

STELLA'S SWORD, FAR BEYOND
THREE HUNDRED FEET IN LENGTH,
WAS AS THE SUN ITSELF.
BUT AS HE STOOD BEFORE THE
APPROACHING CALAMITY, IKKI
KUROGANE MERELY GRINNED.

**"KATHARTERIO
SALAMANDRA!"**



"SHIZUKU?! WH-WHAT
DID YOU JUST...?!"

"I'M SIMPLY KISSING MY
BELOVED BROTHER."





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Chivalry *of a* *Failed Knight*

VOL. 1

Original Story by Riku Misora

Illustrations by Won



Huh?

Upon returning to the student dorms after his daily jog, Ikki Kurogane found a half-naked girl in his room. Her bright red, naturally wavy hair licked her body like a flame. Her ruby-red eyes, just one of her gorgeous, foreign-looking features, were wide with shock at the sudden intrusion. Her pale skin, white as the winter's first snow, contrasted perfectly with the bits of black lace she wore.

She's beautiful. That was the only thing running through Ikki's mind. Her beauty, reminiscent of artistic depictions of goddesses, left no room in his mind for impure thoughts. He was captivated. *Wait, but why is a girl like her in my room? Am I in the wrong room?!*

Room 405 in the first dormitory, a mere thirty square feet with a bunk bed, was definitely Ikki's. In other words, she was the one who'd gone into the wrong room.

"Ah," she squeaked, barely able to make a sound. A long inhale followed shortly after.

This is bad, he thought. *If she screams, I have no way of explaining this. I'll be done for.*

"Hold it!" Ikki exclaimed. "I know exactly what you're thinking. I'm not going to make excuses or pretend I didn't see what I saw."

He intentionally avoided making mention of who was really at fault for the tragedy. For a girl his age to be seen in such a way by a man she'd never met would certainly be painful; that much he knew. The only manly recourse was to try to help out.

"I'll strip too. That way, we'll be even!"

“Nooooo! Get away from me, you doooooog!”

Her scream shattered the morning silence, piercing even the heavens.

Of course...





Chapter 1

Genius Knight & Failed Knight

Blazers. Special beings capable of manifesting their own souls as armaments called Devices and controlling supernatural abilities with their magical power. Once upon a time, these people, wielding power beyond rational explanation, were called witches and wizards. The strongest among them could influence even the movement of time, while the weakest were still capable of performing godlike feats. Incapable of defeat at the hands of mortals and their weapons, Blazers were vital to the success of militaries. Their miraculous power made these humans more than human.

With great power came great responsibility, however. One such responsibility was adherence to the Mage-Knight System. Under the Mage-Knight System, one had to graduate from an internationally-designated academy before they would receive a license recognizing them as part of the chivalry—as a Mage-Knight—and allowing them to use their powers.

Hagun Academy, one of seven schools in Japan that could award such licenses, boasted a campus larger than the combined area of ten Tokyo Domes. There, young Blazers devoted themselves to honing their skills.

“Mm-hmm. So you thought that if you stripped as well, it’d balance out her embarrassment?” The suit-wearing, cigarette-smoking woman who spoke to him from her leather chair was the director of Hagun Academy, Kurono Shinguuji. Ikki Kurogane had been brought to her office after being apprehended for sexual harassment, and had just finished telling his side of the story.

“Are you stupid?” she asked, exasperated.

“I believe equality is the most gentlemanly concept there is,” he replied.

“There was certainly something gentlemanly about it.”

“I’m not a perv or anything, I just didn’t know what to do! I panicked.”

“Hmm, so seeing her supple young body caused you to lose your mind, your only thought being to strip.”

“I guess, but please don’t say it like that. It makes me sound like a crazy person.”

“You made *yourself* sound like a crazy person, Kurogane. Think about it from her perspective: you’re changing clothes in an empty dorm room in the middle of summer when a man you’ve never seen before suddenly barges in and tears off his clothes. How would you react?”

“Wow. I really am a crazy person.” Ikki shuddered as he put himself in her shoes.

“Great. It’s Miss Stella’s first day abroad and I’ve already done something terrible to her. I hope she doesn’t wind up hating Japan because of this.”

“Oh, you already know about Ms. Vermillion?”

“I only just remembered. I was so shocked that I completely forgot.”

That girl was Stella Vermillion, the second imperial princess of the Vermillion Empire, a small European nation. When it was announced that she would enroll at Hagun Academy, it was all over the news. *A Once-in-a-Decade Genius! The Second Imperial Princess of the Vermillion Empire, Age 15, Enters Hagun Academy with Record-Breaking Grades!*

I remember those headlines like I saw them yesterday, Ikki thought, amazed. “Not only is she a princess, but she’s top of the class as well. That’s incredible.”

“That’s part of being the undisputed number one. All of her abilities far exceed the average, and her all-around magical power—a Blazer’s most valuable ability—surpasses the new students’ average thirty times over. She’s a Rank A monster of a knight. The gap between her abilities and those of, say, a Rank F who had to repeat a year is massive. Wouldn’t you agree, Worst One?”

“Please stop talking about that.” Ikki protested Kurono’s prodding, but he didn’t deny the truth. He couldn’t. After all, Ikki Kurogane’s all-around magical power was a measly ten percent of the average student’s.

“But now it’s become a problem. Dealing with transfer students requires so much paperwork that I asked her to come prior to the entrance ceremony, which led to this fiasco. If we aren’t careful about this, it could become an international incident. I know it’s not really your fault, Kurogane, but you’ll just have to take the hit. Show us your kind, manly side, even if you got screwed on this one.”

“People really like to play the ‘manly’ card as soon as it’s convenient for them, don’t they?” Ikki sighed, mulling over the circumstances.

“Excuse me.” The door to the director’s office opened, and the woman they were discussing, Stella Vermillion, entered. Unlike last time, she had clothes on; she wore a tasteful, dark gray blazer that served as Hagun Academy’s uniform. Its modest color only emphasized her crimson hair. Her most eye-catching feature, however, was her breasts. They pushed up on her ribbon as if to signify their grandeur. Ikki began to remember the sight of her in her underwear, but when he saw her expression, he held his tongue. She seemed to have been crying; despite her snide glare, there was a damp redness to her eyes.

“Sorry.” The word naturally escaped his lips.

Men weren’t supposed to make girls cry. Even if it wasn’t his fault, the fear she felt was real. “That was an accident. I wasn’t trying to peep on you, I swear. But what’s done is done, so I have to make things right. Bake me, broil me, do whatever you want as punishment.”

“How noble of you. That must be your samurai spirit.”

“Or my way of stumbling through an apology.” Ikki smiled wryly in response to Stella’s pleasant voice, to which she forced a stiff smile of her own.

“Teehee. To be quite honest, being attacked by a pervert on my first day in Japan made me wonder if this country was worth the soil it inhabits. I considered escalating this to an international incident, but thanks to you, I may have changed my mind. Royalty such as myself must know when to be noble and generous.”

Stella’s friendly expression, less hostile than before, changed Ikki’s perception of her. He had expected her to be difficult and arrogant, but she was actually understanding.

“For being so gallant, Ikki, I’ll be lenient. All you have to do is fall on your sword.”

Or not.

“Whoa, what?! You think suicide is lenient?!”

“Even if it’s accidental, committing such a sin against a princess can only be atoned for through death. My first thought was to impale you on a stick and let eager citizens pelt you with rocks. I’m majorly reducing your sentence!”

“It almost sounds like you’re preparing a meal rather than doling out punishment.”

“You get to die an honorable death! No need to thank me for being such a bleeding heart.”

“It’s my heart that’ll be bleeding here!”

“Hahaha! Very clever, Kurogane.” Kurono couldn’t help but laugh.

“Director, please! Aren’t you supposed to stop people from dying inside your school?!”

“This is our only chance to trade a single life—yours—for eternal peace with the Vermillion Empire. Sounds like a steal to me.”

“How can you use human life as a bargaining chip?!” It seemed more like a scam to Ikki. “E-Excuse me, Miss Stella. Isn’t there some other way we can resolve this?”

“What’s the problem? I thought you Japanese men loved that thing where you kill yourselves to defend your honor.”

“Not me; I’m more of an easygoing millennial. I don’t do the samurai thing. Hip-hop is life, yo!”

“That sounds like a very ham-fisted character trait.”

“If you’re not gonna stop her, Director, at least stop talking!” Ikki yelled at Kurono, tired of her remarks. But Stella, watching Ikki panic, doubled down.

“Come on! You said I could bake or broil you, so be a man of your word and accept your punishment!”

“N-No, that’s just an expression! I didn’t really mean it that way!”

“You’re full of excuses today, Kurogane,” Kurono teased. “Weren’t you going to make things right?”

Shut up, will you?! This is my life we’re talking about here!

“Y-You expect me to pay with my life just because I saw you in your underwear? Who cares?!”

“‘Wh-Who cares’? H-H-How dare you say such a thing, you lecherous commoner?! This is how you respond after defiling an unmarried princess?! Not even my own father has ever seen me like that!” A fiery rage built up in Stella’s eyes. Actually, her eyes weren’t all that caught fire. Even the air around her crackled with flames, brightening the room.

Oh, that’s right, Ikki recalled. The newspapers said her power was—

“That does it! You disrespectful, creepy, crude, perverted little commoner. I’ll turn you into ashes myself! Serve my will, Lævateinn!” The flaming aurora that filled the room shone all at once, revealing a burning broadsword in her hands. It was her Device, her Blazer soul manifested.

Holy Swords, Demon Bows, Cursed Tools, and Blessed Tools. These items, like the magic wand that was all too common in legends and oral traditions, served as mediums for Blazers to activate their Noble Arts. In the Crimson Princess’ case, her special ability was scorching flames!

“Prepare yourself, lecher!” Stella was furious. “You’ll be nothing but a pile of ash when I’m done with you!”

“S-Seriously?!” Ikki cried.

“Don’t waste your breath!”

“Come to me, Intetsu!” He tried to defend himself from the swing of her flaming sword. A katana appeared, black as a raven, and the Rank F knight blocked the swing of her flaming sword with his own unique Device, Intetsu. But —

“Resistance is futile!”

“Hot, hot, hot!”

“Of course it’s hot! My Noble Art, Dragon Breath, covers Lævateinn in five-thousand-degree flames! Even if you avoid her claws, the dragon princess burns all who dare oppose her!”

“What ridiculous power!” Clenching his teeth, Ikki moved to distance himself from Stella’s attack.

“Hohoho... Foolish man. You can’t escape me in such a tiny room. I’ll end your existence and erase my premarital loss of innocence!”

“Hey, hold your horses! Let’s just calm down and talk! What do you mean, ‘loss of innocence’? I didn’t even touch you!”

“Liar! You soiled me with your l-l-l-lascivious gaze!”

“Yeah, I saw you, but l—Uh... I wasn’t thinking of anything bad! I just, umm... I was just stunned by how beautiful you are, Miss Stella!”

“Wha—?!” The seething rage visible on Stella’s face instantly changed into a deep-red blush. Ikki broke into a cold sweat, afraid of angering her further.

“Wh-Wh-What did you just say, fool?! H-How can you call an unmarried woman b-beautiful? You c-commoners certainly have no tact!”



Lævateinn's flames lost their vigor, reducing to smolders. Stella's attitude faltered and she began to look around the room uncomfortably. Her eyebrows, once raised in anger, fell weakly as tears welled up in her eyes. She seemed embarrassed.

This is unexpected. Shouldn't someone like her be used to hearing that? Either way, Ikki took her declining anger as his opportunity to explain the truth. "That aside, you're the one who messed up and changed clothes in my room. Cool it with the 'honorable suicide' nonsense, please."

"You have no idea what you're talking about! You took it upon yourself to enter *my* room! I used *my* key that I got from the Director for *my* room! At what point did I mess up?!"

"Huh?" Ikki couldn't hide his confusion. *Wait. I always lock the door, so even if Stella went to the wrong room, she shouldn't have been able to get in. Then how?*

Stella had just told him how: Kuroono gave her a key.

"What's this about, Director?"

"Heh. Heheheh." Kuroono tried to stifle her laughter.

"Director?" They both turned toward her.

"Haha! Sorry, kids. Things were getting silly in here, so I decided to be a little mean. But hey, there's nothing left for me to explain. Kurogane, you know Hagun Academy's dorms are made for two people each. Neither of you went into the wrong room! You're actually roommates."

An unbelievable declaration escaped her lips.

"Wh-Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"



"E-Explain, Director! A-Am I supposed to share a room with this lecher?!" Stella asked, stupefied.

"That's exactly the case, Stella Vermillion. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I have plenty of problems with it!"

“I do too,” Ikki chimed in. “I know the dorm can fit two people, but I’ve never heard of opposite-sex pairings.”

“You’re too caught up in the past, Kurogane. Everything changed when I took office! I’ve already told you my policy.”

“A completely merit-based system with an emphasis on combat abilities, right?”

“Yes, that is my policy. Hagun is the runt of the litter compared to the other six schools here in Japan. All seven help sponsor the Seven Stars Battle Festival every single year, and yet ours loses every single year. That’s why I was brought on as director. The first step to saving Hagun is redefining the dormitory system. Your student number and gender don’t matter; instead, classmates of similar strength are put together so they can push each other forward. Two people of comparable ability will naturally compete, after all. In short, these dorm assignments are designed to foster competition,” Kurono elaborated. She endlessly, shamelessly tooted her own horn, but Ikki wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Then that makes this even weirder. Stella is the undisputed number one, so why is she being paired up with a bottom-of-the-barrel flunk like me?”

“‘Flunk’?!” Stella couldn’t believe her ears. “You mean you actually failed?!”

“Embarrassingly, yeah. I’m a Rank F.”

“Rank F? A Rank F student is similar in strength to *me*? H-How is that possible?!”

“Heheh. Well, you two are exceptions.” Kurono explained. “To put it bluntly, there’s nobody better than you, Vermillion, and there’s nobody worse than Kurogane. You were leftovers since you’re both on such extreme ends of the spectrum and nobody else could reasonably be paired up with either of you. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“I don’t get it at all!” Stella’s hands made a *bang!* as she slammed them on the director’s desk. “B-Besides, it’s c-common sense that a woman my age shouldn’t be sharing a room with someone of the opposite sex! What do you plan to do if something bad happens?!”

“Ooh, interesting. What sort of ‘something bad’ are you thinking would

happen, Vermillion? I'm dying to know."

"W-Well... Eurgh..."

"You're stumbling over yourself like you're drunk."

As Stella stopped to wipe the tears from her eyes at the affront, Ikki kept arguing with Kurono. She continued to laugh and insist that she was just playing around, but she also refused to overturn the decision.

"Sorry, kids, but the decision is final. There are other coed pairs, too. And this convenient system's blindness toward other priorities is a good point, too; it means you don't get special treatment for being a princess, Vermillion. If you don't like it, there's the door."

You can leave. Stella recoiled at the harshness of those words. She transferred all the way from Europe to Japan. Ikki didn't know why she wanted to be here so badly, but he did know that she would be reluctant to leave.

"...Yes, ma'am." Even Stella could only fold to Kurono.

"Are you sure about this?" Ikki asked her.

"I-If that is your academy's policy, then I have no choice," Stella responded. "But if we're going to share a room, I have three conditions for you to obey!" She held up three fingers. Ikki wasn't too happy about the arrangement either, so he had no reason to accept her demands. As the older of the two and as a man, though, he chose to at least cooperate.

"As long as they're not 'tall, smart, and rich', I don't care."

"None of those matter to me. My conditions should be simple, even for someone like you," she scoffed. "Don't talk to me. Don't open your eyes. Don't even breathe." She listed her demands.

"He'd probably die, y'know," Kurono butted in.

"If you can follow these three rules, I will allow you to be my roommate!" Stella stood her ground.

"I'll be evicted in minutes!" Ikki rebutted.

"Why? Are you not man enough to obey me?"

“Nobody could obey those demands! At least let me breathe!”

“I will not! You just want to breathe near me so you can sniff up my scent, you lecher!”

“I’ll mouth-breathe, then! If I do that, I won’t smell you.”

“Not good enough! You just want to open your mouth so you can taste the air I breathe, you pervert!”

“Do all princesses have imaginations this bizarre?!”

“Why don’t you just leave, then?! I can have the room to myself that way!”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Good Lord. You two are never going to get anywhere at this rate. How about you act like chivalrous knights and let your swords do the talking? We’ll hold a mock battle; winner decides the rules. Then neither of you will have any reason to complain about the outcome.” Kurono, obviously tired of their arguing, proposed a solution. Fight a fair battle, and the winner gets what they want, plain and simple. A very conventional suggestion for resolving disputes between knights.

“Yeah, that sounds fair. Let’s do it, Miss Stella.” Ikki readily agreed and waited for Stella to do the same.

“H-Huh?!” Instead, her eyes and mouth opened wide in shock.

“What’s the matter?”

“N-Nothing, but... Are you hearing yourself talk?”

“Yeah? Did I say something weird?”

“You’re a Rank F! The Worst One, with literally no upward mobility! How are you going to beat a Rank A?!”

When she put it that way, Ikki could understand Stella’s shock. A boy with abilities so humble he couldn't even pass his first year so brazenly challenging someone known for being a once-in-a-decade genius was certainly being more than just reckless.

“C’mon. You won’t know until we try,” he said, flashing her a vague smile.

Words alone would never solve their problem. Stella wouldn't budge, and Ikki wouldn't drop out; he had his own reasons for wanting to be a Mage-Knight. Their only hope was to find a method that didn't involve words, thus Ikki agreed to a mock battle. That only served to enrage Stella further, however.

"Urghhhhh! How dare you, commoner?! Was peeping on me while I was exposed not enough for you?! Now you of all people claim superiority over me as a Mage-Knight?! I have never been so insulted in my life! This may be the worst excuse for a country I've ever seen!" Stella declared, flames of hostility in her gaze.

"All right, fine. I accept your challenge. But since you've brought me down to your level, I'm not only after the rules anymore! Now, the loser must pledge his life to serving the winner! No matter how humiliating the order, he must obey like a dog! Are we clear?!"

"Wh-Whaaat?! I-I think you're taking this a little too far."

"You can't back out now, coward! You'll regret speaking to me so carelessly! In fact, a mock battle won't cut it; this calls for a full-blown duel!"

"Looks like it's settled, then." Kurono declared. "You have my permission to use the third training field."

"D-Director?! It's not settled just because you say it is!" It was too late for Ikki to argue back. Stella exited the director's office with a "Get ready to lose, dog! Hmph!" She was probably headed to the third training field.

"Wow, this really blew up. Thanks a lot, Director," Ikki chided.

"Heheh. You don't want to be her servant?"

"No, I don't. In fact, I don't even want her to be mine if I win."

"If you win, huh? Well, you've seen how strong she is, and there's a reason she's so famous. Her flames can melt anyone who so much as approaches her. Her presence alone is an overwhelming threat to others. Nobody else out there has that much offensive power, much less the gall to use it. You're one interesting guy if you still think you can beat her."

"I'll have to beat her at some point; you know that better than anyone. After

all, you're the one who promised I could graduate if I seized victory at the Seven Stars Battle Festival. She'll be there too, so it's only a matter of time until we fight."

"Then there's no point in hesitating, is there? All you have to do is win. Once you do, you can make whatever rules you need for your dorm room and forget about all this 'servant' nonsense. Now then, that's that." Kurono patted Ikki's shoulder and walked away as he sighed for the millionth time that day.

"All you have to do is win", huh? Well, she isn't wrong.

He knew that was easier said than done, though. His enemy was the strongest of the strong. Her power was overwhelming; an aura of pure fire that would even go against her own volition to respond to her emotions. Against her, Ikki's magical power was essentially nil. He was an ant fighting an elephant; it was an insult to even compare them on the same scale.

He had been prepared for such a thing for a long time, though. *"No matter how hopeless things are, there will always be battles where a man mustn't lose or flee."* Ikki had chosen the path he walked the day he saw *his* smile and heard those words.

"I guess I gotta do this," he muttered, finally leaving the director's office. He was off to the stage of his duel, to sever the threads of fate with the blade of his soul.



As Mage-Knights were a staple of the modern army, skilled fighters were highly sought-after. Not only were they vital in international wars, but they were also a major factor in suppressing terrorist organizations and crime syndicates such as the Rebellion, who wanted to use Blazers' powers for evil. Thus, interspersed throughout Hagun Academy's campus were dome-like battlefields, each about three hundred feet in diameter and surrounded by spectators' seats.

Ikki Kurogane and Stella Vermillion stood in the third training field, one example of those battlefields. The two faced each other at a distance of about fifty feet, with Kurono standing between them as a referee.

All eyes were on them. The gazes belonged to second-and third-years who put their training on hold upon hearing rumors of the coming spectacle. More than twenty people had gathered, interested in the sudden mid-summer mock battle. They all hoped to see the newly-enrolled superstar rookie that the school was buzzing about.

“So that girl is the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion?”

“Damn, she’s real pretty!”

“Her hair looks like it’s on fire. It’s beautiful...”

“But who’s she fighting?”

“Isn’t that Kurogane, the guy who flunked?”

“A flunk like him is gonna fight Miss Stella? Isn’t she a Rank A genius?”

“I dunno what he’s thinking. Hey, did any of you second-years have him in your classes last year? What’s he like?”

“He was in my class, but he didn’t meet the power requirement for battle practices, so I’ve never seen him fight.”

“Forget about moving up, he can’t even train? That’s pretty awful.”

“Laaame. The princess is gonna one-shot him, end of story.”

“You’re sounding more pathetic by the minute. Have you thought about giving up on chivalry and living life as a common man?” Stella giggled when she heard what they said about him

“Maybe I should,” Ikki replied. “I’ll never know until I try, though.”

“You do understand that you’ll be my servant if you lose, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but that’s only if I lose. All it means is that I have to win.”

“I’m amazed that you still think you can beat me.”

“It’s what all my hard work has been for.” Ikki gave a weak, wry smile in response to her harsh words, but he didn’t try to move from his starting position; he was already prepared for defeat. That made his enemy even angrier.

Hard work...

“With enough hard work, even the most talented enemy isn’t insurmountable.” Stella was infuriated to hear such a thing from a commoner. When he lost to her, he would just say, “Well, I tried my hardest, but I just couldn’t stand up to raw talent.”

As if he’s the only one who knows hard work. As if I won only because of my natural talent. It frustrated her to no end.

It’s not like she had been born strong; quite the opposite, in fact. When she was younger, Stella was told that she could never be a real knight. Her abilities, powerful beyond her control, engulfed and scorched everything, including her own body. Not even her parents believed she could become a knight. Despite that, she never gave up trying. She knew a great knight lay dormant within her.

To a small empire like the Vermillion Empire, the presence of strong Blazers was crucial. Long ago, Samurai Ryouma led Japan, a tiny oriental country, to victory in the second World War. Like him, she could be a legendary Mage-Knight who put her empire on equal footing with larger nations.

She was still burned by her own flames, but if she could learn to use them to their fullest extent, she would be akin to a savior for her land. That was why, despite all the resistance she met, Stella pressed onward.

Three years of arduous toil later, she harnessed the power of Dragon Breath. So many times, her body burned; so many times, her spirit faltered. Yet through persistent effort, she was able to find herself.

That’s why I can’t stand when people try to cheapen my success with words like “talent” and “gifted”!

“The mock battle will be starting soon. Both of you, be sure to summon your Devices in Phantom Form,” Kurono said.

“Come to me, Intetsu.”

“Serve my will, Lævateinn!” Stella materialized her soul in Phantom Form, a form in which attacks chipped away at the enemy’s stamina instead of doing real damage. Facing Ikki, she swore: *I will defy all expectations.*

“You can’t beat the gifted. Their natural talent puts them on another level.”
Stella was ready to put such a convenient, self-serving belief to rest once and for all.

“All right! Let’s go ahead!”

The battle between the Genius Knight and the Failed Knight had begun.



“Haaaaaaah!” At the very moment the signal was given, Stella leaped toward Ikki and swung her flaming sword. Her full-power attack may have seemed unrefined at first glance, but it was still dangerous. Still, it was just the swing of a sword. Ikki estimated the trajectory of her attack and moved to parry, but canceled his maneuver and stepped back. Not a second later, Lævateinn smashed the ground below, shaking the entirety of the third training field.

“Good prediction. You wouldn’t have made it out so easily if you tried to take the hit.”

“Jeez, talk about powerful. Were you holding back in the director’s office?” Ikki asked.

“Of course I was. If I hadn’t been, I would’ve destroyed the whole school,” she grinned, preparing to pursue him. Ikki stepped back again, hoping to put as much distance between them as possible. If he were to try trading blows with her, his arm would probably end up being torn off.

Stella’s Device was a broadsword, a super-massive weapon. Ikki was faster, so using that to get the upper hand seemed like the best idea. That was only the common-sense strategy when fighting slower, brute-force enemies, however; a plan that basic wouldn’t work against such a behemoth of a foe.

“You’re too slow!” The air seemed to boom as she caught up with Ikki, startling him. “Did you think you could win with speed? Too bad. Magic isn’t just used for attacks, you know; it can also be detonated behind you to increase your mobility. And with my thirty-times-the-average all-around magical power, there’s no need for me to watch my magic usage. I can maintain this speed for the entirety of our duel and still have plenty of energy left over. You can’t beat me in strength or speed!”

Stella Vermillion was essentially a high-speed armored tank with unlimited fuel. Ikki couldn't help but laugh bitterly in the face of her absurd ability.

So this is what makes a Rank A, is it? Ikki thought.

Many of the previous Seven Stars Kings—his ultimate aspiration—were Rank B and Cs. Every single Rank A, however, left their mark on history as a great hero. She was truly, undoubtedly a once-in-a-decade prodigy.

The Crimson Princess brandished her sword with an unavoidable swing that would shake even the earth itself. Steel collided with steel as Ikki was forced to respond with his own strike. Each clash that rung out was like music to the ears of the crowd that had gathered.

“Ooooooh!” The crowd went wild, entranced by the fiery traces left in Lævateinn's wake—traces left by the swordswoman's honed technique.

Very few Mage-Knights mastered martial arts and fencing, as they weren't factored into one's rank. Additionally, to most, time spent doing that was better spent honing their magic abilities, which would be much more useful in both their school and adult lives. At least, that was what the majority of Mage-Knights, poor swordfighters at best, believed.

The few strong knights honed their fighting alongside their magic. They lusted endlessly for power, reaching for and wringing dry anything and everything that could make them stronger. Stella Vermillion was one of these knights. Her Imperial Sword Style, a school of swordsmanship that had brought her victory at multiple fencing competitions, was graceful like a dance, yet relentless like the hunt in pursuit of Ikki. He could do little more than guard against each blow, unable to counter. He stepped back continuously.

“Figures that flunk can't get a single hit in.”

“Yep. He can barely even dodge.”

“It's just a matter of time now.”

The spectators' excitement began to die down as they watched the one-sided battle. But—

What's going on here?

Stella Vermillion couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong. Any normal opponent would've been crushed by the immense power of just one of her attacks. A situation where they "can't get a single hit in" couldn't have been happening, could it? They should have been down for the count already. Blocking her attacks should have been impossible.

But if that were the case, how could she explain the current situation? Despite her one-sided assault, a cold sweat formed on her brow.

He can barely even dodge? He's just defending? It's just a matter of time? They're all wrong, Stella realized. *He's toying with me!*

"Haaah!"

Stella took another swing at her enemy with Lævateinn, and Ikki again blocked the attack with Intetsu. He didn't take the blow head-on, however, instead using the momentum from the impact to leap away.

Again?!

To the untrained eye, Ikki appeared to have been blown away by her attack, but that was wrong. Stella's immense power was canceled out entirely by Ikki's technique.

Defending oneself with a gentle parry was no simple feat. Too great a difference in power and he would be crushed by the weapon; too little difference in power and he would be powerless to defend against the next strike. Power adjustment, angle, and timing—if even one detail was off by so much as a fraction, that tightrope walk would have ended in a fall, yet the samurai before her had pulled it off without even breaking a sweat. Faced with that realization, feelings that could only be called fear began to build in her heart. Alarms blared inside her head, screaming, *This enemy is beyond dangerous!*

"Can't you do anything but run away?!" Stella taunted as she continued her assault, hoping to hide her fear.

Ikki didn't even bother to respond, however. With his vague, mischievous grin gone, he simply watched her unresponsively, carefully, almost to the point that it was scary.

I can't stand that look!

He was looking into her; beyond her clothing and her skin, down to the very fibers of her muscles. He monitored every minute twitch, every breath she took. His gaze must have been the source of her discomfort.

Only then did she realize what he was doing. Ikki was trying to gather information on her Imperial Sword Style by watching her movements.

"My style isn't so basic that someone like you could imitate it!" she boasted.

"You think? 'Cause I've already got it."

"Wha—?!"

The tables had turned. For the first time since their battle began, after nearly five minutes, Ikki Kurogane was on the offensive. It was suicide; no matter how great his swordplay, a samurai who came face to face with a tank would logically be destroyed by its cannon. Logically.

"Ngh!" Somehow, however, Stella was forced backward. In sword-to-sword combat, the clear winner in terms of strength was being pushed back. Why? The answer lay in the ray of light traced by Intetsu's movements. Without question, it was Stella's own Imperial Sword Style.

"Impossible...! Where did you learn that?!" As the words escaped her lips, something—the most unthinkably terrifying possibility—flashed through Stella's mind.

"Did you... steal my technique while we were fighting?!"

"Well, that's just how it goes. Nobody liked me as a kid, so nobody taught me anything. I had to watch other people and steal their techniques for myself. I'm so good at it that I can pretty much learn any sword style in under a minute."

One's swordplay revealed their knowledge; their form revealed their traditions; their technique revealed their principles. Seeing through the leaves and branches to the root of the matter made it easy to grasp the enemy's style and formulate a way to respond to it.

"Once you reach that level of understanding, you can come up with your own style to counter your foe's."

But how could one completely nullify the enemy's sword style? Simply revise every last bit of the enemy's style and combine it all into a new one. Old methods always fall to new. And once one knew everything there was to know about the old way, they would subconsciously compensate for its deficiencies. It inevitably provided one with the ability to preempt their foe.

"Stealing my enemies' techniques and making them my own is a technique I came up with, Blade Steal. It took two whole minutes to steal your style because it's so well-refined, and another thirty seconds to surpass it. But now that I've mastered your style, I figure it's time for my counterattack."

"H-Hey, is the princess really getting beaten back?!"

The tide of battle was turning against Stella, causing a stir among the audience. But she was more shocked than anyone. Not only had she been eclipsed in swordsmanship, but her very own sword style had been stolen from her and overwritten for the specific purpose of surpassing the original. He had uncovered so much knowledge, so much history, stealing her special technique just by watching the flash of her sword. It was as if his observational skills could bring anything to light.

On top of all that, the samurai before her wasn't using a shred of his magical power. To that man, surpassing the Imperial Sword Style and toying with a Rank A knight, *the* Stella Vermillion, were purely physical feats. Just how much practice did it take for him to reach that level?

He's too strong! There was no longer any doubt in her mind. In terms of swordsmanship, he far exceeded her. Her style was simply no match for his knowledge and experience. Stella accepted that fact. The Rank A knight and Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion, was able to do so thanks to her resolve to surpass all those who were above her.

If he's figured out my style, then I'll just use that to my advantage!

Stella prepared for another slash with Lævateinn, and Ikki instantly raised Intetsu to meet it. Her attack appeared to be a downward swing. Just from her preparations, Ikki had calculated the angle and force of what appeared to be a downward swing, formulating a response, but he had actually fallen for her trap.

It worked!

With a smirk, Stella jumped back without following through on her strike, expecting to take him by surprise given how well he knew her technique. Though she had been on the offensive for the whole fight, she was forced into the defensive role.

The very fact that Ikki had preempted her attack was what caused him to fall for her feint. His blade hit nothing but air, which was just what Stella hoped for. She unleashed a horizontal slash, a sudden shift in tactics from her usual thrusts. Intetsu, still mid-swing, would be unable to parry her attack in time. Lævateinn would then cut deep into his exposed torso—or so she thought.

“Your swordsmanship is slipping,” he said, and parried the blow before it could reach him.

H-How?! She had changed her rhythm and method of attack; she had outsmarted him. Intetsu shouldn’t have been in a position to parry her swing. But it did! Why?!

The answer: its hilt. Ikki had defended himself from her retreating slash using Intetsu’s hilt, of all things. Her blade struck directly between the hands he used to wield it.

How is his eyesight so good?!

“You’re trying to rush your victory because you’re flustered. Taking potshots while you run away isn’t your style; even someone like me can parry a blow from cowardly attacks like that. Losing control is a fatal error! Haaaaaaah!” Ikki shouted, powerfully repelling Lævateinn before bringing his blade down on the defenseless Stella.



“It’s over?!”

“His swing hit its mark. He must’ve won.”

“No way... A top-tier Rank A like Stella lost?”

“She didn’t take him seriously. That’s the only way—”

“No, wait! Look!”

The crowd, dumbfounded by what had just happened, fixed their gaze on Stella's right shoulder. Intetsu dealt a clean hit to her right shoulder—but stopped there. Even with all of his strength behind that blow, Ikki wasn't able to damage Stella in the slightest.

"So that's how this is gonna go," Ikki said, the frustration obvious in his voice, before leaping away from her again to escape the heat.

Magic acted as a barrier for Blazers, so an attack without magic to nullify it wouldn't be enough to take one down. But Ikki's magic was too little, too weak. No matter how excellent his swordplay was, he lacked a Blazer's most important quality. He lacked it so much, in fact, that he'd failed to break through even the magic that passively radiated from Stella's body.

All-around magical power, the basic energy that allowed Blazers to function, couldn't be increased through effort; it was assigned to each person when they were born, based on what they were destined to do. The great were born into greatness. Decided at birth by the hand of fate, it was indisputable from the very beginning. The difference between their natural talent was the ultimate, insurmountable wall that stopped Ikki's blade.

"It's not right for me to win like this," Stella remarked.

"You knew my Intetsu wouldn't do any damage, didn't you?"

"Of course. That's why I chose a swordfight. I was going to defeat you through swordplay instead of magic, proving once and for all that there's more to me than just raw talent, but I guess it just won't work out like that. I have no choice but to concede that my talent was the deciding factor in this battle."

Ikki was strong. His *hard work* was different from that of all of the men Stella had defeated before. It held a different weight. If he had the average person's—no, perhaps even slightly less than the average person's talent, his previous blow would have finished her. Regrettably, he was born without that talent. When the battle was over, she couldn't scorn him even if he were to say he couldn't beat raw talent. He had earned the right to say that. That's just how strong he was.

I will win this fight in the most respectful way I can."

Stella leaped back to the edge of the ring in the blink of an eye, stopping at the partition separating the two of them from the gallery.

I will win this fight in the most respectful way I can."

Ikki doubted those words given that she had moved as far away as she could, but that doubt was quickly disproved.

"Pierce the blue sky, flame of purgatory!"

When she raised Lævateinn to the sky, the fire within it grew ever brighter, ever hotter, until it became more accurate to call it a pillar of light, spreading even beyond the dome's ceiling.

"Whoooooa!"

"This is ridiculous! Is that even still her?!"

Stella's sword, far beyond three hundred feet in length, was as the sun itself—an aurora of pure destruction. She had unleashed the prized Noble Art belonging to the Crimson Princess, a Rank A knight.

She clearly had no intention of trading blows anymore; she wasn't vain enough to believe she could. She was well aware that Ikki's swordsmanship far outclassed her own, and her acceptance of that fact only furthered her desire to destroy the battlefield using her unfair level of raw talent.

"You're done for. It would be better for both of us if you accepted defeat gracefully."

The words she spoke before her final strike were full of nothing but respect. It was for his sake as well as her own that she was going to crush him with the decisive power of her talent.

Anyone who dedicates themselves to their work like that can be successful in anything they choose to do, Stella thought. Anyone except this poor excuse for a Mage-Knight. His fatal flaw was being born without talent.

"Katharterio Salamandra!"

The sword of pure light embodied the true meaning of ruin, incinerating the battlefield as it was brought down.

“Waaaah!”

“Ruuun! It’s gonna hit us, too!”

“Seriously? Who uses a technique like that against a single person?”

The students in the audience screamed and ran, while Kurono smirked ruefully at the destruction of the training field. But as he stood before the approaching calamity, Ikki Kurogane merely grinned.

“My little sister always told me, ‘You can be anything you want, just not a Mage-Knight. Do something else with your life.’ Maybe you’re both right; maybe I don’t have what it takes for that.” For Ikki Kurogane to become a real Mage-Knight, winning at the Seven Stars Battle Festival was the bare minimum. Even he himself knew it was as foolish as trying to swim up a waterfall, perhaps even better than anyone else out there. “But I can’t give up. It’s my dream to be a Mage-Knight. The vow that makes me who I am won’t allow me to give up on myself.”

That’s why...

“That’s why I wondered: ‘how can the weakest defeat the strongest? What do I have to do to accomplish my goal?’ Here comes the answer!” Ikki declared, raising the tip of his sword. “I’ll use my greatest weakness to break through your greatest strength!”

As he spoke, light bathed both him and Intetsu, shining bright like blue flames.

Is his affinity fire, like mine? Stella thought, but she quickly realized that wasn’t the case. What surrounded him was the light of his magic, focused enough to make it visible. *He’s getting stronger?! No, that can’t be right. Magical power is assigned at birth—it can’t be changed in any way. Then what’s going on?*

She didn’t know; she had never heard of anyone increasing their own magical power. What she did know, however, was that Intetsu, enveloped in blue flames, was enough to defeat her.

That didn’t matter. No natural creature could resist being consumed by the heat of the sun.

One slash! That's all I need to win this battle! she thought.

The distance between them was more than two hundred feet. No matter what he tried to do, the blade of light was sure to reach him first. But he said his weakness could defeat that power!

“Huh?!” Just before her blade could hit its mark, he disappeared completely. No, he had simply dodged so quickly that it looked like he’d disappeared.

What was that?! Stella’s eyes opened wide at the shock of her miss, but she aimed a second swing at Ikki despite that.

Katharterio Salamandra was a formless sword of pure heat. As such, it could strike from a distance of a hundred yards at a speed unthinkable for a weapon of such size. A mere human shouldn’t have been able to evade it.

Yet Ikki had done just that. He ran through the battlefield like the wind itself, evading the second and third swings of that blade of light. Far from hitting him, she could barely keep sight of Ikki. He was moving so quickly that she became unable to see him at all beyond the occasional glimpse in her periphery.

“Grr, what even is that power?! How are you suddenly able to move so fast?!” Stella demanded.

“This is my ability. Like your control over fire, I have my own superpower as a Blazer.”

Ikki’s superpower was the heightening of his physical capabilities. Many Blazers would call it the worst of all possible powers; they had no need to heighten their physical abilities when they could put enough magic into their swords to destroy anything they needed to. That was something that even Stella had done during their duel. When she did it, however, it was five or even six times her normal strength, not just double. In other words, Ikki’s ‘superpower’ was something any Blazer could do. It was a fitting ability for a Rank F Blazer such as him. However—

“Impossible! There’s no way you can move like that just by heightening your abilities!” She raised her voice in confusion, continuing to swing her sword of light. “And I’ve never heard of someone increasing their magical power by increasing their strength!”

Though his movements were invisible to the naked eye, the magic he was unleashing was not. He couldn't possibly have been *just* doubling his physical abilities. He had to have been moving at ten times his normal.

"That's right. But instead of using this ability the normal way, I'm putting all of my strength into it," Ikki grinned, still evading the sword of light.

"What?! That attitude alone shouldn't make any difference!"

"It's not just an attitude. Literally."

"Oh?"

"You know, there's something I've always wondered about. If I ran a hundred yards with 'all my strength', I would still have some strength left in the end. Isn't that strange? If I had really been using *all* my strength, I wouldn't have been able to stand after hitting that hundredth yard."

Why was that, though? It was because humans were living beings, plain and simple. Living beings instinctively tried to preserve their own lives, limiting their own potential due to their survival instinct. It was the highest priority for all living creatures, the most unconscious of actions.

No matter how set one was on exhausting all their strength, the brain simply wouldn't allow it. The strength required to maintain bodily functions would always be kept in a separate reserve—one could call it a biological imperative. The result: humans would never use more than half of their strength, stamina, or magical power. That was absolute.

But what if one could disable that imperative? What if a man could, by his own volition, remove that restraint?

"No way. Then you..."

"Right. My magical power never increased; I just willingly broke the limiter in order to make use of this forbidden, life-preserving power!"

Ikki knew of his own deficiency better than anyone else. He could never bridge the gap between himself and a natural prodigy through effort alone. That was natural—even prodigies put in effort. Ikki understood that it was an insult to claim they fought using talent alone. Therefore, the gap could be

narrowed, but never filled; that's just how great it was.

If Ikki wanted to overrule that law, he couldn't do it normally. He would have to become a demon. Never could he avert his eyes from that truth; instead, he had to embrace it, which led him to one solution. If he was too weak to ever fully surpass talent, then he couldn't ask for too much. All that mattered was a single minute, nothing more.

One minute. In that short period of time, he would make himself unbeatable. He would become able to defeat any foe. That was Ikki Kurogane's final solution, his one and only way to turn the weakest into the strongest. By exhausting all of his power in just one minute, Ikki's Noble Art strengthened his once-pathetic abilities by a magnitude of several dozen.

"Ittou Shura!"

Ikki's staggering speed, unrecognizable to the naked eye, allowed him to instantly move directly next to Stella—and he ended the match.

Slash!

His speed left her no time to intercept, no time to defend, no time to even scream; Stella took the brunt of Intetsu's attack.

"Ah." Stella's consciousness was lost to the abyss, along with her footing. All her strength left her and she collapsed. It was a special kind of blackout, experienced when one took what would have been a fatal blow from a weapon in Phantom Form. Ittou Shura brought down the Crimson Princess with only one strike.

"That's enough! The winner is Ikki Kurogane!"

As Kurono announced the winner, the students watching the spectacle stared silently at the failed knight before them, shocked beyond belief by the unimaginable outcome.



"...Ngh."

Stella steadily awakened, bits of light swimming through her vision. When she opened her eyes, she noticed the ceiling was surprisingly low.

“Finally awake, Vermillion?” Kurono asked, smoking a cigarette while sitting next to her on the bed.

“Director? Where are we?”

“Your room. You collapsed after being dealt a would-be fatal wound by a Device in Phantom Form. You weren’t hurt enough to need a doctor or an iPS capsule, so I was told to let you get some rest.”

Her lips, colored red with lipstick, blew smoke into the room.

Aren’t the student dorms supposed to be smoke-free? Stella thought despite not having the energy to say anything.

“So that really did happen, then?” Her mood worsened as she came to that realization. She had hoped that it was a dream, but of course, the truth could never be that convenient. She had lost. Even worse, there was no excuse for how terrible a loss it was. “Heh, so this is what it’s like to lose.”

“There’s no point in dwelling on it. Kurogane even bested me, albeit in a handicapped battle. You’re just not up to the task of beating him right now.”

“He could even best the former third-rank, the World’s Clock? That’s insane,” Stella replied.

His power must be beyond monstrous. Maybe that’s not too surprising, though. His extreme focus allowed him to use his body to its fullest for one minute; a feat like that was anything but normal. What kind of determination and resolve was necessary to pull off a stunt like that? He wasn’t just a monster—he was a demon. *Ah, I wonder how he’s faring after using up all of his strength like that.*

“Director, how is he holding up?”

Kurono nodded slightly at Stella’s question and gazed at the top of the bunk bed. “He’s in much worse shape than you are, but don’t worry. He’ll live.”

Stella crawled out of bed and looked up to see Ikki, pale-faced and wearing a tank top. He could’ve been easily mistaken for a dead man were it not for the snoring.

Ittou Shura was a Noble Art that ignored one’s basic survival instinct to draw

out all of their power. Using it left Ikki so weakened that he could do little more than breathe. It wasn't surprising in the least.

"He saved enough energy to change clothes and hop into bed, at least," she added. "If he couldn't do that much, his technique would be too inconvenient to use. Kurogane must have been careful to keep that in mind."

"Doing that doesn't take that much effort, anyway."

It left him completely unable to fight. If he used it improperly even once, he would be down for the count in no time. But the extreme high that ultimately led to self-destruction allowed him to overcome the extreme low of his normal ability levels.

"What's his story, Director?"

"What do you mean?" Kurono asked in response to Stella's question.

"Don't play dumb! No normal man can move fast enough that even my eyes fail to keep up. Could he be one of those... Japanese ninjas?"

"No, those are completely different."

"How could someone like him be Rank F and fail a year?! What's the deal with that?!"

"Well, Rank F is where he belongs. A person's rank is based solely on their abilities as a Blazer; swordplay, physical prowess, and the like aren't part of it. Those are nothing against the power of a Noble Art, after all."

She was right. Physical abilities were worthless in the face of superpowers. Even a master swordsman wielding a sword capable of cutting anything wouldn't be able to hurt Stella, who wielded the power of the sun. They could only turn to ash. Physical abilities only mattered in battles between Blazers of perfectly equal magical power.

"That's how the world sees it," Kurono continued. "There's just no system that can accurately rank Kurogane. With those factors omitted, Kurogane can only be ranked at the bottom. Honestly, he drew a really crappy hand when he was born. If you're a once-in-a-decade genius, then he's a once-in-a-decade idiot. That's how bad it is. It was clear from your duel—his first full-on attack

couldn't even scratch you."

"That's true, but... flunking him is wrong." Stella said.

"Why?"

"As royalty, I know just how important it is for our empire to have strong Mage-Knights. We expect the same eye for quality from the academies we entrust with the education of our future Mage-Knights. Flunking someone who can fight so well just because of his lack of credits is wrong."

With groups like the Rebellion popping up, strong knights were more important than ever. There was no point in leaving resources like him untapped. When Stella pointed that out, Kurono chuckled.

"Haha. You really know how to hit where it hurts, don't you?"

"Is there another reason, then?"

"Well, maybe. All that garbage about credits is just the school's official stance."

"Official...?"

"Vermillion, does the name 'Kurogane' ring any bells?"

"Am I supposed to know a commoner's name?" Stella asked, but then she remembered one man with that name. "Wait, do you mean Samurai Ryouma?!"

"That's right. The Eastern hero who led Japan to victory in the second World War. Ryouma Kurogane, great-grandfather to Ikki Kurogane. Other great Blazers like him have been born to the Kurogane family since the Meiji era, making them one of the most influential families in the world of chivalry. They're using their influence to directly pressure our academy: 'Don't let that outsider graduate,' they say."

"But why?"

"It's all about image. Rank is everything in this society of knights, so the Kuroganes believe it would damage their reputation if people knew they'd brought a Rank F into the world. The last director rolled over and accepted this, making up some stupid rule about a rank requirement for certain lectures. They effectively barred Kurogane from graduating, forcing him to repeat a year."

“Is that something a parent should do? Something an educator should do?!” Stella felt rage building in her heart again.

“Unfortunately, some adults just aren’t that mature. Of course, I’m not one of them; I’ve been thoroughly scrubbing away all the filth ever since I took office. That said, I can’t give him back the year he lost.

“However, that hasn’t stopped him. Even when his family chased him out of his home, even when they took away his one chance at success... even if they point and laugh and call him a disgrace, he never stops believing in his own worth. He doesn’t see himself as any different from the talented, yet he doesn’t turn away from his own powerlessness. He fights on against injustice, making him who he is now. And, as a result of his unwavering confidence, he’s found his one minute of ultimate power, surpassing even the once-in-a-decade genius, the Crimson Princess. He’s kind of a big deal.”

Stella was speechless. No matter what, Ikki always believed in himself and his own self-worth. She was painfully familiar with how difficult that was. Fortunately for her, though, she had talent. She could be certain that she would be a major asset to the Vermillion family once she learned to harness her flames. That knowledge helped her continue to push forward.

But what of Ikki? He was nothing. A weak mage with nothing but a strength-doubling Noble Art. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, his whole family was trying to hinder him. With so much stacked against him, how could he continue to believe in himself?

“What drives him to do all this?!” Stella demanded.

“Who knows? You might as well just ask him. All I care about is whether or not he can take the Seven Stars,” Kurono said, then jammed her cigarette into her portable ashtray and questioned Stella. “Vermillion. I asked you this morning: ‘What made you want to study in Japan?’ Do you remember what you told me?”

“Yes. In my home country, I don’t have the freedom to better myself. I’m trapped in a prison they call ‘genius’.”

The whole reason she wanted to study abroad was to get away from the pressure of people who labeled her a genius. When she was near them, it made

her begin to think she really was one.

One's heart began to rot as they became more arrogant. They would begin to think they could do anything, fell any foe. Baseless arrogance took over where the desire for self-improvement once was. That was Stella's greatest fear. She couldn't just stagnate at home; to become a better knight who could protect her beloved country, she had to become stronger.

Thus, Stella traveled to Japan in hopes of finding people stronger than her, so that she might one day defeat them all and become the Seven Stars King.

"So, Stella Vermillion, I suggest you use this year to learn from Kurogane," Kurono urged. "I'm certain he'll affect you for the rest of your life."

"I still don't understand." Stella couldn't formulate a clear answer. "I don't even know anything about him beyond what you've told me."

"True." Kurono nodded as if agreeing with her excuse and turned toward the door. As she opened it, she said, "Why don't you find out for yourself, then? Like I was saying before, Ittou Shura is a move that uses up all of his stamina, magic, and energy; he can only use it once per day. Moreover, that ability is like a charging bull in that it can't be interrupted midway. He probably won't wake up for a while... but 'near-dead' doesn't mean 'dead', so he'll wake up eventually. If you're still not interested in living with him after a while, let me know and I'll give you your own room as a VIP deal."

With that, Kurono departed.



Stella looked up at the top of the bunk bed and pondered the man who had defeated her: Ikki Kurogane.

I'm certainly not weak, she thought. She wasn't naïve enough to believe she was the strongest in the world, but she also didn't believe she was weak enough to lose so terribly against an enemy of modest strength. The only logical conclusion was that Ikki was stronger than she had once thought. *Where does that power come from? What's the source of the strength that moves him forward despite the hardships he faces?*

"Ikki Kurogane."

When she spoke his name, a strange feeling arose in her heart. Stella had never been so intent on understanding another person. The boy who slept above her was permanently stuck in her mind—so much so that she couldn't stand to wait until he woke up. Spurred on by her overwhelming curiosity, she climbed the ladder.

Ikki was still sleeping. He must have rolled over at some point, as he was facing away from her. Though she couldn't see his face, the movements of his back showed that he was breathing gently, yet regularly. He must have been recovering already, as she no longer sensed the weakness of a man who might not survive. She was somewhat relieved.

"Ikki." She whispered his name, but he remained in his deep slumber. That wasn't a bad thing, though; it would be rude to wake someone who was sleeping so peacefully.

Stella still hadn't shaken off her languor, so she decided to get some fresh air. Before she could, however, her eyes were drawn to his bare upper back, just barely visible over the neck of his tank top. His shoulders were unexpectedly broad, considering his deceptively soft face. He couldn't be that muscular—she would consider him lightweight at best—but his incredible strength, like honed steel, made them seem wider.

J-Just one touch is fine, right? He's not even looking this way.

Trying to convince some unknown spectator, Stella gently extended her hand until she was touching Ikki's back.

"Wow..."

Thump, thump.

His intense heartbeat reverberated through her hand. His back was hard—and hot enough that it almost burned—but not quite steel. Steel didn't have the warmth of life. Perhaps he was more like a sturdy, powerful tree.

Do all men's backs feel like this? Stella lost herself in the sensation.

"Mmn."

"Eep!"

Ikki suddenly rolled over and lay on his back. In doing so, her right arm got stuck under him.

Oh, no! If he woke up, Stella wouldn't be able to explain her way out, but he was heavy enough that she wasn't able to easily pull her hand away. She might have been able to jerk it away if she tried, but that would wake him up. Not to mention that she would probably fall off the ladder if she pulled too hard. *Guess I don't have a choice. Gently... Gently...*

Stella held her breath and climbed on top of the bed, straddling him. With her left hand, she just barely lifted the right side of his body.

"Hmm? Mmnggh!"

"Ah!"

"Zzz..."

J-Jeez... Despite the cold sweat creeping down her back, she continued using her left hand to lift his body until she could gently remove her right hand from under him. *Yes! A successful escape!*

"This guy is a really deep sleeper," she said, still watching him sleep.

Considering how much effort he'd exerted during the battle, that was no surprise. Looking down at Ikki, Stella's gaze was drawn to his torso, partially exposed after he rolled over.

A man's stomach... She had seen one before, but never felt it. *What does it feel like?*

"Hey! Wh-What are you thinking, Stella?!" She couldn't believe her own thoughts. "You're unmarried, and a princess at that! You can't be so interested in a man you're not engaged to! It's disgraceful!"

Is it really, though?

She wasn't interested in a sexual way, after all, she'd just never met a man who could defeat her. She was definitely, probably, maybe just interested as any fellow knight would be.

"F-First of all, he walked in on me without permission and saw me in my underwear. This just makes us even, right?" She justified her actions through

pure sophistry. Urged on by interest in the first knight to ever defeat her, Stella, still straddling him, poked a finger under his tank top and gently slid it up, stopping just below his pectoral muscles. “So this... is how a man’s body feels...”



Stella had never seen a man so intimately. She hadn't gotten a good look at Ikki when he'd first walked in and started stripping, but looking closer and more carefully, she noticed that his body was incredibly well-defined. His muscles, toned from years of training, looked entirely different than a woman's.

Do they feel different too?

Stella's brain was frothing over the opportunity to explore the unknown. Her breathing became erratic, as if she was suffering from a fever. Unable to stop herself, she timidly poked his stomach. When she did, powerful sinews of muscular tissue pushed back at her from under his skin, which combined flexibility and suppleness with strength. She had never felt anything like it, but it helped her understand the enormous power hidden within him.

"Wow..."

His was a warrior's body, forged not from haphazard action, but from strict dedication to both a purpose and a methodology. Stella thought of herself as a knight first and a woman second, so she knew just how difficult it was to train and maintain a body such as his.

She could no longer doubt what Kurono had said. Despite all the hardships he faced, Ikki never gave up on himself. His body was the greatest proof of that—a manifestation of his resolve. However, knowing that Kurono hadn't overstated his will only made her more and more interested in learning about the man known as Ikki Kurogane.

The more she learned about him, the more her interest in him seemed to suffocate her. It was almost as if he were filling her up with some incomprehensible sensation that was tinged with vague warmth. Why she didn't dislike the feeling was a mystery to her.

"Haah... Wh-What's happening to me?"

As she traced her finger over his stomach, Stella's question was little more than a breathless whisper.

"I was going to ask the same question. What are you doing, Miss Stella?" Ikki asked with a bewildered expression as she straddled him, touching his bare skin.

“Aaaaaaaahhh?!” Stella screamed and quickly jumped away from him.

“Whoa! Don’t stand up too fast!” Ikki’s warning went unheeded. She stood up with all the force she could muster, causing her to slam her head into the ceiling and fall from the top of the bunk bed. “M-Miss Stellaaa! Are you okay?! You really went into that headfirst, didn’t you?!”

“I-I-I’m fine! I just happened to fall on this tomato juice I left on the floor, and now it’s all over me!”

“You are definitely *not* fine! The only tomato juice I can see came from inside your head! Just stay still and let me treat you!”



“That should do it,” Ikki said after treating Stella with a first aid kit he found in the room.

“You’re pretty good at this.”

“I’ve lived alone since middle school. I had to learn to do all of this myself.”

He really has been banished from his own home, Stella thought.

Ikki sighed inwardly, to which she responded with a strange statement.

“Ikki, the director told me about you.”

“What about me?”

“She told me how poorly your family and the school have treated you.”

“Tch. Is she just gonna tell the world about my delicate family matters...? Sorry about that. I’m sure it wasn’t a very fun story.”

“I don’t care about that; I just want you to tell me something.”

“What?”

“Why, despite the awful treatment you face, do you continue striving to be a knight?”

“Huh? Why do you want to know?”

“I-It’s not like I just want to know more about you, okay?! Don’t act so smug! I’m just interested in why a Blazer like you, who has no magical power or ability,

wants to be a knight so badly when you're obviously not meant to be one!"

He almost enjoyed hearing her disparage him again.

There wasn't really any reason not to tell her. It was a bit embarrassing to talk about, but if she insisted, he didn't particularly mind.

"A certain man is my role model," he told her.

"Your role model? Are you talking about Samurai Ryouma?"

Ikki knew that name, the name of the man anyone in the Kurogane family would look up to, would come up sooner or later.

"Yeah. You got it. I've never had any talent, so my family treated me like I was nothing. Even if I didn't do anything, a talentless kid like me was a problem for them because I was a stain on their record of stellar knights. They told the school I wasn't immediate family and demanded they set a power restriction on lectures. And when my family met up every year, they always locked me in my room so I couldn't join in."

"You're worthless, so you should remain worthless."

Ikki's fifth birthday was neatly summed up in his father's last words to him. Ever since then, his father had never said a word to him. In fact, he may never have even looked in Ikki's direction.

The patriarch's decision had affected the rest of the family as well. Everyone had treated Ikki Kurogane like he never even existed. It was the worst pain he'd ever felt. He'd often wished that he hadn't been born.

"But that's when Ryouma Kurogane spoke to me."

Ikki remembered that snowy day as if it was yesterday. It was New Year's Day, and the Kurogane family had gathered to celebrate. As Ikki listened to their boisterous laughter from his bedroom, he realized that he couldn't take living in his home anymore. He ran away, fleeing to the mountains, but there, he lost his way. As the gentle snow turned into a harsh blizzard, his eyes grew heavier and his body temperature fell.

Nobody came to save him. Of course they didn't; who would search for a boy that didn't exist? Even if Ikki froze to death, alone and without a soul knowing,

his family wouldn't mourn for him. To them, Ikki Kurogane wasn't worth losing a bit of sleep over. His sister might be sad for a while, but nobody else. He despaired endlessly at that realization, crying not because he had no talent, but because he couldn't believe in himself.

That was when it happened. Ryouma Kurogane, an old man with a large build and gray Kaiser mustache, appeared before him. He spoke to Ikki, who was still wiping his tears:

"Never forget this pain. This pain is proof that you still haven't given up on yourself."

"Listen, kid. You may still be a child right now, but you'll be an adult one day. Don't be the kind of adult who prides himself on silly things like talent. Don't be the kind of adult who just goes with the flow and takes only what he's given. When it comes to mankind, as long as there's a will, there's a way. We weren't gifted wings, but we still flew to the moon, dammit." He smiled like a little boy as he said that, moving to brush the snow off of Ikki's head.

"I was over the moon with joy," Ikki said. "It was the first time in my life I felt I didn't have to give up on myself. Even if I knew all along that he couldn't make any guarantees about my future, it still made me feel so much better. His words alone saved my life.

"That's when I decided: if I had to grow up, I wanted to be like him. If I ever found someone like me, I wouldn't brush them off and tell them to give up like my parents did to me. Instead, I'd tell them that talent is only a tiny part of their character and that they should never give up. I would be a man that could carry on his message.

"But I can't do that just yet. I have to be strong like him, or else my words will just sound like the complaints of a sore loser. So for now, I can't give up. If I want to be as strong as Ryouma Kurogane, I'll have to be the new Seven Stars King."

"Hmm. Would you call that your dream, Ikki?" Stella asked.

"You must think it's impossible for me." He must have hit the bullseye, as her face clouded over in discomfort. She admired his dream, at least, but as for whether he could make it real... "You don't have to say it, and you don't have to

look so sorry; I know my goal would normally be impossible. But Miss Stella, if you had a goal that you could never stand to give up on, would you give up on yourself just because others told you to?”

“Ah...” Stella’s ruby eyes suddenly opened wide, as if she had suddenly come to an understanding, but her apologetic expression changed to intense laughter.

“Heh. Ahaha! Yes, you’re right. You won’t give up no matter how badly you get burned, will you?” Ikki’s words reminded her that once upon a time, she was just like him. “That’s it, right? It must be. There’s no point in wondering if it’ll work out or not. If you do your best and you fail, that’s just how it was meant to be. People like us can’t bear to give up without ever really trying.”

“Yeah. No matter how talentless I am, no matter how many people try to talk me out of it, I can’t use that as an excuse to give up on myself. The two of us are sore losers anyway, right?”

“I doubt you’re more of a sore loser than I am!” Stella chuckled to herself again, hints of both amazement and joy in her laughter. Finally, Stella relaxed and raised both of her hands in defeat. “All right, fine. You win. I tried to think of you in terms of talented versus mediocre, but a scale like that is too basic for a guy like you. I was sure you couldn’t beat a sore loser like me, but you won fair and square, so congratulations, Ikki.”

It was refreshing for Ikki to hear her say that.

There was no more doubting what Kurono said. Stella had found someone stronger than her, someone whose soul was cut from the same cloth. That was more than enough reason for her to keep learning. If she learned from Ikki, surely she could become stronger than ever. From the bottom of her heart, she was glad to have met him. After all, she had crossed the ocean in search of a fated meeting such as theirs.

Her radiant expression assured Ikki that she finally understood him. His answer seemed to have satisfied her, so there was only one thing left to take care of.

“Sooo... Now that all that’s settled, let’s cut to the chase,” Ikki said.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on. I won, remember?”

“Yes, of course. I may be a sore loser, but I’m not silly.”

“Cool. So you’re ready to be my servant, then?”

“Huh?” Stella suddenly looked dumbfounded, eyes wide in confusion.

“We made a bet, right? Whoever loses is the winner’s lifelong servant. No matter how embarrassing the order, they must obey.”

“...Huh?! ”

Stella’s face flushed red, then quickly lost all its color. It seemed as though she had really forgotten, considering everything that happened.

“I won, yeah? Guess I should start bossing you around.”

“H-Heh. Hahaha, you mean that?! Th-That was just a figure of speech, a-a-and I just kinda said it because I was really mad...”

“Hmmmm, what should my first order be? You did say ‘anything’, right?”

“A-A-A-A-Anything?! N-No, o-o-obviously not anything. Not *anything*, okay?! I-It’s just not right!” In her panic, Stella hid in the corner of her bed, covering herself with her blanket.

So much for not being silly.

“Really, now? You’re going to go back on your word?”

“Aww...”

“If you’re gonna refuse no matter what I say, then I can’t force you to do anything. But gosh, does that mean the Vermillion royal family doesn’t honor their treaties?”

“Oh, uh...”

“That is just a darn shame.”

“H-Hold it!” Stella took the bait, as Ikki expected. She glared directly at him, her eyes red with tears. “Just who the hell do you think I am?! I-I-I’ll do it! Treat me like a servant, a dog, I don’t care! Make me do whatever you want! You can

even make me do something perverted for all I care! Stupid creep! I hate you!”

“What are you getting mad at me for?! This is *your* fault!”

Maybe I was a little too heavy on the teasing.

Ikki had tried to scold her in a roundabout way for so bravely putting her life on the line, but maybe he had gone too far. He regretted his playfulness. It wasn't like he wanted to make her serve him, anyway; all he really wanted was to share a room with her.

“Okay, Miss Stella. Here's your order: I want you to be my roommate.”

“Uh...? Th-That's all?”

“Yeah. When we were fighting, I got to thinking that we might get along pretty well after all. Besides, I want to get to know you better. Instead of an order, consider it a request.”

“Ah...” Stella's brain evaporated in response to his words, as she realized they were thinking the same thing. “Y-Y-You've got some nerve... c-calling an unmarried princess beautiful, and... saying you want to get to know me... as if they're normal things to say! You really do lack tact...”

She avoided looking at Ikki, as her face was burning red, but he didn't mind.

“Oh. I guess you're not into sharing a room with a guy. S-Sorry for being weird. Should we go see the director together, then? I'm sure she'd be flexible enough to give you your own room if we asked.”

“Wait!” Stella shouted, stopping him. “...n't mind.”

“What was that?”

“C-Clean out your ears! I said I... I wouldn't mind.”

“Are you sure?”

“F-First of all, it's an order, right? I don't want anyone thinking we Vermillions are liars. Th-That's all there is to it, I swear! I totally *don't* want to be friends with you or anything!”

Her eyes darted all over the place as she threw out excuses. There were a lot of twists and turns involved, but she eventually made it clear that she was

willing to share the room with Ikki. He was glad to hear it, too.

“All right. Glad you’re on my side, Miss Stella.”

“Not like I have a choice. Hmph.” Stella reluctantly shook his hand, turning up her nose at him. Her hand was smaller and warmer than he’d imagined.

Once that territorial dispute was settled, a bell rang in the dorms. They were being notified that it was eight o’clock.

“Oh, wow. I must have slept a lot. Dang it,” Ikki cursed.

“What’s wrong with eight o’clock?” Stella didn’t understand why he was upset.

“The cafeteria here closes at eight. What am I gonna do about dinner?”

The grocery store closes at nine, so maybe I could get something there, Ikki thought, crossing his arms. But with how much my muscles ache after using Ittou Shura, I don’t really want to cook. I might cut my finger off or something.

“Th-Then I might as well make dinner,” Stella suggested, unusually chipper.

“Huh? Really?”

“W-Well, you are my master... of sorts, even if I detest that fact. And it’s a servant’s duty to cook for her master if his stomach is empty.”

“How about we just forget the whole master-servant thing ever happened?”

“N-No, we can’t! Royalty never breaks a promise once it’s been made! Stop complaining and let me serve you!”

She was one hell of an uppity servant, but to be honest, he was enticed by the idea of eating a girl’s cooking. Ikki was a growing boy, after all.

“All right, Miss Stella. Let’s go to the grocery store; I can at least help you carry stuff.”

“Rgh.”

Wait, why does she suddenly look so mad at me? Ikki didn’t think he’d done anything wrong.

“Cut that out,” Stella said.

“Cut what out?”

“Calling me ‘Miss Stella’. You’re my master, not to mention that you’re older than me. It’s weird to call me ‘Miss’ in this situation, so just stop saying it.”

“Eeeh, I’m not too sure about that. You are a real-life princess, after all.”

“Did you forget which one of us wanted to befriend that real-life princess?”

“Right...”

“It’s weird for friends to be so uptight when they talk.”

“Then isn’t it weird for friends to have a master-servant relationship?”

“Those are two completely different things.”

“Whaaaaaat?”

“Anyway!” Stella jabbed a finger toward his face. “Don’t expect a response from me unless you just call me ‘Stella’,” she demanded. She seemed both angry and a little embarrassed, but it was cute nonetheless.

Ikki was still uncomfortable speaking so casually to a princess, but he *did* say he wanted to get to know her, so there was no point in putting up walls between them.

“Heh. All right, Stella.”

When he thought about it, he realized that she was always making the decisions and controlling the conversation. She really was an uppity servant.

“Good. Let’s go, Ikki! I still don’t know much about Japan, so you’d better be on the top of your escort game!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

If not calling her “Miss” makes her happy, I don’t mind one bit, Ikki decided, smiling along as if spurred on by Stella’s smile.



Chapter 2

A Visitor from the Past

It was a chilly morning in April. Two jersey-clad shadows had fallen over the expansive campus of Hagun Academy. One, standing at the front gate, was Ikki Kurogane, his shoulders heaving as he chugged a sports drink. The other was Stella Vermillion, who, despite her exhaustion, was dashing toward the gate where Ikki waited.

Every morning, Ikki ran twelve miles in order to stay in shape. Of course, because of his lack of magical talent, Ikki had been making up for it by training his physical abilities to an unbelievable extent. During his twelve-mile runs, he didn't simply jog the whole way; he would sprint as much as he could, jogging when he needed to catch his breath, using those twelve miles as high-intensity training.

For the past three days, his roommate had taken part as well. On the first day, Stella had collapsed halfway through. On the second day, she'd vomited. He'd started running slower on the third day so she could keep up.

"I keep telling you not to worry about me!" she'd say with a look like she was ready to slash him whenever he slowed down, so he gave up and ran like normal for the rest of the third day. Stella had fallen pretty far behind, but at least she'd made it the whole way.

She really is something.

Ikki admired Stella for continuing to fight toward her goal despite her fatigue. Even with her incredible magical power, she didn't neglect her physical training. It was clear that she wasn't relying solely on her talent to get her through everything.

"Haah. Haah. I made it..." Stella said, completely exhausted.

"Good job," Ikki congratulated her.

“I-I’m fine. This... is nothing...”

“Here, drink some of this.”

Stella talked big for someone who was drenched in sweat. Ikki had waited for her breathing to calm down before offering her some of his drink, but she just stared at his offering in bewilderment.

“B-But that would be like an indirect kiss,” she muttered.

“What’s the problem? Oh, sorry, Stella. You wouldn’t want to drink out of something a man’s lips have touched, huh?”

“I-I didn’t say that! It’s actually kinda the opposite.”

“‘The opposite’? How so?”

“I-I-It’s nothing, just shut up and hand it over!”

Stella’s cheeks were already deep red from all the running, but they reddened further as she gulped down the drink.

Wow. She went right for the part my lips touched, too.

Ikki felt bad that he didn’t get a chance to tell her, but regardless, he turned toward Hagun Academy’s front gate. A sign there indicated that the opening ceremony would begin soon.

“Finally time for the opening ceremony, huh?”

It made Ikki deeply emotional. A whole year had passed, giving him no chance for advancement, but things had changed. The new director, Kurono Shinguuji, was willing to give every student a chance. With the arrival of the chance he had been waiting for, Ikki was all the more emotional.

“You look really excited, Ikki,” Stella stated matter-of-factly.

“Do I? Probably because there’s someone I’m excited to meet.”

“It’s not a girl, is it?”

I don’t like how menacing that sounded, Ikki thought to himself.

“W-Well, yes, she is a girl, but—”

“Goodbye.”

“Wait, wait, stop! Put Lævateinn down for a minute and let me finish! She’s just my little sister!”

“Your sister? Come to think of it, you did mention you had a sister during our battle.”

“Yeah. I heard she enrolled this year. It’s been four whole years since I ran away, and I haven’t seen her since, so I’m excited to see her again. I can’t wait.”

She’d had silver pigtails and had always been running after Ikki wherever he went. Ikki’s father, brother, and other relatives had hated and ignored him because of his lack of talent, but that girl had never left him alone, even if she had been a crybaby who was always demanding attention. Shizuku Kurogane was Ikki’s only real family.

It’s been four years. I wonder how much she’s grown.

“Just to make sure...” Stella began uneasily. “There isn’t going to be some silly plot twist where you learn she’s not related to you by blood, right?”

“Nope. We’re normal, blood-related siblings, just like anyone else.”

“Good. Then I’ll allow it.”

“Allow” *what*? Ikki didn’t understand, but he had a policy of not probing too deeply into things he didn’t understand.

He went back to looking at the opening ceremony sign, wondering how the day would go. The time had come: Ikki was ready to fight for his spot in the Seven Stars Battle Festival!



“Okaaaay! ☆ Congratulations on your enrollment, new students! ♥” The teacher standing at the podium was all smiles as the students filled the room with the sounds of applause and party poppers. “I’m Yuuri Oreki, instructor for class 1-1. As this is my first year as a homeroom teacher, it would make me so, so, so happy if all of you would call me Ms. Yuuri! ♪”

Things were opening very lightheartedly, especially considering all the fighting to come.

“I’m getting exhausted just looking at her,” Stella grumbled. As if by fate, she

had been seated next to Ikki.

“Ahaha, yeah. But she’s a good teacher,” he assured her.

“Do you know her?”

“A little, yeah.”

“Since today’s the first day, there will be no lessons!” Ms. Oreki cooed. “But, buuut, I do have one important message about this year’s selection battles for the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Everyone, please open your handbooks!”

Ikki removed a palm-sized LCD terminal—his Hagun Academy student ID handbook—from his breast pocket. These handbooks served as identification, a virtual wallet, a cell phone, and an internet-capable device all in one.

“As the director said during the opening ceremony, Hagun Academy used to base its selections partly on ability. From now on, that’s a no-go! The new system is going to be all-inclusive! Six special students will be chosen based on their results in battle! Eww, violence! Gross!

“You should receive an email from the Selection Battle Committee with the schedule for your battles, so make sure to find your names and show up at the right time and place! Watch out, though! If you don’t show up, you lose!♥”

“Ms. Oreki?” Stella raised her hand.

“No, no! I won’t answer to anything but Yuuri☆”

“M-Ms. Yuuri?”

“Yes! What is your question, Stella?”

“How many battles will we be fighting?”

“I can’t share any details, but each person will fight more than ten battles. Once the battles begin, expect to fight one every three days!”

Ikki was relieved to hear that. His Noble Art, Ittou Shura, was a once-a-day deal; he couldn’t handle successive battles. It was a stroke of good luck for him, but other students weren’t as happy.

“Seriously?!”

“Laaame. I’ll never get to travel!”

“I don’t even *want* to fight in the Festival.”

The classroom devolved into grumbles.

Well, sucks to be them. Not everyone was as interested in the Festival as Ikki was.

The Seven Stars Battle Festival involved real battles, with Devices deployed in Material Form rather than Phantom Form. Battles could sometimes turn into actual struggles of life and death. Not everyone was willing to undergo such a high risk just to prove themselves. Most people would prefer to graduate without risking their lives, become Mage-Knights, and start earning the big bucks. They just wanted to take the easy way out.

“Is there a punishment for people who withdraw or lose?” one of those students asked.

“Nope, no punishments here!” Ms. Oreki responded. “It won’t affect your grades, either, but the winners get a little extra credit. Nobody will be forced to join in, so if any of you are all, ‘Man, I don’t wanna be in the Festival’, then all you have to do is reply to the email from the Selection Battle Committee and say you want don’t want to participate. If you do that, you’ll be automatically removed from the ballots. But...”

Ms. Oreki suddenly looked in Ikki’s direction and smiled gently.

“I know it’s inconvenient, but this is really a wonderful system in that it gives everyone a fair chance. Under it, anyone—even one of you sitting in this very room—could become the Seven Stars King! I’d appreciate it if you all participated and aimed for the top; it would be a vital experience for your futures.”

Ikki bowed his head toward her in gratitude. The two first met during his entrance exam. Ikki was, of course, the examinee, while Ms. Oreki was the proctor. It was because of her fair assessment that he was able to enter Hagun in the first place. Thinking back on that day a year ago reminded him of something.

Oh, that’s right. Ms. Oreki...

“Okay, everyone! Get your game faces on and fight hard this coming year!

Cheer with me!

“Hip, hip, hoo-blegh!”

...occasionally vomits up blood, Ikki remembered a second too late.

“Ms. Yuuriiiiii!” The class was in an uproar.

“Oh, it’s okay, guys. She’s fine.” Ikki held her in his arms and tried to quell the uproar amongst his classmates, who had just watched the tragedy unfold.

“There’s nothing to worry about. Ms. Oreki is actually a really sickly woman.”

“That’s worth worrying about! Look how much blood she coughed up!”

“Gah, hagh. I’m fine, just like he said.” Ms. Oreki smiled weakly for her worried students. “I cough up a liter of blood every day. I’ve been like this ever since I was a little girl.”

“How is that ‘fine’?!”

“Ack! Gah. Well, I’m still alive after more than twenty years. In a way, I’m actually strong! Heh... Crazy, right?”

“You don’t have to act so strong when it comes to your tragic health. I’ll take you to the nurse’s office. You guys mind helping clean up the blood?”

“No problem. We’ll take care of it!”

With the peach-blond-haired girl’s confirmation, Ikki lifted his teacher onto his shoulders and carried her off to the nurse’s office. On the way, he asked her about something that had been on his mind.

“Ms. Oreki, I was wondering why you’re so excited today. Are you just trying to celebrate the arrival of new students?”

“Ack! Gah! Yes... It’s such a wonderful day, so I just... wanted to be at my absolute best for everyone.”

Of course she did. Ikki had figured she would feel that way.

“It really does pain me to say this, Ms. Oreki...”

“What?”

“I think you just got on everyone’s nerves.”

“Aww...”

He felt bad for her, but she had to know the truth. She was dealing with high schoolers, not kindergarteners, after all.



“They said Ms. Oreki is free to go home for the day,” Ikki announced to the class, ending the first day’s homeroom.

Maybe I should go look for Shizuku. I doubt they want to look at a repeat student like me for too long.

He had felt some discomfoting glares from the students around him. They couldn’t do icebreakers since their teacher had collapsed, but everyone in the school probably knew he was a flunk. His classmates were probably unsure of how they should talk to him.

I might’ve been a little too bossy back there.

He felt bad for butting in as much as he did. Taking his classmates’ feelings into consideration, he rose from his seat to leave.

“Kurogane!”

“Whoa!”

A girl from his class suddenly hugged him.

“Huh?! J-Just what do you think you’re doing, Ikki?!” Stella was shocked.

“That’s what I wanted to ask! Wh-What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Oopsie! I was super excited to finally talk to you, but I got a little too into it and made myself look bad.” The peach-blond girl with glasses, grinning apologetically, was the one who had promised to help clean up before. She backed away and introduced herself. “I’m Kagami Kusakabe, and I’m a biiiig fan of yours!”

“A fan? Uh, of mine?”

Naturally, Mage-Knights were like celebrities. That popularity extended to student knights as well, so the strongest students, like Stella, were great fodder for mass media coverage. The Seven Stars Battle Festival was streamed over the

internet to viewers throughout the world as well. With all that publicity, it wasn't uncommon for student knights with bright futures or those who had been in the Festival previously to find a few fans at the start of the year. Ikki, however, fit neither of those categories.

"I don't remember doing anything people would be interested in. Are you sure you have the right guy?" He tilted his head, confused by what was happening.

"Don't play dumb, Kurogane! Take a look at this."

Kagami showed Ikki her handbook. He tried to respond that he wasn't "playing dumb", but when he saw the display, the words caught in his throat.

"That's our duel, isn't it?!" Stella peeked at the screen and raised her voice in shock.

"Woow, neither of you knew? Do you even use the internet?" Kagami asked the pair.

"Uh, I don't know much about electronics."

"I don't use the internet either. I don't have a computer," Ikki added.

"I guess that makes sense. Well, someone uploaded your fight right after it ended, and it went viral! Everyone else has seen it, right?"

A few classmates who had been listening in nodded in affirmation.

"Yeah, I saw that vid."

"There are articles all over the net about it. I'd be surprised if there's anybody who *doesn't* know."

"I saw it too. I wanted to ask you a few questions, but... it's so intimidating to talk to upperclassmen. Haha..."

That must be the cause of their uncomfortable glances earlier, Ikki mused. "Oh, well don't mind me. We're all classmates here, so you're free to talk to me as much as you want," he stated.

"For real?!" The girls all responded in unison.

"Whoa!"

They suddenly leaned over his desk to get closer to him.

“Yay! Thank you so much, Kurogane!”

“I’ve wanted to talk to you so badly since that fight!”

“Me too! You were so cool!”

“Could you help me with my sword training, Kurogane? I wanna be as good as you!”

“Hey, butt out! Train me instead!”

“Wh-Whoa, slow down. You all can talk as much as you want, but maybe do it one at a time.”

Ikki was overwhelmed by all the girls looking his way, their eyes full of respect and warmth. That wasn’t a surprise, though; he wasn’t much of a womanizer. Any time he had to chase women was better spent training. That’s why he didn’t have the experience to deal with all these girls at once. Just being stared at was enough to get his heart pounding, but seeing their eyes all glimmering with the light of admiration made it even more awkward.

“Are you surprised by your sudden popularity?” Kagami asked. “Everyone is talking about you! And according to the data I gathered, you’re a real hit among the ladies!”

“Huh? Wh-Why?”

“It’s because you’re so strong! Prospective Mage-Knight women just looove strong men. And there’s an extra layer of mystery thanks to your title as Worst One. But the biggest reason is your face. All the girls are going wild over how adorable you are!”

“I-I beg to differ.”

“Even that nervous smile of yours awakens our motherly instinct!”

The girls around Kagami murmured in agreement.

“Adorable”? I know I don’t look all that manly, but it’s kind of emasculating for younger girls to call me that. Well, better to be loved than hated, Ikki decided. As he was pondering, Kagami latched onto his right arm.

“K-Kagami?”

“Sooo, Kurogane. I’ve got a question for someone popular like you.” Kagami looked at him with puppy-dog eyes, only inches away from his face. “You’re willing to do a favor for your underclassmen, aren’t you?”

“W-Well... I’m willing to help in any way I can, I guess?”

“Yaaay! Thank you so much! I’m trying to start a newspaper club, you see, and I want your face all over the cover of Hagun Academy’s historic first paper! Here’s the headline: ‘A New Threat Emerges! The Legendary Superstar Rookie Defeated!’”

Ikki could only imagine how Stella was feeling. Breaking into a cold sweat, he stole a glance at her face.

“Gee, how lovely. You are just sooo cool. Why don’t you give her an interview, Mr. Popular?” She was pouting. That was natural, though. Who would want their defeat publicized for all to see? At the very least, Ikki wasn’t about to give an interview after seeing Stella’s expression.

“I’m really sorry, but I’m not very good at this kind of thing.”

“That’s okay! I’ll take things nice and slow.” Kagami didn’t budge, instead clutching his arm even more tightly. With his arm sandwiched between her breasts, Ikki’s body went numb, making resistance futile.



“Uh... E-Excuse me, Miss Kusakabe?” he said timidly.

“You don’t have to be so formal. Just call me Kagami, since we’re such good friends.”

Since when are we friends? Maybe I shouldn’t say that out loud.

“Kagami, could you let me go? I can feel your...”

“Oh? What can you feel?” She tilted her head. Apparently, she hadn’t noticed. Kagami finally grasped the situation when she noticed that Ikki was staring at her chest. Then, she grinned spitefully and squeezed his arm even tighter.

“Nnnope. I’m not letting go until you agree to an interview!”

“Whooooa!”

“I wanna know aaall about you, Kurogane♥” He could feel her warm breath as she whispered into his ear. She was clearly baiting him, and he knew as much.

Sh-She’s kinda cute, Ikki thought despite that. He *was* a growing boy. A cute younger girl being so aggressive toward him was one of the most exciting things that could happen. He knew he was taking the bait, but he relaxed against her nonetheless, faltering in the face of her nonstop assault.

“All right, Ikki, that’s enough!”

While Stella, whose patience had reached its limit, scolded him over his wretchedness—

“Hey, Kurogane! We wanna talk too!”

A pack of beasts growled at him, their malice plain to see.



Five jealous boys pushed the girls aside, standing before Ikki. The largest among them spoke to him with an intimidating tone.

“You’re pretty popular, buddy. But maybe don’t get your head too far up your ass, all right? We don’t need you flirting in the classroom.”

Judging by the veins bulging out of his head, the boy glaring down at him from above didn’t seem to appreciate that he was taking all the girls for himself.

“What’s your problem, Manabe?! Jealous, much?”

“Don’t play the victim just because you’re a loser!”

“The hell you just say, broads?! Don’t you dare talk to Manna like that!”

“Okay, okay, let’s calm down.” Ikki tried to appease one of the muscular guys—Manabe’s follower—who threatened the girls. He knew they were just trying to pick a fight, but he also knew that all the noise was his fault. That said, he wasn’t looking for trouble, so he gently lowered his head and apologized. “I’m sorry if I annoyed everyone. Even if the school day was over, I shouldn’t have been causing such a ruckus in the classroom.”

“Hah! Look at you actin’ all nice, cheater.”

“‘Cheater’? When did I cheat?”

“You can trick these dumb broads, but I see you. A Rank F can’t beat a Rank A! You pulled some sort of cheap trick just so you could get some.”

“I did no such thing. Your accusation is an insult to Stella, too.”

“You still think you can go around tellin’ everyone you can beat a Rank A? You’ve got some nerve. If you’re so damn strong, Kurogane, why don’t you come practice with us?”

The five boys surrounded Ikki like hyenas encircling their prey, with Manabe’s four followers all materializing their Devices.

“Wait, are you serious?! If you guys use your Devices here, you’ll get suspended!” Kagami warned the four of them.

“Shut up, bitch! Back off if you don’t wanna get hurt!” Ignoring her warning, they readied their weapons. Judging by the fury in their expressions, they probably weren’t willing to use Phantom Form. But even as they threatened to attack, Ikki continued trying to placate them.

“We can’t fight in a classroom. Like Kusakabe said, it’s against school rules. The school has full control of when we student knights are allowed to use our powers, so we must only use them when and where the school allows. If you want to train with me so badly, I’d be willing to help you all evening at the training fields.”

That was Ikki's brand of kindness: "If we do this, we do it at the training field." He didn't stand to gain anything from fighting Manabe, so there was little merit in doing so; he would have preferred to search for his sister instead. Someone *had* asked him to help with their training, however, and Ikki couldn't help but be thoughtful.

"Prick..." Another vein popped out of Manabe's temple.

Oh, of course. Ikki had made a slight mistake. What Manabe wanted wasn't to train; it was to see a cowardly Rank F cheater begging for forgiveness after being surrounded by thugs who couldn't "get some". Ikki had agreed to the fight, so his condition of a change of scenery was nothing more than an insult.

"Don't get too uppity, you stupid flunk! Get him, boys!"

Huh? Did I misunderstand his intentions?

It was too late for him to be confused; the underclassmen were unstoppable at this point. Brandishing their Devices, they began their assault.

The girls screamed as they watched the ensuing chaos that had little hope for a peaceful resolution. Things had progressed to the point where all Ikki could do was use force, so he sighed in resignation.

"Get 'em, Kurogane! I'll testify that it was a hundred percent self-defense!" Kagami urged him to fight, promising to help him stay out of trouble. It was a welcome offer, but he wouldn't be using his Device.

"That won't be necessary," Ikki replied confidently.

He immediately focused his consciousness into his eyes. *First, forget colors. They're not important right now.* Thus, he blocked color from entering his vision. The world turned gray within his eyes, allowing him to focus more carefully on movement, all of which seemed to slow down.

Such a power wasn't special at all; Ikki was merely accelerating his awareness and cognition through concentration. Any normal person could do the same. Under normal circumstances, it was a power that would only come into play in life-threatening situations. Ikki could control it at will, however—though that was only natural for someone who could use up all of his strength in one minute, as that too was a feat of pure concentration.

Ikki watched the world around him, analyzing the situation as the colorless world slowed to a crawl. There were four enemies, one coming from each direction.

The guy in front of me with the katana should reach me first. Ikki stuck out his right hand, placing the back of it firmly against the enemy's blade. He then pushed it aside as if it was little more than a curtain.

"What the?" The boy with the katana was dumbfounded as his katana missed its mark, slicing nothing but the air. Ikki hooked his foot around the assailant's leg—

"Aaaaaaargh!"

With a sweep of his leg, Ikki tripped up his first attacker, who fell forward into another boy with a longsword-like Device, bringing them both down smack onto a desk.

That's two down.

"Piece of traaash!"

"Diiiiie!"

Next up, the two boys at his sides attacked with a club and an axe, both aiming for his head. Countering was easy.

"Nope."

Ikki bent his knees and brought his head down. There was a ringing noise as the steel of their weapons struck above his head.

"Gaaaaaaah!"

The two of them screamed at the painful shockwaves spreading through their arms before fainting from the agony. Just one more remained.

"D-Damn you!"

All of Manabe's bravado from earlier was nowhere to be found. Clearly flustered after seeing his four buddies taken down, he materialized his Device: a large-bore revolver, rare for East Asians. He pointed the barrel at Ikki and squeezed the trigger.

Ikki had already reacted, however. He grabbed an eraser from a nearby desk and flung it straight upward. The eraser bounced off the ceiling, wedging itself between the hammer and percussion cap, jamming the gun before it could fire one of its magic bullets.

Manabe opened his mouth to scream voicelessly, his eyes wide open as if he had seen a ghost in broad daylight.

After protecting himself from enemy fire in the most absurd way possible, Ikki stepped next to his defenseless foe. He brought his hands together with a loud *clap!* right in front of Manabe's face. It was nothing more than an intimidation tactic with no offensive purpose.

"Hyah!"

It was clearly effective, though. Just from the clap in front of his face, Manabe fell weakly onto his rear and looked up at Ikki, his eyes trembling with fear and panic. That was no surprise; the unarmed Rank F before him had somehow dealt with five Blazers who were using their weapons.

Manabe didn't have any fight left in him, so there was no need to kick him while he was down. Ikki avoided any hostile use of his Device, and the scuffle didn't turn into an all-out brawl. With a vague smile that would tickle Kusakabe's so-called "motherly instinct", Ikki said, "Let's be friends. We'll be classmates for the rest of the year, after all." Manabe could only nod as he continued to tremble, but he wasn't the only one overwhelmed by Ikki's moves. His other classmates were at a loss for words, still processing the sight of Ikki fighting off five Blazers without breaking a sweat.

"Huh. Stella, it feels different in here," Ikki said, confused.

"Of course it does Everyone just saw how ridiculously strong you are."

"'Ridiculously strong'? I was trying to hold back as much as possible so I wouldn't hurt them."

"Maybe that's why they're so surprised, then." Stella let out an annoyed sigh. "You held back as much as possible, and it still led to this."

Clap, clap, clap. Someone started applauding from the entrance of the classroom. A small girl stood there, sunlight leaking through the hallway and

onto her back. She had short silver hair and jade-green eyes. Her appearance could be summed up as “pale and frail”, but those qualities had a certain charm to them. Her tiny pink lips curled into a smile—

“Overpowering strength that wards off weaklings like nobody’s business. Just what I’d expect from you, Big Brother.” Her voice was incredibly refined, as if her words were rehearsed like a song.

“Big Brother”. Ikki’s eyes opened wide when she spoke those words.

“Are you...?” There was no point in finishing his question. Her tone, her face, and her hair were all so mature, but there was only one person in the world who would call him that. Among the vast Kurogane family tree, she was the one person who he could be comfortable around. His little sister, who ran after him wherever he went. “Shizuku?”

“Yes. It’s been a long time, Big Brother.”



“Shizukuuu!” Ikki ran over and took her hand, unable to hold back his joy at seeing her after four long years. “It really is you, Shizuku! Yeah, it’s been so long! Look how much you’ve grown! I didn’t even realize it was you!”

“Of course not. We haven’t seen each other in four years. It would be stranger if I looked the same.”

“Ahaha, you got that right! Man, I’m so excited! I didn’t think you’d be the one to come find me here! I was gonna come find you as soon as I could, but as you can see, there was a bit of trouble in the classroom. But hey, that doesn’t matter now! Sorry, this is just so sudden that I can’t even think straight!”

There were so many things he wanted to say to Shizuku. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was for running away, how much had happened since, and, of course, how happy he was to see her again. But his words fought their way out of his throat, leaving him unable to string together meaningful sentences.

“Hey, Ikki. Is this the little sister you were talking about?” Stella asked.

“Mm-hmm. Yep. Yeah! Stella, I should introduce you two.”

Her question was like a life preserver, bringing Ikki’s mind back above water.

First, he took a deep breath to calm down. From there, he tried to introduce Shizuku to everyone, but the moment he started speaking, Shizuku pulled at his sleeve until he was facing her.

“Big Brother, you don’t know how much I’ve missed you.” She put a hand on his cheek and brought their lips together.

“Ngh!!!”



“WHOOOOOOOOOAAA?!” Stella and the rest of the class gasped in shock at the shameless kiss.

“Oh my God! What is going on here, Ikki?!” Stella couldn’t hold back her confusion.

“I-I-I don’t have the slightest idea!” Ikki was the most shocked out of everyone present after being kissed on the lips by his own little sister. Flustered, he tore her hand away from his face.

“Shizuku?! Wh-What did you just...?!”

“I’m simply kissing my beloved brother,” she said nonchalantly.

“I know what a kiss is, okay?! That’s why this is so weird! But that’s not what I was asking! I was asking *why* you did that!”

“No matter what the purpose, kissing is, at its heart, a show of affection. If people connected by flimsy ‘romantic’ love can kiss, then it’s natural for two people with the same blood—the same DNA—and who share a much greater bond to do the same. In fact, it would be stranger if we didn’t. Besides, kissing is like a greeting in foreign countries.”

“I-It is? Is that true, Stella?”

“Hell no, it isn’t!” Stella asserted. “Nobody kisses on the mouth as a greeting! Don’t just let this happen! Tell me, do any of *you* kiss your siblings?!”

“Nope.”

“Not me!”

“Just thinking about it makes me wanna puke.”

Nobody in the crowd agreed with Shizuku’s claim.

“There you have it,” Ikki said. “Majority rules, and they say you’re wrong.”

“Teehee. There’s nothing wrong about it, Big Brother. What we do is for us to decide. Their relationships with their siblings must be as cold and desolate as the tundra. Truly, we live in a depraved world. It’s my belief that a kiss is far too little to make up for these four long years; for us, sexual intercourse itself would be little more than a greeting.”

“Please, stop!”

Everyone shouted in terror. On the first day of their first semester, the new students had already found something to bond over: shared trauma.

“Shizuku, please. D-Do you even hear what you’re saying?! Y-Young women like you shouldn’t be talking about s-sex so casually.”

“Teehee, I’m only joking. Look how red your face is. You’re adorable, Big Brother.”

Ikki broke into a cold sweat at the sound of her admittedly bewitching giggles.

Wh-Who even is this? The Shizuku I remember was so timid that she would never do something like this. Where did it all go so wrong?

“Putting all that silliness aside, Big Brother, why don’t we get to know each other’s bodies a little better?” Her arms coiled around Ikki’s neck again, like white snakes. Ever since she had entered the classroom, her eyes never strayed from him. “You have no idea just how long these four years have been.”

“Ah...”

Her soft, pink lips began to approach him again, ready to steal another kiss.

No, no, no. I can’t let this go any further. This isn’t how a big brother should be.

Ikki knew as much, but he couldn’t move. It was as if he was locked within her green eyes, unable to escape. Their lips nearly met again—

“Stoooooop!”

Stella shouted as she pried them apart. “Get a hold of yourself, Ikki! Don’t just stand there and enjoy it!”

“S-Sorry! Thank you!”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Shizuku finally shifted her eyes to a different target, as if boasting that she had only just noticed Stella for the first time.

“That’s what I should be asking you! What are you doing to Ikki?!”

“Are you talking about the kiss?”

“D-Duh! What else would I be talking about?!”

“To put it bluntly,” Shizuku sighed, “what I want to do with my brother is my decision.”

“Ikki, your sister is a weirdo! I thought you said you were ‘normal, blood-related siblings’!”

“I’m just as surprised as you are. Look at me, I’m shaking.”

“You seem awfully interested in getting between my brother and me,” Shizuku piped up. “I take it you’re the famed Princess Stella. Tell me, why would someone like you try to barge in on two commoners’ reunion?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I supposed to sit back and watch while you two take part in this weird, X-rated sibling reunion?!”

“Like I said before, that’s for us to decide. You’re not involved in our family.”

“That’s not something family does to each other! Ever heard of common sense?”

“You’re annoying, I’ll give you that. Okay, let’s assume I completely lack common sense and it’s strange for a girl to kiss her brother. What does that have to do with you, Princess?”

“Ngh.”

“This is between me and my brother. It has nothing to do with you, you backwater princess, so stay out of it.”

Stella recoiled at her bluntness. True, it wasn’t exactly her business; it was Ikki’s job to deal with his little sister, who had more than a few screws loose. She had no reason to interfere, and yet...

“Big Brother, people will only bother us here. Why don’t we find a quiet, secluded place to make up for these past four years?”

She doesn’t seem like much of a “little sister” to me. Stella couldn’t overlook Ikki’s little sister’s overt attempts to get him alone together and do God-knows-what. She steeled herself for what was to come. “It does have something to do with me,” she murmured, her face already a deep red, “so I can’t just stand around and watch while you kiss Ikki!”

“Huh?!” Ikki gasped in shock. Stella had just admitted that she didn’t want him to kiss other girls.

Does that mean... she likes me?

“Ikki is my one and only master! I can’t have my master being an incestuous lecher who’s unfit for modern society!”

“That’s the problem?!”

“This is one juicy scandal!” Kagami couldn’t contain her excitement. “Our very first issue’s headline will be *‘Struggle in My Arms! A Princess Servant in Bondage and Her Savage Roommate!’*”

“Wow! I always thought Kurogane looked more like an M.”

“Guess he’s more of a secret alpha.”

“And the princess is his servant? He’s next-level! Maybe they’re into corruption play?”

The crowd started whispering amongst themselves.

Great. Thanks to Stella, this is getting even worse, Ikki thought.

“C-Come on, Stella! You can’t just say that in front of people!”

“B-But it’s true. After you beat me in that all-or-nothing battle, I was forced to entrust to you my body and soul. You and I have become one. To say I have nothing to do with this is foolish! And isn’t it a servant’s duty to lead her master down the path of righteousness?”

“Didn’t we say we were going to forget about that?!”

“We mustn’t! My pride as a princess won’t allow it. You gave me an order, remember? ‘You and I must share a bed.’”

“I don’t talk like that! And it was nowhere near that sexually charged!”

“But it’s not *that* different from what you said!”

“I guess it’s not,” Ikki groaned.

“Is that true?” That voice stabbed at him like an icicle, sending a chill through his body and seemingly freezing the blood in his veins. Her previous

flirtatiousness was gone, replaced with complete emotionlessness. Shizuku had become an ice queen. “Is it true, or is it not?”

Scary...

“Big Brother? I’m asking you a question.”

Ikki knew that refusing was the only way to make it out alive, but unfortunately, it was the truth.

“W-Well, she made it sound worse than it is, but yeah, I guess it’s true for the most part.”

Ikki, honest to a fault, could only admit the truth. But in the grand scheme of things, the honest don’t live long.

“Hmm. Really, now? Heh. Heehee.”

“Shizuku?”

“Liar.” Shizuku’s eyes narrowed as she laughed, sending a chill down Ikki’s spine. “Why would you lie to me, Big Brother? I can’t think of a single reason; after all, you would never willingly hurt your little sister. You would never say something that would cut so deep.”

“U-Uh, Shizuku?”

“I see how it is. This woman is taking advantage of you, forcing you to follow her around like a dog. You lied because you wanted to keep me safe. Yes, of course that’s what’s going on. There’s no other possibility. It’s the only logical conclusion.”

“No, just let me talk—”

“How I pity you, Big Brother. How you disgust me, Princess. This is exactly why I didn’t want him leaving the family. He’s just so handsome, so charming. It’s not his fault these huge-chested bimbo succubi all flock to him.”

“Shizuku, please! Just calm down and let’s talk this out.”

“No, Big Brother. It’s not your fault; I can’t blame you for this. You’re such a wonderful boy—too wonderful, even. It’s all her fault. It’s all her fault. *It’s all her fault.* But I will free you from your chains. Shower me, Yoishigure!”

“Sh-Shizuku?! Cut it out! You can’t do that! Put your Device away and just listen to me! She’s not ‘taking advantage of’—Are you even listening?!” Ikki rattled on like a madman in hopes of calming his sister, who had materialized her Device: a shortsword.

“Oh, please, Big Brother. I hear every word you say. Do you think I would ever let so much as a sound that comes from your mouth pass me by? That’s less likely than the world’s rotation suddenly changing direction. Ahaha! Oh, you are funny, Big Brother. Don’t worry; she can’t beat me. I may be only the second-best new student and a Rank B, but my affinity is water—fire’s natural predator. I do appreciate your concern, though. I love you, Big Brother.”

“You’re obviously *not* listening! You didn’t even respond to what I said!”

“Serve my will, Lævateinn!” Stella shouted, summoning her Device.

“Stella, stop encouraging her!”

“Sorry, Ikki, but I don’t have it in me to be gentle and compassionate toward someone who’s pointing their Device at me. If you want me, come at me!”

Neither Stella nor Shizuku seemed to see Ikki standing right in front of them. Their eyes, ruby and emerald, were fixed solely on the enemy. Ikki’s pleading wouldn’t be able to stop them; they didn’t want to stop. Their hearts were screaming, *Crush the girl who stands before you.*

“Okay, everyone! Get in the hallway! If you don’t, you’re as good as dead!” Kagami had already started evacuating the class. That’s a journalist for you—always the first to act.

With the evacuation complete, the two girls glared at each other.

“Quite the tiny weapon you have there,” Stella quipped. “It matches your chest.”

“Funny,” Shizuku replied. “Your weapon suits you, too. A woman whose weapon and breasts are both needlessly large. I can hardly tell the two apart.”

“I can’t stand listening to jealous girls like you. I’m willing to forgive you, though; my heart is as big as my breasts, you see.”

“...Fatty.”

Ikki could swear he heard Stella snap.

Uh-oh. This is gonna get ugly. Realizing that catastrophe was unavoidable, he shrugged his shoulders and stepped into the hallway.

“I’ll kill yooou!” Stella roared.

It didn’t take long for the battle between these two Blazers to blow the first-year classroom to smithereens.



The destruction of the classroom was, of course, not without consequence. After some deliberation amongst the teachers, both perpetrators were sentenced to a week of house arrest. They were effectively suspended, something nobody had expected of the top two new students on the first day.

The entire student body knew about the scandal thanks to Kagami’s newspaper. As a result, however, *Struggle in My Arms! A Princess Servant in Bondage and Her Savage Roommate!* wasn’t published, so Ikki at least had that going for him.

“She wasn’t like this before.” That was the most shocking thing of all. Ikki couldn’t stop sighing even after returning to his room that night.

Long ago, she was a timid, easily-embarrassed girl. She was reserved and obedient, joining Ikki in everything he did but hiding behind him whenever she did something embarrassing. What went so wrong to make her like... that?

“Looked to me like you were having fun,” came Stella’s voice, her mood soured by her punishment. “Maybe you weren’t as bothered by it as you’d like me to believe.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Yuh-huh. If I hadn’t pulled her away, you two would’ve kissed again.”

Gulp. She was right; if Stella hadn’t jumped in, Shizuku would have stolen another kiss.

“B-But it’s not like I sat there because I wanted to kiss her. I was just so overwhelmed by how much she’s grown as a woman.”

“So you were just taken by how beautiful your little sister became after four years?”

“No, I just—”

To Ikki, Shizuku was just his little sister. He had never thought of her as anything more; the idea didn't even occur to him. That was the absolute truth. But after seeing her for the first time in four years—her feverish eyes, her blushing cheeks, her lips that just begged for him—could he really deny how he felt?

“...Maybe, yeah,” he admitted.

“Sister-lover.”

“Urk!”

“Lecher.”

“Aww... I have nothing to say for myself.”

What the hell? Am I just starved for affection? Even if I haven't seen her in four years, being attracted to my sister is just...

“Where are you going?” Stella asked as he walked away.

“I'm gonna cool my head with a quick bath.”

There had been too many shocks for him in one day. The best thing for him was to take a bath and go to bed.



“So stupid...” After Ikki left for the bathroom, Stella sulked in solitude.

“Maybe, yeah”? Seriously? Why not just say no? Besides, who considers his sister an option? This is so stupid. I hate even thinking about it.

“He even called me beautiful.” He was the one who'd said he wanted to get to know her better, even going as far as asking to be roommates. Why hadn't he made a move yet?

At the very least, she was ready for it to happen. She woke up before Ikki every morning, tidying up her bed head so he wouldn't see it. Every night, she lay in wait in case he decided to attempt the legendary Japanese custom in

which men sneak into unmarried women's rooms for spontaneous—albeit consensual—sex.

Not that I'm hoping he'll do it or anything! If he did, I would reject him! I would reject him so hard; a proper princess would never have premarital sex! But...

"You called an unmarried girl beautiful! You said you wanted to get to know her better!" Stella couldn't bear being neglected for so long. What was his goal when he spouted such provocative lines? She had taken the bait, so where was her reward? She couldn't help but want an explanation. Then, all it took was a kiss—from his little sister, of all people—to have him head over heels. "Ugh, God! What an idiot! Just go die, stupid sister-lover!"

Stella started to cry as she yelled and punched her pillow. Did that mean Ikki had no interest in her as a woman? Maybe she wasn't his type; if he liked Shizuku, it must have been because of her size or something.

That would be a problem. Stella wasn't especially tall, but she couldn't do anything about her generous proportions. She had taken pride in them before, but if Ikki's incestuous nature had morphed into some obsession with petite girls, his tastes would be incompatible with her body. Stella couldn't accept that. It was too much.

"All right."

Rather than moping, she steeled her resolve.



"Sister-lover".

"Uuugh." As Ikki sunk into the bathtub, so too did his emotional state at the thought of Stella's disapproval. "I bet she hates me now."

"Lecher."

"Aaargh."

Was there any man in the world who wouldn't be discouraged by a younger woman calling him a pervert? It honestly stung, especially coming from Stella. As a knight, Ikki had great respect for her. She had so much natural talent, but

she always aimed for greater heights, never relying on that talent alone. He wasn't sure he would share that drive were he in the same position.

Of course, he also found her incredibly charming. His appreciation for her as both a knight and a woman made her disdain that much more painful. He knew he had to set things straight.

"I'll talk to Shizuku about it tomorrow."

Clearing the air with Stella was important too, but Shizuku wasn't a little girl anymore; she couldn't get away with doing things like that. He had to reprimand her for her actions. For someone who grew to be so cute, it would be a shame if she missed out on a real romantic relationship because she was into her brother. Surely, Shizuku would see that as a problem. Ikki had finally made up his mind when...

"I-I'm coming in."

...Stella barged into the tiny bathroom, wearing only a bikini.

What the heck? There's something very, very strange going on here. Something seemed really out of place, like seeing a shark in your swimming pool. Oh, that's it! The bikini is the strange part. This is a bathroom. Who wears a bikini in the bathroom? It's just not civilized.

Ikki decided he ought to get her a towel—

"Wait, wait, wait! That's not it at all! I mean, that's weird too, but still! There's a much more important question here! Stella, why are you in the bathroom when I'm bathing?! What's even going on here?!" Ikki's world had been turned upside-down by the sudden, bizarre development.

"Wh-What? It's not that strange, is it?"

"It sure is! When would it not be strange?! Now, why?! Seriously, why?! Why are you in the bathroom, wearing a bikini, while I'm bathing?!"

"Y-You really don't know why?"

"I don't have the slightest idea!"

"I... I was just going to help you wash up."

His mind was unsteady and he started getting dizzy.

I've gone absolutely bonkers. Ikki must have been hearing things. Stella, helping me wash up? Hahaha, yeah, right. Are we in some sort of porn game?

"Sorry, Stella. I think I lost my mind for a minute there and completely misheard that. Could you run it by me again?"

"Well, you know. I'm like your servant, right? Washing her master's back is... a servant's duty, isn't it?"

"For real? Servants have it tough."

He paused for a moment, then the realization hit him.

"Hey, waaaait a second! I never asked for this!"

"Only the best take initiative. B-Besides, even Hideyoshi warmed up Nobunaga's footwear for him without being asked! That's just how it is!"

"What are you even talking about?!"

"It doesn't matter! This is my duty as your servant, so just come over here and sit down!"

"I'm not doing that, and I'm definitely not letting you do this, either! Cool it with the weird master-servant stuff, already! Both you and Shizuku must have lost your sense of virtue or something!"

"Just sit over here and let me do it! If you don't—" Stella's hair started to glow as she paused. "I'll boil you instead!"

She was clearly serious about it.



Rub, rub.

Stella, princess of the Vermillion Empire, was on her knees in a bikini, washing Ikki's nearly-naked body. Given the turn of events, he couldn't say for sure that he hadn't gone crazy.

Maybe I've been crazy for a long time, he thought. Or maybe that's just what I want to think.

“Seriously, though, starting tomorrow, we’re never doing anything like this again. You promised, remember?”

“Y-Yeah, I know. Besides, i-it’s not like I’m doing this because I want to. I’m simply required to because I lost our duel and became your servant.”

Just don’t do it, then, Ikki thought. There wasn’t any point in saying it, though; he’d already tried.

According to Stella, it was her duty as a servant, she had demanded the deal herself, she wouldn’t feel better unless she did it at least once, blah, blah, blah. Ikki didn’t understand her feelings in the slightest. For starters, she was the one who made it about her pride as a member of the royal family. Whenever the topic was brought up, she wouldn’t let him hear the end of it.

I just have to make it through today. Persevere for now, then forget all about it after! Ikki encouraged himself as Stella washed his body.

“...”

Still, he was captivated by the bikini-clad girl in front of him. His mind was telling him no, but his heart was telling him to look. Pretending to look away, he stole a glance at her in an attempt to fool his mind.

She was far more exposed than when they had first met, when she was in her underwear. Though he usually didn’t take notice of her attractiveness, Ikki could see nearly her entire body—her long, slender neck, the shadows cast by her prominent bones, the small of her back, and all the way down her legs. And the most diabolical of them all: her chest.

Stella’s breasts were practically spilling out of her bikini top. The melons that hung from her chest, insisting upon making themselves known even in her school uniform, moved and bobbed with every move she made. Each time they did, a burning thirst accompanied the feeling of blood rushing to his head.

This is... too much... He couldn’t look away or even close his eyes. Ikki was much more serious and austere than most, but he was still a healthy sixteen-year-old boy. When faced with such an attractive girl only a year younger than him, he couldn’t *not* notice her. Taking advantage of Stella’s blissful unawareness, he kept stealing glances at every nook and cranny of her

seductive body. *She really is beautiful.*

Ikki was interested in her womanly charm, of course, but also her abilities as a knight. Her supple body concealed powerful, flexible muscles in such a way that they didn't interfere with her feminine beauty, but he knew they were there.

He also began to understand just how much she had put herself through to tone those muscles. Her willpower burned like a raging fire, unhindered by her incredible natural talent. Stella's body was like a work of art, her very soul engraved into it.

So... So beautiful... Ikki had never been so taken by a woman's body, and he had never wanted so badly to feel hers. Of course, he knew he would never be able to. Meanwhile...

He won't stop staring at me... Stella had noticed what Ikki was doing. A woman often knows what a man is thinking when she notices his gaze. One might call it a woman's sixth sense; an organ that doesn't exist in men warning her of his gawking and declaring, "He's seriously staring at me!"

"Haah..."

When she became conscious of his leering, her body grew hotter, as if she were suffering from a fever. His eyes crept from her neck down to her collarbone, continuing to her breasts, her navel, even her rear. As they moved, she felt a vague aching in each of those regions.

This is so embarrassing... I can't even think straight.

But she didn't yell at him. In fact, she was relieved. Ikki's ogling was proof that he wasn't put off by her body. In fact, it might even mean that he had some slight interest... maybe. He was reacting to her body in much the same way she had reacted to his, which made her smile in relief. She was still in the running. His little sister hadn't won yet!

"I'll, um... get your back next."

Finished with the front of his upper body, Stella moved behind Ikki. She wasn't mentally prepared to put her hands on his lower body. It was far, far, faaar too early for that.

“S-Sure. Thanks.”

Ikki refused to mention that she’d skipped his lower body. Rather, if she had asked him to remove his towel, he was prepared to destroy anything in his path to make his escape.

All that’s left is my back. After that, it’s all over...

It was a lot easier for him once he could no longer see Stella. He felt a similar itch as she scrubbed his back, but it was nowhere near as bad as having his chest and abs groped. He was going to be okay. Finally, there was a light at the end of the bizarre, trying tunnel. Once it was over, he could forget about everything that had happened once and for all. He would never speak or think of the day’s events ever again. He was ready to completely repress the memory of it. As soon as he finalized his decision...

“Hey, Ikki,” Stella asked from behind him, her voice as quiet as a mouse.

“Yeah?”

“There’s, um... something I want to ask you about. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Go for it.”

“Do you, uh... like women’s breasts?”

“Huh?!” That question struck him like a hammer clean to the back of his head. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?”

“You were just... looking at them a lot, so...”

NOOOOOOOOOOO! She saw me?! Even though I wasn’t looking directly at them?! I wanna disappear. I wanna die. Do not stand at my grave and weep.

“S-Sorry! I knew I shouldn’t have been looking at them! I just...”

“Y-You don’t have to apologize. Just answer my question.”

Her question... *“Do you like women’s breasts?”*

Ikki would have rather prostrated himself than answer a question like that. Being forced to expose his kinks to a girl must have been some sort of cruel and unusual punishment.

Things had taken a turn for the worse; it was a heartless tragedy. Had he

angered some vengeful god? He groaned in distress, for there was no escape. He could only resign to his fate.

“Yeah, kinda,” Ikki replied as if he had to force the words out of his mouth.

“...Huh.”

...

.....

.....

Say something, at least! he screamed internally.

“Uh, Stella?” Ikki spoke, trying not to drown in the thick silence.

Boing.

Suddenly, he felt two things press against his back, firmer than the sponge but far softer than her hands. The shock of that sudden sensation ran up his back, jolting his brain and sending sparks flying through his mind. Though his incredible vision wasn't enough for him to see what she was doing from within his blind spot, he still clearly understood the cause of it.

“S-Stella...?”

Before he could ask why she had done that, Stella had already leaped out of the bathroom at lightning speed. From what Ikki saw of her face, she was beet red.

“Wh-Whaaaat?!”

It was hard to explain away all of Shizuku's and Stella's bizarre acts with just “men and women are worlds apart”. Things had gotten to the point where Ikki couldn't comprehend a single thing that had happened all day. All he knew for sure was that he would never, ever forget what he'd just felt.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

IKKI KUROGANE

■PROFILE

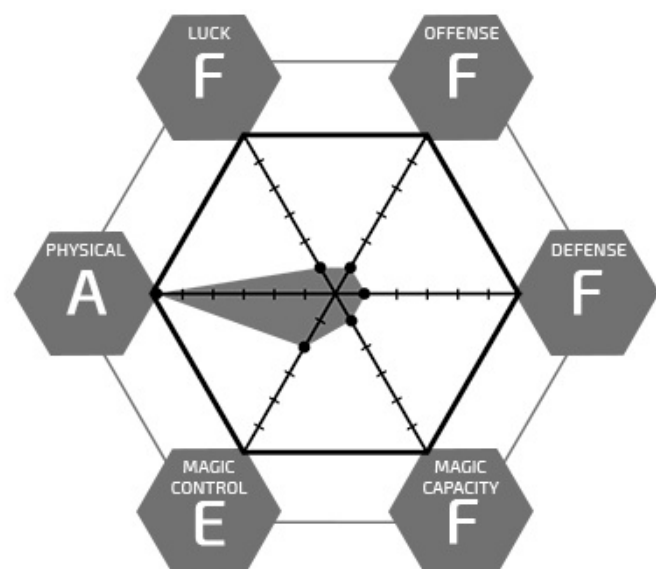
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,
CLASS 1-1

BLAZER RANK: F

NOBLE ART: ITTOU SHURA

NICKNAME: WORST ONE

SUMMARY: AN UNORTHODOX
MASTER OF THE SWORD.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

"Take a look at his stats. What do you make of this guy?"

"He's very... interesting."

Ikki's min-maxed stats are only further emphasized when he activates Ittou Shura! And get a load of that face! Talk about cute!



Chapter 3

The Rebellion

Shizuku Kurogane loved a certain boy. A boy who had been with her since childhood, and the only person who was ever able to smile sweetly at her despite all the stern-faced adults. It was her blood-related brother, Ikki Kurogane. Suddenly kissing him during their reunion was the ultimate proof of her love.

She hadn't always seen her brother as a viable lover, however. Until four years ago, she loved him the way any normal sister would love her brother. Things had only changed after he ran away. They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but that wasn't quite the impetus for her love.

Four years ago, when Shizuku lost her brother, she finally understood the situation Ikki had been placed in. She watched as her parents, her eldest brother, and the rest of her family went about their lives as if nothing had happened, not even bothering to search for their lost son.

Even before he ran away, Ikki was treated as if he never existed. When finally faced with that truth, Shizuku became depressed by her ignorance of the pain her older brother felt as he smiled and embraced her.

Why had she never realized the truth until then? Why had it taken her brother's disappearance for her to see that truth if she had always been by his side?! That lasting regret clawed at Shizuku's heart until it morphed into rage toward her family. They had neglected such a kind person because of his lack of talent, forced him out of his own home, and tried to obstruct his future because they were afraid of a Rank F damaging their reputation even after he cut ties with them. Her hatred intensified the more she ruminated on it.

Thus, she came to a resolution: Shizuku Kurogane would hear nothing of "taboo". She no longer cared if their mother, their father, or anyone else in the

world would love him—she didn't want anything from them, anyway. A father's love, a mother's love, a brother's love, a sister's love, a friend's love, a lover's love—Shizuku would provide all of that for her brother. She was willing to love him enough to make him feel like the most beloved person in the world.

But the one major problem she faced was a certain inferior being. That being, of course, was Stella Vermillion, her brother's self-styled servant. There was no doubt that Stella was interested in Ikki romantically. It was clear from just looking at that woman that she loved the same boy as Shizuku. Using a bet as pretense, that spider seduced him into her web. She was an eyesore at best, and even had the gall to attack Shizuku when it was *her* feelings toward Ikki that were the problem.

Shizuku's house arrest had finally ended, so she was going to use her newfound freedom as a pretense to ask him out to a movie, but then *she* butted in and said she wanted to go, too. Shizuku didn't like her one bit.

To make matters worse, Ikki rolled over and obeyed when Vermillion said she wanted him to tour-guide her around, so Shizuku was forced to accept her as a third wheel. Of course, Shizuku wasn't mad at Ikki; she was mad at Vermillion. How could she be mad at him when he was the best man in the world? It was all the more reason for her to hate the way Stella glued herself to Ikki's hip.

"That stupid pig..."

"My, my. You're as short-tempered as ever." The one who spoke to Shizuku, smiling wryly in response to her bitter tone while drying and combing Shizuku's hair, was her roommate, Nagi Alisuin. "Did something else happen with that princess?"

"...Yeah," Shizuku muttered disconsolately as Alisuin continued combing.

She had tried to speak to Ikki and even Stella with a polite tone, but with Alisuin, she let her hair down. Her expression wasn't prim and proper like before; instead, she puffed her cheeks in irritation.

"Haha. It must be hard to be such a loving maiden," Alisuin smiled, looking at her childish pouting face through the mirror. She had already heard straight from the girl herself that Shizuku loved her brother.

Shizuku was a bit of a misanthrope. Whether they were a boy or a girl, as long as someone was human, she didn't especially care for them; Ikki's disappearance had caused her shyness to reform into distrust for others. If there truly were parents out there that didn't love their children, then who could really be trusted?

Her roommate, however, was different. Shizuku had already told Alisuin everything about her most intimate secret—her love for her brother—even though they had only known each other for a week.

It's kinda fun to talk to Alice.

Alisuin listened to whatever Shizuku had to say, answered any questions she had, found joy in her happiness, and best of all, never intruded on her privacy when a boundary was set. Shizuku only had older brothers, so she could only dream of having an older sister, but she believed someone like Alisuin would be ideal.

They often talked about silly things.

"Hey, Alice?"

"Yeees?"

"Do you think it's weird for a girl to love her brother?"

She regretted how spoiled she sounded the moment she asked the question. Of course it was weird. There was hardly any point in asking. So why did she ask? There was one reason: she wanted Alisuin to guess her opinion and provide a different answer.

"If you consider the opinion of the world at large, then sure, it's strange. Most people wouldn't be into the idea. But you already know that without me explaining it, don't you? If you still love him despite that, then I say that's true love."

Alisuin did exactly what Shizuku wanted.

"Sorry, Alice. I didn't mean to ask such a weird question."

"Oh, please. You should be asking more. Lighthearted conversation puts the heart at ease and makes us happier people. Language is a really wonderful

thing; words were made for us to communicate and support each other, not to hurl abuse. Besides, I believe your love is the real deal, and you shouldn't be ashamed of it. It's sweet that you think so much about someone else."

"Thank you. I shouldn't be ashamed of my emotions, but I'm worried my brother won't accept me."

"That's a question of perseverance. He thinks of you only as a sister, so it'll take some doing to make him see you as a woman. Meanwhile, that princess doesn't have to deal with such a major obstacle, so she's at an advantage."

"Aww..." Alisuin's objective analysis was disheartening for Shizuku.

In the end, though, her screws weren't *that* loose. Though she wanted her brother to understand her feelings, she knew there would be obstacles in the way of her love. Perhaps Shizuku needed to just loosen the screws a tiny bit more before taking the plunge.

In any case, if she wanted to change his mind, Shizuku's first course of action would be to overwhelm Ikki with a saturation attack. Her only chance was to take advantage of the time in which their reunion was still fresh; during that time, the distance between them as siblings would seem greater.

If he wasn't attracted to her in the first place, though, she wouldn't be able to do much other than irritate him. Were her actions just annoying him? Was she going to one day lose her chance to become more than just his sister? Questions like those tortured Shizuku day in and day out.

"Turn that frown upside-down. Remember, his social standing is a major obstacle that he has to face, too. But don't worry; there isn't a man out there who doesn't like when a girl is aggressively affectionate. Especially when it's a girl as cute as you, Shizuku." Alisuin supported Shizuku, obviously noticing her despondence.

Is that really true? Shizuku wasn't a man, so she couldn't be sure. But if Alisuin, who should know quite a bit more about men than she did, said so, then maybe it was.

"Thanks, Alice. I feel a lot better now."

"No problemo♪ But you know, kissing him right off the bat was a little much. I

know you probably did it to make up your mind for good, but when someone gets such a big shock at the very start, it forces them to be on their guard.”

“I do regret that...”

“Good. To get a man to melt in your arms, you have to be slow and steady. Gentle, too, as if you’re sucking on a lollipop. Leave tomorrow’s date to me, by the way; I’ll have things so well coordinated you’d think it was your wedding day.”

“Okay. With you on my side, there’s no way I’ll lose to her.”

Shizuku wasn’t going to give up. If her rival was going to use a “servant for life” bet to her advantage, then she was just going to have to use her sibling bond to hers. She was the only one who could really understand her poor, lonely brother—her brother who was forced to abandon the home he was raised in because nobody else could understand him.

He couldn’t be left with Vermillion. Strangers couldn’t be trusted; all they cared about was themselves. Shizuku, on the other hand, would never betray her brother, never hurt him. She swore that her feelings for him were eternal. That was the whole reason she had come here, after all.

I swear, I won’t let her beat me.

Shizuku’s resolve had been weakened by Stella intruding on her date, but it had strengthened again. Alisuin’s words always gave Shizuku strength.

“I’ll do my best.”

“That’s the spirit! Okay, all done.”

Alisuin turned off the hair dryer, and Shizuku’s silver hair shook slightly as she turned her head. She was impressed by Alisuin’s skill; there was an incredible difference compared to when she used to do her own hair. Shizuku no longer did it herself; instead, she would ask Alisuin every time.

I should do something for her, too.

But what could she even do for her roommate? She finally hit upon one idea.

“Oh, I know. Do you want to go to the movies with us tomorrow, Alice?”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your date.”

“I don’t mind. The date was ruined when *she* decided to tag along, anyway.”

“Haha, I suppose so. Then perhaps I will intrude. I ought to talk to your beloved brother at least once, after all.”

Good. I’m glad she’s happy, Shizuku thought. I’d better send Ikki an email to make sure he’s okay with her coming.

That said, he was bringing his own roommate, so he couldn’t reasonably refuse.

“I’m excited. If he’s handsome enough, maybe I’ll go after him too.”

“Oh? I’m sorry, I couldn’t quite hear you. Care to say that again?”

“It was just a joke, sorry! No need to point Yoishigure at people.”

If that were true, then all was well. Shizuku was willing to spill any blood she had to for her brother—even Alisuin’s.



On the day of the movie date, Ikki and Stella waited at the school’s front gate for Shizuku and Alisuin. They weren’t in their usual school uniforms; Ikki was wearing a comfy t-shirt and jeans, while Stella wore a stylish white blouse and a brightly-colored cardigan.

“They’re late. I wonder what they’re doing.”

“If only we were all in the same dorm, we could have left together.”

Ikki and Stella were in the first dormitory, while Shizuku was in the second. Their buildings were on opposite sides of the school, so they decided to meet in the middle. But even after the planned meeting time had come and gone, Shizuku hadn’t shown up.

“I’m sure they’ll be here soon. But wow, Stella, I’m surprised you’re so interested in movies.” Shizuku had invited Ikki to the movies while they were passing the time with small talk, but Stella, practically foaming at the mouth, had jumped in with “I’ll go too! I have to, even if you don’t want me to!”

“It’s just too dangerous to leave you alone with Shizuku in such a dark place.”

“What? How is it dangerous?”

“The fact that you don’t see the danger in sitting next to a lion like her is dangerous in itself! Did you already forget what she did on the first day?”

“Uh...” No, of course Ikki remembered. He couldn’t forget if he tried. To be honest, that was his first kiss. “She apologized and said she was just too excited the day after that. She even said she regretted it. But either way, I’m just her older brother, so you’re wrong if you think she’ll just chow down on me. The first day was just a one-time thing. We’re fine.”

“Or maybe she was just keeping her distance for a while because she came on too strong.”

“Huh? What was that?”

“I said you’re a sister-lover.”

“I-I am not! Yes, I love my sister, but she’s *just* my sister! And we are a hundred percent blood-related. I’m not suddenly romantically interested in her just because we haven’t seen each other in a few years!”

“Really? You’re not going to ogle her anymore?”

“Of course not.”

There’s just no way I could see my sister as a viable partner. It would be weird as hell, for starters.

Ikki was sad that his first-day blunder had led to Stella continuing to doubt even that obvious fact. He sighed at his own lack of trustworthiness, when they finally showed up.

“Sorry for the wait, Big Brother.”

“Oh, Shizuku.”

“You’re late! What were you—” As Ikki and Stella turned to greet her, their expressions hardened.

“I’m so sorry. It just took some time to get dressed.” Shizuku lowered her head in apology, somehow even more beautiful than usual, maybe unnaturally so.

Her style was gothic Lolita; a perfect match for her silver hair and small figure. The outfit, which looked like it belonged on a porcelain doll, went well with Shizuku's overall aesthetic, making her an order of magnitude more attractive. Such an upgrade was probably thanks in part to the difference between that outfit and her school uniform.

Shizuku had always liked getups like that, though, so Ikki was used to it. Normally, it would have just bolstered his image of her as a little sister because it brought to mind how she used to dress when he was still at home, but whatever magic was under her control had changed things.

S-So pretty...

Her figure, standing in the sunlight, attracted his gaze so powerfully that everything around her seemed to blur. What devilishness made it possible for her to be so eye-catching today? Ikki had just said he was no longer taken by his sister, but there he was, taken once again.

He soon discovered the source of that devilishness: makeup. Looking more closely, he could see that she had applied eyeshadow and lipstick. Her eyelashes were perfectly curled, and her trademark fine silver hair fluttered gently in the wind, reflecting silver light. It was as if Shizuku herself were a radiant source of light.

Of course, none of that stifled Shizuku's own traits; the makeup acted as a sort of seasoning that perfectly emphasized her features, painting her as an attractive woman rather than a little sister or a child.

"Wh-What the heck? That's cheating! Those are obviously not an amateur's cheeks! Did you hire a personal makeup artist?!"

"I'm not a princess, so I don't have the money for that. My roommate did this for me."

"Your roommate?"

"Oh yeah, you said your roommate was coming, didn't you?"

Ikki tried to remember the name Shizuku sent in the email. Apparently, whoever it was was like an older sister to Shizuku.

“Yes. Alisuin should have been right behind me.”

“Jeez, Shizuku, slow down! If you trip, all that makeup work will go to waste.”

Right on cue, Alisuin showed up just behind Shizuku.

“Huh?!”

Ikki and Stella’s expressions hardened like rocks again. Shizuku’s roommate, the one whose makeup skills put professionals to shame, was clearly male.





“Ahaha. Nice to meet you, and thank you so much for inviting me along. I’m Shizuku’s roommate, Nagi Alisuin. I don’t like my first name, though, so please, feel free to call me Alice.”

He was tall and lean, and his clothes, monotone like Shizuku’s, were reminiscent of a glam band rock star’s. Removing his bowler hat, Alice bowed in greeting before offering a friendly smile and a handshake to both Stella and Ikki.

“U-Uh, nice to meet you.”

“It’s my pleasure...?”

They timidly shook his hand, unable to hide their shock.

“H-Hey, Ikki, do you know what’s going on here?” whispered Stella.

“Don’t ask me. I’m just as confused as you are.”

They had been so convinced that he was a woman, and despite being fairly slender, he was clearly a man. He was taller than Ikki, too; likely over six feet tall.

“But doesn’t he walk and talk like a lady? Is this some sort of weird joke? Do I laugh at this or not?”

“Like I said, don’t ask me!”

“Haha, look, Shizuku. They’re bewildered by my beauty,” Alisuin said, interrupting their private conversation.

“That’s one way to put it!” the pair rebutted.

“Uh, Miss Alice?”

“No need for the ‘Miss’. I can’t stand formalities.”

“Okay, Alice. Are you, um... a crossdresser?”

“No. I’m a maiden born in a man’s body.”

“Sounds like a crossdresser to me, Stella!” Ikki lowered his voice again.

“It’s not like I know the difference!” Stella replied, equally quiet.

“Are you still bewildered?” Shizuku asked the two of them, who were visibly shocked.

“A-Ahaha, yeah, I guess.” Ikki scratched his head awkwardly. “I know there are people like that out there, but I’ve never met any of them, so I don’t really know what to say. Sorry.”

“Heehee. I’m used to it, so don’t worry. Although Shizuku wasn’t as surprised as either of you were.”

“I don’t really notice gender,” Shizuku added.

Ikki had panicked because he’d thought Alisuin was a crossdresser, but she’d had no problem accepting him for who he was, and that moved Ikki to his core. She had a strong sense of tolerance toward other value systems.

Shizuku, you really have grown up. We could learn a thing or two from you, he decided.

“Man, woman, I don’t care. I hate all humans equally.”

Scratch that.

It would take more than glue to mend Shizuku’s broken heart.

“Alice may be a little different from your average person, but she wants to be treated like a woman, so that’s what I do. If possible, I would appreciate it if you two would try to do the same.”

Shizuku’s back-and-forth between acceptance and hatred ended with tolerance.

“I’ll do what I can,” Ikki responded.

“Heehee, thank you. But you don’t need to force yourself. I’d hate to make things awkward between us.” Alisuin gave them an out, just in case; she really was affable. “Anyway, it looks like everyone’s here, so let’s get to the theater.”

“Right. Just standing around is boring, anyway.”

“Big Brother, we have plenty of time to walk and talk. Let’s take our time getting there.”

After she looked at her watch and made that proposal, as if it were the most

normal thing in the world, Shizuku grabbed Ikki's arm and held it against her like she did when she was a child.

"Whoa," Ikki gasped, taken by surprise.

He didn't want to get too close to Shizuku, considering how she looked. He tried telling her to let go, as his renewed determination was already beginning to crack, but she wouldn't give in.

"Teehee. It's been so long since we've walked together like this, Big Brother."

"Oh, uh, yeah. You're... right."

He couldn't say anything to Shizuku, who was smiling as if lost in her memories. If she wanted to be close to him because she loved him as a brother, it would look bad if he didn't return the favor. That would be playing right into her hands, of course.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" Stella, unable to just stand back and watch, jumped in to separate them.

"This is just normal brother-sister contact, is it not? We used to always walk together like this, right, Big Brother?"

"Um, well... Ahaha, I guess."

"Th-Then I will, too!"

"I thought you might say that, so I came prepared. Here, I brought a collar so you can enjoy affection worthy of a servant."

"Well, aren't you thoughtful? How jealous can you be?!"

"Walking side-by-side with one's master seems very inappropriate for a servant, don't you think? Or are you trying to be as nasty as you can, unsatisfied with merely being rude to me? I suppose I've seen the worst the Vermillion royal family has to offer."

"Ngh...!"

"Oh, on second thought, don't worry. You can hold his hand if you'd like, Stella. Fortunately for us, he has two of them. That said, holding hands with someone of the opposite sex who isn't even a family member? That carries a

certain, special connotation. Don't tell me you—?!"

"N-No, that's not it! I'm just his servant because I lost to him; that's all there is to us!" Stella, captive to her pride, could only refuse the truth.

"Then I don't see any reason for you to hold his hand."

Finished forcing Stella to dance for her, Shizuku dealt the finishing blow.

"Grr..."

"Shall we go, Big Brother?"

"S-Sure."

"So, you're 'not into her anymore', huh? Stupid, incestuous lecher."

Ikki, accompanying Shizuku, heard Stella practically putting a curse on him from behind. Could he really make it through the day in one piece with those two around?

Thus, the day began with intense discomfort.



Near Hagun Academy, there was a large-scale shopping mall chain that had been expanding throughout Japan. On its fourth floor was Cinema Land, the gang's destination, but they didn't head there immediately.

Per Shizuku's schedule, they had some time before the movie began. Even if they decided to go early, the fourth floor only hosted the theater and shops that carried movie-related goods. Instead, on Alice's recommendation, they decided to kill some time at the first-floor food court.

"Mm! This crêpe is delicious!" Stella couldn't help but express her love for what she'd ordered.

"Crêpes are ridiculously expensive, so I had been avoiding them. But now I see why people like them." Shizuku seemed to agree, taking small bites from her food.

"Right?" Alice added. "The crêpes here have such rich whipped cream, don't they? The ice cream is just sad, though. If you want the good stuff, you'll have to go to 13 Ice Creams on the third floor."

“You know a lot about this place,” Stella commented, impressed.

“I’ve sampled everything here. Us women were born for sweets, after all.”

“Alice is all about candy and clothes, really.” Shizuku said. “Maybe you should ask her for some advice, Stella.”

“I don’t know of any shops that sell clothes fit for a princess, but I’m willing to introduce you to any and every sweets shop. Anything I can interest you in today?”

“Really?! Wow, how exciting! What other shops do you know about?”

“Well, there’s a coffee shop that serves tiramisu, a...”

Ikki decided to watch from the sidelines as the girls talked about sweets while already eating sweets. He didn’t have much to say when it came to girl talk, and since he wasn’t all that interested in sweets, he really had nothing to add to the conversation.

But wow, Alice already fits in like she’s been a part of the gang forever.

Earlier, Stella had been just as surprised as Ikki, but she didn’t seem to care about Alice’s gender anymore. She seemed to be a lot more comfortable with her than with male classmates, too. Maybe unexpected big sister-types were popular among girls. Alice was good-looking to begin with, though, so girls would probably flock to her either way.

Ikki continued to sip his coffee from the outskirts until he noticed there was some whipped cream on Shizuku’s face.

Jeez. It would be a shame if it ruined her makeup.

Seeing her with makeup on had him flustered, but the whipped cream on her face calmed him down somewhat. It reminded him yet again of the little girl he used to know. He was thankful for the convenient reminder. *But she did get all dressed up for this, after all.*

“Hey, Shizuku. Look over here.”

“Yes? What is it, Big Brother?” When she turned to face him, he reached over to her cheek and wiped the whipped cream from the edge of her lip.

“This was stuck on your face. Wouldn’t want to get anything on your pretty dress, right?” He then licked the whipped cream right off of his finger

“Aaah!” Shizuku’s entire face instantly went beet red, and in her panic, she hid behind Alice. That had always been a habit of hers: whenever she was embarrassed, she hid behind things.

“My, my. You sure can dish it out, but you can’t take it, can you, Shizuku?”

“Sh-Shut up, Alice! He just took me by surprise, that’s all!”

Shizuku’s excuse made Ikki smile. “It’s not even that embarrassing to get a bit of whipped cream stuck on your face,” he told her.

“You and I both know that’s not the issue,” Alice interjected. “You’re quite the trickster, though, ‘Big Brother’.”

“What do you mean?”

“Heehee. That’s not something I should be talking about.”

Ikki tilted his head in confusion as Alice evaded the question entirely.

“Ahem. *Ahem.*” Stella was audibly clearing her throat next to him.

“Stella? Are you sick—”

Turning to face her, he was greeted with whipped cream covering her entire face. She looked like some sort of Santa Claus-esque abomination.

“What’s wrong, Ikki? Something on my face?”

“How does that even happen without you noticing?!”

“I-If there is, you should help me out like you did with Shizuku, right?”

“I don’t think my finger will be enough for this one. I’ll go find some napkins, so just sit tight.”

“Ah! Wait!” Stella was helpless to watch as Ikki walked away.

“Excuse me, Stella, but are you perhaps a bit slow in the head?”

“It’s adorable how poorly executed that was,” Alice said, trying to console her. “I’m rooting for you!”

“Sh-Shut up! I didn’t have any ulterior motives! My hand just slipped, okay?!”

I'm serious!"



Finished with their food, the gang continued to talk idly for a while.

"It's almost time for the movie. Let's head to the fourth floor," Shizuku reminded them, and they stood up from their seats in the first-floor food court.

"By the way, what movie are we watching?" Stella finally asked Ikki after making it to the theater.

"I don't know yet, actually."

It was his cute little sister's idea, after all. He'd hardly had the choice to refuse, so he'd simply accepted the offer without asking any questions.

"What are you *really* here for, then?"

"I should ask you that myself, Stella."

"I'm just here to watch over you two; I'm fine with whatever. So, Shizuku, what movie are we watching today?"

"It's just a normal love story," she answered.

"Tagging along was definitely a good idea," Stella muttered with a sigh.

"What's it called?"

"*I Loved My Sister*, it's rated R."

"How is that a normal love story?!"

"It's normal, pure love, as long as you ignore the incest part."

"That's not pure at all! In fact, it's totally immoral! You really are audacious, aren't you?! How can you even think it's a good idea to take your real brother to a movie like this?! How are you supposed to look at each other after that?! You're so appalling that even I'm having a hard time looking at you."

"Strange that you can call me audacious when you told the whole class that you were his servant."

"Sh-Shizuku, how about we just skip this one?" Ikki had a bit more sense than her; there was no way he could bear to watch a movie like that with his little

sister.

“Aww, why? What’s wrong with it?”

“What *isn’t* wrong with it, really?” How was he supposed to see an R-rated incest movie with his own little sister? “A-Anyway, we’re not watching it! Let’s pick a different one!”

“Hmph. If you say so, Big Brother, then I have no choice. Which should we watch instead?”

Shizuku took out her student handbook and opened Cinema Land’s homepage, asking the three of them for their opinions.

“Ooh, how about *Desert Princess Karna*?” Stella suggested. “It’s an anime movie about a princess who’s abducted by a gang of bandits, but falls in love with the young, handsome leader! It’s so dramatic—”

“Denied.”

“Why?!”

“I’m not interested in seeing an ignorant slut open her legs for some common thug.”

“It’s way better than some perverted movie about a guy sexing up his own sister!”

“Good grief. We’ll never make a decision at this rate. Since girls seem to be the issue here, let’s go with a different R-rated movie: *Men’s Paradise Lost*.”

“Nobody asked for a movie like that!”

Stella and Shizuku both shot down Alice’s offer. Maybe they weren’t completely incompatible after all.

“How selfish,” she complained. “But if that’s the case, there’s only one other choice: an action movie.”

“Are there really only four movies showing here?” Stella asked.

“It’s a small theater, after all.”

“But both boys and girls can enjoy a good action movie, so that’s nice.” Ikki seemed to be on board. “What do you two think?”

“Hmph. I’m incredibly disappointed, but if that’s what you want, Big Brother...”

“I suppose an action movie wouldn’t be too bad.”

“That settles it, then,” came Alice’s verdict. “Conveniently, a showing is about to start for this one.”

“By the way, Alice, what’s the name of the action movie?”

“*Gandhi: Emancipation from Rage*,” she said, answering Ikki’s question.

“Whoa! That sounds interesting!” All three of them were excited.

The image posted on the website was all over the place. It showed the title of the movie and a bunch of half-naked macho men with clean-shaven heads holding heavy firearms, flames raging in the background. Its slogan read, “I said forgiveness is the attribute of the strong. That was a lie.” Absolutely terrifying.

Attracted by the exaggerated chaotic nature of the movie, everyone decided they were into it. They got on the escalator in the food court on the first floor, headed up to Cinema Land on the fourth. When they arrived on the third floor, Ikki suddenly spoke.

“Sorry, everyone. I gotta go to the bathroom, so could you buy my ticket for me?”

“Oh, I think I’ll join you.” Alice walked to Ikki’s side.

“We’ll get tickets for you, then,” Shizuku replied. “Make sure you pay us back later, please.”

“You’d better be back before it starts! You don’t have much time,” Stella reminded them.

“All right, I’ll try to hurry.”

“Shizuku! I want the seat next to Ikki!” Alice teased.

“We’ll have all three tickets when you get back, Big Brother,” she said coldly.

“Sorry, sorry! I was kidding! I swear!”

With that, Stella and Shizuku continued onward as Ikki and Alice headed to the third-floor men’s room.

“Heehee! I guess we’re finally alone, then?”

“I don’t see why you’re asking me.”

“Aww. Wasn’t that the whole point of coming to the bathroom?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Heehee. I know, I know, I was kidding. Thanks for playing along,” Alice said sarcastically.

“Sorry. I still don’t know you that well, so it’s hard to gauge how I should talk to you,” Ikki answered honestly.

“Just think of me as a normal girl.”

That’s probably not happening, he thought.

“You can relax,” she assured him. “I don’t put my hands on heteros.”

“‘H-Heteros’?”

“I have no sexual interest in you whatsoever.”

“O-Oh, all right. That works for me, thank you.”

“But I did want a chance to talk to you in private. Shizuku has told me a lot about you, so I wondered what kind of person you were.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

“Oh? Ooh! Now this is an unexpected development. Then how about we go see *Men’s Paradise Lost* together?!”

“That’s not what I meant! Shizuku’s just so shy around new people, you know? She doesn’t really open up easily, especially to men, so I was curious about what you were like.”

“But I’m a woman.”

“...”

“Don’t look at me like that. Is it a problem?”

“Not really, I guess.”

Seriously? Is this real?

Ikki pondered that question, but he didn't know. He couldn't understand the inner workings of a person he'd never met before. Deciding he shouldn't pry into things he didn't understand, he changed the subject.

"So, you said Shizuku told you about me. What exactly did she say?"

"That's a secret between girls." Alice put a long, slender finger to her lips and zipped them.

Maybe it would be rude to point out what's between her legs, Ikki decided.

"But the Ikki she spoke of was so wonderful and strong," Alice continued, "and from what I've seen, that describes you quite well. But that makes me even more curious about something; do you mind if I ask a question?"

"What is it?"

"Did your family really stop you from fighting for all of last year?"

"Y-Yeah. They had the school bar me from any and all fighting-related activities. Classes, mock battles, you name it." Ikki was shocked that Shizuku had explained so much to her. His conflict with the rest of the Kurogane family didn't seem like something to talk about with strangers, considering he was the shame of his family and all. At least, it wasn't information that would be shared by Shizuku unless she trusted someone deeply. "But this year, I'm fine. The new director changed the policy for me."

"That was pure luck though, right? If there wasn't a new director, what would you have done?"

"Whatever I could, just like I did last year. When I decided to retake my first year, I didn't even know there would be a new director."

"Don't you think that's rather unproductive?"

"Not at all. You already know this, but knight schools have real, professional Mage-Knights as staff. They can more or less grasp just how strong the students are even without watching them battle, so I wanted to use that ability of theirs to prove I was strong enough for the Seven Stars Battle Festival despite the old director not letting me fight.

"If I could go there and become the Seven Stars King, which is the highest

honor for a school, they'd have to change, right? I was willing to do anything I could to get there, no matter how many years it took."

At the time, Ikki wasn't worthy enough for the school to do anything but accept the Kurogane family's demands. His only route forward, his motivation to keep fighting, was to prove his worthiness to the school. "But I'm really grateful to the new director. She opened up a new path for me, one that's much less difficult to traverse."

"Good. I'm happy for you." Alice looked down at him with genuine compassion. "But Ikki, you're too used to being hurt."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm speaking from my own experience here, so this doesn't just apply to you, but your strength comes from perseverance, from how much you can endure. In other words, the amount of pain you can tolerate determines your strength. If your heart continues to take on load after load of pain without eventually letting it go, it'll just break apart one day, and it'll be awful when it does. So before that happens, your heart cries out in pain, in anger, in frustration. 'I want someone to know my pain.' 'I want someone to understand me.' Sometimes it's a slow burn, others it's an explosion of passion, but you, Ikki, don't hear the cry of your heart anymore because it's been long buried under the burden it carries."

"I-I don't think that's right."

Alice's mournful speech had left Ikki confused. He didn't understand a word she'd said. Of course, there were times when he felt bad because he was overburdened; he wasn't the kind of person that didn't understand his own feelings. Alice, however, merely shook her head.

"Nope, you're not hearing me. At least, not right now. If you were, you wouldn't be so calm. If you were, you wouldn't be smiling like that."

Sure, my life hasn't been smooth sailing all the time, but still.

He figured she was probably just reading too much into it, so even though she said all that with such a grave tone, all he could offer in response was a bitter smile.

Well, I guess he won't listen to me, Alice finally thought, and sighed quietly. After all, she was someone he had only just met. Why would her words hold any sway over him?

Even with that in mind, she wanted to voice her thoughts, to shake Ikki's very understanding of himself. Not just because he was important to Shizuku, but also because she had taken a liking to him. Alice continued to smile encouragingly as she spoke.

"I hope you can one day meet someone who will hear the cries of your heart for you. I pray from the bottom of my heart for that day to come." She kissed the silver rosary hanging from her neck, praying for Ikki's fortune.

Ikki still didn't understand the point of it. Was he supposed to thank her? All he could muster was continued confusion at her misdirected good will. For some reason, though, her words lingered in his mind, leaving a lasting effect. It was like some sort of epiphany.

"Ah!"

Alice's expression suddenly stiffened. She wasn't gloomy like before; fear and caution colored her eyes as she surveyed her surroundings.

"Alice?"

"Ikki, come over here." She abruptly took his arm and started running.

"Huh? Wh-What?!"

"Just shut up and run!"

Not giving Ikki an option, she ran with him toward the bathroom. Did she have to go that badly? While Ikki considered the possibility, what sounded like an explosion mixed with the shattering of glass reached his ears, followed by the clamor of gunshots.



Heavy footsteps accompanied two men, wearing black battle gear and gas masks, as they charged into the men's bathroom.

"All that's left is the shitter! I'll check this one, so you can just sit tight."

“Checkin’ every room is too damn slow.”

“H-Hey!”

Not heeding his partner’s attempts to stop him, the impatient man unleashed the contents of his M4 assault rifle’s magazine, enveloping every corner of the room in his sweeping fire. When the reverberating gunfire finally ended, the door to every stall was full of holes; if anyone had been in one, they would have been killed. Fortunately, however, no blood flowed from any of the ruined stalls.

“Yep, nobody here.”

“The hell’re you doin’?! We were told to take hostages!”

“I just felt like lettin’ off some steam. Who cares? I don’t see any blood, so that means it was empty anyway. Hah-hah!”

“Don’t be surprised if Bishou kills you, buddy.” They exited the bathroom, left with only a burning smell and the marks of destruction, chuckling evilly. Once they left, Ikki and Alice peeked out of a shadow on the wall as if they were moving through water.

“Whew. Looks like they’re gone.” Confirming that their foes were nowhere to be found, Alice stepped out of the water-like shadow. In her hand, she held a dark-gray dagger. “My Darkness Hermit has some pretty neat moves, right?”

“The power to control shadows, huh? Sure is convenient.”

“It’s a shame it doesn’t always work, though. If there aren’t any obstacles to create shadows, I can’t use it.”

Ikki had thought of that, too. He thought the power seemed befitting of an assassin who fought in the shadows rather than a Blazer who fought under the sun.

“Let’s just hope the school doesn’t find out you used your Device outside of school grounds,” he told her.

“The situation called for it, so too bad for them. Besides, they won’t know as long as you don’t tell them.”

“I’m no snitch, don’t worry.”

Alice extended her empty hand toward Ikki, who was still submerged in the water-like shadow. He took her hand and let her pull him out.

“Thanks. You really helped me out there.” Ikki thanked Alice, both for protecting him and for helping him up. Then, he gathered his mind and considered the situation anew. “Who were those guys?”

“The Rebellion.”

Ikki’s eyes opened wide at her immediate response. The Rebellion was the largest criminal organization in the world, a group who believed Blazers were the chosen, the new breed of man, while everyone else was part of a lesser breed. These elitists aimed for the destruction of modern society, in which Blazers protected the powerless, all in order to create a twisted paradise in which Blazers controlled the “lesser breed” as servants.

“It’s crazy that we have an internationally-recognized terrorist organization right at our doorstep. But how did you know they were the Rebellion?”

“Long ago, I got caught up in an attack just like this one. They were wearing the same gear. Forget about that, I’m worried about Shizuku and Stella.”

“Yeah, same. But before we search for them, there’s something I have to do.”

Ikki grabbed his student handbook and connected to the emergency line. The call connected quickly, displaying a familiar face on the screen. It was Kurono Shinguuji, the director of Hagun Academy.

“I already know the situation.”

Kurono’s first statement removed the need for an explanation. The attack must have been in progress outside the mall as well.

“Thanks for leading with that. Now then, I’d like permission for myself, Ikki Kurogane, as well as Stella Vermillion, Shizuku Kurogane, and Nagi Alisuin to use our Devices off school grounds.”

“Understood. You are hereby permitted to do so.”

“That takes care of the legal stuff, eh?” Alice joked.

“Director, could you explain the situation as you understand it?” Ikki requested.

“The Rebellion is the perpetrator,” she responded. “About twenty to thirty people are equipped with firearms, in pursuit of ransoms and the mall’s assets. It’s one of their regular fundraising runs.”

“How many casualties are there?”

“A few people have sustained light injuries due to the initial chaos. For now, there are zero critically injured or dead. According to information from the company monitoring the surveillance cameras, the Rebellion has taken fifty shoppers hostage in the food court.”

“That’s where we were just eating, correct?”

“Yeah. It was that open atrium area with the staircase.” Ikki answered Alice’s question in full detail.

“That should be in range of my Shadow Walk. We can teleport there in an instant.”

“In that case, let’s hide somewhere so we can get a feel for the situation. Stella and Shizuku should be among the hostages.” Ikki couldn’t imagine that the two of them would have run away while hostages’ lives were on the line. They had to have been stifling their magic and hiding among the crowd.

“I see your point,” Kurono replied, “but remember: our priority is keeping the public safe. Don’t push this too far.”

“All right,” Ikki said with a nod. “Ready when you are.”

“Leave it to me, hon.” Alice took his outstretched hand, and their shadows became watery once again, allowing them to sink straight into the floor. Ikki held his breath as he moved through the lightless makeshift waterway, dragged along by Alice. Allowing movement from shadow to shadow, Shadow Walk’s conduit could only be controlled by the wielder of Darkness Hermit. In other words, Alice was the sole master of that space.

“We’ve made it.”

After swimming through the darkness for a moment, the two emerged from Shadow Walk behind a third-floor pillar that cast its shadow near the atrium, giving them a full view of the food court and allowing them to easily take stock

of the situation. As Kurono had mentioned, the hostages were being kept there, surrounded by ten men in black battle gear.

“Ikki, look,” Alice whispered. Their suspicion proved true; Shizuku stood amongst the hostages. “It doesn’t look like your little princess is there, though.”

“No, Stella’s there. She’s the one standing next to Shizuku, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. Everyone in the world has seen her face, so she’s in disguise.”

“Oh, right, she has been in the news, hasn’t she? Still, this doesn’t look good.”

“Yeah. The hostages are too close to the perps. If we storm the area right now, some of the hostages might die. And this isn’t all of the Rebellion fighters, either.”

“They must be moving in squads. Well, I suppose all we can do is wait for now.”

Even if all the squads reconvened, there wouldn't be enough soldiers to control all the hostages if they tried to make their escape. The Rebellion would be slow to react, and the chaos that ensued would be Ikki and Alice's chance to strike, so the pair decided to lie in wait. However, the situation quickly took an unexpected turn.

“Quit hurting my mommyyy!” Out of nowhere, an elementary-aged boy attacked one of the gun-toting Rebellion soldiers.

What the hell?! Ikki thought, though wasn’t in any position to do anything.

With a primal roar, the little boy flung his ice cream at the soldier. It left a white streak on the soldier’s pants, but otherwise dealt little damage. What it did do effectively, however, was enrage the enemy.

“You stupid braaaaat!” In his fury, the soldier kicked the boy, no taller than the man’s waist, square in the face.

“Augh!”

“Shinji!”

A woman in her late twenties—presumably his mother—let out a cry as she leaped from the ring of hostages. Her stomach was large compared to her tiny arms and legs; she must have been pregnant with the boy’s little brother or

sister. Even so, her unwieldy body moved with incredible speed as she jumped between her son and the soldier.

“Outta the way, bitch, or you’ll get some too!”

“I’m so, so sorry! He’s just a boy! Please, forgive him!”

“Whaddya think you’re doin’, idiot?!”

“That little shit got ice cream all over my nice gear! I’m gonna kill him good!”

“You’re an adult, dumbass! Don’t flip a shit over some snotty kid! How many times do I gotta tell you that you ain’t supposed to hurt the hostages?! If you make Bishou mad, he *will* kill! And when he’s pissed, guess what? He ain’t just gonna kill you; he won’t stop till he kills the whole damn squad, including me!”

“Shut up! We got this many people, so who cares if we kill one or two?!”

Ignoring his warnings, the enraged soldier pointed his rifle at the child.

“No! Please, don’t kill him!”

“Ain’t gonna work! One day, you pigs are gonna serve all of us honorary citizens in our new utopia, and we’re not gonna stand for it if you soil our clothes! He’s gonna have to atone with his life!” Mercilessly, unhesitatingly, he squeezed the trigger, followed milliseconds later by lead erupting from the barrel.

The pregnant woman draped herself over her child as if trying feebly to protect him from the coming attack, but it was pointless. The bullet would easily tear through her flesh, then bore into the child underneath her. Or so it should have, but it never even reached her. The bullet had been disintegrated by Stella’s flames.



“I should go in alone,” Shizuku said, already planning how to free the hostages.

“But they’ll figure out who I am either way,” Stella retorted.

“That’s fine. They wouldn’t try to kill someone as valuable as you.”

“Then why don’t you stay in hiding, just in case I need backup?”

Giving Shizuku those orders, Stella jumped into the line of fire and destroyed the bullet. The sudden appearance of a new threat shook the Rebellion soldiers.

“A Blazer?!”

“Dammit!”

Reflexively, they all pointed their weapons at Stella and hurled lead at her.

“Empress’ Dress!” she yelled, erasing their very existence with her fiery raiments. Every last one of the bullets sublimated before it could reach her.

“Aaaaahhhhhhhhhh!”

The hostages weren’t as calm as she was, however; the intense gunfire had made them all panic. M4 assault rifles had small frames and short barrels, emphasizing mobility at the cost of accuracy. If they weren’t careful, some of the hostages could be hit. Stella had to act.

“CALM DOOOOOWN!”

Her command was louder than even the endless gunfire, with enough authority in her voice to stop even the men of the Rebellion in their tracks. In response to that command and the realization that a Blazer was present, the once-relentless soldiers trembled in place. “I’m not here to fight you thugs, so just calm down and listen to me.”

At least everyone stopped panicking, she thought with a sigh. In Japan, she may have just been an exchange student, but Stella was still a princess of the Vermillion Empire. She knew plenty of things about the Rebellion, the largest international crime syndicate in the world.

One such thing was how their units were organized. The general public believed that the Rebellion was a Blazer organization, but it actually consisted mostly of non-Blazer Followers who approved of the group’s proposed new world order. Blazers, much less plentiful than Followers, were referred to as Apostles. Standard Rebellion units consisted of one Apostle leading multiple Followers.

Given the circumstances, everyone present must have been a mere Follower. It was very likely that their Apostle was acting separately with his own squad.

A group this size should only have one Apostle, Stella thought. I didn't want to make any bold moves until he showed up, but...

She'd lost the element of surprise, but the situation demanded it; there was no other choice. After rationally considering the problem, she glared sharply at the soldiers and declared, "As the representative of these hostages, I'll be negotiating with your leader."

"Wh-What's this broad on about? What gives you the right?!"

The soldiers didn't seem to know who she was. Stella finally removed the wide-brimmed hat she had "borrowed" amidst the chaos.

"My name is—"

"Oh me, oh my. Look who found her way into this mess." Stella was interrupted before she could finish introducing herself. When she turned to look in the direction of the voice, she saw a tattooed man surrounded by ten fully-armed soldiers. His tattoos scrunched up as he grinned at her. "You're the second princess of the Vermillion Empire! Heeheehee!"

"A black coat embroidered with gold... That's what the Rebellion's Apostles wear. I suppose you must be the leader of these idiots, then?"

"Heehee, smart girl. Yes, that's right. My name is Bishou, and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Princess." The man introduced himself and bowed slightly in respect. He then looked at Stella, an aggression in his eyes that the other soldiers lacked. "Hey, what are you all pissing your pants for? Are you this bad at house-sitting?"

"Eep!" one of them squealed.

"I *thought* I told you idiots to just stand and wait. I *thought* I said not to touch the hostages."

"W-We tried to stop him, sir! But Yakin don't listen to no one but his momma!"

"Yakin, are you the cause of all this?"

"N-N-No, sir, that ain't true!" he tried to defend himself. "Th-That brat got my pants dirty, so..."

“What?! That’s all it takes to get you— Nah.” Bishou appeared to be deep in thought for a moment, until, “Heeheehee.”

“B-Bishou?”

“Heh. That’s just awful, Yakin. I really feel for you.” His attitude changed abruptly as he put a hand on his underling’s shoulder. “But don’t worry, buddy. Your Apostle is here to protect all of his honorary citizen Followers.”

Bishou held a pistol at his side, pointing it at the child who was still covered by his mother.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Stella cried.

“Should be obvious, Princess. I’m gonna make this kid realize what he did was wrong. That’s an important lesson, y’know?”

“Didn’t you say you wouldn’t put your hands on the hostages?!”

“Not the well-behaved ones, sure, but this kid ain’t behaving. Well, can’t expect much else from some snot-nosed brat, right? Even if he’s a kid, a crime is a crime: the crime of hurting an honorary citizen. That one’s punishable by death, too. ‘Crime deserves punishment, for punishment brings atonement’. That’s my motto, see?”

Bishou’s finger tightened on the trigger.

“Haaaaaaah!”

Knowing that the man was going to pull the trigger no matter what she said, Stella didn’t hesitate for even a second. She promptly materialized Lævateinn and leaped toward Bishou to attack, but he just laughed silently.

Was this a trap?! she thought. Not that she cared; she wasn’t going to give him the chance to summon his own Device. He was armed with only a single M1911 Government pistol. He won’t be able to defend against Lævateinn with that puny thing!

Ready to slice his gun apart, Stella swung her weapon, but her attack was stopped by Bishou’s left index and middle fingers.

“What?!” She had no idea what was happening.

“Heeheehee, too bad. You’re as fast and strong as one would expect a rumored Rank A to be. That just makes how little you know about the world all the more disappointing.”

Stella couldn’t hide her shock at the display of inhuman strength. Her full-body attack had been stopped by two bare fingers. His arm should have been split straight down the middle, unable to stop the swing of her broadsword. Even if he could stop the blade, Dragon Breath’s aura should have burned his arm to a crisp. Despite all that, Bishou had stopped her sword as if it was nothing.

How?

Before she could find the answer, though, his right fist came crashing into her stomach.

“Gahaah...” The impact caused her knees to buckle. His strike had enough force behind it to rip through Empress’ Dress entirely, knocking all of Stella’s strength out of her.

How? Stella was barely hanging on to consciousness as she looked Bishou up and down. *He didn’t seem like that strong of a Blazer at first glance.*

“It’s... those rings...!”

She had found the mechanism behind his power: two rings, one on each middle finger, shining ominously. They appeared to be little more than decoration, but they were actually Bishou’s Device.

“My Device, Judgment Rings, is a two-for-one deal,” he boasted. “Its abilities are Crime and Punishment. The left-hand ring absorbs any threat to me as Crime, while the right-hand ring converts it to magic called Punishment, turning it back on the enemy. Heeheehee! The stronger my enemy is, the stronger I become!”

“Then that means I was hit with my own full-power attack.”

“You should learn not to jump at people like that when you don’t even know what their power is, Princess. Heehee!”

“You... made me do it.”

“Heehee, well, I am so sorry. I can’t be too picky about my strategy when I’m up against the Crimson Princess. But I am deeply impressed, Princess; instead of hiding and staying safe, someone as important as you risked your life to shield one little brat. You sure are something, aren’t you? A paragon of royalty! In reverence toward your courage, I have a proposal that’ll let you save that brat.”

“What is it?”

“It’s quite simple. Everyone knows the most basic way to atone for their mistakes: you do something bad, you apologize. That’s all. The only difference is that you’ll be apologizing in place of the brat.

“Strip yourself and kneel before me. Gahahahaha!”



“Rgh...!”

Ikki’s blood pressure shot up when he heard the demand as he watched from above. The desire to cut Bishou down where he stood spurred him forward, but he forced himself to hold back. If he jumped in, it would create even more chaos. Hostages would be hurt. He had to avoid that at all costs.

“Heehee. I won’t force you to. It’s discourteous to order a princess around, and I just can’t do that. If you don’t wanna do it, just say no. When you do, I’ll simply go back to my original plan of making this brat take responsibility.”

What a disgusting man! Ikki bit his lip so hard he nearly drew blood as his rage continued to demand he act. Bishou knew she couldn’t let someone die, yet he was going to make her choose anyway, all just to embarrass her. Of course, Ikki already knew exactly how Stella would respond.

“Fine, then.” Stella stifled the frustration in her voice as she signaled her assent, dematerializing Lævateinn. “But you’re going to promise that you will, under no circumstances, harm the hostages.”

“Of course. Bishou always keeps his promises, so fear not. As long as we get our ransom and get off scot-free, that is.”

“All right, then it’s a deal,” Stella said, reminding him as she stood up that the exchange went both ways.

Her knees were ready to give way, likely because she was still reeling from his attack, but the way her hands shivered as she slowly stripped down was definitely due to her shame and frustration.

“Ahaha! Damn, a princess is stripping for us!”

“Brilliant idea, Bishou! That’s why you’re the boss!”

“Get naked, bitch! Hahaha!”

The disgrace of baring her naked body in front of these heathens painted Stella’s face red as she removed article after article of clothing. First came her cardigan, exposing her petite shoulders. Next, her skirt slid off, revealing her enchanting legs for the crowd to see. Then, she unbuttoned her blouse, the fabric trembling as it opened up to show her navel. After all that, the only thing covering her skin was her white lace underwear.



“Whew, check out those titties! Them ain’t high school titties.”

“Hot damn!”

“Bishou, can we take pictures?!”

“Quit your yapping, you premature ejaculators. The real show is about to begin. Heeheehee!”

Forced to listen to their filthy, unbearable voices as they gawked at her body, Stella shuddered. Ikki, watching on in anger, saw something shimmer on her cheek—it was a tear. When he saw that tiny, glistening tear, he heard the *snap!* of not only his teeth breaking the skin of his lips, but also that of the rope of reason keeping him from jumping into the fray.

Stellaaa! Ikki’s mind urged him forward, but his body didn’t react. It wouldn’t move.

“Stay calm,” came a voice next to him.

“Ngh.” He let out a grunt, but his body still wouldn’t budge. It was as if he’d been bound by something.

Glancing to the side, he saw Alice’s Device, Darkness Hermit, stabbed into his shadow. Alice was using her Noble Art, an ability that prevents the target’s movement: Shadow Bind.

“You have to remain calm,” she told him. “There’s no merit in revealing yourself right now.”

“But if I don’t go now, then Stella—!”

“It’s okay. I have a plan,” she claimed, but Ikki simply looked at her in disbelief. “Shizuku is already acting, so just keep waiting.”

“She is?”

“Yes. She’s concealing her magic, but she’s setting up a water barrier to protect the hostages.”

Ikki looked down into the hall again, searching for signs of magic.

“I don’t see anything like that.”

“Well, of course not. As a Rank B knight, Shizuku’s other abilities may be inferior to Stella’s, but she’s the clear winner in terms of magic control this year. In that field, she’s definitely a Rank A.”

Ikki was shocked to hear that. Magic control was a measure of how skillfully a Blazer could handle their magic output; those with exceptional magic control could perform actions using as little as twenty to thirty percent of the magical power normal Blazers would. They could also use their magic to camouflage themselves and their spells. Shizuku Kurogane happened to be a master of that art.

“Nobody can see through camouflage created by someone as skilled as Shizuku,” Alice stated.

“Then how do you know what she’s doing?!”

She showed Ikki her student handbook, set to silent rather than being turned off, in response. On the screen was an email from Shizuku.

“Makong boumdsry. Qill givw sugmal.”

The message was full of typos. She was probably typing without looking, keeping her eyes on her surroundings instead. It got the message across, at least.

Shizukuuu! Ikki delightedly screamed his sister’s name in his mind.

“Shouha Sui ren!” she cried as if responding to his call. The barrier of water divided the captives from the Rebellion soldiers. That was the “sugmal”.



“What?!”

Only a Blazer could create a wall of water like that; there must have been someone other than Stella present. Working off that hypothesis, Bishou barked, “If you can’t behave, I’ll just have to kill you all! Soldiers, open fire on the hostages!”

On his command, Bishou’s Followers pulled the triggers on their weapons, aiming for the barrier. The hostages, panicking from the sudden wall of water and the sound of gunfire, began to curl up and scream, but the deafening

cascade stopped every bullet in its tracks. The hostages were completely unharmed, protected solely by Shizuku's Noble Art, Shouha Suiren.

If one were to fall from high up, water's incredibly high resistance to impacts would make it feel more like hitting concrete than water. A high-speed object like a rifle bullet would be crushed the moment it made contact with the water due to the opposite force being exerted on it—and that was true of regular, everyday water. With Shizuku's magical power reinforcing it, her water became like an iron shield. Lead bullets had no hope of piercing it. But Shizuku wasn't the only one who began to move.

The moment Shizuku erected Shouha Suiren, Ikki activated Ittou Shura. He leaped from the top of the staircase and carried out his assault on Bishou.

"Tch! You had even more friends waiting up above?!"

Bishou was a terrorist, however; he had plenty of experience treading the line between life and death. He reacted quickly to the surprise attack, reaching his left hand—the same hand he had stopped Lævateinn with—out toward Ikki as he swung Intetsu.

The Judgment Rings' Crime half was guided by a natural law that could nullify any attack, including Stella's earthshaking strikes. Ikki's swordplay was faster than hers, but that was the extent of it. A weaker attack such as his couldn't hope to break a law of nature. His surprise attack would fail, and his swing would be converted to a punishment to be turned back on him.

Assuming he could stop the attack, that is.

"Huh?!"

Bishou couldn't believe his eyes. A geyser of blood was erupting from his left arm. He could stop any attack that he caught with his left hand, but it was impossible to stop an attack that he couldn't see. Ikki used that to his advantage, swinging his sword with a speed that far surpassed the processing abilities of the human brain.

An invisible slash. One of Ikki Kurogane's seven original sword arts:

"Seventh Secret Sword: Raikou!"



“I’ll take the cronies. Ikki, you’d better disarm that boss monkey completely.”

Ikki did exactly as Alice commanded. His invisible slash, Raikou, had cut off Bishou’s crime-absorbing left hand, so he followed up by severing the right as well. Even if Bishou’s Device had some other hidden power, it wouldn’t be of any use to him without either of his hands.

“Gaaaah! My haaaands! Damn you!”

“Quit your yapping.”

“Ah...” Bishou’s complaints stuck in his throat when he looked at Ikki.

“I was holding back. Thinking back on what you did to Stella, maybe I should have cut off another limb or two for good measure. After all, an iPS Capsule would be more than enough to completely undo what I’ve done to you so far.”

Ikki shut Bishou up with his cold glare before turning his eyes away from the filth in front of him. No hostages seemed to be injured. Their assault was a success.

“We’ve done it.” Alice patted Ikki on the shoulder.

“Did you wrap up things on your end, Alice?”

“They were already wrapped up, actually. That girl really is amazing.”

What girl? Ikki once again tilted his head in confusion, but then spotted the girl in question out of the corner of his eye.

All of the soldiers had fallen; not one of them remained standing. There was, however, one figure still standing on the battlefield.

“Stella...”

The Crimson Princess, enveloped in a dress of flames. In one hand, she held Lævateinn, still scattering light. Even after the blow she took and the shame she was forced to endure, she was still the first to move when the going got tough. Stella had already taken down every soldier in the room, not even giving Alice the chance to join in.

Cool, calculated decision-making combined with so much excess power that

even being seriously injured didn't hinder her in the least. Alice wasn't kidding when she said Stella was amazing. There was just one problem.

"You can all leave," Stella told the hostages. "I'll report the news to everyone outside."

"Thanks," came their collective response.

She's pushing herself too hard!

"Stella!" Ikki ran over to her, hugging her as she turned to face him.

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

Stella was panicked and confused over the sudden embrace, but Ikki didn't care; he just wanted to hold her, so he hugged her tightly, hiding her bare skin with his own body. He didn't want such a kind, brave girl to feel any more shame.

"Sorry. If only I'd come to help you sooner, you wouldn't have had to go through this."

"Ikki...!"

Stella seemed to understand his feelings, surrendering herself to the embrace as she trembled. Ikki tried not to look at her face, but never loosened his hold on her.

"Big Brother," Shizuku called out to Ikki.

"Thank you, Shizuku. Your boundary was really helpful. Did you get hurt at all?"

"Of course not. I would never make such a blunder," Shizuku said, and indignantly thrust the clothes Stella had taken off toward her. "I brought your clothes. How long are you going to stand around half-naked like that?"

"Th-Thanks. I'm surprised you did that for me."

"How rude. Which one of us is the reason you're not fully naked, again? Honestly, I can't believe you just jumped out there without a second thought. Your recklessness will be your downfall one day."

"Oh..."

Stella uneasily averted her eyes from Shizuku's reproachful look.

"But I guess you're not all bad."

"Huh?"

"I wouldn't have been able to save that family. It's good to know there are people out there who are willing to risk their lives for complete strangers."

"Th-That's not such a big deal. But I would've been in big trouble without your boundary. You're really amazing."

Both Stella and Shizuku shifted their eyes uncomfortably, clearly embarrassed by complimenting and being complimented by someone they saw as an enemy. But at the very least, they had found some common ground.

I hope they can be good friends after this.

"Oh, right," Ikki blurted out. "You can heal, can't you, Shizuku?"

"Of course I can. Are you hurt at all, Big Brother?"

"Not me. Him." Ikki pointed at Bishou, who was losing an incredible amount of blood. Healing a human—a being made primarily of water—required magic that could only be used by high-level water mages. "Don't put his hands back on, though. Just stop the blood loss. We don't want him getting any big ideas."

"Very well. I can't have you being a murderer, Big Brother."

"He should be down for the count, but be carefu—"

"Don't moooove!"

"Huh?!"



A yell, almost like a muffled shriek, had somehow come from within the group of hostages. When Ikki and the others turned to face the source of the commotion, they saw a young man in a red t-shirt holding a gun to a middle-aged woman's temple.

"H-Heeeelp!"

"Don't move, you shits! If you do, I'll blow this hag's brains out!"

“What?! Was he hidden amongst the hostages?!”

“Heehee. Gahahaha! You idiots weren’t the only ones pretending to be hostages!”

“Bishou...”

The terrorist’s tattooed face erupted into laughter, even as blood continued to spurt from his severed limbs. He was probably thinking about how he would deal with Ikki’s group.

“Hey, little goth runt!”

“‘R-Runt’?! ”

“Yeah, you. I hear you can heal people. Get over here and fix my arms! It’s too late to say you can’t do it. Heeheehee.”

The middle-aged woman continued shrieking through his laughter, likely in fear of the gun being pressed against her head.

Dammit!

Ikki clenched his teeth. Ittou Shura was still active, but with the barrel pressed so firmly against her temple, Ikki couldn’t risk an accidental discharge.

“Get your ass over here already!”

“Big Brother...”

“We have no choice. Do as he says and—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

He heard a man’s voice, seeming to speak directly into his mind, followed by the whistle of countless rays of light as they flew past him in a straight, horizontal line. They were magic arrows, reflecting sky blue light.

“Aaargh!”

“Gahhh!”

The magic arrows pierced both Bishou and the “hostage” multiple times, disarming them for good.

“Huh?! What in the world?” Stella was shaken by the sudden occurrence.

That skill... Ikki recognized both the skill and the voice.

“Heheh. Sorry to steal your thunder, but it looked like you really did end up needing some help.”

The air in front of Ikki began to glow, then collapsed as if being peeled away. Amidst that phenomenon appeared a slender boy who looked to be the same age as them. He wielded a Device that took the form of a bow.

“Where did you come from? I didn’t feel your presence until just now.”

Alice had been scanning the area for signs of other Blazers even before the fight with Bishou, but she never sensed so much as a shred of his presence. That was only natural; it was his special ability, after all.

Ikki, however, was already well aware of the boy’s abilities, as he was one of Ikki’s former classmates.

“It’s been a while, Kirihara.”

Shizuya Kirihara was at the top of the class the year prior. He was even one of the representatives at the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“It certainly has, Ikki Kurogane.” The reunion with his classmate made Kirihara grin, and he tossed Ikki a scornful glance from between his narrowed eyelids. “I thought you’d left Hagun.”

Stella and Shizuku noticed his gaze and looked at him in disgust, but they couldn’t raise their voices at someone who had cleaned up their mess.

“Kirihara! We were sooo scared!”

Seven girls ran out from amongst the hostages, charging past Ikki and toward Kirihara. They were all his girlfriends, who had come with him to hang out at the mall.

“Your worthless underclassmen put you through so much. But don’t worry, you’re all okay now.”

“Yep! We knew you’d save us, Kirihara.”

“Aww, Kirihara~! You’re so cool and collected! Knights like you are just so strong.”

He was surrounded by his adoring girlfriends, who continued to fawn over him.

“I don’t like him,” Stella grumbled.

“This is the first time we’ve ever agreed on something,” Shizuku replied.

After Kiriara cleaned up the situation, Alice contacted the police. Before long, they charged into the food court and began restraining the Rebellion soldiers while escorting the hostages out. Thus, the group’s holiday brawl came to a momentary close.

Ikki Kurogane’s body released all of its tension at once and lurched forward. It was the fatigue from Ittou Shura.

“Big Brother!”

“Ikki! Are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. Let me rest a bit and I should be able to walk.”

“Let’s all sit down for a while.”

Alice sat Ikki down on a bench in the food court before someone spoke to the group. It was the policeman in charge of the scene.

“Heeey! You must be the student knights who saved everyone, right? I have to write the report for this incident; would you be willing to help out?”

“My, you have bad timing. We’d prefer to let Ikki rest for a bit,” Alice said before turning to Kiriara and his crowd of girlfriends. “You’re the one who cleaned up our mess, so why don’t you deal with all the boring paperwork?”

Kiriara clearly wasn’t interested in doing so. Instead, he rejected the offer outright and started talking with his harem about where they should all go to hang out next.

“Don’t worry about it, Alice. If they let me rest in the police car, that should be good enough.”

“Don’t go pushing yourself, Ikki.”

“I’m fine. Besides, it’s not like I got hurt.” Ikki forced himself to stand despite his obvious fatigue. He turned toward Kiriara and bowed ever so slightly.

“Thanks a ton, Kiri-hara. You really helped us out.”

“I don’t need your thanks. It’s the duty of the strong to protect the weak, after all.”

Stella and Shizuku were livid at his pompous attitude. They decided that letting Ikki rest for a while was more important than snapping at a man like him, however, so Stella just helped Ikki balance on her shoulder and began to walk him to the police car.

“Really though, Kurogane,” Kiri-hara piped up from behind them, “are you still trying to be a knight with that lame power of yours?”

“Would you just shut up already?!” Stella shouted back, no longer able to ignore the venom in his words.

“It’s okay, Stella.”

“It’s not! How am I supposed to stand here and watch while he says whatever he wants?!” Ignoring Ikki’s attempts to stop her, Stella glared daggers at Kiri-hara and thrust a finger at him. “You talk a lot of crap, but Ikki is ten times stronger than you’ll ever be! I can attest to his strength myself! Do you really think you can hold a candle to him?!”

At the end of the day, Stella was bluffing. She didn’t know how strong Kiri-hara really was; she had no idea of the ocean that separated him from Ikki. In Kiri-hara’s eyes, however, it was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

“Hahah... Ahahaha! Hahahaha!”

“Wh-What’s so funny?!”

“All of this is just hilarious. I don’t know how you expect me not to laugh! You think Worst One here, the Failed Knight, is stronger than me?! Hahahah! Too funny! You’ve really got her head over heels for you, huh, Kurogane? You should be more honest with her. Go on. Tell her about the time you turned tail and ran because you were so afraid of the ass-kicking I was going to give you.”

“Huh?”

Shocked to hear that Ikki had run away from a fight, Stella turned to face him; she couldn’t believe it. Still, Ikki didn’t deny it. He just stood there in silence,

staring at Kirihara. She couldn't tell what he was thinking or feeling, but the idea of him running away from a fight was unthinkable to her.

"You're lying!" she shouted, glaring at him once more. "Ikki would never do something like that!"

"Heheh. Oh, Vermillion, you really do believe he's stronger than I am."

"Of course he is! Ikki is the only one who's ever beaten me in battle!"

"Then why don't we have ourselves a little wager?"

"What wager?"

"Are your words truth or lies? Plans to find out are already in motion."

Kirihara shifted his gaze from Stella to Ikki for a moment. "Kurogane, you must have turned off your student handbook. Turn it on."

Ikki turned on the electronic student handbook as he was told. As soon as it started up, it displayed an email. The sender: the Selection Battle Committee.

"Ikki Kurogane, for your first selection battle, your opponent will be Shizuya Kirihara of class 2-3."

"Huh?!"

"Yes, your enemy is me. A former representative at the Seven Stars Battle Festival, *the* Shizuya Kirihara, known to some as 'The Hunter'. We've already been scheduled to do battle, so if I lose, I'll do as Vermillion suggested and acknowledge your strength. But when I win, she has to become one of my girlfriends."

"Don't be stupid, Kirihara!"

Ikki objected to the deal, but Stella had other plans.

"Very well. I accept your wager."

"Stella?! Cut it out; there's no point in doing this! I don't even want him to apologize to me!"

"You might not, but I do. I won't stand by and watch the knight who beat me be called weak. Do you know how that'll make me look?!"

Though Ikki tried to stop her, Stella wouldn't budge. It wasn't in her nature to

budge in such a situation. Thus, the wager was sealed.

“That settles it. Heheh. I expected a boring win out of this, but now I’m feeling a bit competitive. All right, Kurogane, I’ll see you on the day of the big fight. I think you already know this, but if you’re gonna try to fight me with your lame powers, you’d better be ready for what’s coming to you. The selection battles are the real deal, and you’re really gonna die if you aren’t careful out there. Hahaha!”

With an obnoxious laugh that showed assuredness of his victory, Kiri-hara walked away, taking his harem with him. His haughty attitude certainly didn’t leave a good impression on Stella, Shizuku, or Alice.

“Wow. He has a pretty face, but he’s as ugly as sin on the inside.”

“I don’t like him.”

“Hmph. Ikki can easily beat someone like him. After all, he could beat me. Right, Ikki?”

“I dunno. He’s the worst possible person for me to be matched up against.”

“Ikki?”

Unsurprisingly, the enthusiastic affirmation Stella had hoped for never came. Unlike her, Ikki knew the terror of Kiri-hara’s Noble Art. He couldn’t make any promises.

The coming battle was going to be difficult; Ikki could be sure of that. It was the beginning of the selection battles for the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Stella’s, Shizuku’s, and Alice’s first battles were all scheduled for Monday—the next day—while Ikki’s battle with Kiri-hara would be the morning after that. It was to be Ikki’s first official match; unlike all of his previous mock battles, it would be a real battle with real consequences.

His first fight was approaching before his very eyes.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

STELLA VERMILLION

■PROFILE

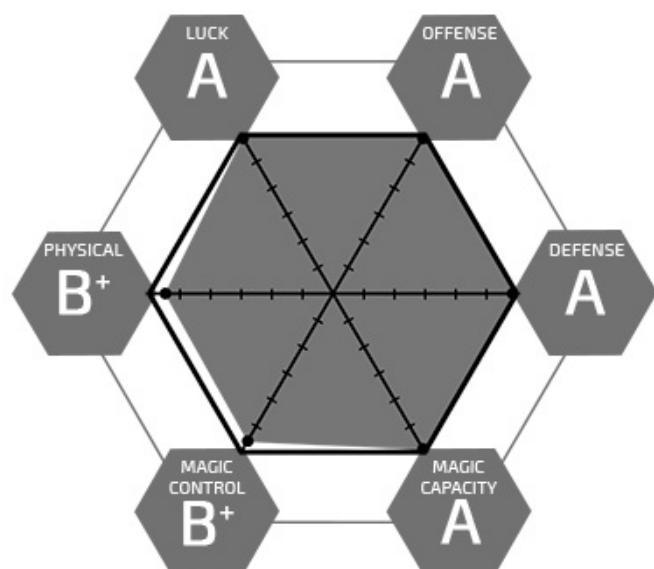
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,
CLASS 1-1

BLAZER RANK: A

NOBLE ART: DRAGON BREATH

NICKNAME: CRIMSON PRINCESS

SUMMARY: A TOMBOYISH PRINCESS
WHO CAME TO JAPAN IN SEARCH OF
WORTHY FOES.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

The rumors about her were no joke; she's a jack-of-all-trades with high stats in every field. Her magic capacity is especially amazing, putting her among the ranks of even the very best Mage-Knights! And! Aaand! I've heard from Stella herself that her magic recovery is off the charts. From the very moment she uses her magic, it's already recovering at breakneck speed! Super scary.



Chapter 4

First Fight

It was Monday, the day after the Rebellion incident. Hagun Academy's selection battles—the war to decide Hagun's six representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival—had finally begun.

"It finally begins! Here's the lowdown on one very special contender. She's a new student, but she's already Rank B! The blood of the great hero Ryouma Kurogane flows through her! That's right, it's Shizuku Kurogane's first selection battle!"

Hagun's broadcasting club was met with cheers from everyone who had come to scout the second-best new student.

"And you may know her opponent from last year's inter-school match against Donrou Academy! He's the Rank C knight who defeated Yamamichiyuki Azuchi, one of Donrou's Seven Stars reps. It's the third-year student, Shigenobu Suga! Will this experienced near-graduate be the one to baptize his young foe, or will a shining superstar of the new generation kick that old fart out of the ring?! And now, the buzzer will—has *already* rung?! Suga's already on the move!"

Suga wielded twin swords as his Device. They crackled, ready to unleash lightning.

"Tough luck, super rookie! My lightning is the perfect counter for your water! Curse your bad luck while you watch the Seven Stars from the sidelines! Hakuraijin!"

With a smug expression for having the elemental advantage, Suga slashed in Shizuku's direction, creating a lightning bolt.

"Shouha Suiren!" Shizuku, standing stock still, went to block the coming attack with her Noble Art, a barrier of water.

A conductor like water should have been useless against an electric attack, but it was quite the opposite. The lightning fizzled out, unable to pierce through the cascade.

“What?!” Suga couldn’t believe his eyes.

“His lightning had no effect! Ms. Oreki, you’re our analyst; could you explain this phenomenon for us?!”

“Gah, gah. Her water is what you’d call ultrapure!”

“‘Ultrapure’?”

“Mm, well, everyone thinks water itself conducts electricity, but that’s not quite right. It’s actually the impurities in the water, like ions and microorganisms, that act as conductors. As water gets purer, it becomes more and more of an insulator. And Shizuku’s water is the purest there is, so it’s ultrapure. Ultrapure water is a nearly perfect insulator, so electricity won’t pass through it.”

“Wow, interesting! So why don’t the other water mages just do the same thing?”

“It’s not that they don’t, it’s that they can’t. Removing all ions and impurities from water is like panning for gold in the desert. Shizuku’s magic control is so refined that she’s able to perform such an incredible feat. If an ordinary knight tried to imitate her, they would probably get really messed up in the head. Cough... That’s the power of the second-strongest new student. Ack! Blurgh!”

“Whoa! This is the third time you’ve coughed up blood today! A-Are you okay, Ms. Oreki?!”

“Oh, p-please, I’m fine. I just need a quick injection is all. Ahhh, that’s nice.”

“Ms. Oreki? Ms. Oreki?! That’s not something people say when they get shots! Are you sure you’re okay?!”

“Yes, yes... You could say I was dying for that shot.”

“Ma’am, you’re starting to sound like an addict!”

It was a bit of a tedious explanation, but essentially, electric attacks were ineffective against Shizuku.

“Damn!” Suga cursed, finally understanding his situation. “I’d better back off for now.”

“Where do you think you’re going to back off to with your legs the way they are?”

“Huh?!”

“Ooh! What’s this?! Suga’s legs have been frozen to the ground! He can’t escape!”

“Suiroudan.”

Shizuku shot a ball of water, about a foot in diameter, from Yoishigure’s tip. It struck the unmoving Suga’s face directly, surrounding his head. He raised a hand to try to pull the orb off of his face, but he only grabbed at water.

Unable to successfully grab a liquid, Suga couldn’t tear the prison off his face. He clawed desperately for air, only speeding up the emptying of his lungs.

“Blurgh.”

The last of his oxygen supply exhausted, Suga’s hands fell to his sides. Shizuku finally dispelled the prison, freeing him, and he fell to the ground in the middle of the ring.

“Shigenobu Suga is unable to battle! Shizuku Kurogane is the winner!” The referee rendered a verdict.

“This battle is oveeer! The winner is Shizuku Kurogane, a first-year student! She overcame an elemental disadvantage through sheer force, seizing her first victory!”

“It wasn’t that big a deal.”

Shizuku looked over to the audience and saw Ikki, waving his hands wildly as he cheered for her. She gave him a small wave back, then turned to look at the electronic signboard above the training field, confirming the time.

She should be finishing her battle soon too.



Meanwhile, at the seventh training field, four times as many spectators were

gathered as there were at Shizuku's fight.

That was to be expected, as the once-in-a-decade genius princess—a first-year student who was already known around the world as the Crimson Princess—and number one rookie, Stella Vermillion, was fighting her first selection battle.

“Get her, Momotani!”

“You're the king of close-range battle!”

“Show her what her upperclassmen are made of!”

Several onlookers shouted words of encouragement at her foe.

“The audience is showing incredible support for the heavy tank Momotani! He's not one of Hagun's top ten most popular students for nothing! Will we see him use his special technique to blow his enemy out of the arena today?! With his rare armor-type Device, Goliath, he's ready to unleash his legendary Heavy Charge!”

The crowd cheered as the announcer talked him up. Takeshi Momotani, the giant who stood almost six and a half feet tall and Stella's first opponent, bore the burden of their expectations:

Momotani, protected by layer upon layer of armor, crouched at his starting position. He pointed his shoulder forward, preparing to charge at his enemy, but he didn't move from that position.

“What are you doing, Momotani?! Just blow her away like usual!”

“She lost to a Rank F! She's no match for you!”

His classmates continued to call out to him, but Momotani remained still.

How am I supposed to win here?

He cowered in fear of the sea of flames before him—in fear of Stella, who wore the billowing flames like a dress.

The sea of flames surrounded her in a ring. Even standing more than ten yards away from her, the sparks that burned the air around Stella's ring of fire were heating up Momotani's armor. He finally had a true understanding the

extraordinary power Stella wielded.

Fighting her would be like throwing myself into a volcano, Momotani began to think.

“They don’t understand, but you seem to.” Stella spoke to Momotani, both of them still at their starting positions. “This is a real fight. There’s no Phantom Form pain here; this is real pain. You’d better think long and hard about whether you want to come near me.”

She knew of his fear, along with the reason behind it. With that in mind, Momotani responded.

“I give up.”

“W-W-Wooow! Momotani has given up without even taking a step!”

“Ahaha! Loser! What a joke! But at least he’s not stupid!” A teacher in the analyst’s chair, wearing a red kimono, cackled tactlessly at his decision. He couldn’t tell if she was making fun of him or praising him.

“What do you mean, Ms. Saikyou?”

“He can’t beat a beast like her! If I told you to burn yourself to death right now, would *you* do it? Of course not! But man, he didn’t even move before he gave up! What a freakin’ loser! Ahahaha!”

“U-Um, Ms. Saikyou? Could you maybe be a little nicer?” the female announcer warned her, recoiling slightly.

“Ooh, hahahah, I’m sooo scared. I’ll just make my escape!”

Ms. Saikyou leaped out of the analyst’s seat and ran off.

“H-Hey, Ms. Saikyou! There are still matches left! God, who asked this woman to be the analyst?!”

The announcer is pretty easily flustered, Stella sighed in annoyance and exited the ring.

“And I’ve just received word that the results of the battle at the fifth training field are out! The second-place newbie, Shizuku Kurogane, has won against Shigenobu Suga!”

She learned of Shizuku's victory on the way. Not that she expected any different, especially when Shizuku was up against some nobody.

"But oh my, these new kids are tough! The best and second-best newbies have completely denied some of the school's best-known knights! Overwhelming victory! They've won their debut battles without so much as a scratch on them! There's something about these kids, I tell you! We might just win the Seven Stars this year!"



"Congratulations, Stella."

Back in their dorm room at the end of the first day of selection battles, Ikki praised Stella for her win.

"H-Hmph. I don't know why you would expect less of me."

She avoided the compliment as always, but the way her expression wavered ever so slightly made it clear that she appreciated it.

"I hear he didn't even fight you."

"Yeah. I decided to turn up the heat a bit more than usual."

"Sorry I didn't come. I wish I could have."

"I wish you had too."

"Huh? What was that?"

"N-Nothing! It's not your fault Shizuku's battle was scheduled for the same time slot. But you'd better come watch me next time!"

"Yeah! Of course. Hey, you came home pretty late for such a speedy victory."

"Well, that battle was such a letdown that I didn't even work up a sweat, so I went to the gym for a while."

"Huh. It's really cool that all of you won, though. You, Shizuku, and even Alice."

Alice's selection battle had taken place immediately after Shizuku's, at the same training field. Even if her abilities weren't specialized for battle, she really had shown off when she'd used the skill that had won her the spot as the

roommate of the second-best newbie, overwhelming her Rank E foe in under ten seconds.

“I saw her abilities in action during the incident with the Rebellion. Since she isn’t made for battle, she has to play a bit dirty. I guess you wouldn’t do well against a trickster like her, huh?”

“I will always win, no matter who my opponent is. You worry about others too much, Ikki.”

“Ahaha. Maybe.”

Ikki chuckled and looked back at the TV, which showed a certain student knight’s match. It was none other than one of Shizuya Kirihara’s matches.

“You’re watching this video again? You’ve been at this since yesterday.”

“Yeah. I want to study his technique until I know it like the back of my hand.”

The video was borrowed from the head of the newspaper club, Kagami Kusakabe. More specifically, it was footage of his first-round match at the Seven Stars.

It was a strange match—Kirihara walked clockwise around his enemy, shooting at him repeatedly while he just stood there. His opponent couldn’t do anything; he looked around, dumbfounded, as he took magic arrow after magic arrow. Eventually, he bled out and fell. Even when Kirihara stood right in front of him, he didn’t react. He was completely at Kirihara’s mercy.

The reason was simple: Kirihara’s opponent couldn’t see him.

“It’s all because of his perfect stealth technique, Area Invisible. It suppresses all evidence of his existence—he’s invisible to the naked eye, and even his magical power and scent become imperceptible. That’s the special ability of his Device, Oborozuki. Man, what an annoying power.”

“I just can’t stand the way this guy fights.”

Stella watched the TV disdainfully. It certainly wasn’t the most honorable battle, so Ikki understood how she felt. In fact, it was more like a hunt than a battle; he was shooting fish in a barrel.

“But it makes sense to fight the way he does. He used that ability in every

fight last year, and he never got a single scratch on him. Kirihara is really strong.”

“Doesn’t that seem weird? He was in last year’s Seven Stars, right? But he’s not the Seven Stars King, so he must have lost at some point.”

“Yeah, in the second round. He withdrew.”

“Why?”

“Kirihara won’t fight an enemy that can break his Area Invisible. It may be a powerful ability, but there’s a surefire way to beat it: wide-area attacks. Kirihara refuses to ever fight an enemy that can hit everything in the arena at once. For example, Stella, I’m sure you could set the whole arena on fire.”

“Hm, so if you can hit the whole arena at once, invisibility is useless.”

“Right. If Kirihara was up against you, he would withdraw. He’s not much of a knight at this point; that’s why most people know him as ‘The Hunter’.”

“Hmph. That’s the worst nickname I’ve ever heard. He avoids fighting people he can’t crush, and when he does fight, he tortures his opponent. He’s more of a chicken than he is a man.” Just staying in a safe place wasn’t so bad—that was actually the whole point of his ability. But Stella was disgusted just watching Kirihara on the TV, as he intentionally avoided dealing the finishing blow in order to continue making his victim suffer. “But now I see why he’s the worst matchup for you.”

“Right? He may as well be my natural enemy.”

The only way to ensure victory against Area Invisible was to use a wide-area attack, but Ikki had nothing like that. He had excellent mastery of the sword, to be sure, along with a well-toned body and hand-to-hand combat skills, but he was limited to purely close-range fighting. He couldn’t hit a foe without first approaching them.

On top of that, Kirihara’s Device, Oborozuki, was a bow—a long-range weapon. Ikki would never be able to land the first hit against him. His trump card, Ittou Shura, could only be used once a day, and a single minute was too restrictive for their fight. Ikki’s Achilles’ heel was an enemy as skilled at running away as he was.

“Do you think you’ll be okay, Ikki?”

On the TV, Kirihara’s prey was being carried away on a stretcher. Concerned that such a tragedy could befall Ikki as well, Stella had her misgivings.

“Are you worried about me?”

“Why would I worry about you?!” His straightforward response had turned her cheeks bright red. “I just need you to win so that I’m not forced to become one of his girlfriends! That’s all I’m worried about! Like, yeah, being your servant is the worst, but having to be that smug ass’ girlfriend is even more the worst!”

“You’re the one who made that wager. I don’t see how you expect me to take responsibility for your blunder. Heck, I even tried to stop you.”

“Aww... I just... couldn’t stand to see him being so mean to you.”

“Huh? You just... What?”

“N-Nothing!” She huffed as she turned away.

Stella was so quiet that Ikki couldn’t hear her. However, he did at least understand that she wanted him to win.

“I don’t care that much about an apology, but I don’t want people looking down on you either. Guess I’d better win tomorrow.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Yeah. I know how to beat him.”

Ikki didn’t hesitate one bit before answering. He was up against the strongest rookie knight of his generation.

Kirihara’s incredible ability helped him win enough to experience the Seven Stars Battle Festival in his first year at Hagun, but in the end, he was still a person. A person who lost in the second round, at that. To be stopped by an obstacle like Kirihara would be a shame to Ikki’s knighthood.

On top of that, the Seven Stars representatives were to be six students with the best results in battle. Ms. Oreki had mentioned “more than ten” battles before, so even rounding up to twenty, there would probably be around six

knights who won all twenty of their battles. If Ikki failed even once, he would most likely lose his chance at the Seven Stars.

There was no room for failure. If he failed, everything he'd endured along his path would go to waste.

"I'm going to win," he swore. Not against anyone in specific, but against himself. Ikki spoke with more confidence than usual.

His confidence was enough to satisfy Stella. Actually, Stella had met up with Alice, who had just finished her battle, on the way back to her dorm. Alice was worried about Ikki, assuming that he was nervous about his first official battle, but he seemed fine. There wasn't a hint of hesitation in the way he spoke or acted.

Stella knew Ikki's strength better than anyone, so she decided he was probably ready.

"Good. There's no choice but for you to win. Remember how he threw the gauntlet at you?"

"That's not how the saying goes at all."

Stella was fluent enough in Japanese, but her knowledge of honorable suicide, idioms, and other bits of the culture were all pretty lacking.

"Anyway, Ikki, how about we go get some food? I'm getting hungry."

"Sure. I'm getting tired of this video."

"Japanese people usually eat cutlet curry at times like this, right? Isn't it supposed to bring you victory or something?"

"Uh, no, I don't buy into superstitions like that. Let's just get some udon."

The two of them left their dorm and headed to the school's cafeteria. The day before the battle ended like any other.



"Sorry, Kurogane. I can't really be your friend anymore."

"Huh?!"

The sun still hadn't risen. Holding his breath and clenching his hands tight, Ikki

opened his eyes; he'd had an awful, awful dream. He relaxed his hands to find they were drenched with sweat.

Why am I dreaming about the past right now, of all times? Ikki's sorry words echoed within his mind. He hadn't slept well at all. *It's a bit early for my daily run, but...*

Deciding to do so anyway in hopes of clearing his thoughts, Ikki climbed down from the top bunk, moving carefully to avoid waking Stella. It was nearly the end of April. The mornings were still chilly, but it was a welcome temperature, cooling the sweat that covered Ikki's body.

"Why am I thinking about it so much now?"

Nobody was with him, so he didn't expect a response. The question had just flown naturally from his mouth, as he still didn't understand why he had a dream like that.

"The director watches me whenever I talk to you."

When had the rumors even started to circulate? One single student couldn't take classes on fighting. The official reason had been that he was too weak and might get hurt, but anyone who had really known the teachers could tell that it was no more than a ruse.

"Anyone who talks to Ikki gets their grades lowered."

As the rumors spread, naturally, people had started to keep their distance from him.

"Come to think of it, I think that's where it was."

Ikki looked through the hallway window and into the lush, green courtyard. Back when everyone had believed the rumors, when everyone but his roommate had shut Ikki out, an unusual voice addressed him in that courtyard. It was Shizuya Kirihara, the superstar rookie of Ikki's generation, a first-year student who had secured his place at the Seven Stars Battle Festival once before.

To be frank, Ikki had had a bad impression of him from the get-go. The other students had kept their distance from Ikki for their own safety, but Kirihara

actively went out of his way to hurt him. Though he never attacked directly, he would slander Ikki amongst his weird harem—always loud enough for Ikki to hear—and spread awful rumors throughout the class, bullying him indirectly.

Why would he do that? Ikki didn't remember doing anything to make Kirihara dislike him, but maybe that wasn't even the reason he'd done it. Put simply, there had been nobody in his corner. There seemed to have been an unspoken rule that they could do anything they wanted to hurt him and go unpunished. There had been plenty of people out there who would have loved to take advantage of that, and Kirihara had been one of them. That was probably the only reason he'd addressed Ikki.

Ikki had figured he was up to no good, and sure enough, he was.

"If you keep listening to your teachers like that, you'll never be able to show them your true power. You know that, don't you? C'mon. Fight with me, and then they'll see."

It was true that Ikki's teachers wouldn't have been able to say he was too weak if he'd beaten one of the school's Seven Stars representatives. Kirihara had made his offer, pretending to care about Ikki, but Ikki hadn't cared for the offer.

Fighting inside the school without staff permission was punished swiftly and severely. If Ikki were to come anywhere close to causing a scandal, his family and the director—who happened to be wrapped around their little finger—would have been more than happy to have him expelled. That had been Kirihara's goal.

At the time, he'd felt the presence of multiple staff members. They were all in cahoots with the director, ready to abuse Ikki. In fact, they had probably been standing right behind Kirihara. Having known as much, Ikki had refused the offer and moved to leave the courtyard.

"Don't be like that. I'm just worried about you as a classmate."

When Ikki had turned away, however, Kirihara had shot arrows into him using Oborozuki. Ikki hadn't even been armed; he hadn't summoned his Device because he knew fighting was foolish.

“I was really surprised at the time.”

Not just at Kirihara’s actions, but because nobody had even tried to stop him. Students and staff alike seemed to ignore them altogether. Ikki had never known his place in the world so intimately before then. He had never hated his solitude so much until then.

The staff had even seemed to have been waiting in anticipation for Ikki to take the bait. For the Kurogane family, the ones who had demanded he not be allowed to become a professional Mage-Knight, his expulsion would have been the single best outcome. He had been fully aware of that, so even as he took dozens of arrows, he’d never summoned Intetsu. Evasion itself could even have been considered violent behavior, so he hadn’t bothered moving.

After having being shot by so many arrows, Ikki had eventually passed out where he’d stood. But, as proven by the school’s camera footage, he’d never tried to fight back, so they weren’t able to punish him. On the other hand, the aggressor, Kirihara, had been “reprimanded”. The whole matter had been settled with a single nominal punishment, making it clear that the whole thing had been a secret deal with the director.

“The more I think about it, the more I realize that last year really sucked.”

From there, the bullying had become more violent and malicious. In the beginning, there were students that sympathized with Ikki, but one by one, they had been caught up in the wave of hatred created by Kirihara and the school staff, becoming numb to the violent displays. Eventually, even Ikki’s roommate—the one friend who’d stood with him through it all—gritted his teeth and left him behind.

Ikki wasn’t mad at him in the slightest; he only felt heartbreak. After that, he never talked to his roommate again. Ikki’s roommate never spoke to him, so he did his best to return the favor and ignore him. He was a kind person; if Ikki had tried to make conversation, he would probably have given in. Eventually, he advanced to the next grade, while Ikki flunked.

“Why did I dream about that?”

It was all over; Ikki didn’t care about it anymore. Until the dream, he didn’t even remember that it happened. So why? Was it because he talked with

Kirihara?

Well, no point in wasting brain power on something I don't know.

It didn't matter, anyway. With the old director gone, there was nobody to stand in his way. All that mattered was showing what he was made of. Nothing else.

Suddenly, a warm, golden light shone on Ikki's face, leaking through the gaps in the urban skyline. The light of dawn signaled a new day. Squinting his eyes, he took in the morning of his battle. Ikki Kurogane's ultimate trial was about to begin.



During the selection battle period, only morning classes—optional for students who had selection battles that day—were held, while the afternoons and evenings were devoted to those battles. Ikki's battle was to begin surprisingly early during that time frame, at 1:30 p.m.

Filling his stomach at lunch was a major priority, so Ikki ate with the group at the school's cafeteria, topping it off with energy gel. From there, Ikki, Stella, Shizuku, and Alice went to the fourth training field, where Ikki's battle would be held.

It was already 1:00 p.m., with the battle prior to Ikki's having just begun. He was supposed to be in the waiting room ten minutes before the battle was to begin, so he had twenty minutes free. Stella and Shizuku suggested he sit with them and watch the current battle until then.

"I guess I'll just go there early, then," he stated instead.

"Huh? You don't want to watch them fight?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather concentrate on my own fight. Later."

Ikki was already optimizing his own mindset and style to face Kirihara. He didn't want to let that go to waste by getting caught up in someone else's match.

"Big Brother, you must win this. I believe in you."

"Like I said yesterday, since you beat me, I'm not going to let you look like a

loser out there.”

“Don’t die, hon.”

Ikki nodded at their words of encouragement before heading off to the waiting room.



“Ikki Kurogane, class 1-1, right? You’re all set, so you can take your handbook back now.”

The girl working at the reception counter had held Ikki’s handbook against her terminal, completing the necessary pre-duel proceedings, then returned the book to him.

“For your first match, I’ll explain the selection battle rules. Like the Seven Stars Battle Festival, selection battles are one-on-one duels with no time limit. You’re free to forfeit at any time.

“Phantom Form will not be used in these battles, and as such, there is a very real possibility of dying in battle. Staff will be on hand to respond to any possible situation in order to prevent accidental death, of course, but we cannot guarantee any student’s safety.

“If you’re willing to accept these risks, tap ‘Yes’ on your handbook’s screen. If not, tap ‘No’, but please keep in mind that doing so will remove you from the pool of selection battle contestants.”

Ikki wasted no time in pressing the “Yes” button.

“Hah! You little boys are all about snap decisions.”

“Huh?” Ikki turned toward the source of the playful voice: a small, familiar-looking woman wearing a white kimono with a floral pattern under a bright red haori. Despite her kimono being far too big for her tiny figure and her childlike features, she wasn’t a student. “You’re Ms. Nene Saikyou, right?”



“Hm? You know my name?”

“Of course I do. Everyone in the school knows the name of Japan’s rep in last year’s Olympics, the Demon Princess of the KoK A-League.”

KoK stood for King of Knights, a fighting competition between Blazers. As the biggest sporting event in the world, its broadcast rights cost over three trillion yen. There wasn’t a single student knight who didn’t know one of the stars of the A-League, known for being the strongest active Blazer in the Asia-Pacific region. She lived a rather debauched private life as well, so Nene Saikyou was often the topic of talk shows and tabloids—not that Ikki could mention that to her face.

“But why is an active pro like you here?”

“I just *had* to meet you, of course, Ikki Kurogane.”

“Me?”

“Yeah! See, Kuu—that’s Kurono Shinguuji to you—has had her eye on you for a while. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to see why there was so much fuss over a Rank F.”

“Um, doesn’t this school forbid visitors?”

“That’s not a problem. Kuu’s been firing useless people left and right, so she’s having me help out here and there. I even have a teaching license.”

“Oh, gotcha.” Ikki knew that Kurono had been restructuring after the old director’s departure, so he got the point pretty quickly.

“And while I’m at it, this little cougar has been looking for some cubs to chow down on. Oh, but I’m not supposed to say that. Forget it.”

“I-I’ll pretend I didn’t hear it.”

“Heh. I like thoughtful boys like you. Even better when they’re brave. Every battle until the end of middle school is fought in Phantom Form, so there are a lot of brats who wet their pants when it’s time to press the button and go into a real battle.” A real battle inevitably meant bloodshed. In Ms. Saikyou’s KoK league battles, it wasn’t rare for someone to lose an entire arm or leg. An iPS Capsule could fully heal wounds like that, but the sight of a limb being severed

from someone's body was still a gruesome one. No doubt it would be enough to scare off even the boldest of new students. "And you didn't wait for even a second. Damn, kid."

"I've been ready for this ever since I decided to be a Mage-Knight."

"Sometimes, it's only human to wet yourself even when you're ready. I guess that's why Kuu is so interested in you. And now that I have the chance to get a closer look at you, you do have a pretty face. What do you say, boy?"

The distance between Ikki and Ms. Saikyou suddenly dropped from six feet to zero.

"Huh?" Ikki was shocked by her unnoticeable approach. She leaned into his chest affectionately, turned her eyes up toward him, and spoke with seduction in her voice.

"So? How about a special lesson in my room tonight?"

"What are you doing to my student?" came a threatening voice from behind Saikyou. It was Kurono Shinguuji, wearing her usual suit.

"Whoa, you scared me! C'mon, Kuu, you can't just sneak up on people like that. I could've killed you!"

"Not on your life. Besides, what do you think you're doing here? You're supposed to be doing analysis at the fourth training field."

"Aww, yeah, but that battle was so boring that I went to pick some flowers instead. On my way, I decided to check out your little fave."

"H-He's not my favorite anything!" Kurono looked a little embarrassed—a rare expression for her—as she punched Ms. Saikyou in the back of the head.

"Sorry this pervert ruined your focus, Kurogane."

"I-It's fine. I was just a little surprised."

"I'm taking her back now, so just ignore her nonsense. Now come on, you walking public indecency!"

"Okay, okay! Just stop pulling on my kimono! Do you know how much this cost meee?!" Ms. Saikyou screamed as she was pulled away.

He could have left it at that, but instead, Ikki made a final, bold statement.

“I’ll have to pass on your offer. Tonight, I’ll be busy celebrating my victory with some friends.”

“Heh! Well, if you’re busy, that’s just how it is. Damn shame. Just put on a good show for me in the battle, then! I’m the queen of watching boys fight!”

One tiny finger pointed out of her too-large sleeve as she giggled toward Ikki. Her tengu geta clogs lightly tapped against the ground as she left with Kurono.

I can’t tell how much of that was serious. She’s unreadable, Ikki thought, but he’d experienced firsthand that she was incredibly strong; someone getting so close to him so easily was a completely new experience for him. *How was she so stealthy when she leaned into me? Maybe it’s some sort of special movement method from an ancient martial art. Not that I know how to replicate it, but...*

“Oops. I should get back to focusing on the battle.”

A method to move closer to someone you’re making eye contact with, without them noticing. It was an interesting trick, but Ikki wouldn’t be able to put it into practice immediately, so he left it alone. An important fight was waiting for him, after all. Renewing his focus, he stepped into the waiting room.

The room had some lockers and sofas, along with a full-length mirror. Apart from those things, the room was empty—drab, even. But in the back of the room stood an imposing door, small as it was. Behind that door was the stage where Ikki would make his debut.

I’ve finally made it.

The first step on his long journey to become the Seven Stars King. So much had happened along the way; he had lost so many things—family, friends, time—but it was his eternal resolution that led him to the day, the moment he’d been so desperate to reach.

His battle with Kiriara was waiting just beyond that door. Would everything he’d worked so hard for be given meaning? Or would it be proven a waste? A single moment that would answer that question.

Thump.

“Huh?”

At that moment, all too abruptly, Ikki’s heart leaped.

Wh-What the...?

His field of vision began to sway. As though paints that had mixed with water, colors blurred uncomfortably. What had happened inside him? What was happening inside him? He didn’t know. He didn’t know, but his throat was horribly dry.

Water. I need water! Ikki tried to open the cap on his water bottle, but his hands moved so unsteadily and unpredictably that he dropped the bottle. The cap rolled away, and water covered both the floor and his shoes. *I should wipe that up. But with what? And why? Ugh, my throat...*

“First-year, Ikki Kurogane. Second-year, Shizuya Kirihara. It is time to begin your battle. Please enter the arena.”

“Gah?!”

The announcement snapped Ikki back to reality. When he looked at the clock, twenty minutes had already passed.

Didn’t I come early? How long have I been standing here? Am I really that nervous? Calm down. Calm down. Ikki tried to soothe himself and regain some control over his heartbeat.

He had already memorized everything about his enemy’s technique. The strength of his arrows, the angles they came from, the directions he moved in—Ikki had analyzed it all. He even knew of a way to break through Area Invisible. After running through so many simulations, he was ready to move his body to react to any possible event.

Just do what comes naturally, and it’ll all work out. Win, and it’ll all work out. Win, and you’ll be rewarded for all that you’ve endured so far. And it won’t all go to waste!

Trying desperately to soothe his raging heartbeat, Ikki opened the door to the arena.



“Our third match has ended, and now, we arrive at today’s fourth! Just look at how full the stadium is! I guess nobody wants to miss this match! Once again, it’s Tsukuyomi on play-by-play and Ms. Nene Saikyou on analysis for today’s match!

“Now, let’s introduce our most interesting contestant! At the top of his class, he made it to last year’s Seven Stars and even won his first battle in a one-sided victory against a third-year student from Bunkyo Academy! He never breaks a sweat when he wins a match. Known also as ‘The Hunter’, he has never taken a single hit in any of his official or inter-school matches! He’s a prime candidate for a repeat trip to the Seven Stars! It’s second-year Shizuya Kirihara!”

Kirihara raised his hand as the host introduced him. Shrill cries arose from the audience.

“That’s Kirihara for you,” Tsukuyomi continued. “His good looks have the girls in the audience falling for him!”

“I like wild boys a bit more,” Ms. Saikyou said.

“Nobody asked you.”

“Really?”

Likely due to her abandoning her post, Tsukuyomi treated Ms. Saikyou with complete disregard.

“And then, we have the Rank F knight who’s here to face off against him! But don’t underestimate him, now! All of you here may already know this, but he’s not just any Rank F! Ikki Kurogane defeated the Rank A Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion, in a mock battle! Is his strength the real deal, or is he really just the Worst One?! His mysterious power level will be made clear to the world today! It’s first-year Ikki Kurogane!”

With his introduction complete, Ikki greeted the audience.

So many people...

Ikki had never had so many people watch him fight. It made it even harder for him to stay calm. His body and mind seemed distant, as if he had stepped into someone else’s body. Fog seemed to gather at the edges of his consciousness,

making it difficult to think clearly.

“I didn’t think you’d actually show up.” Kiri-hara spoke to Ikki, who was still trying to make sense of his own mental state. “Especially after you ran away from that battle I so kindly offered you last time.”

“That was a different story.”

“Really now? Well, I don’t care. But now that you’re here, I guess that means you’re ready for what’s coming to you.”

“There’s no point in wasting our breath on this. Come to me, Intetsu.”

“Fair enough. The hunt begins, Oborozuki.”

After a short exchange, the two took their starting positions and materialized their respective Devices. Ikki held a black blade in his right hand, while Kiri-hara held a green bow in both of his.

“Now, our fourth battle of the day begins!”

The curtain was raised, and Kiri-hara instantly disappeared.

“He’s already at it! Area Invisible! Kiri-hara can no longer be seen with the naked eye!”

“What an annoying ability. You can’t even fight him without wide-area attacks.”

“Right. In the first round of the Seven Stars Battle Festival, Kiri-hara fought a third-year from Bunkyo Academy. His opponent was a one-hit wonder kind of guy with no wide-area attacks, so he won an easy victory. Does Kurogane have any wide-area attacks?! This may be the biggest factor in deciding the battle!”

Hunters hide within the trees, shooting their arrows from the shadows. It was nearly impossible to track such a well-hidden enemy, and with Ikki unable to stop his arrows of light, a sudden attack from his blind spot should have been able to hit him square in the back.

Should have been.

“There!”

“He knocked the arrow away! Kurogane has repelled an attack from an enemy

he can't even see!"

"That's not all, Tsukki. Watch."

As Ms. Saikyou had anticipated, Ikki hadn't just swatted away an arrow in his blind spot. He quickly swiveled 180 degrees and dashed toward what appeared to him to be an empty space, when an arrow flew from the direction he was facing. Kiriara may have been invisible, but his arrows weren't.

I can figure out his location from the direction and distance of his shots. That's Area Invisible's weakness!

By paying attention to where an arrow first had appeared, it would be possible to find the shooter's direction, and his distance could be calculated based on the force behind it. That was Ikki's strategy to defeat Area Invisible.

"Take this!"

He swung Intetsu where he expected the invisible enemy should have been, but his blade didn't seem to strike anything. Instead, a scrap of clothing appeared out of thin air.

"Whew, that was close. You've got surprisingly good concentration to be able to knock away my arrows and even find my location just from a single shot at your blind spot. Is that what they call the 'mind's eye'?"

"It's not that big a deal."

Ikki's humble voice was directed nowhere in particular; he was simply replying to the voice that had no source. But despite his modesty, he could feel confidence welling up in his heart.

It's working!

He hadn't expected his concentration to be broken before the fight, but his plan to counteract Area Invisible was still working perfectly. Ikki just had to catch Kiriara. With that resolution, he focused deeply to prepare for the next shot.

"Ooh, that's a scary look. That's not how you should look at a former classmate at all."

"Maybe not, but this is a duel."

“Heh. Does that mean you actually plan to win this battle?”

“I wouldn’t be here unless I did.”

“Heheh. Hahaha! I guess you’re right. I thought you’d have learned your place in the world after flunking last year, but it looks like there’s no cure for stupid. You haven’t changed at all. It’s honestly disgusting.” Kiri-hara’s voice was tinged with murderous intent.

Expecting him to have his second arrow ready, Ikki honed his focus in order to respond to its angle of fire and stretched his perception.

“If you’re so disgusted, then just keep shooting. Shoot, and I’ll knock every one of your arrows away.”

After taunting him, Ikki resumed concentrating on the next attack. He was ready to activate Ittou Shura the moment he perceived an arrow; he wouldn’t give Kiri-hara a chance to escape. His next attack would decide the battle.

“Heh. That’s the spirit. Yes, you are incredibly skilled with the sword; I’ll give you that much. But cheap tricks like yours only work in the world of talentless garbage. Blazers are the chosen new breed of man, and we fight with our special abilities! Do you really think a Rank F, someone only slightly better than pure trash, could ever hope to defeat my Area Invisible?”

“I’ll never know unless I try.”

“True, true. Then just try!”

A hole appeared in Ikki’s right thigh, spewing blood.

“Ah!”

He hadn’t expected that. Searing pain spread through his thigh, as if a hot iron had been pressed into the wound.

“Guah!” He let out a cry of anguish, but he was almost more surprised than hurt.

What happened?!

Ikki was supposed to be able to respond to any attack with his honed focus, so how could he have been injured so easily? He looked down at the hole in his

thigh, barely able to keep his hold on the reins of his panicked mind, to see a droplet of blood. It appeared to be suspended in midair, almost as if it was stuck to something invisible. He grabbed at it and felt a long, thin, solid object that was infused with magic.

“No way...”

Ikki’s worst nightmare had become a reality.

“Looks like you’ve guessed it! This year, my Area Invisible works on my arrows as well. Get it? Now, you won’t even know I’ve shot an arrow until it hits you!”



“This doesn’t look good,” Alice said, worriedly furrowing her brow.

“No. Big Brother had based his battle plan on using Kirihera’s arrows against him, but now the whole plan is ruined. If he can’t see the arrows coming toward him, then forget about fighting back; he can’t even defend himself.”

“Well, Kirihera is a former Seven Stars rep. His ability is crazy enough that he’s able to perfect both offense and defense.”

“That can’t be!” Stella interjected sharply.

“Stella?”

“Sure, Area Invisible is pretty much a cheat code. I’m surprised at how strong it is too, but that’s not the issue! The real issue is that Ikki is acting really weird!”

“He’s... acting weird?”

“Yeah! Why didn’t he just jump in when the battle started?! He knew the enemy would disappear, so he should have attacked when he knew Kirihera would still be in the spot he started the battle from!”

“Didn’t you learn anything from your fight with those terrorists?” Shizuku sighed in annoyance. “Leaping into battle against an enemy Blazer is suicide if you’re not prepared, and Big Brother’s style is to study the enemy. That’s how he beat you, after all.”

“No,” Stella shook her head in response. “You’re not entirely wrong; Ikki does

study the enemy, refining his method until he can win, but this guy just turns invisible! How long is he going to waste his energy fending off invisible attacks?!”

Shizuku gasped when she heard those words, having come to the same realization. He was too nervous; the pressure of trying to prepare for every single shot, coming from anywhere at any time, was too great.

Ikki was wasting too much energy. For a fight against someone like Kirihara, a battle of attrition was the worst possible plan. Instead, mowing down the enemy at the start of the battle—when his position was known—was easily the best option.

“So why...?”

Stella gritted her teeth in anger and confusion until Alice answered.

“It’s not that he didn’t do it; it’s that he couldn’t.”

“That can’t be right! Ikki’s not some idiot that can’t make such a basic assumption!”

“That’s just how nervous he is; he couldn’t even make that basic assumption.”

“No way! He wasn’t nervous at...” The last word of Stella’s sentence caught in her throat. Was he nervous, after all?

“I’m going to win.”

Come to think of it, he had seemed a little off yesterday. Ikki wasn’t the type of person to act so confident before a battle, was he? At least, he hadn’t been like that before his fight with Stella.

“C’mon. You won’t know until we try.”

Even when he was aiming for victory, he never forgot just how dangerous such fights were. Maybe his words were those of a boy who was desperately trying to forget his own failures and the pressure he faced.

“It looks like you know what I mean. But don’t blame yourself for not noticing it, Stella. After all, he didn’t even notice it himself.”

“He didn’t?”

“Ikki is so used to being hurt that he can’t hear his own heart screaming for help. But think of how much he’s had to suffer through to make it to his first official fight. Even if he seems to be acting normal, can you really call it normal at that point?”

Just how much Ikki had to suffer through?

Stella couldn’t deny it any longer. Understood by nobody, supported by nobody, Ikki spent a full year of his life being laughed at. No, perhaps even longer; he endured years of hardship because he believed his chance would eventually come.

But that chance was also a trial that would test his very being. If he lost, it would all amount to nothing. He would be forced to realize that he had wasted so much of his life. And worst of all, his current opponent was one that he could call his natural enemy.

Of course he’s nervous. The endless rows of spectators only added to the pressure. Ikki couldn’t be normal. If he seemed normal, it just meant he was holding back his emotions beyond reason. *Why didn’t I notice? I was closer to him than anyone.*

It was too late to regret it. Just as Alice had feared, Ikki’s accumulated stress was erupting all at once.

“Now, without Kiriara’s arrows as a guiding light, Ikki’s fangs won’t be able to reach The Hunter, who’s hidden in the dense forest. You two should get ready for the horror that’s to come. This isn’t a battle anymore—it’s a hunt.”



“This is awful...” Tsukuyomi said in a tense voice.

Ten minutes had passed since the start of the duel. In the arena, Ikki was barely standing, using his sword for balance. His arms and legs were covered in blood. Ever since Kiriara had made his arrows invisible, Ikki couldn’t regain the upper hand. The only reason the battle hadn’t ended was that every arrow struck an arm or a leg, intentionally missing his vital regions. Was it mercy?

Absolutely not. Everyone who saw what was happening knew the truth: The Hunter was making a mockery of his prey.

“Ms. Saikyou! There’s no point in letting this go on! You have to stop the duel, please! I can’t bear to watch this anymore!”

Tsukuyomi turned off her mic and beseeched Ms. Saikyou, who was sitting next to her, but her plea fell on deaf ears. Ms. Saikyou merely stared stone-faced at the arena, her playful mood seemingly gone. Unable to help, Tsukuyomi could only continue her play-by-play.

“Though Kurogane showed promise by deflecting Kiri-hara’s first arrow, the invisible arrows that followed have turned this battle into a one-sided affair. Kurogane hasn’t surrendered yet, though. Maybe he has some sort of plan...?”

Hah. Yeah, right, Ikki chuckled when he heard that. He had no plan. His countermeasure for Area Invisible was foiled with the second shot. *I was foolish.*

It was natural that Kiri-hara was way stronger than he was the previous year. Ikki realized that he should have just taken the match at the very start, before Kiri-hara’s stealth could help him. When he finally realized such an obvious truth, Ikki finally awoke to the fact that he was so damn nervous that he couldn’t keep his cool.

Looks like you were right after all, Alice. Maybe his nightmare had been the “cries of his heart” after all, but he just hadn’t heard them because he was too used to stifling them and acting strong. What resulted was to be expected; he couldn’t have been more pitiful. *It’s too late to regret that, I guess.*

What was he to do? What *could* he do? How could he catch the invisible Hunter?

“You’re still not giving up this late in the game? I’m not even disgusted anymore; I admire your grit.”

“If I could just up and surrender against this... I wouldn’t have repeated a year.”

“Sure. Sure, you’re right. In respect for your grit, I’ll give you a handicap. From here on out, I’ll tell you where I’ll shoot you next. See if you can dodge it that way. First, your left thigh.”

“Gah!”

“What’s wrong? You’re so slow to react. Right shoulder!”

“Ngh...!”

“Come on, at least try to dodge! Your right ear is next!”

“Argh!”

“You’re so dull, Kurogane! Where’s all that motivation from before? Get back to dodging! Left shoulder! Right thigh, right palm, calf, bowels, stomach! Liver! Kidney! Colon! Duodenum! Die, die, die! You’d better start dodging or you’ll die!”

“Graaaaah!”

With so many of his internal organs struck by arrows, Ikki fell to his knees.

“Hehehahaha! What a sickening disgrace! If only you could see your face right now, Kurogane! Come on, smile and keep trying. After all, you’ve got plenty of reasons to keep trying. Remember, your graduation is riding on this!”

“Huh?”

The crowd gasped at the sudden, ominous talk of graduation.

“H-Hey, what’s that about graduating?”

“Didn’t they say selection battles don’t affect our grades?”

“Seriously?! I only dropped out because they said it was just extra credit!”

“Oh, my apologies, everyone. I didn’t mean to mislead you all. You can relax, he’s the only one whose graduation rides on this. The Rank F knight, Ikki Kurogane, is so weak that he can’t even graduate normally! I heard the new director made an offer he couldn’t refuse: ‘Win at the Seven Stars and I’ll let you graduate’.”

He revealed the truth to everyone. The commotion in the training field ceased momentarily, until the entire crowd erupted into laughter.

“Hah... Ahaha! Hahahahahahaaaaah!”

“He can graduate if he wins at the Seven Stars? Get a load of that!”

“A Rank F could never be the Seven Stars King! The new director is one hell of

a joker!”

“Did he actually believe her?!”

“Heheh! That’s what he gets for not knowing his place!”

“This guy just got wrecked in his first round, and he thinks he can be the Seven Stars King?! Gaaahahahah!”

Ridicule flooded the fourth training field. The Seven Stars King was the absolute peak of Japanese student knights. Historically, Kings were mostly Rank B, with the rest Rank C and the very rare Rank A. A Rank F failure, so far below average that he was out of sight, couldn’t crawl his way to the top. Common sense dictated that it was a joke at best.

“You’re all wrong! Kurogane is special!”

“Yeah! We saw it ourselves! He won against five armed Blazers with his bare hands!”

“And he beat that Rank A knight, Vermillion, too! Rank A knights are rare even among the Kings, so if he could beat a Rank A, he must be strong!”

Ikki heard certain voices among the ridicule. They were his classmates.

“Dumbass,” someone from the audience retorted, “you haven’t heard? Everyone on the internet is saying that video was staged.”

“You’re the dumbasses! Why would a princess help someone stage her defeat? Use your brains for once!”

“Yeah, right. That Rank F is from the Kurogane family. They’re one of the biggest Mage-Knight families out there, and they have the riches to show for it.”

“Yep! They wanted their son to have some dignity, so they paid off that backwater Vermillion Empire to set up the whole thing. It would be all over the news if he beat the genius knight for real.”

“Ah... Yeah, that’s true.”

“Even if it wasn’t, isn’t it even more unbelievable that a Rank F could beat a Rank A? I don’t know why you guys are trying to stick up for him, but maybe you’re the ones who should be using your brains.”

The classmates who stood up for Ikki were drowned out by the interrogation from the opposite side. It wasn't long before the arena was filled with jeering.

"Trash that gets put on a pedestal by his family can't be the Seven Stars King! Don't make me laugh!"

"That trash doesn't even belong in the presence of real knights!"

"Don't bite off more than you can chew, Rank F! Stupid faker!"

"The Kurogane family staged that video to make their son look better"? That was a blatant lie. It was nothing more than bizarre fiction from an anonymous message board, set loose for the world to ponder.

Ikki's family had hurt him so much. They would never do something like that, but even if they would, it was more than just stretching the imagination to think the Vermillion family could be bought off like that. Even so, that fiction, divorced from the truth as it was, had become truth to the crowd because it was a convenient belief for them.

Knight schools were mostly comprised of Rank E and Rank D knights. They were always looking up in awe at those who existed at the top, designated as geniuses. But Rank F knights, though rare, were people that they could look down on. It was as if Rank F knights existed solely to make them feel better about themselves. They needed people inferior to themselves to call them geniuses and deify them, never to surpass them. They didn't want to face the truth—that an inferior had defeated a Rank A, someone they could never hope to defeat—so they painted a convenient fantasy as the truth, mocking the actual truth as they stomped all over it.

I can't stand them...

Ikki clenched his teeth at their words. It wasn't like he cared about their opinions or that he wanted them to accept him; he didn't care what they said. What he couldn't bear was hearing them speak poorly of Stella. He was angry that his cowardice had brought the very idea to their minds.

"Man, they're all laughing at you. But that's what you get. When you try to shoot for the stars, you're bound to get some haters." Kirihara continued to launch arrows at Ikki, who could barely stay on his knees. "Why don't you just

face facts? Even with your silly physical strengthening ability, you can't do anything against my Area Invisible. That's the basic truth. Your place in the world is decided at birth; hard work is worthless in the face of raw talent. It's honestly disgraceful for a rat like you to try to show off. Don't you agree, everyone?"

"Kirihara gets it!"

"Quit being such a disgrace! You're making Shizuya look like a bully!"

"Give up, daddy's boy!"

"You've got some balls for a complete failure! How long are you gonna keep being so disgraceful?!"

The crowd responded to Kirihara's urging, their voices as daggers stabbing into Ikki. The pain coursing through Ikki's body made him painfully aware of his powerlessness.

"Disgraceful"? Maybe they were right. He didn't have any effective strategy to defeat Area Invisible. Kirihara's sounds, scent, and even Kirihara himself were all completely hidden from Ikki, who had already lost his one chance to attack. I have no idea how to defeat an enemy like him. The only reason I'm still standing is because of sheer willpower. Whether I lose by exhausting that willpower or by surrendering, I'll lose all the same. There'll be a loss on my selection battle record either way, so rather than putting myself through any more of Kirihara's torture, I might as well—

"SHUT UUUUUUUP!"

As Ikki's heart began to lean toward weakness, a scream seemed to tear the wave of insults in half. Everyone looked in the direction of the scream.

Stella.

It had come from the Crimson Princess, her eyes burning with rage as sparks flew around her.



"Stella..."

Both Shizuku and Alice were shocked by her actions, but she didn't care. She

couldn't hold back anymore. She seemed to spit fire as she yelled at the spectators with a fiery gaze.

“Who says a Rank F can't beat a Rank A? That's just some stupid grading scale you idiots made up for yourselves! You think you can't beat talent no matter how hard you work, but that's just you justifying your own apathy! You're all free to give up for whatever stupid reasons you want, but don't you dare use them to try to deny Ikki's strength!”

That was the one thing she couldn't abide by. Ikki may have been unluckier than anyone else here, but he never gave up! He always kept fighting! He kept believing in his own self-worth despite people saying that he was worthless because he didn't believe “talent” was an insurmountable wall. And in his impossible struggle, he had finally found it: his one minute of power that could surpass any amount of talent.

Whenever Stella closed her eyes, she could still see the splendor of his soul. There had never been a moment in her life in which she thought someone else was so strong; in which she admired someone else so much. She knew just how incredible a feat that was.

“Talent is just one small part of what makes us who we are,” she continued. “But you all are clinging to talent alone, blinding yourselves to Ikki's strength! You can't even begin to understand him! Don't make fun of the knight I love just because you think you get him!”

“Stella...”

Struck by Stella's honest, heartfelt words, Ikki's head snapped up.

His expression made her heart throb in pain. It seemed so frail, ready to give way at any moment. That was to be expected, though. Just like Stella, Ikki was still at an age that could be considered childhood. No matter how brave a face he put on, no matter how he tempered his willpower, his heart wasn't made of steel. Insults wounded him, and injustice damaged his heart. That damage would continue to torture him as long as he continued to walk the path he'd chosen. Perhaps losing and being forced to give up would have been better for him in the long run, but...

“Stop looking so pitiful! You said you'd never give up on yourself, Ikki, no

matter what anyone said! I thought we could aim higher than ever together! So don't give up just because those idiots talk down to you! I know I didn't lose to a weakling! I looked up to... I came to love a knight named Ikki Kurogane, who always looked forward and took pride in himself! I want you to keep being the calm, cool man you are for me, you big dummyyyyy!"

Stella aimed for greater heights, and she wanted to make it there with Ikki. She put all of her feelings into that one scream—Ikki wasn't the only one who believed in his own worth.

Pow!

Ikki slammed his fist into his own cheek.

"Wha—?!"

The crowd was shocked at the sudden bizarre act.

"Thank you, Stella," Ikki said amidst the doubtful stares. "That was just what I needed."

Slowly, powerfully, he stood up.



On his feet once more, Ikki stared at the red-haired girl who had scolded him. A teardrop fell from her ruby eyes. He wasn't dense enough to fail to understand who she was crying for, whose heart she was mourning, but even amidst all the pain, Stella was telling him one thing: "Fight on". She accepted the difficulty and perils of his path, yet she wished for him to press on.

Nobody has ever told me that besides Ryouma.

He had thought that if he lost, everything he'd worked for would go to waste—that everything he was would be denied all at once, and he was afraid of that. But that was completely wrong. Sure, his goal of being a Mage-Knight may have been a distant one, but the time he spent working toward that goal wouldn't go to waste.

I've found a girl who accepts my way of living!

When he realized that fact, he felt his body and soul intertwine, clearing up all his fear and nervousness at once. His wounds and his blood loss may have had

him on the brink of death, but he could still move.

Ikki was about to reach his peak. It was too early for him to give up. Far too early. There were still things he could do, things that only Ikki Kurogane could do, so he was ready to push himself forward until the end.

No matter how badly he was beaten, those wounds would heal he could and try again. The wound of running away, however, was a knight's shame, one that would last a lifetime.

“Aaarghhhhh!” Ikki let out a battle cry.

Every muscle, every drop of blood, every single cell in Ikki Kurogane's body scraped up all of the magic within him. He was enveloped in blue flames, unleashing the light of his once-a-day Noble Art.

“I'll use my greatest weakness to take hold of your greatest strength. Get ready to lose, Kirihara!” Ikki declared, resolving himself to end their battle once and for all.



“Ooh, what’s this?! We thought Ikki Kurogane was set to lose, but now he’s made a bold challenge! It’s the Noble Art he used to defeat the Rank A knight Stella Vermillion, Ittou Shuraa! This big skill has a big drawback: he can only use it once a day! If he’s using it now, does that mean he’s figured out how to break through Area Invisible?!”

The host’s tone changed as the tables began to turn on the one-sided battle. Even Tsukuyomi must have been fed up with Kiri-hara’s appalling style. Her words implied that she wanted Ikki to turn the tables.

Unfortunately, Ikki hadn’t actually figured out how to break through it like she wanted. He just couldn’t; Area Invisible was probably one of the strongest anti-personnel Noble Arts out there. The Failed Knight couldn’t break through it on his own, and Kiri-hara was well aware of that fact.

“So, you think you can catch The Hunter, Worst One? I bet you can’t. Don’t make promises you can’t keep!”

He was right, too. To attempt the impossible would be a mistake on Ikki’s part. Doing so would make things even harder for him. Since the very beginning, there was only one thing Ikki Kurogane could do.

“Feel free to stop this pointless struggle. I, for one, am tired of watching your crude fighting. Let’s bring this little charade to an end soon. Oh, that’s right, I said I’d tell you where I’m aiming, didn’t I? Okay. Next up…” Kiri-hara was ready to kill. The arrow nocked in his bow would likely be the final blow, the end of their fight. “Your tiny little brain! If you don’t dodge it, you’ll die a failure!”

He fired off his invisible killing intent. The arrow, liable to actually end Ikki’s life, was flying straight toward him, but it didn’t matter anymore. To try to see the invisible was a pointless, impossible endeavor. Instead, he had to view the visible, listen to the audible.

Remember...

The sequence of his shots—their directions.

Remember.

The depth of the wounds—the angles.

Remember!

The sound of Kiri-hara's voice when he taunted.

Every bit of their duel was contained within those elements.

Read the enemy's traditions from their form; extrapolate their methods from their sequences and directions; learn their knowledge from their swordplay; calculate their location from the depth and angle of your wounds; steal the principles that define them by reading their techniques; expose their train of thought from their words and their tone of voice.

Ikki would take it all, along with the tendencies, personality, skills, and ideas that he had studied so carefully. He would combine it, analyze it, and draw conclusions from it until he had full control over Shizuya Kiri-hara. It wasn't impossible. It wasn't even difficult, because that was how Ikki Kurogane had always fought.

Oborozuki's arrow approached Ikki, but instead of his head, it was aimed at his heart. The cool, calculated Hunter had set a trap with his final shot. He truly believed his enemy was hopeless, but he wanted to be sure, just in case the unthinkable happened. Not only was his attack invisible, but it was also a feint—it couldn't possibly be avoided. Following The Hunter's plan to the letter, his invisible murder weapon barreled straight toward Ikki's heart.

"Huh?" came a dumbfounded voice from Kiri-hara. He couldn't have imagined the mystery that had unfolded before his eyes; it was too far-fetched. His sure-kill attack couldn't be avoided, couldn't be survived, but just before it reached Ikki's heart, he had caught it in his left hand, stopping it entirely. "H-How...?"

How was that possible? How could the impossible have possibly been happening? The Hunter was astonished; it was simply beyond his comprehension.

"Figures. Someone like you *would* lie at the last second," Ikki muttered, covered in blood.

"What... are you?!"

As though insects were crawling along his spine, Kiri-hara felt a shudder creep down his back, for Ikki's eyes had shot through the invisible Hunter without so

much as moving.

“I-It can’t be...”

His body broke into a cold sweat as he felt such intense unease for the first time in his life. Chills spread throughout his arms and legs as they trembled uncontrollably.

“I’ve caught you,” the blood-soaked knight declared from within his swaying field of vision, “and I’m not letting you get away.”



“Amaaaziiiiing! Kurogane caught an invisible arrow mid-flight! How did he do it?! I can’t even see Kirihara from my seat up here! His Area Invisible is still in full effect, but the announcers’ seats have camera feeds from all over the area! I may not be able to see Kirihara himself, but I can definitely see that Kurogane has stopped the arrow! Perhaps Kurogane can really see him, too?!”

“Hah! Ahahahah! For real?! He really did it!” The analyst, Ms. Saikyou, started clapping and laughing.

“Ms. Saikyou? Do you know what he’s doing?”

“Heheheh! Yeah, I do. As you can see, Area Invisible is basically useless now.”

Kirihara gritted his teeth when he heard that.

“D-Don’t be stupid! My Area Invisible can’t be seen through! Especially not by Rank F garbage like him!”

“Haha! Yeah, you’re right. I agree, in fact. You can be confident in the fact that Area Invisible is one of the strongest anti-personnel Noble Arts out there, but he didn’t see through Area Invisible—he saw through The Hunter himself.”

“What are you even talking about—”

“You’re pretty stupid, huh, Kirihara? Didn’t you see little Kurogane’s fight with the princess? He stole her Imperial Sword Style just by watching her. But you can’t steal someone’s style just by imitating it; you have to unravel their form and their swordplay to find the history at its core, grasp the ideas behind it, and reveal the logic at the root of it all. Those are the basics of stealing your enemy’s style. So, little Kurogane did the same thing here, but applied it

differently. In this battle, he stole Shizuya Kirihara in his entirety. Isn't that right, little Kurogane?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Ms. Saikyou's seemingly-nonsensical words were met with a nod from Ikki. He had used Blade Steal on the person themselves.

"I-Impossible! You can't be able to do that! You shouldn't have even been able to see me!"

"Even if I can't see you, Kirihara, it's not hard to guess where you are. You leave evidence all over the place."

"'Evidence'?"

"Every time you hit me, you left evidence. The order in which my wounds formed tells me your methods, the angle of each shot tells me which direction you're in, and the force tells me how far away you are. Using the evidence you left, it was easy to guess where you were. Once I knew that much, it was no different than being able to see you directly. From there, I just did what I normally do.

"Sword styles and people both have basic logic that governs their actions. You can call them 'values'. By understanding a person's actions, preferences, and words inside and out, I can figure out everything you do—how you'll move, what measures you'll take, whether you'll advance or retreat, and whether you'll attack or defend. For example, I know that you just took three steps backward."

"Ngh?!"

Kirihara was frozen to the core with dread as he forced out a voiceless scream. No matter how little he wanted to believe that he had been seen through, everything Ikki had said was unmistakably true.

Human thought was firmly rooted in one's identity—one couldn't change the way they think overnight. Kirihara might have thought he could outfox Ikki, but the very idea of outfoxing him was born from his identity. As long as that was true, he couldn't escape Ikki's notice.

Stealing the enemy's very identity meant being able to grasp all of their thoughts and feelings; it could be called Perfect Vision. Faced with such

incredible power, Kirihara finally understood the true reason to fear Ikki Kurogane. It wasn't because of his swordplay or even his one-minute boost. It was his penetrating eyes, like a magic mirror that could reveal the true nature of anything it looked upon, and they were fixed upon the invisible Hunter.

"I've seen through your ability," Ikki told him. "This battle is already over!"

He dashed toward Kirihara with blinding speed, ready to sink his fangs into the defenseless Hunter!

"G-Go awaaaaaay!"

The Hunter put up one final resistance. He clung to Oborozuki as tightly as he could and put all of his magic into one final shot, aimed toward the sky. The arrow split into a hundred beams of light, which then poured down like a rain shower toward Ikki. Stones throughout the arena were pierced, destroyed, lifted into the storm, and destroyed once again. The rain of destruction showered the area irregularly.

Kirihara's Noble Art, Million Rain, was an indiscriminate attack via a hundred arrows. If Ikki was reading his mind, then Kirihara just had to thoughtlessly cover the area with blanket fire. That was Kirihara's conclusion; he was sure it was correct.

However—

"Why?! Why won't they hit you?!"

Ikki was slicing through every single invisible arrow, sprinting endlessly through the rain of destruction. He hurtled through the rising cloud of dust, for he could already see everything.

"It's no use. No matter how hard you try to stop thinking, you want to win, you want to kill me. Even in fear, your heart can't hold itself back from screaming for the desire to kill. You can try to attack without thinking, but you still harbor the intent to kill." As long as there was intent, he couldn't escape Ikki's Perfect Vision. To attack an enemy without intent or the desire to kill was an ability only within the power of a samurai. It wasn't a feat attainable by someone like Kirihara. All he had done was increase the number of arrows. "Shoot a hundred or a thousand. I won't break a sweat with Ittou Shura!"

Resistance was futile for Kirihara. Like an experienced shogi player who could see a hundred moves in advance, Ikki could already see the end of their match.

“W-Wait, wait! Stop! Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop! I told you to stop! Cut it out, man, seriously! I can’t lose to a Rank F failure like you! Unlike you, people expect things from me! Unlike you, you worthless trash, I have things to lose! You’re not allowed to win against meee! STOOOOOP!”

Ikki wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t, and nothing Kirihara could say would change that.

“H-Hey, I was just kidding, okay?!” Kirihara’s pleading continued. “C’mon, just quit it! Quit it! Th-That thing is sharp, y’know?! I could die if you swing that thing at me! This isn’t normal! Just cut it out, please! O-Oh, I know! Let’s settle it with rock-paper-scissors! Good idea, right?! C’mon, Kurogane! We were classmates! We’re friends, buddy!”

Ikki didn’t care. Kirihara was the one who had said to be “ready for what’s coming to you”, after all. When standing in the arena, a knight had to be prepared to kill or be killed, so Ikki gave him no quarter. Intetsu broke through all of Kirihara’s feeble resistance, finally coming into range of him.

“Haaaaaaaaah!”

“E-Eeeeeeeeeeeek! S-Stooooop! Okay! I get it, you win! I’m the loser here, just don’t hurt meeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Ikki swung his sword downward, its path glowing brightly. When the light finally faded and Kirihara was visible again, he remained face-up and intact on the ground.

He had fainted, eyes wide with fear and frothing at the mouth, but he had no major wounds. The only sign of injury was a tiny cut at the tip of his nose, not even bleeding. Everyone knew he had surrendered, so Ikki had no intent of killing Kirihara with his attack.

I misjudged by just a hair. I’d better work on that.

Ikki admonished himself for his inadequacy. He hadn’t meant to wound his foe, but the blade cut him ever so slightly. It turned out judging his distance just

from the force of his shots was a little difficult.

“Shizuya Kirihara is unable to battle!” The referee announced Ikki’s victory in his very first battle. “Ikki Kurogane is the winner!”

Thus, The Hunter fell before his blade-wielding prey.



“The duel is oveeeeeer! And the winner is, amazingly, the Rank F knight Ikki Kurogane! Kurogane may have been barred from taking classes last year, but he has seized victory in his first official battle! Against the star of his original class, no less!”

The very moment his victory was announced, the strings holding Ikki together snapped. Wounds from the duel, major blood loss, and the exhausting side-effect of Ittou Shura—everything he had suppressed through sheer willpower collapsed on him at once.

“Congratulations... Huh?! Aaah! Kurogane has collapsed in the middle of the arena! He doesn’t look too good!”

“Hoo, boy. Medics! Get him into a Capsule, quickly!”

With Ms. Saikyou’s orders, the facility’s workers loaded Ikki’s body onto a stretcher.

iPS Capsules—commonly known as “Capsules”—were large pieces of medical equipment generously placed at each training field. Ikki was unlikely to die, thanks to the close proximity.

Once the winner was loaded onto the stretcher, Kirihara was left alone in the ring. It wasn’t long before he was carried off by the workers as well.

“Kirihara is now being carried out of the arena. This year’s front-runner for the Seven Stars has suffered a shocking defeat! Though he is uninjured, he shows no signs of waking up from his shock-induced fainting spell yet!”

Kirihara’s supporters, watching from the stands, began to talk amongst themselves.

“Wow, lame.”

“Wasn’t he crying at the end there? And he was all, ‘Don’t hurt meee!’”

“What a disappointment.”

“Let’s dip. I’m not really into him anymore.”

“Oh my! All of his fans are just up and leaving!” Tsukuyomi cried. “That’s... kinda sad, actually. Not one of his friends is going to look after him?”

“He’s not hurt, he’s just being a baby,” Ms. Saikyou reminded her. “Either way, he’ll wake up soon.”

“True, I guess. So, uh, that concludes today’s fourth match. Once we get the arena cleaned up, we’ll start the fifth one. Competitors, that’s your cue to start getting ready.” After that announcement, Tsukuyomi cut off her mic.

“Whew! That was a crazy battle. I still can’t believe a Rank F knight broke through Kiriara’s Area Invisible, considering it’s won him so many flawless victories before! I’d never even dreamed of it!”

She relaxed with a sigh and spoke to Ms. Saikyou, though the analyst’s seat was empty. “Cool battle, I’m out” read a note that had been left on it.

“I can’t take this anymore! Someone trade arenas with meeeeee!”



As Tsukuyomi screamed alone, the spectating students began to leave the fourth training field. The majority of them had come to watch this specific battle, after all. However, two people stood stock-still amidst the outflow. They were Shizuku and Alice.

“I feel bad for the people who fight next. It must be a shame to see so many people leave before your battle.” Alice looked toward the crowd as she spoke, then turned to the little girl next to her. “Are you going to the infirmary, Shizuku?”

“He’ll be asleep by the time I get there,” she replied, shaking her head.

“It’s only natural for a girl to want to be by his side, even if he’s sleeping. I’m sure Stella has already caught up with the stretcher. Are you perhaps giving them a chance to be alone?”

As Alice continued to question her, Shizuku puffed out her cheeks and turned away.

“Today’s an exception, since she pretty much helped him win.” And, though Shizuku was loath to admit, she was happy too. Her brother was so alone, so misunderstood by all, but Stella declared openly, before an incredible crowd of people, that she had come to love him and accepted his way of living. So she endured her desire to run to her brother and stay by his side, instead staying with Alice. Today alone, she would let the two be together. “But only for today. I mean it!”

“Haha. Hey, Shizuku?”

“What? Are you going to call me a loser?”

“No. I just really like this side of you.”

“Ngh! Jeez! Don’t tease me!” Her pale-white cheeks flushed red as she puffed her cheeks out further.

“Teehee, sorry. I won’t bug you about it anymore, so cheer up. Now, what should we do next? Wanna watch the next fight?”

“I’m not really interested.”

“Why don’t we go out and get something nice to eat, then? I don’t think our victory party will work out, considering the condition Ikki’s in.” Capsules could quickly heal wounds, but fatigue wasn’t so easily cured. He would probably be fast asleep all day, and it followed that Stella would be his side until he woke up. “If we’re going to let them enjoy each other’s company, we should at least have our own fun.”

“Let’s go somewhere with good liquor. Call it a coming-of-age ceremony for me.”

“Teehee. Okay. I know a place with a lovely atmosphere, just you wait.”

“I’m going to warn you now: in a few hours, I’m definitely going to regret leaving that sow alone with my brother. When that happens, I’m gonna get really, really mad, so get ready.”

“Heehee! I can’t wait.”

The two of them decided to change clothes in their dorm and enjoy their plan-B dinner. Looking at the backs of the spectators in front of her, Shizuku suddenly spoke.

“I wonder if the fools who insulted my brother still don’t believe in his strength.”

“Who knows? I’m sure some people won’t believe it even after seeing it in person, but those who have the power to vie for the Seven Stars should realize it by now. And they’ll remember the name Ikki Kurogane. He’ll never be called the ‘Failed Knight’ again; I can assure you of that.”

Alice was right. From then on, in the depths of the internet, the Failed Knight and Worst One began to be known by a new name: Another One, the Uncrowned Sword King. That name was proof that Ikki would no longer be known as a failure. After all, Ikki Kurogane had taken down one of the leading candidates for the Seven Stars Battle Festival.



In the stands at the fourth training field, a small, red-clad woman clip-clopped up the stairs. It was, of course, Nene Saikyou, currently missing from the analyst’s chair. Her hair fluttered as she gave a passionate monologue about the battle.

“Phew, that was a hell of a battle. Who knew the Worst One, of all people, would be the one to take down the best anti-personnel Noble Art there is? And with such an unorthodox method, too. Penetrating the enemy’s very identity in the middle of a battle isn’t something anyone can do.

“Even the guys in the A-League can’t do that. I guess that’s Kuu’s ace in the hole for you. I can’t wait for more of his selection battles. But next time, he should fight someone stronger. Like, say, the student council president or something. What do you think, officers of Hagun Academy’s student council?”

When she arrived at the top level of the stands, she tossed a meaningful grin to the four knights before her, who had magical power incomparable to that of the students who had just left.

The officers of Hagun’s student council all had their own nicknames: Utakata

“Fifty-Fifty” Misogi, Vice President; Kanata “Blutrote Dame” Toutokubara, Treasurer; Ikazuchi “Destroyer” Saijou, Secretary; and Renren “Runner’s High” Tomaru, General Affairs Manager. They were the most powerful people in Hagun Academy.

“It’s a shame Touka wasn’t here for this,” Ms. Saikyou told them. “I really wanted her to see today’s match. My intuition tells me Kurogane might just be her new rival before long.”

“Ahaha! Ms. Saikyou, you’re so bad,” Uakata Misogi, as small as—no, possibly smaller than an elementary schooler—laughed in response.

“Ohoho! Isn’t she? But look how hard he’s trying. It would be such a shame if we didn’t take *good* care of him.” A tall, blonde girl spoke after Uakata. Kanata Toutokubara, with the air of a French noblewoman and wearing a snow-white dress, opened her parasol—even though they were indoors.

“Well, aren’t you confident? I’d say there’s a vast gap between him and a semifinalist from last year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

“Ahaha! I’ll say it again: Ms. Saikyou, you know so much, and yet you’re still so bad.”

“Honestly, there’s no point in considering past results. The problem lies even before that.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s exceedingly simple. No matter how sharp a mouse’s fangs or claws are, it can’t stand up to a lion.” Toutokubara looked far ahead and narrowed her blue eyes. “She would hardly even notice him. Our princess is so venerable, so far beyond him, that he can hardly even see her in the distance.”

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

SHIZUKU KUROGANE

■ PROFILE

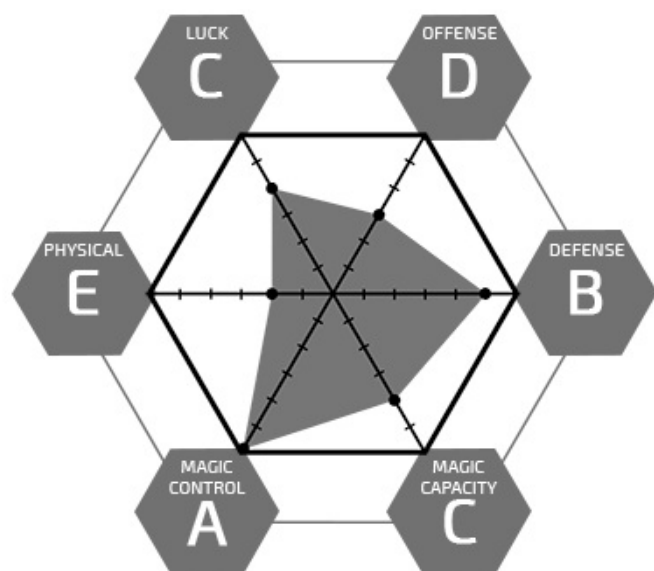
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,
CLASS 1-4

BLAZER RANK: B

NOBLE ART: SHOUHA SUIREN

NICKNAME: N/A

SUMMARY: A GIRL WITH THE BLOOD
OF A HERO.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

Water's offensive capabilities are lower than fire's or lightning's, so she focuses more on defense. Her magic control more than makes up for it, though! She can freeze the floor beneath her enemies without them noticing, or trap them in orbs of water and drown them. Versatility is key! If you underestimate this cute little girl, you're gonna have a bad time!



Epilogue

A Moonlit Vow

“Nh...”

Blurry light signaled Ikki’s awakening as he willingly opened his eyes. An unfamiliar ceiling was above him, barely visible in the dim room.

Is this the infirmary?

It was. After Ikki had collapsed at the end of the battle, he was taken to a Capsule to treat his wounds before being left in the bed to recover. He looked around and noticed that the full moon was already out. He had clearly been asleep for quite a few hours.

I did get beaten up pretty badly, after all.

He wasn’t in pain, however. He must really have been fully healed. Despite how badly he had been hurt, a Capsule was able to handle all of that without leaving any long-term injuries, even if fatigue still weighed down his body like lead.

“Zzz...”

“Hmm?” He heard familiar snoring in the darkness, so he sluggishly sat up in the bed. “Stella...”

She was sawing logs in the seat next to him. His final memories before losing consciousness involved being loaded onto a stretcher and some girl calling out to him; Stella, perhaps?

Was she here with me the whole time?

When that thought crossed his mind, Ikki’s chest tightened with feelings of love.

“Ah...” He looked closer and saw a bit of drool on her lip.

Even princesses are so vulnerable in their sleep. Stella would probably hate to be seen like this, though.

He fished a handkerchief out of his pocket and gently wiped the drool from her mouth, trying not to wake her in the process. She must not have been sleeping deeply, because she woke up as soon as it touched her lip.

“Mm... Ah.”

“Sorry to wake you.”

“Ikki...?” She still seemed to be half-asleep as she looked vacantly at him. Eventually, her line of sight found its way to the handkerchief, damp with her drool. Her face instantly turned beet-red, and she snatched the handkerchief out of his hand. “Ngh! Did you see anything?”

He knew she was ready to kill him then and there if he said yes. There was only one response to her trick question:

“N-No.”

“Liar!”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

“Urghhh!” Her face somehow became even redder as a result of his honesty. Grabbing his handkerchief, she scrubbed her lip raw. “You’re the worst! What an awful time for you to wake up! Ugh, I’m so embarrassed!”

“Why are you complaining to me? It’s not like I can control when my body wakes up.”

“Shut up, dummy! I’ll buy you a new handkerchief later!”

“Huh? No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“I will worry about it!”

“Oh, okay. Thanks, I guess.” Ikki could do little more than back down against the snarling Stella.

During the momentary lull in their conversation, Stella’s stomach made a cute growl that could be heard throughout the quiet infirmary.

“Nooooo! Why is this happeniiiiing?!”

“Calm down, Stella. There’s nobody else here but us, but you should still keep quiet in here.”

“You’d want to cry too if this happened right when *you* woke up! This is all your fault, Ikki! Why’d you just let that guy beat you up so much?! Dummy!”

She pummeled him with her small fists. It hurt just a tiny bit, but he couldn’t complain, considering she had stayed by his side on an empty stomach. He bowed in response to her scolding.

“I’m really sorry. I don’t mean to keep embarrassing myself and making you worry about me.”

“I wasn’t worried! Besides, injuries like those are just paper cuts after a trip to a Capsule!”

“But you never left my side, did you?”

When Ikki turned his attention toward her grumbling belly, she looked away awkwardly.

“I-I had to! I’m your servant, remember? Servants have to nurse their masters back to health, so there’s no point in thanking me, anyway!”

“Well, I want to thank you. If you weren’t there to watch my battle, I could’ve really died.”

She was the one who gave him that pep talk when he was about to give up because she had come to love him, incompetence and all. Though the people around him told him he was worthless, he felt ashamed, but he didn’t give up. There was someone who loved him for it, and he desperately wanted to tell her something other than just “thank you”. He wanted to tell his honest feelings to the girl who accepted his way of living.

“Hey, um...”

“I told you not to thank me—”

“I love you too, Stella.”

Stella looked at him blankly following his sudden confession. It was *too* sudden; her mind hadn’t quite caught up with the conversation, but the words gradually sunk in.

“Hyah!”

She screamed as she fell out of the chair.

“Whoa! A-Are you okay?!”

“D-D-D-Dummy! I-Ikki, d-do you even know what you just said?!”

“Yeah, I do. I said I love you, Stella.”

Ikki must have steeled his resolve already, for there wasn’t a bit of hesitation or embarrassment in his voice. But Stella, taken completely aback, was blushing harder than she had ever blushed before. She was confused, bewildered, and altogether freaking out.

“J-Just so we’re clear, I was just, um, I was just saying that I appreciate your ambition, and your life choices, okay?! I-I wasn’t saying I love you, like, as a guy or anything, okay?! I-I’m a princess. I could never fall in I-love with a commoner!”

“Yeah, I know,” Ikki nodded. “I’m just a bum with no family, and you have to think about your reputation and all. That’s why I couldn’t bring myself to say it until now. After everything that happened today, I just couldn’t hold myself back. And I’ve wanted to say this so badly: I’m really glad I met you, Stella. If I don’t say it now, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say it again. Oh, but you don’t need to say anything back, of course.”

Ikki was ready for her to reject him outright, of course. That would be better than him never being able to convey his gratitude toward her. With that in mind, Ikki revealed his feelings.

“...So unfair.”

She gave him a sharp look with her cheeks puffed slightly in irritation.

“‘Unfair’? What is?”

“Why do you get to be the only one who’s honest?”

“Huh?”

Ikki had no idea what Stella was talking about, but he had a feeling she was pissed. Maybe it got on her nerves to have a homeless commoner hitting on

her.

“Close your eyes.”

Is she gonna hit me?!

“H-Hey, Stella. I’m really sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“Just close your eyes!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Sometimes, Stella’s voice was too compelling to say no. It must have been the royal family’s secret technique. Ikki trembled as he closed his eyes and waited through the silence.

Smooch.



He felt something soft and warm on his cheek.

Huh? Ikki opened his eyes in surprise. Stella's cheeks, right in front of him, were as red as an apple.

"S-Stella? What...?"

Even someone as oblivious as Ikki didn't need to hear the answer to know what had happened. Stella had kissed him on the cheek. The fact that she would even do something like that was unbelievable, though. All he could do was stare at her wordlessly, dumbfounded. Her eyes were wet as she looked back at him.

"D-Don't get me wrong, that master-servant stuff has nothing to do with this. I just did that because I wanted to. Just so you know, I wouldn't do something like that if I was ordered to."

"Does this mean we're dating, then?"

Stella lowered her wet eyes, her face still red. Barely, ever so slightly, she nodded.

"B-But, um, I've... never dated a boy before, so I might disappoint you or something."

"A-Absolutely not! I've never dated a girl, either."

Ikki had never been in love before. His little sister stole his first kiss, but his experience with girls was close to nothing.

"So I'm your first girlfriend, Ikki?"

"Y-Yeah."

Stella closed her eyes and relaxed, obviously happy.

"Wow. Ehehe, it's kinda fun to think—"

"Sorry, Stella. You're just so cute, I can't help myself."

"Eep?!"

There was no stopping him. He didn't even wait for her to stop speaking before pulling her into a hug.

“Thank you for that. I’m really happy.”

“Jeez. You can’t be this pushy all the time. From now on, you’d better be gentle, or I might bite.”

Stella sighed and wrapped her arms around Ikki’s back, returning his embrace. Her body was so warm and soft, yet with the ferocity of a great flame within. That heat was so unbearably dear to him.

“Hey, Stella?”

“What is it?”

“Earlier, you said we could aim higher than ever together, right?”

“...Mm-hmm.”

“I agree. I think I can get stronger and stronger as long as you’re here with me. So let’s go, together, to the peak of knighthood. And in the final battle for the top spot, I want to be up against you.” He looked Stella straight in her ruby eyes as he spoke.

To walk together, to better each other, and to one day meet in battle again. At first, her eyes opened wide, as she was startled by his statement, but before long, they flickered with the flame of her fighting spirit.

“That’s just what I wanted to hear. I’m not gonna lose again.”

Stella wished for the same thing as Ikki. Because she loved him more than anyone else, because she respected him more than anyone else, and because she wanted to fight him again, it was only natural. Just like Ikki, she was always looking to improve as a knight. There was only room for one at the top—room for her.

Thus, the two of them made their vow under the moonlight, in the deafening silence of the infirmary. Both of them would go on to fight enemies stronger than any they had ever seen, but they would never lose, until one day, in the final battle to become the Seven Stars King, these two greatest rivals—these two greatest lovers—would meet in battle once again.

With that promise in their hearts, they both declared:

“I swear.”

Afterword

To all who have first come to know me through *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*, I'm glad to meet you. To those who read *Danzai no Exceed* or *Kanojo no Koi ga Hanashitekurenai!*, it's good to see you again!

I sincerely thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. The idea behind this work was a sort of superhuman sports kind of thing. Actually, ever since *Danzai no Exceed* won its award, I've been hoping to try my hand at one of these "rising up in the world of sports" type stories. Kind of like GA's Akamitsu Awamura and his *Mugen no Linkage*!

I'm happy as a clam to have finally done it, and I hope you all are happy as clams too! If you are, I hope you'll join the Failed Knight on his quest down the path of chivalry.

In writing this novel, I've had the chance to work with so many different people. Let me take this opportunity to make some acknowledgments.

First, my wonderful illustrator, Won, who put up with all of my selfish requests. "Tear her tights here!", "Give her a garter belt!", "We don't just want the bra; we want her panties, too! Draw the panties!" (during the scene where Stella strips). Thank you so much, Won!

And of course, a big thanks to Mr. Ohara for all he's done for me, especially with his touch-ups on the book in general. Without him, I wouldn't have been able to make the plot outline the best it could possibly be.

All of the specific guidance from the people in the sales department was a big help, too. Thank you all!

Finally, I have to express my gratitude to everyone who read *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. It's all thanks to everyone's help that I could release this novel. Thank you so much! I'll see you all again in volume two!

Riku Misora

Illust Won



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