

Riku Misora
Illust. Won



Chivalry of a Failed Knight

All new translation by
j-novel club

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Chivalry of a Failed Knight 3



“With
this battle,
I’ll overcome
my limits!”

Lorelei
Kurogane
Shizuku

Thunderbolt
Toudou
Touka



“Hey, Ikki...
Do you
want to
have sex
with me?”

“Dad...”

“If I manage to
become the
Seven Stars
Sovereign,
will you finally
accept me as
your son?”

Head of the
Kurogane household

Iron Tyrant
Kurogane
Itsuki



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Prologue: Shizuku's Challenge

Kurogane Shizuku was reminiscing about her childhood. No matter what she'd done, she'd never been scolded. Whether she'd hit other kids, stolen—and then sometimes broken—their toys, or otherwise misbehaved, no one had ever said a word. All because she'd shown an exceptional amount of talent as a Blazer from a young age.

"I'm so sorry, Shizuku-chan." That was what the mother of the kid she'd been bullying had said to her. The woman had even slapped her child and forced them to apologize. *"You say you're sorry too!"*

"I'm sorry," the child had said through gritted teeth.

Shizuku had always found such scenes pathetic. Both the children who cowered before her strength and the adults who worshipped her power so much that they allowed such things to happen disgusted her. However, all of the people around her had been like that. They bowed and scraped before anyone stronger than them, piling on insincere praise and empty flattery. She'd despised the lot of them.

In time, she'd grown to despise all of humanity. Not only that, she hated that she, too, was stuck being human. And she took that hate and anger out on those weaker than her. Hearing the screams of the weak distracted her from her own self-loathing.

There was one boy, however, who hadn't allowed her to get away with whatever she wished just because she was strong—her older brother, Kurogane Ikki. One day, when she'd been tormenting another hapless child, he'd come up and slapped her. "It's wrong to bully the weak!" he'd told her.

At first, Shizuku hadn't even processed what had happened. Her parents had never once scolded her, much less hit her. After a few seconds, though, her cheek had begun to sting, and tears had welled up in her eyes. Seeing that, the adults around her had paled and started yelling at Ikki to apologize. And when he'd refused, they'd attacked him. But he'd kept stubbornly claiming that he'd

done nothing he needed to apologize for.

Shizuku had never met someone like him before. Someone who called out injustice when he saw it, regardless of how strong the other person was. Though the pain had surprised her so much she'd started crying, in truth, she had been happy. Her whole life, she'd been looking for someone like Ikki. Someone she could respect as a fellow human being. It hadn't mattered that he didn't spoil her or that he was strict with her. She had finally found someone she could truly look up to, and she'd been certain that if she followed in Ikki's footsteps, she wouldn't grow up to be like all the pathetic adults in her life.

But back then, I didn't do a single thing to help you.

She'd failed to improve her brother's circumstances. Worse, she hadn't done anything to ease his crushing loneliness.



"First-year Kurogane Shizuku-san. It's time for your match. Please step into the arena."

Upon hearing that, Shizuku slowly opened her eyes. There was a dimly lit corridor in front of her that led into the arena. She started walking down that corridor, still reminiscing about the past.

I only discovered how badly the rest of our family treated you after you left, Onii-sama.

When Ikki had run away from home, no one had bothered to go looking for him. Everyone had acted as if he'd never existed in the first place. It was only then that Shizuku had realized how much pain her beloved elder brother had been hiding behind his gentle smile.

Once she'd learned the truth, she'd come to despise the Kurogane family —her family. At the same time, she'd decided that if no one else was going to love her brother, she'd shower him with so much love that he wouldn't need anyone else. But if she was going to do that, she needed to become stronger. She still relied on him far too much. Until she was strong enough that she could stand as his equal and support him as much as he'd supported her, she wouldn't be able to stop him if he left again. And if that happened, he'd be all

alone once more.

In order to prevent that future, Shizuku had to grow stronger. The world would take notice of Ikki sooner or later. She knew how strong he was, so she knew it was only a matter of time. Thus, she'd trained as hard as she could, wanting to be strong enough to stand by his side when that time came. As a result, she'd climbed all the way up to Rank B. But that still wasn't enough. Ikki was aiming to become the Seven Stars Battle Festival champion. If she wanted to be his equal, she needed to get much stronger.

"It's time to introduce the combatants for the twelfth match of the day! Coming out of the blue corner, we have Kurogane Ikki's younger sister and the school's most famous first-year after the Crimson Princess. She's won all fifteen of her matches so far and proved to the whole school that elemental affinities aren't the be-all and end-all when it comes to a duel! Give it up for Kurogane Shizuku, also known as Lorelei! Will she use her superb mana control to drag yet another opponent into the depths, or is this where her undefeated streak comes to an end?!"

Raucous applause filled the air as Shizuku entered the arena. However, she barely even heard the deafening cheers. All of her focus was on the person walking into the arena from the other side.

"And in the red corner, we have our school's very own student council president and current top-ranked Blazer! Last year, she made it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival semifinals. Her defeat was to Bukyoku Academy's Moroboshi, who went on to become the winner of last year's tournament! She's spent the past year training harder than ever, and of course also boasts a perfect win streak for this year's selection matches! Her unbeatable signature move is faster than lightning and can cut through steel! Will our famous Thunderbolt, Toudou Touka, defeat today's opponent in a flash as well, or is today the day she finally gets dethroned?!"

Toudou Touka came to a halt around twenty meters in front of Shizuku, her long brown hair fluttering in the breeze. Even from a distance, Shizuku could tell that Touka was a completely different caliber of fighter than the opponents she'd faced thus far.



Yeah, she's definitely on another level.

Just being near Touka felt so oppressive that Shizuku found it hard to breathe. Goose bumps rose along her arms, and Touka's piercing glare was enough to make her break out in a cold sweat. Perceptive as Shizuku was, she could tell that Touka was without a doubt stronger than her. But that only made her fighting spirit burn more fiercely. Ever since enrolling in Hagun Academy, she'd been dying for a chance to truly test herself. And now, she was finally up against an opponent who would push her to her limit.

Let's see how strong one of the top four students in the country really is.

For the past five years, Shizuku had trained tirelessly, working to catch up to her beloved brother. The time had come for her to learn just how far her love for him could take her.

With this battle, I'll overcome my limits!

Just then, the announcer called out, "Let the battle begin!" and the buzzer signaling the start of the match rang.

Chapter 1: Lorelei vs. Thunderbolt

The battle between Lorelei and Thunderbolt, two of the strongest Blazers in the school, started off with an unexpected lull.

“Wh-What’s going on?! Neither side is making a move!”

Touka and Shizuku were slowly circling the ring, keeping a set distance from each other. Shizuku’s silver kodachi, Yoishigure, was pointed at the ground, and she made no move to raise it. Meanwhile, Touka’s Device, a katana called Narukami, was still resting in its black lacquered sheath. A minute had passed since the start of the battle, yet the two still hadn’t crossed blades. Despite that, the atmosphere was exceedingly tense. Over a hundred people had come to see this highly anticipated battle, and none of them dared speak even a word as they watched with bated breath.

“I wouldn’t want to make the first move either,” Stella muttered softly to Ikki, who was standing next to her.

“They both want to let their opponent strike first to get a feel for them.” It was Alisuin rather than Ikki who responded. “They’re both Rank B Blazers with enough reach to hit each other from the edge of the arena. Since they’re both within each other’s effective range already, they can’t afford to do anything careless.”

“Alice is right, but Shizuku *really* doesn’t want to be the one to move in first here. Toudou-san can strike at any range, but she excels at close-range combat,” Ikki chimed in.

“Is that signature move of hers the announcer was talking about a close-range attack?”

“Yeah. They weren’t exaggerating about how strong it is either. Her Noble Art, which is also called Thunderbolt, uses electromagnetism to allow her to draw her blade at lightning speed. In fact, her nickname comes from the name of her Noble Art.”

By channeling lightning through her sheath and across the surface of her blade, Touka could generate a powerful electromagnetic field that accelerated her quickdraw to supersonic speed. Human reflexes weren't fast enough to react to something like that.

"Toudou-san has won every single match she's had the opportunity to use Thunderbolt in," Ikki noted. "It's a guaranteed hit that's sure to take out any opponent."

"Wait, but she lost in last year's semifinals, didn't she? Doesn't that mean last year's champion was able to beat her Thunderbolt?" Stella asked.

"Not quite," Ikki replied with a shake of his head. "Last year's champion, Moroboshi-kun, uses a spear. I watched the recordings of Toudou-san's battle with him, and he stayed outside of Thunderbolt's range the entire time. In other words, even the current reigning champion was afraid of that move. There hasn't been a single person who's beaten Toudou-san in a close-range fight yet. Everyone who's gotten close has been cut down by that lightning-fast slash. Shizuku knows that as well."

"Which is why she's keeping her distance?"

"Yep. She's probably planning on fighting from as far away as possible. Long-range fights are her forte anyway. There's no reason for her to close the distance."

Shizuku was content to wait for her opponent to make the first move. For now, though, it seemed as though time was standing still as the two slowly circled each other.

"Things will heat up quickly once Toudou-san goes on the offensive, though."

A few seconds after Ikki said that, Touka finally made her move.



Touka dashed forward, accelerating up to top speed in an instant. With her agility, she could close the gap of twenty meters in less than a second. But of course, Shizuku wasn't going to let her approach without a fight. She had been watching and waiting for the moment Touka would strike and thus was able to react immediately.

“Freeze—Frost Field!”

The ground beneath Shizuku froze, and ice covered the entire arena before Touka could take so much as a second step. Naturally, if someone ran at full speed over such icy ground, they’d slip. Touka would be forced to slow her advance, leaving Shizuku free to bombard her from a safe distance, and so Shizuku pointed Yoishigure at Touka and created three Water Prison Bubbles in quick succession. If any of them managed to cover Touka’s head, they’d stick to her until she fainted from lack of oxygen.

With how slippery the ground was, it would be exceedingly difficult to dodge all three bubbles. Touka was no ordinary Blazer, however. She was one of the best student knights in the nation. She immediately realized that Shizuku was trying to slow her down, so instead of decelerating, she let herself slip, using the frictionless ground to increase her speed. That allowed her to safely dash under the three Water Prison Bubbles. She then twirled atop the icy field like a figure skater and unsheathed Narukami, firing a crescent of lightning at Shizuku’s neck despite still being a good distance away.

Touka had not only evaded Shizuku’s attack, she’d managed to counterattack while doing so. The moment Shizuku had transformed the arena into a field of ice, Touka had mentally mapped out what she needed to do. Shizuku had never fought someone who was able to analyze and react to sudden changes so quickly in the heat of battle, but she had known from the start that Touka would be able to exceed all her expectations.

Immediately, Shizuku summoned a wall of water thirty meters wide, creating a barrier to separate her from Touka. This was Pure Wave Lotus, her defense-oriented Noble Art. From the start, she’d known a single exchange wouldn’t be enough to take down a foe as powerful as the famed Thunderbolt. Moreover, she knew Touka could use long-range attacks, which was why she’d been prepared to go back on the defensive at any time.

The lightning crescent Touka had launched slammed into the water barrier and evaporated part of it but fizzled out before it could penetrate all the way through. Shizuku didn’t have any time to catch her breath, though.

“Ah!”

Touka, too, had predicted that one attack wouldn't be enough to bring Shizuku down, and so she kept unleashing lightning crescents one after another at the water barrier. Her offense was relentless and lacked any of the elegance that had been in her initial counterattack. This was a display of pure brute force. But while it lacked style, it was undoubtedly the right play.

At present, Touka possessed one key advantage over Shizuku: she could use her techniques much faster. In order to prevent her water barrier from conducting electricity, Shizuku had to ensure that every single drop was free of impurities—a delicate operation that took both time and concentration. Meanwhile, all Touka had to do was enchant her blade with electricity and let loose. There was no need for minute adjustments, so she could keep slashing away.

After just one exchange, Touka had figured that out and begun making full use of this decisive advantage. She had assumed that a barrage of lightning strikes would be the hardest thing for Shizuku to deal with right now, and she'd been absolutely correct. Shizuku had no choice but to focus solely on defense, or else she risked being overwhelmed. However, Touka's attacks were heavy enough that even when Shizuku was expending all her energy on maintaining her Pure Wave Lotus, it was slowly being chipped away. A few dozen lightning blasts was enough to evaporate the last of the water protecting Shizuku, leaving her exposed. Touka immediately raised Narukami again, preparing to deliver the decisive blow.

“Kh!”

But then, she suddenly stopped and looked down at her feet. Hands made of water had risen out of the frozen ground and were reaching for her legs. The moment they grabbed her, they froze, pinning her in place. A second later, a shadow appeared above her head. She hurriedly looked up, but it was too late. A pillar of ice was hurtling down toward her, and it was already inches away from her face.

While she'd been defending, Shizuku had planned her next move. Touka might have been able to read situations and adapt to them quickly, but Shizuku excelled at reading ten moves ahead and preparing for every eventuality. Indeed, she had led Touka into thinking that speed was her biggest advantage,

and by focusing on defense, she'd made Touka believe that defending was all she could do. All the while, she'd been channeling her mana through the ground, slowly creating the arms that would hold Touka in place. She'd simultaneously gathered all the steam Touka had created by destroying her Pure Wave Lotus and transformed it into the ice pillar that was now bearing down on her.

Working on three different highly technical spells at the same time was impossible for most Blazers, but not for Shizuku. Her mana control was better than some Rank A Blazers'. In that particular field, she was stronger even than Stella.

The pillar of ice crashed into the ground, splitting the ring in half and sending cracks running all the way up to the spectator stands. The pillar itself, however, was undamaged, standing tall in the center of the arena like a frozen gravestone. Nobody watching the battle thought Touka could possibly get back up after that. Shizuku did, though. She could tell that Touka wasn't down yet. The atmosphere was still as tense as before.

Confirming Shizuku's suspicion, there was a brief flash, and her ice pillar was cleaved in twain. Standing directly underneath it was the Thunderbolt, completely unharmed. The fighting had been so fierce that the arena itself was now a pile of rubble, but neither fighter had so much as a scratch on them. So far, the two Rank B Blazers seemed equally matched.



"H-Holy crap! This is one hell of a match! That whole exchange was so jaw-dropping that I completely forgot to comment on it!" the announcer shouted, remembering her job at long last. That broke the spell over the spectators as well, and they started excitedly talking to one another.

"Wh-What's with those two?! Are they even human?!"

"Our student council president is so friggin' cool!"

"We already knew that, dumbass! She made it to the semifinals last year, remember?! What's *really* crazy is how that first-year's keeping up with her!"

"Lorelei managed to defend and attack at the same time, and she even threw

out feints while doing it. Just how many moves ahead is she reading?!”

“Tell me about it! But the student council president managed to handle it all!”

“Those two are monsters, I’m telling you! It’s crazy what Rank B Blazers are like when they get serious!”

“This battle’s definitely got the crowd stirred up!” the announcer shouted. “I don’t blame them! This is a nationals-level match! Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if either of these two ends up being this year’s Seven Stars Sovereign! What’s truly amazing is that despite the fierce exchange we just witnessed, both sides are completely unhurt! They look evenly matched for now, but who will the goddess of victory smile upon today?!”

“Nice going, Shizuku!” Stella cheered.

“I knew she was strong, but I didn’t realize she was *this* strong,” Alisuin said, impressed.

Neither of them had expected Shizuku to fare this well against Hagun’s strongest fighter. This was ironclad proof that Shizuku was strong enough to contend with the best of the best in the nation.

“At this rate, she might actually win!” Stella exclaimed.

Though she was always bickering with Shizuku, Stella didn’t hate the girl. On the contrary, the two of them shared a strong bond as girls who loved the same boy. Stella wished for Shizuku’s victory from the bottom of her heart. And since Shizuku was putting up such a strong fight against a lightning user, the element she had the worst matchup against, Stella was starting to think victory might be a realistic prospect. But while she and Alisuin were hopeful, Ikki’s expression was grim.

“Evenly matched,” huh? I don’t know about that...



“Those two do appear evenly matched, don’t they, Kanata?”

“They certainly do, Vice President.”

Misogi Utakata and Toutokubara Kanata were watching the match from the side of the stands opposite Ikki and the others.

“We really did get an amazing batch of first-years this year. It’s kind of scary to think about, actually. If they turn out to be problem children, it’s going to be our job to stop them, you know,” Utakata said with a shiver.

“Aha ha. That’s a good worry to have. It means we’ll be able to graduate knowing Hagun’s in good hands,” Kanata said with a graceful laugh. She tipped her hat to Utakata, then turned back to the arena. “But I’m surprised Lorelei is able to keep up with our princess.”

“Yeah. They’re definitely evenly matched. I didn’t think any of the first-years except Kurogane-kun and Stella-chan were this strong,” Utakata replied. However, neither he nor Kanata looked at all worried. “Though that’s only when they’re fighting at long range.”

This was precisely why Ikki looked so worried as well. The girls’ previous exchange had made it painfully clear to him who the match favored. Touka was invincible at close range, and there was nothing in Shizuku’s arsenal that could change that. In other words, Shizuku’s only chance of winning was through a long-range battle.

Just being on par with Touka at long range wasn’t good enough, though. She needed to have at least a seven-to-three advantage or there was no hope for her. However, she’d failed to deal any damage to Touka throughout their lengthy clash, all of which had happened at long range. If Shizuku was only evenly matched at long range and at an overwhelming disadvantage at close range, that meant the overall situation leaned in Touka’s favor.

“Besides, Touka hasn’t even gotten serious yet,” Utakata said with a smile.

Shizuku was a Rank B Blazer, but her mana control was Rank A material. It was unlikely that anyone as skilled at fine-tuned spells and pinpoint attacks as her would show up even in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. This was a rare opportunity for Touka to get experience fighting these types of foes. It was for this reason that she wasn’t trying to force a close-range battle just yet and had allowed Shizuku to fight her at long range. Now, she had a much better grasp of how a first-rate water-aspected Blazer fought.

“Touka must be happy she gets to face such a skilled opponent before the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

“Indeed. Though I believe she’s learned all she can now. Besides, if this match drags on too long, it will impact the scheduling for the later matches, and that’s not something the student council president would condone.”



Just as Kanata had said, Touka soon made her move. The ice clinging to her legs and around her feet started to melt—she was using the heat her lightning generated to dispel Shizuku’s Frost Field. Once the ice was gone from the arena, Touka leveled Narukami at Shizuku, making it clear that she was ready to end things. Her piercing gaze caused Shizuku’s expression to stiffen.

I don’t understand. As Shizuku leveled Yoishigure at Touka in return, one big question remained in her mind. During their last exchange, Touka had somehow managed to react in time to protect herself from Shizuku’s ice pillar. *How did she manage to do that?*

Shizuku’s mana control was far greater than Touka’s. Not even Stella, a Rank A Blazer, had mana control as polished as Shizuku. Shizuku was certain she’d camouflaged her surprise attack perfectly. There was no way Touka should have been able to sense what she was doing with her mana.

Furthermore, a human’s biggest blind spot was the area directly above them. Even martial artists who possessed a keen sixth sense and could sense opponents who’d gotten behind them had a much harder time noticing things above them. It was just how humans were hardwired. And yet Touka had noticed the surprise attack in time to react and cut straight through Shizuku’s ice pillar.

It’s like...she sees something I can’t.

Shizuku desperately racked her brain to try to figure out what that something was. But before she could, there was a large gust of wind, and Touka was suddenly right in front of her, with Narukami poised to strike.

“Wha—”

Shizuku gasped in surprise. Just a second ago, Touka had been dozens of meters away, but now, she was within striking range.

“Ngh!”

Not letting her surprise freeze her in place, Shizuku immediately leaped backward, barely evading Touka's horizontal slash. She flipped over while in the air and placed her left hand on the ground. A powerful jet of water burst from her palm, propelling her even farther backward and placing her a safe distance away from Touka. It was a marvelously executed dodge, but unlike all of Shizuku's previous actions, this was one that hadn't been planned ahead of time. Now, Shizuku was half panicking internally and was on the verge of losing her cool.

I don't get how she's doing that!

Shizuku was positive she hadn't let Touka out of her sight for even a millisecond. Even so, Touka had somehow closed the distance between them without making so much as a sound.

"Ooh, that was a close one! Kurogane was keeping up with Toudou's movements before, so what could have happened?! It seemed to me like she spaced out for a second there!"

Me, space out? Shizuku frowned as she listened to the announcer. There was no way she would let her concentration slip during a match. But the announcer's words made it clear that it'd looked that way to a third party. Touka had approached using the same straightforward dash as before, but somehow, Shizuku had simply not noticed it. *No, that's not possible.*

Either way, Shizuku couldn't let that happen again. She honed her focus even further, keeping her attention fixed solely on her opponent. But even though she kept her vision trained on Touka, before she knew it, Touka was once again right in front of her, swinging Narukami at her.

"Aaaaah?!"

This time, Shizuku didn't have enough time to dodge, and Narukami left a deep diagonal gash that went from her shoulder to her hip.

"Whoa! That was a deep cut! Kurogane didn't even dodge Toudou's strike this time around! Will she be able to keep fighting after that?!"

But just when everyone thought the match was over, Shizuku's body turned to water and fell apart. A second later, the real Shizuku reappeared a good

distance behind Touka.

“Th-That was a water clone! It seems Kurogane evaded Toudou’s strike yet aga— Or not!” The announcer cut herself short as she took a closer look at Shizuku. Indeed, there was blood dripping from a cut on Shizuku’s left hand. “It looks like her left hand got cut, so it wasn’t a perfect dodge this time! At long last, first blood has been drawn! The injury it caused isn’t major, but it looks like Toudou has gotten the first hit in!”

“Ngh!”

I keep missing her until it’s too late! Shizuku cradled her injured hand as her mind raced. She couldn’t figure out what trick Touka was using to make herself disappear like that. However, one thing was certain. *I can’t read her movements anymore!*

Indeed, it was clear even to the spectators that the two combatants were no longer evenly matched.



Once the scales had tipped in Touka’s favor, it turned into a one-sided beatdown. Shizuku was forced to stay on the defensive, running around the ring to try to stay out of Touka’s reach. But Touka was faster, and because Shizuku was always reacting late to her approaches, she had to perform desperate, risky dodges that shaved away at her stamina. Before long, she was so exhausted that she could barely stay on her feet.

“What’s going on here? At first, the two were evenly matched, but now, Lorelei is suddenly stuck on the defensive. What could have caused such a dramatic shift?!”

The announcer looked just as confused as Shizuku. From her outside viewpoint, she couldn’t see what was making it so hard for Shizuku to keep track of Touka, and thus she couldn’t understand why Shizuku was being pressed so hard. She *could* see what was clear to everyone watching the fight, however: who was winning.

“She should just surrender...”

“Guess it was too much to hope a first-year would beat our student council

president.”

“I thought there was a chance at first, but yeah, this is just sad to watch.”

“What, you’re leaving already?”

“Yeah. This fight’s over. Our student council president’s just too strong.”

The spectators’ earlier excitement had vanished. They’d convinced themselves that no matter how hard a mere first-year tried, she wouldn’t be able to beat Hagun Academy’s strongest Blazer. As a result, they felt silly for ever having thought that Shizuku had a chance.

Stella, however, refused to accept this. She turned to Ikki and asked, “Ikki, what happened to Shizuku?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can tell just by looking, right? She’s suddenly reacting way slower to her opponent’s attacks.”

“Stella-chan’s right. From our perspective, the president is just moving normally, but it looks like Shizuku can’t see her until the last second,” Alisuin added.

Ikki could see that as well, of course. But he could see a bit deeper and was able to puzzle out the reason that was happening too.

“You’re right. Shizuku can’t see her.”

“Huh?”

“Shizuku can’t see the Thunderbolt while she’s moving. I experienced something like this myself once, so I can tell what’s happening here.” Before his first match, Ikki had met with the Demon Princess, Saikyou Nene. “Back then, Saikyou-sensei went from being half the room away to right in front of me without me realizing it. I’d kept my eyes on her the whole time, but she still managed to catch me by surprise. I suspect the Thunderbolt is using a similar kind of martial art footwork to achieve the same effect.”

“Aha ha. I should have known you’d figure it out, Kurogane,” a voice called out from a few rows above them. When Ikki looked up, he saw a short woman in a stylish kimono and a taller woman wearing a stiff suit walking down toward

them.

“Yo. Long time no see.”

“Saikyou-sensei, Director, did you need something from us?” Alisuin asked.

“Nah, we just happened to spot you, so we thought we’d say hi,” Shinguuji Kurono replied. It seemed the two of them had just come to see how this battle between Rank B Blazers would play out.

Stella turned to Nene and asked, “Nene-sensei, you said Ikki figured it out, so does that mean he’s right?”

“Yep,” Saikyou answered with a nod. “Toudou’s using Stealth Step, a special kind of martial art that combines footwork with breathing techniques to make it harder for your opponent to perceive you. Here, let me show you.”

“Wha—”

Saikyou went from being a good five meters away from Stella to being right in front of her without Stella noticing. Moreover, when Stella looked down, she saw that Saikyou was groping her.

“Waaah?!”

“There, see? Anyway, wow, these are some fine melons you’ve got. They’re so big and soft.”

“Eeeek! Wh-Wh-Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I was hoping mine would get bigger if I fondled them.”

“Fondle your own, then!”

“I don’t have anything *to* fondle!”

“Don’t get mad at *me* for that!”

Kurono ignored Stella and Saikyou’s bickering and turned to Ikki. “Kurogane, you’ve already finished analyzing Stealth Step, haven’t you?” she said.

“More or less,” Ikki replied, nodding. “If you asked me to replicate it, I think I could.”

“Hey, Ikki, how exactly does that ‘Stealth Step’ thing work?” Stella asked,

pulling Saikyou off her.

“Humans aren’t built like machines. They can’t actually process all the information they see or hear—at least not consciously. If you tried to pay attention to literally everything your senses were telling you, your brain would short-circuit, so it filters out information it considers less important and drives it into your subconscious. That prevents you from actively paying attention to it.”

Ikki continued his explanation.

“Stealth Step uses a special arrhythmic form of breathing combined with an unnatural gait to make the other person’s brain classify your movements and presence as unimportant and send them to their subconscious. That’s why Shizuku can’t see Toudou-san even though it looks like Toudou-san’s in plain sight. Shizuku’s eyes are, in fact, seeing Toudou-san, and her brain is even registering that information, but it doesn’t consider any of it important enough to pay attention to. Not until Toudou-san is so close that Shizuku’s survival instincts kick in and warn her, anyway.”

“Correct on all counts. I’m impressed you analyzed it that accurately,” Kurono said with an approving smile.

That was the reason Shizuku was failing to keep track of Touka despite focusing all of her attention on her. By delaying her initial dash by half a step and changing up her breathing pattern, Touka was easily slipping out of Shizuku’s perception.

“I saw the technique once before, after all,” Ikki said, turning to Saikyou. Touka’s Stealth Step wasn’t as refined as Saikyou’s had been, though, which had made it easier for Ikki to analyze. “But I’m amazed there’s any student out there who can use the same technique as the famous Demon Princess.”

“Toudou and Nene are apprenticed to the same knight, so they know a lot of the same techniques. He’s the guy who first developed the Stealth Step technique enough that it could be effective against other knights,” Kurono explained.

“Really? Just who did they study under?”

“Nangou Torajirou.”

“‘War God’ Nangou?!” Ikki gasped in surprise.

Nangou Torajirou, also known as the War God, was another one of Japan’s top Blazers. He was also Kurogane Ryouma’s lifelong rival. Despite being well over ninety years old, he was still an active knight. The man was a living legend.

“They met him when he was visiting a nursing home and begged him to teach them, or so I’ve heard.”

“Hold up, Kuu-chan! I never once begged that old geezer for anything! And he’s *not* my master!”

“Why are you getting so flustered? Besides, you wear those geta because he does. It’s no secret how much you look up to him.”

“I-I-I-I didn’t start wearing these because of him! I just heard that walking around in them cures constipation!”

“I’ve seen marketing like that before, but do those special sandals actually work?” Ikki asked.

Kurono just shook her head and said, “When will you finally admit you love that old geezer?” She then turned to Ikki. “Anyway, if you’ve figured out what Toudou’s doing then you’ve probably already realized that your sister has no hope of winning.”

“What?!” Stella and Alisuin shouted in unison. Ikki frowned, but he didn’t deny Kurono’s claim.

“Is that true, Ikki?” Stella asked after a long pause. “Is there really no way to beat Stealth Step?”

“No, there is. You just have to be able to pay attention to your subconscious. But that’s easier said than done.”

Imagine a man had a gun against your forehead, his finger on the trigger. In that situation, most people would be focused on the gun, the man’s finger, or perhaps his expression. After all, those were the things that mattered most if one’s goal was to survive. In that moment, would the average person be able to instead focus their attention on what kind of earrings the man was wearing, figure out what brand they were, and so on? Obviously not. Though their eyes

might register the earrings, their brain would exclude that information from their consciousness since it wouldn't be important at the time. However, in order to overcome Stealth Step, a person needed to be able to deliberately shift their attention from the gun to the earrings. That was what it meant to pay attention to one's subconscious.

"Shizuku's fighting for her life out there," Ikki continued. "The only way she'd be able to actively move her focus away from her opponent was if she'd trained to have complete control over her own body."

He or Stella could manage such a feat since they'd spent years practicing martial arts and did have complete control over their bodies. Shizuku, on the other hand, had spent most of her time training to control her mana, not her body. The more she felt like she was missing something, the more she would try to focus on her opponent. That would only serve to narrow her field of vision even more, keeping her eternally trapped in Touka's technique.

"To be honest, I don't think Shizuku's got a chance," Ikki said through gritted teeth.

"No..."

Obviously, Ikki didn't want Shizuku to lose. But unfortunately, it was abundantly clear to him that there was a huge gap between her strength and Touka's. Indeed, Shizuku had yet to land even a glancing blow on Touka despite them having started out fighting at long range. If they were equals at best in a long-range fight, Shizuku's defeat was assured, as it meant not only that she couldn't land a decisive blow from her preferred range, but also that she wouldn't be able to stop Touka from closing the distance between them. In turn, that meant Touka would eventually be in range to use Thunderbolt.

"It would be a different story if Shizuku had some trump card that let her counter Toudou-san's Thunderbolt..." Ikki trailed off, unwilling to say the cruel truth. Of course, Stella and Alisuin understood even if he didn't say it.

"Rrrgh!" Stella growled in frustration. Even she herself found it strange how much she wanted Shizuku to win. Shizuku was her rival, vying for Ikki's affections, and she got in the way every time Stella wanted to spend some alone time with Ikki. But at the same time, Stella understood just what was

driving Shizuku to fight this hard. She knew better than anyone just how strongly Shizuku felt about Ikki, because she felt the same way. “Don’t give up, Shizuku!”

Stella knew she couldn’t sum up Shizuku’s feelings in just a few words. Even so, she felt compelled to shout words of encouragement to her rival—who was also her friend.



Stella’s voice cut through the mutterings of the crowd, reaching Shizuku’s ears. It was clear from her tone that Stella wished for Shizuku’s victory from the bottom of her heart.

Why does it have to be you of all people cheering for me?!

Shizuku curled her bloodied fingers into a fist. She glared up at Stella in an attempt to ignore the more positive feelings welling up within her. If she affirmed those emotions, her relationship with Stella would fundamentally change. She did, however, let Stella’s encouragement reignite her fighting spirit, which had been on the verge of being snuffed out.

Stella-san’s almost certainly going to make it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. She was Hagun Academy’s only Rank A Blazer, after all. That meant, at least on paper, that she was even stronger than the Thunderbolt Shizuku was currently facing. There was almost no chance she would lose even a single one of her preliminary matches.

Furthermore, since Ikki was strong enough to beat Stella, he would undoubtedly make it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival as well. Shizuku understood Ikki’s true strength better than anyone else, so she knew he wasn’t going to lose. Not to anyone from this school, at least. That being the case, she couldn’t afford to lose either.

I need to win so I can go there with them! So I can stand shoulder to shoulder with them!

No matter how hopeless the situation was, she couldn’t afford to give up. As she started curing her wounds with magic, she straightened her back and turned to glare at Touka.

“Oh my! Despite her disadvantageous situation, it seems Kurogane hasn’t given up just yet! She’s healing her wounds, and it looks like she’s still raring to go! Has she found some way to defeat the peerless Thunderbolt?!”

Of course not. But I won’t let that stop me!

Shizuku didn’t know what trick Touka was using to approach, but it was painfully clear to her now that she lacked the ability to see through it. Therefore, there was no point in fighting defensively. She wouldn’t be able to make this into a long-range fight either since she couldn’t stop Touka’s approaches anymore. If she tried to keep forcing distance between the two of them, she’d eventually get whittled down. Her only hope of victory was to go on the offensive and bring the fight to close range herself. Of course, she knew the Thunderbolt was undefeated at close range, but this was her only hope.

I’ll find some way to beat her ultimate skill! I have to!

Steeling herself, Shizuku gripped Yoishigure tightly and prepared to charge. However, the moment she did, Touka once again used Stealth Step to approach. It was almost as if she’d sensed Shizuku’s intent the moment Shizuku had made her decision. But at the exact same time, Shizuku thrust Yoishigure into the ground in front of her.

“Blinding Midnight Sun!” she chanted, and all the ice she’d scattered across the ring instantly turned into water vapor, creating a field of mist that covered the arena like a smoke screen. If she couldn’t see Touka, then her best option was to make it so that Touka couldn’t see her either.

Since her ice field hadn’t trapped Touka in place, she’d vaporized it herself and created a fog so thick that no one could see more than a meter in front of them. And while the smoke screen robbed Shizuku of her vision as well, the water vapor was like an extension of her body, and she could sense changes within it. That meant she could sense the position of anyone inside the fog based on what was getting displaced.

Right now, Touka was standing still, presumably because she’d lost sight of her target. Shizuku swiftly circled behind her.

“Scarlet Water Blade,” she said quietly.

Water vapor gathered around the tip of Yoishigure's blade, extending it from the length of a kodachi to that of a katana. The compressed blade of water circulated at high speed, granting it a powerful cutting edge.

People thought of water as something soft and harmless, but with enough pressure and velocity, it became sharper than any metal. Indeed, the blade of water Shizuku had forged was powerful enough to cut through even diamond. It was easy to forget, but the entire world had been shaped by the force of running water over the eons. There was nothing on earth that water couldn't cut.

It's over! Shizuku thought as she brandished her precisely crafted water blade high and charged at Touka from behind.

In this moment, she truly believed her victory was imminent. It didn't matter that Touka had managed to react to her first surprise attack—though Shizuku still had no idea how she'd done it—because Narukami couldn't stop this one even if it was seen through. Regardless of how sturdy Touka's blade was, it wouldn't be able to stand up against a blade made of liquid. And even if it could, Shizuku would be able to use the fluid nature of water to make her blade pass right through Touka's and strike her directly.

Confident in her skills, Shizuku stepped into range of Touka's blade.

"Huh?"

The instant she did so, she saw that Touka was staring right at her through the fog, her hand gripping the hilt of her sheathed blade. Lighting arced across the black lacquered sheath, and Shizuku knew what fate awaited her. She'd seen it enough times in match recordings that she'd never forget the brilliant flash of light that signaled the doom of anyone foolish enough to challenge the Thunderbolt at close range.

"Thunderbolt!"

There was a blinding burst of plasma as the air around Touka became superheated. Shizuku knew only defeat awaited her, but she didn't stop. With all her might, she swung her blade of compressed water down at Touka. Simultaneously, Touka unleashed her Thunderbolt, and the speed of her blade alone vaporized Shizuku's water blade. Then, like everyone else who'd had the

misfortune to face Touka's famed Thunderbolt, Shizuku dropped to the ground, defeated.



Touka's Thunderbolt was so fast that it surpassed even the speed of sound. The force of the shock wave created by her swing blew away the fog Shizuku had created and caused the stands to groan and creak. The wind was so fierce that some students found it difficult to stay upright. But Ikki didn't budge, nor did he close his eyes in the face of the rampaging wind. He kept his gaze fixed solely on his sister, watching solemnly as she dropped to the ground.

"What an attack! Kurogane is dooown! And that's the sign from the referee that this match is officially over! Kurogane put up a good fight, but in the end, she couldn't overcome the wall that is one of the country's top four knights! The winner of this battle of Rank B knights is our student council president, Toudou Touka the Thunderbolt!" the announcer cried out excitedly.

It was true that Shizuku had put up a good fight, especially at the start. Few other students would have been able to press Touka that hard. Ultimately, though, it had been a crushing defeat for her, as she'd failed to so much as scratch her opponent. Even so, Ikki was proud of her.

"Hey, Ikki."

"Don't worry, Alice. I see it."

Ikki and Alisuin were both looking at Shizuku's right hand. It was wrapped around Touka's ankle, and she hadn't let go even after losing consciousness. Despite having been completely overwhelmed, she hadn't given up, even at the very end.

"That was an amazing fight, Shizuku," Ikki said quietly. Shizuku had been keenly aware of the gap in strength between her and her opponent, yet she'd kept fighting. *You've gotten a lot stronger.*

This battle had made Ikki acutely aware of the hardships Shizuku must have gone through and the trials she must have overcome during these past four years. She'd grown from a little girl who followed Ikki everywhere into a splendid knight.

After a few seconds, Ikki turned to look at the victor, who was slowly making her way out of the arena, her brown hair fluttering in the wind.

She's one hell of a Blazer.

Shizuku's final attack had been far from reckless. First, she'd used Blinding Midnight Sun to rob her opponent of their vision, and then, she'd used her most powerful Noble Art, Scarlet Water Blade, to try to match Touka at close range. She'd used up every last bit of her strength and cunning to try and overcome the Thunderbolt. Her strategy had been a good one too. Unfortunately, Touka had just been strong enough to react to all of Shizuku's traps and beat her head-on. She had, at every junction, managed to come up with something to counter Shizuku's plans.

Having faced the Sword Eater, Ikki was painfully aware that all of the Seven Stars Battle Festival's best fighters were like this. Every single one of the Blazers who'd fought their way through that tournament was a monster. They transcended common sense and defied all norms. But that was exactly what made becoming the Seven Stars Sovereign such a worthy goal.

Thunderbolt Toudou Touka... I'd love to cross swords with you one day.



Shizuku slowly opened her eyes, blinking back the darkness of unconsciousness. The last thing she remembered was seeing the blinding flash that accompanied Touka's Thunderbolt. As her vision came into focus, though, she realized she was staring at the sterile white ceiling of the infirmary.

"You're finally awake, Shizuku."

She turned toward the voice and saw her ever-reliable roommate.

"Alice..." Shizuku slowly raised herself to a sitting position. Looking around, she saw that her brother and Stella were in the room as well. *Oh, I see.* It was then that Shizuku realized she'd been defeated. "I lost, didn't I?"

A heavy silence fell over the room. Ikki and the others knew how hollow sympathies like "Don't worry about it" or "You did your best" would ring. After all, everyone here knew firsthand how bitter defeat tasted. There were no words to cheer up someone who'd given their all in a duel and still lost.

“Shizuku, I, um...” Stella began, unable to bear the silence any longer.

“I’m sorry,” Shizuku replied before she could say anything more. “Could you please leave me alone for a while? I’m tired.”

She hung her head, making it impossible for the others to see her expression. She didn’t want to see any of them or listen to anything they had to say. Not right now. She honestly did want to be alone.

“Sure. Let’s go, Stella.”

“Okay...”

Ikki could tell Shizuku wasn’t interested in talking and herded Stella out of the room. She was grateful to him for that. Now, no one would be there to see her cry. She didn’t want her beloved brother or Stella to see her show such weakness. She had her pride to protect. And yet...

“Why are you still here?”

For some reason, Alisuin hadn’t left. She was just sitting there, smiling gently.

“Who can say?”

“I said I wanted to be alone.”

“I heard you.”

“Then get—”

Before Shizuku could finish, Alisuin gently embraced her.

Huh?

“What are you doing, Alice?”

“You did your best,” Alisuin whispered into Shizuku’s ear. “Your brother watched your match until the very end. He said it was an amazing fight.” She gently ran her hands through Shizuku’s silver hair. “I’m not someone you want to protect, nor am I your rival. You don’t have to put up a strong front when you’re with me.”

Shizuku let out a small sob. Alisuin’s kindness had coaxed out the feelings she’d desperately been keeping bottled up. And once the tears started, they didn’t stop.

I hate this. I hate this, I hate this, I hate this. I hate this!

She'd given it everything she had, but still, she'd been unable to make her dream a reality. It was heartbreaking. The crushing pain came out as a half-choked scream, and she gripped Alisuin's shirt so tightly that her nails dug into her roommate's flesh. But even so, Alisuin didn't let go of her. She knew she was the only person this proud, determined girl could vent her sorrow to. And so, Alisuin continued hugging Shizuku until her sobs quieted and her tears faded.



"Shizuku looked really depressed..." Stella muttered as she and Ikki left the infirmary.

"Can you blame her? This basically guarantees she won't be going to the Seven Stars Battle Festival."

Ikki had heard from Oreki that the top six who would become the school's representatives at the Festival would likely all have undefeated records. Even a single loss meant you weren't strong enough to fight in the country's most prestigious tournament.

"But she has nothing to be ashamed of," Ikki added. He still remembered how even at the end, Shizuku had been grabbing onto Touka's ankle. Her resolve had truly been something to behold.

"The preliminaries sure are rough considering you can't lose even a single battle."

"Yeah... That applies to us too, though."

Everyone was fighting under the same conditions. Shizuku, Ikki, Stella, and all the other students in their school. Anyone who wanted to participate in the Seven Stars Battle Festival couldn't afford a single loss. That was the bar the new school director, Shinguuji Kurono, had set. She was serious about having Hagun Academy take the Seven Stars Battle Festival's throne, and this, while harsh, was the best way to find the most promising candidates. Pitting the school's best against one another meant some of them wouldn't be able to make it, but it also meant that the very strongest fighter in the school would

undoubtedly be one of the representatives. When all was said and done, there could be only one champion, so this was a sensible approach.

“There aren’t many matches left, but we need to stay focused if we want to win them all,” Ikki said.

“You’re right.” Stella turned to Ikki, her eyes smoldering with a fierce determination. “No matter what happens, I won’t lose. I’ll fight my way to the Seven Stars Battle Festival finals so we can have our rematch. And this time, I’ll win.”

It brought Ikki immense joy to know that Stella was just as excited about their rematch as he was. It also heartened him to know that she still remembered the promise they’d made that night.

“I’m looking forward to our rematch. But I hope you know that I won’t go down easily.”

“Eheh heh. You’d better not. And you’re not allowed to lose to anyone other than me either.”

Stella grinned, and Ikki grinned back at her. The more he came to know about her, the more his love for her grew. Likewise, he wanted her to like him more, which served as motivation for him to keep growing and getting stronger. It was thanks to her that he was able to keep pushing himself to greater heights. She was the perfect rival and the perfect woman. He wanted to be someone worthy of her. Meeting her was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

“Well, we better get to training so we don’t lose before we can fight each other,” Ikki said with a smile.

“Sounds good to me. Honestly, after watching Shizuku’s match, I’m so pumped up that I need to blow off some steam.”

“Ha ha, I figured. Come on, let’s go.”

Ikki glanced up and down the hallway to make sure there was no one else around, then grabbed Stella’s hand and twined his fingers around hers. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, and the two of them started walking toward their usual training ground.

Ever since that day at the pool, they'd slowly been getting used to physical intimacy. At this point, they took every opportunity they could to hold hands and feel each other's warmth. Both of them loved the sensation of weaving their fingers together. But the form of physical intimacy they loved the most was, of course, kissing.

After they'd opened up to each other at the pool, they'd started acting more like a proper couple instead of two awkward teens crushing on each other. However, Stella was still unsatisfied with the status quo. It wasn't that she hated what they already had; she just wanted to get even closer to Ikki. She wanted to take their relationship to the next level, though as always, she wanted Ikki to be the one to initiate. And the more time they spent together holding hands and kissing, the stronger that desire grew. Especially when they kissed each other good night. The moment their lips parted and they went to sleep was the saddest part of each day for Stella. In fact, just last night, she'd let out a small moan of longing when they'd finished kissing, surprising Ikki.

Man, that was embarrassing. She hadn't even known she could make a noise like that, and immediately after, she'd dived into her bed and hid under the covers. But even so, it had taken hours before her arousal had faded and her heartbeat had calmed down. *Am I really that horny a girl?*

Just remembering the sound she'd made caused her to blush. The problem was that even if Ikki *did* ask to have sex with her, she'd have to say no. She was, after all, the second princess of the Vermillion Kingdom. At the same time, though, they were both fifteen years old. Legally, they were adults, as according to the International Mage-Knight Federation—of which Japan was a member nation—fifteen was the age of majority for Blazers. The two of them could get married whenever they wanted. As legal adults, they had that right.

If, by chance...Ikki actually proposes to me... If he looked Stella in the eyes and asked her to be his wife, she wasn't sure what she'd say. Would she use the fact that she was royalty as an excuse to run away? Or would she be honest with herself and say yes? The Stella of one month ago would have rejected Ikki without a second thought. But now, she wasn't so sure. *If Ikki really wants to marry me, then I—*

"What's wrong, Stella? Your face is super red."

“Bwuh?! I-It’s nothing!”

“There’s no way it’s nothing. Just look at how red you are. Did you catch a cold or something? One sec, let me check your temperature.”

Worried, Ikki pressed his forehead against Stella’s. Stella, meanwhile, was screaming internally.

H-H-H-His face is so close!

“I-I-I-I’m fine! Really! I promise, so get your face off of mine!”

Stella pushed Ikki away, ashamed of herself. She couldn’t believe she’d been having thoughts about something as indecent as sex in broad daylight while still in school.

No more thinking lewd thoughts until I’m in bed. Of course, the sane part of her knew that having them in bed wasn’t any better, but she ignored that voice in her head.

Just then, the two of them heard footsteps about to round the corner of the hallway they were walking down. They hurriedly let go of each other’s hands since they both knew it would be a huge scandal if word got out that Stella, a princess, was in a relationship. Stella was prepared to deal with the rabid journalists who would be hounding her day and night, but they as a couple had decided to keep their relationship secret at least until the Seven Stars Battle Festival was over so that they could focus on the tournament without any distractions. However, what rounded the corner wasn’t a person but a person-sized white rectangle.

“Nnngh... Hrgh...”

Upon closer inspection, the two of them realized that the white rectangle was actually a massive stack of documents that someone was carrying. It was impossible to tell who that someone was because the documents hid everything but their hands and legs. The most they could make out was that this person was a girl.

“Sh-She looks like she might fall over at any second,” Stella muttered.

“Yeah. We should probably help her.” Ikki turned to the girl. “Excuse me,

would you like some help carrying those?”

“Hweh?!” The girl was so surprised by Ikki’s voice that she stiffened up and tripped over her own feet. “Eeeek!”

“Whoa?!”

As she fell, the tower of paper came crashing down onto Ikki.

“Agh, what a mess,” Stella said, shaking her head.

“Oh gosh! I-I’m so sorry! I didn’t think there’d be anyone in front of me!”

“No need to apologize. It’s my fault for startling you,” Ikki said, bending down and gathering up the papers that had scattered all over the floor. Stella and the other girl followed suit. Once they’d gathered up most of them, Ikki turned back to the girl who’d tripped—and got an eyeful of her underwear. “Bwuh?!”



“Oh no... Where are my glasses?”

It seemed her skirt had flipped up when she'd fallen and she hadn't noticed. She was crawling across the ground on all fours, mumbling something about her glasses. Every time she scooted forward, her butt jiggled, emphasizing its presence.

“Y-Your skirt! Your skirt's flipped up!” Stella shouted, warning her.

“Huh? Waaah!” At last, the girl realized that she'd been shaking her rear in front of Ikki's face and quickly smoothed her skirt back down. “I-I'm so sorry you had to see that!”

“I-It's fine... Aha ha.”

“Ikki, did you see her underwear?”

“Would you believe me if I said I didn't?”

“Do you *think* I'd believe you?”

“Definitely not... Hmm?” Sighing, Ikki looked around and spotted a pair of glasses that presumably belonged to the girl. *This must be what she's looking for*, he thought, then scooped them up and handed them to the girl. “Um, is this what you were looking for?”

“Oh, yes! Thank you so much! Without these, I can barely even see in front of my face.” The girl turned back to Ikki and bowed her head in thanks. Only then did he and Stella finally get a good look at her face.

“Huh?”

“No way!”

Both of them stiffened in surprise.

“Y-You're...”

They recognized this girl with braided brown hair.

“Toudou Touka, the Thunderbolt?!”

She was the strongest knight in all of Hagun—the very same girl who'd just defeated Shizuku in a match.

“Huh? Oh, yes, that’s me. Did you need something from me?”



“Yo, Prez!”

“Good afternoon, Mishima-san.”

“Congrats on winning your match, Student Council President!”

“Thank you, Sayama-kun.”

“Hey there, President Toudou! Thanks so much for helping me find my wallet last week! I’m sorry I wasted your whole day with that.”

“Don’t worry about it, Itagaki-san. Besides, it was Uta-kun who found it—I didn’t do anything to help. Try not to lose it again, though, okay?”

Every few steps they took, another student came and greeted Touka, and she responded to all of them. Amazingly, she remembered each and every one of their names too. Ikki and Stella followed after her, carrying some of the documents she’d been trying to carry all by herself.

“You’re really popular, Touka-san,” Stella said, stating her thoughts bluntly.

Touka smiled bashfully and replied, “I’m just doing what any student council president should, but I guess that’s made me popular. Anyway, thank you so much for your help, you two. You really saved me.”

“Don’t mention it. That stack of papers was way too big for one person to carry on their own.”

“Aha ha... I tried to carry them all because I didn’t want to make multiple trips, but I guess there were just too many for that. I won’t make that mistake again.” Touka stuck out her tongue as if to say, “Silly me.” It was a very cute gesture. So much so that it was hard to believe this was the same monster who’d overpowered Shizuku less than an hour ago. “But I didn’t think I’d run into you two of all people. I know all about you from the newspapers, Stella-san, and I’ve heard plenty of rumors about you as well, Kurogane Ikki-san, but...I guess now’s not the best time for us to meet, huh?”

Naturally, Touka was referring to the fact that she’d just beaten up Ikki’s little sister. However, Ikki shook his head and said, “I don’t hold a grudge against you

or anything. Shizuku fought you with everything she had, and you met her head-on, fair and square. If anything, I'm grateful to you for responding so earnestly to my sister's feelings. So you don't need to feel bad. That's just how matches are."

Ikki wasn't lying. He truly was grateful to Touka. Stella, on the other hand, frowned and said, "I agree with Ikki, but there's one thing I'm curious about." Ever since they'd met in the hallway, there was a question that had been eating away at her. "Touka-san. From what you said, you can barely see without your glasses. So how come you weren't wearing them during the match?" Indeed, she was worried that Touka had fought with a handicap. "You weren't going easy on her, were you?"

"Y-Ya got it all wrong!"

"Huh?"

"Er, what I meant to say is, you've got it all wrong." She hurriedly corrected herself, blushing, but it was too late. Stella's question had taken Touka by surprise, causing her rural accent to come through for a second. She awkwardly cleared her throat and added, "If anything, I needed to take Shizuku-san more seriously than any other opponent. She was too strong for me to fight with my glasses on. If I hadn't restricted my vision so I could heighten my other senses, I wouldn't have been able to beat her."

"What do you mean by that?" Stella asked.

"When I cut off my sight, it makes it easier for me to sense the electrical signals running through people's bodies. It's something I can do since my Blazer powers are lightning-based," Touka explained.

Human beings were extremely complex biological machines. Their every action was controlled by electrical impulses sent from the brain to the rest of the body. Anyone who could sense and read those impulses would be able to predict their opponent's every move. Not only that, but they could also read the impulses being sent to the muscles that controlled eye movement, allowing them to predict what their opponent would be staring at in the next second. Those electrical signals even determined when and how many hormones the various glands in the body secreted, so one could determine a person's physical

and mental condition by reading them as well.

“Your body’s signals can’t lie, so by reading them, I can tell what my opponent’s true intentions are. It also lets me read their mental state and what actions they expect me to take. By removing my glasses, I can observe my opponent far better than if I were actually looking at them since I can basically read their thoughts by analyzing those electrical impulses. That’s how I was able to see through Shizuku-san’s surprise attacks.”

“I see. That would explain it,” Stella mused.

“That’s another one of my Noble Arts, Reverse Sight,” Touka continued. “It’s somewhat similar to Worst One-san’s Perfect Vision. Though your ability is a product of your superb observational skills whereas I’m just coasting by, using my powers to make things easy. At any rate, I didn’t go easy on Shizuku-san.”

“Yeah, I get it. Sorry for doubting you.”

“Eheh heh. Don’t worry about it.”

“Why do you look so happy?”

“It’s just heartwarming seeing how much you care about your friends, Stella-san.”

Stella blushed to the tips of her ears. “What?! I-I am *not* her friend!” she shouted.

“Really? You looked pretty close to me.”

“They’re friends, all right. Best friends, in fact,” Ikki said, cutting in.

“N-Not you too, Ikki! Stop teasing me!” Stella stalked off in a huff, passing both Ikki and Touka.

Wait, does she know where the student council room is? She doesn’t, does she? We’re probably going to find her waiting for us at the next turn.

Instead of chasing after her, Ikki turned to Touka and asked, “Are you sure you should’ve told us all that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, was it a good idea to tell us about your powers? The selection

matches are almost over, but there's still a chance we'll get matched up against each other."

"Oh, I don't mind. Even if you know how my Reverse Sight works, you still won't be able to beat me."

Ikki let out a small gasp. A second ago, Touka had been smiling gently like a normal high school girl, but now, there was a fierce glint in her eyes, giving her smile a feral tinge. He was once again reminded that this soft-spoken girl was the feared Thunderbolt. She had absolute confidence in her strength, but more importantly, she was burning with the desire to challenge those stronger than her. Like him and Stella, she was full of ambition.

Ha ha ha... Upon seeing that smile, a single thought went through Ikki's mind. *I get the feeling we're going to be good friends.* On top of that, he now wanted to fight her more than ever.



After another five minutes of walking, Ikki and the others reached the student council room.

"Phew, that took forever. I didn't know the student council room was so far away," Stella said.

"Thank you so much for your help, you two. Please come inside and have some tea before you go. Toutokubara-san found the most wonderful leaves yesterday. You simply *have* to try them."

"I suppose I have the time. How about you, Stella?"

"I'll come too. I was just getting thirsty, so some tea sounds perfect."

"I'll introduce— Bwaugh?!" Touka opened the door, took a single step, and tripped over some heavy object placed just inside the room. She fell face-first onto the floor, flashing her panties to Ikki and Stella once more. Somehow, her skirt kept getting hiked up every time she fell.

"Hey, Ikki, do you think we could charge advertising companies a fee to put ads on this girl's underwear with how often it goes on display?"

"That's not something I ever thought about, but it might work."

“Owww... Who put dat there?” Touka slipped back into her accent as she got to her feet and looked around the student council room. As she took in the full scope of the clutter filling it, her face paled. “Wh-Whadda heck?!” she screamed.

All of the bookshelves in the room were empty, their contents scattered across the floor. Every drawer was open too, with things haphazardly thrown into them. Not a single care had been given to the room’s organization.

The other student council members were all present, seemingly at home in the chaos. The secretary, Saijou Ikazuchi, was calmly writing down today’s minutes with impeccably neat handwriting. Next to him, the treasurer, Toutokubara Kanata, was sipping some tea as she balanced accounts. But the two of them were the only ones doing any work. The vice president, Misogi Uakata, was playing video games. Meanwhile, the head of general affairs, Tomaru Renren, was watching him play and fooling around with a chest expander. She was wearing nothing but a tank top and a pair of panties.



“Oh, you’re finally back, Prez. Sup?” Renren said, waving to Touka.

“Aha ha, you’re such a klutz, Touka. How do you always manage to trip over everything?” Utakata asked.

Touka glared at them and shouted, “How many times do I hafta tell ya, put yer damn dumbbells away when yer done trainin’, Tomaru-san?! It’s dangerous to leave ‘em lyin’ around like this! And Uta-kun, when yer done readin’ manga, put it back on the bookshelf where it belongs! Look at how many books’re on the floor! How’d ya get the room so messy in the one day I was gone?!”

“Isn’t it unfair to decide that the two of us are to blame?! What if someone else was responsible, huh?!” Renren argued.

“Yer the only one who trains in the student council room, Tomaru-san! And the only slobs who don’t put books back when they’re done with ‘em are you and Uta-kun!”

“I just got hit with the sudden urge to binge read all of *Kurouni Renshin*, *Dragon Orb*, and *Dunk Shot*, okay? It’s a pain to go back for each volume, so I brought them all down at once. And when I was done, I felt like playing around on the SNES for a bit. I had to search through all the drawers to find it because it was hidden in some small corner. Oh, but Kanata and Ikazuchi did all the work while you were away, so we’re not behind schedule or anything!” Utakata said with a smile.

“Don’t look so happy about foistin’ all yer work onto someone else! I swear, you two’re gonna—”

“President, I’m sorry to cut you off, but your guests are staring.”

“Wha—” Touka came back to her senses and turned to Stella and Ikki. The two of them were looking at the cluttered student council room with stiff expressions. “O-Oho ho ho. Just give me one second, please.” She gave them a weak smile, pushed them back into the hallway, and slammed the door shut. “Help me clean up, ya louts! Turn that game off ‘fore I snap yer SNES in half, Uta-kun!”

“W-Wait, Touka! I haven’t saved since last night, and I just— Waaaaah! Nooooo! My progreeess!”

“How many times do I gotta tell ya, only one hour of gamin’ a day! Unbelievable! I take my eyes off ya for one second and *this* is what happens! And Tomaru-san, put some damn clothes on! There’s boys in the student council room!”

“But it’s so hoooot. It’s your fault for breaking the AC, Prez.”

“It’s honestly amazing how electronics just short-circuit the moment she touches them.”

“L-Look, I’m sorry about that, but it don’t mean you can just hang around the student council room in yer underwear! You’re settin’ a bad example for the other students!”

“But you nap in your underwear all the time in the dorms!” Renren protested.

“Aha ha, that’s just how she is. Unless she’s got someone else to try and set an example for, she goes full slob too,” Utakata said with a grin.

“Th-Th-Th-That’s not important right now! J-Just help me clean up! Anythin’ still on the floor in five minutes is goin’ into the trash!”

“Whoa! Okay, jeez!”

“Chop-chop!”

For a few minutes, Ikki and Stella could hear a cacophony of clattering noises as things were swept up and put in their place. While they waited, Stella turned to Ikki and said, “Touka-san’s kind of like a mom.”

“She sure has it rough, having to wrangle all those problem children.”

The two of them decided to be as helpful to Touka as possible to ease her burden a little while they were here. They also decided not to bring up the fact that Touka had shooed them back into the hallway before giving them a chance to put down the giant stack of documents they’d been carrying for her.

Finally, the noise subsided and the door to the student council room opened. “Haaah, haaah... S-Sorry for the wait, you two. Come on in.” Touka said, her face looking incredibly haggard.

“Th-Thanks.”

Maybe I shouldn't have taken her up on her invitation for tea... Ikki thought to himself as he walked into the student council room.

To his surprise, the room was now completely spotless. The books were all back on the bookshelves, and the floor had been polished to a reflective sheen. He hadn't noticed when the room was a mess, but all of the furniture was antique, giving the whole place the look and feel of a private parlor in an old, Western-style castle.

At first, Ikki was amazed Touka had managed to clean things up so quickly, but then his discerning gaze picked out how she'd done it. *That particular closet is bulging a little bit.* Saijou was also standing in front of it, his strained expression making it clear he was pressing against it quite hard. *I'm just gonna pretend I didn't see that. "Let sleeping dogs lie," as they say.*

Ikki and Stella dutifully let Touka lead them to the sofa in the center of the room, then sat down across from the other student council members. As they took their seats, Renren smiled cheerfully at Ikki and said, "Yo, Kurogane-kun. Haven't seen you since our match. Looks like you're still undefeated, huh?"

"Yep. I'm managing to hang in there for now."

Kanata turned to Stella and lifted her hat a little, allowing Stella to see her eyes for the first time. "And we last met at that family restaurant, isn't that right, Stella-san?" she said.

"Yeah," Stella replied. "I never thought I'd end up in the student council room, though."

"Toutokubara-san, please brew some tea for our guests," Touka requested.

"Gladly."

"Oh, I want some too, Kanata," Utakata said.

"Kanata-senpai, can you get me some madeleines too?" Renren added.

"The two of you get no snacks today as punishment for trashing the student council room."

"N-Nooo!"

"That's so mean, Touka! What's the point of coming to the student council

room if we can't have our afternoon snacks?!"

"You're *supposed* to come here to get work done!"

It was clear from their exchange that this was what the student council was usually like.

Saijou, who was still struggling to keep the mess safely hidden in the closet, turned to Touka and said, "But I must say, I'm impressed, President. I didn't think you'd find helpers for us so quickly. Especially not such reliable ones. Kurogane-san and Stella-san will bolster our fighting strength quite a bit."

Wait, what?

Ikki and Stella both cocked their heads at Touka. She certainly hadn't mentioned anything about needing helpers.

"Huh?" Touka also gave Saijou a questioning look, just as lost.

Saijou frowned and said, "Hmm, is that not why you brought them here? I figured there wouldn't be any other reason for you to invite them to the student council room."

"Wait, did you already forget about the director's request, Touka?" Utakata asked.

"Did Kurono-san ask us to—aaah!"

Touka paled as she remembered what Utakata was talking about.

"Oh dear, did you actually forget? I also thought you'd brought these two here to help out," Kanata said.

"Er, I was so focused on my match with Shizuku-san that I forgot..."

"Hey, what exactly is this thing you need help with?" Stella asked Touka, who was cradling her head in her hands.

"Director Shinguuji tasked the student council with taking care of a certain matter a few days ago. There's a lodge in Okutama where all of Hagun's Seven Stars Battle Festival representatives go before the tournament to train for a few days. And recently, there have been reports of a suspicious individual loitering around the area," Toutokubara explained as she poured tea into everyone's

cups.

“Sounds like a pretty serious problem,” Ikki said.

“It is. Which is why the director asked us to patrol the area and make sure it’s safe. The teachers are too busy managing the qualifying matches right now, so we’re the only ones who are free. Unfortunately, the lodge is in the middle of a heavily forested mountain, and we don’t have enough members in the student council to comb the area by ourselves.”

“I see. So that’s why you’re looking for volunteers.” Of course, the students were busy preparing for their qualifying matches as well, so it would be difficult to find someone strong with free time on their hands. “Do you happen to have any details about this ‘suspicious individual’?”

“Well, yes, but...” Toutokubara trailed off hesitantly. After a few seconds she shook her head and said, “Supposedly, they’re a four-meter-tall giant.”

“What?!”

“A-A giant?!”

“Yes. Though I don’t mean one of the Titans from that popular anime.”

“Oh, hey, I know that reference,” Ikki said.

“I’m not talking about the Steel Giant either.”

“I know that one too. I’m surprised you know all those references, though, Toutokubara-san.”

“D-Do giants really exist?!” Stella asked, her eyes glowing with childish excitement.

“I didn’t know you were a fan, Stella,” Ikki said, surprised.

“I-I mean, we’re talking about a giant here! They’re like Bigfoot! Cryptids no one’s ever seen before! Isn’t that exciting?!”

Upon seeing Stella’s reaction, Renren beamed and said, “Oh, are you a fan of cryptids too, Stella-chan?!”

“Absolutely! I learned Japanese by watching old DVDs of *Adventurer & Explorer Kawaguchi Hiroshi*!”

That is one insane way for a princess to learn a foreign language! Ikki thought with a shiver.

“Stella-chan, my comrade in arms!”

“You guys know those videos are—”

“Vice President, don’t crush their dreams,” Kanata said, cutting Utakata off.

“Hey, Ikki, let’s help the student council out! Touka-san looks like she could use the help, and I wanna see this giant for myself!” Stella said, turning her glittering eyes to Ikki.

For his part, Ikki had no interest in meeting a giant, but it was thanks to the selection matches existing that he even had a shot at becoming a proper knight. The student council had done a lot to help set those up, so he wanted to repay them if he could. And so, he agreed without hesitation.

“Sure. We’d be glad to help you guys out.”

“R-Really?!” Touka perked up upon hearing that.

“That lodge exists for the students’ sake, right? It’s only fair that we help keep it safe.”

“Thank you so much! You guys are lifesavers!”

Touka reached out to shake Ikki’s hand. But before she could, Stella slid in front of him and shook her hand instead.

“We’ll do our best to help,” Stella said with a smile.

“Huh? Oh, um, great. Thanks again.”

Thus, Ikki and Stella had become part of the student council’s expedition to Okutama that would take place the following weekend.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Toutokubara Kanata

■PROFILE

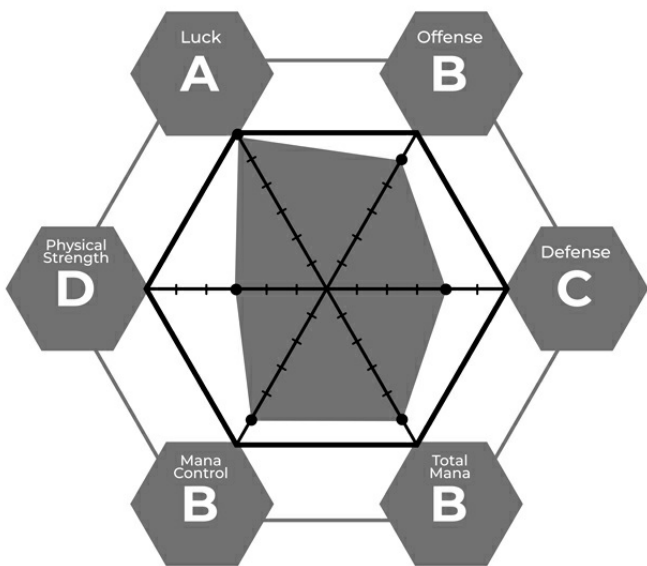
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 3-3

Blazer Rank: B

Noble Art: Diamond Dust

Nickname: Scharlach Frau

Summary: Hagun Academy's student council treasurer.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

The Toutokubara family is one of Japan's most famous Blazer families, and Kanata certainly lives up to her family's reputation. Despite still being a student, she's been called upon to participate in official Mage-Knight Federation operations and performed well above expectations.

Her Noble Art, Diamond Dust, allows her to shatter her sword into countless minuscule shards that she can control. She normally lets them float freely in the air for them to be inhaled, then slices her opponents up from the inside. This works especially well against human foes since every person needs to breathe. Apparently, the reason she carries an umbrella everywhere is to protect her clothes from the fountains of blood her Noble Art invariably causes. What a terrifying Blazer.

Chapter 2: Okutama's Monster

In the heart of Shinjuku, amid the towering skyscrapers, was the International Mage-Knight Federation's Japan branch. It was a respectably tall thirty-story building. Sitting in the office on the top floor was Kurogane Itsuki, the head of the Japan branch. He was on the phone, and his brow wrinkled as he listened to the person on the other end of the line.

"I see. So Shizuku lost," he said with a long sigh that echoed through the dark room. Though it was late at night, none of the lights were on inside.

"She was up against the Thunderbolt. It was an unfortunate matchup."

"That's Nangou-sensei's favorite disciple, right?"

"Yes, sir. Shizuku-san was unlucky, that's all. If it wasn't for that ridiculous new policy the director instituted, she would have without a doubt been chosen as one of Hagun's representatives."

Itsuki nodded silently. He also believed that Director Shinguuji Kurono's new policy was absurd. It was a blatant refutation of everything he stood for.

"What about Ikki?"

"He's maintaining his win streak thus far. It's depressing to think how far Hagun's students must have fallen that a Rank F like him can beat them."

"Does it look like he'll be chosen as one of the representatives?"

"As much as it pains me to say so, I think he will. He's already defeated the Crimson Princess, as well as the third-best student in the school, Runner's High. At this rate, unless he's matched up against either Thunderbolt or Scharlach Frau, his entry into the Seven Stars Battle Festival is all but guaranteed."

"That cannot be allowed," Itsuki said in a voice as cold as ice. Ikki needed to be stopped from entering the Seven Stars Battle Festival no matter what it took.

"Y-You're absolutely right, sir!"

"Is there nothing you can do to stop this?"

“Could you not use your authority as branch head to strip him of his student knight status?”

“If I could, I would have done that ages ago. But it’s the main branch that manages a Blazer’s knight status. Only Whitebeard has the authority to remove someone from the Mage-Knight and student knight registers. I can send a request, but there’s no guarantee it will be approved. Especially if there’s no valid reason to strip someone of their status.”

Last year, Itsuki had made the Hunter provoke Ikki in an attempt to create a valid pretext for stripping Ikki of his student knight status. But Ikki had refused to fight back, foiling his plan. Though the Hunter had nearly killed Ikki, because Ikki understood that self-protection of any kind could be twisted into an intent to fight back, he had refused to even dodge Kirihara’s arrows. As a result, the most Itsuki had managed to do was force Ikki to repeat a year. It wasn’t an expulsion, which would have been enough to get Ikki’s student knight status revoked, but Itsuki had hoped that it would cause Ikki to be ostracized by the other students and eventually lead him to drop out.

Itsuki himself didn’t possess the authority to expel Ikki. The most he could hope to do was convince the people who did to do so for him. But to do that, he needed to give them a definitive justification.

“At any rate,” Itsuki continued, “I need you to find some way to stop Ikki from —”

“I have a suggestion,” a man suddenly said, appearing at the door of Itsuki’s unlit office room.

Itsuki turned to the newcomer. He was a corpulent, middle-aged man with a face that screamed “evil merchant.” But it was a face that Itsuki recognized.

“Akaza.”

“It’s been far too long since our last meeting, my lord. Geh heh heh.”

This man was Akaza Mamoru, a member of one of the Kurogane clan’s branch families.

“What’s this suggestion of yours?” Itsuki asked, hanging up the phone. He didn’t even bother to let the person on the other side know he was done

talking. His attention was solely on Akaza now.

Akaza cleared his throat and gave Itsuki a seedy smile. “Geh heh heh. I’ve obtained some rather interesting information from one of my many sources. If we use it correctly, we may be able to remove this thorn in your side once and for all.”



The next Sunday, Kurogane Ikki and Stella Vermillion filed into a van together with the student council and started heading toward the lodge in Okutama. Incidentally, it was Saijou who was driving. They’d been tasked with finding out the true identity of the giant that people had claimed to see in the region.

Unfortunately, the lodge was in the mountains and surrounded by a deep forest. It was tough terrain for seven people to cover, even if they were Blazers. And so, the seven of them decided to fill their stomachs before embarking on their treacherous search. Saijou and Toutokubara went off to question the people working at the lodge, while everyone else, including Ikki and Stella, helped prepare curry for lunch. They borrowed some cooking utensils and dishes from the lodge and carried all the ingredients Touka had packed over to the campground next to the lodge. They could have borrowed the lodge’s kitchen as well, but since they’d come all the way here to the great outdoors, everyone figured it would be more fun to make curry at the camp.

“Mmm. The air smells so crisp and cool,” Stella said, taking a deep breath. She set the knife and cutting board she’d taken from the van’s trunk down on the brick wall next to the firepit.

“There’s no asphalt around here, so the air doesn’t get as hot,” Ikki said.

“Japan has too much concrete and steel everywhere. It feels suffocating.”

“Well, the heat and humidity is because most of the country is in a subtropical region, not because we have so many buildings.”

Stella’s homeland, the Vermillion Kingdom, was situated in northern Europe. The average temperature and humidity were much lower over there. It was hardly surprising that she was finding her first summer in Japan stifling. For the past few weeks, Ikki had been hearing Stella groaning in her sleep constantly.

Even Japanese natives struggled with the sweltering, muggy summers, so he didn't blame her in the slightest for being unable to deal with it.

"Look, Stella-chan! They have a badminton court! Let's play!" Renren shouted, waving a racket at Stella. She'd already brought out all of the utensils she'd been tasked with carrying.

"Sounds good to me! Just so you know, I'm pretty good."

"Really?! Well, I won't lose to you when it comes to footwork, at least! Bring it on!"

"Heh! You'll regret challenging me!"

Stella eagerly ran over to the badminton court, scooping up a racket along the way.

"Wait, Stell—" Ikki tried to call out to her, but she was already gone. "Sheesh, didn't you just say you were going to help cook?" he said with a sigh.

Touka, who was carrying over a bunch of bags of ingredients, smiled at him and said, "It's fine, we don't need that many people to make curry anyway. We can put the two of them on cleanup duty instead."

"Works for me. Oh yeah, how much did the ingredients cost? I'll pay for our share."

"Eheh heh, don't worry about it. You guys are helping us out with student council work, so the least we can do is treat you to a few meals. In fact, I'll feel bad if you don't let us," Touka answered with a shrug of her shoulders.

I guess I'd feel the same way in her position. At times like this, it was best to simply accept other people's kindness.

"All right, then I won't worry about paying you back."

"Touka's curry uses a special homemade roux that tastes super-duper good," Uakata said, walking over.

"Indeed. I think you'll like it."

"Okay, but at least let me help prep."

"In that case, could you peel the carrots and potatoes, Kurogane-kun?"

“Sure.”

“And Uta-kun, can you make the rice?”

“If you’re making your special curry, then I guess I should make my special rice too.”

“Please do. I made sure to buy Californian rice specifically for you.”

“Perfect. Let’s get to it, then,” Utakata said, rolling up his sleeves.

“Hmm?”

Ikki had no idea what was so special about either the curry or the rice, but he could tell from the way they spoke to each other that Touka and Utakata were quite close.



It had been five years since Ikki had run away from home. In that time he’d learned how to cook and do basic chores as a matter of necessity. As a result, he had no trouble handling prep work.

First, he peeled the potatoes and soaked them in warm water to ensure they wouldn’t fall apart when boiled. While they were soaking, he peeled the carrots and diced them into bite-size chunks. Once that was done, he gathered up the ingredients and brought them over to Touka. As he got close, though, he stopped in his tracks.

“Hmm hmm hmmmm!”

Touka was wearing an apron and dicing meat and onions, humming the theme song of a renowned kids’ anime about a hero who would let anyone who was hungry eat a part of the pastry that was his head.



Despite her youth, she looked like the quintessential comely mother. It was striking.

“Hmm? Is something wrong?” Touka asked, turning back to Ikki.

“Oh, uh, it’s nothing.” Ikki shook his head, Touka’s voice having brought him back to his senses.

I can’t believe I let myself get awestruck by Touka-san like that.

Her presence hadn’t felt that overwhelming even when she’d overpowered Shizuku during the match. Ikki found it strange how this domestic scene could make her seem so much larger in comparison. He put the thought out of his mind for now, though, and held up a basket full of potatoes and carrots.

“The vegetables are ready,” he said. “I also soaked the potatoes so they won’t fall apart.”

“Thank you. Wow, you peeled them all so neatly. You cut them to the perfect size too.”

“Since we’re eating in the great outdoors, I figured bigger chunks would feel heartier.”

“Good job. Your prep work gets a perfect score, Kurogane-san. I guess you’re as good with a knife as you are with a sword.”

“Ha ha, I had to learn how to cook since I spent so much time living alone. Is there anything else I can help with?”

“Nope, that’s everything. Now we just need to throw everything into the pot and let it simmer, so you can rest.”

I guess there’s no point in having two people watch the pot.

Ikki nodded and walked out of the cooking area.

“Heh heh. What’s wrong, youngster? Were you captivated by Touka’s juicy butt?” Uakata teased, suddenly sidling up to Ikki. It seemed he’d been watching Ikki while cooking rice.

“N-No, you’ve got it all wrong!” Ikki shouted, flustered. While it was true that Touka’s butt was shapely and looked quite soft, that wasn’t what had

mesmerized him. “It’s... I don’t know how to explain it, really, but there was something striking about the way Toudou-san was standing there cooking. I felt like I shouldn’t look away for some reason.”

“Hmm...” Utakata seemed intrigued by Ikki’s response. “You felt like you shouldn’t look away, huh? Well, that’s an interesting way of putting it, but you really are something, picking up on that so quickly.”

“What do you mean?”

“What you saw there was a glimpse of Touka’s core—the reason she’s as strong as she is.”

“And you know that reason?”

“Yep. I’ve known Touka for a long time.”

I guess that explains why they get along so well.

“So you’ve been friends with Toudou-san since you were kids, Misogi-san?”

“Hmm? Yeah. We’re from the same orphanage.”

“Oh...”

“It’s called the Wakaba Orphanage, and it’s run by the Toutokubara Conglomerate’s charity branch. Anyway, that’s where Touka and I grew up. Kanata used to come visit pretty often, so we’ve known her for a while too. The three of us got up to all sorts of trouble when we were kids.”

“I see...”

Utakata talked about his past as if it didn’t bother him at all, but Ikki still felt a little awkward. While he’d assumed that Utakata and Touka were childhood friends, he hadn’t expected them both to be orphans who grew up together. And now, he wasn’t sure if he should pry any further into their past.

But I want to know what he meant about that being the reason for her strength.

He wanted to know more about what kind of person Toudou Touka was. Ultimately, his curiosity won out, and he asked, “Um, would you mind telling me what you meant when you said that was the reason for Toudou-san’s

strength?”

Utakata was silent for a few seconds, but then he looked up and said, “When you hear the word ‘orphanage,’ what kind of place do you imagine?”

“A place where kids who don’t have parents live together under an appointed adult’s care?”

“That’s more or less true, but there’s a lot of ways for kids to end up without parents. Some lose them to accidents, others are abandoned...and those are just the lucky ones. Some kids have to be taken away by child protective services because their parents tried to kill them.”

“There are parents...who try to kill their own children?”

“Yep. We had more than a few kids like that at our orphanage, so as you can imagine, it was a pretty crappy place. Kids with gaping wounds in their hearts like that are quick to snap at other people, meaning fights broke out all the time. It was rough. Touka was the only one there who tried to make others smile. Even though she was an orphan like the rest of us, she’d read picture books to the younger kids, make tasty food for us when our caretaker was too busy, and so on. Oh, our caretaker was a really nice person, but he couldn’t cook to save his life, so everyone loved when Touka was cooking instead. Aha ha.”

“She does seem pretty used to looking after people.”

“She’s always been like that. It’s in her nature to look after people. Even surly kids who’ve ended up broken and violent because their parents nearly killed them. There was one kid who hurt her countless times, but she refused to abandon him. It’s thanks to her that he was saved and that he was able to feel human emotions again. That kid is eternally grateful to her. He still loves her to this day.”

Utakata choked up a little as he spoke. Though he didn’t state it outright, Ikki could tell the “someone” he was referring to was himself.

“One day, that kid asked Touka how she was able to stay so strong. How she was able to keep looking after kids like him who only hurt her. She’d lost her parents just like everyone else in the orphanage, after all, so how was she still

able to love others despite what had happened to her? Do you know what she told him? She said, ‘I was blessed enough to be loved by my parents. The time I had with them was cut short, but that doesn’t take away any of the love they already gave me. It’s their love that continues to support me even now, and that’s why I want to bring smiles back on the faces of all the other kids. I want to make joyous memories with them that will support them going forward, just like my parents did for me. They taught me how important it is to love others, and I want to share that lesson with everyone.’”

Utakata went on.

“And you know, even now that she’s left, Touka is still fighting to give the kids of the Wakaba Orphanage courage and joy. She wants to prove to the world that even an orphan like her can grow up to be someone amazing. If she can do that, the other kids won’t give up on their dreams either. That’s what’s made her strong enough to become the famed Thunderbolt.”

After hearing that, Ikki finally understood what Utakata had meant. The reason Touka was so strong was her selfless nature. She was able to call forth such might because she was fighting for other people rather than for herself. That was what lay at the core of the person known as Toudou Touka. Ikki had simply caught a glimpse of that when he’d seen her cooking for everyone. His brain had subconsciously let him know how important it was to pay attention to this integral part of her character, which was what had captivated him so.

“You’re strong, kid,” Utakata said with a serious expression. “Way stronger than I expected. I wouldn’t stand a chance against you, and even Kanata would probably lose. But you can’t beat Touka. Her strength is on a different level. It has to be, because she knows she’s carrying the hopes and dreams of dozens of other people on her back. She knows how much sadness even a single loss will bring them. That’s why she refuses to lose—refuses to break. The reason you can’t beat her is because she’s shouldering so much more than you are.”

Ikki couldn’t think of anything to say in response. He turned back to Touka, marveling at how much weight that small back of hers was carrying. It was little wonder she was so strong when she had such a heavy burden to bear.

It’s true that I don’t have anything like that.

Ikki had fought his way this far simply by believing in his own worth, his own potential. He hadn't relied on anyone else, but neither had he fought for anyone else. He'd worked this hard solely to become what he thought was his ideal self. His sword lacked the weight that Touka's had. He wasn't carrying anyone else's hopes and dreams with him. At that realization, a tiny, dark voice in the back of his mind asked him, "Will that lightweight sword of yours be able to defeat Toudou Touka?"



Lunch was curry with garlic rice. Apparently, this particular dish was one that Touka, Utakata, and Kanata had come up with back at the Wakaba Orphanage—everyone loved it, and it was cheap enough that they could afford all the ingredients. The smell of her secret roux combined with the heavenly scent of garlic and the hearty aroma of beef whetted everyone's appetites, so they all dug in with gusto, savoring the delicious curry. Ikki had never tasted such delicious curry in his life and ended up overeating to the point that he nearly threw up. Conversely, Stella, who normally ate enough to feed four people, didn't have too much.

Maybe it didn't suit her palate?

The group spent an hour digesting, after which Touka split everyone up into pairs to search the premises. Though they were all Blazers, it was still dangerous to wander the mountains alone. The three pairs were Touka and Utakata, Saijou and Renren, and Ikki and Stella. Kanata was staying behind to serve as a central point of communication and so that she could join any group in the event of an emergency.

Once the pairs were decided, everyone set off in search of the mysterious giant. Ikki and Stella had been tasked with searching the western side of the mountain, which was the more densely forested side. Unlike a normal mountain with maintained trails that hikers frequented, this one was used primarily for Blazer training. As a result, there were no trails to speak of, and the undergrowth was thick. This part of the mountain was rather steep as well, making it even more difficult to traverse. Of course, if that was all it had going for it, Ikki and Stella would have had no problem. They were both in peak physical shape, after all.

“Tch. Not again.” Something jumped out of the thicket at Ikki, and he snatched it out of the air with his left hand. It was a viper, its fangs bared. This was the third one they’d run into. The steepness of the mountain wasn’t a huge problem, but these surprise snake attacks were getting annoying. Ikki flung the viper away with a flick of his wrist and turned back to Stella. “It looks like there are a lot of venomous snakes in this region. Their venom isn’t potent enough to kill you, but you should still watch out.”

“Okay...” Stella said listlessly. It was surprising just how despondent she looked. Considering how excited she’d been to go giant hunting, Ikki had expected her to take the lead and charge through the mountain. But right now, she was walking mechanically behind him, her shoulders slumped and her back stooped.

“What’s wrong? You look down. Did losing in badminton hit you that hard?”

Apparently, Renren had wiped the floor with her in badminton. Though it seemed like Stella had mostly been the agent of her own destruction since she’d fired off a series of smashes that were all too strong and had sent the birdie out of the court. Ikki figured that was what was eating at her, but Stella shook her head.

“No...that’s not it.” There was a bit of hesitation in her voice, as if she herself wasn’t sure what had put her in such a depressed mood.

I wonder what’s wrong. Seeing his girlfriend like this worried Ikki, of course, but he didn’t think it was anything major. *Maybe she’s just tired because we’re in a new environment and she isn’t used to trekking through mountains?*

“Make sure you stick close to me.”

Ikki started beating back some of the undergrowth with his sword as he walked, making it easier for Stella to follow behind him. He thought she’d perk back up soon enough, but that would prove to be a fatal mistake.



Two hours of trekking later, Ikki and Stella still hadn’t found the mysterious giant. As they stopped in a small clearing, Ikki glanced up at the sky.

I don’t like the look of those clouds.

The day had started out clear, but thick, dark clouds now hung low overhead. Ikki had heard that the weather could change suddenly in the mountains, but he hadn't expected it to be this drastic. It could start pouring any second. And this high up, the temperature was cool even in midsummer.

Maybe we should try and find shelter.

"Hmm?"

As Ikki turned back to the path ahead of him, he noticed something strange. A few dozen trees lay on the ground. They seemed to have been felled recently. In the center of the destroyed area was a hole a solid five meters in diameter, as if some giant creature had crawled up from under the earth. Ocher soil clung to the roots of the fallen trees, making it clear they'd been uprooted from below rather than chopped down, and there were massive, muddy footprints next to the hole.

"Holy crap!"

The footprints were shaped like a human's, not a beast's. But they were fifty centimeters wide, and no normal human had feet that large. Ikki was certain that these were the giant's footprints.

"Stella, look. The—"

As he turned back to Stella, he noticed that something was wrong with her.

"Haaah...haaah..."

She was breathing heavily and leaning against a nearby tree.

"Stella, are you okay?! Did all the hiking tire—" At first, Ikki thought she was just tired, but then he took a closer look at her. It was pretty chilly this high up, but her face was bright red, and her forehead was slick with sweat. She looked like she was burning up. "Stella?! What happened to you?!"

"I-I don't know. But I'm feeling really tired and woozy. I think I might throw up. Hey, Ikki, can I ask you something?"

Stella raised her head to look up at Ikki, her expression dead serious. He could tell from the determination in her eyes that this was something of vital importance to her. He gulped, mentally preparing himself for whatever it was

she wanted to ask.

“Yeah?”

“Can you get pregnant from kissing?”

Ikki was simultaneously dumbfounded and relieved that it wasn't anything serious.

“No, I don't think that's biologically possible.” *At least I hope my saliva doesn't have the power to get women pregnant.* “Wait, hang on. Maybe you're just sick?”

“Lovesick?”

“No, the normal kind. Uh, I think in English they call it a 'cold'? Actually, in this case, it's probably a 'fever.'”

“Oh, that's what you mean. I get it now.” Ikki's English was pretty spotty, but Stella was able to pick up on what he was trying to convey. “I see. So this is the famous Japanese cold.”

“Have you never been sick before, Stella?”

“Nope. Not even once. When I was a kid, I was jealous when other kids got to skip school because they were sick, but now I think not getting sick is the better deal,” Stella said with a pained smile.

This was the first time in her life that her body was refusing to do what she wanted it to, and it was a very sobering experience. This being a novel experience for her was also the reason it had taken her this long to realize she was sick. The excessive heat and humidity of Japan's summer must have weakened her immune system.

“Well, we can't keep exploring with you in that state. Let's head back.”

“W-Wait, we finally found its tracks. We can't stop now.”

“But you can barely move.”

“That's not true. Look, I can keep— H-Huh?”

“Stella!”

Stella pushed off from the tree to prove that she could walk without support,

but her legs immediately gave out. Ikki ran over and managed to grab her before she fell to the ground. As he wrapped his arms around her, he realized just how high her body temperature had risen.

This is worse than I thought. Since Stella hadn't realized she was sick, she'd kept pushing herself, which had led to her fever worsening. *We need to get back down to the lodge right now.*

"I don't care what you say," Ikki said, lifting Stella into his arms and looking for the fastest route down. "I'm taking you back to the lodge."

"Aww..." Stella pouted, but Ikki's tone was firm, and she decided not to argue. Besides, she was aware that even if she wanted to protest, her body lacked the strength for it. She lay limply in Ikki's arms, too weak to even adjust her posture.

I need to get her to a doctor ASAP.

Under normal circumstances, Ikki could easily carry someone down a mountain like this in no time. But just as he began running, the clouds overhead burst, the torrential downpour instantly drenching the two of them. Storms like this used to be rare, but climate change had made them more and more common over the years.

"God, why now?!"

Ikki could deal with the rain, but it would make Stella's fever even worse as the cold and wet sapped her immune strength. Right now, she probably just had a common cold, but if she stayed out in this rain, she was likely to develop pneumonia. Recovering from that would take long enough that it would impact her upcoming selection matches. That situation needed to be avoided at all costs.

Wait, we passed an emergency shelter hut on the way here! That'll get us out of the rain, at least!

Thus, Ikki turned sharply and made a beeline for the hut.



Unfortunately, even the hut was a decent distance away, and both Ikki and

Stella were soaked by the time they reached it. Ikki immediately got a fire going in the fireplace to provide some warmth and help dry their clothes. Luckily for them, there was a lot of cut firewood in a corner, so they wouldn't have to worry about running out of fuel. Once that was taken care of, Ikki took out his student handbook and called Kanata.

"Stella-san's fallen ill?!"

"Yes. I took her to a nearby hut to wait out the rain for now."

"Dear me. How sick is she?"

"It's just a cold, I think, but I can't be sure until we take her to a doctor."

"Understood. I'll send someone over right away."

"Thank you. Also, we found footprints that probably belong to the giant. They were next to a big hole that looked like someone had climbed up out of the ground. It's possible this giant is a subterranean creature."

"I see. I find it hard to fathom that such a large creature could move about underground, but... Very well. We'll take over investigating the footprints you found. The two of you should stay in the hut until help arrives. It shouldn't take more than an hour or two for them to reach you. The temperature's dropped quite a bit, so make sure you dry your clothes."

"Of course. Thank you very much."

Ikki hung up and threw another log into the fireplace. The inside of the hut was quite warm now.

"All right, this should be a big enough fire to dry our clothes," he said, taking off his shirt and hanging it near the fire. He then turned back to Stella, who was leaning against the wall, her breathing unsteady. "Stella, I know it's embarrassing, but you're gonna have to take your clothes off. If we don't get you warmed up, your cold will just get worse."

"Okay..."

Stella and Ikki had been going out for a few months now, but their relationship still hadn't progressed past kissing and holding hands. Ikki had expected Stella to be reluctant to undress in front of him, but to his surprise,

she didn't utter a word of complaint as she took off her vest and then reached down toward her skirt.

Stella understood that this was not the time to be making a fuss. She was painfully aware that if her condition got any worse she'd be unable to participate in her next selection match. And if there was even a single loss on her record, she wouldn't be able to claim one of the six representative spots for the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Her promise to duel Ikki there mattered far more to her than her sense of shame. She was the kind of person who always had her priorities straight.

"Ah..."

"Stella!"

But as Stella got up to take her skirt off, she stumbled and her legs gave out again. Since she'd never been sick before, she had no frame of reference as to just how weak it had made her. Because she'd pushed herself without realizing she was sick and then been rained on, she was now so weak she couldn't even get undressed by herself.

Thankfully, Ikki once again caught her before she hit the ground. Her body was even hotter than it had been when he'd been carrying her. Her fever was getting worse. She needed rest.

In a hesitant voice, Ikki said, "Stella, is it okay if I take your clothes off for you?"

Stella gasped, her eyes widening in surprise. It was embarrassing enough exposing her bare skin to Ikki, so letting him undress her would be even harder to bear. However, after a brief silence, she nodded.

"Okay..." she said in a tiny voice.

This was embarrassing for Ikki too, of course, but he put his feelings aside for the time being. Taking care of Stella took priority. Stella knew he was saying this out of concern for her as well, which was why she'd agreed so readily.

Ikki once again reminded himself that Stella's health took priority and that this was no time to be getting frisky. Meanwhile, Stella held back her embarrassment, understanding that Ikki was doing this for her sake. He was the

only one here who could help her, which meant he needed to be a perfect gentleman and not take advantage of her in her weakened state. He decided to do this as clinically as possible so as to not make her feel any more embarrassed than she already was.

Okay, let's do this.

Emptying his mind of all lewd thoughts, Ikki reached a hand toward Stella's stockings, which were soaked through and clinging uncomfortably to her legs. First, he unclipped the garter belt that kept the stockings in place, then he slowly, one at a time, started pulling them down, exposing Stella's pale legs. They were lean but toned like a hunter's, and her thighs had a distinct shape compared to those of most Japanese people.



No matter how much Ikki tried to restrain himself, he couldn't help but stare at Stella's perfectly sculpted legs. The whole situation was made even more erotic by the fact that he was the one undressing her. All of his mental fortitude might not be enough to keep him calm.

As he finished removing Stella's tights, a jolt of electricity ran down his spine, and he realized that he had set a monumentally difficult task for himself.

There's no way I can be calm and clinical about this!

Had it been any other girl, he might have been able to stay detached. But this was the girl he loved. And he was taking off her clothes. This was possibly the most sensual thing he could be doing, short of sex. To make matters worse, as he undressed her, Stella's sweet scent tickled his nostrils. Just taking her tights off already had his heart pounding so hard that he thought it might burst. He wasn't confident he'd be able to survive taking her shirt off.

But... Ikki glanced up to see Stella's expression. Unsurprisingly, she was as red as a tomato and had tears in her eyes. *I need to keep it together so I can reassure her.*

"It's okay, Stella. You can relax," Ikki said, smiling gently at her.

"O-Okay..."

Despite what Stella said, she didn't relax at all. Ikki could hardly blame her. This was embarrassing enough for him, so it was probably a hundred times more embarrassing for her. The only thing he could do to help was get this over with as quickly as possible.

Steeling himself, he reached for the button of her blouse and quickly unbuttoned it, doing his best not to touch her any more than necessary. Like her tights, her shirt was also soaked through and sticking tightly to her body. The shape of her breasts was clearly visible, and every time he undid a button, they became more and more exposed.

Once Stella's shirt was fully unbuttoned, Ikki reached up to her collar and spread it apart. Removing her shirt was slow work since it was sticking to her skin, but eventually, he was able to get it off. With it gone, he could see the tantalizing way her throat moved with each of her ragged breaths, and the only

thing covering her breasts was her lace bra. Like her legs, her upper body was also toned and muscular, but it still retained a layer of soft flexibility. Her body was drenched in sweat because of the fever, but that only made her look all the more alluring.

“Hrngh...”

Ikki’s throat was dry, and it was taking every ounce of reason he had to not pounce on Stella. He wanted to kiss her all over, run his tongue up and down her body, and quench his thirst with her saliva. But he kept those urges on a tight leash. Stella was suffering, and this was not the time to be having such thoughts.

“Um, Ikki? Can you...take my bra off too?” Stella requested, instantly making it that much harder for Ikki to keep his emotions under control.

“Wh-What did you just say?”

“It’s hard to breathe... If you don’t want to take it off completely, at least unhook it.”

Stella’s chest rose and fell with every breath she took, and it certainly did look like her bra was uncomfortably constricting. Her boobs were massive, after all.

But...is it okay for me to take off her bra?

Ikki was understandably hesitant, but at the same time, he couldn’t say no when it was clear Stella was suffering. He was the one who’d said he’d undress her, and it would be wrong to go back on his word now.

“S-Sure. Just give me a sec,” he said with a nod, trying to act as normal as possible. Stella’s bra had a front hook. It also had shoulder straps so it wouldn’t come all the way off after being unhooked.

It’s okay. I won’t see anything. It’ll be fine. Just barely, but it’ll be fine.

Ikki kept telling himself that as he wiggled his index finger under the hook of Stella’s bra. The hook was surprisingly easy to detach, but as soon as he did so, her boobs burst from their restrictive container, pushing her bra away. Her nipples were now in plain sight.

“Nnngh!”

This would have been enough to destroy any remaining shreds of Ikki's reason, but he'd prepared for this possibility and bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood the moment he unhooked Stella's bra. The pain brought him back to his senses, and he was able to keep himself from making a mistake he would later regret.

Man, what am I doing? He honestly felt pathetic for being so easily swayed just by seeing a girl naked. If he'd been in more relationships and spent more time with women, he might have been able to handle this situation better. *But I guess it's too late to be kicking myself for that now.*

At the very least, Ikki was proud that he'd kept his urges under control the entire time he'd been undressing Stella. He was pretty sure he'd managed to keep his expression neutral as well, so hopefully Stella's embarrassment had been kept to a minimum.

"H-Here, wrap this towel around yourself," Ikki told Stella as he grabbed a towel from the corner of the room and draped it over her shoulders. "We're high enough up that it's pretty cold."

In a quiet voice, Stella said, "I'm sorry for making you do everything, Ikki."

"Don't worry about it. It's not your fault you caught a cold. This is your first summer in Japan too, so it's no surprise your body isn't used to the heat."

"There's that too, but...you look like you had a really hard time when you were taking my clothes off..."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

Crap, did I let it show on my face? However, Stella wasn't looking at Ikki's face. Her somewhat surprised gaze was fixed on a specific part of his lower body. *Oh no.*

"I mean...look at how big you've gotten..."

Dreading what he would find, Ikki looked down at his crotch.

"Oh no."

His dick was ready and raring to go.

Not good, not good, not good.

He had such a stiff boner that hiding it was impossible. If anything, he felt like an idiot for keeping his expression neutral when his thoughts had clearly been leaking out through his lower half.

“A-Aha ha... Sorry about that. But this is just an unavoidable physiological reaction, you know? There’s nothing I can do about it, so please just pretend you didn’t see anything,” Ikki said awkwardly, covering up his crotch with his hands.

“It’s okay... You don’t have to apologize,” Stella replied with a smile. “It’s true that letting you undress me was really embarrassing...but like I said at the pool, I don’t mind as long as it’s you, Ikki. If anything, I’m happy you find me so arousing.”

Oh...

A sudden wave of dizziness washed over Ikki. He had to tell himself that she was only acting like this because of the fever, because otherwise, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to resist the longing in her eyes or the alluring luster of her lips. He wanted so badly to hold her in his arms and kiss her.

“Hey, Ikki...”

Ikki was not at all prepared for the words she said next.

“Do you want to have sex with me?”

“Hwuh?”

For a few seconds, he stood there, dumbfounded. Finally, his brain processed what Stella had just said.

“Whaaaaat?!” he shouted. “S-Stella, do you realize what you’re saying?!”

“Yes. I know what sex is.”

“Ngh.”

She looked directly into Ikki’s eyes, and he could see the resolve in hers. She wasn’t joking, and she wasn’t delirious because of her fever. She was seriously willing to have sex with him right here and now.

Ikki gulped. He wasn’t sure if it was all right to speak the truth here. Of course

he wanted to have sex with Stella. This was hardly the first time he'd thought that either. Every time they kissed, every time they held hands, every time they hugged, he felt that urge. He loved Stella with every fiber of his being, and not just in a platonic sense. However, saying that aloud would carry with it a special meaning. Humans were creatures that communicated through words. If Ikki communicated what he was feeling to Stella now, and if Stella felt the same way, then they'd end up doing a lot more than just talking about sex.

I don't think I'd be able to stop myself then.

Even if he kept himself from pouncing on Stella in this instant, once she got over her cold and they went back to the dorms, they'd almost certainly end up having sex. But Ikki couldn't allow that to happen just yet. He was traditional, and to him, there was an order to these things.

"I'm sorry. I can't answer that question yet," Ikki said, matching Stella's determined gaze. "Stella. I want to be able to tell people that I love you with my head held high. Not just Shizuku and the others, but even random people on the street and...most importantly, your parents. My love for you is the most valuable thing in the world to me. But if I have sex with you now, then I'll feel guilty when I eventually go meet your parents. I won't be able to look them in the eye when I tell them I love you."

As Stella and Ikki were both adults, they didn't actually need anyone else's permission to get married. It was Ikki's own set of values that was holding him back. Stella loved her parents, and they loved her. That being the case, it was only proper that he met them before taking his relationship with Stella a step further.

"I'm sorry," Ikki said again, and bowed his head in apology. In truth, he didn't even think the current state of their relationship was proper. He would much prefer it if they could be open about the fact that they were dating. That way, he'd be able to tell the world he loved Stella without feeling any guilt about it. But he understood why they had to keep it secret. It would be a scandal if their relationship became public, and that would put a burden on Stella. He wanted her to be able to focus solely on the upcoming Seven Stars Battle Festival without petty paparazzi distracting her. On the other hand, though, he wanted to keep their relationship relatively chaste until they could be open about it.

“Call me old-fashioned if you like, but this is just how I am. I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you, but I can’t give you a proper reply until I’ve met your parents.”

Upon hearing that, Stella shook her head. “You haven’t disappointed me.” She wrapped her hand around Ikki’s and smiled at him. “That just shows how seriously you’re thinking about our future together. If anything, I’m sorry for putting you on the spot like that.” It was clear the blush on her cheeks wasn’t because of her fever.

She mulled Ikki’s words over in her head. *“I want to be able to tell people that I love you with my head held high.” He really cares about me. Even more than I realized.*

In truth, Stella hadn’t expected Ikki to be taking their relationship this seriously. She had only been thinking about Ikki, but he’d been thinking about how their relationship would impact the people close to her as well, and how to build a harmonious relationship with them so that they could stay together long-term. She was overjoyed that he was considering a future with her in it and that he wanted to do everything possible to make it happen.

Meanwhile, here I am acting like a rabbit in heat! She couldn’t believe she’d asked him to sleep with her like that in the heat of the moment. Not only that, but she’d been perpetually horny for the past few weeks too. She could hardly call herself a chaste maiden at this point. *If anything, Ikki’s more like the stereotypical chaste maiden!*

Embarrassed, Stella looked down and muttered, “I think the fever must be getting to me. I keep saying all this weird stuff. I’m going to nap for a bit.” She wrapped the towel around herself and lay down.

“Sounds good. I’ll watch the fire while you sleep.”

Ikki decided to drop the topic for now as well. He felt bad for turning Stella down after she’d worked up the courage to ask him to sleep with her. Stella could tell he was once again being considerate of her, which just made her even more embarrassed.

But still, I wish he’d clearly said he wanted to have sex with me.

She was absolutely overjoyed that Ikki was thinking about a long-term future with her. And though he hadn't given her a straight answer, it was obvious from his expression and tone that he did indeed want to have sex with her. She wasn't so dense that she couldn't figure that out. But even so, she wanted to hear it from his mouth. Feelings like these took on a special meaning when they were put into words. She knew that she'd eventually hear those words from Ikki, but was it really so wrong to want to rush things a little? She honestly wasn't sure.

There was one thing she *was* sure of, though.

I'm a horny girl...



Before long, Stella fell asleep. And though she woke back up about thirty minutes later, the short power nap did wonders for her condition. Her breathing was steady now, and her fever had dropped low enough that she wasn't covered in sweat. She was able to get up and walk over to Ikki without stumbling as well. She was still slightly flushed and her body temperature hadn't quite returned to normal, but from the looks of it, she hadn't caught pneumonia.

If she's feeling this energetic, I guess there's no need to send her back to bed, Ikki thought, taking a closer look at her complexion after she sat down next to him. It would probably have been better if she'd continued to rest, but he knew her too well to think she'd be able to stay still for long.

Indeed, Stella was fidgeting quite a bit, though that was probably because she was still embarrassed about what had happened earlier. Either way, she started talking to Ikki about what had been going on recently at school and other mundane topics. But while he didn't mind the small talk, there was something more important he wanted to discuss with her.

"Hey, Stella?" he said during a lull in the conversation.

"Yeah?"

"What are your parents like?"

"Um, why do you ask?"

“I mean, we’re gonna make our relationship public at some point, right? And when we do, I’ll have to go and meet them. So I figured I should learn about what they’re like now, while I’ve got the chance.”

Meeting Stella’s parents was something Ikki would have to do eventually. In fact, it was the first thing he wanted to do once the Seven Stars Battle Festival was over. But he didn’t want to go into that meeting blind. At the very least, he wanted to know how Stella saw them.

“O-Oh yeah. I guess that’ll happen once everyone knows we’re dating... Ugh.” It was clear from Stella’s tone and expression that she really didn’t want to discuss this topic. “Hey, Ikki? How about we don’t let my parents know until just before we get married?”

Ikki gave her an incredulous look.

“There’s no way we can do that. Maybe we can avoid making our relationship public until then, but I really do think I need to meet your parents sooner rather than later.”

“What if we just do it as a fun little surprise for my father?”

“I’m pretty sure that ‘surprise’ will give him a heart attack.” If nothing else, Ikki was certain that *he’d* keel over in shock if he had a daughter and she suddenly came up to him one day and handed him a wedding invitation.

“But...”

“Um, is there a reason you don’t want me to meet your parents?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Stella nodded.

“Yes. So, my mother’s normal enough. I think you’d like her. But my father is... Well, he’s a really doting parent, and if he found out that I was dating you, he’d...”

“He’d be against it?”

“No, not *against* it, per se.”

“Then there’s no proble—”

“He’d probably have you assassinated while you’re in Vermillion and then

cover up your death.”

Okay, there’s a big problem.

“Considering how much power he wields, that’s a kind of scary joke.”

“It’s not a joke.”

Ikki suddenly felt a massive headache coming on, and he was fairly certain it wasn’t because he was catching Stella’s cold. However, this was a trial he would have to overcome if he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Stella. He couldn’t afford to back down, even if he was dealing with the king of a nation.

Doing his best to put a positive spin on things, he said, “Th-That just shows how much he cares about you, right? He sounds like a good dad.”

“He just doesn’t know how to let go of his kids. When I told him I was going to study abroad, he burst out into tears.”

“In fairness, I think any dad would try to stop his daughter if she told him, ‘I’m going overseas to find people stronger than me.’”

“Thankfully, Mother locked him up for a few weeks, so he wasn’t able to stop me from leaving.”

“She did *what*?! Isn’t he the head of your country?! Is it really okay to just lock him up like that?! Also, it sounds like your mom’s even scarier than your dad!”

“Wait, that’s it. I can just have Mother lock him up again when you come visit and everything will be okay.”

“Hold up a second! You don’t need to do that! It’s okay, I’ll talk to him!”

“But you’ll die.”

“Please don’t say that like it’s a guarantee!”

Ikki was beginning to dread meeting Stella’s parents. But it was something he was resolved to do, because he wanted to stay with Stella forever.

“I’m happy that you’re worried about me, and from what you said, it sounds like your dad is something else. But even so, I can’t run away from this. I’m going to meet your dad, and I’m going to get him to accept our relationship. That’s my duty as a man,” Ikki said, his voice brimming with determination.

Stella sighed and responded, “All right, fine. We’ll go to Vermillion after the Seven Stars Battle Festival, then.” She smiled and rested her head on Ikki’s shoulder. “Besides, I *do* want to show my wonderful boyfriend off to them.”

“Thank you, Stella.”

Ikki ran his fingers through Stella’s crimson hair, and she nuzzled his shoulder contentedly. After a few seconds, though, her expression clouded over and she looked up at Ikki.

“Hey, Ikki, what about me? Should I go visit your parents as well?” she asked hesitantly. She knew how bad Ikki’s relationship was with every member of his family except Shizuku.

As Ikki pondered her question, his expression also clouded over. He wasn’t sure if it was necessary for Stella to meet his parents since he wasn’t even sure they still saw him as their son. He’d ignored the Kurogane family precepts and run away from home. There was no telling if any of them—especially his dad—thought of him as family anymore.

After thinking about it for a few seconds, Ikki finally said, “I guess it *is* important. Once the Seven Stars Battle Festival is over, will you come visit the Kurogane family with me?”

He didn’t know how Itsuki felt, but for his own part, Ikki still thought of his father as family. The man had never once done a single fatherly thing for him, but even so, he was Ikki’s flesh and blood. Ikki couldn’t help but hope that they’d be able to reconcile one day. Thus, he wanted to believe those familial ties still existed, no matter how faint they might be.

“Okay. If that’s what you want,” Stella said with a nod.

In truth, Stella was already worried that the meeting wouldn’t go well. She’d heard from Kurono, Shizuku, and even Ikki himself about how his family had treated him. Any man who told his son “Since you can’t do anything, *don’t* do anything” didn’t have a shred of fatherly love in his body.

Not only had Ikki’s father given up on him from the outset, but he’d even gone out of his way to try and quash Ikki’s potential by hindering his attempts to get stronger. Stella had grown up with loving parents, so from her

perspective, Ikki's family situation was truly messed up. It was hard to imagine that Ikki's father even thought of him as his son anymore, and she was afraid that Ikki's hope that there might still be some familial ties left between him and his father was asking for too much. Moreover, she was worried that having those hopes crushed would leave deep scars in his already wounded heart.

She couldn't bring herself to say that to him, however. She didn't have the heart to tell him that his dad most likely didn't care about him one bit. All she could do was pray that Ikki's hopes weren't unfounded and that his father wasn't as horrible a person as she thought.

The two of them sat in silence for a while after that. It didn't last long, however, as both of them suddenly looked up. They could feel the ground shaking slightly.

"What's happening? An earthquake?" Stella asked.

The shaking didn't quite feel like an earthquake, though. It was actually more like rumbling than shaking, and it happened at surprisingly regular intervals. Almost as if something heavy was hitting the ground over and over.

"Wait, are those the giant's footsteps?" Ikki muttered, thinking back to the giant footprints and uprooted trees he'd seen by the crater.

It was entirely possible that a creature that big would cause the ground to shake every time it took a step. Though he didn't believe in the supernatural, having seen the evidence firsthand, he was willing to accept there might actually be a giant roaming the mountain.

"I'll go take a look outside," he said, cautiously getting to his feet. "*We did* come here to help the student council track down the giant, after all."

"I'll come too!" Stella declared, also making to stand up.

"No you won't," Ikki replied as he flicked her on the forehead. It was a weak flick, but it was still enough to cause her to fall back down.

"Why not?! I wanna see the giant too!"

"If there really is a giant out there, we might have to fight it if it's hostile. You're still sick, so you stay here and rest."

“Awww...”

Stella puffed out her cheeks in protest, but she reluctantly did as she was told. Ikki walked over to the cabin’s door and pressed his ear against it. The stomping noises were getting closer, and the shaking more violent.

“Come to me, Intetsu.”

Lacing his words with mana, Ikki summoned his jet-black katana to his side. He took a deep breath to steady himself, then flung the door open and rushed outside. All he saw was the rain and the drenched trees. The scenery right outside the cabin was unchanged from when he’d first brought Stella here.

What’s going on?

By his estimation, those footsteps had been close enough that he should be able to see the giant. Not only that, but the footsteps and rumbling had also conspicuously stopped now that he was outside.

“What the heck?”

Confused, Ikki turned around.

“Oh...”

He saw a five-meter-tall giant made of stone standing between him and the cabin. He’d run right between its legs without realizing it.

H-Holy shit!

Ikki stared up in shock, slack-jawed. But in the next instant, he regained his senses as he watched the giant raise one of its massive, boulder-sized arms and start bringing it down on the hut.

“S-Stellaaaaa!” Ikki shouted, dashing forward.



Ikki breathed a sigh of relief as he landed safely on the ground behind the hut, Stella in his arms.

“What the?! What’s going on?!” Stella shouted.

It had been a close call. If he hadn’t activated Ittou Shura right before the hut had been destroyed, he wouldn’t have been able to reach her in time.

“You okay, Stella?”

“Y-Yes. But why did you—”

“Take a look for yourself.” Ikki nodded toward the giant. “Looks like the giant’s real.”

“Wha...” Stella’s eyes widened as she looked up at the giant that had squashed the cabin. “I didn’t think it would look like *that!*”

“Wait, *that’s* your concern?!”

In fairness, Ikki understood how Stella felt. When they’d heard the word “giant,” they’d assumed it was a really big person. But this was just a bunch of rocks smooshed together in the vague shape of a human being. It was debatable whether this giant was even a living creature. Either way, it was clearly hostile toward Ikki and Stella. It raised its arm high again and brought it down on the two of them.

“Ngh!” Ikki quickly leaped to the side, Stella still in his arms.

The giant’s arm crashed into the ground, sending a spray of dirt and pebbles flying everywhere. Not even a Blazer’s sturdy body would be able to withstand a blow from this monster. Ikki would need to take the thing down without being hit by a single attack.

“Stella, you wait here. Try to find a tree to hide under so you don’t get too wet,” Ikki said. He lowered Stella to the ground and hefted Intetsu.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay? I don’t think swords are going to work on that thing.”

“Don’t worry, I came up with a technique to deal with enemies like this.”

Ikki drew Intetsu back with his right hand, placing his left hand against the flat edge of the blade, and dropped into a thrusting stance. The giant either didn’t care or wasn’t sentient enough to understand what Ikki was doing, as it again mechanically swung an arm at him. Its attack pattern was far too simplistic to be a real threat to Ikki, and he easily dodged that swing as well before rushing forward, bolstered by the speed Ittou Shura granted him.

As soon as he was in range, he thrust Intetsu forward with as much force as

he could muster. All of his arm strength, leg strength, and even the momentum of his charge were concentrated into the tip of his sword. This thrust boasted the most power out of all of Ikki's techniques. He had developed this particular technique specifically to deal with sturdy objects that didn't break easily.

"First Sword Style: Rampage Thrust!"

Ikki slammed into the giant's chest like a bullet, with Intetsu piercing straight through the dense rock. The force of the impact caused the giant to crumple to the ground, and the rocks it was composed of started breaking apart from each other. The giant hole in its chest made it impossible for it to retain its humanoid shape.

"I did it!" Ikki cheered, landing behind the giant. A second later, however, his elation turned to despair as the rocks formed back together. It was as if they were magnetically attracted to each other. "What?!"

Within seconds, the jumble of rocks had reformed. But this time, instead of taking the shape of a giant, they had become a few dozen human-sized rockmen no taller than Ikki. Furthermore, as they'd reformed, Ikki had noticed that there were tiny threads of mana connecting the rocks, which was what was drawing them together. This was no monster; this was a puppet—or rather, many puppets—created by someone who could use magic.

"That's a Noble Art!" Ikki shouted. "We're up against a Blazer! Stella, keep an eye out for surprise attacks!"

"Ikki, watch out behind you!"

"Ngh?!"

Thanks to Stella's warning, Ikki was able to parry the rockman's fist that had been closing in on him from behind. However, the impact of rock against his blade numbed his arm, while the stone fist barely even cracked.

I can't damage these things without Rampage Thrust!

Unfortunately, Rampage Thrust required a run-up to work. He wouldn't be able to make the space or the time he needed when up against a horde like this.

"Gah!"

“Ikki!”

Before long, the rockmen had managed to overwhelm Ikki with sheer numbers, and one of them was able to land a solid blow on his forehead. Though Ikki was trying to use Celestial Counter to parry the rockmen’s assault, there were simply too many of them. Every now and then, he would miss one, allowing its attack to get through.

This isn’t good. Though he’d had no other choice, Ikki had used Ittou Shura too early. He only had thirty seconds left, and he wouldn’t be able to destroy all the rockmen in that time. *What should I do?!*

Sadly, the rockmen didn’t even give him time to think. As most of them swarmed around him, five or so broke off and ran toward Stella.

“Stella!” he shouted to warn her, but that was all he could do. He was too tightly surrounded to be able to break out. Stella was still weak from her cold, so she wouldn’t be able to fight effectively—or so Ikki thought.

“Hi-yaaah!”

To Ikki’s surprise, Stella had summoned Lævateinn and obliterated the five rockmen with a single swing. On top of that, she cut through a section of the rockmen surrounding Ikki and ran over to his side.

“You know, sick people don’t usually have this much energy,” Ikki said in awe.

“Honestly, I’m surprised too. I guess I’m just that strong.” It wasn’t bragging when Stella said it, and all Ikki could do was nod in response. “That nap really helped. I can basically move like I want to again. Let me fight with you. I’m better at handling enemies like this than you anyway.”

Fair enough.

Stella could strengthen herself to the point that she could crush these rockmen with pure sheer force. In truth, Ikki didn’t want her to push herself until she’d completely recovered from her cold, but it was clear that he couldn’t handle this swarm on his own. Just then, though, someone new showed up, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Now, now. You shouldn’t push yourself when you’re sick, Stella-chan.”

Thankfully, this was a voice that Ikki and Stella recognized.

“Vice President Misogi!”



“How’s it going, you two? I’m here to bail you out.”

“You got here really fast,” Ikki replied to Utakata. “I thought it would take you another half an hour.”

“Aha ha ha, that’s because I’m the guy who can make the impossible possible. This is nothing,” Utakata said with a playful wink.

“Graaaaah!”

It seemed the rockmen were targeting anything that moved, as they roared and immediately started swinging at Utakata as well. The closest rockman swung down at his head, and Ikki cried out in alarm.

“Misogi-san, behind you!”

Ikki had managed to get away with only a scratch on his forehead from its punch because he’d softened the blow with Celestial Counter. If that rockman landed a clean hit on Utakata, his head would be crushed. However, the vice president neither turned around nor made any move to dodge, and the stone fist slammed into his head, pulverizing it.

“Ah?!”

“No!”

Ikki and Stella stared in shock as Utakata’s head was smooshed like a tomato. His headless body fell to the muddy ground, unmoving.

“Too bad. You fell for my magic trick.” A second later, Utakata, whom Ikki had thought was dead, suddenly appeared on the shoulder of the rockman that had killed him. “Aha ha, I’ve always wanted to get someone with that.”

“What the heeeeeeck?!” Stella looked up in confusion at the cackling Utakata.

Ikki didn’t cry out, but he looked just as stunned as Stella. He’d seen Utakata’s head get caved in and watched shards of his skull and pieces of brain matter fly out in all directions. All of his senses had informed him that he really had

witnessed those events, and yet Utakata was sitting atop the rockman's shoulder as if nothing had happened. He must have used his Blazer power, and Ikki had an inkling as to what it was.

"Your Noble Art must have something to do with manipulating fate."

"Got it in one," Utakata said with a nod.

There were various categories of Blazer powers. Ikki's Ittou Shura fell into the body strengthening category. Stella's Dragon Breath, meanwhile, was part of the category that could create and manipulate natural phenomena such as heat, lightning, and the like. Then, there was Ayatsuji Ayase's ability to reopen old wounds, which was in the category that manipulated high-level concepts.

Among the various Blazer categories, the one that could interfere with the natural law of cause and effect—with fate itself—was the smallest and rarest. Powers that fell under this category were also generally considered to be among the strongest.

"My Noble Art is called Black Box, and it lets me manipulate the results of various actions," Utakata explained. "For example, I can make it so that any attack against me fails."

Ikki suddenly thought back to when he'd first met Misogi Utakata—the famous Fifty-Fifty—at that restaurant where Kuraudo had goaded him. Utakata had been able to heal his wound in an instant. At the time, Ikki hadn't understood what kind of power Utakata had used, but now, it all made sense.

Misogi-san must have simply altered fate to make it so I'd never been hurt in the first place. A shiver ran down Ikki's spine. He'd seen many Blazer powers over the years, but none as absurd as Utakata's. *So this is what a Noble Art from the strongest category of Blazer powers is like.*

He couldn't even fathom how he'd fight against something like that. Right now, though, it was reassuring to have someone so strong on their side. With a power as insane as his, Utakata would have no trouble cleaning up this mob of rockmen.

"That's an amazing power! With your help, we can take down these monsters in a flash, Senpai," Stella said, beaming.

“Oh, sorry, I can’t help,” Utakata said flatly.

“Huh? Wh-Why not?!”

“My Black Box only lets me tamper with the result of something if that result could theoretically exist. What that means is that if there’s even a one percent chance that something could have happened, I can make it a hundred-percent chance. But on the flip side, I can’t create a result that has no possible chance of occurring. For example, if it’s physically impossible for me to do something, I can’t make it magically happen. I can turn one percent into one hundred percent, but not zero percent into one percent. You weirdos might be able to beat up these lumps of rock with your swords, but normally, that kind of stuff is only possible in shonen manga. A regular person can’t cut through rock with a sword, you know. There’s no way a cute little boy like me can scratch these things.”

“So your power *does* have a weakness,” Ikki noted.

“Duh. If I could do literally anything with it, I’d be participating in the selection matches, but sadly, Black Box only lets me choose results that are theoretically possible. In other words, it’s worthless against someone I have a zero percent chance of beating.”

Utakata was quite frail as well, which meant the scope of what was impossible for him was wider than what it was for a normal person. That was why he’d elected not to take part in the selection matches for the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“Wait, so then why did you even show yourself?!” Stella exclaimed. It was a fair question. If Utakata couldn’t fight, he’d just get in the way.

“To help you, of course,” the vice president replied with a smile. “Just not through fighting. My job is to guide the person who can get rid of these monsters for you to the right spot.” He jumped off the rockman’s shoulder and, looking up at a small clearing a bit farther up the mountain, said, “And now, it looks like she’s here. Take care of the rest for me, Touka.”

“Thanks for showing me the way, Uta-kun.”

Toudou Touka was standing at the edge of the trees, her electrically charged

golden katana in her hands.

“Toudou-san...”

“I was hoping to get here sooner, but I’m glad the two of you are safe.” Touka smiled in relief when she saw that Ikki and Stella were both unhurt. But then she turned to the rockmen, and her expression turned serious. “You can rest easy now. I’ll take care of these puppets.” She bent low, preparing to charge into the throng of rockmen surrounding Ikki and the others.

Stella hurriedly shouted, “Wait, Touka-san! Swords can’t cut through these guys! It’s too reckless to take them all on by yourself! I’ll help—”

Touka shook her head, cutting Stella off.

“Don’t worry. I know what these puppets’ weakness is.”

“Really?!”

“Some Blazers can run threads of mana through inorganic objects and manipulate them to fight. Blazers whose Devices are things like a set of steel wires tend to prefer this tactic, in fact. However, whenever you manipulate multiple puppets at once like this, it’s far too inefficient to control them all directly. The smart thing to do is to create a hub puppet that controls all the other puppets and focus on controlling just that one hub. This lets the Blazer hide themselves while one-sidedly attacking their enemies.”

Touka continued her explanation.

“Because they want to stay hidden, it’s imperative that they leave as few threads leading back to their location as possible. The drawback is that if you can defeat the hub puppet, the Blazer becomes unable to control any of their other puppets.”

Tactics like that didn’t work in school matches, which were all fought in a wide-open ring. As a result, most student knights had little reason to learn these techniques or ways to counter them. But while Touka was still a student knight, she had occasionally been called upon to fight terrorists and other rebellious organizations along with Toutokubara because of her exceptional talent and strength. Ikki and Stella were unfamiliar with this kind of fighting style, but Touka had seen it plenty of times before and knew how to deal with

it.

“Found it.”

After a few seconds of observation, she spotted the one rockman that moved slightly whenever any of the others did. That was the hub puppet, and as soon as she found it, she sprinted toward it, moving so fast that it looked like she’d vanished.

This was another one of Touka’s Noble Arts, Volt Dash. She used electricity to stimulate her muscles, forcing them to expand and contract much faster than they’d normally be able to. The rockmen puppets were unable to react to her lightning-fast assault, and they just stood there as she unleashed her ultimate attack.

“Thunderbolt!”

Her plasma-laced blade sliced through the hub puppet, bisecting it with ease. The sonic shock wave that followed pulverized the surrounding rockmen as well, and her swing unleashed a massive gust of wind that, for a second, blew all the rain away.



The puppets didn’t reconstitute, which presumably meant that their master had retreated the moment the hub puppet had been defeated.

“Wow...” Stella muttered, mesmerized. “It’s amazing how she was able to discover the enemy’s weakness immediately, but what’s *really* impressive is how well she’s melded her powers with her swordsmanship.”

“Absolutely,” Ikki said with a nod. He was convinced that was the secret to her overwhelming strength.

Touka had managed to apply the unique properties of her Blazer powers to every aspect of her fighting style. Lightning naturally boasted immense destructive power, but she was using it for far more than just offense. She also used electrical impulses to overcharge her muscles and read her opponents’ moves. Because of that, her swordsmanship was able to shine as well. She was actively using her powers in tandem with the martial arts techniques she’d learned, each one building off of and enhancing the other. That harmony was

something Ikki, who relied almost entirely on swordsmanship, couldn't match. He doubted even Stella was able to use her Blazer powers so synergistically with her swordsmanship.

Stella had realized that as well, and she quietly said, "That was a good wake-up call. I think I can learn a lot from Touka-san." Her expression was stiff, mostly because she was aware of the fact that she wasn't as strong as Touka.

The Crimson Princess, a Rank A Blazer, was weaker than the Thunderbolt, a Rank B Blazer. Of course, as her rating suggested, Stella possessed far greater latent potential. In another year, she'd undoubtedly be the stronger of the two. But if they fought right now, Touka would win nine times out of ten. That was a very sobering thought.

"Stella-san," Touka said, turning back to her. "I-I heard you collapsed! How are you feeling?!"

Her pale face and worried expression made it clear that she'd been genuinely worried about Stella the whole time. It was amazing how quickly she'd transformed from the cool, composed warrior who'd easily cut through pure rock into a worried classmate.

"Oh uh, fine. I'll be better after a night's rest, I think," Stella replied, trying to reassure Touka with a smile. However, Touka pressed her forehead against Stella's and immediately discovered that Stella was lying.

"You're not fine at all! You're burning up! You can't be out here in the rain—you'll make your cold worse!"

"It's not like I can be anywhere else. The hut got destroyed," Stella said, pointing to the flattened hut.

Touka frowned and said, "Uta-kun, are there any other huts nearby we can use for shelter?"

"Nope. But there's a cave to the north of us."

"Let's go there for now. We don't want Stella-san's condition getting any worse, and we need to take a look at Kurogane-kun's injuries too." Touka picked Stella up in her arms. "All right, Stella-san, let's go."

“Whoa?! H-Hold on! Put me down! This is embarrassing!”

“No can do. You’re too sick to walk.” Touka’s tone was gentle but firm, like a mother scolding a child.

As she started walking Utakata turned to Ikki and muttered in a low enough voice that only he could hear, “Touka lost both of her parents to disease. That’s why she’s such a stickler about making people rest when they’re sick. I wouldn’t argue with her when she’s like this if I were you. When she’s in mom mode, she spansks kids who don’t listen.”

“Are you speaking from experience, Vice President?”

“Her slaps hurt more than you can imagine. That’s all I’ll say.”

I’ll take that as a yes.

Touka had acted like Utakata’s mother in the student council room too, so Ikki figured this was a common occurrence.

“So, youngster, can you walk on your own? Or do you need me to lend you a shoulder?”

Utakata knew that Ikki was left utterly exhausted after he used Ittou Shura. However, Ikki shook his head and said, “I’m fine for now, at least.”

“Then follow me.”

With that, the vice president guided everyone to the cave he’d spotted earlier.

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“Heh heh heh. I was just planning on sending my new hub out for a test run, but I guess I got a bit too careless. Ah well,” a tall man said with a sigh as he lounged on a sofa in a room shrouded in darkness. It was still noon, but the blinds were closed and the lights were off. “I suppose it was too much to expect that mere puppets would be able to stand up to the famed Thunderbolt.”

“God, it stinks in here. Did you burn your arm?” someone said, walking over behind the sofa the man was sitting on and staring down at him.

“Pretty badly, yeah.” The man rolled up the sleeve of his left arm. When

Touka had sliced through the hub puppet, the electricity from her blade had traveled along the steel wire the man had been using to control it and scorched his flesh. The burns were so severe that even an iPS capsule wouldn't be able to fully heal them. But the man seemed oddly happy despite that. "My left arm's completely busted now," he said with a smile.

"This is what you get for jumping the gun, moron."

"Yeah, I guess so. Heh heh heh."

"I'm just a guest, so I'm not sure what the army has planned, but you're a full-blown member. Shouldn't you be more careful with the main event coming up so soon?"

"You're absolutely right, but I get so bored waiting. And I do so hate being bored. After all, I am the Jester. I need to always be smiling, no matter what. A true jester can keep smiling when they're doing both good deeds and bad."

"As always, I have no idea what you're saying."

"Heh heh heh, that's fine. No one likes a jester who speaks sense." The tall man who kept calling himself a jester made a few motions with the fingers on his right hand. A second later, his charred left arm fell off as if it had been severed by a blade. Because of how severely the arm had been burned, there was no blood coming out of the cut. "Hey, you want this? It's well-done." he said, holding his arm out to the person behind him.

"No thanks. Why don't you let our cat eat it instead?"

"Heh heh heh. You better call her 'Sphinx' like she wants or she'll start crying again."

"You can glue wings onto a cat, but that doesn't make it a sphinx."

The one-armed man sighed and shook his head. "Oh, by the way, the Crimson Princess you're so obsessed with was there too. She looked pretty pale. Is she sick or something?" he asked.

"How would I know?"

"My, my. Aren't you worried? I thought you came here to meet her."

"I did. That's why I'm listening to you prattle right now. But if she fails to

make it to the Festival because of a mere cold, that just means the Crimson Princess isn't all that she's cracked up to be."

The self-proclaimed clown could tell that his counterpart wasn't lying, which just proved to him that the two of them weren't compatible in the slightest.

Good grief. It's just no fun teasing the serious types.

"Come, now. No need to be so cold. Guys need to be more considerate these days or they won't be popular with girls."

"If you want to practice your jokes, clown, do it in front of a mirror," the other man spat as he walked out of the room.

The clown on the sofa watched him go, then let out another sigh. "What a straitlaced guy. He should learn to be more like his little brother."



To everyone's chagrin, the rain continued for another three hours after the battle with the rockmen puppets. As a result, it was sunset by the time Ikki and the others were able to start descending the mountain. It was amazing how quickly the clouds vanished once the rain stopped, and within minutes, Ikki and the others were looking at a clear, red-painted sky. The climate shifts in Japan were starting to get more and more extreme.

As they walked back to the lodge, Stella, who was resting on Ikki's back, turned to Touka and asked, "Hey, Touka-san, shouldn't we be chasing after the guy who was controlling those stone puppets?"

Since they'd retreated to a nearby cave after destroying the puppets, they hadn't been able to chase down the assailant who'd attacked Ikki and Stella. Stella didn't like that they were leaving things like this, and in fairness, neither did Ikki, Touka, or Utakata. Ultimately, while they'd learned the true identity of the giant, they hadn't resolved the underlying problem.

"I'd love to catch them if we could, but I don't think that's possible," Touka replied with a frown.

"Why not?"

"When I destroyed the hub, I sent the electricity from Thunderbolt down the

wire connecting it to the puppet master to measure the distance between us, and it's way too far."

"How far are we talking about, exactly?"

"At least a hundred kilometers, possibly more."

Stella choked in surprise, coughing several times. That was far enough that the culprit might not even be in the greater Tokyo area. *No wonder Touka-san didn't bother trying to chase the guy.*

"Well, I wasn't expecting that. Can Blazers who use steel wire really control puppets from that far away?"

"Not normally, no. One of the times I was called up to help official Mage-Knights with their work, I was put in a team with a Rank B steel wire user, and the maximum distance they could control their puppets effectively was five hundred meters." It was clear from Touka's comparison example that whoever had made these stone puppets was no normal puppet master. Her expression grew grim, and she added, "If anything, we may have lucked out by not having to confront the mastermind."

"In that case, it's definitely smarter to keep our distance for now," Ikki said with a nod. It would be too dangerous to challenge such a deadly foe without a plan. However, Stella still wasn't happy with how easily everyone was backing down.

"Even so, it feels wrong to leave without learning anything about who we're up against."

"Toutokubara-san has already reported everything to the director. If she thinks it's a serious enough problem then I'm sure she'll take action herself. Besides, I left the culprit with quite a painful parting gift, so I don't think they'll come back to this area."

Toudou-san said that as if it was the most normal thing in the world. While it was insane that someone could control puppets from a hundred kilometers away, it was just as insane that Touka had managed to send an electric shock back at the puppet master over the same distance.

From there, the conversation moved to less serious topics, and the four of

them chatted amicably as they made their way down the mountainside. Parts of the path were slick with mud, but Ikki and the others were skilled enough knights that the rough terrain posed no problem. Ikki had managed to get enough rest in the cave that he'd mostly recovered from the exhaustion of using Ittou Shura. As a result, he could navigate the muddy stretches without issue, even while carrying Stella on his back. They made good time and were able to reach the lodge before the sun had fully set.

"Ah, there they are! Yo! Welcome back, guys!" Renren shouted, waving at Ikki and the others. She and Saijou had been waiting outside the lodge for everyone to return. "I hear you caught a cold, Stella-chan. Sounds rough."

"I'm sorry for slowing you guys down. This is my first time ever getting sick, so I didn't realize I had a cold until it was too late."

"Normally, people feel like crap when they're sick, but I guess you just have so much energy that you didn't notice. When we were playing badminton, you hit that birdie so hard that it gouged out part of the ground. I guess there's drawbacks to having too much stamina, huh?"

"I can't tell if you're praising me or insulting me."

Okay, you definitely shouldn't have that much energy when you're sick. Also, why were you playing badminton like it's tennis? Ikki thought with a shake of his head. At this rate, he wouldn't be surprised if Stella could win all of her selection matches while sick too.

"I imagine you must have been under a lot of stress, having to deal with a sick partner and a golem attack at the same time," Saijou said, placing a hand on Ikki's shoulder.

"Ha ha ha. I'm pretty unlucky, so I'm used to disasters coming one after another."

"I heard you were injured. Are you all right now?"

"I have a bit of a bump on my head, but that's all. I'll be fine."

"I see." As he said that, Saijou took a bottle out of his pocket and handed it to Ikki.

“What’s this?”

“I come from a family of doctors, and this is one of our secret salves. If you spread some of that over your bruise, it should heal in no time,” Saijou explained with a smile, giving Ikki a thumbs-up.

“Oh, that’s cool. Thank you. I’ll be sure to use it,” Ikki said, returning Saijou’s smile.

“Gaaay,” Uakata said with a teasing grin.

“Wait, is that why you never come on to me even when I’m in my underwear in the student council room?!” Renren exclaimed.

“D-D-D-D-Don’t be ridiculous, you two! They’re just good friends, that’s all! Probably, anyway!” Touka said.

“Why do you sound so unsure about that, Touka-san?” Stella asked.

Ikki rubbed his temples in exasperation, but Saijou’s smile didn’t waver as he said, “I’m sorry. The student council members are always like this. But, well, they’re good people for the most part.”

“Aha ha ha, I see.”

I’m impressed by your mental fortitude, Saijou-san. It must be tough wrangling these guys every day.

“Haaah. All this walking has made me tired. Hungry too. Hey, Touka, let’s have a barbecue before we head back,” Uakata suggested.

“Oh, I like the sound of that! I wasn’t able to eat too much at lunchtime, so a hearty serving of meat sounds perfect!” Stella said, brightening up.

“Hell yeah! Barbecue!” Renren exclaimed as well.

However, Touka shook her head and said, “Absolutely not. Stella-san is still sick. I’m taking her to the doctor.”

“Awww,” Stella, Uakata, and Renren whined in unison.

“But look, Stella-chan’s already doing much better. Surely a little barbecue won’t hurt,” Renren pleaded.

“Yeah, I’m totally fine now.”

“See? Even *she* says she’s fine. Isn’t it part of the student council’s job to respect our students’ autonomy?”

“You can argue all you want, but no means no,” Touka rebuked. “If you don’t take colds seriously, they can turn into something much worse. And Stella-san still has matches coming up.”

“Mrr...” Stella grumbled, and a second later, her stomach grumbled as well. It seemed her appetite really had returned. She wasn’t as feverish as she’d been back at the hut either. Knowing Stella, it was entirely possible she’d gotten over her cold in the span of these few hours. Her vitality was off the charts.

“Toudou-san, I agree that we should take Stella to a doctor, but seeing as she’s hungry right now, it’d probably be best if we eat first. A cold can also get worse if you don’t keep your strength up, after all.”

“Ikki, my hero!”

“Yeah, what Kurogane-kun said! Sick people need to eat too!”

“I suppose you have a point, but I don’t know if meat in particular is what sick people should be eating... Oh, very well. Let’s take Stella to the doctor, get some medicine, and *then* we can go get some all-you-can-eat barbecue. If we eat first, the clinic will close.”

“Woo-hoo! Meat!” Renren cheered. “You’re the best, Touka!”

“Misogi-senpai, let’s go to Jujuen!” Stella proposed.

“Sounds good to me! I’ll get us a reservation!” Utakata replied.

“Wait, stop!” Touka cried. “They don’t do all-you-can-eat!”

The student council sure is a lively bunch, Ikki thought, smiling as he watched the council members bicker. After a few seconds, though, he noticed that they were short a person. “Wait, where’s Toutokubara-san?”

“Apparently, we have a guest, so Kanata-senpai went to go deal with them,” Renren answered.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Saijou chimed in. “Kurogane, someone came by to see you earlier.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. They stopped by the school first and came here after the director told them where you were.”

Ikki gave Saijou a puzzled look. He couldn’t imagine anyone would come all the way out to Okutama just to see him.

“Saijou-san, did that person say who they were?”

“Uh, yeah, I think it was...” Saijou sifted through his memories for a few seconds. “Oh yeah, I remember now. He called himself Akaza.”

“Gah.”

Upon hearing that, Ikki stiffened up. A second later, a voice called out to him.

“Oh, there you are. I’ve been waiting *ages* for you.” Turning around, Ikki saw Toutokubara Kanata along with the guest she’d been entertaining. “Long time no see, Ikki-kun. Geh heh heh.”

Ikki knew this corpulent, middle-aged man wearing a bright red suit. He’d met him many times before, back when he’d been living at his parents’ house.

“Ikki, who’s the geezer?” Stella whispered. She’d sensed Ikki tensing up.

Ikki gently set Stella down and replied, “He’s Akaza Mamoru-san. The head of one of the Kurogane clan’s branch families.”

“Tch!”

That was more than enough to tell Stella that this guy was bad news. She glared at Akaza like a cat trying to intimidate an intruder. Her glare was so intense that Kanata did a double take and asked, “Um, is something the matter?” However, Akaza himself seemed completely unconcerned.

“Geh heh heh. No need to get so angry, miss. I don’t like this any more than you do. To think I’d have to come all the way out to Okutama for this good-for-nothing lout,” he said, grinning provocatively. His disdainful tone made it clear to the rest of the student council that this person was no friend of Ikki’s, even if they didn’t have the full context Stella did. And naturally, Touka wasn’t about to let his rudeness slide.

“Did you just come here to insult him?!” she shouted. “Where are your manners?!” She, too, glared at Akaza, but in response, he just bowed to her.

“Ah, you must be the famed Thunderbolt-san. Good afternoon. Or good evening, as I suppose it’s gotten quite late. I heard you needed to rush to Ikki-kun’s aid. I must say as a member of the Kurogane family that I’m deeply sorry he was unable to even complete the mission he was assigned.”

“I don’t want you to apologize to m—”

“He truly is a useless waste of space, through and through.”

Though Akaza was addressing Touka, he wasn’t paying any attention to her at all. In fact, he was just using her as an excuse to insult Ikki further. Touka was so shocked by his brazen animosity that she didn’t know what to say. The other student council members were similarly stunned.

After a few seconds of silence, Akaza rose from his bow and said, “Ugh, this backwater is swarming with mosquitoes. Let’s get this over with quickly, Ikki-kun. Geh heh heh. I came here today on behalf of the Mage-Knight Federation. As the chairman of the Japan branch’s Ethics Committee, I have some important news to give you.”

Though Akaza was smiling, there was a sinister gleam in his eyes, and it was clear that whatever business the Ethics Committee had with Ikki wasn’t anything good. But if he was being summoned, there was nothing Ikki could do except go.

“What could they possibly have to say to me?”

“Geh heh heh. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Here, take a look at the headline from this evening’s paper.”

Akaza handed a stack of newspaper articles over to Ikki. Ikki had no idea how these could possibly relate to all this, but as he looked down at the one on top, everything became clear. There, on the front page, was a photo of Ikki and Stella kissing in front of some trees.



Stella’s jaw dropped as she looked at the photo.

“Ikki, h-how did...”

The background was undoubtedly the clearing Ikki and Stella always went to for training, while in the foreground, the two of them were very clearly kissing. And this photo was on the front page of every newspaper in the stack. In other words, their relationship had been leaked by someone from the school, bringing about the scandal the two of them had feared.

“It’s a good picture, isn’t it? Captures both of your faces perfectly. Modern nighttime cameras can take pretty high-quality photos even when there isn’t much light. Geh heh heh. You probably don’t realize this because you’re out in the middle of nowhere, but all of Tokyo’s in an uproar right now. It’s not proper to be getting so frisky with an honored guest of the state, Ikki-kun.”

“W-Wait a second!” Stella shouted as she started rifling through the articles. “This is utterly ridiculous! Who wrote this disgusting libel?!”

She pointed to the headlines, which were all some variation of “The Man Who Stole the Princess’s Chastity” or “King Vermillion Outraged” or “Is This an International Incident?!” To make matters worse, the articles all painted Ikki as a scoundrel. They claimed he was a delinquent who’d caused nothing but trouble for his family and slept around with dozens of women. It even claimed he was cheating on Stella. Not a word of it was true. But that wouldn’t stop the public from believing it. Especially not since the Kurogane family had corroborated the untrue claims that Ikki was a problem child.

Still grinning, Akaza turned to Stella and said, “Oh, I assure you it’s not libel, my dear princess. Every word of those articles is true. You were just deceived by Ikki-kun. Don’t worry, though. No one would ever blame you for that. He’s a wily one, after all. But I’ve known him since he was a child, and while it pains me to speak badly of family, I can tell you that he’s always been a worthless miscreant. He shoplifted, got into fights, and even blackmailed people. Look, here are testimonials from all the people he’s wronged. Geh heh heh.”

“This is all *bullshit*! Ikki isn’t the kind of man to do those things, and anyone who knows even a single thing about him would realize that immediately!”

“Geh heh heh. Well, regardless of what you think, Princess, these articles have been published, and the public believes them. We’ve already gotten

numerous complaints calling for Ikki's knight status to be revoked. As a result, we've been forced to hold an emergency inquiry to get to the bottom of this matter. The inquiry will evaluate whether or not Ikki-kun possesses the qualifications necessary to be a proper Mage-Knight, and if it's decided that he doesn't, the Ethics Committee will ask that the main branch strip him of his knight status and exile him from the Mage-Knight Federation. I've come here to bring him to his hearing."

After hearing that, Stella was one hundred percent certain that this scandal had been manufactured by the Kurogane family to attempt once again to get in Ikki's way. They were trying to use his relationship with her as an excuse to have him wiped from the knight register. The inquiry would obviously find him unfit to be a knight, and a request for his expulsion would be sent to the Federation's main branch. They were determined to erase Ikki because they believed he was a stain on the Kurogane family's honor.

"This is an official summons, Ikki-kun. Geh heh heh. If you refuse to come quietly, it will only make your position worse. Surely you wouldn't do something so foolish, right? Geh heh heh."

Akaza placed his hands on Ikki's shoulders and looked him dead in the eyes. For a moment, there was silence.

"All right, I'll go," Ikki finally said with a nod. The quiet resolve in his gaze made it clear that he was prepared to fight this conspiracy head-on. However, Stella was certain the trials that awaited him would be harsher than any he'd faced before.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Misogi Utakata

■PROFILE

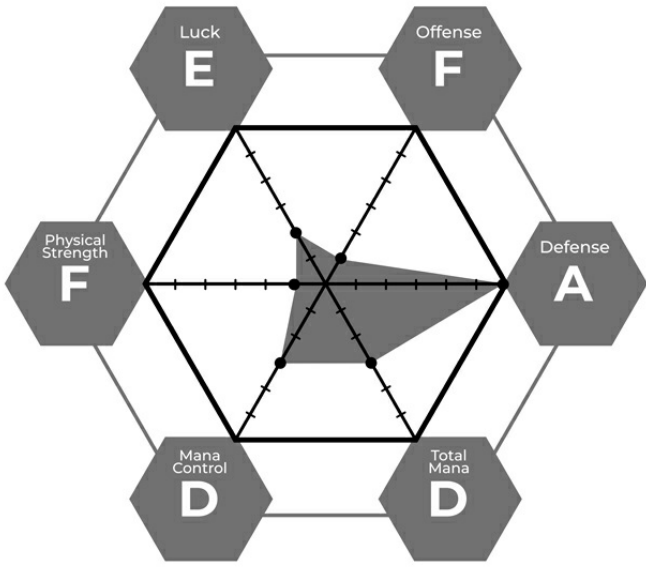
Affiliation: Hagun Academy Class 3-3

Blazer Rank: D

Noble Art: Black Box

Nickname: Fifty-Fifty

Summary: Hagun Academy's student council vice president.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

The only Blazer in Hagun with the power to manipulate fate. His Black Box lets him choose the result of any action, so long as it's within his physical and magical capacity for that result to theoretically occur. Not only is that ridiculously powerful, but it also means he can win every lottery he wants! That said, it's not a power I'd want for myself, since it makes painfully clear what is impossible for him to accomplish. It must be tough having to grapple with that all the time.

Chapter 3: The Worst One's Travails

“Thank you so much for gathering today despite your busy schedules, gentlemen. The reason we’ve called you here is because the accused, Kurogane Ikki-kun, has entered into an illicit relationship with an honored national guest. As he is legally an adult according to the Mage-Knight Federation, many called for him to be formally tried for this offense, and the Japan branch decided that would be the best course of action,” Akaza said from in front of a podium.

“Student knights are afforded privileges that regular fifteen-year-old children are not,” he continued. “But that is precisely why they must act in a more responsible manner befitting their elevated station and not abuse those privileges. Thus, we are here today to go over Kurogane Ikki-kun’s personality and qualifications to see if he is truly fit to be a part of the Mage-Knight Federation. I understand you are all very busy, and I appreciate you taking the time to sit in on this hearing.”

The inquiry into Ikki was being held on the tenth basement floor of the International Mage-Knight Federation’s Japan branch office. This was where the Ethics Committee, which was occasionally referred to as the Federation’s secret police, held trials for suspected student knights and Mage-Knights.

Akaza was the chairman of the Japan branch’s Ethics Committee, which was why he was overseeing the proceedings. He grinned at Ikki, who was standing opposite him, and said, “The hearing will now begin. Everyone, please take your seats.”

All of the men around Akaza sat down, but there was no seat prepared for Ikki. It was a very banal form of harassment, but it meant Ikki would have to stay standing for hours on end. Of course, he’d trained hard enough that doing so wasn’t even an inconvenience for him.

God, what a dreary place.

Ikki took a look around the room. There was barely any lighting, and he was surrounded on three sides by old men in stuffy suits. More specifically, there

were three men sitting in front of him and one on either side, for a total of five. All of them were wearing the same red suit as Akaza, indicating that they belonged to the Ethics Committee.

“No need to look so hostile, Ikki-kun. Everyone here today is on your side,” Akaza said in a playful voice as he spotted Ikki sizing up the committee members. “We’re not trying to expel you. As a matter of fact, the whole purpose of this hearing is to let you tell *your* side of the story. All of us sitting here—and even your father—pushed for this hearing for *your* sake. We just want to get the whole truth. Isn’t that right, everyone?”

“Of course. It would be a shame if you were expelled from the Federation without even being allowed to defend yourself. From what we’ve heard, you’ve almost secured yourself a spot in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. It would truly be a shame if all your hard work went to waste.”

“Thank you...” Ikki muttered, almost impressed at how brazenly they could spout such lies.

“Now that you understand we’re on your side, let’s review the facts. Is it true that you are in a romantic relationship with the second princess of the Vermillion Kingdom, Stella Vermillion?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Geh heh heh. Thank you for your honesty. How long ago did your relationship start?”

“The night after my first selection match for the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

There was no need to lie about that, so Ikki answered honestly. However, the overseeing committee members frowned upon hearing it.

“Oh? That was quite soon after your first meeting, was it not?”

“Hmph. Young people these days are far too hasty. And they have no sense of decorum.”

“In my day, people actually got to know each other before committing to a relationship.”

“Youngsters these days are slaves to their base impulses. Look at all the

shotgun weddings you see.”

“A truly deplorable state of affairs.”

The men were all assuming that Ikki and Stella had already had sex, though that couldn’t have been farther from the truth. If anything, Ikki and Stella’s relationship had progressed surprisingly slowly, all things considered. And indeed, that was precisely because Ikki was seriously thinking about his future with Stella. He understood that her status as royalty put her in a delicate position, and it pissed him off that these men were assuming the worst.

“Excuse me, but I never once—”

“Now, now, Ikki-kun. I understand that there’s a lot you want to say, but you must wait for the committee’s permission before you’re allowed to speak. Failure to do so will only make things worse for you. Geh heh heh.”

“My apologies,” Ikki said, reluctantly bowing his head.

The bearded, seedy-eyed man sitting on Ikki’s left suddenly said, “Hmph. Since you want to talk so badly, let me ask: Did you not think it was abnormal to enter into a relationship with the princess of a foreign nation? Weren’t you worried it might lead to an international incident? I realize boys your age are unable to control their sexual urges, but surely you could have picked a different girl.”

“My relationship with Stella isn’t something so casual. The two of us truly love each other.”

“Hmph. The ignorant words of a child.”

“Geh heh heh. There was a time when I was like you. I thought I would spend the rest of my life with the first girl I fell in love with. But that was just the folly of youth.”

“I’m sorry to correct you like this, but Stella and I are both adults. We have the right to get married now if we want. I think it’s only natural that we would be taking our relationship very seriously.”

“You’re quite the rebellious one, eh?”

“You should show more respect to your elders, youngster.”

“I did warn you that speaking out of turn would sour your impression with these men. Geh heh heh.”

Akaza took out a piece of paper and started writing something down. As he looked around at the old men surrounding him, Ikki sighed to himself.

I knew this inquiry would be a farce, but I didn't think it'd be this poorly acted.

These men kept telling Ikki that he needed to be aware of his responsibilities as an adult, but they refused to accept any of the rights he ostensibly possessed as an adult. It was the ultimate double standard. Not that Ikki had expected any different, but he was certain now that they weren't interested in fairly evaluating his qualifications as a knight. They were just fishing for evidence they could use to back up their claim that he was unfit to be one when they asked the main branch to expel him. This was an inquisition, not a proper hearing.

Well, I figured that was the case the moment I saw the newspaper.

This whole charade barely had any legs to stand on. Sure, it would be a public scandal if word got out that a foreign princess found a boyfriend while studying abroad. But while it would make for good gossip, it had no relevance to one's qualifications as a Mage-Knight.

As Ikki had said, in the Federation's eyes, both he and Stella were adults. Whatever their relationship was, it broke no laws. If the two of them were to decide to get married, not even her father, Vermillion's king, could stop them. And if he was actually against their relationship as the articles suggested, then he would have said something himself. The fact that he hadn't done so proved that the mass media was being manipulated by the Mage-Knight Federation's Japan branch. All so that they could fabricate an excuse to get Ikki ousted from the Federation.

This sure is one convoluted way to get what they want.

Of course, Ikki knew they had to be this roundabout to have any chance at succeeding. The main branch of the Mage-Knight Federation handled the registration and expulsion of all Mage-Knights and student knights. Having all knights be managed in one central location helped prevent regional wars, and it also helped make it easier for knights to travel between countries and assist each other in times of need. It also meant that in the unfortunate event that

conflict between nations did break out, the Mage-Knight Federation could step in as a mediator and choose representative knights from both nations to duel and resolve the conflict by proxy.

At any rate, what all of this meant was that a branch office could not unilaterally strip any Mage-Knight or student knight of their status. They needed the main branch's approval. Neither Itsuki, the head of the Japan branch, nor Akaza, the chairman of the Ethics Committee, could directly affect Ikki's status as a knight. That was why they'd resorted to such indirect methods. It was also why Ikki's father had set the Hunter on him last year.

In this hearing, Akaza was hoping to force Ikki to say something self-incriminating enough that he could get Ikki's student knight status revoked. Even without hard evidence, he could claim that Ikki had a bad attitude, bad posture, bad manners, and so on. Every little bit would help give their claim more credence when they asked the main branch to expel him. At this point, the best thing Ikki could do was stay quiet unless asked a question and answer in as unambiguous a way as possible to avoid giving Akaza anything that could be used against him. But while Ikki knew that, he couldn't stand to let Akaza disparage his relationship with Stella.

"I don't care what your impression of me is. I love Stella, and she loves me. That much I know for a fact. We've done nothing wrong, and I won't let you claim otherwise."

He knew arguing was a mistake, but he also knew just how much Stella loved him. He could vividly recall Stella's smile every time they kissed or held hands. There wasn't a single thing wrong with what they were doing, so he wasn't going to let these old coots claim that their relationship was improper. In fact, staying silent when the sanctity of their relationship was being called into question went against his principles. That was the whole reason he had come to this hearing in the first place.

I told Stella that I want to be able to hold my head high and tell the world I love her. I can't back down here or I'd be breaking that promise.

Ikki didn't care that the people here would never accept their relationship. It wasn't as if he was looking for their approval. But he wouldn't stop telling them

that their love was real. He couldn't, because he didn't want to lie to himself about his feelings.



Three days had passed since Ikki had been imprisoned in the Mage-Knight Federation's Japan branch office building, and Stella's patience was running thin. She was constantly frowning, and sparks flew from her glowing hair for most of the day. There were plenty of curious students who'd read the articles and wanted to hear the truth directly from her, but seeing how irritated she was, no one had the courage to come up and ask her anything. Even in the crowded cafeteria, there was no one sitting at the tables around her. But Stella herself was too pissed to care about such trivial matters.

"I'm impressed you can stay this tense all day right after recovering from your cold, Stella-chan," Alisuin said, unfazed by her prickly attitude.

As she sat down next to the fuming princess, members of her fan club bit their nails in worry, watching from afar. Fortunately, Stella wasn't the kind of person to take her anger out on someone who didn't deserve it. But that didn't stop her tone from being needlessly aggressive when she responded.

"How can I relax after seeing all the disgusting libel the newspapers published?" Not only had the articles impugned Ikki's character, but they'd also painted Stella out to be some dainty, weak woman who'd been taken in by his wiles. Just thinking about it made her blood boil. "I'd heard this country had low standards for journalistic integrity, but I didn't realize the bar was under the ocean floor," she spat.

"Aha ha, it hurts that I can't really deny that," Kagami said, walking over to Stella's table.

"Hi, Kagami."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Go ahead. I don't know why, but all the nearby tables are empty, so there's plenty of space."

"Aha ha, thanks." Kagami put down her tray and adjusted her glasses before sitting down next to Stella. "Well, I don't blame you for being mad. Sure, it's fun

gossip to learn that Vermillion's princess has a boyfriend, but it's unacceptable that reporters keep claiming that your relationship is improper, even when you clearly said it isn't. If anything, *we're* the ones inviting an international incident by ignoring your statements. But, well, the newspaper companies know that, and they're still reporting this anyway."

"Wait, they know they're spouting bullshit and they're still doing it? Why?"

"I happen to have some contacts in the industry, and from what they've told me, the Ethics Committee is pressuring them to keep printing articles about how indecent your relationship is. Apparently, the Ethics Committee threatened to ban any companies that refused from reporting on King of Knights tournaments."

"The Federation is KOK's primary sponsor, so I guess they could actually get away with that..." Stella mused.

KOK tournaments were some of the most watched events in the world. Being barred from reporting on them would probably bankrupt most newspaper companies. As a result, they had no choice but to comply with the Ethics Committee's demands if they wanted to stay in business. That was proof that the Ethics Committee—and the man who led the Mage-Knight Federation's Japan branch, Kurogane Itsuki—was doing everything in its power to strip Ikki of his knight status.

"I can't believe it..." Stella was flabbergasted. "Ikki's just a student! Why's his dad going this far to try and get rid of him?!" She couldn't fathom what Itsuki stood to gain from this.

Wouldn't it stain the Kurogane family's honor just as much if Ikki gets expelled from the Federation as it would if he's a failure? I don't get it.

"How can he do this to his own son?" she wondered aloud.

"Because that's the kind of father he is," Shizuku said, bringing her tray over and sitting down across from Stella. Her voice was crystal clear and as cold as ice. "That's the kind of *person* he is. There's nothing else to say."

"Shizuku..."

"Honestly, I don't know what that man is thinking, or why he hates Onii-sama

so much. His twisted mind is beyond my comprehension. But I do know he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants," Shizuku said simply, then started eating her Japanese-style lunch.

Stella stared awkwardly at her, working up the courage to say what she knew needed to be said. The two of them hadn't spoken since Shizuku's match with Touka, which made this doubly awkward.

"Um, Shizuku? I'm sorry for not telling you I'm going out with Ikki."

Stella knew just how deep Shizuku's love for Ikki ran. And she was prepared to take whatever insults the girl wanted to hurl at her. She deserved that much, at least. To her surprise, though, Shizuku's reaction was quite subdued.

"I don't mind. Or rather, I already knew."

"Huh?"

"The way you two acted around each other changed suddenly after the night of Onii-sama's first match. We could tell immediately what was going on. Isn't that right, Alice?"

"Heh heh. You two were quite obvious about it."

"Yep. Even I noticed," Kagami said, chiming in.

"Oh my god..."

Stella buried her face in her hands, embarrassed.

Were we really that obvious? I thought we kept our flirting to when we were alone.

"I understand why you needed to keep it secret, Stella-san. It would cause an uproar if your relationship went public, and I'm sure neither of you wanted that to distract you from the upcoming Seven Stars Battle Festival. So I don't blame you for not telling me. What's important is what you do now that the secret's out." Shizuku turned to Kagami. "Kusakabe-san, I assume you have an idea of what our family situation is like?"

"Aha ha ha, information is a journalist's lifeline, after all. So yeah, I know a little bit."

“Then let me ask plainly: do you think this scandal is enough to get Onii-sama’s student knight status revoked?”

Kagami shook her head without hesitation. “At present, I don’t think that’s realistic.”

“Oh? How come?” Alisuin asked, intrigued.

“Just think about it, Alice-chan. Neither Senpai nor Stella-chan has actually done anything illegal, or even anything morally dubious. Like I said before, the newspaper companies are being far more unscrupulous by insisting that they have an improper relationship when a member of the royal family is saying it’s not.”

Kagami went on.

“Normally, this is the kind of news that would just get people wondering what a princess’s boyfriend might be like and that would be the end of it. But the mass media keeps trying to force the angle that their relationship is somehow wrong. It’s libel, plain and simple. The Ethics Committee knows that too, which is why they’re trying to force the narrative that Senpai’s being uncooperative and rebellious during his inquiry as well. Senpai isn’t stupid enough to give them anything concrete to work with, though, so I doubt they’ll be able to find anything that will get the main branch to expel him from the Federation. Especially because the Federation doesn’t take expulsions lightly. It’s a last resort for them.”

“It is? Why’s that?” Stella asked.

“The Federation doesn’t want to expel Mage-Knights or student knights unless they absolutely have to. You remember how violent Kurashiki from Donrou Academy is, right?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s a huge problem child, but even *he’s* only gotten a few warnings.”

“That’s a pretty light punishment.”

“I assume there’s some kind of reasoning behind their stance?” Shizuku said.

Kagami nodded and explained, “Most Blazers who get their knight status

revoked end up becoming criminals.”

Mage-Knights and student knights were all Blazers who were hoping to use their powers to make a living. If those Blazers were kicked out of the one association that employed them, it was highly likely they’d use those same powers for criminal activities, if only to make ends meet. Statistics showed that expulsion from the Federation generally led to bad outcomes for everyone.

“Of course, that’s in part because most of the people who get expelled do borderline criminal things to earn their expulsion in the first place, but even then, from the Federation’s perspective, it’s better to keep mad dogs on a leash than to let them run free,” Kagami added. “That’s why they want to eventually manage all Blazers everywhere. A lot of the countries that have joined the International Mage-Knight Federation actually have laws on the books that legally require all Blazers to become knights. But places like Japan have pretty active human rights organizations, so we haven’t gone quite that far yet ourselves.”

Realizing she’d gotten off track, Kagami shifted focus.

“Anyway, that’s not important. What matters is that the Federation sees expelling someone as tantamount to turning them into a criminal with their own two hands. That’s why they barely ever do it. And it’s especially uncommon for student knights to get expelled. The Ethics Committee is trying to make Senpai into one of those rare cases, though, so I’m worried about what they might be doing to him at the hearing.”

The Ethics Committee could complain all they wanted about Ikki’s attitude. Ultimately, that wouldn’t do anything. But if they forced him to say he’d been rash in courting Stella or that he’d done something else untoward, that would be far more concrete proof. The Ethics Committee would likely use any means necessary to force that kind of confession out of Ikki.

Stella, Alisuin, and Shizuku silently absorbed Kagami’s words. The Ethics Committee held their hearings deep in the bowels of the Japan branch’s office building, in a room that never saw the light of day. Furthermore, that building was entirely under Kurogane Itsuki’s thumb. Even the Ethics Committee itself was manned primarily by members of the Kurogane family, which meant that

Ikki was surrounded by Kuroganes and their allies. There was no way they were treating him with basic dignity, much less giving him a fair hearing. Unlike the inquisitions of eld, they couldn't get away with actually torturing him, but that didn't mean they had no way of mentally driving him into a corner.

The more she thought about it, the more worried Stella got. She'd barely slept these past three days. Whenever she closed her eyes, all she could think about was how her beloved Ikki was trapped underground, being subjected to god knew what.

And it's all my fault.

If Stella had just been a normal girl, Ikki's family wouldn't have been able to use their relationship against him. The fact that she was dragging Ikki down was eating away at her. The selection matches were still ongoing, but her status as royalty was getting in the way of Ikki's dream.

"Maybe I should break up with Ikki..." Stella muttered despondently. "I mean, this is all my fault. If I was a normal girl, Ikki wouldn't—"

"Stella-chan!" Alisuin said sharply, interrupting her.

Stella's eyes snapped up in surprise, and she saw a deadly sharp icicle heading straight for her.

"Ngh!"

She reflexively donned her Empress Dress and crossed both arms in front of her face to protect herself. The icicle hit her with so much force that it lifted her off her feet, slammed her against the cafeteria wall, causing it to crumble, and sent her flying out into the yard.

"Eeeek!"

"Wh-What was that?!"

The cafeteria fell into a panic. Ignoring the screams, Stella gingerly touched the arm that had blocked the icicle.

"Nrgh."

Judging by the pain, she'd probably fractured something. Her flames were hot enough to melt bullets, but all she'd managed to do to the icicle was round out

the tip enough that it didn't cut her. There was, of course, only one person here who could use water magic at such a high level.

"Wh-What was that for, Shizuku?!" Stella shouted while cradling her injured arm.

"How could you say that?" Shizuku asked in a quiet voice, standing atop the table and pointing Yoishigure directly at Stella. Her expression was level, but the ice-cold anger in her eyes made Stella shiver. She had never seen Shizuku this mad before. "Don't you realize why Onii-sama is going along with this farce? He could have chosen not to answer the Ethics Committee's summons and just kept quiet about everything. He knows they won't actually hold a proper trial for him. He knows they won't listen to a thing he has to say. The *only* reason he went over there is because he couldn't stand that they were lying about your relationship. That's how much he treasures his bond with you. If you dare tell me you can't understand that, if you dare betray his trust, then I will cut you down right here and now."



It was then that Stella realized just how thoughtless she'd been.

"I'm sorry. That was dumb of me." She bowed her head in apology.

How could I have been so pathetic?

For the past three days, there hadn't been anything in the news about Ikki saying that his relationship with Stella was a mistake. In other words, even now, he was proudly proclaiming that their love for each other was a good thing. Itsuki and Akaza were hoping to prove that Ikki was careless and use that as an excuse to take away his rights as an adult, as well as his status as a knight. That meant that if Ikki ever said that he'd been rash in dating Stella or that going out with her was a mistake, they'd be able to prove that he was irresponsible and not deserving of his privileges as a knight.

Right now, Ikki was making good on his word and telling everyone with his head held high that he loved Stella. It would be an insult to his devotion if Stella started second-guessing their relationship.

In a situation like this, there's only one thing I should be doing. And that is—

"Sheesh, why do you two love destroying school property so much?" A familiar voice suddenly interrupted Stella's thoughts. She turned to see Shinguuji Kurono walking over to her and Shizuku, shaking her head in disapproval. "You know I'm the one who has to run around fixing everything, right?"

As she stepped through the hole Shizuku had made, Kurono snapped her fingers, and the scattered rubble floated up into the air and started wedging itself back into the hole. It was like watching a video be played in reverse. Within a few seconds, the hole was completely repaired.

"That should do it," Kurono said, admiring her handiwork with a satisfied nod. She then turned back to Stella and stated flatly, "Vermillion, I need to talk to you about Kurogane. Come with me to my office."



As always, the director's office reeked of cigarette smoke. Kurono gestured to a nearby sofa, and Stella sat down on it.

“This has become a lot more complicated than I would have liked,” Kurono said with a long sigh, taking a seat opposite Stella. Since she was the one who’d assigned the two of them to be roommates, she’d likely received quite a bit of criticism over the past few days.

In truth, Stella still thought putting men and women in the same room was a questionable decision, so she didn’t really sympathize. *But since I’m already here, I should try and find out as much as I can.*

“Director, what’s been happening with Ikki’s selection matches? Surely he won’t be disqualified because of this, right?”

“I won’t let that happen, no matter what. I’ve been sending Kurogane’s opponents over to the Japan branch office so he can have his duels in the training arena there. I’ve also made sure to send one of our teachers along to be a proper, impartial judge. If I let those bastards referee, they’d definitely try to disqualify Kurogane over some inane bullshit.”

“Would it be possible for me to go visit him?”

“Unfortunately not. He’s not allowed to have any visitors until the inquiry is over.”

“They’re treating him like a criminal...”

It was reassuring to know that Ikki wouldn’t be disqualified due to factors beyond his control, though. It wasn’t his fault his family had put him in what amounted to solitary confinement.

Stella smiled a little and said, “So what did you need me for?”

“I want to know what your parents think about this whole situation,” Kurono answered, cutting straight to the chase.

Why does the director care what my parents think?

Though Stella couldn’t see how it was relevant, she had no reason to withhold that information. She’d called them shortly after Ikki had been taken away and had a long discussion with them about her future.

“Mother respects my autonomy and approves of my decision, but... Well, Father isn’t having any of it. He’s absolutely furious. When I called, he just kept

yelling ‘How dare he lay a hand on my daughter without my permission!’ over and over.”

“He sure loves you, huh?”

“He just doesn’t know how to let go of his children. Apparently, he’s angry enough that he’ll be coming to visit Japan soon.”

“Do you know exactly *how* soon?”

“About three weeks from now.”

“Right around the time the selection matches will be ending. I suppose we just have to hold out for that long, then.”

“What do you mean?” Stella asked, cocking her head to one side.

“If King Vermillion shows up in Japan and asks to meet Kurogane, the Ethics Committee won’t be able to keep going with their sham of an inquiry. They’ll have to let Ikki meet with your father or risk sparking an international incident. Chances are you’ll be allowed to join that meeting too, and it’ll be publicly broadcast. If you both use that opportunity to state that there’s nothing untoward about your relationship, that’ll be the end of this witch hunt.”

Kurono continued her explanation.

“The mass media is only able to publish all of this untrue garbage because the Ethics Committee is preventing you guys from publicly reporting the truth. Furthermore, if King Vermillion publicly accepts your relationship, there’ll truly be no recourse left for the Ethics Committee. Then it’ll be our turn to go on the offensive.”

“You’re not going to stop after Ikki’s free?”

“Of course not. Those bastards came onto *my* turf and messed with one of *my* students. By the time I’m done with them, they’ll wish they were dead.”

Kurono’s anger was palpable, and Stella suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

I never knew she could be so scary... Then again, I guess she was one of the top three knights in the world once. Anyway, we just need to hold out until Father gets here.

The Ethics Committee was censuring Ikki on the basis that his rash actions could cause an international incident. However, if Stella's father, the head of the Vermillion Kingdom, said there was no problem, then they wouldn't be able to make that claim any longer. The only question was, would Stella be able to convince her father to accept the man she'd chosen?

"Ugh. I'm starting to worry things won't go that smoothly. Father is unbelievably stubborn, and he's way too overprotective."

When she'd gone on a camping trip in middle school, he'd bought a bear suit and tried to keep an eye on her from the woods. She'd thought she'd run into an actual bear when she'd seen him and nearly killed him. Honestly, after finding out it had only been her dad tailing her, she'd considered killing him for real. Regardless, she couldn't imagine him welcoming Ikki.

As Stella cradled her head in her hands, Kurono gave her a gentle smile and said, "You don't need to be so worried. He raised you into a splendid, upright young woman, after all. If he can manage that, I'm sure he'll be able to see Kurogane for who he truly is."

That logic didn't track in the slightest, but for some reason, Stella felt all of her worries fade away. It was at least true that her father wasn't a bad person. And when all was said and done, she did love him. Rather than fearing his wrath, it would be more productive for her to try to get him to like the man she'd fallen in love with.

"I sure hope he does..."

"If things start looking dicey, just give Kurogane a hand. You'll be able to do that since you'll be there during the meeting. Take it from a married person: getting along with your in-laws is the first hurdle a couple needs to overcome together. You can't just leave it all to Kurogane. It's not just him your parents will be appraising, you know. They'll want to see how fervently their daughter tries to protect him too."

"I-I'll do my best."

"Heh, that's the spirit. I have to say, I thought you'd be more depressed, but it seems like you're doing just fine."

“Well, my future sister-in-law *did* just knock some sense into me,” Stella said with a smile, nursing her bruised right arm.

She’s right that I can’t just leave everything to Ikki. As his girlfriend, I have to help him fight. Even now, Ikki was proudly proclaiming to the Ethics Committee just how wonderful their love was. *I need to keep my promise too.*



Kurogane Ikki was led to a small room on the tenth basement floor of the Mage-Knight Federation’s Japan branch office.

“I’ve left your food on the table. The hearing will resume at 6 a.m. sharp tomorrow, so I recommend turning in early,” a sickly looking man in a red suit said, activating the electric lock on Ikki’s room before stalking off.

The bed was stained and dirty, and the table looked like it was on the verge of crumbling under its own weight. There was a similarly rickety chair next to the table, and that was all of the furniture in the room. Ikki was just grateful to have something to sit on at all after standing for hours in the courtroom.

Sighing, Ikki lowered himself into the chair. Today’s hearing had lasted from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. The Ethics Committee members had all had chairs to sit on, and they had also gotten to rotate members out every few hours, so they hadn’t been tired, but Ikki had been forced to stand for the full seventeen hours. It had been like this every day for the past week, and even Ikki was beginning to get exhausted despite his toned physique. Granted, his exhaustion wasn’t due just to the physical stress.

“I’d really like to have some rice for once...” Ikki muttered, looking down at the paltry meal that had been set on the table.

Two energy bars sitting on a paper plate. Those bars did indeed contain enough calories and nutrients to provide a meal’s worth of fuel to the human body, but Ikki was still a growing boy, and his warrior’s body needed more energy than the average person’s. Since coming here, he’d been perpetually hungry.

“And as always, they don’t give me anything to drink.”

His jailers had started limiting his liquid intake, and “somehow,” the water he

was supposed to get with every meal would mysteriously vanish. Moreover, the plumbing in his bathroom was broken, so he couldn't even drink tap water from the sink. It was just another base form of harassment. As a result, however, Ikki had been forced to drink as much water as he could while in the shower and whenever he was allowed to leave for bathroom breaks during the hearings. That, combined with being forced to stand all day every day, was starting to take a toll on him. He was alone in enemy territory, which didn't help either.

Well, whatever.

Ikki was used to being mistreated, as well as to being alone. That was how he'd spent most of his life, after all. He hadn't relied on anyone, nor had anyone been willing to teach him anything. This was hardly the first time he'd been in a situation like this.

As he closed his eyes, he recalled the days he'd spent in the mountains behind his family home, swinging his sword by himself in the cold. That time made up the majority of his life. He was used to solitude and hostility, so the petty harassment from the Ethics Committee barely even registered as annoying to him. No matter how hard Akaza and the others tried to get him to admit he'd made a mistake, he'd never break.

If this is as bad as it gets, I can get through it.

Sooner or later, Vermillion's king would come to Japan and demand a meeting with Ikki. From what Stella had said about him, Ikki was certain he wouldn't just sit idly by. That being the case, Ikki's job was to stick to his principles and keep telling the truth to these nosy outsiders until he showed up. Once he arrived, Akaza and the others wouldn't be able to keep Ikki confined here.

If anything, that's when the real battle will start.

Earning Stella's dad's acceptance was of paramount importance to Ikki, to the point that just thinking about their upcoming meeting made him nervous. But he wouldn't run away from it. Since the moment he'd fallen in love with Stella Vermillion, he'd known that this was a rite of passage he would have to go through. He had even spent most of his time in confinement thinking about what the best thing to say to the man when they first met would be.

Should I wear a suit? That's probably best, right? A parted hairstyle would be

good too, I think? As Ikki tried to envision his hair like that he shivered. *Never mind, that would look awful. I'm not a businessman.*

Of course, what was more important than his appearance was how he would convey his sincerity to Stella's dad. There was no point in trying to be fancy; that would likely just backfire. He couldn't think of any better way to properly convey his feelings than just being straightforward and forthright.

Since I have the time, maybe I should practice a little.

While he wasn't planning on doing anything elaborate, it would still help to have a script ready and rehearsed ahead of time. Ikki closed his eyes and tried to imagine the face of Stella's father, the king of the Vermillion Kingdom. Stella had shown him a picture of her father once before, so he remembered what he looked like. He had flaming red hair like Stella, but he was a towering giant of a man, nearly two meters tall, with long sideburns and a regal mustache. He carried himself with the gallant bearing of a lion.

Once Ikki had the details fixed in his mind, he opened his eyes to find the person he'd envisioned standing before him. Of course, he wasn't looking at the *actual* king of Vermillion, but merely an illusion he'd created through extreme focus. Most martial artists could envision an illusory opponent to spar with as a form of training. However, Ikki's ability to recreate people with his mind was on an even higher level. The illusions he created could change their facial expressions, and they even emitted heat like actual people. The phantom standing in front of Ikki seemed so real that Ikki could even hear his heartbeat. Despite being a creation of Ikki's own mind, Ikki was intimidated by the illusion.

The majestic facsimile of Vermillion's king was standing stock-still, neither fidgeting nor saying a word. He was simply quietly regarding Ikki with crimson eyes that looked just like Stella's. His gaze alone was so intense that Ikki felt like his skin was being seared. He broke out into a cold sweat and his throat went dry. But if he couldn't even stand up to an illusion, there was no way he'd be able to keep his cool when face-to-face with the real thing. Thus, he took a deep breath to calm himself and met King Vermillion's gaze. He then knelt and pressed his forehead against the ground.

"Please let me marry your daughter!" he shouted with all the force he could

muster.

“Absolutely not,” a stern voice said, resounding in his ears.

Was I not sincere enough? Wait, hang on. Something’s not right. Sure, this illusion looks and feels real, but it still can’t talk.

Confused, Ikki looked up.

“There’s no way I’m letting you marry Shizuku.”

His actual father, Kurogane Itsuki, was looking down at him, his dull gray eyes devoid of emotion.

“D-D-D-D-Dad?!”



Someone brought a second chair into the room, and Itsuki silently sat down on it, keeping his gaze fixed on Ikki the entire time.

“...”

“...”

The two of them stared at each other in silence for five whole minutes.

Th-This is so awkward... Ikki thought, cold sweat pouring down his back.

His nervousness wasn’t just due to what he’d said earlier. In truth, this was his first time speaking to his dad since that fateful day on his fifth birthday when he’d been told not to do anything. He couldn’t think of anything to say. He wasn’t even sure how he should feel.

In the first place, why did he even bother to come see me?

“Ikki.”

Itsuki suddenly broke the silence.

“Y-Yes?” Ikki said, tripping over his words a little. His nervousness grew tenfold and his heart started pounding. He was on tenterhooks, waiting to see what Itsuki would say next. *I barely know him, so I can’t even guess at what—*

“Do you truly love Shizuku as a woman and not your sister?”

“Bwah?!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t approve of incest. Even if we ignore the moral issue, any children you might have would—”

“H-Hold on! I was just practicing what to say to Stella’s parents when I meet them! I do love Shizuku, but only as a little sister! I don’t wanna *marry* her!”

“I see. Good.”

Phew. That was close. Ikki was worried he was about to actually get a lecture on why incest was wrong. *Though I guess I can’t blame him considering what he walked in on...*

Thankfully, that absurd exchange helped alleviate Ikki’s nervousness somewhat. Building up his courage, he asked, “Um, wh-why are you here, Dad?”

“My son’s an elevator ride away. I figured I should at least see him once.”

“I see...”

Ikki couldn’t tell if Itsuki was being sincere or not. The man was as dour as always, and his eyes betrayed no hint of emotion. But even if Ikki wasn’t sure Itsuki was telling the truth, he was still shaken by the answer.

What’s this feeling? Ikki placed a hand on his heart, confused. *Am I...happy to hear that?*

He was struggling to process these emotions. It had been a whole decade since he’d last seen his father, and he didn’t know where their relationship stood now. On the other hand, Itsuki didn’t seem nervous at all.

“You seem to be doing pretty well for yourself,” Itsuki said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about your record in the selection matches Hagun’s implemented. You have sixteen straight victories, don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. I won the match that was held here yesterday too, so now I’m at seventeen.”

“And it’s not as if you’ve only been matched against weak opponents either. Impressive.”

“Huh?”

Did he just...praise me? Holy crap! I'm so happy!

Ikki was certain now that he was feeling happiness at seeing his dad, at hearing his voice again. Indeed, even now, Kurogane Ikki still loved his father. That was why, back at the mountain hut, he'd told Stella he wanted her to meet him. He still believed there was a familial connection here.

Ultimately, no matter how harshly Itsuki had treated him and no matter how much he'd been ignored, Ikki hadn't been able to hate his one and only father. Parents could hate their children, but children had no choice but to love their parents. Ikki was no exception. Of course, Ikki knew his father was behind this hearing and all the petty harassment that came with it. But even so, it made him happy to know his father was looking at him, that he was praising him. And so, a faint hope bloomed in Ikki's heart.

Maybe now that I've grown so much stronger, Dad will finally accept me.

“Since you can't do anything, don't do anything.” Maybe Itsuki would no longer say such mean things to him now that he'd accomplished something.

Tentatively, Ikki said, “H-Hey, um, Dad?”

“What?”

“Uh, I-I'm trying really hard to get stronger. I'm still Rank F, but I've been able to beat Blazers who are much higher ranked, and I don't intend to lose even at the Seven Stars Battle Festival. I'm different from the powerless kid I used to be. I think I've at least grown strong enough that I'm no longer bringing shame to the Kurogane family name, so...so...” Ikki trailed off, took a nervous breath, gathered his courage, and said, “If I manage to become the Seven Stars Sovereign, will you finally accept me as your son?”

Itsuki stared wordlessly at his son.

“I see,” he said after a few seconds, closing his eyes. “I always wondered why you left home. But now I understand. You believe that I didn't accept you because you were weak.”

“Yeah...” Ikki replied with a nod.

That wasn't the only reason he'd run away from home, but it was indeed something he'd thought. However, he wasn't weak anymore.

"You've made a grave misunderstanding. I've always thought of you as my son."

"Huh?" Ikki's eyes widened in shock. That was the last thing he'd expected Itsuki to say. "Y-You're lying!"

"Not at all. If I didn't, I wouldn't have bothered to come see you."

"B-But you never did anything for me, Dad. You didn't teach me how to use my Blazer powers, or even any of the martial arts all the members of the Kurogane family get taught, including the branch members."

Ikki still remembered how stifling it had felt living in that house. Itsuki had prevented him from doing or learning anything, and all the other members of the family had assumed Itsuki hated him, so they'd also treated him harshly or kept their distance. The pain and isolation he'd suffered all those years had left deep scars on his heart.

Outraged, Ikki shouted, "If you *do* think of me as your son, how come you didn't treat me like you did everyone else?!"

As emotionless as ever, Itsuki replied, "Because there was no need to teach you such things. That's all there was to it. Teaching someone who has no talent is a waste of both the teacher's and the student's time. In the worst case, we get people like you, who earn some tiny modicum of strength and produce extremely mediocre results. That's the greatest tragedy of all."

What?!

"Wh-What do you mean by that?" Ikki couldn't understand why Itsuki found that so abhorrent.

Closing his eyes once again, Itsuki said in a solemn voice, "The Kurogane family has been managing Japan's Blazers from as far back as when Mage-Knights were still called samurai. We have a responsibility to keep an eye on all of this nation's Mage-Knights. But it's exceedingly difficult to unite them all under a single organization. Each and every one possesses supernatural powers that allow them to do things no normal human can. In order to get all of them

to fall in line, you need an organization with a clear hierarchy and the power to enforce its laws. That's why we have such a clear-cut ranking system. It teaches people their place within the hierarchy, and what they are and aren't allowed to do."

He went on.

"This is the only way to maintain order. Every single cog in the machine needs to be aware of its role and act accordingly. Those who stand at the top and those who live at the bottom both have their roles to play. We cannot have people at the bottom looking down on those above them and mistakenly thinking they're actually stronger. That is why your very existence is a threat to our organization, Ikki. If someone like you, who shouldn't be able to do anything, manages to accomplish things above his station, then the others at the bottom will start getting dangerous ideas. They'll start to think that they, too, can accomplish things beyond their ability and forget their predetermined roles. Even if a few succeed, the vast majority will simply cause the gears of the organization to grind to a halt, causing trouble for everyone."

Ikki's father spoke plainly, as if commenting on the weather. But this was the set of ideals that the man known as Kurogane Itsuki lived by.

"A person's rank may not be everything, but it is still a good general indicator," he added. "Very few people are able to defeat those of a higher rank. It's a waste of time for most people to try, which is why I told you what I did. 'Since you can't do anything, *don't* do anything.'"

For the first time in his life, Ikki felt like he understood what kind of person his father was. He was a man who adhered to the duties and responsibilities of the Kurogane family above all else. To him, the rules were ironclad. He was the living embodiment of law and order. That was why his Blazer nickname was "Iron Tyrant."

"Wait...but..." Ikki began. *Does that mean...* "So you weren't worried I was bringing shame to the family when you told me not to do anything?"

"Of course not. I couldn't care less about the family's reputation. The Kurogane family's role in this world is to manage the Blazers of this nation. To that end, those who have been appraised as incapable of accomplishing

anything should just sit quietly and do nothing. Ikki, you said you wanted me to accept you. If that's true, then give up on becoming a knight."

Ikki gasped.

"Since you can't do anything, *don't* do anything. As always, that's my only request of you," Itsuki concluded.

It was at this moment that Ikki realized just how serious his father was. And that hurt more than anything.

What even am I to him?

He'd learned that Itsuki didn't hate him. But honestly, he would have preferred it if that were the case. If his father hated him because he was untalented, that would have at least left him with the small hope that they might one day reconcile. In reality, however, Itsuki had no expectations of Ikki, nor did he care at all about him except as a cog in the machine.

That's too cruel...

Itsuki didn't hate Ikki in the same way he didn't hate a pebble on the road. To him, Ikki was so insignificant that he didn't matter at all. Despair welled up within Ikki as he realized that.

"Ngh..."

"Hmm? What's wrong? Why are you crying?" Itsuki asked as tears spilled down Ikki's cheeks.

His reaction was the final nail in the coffin. Somewhere in a corner of his heart, Ikki had hoped to forge a proper familial connection with his father. He'd fervently wished that the day would come when they would be able to understand each other.

But now I know... We're so estranged from each other that he doesn't even understand why I'm crying.

In that instant, Ikki's heart shattered. And from that moment onward, the person known as Kurogane Ikki began to fall apart.



After that, Itsuki tried asking a few things, but Ikki just kept sobbing uncontrollably. Deeming it pointless to speak with his son any further, Itsuki left the room and returned to his office on the top floor. There, he found a fat man in a red suit waiting for him.

“Good afternoon, Family Head. Or good evening, I suppose. It’s gotten quite late.”

“What do you want, Akaza?”

“How did Ikki-kun seem to you?”

“As always, I have no idea what he’s thinking. Though I suppose he isn’t as strange as his brother.”

“I wasn’t asking about his personality. I meant, did he seem ill in any way?”

“Should he have?”

“Geh heh heh. Well, you see, we’ve been slipping a little something into his food. A drug that’ll slowly whittle away at both his body and mind.”

“The truth serum you military police love so much? I see you’re resorting to rather drastic measures.”

“We simply know how stubborn he can be. He knows us just as well too, so he’s likely prepared for those kinds of tricks. From the very start, I wasn’t expecting him to break during the hearings. This inquiry is just an excuse to isolate him. Everything is still going according to plan. Now we just need to wait for King Vermillion’s arrival and—”

“No need to explain. I can more or less figure it out,” Itsuki said, holding out a hand to forestall Akaza’s explanation. “I’ll leave that all to you. Use whatever means necessary to get Ikki expelled. Just bear in mind that failure will not be tolerated.”

“Of course. Geh heh heh. Just wait. It’ll all be over soon.” Akaza bowed and left the room.

Itsuki walked over to the wall that held the portraits of all the previous branch office heads and looked up at them. More than half had been members of the Kurogane family. This had been the responsibility of Itsuki’s family for

generations, and it was currently his to bear. That was why he would thoroughly pursue the policies he believed would result in the best outcomes for the most people.

People need to live in accordance with their station. That's the best way to bring happiness to as many people as possible.

There were very few people like Ikki who were capable of overcoming their own powerlessness. The false hope he would present to people would be bad both for society as a whole and for the people who would mistakenly come to believe they could become like him. For that reason, Ikki simply didn't belong in Itsuki's organization.

I will have him expelled from the Federation, no matter what it takes. Itsuki couldn't afford to show Ikki any mercy simply because he was his son. That's the responsibility I bear.

Everything was for the sake of stability and order. That was the ironclad rule the Iron Tyrant had lived by, and that which he continued to live by.



Ten days after Ikki had been imprisoned by the Ethics Committee, he fought his eighteenth selection match. His opponent was a no-name Rank E Blazer, and Oreki Yuuri was there to preside over the duel.

After learning everything she could about the situation from Kagami, Shizuku went out to the front gate with Alisuin to wait for Oreki's return. The sun was starting to set by the time they spotted her, and she had come back alone. They sprinted over to her.

"Oreki-sensei, did Onii-sama manage to win his match? How was he doing?"

"Hmm? Oh... Yes. He successfully won his eighteenth match," Oreki said, not sounding too happy.

Alisuin picked up on her worried tone and asked, "Is something the matter?"

Oreki fell silent, debating whether to say anything. In the end, she decided it wouldn't be good to hide things from Ikki's own sister.

"The truth is, Kurogane-kun looked like he wasn't doing too well."

“You mean physically?” Shizuku questioned.

“Yes. He was pale and coughing an awful lot. Though someone of his caliber can still win easily against weaker opponents even in that condition.”

Shizuku and Alisuin exchanged worried looks.

“Maybe he caught Stella-chan’s cold?” Alisuin posited.

“It’s a possibility.”

Ikki had gotten just as soaked as Stella at Okutama, so even if he hadn’t caught her cold, he might have gotten sick from that anyway. He was probably exhausted from the hearings as well.

Shizuku and Alisuin assumed that was all there was to it, but Oreki frowned and said, “No, I think he’s...”

She was more well-versed in illnesses than most people, so she could tell that his condition was more than a simple cold or exhaustion catching up to him.

“Sensei?”

“Never mind. Sorry, but I need to go report to the director.”

Oreki shook her head and walked off. Even if she told Shizuku and Alisuin what was going on, there wasn’t anything students like them could do. It would just make them more worried. Unfortunately, the two of them were too perceptive for their own good.

“Oreki-sensei was definitely about to say something we wouldn’t like hearing,” Shizuku said.

“She knows more about illnesses than most people. Maybe she was able to glean something from Ikki’s symptoms,” Alisuin replied.

“So she thinks it’s more than just a regular cold?”

“That’s my guess. The Ethics Committee might be doing something to purposely make him sick.”

A shiver ran down Shizuku’s spine. She wouldn’t put it past her father to do something like that.

“Onii-sama, please stay safe...”

Ikki was confined in an underground prison far beyond her reach. All she could do was pray for his safety, and that galled her to no end.



“Hey! Wake up!”

Ikki opened his eyes as a ruddy-faced Ethics Committee member threw water at his face.

“How dare you sleep during a hearing, you delinquent!” another Ethics Committee member with thin bangs said, adjusting his glasses. His loud voice echoed through the tiny courtroom. But to Ikki, it sounded faint and far away.

Oh. I must’ve fallen asleep again.

The inquiry had been going on for two weeks now, and Ikki’s exhaustion had peaked. He’d been confined the whole time and forced to answer the same questions over and over. That would wear anyone down.

Ikki had it even worse because he’d been running a high fever and coughing constantly for the past few days. His lungs felt like they were on fire. Every time he took a breath, it burned. That led to a chronic lack of oxygen that made it difficult for him to stay conscious. He clearly had pneumonia, and it was possible his illness was even more severe than that. Normally, he would have been sent to a hospital, but the Ethics Committee wouldn’t allow that.

“Hmph. Feigning illness to try and get out of your hearing, I see. What a truly spoiled brat you are.” Despite Ikki’s dire condition, the members of the Ethics Committee continued to needle him. “Now then, let us continue. We’d like to know about the secret pact you made with Director Shinguuji. The previous director held you back a year because they deemed you unfit to be a proper knight, but Shinguuji has obviously ignored that assessment. We believe that poses a huge ethical—”

The Ethics Committee had asked Ikki this question several times already, and Ikki had already explained that the previous director had added a minimum ability requirement to attend classes that had caused him to have to repeat a year—which, of course, the committee members already knew. In fact, they were the ones who’d instructed the previous director to do so.

Naturally, though, Akaza and the others didn't care about the truth. They just wanted to keep pestering Ikki with questions until he gave in. Meanwhile, they kept talking about how rebellious and impertinent he was being. It hadn't bothered Ikki at the start, but in his weakened state, it was getting to him. Even so, he wouldn't stop arguing. But this time, before he could say anything, he broke into a coughing fit and crumpled to the floor.

"Who said you could sit down?! Back on your feet, worm!"

"Ngh!"

Ikki suddenly felt a heavy impact on the back of his head. His nose slammed against the floor. The metallic scent of blood filled his nostrils, and red droplets spilled to the floor.

I must look pathetic right now.

Ikki smiled bitterly to himself. He'd already realized that this sickness wasn't natural. Chances were the Ethics Committee was putting something in his food. But normally, Ikki wouldn't have fallen apart this easily even if he was sick.

His meeting with his father had broken him. He'd wanted to believe that no matter how coldly the man treated him or how much he kept his distance, somewhere in his heart, Itsuki still loved Ikki. However, their meeting a few days ago had dashed those faint hopes and shattered Ikki's mental state. Without his usual firm resolve, he couldn't shore up his waning physical condition through mental fortitude alone. The resulting negative feedback loop had led to his current pathetic state.

"Now, now. No need to be so rough with him," Akaza said, getting up and pulling the man who was stepping on Ikki's head away. He then knelt in front of Ikki and said with a grin, "Geh heh heh, you seem to be in quite a bit of pain."

Ikki said nothing in response.

"I suppose it's understandable considering how long this hearing has gone on for," Akaza continued. "But please understand that we're doing this to help you prove that you are, in fact, an upstanding knight. Unfortunately, it seems you aren't willing to cooperate, so I have a different proposition for you. You can silence all the people claiming your relationship is impure in one fell swoop.

Doesn't that sound nice? You'd like to hear this proposition, wouldn't you?"

Ikki knew there was no way it would be an even remotely fair proposition. But if he didn't ask what it was, they'd just keep going in circles forever.

"What is it? *Cough, cough!*"

Satisfied with Ikki's response, Akaza nodded and said, "Geh heh heh. It's very simple. As you know, Ikki-kun, a true knight carves open their path with the sword. So why not go back to old customs to resolve this dilemma?"

What is he talking about?

"Why don't we determine whether you or your detractors are right by betting it all on the outcome of your next selection match?"

It was then that Ikki understood what Akaza was trying to do.

"You want me to duel a representative of your choice?"

"That's right. For us knights, the outcome of a duel is absolute. Regardless of what evidence there may or may not be against you, no one will be able to say anything if you win an official duel to prove your innocence. That's an ironclad rule all knights must follow, including members of the Ethics Committee. If you agree to this duel and win, no one will ever be able to question your qualifications for knighthood ever again. It's the perfect opportunity, wouldn't you say, Ikki-kun? Surely you'll agree to this duel, no?"

"If I win tomorrow, you promise you'll leave me alone?"

"Yes, of course. However, at present, your next opponent is meant to be a Rank E third-year. I'm afraid defeating such a weak opponent won't be enough to sufficiently prove your strength to everyone. So if you agree, we'll be arranging a different opponent for your duel tomorrow."

Yeah, I figured that was the catch.

"*Cough, cough.* Who are you going to have me fight?"

Akaza's grin grew wider.

"We intend to nominate the Thunderbolt, Toudou Touka, as our representative."

Touka was so strong that Ikki would struggle against her even if he were in perfect condition. She had made it to the semifinals of the previous year's Seven Stars Battle Festival, after all. In his current condition, beating her would be nigh impossible.

There was no reason for Ikki to accept this duel. Eventually, Stella's father would arrive and demand a meeting. If Ikki could just hold out that long, everything would get resolved, and Akaza and the others would never be able to harass him again. Besides, it would be rude to Touka to duel her in his current condition. Ikki understood all of that.

"Oh, by the way, we've already told King Vermillion about this. There was a bit of a miscommunication, though, and we unfortunately told him that you'd agreed to this duel. Terribly sorry about that. But you know, he was quite interested in watching your duel. I believe he even said something to the effect of 'A man who can't overcome a trial of this caliber doesn't deserve my daughter!' I imagine that if you refuse this duel, his opinion of you will be gravely impacted."

Akaza had carefully cut off Ikki's path of retreat.

I see, so this was their plan all along.

This hearing was simply an excuse to keep Ikki away from Hagun Academy. Akaza and the others had known from the start that they wouldn't be able to break Ikki with just petty harassment. This had all just been setup to force Ikki to accept an unfair duel.

"But naturally, a principled man such as yourself will accept this duel, no?"

In a duel, right and wrong ceased to matter. Everything hinged on the outcome of the match. That was how it had been for knights since time immemorial.

Even though Ikki had done nothing wrong, if he lost the duel, he would be stripped of his knighthood and lose everything. Agreeing to it was an extremely risky proposition, and frankly, Ikki had very little to gain from doing so. Even victory would only grant him the freedom he deserved to begin with. However, he had no other choice.

“All right. Let’s settle everything with a duel,” Ikki said through gritted teeth. It was a risky proposition, but Akaza had made it impossible for him to refuse.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Splendid! Geh heh heh, what a fine young man you are! Everyone, did you hear that?! Kurogane Ikki has agreed to settle this matter with tomorrow’s duel! In accordance with our ancient customs, there will be no arguing with the outcome, no matter what it may be! Duels are sacrosanct, and those who agree to settle their differences with one must abide by their rules! With that, I hereby declare the inquiry into Kurogane Ikki’s conduct over!”

And so, Ikki was forced into an even more desperate situation. The Thunderbolt was not only unbelievably strong, but she was also strongest at close range, which was Ikki’s specialty. Ikki would be hard-pressed to win even if he were in top form, but as he was currently, he hardly stood a chance.

This duel would decide his fate and his future. As that realization sank in, Ikki remembered what Utakata had told him earlier. *“The reason you can’t beat her is because she’s shouldering so much more than you are.”* Touka was carrying an uncountable number of hopes and dreams on her slender shoulders. It wasn’t just the expectations of the kids at the orphanage she had to live up to either. All the students at Hagun Academy were hoping she’d bring home the crown this year.

Do I have what it takes to beat someone like her? My sword is so empty and worthless that even my own father expects nothing from me. Can it truly match hers, filled with hopes and dreams like it is?

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Toudou Touka

■PROFILE

Affiliation: Hagun

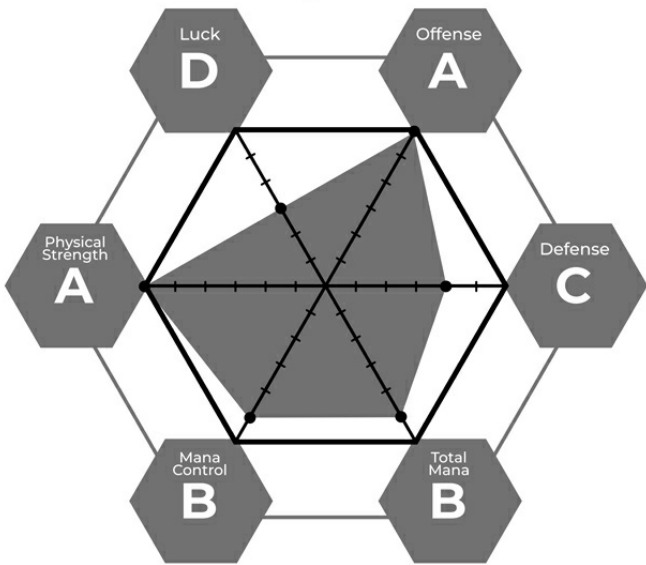
Academy Class 3-3

Blazer Rank: B

Noble Art: Thunderbolt

Nickname: Thunderbolt

Summary: Hagun Academy's student council president.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

Our student council president is both strong and kind. She really is the perfect role model. And as you'd expect from a Rank B Blazer, her stats are high across the board. Her Noble Art, Thunderbolt, is so unbelievably strong that it became her Blazer nickname as well. So far, she's never lost at close range thanks to the overwhelming power she can unleash. If you ask me, the only way to beat her is to find a way to seal her Thunderbolt. Otherwise, you won't stand a chance.

Chapter 4: A Single Slash

“Mm-hmm. Yep, I’m doin’ fine. Mm-hmm. T’morrow’s selection match is gonna be the last one. Hmm? Yer gonna come all the way to Tokyo to cheer me on? Ya even made me a banner?! Guys, yer jumpin’ the gun! ‘Sides, this year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival’s gonna be in Osaka. Mm-hmm. Yep. Win or lose, I’ll come see ya guys after the match. Mm-hmm. See ya soon. Give the kids my thanks for the veggies. And take care of yerself, ya hear? Bye-bye.”

Touka pressed the “end call” button on her student handbook and looked down at it. The screen was slick with sweat, and the call log showed that she’d been on the phone for fifty minutes. It had been quite a long conversation.

“How’s the orphanage director doing?” Utakata, who was lounging on the sofa in the student council room and munching on a tomato, asked. Touka had been talking to the director of the Wakaba Orphanage, the woman who’d raised the two of them.

“She’s doing fine. It looks like she’s completely recovered.”

Last year, the director had suffered from a heart attack. At the time, her condition had been so dire that Touka had cried all night, and even Utakata had lost his cool. But she’d made a full recovery and was back to looking after the kids at the orphanage. In fact, she had so much excess energy now that she’d gone out of her way to make a victory banner for Touka.

“Did she really make a banner for you?” Utakata followed up.

Touka still had one selection match left, which meant it wasn’t even a guarantee that she’d be one of Hagun’s representatives. But the director and the kids at the orphanage had already made a banner they were planning to take to the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“Everyone’s getting ahead of themselves.”

“It just shows how confident they are that you’ll win. After all, the Thunderbolt is everyone at the Wakaba Orphanage’s hero.”

Utakata stuck his hand into the box filled with vegetables that the kids had sent Touka and fished a picture out of it. He handed it over to her, and she looked down to see a group of smiling kids all covered in mud and harvesting vegetables. She then turned it over and saw words of encouragement written on the back.

Touka truly was these kids' hero. Like them, she was an orphan, but she'd proved that even orphans could climb their way up in the world. She was fighting against the best knights in the country and coming out on top. All of the kids back at the orphanage adored her and wanted to be like her. It was thanks to her that they had the courage to chase after their dreams.

Naturally, Touka was well aware of that, which was why she knew she couldn't afford to lose. To some, that might have been a burden, but Touka had converted those expectations that had been heaped onto her into the strength to keep pushing forward. It was what made her as strong as she was.

I'll be sure to read all of your messages later.

Touka pressed the picture against her chest and carefully placed it into her bag before turning to the box of vegetables. It was filled to the brim with tomatoes, eggplants, and cucumbers, all of which had been grown in the orphanage's vegetable garden. They didn't look as pristine as the vegetables one might find at a supermarket, but they'd been harvested with love, and that made all the difference.

"Maybe I'll use these to make eggplant curry for tonight's dinner. Wow, look at this one, Uta-kun! It's so big and long!"

"That's what she said."

"H-How many times have I told you to stop making dumb jokes like that?!"

"Ha ha ha, my bad. But I think there are too many veggies here for us to eat by ourselves. Maybe we should hand some out at the cafeteria tomorrow," Utakata muttered.

Upon hearing that, Touka's expression clouded over. Talk of tomorrow brought forth unpleasant thoughts.

"Tomorrow, huh?"

A few hours ago, Touka had received a notification from the school director, Shinguuji Kurono, informing her that her opponent for tomorrow's match had been changed to Kurogane Ikki. It was obvious to her this was some sort of conspiracy that had been cooked up by the same people who were currently confining Ikki in the Mage-Knight Federation's building.

When Touka had asked Kurono what was going on, the director had explained everything to her. She'd learned about the horrific treatment Ikki was being subjected to and why this duel had been arranged. Therefore, she knew that she was the assassin the Ethics Committee had chosen to destroy Ikki's career as a Mage-Knight. But of course, she had no desire to play a role in such a disgusting scheme.

"Touka, do you plan on agreeing to the duel?" Uakata knew that Touka was conflicted about what to do.

Touka closed her eyes, and after a few seconds of silence, said, "I don't have any choice. It's like the director said: for me, this is still a regular selection match."

Though everything was on the line for Ikki in this duel, Touka wasn't bound by the same pact. All she was betting on the outcome of this match was her participation in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. This wasn't the first time her next opponent had changed either. There had been other circumstances that had led to her being matched with a different opponent than she'd initially been assigned, even if it had never been so sudden. Ultimately, though, this had been done through official channels, which meant that she couldn't protest.

"You say that, but you clearly aren't happy about this."

"Yeah..."

Even though Touka knew there was nothing she could do, she still felt awful. She was a kind girl at heart, and this was not how she wanted her match with Ikki to go. That was why she'd decided to make certain arrangements. Just then, there was a knock on the door, and Touka's expression brightened slightly.

"Who could have business with the student council at this time?" Uakata asked.

“It’s someone I called here. Come in.”

“Excuse me.”

The door opened, and Kurogane Shizuku, the same girl Touka had defeated in a match not too long ago, walked into the student council room.



“Now *that’s* an unexpected guest,” Utakata said, surprised.

“I didn’t think the only person I lost to would call me here in the dead of night either,” Shizuku said with a frown.

“Ha ha, fair enough. Oh, hey, want a tomato? They’re tasty.”

“I’ve already brushed my teeth, so I’ll pass. That aside, I assume you didn’t call me here to give me tomatoes, Student Council President. What do you want?”

Shizuku cut right to the chase, in part because she didn’t want to speak to Touka any longer than necessary. She knew that acting like this showed her weakness, but it was difficult for her to be in the same room as the person who’d destroyed her dream of going to the Seven Stars Battle Festival with her brother. Touka could see that as well, so she decided to make things quick.

“I spoke with the director a while ago and learned something that I believe you need to know.”

Touka explained that her opponent for tomorrow had been changed to Ikki and that Ikki had been forced to stake his entire future as a knight on this duel. Shizuku’s expression grew angrier and angrier the more she learned about what was being done to him.

“Those scumbags!” Shizuku spat as soon as Touka had finished talking. Then, she stared Touka right in the eyes and asked, “Are you going to fight in this match, Student Council President? Even though you know they’ve purposely crippled Onii-sama?”

“I may be the student council president, but I’m still just a student. I don’t have the power to change any of this.” Touka didn’t want to be party to this, but she had no choice. Regardless, it was because she wanted to do something for Ikki that she’d called Shizuku here. “But that’s why I have a request of you,

Shizuku-san, as the only member of Kurogane-kun's family who actually cares about him."

"What is it?"

"I'd like you to convince him to withdraw from this match."

"Huh?"

"From what I've heard, he's quite ill. At the very least, he has pneumonia, and he might have something worse. He's in no state to fight. However, after spending a few days with him, I have an idea of what kind of knight Kurogane Ikki is. I imagine he'll try to fight despite the awful condition he's in. Not out of plain stubbornness, but with a solid plan for how to win. He's going to come at me with everything he's got."

That was exactly the problem.

"That means I'll have to fight him with everything I've got as well," Touka continued. "It goes against my principles to hold back against someone who's fighting seriously. But if I go all out against someone as ill as Kurogane-kun, it may lead to a truly unfortunate accident."

"Ah!" A shiver ran down Shizuku's spine. *She means it.*

Shizuku could tell from the glint in Touka's eyes that she wouldn't hold back against Ikki, even if it killed him. It wasn't a threat; Touka was saying this because she was genuinely worried. She'd called Shizuku here because she believed there was a distinct possibility she'd end up killing Ikki tomorrow.

"Please, convince Kurogane-kun to step down. As his sister, you're the only one who can do that."

Shizuku silently looked down, unsure of what to do. She couldn't decide what the right choice here was.

"Let me think about it overnight..." she finally squeezed out.



After Shizuku left, Touka muttered sadly, "Regardless of whether Kurogane-kun withdraws or fights and loses, I'm not sure I'll be able to go to the Seven Stars Battle Festival with my head held high."

Touka thought back to the picture that had come with the box of vegetables, remembering the smiles of admiration on the kids' faces. She wasn't sure she'd be able to have a match worthy of their admiration tomorrow.

"Touka," Uta-kata said gently, placing his hand over hers. He looked up into her eyes and said with conviction, "It's true that this match has been tainted by the machinations of some shitty adults, but that has nothing to do with you. All you have to do is fight proudly, in a way you'll be satisfied with. It's because you've done that up until now that we all love you. Besides, I bet that's what our cute little kohai wants from you anyway."

It didn't matter what the rest of the world thought. As long as Touka could be proud of the way she'd fought, that was all that mattered. Touka smiled for the first time since learning she'd be fighting Ikki.

"Yeah. Thanks, Uta-kun."

He's right. All I can do is fight this match properly. In which case, all she had left to do was give Ikki as good a match as possible.

"All right!" Touka slapped her cheeks and shook her head, clearing away the last of her hesitation.

If you insist on fighting despite how sick you are, Kurogane-kun, then I won't show you any mercy. Fighting with all her might would be the only proper way to honor Ikki's strength and determination. Of course, she also intended to win. *I'm going to win and head to the Seven Stars Battle Festival with my head held high!*

The long night eventually gave way to dawn, and the sun rose on the morning of the final selection match to determine who Hagun's representatives would be.



"Yeesh. Summer's barely started and it's already this hot?" the stationmaster who oversaw the closest station to Hagun Academy said, wiping sweat off his brow. He was currently sweeping the area around the station platform under the blazing sun. There wasn't a cloud in the sky today, and his navy blue uniform was uncomfortably hot.

He looked up when he heard the sound of an approaching train. It slowed to a stop as it reached the platform, and the doors slid open. The stationmaster took a few steps back so as not to get in the way of anyone getting off.

Though practically no one gets off here at this time.

The only thing near this station was Hagun Academy, and since every student lived in the dorms, no one would be stepping off the train at this station on a weekday. Or so the stationmaster thought, but one person did, in fact, exit the train.

Hmm? They were hunched over, and for a moment, the stationmaster thought it might be an elderly man. Well, that's unusual. First time I've seen someone come here at this time on a weekday. I wonder who they are.

Curious, the stationmaster stepped forward and took a closer look at the person who'd gotten off the train. To his surprise, it wasn't an old man, but rather a young boy. Even though he was in the prime of his youth, he was hunched over and shuffling his feet like a man eighty years older. But what surprised the stationmaster even more was the state the boy was in.

"Haaah...haaah..."

He was panting heavily and so pale that he looked like a ghost. His eyes were dull and unfocused, and he was covered in sweat. Sure, it was hot out, but the train had air conditioning. No healthy person would be sweating that much inside a cooled train car.

"A-Are you okay, sir?!"

"I-I'm fine..."

"You certainly don't *look* fine! One moment. I'll call— Wait, you're..."

Upon seeing Ikki's face, the stationmaster gasped. He'd seen Ikki's face in the newspaper and had heard all about how this was the boy who'd seduced the Vermillion Kingdom's princess. In that instant, the stationmaster's expression transformed into one of disgust.

Ikki noticed the change and said, "Thank you for worrying about me, but I'm fine. Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I can't stay to talk."

Ikki bowed politely and shuffled off to the station's exit.

“Ah...”

As the stationmaster watched Ikki wobble away, he began to wonder just how true the things the newspapers had been saying were. According to articles, Ikki was an uncouth hooligan who'd caused his family immeasurable trouble, but he'd been perfectly polite toward the stationmaster. After actually meeting Ikki, the stationmaster had a hard time believing the news reports.



Upon exiting the station, Ikki started making his way up the hill leading to Hagun Academy. It was a mere one kilometer from the station to the school, and he often ran this route during his morning jog with Stella. A gentle slope like this wouldn't even slow him down under normal circumstances, but right now, it felt like he was slogging his way up a mountain. Every breath caused his lungs to burn, and he could barely get enough oxygen into his body.

It hurts...

Starved for oxygen, Ikki opened his mouth to suck in a huge breath. But the burning pain from his lungs caused him to cough out all the air he'd inhaled. His blood was so lacking in oxygen that his lips were turning purple. He was also running a high fever and on the verge of unconsciousness. Furthermore, the hallucinogens that had been mixed into his food were causing his thoughts to turn in a negative direction.

I'm going to have to fight the Thunderbolt in this condition...

He knew that was tantamount to suicide.

There's no way I can win...

Even if he were in perfect condition, he didn't think someone with a blade as empty as his could hope to beat Toudou Touka.

I just want to sleep... Ikki thought as he walked up the deserted hill, his only company the blazing sun and the cries of cicadas. Succumbing to unconsciousness here was an extremely alluring proposal to him. Just as he was thinking that, he tripped over a small pebble and hit the asphalt—hard.

“Ow...”

I...really should get back up. If I don't, I won't make it in time for my match. If I miss my match, it'll be counted as a loss. And if I lose... Wait, what's going to happen if I lose?

Ikki's brain was barely functioning now. The fever and the hallucinogens were making him dissociate. He couldn't remember what he was doing or why. As his consciousness blurred, he saw something that should have been impossible: snow.

Ah...

At some point, the sky had become covered by thick, gray clouds, and fat snowflakes were now fluttering to the ground.

No, hang on. It's summer right now, isn't it? But it's so cold.

Ikki started shivering uncontrollably. This particular cold felt awfully familiar to him.

Come to think of it, it was snowing that day too.

Ikki thought back to that fateful New Year's Day all those years ago. The day he'd run out of the house because he couldn't bear to be cooped up in his room during the annual family reunion. No one had been worried about him or even noticed that he was gone. Eventually, he'd gotten lost and started stumbling around in the snow.

Nothing's changed at all since that day. What am I even doing here?

Still no one wanted him. Still he hadn't accomplished anything. And still he'd failed to change anything about himself or the world. Just like in the past, he was stuck all alone in a cold, harsh blizzard. What was the point of pushing himself this hard to keep fighting?

I don't know. I just don't know anymore.

At long last, Ikki closed his heavy eyelids and let the darkness take him.



The final set of selection matches was being held today. There were fewer

matches scheduled than usual, as only the twelve students who'd maintained undefeated records would be fighting. As a result, each training field had more spectators than usual. The first training field, where Thunderbolt vs. Worst One would be held, had the biggest crowd of them all. Even the students who'd come to watch seemed surprised by the impressive turnout.

"Damn, I've never seen the stands this packed."

"I guess everyone just wants to see Thunderbolt fight the Worst One."

"Is it just me or are there a bunch of people with fancy professional cameras too?"

"They're all reporters. Remember the weird rumors?"

"Oh yeah, there were some articles about there being a scandal between the Crimson Princess and the Worst One, right? I thought reporters weren't allowed on school grounds, though."

"I heard the Federation pulled some strings and got a special exception made."

"By the way, do you believe those articles?"

"I mean, they're definitely dating. It's not like they denied that part, and anyone who's seen them together at school could figure that much out."

"If you were there for the Hunter's match, the Crimson Princess basically confessed to him during the fight."

"Yeah, I know that much, moron. I'm talking about the testimonials from his family and all that stuff. You think it's true that the Worst One's a delinquent who fools around with women all the time?"

"Oh, that."

"I don't believe it for a second."

"Me neither. My Device is a katana, so I actually go to the Worst One for some swordsmanship lessons during lunchtime. He's not that kinda guy at all."

"Oh, you too? I go to his martial arts lessons. I heard he started teaching people because his classmates begged him to."

“Yep. Anyway, I’ve spoken to him a few times, and there’s no way those mass media vultures are telling the truth. He was super busy with his selection matches, but he still went out of his way to teach all of us even though he might have had to fight us in a match. No way he was just fooling around with the Crimson Princess.”

“But those testimonials are from his family members, aren’t they? Why would they lie about this? I could see them lying to protect him, but there’s no way they’d lie just to screw him over, right?”

“Hmm, I dunno about that.”

As expected, Ikki was the hot topic everyone was discussing.

Saikyou Nene, dressed in a kimono as always, observed the crowd from the top row of the stands. She turned to Shinguuji Kurono and said in an impressed voice, “Huh, looks like most of the kids aren’t gullible enough to believe everything the news says.”

“Yep. The ones who’ve spoken to Kurogane are especially suspicious.”

“One look’s enough to tell you he’s a pretty nice guy, after all.”

“But that doesn’t matter anymore,” Kurono said through gritted teeth. The truth was no longer important. Whether or not Ikki would get to continue being a knight depended solely on the outcome of this duel. It didn’t matter how right Ikki was or how wrong Akaza and the others’ actions had been; the only way Ikki could prove his innocence was by winning. “I didn’t think they’d go this route. I’m going to grind that bastard into a pulp.”

Kurono had been blindsided by this development. She’d figured they just needed to hold out until Stella’s father arrived. But Akaza had been even craftier than she’d expected, and she was kicking herself for letting this happen.

“Geh heh heh, why thank you for those kind words,” Akaza said with a smile, walking over to Kurono and Saikyou. He mopped his sweat-streaked forehead with a handkerchief, and it was clear from how red his face was that he wasn’t handling the heat well. “Good afternoon, ladies. It’s quite hot out today, isn’t it?”

“Chairman Akaza...”

Kurono and Saikyou glared at Akaza, making it clear he was unwelcome.

“What do you want, you ugly baboon?” Saikyou asked, not even bothering to hide her displeasure.

“Now, now. No need to be so hostile. I’m not here for anything, but there’s someone I met along the way who wanted to speak to the two of you. Over here, Sensei.”

Akaza waved over a short old man wearing a highly decorated hakama.

“Ah, there you two are. This place is so big that I can’t tell left from right.”

“Geh! What are you doing here, old man?!” Saikyou exclaimed.

The old man was none other than Nangou Torajirou, the War God. At ninety-two years old, he was Japan’s oldest active Mage-Knight, as well as Saikyou and Touka’s teacher.

“Hoh hoh hoh, sharp-tongued as always, I see. Well, that’s what makes you cute, I suppose.”

“‘C-Cute’?! Stop being such a creep!”

“You’re not fooling anyone when you’re blushing like that, Nene. Just admit you’re happy to see him,” Kurono said with a grin.

“Wh-Who on earth would be happy to see this washed-up old geezer?!” Saikyou shouted, blushing even harder.

When’s she going to be honest with herself? As Saikyou’s longtime friend, Kurono knew that she respected Nangou more than anyone else in the world.

“Long time no see, Kurono-kun. You were still pregnant last I saw you. Did the delivery go smoothly?”

“As smooth as childbirth can go, anyway.”

“Glad to hear it. I must say, you’ve become even more alluring after giving birth. In fact, your hips have filled out quite—”

“Stop sexually harassing my friend, you geezer, or I’ll send you to the afterlife!”

“Hoh hoh hoh. You’re getting on in years too, Nene. You should take a leaf

out of Kurono-kun's book and learn how to charm men, or else you'll spend the rest of your life alone."

"Don't bother giving her advice, Nangou-sensei. She's already beyond hope."

"N-No I'm not! I'm just enjoying my life as a single woman for now! Besides, who wants to be tied down to one man? And why are you taking his side, Kuu-chan?!"

Because it's funny seeing your reactions when Nangou-sensei's around.
Saikyou was normally quite composed, but in front of Nangou, she became extremely easy to tease. *Not like I'll ever admit that to her, though.*

"Incidentally, why did you come today, Nangou-sensei?"

"Hey, don't ignore me!" Saikyou shouted, which Kurono promptly ignored.

Of course, Kurono had only asked to make small talk. She could more or less guess why he was here.

"Why else but to see Touka's final match? Normally, I wouldn't have bothered to come until the Seven Stars Battle Festival, but after I learned her opponent was a member of the Kurogane family, I simply had to come watch."

Thought so.

Nangou was Touka's teacher in addition to being Saikyou's. Ever since he'd taken note of Touka's talent, he'd been teaching her swordsmanship. In fact, Touka had devised her signature skill, Thunderbolt, by adapting one of Nangou's techniques, Soundsplitter, to match her fighting style. But there was another reason Nangou had come today as well.

"Geh heh heh. Nangou-sensei was Kurogane Ryouma's lifelong rival, after all. I imagine he's curious to see how the current Kurogane family is doing."

Nangou had fought alongside Ryouma in the Second World War, and the two of them had been best friends as well as lifelong rivals. Outsiders normally wouldn't bother coming to a simple school match like this, but the mass media had made a huge deal about how Ikki was going to use this duel to clear his name. Furthermore, this was a duel between his disciple and the great-grandson of his rival. He couldn't afford to miss it.

“Unfortunately, Nangou-sensei, it’s entirely possible that today’s match will be canceled,” Akaza said with a wicked grin.

“What?” Kurono asked, raising an eyebrow. It was clear from his tone that Akaza had gotten up to some more mischief.

“Good afternoon, everyone. It’s time for the match, but it appears that Kurogane Ikki has yet to reach the waiting room. As per the selection match rules, if Kurogane fails to arrive within ten minutes, he will be considered to have forfeited the match,” the announcer said, confirming Kurono’s fears.

“Did you not say you would be driving Kurogane here, Akaza? And that I wouldn’t need to go pick him up?” Kurono said coldly, glaring at Akaza.

“Geh heh heh, my apologies, I completely forgot to do that. Whoops. But the Federation building isn’t too far from here. I’m sure he can make it if he takes the train. Though he *did* seem to be in quite bad shape, so perhaps he’s collapsed somewhere along the way. Geh heh heh.”

You scumbag...

Kurono clenched her fists so tight that her fingernails cut through her skin.

Saikyou gently put a hand over Kurono’s and said in a whisper that only she could hear, “Don’t do anything rash, Kuu-chan.”

Kurono said nothing.

“Regardless of how underhanded their tactics were,” Saikyou continued, “the fact remains that Kuro-bou accepted this duel. It’s not our place to interfere.”

Again, Kurono said nothing.

“Not yet, anyway. We can make our move when it’s all over,” Saikyou concluded. She was just as incensed as Kurono.

Sighing, Kurono unclenched her fists. “Yeah, you’re right.”

In that instant, the two of them made up their minds. Regardless of whether Ikki won his duel, they wouldn’t let Akaza leave this campus alive.

For his part, Akaza was completely oblivious to their seething rage. He stared down at the empty ring, glad that his plan was progressing smoothly thus far. If

things went well and Ikki was expelled from the Mage-Knight Federation, he would finally be promoted from Ethics Committee Chairman to Head of Public Relations. At long last, he would be able to say goodbye to the dark, dingy underground office he'd gotten used to and bask in the light of day.

I'll finally stop having all these dirty jobs assigned to me, Akaza thought.

People reviled the Ethics Committee and insultingly called its members the Mage-Knight Federation's secret police. Back when it had actually been a proper military police force, it'd had a lot more power, but now, it was just who the Federation dumped all its unsavory tasks onto. Most people stuck in the Ethics Committee wanted to get out of it as quickly as possible, and Akaza was no exception.

Sorry about this, Ikki-kun, but for the sake of my future, I'm going to need to get rid of you.

It didn't matter if doing so resulted in Ikki's death. That wasn't Akaza's responsibility.



Ikki's consciousness was still trapped within a whirling blizzard. As he looked around at the endless expanse of snow, he thought back to that day he'd nearly frozen to death—the day he'd met Kurogane Ryouma and started down the path that had led him to become the person he was now.

It had made Ikki unbelievably happy to hear Ryouma tell him that it was okay to believe in himself. Ryouma had passed away peacefully in his bed a few months later, but the confidence Ikki had gained because of him was still alive and well within his heart. On that day, he had resolved to become the kind of adult who could inspire other children worried about their lack of talent to keep trying, and he had trained constantly to overcome his limits. Had he not met Ryouma, he wouldn't be standing here today. That meeting was one of the best moments of his life.

"But was it really?" a voice that sounded just like his own whispered in his ear. *"Was it not that very meeting that brought you years of suffering and solitude?"*

Scenes from Ikki's past flashed through his mind. Elementary school, where he'd spent his days alone, swinging Intetsu over and over until his palms bled. Back then, he hadn't even been sure if he had the proper form or if his training would actually make him any stronger. He'd been so deprived of proper martial arts knowledge that he'd resorted to learning from manga.

Because no one had been willing to teach him anything, he'd hidden in the bushes and watched the kids from the branch families train, then tried to copy what they were doing. He could still vividly recall the loneliness he'd felt back then. It had been unbearably painful to know that the gentle yet stern swordsmanship instructor who worked for the Kurogane family would never give him any words of encouragement or reprimand him for his sloppy form.

Next, he recalled the time right after entering middle school when he'd gone on a journey around the country to visit as many dojos as possible. At one of the dojos, he'd challenged a disciple to a one-on-one match. But even though his opponent had agreed to the match, the moment it had started, the other disciples had ganged up on him and beaten him to a pulp.

"I'll make it so you can't challenge another dojo ever again!" Ikki's opponent had shouted, grabbing Ikki's arm and breaking all of his fingers. The disciple had been laughing the whole time too. He, a grown man, had enjoyed torturing a young child.

None of the other disciples had come to Ikki's defense either. They had just watched on gleefully as Ikki's opponent broke his fingers one by one. The pain and fear he'd felt in that moment had scarred him deeply.

Finally, a vision from last year appeared in his mind.

"Come on. If you don't fight back, you won't be able to prove your strength to anyone. Here I am, offering to fight you out of the kindness of my heart, and you're just standing there? Hurry up and do something," Kiriara had said back when he'd shot Ikki full of arrows. Meanwhile, the teachers had just watched on coldly. And after that whole ordeal had ended, Ikki had lost the one friend he'd made.

"I'm sorry, Kurogane. I don't think I can be your friend anymore."

The sight of his friend walking away was seared into his memory.

The voice that sounded exactly like Ikki's own whispered, *"And look at you now. Crawling on the ground, struggling to make it to a match you can't even win. All because you let yourself be led astray by Kurogane Ryouma's irresponsible words. If you'd listened to your father and lived a life befitting your station, you wouldn't have to suffer like this. Dreaming above your capabilities will bring only suffering. Everyone is born with a role to play, and those who try to carve a different path are rewarded with pain and loneliness."*

That wasn't all the voice had to say.

"Haven't you done enough? Surely you must realize that your dream is impossible to achieve. Just give up. Let go of your burdens. How long are you going to let the words of a dead man tie you down? If you just let yourself fall asleep here, you won't have to suffer anymore. Kurogane Ryouma's words won't be able to torment you any longer. So rest."

Ikki did indeed desperately want to rest. He knew more pain awaited if he kept going, and that falling asleep here would spare him that pain.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Despite knowing all that, he let out a hoarse scream and forced himself to his feet. He took one step forward, then another, slowly climbing up the hill.

"Give up already. Why do you keep tormenting yourself like this?"

In truth, Ikki had forgotten the answer to that question. His consciousness was so hazy that he could barely think. However, at the very edge of his vision, small enough that the blizzard nearly blotted it out, was a burning flame. When he focused on it, he realized that the flame was actually crimson hair that glowed like fire.

Whose hair is that? Who's here with me in this blizzard?

As he was currently, Ikki could no longer recall. But just staring at that flaming red hair gave him strength. He didn't know who it belonged to, but as it fluttered in the wind, he could feel a faint heat starting to well up inside him again.

"Just rest. No one wants you or cares about you. There's no way you'll be able to defeat the Thunderbolt. What can you possibly hope to accomplish in this

battered state?”

Ikki had no answer. He didn't even remember where he was going or why.

But...I'm sure of it. The faint heat spreading within him helped Ikki remember just one thing. *I made a promise to someone.*

“So le...kni...geth...”

Though he couldn't recall the words, he knew it was a very important promise he'd made with someone who meant a lot to him.

Before long, he started hearing voices other than his own. He couldn't tell who they belonged to, but they sounded familiar. And all of them were cheering him on, telling him to keep going.

Which is why...I can't stop...

That was Ikki's answer to the voice that sounded exactly like his own.

“Really? You're going to keep torturing yourself like this?” the voice said in an exasperated tone. But then, the ghostly apparition grinned. *“Looks like it doesn't matter either way, though.”*

A second later, Ikki's legs gave out from under him, and he started to fall. He'd made it as far as the school gates, but this was where his journey ended. No matter how stubbornly determined he was, his body was well and truly at its limit now. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't keep standing, much less walking. At long last, Kurogane Ikki could go no farther.

“You're done for,” the voice said as Ikki's body tilted forward. If he hit the ground again, this time, he wouldn't be getting back up.

Ah!

But just before he did, a pair of arms wrapped around him, stopping his fall. Their warm, gentle embrace dispelled the blizzard that had been blowing in Ikki's mind.

In a trembling voice, the owner of those arms said, “Welcome back, Onii-sama.”

That graceful voice echoed inside Ikki's head, piecing together the fragmented

scraps of his memory and reminding him who he was looking at—his beloved little sister.

“Shizuku...”



“Last night, Touka-san asked me to convince you not to go to your match,” Shizuku said in a pained voice. “I spent the whole night wondering what the right thing to do was.”

If she was being honest with herself, she wanted to stop Ikki. He’d already tried harder than anyone else, and she didn’t want him to keep getting hurt. She was tired of seeing how much pain and suffering his chosen path had brought him. She would much rather that he give up on being a knight and return to the Kurogane household. That estate was nothing more than a cage, but at least he would have her. He wouldn’t be alone like he’d been in the past. Shizuku was confident she would be able to love him as a mother, as a sister, as a friend, and even as a lover. She would give him anything he wanted. So maybe it was time to let him rest.

“But you know, even though I want you to rest, I still can’t bring myself to stop you. Because here, at this school, you finally learned to smile for yourself.”

Shizuku couldn’t imagine Ikki smiling like that back home. Sure, he’d smiled at her when they’d both been living there, but those smiles had been for her sake, not his. It was only here that he’d found an environment he could be truly happy in. She didn’t want to take that happiness away from him.

“So I made a bet with myself. I decided that if you managed to make it this far on your own, I would send you off to your duel and cheer you on with all my might.”

As Shizuku said that, Ikki looked up and saw that there were numerous other people with her.

“You can do this, Senpai! We believe in you!”

“There’s still time to make it to your match! Don’t stop here!”

“The arena’s right around the corner, Kurogane-kun! You’ve got this!”

“Smash the Thunderbolt to pieces, Ikki-kun!”

“You’re almost there! You can’t give up now!”

Shizuku had gathered all of the people who’d been inspired by Ikki in one way or another and told them to cheer him on if he made it this far. Ikki’s friends, classmates, disciples, and even his past opponents had come to the main gate to wait for him.

As Ikki stared at them all in awe, Shizuku said, “Onii-sama, I won’t ask what they said to you or how they forced you to accept this duel. I can tell just by looking at you that they must have done terrible things to you. But don’t forget: you’re not alone anymore. It’s true that you started out alone and that you spent years burdened by that solitude. However, look at how many people are here cheering you on now. Stella-san and Alice couldn’t make it because they have their own matches to fight in, but they’re praying for your victory too. The Worst One has become everyone’s hero. So please, fight for all of us. And win!”



Though Ikki’s vision was still blurry, he could clearly make out the faces of his friends cheering him on.

“So please, fight for all of us. And win!” his silver-haired sister exclaimed.

“I’m planning on writing an article about how you beat the school’s strongest Blazer, Senpai, so you’d better not lose!” Ikki’s bespectacled classmate shouted.

“Kurogane-kun, you can do this!” a tall girl who had once been Ikki’s disciple cheered.

“I know you’re not the kind of man who’ll let a mere illness get you down,” the teacher who’d allowed Ikki to attend this school said.

“Prez is crazy strong, but you beat *me*, so go and beat her too!” one of the strongest opponents Ikki had faced shouted.

“That’s right. I believe in you,” a member of the student council whom Ikki recalled becoming friends with said.

“Ikki-kun, we all have faith that you’ll win again!”

All the people Ikki had touched in some way had gathered together to cheer

him on. Upon seeing them, he realized something.

I finally get it now.

It was their voices, their thoughts that had been giving him the strength to surpass his limits. And it wasn't just his friends and those who looked up to him that believed in him. The people he'd defeated, whose chance to appear in the Seven Stars Battle Festival he'd stolen, were here too, entrusting their dreams to him. It was for that very reason that their words of encouragement were able to push him forward.

When Utakata had told him, "The reason you can't beat her is because she's shouldering so much more than you are," Ikki had indeed believed that he wasn't carrying anyone else's expectations with him. But that was wrong. Now that he'd overcome his limits yet again, he realized that he was, in fact, carrying a lot of people's expectations. They were what had enabled him to overcome his limits and find the strength to keep walking despite his exhaustion.

Before I knew it, I'd become just like Touka-san.

As that realization washed over him, Ikki felt a surge of strength well up within him, and warmth started returning to his chilled limbs. The fog clouding his consciousness cleared up, and his thoughts became crystal clear once more. He couldn't afford to give up here. Not when so many people's hopes were riding on him. And most importantly of all, he still had his promise with Stella to keep.

"So let's aim for the pinnacle of knighthood together."

He could remember it clearly now. If he wanted to make that promise a reality, he couldn't afford to fall here.

"Thank you, Shizuku. Kusakabe-san, Ayatsuji-san, Tomaru-san, Saijou-san, Oreki-sensei, and everyone else too."

Smiling, Ikki disentangled himself from Shizuku's arms and started walking, his back perfectly straight. He'd received more than enough strength from his friends, and there was no longer any fear in his heart.

"No one wants you or cares about you. There's no way you'll be able to defeat the Thunderbolt."

Those words had been a manifestation of his weakness. But now, he could confidently say that he *could* defeat the Thunderbolt. Because he was carrying something of equal weight—of equal value. It was by no means a sure thing, of course. After all, Touka was still an incredibly powerful opponent. He was in an absolutely terrible condition, and the deck was stacked against him. Even so, he would do everything in his power to win. Otherwise, he would be betraying the expectations of everyone who'd given him the strength to keep walking.

"I'll do my best," he said, waving to everyone.

"Ikkiiii!"

Just then, Ikki heard the strong, beautiful voice of the person he wanted to see more than anyone else.



"Stella!"

"Good... I made it...in time!" Stella put her hands on her knees and took a few seconds to catch her breath.

Surprised, Shizuku exclaimed, "S-Stella-san?! What, what about your match?!"

Indeed, Stella should have been in the middle of a match right now, just like Alisuin. If she didn't show up in time for it, she'd lose her win streak and the opportunity to go to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. To answer Shizuku's question, however, Stella pulled a small medal out of her pocket and held it out in front of Ikki.

"Ikki. I won the right to enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival, just like I promised!"



The medal she was showing him was granted to those who would be representing Hagun Academy in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. In other words, she had already finished her match. She'd won within three seconds of it starting, immediately KO'ing her opponent just so that she could be here right now.

The whole time Ikki had been trapped in the Federation building, Stella had been thinking about how she could help him. Ultimately, the answer she'd arrived at was that the best thing she could do for him was to keep her half of their promise. Telling him that she'd done so would encourage him like nothing else.

"So you better win too!" she demanded. "Don't forget, we're going to aim for the pinnacle of knighthood together!"

Tears welled up in Ikki's eyes.

I truly am blessed to have such a wonderful girlfriend. It was only because of Stella that he'd made it this far, and now, she was here, pushing him to even greater heights. The strength she'd given him was irreplaceable. *I'm so glad you're the woman I fell in love with.*

Ikki needed to give this battle his all in order to live up to Stella's expectations. He couldn't give up, or else he'd stop being the person she loved so much. Earlier, he'd thought even if he couldn't win, it would be enough to do his best. But after seeing Stella again, he realized that he'd been too weak-willed. Thus, he chose not to say that he'd do his best. Instead, he declared, "I'm gonna win this!"



"Okay, got it. Thanks for letting me know." Utakata said, hanging up the phone. He then turned to Touka, who was sitting on a chair in the waiting room, her eyes closed. "Renren just called. Looks like our cute little kohai made it."

"I see..." Touka said softly, looking down at the floor.

Because her hair was hiding her face, it was impossible for Utakata to make out her expression. He knew that she'd wanted to dissuade Ikki from coming, though, so he assumed the news had saddened her.

“Heh heh.”

But much to his surprise, when she raised her head, Touka was smiling. Goose bumps rose on Utakata’s arms as he looked at her. Lightning was crackling all around her, and her eyes were shining with excitement.

Oh no, she’s totally fired up. Utakata hadn’t seen Touka this excited to fight someone since her battle against Moroboshi in the previous year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival.

It was out of kindness that Touka had asked Shizuku to convince Ikki to withdraw. But that was just one side of her. And it wasn’t her kindness that had gotten her all the way to the semifinals last year. For as kind as she was, she also had it in her to ruthlessly crush her opponent no matter what state they might be in.

Though she normally doesn’t show that side of herself. It just so happened that Kurogane Ikki was a strong enough opponent that he’d drawn out Touka’s battle-hungry side.

Now that she was like this, Touka wouldn’t hold back in the slightest. Despite the fact that Ikki was deathly ill, she’d come at him with everything she had. Utakata doubted Ikki would last a single minute.

“Toudou Touka, please enter the ring. Your match is about to begin.”

“See you in a bit, Uta-kun,” Touka said, getting to her feet and walking through the door that led to the arena.

As Utakata watched her leave, he felt a twinge of sympathy for Ikki.

Sorry about this, Worst One. But if you want to blame someone, blame your own bad luck.



“Sorry for the wait, everyone, but it’s finally time for the final battle of the Seven Stars Battle Festival selection matches! Coming out of the red gate, we have the infamous Thunderbolt! She’s won all nineteen of her matches without taking so much as a scratch! Though Hagun Academy’s performance in the Seven Stars Battle Festival hasn’t been great in recent years, she’s managed to

bring our school back into relevance all by herself! Our student council president truly is the pride of Hagun Academy! Our shining star! Will she win this match as well and get to shine on the big stage once more, or will today mark the end of her reign as Hagun's queen?! Everyone make some noise for Thunderbolt Toudou Toukaaa!"

As Touka walked boldly into the ring, she stared firmly at the blue gate on the opposite side.

"Look at how focused she is. I can feel the pressure she's emitting from here," Stella muttered, impressed. Shizuku, who was sitting next to her, didn't respond, though.

"Urk..."

Stella turned and saw that Shizuku was shivering in fear. The girl wanted nothing more than to look away, but she stubbornly refused to avert her gaze. Despite her trembling, she kept her eyes fixed on Touka.

"Shizuku, are you okay?"

"Honestly? No. But Onii-sama worked so hard to make it here. I can't leave now. I'll see this match through to the end no matter how it goes."

"And from the blue gate, we have the Worst One, Kurogane Ikki. He's walked a path the complete opposite of the Thunderbolt's. Even though he's also racked up nineteen wins, no one expected him to win even a single match, much less all of them. A lone wolf who everyone thought was an absolute failure has proved time and time again that there's more to strength than one's rank! He's climbed his way up here from the bottom, defeating the Crimson Princess, the Hunter, and even Runner's High! There isn't a student in Hagun who hasn't heard of his deeds by now! Give it up for the strongest Rank F in history, Worst One Kurogane Ikki! Will he dethrone Hagun's invincible queen, or does his rise to the top stop here?!"

Ikki strode into the arena with sure steps. Even though he was just as ill as before, he no longer looked like he was on the verge of passing out. Quite the opposite, in fact—he looked more daunting than ever.

"I-Is it just me or does he look different from normal?"

“Y-Yeah. His expression’s the same as always, but he seems different somehow.”

“He looks way scarier than usual...”

The students in the audience started muttering to each other. Even if they couldn’t explain exactly what, they felt something from Ikki’s stance. And then there were those who completely understood what was going on.

“Oho. So *he’s* Touka’s opponent. Yes, he’s quite strong,” Nangou mused.

“You can tell, Nangou-sensei?” Kurono asked.

“Of course. Just look at his expression. That youngster came here prepared to die if that’s what it takes to win. His resolve is so strong that the spectators are getting overwhelmed by it. I didn’t realize the Kurogane family still had men like him in it. This will be quite an interesting match.”

“You think so? He’s not letting it show, but he’s clearly exhausted. Kuu-chan, do you think he stands a chance the way he is right now?” Saikyou asked.

“Geh heh heh, regardless of whether or not he stands a chance, he has no choice but to fight. This is a duel, after all.”

Kurono ignored Akaza’s blabbering and turned to Saikyou.

“To be honest, his chances are slim. He can probably only swing his sword a few times before he collapses. But that’s precisely why he needs to take this battle slowly. I’m sure he’s already figured out the Thunderbolt’s weakness.”

“Hmm? She has a weakness?” Akaza questioned.

Kurono considered ignoring him, but she decided she’d rather not have this baboon pestering her with questions all match, so she turned to him and said, “Toudou’s signature move, Thunderbolt, is, for all intents and purposes, an iai technique. That means she can only use it while her sword is sheathed. Kurogane’s best shot is to shuffle in and out of her effective range over and over, trying to bait her into drawing her sword. If he can get her to do that and then evade whatever first attack she throws at him, he’ll have a brief window of time where she won’t be able to use Thunderbolt. That’s the only moment he’ll have to eke out a victory. But in order to accomplish that, he’ll need to win a

battle of attrition in his current exhausted state.”

It was definitely a tall order for Ikki as he was now. However, he couldn’t afford to rush things, because if he tried to make this a quick, decisive battle, he was sure to lose. There wasn’t a single opponent who’d managed to match Touka at close range. Kurono was certain that if Ikki carelessly entered Thunderbolt’s range, he’d be destroyed. Even Ittou Shura’s immense power boost wouldn’t be enough to match it. Therefore, Kurono believed he needed to fight conservatively. Saikyou believed that was Ikki’s best bet as well, but there was one person who disagreed.

“Hoh hoh hoh. So you think this will be a protracted battle, Kurono-kun?” Nangou said. He stared intently down at Ikki, then shook his head. “If you ask me, I think this match will be a short one, ending with a single decisive stroke.”

Meanwhile, down in the ring, Ikki and Touka were focused solely on one another.

“Kurogane-kun, I owe you an apology.”

“What for?”

“This whole time, I was thinking it would be better if you didn’t show up to our match. I even asked your sister to convince you to withdraw. But now that you’re finally here, I’m so excited to fight you that I can hardly contain myself! I’m sorry for being such a hypocrite.”

“Ah!”

“I know you’re so ill that you can barely stand. Even if I hadn’t heard as much from the director, I can see the exhaustion in your stance. And yet, I’m still overjoyed at seeing you here. From the moment I first met you, I’ve been thinking about how much I want to fight you!”

Grinning, Touka widened her stance slightly. Lightning crackled and coalesced around her hand, forming into her Device, Narukami. She was so excited that she could barely even wait for the gong that would signal the start of the battle.

“Don’t worry, I feel exactly the same way,” Ikki said, summoning his own Device, Intetsu.

Ikki, too, had been dying to fight Touka from the moment they'd first met. He desperately wanted to know if he could beat someone as strong as the Thunderbolt. At times, the uncertainty over whether he could beat her had weighed on his mind, but right now, he was glad to be standing across the ring from her.

"I may not be in the best condition, but I intend to make this duel one that you, me, and everyone cheering us on can be proud of. So let me just say this." Ikki pointed Intetsu at Touka. "Using everything I have, I'll destroy your invincible technique!"

Ikki had vowed that he would win, and that was exactly what he had come here to do.

"Both fighters have summoned their Devices, and they appear to have finished exchanging words. It's time to find out who's stronger, the girl who's always reigned at the top, or the boy who climbed his way up from the bottom. The last of the Seven Stars Battle Festival selection matches is about to begin, so say it with me: let's go ahead!"



To everyone's surprise, the moment the battle began, Ikki started glowing a pale blue and charged straight at Touka.

"U-Unbelievable! Kurogane used Ittou Shura immediately!" the announcer shouted, stunned.

Until now, Ikki had never used Ittou Shura at the start of a battle. After all, he could only keep it active for a minute. If his opponent just dodged away from him for that long, he was done for. That was why he normally spent some time analyzing his opponent and only used Ittou Shura once he had a plan in mind for taking them down. But this time Ikki had jumped straight to using Ittou Shura. Was it because he'd decided that he didn't have enough stamina left to carefully analyze Touka? Was it because he wanted to finish the battle as quickly as possible? It was impossible for anyone watching to say, but regardless, Kurono gritted her teeth in frustration when she saw him do that.

You're being too reckless, Kurogane! From her perspective, this was a mistake. Looking at it optimistically, Ikki had opted to go for a short, decisive battle

despite the risks since his stamina wouldn't hold out for long. But he'd made a fatal error. *You don't understand who you're dealing with. The Thunderbolt is one of the four best student knights in the country!*

A simple headlong rush wouldn't be enough to take down an opponent of Touka's caliber. She would either strike Ikki down with Thunderbolt or use Volt Dash to stay out of his range until Ittou Shura ran out. Either way, Ikki was done for.

Both Kurono and Saikyou watched on with grim expressions, believing that Ikki had sealed his own fate. Shizuku, Alisuin, and most of the other strong students in the school also seemed to think this was a thoughtless ploy. All of them watched on with dismay. Conversely, Stella Vermillion smiled as she looked at Ikki.

Sheesh. You know your future as a knight is riding on this, right? You really are hopeless, Ikki.

Unlike the others, Stella knew the real reason Ikki had made this choice. Thunderbolt was an iai technique. It could only be used when Touka's sword was sheathed, which meant the easiest way to avoid it was to attack while her blade was drawn.

It's obvious to me, so there's no way he couldn't figure it out either.

Had Ikki decided against using that strategy because he'd determined he didn't have the stamina to try to bait Touka into attacking? Absolutely not. Stella knew such calculations hadn't even crossed his mind.

I decided at the very start that this was how I was going to fight her! Ikki thought as he rushed forward.

The moment he'd met Touka, he'd made up his mind that he could only truly say he'd defeated her if he could overcome her Thunderbolt. After all, that move was so famous that it had become her Blazer nickname. Any victory achieved without beating her strongest attack head-on was no victory at all as far as Ikki was concerned. Besides, his body really was at its physical limit. He still had all of his mana left, so he could use Ittou Shura without issue, but even with the exceptional body strengthening it granted, he wouldn't be able to swing Intetsu with his full might more than once.

One swing was enough, though. He wasn't planning on throwing out any feints or wasting stamina on baiting out any of Touka's attacks. He'd close the distance between them as quickly as possible and bet it all on a single decisive swing. As he'd promised, he'd use everything he had to overcome Toudou Touka's Thunderbolt. It was the only way he could show proper respect to his opponent for agreeing to this duel despite all the disgusting, underhanded schemes that had ultimately brought the two of them here.

But more importantly, it's a challenge I've imposed upon myself!

No matter how disadvantageous a situation he was in, Ikki had no intention of fighting in a way he'd regret. He refused to give any less than his best either, lest his opponent feel as though they didn't get the battle they deserved.

As Toudou Touka watched Ikki approach, she could see his determination written plainly on his face. Even without using Reverse Sight, she could tell he'd meant it when he'd said, "Using everything I have, I'll destroy your invincible technique!"

He really is planning on settling everything with one swing. I guess that makes things simple.

If she wanted to, Touka could easily throw out her Thunderbolt as a feint and make Ikki waste his one attack. From there, she could safely backstep away and take advantage of his exhaustion to whittle him down from long range. It was a foolproof strategy.

But like hell I'm doing that!

Touka didn't even consider that a plan worth enacting. Close-range combat was her domain, and Thunderbolt had never once let her down. Only a coward fled when an opponent came to challenge them on their own turf. She was at her strongest at close range, so if she didn't fight to protect her throne, could she truly call her Thunderbolt invincible? More than that, though, Ikki was pushing his battered body to the limits to challenge her strongest move. If she didn't respond in kind, how could she be proud of her victory?

I'm not here to defend my title as the top Blazer in Hagun! I'm here to defeat this outstanding knight in an honorable battle and go to the Seven Stars Battle Festival with my head held high! You're on, Kurogane-kun! I'll give you the

Thunderbolt you asked for!

Touka widened her stance and gripped her sword, charging it with electricity. Her signature move, which had cut down everyone who'd entered her range without exception, was ready, so she stood there, waiting patiently for Ikki to get within reach of her blade. Like him, she was ready to stake everything on this one swing. The two of them would fight fair and square, pitting their strongest techniques against each other. This was how a showdown between knights was meant to go.

To combat Touka's Thunderbolt, Ikki had decided to use the fastest of his seven unique techniques, the similarly named Thunderclap. He swung his sword so fast that it was practically invisible. In response, Touka drew her blade, unleashing her Thunderbolt. Both blades were moving faster than lightning and were evenly matched in speed. The match would be determined by which blade carried heavier hopes and dreams with it. It was a contest of both how many people were fervently wishing for each side's victory and how strong Touka's and Ikki's desire to beat their opponent was. They'd each put their whole heart and soul into their attack.

"Haaaaah!"

"Yaaaaaaaah!"

As the two blades drew nearer to each other, Ikki suddenly realized that they were not, in fact, equal in speed. Intetsu was just a hair slower.

Oh no! At this rate, I won't be able to reach her!

In a colorless, gray world, Ikki watched Touka's plasma-coated blade head toward him in slow motion. He was absolutely certain that, at the speed Intetsu was currently going, he would lose. Touka hadn't hesitated in the slightest when she'd unleashed her Thunderbolt. She'd been fully prepared for the possibility that she might kill Ikki with it.

What a dazzling display of swordsmanship, Ikki thought as he stared at her blade. Toudou Touka was an unbelievably strong opponent. *But so what? I knew that from the start!*

Ikki had known going into this duel how lacking he was in all respects, as well

as how strong a woman the Thunderbolt was. He had never once averted his eyes from that truth. But he had also never given up in the face of it. He'd kept moving forward one step at a time, confronting reality as it was. And because he'd done so, he knew that there was still something he could do in this situation, at the eleventh hour. Something *only* he could do.

If he couldn't rival his opponent's strength, the only option available to him was to gather what little power he did have, squeeze every last drop from his body, and unleash it in one big burst. One minute was far too much time for a decisive battle like this one. Right now, all he needed was a single second!

It was time for Ikki to let his soul burn bright. In this instant, he didn't need sight, smell, hearing, taste, or touch. In fact, for this brief moment, he didn't even need to breathe. Thus, he cut off all of his senses, cut off all bodily functions not related to this one attack, and gathered up whatever excess strength that brought him. He drew every bit of mana, of stamina, of willpower, of raw potential that he could from his muscles, his bones, his blood, and even his cells, and poured it all into this one brief second!



“Hrrraaah!”

Steel clashed against lightning, and a massive shock wave of light and sound rocked the arena. As the flash faded, the audience heard the faint clink of steel shattering. The people in the stands timidly opened their eyes and saw the Thunderbolt, Toudou Touka, lying on the ground. It was her blade, Narukami, that had shattered.



“T-Toudou’s sword, Narukami, has been shattered! Unbelievable! After just a single exchange, the invincible Thunderbolt is down! And it doesn’t look like she’s able to get back up! Let’s see what the referee has to say!”

Everyone watched with bated breath as the referee ran over to check on Touka. After a few seconds of examination, he looked up and held his hands up in an X shape.

“The referee’s made the call! This match is over! What a finale! In just one exchange, the Worst One brought down Hagun Academy’s strongest knight! The winner is Kurogane Ikki!”

Cheers erupted throughout the stadium, though there were plenty of students who were so shocked by the outcome that they were still unable to process it.

“N-No way...”

“H-He really won! He actually beat the Thunderbolt!”

“I can’t believe it! I never thought the president would lose in a close-range battle!”

“Man, I’ve never seen anyone’s Device break before. Is the prez still alive?”

“Squeeee! You’re so cool, Ikki-kun!”

Ikki started stumbling back to the waiting room, seemingly unaware of the cheering all around him. Seeing his unsteady gait, Stella let out a small gasp and started running toward the blue gate to be there for him.

“Shouldn’t you be going too, Shizuku-chan?” Kagami asked, turning to

Shizuku, but the silver-haired girl quietly shook her head. “Are you holding back because you want to give the two of them some time alone? I feel like Stella-chan won’t mind for today, at least.”

“It’s not that...”

“Shizuku-chan?”

Shizuku suddenly slumped to the floor, and Kagami understood that it wasn’t that Shizuku didn’t *want* to go, it was that she *couldn’t*. Her legs had literally given out from under her. She’d been so worried for her brother, who’d already been half dead when he’d walked into the ring, that all of her strength had left her now that she knew he was safe.

When Ikki had gone in for that decisive swing, Shizuku had nearly fainted. Sure, he’d come out on top in the end, but it had been by the skin of his teeth. If he’d made even a single mistake, his head would have gone flying.

“Thank god... Thank god you’re safe!” Shizuku wailed, tears streaming freely down her face. Considering how stressed she’d been since the night before, her reaction was hardly surprising. But while she thought the duel had been extremely close, that wasn’t quite true.

“Did you see that, Nene?” Kurono asked, turning to Saikyuu.

“Oh, I saw, all right. Kuro-bou’s one hell of a kid.”

Unsurprisingly, the two of them fully grasped what had happened in that brief exchange when Thunderclap and Thunderbolt had clashed. At the very last second, Ikki had accelerated to move even faster than Touka.

“Kurogane realized that Ittou Shura wouldn’t be enough to beat Thunderbolt, so he decided one minute was too long and instead concentrated all that power into a single second! It’s the kind of thing that’s only possible thanks to his immense focus and concentration. By condensing every ounce of his might into just one second, he went from multiplying his strength by a few dozen times to multiplying it by a few *hundred* times. That massively increased both the speed and power of his swing!”

If Ittou Shura could be likened to expending all of the body’s energy in a hundred-meter sprint, then what Ikki had done here was expend it in the very

first step of that sprint. It wasn't something a normal person could do. The path Ikki was walking was not one a regular human could. He'd so greatly surpassed his limits that he had, in many ways, become an asura, a demon. And so, the only fitting name for this new technique was "Ittou Rakshasa."

"The boy's trick was impressive, but that wasn't what let him win this match," Nangou said, cutting in.

"Nangou-sensei?"

"What do you mean by that, you senile old fart?"

"The Thunderbolt Touka unleashed was truly splendid. She was prepared to kill the Kurogane boy with it if that was what it came to. Of the Thunderbolts I've seen, it was without a doubt the fastest, strongest, and most beautiful of them all. And more importantly, it was faster than the boy's sword. But in that decisive instant when the boy realized he couldn't match up, he evolved. At the pivotal moment, he overcame his limits in order to defeat Touka, who was stronger than him."

Nangou continued.

"I imagine that's something that boy has had to do time and time again. Lacking in talent as he is, he must have faced countless hardships and setbacks. But he continued believing in his own potential and kept on training. The determination to constantly be stronger than you were a minute or even a second ago was what allowed him to win this battle. Touka unleashed her full potential and fought to the very limit of her strength, but in the heat of battle, that boy pushed past his limits and increased his potential. It was that drive to continue surpassing himself that gave him the strength to win. He reminds me a lot of that man."

Nangou smiled wistfully as he watched Ikki stagger out of the arena. Meanwhile, Akaza was having a complete breakdown.

"Th-This can't be happening! It's not possible! He's half dead, for god's sake! This has to be some kind of mistake! Yes, that's it! This isn't right! I refuse to accept this outcome!"

The man ran to the staircase and started heading down toward Ikki,

screaming the whole way. As she watched him leave, Saikyou turned to Kurono.

“Kuu-chan, you sure we should let him go? He’s gonna get up to no good again.”

Kurono agreed wholeheartedly with that assessment of Akaza, but she shook her head.

“To be honest, I wanted to make him pay for what he put Kurogane through, but after seeing how well the kid fought, I feel like it barely even matters now. So leave that moron be. There’s nothing for him to accomplish anymore. Besides, it’s too late to stop Kurogane’s rise now. The fact of the matter is that he pushed through all of his family’s unreasonable traps and beat one of the nation’s top Blazers head-on in a duel that was rigged against him. In one decisive slash no less.”

There was no one who could dispute the outcome of this duel. Furthermore, plenty of cameras had broadcast the entire thing live. Thousands of people had watched the Thunderbolt fall to the Worst One.

“No matter what Kurogane’s family tries to do, the rest of the world is watching him now. They can’t stop the Worst One—no, Another One—from taking his rightful place on the world stage.”



The cheers sound so far away...

To Ikki, they were as distant as raindrops pattering against a window. He was barely conscious, and he knew that if he let himself relax he would drop to the ground. Of course, there was no reason to keep standing now. He’d won his duel, after all. However, he kept plodding onward. There was someone he needed to go to.

I need to let her know I made it.

As Ikki passed through the blue gate, he saw the person he wanted to meet running toward him.

“Ikki!”

It seemed she’d come to him instead.

Thank you...

Honestly, Ikki wasn't sure he would have been able to make it all the way to the stands. Stella spread her arms wide as she ran over, and Ikki gratefully fell into her chest.

"Congratulations, Ikki!" she said as she wrapped her arms around him. Looking up, Ikki saw that her face was streaked with tears.

"Did I really...worry you that much?"

"Of course you did, you dummy! You got kidnapped and didn't show up for weeks, and when you finally came back you could barely stand! And then you went and challenged the Thunderbolt head-on for fun! You're unbelievable! You're so *stupid!*"

Ha ha, so she figured out I went for that on purpose.

"But I guess I'm pretty stupid too."

"Huh?"

"Because I love that side of you. I love how you keep challenging even greater heights every time."

Stella hugged Ikki tight, and he felt her warmth against his clammy skin.

Ah, it was this heat that gave me strength when I thought I was going to freeze.

When Ikki had started hallucinating a blizzard and fallen to the ground, he'd thought he was done for. He'd truly felt as though there wasn't an ounce of strength left in his body. But the memory of Stella's warmth had given him a newfound surge of energy. He hadn't even been able to recall her name at the time, but it was because of her that he'd been able to stand up again.

Thank you...

If it hadn't been for Stella, he wouldn't be here right now. He would have despaired after being abandoned by his father and fallen to the blizzard for good. But thanks to her, he'd gotten back up and continued fighting. That was why he'd decided that if he managed to win this battle, he would convey his feelings to her as directly as possible.

“Stella,” he began. He then sucked in a deep breath and used all of his remaining strength to hug her back. “I want you to become part of my family.”

He conveyed every ounce of love he felt for her in a single sentence. Until now, he’d never voiced these thoughts aloud, since it would mean advancing their relationship a step further.

For a moment, Stella trembled, but then she hugged Ikki even tighter and said, “Of course. I’d be happy to marry you, Ikki.”



She started sobbing again, but from happiness this time. The moment Ikki heard that, relief flooded his body and he fell unconscious.

“Ikki? Oh no! Ikki, keep it together!”

Stella pressed her ear against Ikki’s mouth. He was breathing, but just barely. It was clear that his life was in danger. A second later, Stella noticed that his uniform was starting to get stained with blood. He’d strengthened himself so far with Ittou Rakshasa that his body hadn’t been able to withstand the strain.

I need to get him to a capsule right away!

“Hold it right there!”

Before she could take a single step, however, a fat man suddenly appeared, barring her path. It was, of course, Akaza Mamoru. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was slick with sweat. His expression was half crazed. Since he’d failed to get Ikki expelled, he’d be forced to take responsibility for that failure. A promotion was out of the question now. Instead, he was likely to lose his current position. The prospect had sent him into a panic, robbing him of what little sanity he’d had left.

Akaza summoned his Device, a hatchet, and pointed it at Ikki.

“Geh heh heh! Wait just a moment, Princess! I need you to leave that boy here! After all, I have a duel I must fight with him! The truth is, his duel opponent wasn’t Toudou Touka but me! This is a promise that can’t be broken so hurry up and— Huh?”

Stella suddenly vanished from Akaza’s sight. Or rather, she slipped between the gaps of his perception using Stealth Step. For someone like Stella, reproducing the technique was easy enough once she’d learned how it worked. As she walked past Akaza, she slammed her fist into his back with all her might.

“Bwaaaaah?!”

Akaza flew out of the blue gate with such force that it looked like he’d been hit by a truck. He skipped a few times across the ground before coming to a rest in the middle of the ring.

“Whoa! Who’s the old dude who just came flying in?!”

“I feel like I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“Is it just me or is his spine bent weirdly?”

“The way he’s twitching is kinda creepy.”

“Is that guy still alive?”

The audience started muttering in confusion when they saw Akaza appear, but Stella paid them no mind. She slung Ikki over one shoulder and hurried over to the infirmary. The face of the man she’d punched had already left her mind and her memory.



About an hour after the match, Touka regained consciousness.

“Ngh...”

She’d felt a powerful mental shock the moment her Device had been destroyed, which had knocked her out.

“Finally awake, Touka?”

“How do you feel? Does it hurt anywhere?”

The fact that she was lying in bed and that Utakata and Kanata were here watching over her told Touka a painful truth.

“I see. I must have lost...” She had no memory of what had happened after unleashing Thunderbolt. As a result, she didn’t remember the decisive moment that ended the battle. But it was clear from the pained expressions her friends were wearing that she hadn’t won. “And here I thought I’d managed to unleash my strongest Thunderbolt yet.”

“Nangou-sensei said it was.”

“Wait, master did? He came to watch me?”

“He sure did. Isn’t that right, Kanata?”

“Indeed. Today’s match was open to the public, so he came.”

“He had nothing but praise for you. He even said it was your most amazing Thunderbolt yet.”

I see...

“If even master said that then I guess my intuition was right.”

Touka had fought with everything she had. And at the start of their clash, she was certain she’d been the one with the upper hand.

But halfway through his attack, Kurogane-kun became even faster.

In that brief window of time, he’d overcome his own limits, all in order to beat her. Touka had thought that she’d always worked hard and aimed for ever-greater heights, but compared to Ikki, she clearly hadn’t done enough. She could tell from their fight that today wasn’t the first time Ikki had needed to evolve in the middle of a battle. Every single match he’d fought had been just as difficult for him. But every time, he’d raised his potential in order to overcome his foe.

What a guy.

In a sense, her loss had been inevitable.

But it won’t stay that way forever. The sensation of the Thunderbolt she’d unleashed had yet to leave her hands. She knew now that she could still get stronger. Sooner or later, she’d catch up to Ikki and surpass him. *Next time we fight, I’ll be sure to have caught up to you. And then I’ll be the underdog who needs to overcome her limits to beat you.*

“By the way, Touka,” Utakata said with a pained expression.

“Yes?”

Is something wrong?

“Would you rather I be the one to tell the kids back at the orphanage about your match?”

Oh, I see.

Everyone had made a banner to cheer Touka on at the Seven Stars Battle Festival. But now, she had to tell them she’d lost. She couldn’t even avoid meeting them since she said she’d go back once the selection matches were over.

She appreciated Utakata's kindness in offering to tell them in her place, but she shook her head and said, "Thanks, but I'll be fine. I should be the one to tell them."

"You don't have to force yourself if it's too painful."

Touka shook her head again. The prospect of telling the kids truly didn't bother her. She'd fought Ikki with everything she had. In fact, she'd even been prepared to kill him with the Thunderbolt she'd unleashed. She'd done her absolute best and fought proudly, as was befitting of a knight, so there was nothing for her to be ashamed of.

"When I go back, I'll be able to tell them that I fought a truly amazing knight."

Epilogue: Another One

Ikki had spent a full week asleep after his duel with Touka. The exhaustion from the inquiry combined with the drugs they'd force-fed him and the recoil from using Ittou Rakshasa were all severe, so it was hardly surprising.

While he'd been asleep, the hubbub about his relationship with Stella being scandalous had died down. Stella's father, the king of Vermillion, had lodged a formal complaint against the Ethics Committee of the Mage-Knight Federation's Japan branch after hearing from Stella about how they'd abused Ikki and manipulated him into the duel. Naturally, the media couldn't keep reporting false information after that, so they had settled down as well.

The king had also publicly declared that he wanted Ikki to visit Vermillion after the Seven Stars Battle Festival was over and that he would decide whether he approved of their relationship then. Furthermore, Akaza had been stripped of his position as Ethics Committee Chairman, so there was no longer anyone left willing to challenge Ikki's qualifications as a knight.

With all that now in the past, the students of Hagun Academy had been summoned to the gym, which was rarely ever used. Today was the day the school's six representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival would be formally appointed.

"All right, it's time for the appointment ceremony. Those of you whose names are called, please walk up to the podium," Kurono said in a clear voice that carried across the gym. "First-year Rank A, Stella Vermillion. Third-year Rank D, Hagure Botan. Third-year Rank B, Toutokubara Kanata. Third-year Rank C, Hagure Kikyou. First-year Rank D, Alisuin Nagi...is absent today on urgent business. And lastly, first-year Rank F, Kurogane Ikki."

Ikki got to his feet.

"Present."

He walked over to the podium and came to a stop in front of Kurono. She

handed him a small medal, just like she had to each of the other four present representatives.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you very much.”

He bowed to her, then turned to face the rest of the student body together with the other representatives. Once they were all assembled, Kurono said, “The five students you see here, as well as Alisuin Nagi, will be Hagun Academy’s representatives in the Seven Stars Battle Festival!”

The students gave Ikki and the others a big round of applause. During his matches, Ikki hadn’t really cared that much about being the center of attention, but here at a public ceremony, it felt kind of awkward to have so many eyes on him. He had never been particularly interested in social status or the respect of his peers, so he wasn’t at all used to ceremonies like this. He honestly wished that he could leave. Unfortunately for him, though, the ceremony wasn’t over yet.

“I will now announce who our team captain will be. Please step forward when your name is called,” Kurono said. “First-year Rank F, Kurogane Ikki. You will be our team captain.”

“Wait, what?” Nonplussed, Ikki turned back to Kurono. “*I’m* going to be the team captain? Wh-Why choose me?”

Ikki had assumed that either Kanata, who was a member of the student council and one of the strongest Blazers in the school, or Stella, who’d been hyped up as the first student knight to ever reach Rank A, would be chosen as team captain.

Kurono gave him an exasperated look and said, “Why do you think? You beat the Hunter, Runner’s High, *and* Thunderbolt. They were all favorites in the selection matches, and you overcame all of them. Who else would I pick as team captain? Now get your ass over here.”

“O-Okay.”

Ikki reflexively stepped forward. Truth be told, he still wasn’t sure he was the right choice, and since he wasn’t a fan of being the center of attention, he really

would have much rather just waited in the back. Kurono noted his discomfort, but she continued with the ceremony regardless.

“We will now present the team captain with our school flag.”

As Kurono said that Touka walked over to Ikki from a side door, carrying Hagun Academy’s flag.

“President Toudou...” Ikki said, surprised.

“We haven’t had a chance to speak since our match. I’m glad you’re doing better now.” Touka smiled gently at Ikki and held up the flag. “Last year, I was the one who accepted this flag as our team captain. I planned on taking it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival with me this year as well, but in the end, I lost to you. But that’s precisely why I asked the director if she’d let me be the one to present the flag this year.”

Ikki wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Touka had had a full week to sort out her feelings, and it was clear that she was no longer weighed down by the loss, but Ikki had only woken up a few hours ago. Memories of their duel were still fresh in his mind. He didn’t know what he should say to the person he’d defeated.

But while he wasn’t sure what the right thing to say was, he did know that he wanted to thank her. He was extremely grateful that Touka had come at him with everything she had despite the selfish machinations that had led to their lopsided duel. It was thanks to her that he’d been able to draw out as much strength as he had.

“Toudou-san. It was only because I was fighting you that I was able to go all out. It’s because I wanted to beat you so badly that I was able to muster up the strength to fight. If it hadn’t been you I was facing...I don’t think I—”

“Kurogane-kun,” Touka said, interrupting Ikki. She looked into his eyes. “Kurogane Ikki-kun. Winning means inheriting the hopes and dreams of those you’ve defeated, of those who wanted to be where you are today but couldn’t make it, and carrying them with you. This flag represents those wishes. I won’t ask you to fight for our sake. But please at least take this flag—take *us*—with you to the top. To the seat of Seven Stars Sovereign.”

She held the flag out to Ikki, and he understood that any further words were unnecessary. There was only one way to show his gratitude to Touka, and to all the other knights who'd fought against him with all their might but failed to achieve their dreams. Winning meant inheriting the hopes and dreams of those you'd defeated, so there was only one thing left for him to do. He accepted the black-patterned flag and said, "I promise to take you all there with me."

The rest of the students started cheering.

"You've got this, Captain!"

"I'll come watch your matches!"

"You even beat the prez, so you better win the whole thing now!"

"We believe in you, Ikki-kun!"

"Take them all down, Another One!"

Ikki could physically feel the respect and admiration packed into those cheers. A shiver ran down his spine, and he bit his lip to keep himself from bursting into tears. Stiff-faced, he held the flag up high for everyone to see, then returned to his place next to the other representatives.

"Stella," he said, turning to the girl standing next to him.

"Yeah?"

"To be honest, I never really cared much about what other people thought of me. I'd never once earned anyone's approval, and I figured I never would. I thought that as long as I was satisfied with what I accomplished, that would be enough for me. But...being recognized by others is surprisingly nice."

Ikki couldn't tell if he was smiling or crying, but Stella smiled when she saw his expression, so he figured he must have at least looked pretty happy.

Thus, the representatives from the southern Kanto region's Hagun Academy had been chosen. Joining them at the Seven Stars Battle Festival would be representatives from the northern Kanto region's Donrou Academy, the Tohoku region's Kyomon Academy, Hokkaido's Rokuzon Academy, Kyushu and Okinawa's Bunkyo Academy, and Chugoku and Shikoku's Rentei Academy.

The final participating school was the one whose representatives had made it to the finals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival for twenty years in a row and won for the past five: Bukyoku Academy, representing the Kinki and Chubu regions as Japan's top Blazer school and one of the best schools in the world.

Naturally, each of these schools had notable Blazers to watch out for. Kyomon had Tsuruya Mikoto, known as the Icy Sneer. Rokuzon had Kaga Renji, known as the Panzer Grizzly. Donrou had Kurashiki Kuraudo, the famous Sword Eater. And of course, there was also the winner of the previous year's Seven Stars Battle Festival, the current Seven Stars Sovereign Moroboshi Yuudai.

Each and every one of those Blazers was a highly skilled fighter who'd survived countless battles, and Kurogane Ikki would have to beat them if he wanted to claim the title of Seven Stars Sovereign. More importantly, he'd have to beat them to keep his promise with his greatest rival, the Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion. At long last, the goal he'd been working toward was in sight.

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Meanwhile, at a deserted underpass beneath a highway, a lone figure was speaking to someone on the phone.

"Heh heh heh, looks like Hagun's representatives have been decided. I'm surprised Thunderbolt, Runner's High, and even Lorelei didn't make it in," the person on the other line said.

"Two of them were stuck with the worst opponents possible, after all."

"Luck, too, is a skill. If they drew the short straw in the tournament matchups, that just means that's all they amounted to as knights. Or, well, that's what Ouma-kun would say, at least."

"It doesn't matter either way."

"Oh, come on. No need to be so cold. Anyway, are your preparations ready?"

"Yes. I wasn't expecting Lorelei to not be attending, but it won't affect my plans. I'll be able to kill them anytime."

"Heh heh heh. I expected no less from a master assassin. I can see how you cleared the Killing House with the highest score in history, Black Hand. Oh, sorry,

I guess you go by 'Black Sonia' these days. Isn't that right, Comrade Alisuin?"

Alisuin, who didn't reply, had an extremely cold expression on her face, the likes of which she'd never shown Ikki, Shizuku, or any of the other people she was close to. It was hard to imagine a living human could make a face so devoid of emotion. That face was hardly even recognizable as Alisuin's. But there was an eerie beauty to this cold expression of hers.



“Either way it sounds like everything’s ready for the show.” The person on the other end of Alisuin’s student handbook—one that wasn’t Hagun’s—chortled as if mocking the world. Ecstasy was clear in their voice. *“Everyone thinks all the actors have assembled, but they don’t realize that the star has yet to appear. It’s time we taught those arrogant fools who think they’re the main characters a lesson in humility. The true stars of the Seven Stars Battle Festival are us, Akatsuki.”*

The Seven Stars Battle Festival was drawing near, and sinister machinations were afoot.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. Riku Misora here. Thank you all so much for picking up volume 3 of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*.

This volume was the climax of the school tournament arc. It was pretty exciting to write, so I hope you all enjoyed it. I feel like I did a pretty good job concluding the first arc with a heart-pounding climax, and I hope you all thought so as well.

On an unrelated note, it seems the first two volumes have sold a hundred thousand copies in total now. Thank you so much for supporting me! It's all thanks to you that I've been able to write up to the end of the first arc and start laying the groundwork for the next one.

In the next volume, we'll get to see students from all the strong schools that have been foreshadowed. All the actors who've been moving in the shadows until now will be making their appearance as well. I'm hoping I'll be able to write even more interesting battles and cooler antagonists from here on out, so I hope you all keep supporting me.

Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge all of the people who helped make this book a reality. Won-san, thank you as always for your godlike illustrations. I know you have a packed schedule, so I'm grateful that you're willing to put up with my random requests. I asked you to up the suggestive poses this volume, and you delivered beyond my wildest expectations. One of the greatest perks of being an author is that I'm able to enjoy your illustrations before everyone else (ha ha)! I always look forward to seeing what you'll draw next.

I'd also like to thank my editor, Ohara-san, as well as everyone else in the editorial department for their exceptional assistance. And last but not least, thank *you*, dear reader, for sticking with me this far.

Let us meet again in volume 4!

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Riku Misora

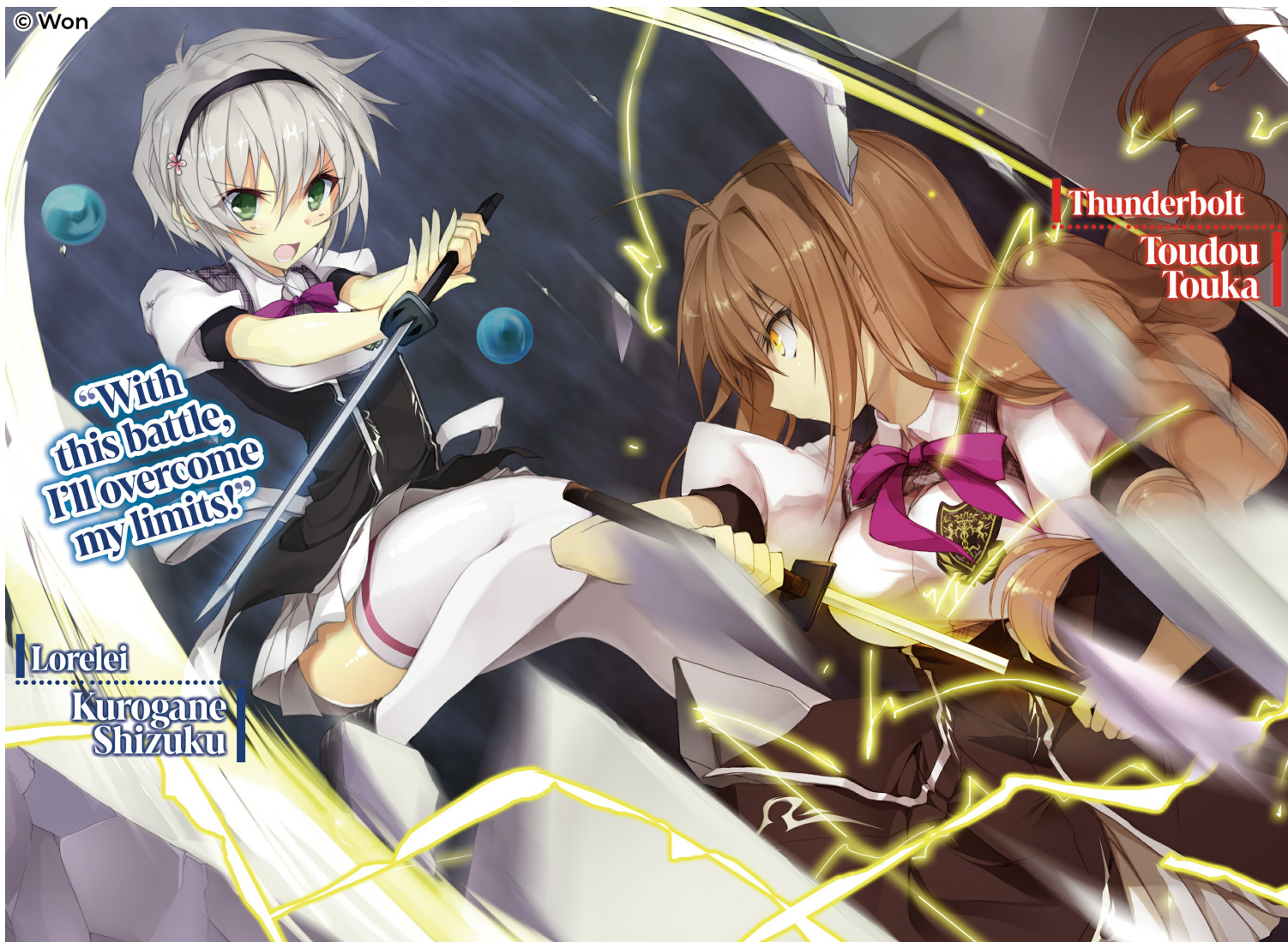
Illust. Won



Chivalry of a Failed Knight



Chivalry of a Failed Knight 3



"With
this battle,
I'll overcome
my limits!"

Lorelei
Kurogane
Shizuku

Thunderbolt
Toudou
Touka



“Hey, Ikki...
Do you
want to
have sex
with me?”

“Dad...”

“If I manage to
become the
Seven Stars
Sovereign,
will you finally
accept me as
your son?”

Head of the
Kurogane household

Iron Tyrant
Kurogane
Itsuki





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by Riku Misora

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