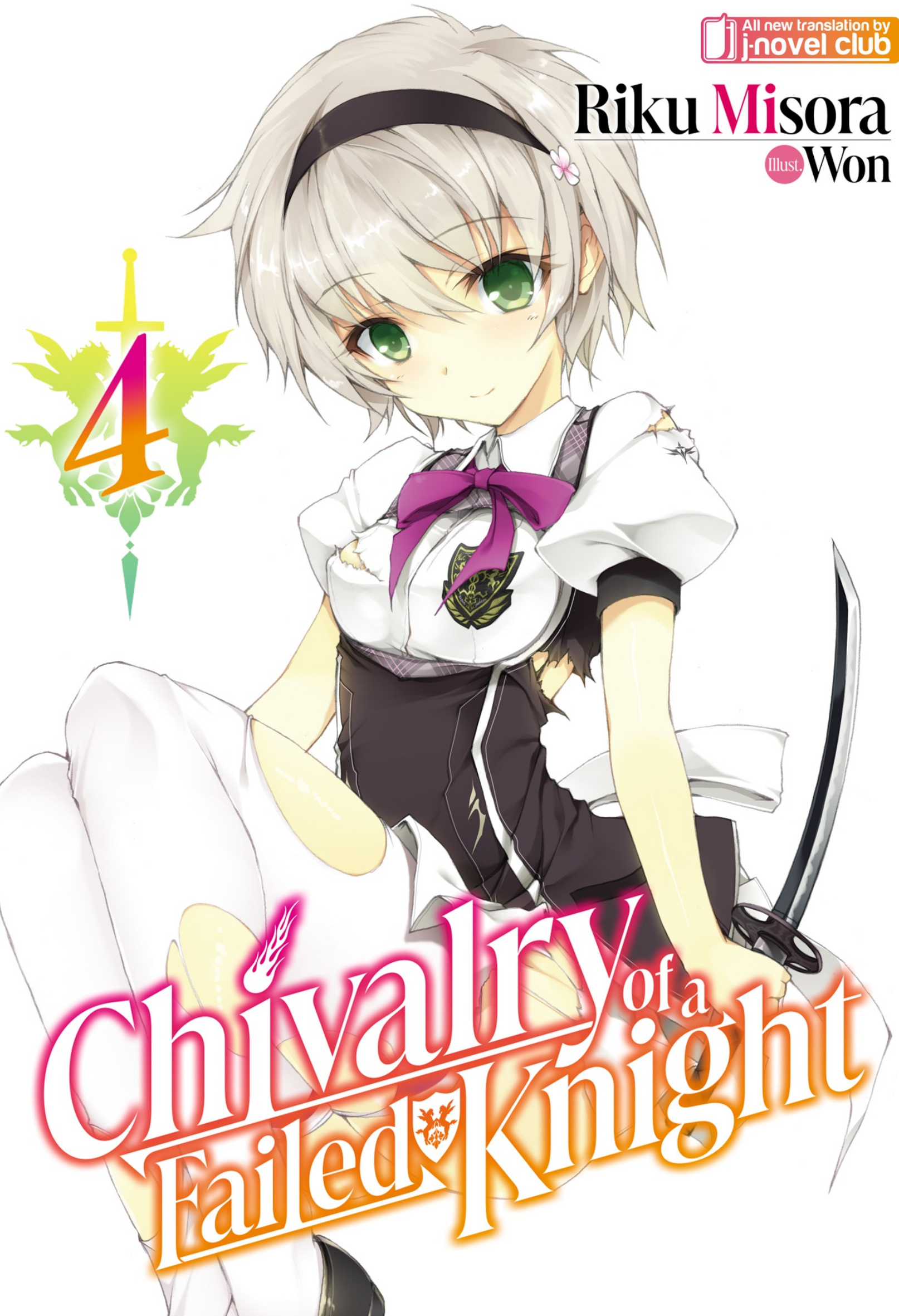


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Illust. Won



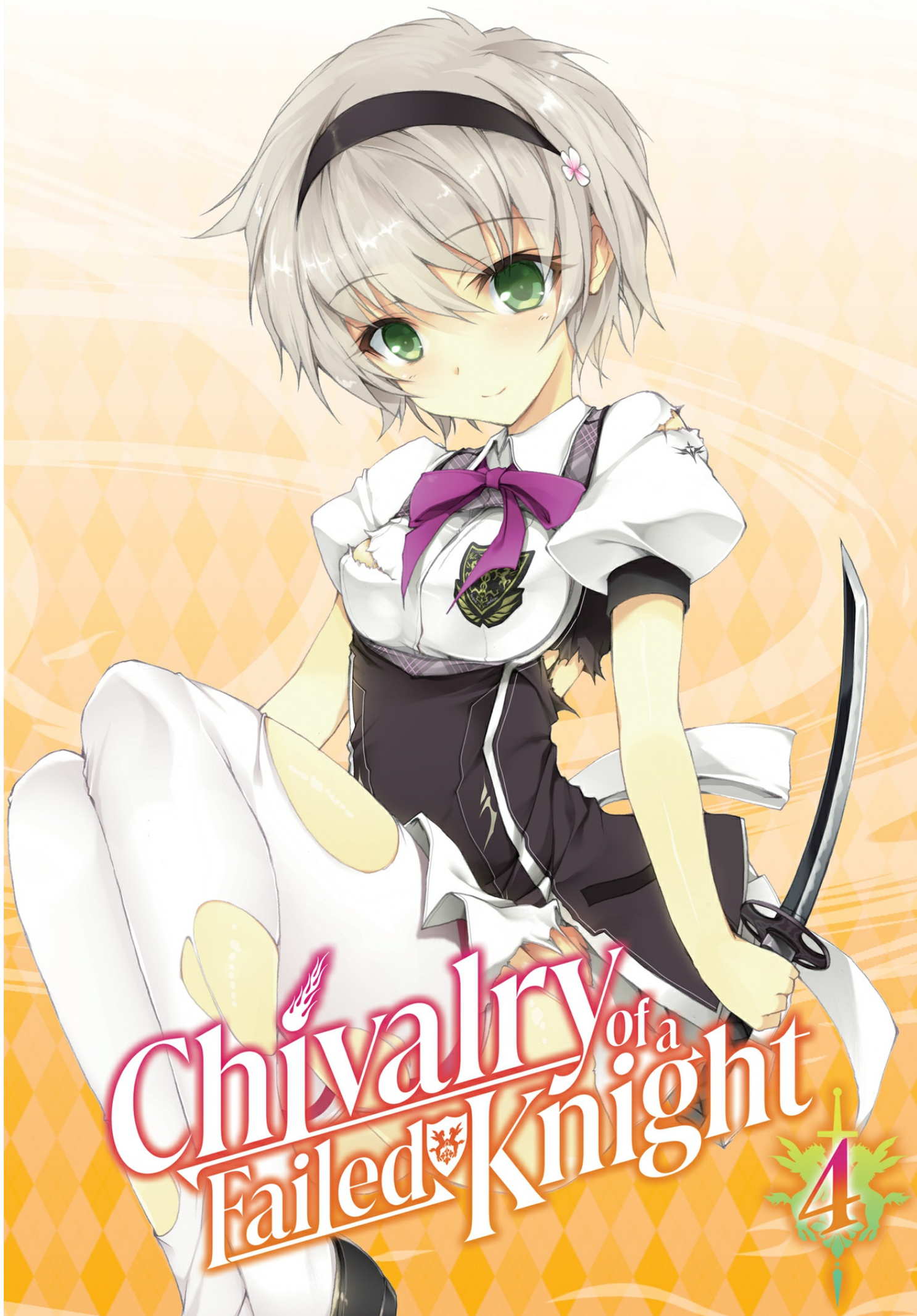
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Riku Misora

Illust. Won



Chivalry of a Failed Knight



Chivalry of a Failed Knight





"I am the harbinger of
the end atop the distant peak.
The twin swords that cleave the earth.
I am Edelweiss the Twin Wings.
Young man, it is time you learned
how vast the world truly is."

Thus,
the battle
between Worst
One Kurogane
Ikki and Twin
Wings Edelweiss
began.

Hiraga Reisen

Kurogane Ouma

Shinomiya Amane

Sara Bloodlily

Kazamatsuri Rinna

Tatara Yui





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Prologue: Snowbound Land

“Listen up, kids. Alcohol is the cool adults’ drink. That means anyone who can drink it is an adult,” a red-haired girl of about ten said. She was standing in front of a storehouse behind a church, a vivid green bottle filled with liquor in her hands.

This was happening in a small village in a snowy country in the northern tip of Eurasia.

“If you guys can drink this, you won’t be kids anymore! You’ll be cool adults just like us! And cool adults never betray their comrades! They never abandon the weak! Drinking this will mean swearing an oath to always stand by your friends and defend the weak! Are you kids ready?!”

Two boys who couldn’t have been older than six straightened their backs and shouted, “Yes, we are!”

“All right, then show me your resolve!”

“Okay!”

The two boys cupped their hands into a bowl shape and held them out, letting the red-haired girl pour a few drops of booze into them. They then brought the alcohol to their mouths and gulped it down.

“Bwaaargh!”

The two of them retched simultaneously.

“Wh-Why does it smell so bad?!”

“It burns in my throat...”

They dropped to their knees, placing their hands on the floor to steady themselves. Seeing that the red-haired girl cackled and said, “Looks like you can’t become cool adults just yet! You can try again next year, but until then, you’re gonna have to let me and Alice protect you!”

“Urgh...”

“I didn’t know becoming an adult would taste so bad, Timur...” one of the boys said, cleaning his mouth out with a handful of snow.

“Ha ha ha, no need to rush. You can take your time becoming cool adults,” a boy about the same age as the red-haired girl said, walking over and giving the two younger boys a gentle smile. He had dark blond hair and his face was smeared with soot and mud, but beneath all the dirt and grime, his features were stunningly beautiful. He was the same person who would eventually enroll in Hagun Academy under the name “Alisuin Nagi.”

Alisuin—or rather, Alice—then turned to the girl and said, “You know, Yuuri, I’d say this is what a *bad* adult would do, not a cool one. Timur and Kondla are still just six. You should have known that they wouldn’t be able to handle alcohol.”

The girl known as Yuuri smirked and replied, “It’s fine. Trying to grow up as fast as possible will make them stronger.”

Like Alice, Yuuri was a street urchin. She was the leader of the group of kids who made this storehouse behind the church their home. She was quite the tomboy, while in contrast, Alice was gentle and mild mannered. Though they seemed like polar opposites, there was one trait they both shared: they were both committed to protecting these young kids who couldn’t survive on their own.

The two of them were surrogate parents to the orphaned children living on the street. Yuuri was the stern father, while Alice was the kind mother. Though the two of them were still children themselves, they were quite responsible. Incidentally, the ceremony Yuuri had tried to make Timur and Kondla go through was a rite of passage in this particular family. Any child who could drink the strong liquor stored in the green bottle went from being a kid who needed protection to an adult who would instead protect others.

These kids had no parents or other adults they could rely on. That was precisely why they were eager to grow up as quickly as possible. It was also why Yuuri had come up with this ritual for the younger kids. Even so, there was never a good reason to give kids alcohol.

“Yuuri! How many times do I have to tell you not to give the kids alcohol

before you'll learn?!"

"Crap, it's the old sister! Everybody run!"

The sister who managed the dilapidated church stormed out of the front door, and Yuuri, Timur, and Kondla scattered. The speed the boys reacted with proved how much trust they placed in their leader's orders.

"Hold it right there, you brats! If you don't come back this instant, there'll be no soup for you tonight!"

"Leader forced us to drink it!"

"Yeah, it's all her fault. We didn't do anything wrong."

However, they were still willing to betray their beloved leader for some warm soup.

"H-Hey! You'll pay for that, you two!"

"Ha ha ha!"

Laughing, Alice started walking toward the main road. The sun was starting to set, which meant it was time for him to get to work. But as he strode past the storehouse, three young girls came out to meet him.

"Um, hey, Big Sis Alice!"

The three of them were aged five, six, and seven, respectively. The seven-year-old, Anastasia, was the oldest member of this family after Yuuri and Alice. She stepped forward, blushing, and timidly handed Alice a handmade scarf.

"L-Look."

She'd asked Alice to teach her how to knit and made it using the wool the church's sister had given her. Alice assumed Anastasia just wanted him to judge the quality of her knitting, so he said, "Wow, it's beautiful. You did a great job." He then tried to hand it back to her, but she pressed the scarf into his chest.

"I-It's a present for you, Big Sis!"

"Really?"

Anastasia, who went by the nickname "Natasha," nodded emphatically.

“You’re always working so hard for us during the cold nights, so...”

“I see...” Alice wrapped the scarf around his neck, and to his surprise, it felt much warmer than the one he’d picked up a while back. “It’s so warm. Thank you, Natasha.”

“Hee hee.” She beamed, and Alice felt himself warmed to the core by that splendid smile.

Their lives were by no means easy. While the sister was willing to lend them this storehouse out of the kindness of her heart, it was still difficult for two ten-year-olds to feed five younger ones as well as themselves. Alice did odd jobs for the local mafia, but they took most of the money he earned, leaving him with barely anything. Most of their meals consisted of the soup the sister sometimes made for them and crusty old bread that they could barely afford. Naturally, all of the kids were perpetually hungry since that wasn’t nearly enough food for them.

Despite their harsh living environment, however, Alice was happy. Sure, he had less to eat than when he’d been alone, and he also had to work way harder than before, but now, he was surrounded by warmth and love every day. It was a far cry from when he’d been on his own, stealing food to survive and always on alert in case someone tried to steal from him. He got to spend every day with people he cared for and who cared for him in turn. What more could he ask for? All he wanted was for these peaceful days to continue forever.

If only they had.

Chapter 1: Training Camp

By the end of July, the rainy season had come to an end, and the dark storm clouds were replaced by wispy white ones that merely dotted the blue sky. The first semester was over, and Hagun Academy’s summer break had officially started. It was decently long, so there were plenty of students who’d opted to go home for the summer. The only people left on campus were those who wanted to enjoy their summer in Tokyo, those who wanted to use the school’s facilities to continue training even through summer break, and those who had troubled family situations and simply couldn’t go home.

Though Kurogane Ikki fit into two of those three categories, he wasn’t on campus. Neither were any of his friends or his sister. That was because the Seven Stars Battle Festival would be held in just a few weeks, in the middle of August. And like with any tournament, the people participating were off at training camps, doing everything they could to prepare for the coming battles.

Hagun Academy held a training camp for its representatives every year as well, of course—a ten-day intensive program in Okutama, where Ikki and Stella had gone before to investigate rumors of a monster. Active members of the King of Knights league had even been invited to serve as instructors during this training camp, so it was a great opportunity to learn and grow.

The reason Ikki, Stella, Alisuin, and Shizuku weren’t on campus was because they were either participating in that training camp or, in Shizuku’s case, assisting those who were. However, this year, Hagun’s training camp wasn’t actually being held in Okutama. While the stone giant had been taken care of, Touka and the others hadn’t managed to pin down the person who’d created it. There hadn’t been any reports of another golem running around, but Director Shinguuji had still deemed it unsafe to go and had instead asked Kyomon Academy if they could do a joint training camp at Kyomon’s lodge in Yamagata. Kyomon had agreed, so Yamagata was where everyone had gone.



Stella Vermillion, the famous Crimson Princess, had traveled from her homeland to the faraway samurai nation of Japan solely to find strong opponents who would give her a real challenge. And right now, she was in the middle of exactly the kind of fight she'd been searching for.

“Ngh!”

Crimson flames and golden lightning arced across the training arena, sending sparks flying everywhere when they clashed. Her blade cloaked in fire, Stella charged her opponent once more.

Stella's fighting style relied on using her power and speed to overwhelm her opponents. Her immense mana pool allowed her to strengthen herself to the point that she was faster and stronger than most of her foes. But while people tended to focus on her offensive might, Stella was an all-rounder with no true weaknesses to speak of. She was just as skilled at defense as she was at offense. It was precisely because she could adapt to whatever the situation called for that she was Rank A.

But the girl she was crossing swords with was strong enough to weather her ferocious onslaught. That her opponent could defend against her blows was already impressive enough considering that Stella could crush most people in a single blow, but rather than just defending, her opponent's parries were also creating openings for her to counterattack. That was hardly surprising, though, considering she was up against the Thunderbolt, Toudou Touka. Touka and the other student council members had volunteered to come to the training camp as coaches.

“Haaah!”

As their swords clashed once more, Touka twisted her wrist and tilted her blade, using the force of Stella's own blow to redirect it. Stella pitched forward as Lævateinn slid harmlessly past Touka.

“Ngh!”

Stella was a highly skilled knight herself, though. She didn't let that parry destroy her balance, using her powerful lower-body muscles to keep herself grounded. That did, however, leave her open for a brief instant, and Touka wasn't the kind of person to let an opening slip past her, no matter how small.

She immediately sheathed her Device, Narukami, then spread her legs wide and started gathering electricity in her black lacquered sheath.

“Ah!”

A shiver ran down Stella’s spine. That was the stance Touka took up when she was about to unleash her Noble Art, Thunderbolt. It was her trump card, and while Ikki had defeated it once before, that didn’t change the fact that it boasted overwhelming power at close range. Not even the Crimson Princess could stand up to Thunderbolt’s might, because while her trump card, Karsalatio Salamandra, technically beat Thunderbolt in both range and power, it was much slower. And since Touka was already in her stance, Stella had no choice but to back away.

But this is the moment I was waiting for!

Stella did indeed backstep away, but this was all part of her plan. The whole reason she’d started fighting Touka at close range was to bait out her Thunderbolt.

Thunderbolt used the principles of electromagnetism to shoot Narukami out of its sheath with the force of a rail gun. But because of the overwhelming power it boasted, Touka couldn’t stop it once she’d started it. Stella’s plan had been to bait it out and then dodge at the last second so she could take advantage of the opening after it missed. However, Touka didn’t draw her blade. She just stood there, still in the ready stance, and carefully observed Stella. Stella couldn’t help but be impressed by the restraint Touka had shown.

I guess it won’t be that easy to bait her, huh?

Trying to bait out Thunderbolt and then dodging was such a simple plan that anyone could come up with it. In fact, it was the go-to plan for anyone who was fighting Touka. She had fought enough foes who’d tried to do this that she was more than ready for it.

In that case, let’s try something only I can pull off!

Stella backstepped even farther away, putting a good ten meters between her and Touka. At this range, neither swords nor spears could reach one’s opponent. The only weapons that could hit someone at this range were bows,

guns, and magic, and the latter was something Stella had in spades.

Close range was far from the only range she could fight effectively at—she was equally at home at long range. She possessed the greatest quantity of mana out of all the knights currently registered with the Mage-Knight Federation, and when it came to magic battles at long range, the person with more mana had a huge advantage. Touka had a few long-range techniques she could use, but she'd eventually be worn down by Stella's superior mana pool if she kept trying to fight from this distance.

“Hah!”

And so, Touka leaped forward, determined to close the distance between the two of them again. Unfortunately, she'd made her decision a second too late.

“Haaaaah!”

Stella poured yet more mana into Lævateinn, which was already enveloped in the fire of her Dragon Breath. It greedily sucked in her mana, the flames growing even brighter and hotter. Then, she pointed her blade at Touka, who was charging straight at her.

“Devour! Dragon Fang!”



She unleashed all the power she'd stored in Lævateinn, and the flames swirling around it formed into the shape of a dragon. The flaming serpent opened its jaws wide and bore down on Touka. Touka sidestepped slightly to avoid the blazing fangs, but the dragon changed course to match her.

Stella's Dragon Fang was more than just a blast of fire shaped like a dragon. The fiery dragon it created would chase her foe until it finally had them in its red-hot maw. Because she could control the mana that comprised the dragon, it was impossible to shake it off.

There was only one recourse Touka had against this dragon, and that was to destroy it with her own Noble Art. Dragon Fang was powerful enough to destroy anything caught in its mouth, so nothing less than Touka's Thunderbolt would be enough for her to destroy it. And so, Touka quickly dropped back into her stance.

"Thunderbolt!"

She unleashed her strongest attack against the dragon without hesitation. She had no other choice, after all. And that was exactly what Stella had been waiting for.

I've got you now!

The moment Touka used Thunderbolt, Stella leaped forward. As powerful as the technique was, it left Touka vulnerable for a moment right after she used it, and Stella hoped to take advantage of that. This was her opportunity to end the match. She reached her opponent in less than a second thanks to her godlike speed, then swung Lævateinn down with all her might, certain that Touka couldn't defend against her attack.

"Wha—"

And yet, a second before Stella's blade made contact, Touka did something completely unexpected.

She's...spinning?!

Using the propulsion of her swing, Touka indeed spun in a circle and launched a second attack, this one aimed at Stella. She had seen through Stella's plan and

prepared accordingly, purposely unleashing her Thunderbolt to lure Stella into committing to a decisive attack. And Stella had fallen for it. Narukami made contact with Stella's stomach, cutting through her.

"Ngh."

As both Stella's and Touka's blades were in phantom form, Stella wasn't physically hurt, but she was drained of all her stamina and dropped to one knee. As she did so, Touka placed Narukami against her neck, indicating that the battle was over.

"I didn't know you already had ways to deal with feints like that," Stella said, frowning.

"That's because it's the first time I've used that technique in an actual battle. You're not wrong for trying to take advantage of your opponent's weaknesses, but just remember, when it comes to the national level, most Blazers are capable of using their own weaknesses to lay traps for their foes. You can be certain that last year's Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi-san, is capable of doing that too. If you want to make it to the top, you'll need to get better at reading your opponent," Touka explained. "You've still got a long way to go, Stella-san," she added with a smile.

Stella could only groan in frustration, unable to say anything in return.



"Well, it looks like the Crimson Princess lost."

"Aww, come on."

Two girls sighed in unison as they watched Stella and Touka's battle from a distance. Both of them wore yellow armbands that said "Newspaper Club." They were members of Bunkyoku's newspaper club who had come here to collect information on Hagun's and Kyomon's representatives.

These training camps presented schools with the rare opportunity to have their students learn about rival schools' strongest Blazers. Every school's newspaper club sent at least a few members to each training camp. The two girls from Bunkyoku had come all the way from Kyushu to learn more about the knight everyone was talking about: Stella Vermillion.

“Man, what a letdown.”

“It would have made for a good article if she’d been able to beat the Thunderbolt.”

“Yeah, who wants to read an article titled ‘Turns Out the Crimson Princess Was Weak All Along!’?”

They shook their heads in disappointment. They’d wanted to write articles about Stella’s upset victory since an article about her losing wouldn’t be nearly as interesting. Meanwhile, Kusakabe Kagami, who was also wearing a yellow newspaper club armband and watching the battle from a slightly different vantage point, shot the two girls an exasperated look.

“Sheesh, are all of Bunkyo’s journalists blind or something?” she muttered quietly.

“It certainly seems like it. They’re so concerned with seeing the result they want to see that they’re not paying attention to the things they actually should be. They’re a disgrace to journalists everywhere.”

Alisuin Nagi, who was standing next to Kagami, said with a shake of her head. The two of them had seen Stella fight enough times to know that Stella definitely hadn’t lost because she was weak. Honestly, anyone with even basic observational skills would have been able to figure that much out.

“Man, that was a crazy battle,” someone said as they walked over to Kagami. “We coulda made a killing if we’d charged people to come see it.”

“Hagun’s lineup is quite something this year, Kusakabe,” the person walking with them added.

The pair, one a boy and the other a girl, shook their heads in amazement. Kagami smiled at them.

“I didn’t know you were here too, Yagokoro-san, Komiyama-san.”

“Of course we’re here. No self-respecting journalist would miss out on a match between the Crimson Princess and the Thunderbolt.”

“Exactly.”

As Kagami was talking, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to look at

Alisuin, who asked, “Who are your friends, Kagami?”

At that, Kagami remembered this was Alisuin’s first time meeting these two.

“My bad, I forgot to introduce them. The lively girl here is Yagokoro-san from Bukyoku Academy’s newspaper club. And this guy here is Donrou’s newspaper club’s Komiyama-san.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Alisuin-san,” Komiyama said.

“Sup?” Yagokoro said.

“I see, so you’re all journalists.”

“Yep. As you can see, we’re wearing the same yellow armbands.”

Alisuin nodded in understanding as Komiyama held out his arm.

Yagokoro sidled up to Alisuin and said, “Man, I’ve heard the rumors but you’re even hotter in person. You could be an idol if you wanted.”

“Yagokoro, you’re being rude.”

Komiyama elbowed Yagokoro to get her to stop peering at Alisuin’s face. But Alisuin didn’t seem to mind at all. She smiled and said, “Aha ha, it’s fine. Besides, girls love being complimented.”

“‘G-Girls’?” Komiyama sputtered, confused.

“Oh, yeah, that’s Alice-chan for you. It’s nothing to worry about, Komiyama-san,” Kagami said cheerfully.

“I-I’ll try not to.”

“Wait, you didn’t know about Nagi-san, Komi-yan? What kinda journalist doesn’t do their research?”

“Urk. Look, I didn’t think it was important to research her fetishes, okay?”

That’s so like you, Komiyama-san, Kagami thought.

Journalists naturally had preferences about what they liked to look into. Yagokoro and Kagami were more interested in Blazers’ personalities and histories than their abilities. They also exaggerated a fair amount in their articles. Komiyama, on the other hand, reported the truth as he saw it and was

much more interested in the fighting prowess of the competing Blazers. Thus, it was only natural that he hadn't looked into what kind of person Alisuin was.

"But shouldn't you be out training too, Nagi-san? You're one of Hagun's representatives, aren'tcha?" Yagokoro asked.

"I only made it in because I was lucky enough to avoid getting matched up against any strong opponents. To be honest, I'm not that interested in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. My apologies to those who lost to me, but I'm really just here to help my roommate out with anything she might need. That's why I'm here taking it easy."

"Just lucky, eh? It takes more than luck to win twenty battles in a row, no matter what you say."

"I'm afraid that's really all there is to it."

"Well, it's your choice how much you care about the Seven Stars Battle Festival," Komiyama interjected. "Besides, having all sorts of reps here will make reporting on it more interesting."

"My, what a thoughtful gentleman." Alisuin gave Komiyama a suggestive look.

"I-I'm straight, okay?" Komiyama stammered, backing away.

Kagami looked at the two reporters and asked, "By the way, Yagokoro-san, Komiyama-san, what did you make of the match?"

"The one between the Crimson Princess and the Thunderbolt?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if I had to sum it up, they're insanely strong."

"Which one is?"

"Both of them, obviously."

Upon hearing that, Kagami smiled. *I should have known that you two, at least, have functional eyes.* Unlike the two girls from Bukyoku, Yagokoro and Komiyama had properly understood how impressive the earlier match had been.

"The Crimson Princess is as strong as the rumors say. Each and every one of

her attacks is powerful and precise. She's the kind of Blazer you only see once in a generation. She didn't lose because she's weak. Thunderbolt's just way too strong," Komiyama said.

"I know, right? Komi-yan and I are both third-years, and we followed Thunderbolt last year too during the Seven Stars Battle Festival. I can say for sure that she's way stronger than she was back then."

"I imagine she trained like never before because she knew this was her last chance to take the title of Seven Stars Sovereign. Which is why I can't believe she's here not as a representative but as a volunteer coach. Or that even though she has the strength to beat even Rank A Blazers, it was a Rank F who took her representative seat."

Komiyama turned to a different corner of the training area. There, the man who'd defeated Touka—Kurogane Ikki, the Rank F known as "Worst One" who'd fought his way through the selection matches—seemed to be training with a pair of girls.

"What's he doing over there anyway?" Yagokoro asked.

"It's gotta be a mock battle, right? He's got Intetsu out," Kagami replied.

"He's facing off against the Hagure sisters. They're two of Hagun's representatives," Alisuin added.

"A two-on-one?" Komiyama asked.

"Senpai can probably handle that no sweat," Kagami said confidently.

Indeed, the third-year twins Hagure Kikyou and Hagure Botan had asked Ikki to spar with them.

"Take thiiiis!"

Hagure Kikyou used her Noble Art, which drastically boosted her speed, and charged at Ikki with her spear-shaped Device. Ikki wasn't the slightest bit fazed by the speed of her rush, though, calmly raising his foot and slamming it down on the tip of the spear, forcing it into the ground.

"That should do it."

"Whoa?!"

With her spear grounded, Kikyou's charge turned into an accidental pole vault, and she shot into the air. She flew over Ikki's head and headed straight for her sister, Hagure Botan, who'd been taking aim at Ikki from behind with her twin pistols.

"Huh?"

"Waaah?!"

"Eek!"

Kikyou landed on her sister, and the two of them rolled across the ground in a tangled heap. Ikki chased after them and asked in a concerned voice, "Are you two okay?"

"Ow... Yeah, I'm fine. How about you, Botan-chan?"

"I think I scraped something."

"Shizuku."

"Leave it to me, Onii-sama."

Shizuku, who'd been waiting off to the side, stepped forward and used healing magic on Botan. The scrape on her knee started to close up immediately. While Shizuku was working, Ikki gave the Hagure sisters some advice.

"Your greatest asset is your speed, Kikyou-senpai, but you should be careful about when you choose to use it. There's not much point in charging an opponent whose weapon has less reach than yours. You're basically throwing away one of the advantages a spear has. You'd be better off waiting for your opponent to come to you in those situations. Also, I don't recommend standing directly across from Botan-senpai when you're trying to set up a combination attack. If you do that..."

It wasn't too different from the impromptu lessons he held at school.

As Kagami and the others watched on, Alisuin said, "It's more like Ikki giving them a training lesson than it is a sparring match."

The battle had been far too one-sided to have been a proper sparring match. In truth, the Hagure sisters had asked Ikki to spar with them precisely because

they wanted him to train them, so Alisuin was correct.

“So he’s training the same people he’ll be going up against in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Though I gotta say, the Worst One’s quite the fighter. He didn’t even need to swing his sword that fight,” Komiyama said.

“Kagami-chan, are the Hagure sisters weak?” Yagokoro asked, turning to Kagami.

“No way,” Kagami replied, shaking her head. “Sure some people are saying they got lucky getting only weak opponents the same way people said Senpai and Stella-chan got lucky in their selection matches, but that’s a hundred percent false. The two of them beat some of the strongest knights in their school in their selection matches too. They might not have had to go up against opponents as strong as the Thunderbolt or Runner’s High, but they’re by no means weak.”

“And yet the Worst One made beating them look so easy. He must really be something,” Yagokoro said, impressed. “He must have a lot of confidence in his skills if he’s willing to spend what precious time he has at this camp training other people too.”

“Senpai just likes looking after people, so he’s probably doing it to relax for a bit.”

“Besides, Ikki already beat all the coaches Kyomon had prepared by day three,” Alisuin noted.

This was day four of the training camp, and Ikki had already defeated every single coach Kyomon had called over in a sparring match. Even if he wanted to train, there was no one on his level for him to train with. The strongest coach at this training camp was most likely Touka, and Ikki had beaten her in a real match.

“Well, if things stay like this, it’ll hurt Kyomon’s image since they’re the ones who organized this training camp,” Alisuin continued. “That’s why they’ve called in a special coach just for the Worst One.”

“I wonder who they called,” Kagami pondered. “I’m sure Director Shinguuji or Saikyou-sensei would have loved to come, but they’re in Osaka for their official

KOK matches and to prepare for the Seven Stars Battle Festival. But all the coaches Senpai beat were high-ranking members of Japan's national KOK league, so any regular Mage-Knight won't be able to do much."

"The fact that they need someone stronger than an active KOK fighter already shows how crazy the Worst One is," Komiyama said.

"Hagun's got a really solid lineup this year, huh? Makes me kinda worried if we'll stand a chance," Yagokoro, who was from Bukyoku, said playfully.

Kagami grinned and said, "Don't give me that fake humility. As if you actually think you'll lose. Besides, doesn't Bukyoku have a crazy strong member on their team this year too?"

Bukyoku had consistently been winning the Seven Stars Battle Festival for the past few years. The reigning Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudai, was from there as well. It was famous not just in Japan but across the world as one of the premier Blazer schools.

Furthermore, there was a man who'd forced his way past this famous school's strongest representatives and secured a slot for himself in the Seven Stars Battle Festival at the very last second—the man known as the Gale Emperor and Japan's only homegrown Rank A Blazer, Kurogane Ouma.

"For whatever reason, he didn't bother entering the Seven Stars Battle Festival when he was a first-or second-year, but it looks like he's finally making his debut. When I saw Bukyoku's lineup, I was shocked," Kagami added.

"Me too," Komiyama replied. "I thought for sure he wouldn't bother entering this year either. I guess Bukyoku's serious about winning this if he's part of their team now."

Hagun had the Crimson Princess, a Rank A Blazer of their own who'd come from abroad, as well as the Worst One, who'd defeated even the famous Thunderbolt. All of the other schools also had first-years in their roster who'd shown exceptional talent. It was honestly strange just how much new blood was coming to this year's Seven Stars Battle Festival.

It was clear this year would be a special one, which was likely why Bukyoku had convinced Ouma—who was ranked even higher than the current Seven

Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi—to participate as well. At least, that was what Komiyama and Kagami assumed. However, Yagokoro shook her head.

“It’s not what you’re thinking. The Gale Emperor doesn’t give a rat’s ass about what the school wants anyhow. He never shows up to class, and no one can ever get in touch with him. He’s the one who went out of his way to apply. Needless to say, I was just as shocked as you guys.”

“Wait, so the school didn’t ask him to take part?” Kagami asked.

“Nope.”

“I see. Well, I guess if he wanted to join, the school wasn’t going to say no.”

“Pretty much. That’s why they set up an emergency special match against Shibata-kun, the lowest-ranked member of our team, and said that whoever wins gets to be the next representative.”

“And I guess Ouma-san won?”

“You couldn’t even call that a match. Poor Shibata-kun was totally outclassed,” Yagokoro said, a sympathetic look on her face. Shibata had clearly lost badly.

“I feel bad for Shibata-san, but having the Gale Emperor be a last-minute addition is exactly the kind of sensational story journalists like us are always looking for.”

“Yeah. The more strong fighters there are, the more interesting articles we’ll be able to write.”

“People on the internet are already getting hyped for a potential duel between the Crimson Princess and the Gale Emperor.”

“Can you blame them? We haven’t had two Rank A student knights fight each other since the battle between the World Clock and the Demon Princess all those years ago.”

That battle had been so legendary people still talked about it to this day. Coincidentally, that had also been an East versus West, Hagun versus Bukyoku battle.

“It’s a shame our school isn’t as impressive, considering we’re also part of the

East crew,” Komiyama said with a shrug.

“But I heard that after fighting with Senpai, your guys’ Sword Eater started getting really into training again.”

“If I’m being honest, he’s our only saving grace. I’m hoping he can put up a good showing since the rest of our team won’t. His personality’s the worst, but you can’t deny that Sword Eater’s got talent when it comes to fighting. But again, the fact that he’s started training again comes back to the Worst One.”

Komiyama’s journalist instincts were telling him that the real dark horse in this tournament wouldn’t be Sword Eater, but Worst One. Even though Sword Eater was who he wanted to see win.

“A few people were whispering about him after his duel with the Crimson Princess, but after defeating Thunderbolt, *everyone’s* been talking about him,” he went on. “They all want to see how far a no-name Rank F Blazer can climb in this tournament. You didn’t hear this from me, but apparently, a major TV station is planning on doing an entire long-form segment on the Worst One in the run-up to the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

“He beat the Crimson Princess, took down the Thunderbolt in one attack, and he’s even the younger brother of the Gale Emperor. Makes sense they’d wanna interview him and stuff,” Yagokoro said with a nod.

Kagami smiled as she listened to their conversation. It was a nice feeling, having the knight she’d been personally following for a few months garner so much attention. It felt like an affirmation that her eye for picking out notable people was the real deal, but more importantly, she was happy that Kurogane Ikki was finally getting the respect he deserved. She knew just how much he’d struggled to reach this point. *Though as a reporter, I can’t allow myself to get too biased toward any one knight.*

Despite telling herself that, Kagami couldn’t help but want to cheer Ikki on. *What girl wouldn’t want to root for such an earnest boy?* And so, she accepted that just this once, she’d allow herself to be biased.

“Hmm?”

As Kagami turned back to Ikki, she spotted someone out of the corner of her

eye. A girl with ash-blond hair who, just like Kagami and her friends, had been watching Ikki's match from afar.

"Hang on, isn't that Kyomon's Icy Sneer?" Kagami muttered.

"You're right," Yagokoro answered. "Is she trying to get intel on the Worst One?"

"Let's go ask," Komiyama suggested.

"Yeah, we definitely need to hear her— Wait, Komiyama-san! Don't just run off without us!" Kagami shouted.

"Wait up, Komi-yan! I won't let you have her all to yourself! Oh yeah, I'll be back later to interview you too, Nagi-san, so talk to ya then!"

Yagokoro glanced back at Alisuin, then chased after Komiyama. Kagami didn't go, though, since she was here with Alisuin. It wouldn't be fair to her to just run off. So instead, Kagami turned to her and asked, "Alice-chan, do you mind waiting here for a bit?! I want to go interview the Icy Sneer too!"

However, Alisuin said nothing. She was staring down at the ground, seemingly lost in thought.

"Alice-chan?"

"Hmm? Oh, sorry, Kagamin, I wasn't paying attention. What did you say?"

Kagami once again asked if she could go interview the Icy Sneer, and Alisuin immediately nodded.

"Of course. Have fun. I'll be waiting here."

"Got it. I'll be back soon!"

Kagami chased after her two reporter friends. As she ran off, she thought back to Alisuin's earlier expression.

I wonder what's on Alice-chan's mind? Kagami had known Alisuin for a few months now, and this was the first time she'd ever seen her fail to pay attention to what those around her were saying. Is she getting nervous now that the Seven Stars Battle Festival is so close? She went quiet right when we started talking about Kurogane Ouma, so maybe it's got something to do with that.

After thinking about it for a bit, Kagami decided it wasn't that big of a deal. *Everyone spaces out every now and then.* She reached the Icy Sneer around that same time, so thoughts of Alisuin left her head completely after that. Komiyama had already started his interview, and she'd arrived just in time to catch it.

"Good afternoon, I'm Komiyama from Donrou's newspaper club. Icy Sneer Tsuruya Mikoto-san, what do you think of the Worst One—or rather, Another One after watching his mock battle? Do you believe Kurogane Ikki's abilities are a match for the nation's top eight?"

It was a very impromptu interview, but someone as strong as Tsuruya was used to dealing with reporters. She didn't look surprised or put off by Komiyama's sudden appearance.

"Reporters shouldn't be so hasty to seek answers," she said with a suggestive smile. "Is there truly any point in explaining with words what my impression of him is? For knights such as ourselves, all that matters is the outcome of the match. The stage for our grand battle is already set. You'll soon see for yourselves whether or not his abilities are a match for us. Our clash will bring the merciless truth to light."

Tsuruya's smile turned into an ice-cold grin. The three reporters felt chills run down their spines, and they suddenly realized why she was called the Icy Sneer.

"Now, if you'll excuse me." Tsuruya turned on her heel and headed for the training grounds' exit. Though she'd given no clear answer, her confident stride made it clear to the three reporters that she had absolute faith in her own strength.

"I guess once you make it to the top eight in the country, you can act that confident," Komiyama said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"She's got some serious aura. That smile scared the pants off me," Yagokoro replied.

Kagami had a similar impression of Tsuruya's strength, but her faith in Ikki was even greater. After all, Ikki had managed to defeat Sword Eater, who was similarly among the best eight fighters in Japan, and Thunderbolt, who'd made it as far as the top four.

Let's see how long that confidence of yours lasts.

Though Kagami thought Tsuruya was being overconfident, there was no way someone who'd made it to the top eight would actually underestimate their opponent to such a degree. As Tsuruya left the training grounds, one of her friends and a fellow Kyomon representative walked up to her.

"Hey, Mikocchan. Whaddya make of Hagun's representatives for this year? Think you can crush 'em?"

She smiled the same cold smile that had earned her the moniker "Icy Sneer" and said with absolute confidence, "Definitely not."

Tsuruya Mikoto was much stronger than Kagami and the others gave her credit for. Strong enough that she could accurately gauge the difference in strength between herself and her opponent. That was why she knew better than any of the reporters that she didn't stand a chance against the Worst One.

"Have you seen that man fight?" she asked. "He took down three KOK fighters. I've never heard of anyone managing that."

Tsuruya leaned weakly against the wall. As she lamented her fate, she heard surprised shouts coming from inside the training grounds.

"Wait, is that Nangou Torajirou?!"

"You're telling me the special coach they brought in for the Worst One is the War God?! You've gotta be kidding me!"

"I *wish* they were kidding." Tsuruya slumped to the ground and hugged her knees. She looked up at the sky and said in a pleading voice, "God, please don't put me up against that monster in the first round!"

Unlike before, everyone here correctly understood just how strong the Worst One really was. So much so that he was as much a favorite to win the whole thing as the other three top candidates. Those three were, of course, the current Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudai; the Rank A Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion; and the other Rank A knight, Kurogane Ouma the Gale Emperor. The question was, how well would Ikki match up against those three? Would the Uncrowned Blade Master finally manage to win his first crown? Both the other participants and the eager spectators were waiting with bated breath

to see just how far Ikki could go.



Kyomon's training camp didn't have any particular training course prepared for the students. The volunteer coaches held classes of their own volition, but it was up to each individual whether they wanted to participate. It was hard to have a unified course for Blazers because of how varied their abilities were. Trying to give everyone the same training wouldn't actually lead to efficient growth for most knights. As a result, everyone got to plan their own training course—alone or with their friends depending on how they preferred to train.

And so, in the free time before dinner, Stella invited Ikki to go running with her. They would jog all the way down to the shopping district in the nearby town and back, which was a round trip of twenty kilometers. For the two of them, it wasn't even a long enough distance to really work up a sweat. It was more of a light cooldown exercise to relax after their strenuous training. Stella also wanted to vent the pent-up stress of having lost to Touka.

"Waaagh! I still can't *believe* I fell for that!" Stella shouted as the two of them sat on a park bench near the shopping district for a short break. She flapped her legs in the air like a petulant child.

"Running didn't make you feel any better?" Ikki asked.

"Nope! Not one bit!"

They'd run at twice their usual pace, but even after washing her face at the park fountain, Stella still felt miserable. In truth, ever since their trip to Okutama, Stella had vaguely had the sense that Touka was stronger than her. That feeling had only grown after watching Touka's duel with Ikki. But even so, losing in an actual match still galled her.

"Now that I've fought her, I can say for sure that she's super strong."

"Toudou-san is practically invincible at close range. It's hard to fight her there."

"But you did it, Ikki."

"That's because close range is the only range I can fight at. If I can't win there,

I won't be able to win at all."

Stella couldn't help but feel a little jealous of Ikki. She hadn't stood a chance against the Thunderbolt, but her boyfriend, who'd challenged Touka in her own domain and won, could just laugh off his victory like it was nothing. Their duel had been burned into Stella's retinas. She could still remember every single detail vividly. And while she was proud of what Ikki had accomplished, she couldn't stand the fact that she was no closer to reaching his level than she'd been when they'd first met.

"I can't believe she only made it to fourth place in last year's tournament. Japan must have some really strong Blazers," she mused.

"Well, in a single-elimination tournament, sometimes you just get matched up against the wrong opponent. The fact that Toudou-san was ranked fourth doesn't necessarily mean there's three people who are stronger than her. Besides, I heard she had to abandon the battle to decide third place because one of her relatives fell ill."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean it's okay for me to lose to her. Both you and the current Seven Stars Sovereign were able to beat her, which means there's at least two people stronger than her in this tournament. If I'm losing to her, then there's no way I'll be able to beat you and take the title of Seven Stars Sovereign for myself. Plus, there's another representative I'm keeping an eye on."

"Who's that?"

"He's from Bukyoku, the same school as the Seven Stars Sovereign. Ouma Kurogane."

Ikki gasped in surprise upon hearing that name.

Seeing his reaction Stella said, "So he really *is* from the same family as you and Shizuku."

"Yeah... He's my older brother."

"I didn't know you had an older brother, Ikki. In fact, it's only after I saw him in Bukyoku's lineup that I learned that Japan also has a Rank A student knight."

“That’s because, for the past two years—or rather, since he entered middle school, so really the past five years—no one’s had a clue where he’s been going or what he’s been up to.”

“You mean he’s been missing?”

“Not quite. From what Shizuku’s told me, he calls home every now and then, and he’s shown up in public places before. But he vanishes for days at a time with no one knowing what he’s up to, and he hasn’t appeared in any public matches for the past five years. He became the little league champion in elementary school and everyone was excited to see where he’d go from there, but since he hasn’t shown up in the past five years, the mass media lost interest in him. At this point, more people are interested in Shizuku than they are in him. That’s probably why you never heard about him.”

“I see. That makes sense. But then why has he finally decided to come back and fight now? Do you have any idea?”

“No clue,” Ikki answered with a shake of his head.

“Even though he’s your brother?”

“Ouma-niisan was a black sheep in the family, just like me,” Ikki explained, giving Stella a sad smile. “I basically never talked to him. I know him even less than I know my father. So I really couldn’t tell you what he’s thinking. My main impression of him from the few times I saw him was that he was a really single-minded guy.”

“In what way?”

“He believed that life was all about getting stronger.”

“So he was just like you?”

Ikki shook his head again and said, “No, he was way more hardcore than me. Ouma-niisan literally didn’t care about anything other than getting stronger. He had no interest in his brother or sister, who were both weaker than him. He didn’t even care about his father, who was also weaker than him. He mentioned in an interview that the reason he wasn’t interested in joining the Seven Stars Battle Festival or any other tournaments was ‘There’s no one there worth fighting.’”

“Sounds like he’s quite confident in his skills.”

“He has the strength to back that confidence up. And since all he cares about is getting stronger, he’s probably entering this Seven Stars Battle Festival because he thinks it’ll make him stronger. This is just a guess, but I think his target is you, Stella. You’re both students who reached Rank A. There are very few of those in the entire world. If I were in Ouma-niisan’s shoes, I’d definitely want to fight you.”

Stella nodded in understanding. She was also quite interested in meeting a fellow Rank A student knight. She wanted to fight him too, of course, so it stood to reason that he was thinking the same thing.

“By the way, how strong would you say Ouma is?”

“As strong as he claims to be.”

“Really?”

“When he said there was nobody in past tournaments worth fighting, that wasn’t him bragging.” There was a bit of a tremor in Ikki’s voice as he said that, and that more than his words caused Stella to shiver a little.

Still, what Ikki had said was terrifying enough. If Kurogane Ouma hadn’t entered the Seven Stars Battle Festival in past years because he thought there wasn’t anyone strong enough to challenge him, that meant he considered the Thunderbolt and even last year’s Seven Stars Sovereign beneath him. And the fact that Ikki was wary of him meant that Ouma might really be stronger than both of them. Stella had never seen Ikki speak so highly of anyone else’s strength. If someone like him was fighting in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, then Stella really couldn’t afford to be losing to Touka.

“All right, I’ve decided! I’m gonna get stronger than Touka before the end of this training camp!”

There were still five days left. If she fought Touka once a day, she’d be able to have six matches against her, including the one she’d already fought. She decided her goal would be to have more wins than losses by the end. And now that she’d set a goal for herself, she could feel motivation welling up. This was no time to be relaxing in a park. She leaped off the bench and turned to Ikki.

“Ikki, let’s go back to the lodge! Once we’ve had dinner, I’m gonna train like I’ve—”

Stella’s stomach grumbled loudly, cutting her off. The park was deserted except for the two of them, so the sound of her stomach was clearly audible to Ikki.

“Ha ha ha, I guess someone’s hungry,” Ikki said, grinning.

Stella blushed bright red.

“I-I can’t help it, okay? I exercised a lot today and it’s almost dinnertime!”

“Yeah, you’re right. You worked really hard today, so of course you’re hungry. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“E-Exactly. I’m glad you understand.”

“And there’s no point in training on an empty stomach, so how about we get some food first?”

Ikki also got to his feet and grabbed Stella’s hand.

“Ah.”

She was surprised by the sudden contact, but Ikki just nonchalantly said, “I’m sure we’ll be able to find something in the shopping district. Come on, let’s go.”

He smiled at her and gently tugged on her hand.



The shopping district was packed with students enjoying their summer break and housewives shopping for groceries for dinner. Ikki and Stella walked through the crowd, openly holding hands. As expected, people turned to stop and stare at the two of them.

“Wait, is that the Vermillion princess and that Kurogane kid who was in the news recently?”

“Yeah. Wasn’t the news saying he toyed with her feelings or something?”

“I heard that was all bullshit the media made up.”

Everyone had heard of both Ikki and Stella now thanks to the relationship

scandal Akaza had tried to manufacture. Naturally, everyone also knew the two were dating. As a result, they stood out anytime they were together in public.

“Look, they’re holding hands. I told you they were going out.”

“The pictures don’t do her justice. That princess really is hot.”

“Man, I wish I could go out with a girl like her.”

Stella blushed to the tips of her ears as the crowd turned to look at her. She’d gotten used to her fellow students’ teasing on campus, but it was still embarrassing to have random people on the street gawk at her.

Noticing her discomfort, Ikki gently asked, “Hey, Stella, if it’s too embarrassing, should we stop holding hands?”

“I-It’s not embarrassing at all,” she lied, firmly shaking her head. It was actually extremely embarrassing for her, but she genuinely loved holding hands with Ikki.

“If you say so. But you don’t need to force yourself,” Ikki said with a smile, correctly picking up on the fact that Stella wanted to keep holding hands despite the embarrassment. He squeezed her hand a little tighter to reassure her as he led her down the street.

Stella looked up at him and thought, *Is it just me, or has Ikki changed a little?*

The Kurogane Ikki she knew was by no means an assertive man. And like her, he had no experience with love or romance. Up until now, the two of them had been equally awkward when it came to exploring their relationship and taking it further. Recently, though, Ikki had become a lot more confident, like when he’d taken her hand at the park. Of course, both of them loved holding hands, but before, they’d awkwardly brought their hands closer together until their pinkies finally touched, and then they’d awkwardly transitioned to holding hands.

Now, though, he’s like... How do I put it...

Ikki no longer waited for the two of them to just end up holding hands—he went out of his way to take Stella’s hand. Moreover, he didn’t seem the least bit bothered by all the staring. Before, he’d been a lot more reserved when it came to initiating things. Stella had known that was because of his personal moral

code, of course, so she hadn't blamed him for it even if she'd secretly wished he'd be less uptight. Regardless, that was why the sudden change was so surprising to her.

What on earth happened to him?

Deciding that there was no point agonizing over it by herself, Stella decided to ask Ikki outright.

"Hey, Ikki? Is it just me, or have you changed a little?"

"Have I?"

"I feel like you're...bolder than you were before." *And manlier and cooler...*

Ikki looked taken aback for a second, but then he awkwardly scratched his cheek and said, "I should have known you'd notice, Stella." It seemed he was aware of this change in himself too. "Sorry for being so forceful."

"I-I don't mind at all! I was just wondering what prompted the change."

"It wasn't anything huge," Ikki said. But then he added, "I guess it's just that, after proposing to you, I've fallen even more in love with you than before. So I feel compelled to show off to everyone that you're my girlfriend. That no one matters more to me than you do."

Indeed, Ikki had felt something change inside him after proposing to Stella. He'd thought he'd loved Stella more than anyone before that, but his desire for her had grown even stronger after she'd accepted his proposal. Knowing that she felt as strongly about him as he did for her had made him far less restrained than before. And now he was determined not to give Stella up to anyone else. It was a base instinct, a man's desire to protect the woman he loved. That was what was making Ikki so much more assertive.

"Honestly I want to hug you right now in the middle of the street. Sorry for being such a horny boyfriend," he added, blushing a little.

Stella's heart started to pound upon hearing that.

Ikki...

It was honestly endearing knowing that Ikki was trying to show off to everyone that she was his woman and that he wouldn't let anyone else have

her. She could feel her lips forming a smile, and she quickly looked down to hide her face.

You're so cute, Ikki...

She loved that childish, jealous side of him. He probably wouldn't like it if she said it was cute rather than manly or cool, but she couldn't help it. He was just too cute. At the same time, as his girlfriend, she wanted to reward him in some way for his efforts. And so, she looped her arm around his and pulled him close.

"S-Stella?"

"This way, you'll be able to show off that I'm your girlfriend even better, right?" Stella said with a smile, pressing her face against his arm. At this point, she no longer cared what the onlookers thought of her. All she wanted was to reward the boy who was trying so hard to play the good boyfriend.

However, it seemed that while Ikki was brave enough to hold hands with her in public, entwining their arms like this was a bit more than he could handle. He'd started fidgeting bashfully. But since he was the one who'd said he wanted to show off, he couldn't say he was too embarrassed now.

"Y-You're right. Good idea, Stella."

Ikki tried his best to act normal, but now he was the one blushing to the tips of his ears, and his palms had started to sweat.



Hee hee. It was cute seeing him try so hard to stay calm. *I feel like I'm the happiest girl in the world right now.*

Grinning like an idiot, Stella leaned into Ikki, letting him lead the way. She knew they probably looked like a flirty couple showing way too much affection in public, but she didn't care anymore. She loved Ikki, and that was what mattered.

You better do a good job escorting me, my cute little prince. She wanted to say that aloud, but it was too embarrassing.

"Hmm?"

Just then, Ikki came to a halt. At first, Stella thought he'd found a nice restaurant, but after looking up at him, she quickly realized that wasn't the case. He was looking back over his shoulder, a grim expression on his face.



"What's wrong?" Stella asked.

"That man in overalls who just walked past us..." Ikki nodded toward the person he was talking about. "Don't you think there's something strange about his gait?"

"Maybe he's injured?"

"No..."

That was what Ikki had assumed at first, but now, he doubted that was the case. He took a deep breath and heightened his focus. Even at this distance, the man's height and the set of his shoulders gave away a lot about his skeletal structure and his musculature. Ikki could extrapolate how the man's limbs should have been moving based on his build, and there was definitely something off about the way he was walking. His right and left legs weren't in sync. But not in the way they would be if he was limping or injured in some way. All of the joints in his legs appeared to be in working order. No, it was something else. The presence of some obstruction was altering his stride.

Based on the way he's walking and the wrinkles in his overalls, there's something in his right pocket.

The man had his hand shoved in his right pocket, but based on what Ikki could see, there was more than just his hand in there. Assuming he had his hand wrapped around the object, it was long but not too wide. Possibly a knife of some kind.

Judging by his clothes, it's possible he's just a normal electrician.

Electricians often carried knives to cut through cable casings. If what he was holding really was a knife, though, it was slightly too long to be one meant for everyday use. Indeed, combat knives were usually this length. However, Ikki was no electrician, and he wasn't sure what kind of knives they carried. But as they'd walked past each other, Ikki had caught a glimpse of the man's face from under the brim of his hat. He'd had the bloodthirsty look of someone stalking his prey.

Of course, there were plenty of people who had a mean look in their eyes by default. Plus, it was possible his eyes were bloodshot because he was sleep-deprived. Furthermore, Ikki couldn't actually be sure the man was carrying a knife—for all he knew, it was some other tool with the same length and width. There were plenty of reasons not to assume the worst. But Ikki's instincts were telling him that something was wrong here.

"All right."

"Huh? Ikki? Where are you going?!"

"One sec. I'll be right back."

Ikki disentangled himself from Stella and started chasing after the man in overalls. His plan was to strike up a conversation and see if he could find an opportunity to confirm the contents of the man's pocket. If he was just overthinking things, that was fine. All he'd have to do was apologize. Even if the man didn't accept his apology, Ikki didn't mind taking a punch or two to the face. It would be worth knowing for sure the worst-case scenario wasn't going to happen.

Just as Ikki was about to call out to him, the man came to a stop in the middle of an intersection. There was nothing there, and people normally passed through them as quickly as possible. So why had he stopped there?

“Ow! Hey, old man, don’t just stop in the middle of the street!”

A group of middle school boys ran into him, and he let out a strange sound. It sounded like something halfway between a scream and a groan. He then started to take his right hand out of his pocket, and Ikki immediately concentrated as deeply as he could on sharpening his kinetic vision.

Everything began to move in slow motion as he took in every possible detail. A glint of light came from the object in the man’s hand, and Ikki spotted the metallic edge of a combat knife. There was only one reason someone would draw a knife in the middle of an intersection. Ikki’s instincts had been correct.

The moment he confirmed that the boys were in danger, he shot forward. Everything still looked like it was moving in slow motion, and he was easily able to weave his way through the crowd. He was just five meters away from the man now, and the knife was only halfway out of his pocket. The middle schoolers had yet to even register what the man was doing.

I’ll reach him in time!

Ikki was more than fast enough to get there before the man attacked. He was confident he’d be able to knock the man out with one blow to the back as well. Sure, it would cause a scene, but it was better than letting the man draw his knife and potentially injure someone. Ikki was glad he’d trusted his instincts and taken action immediately. Unfortunately, it was at that moment that something unexpected happened.

“Whoa, hold on a sec! You can’t just do that!”

Before Ikki could reach him, someone grabbed the man’s arm and tried to drag him away.

What?!

The man still hadn’t fully drawn his knife. Anyone interrupting him now must have both been paying close attention to the man’s pocket and had reflexes as good as or better than Ikki’s.

Ikki definitely hadn’t expected anyone else to jump in at this moment. He’d been taken completely by surprise. To make matters worse, the girl who’d shown up was now directly in Ikki’s trajectory, meaning he wouldn’t be able to

knock the man out in one clean hit as easily.

“Tch!”

It was too dangerous to rush at the man full tilt now, so Ikki slowed down and adjusted the angle of his approach. Meanwhile, the girl who’d grabbed the man’s arm shouted, “Don’t throw your life away, mister! Even if you got fired and are drowning in debt, suicide isn’t the answer! And how could you even *think* about dragging innocent people down with you?!”

“What?!”

The other passersby turned to see what the commotion was.

“H-Hey, that old man’s got a knife!”

“What?! Whoa!”

“Aaah! He’s a murderer!”

Though the man hadn’t completely drawn the knife out of his pocket, it was still clear to anyone looking what it was. The crowd immediately fell into a panic, with people scrambling to get away from him as quickly as possible. Ignoring the commotion, the girl kept her gaze fixed on the man.

“You haven’t actually committed a crime yet, so let’s go to the police and turn that knife in, okay?” she said. “Think of how sad you’ll make your poor mother if you turn into a murderer! It’s okay. As long as you stay alive, your luck will turn around!”

She smiled up at him, sweat beading on her forehead. Sadly, though, her attempts to calm him down weren’t working.

“You braaat!”

“Wah?!”

Howling, the man flung the girl away. As she fell to the ground, he pulled out his knife and pointed it at her.

Wh-What should I do?!

Ikki looked from the man to the girl, hesitating. Normally, he would have rushed in to save her—or rather *him*, as on closer inspection, Ikki realized that

they were a boy and not a girl. His voice was rather high-pitched and he had feminine features, but he was undoubtedly male.

That wasn't why Ikki was hesitating, though. The reason he was hesitating was that not only was the boy wearing a Kyomon Academy uniform, but Ikki also recognized his face. He hadn't realized it at first, but now, he remembered seeing it on the roster of Seven Stars Battle Festival entrants that Kagami had shown him a few days ago. He had forgotten what name was associated with that face, but regardless, the cowering young boy was a Blazer strong enough to fight in one of Japan's most prestigious tournaments.

There's no way a guy like that jumped in without a plan. Anyone that skilled would have calculated their moves ahead of time. The boy must have had some means of neutralizing the man. And without knowing what his powers were, Ikki feared that intervening now would just get in the way of whatever he had planned—much like how he had gotten in Ikki's way when he'd intervened. *I should leave this to him.*

But to Ikki's utmost surprise, the boy covered his head with his arms and shouted, "S-Someone heeelp!"

He really had no plan?!

Taken aback, Ikki nevertheless sprang into action immediately. While he wouldn't be able to reach the man in time anymore, the ground was littered with objects people had dropped when they'd started running. He kicked a tube of lipstick, and it smacked into the man's knife before he could swing it down.

"Ngh?!"

The unexpected impact caused the man to drop the knife. Ikki then dashed over and punched him in the face.

"Gaaah?!"

The man fell to the ground, blood dripping from his nose. He made no move to get back up—that one punch had been enough to knock him out. It had been a perfectly aimed punch, after all.

"Haaah, haaah, haaah!"

However, Ikki was panting heavily and covered in sweat.

Th-That was close! I can't believe this guy hadn't thought up a way to stop that man!

If Ikki hadn't jumped in, the boy would have undoubtedly been killed. That was how defenseless he had been in the second before the knife was going to come down. It was no act either. Despite being a Blazer, he hadn't even protected himself with a shroud of mana. He had genuinely been helpless against that knife. It was his recklessness that had made Ikki break out in a cold sweat, not the threat the man posed.

"Ikki!"

"Hah... Stella, can you call the police and let them know I caught an armed man assaulting people with a knife?"

"G-Got it!"

As Stella took her phone out, Ikki turned to the boy on the ground. Honestly, he wanted to scold him for rushing in without a plan, but he'd also been trying to prevent a tragedy, so Ikki bit back his harsh words and held his hand out.

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you." The boy took Ikki's hand with a relieved smile. "Wait..." His eyes widened when he saw Ikki's face.

"Hmm? Is there something on my face?"

"N-No! Um, a-are you Kurogane Ikki-kun?!"

"Yeah. Is there—"

Before Ikki could finish, the boy squealed in joy.

"Woow! It's the real Ikki-kun, in the flesh!"

He leaped to his feet and hugged Ikki.

"Wh-What?!"

"H-Hey, what are you doing?!"

Ikki and Stella both looked down at the boy in confusion.

The boy ignored Stella's question and said, "I'm so moved! I was hoping I would get a chance to meet you here, but I didn't think I actually would! I'm so lucky!"



He was acting like Ikki was some long-lost friend he was seeing for the first time in ten years. His clear blue eyes were brimming with affection. He was clearly overjoyed from the bottom of his heart. But that was precisely why Ikki was so confused.

Why is he so happy to see me?

“Who are—”

This time, it was Stella who interrupted before Ikki could finish his question. She put her phone away, stalked over to Ikki and the boy, and forcibly pulled them apart. Then, she stepped protectively in front of Ikki and said, “Who are you?! You’re dressed like a guy and look like a guy, so...are you gay? Do we have another gay guy?! I already have enough of those to deal with!”

Stella glared daggers at the boy. At first, the boy seemed surprised by how rough Stella was being, but then he realized that he was talking to Ikki’s girlfriend, and the reason for her anger became apparent.

“Ah, sorry, Stella-san. Don’t worry, I’m not gay. I just got excited after seeing Ikki-kun for the first time,” he explained. “It’s nice to meet both of you. I’m Shinomiya Amane, a first-year at Kyomon Academy. And just like you two, I’ll be participating in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. I’m also a huge fan of Another One!”



Afterward, Ikki and Stella handed the criminal over to the police and went into a nearby hamburger joint to sate their hunger. Shinomiya Amane, Ikki’s new fan, joined them as well. He said he wanted to treat the two of them as thanks for saving him.

“Mmm, these fries are great! They have just the right amount of oil and salt. I haven’t been here before, but maybe I’ll become a regular,” Amane said, savoring a french fry.

“I don’t have junk food that often myself, but I like this place too. You really don’t have to treat us, though, you know,” Ikki said to Amane.

Amane shook his head and replied, “Of course I do! You saved my life! Some

McDonald's is nothing compared to that!"

Amane wasn't exaggerating. Ikki had literally saved his life. Based on the visual information Ikki had gotten, Amane most certainly would have died if he hadn't intervened. It seemed Amane hadn't had anything up his sleeve either, what with how emphatic he was being about thanking Ikki.

"All right, if you insist."

Figuring Amane would feel bad if he couldn't do anything in return, Ikki decided to let him pay. He unwrapped his burger and started eating. It was delicious—nothing like the healthy but bland food served at the dorm.

"By the way, Amane-san," Stella said, turning to Amane. She'd already finished her two burgers and was now idly picking away at her giant serving of fries.

"Just 'Amane' is fine. We're the same age, so there's no need for honorifics. Besides, it feels weird to have a princess attaching honorifics to my name."

"If you say so. Anyway, you're one of Kyomon's representatives, right?"

"Yep, that's right."

"How come I haven't seen you at the training camp, then?"

"Oh, that's because I wasn't taking part. I actually only just got to this city today. That's why you haven't seen me around."

"I see. So will you be joining the training camp starting today?"

"Nope. I just came here to deliver some things to a senpai. Once that's done, I'm going home."

"Don't you think that's a waste? You're already here, so you may as well take part."

"Aha ha. I get what you're saying, but unlike you, Stella-san, I'm not that interested in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. I don't have much physical strength, and I haven't trained in any martial arts either. The only reason I was chosen as a representative is because my power's on the rarer side."

For schools that weren't holding selection matches like Hagun or Bukyoku, it

wasn't too surprising that a few students with no interest in the tournament were nevertheless chosen as representatives. Amane wasn't just being humble either; Ikki could tell that he really was as physically weak as he claimed.

"Is it that special power of yours that told you the man was going to try to stab someone?" Ikki asked Amane.

Amane cocked his head and asked back, "What makes you think that?"

"Process of elimination. Judging by your physique and the way you reacted to the man's attack, you really don't have any martial arts training. But you grabbed that man's arm at exactly the right time to stop him from stabbing those boys. Normally, that's only something you can do with honed reflexes and a lot of training. Since you have neither, the only thing left must be your Blazer power."

Amane gave Ikki a surprised look.

"Wow. I guess I should have seen that coming. You're as perceptive as the rumors say, Ikki-kun."

On the internet, fans of the Uncrowned Blade Master often raved about Ikki's powers of observation. Amane was glad he'd been able to see the real thing in action. Smiling, he replied "You're not wrong, but I'm afraid I can't tell you what my power is. Sensei said I'm not allowed to tell people from other schools. Sorry."

"That's fine. You don't need to apologize. We're both fighting in the same tournament too, so it wouldn't be fair if you told me." There was no benefit to divulging your powers to someone you might end up fighting. Ikki had no intention of pressing the issue. "But, Amane-kun, if your power doesn't let you also neutralize your opponent, you should think a bit more before you act. You could get yourself killed if you're not careful," Ikki said, his expression stern.

Amane looked away bashfully.

"Y-Yeah, you're right. I was so shaken that I even forgot to use mana to protect myself. I might really have died if you hadn't shown up, Ikki-kun, so I get that I was lucky. But..."

"But?"

“Thanks to that, I got to see you fight in person! All in all, I think I won out. You were super cool, Ikki-kun. Like a superhero in a movie.”

Amane looked up at Ikki, his eyes sparkling. Ikki shook his head in exasperation at Amane’s endless optimism.

W-Well, I guess he’s not a bad person, at least.

“Oh yeah,” Amane said suddenly, and started rummaging through his bag. “When I learned Hagun and Kyomon would be doing a joint training camp, I bought this autograph board for you to sign in case I managed to meet you. So...would you be willing to sign it, Ikki-kun?”

Amane pulled out a rather expensive-looking autograph board and looked up at Ikki with pleading eyes.

“Y-You want my autograph?”

“Yep! Do you not do autographs?”

“No, I can, but...”

Ikki wasn’t sure what to say. After his battle with Stella, he’d started getting more popular within his school, so he’d done a few handshakes and signed some notebooks. This was the first time someone had brought an actual autograph board for him to sign, though. He still hadn’t come to terms with his sudden rise in fame.

This is the kind of thing famous actors do, not me.

“I just feel like my autograph isn’t worth going on such a fancy board...”

Ikki turned to Stella for help.

“Might as well sign it. If you don’t like how your signature looks, just write your name normally,” she said flatly.

“But...”

“He’s your fan. This is the least you can do for him. Besides, regardless of what you think, he clearly thinks there’s a lot of value in your signature.”

“Ugh...”

She has a point.

It was Amane who wanted Ikki to sign this fancy board, so it wasn't Ikki's place to say that his autograph wasn't worthy. Thus, he nodded to Amane and took the autograph board.

"I don't have a special signature or anything, so it's just gonna be writing my name normally. Is that okay?"

"That's totally fine!"

Ikki hesitantly wrote out his full name. As he hadn't practiced a signature, his handwriting was by no means neat.

"Wow! Thank you so much, Ikki-kun! I'll frame this and keep it with me forever!"

Amane held the autograph board close to his chest, grinning from ear to ear. He was like a kid who'd gotten the exact toy he wanted for Christmas.

I can't believe someone likes me enough to frame my signature...

Ikki knew he should be happy about this, but he wasn't used to being a celebrity, so it felt more awkward than anything. Until he'd met Stella, there hadn't been anyone who even respected him, much less praised him. Meanwhile, Stella was happy to see Ikki getting more fans.

"By the way, Amane, what do you like about Ikki so much that turned you into a die-hard fan?" Stella asked, eager to talk about Ikki some more.

"His fighting style, for one thing. Cutting down everything that stands in his way with just a katana is so cool, don't you think?"

"Actually, how were you able to see his fights? I thought Hagun prohibited uploading recordings of any of the selection matches."

"Officially, yes, but every school has students who are willing to break the rules and upload everything. Especially since in Hagun and Bukyoku, any student is allowed to spectate the matches, so there's people who go around trying to record and upload all of them. Anyway, that's how I've been able to see all of Ikki-kun's important matches! I have them all downloaded, and I've watched them hundreds of times now! I even have all the lines he said memorized! My favorite was 'Using everything I have, I'll destroy your invincible

technique!”

“Bwah?!”

Ikki nearly spat out his ginger ale as Amane struck a cool pose and said the same words he’d told Touka during their duel.

“Every time I hear that, it sends shivers down my spine! I really like what he said to the Hunter before taking him down too!”

“Um, c-can we please talk about something else? *Anything* else? Please?!”

““Using everything I have, I’ll capture you, the master of stealth.””

“Aaaaah!”

“I think it’s cool how Ikki-kun tailors his signature line to match his opponent’s abilities.”

“I’m begging you, just stop! I know I get carried away a little when I’m fighting, but I’m not normally that cringe! I promise!”

Ikki grabbed Amane’s shoulders and started shaking him. His face was beet red, but Amane was clearly unwilling to stop.

“Huh? It’s not cringe, it’s cool. Isn’t that right, Stella-san?” He turned to Stella, who was struggling to hold in her laughter.

“Y-Yeah, totally. Ikki’s *super* cool. Bwah ha ha ha ha.”

In the end, she wasn’t able to do so and burst out laughing.

“If you really think it’s cool, why don’t you look me in the eyes and say it, Stella?” Ikki requested.

Stella immediately averted her gaze. Ikki couldn’t blame her, though. Even he didn’t think it was cool. If anything, he was amazed he’d managed to say those lines with a straight face all this time. The things people did in the heat of the moment were crazy.

Ignoring Ikki’s embarrassment, Amane continued gushing about all the things he found cool about Ikki.

“Of course, the way he fights is cool, but the thing I like most is Ikki-kun’s mindset about how he approaches fights.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but Ikki-kun barely even qualifies as a Blazer. He hardly has any powers, right? But that hasn’t stopped him from trying. It doesn’t matter how strong his opponent is or how much more talent they were blessed with, he still goes into each fight thinking he’ll be able to find a way to win. It’s amazing to me how much he believes in himself. That’s the most dazzling thing about Ikki-kun.”

Ikki was more surprised than embarrassed upon hearing that.

Wow, he’s really perceptive. And he’s really been watching me closely.

Indeed, Ikki’s faith in his own potential was what had driven him to come this far.

“Aha ha, it’s kind of embarrassing to say that in front of you, though, Ikki-kun. Sorry. I got carried away.”

“It’s even more embarrassing to hear it, you know.”

“Ha ha ha, sorry about that.” Amane finished the last of his fries and got to his feet. “All right, it’s about time I left.”

“Aren’t you going to the training camp to deliver something? In that case, we might as well go together.”

“If I tried to keep up with you two, I’d hurl these delicious fries back up in five minutes. Besides, I still need to finish buying a few things Senpai asked me to bring.”

As he walked off, he turned back to Ikki and said, “Thank you so much for the autograph. I hope you manage to fight your way to the top and become the Seven Stars Sovereign!”

Amane gave Ikki a big smile. It felt weird to be cheered on by someone he might have to fight in the tournament, but Amane’s smile was so genuine that Ikki didn’t feel like it was worth pointing that out.

I have to do my best to live up to his expectations as well!

Ikki smiled back at Amane and opened his mouth to thank him.

Huh?

But then he realized something and the words died on his lips.

“Ikki-kun?”

“Oh, uh, sorry. Yeah, I’ll do my best. Thanks for cheering me on,” Ikki said after a brief silence.

Amane gave Ikki a curious look, but then he smiled again and said, “See you later!”

Ikki’s response seemed to have been satisfactory enough for him, and he walked out of the burger joint.



“Hee hee hee, looks like you’re popular enough to have fans outside of our school now, Ikki. You’ve come so far from when we first met,” Stella said, munching on her leftover fries.

Ikki nodded and said, “Yeah...”

“Amane seems like a pretty hardcore fan too.”

“You seem happy about that, Stella.”

“Of course I am. Your strength is finally getting recognized by everyone, and Amane likes you not just because of your strength but also because he saw the same things in you that I did. Why wouldn’t I be happy? Aren’t you happy that someone who understands you so well is rooting for you too? There aren’t many fans who are that perceptive, you know.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I should be happy about this.”

“Ikki?” Stella asked, hearing the hesitation in Ikki’s voice. He was staring at the door Amane had left through, his expression stiff. Not only that, but he was also sweating profusely despite the fact that the AC was working just fine. “What’s wrong, Ikki?”

“Hey, Stella.” he turned to look at her. “What kind of person did Amane seem like to you?”

“Well...he’s cheerful, he’s cute, and he understands you really well, so I think

he's a good person."

Ikki nodded in response.

"Right. Normally, that's what you'd think..."

He frowned and closed his eyes.

Yeah, there's not a single reason to dislike him.

Shinomiya Amane was an effeminate, cheerful boy who was willing to throw himself into danger to help others despite not being particularly strong. Not only that, but he also respected Ikki from the bottom of his heart. Ikki should have found those traits endearing. And yet...

For some reason, I don't get the impression that he's a good person.

When Ikki had tried to smile back at Amane, he'd found it surprisingly difficult. Even though Amane's words, expressions, and mannerisms were all things that people would normally like, somehow, none of them had left a positive impression on Ikki whatsoever. He couldn't understand why. It baffled him that he couldn't bring himself to like Shinomiya Amane. That disconnect felt almost ominous to him.

He was so bothered by this that he pulled out his student handbook and dialed Kagami's number. She picked up after the first ring.

"Hello? It's unusual for you to call me, Senpai. What's up?"

"Do you have a few minutes, Kagami-san? There's something I want to ask you."

"Yeah, I'm free. I was just getting tea with Alice-chan. So, what do you want to know?"

"You've investigated the representatives from all the schools, not just Hagun, right?"

"You bet. Any reporter worth their salt will have checked out everyone participating in the Seven Stars Battle Festival."

"Can you tell me what kind of person Kyomon's Shinomiya Amane is?"

"That's a pretty broad question."

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Hmm...”

Ikki lapsed into thought, trying to think of what concrete question to ask. However, he didn't know what he needed to learn about Amane to get rid of the nagging feeling.

After a few seconds, Kagami seemed to sense that he was having trouble being more specific and said, “Never mind, broad is fine. Honestly, I only know a couple of vague things about Shinomiya-san to begin with.”

“Really?”

“There's not much intel on him. He didn't enter any tournaments in middle school, so all I really know about him is that he's one of the rare Blazers whose power interferes with fate, and that's why he was chosen as one of the representatives this year. The weird thing is, there's a bunch of entrants like him this year. No-name first-years who didn't enter any tournaments in middle or elementary school but got picked to be one of their school's representatives anyway. Sadly, all I know about Shinomiya-san is that he's one of those no-name first-years. But why did you want to know about him specifically, Senpai?”

For a second, Ikki wasn't sure whether he should try to explain the strange disconnect between Shinomiya's demeanor and the impression he had of him. In the end, he decided it wouldn't be good to speak ill of someone he didn't really know, especially since he wasn't sure he could even find the right words to describe what he was feeling.

“We ran into him during our jog, so I was just curious what kind of person he was,” he finally replied.

“Huh. I heard he wasn't going to be at the training camp, but I guess he's still in Yamagata.”

“He said he came here to deliver something to his senpai.”

“Oho, then maybe I'll have a chance to interview him.”

“Aha ha. Don't grill him too hard, okay? And sorry for calling you out of nowhere.”

“No worries. If anything, I should be the one apologizing for not being able to

tell you anything useful. I'll let you know if my interview turns up any interesting details."

"Thanks a bunch. See you later."

Ikki hung up and looked down at his student handbook. If someone as well-informed as Kagami didn't know about Shinomiya, he doubted he'd be able to find anything by searching online.

"I think you're overthinking things. Maybe you and Amane are just fundamentally incompatible," Stella said. "For all you know, you two killed each other over the same girl in a past life or something."

"Does reincarnation work like that?"

"Even if it doesn't, everyone has some people they simply can't like no matter how hard they try."

Ikki wasn't sure this feeling was something as simple as dislike. But he didn't know *what* it was either.

"Yeah, I guess you might be right," he said, trying to convince himself that Stella was indeed correct.

Unfortunately, he just couldn't shake the strange feeling that stuck in his chest like tar. His instincts were telling him that his meeting with Amane had been an ill omen. The person who'd walked out that door, they said, was far more terrifying than he let on.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Oreki Yuuri

■PROFILE

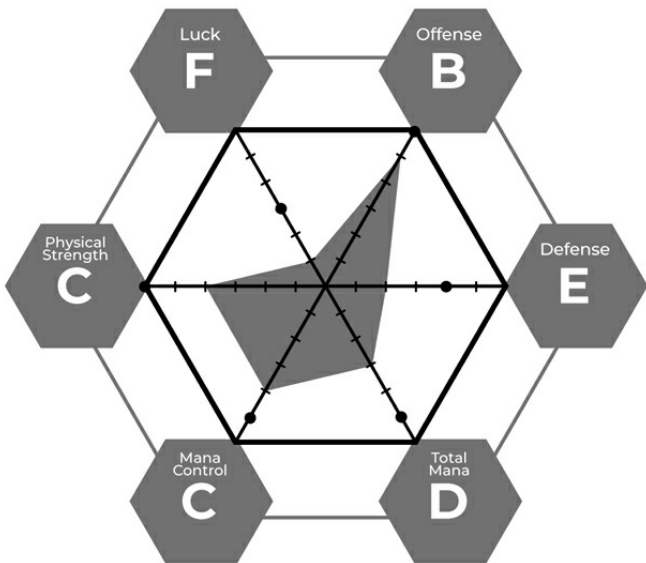
Affiliation: Hagun Academy

Blazer Rank: C

Noble Art: Violet Pain

Nickname: Jolly Roger

Summary: One of Hagun Academy's teachers.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

For the first time in this series, we'll be introducing a teacher instead of a student! And the historic first teacher we've chosen is our beloved homeroom teacher, Oreki Yuuri-sensei! Her Blazer powers allow her to share the pain she's feeling with other people, and her ability's range is a whopping several kilometers. She can easily catch hundreds of people in it if she has to. And with how many different illnesses she has, most knights would pass out after just a few seconds of the pain she deals with on a daily basis. For how unassuming her ability seems at first glance, it's quite powerful when combined with her unique constitution! Also, the pain is just a psychological sensation that causes no physical damage, so Sensei uses it all the time on students who aren't listening to her in class... (((;°A°)))

© Won

Chapter 2: Schemes and Plots

As the sun was just beginning to rise on the snow-covered land, Alice started walking home after having completed his latest job for the local mafia. The dawn chill in winter was cold enough to kill those who weren't bundled up properly. Thankfully, he had the warm scarf his little sisters had knitted for him.

"Yo, Alice," someone said from far above him. He looked up and saw a familiar red-haired girl walking atop a two-meter-high stone wall.

She's just like a cat, Alice thought with a small smile. "It's rare that we finish up at the same time, Yuuri."

"I know, right?" Yuuri leaped off the wall and walked over to Alice. She hugged him to try to warm her chilled body. "It's so coold. Must be nice having that scarf."

"Hee hee hee. Jealous?"

Alice held up the scarf, and Yuuri shot him an envious look.

"Let me wear it too!"

"No way. You'll get it dirty like you do all your clothes."

"Mrr. What kind of guy lets a girl freeze on a cold winter day like this?"

"You barely even qualify as a girl. But I guess..." Alice pressed himself against Yuuri and wrapped the scarf around both of their necks. "There. Now we can both be warm."

"Th-This is kinda embarrassing..."

"If you're blushing, that'll make you even warmer," Alice said with a playful smile.

The two of them made their way down one of the city's newer streets. There weren't many people out and about since it was still predawn. As they walked, they talked about the ritual Yuuri had made the younger boys go through the day before.

“I can’t believe the two of them are old enough that they want to try becoming adults now,” Alice said with a nostalgic smile.

“Well, it *has* been two years since we picked them up. But they’re still just kids. We were way tougher than them when we were their age.”

Alice’s smile turned into a frown.

“I’d rather not remember those days.”

“Aw, come on, they weren’t *that* bad. Besides, I still have the scars from when you stabbed me, and I’m never gonna let you forget that.”

“You say that, but you won our fight in the end. That’s why I’m part of your group now. So don’t act like you’re the victim here,” Alice said, pouting.

Both Alice and Yuuri were Blazers as well as orphans. Because they’d been stronger than the other kids around them, it had taken a lot of fighting with each other before they’d settled into their current relationship. They’d nearly killed each other dozens of times fighting over food or a warm place to sleep.

Eventually, though, they’d gotten tired of stealing from each other just to get ahead—just to survive another day. So one day, they’d shared a cup of the alcohol Yuuri carried around and sworn an oath to use their strength to protect as many kids as they could rather than steal from them. They’d realized that their powers existed not to take from others but to help them. After all, that was what cool adults did, and they wanted to be cool adults.

Ever since they’d sworn that oath, they’d stuck to it, bringing any powerless kids they found into their little group and looking after them.

“Now that I think about it, didn’t we try to kill each other on this street before?” Alice asked.

“Yeah. Though it’s gotten a lot cleaner in the years since.”

As Yuuri had said, the street had been repaved with nice, neat stones, and the surrounding buildings were no longer dilapidated, their paint peeling. When they’d been fighting each other, the road had been so broken and pitted that cars couldn’t drive down it, and any tourist foolish enough to walk it was robbed of their possessions in seconds. Incidentally, the reason the street was

so much nicer now was that this city would be hosting the Olympics that year. There were posters advertising that fact plastered all over the place.

“They don’t want to look bad to the rest of the world since they’re hosting the big event and all,” Alice explained.

“They don’t want to look bad, huh?” Yuuri muttered, frowning.

Alice sensed the change in her tone and asked, “Did those government officials come again?”

“Yeah, yesterday.”

Though they were poor, Alice was happy with their current life. Everyone was able to get by, and they were all together. But because of the looming specter of the Olympics, maintaining their current lifestyle had gotten much harder. The government, not wanting to look bad to the rest of the world, had started clearing out the homeless, having officials beat them until they left instead of putting them in institutions or housing. And now, those officials had found Alice’s group.

“Those bastards said they’d be willing to adopt me and you because we’re Blazers,” Yuuri said through gritted teeth.

“Not happening.”

“Exactly. If we left there’s no telling what’ll happen to Natasha and the others. The sister knows that too, so she was able to chase the government guys away. I hate those bastards so much.”

“I guess they’re worried we’ll start mugging tourists.”

Of course, Alice and the others had no intention of leaving. If they were forced to abandon their shed in this freezing weather, they’d probably die before they found another place to live.

“If they were willing to put everyone else in an orphanage somewhere, I’d consider going with them. *We* can survive no matter where we go, after all,” Yuuri noted.

“They probably won’t, though,” Alice replied. “If it was that easy to find homes for kids, there wouldn’t be so many of us on the streets.”

Indeed, in this country, there was an epidemic of orphaned kids living on the streets. There were too many for the government to take care of. Or rather, the nation's leadership could have stepped in and solved the problem at any time by directing resources toward it, but they clearly lacked the will to do so. They were too busy spending money cleaning up the roads and buildings to have time for homeless kids.

That was why Alice knew they had to get by on their own. They couldn't afford to get kicked out of the city. Not in the winter, at least.

"But...maybe it's time we packed up and left," Alice muttered.

Yuuri nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. The sister's been kind to us, but we can't just rely on her forever."

The sister who was letting them use the church shed was a nice person. She was willing to maintain the old church that barely got any funding by herself, and she even paid out of her own pocket to make soup for the kids. At the very least, she was the first kind adult Yuuri and Alice had met in their short lives. Because of that, they couldn't bear to see her get heckled by government officials constantly. She was clearly being pressured to kick Alice and the others out.

"All right, let's do it!" Yuuri stepped away from Alice and pointed toward the rising sun. "Alice, as soon as winter ends, let's leave this city. We can go south where it's warmer. I'm sick of cold places."

You know the sun rises in the east, right? Alice thought to himself. Yuuri was probably just trying to point where it seemed the warmest.

"Okay," he said with a nod. "That sounds good to me. Let's find a warmer place to live."

In truth, Alice had also been considering moving somewhere warmer for a while. The other kids were old enough now that they could probably handle long-distance travel as long as it wasn't in the dead of winter.

"Let's go all the way to the equator!"

"You know even birds don't migrate *that* far," Alice said with a shake of his

head.

He wouldn't have minded the equator, though. Honestly, he was looking forward to the trip. He didn't think they'd actually make it as far as the equator, but a city farther south in a warmer climate was a realistic goal.

Alas, they would never get the chance to make their big move. Soon, tragedy would strike, destroying Alice's small piece of happiness.

As the two of them continued down the street, a black car passed by them. The old man sitting in the back seat of the car said to his secretary, who was driving, "It seems the renovations for this area are lagging behind."

"Huh? Do you really think so, sir? The main street's already been repaved, and we're almost done repainting the buildings."

"Perhaps, but I just saw some filth on the side of the road."

"Do you mean those urchins, sir?"

"What good will it do to lay Persian rugs on the streets if those brats get their dirty feet all over them? And think of what people will say if we let beggars hang around the audience."

"But sir, there are so many orphaned children on the streets that it would be impossible for us to relocate them all. Furthermore, the group here that Yuuri leads is made up primarily of younger children. Not to mention that she and her friend are both Blazers, so the police would have a hard time removing them."

"Are you really getting scared over two brats? Coward."

"Very well, I'll ask the police to clear them out."

"Don't be daft. The police chief is gunning for the mayor's seat in the next election. If you make him do it, he'll look like a heartless monster in the eyes of the public. The opposition will tear him to pieces."

"What should we do, then?"

The secretary was sick and tired of his boss, who kept giving unreasonable orders without any understanding of how things worked on the ground.

"It's best to let trash clean up other trash. Everything's easier that way," the

old man replied with a smile. He'd spoken as nonchalantly as if he'd been ordering a coffee.



It was pouring the night before the last day of Hagun and Kyomon's joint training camp. While not quite a thunderstorm, the rain was heavy enough to make everyone want to stay indoors.

Kusakabe Kagami was sitting in the room the schools had been nice enough to allot her and the other newspaper club members who'd come to report on the training camp, going over all the data she'd collected thus far. The pleasant sound of raindrops pattering against the windows made for soothing background noise as she sorted out both the information she'd gathered herself and that which she'd acquired from other newspaper clubs. The laptop on her desk displayed all the notes her friends who'd also come to this training camp had given her. She was compiling an estimate of each school's relative fighting strength and how much their representatives might have grown during the training camp period in order to write an article about her predictions for the tournament.

Thanks to Ikki's phone call, Kagami had noticed something interesting while reviewing her information. In all honesty, she hadn't been particularly interested in Shinomiya Amane at the start. He was one of the representatives who had little information available online. No one even knew what his powers were. But that made sense considering that he hadn't appeared in any tournaments before this.

Most schools kept information on their representative Blazers top secret. After all, there was no benefit in giving the competition information. Moreover, there were a number of first-year students taking part this year who had no prior tournament experience, so Amane wasn't too much of an anomaly. As a result, Kagami hadn't considered him someone worthy of special notice and had opted not to gather too much intel on him. There were plenty of other participants who deserved more attention, such as Kurogane Ouma the Gale Emperor, Stella Vermillion the Crimson Princess, or last year's Seven Stars Sovereign, Moroboshi Yuudai.

After speaking with Ikki, however, she had gotten a little more interested in Shinomiya Amane. Thus, when she'd been going over her notes, she'd paid special attention to his profile. And in doing so, she'd noticed something insane.

"What on earth..." Kagami stared at her notes in shock. It was a decently warm night, but she felt chilled to the bone. What she had in front of her was the results of the six mock battles Shinomiya Amane had fought during his first semester at Kyomon. He'd won all six—each of them by default. In other words, every one of his opponents had forfeited before their match had even started. "What's with this guy?"

Kagami had collected information on tons of Blazers in her time in the newspaper club, but she'd never seen anyone with a record like his.

That's not the only crazy thing here. Looking back over her notes, she began to realize that it was odd for this many no-name first-years to be participating. At first, she'd assumed that it had just been a good year for up-and-coming rookies, but now, she realized that it was too crazy of a coincidence. In the world of Blazers, the strong garnered attention whether they wanted to or not. It was downright impossible for so many strong first-years to have been completely overlooked until just now. *It's almost as if they were all hiding their abilities for this moment...*

Kagami gulped. She recognized that she had just unearthed a massive conspiracy. It was more than a simple student could handle.

But I can't afford to just ignore this either.

It was in Kagami's nature to seek out the truth no matter what. She took pride in being a reporter with integrity. And so, she flipped through her notes again, looking for more clues. She looked over all of the Blazers participating in this year's Seven Stars Battle Festival, as well as the members of the Festival's Management Committee, its board of directors, and even all of the sponsors funding the event. It took her a few hours of examination, but a little after midnight, Kagami was able to grasp the overall situation. Her honed reporter instincts had led her to a truth she knew she hadn't been meant to find.

No doubt about it. As she stared at the list of participants, she muttered, "There's an eighth school hidden among the entrants!"

A second later, Kagami felt a sharp hot pain in her back.

“Wha—”

She looked down and saw a dark gray blade sprouting from her chest. It was a blade she recognized all too well.

I...knew it...

The dagger she'd been stabbed with was Darkness Hermit. Naturally, she knew exactly whom that Device belonged to.

“Alice...chan...”

Squeezing out the last of her strength, Kagami turned around. Her friend, Alisuin Nagi, was staring back at her, her expression colder than she'd ever seen it.

In a flat, emotionless voice, Alisuin said, “You're too smart for your own good.”

She drew Darkness Hermit back out with a sickening squelch. Kagami slumped forward, her head landing on the pile of documents on her desk.

No...

She knew she had to run, but she couldn't muster the strength to get up. She could feel the exhaustion that came from being hit by a Device in phantom form slowly eroding her consciousness.

Senpai...Stella-chan...be careful...

Without enough strength left to even scream, all she could do was pray for her friends' safety.

There are demons lurking in this year's Seven Stars Battle Festival!

With that final thought, Kagami fell unconscious.



Alisuin bent down and checked to make sure Kagami was unconscious. From the looks of it, she'd be out cold for a whole day.

“I'm sorry. If you'd only been a little dumber, we could have been friends for a

few more hours.”

Kagami’s conclusion that there was an eighth school hiding in the upcoming Seven Stars Battle Festival was correct. The name of the underground school that had sneaked its way into the tournament was Akatsuki Academy. It was a new school that had been established solely to bring down the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

At present, only seven students were enrolled in the school. They were all powerful Blazers from society’s underbelly, most of them members of Rebellion, who had been hired by their sponsors to join this school and take part in the plot to destroy the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Each of them had infiltrated their target school and secured a spot on its roster. Their job was to dominate the tournament and prove that people outside the seven schools officially recognized by the Federation could beat its prized student knights. Kagami had managed to figure that out, which was why Alisuin had knocked her out.

“It really is a shame,” Alisuin muttered. A second later, her student handbook began to vibrate. She’d gotten several calls over the past few hours, but because she’d been observing Kagami from the shadows, she’d ignored all of them.

Alisuin reached into her pocket and pulled out her student handbook—her Akatsuki Academy student handbook. She didn’t even need to check the display to know who was calling her. The only person who called this handbook was the man who served as the liaison for Akatsuki’s students: the Jester, Hiraga Reisen.

“What do you want?”

“Finally. I’ve been calling you for ages. I thought you might have blocked me.”

“I certainly have good reason to.”

“Ouch.” Hiraga let out a cackle, and Alisuin frowned. She did not like this man. Though he always acted cordial, she could tell from his disposition that he was secretly looking down on everyone and everything. *“Why didn’t you pick up immediately, anyway?”*

“There was a bit of an incident.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“One of Hagun’s newspaper club members figured out what we were up to, so I had to silence her.”

“How much did she figure out, exactly?” Hiraga asked, his voice turning serious.

Alisuin picked up the notes Kagami had been looking at a second ago and said, “Donrou Academy’s Tatara Yui. Kyomon Academy’s Shinomiya Amane. Rokuzon Academy’s Sara Bloodlily. Bunkyoku Academy’s Hiraga Reisen. Rentei Academy’s Kazamatsuri Rinna. Bukyoku Academy’s Kurogane Ouma. Hagun Academy’s Alisuin Nagi. She’s marked these seven from a list of all Seven Stars Battle Festival participants.”

“That’s quite something.”

“I don’t know who any of our members are except you, our liaison, and Ouma-san, our guest member, so I don’t know if this list is perfectly accurate. But she also seems to have figured out our goal, hence I dealt with her... How accurate is her list?”

“Sorry, but I can’t divulge the other members’ personal information just yet. It would only make things riskier if I did. That said, the pregame show’s supposed to be tonight. You’ll all be seeing each other then, so I’ll introduce you. Anyway, you know for sure that she got at least three of the seven right. How did she figure it out?”

“Judging by her notes, she looked into the pasts of every single participant. Aside from our guest member, all of our past schools and tournament records are faked, so if you really went looking, you’d be able to tell something’s up.”

“I see, I see. So we should have done a better job forging fake pasts for ourselves. Well, I can grill the guy in charge of that later. Either way, good job. I’d expect no less from the famous Black Hand. By the way, how exactly did you deal with our nosy little mouse?”

“I knocked her out. If you want me to kill her, I can.”

There wasn’t the slightest bit of hesitation in Alisuin’s voice. It didn’t matter that she was talking about someone she’d ostensibly been close friends with.

“No, no, that’s fine!” Hiraga said in a hurried voice. “Covering up a murder’s a lot of work. Besides, the whole world will know about Akatsuki Academy come evening. Just keep her locked up somewhere for the day. That’s all I need.”

“Understood. Sorry, that was just a joke. So, why did you call me?” Alisuin asked bluntly. She had no love for Hiraga, so the shorter this conversation was, the better.

Reisen replied, *“It’s actually someone else who wanted to talk to you, not me. They asked me to call you on their behalf. One sec, I’ll hand the phone over to them.”*

There was a slight rustling sound as Hiraga handed the phone over.

“Hello, Alice.”

Alisuin’s expression stiffened the moment she heard that voice. It was a stern voice that she would have recognized anywhere.

“It’s been a while, Master Wallenstein.”

“It has. We haven’t spoken since you left for Japan.”

The One-Armed Sword Master, Sir Wallenstein. He was one of Rebellion’s Numbers—their top twelve members—and the man who’d picked up Alisuin when she was still an orphan and trained her to become the Black Hand, one of Rebellion’s premiere assassins.

“I didn’t know you were also in Japan.”

“I’m supposed to be overseeing this whole thing, so of course I came.”

The fact that Wallenstein was already in Japan caused Alisuin to stiffen in fear. She knew just how strong her teacher was. The Mage-Knight Federation would have classified him as a Rank A Blazer if he’d been part of it. His swordsmanship was unparalleled, and his Blazer powers were equally suited to offense and defense. He was without a doubt one of the strongest people in Rebellion. Him being physically present meant that Rebellion was serious about taking down the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“I see. Why did you want to talk to me?” Alisuin asked after a few seconds.

In a cold voice, Wallenstein said, “Alice, you’re one of the best students I’ve

ever trained. In some ways, it's harder to assassinate mafia bosses, cult leaders, and terrorist cells than it is to take out high-profile political figures. Even so, you've never failed a single mission. This probably isn't even worth asking, but I wanted to confirm just in case: you know what your role is today, correct?"

Alisuin closed her eyes as if mentally saying her farewells.

"Yes, I'm aware. And I'm fully prepared to do what must be done. I've already earned the trust of most of Hagun's representatives. My first attack will be sure to land, and with my Shadow Bind, I can completely neutralize anyone I manage to strike. There's no need to worry, Sensei. I'll make sure our show is a complete success. I swear it on my name as the Black Hand," she answered with complete conviction.

"That's a relief," Wallenstein said with a small smile. "I'm counting on you, Alice."

Alisuin nodded and replied, "Leave it all to me."

Upon hearing that, Wallenstein hung up.

It's rare for Sensei to call me. Though I guess it makes sense considering the situation.

Rebellion's sponsors wanted the pre-Festival show to go off without a hitch. It was, after all, the big event that would reveal Akatsuki Academy's existence to the world. Were it to go wrong, everything Rebellion and its sponsors had been plotting would be ruined.

I guess I should clean things up here first.

If Alisuin wanted things to go smoothly, she needed to make sure that Kagami and her findings remained hidden for the rest of the day. She activated her Blazer powers, and both the reporter and her notes started to sink into her shadow.

"I'm sorry about this, but I have to remove all potential risks to ensure the plan succeeds."

After a few seconds, those risks had disappeared completely.



After hiding Kagami and her documents somewhere inconspicuous, Alisuin returned to the dorm building assigned to the tournament entrants. She went straight to her room and opened the door.

“Welcome back, Alice,” Shizuku said, not looking up from the book she was reading. She was wearing a negligee and had the light next to Alisuin’s bed on.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were still awake, Shizuku.”

“I’ll be going to sleep soon.”

As she said that, Shizuku turned the page of her book. She was close to the end, from the looks of it.

“What are you reading?”

“108 Ways to Torment Your Daughter-in-Law.”

Yikes!

“By the way, Alice, I noticed you’ve been going out a lot at night these past few days.”

Alisuin pondered how best to respond to that. She’d overheard Ikki’s phone call with Kagami, so she’d been spending most of her nights observing her. It was hardly surprising that Shizuku was starting to get suspicious that something was up. Especially since Alisuin had even gone out tonight, when it was pouring rain. The problem was that Alisuin wasn’t sure she could lie convincingly to Shizuku. The girl had a knack for reading people, and she was quite perceptive.

“I haven’t been fooling around, if that’s what you’re thinking. The Seven Stars Battle Festival is close, and I happen to have some preparations I need to make beforehand.”

That wasn’t a lie, though it wasn’t quite the truth either.

“I see,” Shizuku said simply, returning to her book.

It was times like this that Alisuin was grateful for Shizuku’s lack of interest in other people. Her head was filled with thoughts of her brother, Kurogane Ikki, and no one else.

I’m a little jealous.

The reason Alisuin was willing to admit that to herself was that she knew today was the last day she would get to be Shizuku's friend. Once Akatsuki Academy's preparty show was over, she would leave Hagun for good.

"Hey, Shizuku." Alisuin walked over to her travel bag and pulled out a soot-stained bottle of alcohol. "Would you like to have a glass with me?" They could at least share a drink on their last night together.

Shizuku closed her book and got to her feet. But when she saw the bottle Alisuin was holding up, she frowned.

"Is that the disgusting liquor you brought last time we went to a bar? The one that tastes like cough syrup?"

Oh yeah, I forgot we went drinking together after Ikki won his first selection match.

Back then, Shizuku had only taken a single sip of the strong whiskey before grimacing and chasing it down with an entire glass of water.

"Sorry. I forgot you don't like this. In that case, I'll just—"

"It's okay. I'll drink it with you." Shizuku walked over to the sofa and sat down.

"Are you sure? You don't have to force yourself."

"I'm sure. Today's a special day, after all."

It is? Did something special happen today?

Confused, Alisuin grabbed two glasses and set them down on the coffee table. She then sat down on a chair opposite Shizuku and poured a small measure of the amber whiskey into each of them. She offered one to Shizuku, who took it gingerly.

"Ugh." She grimaced as the medicinal smell of the whiskey hit her nostrils. It would take her a while to acquire this particular taste. "You're a weirdo, you know that, Alice? There's plenty of other alcohol that tastes way better than this."

"Hee hee, I suppose so." Alisuin didn't deny that this whiskey tasted awful. "But when it comes to this particular drink, it would be a problem if it tasted

too good.”

“Why’s that?” Shizuku cocked her head to one side.

Alisuin glanced over at the soot-stained bottle and said, “A long time ago, when I was still a kid, my friends and I would always say, ‘Cool adults *like* drinking this disgusting stuff. That’s why anyone who can drink it is a cool adult.’”

Shizuku burst out laughing.

“Aha ha ha, that’s so cute.”



“Yeah. It’s the kind of logic children would come up with. But in our minds, anyone who could drink this went from being a kid to being an adult.”

“So it was like a rite of passage in your friend group?”

“You could think of it that way, yes.”

“What a naughty kid you were, Alice. You weren’t even old enough to drink back then, were you?”

“The country I came from didn’t have a legal drinking age to begin with.”

Smiling, Alisuin took a sip of her whiskey. The liquid burned as it went down her throat, and the overpowering smell was dizzying. This particular brand of whiskey had such a peculiar taste that it had only a few fans even among whiskey lovers.

“To be honest, I still don’t like this whiskey very much myself,” Alisuin confessed.

“But you still drink it anyway?”

“Because it brings back fond memories. Though I rarely ever drink from this specific bottle.”

“I see... Well, I don’t have any memories associated with it, so it just tastes bad to me.”

With that, Shizuku lifted her glass and downed the whiskey in one gulp. She then scrunched up her face and said, “I don’t think I can have any more. My throat hurts, and the cough syrup taste is so strong that it’s giving me a headache.”

“I told you you didn’t have to force yourself.”

“No, it’s fine. Today’s a special day,” Shizuku said as she rubbed at her throat.

That’s the second time she’s said that. Curious as to why, Alisuin asked, “You said that earlier too. Did something good happen? What’s so special about today?”

Shizuku shook her head and replied, “It’s not special to me, it’s special to you.”

Huh?

Alisuin's heart skipped a beat. Indeed, this was the last night she would get to spend with Shizuku. By the time the sun set again, she would have officially declared her affiliation with Akatsuki Academy. But there was no way Shizuku should have been aware of that.

"What makes you think that?" Alisuin asked, not bothering to hide her surprise.

"Because this is the first time you've ever invited me to join you for something."

It is?

"That's not true. I invited you to go out drinking after Ikki beat the Hunter, didn't I?"

"Back then, you invited me because you wanted to cheer me up after that cow took Onii-sama away from me. You've never actually gotten closer to other people, including me, for your own sake until now. You're sociable and get along with everyone, but you never let anyone get too close to you."

Alisuin gasped. It was true that she had purposely been acting this way since day one. She was friendly to everyone, but she never opened her heart to anyone. In fact, she was careful to make sure no one even tried to get too close to her. After all, she'd infiltrated Hagun in order to betray the school and its students. She thought she'd been natural enough about it that no one had noticed, but it seemed Shizuku had.

Shaking her head in wonder, Alisuin said, "I'm amazed you noticed that, Shizuku. I guess you've been paying more attention to me than I thought."

"Of course I've been paying attention to you," Shizuku said with a smile. "You're my beloved big sister, Alice. And now, you've finally invited me to join you for a drink for your own sake instead of mine. I don't know why today is special to you, but it is, right? So I'll gladly suffer through a glass of whiskey for you. Only one, though. Next time, please pick a drink that doesn't taste disgusting."

Shizuku pouted as she stared at the soot-stained bottle. Her expression was

so cute that Alisuin found herself smiling.

“Hee hee, one glass is more than enough. Thank you, Shizuku.”



Shizuku must have been exhausted, as she started nodding off shortly after finishing her whiskey. Within a few minutes, she was completely asleep.

Come to think of it, when we went to the bar, she fell asleep not long after drinking too. Maybe alcohol just makes her sleepy.

Alisuin gently picked Shizuku up and carried her to the bed. It was warm enough that she wouldn't catch a cold sleeping on the sofa, but that didn't seem very comfortable.

“Mmm... Onii-sama...”

Shizuku wiggled a little in Alisuin's arms.

“Heh. I wonder what kind of dream she's having.”

“Move... I need to kill her... Zzz.”

“S-Seriously, what kind of dream are you *having*?”

Alisuin's expression stiffened a little as she tucked the girl into bed, taking great care not to wake her as she did so. Shizuku smiled in her sleep and snuggled under the covers.

“She really is quite cute...”

Alisuin stared at Shizuku for a few seconds, then went to lie down in her own bed. Shizuku's words flashed through her mind.

“Your big sister, huh?”

Alisuin looked over at the whiskey bottle that was still sitting on the table near the sofa. Feeling a little drowsy, she started reminiscing about the days when that whiskey had meant so much to her—the days before she'd been picked up by Rebellion and become a cold-blooded assassin. After a while, her thoughts turned to darker places, and she recalled the very last day she'd spent with Yuuri as the younger children's big sister.



On that day, it was pouring a freezing rain. It wasn't cold enough out to snow, but the frigid raindrops chilled the body more than snow ever could.

Sheltering beneath a cheap vinyl umbrella, Alice walked up to a tall man—a debt collector for the local mafia. Alice had to give most of the money he made doing work for the mafia to this man, so his share of the profits was quite small, but that was the price one paid for being an underling. Still, the men who worked for the mafia were far from honest.

“Here.”

The money the man handed him was far less than the share he'd been promised.

“You said I would get twenty percent of—”

Before he could finish, the man spat in his face.

“Shut the hell up, brat. You should be thankful we're letting you do business here at all.”

The man looked at Alice like he was trash, then turned on his heel and walked away. After he was out of sight, Alice stuck out his tongue at him.

You were a street urchin once too, you know, Alice thought bitterly as he wiped the spit off his cheek. He then walked over to a corner of the alley and cleared away a pile of snow to reveal a small plastic container wrapped in a pink cloth.

“I hope it didn't get too cold.”

Inside the container was a meat pie a generous customer had given him. The mafia debt collector would have taken it away from him for sure if he'd found it, which was why Alice had hidden it.

“Everyone's gonna be so happy. It's been ages since we've had meat.”

I should share some with the sister too. Oh, but she has that big church meeting in the next town over today.

Alice started down the road home, his desire to see everyone's smiling faces speeding up his steps.

“What...”

But when he returned, he found the door to the shed broken open and barely attached to its hinges. He was used to strife, so he knew immediately that someone must have attacked their tiny home.

“N-No!”

Alice dropped everything he was carrying and ran to the shed. But there was no one inside. It was still early morning, which meant his younger sisters should have still been asleep. The only thing on the bed, however, was the dirty blanket they all shared.

What happened?! Where did everyone go?!

Alice lifted the blanket and gasped in shock. There were bloodstains on the bed, and they were fresh. Looking around, he spotted more leading outside.

The ones outside had nearly been washed away by the rain, but they were still faintly visible. Alice desperately followed them, worried that he might already be too late. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead. The most likely explanation for these bloodstains was that some member of his family had been hurt.

No, it could be anything! Alice told himself, not wanting to believe his family had been hurt.

But reality was merciless. He followed the bloodstains out toward the main street in front of the church—the street opposite the side street he used to go to and from work—and found the exact thing he’d feared.

Ah...

A red-haired girl was slumped against a nearby brick wall, her stomach covered in blood.

“Y-Yuuri!”

Alice ran over to her, and she weakly lifted her head.

“Nh...” She forced her heavy eyelids open and looked up at Alice. “Thank goodness...you’re safe...Alice...”

“What happened?! Who did this?!”

Yuuri’s expression twisted in pain and rage.

“I’m not sure why...but Sergei’s men just suddenly attacked us... They said they were...cleaning up the trash... They took the kids... Fuck... If only I’d been stronger...”

“The mafia attacked you?! B-But why?! We’ve been paying them the protection fee!”

“I don’t know... *Cough, cough!*” Yuuri coughed up blood, staining the icy road.

“Yuuri! D-Don’t force yourself to speak!”

Alice knew he needed to get Yuuri to a doctor, and fast. Fortunately, this was a pretty busy street, and people were starting to notice that a girl was bleeding out on the road.

“Excuse me! Someone, anyone, please call a doctor!” Alice shouted.

However, he was met with silence. Everyone who’d been staring suddenly looked away awkwardly and started walking off. They all pretended they couldn’t hear him.

B-But why?

“Please, I’m begging you! At least let me use your phone! I can pay, I promise!” Alice cried, but once again no one responded.

A few people shot curious glances at Yuuri, but none stuck around for long. No one wanted to get mixed up in this troublesome situation. Alice was flabbergasted by how apathetic everyone was.

Why won’t anyone help? Can’t they see how badly she’s injured?

“Please! I know you can hear me! She’s going to die!”

“Don’t waste...your breath...” Yuuri said, squeezing the words out through the pain. “No one’s going to help us...street urchins... You should know that by now...”

“Ngh!”

Alice knew that Yuuri was right. There was nothing to gain from helping

abandoned, penniless orphans like them. The adults were aware of that, which was why they kept their distance.

“But we’re not like them,” Yuuri added.

“Huh?”

“We’re cool adults. Isn’t that right?”

Alice’s eyes widened as he was reminded of the promise he and Yuuri had made all those years ago when they’d first shaken hands and drunk the burning whiskey. They’d sworn not to live life thinking only of themselves. They’d sworn to become cool adults who loved and helped others.

“Yeah. Yeah, we are! But why are you bringing that up now?”

“Then you have to save them...” Yuuri answered, looking Alice in the eyes. She’d said it as if she’d accepted her death and was entrusting everything to Alice.

Scared, Alice grabbed Yuuri by the shoulders and shouted, “D-Don’t be stupid! Pull yourself together, Yuuri! I can’t do that on my own! I lost to you before, remember?! If we’re going to save them, we have to do it together!”

“Heh heh. *Cough*. You liar... How many years do you think we’ve known each other? I know...that you were holding back...so you didn’t kill me...”

“I—”

“I know you can protect them... You’re strong enough...so...”

“Stop talking like you’re going to die!” Alice screamed, tears streaming down his face.

The light started to fade from Yuuri’s eyes as she muttered, “It’s all...up to you...Alice...”

She closed her eyes, and a second later, her body went limp.

“Yuu...ri?”

Alice shook Yuuri’s shoulders.

“Come on, say something. Please.”

However, her eyes remained closed.

“You can’t lie down here, Yuuri. We promised we’d go south...remember...”

Alice was sobbing uncontrollably now, but still, Yuuri didn’t answer. She couldn’t. Deep down, Alice knew that she’d never open her eyes again.

This was hardly the first time an orphan had died in the streets of this city. In fact, Alice had seen it happen before. But he didn’t want to accept that the place he’d worked so hard to protect could crumble so easily. He didn’t want to accept reality. Even so, the cruel passage of time didn’t even allow Alice the small mercy of denial for more than a few minutes.

“Oh, there he is. Boss, we found the Alice brat.”

“All right, capture him. Make sure you don’t scar his face. With his looks, he’s worth twenty times as much as those other brats.”

Alice heard footsteps approaching from behind. He turned and saw members of the mafia he and Yuuri worked for surrounding him, armed with guns or Devices depending on whether they were Blazers. They pointed their weapons at Alice, and he looked up at them with empty, unfeeling eyes.

“Why? We paid what you asked for,” he asked simply.

“Heh heh. We’re just doing some public service to help out, y’know? The bigwigs at the palace asked us to clean up the streets. And they paid us way more to do it than you’d make in a lifetime. Plus, we’ll get a bonus for selling you off to some brothel, so of course we’d betray you.”

“It’s a dog-eat-dog world out here, kid. Just give up and accept your fate, or we’ll gut you like we did that stupid bitch over there.”

One of the mafia members reached out to grab Alice by the hair. Alice stared intently at the man’s arm as it slowly outstretched.

Yeah, I guess it is a dog-eat-dog world.

These mafia thugs had survived far longer than Alice and the others had, and he could feel the weight behind their words. After all, if what they’d said was wrong, Yuuri wouldn’t have died.

The world wasn’t at fault for what had happened. There was nothing unfair or

unreasonable about this situation. It was Alice and the others' fault for chasing after an ideal version of "cool adults" that didn't exist in reality. Alice understood that painfully well.

But in that case, you can't complain if I steal everything from you either.

The moment the man grabbed Alice's arm, his vision went red, and he was overcome by a boiling rage.

"Raaaaah!"

He didn't remember what happened next. By the time he came back to his senses, he was standing in the mafia's headquarters, covered in blood. The room, too, was covered in blood. The corpses of dozens of mafia members littered the floor, their bodies so badly ravaged that they barely resembled those of humans. Half-crushed organs and bones were scattered all over the room as well. Cowering in a corner were his younger siblings, their teeth chattering.

"E-Eeeek..."

"P-Please...don't...kill us..."

"Aaah..."

They were all staring at Alice, their eyes filled with fear and despair. Gone was the respect and love they usually showed him. He knew he would never see their warm smiles again. Though he'd managed to protect them, he was certain that he'd also lost them.

※ ※ ※

Sometime later, Alice was walking through the streets, not even bothering to carry an umbrella to keep the freezing rain off him. He had no destination in mind and just aimlessly wandered around the city like a ghost. Despite being soaked from head to toe, he didn't care. He was already soaked in blood from earlier, so what difference did a little more liquid make?

Passersby turned to stare at Alice since his clothes were still bloodstained, but none actually tried to speak to him. What did it matter to them if an orphan was on the verge of death? Alice couldn't bring himself to care about that

either. There was no rage or sadness left in his heart. He'd cried out all of his emotions when he'd hugged Yuuri's lifeless body.

But he didn't even mind that they were gone. He thought back to the moment his best friend had gone cold. To the moment his younger siblings had stared at him in fear. If the price of having emotions was feeling the searing pain of losing your loved ones, it was better to not have them at all.

Just then, someone called out to him from behind.

"I never thought I'd get beaten to the punch by a little kid."

Alice slowly turned around, his eyes still empty. The person who'd called out to him was a middle-aged gentleman wearing a black cloak. Having spent as long in the underworld as he had, Alice could instantly tell from the man's demeanor that he wasn't a respectable person. In fact, this man was even more of a scoundrel than the mafia boss Alice had just killed. But Alice felt no fear. He'd cried that emotion out as well.

"Who are you?" he asked in a deadpan voice.

"A foolish assassin who had his target stolen by a kid."

The man went on to explain that he'd been hired by the city's mayor to clear out the mafia trash that ruled these streets. Alice found that incredibly ironic. The very same mafia who'd called him and his family trash was considered trash by someone else.

It's all so stupid.

A cruel smirk formed on Alice's lips and he asked, "So, did you come here to yell at me for taking your prey?"

"Oh no, not at all," the older man replied. "I came here to thank you for making my job easier. Here's your reward."

The gentleman pulled a round object out of his cloak and threw it at Alice's feet. Alice looked down to see an old man's severed head. It was the head of this city's mayor, the man who'd ordered the mafia to kill Alice and his family. Oddly enough, he wasn't very surprised by this turn of events.

"Thank you for the wonderful present," Alice said, and he stomped on the

mayor's head with as much force as he could muster. Once he'd ground the mayor's head to a pulp, he let out a hollow laugh. "Heh... Aha ha ha..."

What a world.

Yuuri had been killed by the mafia, and the mayor had then ordered someone to kill the mafia he'd had kill Yuuri, only to then be killed by this assassin standing in front of Alice. In this moment, Alice was certain that hell wasn't somewhere you went after you died. He was there right now. There could be no universe worse than this. It had been foolish of him to think that he could protect anyone, that he could love anyone in a world this heartless.

We really were morons, weren't we?

"The realization you've come to is correct," the gentleman said in a grave voice. "Love, money, morals, virtue—all of those are meaningless hypocrisies that mankind clings to so they can avert their gaze from reality. From the sole constant truth in this world. The strong steal, and the weak are stolen from. The more powerful being will always get their way. That's the one and only truth of this world. Now that you've come to realize that, you're worthy of becoming one of us. We are Rebellion, a group that seeks to rip away the lies that blanket this world and bring the truth to all. Your assassination skills would be of great value to us. Come with me, boy."

This man was inviting Alice into an even darker place than the one he was standing in now. In a flat voice, he asked, "And if I refuse?"

"I already told you, the one truth of this world is that the strong steal and the weak are stolen from. If you try to say no, I'll just force you to say yes."

The gentleman reached into his coat pocket, his gaze suddenly turning hostile. Alice found that naked hostility almost comforting. The threat of violence was no threat at all to him. The purpose of violence was to steal from others, and he had nothing left that others could take.

"Ha ha ha. I see, I see. Clear-cut and simple. I like it." However, it was precisely because Alice had nothing left that the man's proposition intrigued him. "Sure, I'll come with you. It's not like I have anywhere left to go home to. But I do have one condition."

“And that is?”

“A hundred million. That’s my price. Give me that much and I’ll work for you.”

Alice was asking for a vast sum of money.

“You think an orphaned brat like you is worth a hundred million? You’ve got a pretty high opinion of yourself, boy,” the man said with a frown. After thinking about it for a second, he asked, “And if I refuse?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to spell it out for you. You already know the truth of this world, right?” Alice replied with a smirk. If this man wouldn’t give him the money, he’d steal it from him. It was the kind of reckless arrogance that could only come from having nothing left to lose.

“Heh heh heh heh. I like you, boy. Fine. You can have your hundred million.” Alice’s attitude impressed the man, and he readily agreed to his request. “So, what’s your name?”

“Alice. That’s what everyone calls me, anyway.”

“I’m one of the twelve Numbers of Rebellion, Wallenstein, the One-Armed Sword Master. Welcome to the fold, Alice.”

Wallenstein held his one hand out to Alice for a handshake, and Alice grasped it, sealing their contract. Afterward, Alice gave the money Wallenstein gave him to the sister at the church and told her to use it to help raise his younger brothers and sisters. He then cut all contact with the people in his old life and left town with Wallenstein.

Freed from the burdens of morality, Alice honed his talent for killing under Wallenstein’s tutelage. He became Rebellion’s Black Hand and carried out countless assassinations. That was how the person known as Alisuin Nagi spent the next few years of their life.



What a joke, Alisuin thought with a bitter smile as she thought back to how she’d spent the last half of her life. Though she knew it was just a persona she’d donned while infiltrating Hagun, it was ironic that she’d ended up playing the role of the older sister again. But in less than twenty-four hours, that farce

would come to an end. The false bonds she'd built with Shizuku and the others would be shattered.

I wonder what kind of expression she'll make when she learns the truth.

Alisuin thought back to the looks of fear and disgust her younger siblings had worn when she'd rescued them. They'd looked at her like she was a ruthless murderer. She had no doubt that Shizuku, too, would be disgusted with her for her betrayal. However, that didn't bother her much. After all, she'd only gotten close to the girl as part of her mission. Lorelei was one of the most prominent Rank B Blazers in Hagun, so of course Alisuin had needed to keep tabs on her. That was why she'd played the role of the older sister—to earn Shizuku's trust. She had no attachment to their relationship whatsoever.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

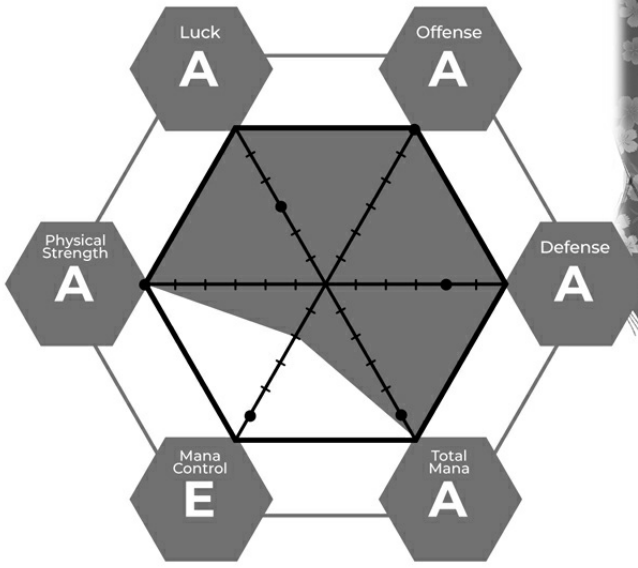
Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Saikyou Nene

■PROFILE

Affiliation: KOK A-League
Blazer Rank: A
Noble Art: Starslammer
Nickname: Demon Princess
Summary: One of Hagun Academy's teachers.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

Our second teacher to be introduced is a currently active KOK league member and ranked third in the world: Saikyou Nene the Demon Princess. She's quite the bombastic figure, which makes her the perfect choice to report on. Her Device is a pair of iron-ribbed fans, and her Blazer power allows her to control gravity. Her strongest Noble Art, Starslammer, pulls space debris down onto her foes at speeds exceeding Earth's escape velocity. In terms of raw power, it's the strongest Noble Art in the world, packing more power than a nuclear warhead. In fact, it's so strong that the Federation has banned the use of it without permission. Despite being overkill against a single enemy, she did use it during the Seven Stars Battle Festival finals when she was a student, in her match against Director Shinguuji (her family name was Takizawa back then). I kind of get why their match was ended and Nene-sensei was disqualified. If Shinguuji-sensei hadn't blocked that attack, there would be a huge crater in Japan right now.

Chapter 3: Akatsuki's Advent

On the evening of the training camp's final day, Oreki Yuuri was sweeping outside the main entrance to Hagun Academy as she waited for the school's representatives to return. When she stopped for a second and leaned onto her broom, a girl in a tracksuit called out to her from behind.

"Hello, Oreki-sensei."

Oreki turned to see a third-year student she recognized. Though they hadn't talked much, Oreki had refereed one of her selection matches.

It took a few seconds for Oreki to remember the student's name, but once she did, she said, "Good evening, Ayatsuji-san. *Cough.*"

"Thank you for not disqualifying me before," Ayase said with a small bow. She was, of course, referring to her match against Ikki.

"Don't thank me, thank Kurogane-kun."

"If you hadn't overlooked my foul play, Oreki-sensei, I'd probably still be stuck in the same rut I was in back then."

"I only did that because Kurogane-kun asked me to. *Cough.* I'm surprised you elected to stay on campus over the summer, though, Ayatsuji-san. I thought you'd want to spend as much time with your father as you can."

"I was planning on going back home to help him with his rehabilitation, but he chased me away. He said I can't afford to slack on my training at this critical time, and that he could handle rehab all on his own."

"Heh heh, that certainly sounds like something the Last Samurai would say."



“He has so much energy even though he just woke up from a two-year coma. I don’t want to disappoint him, so I’ve been continuing my training regimen here.”

“That’s the spirit. Your other teacher is probably training quite hard right now too.” Oreki looked up toward the northern sky.

“Yeah...” Ayase muttered, also looking up. “Kurogane-kun really is amazing. I can’t believe he was able to beat the student council president in that condition.”

“That took me by surprise too.”

“I heard you were the one who administered Kurogane-kun’s entrance exam, Oreki-sensei. Is that true?”

“Cough.” Yes, it is.”

“You must be really perceptive to have realized how strong he is, Sensei.”

Looking at just Kurogane Ikki’s Blazer abilities and mana pool, he was undeniably a Rank F. Hagun Academy normally didn’t even accept Rank F Blazers. The only reason Ikki had been allowed to enroll was because Oreki had noticed the potential within him. At least, that was what Ayase assumed. To her surprise, though, Oreki shook her head.

“Not at all,” Oreki said in an apologetic tone. “Actually, I was ready to fail Kurogane-kun.”

“Really?”

Oreki nodded. Her first impression upon seeing Ikki had been that his lack of the qualities needed to be a Blazer was astounding. After looking at his records, she’d had no intention of letting him enter Hagun. Since it was protocol, however, she’d asked him to try to sell himself as a Blazer and explain why Hagun should accept him.

“What do you think that boy said when I told him to convince me he’d be a valuable addition to Hagun?”

“What did he say?”

“‘I’m strong enough to beat you.’ Can you believe that?” A little kid like him had said that to a teacher. A Rank C teacher and full-fledged Mage-Knight. “I was shocked.”

“H-He does have a lot of confidence in himself.”

“*Cough*. Then, he went and actually beat me in a mock battle, so I had no choice but to pass him. Anyone would after that.”

“I never knew he’d done all that...”

Ayase was impressed by Ikki’s tenacity. He’d likely realized that he would never get accepted into a Blazer school through normal means since he wouldn’t be able to pass the entrance exams. So instead, he’d tried to provoke Oreki and prove his strength to her.

Ikki was lacking in every way that mattered for a Blazer, thus he had no choice but to make up that difference somehow. It was very like him to have forced his way in like that, and Ayase had no doubt that he would do the same thing anytime he found himself up against a seemingly insurmountable wall.

“Oreki-sensei, do you think Kurogane-kun can become the Seven Stars Sovereign?”

Oreki thought for a moment before saying, “I’ve known him for long enough that my opinion is biased, but I do think he’s as strong as any past Seven Stars Sovereign. However...”

“However?”

“Just being as strong as past Seven Stars Sovereigns might not be enough to win this year,” Oreki said with a frown.

“Is that because Kurogane-kun’s older brother is participating? That Rank A knight?”

Oreki nodded, coughing a little.

“That’s part of the reason, at least. But there are also a lot of unknown factors in this year’s tournament. We have first-years whose abilities are unknown representing pretty much every school. The outcome of this tournament will depend greatly on what their powers are.”

“I see. And I guess we have Stella-san. This year really does have a lot of promising new blood.”

Oreki said nothing in response. Ayase was right that there was a lot of promising new blood this year. Historically, there were at most two first-years entering the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Some years, there weren't any. Meanwhile, this year, there were ten first-years entering across all participating schools.

Rather than a sign that this generation showed exceptional promise, however, to Oreki, this seemed an ill omen. It was one thing to have a lot of talented first-years, but why were all of them no-name Blazers with little to no past tournament records?

It's almost as if they were hiding themselves until this moment.

Oreki decided she'd consult with Director Shinguuji and Saikyou about this once they returned from Osaka.

“Hmm? Oreki-sensei, is it just me or are a bunch of people coming this way?” Ayase asked, pointing to the road that led to the main gate.

Oreki looked where she was pointing and saw seven figures heading toward Hagun. It was rare for such a large group to approach the school, especially during summer when there were barely any students staying on campus. What was even stranger was that two of the seven figures appeared to be riding a large animal that looked like a lion. Oreki narrowed her eyes, trying to make out more details.

“Wait, isn't that...”

Oreki's eyes widened in surprise as the figures got closer. She recognized one of them, though she hadn't seen him in a long time.

That's Kurogane Ouma from Bukyoku Academy! What's someone from Bukyoku doing here?!

Oreki didn't get to ponder that question for very long. As the figures drew even closer, Oreki realized that she recognized all of them, not just Ouma. They were all students who'd be participating in the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

That one's from Donrou, that one's from Bunkyo, that one's from Rentei, and... Not only were they all Seven Stars Battle Festival entrants, but everyone but Ouma was one of the mysterious first-years that no one knew anything about. Chills ran down Oreki's spine. *Why have people from every school gathered together and come here? And why does it feel so ominous that they have? And why, just why do they all have their Devices out?!*

Oreki came to a snap decision.

"Ayatsuji-san, run!"

A second later, a girl wearing a thick coat despite it being the middle of summer—Donrou representative Tatara Yui—suddenly rushed forward, closing the distance between her and Ayase. She raised her chainsaw-shaped Device high and swung it down on the defenseless Ayase.

"Huh?"

It all happened so suddenly that Ayase didn't even have time to react. The chainsaw's engine revved loudly as Tatara swung down at Ayase's neck.

"Haaah!"

Oreki immediately summoned her cutlass-shaped Device and blocked the attack. Tatara stumbled backward, and Oreki moved swiftly to take advantage of that opening.

I can worry about what's happening later! Right now, I need to subdue them! It didn't matter if she had to knock them out; she could interrogate them later.

With a flick of her wrist, Oreki swung her cutlass around and slashed at Tatara's neck. She'd brought her Device out in phantom form, so it wouldn't kill. Her goal was ultimately just to incapacitate Tatara.

Oreki's counterattack was so swift that Tatara had no way of blocking or dodging it. But just as the cutlass touched her neck, Tatara smiled and said, "Total Reflect."

A mysterious force knocked Oreki's blade back, sending her flying.



A short while before Hagun was attacked, Ikki and the other students who'd

gone to the training camp were riding the bus home. The trip was an amicable affair for the most part, with people chatting happily and sharing snacks. Stella, however, was in a rather gloomy mood, sitting next to Ikki with her shoulders slumped.

“Haaah...”

“Come on, Stella, cheer up,” Ikki said, trying to encourage her.

“But I wasn’t able to do it...”

Two girls with identical faces, Hagure Kikyou and Hagure Botan, called out to Stella with worried looks on their faces.

“What’s wrong, Stella-chan?”

“Are you getting carsick?”

Ikki waved his hand at them as if to say that there was nothing to worry about and explained, “She’s just disappointed that she couldn’t get more wins than losses against Toudou-san in their matches.”

“Oh yeah, you guys fought a bunch during the training camp. What was the final score like?”

“Three wins and three losses,” Stella said glumly.

Her goal for this training camp had been to definitively beat the Thunderbolt. While she’d managed to tie the score, that wasn’t good enough, hence she was feeling so down.

“Honestly, it’s amazing that you even managed to tie with your student council president,” Botan said, impressed.

“Well, Stella-chan’s a Rank A Blazer, so maybe she feels bad about not being able to beat someone weaker than her?” Kikyou asked.

“I don’t think Touka-san’s weaker than me at all,” Stella rebutted. If anything, she thought Touka was stronger than her. But that was precisely why she’d wanted to improve enough during the training camp was so that she could beat Touka. That would have let her start off on the right foot going into the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Unfortunately, though, she had only been able to match Touka, not surpass her. “Gaaah! This sucks! I’m so mad at myself! Maybe I really

should have just run back to Hagun to blow off steam!”

“I think that might have been a bit too much...” Ikki said with an awkward smile. Of course, even Stella didn’t truly think that she could run all the way to Hagun from Yamagata.

“I guess I’ll distract myself with food,” Stella muttered, pulling three Smickers bars out of her bag and starting to nibble on them, her shoulders still slumped. The Hagure siblings stared at her in disbelief.

“You had three bowls each of udon and ramen for lunch and you’re still hungry?!”

“You’ll get fat if you eat that much...”

Stella shook her head and replied, “It’s fine. I don’t get fat no matter how much I eat.”

Indeed, Stella’s body had the strange ability to whisk calories away somewhere. Despite how much she ate, she was still relatively slender. Ikki’s trained eyes could tell that her muscles were well-developed and that her limbs and torso were completely devoid of needless fat. It was honestly a mystery to him how she was able to maintain her figure with her eating habits, but he’d just accepted that this was how her body worked.

“What?!” the Hagure sisters exclaimed in unison. Their expressions froze over and they turned to each other.

“Botan-chan, she had kitsune, curry, and seafood udon, as well as soy sauce, miso, and tonkotsu ramen. And now she’s eating Smickers bars. Is it possible for anyone to not gain weight after eating all that?”

“Absolutely not. I don’t believe in the supernatural. She’s totally hiding a potbelly under that uniform.”

“H-How rude! I am not! From what I can tell, all the extra calories just go to my chest. I’ve never had to worry about getting fat anywhere else,” Stella said, casually eating through three very fatty candy bars. Though she didn’t notice, Ikki definitely saw the Hagure sisters snap the moment she said that.

“You liaaaaar!” the two of them shouted, jumping out of their seats and

assaulting Stella.

“Whoa?!” Stella cried as they grabbed her by the shoulders, dragged her out of her seat, and pinned her to the floor. “H-Hey, what are you doing?!”

“Shut up! We know you’re hiding all that fat somewhere! Confess now or we’ll examine you by force!”

“I already told you, it all goes to my chest!”

“I refuse to accept that!”

“We’ll uncover the truth if it’s the last thing we do!”

The twins rolled up Stella’s shirt and started squeezing her stomach. Stella blushed and shouted, “Wait, stop! Wh-Where do you think you’re touching?! Ikki, don’t just sit there! Help me!”

“O-Okay! Um, hey, you two. I think that’s en—”

Ikki tried to mediate, but the moment he spoke up, the twins turned to him, their eyes gleaming with bestial rage.

“This is a girls’ fight! Don’t butt in!”

“Eat your Pucky and stay out of this!”

“Uh, right. Sorry.”

“Ikkiiii!”

I’m sorry, but I’m terrified of that look in their eyes. Ikki averted his gaze, choosing wisely not to involve himself in a scuffle that could technically become an international incident.

As the Hagure sisters resumed their “examination” of Stella, Shizuku slid into the now-empty seat next to Ikki. She watched Stella get molested for a few seconds, then said in a joking voice, “If Kusakabe-san were here, she’d be taking a mountain of photos right now.”

“Aha ha, yeah. She’s gonna be so sad when she learns she missed out on this,” Ikki agreed, knowing that Kagami probably would have joined in. He then turned to Alisuin, who was sitting across the aisle from him, and asked, “Kagami-san went off to Hokkaido, right?”

“Yes. She said she wanted to report on Rokuzon’s training camp and left first thing this morning,” Alisuin replied with a nod.

That was, of course, a lie. Alisuin had tied her up and left her somewhere people wouldn’t find her back at the lodge. But at present, Ikki had no reason to doubt Alisuin, and so he didn’t read too deeply into her words.

“It would’ve been nice if she could’ve joined us,” Ikki said, none the wiser.

Even Shizuku, who knew Alisuin quite well, trusted her words completely. She let out a small sigh and said, “Kusakabe-san sure has a lot of stamina. I’m already exhausted after this training camp.”

“Thank you for coming, Shizuku. You were a huge help.”

While iPS capsules were great at healing even life-threatening injuries, they required going under anesthesia and put a large burden on the person’s body. Having a skilled healer like Shizuku around reduced the amount of time people needed to spend recovering and let them train more efficiently. Ikki truly was grateful that Shizuku had come all the way to Yamagata to help out despite not having been chosen as a representative for the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

Shizuku beamed at Ikki, basking in the praise. That smile was one she only ever showed to him—no one else.

“I would do anything for you, Onii-sama.” She held out a box of Pucky sticks to him. “Would you like some?”

“Sure, I’ll take one.”

Ikki wasn’t really fond of sweets, but he would never turn down something Shizuku offered him, so he reached out to take a stick. But just before he could grab one, Shizuku pulled the box away.

Huh?

Ignoring his confusion, Shizuku took a Pucky stick out and placed it between her lips. She then pursed her lips out toward Ikki as if asking for a kiss.

“Mmm.”

“D-Do you want me to take it out of your mouth?!” Ikki asked, flustered. No matter what situation she was in, though, Stella would never let something like

that slide.

“H-Hey! What are you doing to Ikki, Shizuku?!” she shouted, knocking the Hagure sisters aside as if they weighed nothing and jumping to her feet.

“Whoa!”

“Eep!”

The two of them screamed in surprise at how easily she’d batted them away.

“Sexually harassing him, of course,” Shizuku said bluntly.

“Don’t say that like it’s okay! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, doing something like this in public?!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you. Just look at how you’re dressed.”

“Huh?” Confused, Stella looked down at herself. What she saw stunned her. Her shirt was open, revealing her bra, as well as her ample cleavage. Her skirt was halfway off her legs too, and her panties were clearly visible. “Eeeek!”

Blushing furiously, Stella squatted down and covered herself up with her arms. Utakata, who was watching the commotion from a distance, idly commented, “Wow, that’s hot. She looks like she just got raped.”

“Uta-kun, I hope you’re ready for a stern talking-to once we get back to school,” Touka said, glaring menacingly at Utakata.

“Waaah! I shouldn’t have said that! Kanata, save meee!”

“You brought this upon yourself, I’m afraid.”

Stella wasn’t so weak that she’d let a minor setback stop her. She quickly fixed her clothes and walked over to Shizuku.

“Hey, Shizuku, I thought you said you were willing to accept our relationship.”

“You mean admit that you’re Ikki’s girlfriend?”

“Yes!”

“Well, I do admit it.”

“Th-Then stop trying to seduce him!” Stella exclaimed.

Shizuku just scoffed and said, “Sheesh. Don’t get so full of yourself, you cow.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Yes, I may have accepted that you’re Onii-sama’s girlfriend, but that’s all. I still love him like a sister, like a mother, like a friend, and like a mistress.”

“Um, Shizuku?” Ikki said hesitantly. “That last one’s news to me.”

Shizuku ignored him, however. She held out four fingers in front of Stella and declared, “That means I love him four times as much as you do! Do you understand now? Is that clear enough for you?”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all!” Stella’s reaction was understandable considering how ridiculous Shizuku’s logic was. “Stop spouting nonsense and get away from Ikki! That’s my seat!”

“I refuse!”

Stella tried to forcibly drag Shizuku out of her seat, but Shizuku clung to Ikki and refused to budge. Unwilling to make his sister sad, Ikki looked up at Stella and said, “L-Let’s not make a huge fuss about this. It’s dangerous to fight in a moving bus.”

“But...”

“Let Shizuku sit here for now. We’re almost back to Hagun anyway.”

Ikki turned to look out the window as he said that. They’d left the city and were driving up the wooded mountain path to the school grounds. This was the same road Ikki and Stella ran up and down every morning as part of their training routine. They’d reach Hagun in just a few minutes.

“Mrr. Fine. But you have to make it up to me when we get back!”

Stella reluctantly backed off, accepting that it wasn’t worth fighting to get just a few more minutes of sitting next to Ikki. But then, the driver braked hard, and the bus came to a sudden stop.

“Eek!”

“Aaah!”

All the passengers shot forward in their seats.

What’s going on?

“Wh-What’s wrong, Saijou-kun?!” Touka asked, the first to recover from the sudden stop. She got to her feet and ran to the driver’s seat, where Saijou was. He was normally quite calm, but right now, his face was deathly pale as he looked out the windshield. “Did you run over someone?!”

“No...it’s not that...”

With a trembling finger, Saijou pointed in the direction of the school. Ikki and the others, who’d run over a few seconds later, all turned to see what he was staring at.

“Wait...that’s where the campus is, right?” Ikki muttered.

Black smoke was rising from that direction, darkening the evening sky. Everyone stared at the smoke in shock. Everyone except for Alisuin, who sat quietly in her seat.



Saijou floored the accelerator and sped the bus through Hagun’s gates, braking sharply the moment they got onto the campus. As soon as the bus came to a halt, Ikki and the others leaped out the doors and windows.

“This is...terrible...”

Half of the buildings were on fire, and the air was thick with acrid smoke. The asphalt roads were pitted with cracks and craters like someone had dropped a bomb on the school. Students and teachers were lying on the floor, all of them unconscious. This was no mere fire. A battle had clearly taken place here.

“Ikki, look over there!” Stella shouted, pointing. Ikki turned in that direction and saw two familiar faces.

“Oreki-sensei and...Ayatsuji-san?!” The two of them were lying on the ground as well, unconscious. Ikki ran over to them and lifted Ayase off the ground.

“Ayatsuji-san, are you okay?!”

“...”

“It’s no good—she’s out cold. How about Oreki-sensei, Stella?”

“She’s not waking up either. But she doesn’t look injured. Someone just knocked her out.”

Ikki looked down and noticed that Ayase was similarly unhurt. Her clothes were slightly torn, though, as if they'd been slashed through.

"They must have been hit by a Device in phantom form," Ikki muttered.

"Ladiiies aaand gentlemeeen!"

"Wha—"

A cheerful, playful voice rang out through the grounds. It was coming from above, and Ikki and Stella immediately looked up. Standing atop one of the burning school buildings was a tall, slender man dressed like a clown.

"Congratulations on making it back home, representatives of Hagun! We've been waiting for you!"

"Who's that clown?!"

Everyone was taken aback by the man's eccentric appearance—with the exception of Ikki and Touka.

"He's..."

The two of them recognized his face. He was one of the entrants in the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

"You're Bunkyoku's Hiraga Reisen, aren't you?" Touka asked sharply.

The man's red-painted lips curled up into a grin.

"Oh, I'm honored that you've heard of me, Thunderbolt. Heh heh heh, what do you think of the stage we've set up for you? Quite the splendid surprise, wouldn't you say?"

"You're the one responsible for this?"

Hiraga shook his head.

"Oh no, not at all. Or rather, I couldn't have done it all alone."

He jumped off the roof of the school building, revealing a row of other students behind him. As he landed, they all jumped off as well, lining up in front of Ikki and the others.

"Wha?!"

One was a man dressed in traditional Japanese clothes and carrying a long katana—a nodachi. Next came a girl wearing only pants and an apron. After that were a woman in a maid uniform and a girl wearing an eye patch, both riding a lion with jet-black fur. There were two others who followed, and including Hiraga, all seven were dressed in unusual clothes. But though their outfits made them seem ridiculous, Ikki and the others could tell that they were dangerous.

Hiraga pointed to the others and then to himself, and said, “We’re responsible for this. The proud students of Akatsuki Academy.”

This was the first time the students of Akatsuki Academy had publicly declared their affiliation. The seven major Blazer schools in Japan had named themselves after the Japanese names for the seven stars in the Big Dipper, which was why the students at this new eighth school had chosen the name “Akatsuki,” which meant “dawn.”

Ikki and the others just stood there, stunned by the sudden declaration. After all, these students all ostensibly belonged to the six schools other than Hagun. They were even those schools’ official representatives in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Not only that, but one of the members was Ikki and Shizuku’s older brother, Kurogane Ouma. There was also one other student Ikki and Stella had met before.

“Y-You’re that fan of Ikki’s we met at—”

“Aha ha, we meet again, Stella-san, Ikki-kun. I’m so happy to see you again.”

Among the seven people who’d called themselves students of Akatsuki Academy was Amane, the boy Ikki and Stella had met a few days ago during the training camp.

“So this is why you had a bad feeling about him, huh, Ikki?” Stella muttered, nodding in understanding. However, Ikki wasn’t so sure.

I don’t think this is why I felt something off about him, though.

The feeling Ikki had gotten from Amane certainly hadn’t been pleasant, but it wasn’t as though he’d thought Amane was hiding a dark secret or something. Regardless, Ikki knew that now wasn’t the time to ponder such a thing.

“Kyomon, Rokuzon, Bunkyoku, Bukyoku... Why have the representatives of every school other than Hagun gathered here? Would you mind explaining, Nii-san?” Ikki asked Ouma. “And what’s this about ‘Akatsuki Academy?’ I’ve never heard of a school with that name.”

“Shut up.”

However, Ouma dismissed Ikki as if he were nothing more than a fly.

“I’ve cut all ties with the Kurogane clan. Don’t talk to me like I’m family,” Ouma said flatly, not even bothering to look at Ikki or Shizuku. His gaze was focused entirely on Stella.

I can tell that he’s no ordinary Blazer. Just meeting his gaze caused goose bumps to rise on Stella’s arms. All seven of these people exuded an aura of strength, but even among them, Gale Emperor Kurogane Ouma was a cut above. His presence alone was overwhelming. *He’s definitely the strongest one in that group.*

Stella glared back at Ouma, not the least bit daunted. Touka and the others had recovered from their shock and were also beginning to glare at the members of Akatsuki. Seeing as Ouma had neglected to answer, Hiraga decided to enlighten everyone instead.

“Why are we doing this? What’s Akatsuki Academy? Both good questions, young Kurogane Ikki. Allow me to explain. It’s really quite simple. You see, even if there’s students who are qualified to participate in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, the Managing Committee would never let a new school’s students join the tournament without the Mage-Knight Federation’s approval. Thus, we needed to take drastic measures to prove our strength to them. We’ll show the world that a tournament to decide Japan’s strongest Blazer is meaningless unless it also allows people like us to participate!”

“I see. And your way of proving this is crushing Hagun Academy and taking its place as the seventh school in the Seven Stars Battle Festival?”

“Perceptive as always, Thunderbolt. That’s right.”

“Do you really think such a barbaric method will work?”

“The Managing Committee members aren’t idiots. They’ll suspend your entry

if you do this,” Saijou added. This was a clear violation of the law as well, so the authorities wouldn’t just sit by either.

However, Hiraga just smiled and replied, “Heh heh, I’m not so sure about that. We’ll be allowed to participate. You see, the Managing Committee—and the Mage-Knight Federation as a whole—will have no choice but to recognize Akatsuki’s validity. Think about it. If we’re able to destroy a school as powerful as Hagun, they would look like cowards if they barred us from participating in the tournament.”

Hiraga continued speaking.

“The Mage-Knight Federation has a responsibility to train the Blazers of every country that’s a part of it. It would be a political disaster for them if they allowed an educational institution outside its purview to defeat Blazers who are being trained by its officially recognized schools. The only way they’d be able to save face would be to prove that their schools are still superior to us. And to do that, they’ll need to let us compete. Otherwise, the system they spent half a century building up after World War II to monopolize all Blazer schools in Japan will crumble to dust.”

Indeed, the Seven Stars Battle Festival was more than just a tournament. It was a stage for the Mage-Knight Federation to show the people of Japan just how strong the Blazers it had trained were. Only by doing so could it convince Japan’s politicians to allow it to continue operating in their country. Trusting a foreign organization with something so integral to Japan’s national defense force was a big ask, after all.

Naturally, then, if a school that didn’t belong to the Mage-Knight Federation defeated all of the Federation-trained Blazers, it would tarnish the group’s reputation. Japan would stop believing that the Federation was best suited to train its Blazers. And that, in fact, was the goal of the shadowy, massively influential organization that had created Akatsuki Academy and hired Rebellion to help with its plans.

“I’m terribly sorry about this, but I’m afraid that for our plan to work, we need to defeat all of you. I hope you don’t mind becoming our stepping stones.”

The members of Akatsuki summoned their Devices and prepared to attack.

Ikki and the others, of course, replied in kind.

“You really think we’re just going to sit here and let you walk all over us?” This development was sudden enough that everyone was still shaken by what they’d learned. But that wasn’t going to stop them from fighting back. “We won’t go down that easily!”

“We’ll see about that. Heh heh.”

Both sides charged at each other, signaling the start of the battle.



“Thank you for taking the time to come out here on such short notice, Nangou-sensei,” one of Kyomon’s teachers said with a bow as they escorted Nangou Torajirou to the car they’d called to pick him up. Now that all the students had left, the Yamagata lodge that had held the training camp was rather quiet. “I never would have imagined that the instructors we brought wouldn’t be strong enough to serve as worthy opponents.”

“Hoh hoh hoh, don’t worry about it. If anything, *I* should thank *you*. I was hoping I’d get a chance to spar with that boy. He’s really something else, that kid.”

“Is he truly that amazing?” the teacher asked, cocking their head to one side. “I had the opportunity to watch your matches, and you and Ikki-kun just stood there staring at each other the whole time, so I thought perhaps Ikki-kun had been too intimidated by you to make a move.”

“Hoh hoh hoh. I suppose that’s what it would look like to an amateur.”

During the training camp, Ikki and Nangou had sparred three times. Each time, the two of them had silently stared each other down until the timer ran out and the match was over.

To the teacher, their matches had appeared quite lackluster. But Nangou had a very different opinion of the sixty minutes of combat he’d engaged in against Ikki over the course of three rounds. The moment each battle had started, Ikki had begun using a number of subtle movements and changes in line of sight or stance to try to create an opening to attack Nangou from.

Sword masters at Nangou's level were skilled enough that they could immediately cut down any foe who carelessly entered their range. Ikki had known that if he'd jumped in unprepared, he would have been brought down in a single stroke. That was why he'd instead tried everything he could to create an opening in Nangou's stance and slip into his perfectly defended territory.

But Nangou Torajirou was called the War God for a reason. He was the only Japanese Blazer who'd ever won the War God tournament that was held in China. Regardless of what Ikki had tried, Nangou had reacted accordingly, giving him no openings from which to approach. As a result, Ikki had spent every match not moving, but even so, Nangou had been impressed by his mettle.

I never imagined that boy would keep me pinned down like that.

Indeed, while Ikki had been unable to move, the same was true of Nangou. Throughout the sixty minutes they'd fought, Ikki had not once let War God Nangou Torajirou find an opening to strike at him from. None of the mental feints or stance shifts Nangou had attempted had managed to shake Ikki, and in fact, Ikki had tried to make Nangou impatient so that he would leave himself open to a counterattack. To one unskilled in martial arts, it had just looked like two people staring each other down, but Nangou could count on one hand how many times he'd taken part in such an invigorating mental battle.

Had we used our Blazer powers, the outcome would have been different, but... Nangou grinned to himself. "That boy's a better swordsman than even Ryouma was. Who knows how strong he'll become in a few years."

"He must really be something if you're that impressed by him, Nangou-sensei."

"Hoh hoh hoh. That being said, I don't intend to let him beat me no matter—Hmm?" Just then, Nangou came to a halt. "Hmm..."

"Is something the matter, Sensei?" The teacher also came to a halt and turned back to Nangou, who was staring at a small shed off the side of the road.

"What is that building?" Nangou asked.

"It's just a storage shed. It holds quicklime and other materials we use to build training arenas."

“And that’s all?”

“I believe so.”

Nangou stroked his mustache and tilted his head slightly. “Well, that’s odd, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s someone inside,” he said simply.

“Wh-What?!” the teacher cried in shock, turning to the shed. “B-But there shouldn’t be!”

Nangou ignored the teacher and walked over to the shed. The teacher gasped as he summoned his Device, a sword cane, and slashed through the door’s padlock in one clean stroke, all in the blink of an eye. He then opened the door and said, “See?”

“Mmm! Mmmpf!”

There was a girl inside. She’d been gagged and tied up. The teacher walked over, stunned. They recognized this girl.

“Y-You’re from Hagun Academy’s newspaper club, aren’t you?!”

Indeed, the girl who’d been confined here was Kusakabe Kagami.

“Mmmmmrph!”

“Stop struggling, I’m here to free you.”

As he said that, Nangou deftly cut through Kagami’s bonds. As soon as she was free, Kagami took the gag out of her mouth and sucked in a deep breath.

“Hah, hah, hah! Th-Thank god!”

“Wh-What’s going on here?” the teacher asked, panicking slightly.

Kagami shook her head and, with a pant, replied, “I’ll explain later. I need to make a phone call first!”

She had uncovered a bone-chilling truth, and she needed to let her friends know. She also needed to tell them about who’d attacked her. To that end, she dug her student handbook out of her pocket and dialed Ikki’s number. He didn’t

answer, so she cycled through Stella's and Shizuku's numbers in short order. *No one's picking up!*

A chill ran down Kagami's spine. She envisioned her friends lying incapacitated at Alisuin's feet. She knew about Alisuin's Blazer powers and thus knew just how dangerous she could be. If Alisuin really was everyone's enemy, then it wouldn't be hard for her to take Ikki and the others down with a surprise attack.

"Tch!"

Kagami needed to tell everyone about Alisuin's betrayal. Spurred on by desperation, she inputted a series of special commands into her handbook, allowing her to forcibly send a max volume message on speakerphone to any other student handbook that belonged to the same school. She then dialed Ikki's number again.

"Senpai, watch out!" she shouted. "Alice-chan's a spy for another school!"



Kagami's voice rang out through Ikki's phone, reaching everyone's ears.

"Ah?!"

Unfortunately, her warning came a moment too late. It was right as both sides were charging at each other, and right as Alisuin was making her move.

Alisuin stared at the backs of her charging friends and summoned multiple copies of her Device, Darkness Hermit. She spread them out in a fan shape in her hand and took careful aim. This was the moment she'd been waiting for.

Alisuin's Blazer powers allowed her to manipulate shadows, both her own and others'. One of her Noble Arts, Shadow Bind, was a powerful skill that completely sealed the movements of anyone whose shadow she stabbed with Darkness Hermit. No amount of physical or magical strength could break free of this supernatural binding. Not even Stella could escape from it.

The nature of her powers made Alisuin perfectly suited to surprise attacks. That was why she'd infiltrated Hagun, gotten close to its strongest students, and earned their trust—it had all been so that she could get one perfect

surprise attack off against them. As long as this attack succeeded, Akatsuki's victory was guaranteed.

This was the insurance that Akatsuki's sponsors had brought in to make sure the party went off without a hitch. And right now, every Hagun student here had their back turned to Alisuin. They were utterly defenseless. None of them had doubted her in the slightest, which had been a fatal mistake. Kagami's warning was too late for anyone to dodge out of the way.

"Shadow Bind!"

Alisuin mercilessly threw her daggers, and each one landed exactly where she'd been aiming: at the shadows of Akatsuki's Blazers.



Ten minutes earlier, when everyone first saw the smoke rising from Hagun:

"Akatsuki Academy. That's the name of the organization attacking Hagun right now," Alisuin said calmly. As she did so, she used Darkness Hermit to bind everyone on the bus.

"Huh? A-Alice?!"

"What are you doing?!"

Everyone stared at Alisuin, confused. Alisuin looked them over and said, "I'll explain everything, so please stay calm and listen."

She went on to explain that she was an assassin for Rebellion and that Rebellion had been hired by a certain organization to turn the Seven Stars Battle Festival on its head. That organization had sent seven kids living in the underworld to the seven big schools in Japan, and those seven kids would attack Ikki and the others once they reached Hagun.

"My job is to neutralize you with a surprise attack once you arrive at Hagun. That will ensure this plan can't fail. That's why I infiltrated Hagun and got close to all of you."

"You've been deceiving us this whole time?!" Stella shouted.

"This is a really bad joke, Alice," Ikki said with a frown.

“I’m afraid it’s no joke,” Alisuin replied in an unwavering voice, shaking her head. “Everything I said is the truth.”

Upon hearing that Stella and Ikki’s expressions darkened.

“I don’t understand,” Shizuku said quietly. Out of everyone here, she was the one who’d spent the most time with Alisuin. Nevertheless, she didn’t seem terribly upset by her friend’s confession. “Why would you tell us all of this? Isn’t your plan ruined now?”

She had a point. This entire plan hinged on a surprise attack, and Alisuin had spoiled the surprise. Furthermore, it made no sense for her to betray everyone this early if her comrades were waiting for her up ahead.

“Yes, it is,” Alisuin said without hesitation as she turned to Shizuku. She’d already rehearsed these words in her head. “That’s the thing—I *want* to ruin this plan.”

Shizuku was certain that, at this moment, Alisuin was speaking from the heart. Her determination was clear for everyone to see.

“Why, though? Didn’t you infiltrate this school and get close to Shizuku to betray us all at the last minute?” Ikki asked.

“Yes. Yes, I did. But things have changed,” Alisuin replied with a sad smile. “I’ve been hopelessly captivated by Shizuku.”

Alisuin looked Shizuku in the eyes. Despite the twisted household she had grown up in, despite the many obstacles in her way, Shizuku had never lost sight of the one thing she truly cared about. No matter how much it hurt her, no matter what she lost, Shizuku continued to love her brother. Even when Ikki had chosen Stella over her, her love hadn’t waned. It didn’t matter if she wasn’t the one standing by his side; she would continue to love Ikki until her dying breath. Her unwavering love in the face of these hardships was enchantingly beautiful to Alisuin.

Unlike Shizuku, Alisuin had caved before the unreasonable cruelty of the world and given up on the people she loved. However, watching Shizuku had only cemented in Alisuin’s mind that this world was indeed heartless. The strong stole, and the weak were stolen from. Wallenstein had been correct. In

spite of it all, though, Alisuin couldn't bring herself to be the one to steal from Shizuku—from this proud girl who always stayed true to herself. It would mean Alisuin was no better than the mafia who'd taken everything from her.

“That’s why. I have no other reasons. I can no longer bring myself to shatter Shizuku’s dreams or those of the people she holds dear. And I won’t let anyone else destroy them either. But to do that, I need everyone’s help. I won’t be able to protect the pinnacle you’re all aiming for, the Seven Star Battle Festival, alone.”

“You want us to help you betray your school?”

“Yes. The members of Akatsuki are all elite Blazers from the underworld. You’d have a hard time beating them head-on. That’s where I come in. I’ll launch my surprise attack against them instead of you, giving you an opportunity to take them down.”

There was nothing more effective than a betrayal from a trusted ally. That was why Rebellion had sent Alisuin to Hagun in the first place. Alisuin was simply proposing to use that same strategy against Akatsuki instead. It was for this reason that she’d pretended to be loyal to Akatsuki up until the very last moment. There was no other way to ensure that this surprise attack would succeed.

“If Hagun crushes Akatsuki instead, our sponsor’s plans will be ruined. Akatsuki won’t be able to enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival, and we’ll all become wanted criminals instead. You’ll be able to have a fair tournament. So please, help me defeat Akatsuki.”

Alisuin bowed to everyone as she said that. The only thing she cared about was protecting Shizuku and the people Shizuku loved. She didn’t expect this one good deed to be enough to repair a relationship that had been built on lies. She was a murderer who’d been deceiving Shizuku since the day they’d met, after all.

She doubted Shizuku would ever think of her as a sister again. Shizuku would probably be disgusted with her forever, the same way her other younger siblings had been when she’d saved them from the mafia. But she didn’t care. It didn’t matter if she was gone from Shizuku’s life after this as long as she could

protect the things Shizuku held dear. That was all Alisuin cared about.

“H-How can we trust you, though?! Isn’t Rebellion a group of bloodthirsty terrorists?!”

“Yeah! You even said you were an assassin, and you’ve got us all trapped with your daggers! How can we believe anything you say?!”

The Hagure sisters had no way of reading Alisuin’s mind, and so they couldn’t know what she was thinking. The fear and disgust on their faces were things Alisuin was used to seeing at this point. They couldn’t believe they’d been spending time with a murderer. It was horrifying and disgusting.

Alisuin had, of course, been expecting this kind of rejection. Anyone would be scared if they learned that someone they’d been laughing and joking with had actually killed dozens of people. They’d feel like every interaction, every innocuous smile they’d shown that person was now tainted. Alisuin had only ever killed other members of the criminal underworld, but a murderer was still a murderer. She didn’t blame the Hagure sisters for their reaction.

“You’re right, of course. It’s hard to trust the words of a murderer. And it’s true that I betrayed all of your trust once already. But I promise to never show my face in front of any of you again once this battle is over. I won’t ask you to protect me either. If this plan ends with me being gravely injured, you’re free to abandon me. So please, if nothing else, trust that I do want to bring down Akatsuki.”

Alisuin once again bowed her head as she made that request. She knew that all she could do was beg and hope that someone would be willing to trust her. After all, there was no way for her to show everyone what she was really thinking deep down.

Touka narrowed her eyes at Alisuin and said, “There’s something I’m curious about. You mentioned that a powerful organization hired Rebellion to mess up the Seven Stars Battle Festival. What organization is that, exactly?”

“I can’t say. Not yet, at least.”

“Why not?”

“They’re not someone any of us stands a chance against. If I told you, it would

just unsettle you and make it harder to concentrate on the fight at hand. So I can't tell you."

"S-See! She's hiding things from us!"

"There's no way we can trust her!"

"Enough," Touka rebuked with a frown in response to the Hagure sisters' shouts. "Alisuin, if we say we can't trust you, what will you do?"

"Then my only recourse will be to hijack this bus, turn it around, and take you all as far away from here as I can," Alisuin answered without hesitation. She'd been thinking about what to do if no one was willing to go along with her plan. "However, there's no real escape from Akatsuki, so all that would do is buy you some time. I'd much rather make this surprise attack succeed."

"I see. Thank you for your honesty," Touka said in a solemn voice. She organized her thoughts, then turned to Ikki. "What do you think we should do, Kurogane-kun?" She was willing to follow his decision. "Regardless of whether we fight or run, trust Alisuin or don't, the clock's ticking. We don't have time for a thorough debate, so I want you to decide on our course of action as Hagun's team leader. I believe you're best suited to make this decision."

Ikki fell silent, weighing their options. There was no guarantee that Alisuin would keep her word. But as Shizuku had pointed out, Alisuin only stood to lose by telling everyone about Akatsuki's plans. It must have taken a lot of determination for her to betray them.

After thinking about it for a few seconds, Ikki turned to Shizuku and studied her expression. Then, finally, he spoke.

"I think we should trust Alice."



Alisuin's plan went off without a hitch. The members of Akatsuki Academy were pinned by their shadows just as the two sides were about to clash, leaving them completely defenseless.

"Yaaaaah!"

They fell before Hagun's blades, unable to block or dodge. It was an

overwhelming victory.

This was for the best, Alisuin told herself. She'd been able to protect her precious younger sister's—Shizuku's—dream. Now, Ikki and the others would be able to fight fairly in the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

Alisuin smiled to herself, and the other Hagun students all breathed sighs of relief.

"Th-Thank god... Up until the end there, I wasn't sure whether or not we were about to get stabbed in the back," Saijou said. However, while everyone else had felt their Device hit home, Ikki stared down at Intetsu, his expression stiff.

No way. Even though Ouma was lying on the ground in front of him, Ikki felt himself shudder. *What's going on?*

Everything about the Ouma lying in front of Ikki felt real. The aura he'd given off a second before Ikki had cut him down, his voice, his demeanor—all of it had belonged to the real Kurogane Ouma. Ikki had even felt resistance as his blade had sliced through Ouma, telling him that he'd landed a hit on a real person. But even so, Ikki knew that something wasn't right. There was no way his older brother, the famous Gale Emperor, could be unconscious at his feet.

Suddenly, a memory flashed through Ikki's mind. He recalled when Amane had tried to stop the knife attack in Yamagata's shopping district. *"Whoa, hold on a sec! You can't just do that!"* Amane had said that while jumping in faster than Ikki could react. At the time, he'd explained it as one of his Blazer powers. And considering his physical capabilities, he would have had to have started moving before the man started drawing his knife. Otherwise, Ikki would have reached him first.

There were two possible abilities that would explain how Amane had known to act ahead of time. The first was X-ray vision. Had Amane been able to see through the man's pocket, he would have known about the knife and started moving immediately. However, Ikki knew that couldn't be Amane's Blazer power. Kagami had already told him that Shinomiya Amane had been chosen as a representative because he had the rare ability to interfere with fate. Enhanced vision was not a rare ability among Blazers, nor did it have anything to do with manipulating fate.

That left only one explanation: Amane had the power to see into the future.

Oh no!

As realization dawned on him, a piercing chill ran down Ikki's spine.

"Watch out, Alice! This is a trap!" he shouted, turning back to Alisuin. But unfortunately, his warning came too late.

"Huh?!"

Before Alisuin could act, countless blades pierced her back.

"Wha—"

"Alice?"

Alice pitched forward, ten silver blades stuck in her back. Everyone stared in shock.

"Too bad. If you'd noticed a second sooner, you would have made it in time," a cheerful voice said. "But I'm amazed you were able to figure out my power after meeting me just once. You're really something else, Ikki-kun!"

Standing behind Alisuin was Shinomiya Amane, holding numerous silver daggers in either hand.



As Alisuin had been hit with a Device in phantom form, she'd only been knocked out, not killed. Shizuku was the first to react.

"Alice!" she shouted, running over. But that proved to be a mistake.

"Shizuku, don't get distracted! Look out in front of you!"

"Ngh?!"

Ikki's warning came just in time. The air directly in front of Shizuku began to twist and warp.

I recognize this!

Shizuku immediately lifted both of her hands to protect the top of her head. A second later, there was a huge impact on her side, and she was sent flying like a pinball. It was as if she'd been hit by an invisible punch—which was, in fact,

exactly what had happened.

“Huh?!”

Everyone on Hagun’s side looked stunned as the members of Akatsuki they’d just defeated stepped out of seemingly thin air, looking completely unhurt.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Are they all twins?! No, that’s impossible! We knocked all of you out just—”

Renren and Saijou turned back to where the members of Akatsuki should have been lying unconscious, and their jaws dropped open. Collapsed on the ground were wooden dolls painted in roughly the same colors as the members of Akatsuki Academy.

“Wh-What the?!”

“Trick Art. Impressed? My ability lets me make art that looks realer than real,” one of the members of Akatsuki said softly. It was the girl wearing only pants and an apron. She was Sara Bloodlily, a member of Rebellion known as the Bloody da Vinci.

“The people you thought were us were actually puppets that she’d created with her Noble Art,” Hiraga explained. “I used my Black Widow to remotely control them and make them move like real people. And as you can see, we were *actually* hiding behind a refractive barrier that Ouma-kun made for us using his wind powers.”

“So you knew all along that Alice was going to betray you?!”

“Yep. We have a wonderful oracle on our side, after all. Of course, I was careful not to tell our little traitor here that one of our members could see the future,” Hiraga said with a small chuckle. “I still can’t believe Amane-san’s prediction came true, though. Poor Master Wallenstein. He gave Alisuin one last chance, and she threw it away.”

Hiraga then picked up Alisuin’s limp body.

“Please take care of the rest, everyone,” he continued. “Remember, our sponsor wants us to thoroughly crush them so that there’s no doubt we’re the superior school. Show them no mercy. I’ll deliver this traitor back to Sensei.”

Hiraga deftly leaped away, Alisuin slung over his shoulder. Ikki had no intention of letting him go, though.

“Wait!” he shouted, kicking off against the ground. He was fast enough that he’d be able to catch up in no time.

Unfortunately, his brother, Kurogane Ouma, stepped in his path.

“Ouma-niisan!”

“Get lost.”

Ouma swung his long blade, Ryuuzume, without hesitation. It was a horizontal slash aimed at Ikki’s torso. Ikki knew for a fact that he would have to stop and guard with all his might or he’d be cut down.

“Ngh!”

But just as Ikki resigned himself to being pinned down, a flaming golden sword came down on Ouma’s blade.

“Haaah!”

“Stella!”

Indeed, Stella had jumped in to protect Ikki from Ouma. As the two of them clashed, she turned to Ikki and shouted, “Ikki! Shizuku went after Alice!”

“What?!”

Confused, Ikki turned to where Ouma had sent Shizuku flying. She was no longer there. Looking around, he saw her chasing after Hiraga with all her might.

“They let her through on purpose! There’s probably a trap waiting for her up ahead! You can’t let her go alone!”

For a moment, Ikki hesitated. He wasn’t sure if it was okay to leave Stella and the others behind. Fortunately, Touka and the rest of the student council were here, as were the Hagure sisters. They would make sure everything turned out okay even if he went after Shizuku. And he certainly couldn’t just leave her alone.

“Got it! I’ll leave protecting the school to you!”

“Don’t worry, I can beat these guys even without Alice’s help!”

Spurred on by Stella’s words, Ikki once again started sprinting after Hiraga. Stella then turned back to Ouma, the man who looked so very much like her beloved Ikki. Just like the fake Ouma, the real one had his gaze locked on her and her alone.

“You’ve been staring at me this whole time. Do you want to fight me that badly?!” If Sara Bloodlily’s art was realer than real, that meant the real Ouma was as dead set on fighting her as the doll had been. “Fine, I’ll give you your duel, Gale Emperor!”

Naturally, the Crimson Princess would never run from a challenge. Besides, if he was a Rank A Blazer just like her, she was the best suited to fight him.

Stella increased the amount of strength in her arms and pushed Ouma away. As he flew a good thirty meters back, Stella brandished Lævateinn and prepared to throw out her strongest Noble Art, Karsalitio Salamandra. She poured all of her mana into her blade, and the flames around it grew white-hot.

I don’t know how strong he is, but I know he’s strong!

That being the case, Stella needed to go at full throttle from the very start. If that was enough to take her opponent out, that was ideal, but if not, she’d be able to gauge his strength by how he dealt with her attack. It was a wise decision on Stella’s part.

“Hmph,” Ouma scoffed as he stared at Stella. “Don’t bite the dust too quickly, all right?”

Grinning, he countered with his own strongest Noble Art. Funnily enough, his stance was the same as Stella’s. He held his sword up high and started pouring all of his mana into it.

Kurogane Ouma had the power to control wind, hence he was called the Gale Emperor. A whirlwind formed around Ryuuzume, sucking up everything in its vicinity, from rubble to stray flames. He then condensed the whirlwind until it was roughly the same width as his sword, the wind whipping around it so fiercely that it was like a mini tornado.

“Kusanagi.”



He swung his sword down at the same time as Stella. A beam of heat and fire fifty meters long collided with a storming tornado roughly the same length. Sparks flew as the two blades slammed into each other and attempted to devour each other. The immense magic power both of them had used to shape their respective blades started to slip, creating a gusting firestorm around them destroying everything in sight.

“Eeeek!”

The Hagure sisters, who had been the closest to Stella, screamed in pain as they tried to leap away. Everyone else also coated their bodies with mana to protect themselves. Even the farthest people away had to steel themselves or they’d get blown away. And they’d get blown away with enough force that they’d crash into a flaming school building and probably lose consciousness. Everyone was so focused on protecting themselves that they couldn’t interfere even if they wanted to. Most knights would never even see a battle this epic between Blazers.

“Ah!”

Eventually, the delicate balance between flames and wind began to crumble, and it was Stella, the Crimson Princess, who started being pushed back.

A-Are you kidding me?!

Stella had absolute faith in her strength, but she was feeling more pressure on her arms than she ever had before. She dug her heels into the ground, which made the asphalt crack and splinter. This was a new experience for her.

I’m being pushed back in a contest of pure strength?!

She couldn’t hide her surprise. Her plan to gauge how her opponent fought by seeing how he dealt with Karsalitio Salamandra was no longer going to work, because for the first time in her life, she was facing off against someone who could overpower her strongest Noble Art through brute force alone. There was nothing to learn from this except that Ouma had even more mana than her. That wasn’t something Stella had dealt with before, so she didn’t even know what countermeasures to take.

What do I do?

Slowly but surely, the beam of light and fire was being eroded by the spinning tornado, like a rock being slowly bored through by a drill. Then, finally, it pierced through, bisecting the beam created by Karsalitio Salamandra. What remained of Kusanagi's tornado was now coming down on Stella's unguarded head.

Crap!

Since Stella had been holding on until the very last second, she no longer had time to dodge. Furthermore, everyone else was too busy protecting themselves to come to her aid. Stella knew she couldn't dodge. She also knew that if Kusanagi hit, the battle would be over. Thankfully, Toudou Touka was the one person capable of doing more than just protecting herself while this fierce battle raged.

"Stella-san!"

Just before Kusanagi could ravage Stella, Touka sprinted forward using Volt Dash, grabbing Stella and dragging her to safety. The tornado slammed into the ground instead, cutting through the asphalt like it was made of paper.

Stella watched on in awe as the tornado gouged out the ground. Everything in its path had been reduced to rubble, including one of the school buildings off in the distance. There was a fifty-meter-long furrow in the ground, showcasing the extent of the destruction. It was as if a dragon's claw had raked the surface of the earth. No human could take a blow like that and survive.

Th-That was close. If Touka-san hadn't rescued me, I'd...

"Thank you! You saved my— Gah?!" Touka pressed her right hand against the back of Stella's head and delivered a strong electric shock to her brain. "Why..."

"I'm sorry, Stella-san, but I can't let you fight Ouma-san. If the best you can do against me is a draw, then you don't stand a chance against him."

"Ah..."

Stella glared at Touka, but before she could say anything more, she lost consciousness. There was nothing she could do to resist a direct electrical shock to her brain.

“Kikyou-san! Botan-san!”

“Huh?!”

“Eek!”

Touka threw Stella at the Hagure sisters. Though they were surprised, they still managed to catch Stella. When all was said and done, they’d fought their way through Kyomon’s selection battles and were quite strong in their own right.

“Take Stella-san and run as far as you can! We can’t allow all our representatives to be defeated here!” Touka shouted the moment they caught her. Out of everyone here, she had managed to remain the calmest.

Beating all of Akatsuki’s members here certainly would have been the ideal solution, so I don’t blame Stella-san for choosing that course of action. But it’s looking like we’ll have to settle for something less than ideal right now.

Considering how strong Akatsuki’s members were, Touka didn’t think it was possible to defeat them here, especially since her group’s surprise attack had failed. If Stella and the Hagure sisters continued fighting despite the disadvantage they were at, it was possible they’d be beaten so badly that they wouldn’t be in any shape to enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival in a few days. That would let Akatsuki Academy replace Hagun Academy in the tournament, leading to the worst-case scenario.

I need to protect the representatives at all costs!

Touka had been in enough real combat situations that she could keep her cool and continue making the most optimal decisions as the situation rapidly changed.

Overwhelmed by Touka’s fervor, the Hagure sisters nodded and shouted, “Okay!” the Hagure sisters shouted, overwhelmed by Touka’s fervor. Even if they hadn’t thought through everything as far as she had, they knew now wasn’t the time to disobey her. Kikyou, the stronger of the two, slung Stella across her shoulder, and the two of them started running.

“Do you really think we’ll let her escape?” Ouma said in a low voice, and the other members of Akatsuki sprang into action. The girl riding the giant black lion

—Beast Tamer Kazamatsuri Rinna—commanded her steed to chase after the Hagure sisters. Tatara Yui, also known as “Unmovable,” began pursuing them as well.

“Mach Greed!”

“Crescendo Axe!”

However, Renren and Saijou, Runner’s High and the Destroyer, immediately moved in to intercept Tatara and Kazamatsuri.

“Do you really think we’ll let you catch her?” Touka replied blithely, Narukami held at the ready. All the remaining members of Hagun hefted their Devices as well, preparing to fight.

“So, you plan on sacrificing yourselves to let the representatives escape. A wise decision, but you’re only delaying the inevitable.”

At Ouma’s words, the remaining members of Akatsuki brandished their own Devices, determined to plow through the student council. The two sides would clash again, but this time for real. It would be a bloody fight.

“Kana-chan...” Touka said, turning to the girl standing next to her. Toutokubara Kanata was the only member of the student council who would be participating in the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Naturally, Touka wanted her to run too.

“I’m not running. I’ll stay with you until the end, Touka-chan,” Kanata replied without even sparing a glance at Touka. Her gaze was fixed firmly on the enemies before her.

“Okay.”

The two of them had been together since they were kids, and Touka knew how stubborn Kanata could be. Trying to convince her would be pointless, so instead, she elected to encourage her comrades.

“There’s no way we’re letting them just roll over us,” she declared. “We’re Hagun Academy’s student council! It’s time to pay them back for what they did!”

“Yaaaah!” Kanata, Saijou, and Renren shouted in unison.





“Haah...haah...”

Shizuku panted heavily as she ran down the sloped road that connected Hagun and the town below. By the time she reached the town’s shopping district—which was empty at this time of night—her legs and sides were killing her.

I really need to work on my stamina... She clicked her tongue, irritated at herself as she stopped to catch her breath. Though she could no longer see Hiraga, she was still able to measure the distance between them. It seemed as though he’d gotten into a car at some point, as he was moving much faster than a person could run. *I’ve still got his trail, though.*

The moment Alisuin had been kidnapped, Shizuku had attached a thread of mana to her. It was thin enough that it wasn’t visible to the naked eye and connected the two of them in a straight line, ignoring all obstacles along the way. Following it would lead her to Alisuin without fail, though unfortunately, she wouldn’t be able to catch up on foot anymore.

“Excuse me,” she said to a nearby man on a motorcycle as he was waiting for the light to turn green. “I’m a student knight at Hagun Academy. This is an emergency, so could you please lend me your motorcycle for just—”

“Huh?! Don’t screw with me. Why me, huh?”

Shizuku summoned Yoishigure and pointed it at the man’s throat.

“Like I said, this is an emergency. Now please lend me your motorcycle.”

“Of course! My apologies!” The man nodded with a stiff smile, leaped off the motorcycle, and ran away.

Shizuku was in too much of a hurry to have handled things in a more elegant manner. She’d ask the school to return the motorcycle to its owner later. Shizuku straightened the bike and hopped on. But then she realized she’d made a grave mistake.

My legs are too short.

“I can’t believe there was a trap like this waiting for me.”

“You sure this is the time to be messing around, Shizuku?”

Shizuku turned around upon hearing a familiar voice.

“Onii-sama.”

Ikki was standing there, looking not the least bit out of breath. Not wanting to waste any time, Shizuku explained, “They got into a car. Alice is too far for me to catch up to on foot now. So I commandeered this motorcycle, but as you can see, it’s a defective product that doesn’t account for people’s heights. Japanese engineering truly has fallen.”

“I don’t think this is the manufacturer’s fault,” Ikki said with a wry grin. But then his expression turned serious and he walked over to Shizuku. He needed to know how determined she was to chase after Alisuin, who’d betrayed them. “Shizuku, Ouma-niisan isn’t coming after us even though he knows we’re going after Alice. That means he doesn’t think it’s necessary for him to stop us. There’s probably an enemy so strong that we don’t stand a chance against them waiting up ahead. I’m sure you’ve realized that too, right?”

“Yes. I’m aware.”

“Alice betrayed us once before. It’s possible that having us chase after him is the real trap he’s set for us. You realize that’s a possibility, right?”

“Yes. I’m aware.”

“And if Alice really did betray Akatsuki to help us, then if you recall, his wish is for us to make it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. He even told us to abandon him if he got into danger. The last thing he would want is for you to risk yourself for him, right?”

“Yes. I’m aware.”

As Shizuku gave the same response to all three questions, she realized that Ikki had probably come here to take her back. But she wasn’t going to turn around no matter what he said. Even if he was the brother she loved more than anything, she couldn’t do what he wanted her to.

“Onii-sama, does any of that truly matter?” The three things Ikki had asked were of no importance to Shizuku. She looked him straight in the eyes and said,

“Aside from you, Alice is the first person in the world I came to care about. She’s my best friend, and right now, she’s in danger. Nothing else matters. Regardless of who’s waiting for us up ahead, regardless of whether or not this is what Alice would have wanted, I’m going to save her.”

Shizuku’s resolve was unshakable. She knew the risks, but even so, she wanted to rescue the person who was like an older sister to her.

To her surprise, after hearing all of that Ikki smiled.

“Good answer.”

“...Huh?” Shizuku was blindsided by his response. “Didn’t you...come to stop me, Onii-sama?”

“If you’d come here with only half-hearted resolve, I would have dragged you back by the scruff of your neck. But if you’re this determined then I have no reason to stop you.” As he said that, Ikki scooted Shizuku back and hopped onto the motorcycle as well. He then gripped the handlebars and looked over his shoulder at her. “I’ll stick with you until the end, Shizuku.”

If this was what his sister truly desired, then he would do everything in his power to help her.

“Onii-sama...”

Shizuku felt an overwhelming wave of love that squeezed her chest tight. She pressed her forehead against Ikki’s back.

My love ended up unrequited, but...I’m still glad you were my first love, Onii-sama.

“Thank you,” Shizuku said quietly, her voice quivering a little.

“No need to thank me. I’m a big brother, it’s only natural that I’d help my little sister. Now, let’s go. I’ll leave navigation to you.”

“Okay.”

Ikki revved the motorcycle’s engine and sped off toward where Alisuin was being held: Akatsuki Academy.

Hagun Academy Bulletin

Character Intros

Journalist: Kusakabe Kagami

Shinguuji Kurono

■PROFILE

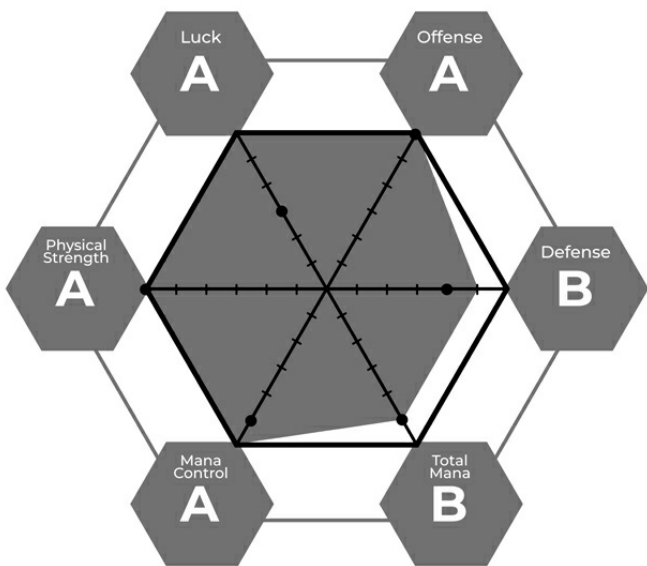
Affiliation: Hagun Academy

Blazer Rank: A

Noble Art: World Crisis

Nickname: World Clock

Summary: Hagun Academy's director.



Kagamin's Thoughts!

And finally, we've got our director, World Clock Shinguuji Kurono-sensei. Her Device is a pair of pistols, and her Blazer power is the ability to control time. Her strongest Noble Art, World Crisis, is a special application of her time powers that warps the flow of time in a localized area, causing space to collapse on itself. It's what she used to stop Nene-sensei's Starslammer in the Seven Stars Battle Festival finals, a truly legendary battle that people still talk about today. But the problem with World Crisis is that the space she destroys with it will never return to normal. It effectively scars the world itself, so the Federation banned the use of this ability as well. She used to be part of the KOK A-League and was ranked third at her peak, but she retired from it after getting married, claiming that she'd found something she cared about more than proving her strength and was no longer interested in risking her life for glory. Basically, she chose being a mom over being a knight. A lot of people complained, but if you ask me, I think it took a lot of courage to make that choice.

Chapter 4: A Premature Confrontation

As the battle between Hagun Academy's student council and Akatsuki Academy raged on, it became increasingly clear that Hagun was at a disadvantage. With the exception of the Gale Emperor, all the members of Akatsuki Academy were skilled Blazers from the criminal underworld. They'd been fighting on bloody battlefields since they were children and were the absolute cream of the crop. Any one of them was fit to be a regular school's top Blazer, and all of them were more than capable of making it to the top eight of the Seven Stars Battle Festival. As a result, Touka and the others were slowly being overwhelmed.

"Grr!"

Tomaru Renren let out a growl of frustration. Her Noble Art, Mach Greed, allowed her to accelerate indefinitely, but while she'd lost battles before, until now, there had never been anyone who had been able to match her speed.

"Cease your futile defiance!"

Even though she'd accelerated to the highest speed her body could withstand, the big black lion was still managing to keep pace with her. Of course, it was no normal lion. This particular lion was stronger and faster than normal ones, and on top of that, it was jettisoning mana to increase its speed.

"Sphinx, my familiar, is no normal beast. I used the power passed down in my bloodline, Hellbind, to brand his body and soul with my unholy stigmata and unleash the latent power within him. No human can withstand his might!" the girl with the eye patch, Kazamatsuri Rinna, said in a theatrical voice.

"What my mistress means is, 'My Device, Binding Collar, can turn whatever animal I collar into my Device. Lions are already stronger than humans, and with the help of mana, they become even stronger!'" her maid, Charlotte, added, translating for her.

"Accept your fate and return to dust, puny human!"

“What my mistress means is, ‘It’ll only hurt more if you struggle, so please stop.’”

“Quit screwing around!” Renren shouted, irritated at the skit Kazamatsuri and Charlotte were putting on.

Regardless, there was no way she was going to stop just because someone told her to. If she stopped moving when her opponent was a lion the size of a truck, she’d be ripped to shreds in no time. The problem was, since the lion could keep up with her, she couldn’t use her usual hit-and-run tactics.

I’ve got it! Renren glanced over at a nearby light pole. *If that lion can match my speed, then I’ll just use its speed against it!* She would use the same thing Ikki had done to defeat her and make the lion eat the force of its speed.

As Renren dashed past the light pole, she grabbed it with her left hand, whirling herself around to run headfirst into the oncoming lion. Her plan was to hit it on the forehead, using both its own speed and the centrifugal force she’d just generated to incapacitate it. At this speed, there was no way it would be able to dodge, and unlike humans, animals couldn’t take up defensive stances.

I’ll end this here!

“Black Bird!”

Renren thrust her fist out, aiming for the lion’s forehead.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! Foolish mortal! You’re still blind to the true nature of this world!” Kazamatsuri shouted. “Did you not understand my earlier proclamation?! My dark powers allow me to do far more than tame wild beasts! Witness the energy lying dormant within my majestic Sphinx and kneel before me! King’s Pressure!”

“Rooooaar!”

The black lion’s eyes glowed an eerie crimson. It let out a bloodcurdling roar, and Renren froze.

“Wha—” she cried. *My body won’t move?!* But she didn’t even have the time to consider what had caused her to go stiff. “Gah!”

Though Renren’s muscles had seized up, she was still traveling at top speed,

and she crashed into the lion. She was, of course, much lighter than it, so she was blown away by its charge. After flying a few dozen meters through the air, she slammed into the concrete and lost consciousness.

“Behold! This is the power my unholy stigmata can draw from my familiar! Anyone caught in Fenri—I mean Sphinx’s cursed gaze is overwhelmed by the king of beasts and shaken to their very soul! This is the power of King’s Pressure!”

“What my mistress means is, ‘Since I turn animals into my Device, I can have them use Noble Arts too. Cool, right?’ She seems quite pleased with herself.”

“Tomaru-san!” Touka shouted, biting her lip as she watched Renren fall.

Renren wasn’t the only one who’d been defeated either. *Saijou-kun, Uta-kun, and even Kana-chan!* Ten minutes after the start of the battle, Touka was the only Hagun Academy student left standing.

“Is there any point in continuing?” Ouma asked in a bored voice.

“Ngh...”

Touka gritted her teeth in frustration. Unlike Renren and the others, she was still unhurt. That wasn’t because she’d been able to fight evenly against Ouma, though. After letting Stella escape, she had determined that, of the people left, she was the only one capable of taking him on. But as she’d squared off against him, he had dematerialized Ryuuzume and stood defenselessly in front of her.

“I have no interest in pointing my blade at a woman who I know is weaker than me,” he’d said, folding his arms and closing his eyes. *“If you wish to be my opponent, prove your worth. Even a scratch is fine, just prove you can hurt me at all. If you manage to draw blood, then I’ll fight you.”*

He hadn’t even considered Touka a worthy opponent. While that had galled her, she’d also known that his arrogance was helping her. Considering how easily he’d overpowered Stella, Touka had known that she wouldn’t be able to win in a battle of brute strength. However, he’d left himself completely open to her strongest attack, giving her the perfect opportunity to take him out while he was still underestimating her.

She’d rushed at Ouma and unleashed her strongest Thunderbolt yet.

Everything had been perfect, from her stance and the way she transferred power to her blade to the angle of the swing and the speed of her sword. Her only mistake had been thinking that Ouma was being overconfident. Her Thunderbolt had landed cleanly, but it had failed to so much as scratch him.

For ten whole minutes, Touka had fired off Thunderbolt after Thunderbolt, attacking him in every way she knew how, yet all she'd accomplished was slicing through his clothes. She felt as though she was swinging her sword into a mountain; Ouma's body was simply too sturdy for her to cut.

How does he have such a solid defense when he's just standing there?!

This phenomenon wasn't unheard of. It would sometimes occur when one Blazer had vastly more mana than another. The same thing had happened when Ikki had fought Stella.

But there shouldn't be that huge of a difference between my and Ouma-san's mana pools, so why can't I hurt him?!

Sensing the question in Touka's mind, Ouma said, "The way we trained ourselves is simply too different. Do you realize now that you don't stand a chance against me?"

"I'm not done yet!"

Touka decided to take a gamble. Now that her allies were down, the rest of Akatsuki's students would probably rush at her soon. She definitely wouldn't be able to stop all of them. This was her last chance to accomplish anything.

If Ouma-san won't attack, then I have to at least land one solid hit on him!

Touka backstepped away to put some distance between her and Ouma before leveling Narukami at his chest. She then manipulated the charge of the air in front of her to create a magnetic field. At the same time, she coated her body with lightning.

"Lightning Flash!"

She jumped into the magnetic field she'd shaped into a tunnel, which accelerated her lightning-coated body to superhuman speeds. She'd created a rail gun and shot herself out of it like a bullet. This was a reckless technique she

still hadn't fully perfected, and she wasn't even sure how practical it was to use in combat. However, the attack it produced had far more destructive power than even her Thunderbolt.

Blood flew through the air as Touka crashed into Ouma. But that blood wasn't Ouma's. Touka's right arm hadn't been able to withstand the force of her own attack, leaving blood spurting from her shredded muscles. Narukami had failed to pierce Ouma's chest, and he hadn't even budged from the impact. He was as immovable as a mountain. But Lightning Flash had succeeded in just barely cutting open Ouma's skin, and a single drop of blood trickled down Narukami's tip.

"What...are you..."

Touka lowered her blade, her destroyed right arm hanging limply at her side. At the same time, she gazed up at Ouma in shock. Her surprise wasn't because he'd managed to withstand her ultimate attack, though. Rather, it was because her thrust had ripped open his shirt, and she saw what lay beneath.

Ouma's chest was covered in scars, to the point that there wasn't a single inch of whole skin. Lacerations, stabs, gunshot wounds, burns—Ouma's chest was covered in old wounds of all sorts. Some hadn't even had time to heal before Ouma had suffered new injuries, and there were knots of scar tissue layered atop each other.

With the advent of iPS capsule technology, most wounds could be healed without leaving a trace. It was exceedingly abnormal to see someone with so many scars in this day and age. For the first time, Touka was *afraid* of Kurogane Ouma.

"What happened to you after you left elementary school? What did you do?" Touka couldn't fathom how many life-or-death battles it must have taken for Ouma to end up like this in the five years since he'd vanished from the public eye.

"I have no interest in talking about myself," Ouma replied. He then shook his head and added, "Or rather, there's nothing to say. I threw away everything worth talking about. My parents, my siblings, and even my name are all gone. All that remain to me now are this blade and the oath I swore upon it."

Ouma resummoned Ryuuzume into his hand.

“Ngh!”

“I suppose this does count as drawing blood. As promised, I’ll give you a real fight now.” A whirlwind whipped up around his blade, sucking in everything nearby. He was planning on using the same technique that had crushed Stella’s Karsalatio Salamandra. “Kusanagi.”

The recoil of using Lightning Flash had caused Touka’s muscles to seize up, so she could only stand there doing nothing as Ouma swung his blade down at her.

I’m sorry, everyone...

The merciless vortex of wind buffeted Touka, sending her flying and knocking her unconscious.



Once they’d defeated the members of Hagun’s student council, Shinomiya Amane let out a long sigh. The sun had long since set, and the sky was dark.

“Phew. That took longer than expected.”

“Geh heh heh, that’s because you idiots took forever,” Tatara grumbled, dragging her chainsaw along the ground as she walked over. “I beat my opponent right away.”

“Ku ku ku. Bold words from someone who was graced by the blessings of the stars, Unmovable,” Kazamatsuri replied.

“What my mistress means is, ‘You were lucky you had a favorable matchup against your opponent, so don’t try to act like you’re better than us.’”

“What was that, bitch? You wanna go? We can find out if I’ve got a favorable matchup against you too!”

“An enticing proposal.” Kazamatsuri grinned and brought a hand up to the eye patch covering her right eye. “It’s too late to regret your foolishness now! Watch as I unseal the power of my Twilight Eye!”

“It’s the same damn red color as your left eye,” Tatara said, looking unimpressed.

“Mistress, you forgot your color contact.”

“...Bwa ha ha ha. I appear to have expended all of my mana. Count yourself lucky, Unmovable.”

With Hiraga-san gone, I guess it's up to me to take charge, huh? Amane thought. Then, sighing, he said, “Stop joking around, you two. Our job's not done yet. We need to chase after Stella-san and Ikki-kun. Let's split up into two groups.”

Though Amane seemed ready to step into a leadership role, Ouma shook his head and replied, “There's no need to split up.”

“Huh? Why not, Ouma-san?”

“My younger siblings have headed straight into a death trap. They would be hard-pressed to beat even the One-Armed Sword Master, but don't forget, we have a guest at the academy tonight.”

Upon hearing that, Amane recalled who was visiting their school, which was hidden on the outskirts of Tokyo. A certain someone had been offered a room there while she was in the city.

“I forgot she was staying at Akatsuki Academy today,” Amane said.

“Yeah. They don't stand a chance against her. We should chase after the Crimson Princess together,” Ouma said, and Amane nodded.

Though their guest wasn't part of the plan to upstage the Seven Stars Battle Festival, she was a principled woman. As thanks for lending her a place to stay, she would likely defeat Ikki and Shizuku for Akatsuki. Indeed, there was no need for anyone else to go if she was there.

“I've gotta say, though, you sure are calm about their impending demise. Aren't you worried about them?” Amane asked.

“A pointless question. I abandoned my family ties long ago. I don't care what happens to them now,” Ouma said dismissively.

“Aha ha, poor Ikki-kun. He sure has a heartless family.”

“Hmph. If anything, it strikes me as strange that *you* aren't worried about him. Aren't you one of his fans?”

“Me, worried? Aha ha ha. As if.” Amane let out a hearty laugh. “I have no reason to be worried. If anything, I’m overjoyed. Ikki-kun needs to suffer even more. He needs to feel even greater pain. He shines the brightest when overcoming unreasonable odds and unfathomable suffering, after all. That’s what makes his story as the Worst One so special.”

The greater Ikki-kun’s despair, the better.

What Amane wanted to see was Ikki continuing to struggle against his fate even when he was at the end of his tether and coughing up blood.

“You see, that’s why I love Ikki-kun!” the boy continued. “And that’s why I want to fuck him up even more!”

“Geh heh heh, I forgot how insane you were,” Tataru said with a laugh.

“Mrr, that’s so mean. Isn’t it normal for a fan to want to see their idol at their coolest?” Amane replied, puffing out his cheeks.

Just then, his student handbook beeped. He took it out and saw that he had a message from Hiraga Reisen. It seemed he’d handed Alisuin off to Wallenstein and was now headed back to meet up with everyone. The fact that he’d texted Amane made it clear that he expected Amane to be the acting leader while he was away. Amane let Hiraga know that they were going to chase after Stella and put his handbook away.

“All right, let’s go capture our wayward princess,” Amane said, and everyone ran off after Stella and the Hagure sisters.



At around the same time, the teachers of Hagun were finally making their move.

“Dammit! I can’t believe the planes are grounded today of all days!” Demon Princess Saikyou Nene shouted, her elegant kimono fluttering in the wind as she ran.

“I know, right?” Shinguuji Kurono, the World Clock, replied as she ran side by side with her.

For the past week, the two of them had been in Osaka helping set up for the

Seven Stars Battle Festival. They'd received an urgent message from the teachers still in Hagun, however, and were currently on their way back to Tokyo. The fastest way there was by plane, but unfortunately, there were apparently issues on the runway at Osaka's airport, so all flights were grounded. For that reason, the two of them had opted to run back to Tokyo along the most direct route: the railway tracks the Tokyo-Osaka bullet train ran on. With their Blazer abilities, the two of them could run much faster than the train.

"It's possible they were grounded on purpose just for today, though," Kurono mused.

"Don't say that," Saikyou said with a frown. "I don't even wanna *think* about the implications of that."

At present, Kurono and Saikyou didn't have too much information to go off of. All they'd been told was that representatives of other schools had come to attack Hagun. They didn't know why the other representatives had attacked, but the two of them had a feeling there was more to this attack than met the eye. This attack wasn't being reported on at all, and it didn't feel like a coincidence that planes out of Osaka airport had conveniently been halted just a few minutes ago. It seemed like a highly influential organization was pulling the strings behind the scenes.

"Well, we'll know for sure either way once we get back to Hagun. That's why we—"

Both of them gasped suddenly, the words "need to hurry" dying unsaid on Kurono's lips. Time was of the essence, but Kurono and Saikyou just stood there, feeling as if they were being buffeted by a ferocious gale.

In reality, there was no wind blowing. The sea off in the distance was calm. Nevertheless, the two world-class knights were extremely shaken. Cold sweat poured down their foreheads, and their legs started to tremble.

It wasn't wind that had stopped them but a violent bladelust. Though its origin point was all the way in Tokyo, they both felt as though there was a sword held against their neck. They could only sense this aura because the two of them were such skilled knights, but that was also why they couldn't move. It was too dangerous to get closer to the source of that enmity. Their instincts

were telling them to run away.

“D-Doesn’t that bladelust belong to...”

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me. If *she’s* with the enemy, we’re in deep shit!”

Kurono and Saikyou recognized this sensation. There was only one person in the world who gave off such an aura.

“It only lasted for a second. That was just a warning for someone... Oh no! Nene, we have to hurry!”

“Y-You don’t need to tell me twice!”

Both of them paled and started running even faster than before, pushing their bodies to the limit.

The only person who could possibly interest her enough that she’d unleash her bladelust is Kurogane! Closing her eyes, Kurono prayed, Don’t be hasty, Kurogane! It’s too soon for you to challenge her!



Shizuku directed Ikki to the outskirts of the city and down a rural mountain road. At the very end of that road sat an inconspicuous building Ikki assumed had to be Akatsuki Academy. As he drove through the open gates and onto the deserted grounds, he suddenly felt an intense pressure.

“Hrrrngh!”

Ikki braked harshly as an overwhelming bladelust bore down on him.

“O-Onii-sama?! What’s wrong?!” Shizuku asked, confused by the sudden braking. She wasn’t a martial artist, so she couldn’t sense what he could, which was that they had entered the territory of a master.

Ikki was so tense he couldn’t even give Shizuku a response. It took him a few seconds to overcome his fear and steady his breathing. He silently summoned Intetsu and looked up at the rooftop of Akatsuki Academy. Standing there was a woman dressed in all white and holding a sword in each hand. She was glowing faintly and looked as beautiful as the moon. It was like Ikki was staring at one of the Valkyries from Norse mythology.



“Is she an enemy?!” Shizuku shouted, following Ikki’s gaze. She jumped off the motorcycle and summoned Yoishigure.

However, the woman in white ignored Shizuku, her beautiful eyes trained solely on Ikki. Ikki could tell she had no interest in Shizuku, and he came to a decision.

“Shizuku. Alice is in that building, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. I’m sure of it.”

“Then go on ahead. I’ll take care of things here.”

“Akatsuki is the one who launched a surprise attack. We have no obligation to fight their members one-on—”

“Please, Shizuku. Go.”

Ikki’s tone brooked no disagreement.

“Oniisama?” Shizuku turned to Ikki and gasped when she saw his expression. This was the first time she’d seen him look so uneasy. “Is she that strong?”

“Yeah.”

“Then that’s all the more reason we should fight her—”

“No.” Ikki shook his head. “I came here prepared to do whatever it takes to help you accomplish your goals. If we can’t rescue Alice, there was no point in doing this. You have to go now or it might be too late. Leave this woman to me.”

Ikki stubbornly refused Shizuku’s help. At this point, even Shizuku could tell that he was really saying “If you stay here, I won’t be able to protect you.” That was how strong the woman in white was.

“Fine,” Shizuku said with a nod. “Please hold her back for me, Oniisama.”

Shizuku decided to leave things here to Ikki and ran into the school building. The woman in white did nothing to stop her. The entire time, her gaze remained fixed on Ikki.

“I see you let Shizuku through,” Ikki said.

“Yes. Sir Wallenstein is inside, you see. Besides, it will take basically the same amount of time to defeat both of you as it will to defeat you and chase after her.”

There was a lilt to the woman’s voice, which was elegant and refined.

“Knowing you, that’s not an exaggeration,” Ikki noted, his voice cracking a little.

I’m in big trouble. Akatsuki is supposed to be a school, so it makes sense that there’d be teachers, but still. Considering how strong the students were, Ikki had been prepared to face off against some truly powerful teachers. Rank A Blazers at the very least. *I certainly didn’t expect to run into her.*

Indeed, Ikki knew who this woman who looked like a pure white Valkyrie was.

“Everyone who lives by the way of the sword has heard of you. That divine appearance, and those swords that look like a pair of wings. You’re the world’s least wanted criminal—the Mage-Knight Federation officially gave up on trying to capture you because you’re too strong. And you’ve walked further down the path of swordsmanship than anyone else alive. The world’s strongest swordsman, Edelweiss the Twin Wings. Am I wrong?”

“Indeed, I am the one they call the Twin Wings.” Edelweiss nodded, then asked in a curious voice, “But I don’t understand. If you know who I am, why draw your blade? You’re clearly a skilled enough swordsman to know just how large the gap in strength between us is. You wouldn’t be so terrified if you weren’t.”

“I was trying not to let that show, but I guess you saw right through me,” Ikki said with a pained smile. In truth, he knew full well just how outclassed he was. *I’m being extremely reckless right now.*

Because of how skilled he was, Ikki knew without a shadow of a doubt that he couldn’t win. His opponent was quite literally one of the strongest Blazers in the world. She was on a completely different level than anyone he’d faced thus far—so far beyond the champions of the Seven Stars Battle Festival that it was foolish to even compare them. She was the kind of opponent Ikki could only hope to stand a chance against after years, possibly decades of constant training and dedicating himself wholeheartedly to the way of the sword.

As he was now, he didn't stand a chance. He'd met her too soon. At this stage in his life, he wouldn't even be able to put up a proper fight. Edelweiss knew that too, and she'd gone out of her way to ask him if he was still going to fight. She was giving him a chance to run away.

She's kind, Ikki thought, realizing what she was doing. He suspected that if he turned back, she wouldn't chase him. Though the world called her a criminal, he could tell that she was truly kindhearted. *Unfortunately, though, I can't just say "Sorry for bothering you" and walk away.*

Ikki was certainly terrified. So much so that the weight of Edelweiss's gaze alone was enough to make his knees tremble and his teeth chatter. This was the first time he'd ever been this afraid of a fight. But even so, he had a reason to stay no matter how scared he was.

"That's a surprise. I never imagined that the world's strongest swordswoman would ask someone who's drawn their blade if they want to fight," Ikki said, smiling and trying his best to sound braver than he felt. He pointed his jet-black blade at the pure white swordswoman, making his intentions clear.

"True. I suppose it was an unnecessary question," Edelweiss responded with a nod. "I am not part of the Akatsuki operation, nor do I bear any ill will toward you. But I'm afraid I cannot let you pass. I owe these people a debt for letting me stay here." She leaped off the roof and alighted on the ground without a sound. It was as if she'd glided down on wings.

"Nrgh!"

The moment she stepped onto the ground, Ikki felt a wave of terror so powerful rush over him that he thought his heart might burst. His instincts were screaming at him to run. To please, for the love of god, just run. Otherwise, he'd die here. But Ikki gritted his teeth and met Edelweiss's bladelust head-on.

"I am the harbinger of the end atop the distant peak. The twin swords that cleave the earth. I am Edelweiss the Twin Wings. Young man, it is time you learned how vast the world truly is."

Thus, the battle between Worst One Kurogane Ikki and Twin Wings Edelweiss began.



At around the same time, Alisuin finally regained consciousness.

“Nnngh...”

She slowly opened her eyes, having finally recovered after being stabbed with Amane’s phantom form knives.

Where...

She looked up and quickly analyzed the situation. The high, well-lit ceiling and slight breeze told her that she was in a large, open room. The deep chill that permeated the air despite it being late summer told her that she was underground.

“Finally awake, huh?”

“Ah!”

Alisuin tried to jump to her feet when she heard that voice, only to realize she couldn’t.

My arms and legs are tied...

She wasn’t bound by regular rope either. The piano-wire-thin strings wrapped around her were clearly Hiraga Reisen the Jester’s Black Widow.

“You utter fool.”

A figure stepped in front of Alisuin, casting their shadow over her. She looked up and saw the face of an old man she recognized very well.

“Wallenstein...” Wallenstein kicked her in the stomach. “Rngh!”

“That’s ‘*Master* Wallenstein’ to you.”

The pain shocked her wide awake, and she quickly realized what was going on.

I failed.

Akatsuki had known that she would betray them and planned accordingly.

But it doesn’t make any sense. Alisuin was certain she hadn’t done anything that would have made the others suspicious of her. “How did you know I was

going to betray you?”

“One of the students’ powers. That’s the only thing that tipped us off.”

“I see...”

That made sense to Alisuin. There was no logical reason for the other members of Akatsuki to have suspected her, so a Blazer’s powers were the only possible explanation. Considering how varied Blazer abilities tended to be, it wasn’t that surprising.

It’s truly a shame I wasn’t able to figure out who the rest of Akatsuki’s members were ahead of time.

There was no point in regretting it now, though.

“At first, I doubted his prediction. Out of all the members we gathered for Akatsuki, you were the most loyal, the most obedient. I just couldn’t believe that you would betray us.”

“I didn’t realize you trusted me so much.”

“Of course I did. I’m the one who found you all those years ago. That’s why I’d hoped that prediction was a lie, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding. I’d wanted to believe in you. And until today, until the moment you actually betrayed us, I’d had faith in you. And yet...” Wallenstein snarled and shouted, “Why?! *Why?! Why?* Why did you betray me?! I had such high hopes for you!”

“Gah! Rngh!”

He stomped on Alisuin’s stomach over and over.

“I thought you understood! I thought you knew how pointless it was to love anything in this empty world full of lies! I taught you that! So why did you go and make the same mistake again?! I thought you abandoned those worthless emotions the day you learned the truth of this world!”

“Cough, cough!”

Alisuin started coughing up blood. Her ribs had been broken, and her internal organs were likely bleeding. But Wallenstein continued beating on her, venting all of his rage. It was precisely because he knew Alisuin’s past that he couldn’t understand why the prodigious assassin he’d trained would once again foolishly

attempt to fight against a power greater than her.

“Answer me! Why?!”

Wallenstein finally stopped kicking Alisuin. He was panting from how much he'd exerted himself, but his rage was still burning white-hot. In response, Alisuin smiled sadly, blood leaking from her lips.

“Sure, I'll tell you. I was planning to anyway.”

Back then, when Yuuri had died, Alisuin really had intended to abandon everything and everyone dear to her. That was why she'd asked Wallenstein for money. By giving the sister at the church enough money to look after Alisuin's siblings until they were adults, she'd be able to completely cut ties with them.

After receiving the money from Wallenstein, she'd gone to the sister and told her everything—that she'd slaughtered all of the local mafia, and that she'd sold herself off as an assassin. To her surprise, when she was done, the sister had walked into the shed behind the church and brought back the green liquor bottle.

Crying, the sister had said, *“Take this with you. You need it more than anyone else. Someday, I hope you can remember the person you wanted to be. The people you and Yuuri swore you'd be when you first drank from this bottle.”*

Alisuin hadn't intended to take the bottle. After all, it belonged to the two children who'd sworn to become people who could love and protect others despite never having received love or protection from the adults around them. Moreover, it was just another stark reminder that Yuuri was no longer here.

Not wanting to so much as look at that bottle, Alisuin had thought about just tossing it somewhere before heading back to Wallenstein. She'd known that she could never bring herself to fully hate this world while she still held on to it.

“But in the end, I wasn't able to throw it away.”

No matter how much blood had stained her hands, no matter how far she'd fallen, she hadn't been able to get rid of that bottle. And years later, she'd finally met another person she was willing to risk everything to protect.

“After meeting Shizuku, I finally remembered what kind of adult I really

wanted to become. I was lost, I was a killer, but through it all, I just couldn't abandon that wish." That was why Alisuin had decided that even if it meant Shizuku learned who she truly was and forever stopped thinking of her as a big sister, she'd do everything she could for the girl who'd helped her find herself again. "I'll protect her and her dreams no matter what! I won't let you guys have your way with the Seven Stars Battle Festival!"

Alisuin freed herself from her bonds and leaped to her feet. A skilled assassin like her could easily deal with such flimsy restraints. She summoned Darkness Hermit and prepared to throw it at Wallenstein's shadow.

"Pathetic."

Before she could, however, Wallenstein kicked her in the stomach once more. He'd clearly seen the attack coming. As the one who'd trained Alisuin, he knew full well that the famous Black Hand wouldn't be constrained so easily, hence he'd been able to react the moment she'd gotten up.

"Gah!"

Darkness Hermit slipped from Alisuin's fingers, and she crumpled to the floor.

"I understand now just how foolish you are. You've fallen for that girl, haven't you?" Wallenstein said, looking down at her as she gasped for air. A cruel smile spread across his lips. "In that case, this is perfect."

"Huh?"

What do you mean, "perfect"?

Before Alisuin could ask, a section of the underground training arena's ceiling caved in, a giant ball of water falling through the newly created hole. The hemispherical globe maintained its shape even after hitting the ground, and standing inside it was someone extremely familiar to Alisuin.

"Sh-Shizuku?!"

Lorelei Kurogane Shizuku had made her entrance.



"I finally found you, Alice," Shizuku said softly. Upon seeing her, Alisuin paled.

“Wh-What are you doing here?! I told you to abandon me if anything happened!”

“Yes, you did.”

“Then why—”

“But I don’t recall ever agreeing to do so.”

“Wha—” Alisuin was at a loss for words. While it was true that Shizuku had never agreed, she’d assumed Shizuku wouldn’t bother chasing after her. *Why...*

“I’m a murderer, you know. And I’ve been deceiving you all this time,” Alisuin continued, her expression pained. She thought back to that day she’d slaughtered the mafia. She recalled her younger siblings’ terrified expressions as they’d looked at her, soaked in blood. She was a merciless killer unworthy of being saved by anyone, let alone Shizuku. “So why...”

“Because I care about you, Alice. Why else would I be here?” Shizuku replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. There wasn’t a hint of fear or disgust in her voice. She looked kindly down upon Alisuin the same way she had before she’d learned that her roommate was a cold-blooded killer. “It doesn’t matter what secrets you’re hiding or what sins you committed in the past. The Alice I know is cool and fashionable, always knows how to calm me down, is great at doing people’s hair, is better at makeup than anyone I know, always listens to my worries and gives good advice, always knows how to cheer me up, fought her hardest to protect me and Oniisama, and is my one and only friend. And more than any of those things, you’re my big sister. That’s all that matters to me.”

“Shizuku...”

“Please don’t assume I don’t care about you as much as you care about me. Because I do. There’s no way I’m letting scum like him take you away.”

“Ah...”

Alisuin once again found herself at a loss for words. The emotions welling up within her were too powerful to put into words. She’d thought Shizuku would hate her. She’d thought Shizuku would give her the same disgusted look her siblings had. And yet, here Shizuku was, telling Alisuin that she still cared about

her. This was far more than Alisuin could have ever hoped for, and it made her think that maybe, just maybe...

Shizuku, I...

"All right, enough of the sappy reunion," Wallenstein said, digging his heel into Alisuin's back.

"Gah!" Alisuin cried out in pain. She could feel her organs being crushed and was coughing up even more blood.

"You just lie there and watch as I show you what the price for betrayal is," Wallenstein said as he looked coldly down at her. He then summoned a greatsword into his right hand and turned to Shizuku.

At that moment, Alisuin finally realized why Wallenstein had said this was perfect. He was planning to kill Shizuku right in front of her.

"Stop... Cough."

Her diaphragm had been so badly hurt that she could barely talk. All she could do was pray.

Shizuku, please run! Alisuin had been Wallenstein's disciple for years. She knew just how dangerous the One-Armed Sword Master was. His Noble Art gave him unparalleled offensive and defensive power. *Your water powers are useless against him! You have to run!*

Unfortunately, her thoughts couldn't reach Shizuku. Even if they could, she doubted Shizuku would listen. After all, Shizuku had come here determined to bring her back.

As Wallenstein started slowly walking toward her, Shizuku said, "I take it you're Ouma-oniisama's boss?"

"Wallenstein. A member of Rebellion."

"I don't care what your name is. Give Alice back. That's my only demand."

"Do you really think I'll do that just because you asked?"

"No, but I thought I should ask anyway. That way, if I kill you, no one can blame me for not trying to negotiate first."

Still within her orb of water, Shizuku waved Yoishigure like a conductor's baton. A portion of that water formed into the shape of a whip. At the end of the whip was a spiked hammer, which she then froze and swung down at Wallenstein with all her might.



The ice hammer slammed into the ground with a deafening roar and kicked up a huge cloud of dust.

"You're quite vicious, girl."

The ice hammer had fallen slightly to the side of Wallenstein. Completely unhurt, he continued walking toward Shizuku. Had the hammer hit its mark, it would have turned a regular person into a bloody smear. Of course, Shizuku wasn't so soft that she'd hesitated to kill and missed on purpose. Among their friend group, she was without a doubt the most ruthless. And right now, she was fighting seriously. She had intended to murder Wallenstein with that attack. However, her hammer had missed.

Did he dodge?

As far as Shizuku could tell, Wallenstein hadn't moved at all when the hammer had come down. And her mana control was among the best in the world, so there was no way she'd missed. He must have used some kind of ability.

But it doesn't matter what your ability is.

Shizuku didn't know what Wallenstein's power might be, but if he could use it to dodge, she'd just bombard him with a barrage so heavy that there was no room for him to do so.

"Frost Field."

She started by freezing the ground to hopefully limit his movement.

"Bloodstorm."

Spikes of water jutted out of her sphere like quills on a hedgehog.

"Fire."

She launched those spikes out in all directions. Tens of thousands of highly pressurized water bullets were sent slamming into every inch of the arena, creating gouges and cracks all over it.

Shizuku was controlling far more water than she had been while fighting Touka. The reason for that was simple: Touka, the Thunderbolt, was a lightning user. As a water user, Shizuku had needed to make sure every drop of water she used was pure to prevent it from conducting electricity. Because of that, the volume of water she'd been able to control had been limited.

That wasn't something she had to worry about against Wallenstein, though, so against him, she could control hundreds of times as much water at once. She blasted holes into the walls, the floor, and even the ceiling. The only section of the training arena being spared her assault was where Alisuin was lying, leaving nowhere in the room for a person to dodge. Thus, Wallenstein was unable to avoid the all-encompassing barrage, and a number of Shizuku's water bullets hit their target.

"What?!"

And yet, they appeared to have no effect whatsoever. The projectiles had enough force to rip through a person's flesh, but they just slid off him like they were nothing. Not only that, but Wallenstein was also still walking forward, seemingly unaffected by the fact that the ground under his feet was frozen solid.

What's going on? Neither my Frost Field nor my Bloodstorm is having any effect!

Her bullets were still demolishing the solid concrete walls and floor, so she knew the problem wasn't with her own attack; Wallenstein simply wasn't getting injured. In fact, her water bullets weren't leaving any trace at all that they'd collided with him. His clothes were still perfectly dry.

Seeing Shizuku's confusion, Wallenstein said in a low voice, "It's a shame. If you didn't hold such a deep grudge against me, I would have adopted you as well. Though I suppose it's still fortunate that I ran into you here."

Once he was only ten meters away from Shizuku, Wallenstein rested his greatsword on his shoulder and dropped into a stance. The moment she saw

him do so, a shiver ran down Shizuku's spine. She could instinctually tell that he was about to use a powerful technique.

Here it comes!

Shizuku stopped her barrage and froze the water surrounding her. Her bulwark of ice was even tougher than Antarctica's permafrost. She had absolute confidence in her defense.

"Shizuku, defending won't work!" Alisuin suddenly shouted.

"Wha—"

A second later, Wallenstein unleashed a slash that could cut through anything.

"Bergschneiden."



Knowing that he was up against Edelweiss, the world's strongest swordsman, Kurogane Ikki immediately activated Ittou Shura.

"Raaaaah!"

A faint blue aura enveloped his body as he forcibly brought out all of his magical power at once. They hadn't even crossed blades yet, but Ikki had already activated the technique with a one-minute time limit. The reason for that was simple: if he didn't go that far, he wouldn't be able to fight against Edelweiss at all.

Ikki had more astute powers of observation than most, so he could tell full well just how large the gap in skill was between the two of them. One minute was probably the longest he could stand his ground against Edelweiss no matter what he did, in which case activating Ittou Shura at the very start was the correct move.

As Edelweiss glided forward and unleashed her first swing, Ikki knew for a fact that he'd made the right choice. She swung both of her arms, and Ikki lost sight of her swords.

"Ngh?!"

He hurriedly backstepped away, and immediately after, the air in front of his nose was sliced apart. Something invisible passed in front of his face, and a small cut appeared on the tip of his nose. A second later, a burnt smell tickled his nostrils, and he understood what had happened. Edelweiss's slashes were too fast for the naked eye.

I couldn't even see that!

In fact, her slashes had been so fast that Ikki had barely even caught a glimpse of the afterimages they'd left behind. And those afterimages were an indication that she'd swung her blades so fast that they'd turned the air into plasma.

Those cuts were so sharp too! If I let my guard down for even an instant, my head will go flying!

In that instant, Ikki decided to give up on breathing. There wasn't enough time to take a breath anyway, and he could refocus that energy on fighting. He needed to concentrate everything he had on his nerves or he wouldn't be able to react to Edelweiss's slashes in time. On top of that, he would need his fastest technique just to match her speed. Thunderclap, the superfast slash he could only use while under the effects of Ittou Shura. With its speed, he managed to block one, then two, then three, then four of her invisible slashes. Sparks flew every time their swords clashed, lighting up the dark night.

After ten exchanges—ten lightning-fast exchanges that happened in the literal blink of an eye—Ikki had seen enough of Edelweiss's swordsmanship that he could predict her attacks based on where she was looking and the movement of her body. However, that didn't improve his situation much. All he'd managed to do was survive the first volley.

Sh-She's amazing!

His arms were numb all the way up the shoulders because of how heavy each and every one of her swings had been. Despite the fact that she was swinging each blade with just one hand, her swings were far heavier than his Thunderclap. Of course, he had been able to observe enough of her swordsmanship to figure out why.

"Kh!"

Edelweiss struck once more, and Ikki was again forced to respond with Thunderclap. Seeing her attacks, he confirmed that his hypothesis was indeed correct.

I knew it! None of her movements make any sound!

Her lunges, her slashes—all of her motions were soundless. Normally, a person made a bit of noise when doing any of those things because they were moving through the air. And of course, air resistance lowered the efficiency of those movements. But if someone was capable of fully controlling every ounce of energy they expended and ensuring none of it was wasted, it would mean they'd travel through the air without making any noise. Not only that, but their movements and their attacks would be able to exhibit a hundred percent of their potential as well. That wasn't something a human should be able to do, but Ikki was watching it happen right in front of him. It was frightening.

So this is the power of the world's strongest swordsman! Edelweiss's every step, her every swing was unbelievably powerful. He couldn't find a single opening to go on the offensive. *But still, I can't stay on the defensive forever!*

Though he was managing to fend off her attacks for now, he knew that wouldn't last. *I'm barely able to keep up with her by using Thunderclap, but I'm losing in both speed and power! If I'm forced to just defend, I won't last more than five seconds against her!*

If there was no room for him to attack, Ikki would just have to try a different avenue of offense. While he didn't buy into the belief that “the best defense is a good offense” wholesale, there was a grain of truth to it. Even if he couldn't hurt Edelweiss, if he could just throw her off-balance or break her stance a little, there was meaning in going on the offensive.

And so, Ikki steeled his resolve and prepared to attack the world's strongest swordsman. This wasn't the kind of opponent he could afford to hold back against, so he went in with the intent to kill.

This is everything I've got concentrated into one strike!

As Edelweiss launched another lightning-fast swing at him, Ikki backstepped away. She immediately dashed forward, positioning her two swords out in front of her in a cross shape. Holding them like that allowed her to attack and defend

at the same time, as she could block Ikki's slashes while also quickly pivoting to a cross slash if an opening presented itself. It was the ideal stance to take when chasing after an opponent, but it was also exactly the move Ikki had expected her to make.

Here we go!

As soon as Edelweiss stepped forward, Ikki reversed his momentum and lunged forward as well. Using some tricky, off-tempo footwork, he made an afterimage of himself appear right in front of him. This was Flicker Mirage, another one of his unique techniques.

Edelweiss swung at the illusion Ikki created, her swords cleaving a cross through it. But as she didn't hit Ikki himself, he was finally able to attack.

Your torso's wide open!

He raised Intetsu high and prepared to step forward.

"Ngh!"

But just then, he sensed something and quickly jumped back again. A second later, an invisible slash cut through the space where Ikki's neck had just been.

Dammit! She can bring her swords back up faster than I can jump in! I can't try to hit her right after a swing! Had he carelessly stepped forward, his head would have been separated from his body. *But I'm not gonna give up just because one strategy didn't work!*

If he couldn't win in speed, maybe he'd be able to win in power. He stepped forward again, coiling his body like a spring. Then, he transferred all of his weight, all of his strength, all of the forces he could muster into his sword, unleashing yet another of his seven techniques: Rampage Thrust. This thrust, which could bore a hole through a boulder, had the most destructive power of anything in his arsenal. He was hoping that even Edelweiss would need to retreat in the face of such might, but his hopes were soon dashed.

"Wha—" No sooner had he started his attack than it lost all of its force and came to a halt.

Rampage Thrust focused all of Ikki's power into the point of his sword, and

Edelweiss had stopped that point cold using the point of her own sword. She'd done something akin to hitting the tip of a needle with the tip of another needle with perfect accuracy. Not only that, but she was also holding back all of Ikki's might with just one arm. And she was making it look easy.

"Rgh!"

Having the gap in skill between them thrust in his face like that caused Ikki to waver for a second. Naturally, Edelweiss took advantage of that brief moment of hesitation. In the instant his reflexes were slightly dulled, she slashed again.

"Gah?!"

This time, her sword drew blood. There was a shallow gash on Ikki's forehead. But the truly damaging thing about the injury was that the blood spilling out of it got into Ikki's eyes.

I can't see!

That left him open once more, and she unleashed another barrage of ten consecutive slashes, just like she had the first time they'd crossed swords. Like before, her slashes were so swift that they left trails of burnt air in their wake.

"Haaah!"

"What?!"

But to Edelweiss's surprise, Ikki blocked all of them. There was no hesitation in his movements despite his inability to see—mostly because there was no point in seeing anyway.

I can't see her swings because of how fast they are, but I've already seen through her attack patterns!

Ikki had been observing Edelweiss's breathing, her swordsmanship, her footwork, and the tempo of her attacks, and using all of that information he'd fully analyzed her technique. Thanks to his Perfect Vision, the only weapon available to him other than his sword, the Worst One had seen through her swordsmanship. Now that he had a full grasp of her technique, he didn't need to see anymore. Even without his sight, he could read two or three moves ahead.

“Impressive,” Edelweiss said, amazed at how close this boy was to awakening his mind’s eye. However, she didn’t let up her assault. She continued bearing down on Ikki with swing after swing.

Edelweiss knew that even if her opponent had seen through her swordsmanship, the difference in their abilities was too great to be bridged by reading her moves. That being the case, she didn’t need to try anything tricky. She’d just overwhelm him with power and speed.

Indeed, that was the correct decision. At this rate, Ikki would be beaten down even if he could predict her attacks. He, too, was aware of that.

Which is why I’ve gotta settle things here!

There was still one thing Ikki could do in this situation to turn it around. Relying only on his predictions to block Edelweiss’s invisible blows, he thought back to all of their exchanges thus far.

Edelweiss had never once stepped back during their battle. She’d taken defensive stances while advancing, but she’d never tried to evade any of Ikki’s blows. There hadn’t been any need for her to. Attacking with one sword and defending with the other had been enough; she had successfully parried every single one of Ikki’s attacks without bothering to dodge. Considering how much stronger she was, that made sense. She saw no need to rely on evasion.

But in that case... That meant there was one possible way for Ikki to get out of this situation. It was because the gap in their strength was so large that Edelweiss’s actions were predictable. And because they were predictable, Ikki could plan ahead! *I’ll break her rhythm with this one attack!*

Once again, Ikki went on the offensive. He put more force into his Thunderclap than usual, knocking Edelweiss’s sword back a little. That slowed down her return swing by a fraction of a second, allowing him to slash diagonally up at her. He started off his attack so low that it gouged the ground. But while his swing had a big startup, it was also extremely fast.

Of course, even then, Ikki knew that it wouldn’t be fast enough to beat Edelweiss. If he was as fast as a surging gale, Edelweiss was as fast as light itself. She would undoubtedly manage to block his blow. He didn’t mind though. After all, this particular attack needed to be blocked.

The moment Intetsu collided with Edelweiss's sword, Ikki tensed and then relaxed his muscles, creating a series of vibrations that traveled down his body and into his blade. The human body was made up mostly of water. It was effectively a water balloon wrapped up in a ball of flesh. As a result, it was extremely weak to vibrations. Certain types of shock waves easily permeated through the human body and caused serious internal damage. Chinese kenpou had multiple techniques that took advantage of this fact. And Ikki was now doing the same thing, albeit with his sword. If blocked by armor, the impact would damage a person's torso, and if blocked by a sword, it would damage their arms.

Ikki had laced his blade with a deadly toxin, and he didn't even need to cut his target to infect them. This was his Sixth Sword Style: Venomscale Cut. And because Edelweiss was so much stronger than him, he knew she wouldn't dodge. She had accurately gauged the difference in their strength, but some techniques were effective precisely because they got blocked.

As Ikki had hoped, Edelweiss didn't bother to dodge, and she blocked Intetsu with one of her pure white blades. No matter how strong she was, ultimately, she was still human. Her body composition wasn't all that different from Ikki's. Thus, it stood to reason that his attack would be effective against her.

Ikki tensed and relaxed his muscles in a specific rhythm, creating a series of vibrations that ran down his sword at the moment of impact. A second later, blood spurted from all over his body.

"Huh?"

His skin and muscles ripped apart in places, and blood started spilling everywhere. It took him only a second to realize what had happened. It was quite simple, really. Edelweiss had done the exact same thing he had, but on a far more destructive level. As a result, his vibrations had been subsumed by her much stronger vibrations, and it was his body that had been damaged instead.

"Gah!"

Ikki thought he'd seen through Edelweiss's technique, but it had been arrogance to think he could. All he'd analyzed were the parts of her swordsmanship that she'd intentionally shown him. From the very beginning,

he'd been dancing in the palm of her hand. As that realization washed over him, a chill ran down his spine.

This is how far apart we are... Even after using every trick in the book, every technique at his disposal, Ikki hadn't managed to so much as scratch Edelweiss. *I never realized that the peak of swordsmanship was so far above me!* Ikki couldn't even begin to measure how strong Edelweiss was, and that terrified him.

A second later, Edelweiss dealt the final blow. She swung the blade in her right hand, and the invisible slash cut through Intetsu and sliced open Ikki's skin.

"Ah—"

The wound itself was light, but the shock of having his Device, the crystallization of his soul, destroyed was a huge mental blow.

Edelweiss didn't even bother attacking again. She knew there was no need. But as she was about to turn away, something unbelievable happened.

"Aaaaah!"

"What?!"

With the last of his strength, Ikki kept himself from toppling over. He reached out and grabbed Intetsu's blade, which had been separated completely from the hilt, and pointed it at Edelweiss.

"Raaaaah!"

He slashed at her again, but she easily batted away the desperate attack.

"You intend to keep fighting?" Edelweiss was slightly shaken by Ikki's unflagging determination. He was panting heavily, bleeding from all over, and had only a broken blade as his weapon now. "The difference in our strength should be clear now. Your Device, your very soul has been shattered, and you're barely conscious. You're in no shape to fight, so why do you continue to bar my path? I do not wish to needlessly harm children. From the start, I had no intention of killing you or your sister. If anything, the longer you keep me here, the more danger your sister will be in. Sir Wallenstein shows no mercy, even to children. But surely you're aware of that as well?"

Ikki nodded.

“Yes... I know...that you’re a kind person,” he said between pants.

“Then why?”

“Because Shizuku doesn’t want me to let you go.” Ikki’s vision was blurry, and he was barely keeping himself conscious through sheer force of will. Despite that, he looked Edelweiss in the eyes as he spoke. “If I let you through, it might lead to Shizuku being saved. But Alice won’t be!”

“That boy is a member of the criminal underworld. His fate is unfortunate, but he brought it upon himself.”

“That may be, but Shizuku doesn’t want him to die. That’s why I came here! I promised to help make Shizuku’s wish come true! Which is why I won’t let you leave, even if it kills me!”

Edelweiss frowned.

“Even if it kills you, you say? Surely your life isn’t so cheap. Having crossed swords with you, I understand just how deep your ambitions run. I know how strongly you wish for the strength to achieve your own dreams. Not only that, but there are clearly many people important to you who would be saddened by your death. And yet, you say you don’t mind losing your life here?”

Ikki smiled in response.

“This is the first time...”

“What do you mean, ‘the first time?’”

“It’s the first time Shizuku has ever relied on me.” Ikki thought back to the time he’d spent with Shizuku. “All this time, all I’ve done is make her worry about me. I haven’t been able to do a single thing for her as her older brother. But she still loves me anyway. And today, for the first time ever, she asked me to help her for her own sake.”

She entrusted her wish to me, even though I’m a failure of an older brother.

“That’s more than reason enough for me to risk my life here!” That was why Ikki wouldn’t back down no matter how hopeless the odds. He’d keep Edelweiss here as long as he could for the sake of his beloved, almost infuriatingly perfect

sister who'd supported him for so long. If he couldn't even do that, he didn't deserve to call himself Shizuku's brother. "Using everything I have, I'll hold you, the strongest swordsman, back!"

As long as he was still standing, Ikki wouldn't let Edelweiss through. Edelweiss could see the fierce determination burning in his eyes.

What a strong-willed boy. I can't believe one who is just barely considered an adult in the Blazer world has such strong resolve. She couldn't help but be impressed. Despite how strong he was, despite the strong ambitions he held, he was still willing to risk everything for the sake of those dear to him. *How long has it been since I last met such a noble, beautiful soul?*

"Young man, what is your name?"

"Kurogane Ikki."

"Kurogane. I apologize for the disrespect I've shown you, young samurai." As she said that, Edelweiss leaped back to put some distance between the two of them. "You are not a child who needs to be coddled. You are a true swordsman—one worthy of witnessing my full strength. As the world's strongest swordsman, I will strike you down."

For the first time tonight, Edelweiss was fighting in earnest. The bladelust oozing from her was magnitudes stronger than it'd been when Ikki and Shizuku had first driven through the gates.

Ikki felt as though he was being buffeted by a storm of light. The force of Edelweiss's aura alone was enough to whip up a gale, causing trees to shake and nearby windows to shatter. Though she was human, she felt like something much greater as she spread her swords out in a way befitting her "Twin Wings" epithet.

"Prepare yourself," she said, charging forward. Now that she considered Ikki a man and not a boy, she was coming at him with the intent to kill.

"Ngh!"

To Ikki, it felt as though the grim reaper itself was bearing down on him. Those gleaming white blades would cut his life short if he didn't block them. This wasn't like their earlier clashes, where Edelweiss had been holding back

while toying with him. Now that she was serious, she was much faster than before.

Forget her slashes, she's so fast that I can barely even see her now.

A second later, the two swordsmen clashed, and there was another large spray of blood. This time, though, Kurogane Ikki collapsed without a sound.



Alice's warning saved my life.

Had Shizuku reacted a split second later, she would have been dead. As it was, she'd still lost an arm.

"Ngh."

Her left arm had been sliced off at the elbow. The pain was severe, but she didn't even have the leeway to scream. Wallenstein had once again rested his greatsword on his shoulder and was preparing to unleash the same attack that had sliced through both Shizuku's ice fortress and her arm.

"Blinding Midnight Sun!"

"Hrm?!"

Shizuku immediately vaporized the water around her, creating a smoke screen of white mist. That proved to be the correct decision. The moment Wallenstein lost sight of her, she froze the gaping wound on her left arm to stop the bleeding and started running. She circled around Wallenstein, escaped the cloud of mist, and started running toward the one part of the room spared by her earlier barrage: the area where Alisuin was. Her opponent had the power to cut through any and all defenses, as well as the ability to ignore her bombardment. Not only that, he could walk freely on a field of slick ice.

If his power is what I think it is, it's one of the strongest abilities in existence. She wouldn't be able to take him in a head-on fight, so her best bet was to grab Alisuin and run.

"Enough of your petty tricks," Wallenstein said, and he stuck his sword into the ground.

"Whoa!"

A second later, Shizuku slipped and fell. Every time she tried to get up, her legs slipped out from under her and she fell back down.

I can't stand?!

Her Frost Field couldn't be the cause, as she had complete control over her powers; her own ice had never affected her before. The only explanation for why she kept slipping was that someone else's powers were impacting her.

"That means..." She was sure of it now. She turned to Wallenstein as he walked out of the mist and said, "You removed all the friction from the ground under me, didn't you?!"

"Smart girl. That's right," Wallenstein said, slowly walking over to her. "Bullets, swords, even blunt weapons like hammers all need friction to effectively deal damage. No matter how fast a bullet is, if there's no friction between it and its target, it can't penetrate. It'll just slide right off. And if I use this power to attack, I can slice through any and all objects with zero resistance."

Wallenstein had the power to control friction, which was the source of most destructive forces in the world. He possessed both the unpierceable shield and the all-piercing spear.

"This is my true power, and why I'm such a feared swordsman," Wallenstein said, coming to a stop in front of Shizuku.

"Sh-Shizuku, ruuun!" Alisuin shouted, but it was no use. Wallenstein swung his greatsword, cutting Shizuku in half. "Ah—"

The upper half of Shizuku's body fell to the frozen ground. Blood and organs spilled out onto the ice.

"N-Noooooo!" Alisuin screamed.



Edelweiss looked down at Kurogane Ikki, a surprised expression on her face. She thought back to the moment they'd clashed. During their final exchange, Ikki had done something truly unbelievable. Despite being up against the world's strongest swordsman, he had gone on the offensive. Unlike before,

she'd been coming at him with all her might, and yet he'd chosen to strike without hesitation.

Because she'd gotten serious, she'd stepped farther forward than usual to deliver a full-power attack that was sure to slay Ikki. But that had created a minuscule opening, which he had used to deliver his own full-power attack. Up until the very last minute, he'd continued fighting with the intention of beating her. As a result, she had been forced to defend first, which had dulled her attack slightly. She'd ruined the full force of her blow by using the brunt of that energy to block, and the attack she'd hit Ikki with afterward had been lacking in power. Thus, she'd failed to fully sever Ikki's soul. Right now, he still drew breath.

On top of that, the final attack he used was...

"I never imagined he'd put up this much of a fight." Edelweiss walked over to the unconscious Ikki and placed her pure white blade against his neck. But then she smiled to herself and said, "If I kill you after you've already lost consciousness, it would be a truly shameful act."

Just then, someone else arrived on the scene.

"K-Kurogane!"

"Good evening, World Clock," Edelweiss said, turning to the newcomer.

"How dare you, Edelweiss!" Shinguuji Kurono shouted as she leaped over the fence and saw Edelweiss holding her sword against a bloody Ikki's neck. While still in the air, she summoned her Device—a pair of pistols, one white and one black—and pointed them at Edelweiss.

"Calm down."

"Kh!"

The moment Edelweiss looked into Kurono's eyes, she froze, unable to pull the triggers. Fear gripped her, and as she landed, she made no move to attack, though she was able to just barely keep her pistols trained on Edelweiss. Her instincts were telling her it was too dangerous to attack. She knew that if she did, a battle that she absolutely could not win would break out.

“You damned monster...”

“That’s a rather rude way of greeting someone you haven’t seen in a while.” Edelweiss sounded calm and composed—a stark contrast to Kurono’s trembling voice. “Don’t worry, he’s still alive.”

“R-Really?!”

“I hadn’t intended on letting him live, but yes.”

Edelweiss smiled wanly at Kurono, then leaped back up onto Akatsuki Academy’s rooftop.

“Wh-Where are you going?!”

“I’m leaving Akatsuki. After all, I’m not really involved in this project.”

Edelweiss turned to look down at the young samurai who’d impressed her with his strength and resolve time and time again. Her thoughts turned to the trials he would soon face at the Seven Stars Battle Festival. While she wasn’t involved in this particular plot, she knew most of the details.

I’m sure you’ve noticed it yourself. Your greatest hurdle will not be the Gale Emperor or the Crimson Princess. In the near future, you’ll have to face off against Shinomiya Amane. It will be a harsher battle than you can possibly imagine. Likely even harsher than your battle against me was.

Edelweiss turned back to Kurono.

“World Clock. When Kurogane wakes up, I want you to deliver a message to him. Tell him ‘I look forward to facing off against a worthy rival when we next meet.’”

She then disappeared into the night sky without a sound.

“I’ll be sure to let him know,” Kurono said to the empty rooftop, then ran over to Ikki. He was covered in wounds, but none of them were fatal. She breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that she could still save him.

It’s impressive enough that you managed to survive a battle with Edelweiss. You can’t ask for much more against—

Just as Kurono was about to use her time powers to revert Ikki’s wounds, she

spotted something out of the corner of her eye.

“No way...”

On the white concrete rooftop where Edelweiss had been standing were red spots. It was a scant few drops, but they were undoubtedly blood. It wasn't Ikki's blood either, but the blood of the woman who'd been standing on that rooftop seconds ago.

You actually cut her?! You've barely even reached adulthood and you managed to cut the world's strongest swordsman?!

Indeed, though it was a light cut that could barely even be called a scratch, the Worst One's blade had carved its mark into one of the world's strongest Blazers.

“H-Ha ha ha. You never fail to surprise me, Kurogane.” Goose bumps rose on Kurono's arms. “I can't wait to see what kind of Blazer you become.”

She began tending to Ikki's wounds while reassessing the situation. The only people she and Saikyou had found when they'd reached Hagun were a bunch of unconscious students. Kurono had used her powers to see what had happened in the past few minutes, after which Saikyou had gone off to rescue Stella and the Hagure sisters while Kurono herself had rushed to Ikki and Shizuku's aid. But Ikki was the only person in the courtyard.

To try to figure out where Shizuku and Alisuin might be, Kurono sharpened her senses and read the flow of mana in the school. Within a few seconds, she could tell that there was a battle going on underground, within the building.

“She's...”

However, the flow of mana told Kurono something utterly unbelievable.



Huh? What happened to me?

Shizuku regained consciousness, and she slowly opened her heavy eyelids.

Alice...

She saw Alisuin's face in front of her, but it was upside down for some reason.

Alisuin was sobbing while shouting something, but Shizuku couldn't hear her. She couldn't hear anything.

Sensing something was off, Shizuku looked down at herself. Upon doing so, she realized that she was missing everything below her stomach. It was then that she remembered what had happened.

Oh yeah... I got cut in half...

Her senses started returning to her, and she could more keenly feel the loss of her lower body now.

It looks like most of my organs are missing too. They must have spilled out when I got bisected.

This was without a doubt a lethal injury. Shizuku could tell she'd be dead in less than a minute.

I'm so sick and tired of this.

Again. Again she'd lost. Just like when she'd fought against Touka, she'd been unable to keep her opponent at a distance and had been cut down by a sword.

I'm weak. No matter what I do, I can't keep stronger foes from closing in on me.

Shizuku gritted her teeth, having once more been reminded that she lacked the strength to fight the way she wanted to.

Will Oniisama be sad...if I die?

He would, of course. And not just him. Stella and Alisuin would be sad as well. Shizuku knew that she was surrounded by kind, caring people. Even though she was a snarky, misanthropic little brat, she knew everyone would mourn her death. She could easily imagine them all crying over her dead body. And she really, truly didn't want that.

I guess that means I've gotta give this another shot.

After she'd lost to the Thunderbolt, Shizuku had constantly been thinking about what she could do to avoid losing like that again. She had to come to terms with the painful fact that she'd eventually be stuck in a close-quarters battle whenever she was up against a powerful foe who used short-range

attacks. And in close quarters, she couldn't do a damned thing. She was tiny, and she certainly hadn't trained physically the way Ikki and Stella had. She didn't have what it took to duke it out in a fight like that.

After thinking about it for ages, Shizuku had finally come up with a single method to overcome this weakness of hers. It was an unprecedented technique that carried a lot of risks with it, so she hadn't attempted it before. But if she was about to die in a few seconds anyway, there was nothing to lose by giving it a shot here. She didn't want to die with regrets, after all.

No matter how painful it gets, I'll do everything I can.

Just like her beloved brother always did, she'd have faith in her own strength. Then, with her decision made, Shizuku closed her eyes and got to work.



"Shizuku... Shizuku..."

Alisuin hugged the upper half of Shizuku's body. She watched helplessly as blood and organs dripped out of the gaping hole in the girl's torso. As Shizuku grew lighter, it felt as though the weight of her life was leaving her body.

Alisuin's vision went black. Right after she'd decided to protect someone again, she'd lost them. She felt numb. There was no anger at herself for being too weak to protect Shizuku. She didn't even feel hatred toward the man who'd taken Shizuku away from her. She didn't feel anything at all. After a few seconds, she couldn't even muster the energy to call out to Shizuku.

"This is the truth you averted your eyes from," Wallenstein said from behind Alisuin. "The only thing that matters in this world is strength. I taught you that, and I even gave you the opportunity to be on the side of the strong. But you still failed to learn your lesson. You're utterly hopeless."

Wallenstein shook his head in exasperation. He was disappointed in his disciple, who continued to cling to Shizuku's corpse.

"An assassin who develops feelings for their target is useless," he continued. "I'll have you die here along with the girl."

Alisuin heard a whooshing sound as Wallenstein shouldered his greatsword

and prepared to cut her down like he had Shizuku. She didn't even feel like running. If anything, she welcomed oblivion. She just wanted it all to be over.

While she sat there waiting, Shizuku kept getting lighter. Of course, she knew that Shizuku was never coming back either way, but the sensation of Shizuku slowly dwindling away to nothing was more than she could bear. The girl's body got lighter and lighter and lighter until Alisuin felt like she was hugging a body that was lighter than air.

Wait... It was then that Alisuin finally realized that something was off. *Lighter than air? That shouldn't be possible.*

Even if Shizuku had lost all of her blood and most of her internal organs, her bones, muscles, and skin should still have had weight. That realization brought a ray of light to Alisuin's pitch-dark world. She looked down at her hands and saw that Shizuku's corpse had vanished completely. All that was left were her clothes.

"Don't worry, Alice."

Shizuku's clear voice rang out through the underground training arena.

"Huh?"

"Wh-What?!"

Alisuin and Wallenstein looked around in shock, trying to find Shizuku. But she was nowhere to be seen. Moreover, all of her blood and organs were gone, as was the abandoned lower half of her body.

"Wh-What the hell is going on?!" Wallenstein shouted, shaken by this incomprehensible phenomenon.

A few seconds later, smoke gathered near the center of the arena and solidified into the shape of a naked but perfectly whole Kurogane Shizuku. She looked at Alisuin and said, "It'll be fine. I'm going to win."



“Shizuku? Are you...alive?”

Alisuin stared at Shizuku like she was looking at a ghost. She still wasn't able to understand what had happened, though Wallenstein appeared to have figured it out.

“Don't tell me...” He'd seen enough battles to be able to intuit what Shizuku had done. Panicking, he swung his greatsword at her. She didn't even bother trying to dodge, and Wallenstein's Device once again bisected Shizuku. But there was no spray of blood, and the two halves of Shizuku's body just parted like mist before reforming again. Upon seeing that, Wallenstein knew that his suspicion was correct. “Y-You monster! You turned your entire body into water vapor!”

The wavering image of Shizuku smirked and said, “Heh heh heh, I guess all those years of fighting taught you *something*, old man.”

Her grin turned cruel. Indeed, that was how Shizuku was still alive.

“You know, after I lost to the Thunderbolt, I started thinking about what I'd have to do to never lose like that again,” Shizuku continued. She was skilled at mana manipulation and had many powerful abilities at her disposal, but she didn't have a decisive move that could close out fights. As a result, she always found herself slowly being pushed back until the enemy was in her face to deliver the finishing blow. She needed to find a way to stop that from happening. “I thought about it for ages, and then I finally figured it out. The only reason I keep getting cut down is because I have a physical body.”

And so, Shizuku had decided to tackle this problem at its roots. That was how she'd come up with this Noble Art. Healing magic was a subset of her water powers, and she realized that she could use both in conjunction to disassemble her own body and turn it into water vapor, something that was unaffected by slashes and punches.

“I call it ‘Azure Reincarnation.’ It worked out pretty well considering I tried it out in the middle of a battle,” Shizuku said proudly.

Wallenstein paled, utterly dumbfounded.

“You...tried it out? For the first time?! Do you have any idea what you've just

done to yourself?!” The reason Wallenstein was so shocked was that Azure Reincarnation required the user to kill themselves to activate it. “Even if you have exceptional mana control and had set things up with perfect precision, there was no guarantee your mana would still activate after you died! And even if it did, if you messed up recreating even one of the trillions of cells in your body, there was no telling what might have happened to you! You used a technique like that without even testing it first?! Are you insane?!”

While making oneself immune to physical attacks certainly provided a huge advantage, the ability was incredibly risky and required an immense amount of concentration and control to pull off correctly.

“I’m perfectly sane,” Shizuku answered matter-of-factly. “I just believed I could pull it off, that’s all.”

“What?!”

In that moment, Wallenstein realized he’d made a mistake. Based on the data he’d received, he’d thought that the only Hagun student they’d need to watch out for was Stella Vermillion. But that couldn’t have been further from the truth. Lorelei was just as talented as the Crimson Princess, albeit for very different reasons.

That caught me off guard, but I still haven’t lost yet. As long as I—

Wallenstein once again shouldered his greatsword, and Shizuku laughed at him.

“Oh? You seem to be under the misconception that you can still fight.”

“What are you— Gah?!” Having finally recovered from his shock, Wallenstein noticed something was wrong. *“Cough, cough!”*

He couldn’t breathe. None of the air he sucked in reached his lungs. It felt like he was drowning—because he was.

“So this is what happens when you fill a person’s lungs with water. It would have been too dangerous to do this to another student, so this is my first time seeing what happens.”

While using Azure Reincarnation, Shizuku was effectively one with the water

vapor in the air around her. That meant she could control it freely. When Wallenstein had been breathing earlier, he'd of course sucked in droplets of water vapor, which she had kept in his lungs, allowing water to build up. While Wallenstein could use his friction powers to prevent any and all external damage, he was helpless against an attack of this nature.

"It's not like getting rid of the friction in your lungs is going to help here, now is it?" Shizuku taunted.

"Blaaagh!"

Starved of oxygen, Wallenstein slumped to the ground. He looked like a fish on land, his mouth opening and closing fruitlessly as he tried to breathe.

"Hmm? Are you trying to say something? I can't hear you?"

"S-Spare... Spare me... *Cough!*"

"Oh, you want me to show you mercy." The fact that he was begging for help meant that Wallenstein had accepted defeat. He knew he couldn't beat Shizuku now. "Well, too bad."

With a cruel smile, Shizuku snapped her fingers. A second later, blood spurted from all over Wallenstein's body as the water in his lungs froze and shot out in all directions.

"Gaaaaah?!"

With a final tortured scream, Wallenstein fell unconscious, blood and icy water dripping out of his mouth.

"I'm not kind like Onii-sama, and I'm not soft like Stella-san. I don't stop until I've thoroughly exterminated my enemies. You were up against the wrong opponent," Shizuku said, giving him a derisive look. She then took his coat, wrapped it around herself, and turned away, having completely lost all interest in him.

Thus, Lorelei had managed to defeat the One-Armed Sword Master.



"That worked out better than expected. I really impress myself sometimes," Shizuku commented as she reconstituted her flesh and blood body, flexing her

muscles to make sure everything worked right. As far as she could tell, she'd done a good job since nothing seemed out of place. That being said, the technique was far from perfect. "Although my head hurts so much that I feel like I'm going to throw up."

She'd needed to control her mana with such precision that her brain was fried. If she'd tried to keep that technique up for much longer, she might have passed out. It also wasn't the kind of technique she could use twice in a row.

"Shizuku...are you really alive?" Alisuin asked while looking at Shizuku like she still couldn't believe she was real.

"Please don't talk to me like I'm a ghost. I'm very real," Shizuku replied, pouting at Alisuin. Of course, the technique Shizuku had pulled off was so otherworldly that Alisuin's disbelief was understandable. "Also, while Azure Reincarnation is a pretty good idea if I do say so myself, I don't like that I lose my clothes when I use it. I certainly can't let Onii-sama see me like this."

Seeing Shizuku acting so normally finally made reality sink in for Alisuin.

"Ha ha. I see. So you're still alive. Thank god." Alisuin slumped in relief, tears spilling from her eyes. "I'm so glad..."

"That's my line, you know," Shizuku said with a frown. She walked over to Alisuin, knelt down, and gently hugged her. "I was worried they'd already killed you."

"Sh-Shizuku..."

"Never make me worry like that again, Onee-chan," Shizuku said, her voice trembling with emotion.

"Ah..."

Hearing Shizuku call her "Onee-chan" made Alisuin think back to the day she'd slaughtered the mafia to save her younger siblings. The looks they'd given her had convinced her that a killer like her didn't belong, that she no longer had the right to become a cool adult. When she'd told Shizuku that she'd been betraying her, she'd thought for sure that Shizuku would look at her the same way and not want to be by her side anymore. But to her surprise, Shizuku had called her "Onee-chan" with the same amount of affection as before.

“Is it...really okay for me to stay by your side, Shizuku?”

“That’s what I want, at least. Is that not good enough for you, Alice?”

Alisuin shook her head. That was more than enough of a reason for her to stay.

“Thank you...Shizuku...”

“Now, we’re finally even,” Shizuku said with a small laugh. It took a second but Alisuin realized she was referring to how Alisuin had comforted her with a hug after she’d lost to the Thunderbolt.

“Yeah...” Alisuin said, finally smiling back. And then, she made an oath. *I promise I’ll never betray you again. I’ll stay by your side for as long as you wish. And I’ll protect you and those dear to you no matter what it takes.*

By doing so, Alisuin felt like she would, at long last, be able to become the kind of person she’d always wanted to be: a cool adult.



The flow of mana Kurono had sensed was unlike any she had ever felt before. Kurogane Shizuku’s mana had spread extremely thin over a wide area and then coalesced back into the size of a human. As Kurono knew what Shizuku’s abilities were, she could guess what Shizuku had done.

“You broke your body apart and reassembled it, didn’t you?” The girl had, in a sense, resurrected herself. “My god. You truly are a crazy pair of siblings.”

Kurono shook her head and started searching to see who else’s mana was in that underground space. From what she could gather, the opponent Shizuku had been fighting was already out of commission. Additionally, as far as she could sense, there were no other threats in the school building. She breathed a sigh of relief and looked off toward the west.

Everyone’s alive over here. I hope you make it in time too, Nene.



“Jet-Black Yatagarasu!”

“Kusanagi!”

A blade that looked to be made of a bundle of lightning blacker than even the night sky slammed into the storming whirlwind created by Ouma, and the two fighters were both blown backward. As his feet slid across the gravel road, the Gale Emperor clicked his tongue.

“I suppose the power’s bound to drop by the third shot.”

His opponent, Demon Princess Saikyou Nene, sailed gracefully through the air and landed softly next to the Hagure sisters, her kimono billowing around her.

“Sensei!”

“Looks like I just barely made it in time.”

“*Sniffle*. Thank god. We’re saved...”

“You two did well. You can leave the rest to me.”

Saikyou was relieved to find that they were both fine. The unconscious Stella was too.

“Now then...” She looked over the members of Akatsuki Academy, and her gaze stopped on Kurogane Ouma. “I haven’t seen you since the elementary school little league tournaments, Ouma-chan. You’ve sure grown up since then.”

“Meanwhile you don’t seem to have grown at all.”

“Shut it. So, what exactly is the point of this stupid stunt? Mind telling me?”

Saikyou fanned out her Device, a pair of iron-ribbed fans, and covered her mouth with one of them as she spoke. Ouma said nothing, and instead, Amane stepped forward, an innocent smile on his face.

“I suppose I could tell you, but in return, would you mind handing those three over to us?”

“Ha ha ha. You think you can negotiate with me, boy?” The air crackled with energy. “Stop trying to act like adults, you brats!”



A second later an immense amount of weight bore down on Akatsuki's members.

"Gwah!"

It wasn't affecting just them either. Everything within a twenty-meter radius of Saikyou was being pushed into the ground by an invisible force. That invisible force happened to be Saikyou's Noble Art, Binding Circle. Her Blazer power was the ability to control gravity.

Assaulted by ten times the normal force of Earth's gravity, the members of Akatsuki were driven to their knees. Kurogane Ouma alone stayed standing. Completely unfazed by the massive force weighing down on him, he slowly pointed Ryuuzume at Saikyou. In response, Saikyou brandished her fans and once again created a blade of pure gravity—her Jet-Black Yatagarasu. But just before the two of them clashed again, someone jumped in.

"Hold up! One second please, everyone!"

It was Hiraga Reisen, the Jester. After delivering Alisuin to Wallenstein, he'd turned back to meet up with his comrades.

"Everyone, please retreat. We don't need to finish off those three anymore," he said, turning to the Akatsuki students.

"You sure?"

"Yes. We've already made enough of a splash, and it would be too dangerous to fight the Demon Princess. Maybe *you'll* be fine if she runs amok, Ouma-kun, but the rest of us certainly won't be. And our sponsors don't want any of us to lose before the Seven Stars Battle Festival starts. Let's retreat."

"Hmph."

Ouma frowned, but he sheathed his blade.

"Is that acceptable to you, Demon Princess?" Hiraga asked.

After a few seconds of silence, Saikyou reluctantly tucked her fans into the sleeves of her kimono. There were too many opponents for her to deal with. She was confident she could take them all, but she wasn't sure she could protect the students behind her while doing so. It was a teacher's job to protect

their students, so she had no choice but to accept Hiraga's terms.

"You're lucky I'm a teacher right now, you damned brat."

"Thank you for agreeing."

And so, Akatsuki's pretournament party finally came to a close. Hiraga and the other members of Akatsuki Academy disappeared into the darkness, and a strong gust of wind shook the trees lining the small mountain path.

"Your sponsors, huh?" Saikyou muttered with a frown, ruminating on Hiraga's words. She looked up at the sky and said, "Things are about to get real messy, Kuu-chan."

Epilogue: The Fixer

News of Akatsuki Academy's attack on Hagun Academy spread like wildfire. In the face of such an unprecedented act of terrorism, the Seven Stars Battle Festival Management Committee immediately opened a hearing to determine what should be done, including potentially stripping the school's members of their statuses as student knights. At the very least, everyone assumed the members of Akatsuki would be arrested and some manner of punishment doled out. And of course, there was no way they'd be allowed to participate in the Seven Stars Battle Festival either. But everything changed when the director of Akatsuki Academy made his first public appearance.

The man who claimed to be Akatsuki Academy's director was Tsukikage Bakuga. A middle-aged man who looked relatively unassuming, but who also happened to be Japan's current prime minister. When the Committee asked him to answer for his students' actions, he didn't apologize. On the contrary, with a beaming smile, he said, "It's amazing, isn't it? Shocking that a school run by the Federation couldn't even put up a fight against Akatsuki Academy. Rather than the seven major schools, all of which are in the Federation's pockets, Japan should entrust its Blazers to Akatsuki Academy, a national institution made by Japan, for Japan!"

He then went on to talk about how, by beating all the other schools in the Seven Stars Battle Festival, Akatsuki Academy would prove that Japan was more fit to train its Blazers than the International Mage-Knight Federation. He also spoke about bringing an end to the Federation's monopoly on education and making Japan a proper world power again.

Tsukikage's appearance caused things to go in a completely unexpected direction. Because the police and courts were run by Japan and not the Federation, no moves were made to arrest the members of Akatsuki Academy or try them for their crimes. Instead, the prime minister claimed that Hagun Academy was lying about what had happened and that it had been a joint training session between the two schools that had been agreed upon

beforehand. National media outlets reported his version of events as if it were the truth even though it was obvious to anyone who was paying attention that his words were a blatant lie.

Unsurprisingly, Hagun and the six other big schools were furious, as was the Seven Stars Battle Festival Management Committee. They moved to bar Akatsuki's students from participating in the tournament, but their motion was blocked by a direct order from the International Mage-Knight Federation's main branch. It couldn't allow there to be legitimate educational institutions outside its purview, but simply barring them from the tournament wouldn't work. Akatsuki needed to be allowed to participate so that it could lose and the Federation could continue to claim that it was best suited to training young Blazers.

Everything went as Hiraga had said it would. Akatsuki was being backed by the nation of Japan, and the higher-ups in the Mage-Knight Federation also wanted them to participate, so there was nothing the Seven Stars Battle Festival Management Committee could do. In the end, Akatsuki's barbarism went unpunished, and the story everyone reported on was how, with just seven members, Akatsuki Academy had managed to destroy half of Hagun Academy. Akatsuki's reputation skyrocketed, and it was allowed to enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival as a new, eighth school.



"I'm sorry," Kurono said, bowing to Ikki and Shizuku. She'd just finished explaining the situation to the two of them.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Director."

"Onii-sama is right. But I am surprised that the mastermind was the entire nation of Japan."

"There's been friction between Japan and the Federation since the Second World War," Kurono explained.

Japan's entry into the Mage-Knight Federation had been far from smooth. After the war, the prime minister at the time had pushed the proposal through despite heavy opposition from other politicians. He'd believed it was the right move because of how war-weary the citizens had become, but he'd needed to

sell off his land and assets in a symbolic gesture to garner enough popular support to overcome the imperialist faction.

“The thing is, becoming part of the Federation’s umbrella means throwing away your influence as a nation. It’s not that surprising that it was an unpopular move that led to numerous political assassinations and power struggles. That era’s prime minister truly believed that international cooperation was the way of the future though, and he managed to force his proposal through.”

Kurono went on.

“But the animosity that created is still lingering today. Many people still believe Japan should have refused to join the Federation and remained a major world power like Russia or America. And most of them are still trying to reclaim the glory and power they believe Japan deserves. Even among people who aren’t that imperialistic, they don’t like that they’re not allowed to teach, arrest, or punish Blazers under the current system without the Federation’s approval. They think Japan has given up too much of its autonomy to the Federation. Even people within the Japan branch of the Federation think this.”

“Even though they’re part of the Federation?”

“The Japan branch wasn’t actually established by the Federation. Back when Japan still managed its own Blazers and they were called ‘samurai,’ Japan had a Samurai Administration Bureau that was under the direct control of the government. When we joined the Federation, the Bureau was simply removed from the government’s jurisdiction and put under the Federation’s leadership. The Japan branch sees the main branch as tyrants who pushed their authority onto them. In a sense, this all happened because the old prime minister forced Japan to join the Federation. It’s not just politicians who support the current prime minister, by the way. Plenty of civilians are anti-Federation as well.”

Some were just right-wing nuts, but there were plenty of reasonable people who simply thought it was unfair that Japan had to let an outside organization train and maintain its strongest military force. Japan did enjoy numerous benefits by being part of the Federation, so it wasn’t purely a loss, but it was the kind of situation where it was hard to say objectively whether or not being part of the Federation was the right move.

“Anyway, for the past half a century, the anti-Federation faction has been gathering strength. They’ve been slowly getting the public on their side as well. An incident like this was inevitable, if you ask me.”

“So to sum things up, because the Seven Stars Battle Festival is a way for the Federation to show off how strong its Blazers are, Prime Minister Tsukikage wants Japan’s Blazers to beat them all and prove that the national government is better equipped to train strong Blazers?”

“That’s honestly the best-case scenario. Depending on how hard-line his stance is, he might want to take Japan out of the Federation entirely.”

“Does no one consider it a problem that he recruited some of Akatsuki’s students from the terrorist organization Rebellion?”

“The only proof we have that any of Akatsuki’s members belong to Rebellion is Alisuin’s testimony. If the prime minister claims that Alisuin is lying, there’s not much we can do. Even if we had more definitive proof, the government would likely just suppress the media from reporting on it. The same way they spun the attack on Hagun as a ‘joint training exercise.’” Kurono let out a sigh and took out a cigarette, a dark look on her face. “I just still can’t believe Tsukikage-sensei would do this...”

“You know Prime Minister Tsukikage, Director?”

“He was Hagun’s director when I was a student here. He was a wise, rational man, and I respected him a lot at the time. I have no idea what happened to him since he became a politician though.” She lit her cigarette and took a long puff. There were over a dozen spent cigarettes in her ashtray. She was clearly stress smoking. “The point is, Akatsuki’s going to be in the Seven Stars Battle Festival whether we like it or not. And their members are all elite Blazers from the criminal underworld. This year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival is going to be nothing like past ones. As your teacher, I have a duty to ask all of you whether or not you still want to participate knowing that. That’s why I called you two here.”

“I see.” Ikki had thought Kurono had just called them here to explain the situation, but it seemed it was more than that.

“Alisuin, Toutokubara, and the Hagure sisters have already decided to drop

out. Alisuin still feels guilty about being a spy and doesn't want to participate, while Toutokubara wants to look after Toudou since she still hasn't come to. As for Hagure Kikyou and Hagure Botan... Well, the two of them have honestly lost the will to fight after seeing how strong Akatsuki is."

"I see... I can't really blame them."

"How about you, Kurogane Ikki? Considering the circumstances, I wouldn't mind putting our promise on hold until—"

"No, thanks. I'll be fine," Ikki said, cutting Kurono off. He didn't need any concessions. After all, his mind was made up. "I'll enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival, and I don't mind if we keep the conditions of our promise the same."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. In the first place, I don't think this year's tournament is all that different. It just so happens that some of the entrants are from the underworld. If anything, this is exactly where they should be fighting since the whole point of the Seven Stars Battle Festival is to determine who the strongest student knight in Japan is. You could say this is the first year it's actually living up to its goal. I don't care what their backgrounds are, and I don't care what Prime Minister Tsukikage is thinking. None of that's important to students like us. All I need to do is fight fair and square until I can stand on that stage against Stella and fulfill my promise with her." Ikki's voice was determined, and it was clear to Kurono that his mind was made up. "Besides, there's someone from Akatsuki who caught my eye, so I'd like the chance to fight them."

"The Gale Emperor?"

"Nope," Ikki answered, shaking his head. "While I *am* curious about what happened to Ouma-niisan these past few years, there's someone else I'm more interested in."

"Really? And who's that?"

"The Akatsuki student from Kyomon. Shinomiya Amane."

"That's the boy with the cute face, right, Onii-sama?" Shizuku asked, and Ikki nodded.

“He didn’t seem like a Blazer worthy of special attention to me,” Kurono said, giving him a quizzical look.

“I agree,” Ikki replied, nodding again.

“Huh?”

“He doesn’t have the imposing aura Ouma-niisan does, and he certainly didn’t leave that strong of an impression compared to the rest of Akatsuki’s lineup. I suspect our impression of him is mostly correct too. He doesn’t strike me as one of the stronger Blazers in Akatsuki. But for some reason, he keeps weighing on my mind. I have this almost instinctual revulsion toward him that I can’t really explain.” Ikki still couldn’t tell why Amane repulsed him so, but that was precisely why he was so curious. “I really want to know why it is he makes me feel like this.”

While Ikki wasn’t sure what the reason was, he was sure there had to be a reason. Kurono nodded in understanding.

“I get what you mean. You’re not the type of person to hate someone for no reason. It’s possible that Shinomiya boy possesses something only you can sense. At any rate, since you’ll still be participating, I’ll get the paperwork for that out of the way.”

“Thank you.” Ikki hesitated for a second, then asked, “By the way, Director, is Stella...still going to be entering?”

“I asked her this morning,” Kurono said with a grin. “She said, ‘Like hell I’ll back down after getting my ass handed to me like that!’”

“That certainly sounds like Stella-san. Isn’t that right, Onii-sama?”

“Yeah,” Ikki said with a nod.

“Oh, that reminds me. She left a message for you, Kurogane. ‘I won’t be coming back to the dorms for the next week. But just because I’m gone, don’t let Shizuku stay over, okay?’”

“She can’t tell me what to do,” Shizuku said in a flat voice, then turned to Ikki. “But I wonder what she’s gone off to do.”

“Hard to say.”

As he said that, Ikki thought back to the previous night. He and Stella had gone to visit Uakata and Touka, both of whom had yet to regain consciousness. While staring at their unconscious bodies, Stella had clenched her fists so hard she'd drawn blood and said in a trembling voice, *"I never realized just how painful being weak feels."*

"I'm sure Stella's got a lot on her mind right now," Ikki said simply. He knew she wouldn't want anyone else to know she'd said that, or that she'd cried afterward.

"Kurogane Shizuku. I called you here to ask you something as well," Kurono said, turning to Shizuku.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Toutokubara Kanata, Alisuin Nagi, Hagure Kikyou, and Hagure Botan all said that they would be more than glad to give their place in the Seven Stars Battle Festival up to you. In fact, all four of them were hoping you would take their spot. Seeing as you're the only one who won your fight during this incident, you've clearly shown that you're strong enough to participate. If you want to take any of their spots, I can work you in. What do you say?"

Shizuku didn't seem surprised by the proposal. Alisuin had likely talked to her about it already.

"Sure. I'll gladly participate," she said with a nod after a brief silence.

"Then I'll get the paperwork for that squared away as well." Kurono wrote something on a document next to her and stamped her seal on it. She then turned to Ikki and Shizuku with a feral grin. "There's been a lot of unexpected developments during this Seven Stars Battle Festival, but like you said, Kurogane, none of that has anything to do with you students. You don't have to give a shit about whatever conspiracies anyone might be cooking up. The Seven Stars Battle Festival is a tournament for you guys. The fact that people from Rebellion are participating just means you have the opportunity to fight people you normally wouldn't. It doesn't matter if they're a regular student or a criminal, all that matters is proving that you're the strongest student knight in Japan. Fight to your heart's content, the both of you!"

"We will!" Ikki and Shizuku said in unison.



At roughly the same time, Stella Vermillion was standing outside the special gym made for King of Knights league members. She was waiting for a certain someone to come out.

“Well, well. Didn’t think I’d see you here,” Saikyou Nene, the Demon Princess said. She had become a regular at this gym after coming to Hagun to teach.

“I was waiting here for you, Nene-sensei.”

“Oho. And whatsoever for, Princess?”

“I want you to train me for the one week we have until the Seven Stars Battle Festival,” Stella said, her expression dead serious.

“What could have possibly brought on this sudden change of heart? I thought you had absolute confidence in your abilities.”

Stella bit her lip and said in a strained voice, “When I couldn’t get more wins than losses against Touka-san, I started to realize something. And after what happened the other day, I became sure of it.”

She still vividly remembered how it had felt to be overwhelmed by Ouma’s Kusanagi. That was the first time she’d been utterly outclassed in her own arena: pure strength. The shock of that defeat, combined with the fact that Touka had risked her life to protect her and was unconscious because of it, had spurred her to finally take action.

“I’m...weak,” she continued. “At this rate, I won’t be able to keep my promise to Ikki and make it to the finals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

“So you want me to train you?”

Stella nodded in response.

“From what I can tell, you’re the strongest teacher at Hagun, Nene-sensei! That’s why I want you to train me! Please!” Stella bowed deeply to Saikyou.

“And if I say no?”

Her head still bowed, Stella replied, “Surely you’ll have to defend yourself if I attack, right?”

She looked up slightly, glaring at Saikyou. If Saikyou wouldn't agree to train her, she'd force her to. Saikyou could tell from the look in Stella's eyes that if she said no, Stella would attack immediately despite them being in the middle of the city. Upon seeing Stella's expression, Saikyou sighed to herself.

She truly is desperate, Saikyou sighed to herself upon seeing Stella's expression.

In that moment, she realized that Stella was blindly groping for a way forward. She'd never been beaten so thoroughly, and she'd never felt so powerless. She was struggling to find something, anything that could help her get stronger and overcome the bitter taste of defeat. But she didn't know what to do, which was why she'd decided that the best course of action was to throw herself into the most difficult fights she could think of. She was spurred on by impatience, feeling that if she didn't do something *now*, she'd be crushed by her own inadequacy.

Honestly, the thing she needs the most right now is to calm down.

Forcing yourself to go through harsh training when you weren't in a stable state of mind was extremely dangerous. On top of that, Saikyou knew that there was nothing she could teach Stella. The girl simply had that much potential. If an average person like Saikyou tried to teach Stella the tricks she'd come up with to improve her own skills, it would inevitably limit Stella's growth. In the long term, just doing what she already was would be enough to let her make full use of her incredible potential and unprecedented mana pool. As a teacher, the best thing Saikyou could do for Stella was to get her to calm down.

But I'd feel bad if I did that to her, Saikyou thought, looking at Stella's teary expression.

Indeed, calming Stella down was the right thing to do in the long term. Stella's potential was so great that by the time she graduated, she'd be far above the Gale Emperor. Saikyou had spent enough time around Blazers to know that for a fact. However, that was where she'd be in three years. Right now, she was desperate because she knew she was weaker than Kurogane Ouma. It would be quite difficult for her to reach the finals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival this year. And Stella was smart enough to realize that, which was why she wanted to

do something about it.

She's not at the age where she'll listen just because I tell her she's a late bloomer and she doesn't have to worry so much about getting stronger right now.

Saikyou smiled self-deprecatingly as she recalled her own student years. When she'd been younger, she'd also been desperate to get stronger quickly, no matter what it took. She'd wanted to achieve big things as soon as possible so badly that she'd ended up getting into a serious deathmatch with Kurono that had led to her getting disqualified.

Stella was in the same headspace she'd been in back then. She didn't give a damn about how much stronger she'd be in the future; she wanted to be able to beat Kurogane Ouma right now, and she'd do whatever it took even if it killed her. Nothing mattered to her right now except making it to the finals and fulfilling her promise with Ikki.

Youngsters care about different things than we do, after all.

A more mature adult might claim that it was irrational to be so obsessed with the present. At that age, kids didn't have the experience and wisdom to see the bigger picture. But as far as Saikyou was concerned, it was foolish for adults to push their values onto these children.

It just wouldn't be fair.

Thankfully, she had an idea of what to do.

"So, Stella-chan. If I'm going to train you, you're going to have to agree to a condition of mine."

"Y-You'll do it?! What's the condition?!"

"It's simple. I'll fight you as many times as you want, but I won't actually teach you anything."

"Huh?"

"Basically, I'll spend this week beating the crap out of you. Your body might give out, or your heart might break before that even happens. That's how hardcore these battles are going to be. I'm not going to show you any mercy. If

you're fine with that, then sure, I'll train you."

"So you're saying I have to find the solutions to my problems on my own?"

"That's right. Of course, there's no guarantee you'll be able to figure anything out while fighting me. Still wanna do it?"

This was the best compromise Saikyou could come up with. She would just mercilessly crush Stella over and over in the hopes that she could figure out how to overcome her own weakness. If she couldn't, that was that.

It wasn't the kind of thing a teacher should do, but it was exactly what Stella needed right now. She was currently groping blindly in the dark, and fighting against Saikyou would give her a direction to focus her efforts. It would give her the chance to make progress. Sure, there was no guarantee, but if there was even the slightest chance that it might help, Stella would gladly take this opportunity.

"That's more than enough! Thank you so much!"

"All right, then follow me. Get ready for a week of true hell."

And so, the final week before the Seven Stars Battle Festival passed. All of the students, whether they were from the underworld or not, spent their time preparing as best as they could, while the adults and their conspiracies moved in the shadows.

It was now two days before the first match, and Kurogane Ikki smiled as he looked at the tournament bracket that had just been posted. It was hard to tell if it was a confident smile or a forced one. Of the thirty-two entrants that had chosen to remain in the tournament, his first opponent would be none other than the man who'd proven himself the best Blazer from among the seven Mage-Knight schools in Japan in the previous year's tournament: Bukyoku Academy's Moroboshi Yuudai, the reigning Seven Stars Sovereign.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up volume 4 of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*.

Hello, everyone. Riku Misora here. I hope you all enjoyed this volume. It was a pretty unlucky time for poor Ikki-kun. He found out that his older brother's working for some shady criminal organization, he had to fight the final boss as a random encounter when he's barely leveled up, he's got a fan that's basically like Robert De Niro's character in *The Fan*, and his first opponent in the Seven Stars Battle Festival is last year's tournament winner. The poor guy just can't catch a break. I guess it's only fitting since Ikki's luck is also Rank F.

At any rate, volume 5 is probably going to focus on Ikki's battle with Moroboshi Yuudai, the man who was able to completely shut out Toudou Touka. I wanted to make the battles exciting from the very start, so I hope you all enjoy them!

And while I'm here selling you on volume 5, I'd also like to mention that *Chivalry of a Failed Knight* is finally getting a manga! Having one of my series be adapted to manga has been a dream of mine for ages, so I'm overjoyed that it's finally happening. I wasn't able to get a manga for *Danzai no Exceed* or *Kanojo no Koi ga Hanashitekurenai!*, but now, my dream's finally come true! And it's all thanks to the support of you readers! Thank you so much! By the time this book comes out and you're reading this afterword, the first chapter of the manga should be up on Gangan Online, so go check it out if you have the time. I'm super looking forward to seeing how it turns out too!

Last but not least are the acknowledgments. I'd like to thank all of my editors for their constant help, as well as Won-san for drawing up all the new characters who got introduced in this volume. Thank you so much. Amane and Sara Bloodlily turned out exactly as I'd imagined them in my head, it's amazing.

And of course, thank you, dear reader, for supporting me all this time. I hope you'll stick with me to the end of the Seven Stars Battle Festival arc and beyond.

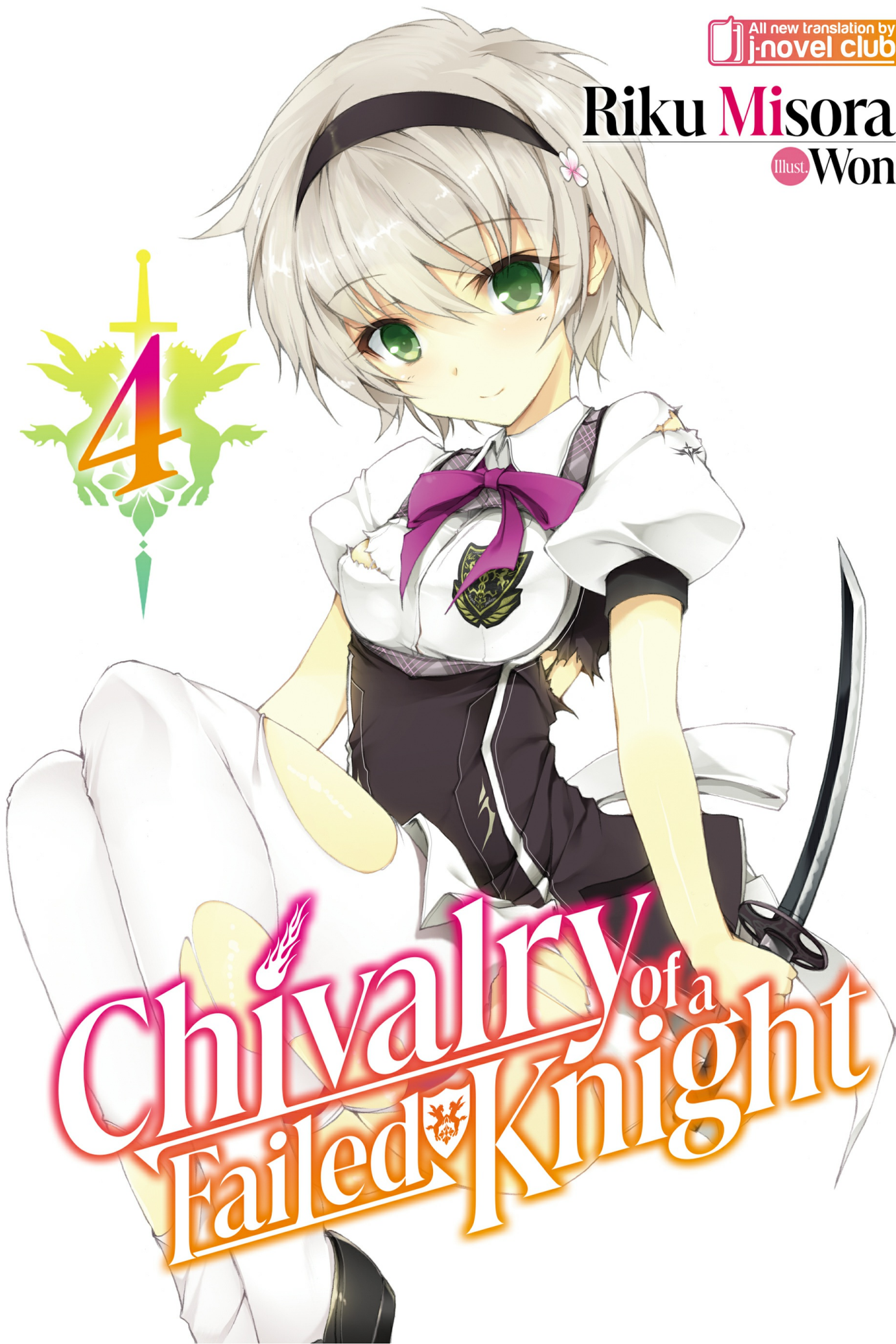
May we meet again in volume 5.

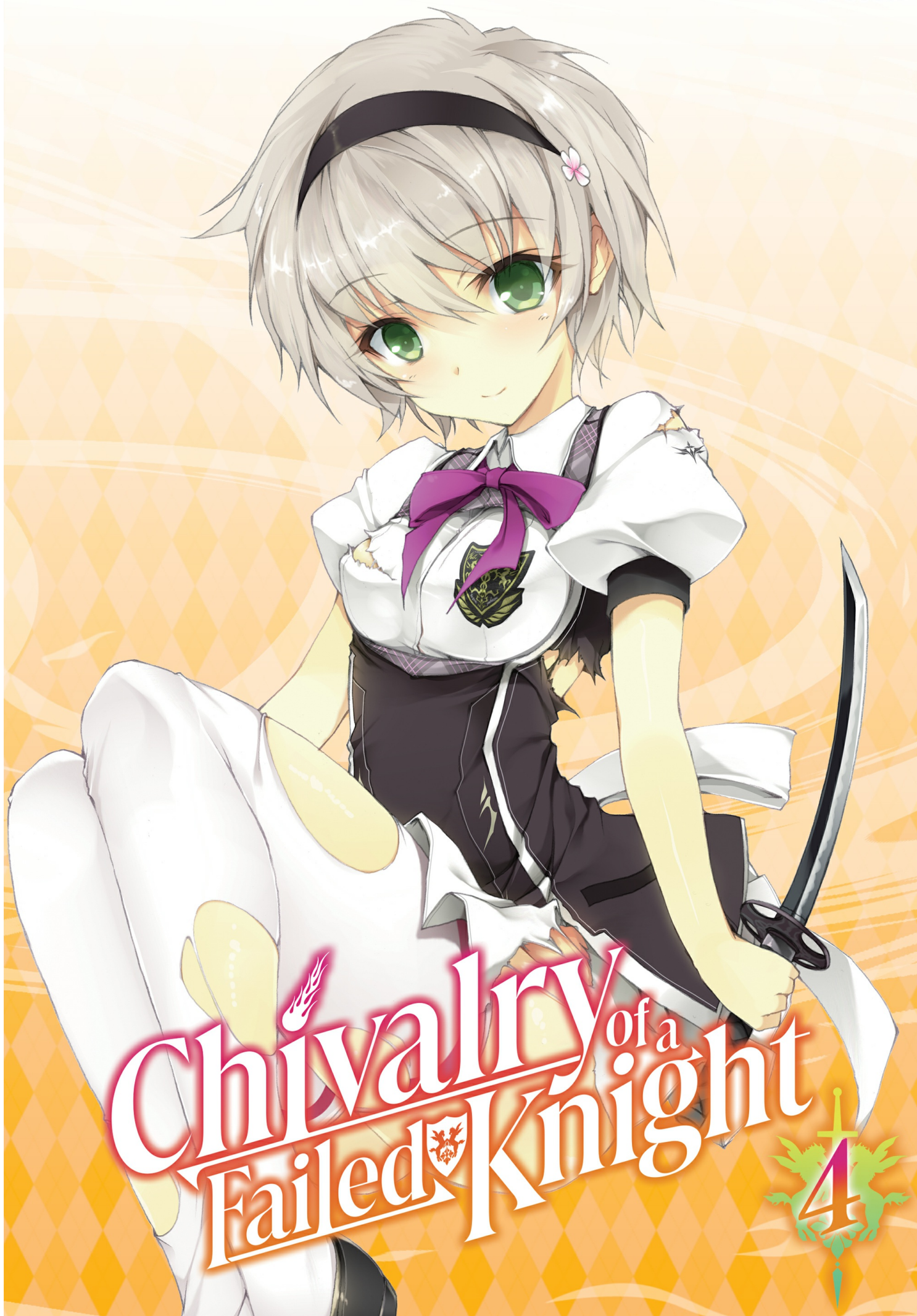
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j-novel club

Riku Misora
Illust. Won



Chivalry of a Failed Knight





Chivalry of a Failed Knight





"I am the harbinger of
the end atop the distant peak.
The twin swords that cleave the earth.
I am Edelweiss the Twin Wings.
Young man, it is time you learned
how vast the world truly is."

Thus,
the battle
between Worst
One Kurogane
Ikki and Twin
Wings Edelweiss
began.

Hiraga Reisen

Kurogane Ouma

Shinomiya Amane

Sara Bloodlily

Kazamatsuri Rinna

Tatara Yui





the two of
them shouted,
jumping out of
their seats and
assaulting
Stella.

**"You
liaaaaar!"**

**"I already
told you,
it all goes to
my chest!"**



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Chivalry of a Failed Knight: Volume 4

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by Riku Misora

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