount to anything, though. Whether he struggled fruitlessly until the end or just gave up now, his loss was set in stone. The defeat would be marked on his record all

the same.

In that case, maybe surrendering was the right choice after all. Maybe it was better for him to give in to his weakness.

“Shut uuuuup!”

“Huh?!” the spectators gasped, stunned. They all turned to look at the person whose shout had cut through their scorn.

Stella... Ikki thought.

Tiny flames danced around the Crimson Princess, whose scarlet eyes blazed with rage.



“Stella-chan...” Alisuin muttered, surprised by Stella’s sudden outburst. Shizuku looked equally taken aback. But Stella didn’t care. She couldn’t take it anymore.

“What makes you all so certain a Rank F can’t beat a Rank A?!” Stella spat while glaring at the spectators. “You just convinced yourselves that no matter what you do, you can’t beat prodigies like us! Hell, you’re the ones who stuck us into the category of ‘prodigy,’ and you created that category all on your own just to justify the fact that you gave up! Well, if you want to give up on your dreams, that’s on you. But don’t try and deny that Ikki’s strong just because you want to feel better about giving up!”

That was the one thing Stella couldn’t condone. Because even though Ikki’s abilities as a Blazer were weaker than those of anyone else here, he’d refused to give up all this time. Even though the rest of the world had laughed at him and called him worthless, he’d continued to believe that talent was a wall that could be overcome—that *he* could overcome. And because he hadn’t given up, he’d finally acquired a power that did indeed let him overcome that wall, granting him unparalleled strength for one minute.

Stella had seen how radiantly Ikki’s soul had blazed during their duel. She would never forget that sight for as long as she lived. Never before had she been so impressed by another person’s strength. Never before had she admired another so greatly. It was because she knew how precious Ikki’s achievements

were that she couldn't stand to see people pretend they weren't real.

"Talent is just a small part of what makes us who we are! And it's because you guys cling to that one small part that you can't see just how strong Ikki really is! You'll never be able to understand him! So don't act like you know him! Don't insult the knight I love!"

"Stella..."

Shocked by Stella's words, Ikki finally turned to look up at her. When she saw his expression, her heart began to ache.

"What's with that pathetic look?!"

Indeed, Ikki looked like he was on the verge of giving up. But Stella realized that she couldn't truly fault him for it. Though he acted mature, he, like her, was still just a kid. No matter how strong his resolve was, no matter how hard he tried to act tough, at the end of the day, he had a human heart and human feelings.

Despite what Ikki told himself, he did rail at the unfairness of it all, and it did hurt when people made fun of him. And as long as he continued to walk the path of a knight, he'd continue having to endure that pain.

In a way, it would be better to let Ikki break and give up now. Stella understood that, but even so...

"Ikki, didn't you say that no matter what anyone else said, you'd never give up on yourself?! I thought for sure I'd be able to reach even greater heights if I was with you because of that! So why do you look so defeated just because these losers are making fun of you?! The man I lost to isn't that weak! The knight I admire, the knight I fell in love with, is the Kurogane Ikki who's always looking forward and who takes pride in who he is! So at least when you're in front of me, you have to always be the cool knight I know, you stupid idiot!"

Even so, she wanted to aim higher than ever alongside Ikki. That was why she was pouring her heart out to him, letting him know there was someone else out there who believed in the man known as Kurogane Ikki.

Upon hearing that, Ikki curled his fingers into a fist and punched himself in the face.

“What?!”

The spectators all stared at him in shock. They had no idea what he was doing, but Ikki no longer cared about any of them.

“Thank you, Stella. That was the wake-up call I needed.”

Slowly but surely, Ikki got back to his feet.



As he rose to his feet, Ikki looked up into Stella’s crimson eyes. He could see the tears spilling from them, and he knew whose sake she was spilling those tears for. But even though she understood and sympathized with his pain, even though she was the one person listening to the cries of his heart, she’d still told him to fight. She knew just how harsh a path Ikki would be walking, but she’d asked him to walk it all the same.

I can’t believe there’s someone other than Ryouma-san who’d say that to me.

Ikki had believed that all his effort would become meaningless if he lost this fight, that the harsh realities of the world had rejected his dream. He’d thought defeat would prove that he simply wasn’t good enough, and that had terrified him. But that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

It was true that if he lost here, achieving his goals would become much harder, but it didn’t mean the hard work he’d put in to get closer to that goal was for nothing.

After all, I finally met a girl who told me she admires the way I live my life and that she loves me for it!

The moment he realized that, Ikki felt as though he was in his own body again. His heart and mind were finally in sync. His thoughts, which had been clouded by anxiety and nerves, were now crystal clear.

While he was injured all over the place and his body was in tatters, it could still move. At long last, Ikki was in peak condition. And since he was, there was no need for him to give up just yet. There were still things he could do. In fact, there were still things *only* he could do.

So I might as well give it a shot and keep going until I can’t anymore.

No matter how badly he was beaten, as long as he put everything he had into the battle, it didn't matter. His wounds would eventually heal and he'd be able to try again. But the wounds that giving up on himself and running away would leave were scars of shame that would never fade!

"Raaahhh!" Kurogane Ikki roared a mighty battle cry and drew upon every last drop of mana his body, his blood, his very cells could muster. A faint blue light enveloped his body, indicating that he had activated the Noble Art he could only use once a day, Ittou Shura. It was a declaration that he would settle this match here and now, without care for the consequences. "Using everything I have, I'll capture you, the master of stealth. Here I come, Kirihara-kun!"



“Oh my! Kurogane’s defeat seemed all but inevitable, but it seems he’s finally pulled out his trump card! His Noble Art, Ittou Shura, was able to defeat even the Rank A knight Stella Vermillion! However, it’s a move he can only use once per day! If he’s using it now, does that mean he’s found a way to break through Kiri-hara’s Area Invisible?!”

Tsukuyomi’s tone changed dramatically as soon as the fight stopped being a one-sided stomp. She was clearly tired of Kiri-hara’s cruel antics. And though she couldn’t publicly show any bias, she was secretly hoping that Ikki would win this fight.

Unfortunately, Ikki still hadn’t found a way to see through Kiri-hara’s Area Invisible. Such a method simply didn’t exist. In a one-on-one situation, so long as the opponent didn’t have access to wide-range attacks, Area Invisible was likely the most powerful Noble Art in existence. At the very least, it wasn’t a technique a failed knight like Ikki had the means to defeat. Kiri-hara knew that as well, of course.

“You, the guy everyone calls the Worst One, capture me, Kiri-hara Shizuya, the Hunter? In your dreams! You’re all bark no bite!”

It was precisely because Ikki kept on trying to do the impossible that Kiri-hara found him so irksome. It was wrong for someone like him to aim above his station. As far as Kiri-hara was concerned, there was only one thing Ikki could do.

“Enough of this unsightly struggling. I’m tired of seeing you keep getting back up when there’s nothing you can do. Let’s put an end to this. Oh, whoops, I forgot I promised to tell you where I’d aim my shots. Next up is...” Kiri-hara’s voice then grew murderous, making it clear that he intended to end the match with this shot. “...your forehead. Better dodge if you don’t want to die, you failure!”

He drew back and loosed. An invisible arrow shot forward, aiming right for Ikki’s vitals. That was of no concern to Ikki right now, though. There was no point in trying to see the invisible. Instead, he focused his attention on the things he could see and hear.

Think back...

Ikki recalled the order in which he'd received his injuries and the direction each arrow had come from.

Think back.

He remembered how deep each wound had been, telling him the force and distance of each shot.

Think back!

He replayed everything Kiri-hara had said back in his mind, taking special note of any changes in tone and cadence.

Everything he needed to win this fight was contained within those bits of information. He was trying to understand his opponent's movements and patterns from the ways the arrows had hit him, much like how he could trace the history of a person's sword style from their techniques and form. Rather than analyzing swordsmanship, however, he was analyzing his wounds. And in the same way that a person's breathing informed him of their intentions, he was using Kiri-hara's words and tone to dissect his foe's thought patterns.

Ikki had already spent ages researching Kiri-hara's personality, techniques, and tendencies before the match. All he needed to do now was combine it with the information he'd gleaned during the match and analyze the vast store of data he possessed. If he couldn't see through Area Invisible, he would see through the person known as Kiri-hara Shizuya. It was neither impossible nor even all that difficult. After all, that was the way Kurogane Ikki had fought for a long time now.

"Hah!"

The arrow loosed from Oborotsuki flew not toward Ikki's forehead but his chest. Kiri-hara the Hunter had lied about where his final shot would land.

Though Ikki was on his last legs, Kiri-hara had wanted to be doubly sure he took him down. He'd claimed to be aiming for Ikki's head but had actually gone for his heart. Adding a feint onto an already invisible arrow had made it truly impossible to dodge. But while the arrow had indeed gone exactly where Kiri-hara had aimed it, it hadn't pierced Ikki's skin.

"What?" Kiri-hara muttered, shocked. He was staring at something so

incomprehensible that his brain shut down momentarily.

Unbelievable as it was, rather than dodging or blocking the invisible arrow that Ikki should have had no way of perceiving, he'd grabbed it midflight, right before it had pierced his chest.

"H-How..."

How is this possible? How can this be happening?

Kirihara just stood there, slack-jawed.

"I knew it. I knew you'd lie, Kirihara-kun," Ikki muttered, more to himself than to Kirihara.

"What...are you saying...? Ah?!" A shiver ran down Kirihara's spine. Despite the fact that he was still invisible, Ikki was staring straight at him. "Impossible..."

Kirihara began to panic a little, causing cold sweat to pour down his back. He started trembling in fear, and his vision grew blurry.

"I've caught you, Hunter. There's no escape from me now."

Ikki's lips curled into a small grin.



"U-U-U-Unbelievable! Kurogane caught the invisible arrow! How on earth did he manage that?! I still can't see Kirihara or his arrows, so Area Invisible is definitely still active! We're reviewing the camera footage to see if we can't figure out what happened, and from the looks of it, Kurogane definitely reacted the moment the arrow was shot! Does this mean he's seen through Kirihara's Invisible Area after all?!"

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Man, that kid's something else!" Saikyou said suddenly, clapping her hands together.

"Saikyou-sensei, do you know what Kurogane did?!"

"Heh heh heh. Oh, absolutely. As you can see, that Area Invisible technique won't work any longer."

Upon hearing that, Kirihara ground his teeth together.

"B-Bullshit! My Area Invisible is perfect! There's no way that Rank F managed

to see through it!”

“Aha ha, you’re not wrong there. I agree that your Area Invisible is the ultimate Noble Art when it comes to fighting other people. You can at least be confident about that. After all, it’s not like he’s seen through it. He just saw through you, the Hunter, instead.”

“What do you—”

“Oh? You’re surprisingly dense, Kiriyan. Didn’t you watch the duel between Kuro-bou and the princess? During it, Kuro-bou stole the princess’s Imperial Sword Arts style. But you know, you can’t steal someone’s style just by copying their stance and forms. You need to understand the multilayered history that led to those stances and forms, as well as what the creator of the style was thinking when they designed their techniques. In other words, you need to understand the true nature of a style in order to steal it. And now, Kuro-bou’s done the same thing to you. During the fight, he analyzed everything about you, stealing the very person known as Kirihara Shizuya. Isn’t that right, Kuro-bou?”

Indeed, Ikki had used his Blade Steal on a person rather than their techniques. Saikyou was absolutely correct.

“Yeah, something like that,” Ikki said with a nod.

“N-No way! That’s not possible! You can’t even see me, so how could you—”

“I don’t need to see you to know where you are right now. You’ve left behind a lot of footprints, after all.”

“What?”

“I’m talking about the wounds you inflicted. The order they came in taught me how you think. The angles they came from taught me how you move. And the strength of the shots taught me the distance you like to keep. By following all of those footprints, it’s easy to figure out where you are. And since I can basically see you now, I can fight like I always do.”

But that wasn’t all Ikki had to say on the matter.

“Whether it’s swordsmanship or people, ultimately, they all have a core that influences everything about them. With people, I guess you could call it their

set of values. If you analyze the way a person acts and the things they say, you come to understand that core. Once you do, you can tell what they're thinking, what they'll do next, whether they'll advance or retreat, attack or defend, and so on. For example, I can tell that you took three steps back just now, Kirihara-kun."

"Gwah?!"

Kirihara let out a garbled scream as a bone-chilling fear settled over him. Just as Ikki had said, he had indeed taken three steps back.

But it was only natural that Ikki could read Kirihara so well. Understanding someone's core meant far more than knowing what they were thinking in the moment. It meant fully understanding their underlying thought processes—their very identity. Something that fundamental to a person couldn't be changed overnight. No matter how hard someone tried to think deceptive thoughts to throw Ikki off their scent, Ikki would know which were misdirections and which were sincere, as even those ideas came from that person's identity.

Stealing someone's identity meant understanding their thoughts and feelings on the deepest level. Thus, Ikki decided to dub this particular technique "Perfect Vision."

At this point, Kirihara finally understood that what was frightening about Kurogane Ikki wasn't his exceptional swordsmanship or the once-a-day power boost he could use. No, it was his otherworldly observational skills with which he could peer into the true nature of whatever he wished that was truly terrifying. And Kirihara had been caught by those observational skills.

"I've seen through you. This battle's mine!"

As he said that, Ikki shot forward, heading straight for the trapped Hunter.

"S-Stay awaaaaay!"

Kirihara desperately pulled Oborotsuki's string as far back as he could, put all of his remaining mana into one last arrow, and shot it high into the sky. The arrow burst in midair, raining a hundred invisible arrows of light down on Ikki. It also riddled the stone floor of the arena with holes, causing it to crumble in

places. As Kirihara had no way of aiming the shower of arrows he'd created, they came down over a large area in a truly random pattern.

This was his other Noble Art, Million Rain. If Ikki was reading his thoughts, then he figured his best bet at winning was carpet-bombing half of the arena. It was an assumption that was very much correct, as this was, in fact, the best course of action he could have taken.

“Why?! Why won't any of them hit you?!”

However, Ikki was able to effortlessly bat aside the arrows that got close to him without slowing down even a little bit. Aside from the wounds he'd already received, he emerged unscathed from the cloud of dust created by Kirihara's Million Rain. Now that he'd seen through Kirihara's true nature, even an attack like this couldn't stop him.

“You're just wasting your time. Even if you try to empty your thoughts, subconsciously, you still want to beat me. You still want to *kill* me. There's bloodlust lingering in your fearful heart that you can't suppress. Try all you want to fire at random, but your will hasn't stopped guiding your actions.”

As long as there was some manner of will guiding Kirihara's actions, Ikki's Perfect Vision could see through them clearly. It took a certain level of martial training to unleash attacks devoid of bloodlust or other emotions, which Kirihara most certainly did not have. All his Million Rain had accomplished was launching more arrows; they weren't truly fired randomly. “It doesn't matter if you fire a hundred arrows or a thousand,” Ikki continued. “They're no match for my Ittou Shura!”

There was nothing Kirihara could do now. In the same way that a pro shogi player could see a hundred moves ahead, Ikki could predict and deal with any action Kirihara might take.

“Wait, stop! Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop! Listen to meeee! What the hell?! Am I really going to lose to this Rank F trash?! I'm not like you! People actually expect things out of me! I'm not a failure like you! I actually have face to lose! You can't beat me! It's not right! Stoooooop!”

But of course, Ikki had no intention of stopping. And Kirihara had no means of stopping him.

“W-Wait! This has to be some kind of sick joke! Stop! Come on, let’s just calm down here for a sec, okay?! That’s a blade you’re holding, you know that?! If you cut someone with it, they’ll bleed! That’s real bad news! You can’t just hurt someone like that! Let’s talk it out, okay?! W-Wait, I’ve got it! How about we settle this with rock-paper-scissors?! Come on, Kurogane-kun, we used to be classmates! We’re friends, aren’t we?!”

Ikki ignored Kirihara. After all, it was Kirihara himself who’d asked Ikki if he’d come here with the proper resolve. The moment Ikki had stepped into the ring, he’d prepared himself both to get hurt and to hurt others. Therefore, he would show Kirihara no mercy.

Ikki blocked the last few arrows Kirihara shot at him in a desperate panic, then raised his gleaming black blade high as he got within striking range.

“Haaaaah!”

“Eeeek! S-Stoop! Fine, I forfeit! I forfeit, so please don’t hurt meeeee!”

Ikki swung Intetsu down, and the place right below his blade began to glimmer with light. A second later, Kirihara became fully visible, and he fell onto his ass. He was completely unconscious, foaming at the mouth and with his eyes rolled up into the back of his head. However, he had no sword wounds on him. The tip of his nose had been lightly scratched, but the cut was so shallow it wasn’t even bleeding.

Ikki had known Kirihara would surrender. Because of that, he’d never intended to cut him in the first place.

I misread his position by a millimeter. Though Ikki hadn’t meant to cut Kirihara, his sword had lightly scratched him. Judging distance alone from just the force of an arrow had proved more difficult than Ikki had expected. *It looks like I need to train harder.*

Despite his near-perfect success, Ikki still wasn’t satisfied. Regardless, the Hunter had finally fallen.

“Kirihara Shizuya is unable to continue fighting! The winner is Kurogane Ikki!”

The referee’s shout signaled the end of the match.



“There you have it, folks! Against all odds, it was Rank F Kurogane Ikki who won the match! The very same Kurogane Ikki who wasn’t even allowed to attend classes last year has managed to defeat the strongest knight in our year! And what a splendid victory it was!”

After confirming that he had indeed won, Ikki relaxed, and the strength drained from his limbs. He’d been shot through numerous times and had lost a lot of blood. On top of that, Ittou Shura had ended, and the recoil from using it was hitting along with the pain of his injuries. Until now, he’d powered through with sheer grit, but his body could only take so much before it gave out.

“Congratulatio— Whoa! Kurogane just collapsed! It looked like he hit his head pretty hard too!”

“Oh no. Medics, get him into a capsule right now!” Saikyou shouted, and the support team loaded Ikki onto a stretcher and carted him away. By “capsule,” she of course meant an iPS capsule, which was a special recovery vat. There were a few next to every training arena, so thankfully Ikki’s life wasn’t in any danger.

The victor was carted off by the medical team, leaving Kirihara alone and unconscious in the arena. Once Ikki had been safely sequestered into an iPS capsule, the support staff returned to drag him off as well.

“And it looks like they’re taking Kirihara away as well. To think one of the favorites to be selected as a representative this year would lose this early on! It must have been quite a shock to him as well, as he shows no signs of waking back up despite being unhurt!”

As the crowd watched Kirihara get dragged off, one of his fangirls muttered, “He’s kind of...lame.”

“Was he crying at the end there? You know, when he was screaming, ‘Please don’t hurt me.’”

“I’m disappointed in him...”

“Come on, let’s go home. I’m not in the mood to watch any more matches.”

“Oh my, it looks like Kirihara’s cheerleading squad is leaving in droves,” Tsukuyomi said.

“Hmm, this might be a problem. We were hoping one of his friends would come pick him up.”

“It’s not like he’s hurt, so just leave him. He’ll wake up eventually.”

“I suppose. Er, at any rate, that concludes the fourth match of the day. The fifth match will begin after we clean up the ring, so fighters, please make your final preparations now.”

After she said that, Tsukuyomi turned the mic off and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Phew,” she sighed. “That...was an amazing match. I never imagined a Rank F knight would be able to break through Kirihara’s Area Invisible and end his perfect win streak.”

She turned to Saikyou to see what she had to say. However, the only thing in Saikyou’s seat was a small note that said, “I’m satisfied after that match, so I’m going home.”

“Not agaaaain! Someone, please swap with me! I can’t do this anymooore!”



At around the same time, the students were starting to file out of the stands.

Almost all of them had come to see just this match, so it wasn’t surprising that they were all leaving. However, two people were standing still against the flow of the crowd: Shizuku and Alisuin.

“I kind of feel bad for the people who’ll be fighting next. It’s clear the crowd has no interest in them,” Alisuin said casually. “Anyway, are you sure you don’t want to go see Ikki, Shizuku?”

Shizuku shook her head.

“Even if I went, he’ll probably be asleep for a while.”

“Isn’t part of love wanting to be by their side even when they’re asleep? Stella-chan certainly went running over to him immediately. Could it be that

you're actually willing to give the two of them some alone time?"

Shizuku puffed out her cheeks angrily and turned away from Alisuin.

"Today...is special. That woman did help Onii-sama win, after all."

Loath though she was to admit it, Shizuku had been happy when Stella had started yelling at everyone. She'd believed that no one else in the world understood her brother, or even tried to understand. And yet, Stella had boldly proclaimed that she admired Ikki's way of life. That was why Shizuku had reined in her burning desire to run to Ikki's side and let Stella have him all to herself for today. But just for today.

"I won't be this nice again, though," Shizuku added. "Only today."

"Heh heh heh. Shizuku."

"What? Do you think I'm just acting like a sore loser?"

"Not at all. I just...really like that considerate side of you, that's all."

"Mrr! Stop teasing me!" Shizuku blushed, then pouted because Alisuin had made her blush.

"Heh heh. My apologies. I promise I'll stop, so please cheer up. What do you want to do for the rest of the day, by the way? Watch the other matches?"

"I'm not very interested in any of them."

"Then how about we go out and get a fancy dinner somewhere? We won't be able to have a celebration party for Ikki seeing as he's not in any state to be moving around." While capsules healed physical injuries almost instantly, they couldn't do anything for the patient's exhaustion. Ikki would likely sleep for the rest of the day. And Stella would likely stay by his side until he woke up. "Since you're so kindly leaving those two alone, I'd say you deserve a reward," Alisuin said with a wink.

"In that case, I want to go somewhere with good liquor. I've already had my coming-of-age ceremony."

"Eheh heh. As you wish. I happen to know a restaurant with a very nice atmosphere that would fit the bill."

“I’m warning you now that in a few hours, I’m probably going to deeply regret letting that bitch have Onii-sama all to herself and drink myself silly to dull the pain. I hope you’re ready.”

“Eheh heh, I’m looking forward to it. Shall we go back to our room and get changed?” Alisuin joined the flow of people leaving the stands, and Shizuku followed after her.

As Shizuku stared at the backs of the exiting spectators, she muttered, “I wonder if the people who disparaged Onii-sama earlier still don’t believe that he’s strong.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Of course, there’s probably a few who refuse to accept reality, but I’d imagine all the strong students who are seriously aiming for the title of Seven Stars Sovereign have taken note of the knight known as Kurogane Ikki. I have no doubt they’ll be keeping a close eye on his upcoming matches. No one will ever be able to call him the Worst One anymore, at least.”

Alisuin’s prediction proved accurate. Before the day was over, people on various corners of the internet had given the failed knight a new nickname: the Uncrowned Blade Master. They were calling Ikki “Another One,” as if to prove that he would never again be known as the Worst One. But of course he wouldn’t. Not when he’d defeated one of the most likely candidates to make it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival.



A lone figure clad in red walked her way up the stairs of the fourth training field’s spectator stands, her geta clacking against the floor.

“That really was quite the match. I would have never guessed that the Rank F Worst One would actually manage to overcome the Hunter’s Area Invisible. Especially not through such an unconventional method. Being able to see through someone’s identity in the middle of a battle is no small feat.”

The figure was none other than Saikyou Nene, who had absconded from the commentator’s booth. She pushed a stray strand of hair out of her face as she continued muttering to herself.

“There isn’t even anyone in the top league who can pull off something like

that. No wonder Kuu-chan's called him her secret weapon. The selection matches are sure to be quite interesting. But I'd like to see how he fares against a stronger opponent next time. For example...this school's student council president."

As Saikyou reached the top row of the stands, she smiled at the four people standing there.

"Don't you esteemed members of Hagun Academy's student council agree?"

The mana swirling around these four knights was far greater than the Aura that surrounded the students filing out of the stands. They were all members of the Hagun Academy student council's top brass, and each possessed a famous title.

Vice President Misogi Uakata, known as Fifty-Fifty. Treasurer Toutokubara Kanata, known as Scharlach Frau. Secretary Saijou Ikazuchi, known as the Destroyer. And Head of General Affairs Tomaru Renren, known as Runner's High. After the president, these four were considered the strongest students in the school.

"It's a shame Touka-chan isn't here. I would've liked her to have seen today's battle. My gut's telling me her biggest rival in these selection matches is going to be Kuro-bou."

Misogi Uakata, a boy who looked young enough to be in kindergarten, burst out laughing.

"Aha ha ha. You're so mean, Saikyou-sensei."

"Oho ho. Indeed, that poor boy is working so hard. You shouldn't make fun of him like that," said a tall, blonde girl—Toutokubara Kanata. She was wearing a white dress that looked like it belonged on a French noblewoman, and though they were indoors, she was carrying a parasol.

"Oh? You seem quite confident. Are you that certain Kuro-bou won't be able to match someone who made it to the top four in last year's tournament?"

"Aha ha. Come on, Saikyou-sensei, you know what we're implying."

"Precisely. Last year's accomplishments have nothing to do with why that boy

stands no chance.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s quite simple. No matter how much a rat sharpens its fangs and hones its claws, it will never be able to defeat a lion.” Toutokubara looked into Saikyou’s eyes, her own pale blue eyes shining with unwavering conviction. “Our princess is so far above him that he’s not even worth her time.”

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Kurogane Shizuku

■PROFILE

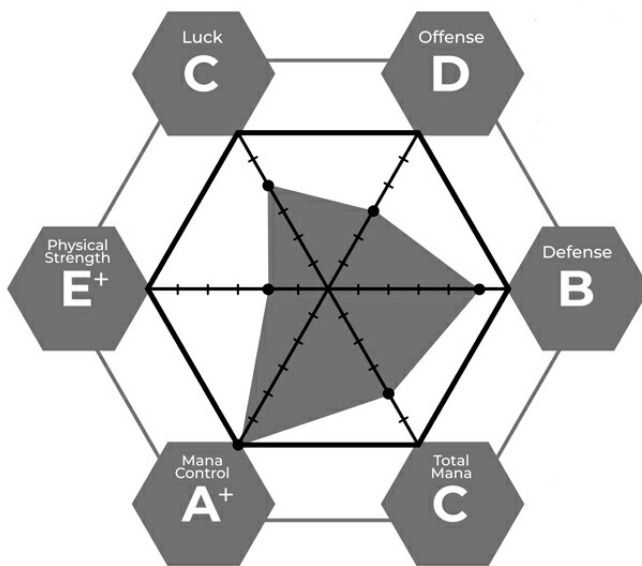
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 1-1

Blazer Rank: B

Noble Art: Pure Wave Lotus

Nickname: NO DATA

Summary: A girl who inherited the blood of a hero.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

Water excels at defense while having less offensive power than fire or lightning. Shizuku's stellar mana control more than makes up for that shortcoming, though! She can freeze the floor under a foe without them noticing, and even finely control a ball of water to asphyxiate her enemies! She's able to use her powers in versatile, novel ways, and if you underestimate her, you might find yourself in hot water!

Epilogue: Oath under the Moonlight

“Nh...”

Ikki could feel his consciousness stirring to wakefulness, and he submitted to the urge, opening his eyes. He found himself staring at an unfamiliar, dimly lit ceiling.

Am I in the infirmary?

He was indeed. After Ikki had been healed in the iPS capsule, the medical staff had transferred him to a bed in the infirmary. He turned his head to look out the window and saw that the moon was out. It seemed he'd been asleep for hours.

I guess I did get banged up pretty bad.

He didn't feel any pain now, however, which meant that he'd made a full recovery. Though he'd been seriously injured, those capsules could heal nearly any wound. The only thing that hadn't been treated was the exhaustion that came from using Ittou Shura.

“Zzz...”

“Hmm?” He heard someone breathing softly at his bedside and rose to a sitting position to see who it was. “Stella...”

She was sleeping peacefully on the chair next to his bed. He vaguely recalled her calling out to him as the medics had been carrying him away, just before he'd lost consciousness.

She must have stayed by my side this whole time.

Ikki felt his heart flutter a little as the realization hit him.

“Ah.”

Looking closer, he noticed that there was a line of drool spilling from Stella's half-open mouth. It seemed even princesses drooled in their sleep.

Ikki suspected that she wouldn't like being seen like this, though, so he took a handkerchief out of his pocket and gently wiped the drool away. He did his best not to wake her, but unfortunately, his ministrations weren't soft enough.

"Mmm... Fwaaah."

Stella hadn't been in a very deep sleep, and she woke up the moment his handkerchief touched her lips.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Ikki?" She blinked sleepily for a few seconds, then she noticed the handkerchief in Ikki's hands that was wet with her drool. "Waaah!"

Blushing, she snatched the handkerchief out of Ikki's hands.

"What did you see?" she asked after a few seconds, her tone making it clear that she would cut Ikki down if he said the wrong thing.

"N-Nothing," he replied hesitantly.

"Liar."

"Yeah... I'm sorry."

"Waaaaah!" Stella blushed even brighter and hurriedly mopped up her mouth with the handkerchief. "This sucks! Why did you have to wake up now?! Could you possibly have any worse timing?!"

"I really don't think this one is my fault..."

"Shut up! I'll buy you a replacement handkerchief!"

"Huh? Oh, no, it's fine. I don't mind."

"I mind!"

"Oh, okay. Sorry." Ikki raised his hands in surrender.

As the conversation died and the room fell silent, Stella's stomach suddenly grumbled.

"Nooo! Come ooon!"

"Calm down, Stella. There's no one else here, but this is still the infirmary, you know."

“Anyone would cry if they woke up to this! This is all your fault, Ikki! You’re the reason I’m hungry, you idiot!”

Stella beat Ikki with her fists, but there was no force behind her blows. Actually, there was a little force behind them, but seeing as she’d stayed with Ikki all this time even though it had meant ignoring her hunger, he couldn’t really complain. He bowed his head in apology.

“I’m sorry. I showed you an uncool side of me today and made you worry.”

“I wasn’t worried! There were capsules nearby, so I knew those injuries wouldn’t be a problem, and—”

“But you stayed by my side this whole time,” Ikki said, pointedly looking at Stella’s stomach. She blushed again and averted her gaze.

“Wh-What choice did I have? Have you forgotten that I’m your maid? It’s only natural for a maid to look after her master. You don’t need to thank me.”

“Oh yes I do. If you hadn’t been there for me, Stella, I might not have won today’s match.”

Ikki had been on the verge of giving up until Stella had told him that she loved him the way he was. She had reminded him that he liked himself in spite of how everyone around him kept saying he’d never amount to anything—that even if hearing it frustrated him, he wouldn’t give up like they wanted him to. It was because of her that he had been able to recall those things, and that was why he wanted to tell her how he felt.

“Hey, Stella.”

“Like I said, you really don’t need to thank—”

It wasn’t gratitude that Ikki wanted to convey, though.

“I love you too.”

He laid his feelings bare before her. His confession was so sudden that Stella just stared blankly at him for a few seconds. But eventually, understanding dawned on her, and she tumbled out of her chair.

“Eep!”

“Whoa! A-Are you okay?!”

“I-I-I-Idiot! D-Do you have any idea what you’re saying?!”

“Yep. Like I said, I love you, Stella.”

He’d already resolved himself to confess, so he wasn’t embarrassed to say it again. However, Stella hadn’t expected it at all, and she blushed brighter than ever before.

“J-Just so you know, when I said I l-loved you, I was talking about your way of life and your determination, okay?! I-It’s not like there was anything r-r-r-r-romantic behind it or anything! Plus, I’m a princess! I couldn’t m-marry a commoner!”

“I know,” Ikki said with a nod. “I understand that completely. I’m a guy with no social standing who’s been exiled by his family, while you have your position to think about. That’s why I didn’t say anything until now. But after what you said today, I couldn’t hold it in any longer.” His feelings had grown too strong to hide. “I’m really glad I met you, Stella. If I don’t tell you this now, I’m not sure I’ll ever get another chance. Don’t worry, though. It’s all right if you don’t feel the same way.”

Ikki was fully prepared to get shot down right here and now. It would hurt, of course, but letting Stella know how he felt and getting rejected was a much better option than never telling her how much she meant to him.

“That’s not fair...” Stella finally muttered, puffing her cheeks out sulkily.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not fair that only you get to be honest about how you feel.”

“Huh?”

Ikki had no idea what Stella was trying to say. He had the feeling she was mad, but he couldn’t understand why.

Is it because a commoner like me dared to have feelings for her?

“Close your eyes.”

Is she going to hit me?!

“Um, S-Stella? I’m sorry if I made you mad, but—”

“Just shut up and close your eyes!”

“R-Roger!”

Stella’s tone brooked no disagreement.

Can all royalty sound so forceful when they want to?

A little scared, Ikki closed his eyes. After a few seconds, he felt something warm and slightly wet touch his cheek.



Wait...

Ikki was so stunned that his eyes flew open. Stella's face was right next to his, red as a beet.

"S-Stella, did you just..."

Dense as he was, even Ikki could tell that she'd kissed him on the cheek. However, since he'd thought she was mad at him, he was taken completely by surprise. He just stared blankly at her, unable to form a coherent sentence.

Stella looked up at him, her eyes full of longing.

"D-Don't get the wrong idea. This has nothing to do with the fact that you're my master or that I'm a princess or any of that. I just did what I felt like doing. A-And just so you know, I'd never do this if you ordered me to or anything! I won't kiss someone I don't like!"

"So you like me too, then?"

Stella averted her gaze, and after a very long pause, she nodded bashfully.

"B-But I've never, um...gone out with a boy before, so you might end up disappointed with a girlfriend like me."

"I-I would never! Besides, I've never gone out with anyone before either."

Indeed, Ikki had never had a girlfriend before. He'd technically had his first kiss stolen away by his little sister, but otherwise, he had no experience with women. Stella perked up a little upon learning that.

"Does that mean I'm your first girlfriend?"

"Y-Yeah."

"I see... Hee hee, that makes me kinda happy."

Seeing Stella happy made Ikki happy as well, and he smiled.

"Sorry, you're just so cute that I can't help myself."

"Wheh?!"

Ikki pulled Stella close and embraced her.

"Thank you. I'm really glad to know you feel the same way," he muttered

quietly.

“Sheesh. Today’s special, so I’ll let this slide. But you have to be gentler next time or I’ll sock you good,” Stella said with a sigh. Nevertheless, she wrapped her arms around Ikki’s back and returned his embrace.

Stella was warm and soft, but Ikki could also sense a core of pure determination burning within her. It was that strength that he loved most of all.

“Hey, Stella.”

“What?”

“Earlier, you said you think you can reach even greater heights if you’re with me, right?”

“I did.”

“Well, I feel that way about you too. If I’m with you, I’m sure I can get much stronger than I could if I was alone. So let’s aim for the pinnacle of knighthood together. I want it to be you who I fight for the title of the strongest knight.”

Ikki let go of Stella and stared into her scarlet eyes. He wanted to walk the same path as her, aim for the same goal as her, and duel her again on an even grander stage. At first, Stella looked surprised, but then her eyes began to blaze with a fierce light.

“Bring it on. Next time, you’ll be the one tasting defeat.”

What Ikki wished for was exactly what Stella wished for as well. It was precisely because she loved and respected Ikki more than anyone that she wanted to fight him again. After all, she was aiming to become the strongest knight, just like him. But since only one could stand at the top, it was natural they’d have to fight for the throne.

And so, on that silent night under the full moon, the two of them swore an oath. No matter what powerful foes stood in their way, they’d win every battle they fought so that the two of them could once again face each other as rivals in the battle to decide the Seven Stars Sovereign.

“It’s a promise,” the two of them said in unison.

Afterword

To those of you seeing me for the first time, nice to meet you! And to those of you who are familiar with me through *Danzai no Exceed* or *Kanojo no Koi ga Hanashitekurenai!*, nice to see you again! Thank you very much for picking up my newest series, *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*.

I decided to try my hand at writing a battle school series this time around. Honestly, ever since I first won an award for *Danzai no Exceed*, I've wanted to write a supernatural battle story that's structured a lot like a sports series. Something along the lines of Awamura Akamitsu-sensei's *Mugen no Linkage* series that ran under the GA label. And now that I've finally gotten to, I'm overjoyed!

I hope everyone enjoyed reading this volume as much as I did writing it. If so, I hope you continue following along with the journey of our failed knight.

I had help from a lot of people to get this volume out, and I'd like to take the opportunity to thank them all.

First off, I'm extremely grateful to Won-san for his wonderful illustrations. Thank you so much for meeting all of my unreasonable requests, like including ripped tights, garter belts, and bras and panties (during Stella's strip scene) in your illustrations!

I'd also like to thank my editor, Ohara-san. You helped me a lot when it came to fine-tuning this volume, and for that, I'm eternally grateful. Thank you especially for all your help in making the perfect summary for the book!

Many thanks as well to the people in the sales department for all the advice you gave me!

Last but not least, a big thank-you to you, dear reader, for picking up *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. It's thanks to all of you that I'm able to keep writing, and I can't thank you enough for that! Let us meet again in volume 2!

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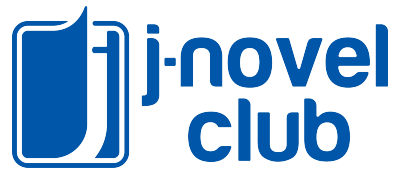


**“Karsalitio
Salamandra!”**

Her blade blazed as
brightly as the sun.
In the face of such
overwhelming heat,
Kurogane Ikki
smiled.







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by Riku Misora

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