





RUNNER'S HIGH
RENREN TOMARU

WORST ONE
IKKI KUROGANE

ONCE TOMARU HAD
BECOME FAST ENOUGH
THAT EVEN IKKI'S SUPER-
HUMAN VISION COULDN'T
KEEP UP, SHE MOVED
BEHIND HIM AND PRE-
PARED TO CONVERT ALL OF
HER SPEED INTO A SINGLE,
MATCH-WINNING PUNCH.

"GET A LOAD OF MY
SUPERSONIC STRIKE!"



AYASE AYATSUI

"WE CAN
PLAY ALL WE
WANT WITH-
OUT WORRYING
ABOUT SPACE!"

IKKI MADE HIS
WAY TO THE
POOLSIDE TO
WAIT FOR THE
GIRLS, WHO
APPEARED A
FEW MINUTES
LATER.

CRIMSON PRINCESS

STELLA



FIFTY-FIFTY
UTAKATA MISOGI

"MAYBE I UNDER-
ESTIMATED YOU A BIT."

BLUTROTE DAME
KANATA TOUTOKUBARA

"C'MON, KID!
GET YOUR DEVICE!"

SWORD EATER
KURAUDO KURASHIKI



Chivalry of a Failed Knight

VOL. 2

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Chivalry *of a* *Failed Knight*

VOL. 2

Original Story by Riku Misora

Illustrations by Won



Prologue

Memories of a Distant Time

“Are you really, absolutely sure about this?” the girl asked the man in front of her, her voice dripping with unease.

As they stood in the middle of the dojo, dyed a bright red by the setting sun, the grizzled, middle-aged man laughed heartily at the question asked of him for the umpteenth time.

“Hahaha! You’ve got a long way to go before you’ll need to hold back against me. Gimme all you’ve got.”

“But Dad, your body is getting weaker by the day.”

“Sounds like we’d better hurry, then; while I can still lift a sword. I need you to learn this technique.”

The man slowly raised his bamboo sword.

“I’m no Blazer, so the only way I can help you is through swordplay. This technique is the result of an entire lifetime of hard work—a trump card no one has ever seen before. I’m sure it’ll save your butt someday, Ayase, so please.”

Her father’s eyes shined brighter than the evening sun. She couldn’t refuse him when she saw that look in his eyes, when she felt that love in his heart.

“You drive a hard bargain, Dad.”

Suppressing her unease, she materialized her soul as a weapon: a scarlet katana, redder than the twilight and more vivid than blood. She gripped the handle with both hands and began to run toward her father, and just as he wished, she swung her sword.

But that was all a distant memory. She had already lost everything; she had nothing left in her hands, and nothing left for her to protect. All that remained were memories of the good old days, still burned into her mind.



Chapter 1

Apprenticeship

“Let’s get to it, shall we?! Today’s seventh battle will now begin!

“From the blue gate, we have the man who defeated former Seven Stars representative Shizuya Kiriara in his very first match! It’s the first-year Rank F, the Worst One, Ikki Kurogane! He’s on a perfect eight-win streak, and he hasn’t gotten so much as a single scratch since his first battle! But now, he faces a new opponent, ready and raring to bring down the Worst One once and for all!

“From the red gate, a member of Hagun’s student council and a favorite for this year’s Seven Stars! It’s the second-year Rank C, Runner’s High, Renren Tomaru! Just like Kurogane, she’s undefeated with eight wins, but unlike him, she was ranked third among the entire school last year! Will the third-strongest student knight among us show off her incredible strength today, or will the Worst One betray our expectations yet again and use his martial arts to defeat her magical power?! Ms. Yanagida is here on analysis! What are your thoughts, ma’am?!”

“I fell asleep, what were you saying?”

“Thank you for the insight! Let the battle... begin!”

The buzzer sounded, sending a surge of excitement through the crowd. They cheered for the two knights standing in the arena: Ikki Kurogane, a black-haired boy wielding a Device much like a katana, and Renren Tomaru, a girl equipped with brass knuckles.

“Heya, Kurogane. I saw your battle with The Hunter! It was super exciting!” Though the start of the battle had already been announced, Renren merely danced around and spoke affably to Ikki. Her skin was tanned a light brown, adding to her healthy, lively appearance.

“Thank you,” Ikki said, letting a smile slip at her friendliness. “It’s an honor to

receive such high praise from the third-strongest student in the school.”

“Aw, shucks, don’t be like that. We’re the same age, so you can relax, ’kay? Anyway, I’ve been wondering: If you’re such a strong fighter, why’d you flunk?”

“Haha. Well, y’know, things happened.”

“Huh. Whatever those ‘things’ are, it’s a crying shame. It’d be really fun to have someone like you in the same grade as me.”

“What about Saijou? He’s only one place below you.”

“Ugh, not him. Not even close. He’s all brute force; with the way he swings his sword in circles like that, he might as well be a ceiling fan. But come to think of it, maybe you’re the same as him. If you had so much trouble against The Hunter, then you definitely can’t beat me.” Tomaru’s smile became a fierce grin. “I’ll show you how the third-best fights!”

She instantly disappeared from Ikki’s sight. Was it a stealth-based skill like Area Invisible? No. He could hear the sounds of footsteps tracing the edge of the arena. Something was moving with incredible speed. When he focused, he could just barely see the afterimages.

Renren didn’t vanish into thin air, of course, she was just moving so fast that she seemed to vanish. That in itself was Renren Tomaru’s Noble Art.

“It’s Mach Greed! Tomaru is already giving it her all!”

The trick behind her ability was the accumulation of velocity. By removing all sources of deceleration from her body, she could accelerate endlessly.

“I did some research on you, but wow. You’re faster than I expected.”

“Way different from how it looks on camera, right?”

“Yeah. I can’t even keep up. Hey, were you talking at the start of the match because you needed to build up speed by moving around?”

“Correct! My biggest weakness is the initial velocity, so I built up about three hundred miles per hour while I was moving around before. But three hundred is just the start—my Mach Greed really struts its stuff after I break the sound barrier!”

Tomaru continued to run around the ring, even running on the walls that surrounded it. The basic laws of physics seemed to be ignored—rewritten, even—by the principle behind her ability as she accelerated. Five hundred, six hundred, seven hundred... eight hundred miles per hour! She broke the sound barrier and entered the realm of supersonic speed, moving far faster than the human eye could process.

“Get it? I don’t just disappear like The Hunter does! On top of being invisible, I’m impossible to catch! Since you had so much trouble dealing with just the vanishing act, you can’t even think about beating me!”

“Hmm. So if I can catch you, will you surrender?”

“Hahah! Sure, if you can! Too bad you’ll never be able to! Sorry, Kurogane, but you’re not making it to the Seven Stars. Not after you get a load of my supersonic strike!”

Once Tomaru had become fast enough that even Ikki’s superhuman vision couldn’t keep up, she moved behind him and prepared to convert all of her speed into a single, match-winning punch.

“Black Bird!”

Having broken even Mach 2, Tomaru generated a sonic boom as she lunged toward him from behind. An invisible attack moving at an impossible speed was sure to finish him. He wouldn’t be able to block it, let alone avoid it. Hell, he wouldn’t even be able to react to it. Her victory was assured.

“What an idiot,” a silver-haired girl sighed contemptuously from within the audience.

Shizuku Kurogane, a girl so beautiful that she could be mistaken for a porcelain doll, Ikki’s little sister, and a Rank B knight, had earned the nickname Lorelei through her reputation of winning by drowning her foes. “Big Brother wasn’t struggling against that trash just because he couldn’t see him.”

Of course, Shizuku didn’t speak loud enough for Tomaru to hear her. Tomaru realized it quickly enough anyway, though.

“Huh?!”

She witnessed the unthinkable: in an instant that seemed like an eternity, someone was staring straight at her. It was Ikki—his eyes were digging into her very soul!

N-No way! How was he able to react?!

The very next moment, he disappeared from the path of her supersonic fist, sending it—and her—sailing through the air, right past her target. Grabbing the collar of her windbreaker, he used her super-speed momentum to swing her around and throw her down to the stone floor.

“Gah!” The force of the impact knocked the wind out of her, and before she could catch her breath, she felt the tip of his sword pressed against her.

“Looks like I win.”

What happened? How did he catch me? Tomaru was flabbergasted. The only thing she knew was that she had lost.

Interrupting Tomaru’s Mach Greed meant all of the velocity she’d accumulated went away. She required perpetual motion for her ability to continue working, but she wouldn’t get the opportunity to start accelerating again. Not against this samurai. Coming to that realization, she nodded vaguely and surrendered to Ikki.

“And it’s oveeer! What an abrupt conclusion! Ikki Kurogane has defeated the third-strongest student in the school, the Runner’s High, marking his ninth consecutive victory! This could end up being the first time that a Rank E or lower has ever represented our school at the Seven Stars!”

“Whoa, for real?!”

“Not even Tomaru could touch him.”

“What’s with that Rank F?! How did a monster like him flunk?!”

“S-So cool...”

“That’s Ikki for you. Another easy victory.” From among the cheering of the host and crowd, the tall, handsome woman standing next to Shizuku, Nagi Alisuin, applauded. “He didn’t even have to use Ittou Shura.”

“Of course he didn’t, Alice. Big Brother didn’t have trouble with The Hunter

because he couldn't see him; it was the full stealth and long-range attacks with his bow that were the problem. No matter how fast or unseeable you are, if you step into range of his world-class swordplay, you're not gonna make it out unscathed."

A swordsman as skilled as Ikki might as well have a barrier around him, created by his sword. Anyone who stepped within his range, be they visible, invisible, fast, or slow, would be noticed by his sixth sense, and he'd react in the blink of an eye. That was Tomaru's fatal mistake.

"Good work out there, Ikki." A red-haired girl praised him as he left the arena through the blue gate.

"Hard to call that battle 'work'. I just dislocated my arm a little, is all. Oh, but good luck to you, Stella."

"I don't need luck for this one," Stella replied with her usual confidence and entered the ring in Ikki's place.

"Let's keep up the hype and get to today's eighth match! The girl entering the ring now is the Rank A whose hair is as red-hot as her personality! It's the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermilliooon! Just like her roommate, the Worst One, she's on an uninterrupted eight-win streak! Every single one of her opponents so far has surrendered instead of fighting her, too! Not only is she untouchable, but she hasn't even had to lift a finger! She's the superstar rookie who wins through sheer intimidation! But todaaaaay, her foe is one heck of a buffalo!"

Entering from the red gate, taking Tomaru's place, was a giant of a man with a long coat and a shaved head.

"He's the fourth-strongest student in all of Hagun Academy! They call him The Destroyer; it's Rank C Ikazuchi Saijouuu! His long uniform flutters in the wind as he stands coolly in front of Vermillion! I don't see a hint of nervousness in him like I did in her previous opponents—just the hard glare of a man who's ready to take what's his! The Hagun newspaper told us that 'young Japanese men don't run away', and boy, is this one eager to win! Is it finally time for us to see the Crimson Princess fight?! The fighters have materialized their Devices... and there's the buzzeeeeer!"

"Oooooooooough!"

“Whooooa! Saijou is spinning his Device, Zanbatou, above his head! It’s moving so much air that I can hear and even feel the roar from all the way up here in the announcer’s seat!”

“Is it possible that you know the truth behind my ability, Princess?” he asked Stella, still spinning his blade.

“I don’t. Unlike Ikki, I don’t bother to study my foes before a fight.”

“Hah! You’re no different than any other famous Rank A; there’s simply no room in your brain for a Rank C like myself.”

“It’s not like I came here unprepared. At the end of the day, this battle and the Seven Stars are just trials I have to tackle to become a more powerful Mage-Knight. When terrorist Blazers attack, I won’t be able to study what they can do, so I just have to be strong enough to win against even the unknown unknowns.”

“So you go in blind to foster that state of mind, huh? Your willpower is admirable, for a first-year student. This time, however, it’ll be your downfall!”

The air boomed as Saijou pointed Zanbatou at Stella. His blade, even larger and more imposing than Stella’s golden Lævateinn, was coated in magic, its supernatural powers already activated.

“My ability is the accumulation of slashing power! The more I spin my weapon, the heavier it gets! It can grow denser and denser until it reaches ten tons! Charging into battle against an ability like mine was a fatal mistake!” Saijou swung Zanbatou down toward Stella as he roared, “Crescendo Axe!”

The accumulation of slashing power—Saijou certainly wasn’t lying. His slash could rend the very earth in two.

“If your sword is so heavy, then all I have to do is dodge it.” That was the reason he couldn’t beat Renren Tomaru. Crescendo Axe probably had the most power of any single strike out there, but such a large sword couldn’t be swung very fast. To a speed demon like Tomaru, beating him would be child’s play. Stella may not have been as fast as Tomaru, but she didn’t need to be. She could evade a slash from that thing with her eyes closed. “But I’ll take the blow!”

“Whaaat?!”

The deafening *clang!* of metal on metal rang out as Saijou's Crescendo Axe swing met Stella's Lævateinn. But they didn't just meet—Stella put all of her strength into her sword and pushed Zanbatou away.

"I-Impossible!" Saijou was shocked beyond belief at the fact that he had lost in a battle of pure force.

He wasn't present during Stella's mock battle with Ikki Kurogane, only having seen blurry videos taken by people who couldn't even keep their cameras steady, so how could he have known that Stella had the power to shake the earth with her own strike?

"Remember this, Saijou." She parried Saijou's sword and grabbed his now-exposed collar. With a cruel grin, she spoke, "Strength, ability, cheap tricks—I'll face them all head-on and win. I'm a Rank A *because* I can win."

Flames exploded from Stella's hand, tearing Saijou's collar and tossing him ten yards into the air before he fell back down into the arena. Covered in soot and not moving, he had clearly been knocked unconscious by the point-blank explosion.

"This duel is over! Our winner is Stella Vermillion!" The referee judged the situation in a jiffy and declared the winner. "She's done it agaaaaain! Saijou came at her with daring resolution, but he didn't stand a chance against the Crimson Princess! This is what world-class, top-tier power looks like! These first-years are just too strong for us, folks! These girls may just be able to bring Hagun Academy the glory of the Seven Stars King!"

Showers in cheers from both the host and the audience, Stella walked leisurely out of the arena.

Lush greenery had filled the campus as summer began, about a month since the start of the Seven Stars Battle Festival selection battles. The Worst One, Ikki Kurogane; the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion; and Lorelei, Shizuku Kurogane. All three were famous throughout the school for their perfect nine-win streaks.



"Congratulations, Big Brother!♥"

Ikki felt a soft impact on his waist as soon as he departed the fifth training field. He looked down to see himself reflected in his little sister's jade eyes. Waiting behind her was Alice.

"Thanks, Shizuku. But try not to hug me with so many people around, okay? It's kinda embarrassing."

"Okay. But you're so cute when you're embarrassed, Big Brother."

"Alice, quick question. Lately, my little sister doesn't seem to listen to me. Do you think it's because we haven't worked on our communication in four years?"

"Teehee. That may have something to do with it."

"Aaargh! Shizuku, you're hugging Ikki again?!"

Ikki, still stuck in Shizuku's embrace, heard an angry voice coming from behind. It was, of course, Stella, who had left the training field after him. Shizuku's face turned from sweet to sour the moment she caught a glimpse of Stella.

"Why are you making such a fuss?" she asked. "Adults should know not to scream at random."

"I'm making a fuss because you're doing weird things to Ikki!" Stella shouted.

"'Weird'? I don't know the meaning of that word. I'm just being nice to my brother. Right, Big Brother? We're just such loving siblings, aren't we?"

"S-Sure." Ikki didn't know how else to respond. "But I think you're a little too close. Could you back off a bit, please?"

"See? He said 'sure'." Shizuku had completely cherry-picked Ikki's reply.

"He said more than just that! You can't just ignore the parts you don't like!"

"Come now, I have no idea what you're talking about. Besides, think about it like this: I may be clinging to my big brother, but it's not like I'm clinging that tightly. And even if I were clinging to him as hard as I could, such a strong boy could just push me away like it was nothing. So, if my big brother doesn't want me clinging to him, wouldn't he be pushing me away right now?" Shizuku put on her best teary-eyed puppy-dog face and continued, "You wouldn't push your doting little sister away, though, would you, Big Brother?"



“N-No, I guess I wouldn’t.” Ikki couldn’t just push her away like that.

“Ikkiiii!” Stella whispered in protest.

“It’s not my fault! I can’t say no to that face!” he replied.

“Do you get it now?” Shizuku asked, interrupting their quiet discussion. “This is consensual brother-sister affection. I think outsiders should keep their mouths shut, Stella.”

“I-I’m not an outsider!”

“Really? What makes you say that?”

“W-Well...”

“Don’t give me any of that ‘servant’ nonsense. It would be absurd for a servant to complain about every little thing her master’s little sister does. For example, the people of your country are essentially your parents’ servants; does that make them your servants, too? Of course it doesn’t. But I bet they’re oh-so-courteous to you. Do all Vermillions only think logically when it’s convenient?”

“No... Rgh!” Stella seemed to want to retort Shizuku’s violent assault, but she stopped herself.

Ikki knew what she wanted to say: their relationship had changed on that night one month ago. More than mere roommates, they were a couple. Stella was a princess, however; they could hardly go around telling anyone and everyone about it.

Ikki knew that as well, so he agreed to keep it a secret between them. But any woman could hardly bear to stand and watch her lover’s little sister—a sister that loved him as more than just a brother—clinging to him like that. Stella was no exception, but all she could do was watch in silence.

Shizuku shot a bored glance at her.

“Spoilsport.”

“You say something, Shizuku?”

“Nothing, Big Brother. Sorry. Let’s get going.”

“Ugh.” Stella glared at Ikki spitefully as Shizuku started to drag him away. He could see tiny tears forming in the corner of her eyes. It was kind of cute.

“Uuuugh! Grrrrr!”

Is she growling?!

“H-Hey, Shizuku. Maybe we shouldn’t be walking around school arm-in-arm like this. I mean, we’re high schoolers.”

Realizing the danger he was in, Ikki started to pull himself away from his sister.

“Okay,” she said disappointedly and released him. “I don’t want my big brother to hate me, after all.”

“C’mon, Shizuku. I couldn’t hate you.”

He could deny that easily; who could hate such a loving little sister? No matter what, he would always love her. Shizuku smiled, a little embarrassed.

“Thank you, Big Brother. But...” she started to whisper, loud enough for only Ikki to hear. “If you’re too gentle, you might never be able to make the next step.”

Ikki could tell that Shizuku had already seen through their ruse.

Never make the next step, huh?

Maybe that was true, after all. In the month since he and Stella had started dating, their relationship hadn’t progressed at all. In fact, it almost seemed to have deteriorated. They were secret lovers, after all, so Ikki had to be more conscious than ever of his interactions with Stella.

He wanted to be closer to her, to feel her, and he was ready to take that next step. However, due to his lack of relationship experience, he never knew when to broach the subject, much less how.

What would I even say? Should I sit her down for a heart-to-heart? Or should I just bring it up casually and act like it’s no big deal? I have no idea what to do.

To make matters worse, Stella was equally hopeless. The two of them were up a creek without a paddle, and their canoe wasn’t going to last long.

Maybe Shizuku was right. As the man, I should be more proactive. But what if I come on too strong and push Stella away? That thought always kept him away from being aggressive, and as a result, Ikki and Stella hadn't so much as touched each other that whole month. Ugh. I'd at least like to kiss her sometime soon.

They were dating, but the distance between them seemed greater than ever before.



"Oh, look."

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

"Man, those three really are larger than life, huh?"

"Don't act like you know anything about them. You're right about the girls, but the Worst One is just a Rank F who got lucky a few times."

"You don't honestly still believe that, do you?"

"Didn't you hear? Vermillion and Kurogane fought the fourth-and third-best students in the school today. Y'know, those student council guys? And get this: they both won."

"Seriously? Then the only ones left above them are the Blutrote Dame and the student council pres, right?"

"Those two are the strongest in the school, no contest. Still, the Crimson Princess and the Worst One have come this far already, so they're shoo-ins for the Seven Stars unless they get crap luck. Lorelei is on a nine-win streak too."

"This year's new kids are something else, huh? That tall guy with Lorelei is a first-year too, right? He's pretty tough."

"Don't call her 'that guy'! Do you even know Lady Nagi's nickname?! She's the Black Rose! Have you ever heard a cooler name than that?!"

"Yeah, that's right! I can't believe you'd call her 'that guy'! What's wrong with you?!"

"O-Oh, sorry."

"There are so many promising knights this year, even if they're all newbies."

Maybe this is the year we take the Seven Stars!”

The four of them could feel countless stares on them as they walked down the path between the fifth training field and the main school building. It was pretty normal for them to be noticed, though; the list of potential candidates kept getting smaller, yet they were all undefeated in the month since the start of the selection battles.

Of them, the one getting the most attention was Ikki. Beginning with The Hunter, the Worst One brushed off insurmountable odds in every single battle, his forward charge sending shockwaves throughout the entirety of Hagun Academy. At first, the students thought the sight of his victory was so unrealistic that they had trouble accepting it as the truth, but after he’d racked up nine wins, they could no longer deny it. Those who had called him an impostor a mere month ago were forced to change their tune.

Nearly every knight recognized his unorthodox strength, even if they were bewildered by it. Many of them even believed he could make it to the very top. Taking note of this, Stella chuckled.

“Heheh. Good to see that those idiots finally recognize Ikki’s strength.”

“But of course. My big brother is the loveliest man in all the world. It’s honestly appalling how long it took them to see it, but a lot has changed in the past month. So many people are coming to his lunchtime lectures now.”

“You’ve got that right. I still can’t believe that even some third-years showed up.”

Ikki’s lunchtime lectures were a result of his classmates constantly begging him for martial arts lessons. He agreed, but it wasn’t just swordsmanship he taught them. He also showed them how to handle shortswords, lances, and even bows.

Being well-versed in all sorts of martial arts after teaching himself how to use every weapon imaginable—all for the sake of predicting his enemies’ actions—it was a class that only Ikki himself could teach. He knew that the only weapon he’d mastered was the sword, however, and since his students weren’t quite ready to learn advanced techniques to begin with, his lectures only covered the basics of the basics.

The lectures started off with only a few of his classmates, but as Ikki became more popular, Hagun's students seemed to be swept up in some sort of martial arts fever. It became more than just his classmates; students from every year started coming to watch him.

He had thought things would die down if he left them alone, but onlookers had been flooding in for a week, and the situation didn't seem to show any signs of improving. With the way things were progressing, he couldn't keep ignoring it. It was such a major change that it was hard to believe only a month had passed

"But that's not even the biggest change these days," Ikki told them.

"What would you say it is, then, Big Brother?"

"Well, I think I have some sort of stalker."

"Whaaaat?!" Stella and Shizuku both screamed hysterically.

"A-A-A stalker?! You mean like those guys who follow you around all day, go into your room uninvited, and send you razors in the mail?!"

Stella was shocked, but Shizuku didn't miss the chance to correct her.

"Stalkers only put the razor *blade* in the mail, Stella. Nobody would put the whole thing in there."

"Maybe they're trying to help you with your hygiene," Alice joked. "Quite the kind stalker."

"Jeez, shut up, will you?! They just forgot to take the blade out, okay?!" Stella couldn't hide her embarrassment. "Whatever, that doesn't even matter right now!"

"You're right. Big Brother, could you tell us more?"

"I first noticed it about a week ago," Ikki began. "Ever since then, I've had this feeling like someone's staring at me from behind, day in and day out. I bet you've noticed it, too, Alice."

"I did," she confirmed, "but since you seemed to be trying to ignore it, I kept my mouth shut. Figured I'd let you deal with it."

“I thought the problem would go away by itself, but they don’t seem too intent on giving up any time soon.”

“Have you done anything to make any enemies?”

“Eh, not really.”

Ikki couldn’t find any reasonable answers to Alice’s question. They didn’t seem to have any ill intent, though, so it was unlikely to be a grudge.

“Maybe they’re in love with you, then?” Stella suggested.

“That’s not unlikely.” Alice nodded in agreement. “I’d bet there are more lovestruck stalkers out there than there are hateful ones, anyway.”

“Big Brother is a popular knight, especially among girls. Maybe he made eye contact with someone who was watching him from afar and they thought he was interested in them. Or perhaps a fan ran up to talk to him and thought their conversation meant more than it actually did. There are endless possibilities, really.”

“Ikki *is* pretty bad at dealing with the ladies,” Alice teased.

“Definitely. If someone asked for a handshake, he’d do it in a heartbeat. He’s pretty much at his fans’ mercy.” Ikki smiled wryly at Stella’s criticism.

The three of them were right, though. Ikki’s mild-mannered personality and soft face drew girls in. Lately, students were coming to his matches for no reason other than to cheer for him, and he just didn’t know how to deal with them. He wasn’t like Shizuku or Alice; he didn’t have it in him to mercilessly reject his fans, but he didn’t know where to draw the line with accepting their requests either.

Unable to ignore those who took time out of their lives to support him, Ikki would stop and talk to anyone who asked, even shaking their hands if they wanted. It wasn’t rare for him to be late to class because he kept stopping to talk to girls. Maybe he was giving them the wrong idea, after all.

That was Stella’s opinion, at least, but Ikki wasn’t so sure. Their presence lacked malice, but it also seemed to lack love or any other warm feelings. It almost felt like he was simply being photographed.

“I’ll accept girls idolizing my big brother, but to lay their filthy hands on him is going too far. The only solution is torture.”

“What are you going to do with that feather duster, Shizuku?” Stella asked.

“I’m going to catch them and tickle-torture them, of course.”

“That’s a surprisingly cute torture method. How unlike you.”

“I’m going to tickle their eyeballs.”

“Scary,” Ikki, Stella, and Alice all said in unison.

“Well, at this point, we’re pretty much just speculating. I’ll figure it out after I have a chat with them myself,” Ikki said, turning back in the direction they had just come from.

“Ikki, are they still...?”

“Yeah. They’ve been following me since my morning jog.”

They had been observing Ikki for a full week, sticking to him like glue. He could feel their gaze coming from a thicket along the paved path, so he took a deep breath and yelled at them.

“Hey, you, I know you’re in there. Wanna tell me why you’re following me everywhere?”

“Hyah?!”

A girl sprung out of the thicket like a frightened animal.

Even if she wasn’t malicious, following someone around all day just wasn’t normal. Ikki was prepared for some sort of vile snake to slither out, but the stalker’s true identity was, surprisingly, a polite-looking, tidy, black-haired young woman. In each hand she held a tree branch, as if trying to use some clichéd method of blending in with the brush.



“A-Aaahh! N-No, this isn’t what it looks like! I-I... Waaah!”

Clearly unprepared to be called out like that and astonished that she had been exposed so easily, the girl turned and dashed away. She didn’t seem to have noticed the small pond behind her former hiding place, however.

“Aaahhh! Glrgh?!”

In her panic, she tripped over the rocks that surrounded it and fell straight in, head-first.

Bonk! The group heard a noise that made them think the worst, then watched in silence as she slowly floated to the surface back-first. She wasn’t moving at all.

“H-Hey, is she okay?” Ikki asked. “She definitely doesn’t look okay! Alice, help me get her out of the water!”

“Oh, my. This is bad,” she said, and ran over with Ikki to help.

“Ikki’s stalker was that gorgeous?!”

“Seems the time to use my feather duster has come much earlier than expected.”

Stella and Shizuku’s womanly intuition signaled danger.



A small, dark room. The only light was provided by a small desk lamp. Surrounding the sole girl, who sat in a chair in the middle of the room, were four men with furrowed brows, reinforcing their already-intimidating appearances.

“Tell us the truth!” they yelled at the girl. “You were the victim’s stalker all along, weren’t you?!”

“They caught you red-handed! Don’t say you didn’t do it!”

“N-No! I wasn’t stalking him...” Overwhelmed by the sudden interrogation—and blinded by the lamp—she struggled to think of how to respond.

“You’d better not be coming up with some excuse!”

“Eek!”

“It’s clear as day that you’ve been following him around for an entire week!”

“And you’re still gonna play innocent?!”

“To hell with it. Let’s get to the torture!”

“S-Stoop!”

“Huh?!”

She awoke from the nightmare world, a clean, white ceiling over her head. From the smell of medicine around her, she could tell that she was in the infirmary. Someone must have brought her there.

Good. It was just a dream, then, she thought, calming herself down.

“Candle torture, flagellation, denailing, the rack, the pillory...”

Turning her head, she saw a silver-haired girl whispering to herself.

“Immolation, water torture, crucifixion, public execution, the wooden horse. Oh, you’re awake.”

“What were you just whispering?”

“Who knows? You were probably just having a bad dream. Big Brother, she’s awake!”

The silver-haired girl, Shizuku, called out toward the opening in the privacy curtain, and Ikki, Stella, and Alice walked in.

“My, you’re already awake? I guess even a nasty bump like that can’t stand up to Shizuku’s healing powers,” Alice commented.

“We couldn’t put you in a Capsule since the wound wasn’t from a duel. You’re lucky Shizuku was here. Does it still hurt at all?” Ikki’s genuine concern put her at ease.

When she saw their four faces, she finally understood what had happened. After she lost consciousness in that pond, they brought her to the infirmary and treated her.

“N-No, I... I’m fine. Thank you for helping me.”

She stood straight up and quickly bowed her head to the group. Such a polite stalker. She was avoiding eye contact, though, instead looking in every other direction she could.

“Well, it’s basically my fault for surprising you,” Ikki admitted. “I’m just glad this didn’t end up any worse. But, uh, why won’t you look at us?”

“D-Don’t worry about it. I-It’s a personal thing.”

Her voice was panicked. Not only was she avoiding eye contact, but her body was trembling as well. Possibly because she felt guilty about following Ikki around, she looked profoundly uncomfortable.

There’s no way to know unless I ask, I guess, he thought. “Well, if you’re not hurt, I’d like to ask you a few things. First off, could you tell us your name?”

“I-I’m Ayase Ayatsuji, a third-year.”

An upperclassman? That’s surprising. Considering her clumsiness when we first met and her clear discomfort now, she doesn’t seem older.

Ikki figured he should be polite regardless. Changing his tone, he jumped straight to the question that was bothering him the most.

“Okay, Ayatsuji. Sorry for asking you again, but why were you following—Uh, excuse me?”

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Now your entire head is facing away from us. Really, is something wrong?”

Ayase was looking at the wall behind her, while the rest of her body was still facing Ikki. Her neck was creaking audibly under the strain.

“D-Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t seem like nothing! I’ve never had someone try this hard to avoid eye contact! What’s so interesting about that wall?!”

“I-I just... I’m embarrassed.”

“Huh?”

“I-I can’t just make eye contact with a boy I don’t even know.” Ayase’s voice was as quiet as a mouse, and her face was so red it looked like it had caught on

fire. “How are you able to look a girl you just met straight in the eyes, Kurogane?”

“Um... I think it’s pretty normal to look at someone when you’re talking to them.”

“N-Normal? Really? Wow, I could never do that. Even if it seems rude, I just can’t keep looking forward when people are looking at me.”

Ikki never thought someone would admire him for something he thought was common courtesy. But she didn’t seem to be lying; Ayase would occasionally glance at him, but the moment their eyes met, she would look away again. She was obviously doing her best to look him in the eye, but apparently the embarrassment was too much for her to handle. She must have been exceptionally shy, especially given that she was older than him.

Jeez. I wish she would just look at me. Without seeing her face, it would be hard to tell if she was lying. Ikki pondered his next action for a short time.

“Then why don’t you talk to us girls?” Stella asked, standing with Shizuku in Ayase’s line of sight. The two of them were probing her with their doubtful expressions. “Out with it. Why were you following Ikki around? What were you planning?”

“Well... um...”

“There’s only one reason a girl would follow a boy around,” Shizuku stated. “You were giving my big brother lascivious looks!”

“Really?!”

“N-No! I wasn’t, I swear!”

Maybe it really wasn’t a grudge or love, Ikki began to think. *But then why in the world would she stalk a flunk like me?*

As Ayase frantically gesticulated in her attempts to plead with Stella and Shizuku, Ikki took notice of her hands. They were covered in calluses as a result of swinging a bamboo sword thousands upon thousands of times.

Those calluses... and the name Ayatsuji... Suddenly, a light bulb lit up deep within Ikki’s mind. “Excuse me, Ayatsuji. Are you related to Kaito Ayatsuji, by

any chance?”

Ayase opened her eyes wide and turned to face him. “H-He’s my father, yes. How did you know that?”

“I saw the calluses on your hands. Those are the hands of a swordsman. And you’re definitely athletic since you were able to keep up with Stella and me while we were jogging. Between all that and the name Ayatsuji, it finally clicked. I didn’t know he had a daughter, let alone that she was enrolled in the same school as us!”

Stella was confused by Ikki’s sudden excitement. “Hey, Alice. Who’s this Kaito Ayatsuji guy?” she asked.

“Who knows? I certainly don’t.”

Stella didn’t understand Ikki’s sudden excitement, and while Alice was equally confused, Shizuku was able to answer the question for them.

“He’s a non-Blazer popularly known as the Last Samurai. Many Blazers don’t care about martial arts, so it’s no surprise that you don’t know about him. But all swordsmen know about the man named Kaito Ayatsuji. He’s just that famous.”

The Imperial Tournament, the International Competition, the Musashi Cup, the Grandmasters’ Tournament—he was a world-famous swordsman who had won countless competitions, a master who took any and all glory for himself. In his prime, he was able to suppress many Blazer criminals all by himself, even as a non-Blazer.

“Blazers have magic to protect themselves from anything, with even gunfire leaving a bruise at worst,” Shizuku continued. “Kaito Ayatsuji, for as strong as he was, didn’t have an advantage like that. He probably lamented not having been born a Blazer more than anyone else in the world; Mage-Knight society didn’t take very kindly to a non-Blazer being so powerful, so despite his incredible swordsmanship, he isn’t too well-known nowadays.”

“But you know about him, Shizuku,” Stella said.

“Unlike most other Mage-Knight families, ours knows just how useful proper swordsmanship can be.”

Once she grew tired of the family that so abused her beloved brother, Shizuku stopped taking the Kurogane family's martial arts classes. Even so, the name of the Last Samurai still lingered in her mind. Ikki, however, was so dead-set on the path of the sword that he was sure to know that great hero's name.

"I used to study Kaito's videos when I was a kid. In fact, this one time in middle school, I went to his dojo and challenged him directly."

"Oh? Really?"

"He turned me down, though, saying he didn't take random challenges. But I'm so glad I'm meeting his daughter! How is Kaito doing now? I haven't heard his name in a while, so it's been tugging at my mind." Ikki was still obviously excited, but Ayase's face clouded at his question.

"Well, actually... He was injured in a duel. He's in the hospital."

"Oh, I... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"N-No, it's not a problem. I'm glad someone as incredible as you cares about my father so much. Plus, this is actually related to why I was following you around."

"How so?"

"Since my father and mentor is hospitalized, I've been working on the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style on my own, but I'm starting to hit a wall." It was only natural that she couldn't match her mentor's movements without his help.

"Then, I heard about you. It's hard to find a good swordsman, but when I heard there was a first-year who was one, I thought that maybe I could figure it out if I could just talk to you, or something..." Her voice trailed off and she started avoiding eye contact again. "B-But ever since I was a child, I've never been able to talk to any boys besides my father and his other disciples, so I just didn't know how to talk to you..."

"Is that why you've been following me around for an entire week?"

"It's embarrassing, but..." Ayase nodded, her eyes pointed to the ground.

Wow, she's really reserved. If she were a bread roll, she'd be the one you put in your desk drawer and forget about until she eventually got covered in mold.

The gang, save for Ikki, was speechless. *That* was why she had to stalk him?

In the silence, Ayase bowed her head to Ikki again. “I-I’m really sorry for following you around so much! I won’t blame you if you think I’m weird, but I swear, I’ll never come near you again! Just... don’t report me to the police, please.”

“Uh, I wasn’t really thinking of calling the police.”

As a matter of fact, quite the opposite was true: the swordswoman he’d just discovered piqued his interest. She wasn’t just any swordswoman, either; she was the Last Samurai’s favorite disciple! He was incredibly interested in seeing her swordplay. “Actually, Ayatsuji, if you’d be willing, I’d love to train together with you.”

“Huh...?”

“We’re both trained swordsmen, so maybe we could give each other tips. And I want to experience the Last Samurai’s style in person. Videos are limited to a single angle, so I can’t learn much from them.”

“Really?! Thank you! I’m so excited!” Grinning from ear to ear, Ayase instantly leaped off of the bed and took Ikki’s hands in hers. She had avoided looking at Ikki before, but now, she was staring straight at him. As soon as she realized what she was doing, however, her face went beet-red and she jumped ten feet back. “Oh, s-sorry! It’s so unladylike to just grab people like that!”

“Haha. I think that’s a bit of an overreaction just for grabbing someone’s hands.” His mind jumped to his little sister, who’d kissed him straight on the lips, and his princess girlfriend, who’d put on a swimsuit and bathed with him. “So, how about it? Matches are over for the day, so I was thinking we could train until dinnertime.”

“Yes, please. Also, you don’t have to be so formal. You’re going to be my teacher, after all; it would be strange for you to act like that toward your student.”

“Please. I’m not good enough to be called your teacher, really.”

“You are! You tried to make me feel better by saying we could give each other tips, but honestly, I don’t have a single piece of advice to offer you. I’m just a

novice.”

Ikki chuckled as she exposed his attempt at politeness. There were definitely things he could learn from her, but he didn’t need advice from her given that he could steal her style just by watching her. Continuing to try to be humble would probably come off as disrespectful, so he went for a compromise.

“All right, fine. I won’t be super formal anymore, but I can’t just be completely casual. It’s just really weird to talk to an upperclassman without being at least a little polite.”

“Okay. I’m looking forward to learning from you.”

Ayase Ayatsuji was no longer a stalker. She had become a disciple.



After class, Ikki Kurogane trained his swordplay in a forest clearing behind the school. The lack of concrete and the shadows cast by the tall trees were deeply calming, making it the perfect place to move around during the muggy Japanese summer.

His training began with a simple warmup, followed by practice swings with Intetsu. Once he got comfortable, he began striking imaginary shadows, simulated from within his mind. Next to him, Stella was training with Lævateinn in a similar manner, and on a nearby bench, Shizuku and Alice trained their magic control by molding a special type of clay without using their hands. There was little to no conversation within the group. Even Stella and Shizuku, who were usually fawning over Ikki, were completely focused on their training.

That was par for the course when the gang trained together, but the past three days had one difference: a new member had joined them. That was, of course, Ayase Ayatsuji.

“Hup! Hah!”

Ayase swung her scarlet Device, Hizume, through the air, tracing arcs as she went. She was no longer hapless and clumsy; a stark contrast from how she had acted before. She was fiercer—her eyes wide-open and focused, her visage surprisingly valiant. Her fear of men disappeared entirely when she held her weapon.

She had agreed to Ikki's offer of mutual, equal training. Though he was the superior swordsman, he could estimate Ayase's ability and limit his own to match her. Then, he could measure her true skill.

Unsurprisingly, the Last Samurai's daughter had a very good grasp of the basics. She could keep up with Ikki and Stella during their jogs, and her core was also well-honed—no matter how much he forced her to twist and bend, her balance and form remained intact.

She was mastering her martial arts as well. Her footwork and swordplay flowed perfectly, never requiring her to stop midway through an action. Her form must have been drilled into her brain through thousands of repetitions.

That didn't mean she was pigeonholed into one style, though. Ikki would often attack her in sneaky ways meant to specifically counteract her style, but she was able to defend herself swiftly and skillfully, responding with impressive speed.

Never forgetting her style, yet never held hostage by it. When it came to real battle, Ayase was a very impressive swordswoman. It was plain to see that she had put incredible effort into her studies. At the same time, though, Ikki could see why she was struggling.

"Hold on a second, Ayatsuji."

"Hm?"

Ayase's Hizume had just parried one of his blows and was already trained on his torso, but hearing him speak, she stopped her attack on a dime.

"What is it, Kurogane? I'm not tired yet."

Ayase stared blankly at him, surprised by the sudden interruption. Her gaze was still a bit unsteady, but it was better than when she would turn her neck 180 degrees. Training together for the past three days must have helped her get used to him.

"I can tell that the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style is a passive style based on counterattacks," Ikki said.

"Oh, um, yes. Did you figure that out just from sparring with me?"

"I never had a master, so I've learned to watch and steal. Thanks to that, I think I've figured out why you feel like you're not making progress."

"R-Really?!"

"Yeah. I think it's because you think you'll never be as good as your father."

"Right!" Ayase nodded excitedly. "No matter what I do, I can't move as smoothly as my father, even though I can remember his movements exactly."

"You've got it all wrong."

"I do?"

"Trying to perfectly imitate your father is the source of your problem."

"Are you saying it's my father's fault, because I learned from him?"

Ikki saw anger flare up in Ayase's eyes. She didn't want to be told that her mentor was the problem.

She really trusts him, Ikki thought. He was a little envious of her for having a father that she could take such pride in, but he swallowed it down and shook his head. "No, that's not what I mean. Kaito was definitely an amazing swordsman; there's no doubt about that."

"Then why shouldn't I try to imitate him?" she asked bitterly.

"Because you're not the same sex," he explained.

"'Not the same sex'? Does that really have anything to do with it?"

"It does. Men and women have inherently different bone structures, which means their muscles are different as well. Consequently, a man's optimal movements are different from a woman's. The more you try to perfectly mimic his actions, the more you'll experience this incompatibility."

"Ah..."

After Ikki's simple and polite explanation, the fire in Ayase's eyes was replaced with the light of understanding. It wasn't that he was making fun of her master, it was the very fact that he was so incredible that was the problem. Swordplay as an art was created by men, after all, so her father's style being better suited for men wasn't a huge surprise. The closer she copied him, the

more apparent it became.

“I have an idea of how you can reform your style, but if you pride yourself on perfectly mimicking your father, I won’t force you to do it. You don’t have to, after all, and how you feel is more important than meets the eye. In the end, you should do what you want to do. Just know that if you choose to reform your style, there’s no turning back.”

Ayase was forcing herself to use a style optimized for men. It led to her straining certain parts of her body, wearing down her power and speed. If she took Ikki’s advice, she would be smoother and more in-control than ever.

Once she became used to her newfound fluidity, however, Ayase wouldn’t be able to go back to her old, stiff swordplay. She would be too focused on that fluidity. Thus, Ikki wanted to confirm whether or not Ayase was truly willing to accept his instruction.

She looked toward the ground for some time, wrestling with the decision. After much inner turmoil, Ayase fixed her gaze on Ikki, resolute.

“Please, teach me! I desperately want to be stronger!”

She looked him directly in the eyes as she earnestly beseeched his aid. She may have been conflicted, but her desire to grow stronger won out in the end. Realizing he had nothing to worry about, Ikki lightly touched her arm and smiled confidently.

“All right. Leave it to me,” he said.

“Eep! K-Kurogane?!” The sudden skin-on-skin contact turned Ayase’s face red, and she let out a tiny squeak.

Ikki was serious about helping her, though. If he was going to reform her style, he couldn’t make mistakes just because he was distracted; they couldn’t be taken back. As her teacher, he had to make sure he did everything correctly, so he didn’t bother to be embarrassed.

“We’re going to be changing your form. Direct contact may be embarrassing, but we’ll just have to accept it.”

“O-Okay. I will.” Ayase bit her lip, her face so red that it looked like she’d start

spewing steam.

Though he hadn't broken a sweat during their training, a cold sweat had formed on Ikki's brow as he touched Ayase's body while grimacing. She could tell just how serious he was from his expression, so she suppressed her embarrassment and surrendered her body to Ikki's touch. If Ikki was going to try so hard for her sake, she couldn't let his efforts go to waste because of her selfish shame.

"I'm only going to move you fractions of an inch. Make sure you focus on these changes so you can remember them."

"Okay... Mm."

With a touch as gentle as a glassworker's, Ikki adjusted Ayase's posture.

He lowered her shoulders and brought her arms closer together, then brought his hands between her ample thighs, broadening her stance.



“Ah... Hah...”

“Compared to men, women have remarkably flexible joints—this is especially true for the hips. The pelvis needs room to expand during pregnancy, so women’s hips protrude somewhat. In practical terms, they have a much wider range of motion, especially laterally. It’s an advantage only women have, so if you can get used to moving your body through your hips, you’ll be faster than ever in no time.”

While lecturing Ayase about her own body, Ikki traced his hand from her thigh to the back of her knee, drawing a line through her muscles. Her knees wobbled, unused to the sensation of a man’s touch, which made Ikki feel a bit guilty for what he was doing. He didn’t let it affect him, though, and continued his adjustments.

“All right. This is about how your stance should be.” With his work completed mistake-free, he glanced at Ayase. She was as red as a lobster and looked like she was ready to cry. “Do you think you’ll be able to do this on your own?”

“I-I think so...”

“Uh, sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that.”

“N-No! It’s fine! I asked you to, anyway, so don’t worry about it!” Ayase wiped away her tears and forced a smile. “Besides, your hands are like my dad’s. They’re big and strong, but gentle too.”

“Hah, sure. Though I didn’t think you’d say something like that about gross hands like mine.”

The skin on Ikki’s hands was thick from years of holding a sword. No matter how much his skin tore or his blisters popped, he kept on swinging. He didn’t think his hands were worth complimenting.

“They’re not gross,” Ayase said, shaking her head in response to his self-deprecating statement. “It’s very manly to have hands like those. The best boys are the ones who are driven.”

“Huh?” Ikki was at a loss for words.

“Ah...” When she realized what she had just blurted out, Ayase went into a

panic. “Oh, um, I didn’t mean it like that or anything, I swear! Just, like, from a general point of view!”

“Y-Yeah, I get it. Don’t freak out like that, though. You’ll break your posture.”

Ikki calmed her down and got her back into position. He couldn’t bear to watch his work go to waste, especially when he had been so nervous about it.

“Oh, but... This feels a little stiff, Kurogane.”

“Your body can’t get rid of all its bad habits with just one adjustment. You’ll have to get used to it through repetition. For now, just get used to how it feels.” Ikki materialized Intetsu and stood in front of Ayase. “Parry my slash like you did before, but this time, be mindful of the angles of your elbows and knees when you counter. Make sure to feel yourself moving through your hips, too.”

“G-Got it!”

Ayase’s expression fierced as she readied Hizume and focused herself. Once she had fully prepared herself, Ikki attacked at the same speed and angle as before. And just like before, Ayase parried the blow with her sword and launched a counterattack at his torso. The basic actions were the same, but thanks to Ikki’s adjustments, she had performed them with much greater speed.

Ayase was speechless. Unable to believe what she had just done, she looked back and forth between Ikki and Hizume, her mouth agape.

Phew. Looks like I got it right. Ikki heaved a sigh of relief, happy to see that his modifications were correct.

Previously, Ayase had been fighting using only her upper body. With a man’s upper-body strength, one could smoothly transition into their next action without much trouble. Women, on the other hand, typically couldn’t match men’s upper-body strength, so they would end up planting their feet on the ground. As a result, their bodies would stiffen, ultimately delaying their follow-up. Ikki was aware of that difference, so he decided to change her stance to allow her lower body to take the impact.

Women’s flexible joints and the way their inner thighs were constructed made their lower bodies ideal for absorbing impacts, most of which could be

counteracted through leg strength alone. Doing so didn't require any extra effort, meaning the body wouldn't stiffen up, allowing for smoother action. Achieving that result was the entire purpose of the adjustments Ikki made.

"W-Wow... That's so cool! This is amazing, Kurogane!" Having finally understood the major implications of his minor changes, Ayase smiled broadly and took Ikki's hand, shaking it wildly. "I spent my entire second year worrying about this, and you solved it just like that! They ought to give you a PhD in swordsmanship!"

"I'm just glad my teachings worked out," Ikki replied humbly.

I'm really not worthy of a title like that, though. He wasn't at the point where he could give every one of his students such concrete direction. It was his first time ever mentoring someone so closely, but seeing Ayase jumping for joy and cheering because she was finally able to break through that wall made him glad he tried.

Fwoom!

He was actually more nervous helping her than he was during a real battle, and it made him ten times more tired than training. It was all worth it in the end, though.

Fwoom!

Being a teacher might not be so ba—

Fwoom, fwoom!

"Hey, Stella?"

"Yes, Doctor Sword?"

"Why's it so windy all of a sudden?"

Ikki turned toward the source of the point-blank, blustery assault on his face. It was Stella, swinging Lævateinn around with a very unhappy look on her face.

"Goodness, I do beg your pardon. I just couldn't help but get mad when I saw a pervert groping a girl's thighs and calling it 'training'. I guess it's affecting my swordplay now. Maybe you should make some adjustments for me, too?"

“Oh, s-sure.”

Ikki nodded in fear, considering he didn't really have a choice in the matter.

I'd rather not intrude on her style, though...

Stella's style was befitting of someone with her level of power; she could just mow down her enemies indiscriminately. Ikki's style, however, was meant for those without power. The two were fundamentally different.

He didn't see any way things would turn out well, but if he didn't just smile and nod, he'd never hear the end of it. With no other choice, Ikki began thoroughly examining Stella's sword swings.

Oh?

Her swings may have appeared rough at a glance, but on closer inspection, Ikki could see she struck with form that wasted no power whatsoever. Every part of her lower body, from her hips to her toes, worked in perfect harmony.

She may have thought she was swinging randomly, but Stella's superhuman sense for movement led her to subconsciously adjust her joints and muscles. Whether she knew it or not, her form was perfect; not a single motion was wasted. It was yet another reminder that her Rank A status wasn't for nothing.

Ikki simply couldn't find any fault in the work of art that was her style, so he couldn't play along with her whim.

“Wow, Stella. There's really nothing I can do to help you.”

“Why nooooooot?!”

“Whoa! Why are you getting mad at a compliment?!”

“Because! You dummyyyyy!”

Even Ikki's all-seeing eyes were useless against a woman's heart. No surprise there, though; the brain behind those eyes was made purely for battle.



“Why does *she* get all the attention?!”

Tired from chasing Ikki around, Stella sat on a bench in the clearing and pouted. Shizuku, having just finished her magic control training on a nearby

bench, looked at her with a tired expression.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to touch your faaaaaaaaat thighs.”

“Th-They’re not fat enough that you need to say it like that! They’re just pleasantly thick! I can’t help that I’m muscular!”

Stella raised her voice in indignation at the insult, but Shizuku was unfazed. She simply continued to make a statue of her brother out of clay.

It really does look like him, Stella thought. It’s kinda cute. I want it.

“Don’t be so touchy, hon. Unlike Ayatsuji, you’re a master swordswoman. Ikki honestly doesn’t have anything to teach you.”

“Mm.”

Alice was right, and somewhere deep inside, Stella knew that. If she were honest, she didn’t need Ikki’s help, but that wasn’t the problem at hand. It wasn’t exactly pleasant for her to watch her significant other touch someone else up and down like that.

Maybe I’m just narrow-minded. Maybe Ikki wouldn’t care that much if I touched another guy’s abs or arms, she thought. No, wh-what am I thinking?! I can’t actually touch someone else! I’d never do that to anyone but Ikki! These hands are for him alone!

It was a dreadful thought. Forcing them out of her mind in an attempt to get the goosebumps to stop, Stella turned toward Shizuku.

“Hey, Shizuku? Are you okay with that?”

“Okay with what?”

“Ikki, y’know... touching another girl.”

“Seriously?” Shizuku replied, uninterested. “Big Brother is just teaching Ayatsuji swordplay. Unlike a certain pig, she’s not making goo-goo eyes at him. If you’re going to snap at him for it, you must be no more than a wild animal.”

Taking some acrylic paints out of her bag, Shizuku began painting the figure she’d made. Her technique was masterful, though it had nothing to do with her training.

“You’ve snapped at me plenty of times,” Stella retorted. “You think you have a right to talk to me like that?”

“I do.” Shizuku stuck her tongue out at Stella, annoying her to no end. “Stella, I think you’ve misunderstood something.”

“What?”

“You seem to think I want him all to myself, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. My love isn’t so cheap and selfish; the most important thing to me is my brother’s happiness. If his partner makes him happy, I don’t really care who it is. As long as she doesn’t betray him or disappoint him, I’ll gladly give her my blessing.”

Stella was surprised by this declaration, because she thought Shizuku only loved Ikki romantically.

“I doubt anyone could love him as purely as I do, though.” Shizuku shot Stella a challenging smirk before looking back toward the clearing where Ikki and Ayase’s mutual training was still going on. “Big Brother has been happier since he met Ayatsuji. The rest of us aren’t strong enough for specialized lessons, and you’re *too* strong for them. I’m sure he’s been waiting for an opportunity like this; it’s adorable how much he loves to teach. In fact, I’m glad Ayatsuji came.”

“You’re really mature for your size.”

“And you’re too immature for your ridiculous sizes. Your legs are fat, too.”

“They’re not fat! You’re just too skinny!”

As long as Ikki’s happy. Stella prioritized Ikki’s happiness too, of course. *But I want to be the one who makes him the happiest.*

Unfortunately, though, things could never be that simple. Ever since they’d gotten together, they couldn’t so much as be near each other without getting nervous, much less do anything lovers do.

It was even worse at night, when they were alone together. Whenever their eyes met, Stella seized up in fear and looked away. Out of respect for her, Ikki never tried to invade her personal space.

She didn’t think their slow-moving relationship was so bad, though. Even

when she was unbearably nervous, just being near Ikki made her heart flutter. Still, she was ready to take their relationship to the next level, especially considering that she often heard that men hate women who make them wait.

“We haven’t done anything that couples do for the whole month we’ve been dating. Why don’t we just go back to the way we used to be?”

Just imagining it brought tears to her eyes. If it actually happened, she wouldn’t be able to handle the pain.

Please, no...

Was that a subject the woman in the relationship should bring up, though? Would he think she was being too forward and be disgusted by her? She couldn’t bring it up herself, and even worse, if Ikki brought it up, she wasn’t confident that she could give him an honest response. Every option scared her.

Stella knew better than anyone that she was difficult to deal with. She would just come up with some excuse like “A princess doesn’t do that” or “A princess should do this”. Just the thought of it made her sigh.

How could she dive into battle without a second thought, yet be so afraid to even dip her toes into romance? It amazed her that any other couple—her parents, for example—could do it so easily. Everyone else was just too brave.

I just want to kiss him.

Helpless thoughts swirled around Stella’s mind as she stared at the rosy evening sky and sighed for the umpteenth time in the past month.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

NAGI ALISUIN

■ PROFILE

AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,

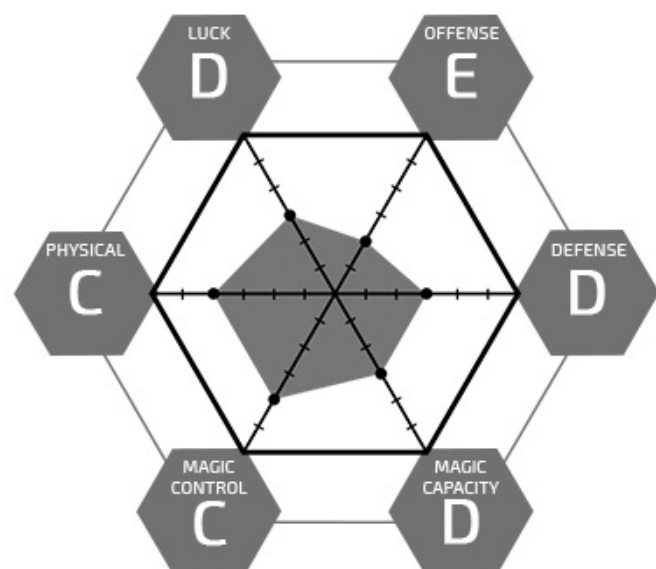
CLASS 1-4

BLAZER RANK: D

NOBLE ART: SHADOW WALK

NICKNAME: BLACK THORN

SUMMARY: A MAIDEN TRAPPED IN A
MAN'S BODY.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

A handsome woman over six feet tall, with a style like a glam band rock star. Many of her female fans love her masculine features and how she's much more approachable than your everyday 'cool guy'. She was born for popularity! I bet she'd look great dressed to the nines!



Chapter 2

Looming Dusk

“Let’s go to the pool tomorrow.”

The day before, shortly after winning his tenth battle in a row, Ikki made that suggestion and parted with Ayase. He wasn’t just inviting her to hang out; Ayase hadn’t noticed it yet, but her body had amassed a lot of fatigue from her consecutive days of training.

Due to her corrected stance, she was using muscles that she’d never had to use before—muscles that were untrained from the lack of use. Today, she was to rest those muscles, and Ikki knew just the training course for such a day.

“You’re coming, too, Stella?”

Waiting for Ayase at the school gate, Ikki was accompanied by Stella, who was wearing a white sundress.

“Of course I am. If I take my eyes off you, you’ll just sexually harass her again.”

“I didn’t do that.”

“Liar! You did during your training. Or is it normal for people to touch other girls’ thighs?”

“I had to do it to correct her form! It was very delicate work that I couldn’t afford to mess up. Trust me, I was so nervous that there wasn’t any room in my mind to think of doing anything bad.”

Stella had seemed unhappy the past few days. Ikki knew why, of course: he was only focusing on Ayase. At least, that’s what Stella seemed to think.

It wasn’t as though Ikki didn’t understand her feelings. No matter the reason, he would be upset if she got close to another man too. She was his girlfriend, after all.

“Hey, Stella. I really haven’t thought of her like that even once. You have to believe me when I say that. The only thing going on between us is me giving her advice as a fellow swordsman. All of us need help sometimes.”

Nobody had ever helped Ikki; the people who were supposed to have his back had stabbed him in it. He was painfully aware of how difficult it could be for someone to overcome hurdles on their own, hence he was all the more willing to help them.

“That’s the only reason I’m helping her,” he continued, “not because I’m interested in her or anything. I swear. You’re the only one I’m interested in, Stella.”

“Ikki...” Stella’s face was tinged red as she looked up at Ikki, her ruby eyes still quaking with unease.

In truth, she knew all along that Ikki didn’t feel anything for Ayase that she needed to be so apprehensive about. The boy who loved her wasn’t so frivolous. Regardless, however, she couldn’t quell her anxiety.

All that had happened between Ikki and Stella was the promise they made to each other—there was nothing to solidify it. As if hopelessly searching for something to do just that, Stella’s pale pink lips began to move, seeming to voicelessly call Ikki’s name.

That’s it! Ikki thought. If he could do something to prove that their promise was more than just empty words, she’d be able to trust him even more. *I...*

Like a bee to a flower, his lips were drawn to hers.

“Sorry to make you wait! I couldn’t find a swimsuit!”

“Aaah!” They both cried in shock at the voice that had interrupted them.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” Ayase, the person behind that voice, asked. “You screamed like a couple being discovered on a secret rendezvous.”

How did she know?! They both broke into a cold sweat, amazed by Ayase’s exceptional deduction.

“N-N-N-Nothing’s wrong! Right, Ikki?!”

“Right! You just surprised us!”

Ayase seemed confused by their agitation. She didn't seem to be too convinced, so Ikki quickly changed the subject and they moved to depart.

That could have ended badly. If their relationship were to be discovered, it would become a scandal thanks to Stella's status as a princess. Not only did they have to find the right mood to show their affection, but they also had to be careful of where they showed it.

What a shame, Ikki thought, dejected. They had found the same pleasant mood that naturally arose on the night of their promise. If Ayase had come just a little bit later, they could have taken the next step.

Disappointed that he'd lost his chance, Ikki sighed inwardly.



Among other facilities, Hagun Academy naturally had a pool on its enormous campus. Two of them, in fact, both over a hundred yards long. The first happened to be in the middle of a scheduled cleaning, however, and the second was reserved by Kurono Shinguuji, the school's director and former third-place King of Knights contestant, for special training, so the three of them chose to use a heated swimming pool in a nearby gym.

Ikki, in his red and black swim trunks, was the first to finish changing. He made his way to the poolside to wait for the girls, who appeared a few minutes later.

Unsurprisingly for the easily-embarrassed and straitlaced Ayase, she wore a sporty tankini that looked suitable for both the pool and exercise. It wasn't very glamorous, but it had a certain stylish charm that fit her well-maintained, well-proportioned swordswoman's body.

Also unsurprisingly, Stella was much more eye-catching. Unlike the bikini she'd worn when they bathed together, this one was a black string bikini. It exposed even more skin than a normal bikini, let alone Ayase's tankini. With every step, her ample breasts seemed ready to burst out of her top.

Moreover, even the bottom was mouth-wateringly attractive, exposing her wide hips—an unusual sight in Japan. Her shapely legs were a sight to behold too. How could she maintain such a soft, voluptuous appearance despite her

muscular strength? It was mysterious even to Ikki's well-trained eyes. Too mysterious, in fact; she must have been cheating somehow.

To top it all off, the way she walked accentuated her gorgeous looks. Stella moved like a model, like someone you'd see at Paris Fashion Week. She had probably been taught how to carry herself.

Stella's so beautiful...

Mesmerized, Ikki let out a sigh. It wasn't just him, though; people resting beside the pool and even some who were in the water stopped and stared, spellbound by the foreign beauty. Stella was often on television, too, so it wouldn't have been surprising if some of the gawkers recognized her.

"Sorry for taking so long," she told him. "Boys get ready so fast."

Everyone's eyes had been attracted to Stella, but they instantly shifted to Ikki, their glares stabbing into him like knives.

"What?! Those two babes are with *him*?!"

"No way! How'd such a plain guy get a chick like that, let alone two?!"

"You've gotta be kidding me! Japan's short enough on girls as it is!"

"I'm gonna kill him!"

I get the feeling I'm going to "accidentally" drown while we're here.

Ignoring the cold sweat that crept down his back, Ikki noticed Stella looking curiously over the indoor pool. He had begun to forget about it due to living with her, but she was a princess. She had probably never seen a commoners' pool before.

Smaller than the ones at Hagun at about fifty yards long, the pool was divided into two areas by a rope: one area for swim lanes and one for recreational swimming. It was still only June, so neither area was relatively crowded.

"It's so big," Stella said, awestruck.

"Miss Vermillion, you're a princess, right? Doesn't your family have a pool this big?" Ayase didn't understand her fascination.

"Nope. But we do have a bath about this size."

“Wow! That’s amazing! You really are like a celebrity!”

“Well, that bath is for our servants. The family’s bath is a lot smaller. Bit of a waste of space to have a big bath for only a few people, don’t you think?”

Ikki hadn’t really thought about it before, but he realized that Stella didn’t seem to live a life very different from those of ordinary people. She had been surprised to learn that instant coffee was a real thing, but that was about it. The Vermillion Empire was small, so maybe they just lived more humbly than royalty from larger countries.

“Phew. I heard that Japanese people are packed into places like sardines a lot, so I’m glad this place isn’t super busy.”

“It’s not pool season yet, fortunately.”

“Then we can play all we want without worrying about space!” Stella cheered, revealing a beach ball.

“We’re not here to play.”

“Whaaat? Why did we come to a pool, then?”

“I’m more curious about why you came at all, Stella.”

“Ugh. I lugged this thing here for nothing!”



“All right, fine. We can play once we’re done training, just lose the ball for now.”

“Whatever. But afterward, we *will* play!” she said and reluctantly handed the ball over to Ikki.

She really is here to play, huh? he thought. *I could’ve sworn I told her that we were here to train, though.*

“So, Kurogane. What are we doing for today’s training? Just swimming?”

“Nah.” Ikki shook his head. “Honestly, I keep calling it ‘training’, but it’s not really that tough. Your body is going to start feeling some fatigue soon.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“In a word: nothing.”

“Huh?”

“We’re just gonna float underwater like jellyfish.”

“D-Does that really count as training?”

“Sure does,” Ikki responded confidently. “First off, of course, this will help increase your lung capacity. Anaerobic exercise is good preparation for heated battles—those with lesser lung capacities will be the first to fall, so it’s just as important to a swordsman as strength or power. That’s actually just a side-effect of today’s training, though. You might not get it until you try it, but when you’re underwater, you’ll begin to feel much closer to yourself.”

Ayase must not have understood it fully, as she cutely tilted her head in confusion.

“While you’re floating under the water, try to forget about the strength your body uses to stand, along with the brainpower you use to understand what your eyes see. Shift your focus inward and listen to the voice of your very self.”

“I don’t think I understand, but you’re the boss, so I’ll give it a try.”

Ayase was still unsure of what Ikki wanted her to actually do, but she had no reason to doubt him. She obediently held her breath and submerged herself underwater. Judging from her training, she could probably stay under for about

three minutes.

A swordswoman as experienced as Ayase should grasp the meaning of this after she's tried it once, Ikki thought while pulling Stella's ball out of the pool.

"I'll go put this in a locker," he said. "It'll just get in the way if we leave it here."



As soon as Ikki left, Stella got bored. She didn't know anything about Ayase as a person, much less about her swordplay. There wasn't anything to talk about, not to mention that it was rude to interrupt someone's training for no reason.

Boooriing...

With nothing else to do, Stella decided to follow along with Ayase's training. She held her breath and sunk into the water.

It wasn't difficult; she had far greater lung capacity than even Ikki. If she wanted to, she could stay underwater for ten minutes—calling it superhuman wouldn't be too far-fetched.

It's quiet down here.

There were still swimmers paddling and children romping around above water, but beneath the surface, now so far away that it seemed as though the world itself was a distant thing, there was nothing.

In that silence, she began to hear herself. Sounds that were normally inaudible among the external noise—her heartbeat, the flow of her blood, the movement of impulses sent from her brain and through her nerves—all became incredibly clear.

"When you're underwater, you begin to feel much closer to yourself."

Stella was experiencing exactly what Ikki had meant, though a knight as accomplished as her already knew the feeling of letting her consciousness permeate her body. She understood that sensation, the feeling of the very consciousness that governed her.

To the unenlightened, swinging a sword was just "holding your sword and moving your arm". But when one was conscious of every movement from

shoulder to thumb, the impulses carried through their nerves, and the expansion and contraction of their muscles, they would begin to notice a marked difference in the speed and strength of their swings. To be able to control every minute factor of one's swing, one has to understand the makeup of their body.

Ayase wasn't ready to do that yet. If she were, she wouldn't have moved so unnaturally in the first place, as once one felt their consciousness so intimately, they became able to recognize areas of themselves that caused strain and wasted energy.

Thanks to Ikki adjusting her form based on her bodily condition, Ayase's movements had sped up. One's bodily condition can change from day to day, however, so she had to be ready to adjust to those changes on her own. Only then could she say that she had full control of her own strength. Therefore, the training she was undergoing was sure to be useful for her.

Stella, however, didn't need it, for she had already trained herself to automatically adjust without conscious effort. That was why, even when she meant to swing wildly the other day, she was subconsciously correcting herself for optimal movement.

I was naïve to think that was enough.

Looking up at the surface, Stella lost herself in her thoughts. She had believed she'd trained herself more vigorously and earnestly than anyone else out there. She had believed she'd had perfect control of herself. But she had believed incorrectly.

Ikki's Ittou Shura was at the furthest extreme of self-control, and Stella was not yet at that point. The level of discipline required to use up all of her own energy in a single minute was beyond her.

That gap showed that Stella's martial arts prowess was lesser than Ikki's. She surpassed him in so many physical capabilities, such as lung capacity, strength, instantaneous force, and the like, but still fell short because their ways of living were fundamentally different.

Ikki stood alone at the darkest, quietest depths of self-control, deeper even than the water she floated in, while Stella remained in the shallows. That was

his world. If she could claw her way there, she thought maybe she could find something she hadn't found before.

The light filtering in from the surface faded as she slowly closed her eyes, leaving her cut off from everything but the sounds within her own body. She was completely alone. Amidst silence and darkness, all that remained was a vision of herself.

It wasn't enough. She hadn't delved deep enough, so she turned, moving deeper and deeper, reaching her hand toward the domain of Another One.

"Miss Vermillion, are you and Kurogane dating?"

"Gblorfgh?!"

Stella started to drown.



"Oww! Wader wennup my noshe!"

Stella coughed as she pressed on her nose, disappointed at her own failure. She had come to the surface and was standing in the pool, but the fact that Ayase's voice had reached the depths of her consciousness while she was underwater proved that her training was incomplete. She would never be able to catch up with Ikki at the rate she was going.

Ikki can probably just cut off his sight and hearing entirely. He needed to be able to do at least that much to use Ittou Shura, bringing her face-to-face with the difficulty of her goal once more.

"S-Sorry, Miss Vermillion," Ayase said. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah. I'm fine," Stella assured her.

"Considering how exaggerated your reaction was, that must mean..."

"N-N-No way! The second imperial princess of the Vermillion royal family would never date a commoner!"

"Are you sure you're not dating?"

"Of course we're not."

"Then you don't mind if I ask him out?"

“What?!” Stella’s voice cracked. “H-Hold on! I thought you just wanted him to teach you swordplay! He even told me there were no feelings between you!”

“At first, yes. But Kurogane is so gentlemanly and handsome, and he even gave a stalker like me a chance. Even though he’s younger than me, he’s so much more mature. And he’s so gentle when he teaches, but he’s still so good at it. Kurogane is the perfect man. Now that I can look at his face when I talk to him, I think I might ask him out to—”

“N-Nooo!” Stella couldn’t take it anymore, screaming before Ayase could even finish her sentence. “No way! Absolutely nooot! Ikki is *my* boyfriend, so back off!”

She smacked the water with her hands like a child throwing a tantrum. She didn’t even want to think of another person asking Ikki out, so she drowned out Ayase’s words entirely and glared at her, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I knew it.” When she saw the mischievous grin on Ayase’s face, Stella knew that she’d been had. “I thought you two looked pretty lovey-dovey back there, and it looks like I was right after all!”

“Ugh. I didn’t think you would be the type to come at me with a sneaky tactic like that,” Stella moaned. “I figured you were too dumb.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet.”

“I think it’s natural for me to be a little mean after you trapped me like that. But let’s keep this a secret, okay? It would be annoying if everyone and their brother found out about this.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep quiet. You’re famous, so it would just cause problems.”

“By the way... Were you lying about liking Ikki?”

Ayase nodded decisively. “I do think he’s a wonderful person, but that doesn’t mean I’m interested in him like that. It would be a betrayal to the man who humored me and taught me swordplay. I always had a hunch, though. You two are so lucky. I want to fall in love with someone too!”

Much to Stella’s surprise, Ayase’s eyes sparkled and she put her hands over her blushing cheeks. She looked like a little girl reading a fairy tale.

“I thought you hated men, Ayatsuji.”

“You’ve definitely got the wrong idea. I actually love boys.”

“Shh! Be careful what you say here. I think I just saw like six guys perk up.”

“Anyway, I don’t hate men at all. I actually focus on their presence so much that I can’t help but get embarrassed. My roommate says I look mean. Oh, how I wish I could love someone.”

“Why not just do it?” Stella asked, putting aside her surprise at seeing someone be so upfront about such a thing.

“N-No, I couldn’t! I would be delighted if I could, but I’m so inexperienced when it comes to love that I’d probably die of embarrassment. Instead, I just content myself with manga and books.”

“Talk about a sad life.”

“So, do you two do sexy things when you’re together at night?”

“Gak!” Ayase’s fastball lodged itself in Stella’s throat. “H-H-How can you just say that?!”

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

Just like all the other girls in her class, Ayase readily pried into Stella’s private affairs, shattering Stella’s impression of her as a prim and proper swordswoman. She was just another gossip-lover with a nose for romance.

“Obviously not. We haven’t even said our vows yet.”

“Really? All the girls in the manga I read are constantly having premarital sex.”

“S-Seriously?! Don’t people think that’s weird?!”

“I’ve never had a boyfriend, so I wouldn’t know.” Her reply was so honest that it was almost sad. “But seeing the way you act, I think you want to have sex with him, don’t you?”

Sh-She’s really out for blood! Stella cried in her mind. There was no point in hiding it since the truth was out, though. She thought that talking to someone might help soothe the unease deep within her, so she lowered herself further into the water and muttered quietly.

“I-I wouldn’t go that far, but I do want to do more lovey-dovey stuff.”

“Why don’t you tell him exactly what you just said?”

“I wouldn’t be so stressed out if I could do that.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Isn’t it kind of unladylike for a girl to say that?”

“Is it? I think it’s normal to want to be closer to your boyfriend. In fact, I’d think it would be less healthy if you *didn’t* want to.”

Huh? Stella didn’t know how to respond.

It made sense when someone else said it. Of course it did; what kind of person, boy or girl, wouldn’t want to take the next step with their significant other? But...

“Maybe he wants to take things slow, though. If I get too ahead of myself, he might think I’m a slut or something and get turned off by it.”

“So you think Kurogane is insensitive, then? He would have to be really insensitive to be turned off just because you’re interested in moving things forward.”

“N-No! He’s not insensitive!”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

“But... Hm.”

Stella didn’t have a rebuttal. Perhaps Ayase was right, after all. It seemed so simple. Why hadn’t she realized it before? Maybe this is what people mean when they say love is blind.

Ayase looked Stella right in the eyes. “Don’t waste the time you have with your loved ones. For as long as humans live, we’ll have to say goodbye sooner or later,” she said with a mature look on her face.

“Wow. This is the first time it’s really set in that you’re older than me.”

“I’m just speculating at this point, but I bet Kurogane wants to take the next step with you too.”

“Why’s that?”

“You may not have noticed it when we got here, Miss Vermillion, but he was practically drooling at the sight of you. I had to stop myself from laughing at how obviously he was leering at you.”

“Ah!”

No way. This is the worst thing ever. Why didn’t I look at him? I’ll never live this down.

While Stella agonized over the shame of missing her opportunity, Ikki returned from locking away the beach ball.

“Oh? Already given up, huh, Ayatsuji?” he asked.

“No, sorry. I just wanted to chat with Miss Vermillion.”

“Cool. So, how was it? Did you feel your consciousness moving throughout your body?”

“Yes! I understand the point of this exercise, too. In fact, I’d like to focus on it by myself for a while. Would you mind letting me be alone for a bit?”

“Go ahead.”

In the meantime, I think Miss Vermillion here has something she really wants to tell you!”

“Wha—?!”

Stella seemed to scream as she was put on the spot. Ayase ignored her and just swam far off, shooting her a wink as if to say, “This is me making up for interrupting you two before.”

I don’t need your help!



After Ayase’s departure, Ikki and Stella moved to a bench next to the pool.

“So, what did you want to tell me?”

“Umm...” Reluctant to answer, Stella simply looked down at her legs without a word.

Who could blame her? Ayase had been able to coax her to sit down with Ikki using logic, but logic wasn't the issue. Why did she think he would hate her for wanting to do more things that lovers do? Why didn't she realize that he *couldn't* hate her for something so simple and innocent? She learned the answer when she looked at Ikki's face.

The problem was simple: she was ashamed of herself. She kept on putting off the issue, clinging to whatever justification she could, all while pretending she didn't realize it and thinking that maybe, just maybe, Ikki would bring up the topic himself. It wasn't like she could just ask him to kiss her.

I can't say something that embarrassing!

"Stella?"

"Oh! S-Sorry! So, what I wanted to tell you is, umm..." With her escape route having been cut off by Ayase, Stella had to at least say something. "R-Right! My swimsuit! I was wondering if you liked it!"

"Of course I like it. It looks really good on you. You've got a nice style, and the swimsuit really complements it."

Ikki responded smoothly and comfortably to Stella's emergency maneuver, his expression as gentle as ever. Even that bothered her, though. Was it because she had been told earlier that he was nearly drooling over her? If that were true, should he have been able to answer so easily? What if he was just putting on an act when he first saw her?

"Actually, I have something I want to tell you too."

"You do?"

What is it? I didn't plan for this!

Was he just going to ask for her thoughts on his swimwear too? How should she answer? She was attracted to him no matter what he wore, but she wasn't sure she could get that across—

"I was just wondering, uh, if we should keep doing this."

"Huh?"

"I've been thinking about it for a while now. We haven't done anything that

couples do for the whole month we've been dating."

Stella felt as if her heart had frozen over when she heard that. *We haven't done anything that couples do for the whole month we've been dating.* Those were the words she feared most. Her boyfriend had just said the most frightening thing he could possibly say.

So it's true. Ikki's grown tired of our relationship, he just didn't say anything for the entire month. He's gotten bored of me.

Who wouldn't? He had Shizuku. And he had a beautiful disciple, too, even if she was older. And there were plenty of other viable girls among his classmates, like Kusakabe. Countless girls fawned over him on a daily basis. Why should he care about a self-important girl who wouldn't even touch him? The blood in her veins grew colder the more she thought about it.

"So I was just wondering where we should go from here."

No. Stella knew what he would say next. *"Why don't we just go back to the way we used to be?"* She didn't want to hear it. She couldn't bear to let Ikki finish that thought, so she turned to face away from him and spoke with a shrill tone.

"Y-You're right! Honestly, I meant to bring that up, instead of the dumb swimsuit! H-Haha, yeah, it was never gonna work out in the first place! A princess and a commoner are just too different! Instead of being with a girl who won't even hold your hand, you should just be with someone like Ayase who'll let you touch her thighs and her butt!"

"H-Huh?! No! Stella, wait! What are you talking about?!"

"I-I-I'm talking about b-breaking up, obviously! You don't need to be with a prude who won't touch you!"

"Wha—?!" Ikki stood there, his eyes wide with shock. He had no idea why Stella would say something so hurtful. With all the color gone from his face, he grabbed Stella's shoulder and pleaded, "I've never felt that way! Let's just calm down and talk this through!"

"Don't touch me!" she screamed and turned back toward him, smacking his hand away. Droplets of water shimmered as they were sent dancing through

her red hair.

Is she crying? Ikki thought. He knew he had to figure out why she wanted to break up, so he reminded himself that their relationship would be over the moment he got angry, then spoke.

“If I did something to put you off or make you hate me, I’ll apologize, but please, I need you to tell me what’s wrong!”

“You’re the one who hates me!”

“That’s not true! Why would you ever think that?! I never said I hated you!”

“I already know you do, even if you don’t say it!”

“You don’t know! Please, just calm down!”

“I am calm!”

“You don’t seem calm! Why do you think I’d hate you, Stella?! If that’s what you think of me, that must mean you’re the one who hates me!”

Ikki’s voice gradually became more and more panicked, until he was basically yelling. He couldn’t help but lose his cool; he was being broken up with by his girlfriend without an explanation, after all. How could he stay calm when he loved her so much?

“I-I don’t! I love you, Ikki!”

“Well, I love you more!”

“Liar! I love you way more! Remember when I asked if you liked my swimsuit and you lied?! You don’t care about me, and it’s because I won’t even touch you! When Ayase said you were drooling over me, you were actually just drooling over her!”

“What?! That’s mean, and it’s definitely not true! You’d better stop, or I’ll get mad at you!”

“You’re already mad at me!”

“Because you’re making baseless accusations! Why would I look at another girl when my smoking-hot girlfriend is standing right there?!”

“Then why did you act so normal when I asked?!”

“I might have looked normal, but come on! I can’t just answer a question like that honestly! You’re so sexy, I can’t keep my eyes off you! But the problem is that if I act like some sort of pervert, I’m worried you might be grossed out! And what about you, Stella?! If you love me so much, why haven’t we been intimate at all this past month?!”

“That’s your fault, too! The girl in the relationship can’t be the one to say she wants to have sex! I don’t want you to think I’m some sort of slut or something!”

“Then why are we even fighting?!”

“How should I know?!”

They continued yelling at each other, despite all the people around them.

“Excuse me? I’m not sure if you’re having a lovers’ quarrel or flirting, but there are other people trying to enjoy the pool. Could you possibly take it somewhere else?”

A lifeguard smirked as he spoke to them, while the other swimmers around them watched as if they were exotic animals. Ikki and Stella could feel their faces burning as they simultaneously realized how strange their fight must have looked.

“E-Excuse us!”

“Sorryyy!”

The two ran off to the kids’ pool, also empty, in an attempt to escape the onlookers. They sat under an umbrella-shaped fountain in the middle of the pool, the curtain of water making them invisible to any onlookers and drowning out their voices. They were completely isolated; only the two of them would know what happened there.

“Ikki, um, don’t look at me right now.”

“Sure. I don’t really want you to see my face either, so that works.”

Both of them were painfully embarrassed. Though they had at least escaped it, they realized that their argument was downright ridiculous. They were so ashamed of themselves that they couldn’t even look at each other.

“Hey, Stella?”

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t we both say what we want the most right now? We’ll do it at the same time.”

“...Okay.”

It was a stupid argument, but it wasn’t pointless. It proved to both of them that the person they loved loved them back.

“I want to kiss you,” they said in unison. They didn’t need to say any more than that.

The two of them sighed heavily before looking into each other’s eyes, neither of them too embarrassed to make eye contact anymore. Stella looked up at Ikki and gently closed her eyes, tears still sitting gently at the ends of her eyelashes. Ikki gently wiped them away and put his hands on her soft cheeks.

Stella’s body stiffened. Her eyes shot open and her soft, warm face trembled. She was unsure how to react to the new sensation of a boy touching her eyelashes. But she didn’t push him away; she just closed her eyes, giving herself to him.



Ikki felt so happy, so loved in that moment. Within the curtain of water and the sound of the fountain, he drew closer and placed his lips against hers. It was a light touch—one tiny kiss—but Ikki's lips burned for more.

Friends and family often kissed each other on the cheek, but never on the mouth. It was proof above all else that they shared a special relationship, proof of the new bond between them that gave their promise meaning.

“Hey, Ikki?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you hate bad girls who beg for kisses like me?”

“There isn't a guy in the world who hates a bad girl. I should be asking you a similar question, though. Stella, do you hate guys having sexy thoughts about you?”

“Not if it's you having them, Ikki.”

After they took that first step, their hesitation melted away. They shared a second kiss, deeper and more forceful than the first. It was an immature, impatient, clumsy kiss, but it was one born from their desperate longing for each other.

There had been some rough patches, but Ikki and Stella had shared a day they would never forget.



The sky was already getting dark when the trio left the pool. With their stomachs empty, they decided to head to a restaurant before returning home. Ikki asked Stella and Ayase if they wanted to go anywhere in particular, but they didn't offer any ideas, so he took them to a random family restaurant.

They ordered according to their own tastes: for Ikki, a hefty serving of udon with tofu; for Ayase, a salmon meal; and for Stella, four servings of mixed grill and three servings of steak.

“Y-You certainly eat a lot, Miss Vermillion,” Ayase said, astounded by her appetite.

“I can’t help it,” Stella replied. “My body needs all of this to function.”

“How do you eat so much, yet stay so slim? It doesn’t make sense.”

Stella’s cheeks flushed slightly. She knew she was a big eater, but she didn’t care to stop. She just kept on chomping and chomping, filling up on calories. The machine that was her body needed ample fuel to keep on moving—she needed to eat a lot for everything to work properly.

“If I didn’t know better, I would never have imagined you were a princess.” Ayase laughed as she watched Stella eat.

“Om-nom. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not insulting you! You just seem so approachable, and you don’t eat any differently than we do.”

“Well, I *have* taken classes on table manners, but now’s not the time or place for any of that. Knowing the proper time and place when it comes to anything—be it manners or swordplay—is an important skill.”

Stella looked around the restaurant. It was packed full of people, owing to the dinnertime rush. The sounds of clanging silverware, the bells on the door ringing every time someone came or went, children screaming and crying, and students laughing and talking loudly all mingled into a cacophony of noise. If she ate politely like she had been taught, it would look out of place.

“Haha. Isn’t that the truth?” Ayase laughed self-derisively as one of her faults was pointed out. “I’ve learned a lot today. Ever since I started training under you, every day has been full of discovery and growth. I’m nowhere near ready to use the ultimate technique my father taught me, but I think I’m getting closer and closer by the day. I don’t know how I could ever thank you, Kurogane.”

“It’s all your own doing, Ayatsuji. I mean it. Even if you were studying alone, you would’ve figured it out someday. All I did was give you a little push in the right direction, so there’s no need to thank me.”

“No. I’m going to use what you’ve taught me very soon.”

“In your selection battles, you mean?”

“Yes. This is my third year, so it’s my final Seven Stars. I have to win every one

of my selection battles and make it to the Festival to take back what was stolen from me. That's why I need strength right now."

Huh?

Ikki saw a strange emotion in Ayase's eyes: anger. It wasn't your average, everyday anger, though; it was full of hatred that almost resembled murderous intent. Why was she so—

"Hah! If it isn't Ayase. I thought I recognized that mug."

A hoarse voice called out from behind Ikki, interrupting his thoughts.

"Gah?!"

Ayase's eyes opened wide with shock. The man who'd spoken was just under six feet tall with dyed hair. The whites of his eyes were constantly visible, revealing his ferocity through his sunglasses. He puffed on a cigarette despite being in a no-smoking area. His deep-red top was unbuttoned to reveal a laughing skull tattoo on his chest, which bothered the nearby customers.

Ikki recalled his distinctive appearance. When they'd walked into the restaurant, he and the rest of his poorly-mannered group had been roaring with laughter.

"I was just wondering where you went off to, and here you are. Hah! One hell of a coincidence, right?"

"Kuraudooo? Who are you talking to?"

"Let's get to the arcade, man!"

"Hey, that's Ayase, ain't it?! Long time no see!"

"We were worried about you, y'know? You never show up anymore. Gahaha!"

"You just gonna ignore Kuraudo when he's talking to you?"

"You got pretty full of yourself, didn'tcha? Well?"

Following the guy with the skull tattoo, around ten more outlaw-like men gathered around Ikki's table. He figured they must have known Ayase, but she didn't bother to look at them. Instead, she stared down at the table and bit her

lip angrily. Ikki knew what he had to do.

“Sorry, I don’t think my friend likes you. Would you mind backing off?”

“Just who the hell are you?”

“You’d better shut up before you get messed up, pal!”

The henchmen yelled at Ikki, but he didn’t respond. He knew there was only one person he needed to deal with, so he turned his attention toward the guy with the skull tattoo, apparently named Kuraudo.

Kuraudo glared at Ikki with deep interest, then asked a strange question.

“You’re a swordsman, aren’t you?”

“How’d you know?” Ikki replied.

“Hah! You all have the same aura.” He then took a beer bottle and a glass from a nearby table where a family was eating.

“Sorry for butting in on your meal, brother. I saw an old friend, so I just wanted a quick chat,” Kuraudo said as he poured the beer into the glass and slid it over to Ikki. “Here, a symbol of my apology. Take it.”

“Oh, sure.”

He wanted to point out that it wasn’t Kuraudo’s drink to give away, but there wasn’t any merit in stirring the pot, so he silently reached his hand toward the glass. Before he knew what had hit him, he felt the bottle being smashed over his head.

“Ikki!”

“Kurogane!”



The bottle shattered, sending shards of glass all over the table and floor. After taking such a painful hit to the head, Ikki fell forward onto the table.

“Hah! Great reflexes there, swordsman! Dumbass!”

“Ahaha! Nice one!”

“Damn, Kuraudo! You’re always flippin’ a shit outta nowhere!”

“He just does what he wants, devil may care!”

Kuraudo’s henchmen cheered him on as the people at nearby tables screamed.

He tossed the broken beer bottle aside and licked his lips.

“Beating up little sword-flailing idiots like you is my favorite thing to do. C’mon, kid! Get your Device!”

The man summoned his own Device, a nodachi with a saw-like blade that reflected no light, more akin to bone than steel. His red top, though unbuttoned, was the uniform of Donrou Academy, another Mage-Knight school in Tokyo. He was a Blazer, like Ikki.

“How *dare* you?! I hope you enjoy being burnt to a crisp!”

Seething with rage after watching Ikki get hurt, Stella sent embers flying from her hair and opened her hand to summon Lævateinn, but Ikki grabbed her arm.

“No, Stella,” he said, slowly rising from his seat as if nothing had happened to him. He smiled at her while a stream of blood gushed from his head. “There’s no reason to make a scene. His hand just slipped.”

“Wh-What the hell are you talking about?!”

“It’s just a cut on my head and a little blood on my clothes. We don’t have to fight here.”

Ikki was clearly trying to suppress Stella’s anger. If they used their Devices and made things even worse than they already were, suspension wouldn’t be the end of it; expulsion was the best-case scenario.

“Pfahahahahahaha! Aahahahahahaaa!” Ikki had managed to stop Stella, but the skull-guy’s henchmen seemed to think he was running away from a fight like some sort of coward. They pointed at him and laughed oafishly. “Get a load of this guy! He’s still smiling like a dumbass even after his head got split open!”

“Are you that scared of Kuraudo? What a freakin’ loser!”

“Bwahaha! So lame!”

“Hahahah! I’ve never seen a swordsman who’s as big a pansy as you. How

'bout you grow a pair?"

They ridiculed Ikki, showering him with profanity. He showed no signs of reacting, however, instead just smiling vacantly while he waited for it all to end. Hoping for some sort of reaction, Kuraudo spat on his face.

"Rgh!"

Stella's rage peaked yet again, but Ikki held her back, stronger than before. Even that wasn't enough to provoke him, which perturbed Kuraudo.

"Damn killjoy. If we hang around a chicken-shit like this, we're bound to look bad too. Let's go, boys."

"Later, coward!"

"Good. Kuraudo's not the type to bully wimps!"

"Right? Good thing he was a weakling. Ahahaha!"

The group turned around and headed out of the restaurant. Once they had left, a man who seemed to be the owner of the restaurant ran over to Ikki and bowed deeply, sweating profusely.

"I'm so very sorry, sir! Are you okay?! I'll go call an ambulance!"

"No, I'm fine. Do you have a first-aid kit? I can just bandage this up and call it a day, if you'll bring it over."

"Y-Yes, sir! Right away!"

The owner ran to the break room like a madman in search of the first-aid kit while all the other workers were apologizing to nearby customers. After confirming that the situation had been resolved with the smallest mess possible, Ikki wiped the spit off of his face with a napkin.

"Your face looks twice as big as usual, Stella," he said.

"I can't help that I look mad!" she exclaimed, her cheeks puffed up like a balloon. "How could you let that trash talk to you like that?! Hell, you didn't even try to avoid that beer bottle! What's with you?"

"If I'd avoided it, he might've just gotten angrier. I can't go around causing problems in public."

“I guess that’s true. Couldn’t you have beaten those guys up even without Intetsu, though?”

“I dunno.”

“Why not?”

“That guy with the skull tattoo is really strong. I’m not sure I could take him on barehanded.”

“You’ve got that right. That guy was a quarterfinalist in last year’s Seven Stars, y’know.” A boy’s voice, so cheerful that it seemed out of place, cut into their conversation, plastering Ikki’s and Stella’s faces with shock.

The reason they were so surprised was that he had somehow *appeared* on their table, scattering silverware in all directions. He’d intruded without so much as a trace of his approach; it was as if they had suddenly cut to a new scene in a movie.

Wavy hair of dull silver, eyes of gold that reflected no light. The boy, no larger than a kindergartener, was wearing Hagun Academy’s uniform. He went on to speak to Ikki, wearing a smile so fake it looked like he’d glued it on.

“Ahaha! Hoo, boy, that was unfortunate, huh? Just a disaster. That’s the ace of Donrou Academy, a wild dog who’ll sink his fangs into anyone he sees. Kuraudo Kurashiki is his name, but people just call him the Sword Eater. Shame you had to run into him, Worst One, but you made the right choice.”

“Heehee. Yes, absolutely.”

A tall girl appeared next, but her presence was much more pronounced than the boy’s. Even indoors, she was equipped with a parasol and a wide-brimmed hat. Her eyes were hidden by the hat’s brim, but her features could be imagined based on the outline of her jaw. She carried herself like a noblewoman, wearing a snow-white dress that was glorious to see.

Despite her pure, innocent appearance, however, Ikki and Stella felt an intense, hair-raising disgust. Immaculate white covered her body, but she almost seemed to be covered in the blood of others. Why? It didn’t take long for Ikki to realize that she reeked of blood, unable to be concealed by even the most potent perfume.

If there was one thing he could be sure of, it was that she was, without a doubt, the real deal.

“If either of you had escalated the situation any further, I would have been forced to apprehend everyone present.” She spoke with a refined tone that further clashed against the pure-white blood and death.

“Who are these people, Ikki? *What* are they?” Stella, thoroughly creeped out and wary, spoke to Ikki in a low voice.

“They’re from Hagun’s Student Council. Vice President Utakata Misogi and Treasurer Kanata Toutokubara.”

“Toutokubara?! You mean...”

Even Stella, ignorant of most rumors, recognized that name. Kanata Toutokubara, the Blutrote Dame. The second-strongest student in Hagun Academy and a Rank B knight. She made a name for herself through her battle capabilities that, despite being a student, led her to be summoned into real combat under special circumstances. Toutokubara had experience with destroying bases belonging to the Rebellion and other terrorist groups.

“Looks like we don’t need any introduction, huh?” Utakata said. “Great job not dodging the bottle, though, Kurogane. That Sword Eater attacks other schools whenever he wants, goes around destroying sword dojos around the city, and is overall just not a fun guy to deal with when he gets mad. We didn’t have to because of you, so thanks! Maybe we underestimated you a bit.”

“It’s no surprise now that you were able to defeat Renren,” Kanata added. “That Demon Princess really has a keen eye; she saw your potential in just one battle. We certainly think more highly of you now too.”

“Ahaha! Definitely. So, how about you let me see that little scrape? I’ll fix you right up.”

“Oh, no, thanks. I can handle it myself.”

“Come on, don’t be like that! Let your upperclassmen help you out. ‘Pain, pain, go away’, as they say!” Utakata gently touched Ikki’s wound. “There! All done.”

“Huh...?”

Ikki was surprised at how skilled Uakata was. Despite not dodging the blow, Kuraudo didn't land a direct hit, so Ikki's wound wasn't that deep. Still, Uakata had an almost unnatural healing ability—both the cut and the bruise had been healed quickly and cleanly. Even Shizuku, with her Rank A magic control, needed more time than that to fully heal someone. There was something more to his healing power.

Actually, it's as if he was removing the wound in its entirety.

Uakata Misogi, also known as Fifty-Fifty. Ikki had no idea what his ability was; all he knew was that this boy was stronger than most.

“Ahaha! You don't have to look at me like that. I'm not in the selection battles this year, so don't sweat it.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to be rude after you were so kind to me.”

“Ahaha! Don't worry about it. That cautiousness is what makes you a knight. Now that your wound's all taken care of, we'll be off. Let's get going, Kanata.”

“Yes, Vice President.”

With a “Don't party too hard tonight!” to see them off, Uakata Misogi led Kanata Toutokubara out of the restaurant. Once they were gone, Ikki looked out the window at the twilight sun and sighed deeply.

It feels like dusk is looming more ominously than ever.

Ikki felt as though the only people he'd met recently were big shots, but seeing as they'd left, Ikki didn't bother letting the student council members' appearance get to him. There was something weighing more heavily on his mind.

“Hey, Ayatsuji?”

“Nh!”

Having known he would bring it up sooner or later, Ayase turned to look anywhere but at him. She tried to escape him, but he asked his question regardless.

“What’s your relationship with that jerk?” He had known Ayase’s name. As skilled a knight as she was, she wasn’t all over the internet or TV, so it must have been a personal relationship. It clearly wasn’t a positive one, however, as the expression on her face showed. As her friend, he wanted to help her. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But when they were harassing you, you looked different. If they’re making trouble for you, I think I might be able to help you out.”

“I...”

She visibly hesitated to answer his question, but eventually opened her mouth to speak before an email suddenly interrupted their conversation. The tone had come from Ikki’s and Ayase’s pockets simultaneously.

Ikki looked at his handbook’s display to see the sender: the Selection Battle Committee. He got a bad feeling about the email, which was confirmed by the text.

“Ikki Kurogane, for your eleventh selection battle, your opponent will be Ayase Ayatsuji of class 3-1.”

Gee, great timing, he thought, certain that Ayase’s email had given her the same news.

“Uh, sorry! My roommate said I need to get back to our room ASAP! I gotta run!” she claimed, her face as pale as a ghost. She was clearly lying. Reading the notification from the committee had probably made her feel uncomfortable to be around him.

“Oh, all right. See you tomorrow.”

Ikki didn’t try to stop her. Kuraudo and Ayase’s relationship bothered him, but he didn’t need or want to interrogate her in public. He could just wait to ask until she was more comfortable.

“Yeah, tomorrow...”

Ayase set her portion of the bill on the table and left Ikki and Stella behind.

“She didn’t look good. I wonder what happened.” Stella didn’t understand the situation, so Ikki showed her the email on his handbook. “Oh. Oh, no.”

“I didn’t want to have to fight her, but I guess this is fate.”

“Come to think of it, didn’t she say she had to make it to the Seven Stars so she could take something of hers back?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not gonna throw the match, are you?”

“Do you really think I’d do that?”

Ikki answered her question with one of his own, to which she smiled and shook her head, relieved.

“No. That was a stupid question, sorry.”

Of course Ikki would never do such a thing. Even if his opponent were Stella or Shizuku, he would fight sincerely. That was common courtesy for a knight, no matter what sort of curveball fate threw at them.

I said “see you tomorrow”, but she probably won’t be coming to our training sessions for a while.

Ikki’s intuition turned out to be correct. After that day, Ayase never came to meet them.



“Man, that guy today was a real piece of work.”

“Hah! That’s what you call a sissy.”

“What a loser! Who the hell just sits there and smiles after being smashed upside the head with a bottle?”

“You know how it is, Misato. It ain’t smart to try to fight Kuraudo.”

“Bahaha! You right. Don’t pick fights you can’t win!”

The teenagers laughed as they filled the ruined dojo they used as a hangout spot with smoke. They were, of course, talking about the scene at the restaurant.

“Heh. You boys think so?” Kuraudo sipped some sake as he spoke to his henchmen, looking down at them from a hole in the roof.

“Hell yeah! A beansprout like him can’t beat you, Kuraudo!”

“Seriously. He’s not even worth your time. I could beat his ass with one hand tied behind my back!”

“Gahaha! C’mon, guys, don’t bully weaklings like that. He might snitch to the cops.”

They laughed again. Even when nobody said anything funny, they just kept on laughing.

Idiots. They don’t know a damn thing. Kuraudo glanced down at them and chuckled before turning to look at the moon. He remembered Ikki’s eyes. Those eyes showed no signs of horror or panic as they pierced his soul; just the coldness of ice. *All that guy cared about was getting out of there without making a scene. He probably took that bottle to the head on purpose. A man with eyes like his could’ve easily dodged that.*

“He’s above all that. He wouldn’t fall for such a cheap challenge. Heh...”

It didn’t matter. Ikki was certain to get into Seven Stars.

When that happens, I’ll gladly crush him.

Kuraudo gulped down the rest of his drink as his heart throbbed in anticipation of the first real challenge he’d faced in a long time.



Three days had passed since Ikki and the gang had last seen Ayase. Even the afternoon before their match, she was nowhere to be found.

“She never came. Not even once,” Stella sighed listlessly.

“Isn’t that more convenient for you, Stella?” Shizuku asked. “I recall you being jealous of her for taking up all of Big Brother’s time with their lessons.”

“Shut up. This is a different issue. It just feels kinda lonely without her around.”

“How selfish. But that may be one of your better sides.”

“Did you say something?”

“I said your legs are fat.”

"I keep telling you, they're *muscular!*"

Still unsure of whether they had a good or bad relationship, Ikki watched them from afar while toying with his student handbook.

"So she still hasn't sent you any emails or anything?" Alisuin cast a long shadow over him as she approached.

"Nope," Ikki replied.

"Are you being honest?"

Ikki raised his head and looked at Alice. A smile spread gently across her face, but she probed for more information with her eyes.

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I don't. I don't know her all that well, but I know she's frightened that she won't reach her true goal of fighting in the Seven Stars. She can't bear the thought of losing to you in tomorrow's match."

The six participants to be sent to the Seven Stars Battle Festival were chosen based on their win-loss records. Judging from what Ms. Oreki had said, there would be about twenty battles per person. With a number like that, there was bound to be a number of students with perfect twenty-win records. In other words, even a single loss meant forfeiting one's chance to enter the Seven Stars.

"But if you fight the way you normally do, there's no chance she'll win. There's just too big a difference in your skill levels. To make matters worse, you know her style of swordplay better than anyone else since you're teaching her. What I'm saying is that she must be concocting some plan to secure victory. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You're really sharp, Alice."

Ikki shrugged his shoulders in defeat and tossed his student handbook over to Alice. The display revealed a single email sent by Ayase Ayatsuji.

"There's something important I can only ask you for. I need your help, Kurogane. I'll be waiting on the roof of the main building at 3:00 a.m."

"She sent it this morning."

“This certainly reeks of a trap.”

“Heh, yeah. It does, but there’s no trickery afoot here.”

“You seem sure of that.”

“I believe in her. Ayatsuji would never do something so cowardly. I may have only known her for a few days, but I can say that for sure.” The Ayase he knew was honest to a fault, and a sincerely hard worker. “She said she liked my hands.”

Would someone cowardly enough to rig the fight beforehand, someone who would spit on everything their fellow knights trained and put their hearts on the line for, say something like that? No. They wouldn’t be able to say that even if they wanted to.

“I’m going to go see what she wants.”

Ayase was a friend—one who only had him to rely on. Ikki couldn’t just ignore that, so he told Alice that he would go.

“You really are a star, honey,” she responded with a bitter smile, and extended her hand toward Ikki. He was within arm’s reach, but the look in her eyes suggested that he was far, far away.

“A star?”

“Yes, absolutely. I’m honestly jealous of you all sometimes. Shizuku and Stella have the ability to love with all their hearts, and you have the ability to trust someone with all of yours. It makes me realize just how rotten my own heart is, because I always find myself thinking twice about others.

“Sometimes, however,” Alice punctuated before warning Ikki with a worried expression, “that’s exactly why I’m able to figure out the truth. You might think I’m stepping too far into your business here, but you should be ready to cut ties with her if need be. You never know what may be lurking behind a person’s mask. Going in half-heartedly and faltering may turn a winnable match into an unwinnable one, like what almost happened with The Hunter.”

“You warned me about the same thing back then, too, Alice. But don’t worry about me. I can’t falter anymore because I know what’s most important to me.”

Ikki turned his attention to Stella, who was still bickering with Shizuku. They'd made a pact to fight for the crown in the final battle. "No matter what, I'm not going to break our promise."

"Ahaha. I guess I was prying too much. Sorry for being such a downer."

"You're not. In my battle with Kirihara—and even now—I managed to turn things around thanks to my friends' help. That's why I won't let anyone call any of you rotten, Alice. Not even if you're saying it about yourself."

For a moment, Alice appeared as though she were worried by some difficult truth, but she quickly masked it.

"Teehee. Don't be too smooth, now. I might just fall in love."

"Leave the jokes for the girls, please."

Alice spoke as cheerfully as ever, so Ikki reciprocated by not pressing any further. She probably wouldn't have gone along with it even if he'd tried to probe for more information anyway. For the time being, he decided to focus on what lay ahead.

He looked up at the roof of the school building, bathed in the light of the setting sun. At 3:00 a.m., Ayase would be waiting there for him.

I hope I can help her.



Ten minutes before they were to meet, Ikki quietly left his room, being careful not to wake Stella. He exited the dorm, which was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop, and used the dim, pale moonlight to guide him as he moved toward a window that he'd opened in preparation.

From there, he snuck through the school building, his footsteps just barely echoing through the night. The place was normally so loud and active, but Ikki pushed through the deafening, discomforting silence until he finally reached the top of the school and opened the steel door before him.

Pale moonlight shone into his face, accompanied by a gust of wind. The rooftop before Ikki's eyes was entirely plain, with a sterile concrete floor and an ugly fence sullyng the night sky. It was summertime, but the wind and

moonlight felt cold, making the sight all the more dreary.

Ayase Ayatsuji stood there, facing away from the fence, basking in the pale moonlight.

“Hey. I haven’t seen you since we went to the pool, Ayatsuji.”

“Yeah. Sorry to ignore you, considering you were helping me and all.”

Hmm?

Ikki noticed something a little bit off about Ayase’s eyes—something more than the apologetic glance. Her gaze seemed dry and artificial, as if her eyes were made of glass.

Ayase seemed to have gotten more comfortable with Ikki to the point that she didn’t constantly avoid eye contact, but the day they’d gone to the pool, when their conversation was interrupted and their eyes met, she’d had the same artificial look. Ikki had figured it was a normal reaction for someone like her who wasn’t used to boys.

That was what made her current gaze bother Ikki all the more. Was Ayase really the type of girl who could look at him so calmly on such a quiet night? Even if she did seem off, though, it was really only a tiny bit. They weren’t here for something so small, so he didn’t waste his breath asking her about it.

“You’re fine. Honestly, I felt pretty awkward after that email too.”

“I’m glad you understand. But... You really came alone, didn’t you? That seems pretty immoral for a boy with a girlfriend, but thank you.”

“Oh, I thought you might mention that. Let’s not tell Stella about this; she’ll get mad at me.” Ikki shrugged as a follow-up to his joke and approached Ayase, ready to change the subject. “So, what did you need me for?”

“...”

She didn’t answer. Was she reluctant to tell him, or was there some other meaning to her silence? Ikki couldn’t read Ayase’s emotions or motives behind her glass eyes. A conversation couldn’t advance if both speakers were quiet, though.

“If you don’t want to just come out and say it, could I ask you a question?”

Ayase remained silent even when Ikki attempted a different approach. He took it as a no and tried again, aiming for the core of the matter. “Sorry to bring this up again, but is Kuraudo Kurashiki the one who stole what was important to you?”

“What makes you think that?” Ayase answered his question with one of her own.

“Just a bit of observation and intuition,” he replied, not overlooking the instant change from glass-eyed stoicism to wide-eyed shock. “At the restaurant, when you said you wanted to take back what was stolen from you, I saw something in your eyes that almost seemed like bloodlust. You had the same look on your face when the Sword Eater came over to our table.

“You said you had to go to Seven Stars to take it back, so that means the one who stole it from you would be there as well. The Sword Eater was a quarterfinalist last year, and since his school doesn’t use Hagun’s new Shinguuji System to select its candidates, his place in the Festival is guaranteed. With those two things established, I figured the person you’re trying to take something back from must be the Sword Eater. Am I right?”

Ikki didn’t have to ask; he knew he’d hit the nail on the head.

“Haha, that’s right. You’ve figured it all out. Now I don’t have to hide it anymore. With that out of the way, Kurogane, I came here because I wanted to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Miss Vermillion told me in the changing room when we were getting ready to leave the pool that you two promised to meet in the final battle of the Seven Stars Battle Festival this year.”

“Yeah. If the bracket works out for us, at least, we’re going to meet in the finals. But we *will* fight at some point, for sure.”

“But what if you were pitted against an enemy that you just couldn’t defeat no matter how hard you tried? What would you do?”

Ikki raised an eyebrow, unsure of where Ayase was headed. Why was she so interested in him and Stella?

Instantly, though, he realized that her question applied to herself just as much as it did him. Ikki had to win to fulfill a promise, while Ayase had to win to take back what was hers. Their reasons differed, but their resolve was the same.

Was it possible she was asking him because she wanted advice on how to prepare herself to fight even the strongest warriors? Ikki still wasn't positive about what he wanted, but he was positive about how to answer.

"I'd fight with every last ounce of my strength."

"Even if you couldn't win?"

"I wouldn't know until I tried. But even if I ended up losing, the only thing I can do is fight, fight, fight."

When he'd fought The Hunter, Ikki had accepted defeat, but it was thanks to Stella that he remembered. If someone lost to their enemy and got hurt, their wounds would one day heal. They would be able to fight again. However, the wound of running away—of losing to oneself—would never heal, dragging that person down forever. Even if one was fated to lose, they should at least fight so that they were able to pride themselves on their effort. Ikki would never lose sight of that again.

"I disagree." Ayase coldly cast his answer aside. "Why play fair if it means you won't get what you want?"

"Huh?" Ikki gasped in surprise, taken aback by her sudden conclusion that the ends justify the means. He had no idea why she would say such a thing. The Ayase in his mind could never imagine something so awful. He didn't even know how to respond.

As he stood there, still silent from the shock, Ikki noticed that Ayase's lips had curled into a sneer beneath her artificial-looking eyes. He had never seen her look that way.

Is this really Ayase? No, maybe this is the real Ayase? Her cold smile pierced into his confused thoughts.



“Here’s my answer, then,” she continued. “I would do whatever I had to if it meant stomping them into the dust.”

“Nh!”

Ayase materialized her scarlet sword, Hizume, in her right hand, and the sound of something being sliced reverberated twice through the night sky.



“Ngh?! ”

Ikki knew immediately that Ayase had used her magic to cut something, but what did she cut? Heightening his guard and concentration, he focused all of his consciousness into his eyes. He surrendered his cognition of color and sound to maximize his awareness of the situation, and instantly understood what was going on. The section of fence behind Ayase was falling away from the top of the building—she’d sliced both ends of it. There had been two slashing sounds, so Ayase must have used some ability to cut them.

What is she doing? Why would she need to do that? Ikki was bewildered, completely unable to figure out her goal.

“Wha—?! ”

Something even more bizarre was happening. Alongside the fence, Ayase was falling head-first from the top of the four-story school building. As shocked and stupefied as he was, those feelings were suppressed by the decisive, instantaneous urge to act.

Ikki didn’t understand Ayase’s actions; he didn’t know whether her ability had misfired or if what she did was intentional, but he didn’t have time to play detective. He knew what he had to do.

A blue aura of magic surrounded Ikki’s body, signifying the use of his Noble Art, Ittou Shura. With his one-minute superpower activated, Ikki looked down from the hole in the fence. Once he perceived Ayase’s falling body, he ran straight down the wall of the school building in pursuit.

Catching up to her as she fell was easy with the speed granted by Ittou Shura. Ikki grabbed Ayase’s right arm and held her against himself.

Got her! But what now?!

They only had another second before they hit the ground. With how much speed he had built up running down the wall, he wasn't sure if there was any hope left. Ikki racked his brain before spotting something in his peripheral vision: a small pond within the courtyard, nearly a hundred feet away from the wall. It was far, but it was their only chance. Ikki forced his body to turn 180 degrees, then used all his might to kick off of the school wall.

"Haaaaaaaaaah!"

A crack spread from the point he kicked off of, shattering every window on that side of the building with the impact. In return, he and Ayase flew horizontally with enough force to make it all the way over to the pond. The two of them fell into the water with a huge splash.

"Phah! Haah, haah, haah...!"

They'd made it by the skin of their teeth. If Ikki had delayed by even a fraction of a second, things could have taken a life-changing turn for the worse. If his calculations had been off ever so slightly, Ayase may very well have died.

Ikki trembled with fear at the thought of it. His hands shook and his body froze to the core, but welling up within him as he lifted Ayase out of the pond as well was fury.

"Wh-What the hell were you doing?! You would've died if I wasn't here to save you!" Ikki grabbed her by the collar and yelled angrily—a reaction he seldom had.

"Heehee. Haha... Ahahah! Hahaha!" Her scornful laughter echoed clearly through the dark night. "Don't worry. I knew you would come to save me."

"What?!"

Still roaring with laughter, Ayase peeled away Ikki's fingers and stood on her own, looking down at the drenched boy beneath her. Her lips curled into a wicked grin.

"You just used up your only trump card—Ittou Shura."

Ah!

“No way. Were you planning to make me use it this whole time?!”

“Of course I was.”

“S-So you acted like you were throwing your life away just to accomplish that?!”

“Didn’t I say I’d do whatever I had to?” she asked in a detached tone that made Ikki even angrier. “If you’d said the same thing I did, I might have tried bribing you instead. But, of course, you took the righteous path because you’re such a righteous person. The only thing I could do was force you to use your ace in the hole ahead of time. I can’t win if you have Ittou Shura on standby, but now, you can’t use it for another twenty-four hours, and there are just ten more until our fight. This gives me an actual chance to win. Even if my swordplay isn’t enough to best yours, my ability as a knight may be able to defeat you without your trump card.”

She was right. Ittou Shura’s basic premise was that it used all of Ikki’s magical power to push him to a never-before-seen level of strength. By making him use it before the battle, she no longer had to worry about Ittou Shura.

Was I wrong about her? Was I misreading her this whole time?

Ikki had thought she was honest, sincere, and hard-working. Had it all been an act? Was Ayase such a dishonorable person that she would gladly sabotage her opponent, the greatest taboo in all of chivalry? Was the way she smiled like a little girl when she’d believed she was finally catching up to her father fake too?

“When I first saw the calluses on your palms, I was so excited,” Ikki told her. “I thought I had finally found another true swordsman like me in this school. I thought I had found a friend.”

“I do appreciate your teaching,” she replied coldly. “The skills you taught me will be a great help when I’m beating you down.”

“I never thought of you as the type of person who’d do this.”

“That was your mistake. Don’t project your ideals onto me.”

“Urgh! I don’t know or even care what the Sword Eater stole from you, but what you’re doing doesn’t hurt just me! It’s an insult to Stella, to Shizuku, and

to every knight who's fighting to make it to the Seven Stars! You've thrown away your honor and dragged everyone else's through the mud in the process! Even if you take back whatever it is you've lost, will you be able to take pride in it?!"

"That has nothing to do with you, Kurogane." Ayase turned her back to him, shrugging off his screams with a single statement. "No matter what you say, I will crush you. I have to."

After that, she disappeared into the darkness. In reality, she wasn't far away, but to Ikki, she seemed to be miles off in the distance.

"You should be ready to cut ties with her if need be. Going in half-heartedly and faltering may turn a winnable match into an unwinnable one."

Once she'd left his vision, Alice's words flitted through Ikki's mind.

It was true; confused thoughts would only dull his swordplay. Should he just cut ties with Ayase? Cut ties. Never speak to her again. Forget about her. Should he really do that?

"Urgh."

Dark clouds began to weigh on his heart and he fell to his knees—Ittou Shura's side-effect.

"Dammiiiiit!"

Cursing, though nobody could hear it, he futilely punched the grass.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

AYASE AYATSUJI

綾辻絢瀬

■PROFILE

AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,

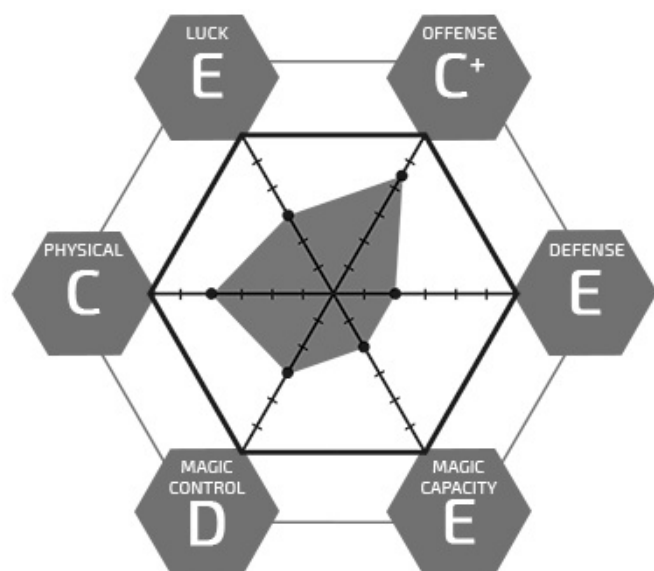
CLASS 3-1

BLAZER RANK: D

NOBLE ART: N/A

NICKNAME: N/A

SUMMARY: THE LAST SAMURAI'S
BELOVED DAUGHTER.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

Ayase stalked Kurogane, and I stalked Ayase. We make a pretty good RPG-style party, if I do say so myself! It was kinda fun! I didn't find any noteworthy scoops other than the fact that Kurogane had taken her in as his disciple, though. I wish I could've learned about her ability. That said, rumor has it her ability is a concept-manipulation type rather than the nature-manipulation types used by Stella, Shizuku, and others.



Chapter 3

Ayase Ayatsuji

Ayase greeted the morning—the day of her battle with Ikki—groggily at 9:00 a.m. After leaving him behind, she'd dozed off in her room. She was tired, not only because of the meeting with Ikki, but also because she had been preparing for the duel.

As she crawled out of bed, she noticed a letter from her roommate on the table:

"You told me yesterday not to come, so I won't watch your match today, but come talk to me if something's wrong. I get so worried whenever I see how gloomy you look these days."

"I really am a good-for-nothing."

She had betrayed her teacher and made her roommate worry.

"You've thrown away your honor and dragged everyone else's through the mud in the process! Even if you take back whatever it is you've lost, will you be able to take pride in it?!"

Ikki's cries still rang in Ayase's ears. She felt awful, even before such an important battle. She needed to set herself straight. She had to fix her mood and prepare herself, so she headed to a certain place before the morning ended.



Fifteen minutes after departing from the train station closest to Hagun Academy, Ayase arrived at her destination: a massive, chalk-white building that penetrated the cloudless summer sky. It was Shishido General Hospital, the closest hospital to Hagun Academy.

Ayase followed the same path she'd walked countless times as she headed

through the large building to room 515, before opening the sliding door. Inside the private room was a single solitary bed, with a beautiful, middle-aged woman sitting next to it in a pipe chair. She gasped in surprise when the door opened to reveal Ayase.

“My, oh, my. Is that you, Ayase?”

“Hello, Aunt Suzuka.”

“Hi! What are you doing here at this time of day? Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Attendance is voluntary for me today. Students are exempt from classes on days they have selection battles, so I decided to come see Dad instead.”

“Huh. That new director has some strange policies, both for battles and for roommates.” Her aunt seemed to understand when Ayase explained it was one of Kurono’s policies. As she stood up from the pipe chair and moved toward the bed, she spoke to the man lying in it. “Did you hear that? Your cute little daughter is here to see you!”

His cheekbones had receded with age. His skin was wrinkled, like a long-forgotten, cracked patch of land, and his arms were thin and brittle like twigs in the winter.

The man, as thin as a rail from losing so much weight, was Kaito Ayatsuji—Ayase’s father.

“Good morning, Dad.”

Following her aunt, Ayase spoke to Kaito, but he didn’t respond; he kept sleeping. He slept and slept, like he had for the past two years.

“I don’t want to get between you two,” Suzuka said, “so I’ll be at the coffee shop outside. How long will you be here, Ayase?”

“My match isn’t until the afternoon, so I can stay until noon.”

“Okay. I’ll be back around noon, then. Bye.”

Her aunt waved and left the hospital room. No matter what time of day, she was always so lively. If only she could share that liveliness with her brother.

No, that’s not right. Long ago, even he—

“Mm... Ah...”

Kaito’s bone-dry lips moved ever so slightly, trembling weakly.

“Dad...”

He had been that way for a long time. He spoke the same words he always did, but Ayase couldn’t hear him, as he had no voice to hear. His daughter had memorized the motions his lips took:

“I’m sorry.”

“Rgh!”

Ayase audibly ground her teeth. The only way she could withstand the shame and anger in her heart without screaming was by clenching her teeth.

Ever since that day, Kaito never stopped apologizing to her. Apologizing for being unable to protect her, unable to entrust something so special to her. He was forever lost and alone within that one rainy day.

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“Remember, Ayase. No matter what happens, never forget your pride. Our swords have the power to kill men, and you Blazers have power greater than any men that came before you. If you forget your pride, all you’ll have left is destruction.

“Respect others, protect the weak, and curse the wicked. Never be a puppet to your own power. Fight others fair and square. Be a knight that neither you nor anyone else can be ashamed of.”

Ayase’s father, the Last Samurai, often repeated those words to her. It was the responsibility of the strong to obey those teachings. Kaito knew as much, so he continually drilled the samurai’s morals into his daughter’s head despite her having been born as a Blazer. He never wanted her to become addicted to power and turn into a cheap, arrogant person.

Kaito’s lessons weren’t mere lip service, either; he backed up his teachings with rigorous training. Despite his severity, however, his daughter loved his strength that was so noble. She loved to watch her father valiantly swing his sword. She loved his large, coarse hands that patted her on the head whenever

she grew as a person.

In their little dojo, it was just her, Kaito, and his ten disciples. They may not have been well-off, but they shared a bond. It was a happier time.

Ayase wished those days could have gone on forever, but that desire was cruelly smashed and thrown aside. She lost everything because of the man who'd intruded on their everyday life on that rainy day two years ago.

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Two months after Ayase enrolled at Hagun Academy, the rainy season began. The air was suffocatingly hot and humid, and the sky teemed with dismal rainclouds.

After class, rather than returning to her dorm, Ayase, umbrella in hand, went to visit the family dojo. She was ready to learn what they didn't teach in school: swordplay.

Ever since her first year of middle school, Ayase had known that Kaito was suffering from an illness that couldn't be cured even by modern medicine. At that point, he could hardly even swing a sword. The last time he'd picked up a sword was when Ayase was accepted into Hagun Academy, when he'd taught her his ultimate technique. Put simply, his body was no longer up to the task.

Yet his disciples remained at the dojo, their knowledge of the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style intact. Though they were few, they were veterans of the style, having trained under the Last Samurai their entire lives. His best student, Sugawara, may not have been as skilled as Kaito, but he still far surpassed Ayase.

She had spent the past three weeks frequently visiting the dojo in order to learn from him. It was all she could do to get even a single day closer to mastering her father's technique. Traveling to the dojo might as well have been part of her daily schedule.

This time, however, when she entered the open door that invited Kaito's disciples, she was greeted by an unusual sight.

"Huh?"

Ayase ran into a tall boy with a western-style umbrella. He had dyed hair, a cigarette between his lips, and eyes as sharp as those of a hungry wolf. He wore an unbuttoned Donrou Academy uniform, a skull tattoo visible on his chest. His appearance wasn't that of a boy in the polite world of dojos and samurai; instead, he was from somewhere brutal and fiendish.

Ayase was already scared of most men, so the intimidating boy standing before her was enough to make her back away.

"Hahah! Later."

The boy, Kuraudo Kurashiki, laughed derisively at how pathetic she was before disappearing into the ash-gray, cloudy city.

Who was that? Why was someone so dangerous-looking coming out of my house? He was wearing Donrou's uniform, so he must have been a Blazer. He shouldn't have anything to do with a samurai dojo. Was he just here to ask for directions?

With those questions in her mind, Ayase walked toward her family's dojo.

"Dammit! I won't let that stupid kid get away with this!"

The voice of Sugawara, who could be considered one of her childhood friends, echoed from within the dojo. She hurried inside, where there was none of the usual lively swordplay.

Sugawara and six other disciples were all standing around, gritting their teeth in anger. Kaito sat cross-legged among them, wearing a troubled expression.

"What's wrong?" Ayase asked Sugawara. "Did something happen?"

"Some weird-looking thug kid just barged in and demanded that we bet the dojo on a duel with him."

"Did he threaten to fight you guys too?"

"Yeah, but our master is too weak to fight. Besides, the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style doesn't allow stupid gambles like that."

Ayase knew that as well. The Ayatsuji style existed to protect. Kaito was always telling her that. It didn't exist for pointless brawls or for students to boast about their strength. Under those ideals, the Ayatsuji style forbade any

and all unofficial battles based on private disputes.

“Master Ayatsuji declined, of course. And then...”

“That brat insulted our master! He called him a coward, a weakling, and a failure! He even spat on his face!”

“He’s nothing but an uppity thug who thinks he can do whatever he wants just because he has magic!”

The disciples expressed their anger, one after another. They had all studied under Kaito for so long that they thought of him as a father, making it all the more appalling to see him treated so poorly.

Ayase knew how they felt. That teenager had spat on her father’s face. She could feel her body temperature rising just thinking about it.

“He tracked dirt all over the place, too. What kind of idiot comes into a dojo with his shoes on? If our master were in better condition, he’d get what was coming to him!”

“No, Nitta.” Kaito, who had remained silent, admonished his disciple with a sharp tone. “I would have refused even if I was healthy. The Ayatsuji style exists solely to protect, not to fight pointless battles. We do not live in an era where people are protected with swords, but we must never forget the spirit of this style.”

“S-Sir! I’m so sorry! I must repent!” Nitta lowered his head in honest regret.

“Good. Disciples, why are your hands idle?! As punishment, that’s another thousand practice swings!”

After Kaito reminded Nitta of their philosophy, he clapped his hands and refocused their efforts. The disciples responded unanimously with a “Yes, sir!” and returned the dojo to its usual liveliness.

“Okay, Ayase. Change into your uniform. I can’t have you being a power-drunk Blazer like him, so get ready for another day of tough training.”

“Yes, sir! Gladly!”

Relieved to see the dojo revitalized, Ayase hurried to the changing room.

On the way, she noticed an unusual scent wafting through the dojo—the scent of Kuraudo’s cigarette smoke, still lingering in the air. That scent would infect her beloved daily life like an ominous, ever-present snake that eternally bared its fangs.

Eventually, finally, the snake struck.

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The next day, Ayase once again walked to the dojo through the dreary rain.

“Hellooo! Hm?”

She gave a greeting as she opened the door to the dojo, but the only one there was Kaito, sitting cross-legged on a cushion.

“Is it just you, Dad? It’s weird for everyone to show up after me.”

“You’re right. I’ve never seen them all late on the same day.” Kaito raised an eyebrow, puzzled. They usually weren’t all late at once, but they would occasionally trickle in one at a time. They assumed it was just a coincidence, so Kaito and Ayase didn’t think much of it. “Well, they’ll be around soon enough. Since we’re alone now, I can personally direct your training.”

“Thank you. Just make sure you don’t pick up a sword yourself, okay? You’re too sick.”

“You’re such a worrywart, Ayase. But fine, I’ll just watch. The rain hasn’t exactly been doing wonders for my health anyway.”

While they waited for the rest of the disciples, Ayase decided to show him her stance for the ultimate technique he’d taught her before she’d started at Hagun. She lifted her wooden sword in front of her and opened her stance slightly, then dropped her hips and relaxed her shoulders, carefully tracing Kaito’s actions one by one.

“No.” He immediately found fault with her stance. “Relax your shoulders, but keep your arms tight. Tighten up your wrists especially. Don’t strain yourself, though; keep the stance natural.”

“It’s really hard to do all of that at once.”

“If you can’t do it, you’ll never be able to use this technique. Let me show you

one more time,” Kaito said, using the wall as a support to help him stand up. He reached toward a sword.

“Grr.”

“...”

“Grrrrr.”

“Fine, fine. I won’t use the sword. Happy?” Unable to go against Ayase, he threw his hands up in surrender. “Lord. You’re just like your late mother. Whenever she wanted to nag at me, she’d just stare at me instead of saying anything.”

“Well, she’s the one who taught me to do it. She said that if you ever start to do something stupid, that’s all I have to do to make you stop.”

“I can’t believe both my wife and my daughter can control me like that.” Kaito sighed and moved behind Ayase. He put his arms around her and grabbed her hands, which still held her sword. “Look. Here’s how your wrists should be angled. The main point of this technique is that you don’t break your posture.”

While he explained the purpose of the technique he’d passed down to his high school-aged daughter, Kaito corrected her posture. His stiff, hard hands covered Ayase’s.

Dad’s hands are so big. His hands weren’t gentle, but she loved them for it. *It’s been such a long time since he trained me one-on-one like this.*

“Teehee.” Ayase couldn’t help but giggle with joy when she realized that.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking of how long it’s been since we trained together like this. It just made me happy.” She leaned on Kaito’s chest and pressed her cheek against him. “I wish we could stay in this moment forever.”

Listening to her beloved father’s heartbeat thumping against her ear, Ayase spoke to nobody in particular.



Kaito said nothing in response. He knew he couldn't grant her wish, and she knew it as well. Kaito didn't have much longer left to live. Someday, the time would come that his heartbeat would cease forever. That was why he'd passed on his ultimate technique to his daughter before she was ready; he was no longer able to use it himself.

How long does Dad have left?

She had steeled herself for the day death would force them apart, but it made her hope that their final day together would be gentle and sweet, just like this one.

Her wish was betrayed, however, in the cruelest possible way. Not a second later, the dojo door opened. The two of them looked toward the door, expecting to see the other disciples, but only one was there.

"S-Sugawara?!" Ayase's face drained. Sugawara's body was covered with bandages and gauze, as if he had been badly injured.

"What happened to you?! You look terrible!" Kaito ran over to Sugawara, his face also pale.

"Master... I'm so sorryyy!"

When Sugawara saw his master running over to him, he looked like he was ready to cry. He kneeled down so quickly that his head smacked against the dojo floor. Though they couldn't see him crying, they could hear sobs between words. Kaito instantly realized that something had gone very wrong.

"Pick your head up. You didn't hurt yourself this badly. Who did this to you?"

"I-It was that boy from yesterday!"

"What?!"

"That guy's insane! He ambushed the seven of us on our way home last night and attacked us with a stick, trying to crack our skulls open! We tried to fight back, but..." He was bawling so hard he could barely speak. "We couldn't do anything! Even with the seven of us, we couldn't lay a finger on him! The guy didn't even use any magic to attack us or even defend himself!"

Ayase gasped in shock at what had transpired. Just like her, Sugawara and the

other disciples had trained under the Ayatsuji style since they were children. How could they not do anything against a single teenager?

Is he really that strong?

“I let that stupid thug beat us up. I’ve sullied your good name, Master! I’m so very sorry!”

“Stop apologizing! Are the others safe?!”

“Nitta is rich enough to go to an iPS Capsule, but the others are all in the hospital.”

Capsules had to be paid for out-of-pocket; they weren’t covered by insurance. The other five were probably still asleep in their hospital beds, with the ones who were worse off having been told that they might never be able to use their arms again. After explaining everything that had happened, Sugawara looked up.

“All seven of us just wanted to be proud swordsmen like you, sir. I... I don’t want to say this, but what was the point of all these years we’ve spent training?! What were we doing all this time?!” he asked Kaito, tears spilling from his eyes.

Ayase stared at the pitiful husk of her father’s best disciple, lost for words. Sugawara, the man who had given her so much direction and aid, was no longer there. His broken eyes only communicated despair and fear. His heart had shattered into countless pieces, never to be repaired.

It wasn’t just Sugawara, either. The other six disciples had been broken in much the same way.

“I’m sorry. We can’t hold swords anymore.”

Sugawara looked up again and requested that all seven of them be allowed to leave the dojo.

This is awful. How could he do something like this? How did he do something like this? All of them have walked the righteous path of the samurai since they were born. How can someone just trample all over them like it’s some sort of game?

Ayase couldn't understand any of it.

"Guess I came in at a fun time, huh?" came the voice of the man who had committed the atrocity.

"Gh?!"

He then appeared as if he had been watching, waiting for the right moment.

"Maybe I was a bit too mean, if all of you are quitting."

"Eeeeeeeeeep!"

Sugawara screamed like a scared little girl when he saw him and scurried to the back of the dojo on all fours.

"Don't run away from me. I have feelings, too, y'know."

Kuraudo laughed oafishly and walked into the dojo, his shoes still on.

"G-Get away from me! Don't get any closer! Eek!"

"C-Cut it out! He's afraid of you!" Unable to bear seeing her lifelong friend in such a state, Ayase stepped in front of Sugawara to protect him.

She felt a firm hand grab her shoulder. It was Kaito's. He pulled her back and stood in front of her, glaring at the intruder.

"What do you want?" he asked coldly.

"Same as yesterday."

"Didn't I refuse you?"

"I figured you might change your tune if I came back. Hahah!"

"Hmph. So you did this to my disciples just to bait me into fighting you?"

"Yep. Just a shame I couldn't get my hands on that girl yesterday."

"...Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you do this? You're a Blazer. You have your school, the Seven Stars Battle Festival, and plenty of other places to run wild. Why are you so obsessed with me?"

“Don’t ask me like you don’t already get it, old man. Or did your mind lose its edge after you retired, too?”

Kaito’s eyes widened slightly.

“Hah! Ah, whatever. It’s a simple reason: I just want to show off my strength—my raw power! It doesn’t matter if you’re a Blazer or a normal person; you’re gonna see it whether you want to or not!”

Ayase’s anger reached a boiling point as Kuraudo bared his teeth and revealed his motive.

“You did something so awful... for such a stupid reason?!”

“‘Stupid’? What’s stupid about it? I want to find strong people and crush them. Isn’t that natural?”

“Shut up!” Ayase wouldn’t let him have his way. “The answer will always be no! This isn’t a place where you can just barge in with your shoes on to show off how strong you are! Dad, let’s call the police!”

“No,” Kaito murmured. “That won’t do anymore. The Ayatsuji Single-Blade Dojo accepts your challenge. The first to strike twice is the winner. We use wooden swords. I expect you won’t mind foregoing your magic?”

Kuraudo had beaten the dojo’s disciples to a pulp, leaving Kaito no choice but to accept his challenge.

“Wh-What?! Dad?!”

“M-Master! Please, Master! You can’t fight this thug! Your heart...!”

“Yeah! Your body is in no condition to fight, Dad! If we have to, then I’ll fight in your place!”

Sugawara, who had been cowering in the corner in fear of Kuraudo, and Kaito’s daughter both suppressed their fear when he revealed that he was willing to fight Kuraudo. They had gone pale, but they tried desperately to persuade him. In response, a small grin crept over Kaito’s face.

“Thank you for your concern. I’m honestly proud of both of you. But that’s exactly why I can’t let this brat get away with hurting you!”

Sugawara's words wouldn't leave the back of his mind. *"What was the point of all these years we've spent training?! What were we doing all this time?!"* Kaito couldn't leave the job to someone else. He was going to win on his own.

He stared Kuraudo down like an angry beast, resolution in his heart. It left Ayase speechless, for she finally understood that nothing she could say would stop her father.

"Okay. If that's what you want, Dad, I won't stop you. I'll watch over this fight as the referee."

"Good. Thank you."

"Please win, Dad."

Ayase begged, almost as if she were praying. A tactless voice interrupted them.

"C'mon. If you've made up your mind, then let's get this fight started. I'm getting tired of waiting."

"Fine." Ayase scowled at Kuraudo, who was tapping his foot impatiently. She tossed him a wooden sword in response to his demand.

"Hahah! You've got spunk, girl."

"As my father stated before, the first to land two hits is the victor. You will use wooden swords, and magic is strictly forbidden. Understood?"

"No point in repeating it. Why fight if it isn't fair?"

Kuraudo's canine teeth reflected gleams of light as he smirked, his eyes fixed solely on Kaito. Meanwhile, Kaito stood stock-still, sword in hand and eyes closed, as if concentrating deeply. They both seemed prepared.

"Both fighters, stand and face each other. Now... Begin!"

Ayase gave the signal, and their battle began.

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"Hahah! Let's do this!"

The instant the battle began, Kuraudo dashed toward Kaito. He closed the distance between them immediately, raising his wooden sword and swinging it

toward Kaito's head.

No technique guided his sword as it tore through the air. He didn't drive power to his upper body using his legs, keep his arms at his side, or even use his latissimus dorsi muscles. It was a wild swing, guided by sheer force alone. Kuraudo's technique was amateurish at best.

Even a master like Kaito was surprised by his speed, however. He knew it was too dangerous to try to parry, so he quickly stepped out of the way. Kuraudo's sword grazed the tip of his nose and crashed into the floor of the dojo, splitting it apart.

"He's so strong!"

The referee, Ayase, was shocked. She couldn't help but be nervous when such a ridiculously strong attack was mere inches away from killing her father.

Kaito, on the other hand, was not as nervous; the near-miss was completely intentional on his part. Minor distance adjustments through leg movement was a basic skill for swordsmen. Letting the sword scratch his nose was meant to minimize the distance between them, improving the success rate of a counterattack.

After a full swing strong enough to smash through the floor, his foe wouldn't have time to defend himself. The tiny opening such an attack created was the difference between victory and defeat against a master.

The Ayatsuji style happened to be most proficient when it came to counterattacks. As soon as Kuraudo's blade struck the floor, Kaito slid his foot forward, closing the distance between them by a half-step and putting him in the perfect position to attack.

He exhaled sharply and swung his sword. Though their swings traced the same arc, Kaito's was much cleaner and more controlled than Kuraudo's barbaric attack, making it faster as well—faster than the naked eye could perceive.

He had gotten worse due to his illness, but the Last Samurai was still an extraordinary master of swordplay; it was foolish to even begin to compare his abilities to an amateur's. Kuraudo couldn't hope to dodge such a swift attack

while he was still recovering from his first strike. Or so one might expect.

“Hahah!”

What felt like electricity ran through Kaito’s hands, numbing them. However, it wasn’t the sensation of striking Kuraudo’s head, like he’d expected. It was Kuraudo’s sword, raised to repel Kaito’s blow. The collision caused the latter’s bones to creak.

“You look surprised, old man. Did you think you’d get me with that?”

“I did. I didn’t expect you’d be able to defend against it.”

Kaito was honestly surprised. He hadn’t even considered such an outcome as a possibility. He wasn’t so inexperienced that he would let it show on his face, though.

This boy is surprisingly quick-witted, Kaito thought. He must have known that I would counterattack.

His reaction speed was otherwise unexplainable; it was simply inhuman. That he had blocked a single blow was no issue, however. Kaito had other tricks up his sleeve.

“My turn!” Kuraudo cried and swung again, with the same speed, arc, and artless form.

There was something awe-inspiring about the force behind his attacks. If Kaito tried to block, his sword would probably shatter into a hail of splinters. However, he did exactly that. Was he cornered? No. It was all part of his plan. If his opponent was expecting him to dodge and counterattack, all he had to do was betray his expectations.

The instant their swords met, Kaito deftly moved his wrist before his sword could break, shifting the majority of the impact away from it. Kuraudo’s sword slipped away as a result, breaking his posture.

Blocking and evasion were only the most basic of defensive moves. Martial artists had invented much greater, much more radical methods of defending themselves. The parry, for example, was a move that could deflect the foe’s force and use it to the defender’s advantage. When done successfully, it could

knock the foe off balance, break their form entirely, and create a decisive opening.

“Haaaah!”

Having finally created the opportunity he needed, Kaito swung straight for Kuraudo’s torso. His greatest skill, parrying into a counterattack, was a textbook example of a perfect maneuver.

“Successful hit!” Ayase declared. “One point to Ayatsuji!”

What is this feeling?

Kaito, breathing heavily, felt a thud as the strike reverberated back into his palms, causing a strange feeling to arise within his heart.

“That’s our master for you! You couldn’t even tell he’s sick!”

“Amazing, Dad! You’re incredible!”

Kaito’s disciples cheered for his first point. He smiled at them, concealing the inexplicable stirring within him, then looked back toward his enemy, who had dropped to one knee and was holding his side in pain.

“Hah... You’re not the Last Samurai for nothing. I’ve never taken such a sharp blow. But let me tell you something, old man: If that’s the best you can do, you’re dead meat.”

Even when he was on the brink of defeat, Kuraudo’s fighting spirit remained. His eyes still burned with hunger as he glared at his prey.

“We’ll see about that. I’ve only just begun, boy.”

“Good. Then I’ll get serious, too!”

With another fierce smirk, Kuraudo charged toward Kaito once again. His third attack was just the same as the first two.

He still hasn’t learned? An amateur is an amateur, strong or not!

Kaito had thought his foe was onto something when he’d predicted the first counterattack, but Kuraudo just continued to bet it all on emotions and brute force. Swordplay based on strength alone couldn’t threaten a refined swordsman.

This is it!

Kaito adjusted his stance once more, ready to parry Kuraudo's next attack and put an end to their duel—he, Ayase, and Sugawara were all prepared for his victory. However, Kuraudo's wooden sword seemed to disappear into thin air for a moment.

What?!

The sound of Kaito's ribs breaking echoed through the dojo.

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After taking the full force of Kuraudo's blow to his side, Kaito collapsed onto the dojo's floor. It was a boorish, messy blow, but a blow nonetheless.

Ayase, however, wasn't in any condition to pass that judgement, because her father, holding his side, had begun coughing up blood. It wasn't a small amount of blood, either; one of his internal organs had clearly ruptured. Seeing his condition, Ayase ran over to him, her face pale.

"Dad! Are you okay?!"

"Don't come any closer...!" Kaito raised his voice through the blood that spilled from his lips. "This duel isn't over...! If you won't judge fairly, then step down!"

"Now's not the time for you to—"

"Ayase! This is my fight! Don't interrupt!"

His voice boomed in response to his daughter ignoring his command to stay away. Ayase had been yelled at by her father many times, but what she'd just heard was of an entirely different nature. Like the bellowing of a monster, his roar struck her heart, filling her with fear.

"Ah... D-Dad...?" She was paralyzed after hearing the raw anger in her father's voice.

"I'm fine! I... will win this...!"

Kaito stood up, blood still dripping from his mouth. His bloodshot eyes, fixed on Kuraudo, were full of fighting spirit as he shouted and ran forward.

“Let’s do this, boooy!”

“Hahah! Try all you want; this won’t end any different!” Kuraudo faced the attack head-on.

They clashed for a third and final time, albeit much more one-sidedly. Kaito had already been severely injured, and the rust after his many years of not holding a sword was finally beginning to show. He was losing.

Countless amateurish yet savage blows pushed him back with pure force. He could barely defend himself with his own wooden sword, leaving him unable to fight back.

Then, ready to finish off his wounded foe, Kuraudo unleashed the same skill that took his first point from Kaito just before: a strike to the torso, coming diagonally from below.

Kaito swiftly moved to defend himself, assuming a defensive stance. However, just before the two swords connected, Kuraudo’s disappeared once more. It reappeared above Kaito, headed for his skull.

It was completely beyond his comprehension. How could a sword being swung upward toward his torso now be moving downward toward his head? Such an action went far beyond human ability. What sort of trick was he using? Nobody could tell.

Regardless of how it had gotten there, Kuraudo’s sword was right above Kaito’s head, about to crash mercilessly into it. The duel should have been over.

“What?!”

Kuraudo was shocked. He had been convinced that that would be the deciding blow, but his sword struck Kaito’s collarbone rather than his head. He hadn’t been able to dodge the entire blow, but he’d moved just enough to cause the sword to fall a hair’s breadth off its mark.

“That wasn’t a scorable point, boy!”

“Hahah! It’s long past your time to die, old man! Quit struggling!”

Kuraudo kicked Kaito in the stomach to create a small gap between them. Then, he once again charged at him, swinging violently.

Even though the hit on Kaito's collarbone hadn't been a scorable point, it had surely weakened him. His movements were slower and duller, lacking their previous vigor. As a result, he took blow after blow.

The sharp strikes from Kuraudo's wooden blade broke bones, tore skin, and splattered the dojo with blood, but Kaito refused to let him take that last point. His whole body was covered in blood, but he kept his feet planted and continued fighting.

Why?!

Ayase didn't understand what her father was doing. It was clear who would win; why wouldn't he stop fighting? Why wouldn't he surrender?

"Please, stop," she whimpered. "No more."

The sound of wood smashing against flesh repeated endlessly, accompanied by a fresh spray of blood every time.

"Hahahah! Hahahahahahahah!"

Kuraudo, covered in his opponent's blood, laughed boisterously. Their duel had ended long ago; Kaito was merely being beaten on. His expression—or even if he was still alive—was no longer visible to Ayase through the tears that clouded her vision.

I have to stop them, she thought. I have to stop them! If I don't stop them, Dad will be killed!

Yet even as Kaito's blood splashed onto her clothes and his broken teeth stuck to her face, she couldn't move. She was still paralyzed from when he'd barked at her, unable to put any strength into her legs.

"Just stop this, please! The dojo doesn't matter anymore! Just stop hurting Dad!"

All she could do was scream, even though her voice couldn't reach the two men standing on the border between life and death. Kaito still wouldn't surrender, and Kuraudo still kept battering his opponent.

Suddenly, Kaito took his final fighting stance, his entire body dyed with blood. He held his sword before him and charged toward Kuraudo.

“Raaaaaaahhh!”

“Tch!”

Kuraudo’s expression changed as he sensed something strange coming from his dying prey, who had previously only been able to defend against scorable points. Instead of moving away, however, he just swung his sword again with all his might, aiming for Kaito’s head.

The wooden sword tore through the air, but Kaito charged ceaselessly. He didn’t even move his own weapon; he held in front of him, never moving to defend against the flash of lightning ready to strike him from above. It was a suicide attack.

That stance...!

It appeared reckless to the untrained eye, but Ayase knew the meaning of his action. His charge signaled the end result of the Last Samurai’s lifelong dedication to the sword and the only skill that could possibly turn the tide on his bleak situation: the Ayatsuji style’s ultimate move.

Kaito’s body, however, withering away from illness and the damage done to him by his opponent, couldn’t possibly—

“Stoooooooooooooooooop!”

Kuraudo’s sword cruelly destroyed both Kaito’s skull and consciousness.

“Ah...”

The second point was accompanied by Kaito’s broken body falling to the floor.

“Aaaaaaahhh!”

Ayase frantically ran over to her fallen father. She screamed and screamed, but he didn’t respond; blood simply continued to flow from his mouth.

“No! Nooooo!”

“Hmph. Boring. Well, should’ve expected as much now that he’s so damn old.”

Kuraudo’s wooden sword, stained with blood and cracked in many places from shattering so many bones, clacked against the floor in front of Ayase. The

sight of it filled her with such intense hatred that the world turned red before her eyes.

This guy hit my dad so much that his sword looks like this now?

“You monsteeeeer!”

With the last of her reason having melted away, Ayase materialized Hizume and leaped toward Kuraudo. Unfazed, he merely grabbed the hand that held her weapon and lifted her up effortlessly.

“Calm down, bitch. I’m not here to fight weaklings.”

“Let me go! Let me gooooo!”

“You sure you wanna be fighting me right now?”

He tossed her on top of her father, making her realize what she needed to do most.

“Gh! Sugawara, an ambulance! Call an ambulance! Hurry!”

“O-Okay!”

After giving that direction to Sugawara, who had been standing stupefied in the corner, Ayase screamed desperately at Kaito in a vain attempt to wake him. Kuraudo shot an uninterested glance at the two panicking disciples before turning to leave the dojo.

“You’ve got until tomorrow to pack your shit and get out. This isn’t your home anymore,” he declared as he left.

Ayase ground her teeth so hard she thought they might break. As she did, Kaito groaned out two words: “I’m... sorry...”

“Dad!”

When she looked back down at her father, his eyes were closed. All he could do was weakly exhale an apology.



That day two years ago was the day Ayase had lost everything. Kuraudo had taken everything from her, right down to the dojo’s signboard and the land it stood on. She never saw the other disciples again.

Kaito himself had been injured so badly that he went into a coma and hadn't woken up since. He was still trapped in that nightmare, forever apologizing.

"I'm sorry," he'd say, apologizing for the broken hearts of his disciples. *"I'm sorry,"* for losing the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style before he could pass it on to his daughter in full.

Dad might not even survive until winter.

That was Kaito's life expectancy, given by the doctor himself. Ayase had long accepted the fact that her father would be taken away from her—she'd come to terms with it when his illness was first diagnosed. What she couldn't accept, however, was that her father was trapped in an unending nightmare. She couldn't forgive the boy who'd done that to him.

In her anger, she would often challenge the new owner of the dojo, Kuraudo, in hopes of winning back the home that her father had gambled away his life for. But if Kaito couldn't defeat him, then Ayase had no hope of winning. He would always turn down her challenges, treating her like a kitten that wanted to tangle with a full-grown lion.

At first, he would make a show of her pleading and laugh with his friends at the sight of the poor girl clumsily trying to take back her home. Once he'd grown bored of that, however, she was turned away at the door, never even getting the chance to see him.

The only way for Ayase to fight Kuraudo was to enter the Seven Stars Battle Festival and defeat him there. As it was their final year of school and Kaito's final days were drawing ever nearer, she was down to her final chance. If she let it go, Ayase would doom her father's soul to an eternity of darkness and despair.

No matter what she had to do to get there, victory was her only option; getting results was her sole priority. The end justified the means, and she would use whatever means necessary. She didn't believe it was quite the right thing to do, but it certainly wasn't wrong. For someone weak to defeat someone strong, they had to take any and every advantage they could. That much was indisputable.

"I'm going to take our dojo back, even if it means Kurogane will never want

anything to do with me again,” she said to her father, who was lost in the depths of despair. He didn’t need to apologize anymore.

Looking back on how it had all begun, Ayase resolved herself that she would no longer waver, no longer hesitate, even if the world became disgusted by her. Ayase Ayatsuji’s entire being embodied a single goal: to take back her dojo.



“Thank you all for waiting! The time has come for today’s first match at the sixth training field! I’m Isogai, a third-year student with the broadcasting club, and I’ll be giving you the play-by-play! Analysis will be handled by the teacher for class 1-1, Ms. Yuuri Oreki! Ms. Oreki, you look healthy today!”

“That’s because it’s the first match of the day,” Ms. Oreki replied. “By the third match, I’ll be the sickly Yuuri you all know and love! Oh, but don’t worry! I’ve got about a quart of blood ready to go at any time!”

“I see! Looks like blood’s gonna rain both on the field and in the announcers’ booth, then! Now, the two fighters everyone has been waiting for are taking the field!” the girl from the broadcasting club spoke, inviting the first pair of fighters into the arena. “Coming in hot from the blue gate, we have the Rank F knight that everyone’s got their eyes on! It’s Ikki Kurogane!”

As Ikki entered, the bowl-shaped arena erupted with screams from the girls who’d come to support the Worst One.

“The crowd went wild as soon as he appeared! How popular can you get?!”

“Kurogane has a lot of fangirls, huh?”

“Being assigned Rank F despite his strength really makes him feel like the underdog. It just makes you want to have his back!”

“I think I know how that feels.”

“Not long ago, he was a nameless flunk who nobody cared about. But thanks to the changes to Hagun’s system, he’s finally able to show his true battle prowess. Now, the Worst One is among the select few favorites to make it into the Seven Stars Battle Festival! What kind of fight will it be today, I wonder? His opponent is now entering through the red gate! Also undefeated and aiming for

her eleventh win, it's the Rank D third-year Ayase Ayatsuji!"

Ayase entered the arena after him, her black hair fluttering in the wind.

"Oddly enough, Ayatsuji is a swordsman just like Kurogane! She's won all of her matches so far through swordplay alone, and according to the editor of the Hagun Academy Bulletin, Kagami Kusakabe, she's actually one of Kurogane's martial arts students! That makes today's battle master versus apprentice! Will the student finally surpass the master?!"

"Cough. This battle will be a major turning point for Ayatsuji."

"Yep! Unlike Kurogane, Ayatsuji hasn't been up against opponents like The Hunter or Runner's High yet. She's been blessed by the luck of the draw so far, matching up only with Rank E opponents. It's made for an easy ten-win streak."

"What kind of Blazer is she?"

"Well, we have almost no information on Ayatsuji. She hadn't been in any official battles until this year, so there's no data available. And this year—as I mentioned before—she's won using swordplay alone, so we have no idea what tricks she might have up her sleeve! Whether she wins or loses here might just depend on whatever trump card she may have! Now, the fighters have moved to the starting lines!"

In the center of the three hundred-foot diameter ring, the two stood facing each other, about fifty feet apart. Ikki and Ayase had spent so much time practicing their swordplay together, but the atmosphere between them was anything but pleasant.

That's a scary face.

Ayase realized as she looked at Ikki that his expression was tighter and more severe than she had ever seen. He was furious at the girl who had intentionally, remorselessly thrown her pride to the wind. She wouldn't apologize, however, because her path was one she'd chosen to forge herself.

This is actually good for me.

Ikki's magic hadn't fully recovered after what had happened the night before. He wouldn't be able to use Ittou Shura. Moreover, he was straining himself—his

posture was clearly unnatural. Fury had replaced his usual calmness, its absence decreasing his potential.

Considering the vast difference in skill between Ayase and Ikki, she needed to decrease his fighting power as much as she could, so she considered it a nice side-effect of her actions. Plus, she had a trump card available to her in the form of a trap she had set the day before, prior to meeting with Ikki.

If he's already lost his cool this much, he might just fall for it.

“Now, everyone, say it with me! Let’s go ahead!”



Jumping off the line like a sprinter, the swordsman dashed toward Ayase the moment the buzzer sounded, his black sword at the ready. He crouched low, using his whole body to run rather than just his leg strength.

The match began with a complete surprise attack. Ayase hadn’t had time to hold her sword with the proper posture, so normally, she wouldn’t be able to react. But she wasn’t any ordinary swordswoman—theirs was a battle between Blazers.

“You fell for it!”

As she yelled, Hizume emitted a red light that looked strikingly similar to blood. When it did, blood sprayed from Ikki’s body.

“Gaaah!” He screamed and stopped running. His body was covered in long slash wounds.

“Wh-Wh-What was thaaat?! Kurogane’s been sliced all over somehow! What just happened?!”

“I-Ikki?!”

“What the heck?! What’s going on?! The Worst One is bleeding!”

A commotion spread through the crowd. Nobody knew what had just occurred, but they all knew that the only beings capable of making mincemeat of a person from afar were Blazers.

What had happened to Ikki was a result of the ability of Ayatsuji’s Device,

Hizume.

I have the ability to open wounds using Hizume.

When used against other people, any wounds created by Hizume could be freely expanded at will, turning even tiny cuts into life-threatening gashes. It could also be used against the air itself; if she cut through the air using Hizume, she could, at any time of her choosing, instantly create blades of air in that place. That was her Noble Art, Mark of the Wind.

That morning, before her meeting with Ikki, Ayase had visited the sixth training field and left Hizume's claw marks all throughout the arena. In essence, she had created remote-operated explosives.

I've placed over a hundred marks throughout the ring. Even if Kurogane is a master swordsman, he can't defend against attacks he can't see! He's already fallen right into my trap.

Ayase was cheating, of course. Had the marks been produced during the fight, there would have been no problem, but setting traps in the arena before the start of the match was a clear violation of the rules.

Because the marks were invisible, however, her deception was nearly undetectable. She had been apprehensive that a full-fledged Mage-Knight like Ms. Oreki might have noticed, but given that she hadn't spoken out about the rule violation yet, Ayase felt that she had outwitted her.

This just might work! she cheered.

The blades created by Mark of the Wind were byproducts of the conceptual ability to open wounds. They couldn't win a battle decisively or deal fatal blows, but direct cuts from Hizume were a different story. If she could make even a single, tiny cut with Hizume, Ayase's victory would immediately be sealed. That one cut could be expanded until it had sliced through flesh and bone, even becoming fatal. Thus, her goal was to tire Ikki out using Mark of the Wind until she could get that one decisive cut in.

If I can do that, victory is mine!

The only question was how long it would take for her to cut Ikki. Ayase had trained under him, so she knew better than anyone else that he was no

ordinary swordsman. If she got ahead of herself, he would cut her down.

She had successfully damaged him with her surprise attack, but momentarily stopping his charge didn't equal victory. Even with his wounds, Ikki's fighting stance remained unbroken.

It's not time yet. I can't make my move this early. And if I don't make my move now, Kurogane can only do one thing.

His charge had been broken, and he had sustained deep wounds as a result. He would want to take a moment to reconfirm his mindset and his posture.

"Oh! Kurogane is stepping away from his opponent! He must be coming up with a new strategy to deal with her mysterious attack!"

And that's where I'll take aim!

"Gah!"

"What on earth is happening?! Kurogane has just been attacked from behind! What could possibly be going on in that arena?!"

Ayase had created a prison of countless sword slashes, leaving no room for escape. The attack from behind forced Ikki to his knees, giving Ayase a decisive opening.

Now's my chance! She charged toward her fallen foe, ready to end their duel.

"Kurogane has fallen to his knees, and Ayatsuji has immediately gone on the offensive! He won't be able to show us his legendary swordplay like this!"

Ayase also had the option of drawing out the battle and thoroughly destroying Ikki, but she chose to go for broke right away as a result of her fear.

Kurogane is the man who defeated The Hunter.

He didn't just win, either; he won after taking countless arrows unleashed from the cover of Area Invisible, one of the strongest anti-personnel Noble Arts out there. On top of that, he did it without even breaking through Area Invisible itself.

In that duel, despite Ikki never once seeing The Hunter, he, the Worst One, managed to catch the invisible Hunter and take him down. With his

otherworldly perception, it wouldn't have surprised her if Ikki had learned to predict the location of every Mark of the Wind.

Such a problem wouldn't even be worth considering if her opponent were anyone but Ikki Kurogane. Though she could chip down his stamina bit by bit, things wouldn't end well if Ikki won mentally; the Worst One's true fearsomeness didn't lie in his stamina, but in the mind that granted him such perception.

I have to do it now! Just one cut is enough for me to win!

"Haaaaaaaaaah!"

"Ayatsuji's out for blood now! Rushing, rushing, rushing! Brandishing her scarlet blade, she's unleashing a storm of swords on her enemy as he sits helpless on his knees! Is blocking this flurry of fire all he can do from such an unsteady position?! Will he fall victim to her blizzard of blades?! What's this?! S-Somehow, Kurogane is blocking every blow with Intetsu despite his unsteady posture putting him at such a disadvantage! Not a single drop of this steel shower is reaching him!"

Ngh...!

She couldn't reach him. All she needed was one small graze, but even that goal felt so distant. Ayase was astonished at Ikki, who was deflecting every one of her attacks with simple flicks of his wrist despite his disadvantageous position.

Doing so was no extreme feat for Another One, the Uncrowned Sword King. He wouldn't let her end things so easily. While he continued to deflect the sword rain, Ikki gradually stood back up.

"Hah!"

"Not only has Kurogane outmatched Ayatsuji in terms of swordplay, he's actually regained his posture and is now on the counterattack!"

He unleashed a large, powerful downward swing. What seemed like a rash, thoughtless move on his part was actually a calculated action; it wasn't a counterattack like the commentator had claimed.

Though he had regained his posture, Ikki's rhythm had been broken by fending off so many blows, and it wouldn't return so easily. Such a large swing was his way of trying to buy time to recover that rhythm.

If Ayase dodged, she would be putting distance between them, and if she blocked it, the force of the blow would push her away—either option was advantageous to Ikki. She could see the reason behind it, however.

This is it! Once she had read into Ikki's actions, Ayase found a chance at victory. The Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style was the most proficient when it came to parrying into counters. *At my level, I wouldn't normally be able to counter a full-powered attack from Kurogane, but this one is different! Even I can parry this!*

Ikki's swordplay was sharp; Ayase had to be careful at all times. His current attack was wild, however, lacking his usual precision. It was nothing more than an intimidation tactic meant to force her away.

She made her decision instantaneously. Ayase held Hizume at the ready and easily parried his heavy blow, pushing the hammer-like swing aside. As she did, she channeled energy through her toes and pushed off the ground, moving in for a counter.

Ikki had yet to regain control of his upper body after Ayase's parry, leaving his torso wide open. Still moving forward, she swung Hizume as she passed by her foe.

I got him!

Ayase was confident in her decision, but she didn't feel the sensation of tearing through flesh. Instead, she hit something solid.

He blocked it? How?! I parried his sword, so how could he have blocked it in time?

The answer lay in Ikki's hand: he had blocked her counter using Intetsu's hilt.

"Oooooooh! I thought he was going to eat a counterattack, but Kurogane defended himself with his sword's hilt! What an amazing trick!"

"He did something similar during his mock battle with Stella. If he can't block with his blade, he'll just use the hilt. His two-pronged defense makes him a

brick wall when it comes to close-range fighting!”

Tch! I forgot he could guard in such an unorthodox way!

Ayase clicked her tongue in frustration when she heard Ms. Oreki’s analysis. Ikki’s concentration was astounding. How was he able to maintain that level of concentration even after he’d lost his cool?

“Gh?!”

Ayase was stunned when she looked at Ikki’s face. She no longer saw anger and confusion in his eyes; he had calmed down. His eyes, as tranquil as a pond with no ripples, looked down upon Ayase.

Was that a trap?! The chills running down Ayase’s spine spurred her into action. She kicked hard off the ground, jumping far away from her foe. Though she’d expected Ikki to pursue her, he instead stood perfectly still. Had she been mistaken in her prediction, or had she been overly cautious? *Either way, we’re back to square one.*

There were still plenty of traps all over the arena. Ayase wasn’t hoping for a drawn-out battle, but she wasn’t going to try to force a win and lose it all in the process. Next time, she’d just have to be more careful—

“Good,” the samurai with the black katana suddenly sighed in relief.

“Huh?”

What was good? The fact that she had jumped away from him? Ayase’s mind raced as she tried to figure out the meaning behind that word.

“You’re just the person I thought you were, Ayatsuji.”

Her mental processes seemed to freeze when she was faced with Ikki’s smile.



“Good.”

That one word brought a gentle smile to the face of Yuuri Oreki, his teacher and the woman running analysis on and supervising his and Ayase’s match. On the morning of that match, she was taking Ikki’s testimony regarding the destruction of the school building.

“Ms. Oreki. In my match today, my opponent is definitely going to break the rules.”

“Blurghfgh!” The bluntness of his statement had sent coffee and blood shooting out of her nose. *“Huh? What? Umm, explain what you mean while I stop the bleeding!”*

There, Ikki had told her everything about what had happened between him and Ayase the night before. Their meeting, how she had jumped from the building to weaken him, and how he had destroyed the building in the process.

“I-I don’t believe it...” That would surely be a red card if it were true. She wouldn’t be expelled, but cheating was easily grounds for being removed from the Seven Stars selection pool. *“B-But how do you know she’ll do that?”*

“Even though she didn’t actually move when she cut through the fence, I know I heard the sound of blades. I don’t know the specifics, but judging from that, I think Ayase’s ability must involve placing sword slashes and activating them remotely. If she does have that ability, then she’s probably already covered the sixth training field with traps. She was already willing to nearly kill herself to rid me of my trump card, after all, so I’m sure she’d be willing to cheat in the battle too.”

“If she went that far, then I guess she wouldn’t fight fairly, either, but... Mm, attempted suicide and the obstruction of fair play? If this is true, it’s a very big problem.”

“I guess my own testimony isn’t sufficient.”

“Right. I trust you, Kurogane, but I can’t do anything with your testimony alone. I understand, though, and I’ll keep a close eye on your fight. If she cheats, I’ll stop the battle immediately, so you don’t need to worry—”

“No. Please, don’t call out her cheating.”

Blood had erupted from Ms. Oreki’s nose again. Dizzy and anemic from the loss of blood, she’d shoved tissues into her nose and spoken.

“What? Really? Why not? I don’t understand! Why would you even tell me about it, then?!”

“I had to tell you why I destroyed the school building. Besides, I figured that even if I didn’t tell you, you would notice what Ayatsuji was doing and stop the match. I just... don’t want you to.”

“But why?! If she does break the rules, she’ll be disqualified and you’ll get the victory. You do know how important every single victory is in these selection battles, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. If I lose even one battle, I probably won’t make it to the Seven Stars.”

“That’s right! To be frank, you need a flawless record to get in. You know that, and yet you still don’t want me to call her out for cheating?”

“That’s right, ma’am. Please.”



Ms. Oreki still hadn't understood; Ikki had probably thirsted for victory more than anyone. She had known him ever since his entrance exam, where she was the proctor. There had never been an examinee more driven and determined than Ikki.

Her heart had still ached for the year that had been wasted because of the irrational world he was thrust into, but he'd finally been given a fair chance. If anyone should have been willing to fight dirty, it ought to have been Ikki. How could he have just bowed and let his opponent commit the greatest taboo among knights?

"Could you at least tell me why?"

"Because I want to believe in her."

"You want to 'believe in her'?"

"Yes. After what happened last night, I've been thinking. If I cut ties with Ayatsuji, like my friend Alice said I might have to, I can easily win by getting her disqualified. But is that really what I want? No matter how much I rack my brain over it, I can't find the answer. Still, there's one thing I know for sure."

"What's that?"

"I know in my heart that I don't want to cut ties with her. Until the very last moment, I've decided that I want to believe in Ayatsuji. Something must be driving her into a corner and making her lose sight of herself."

Ikki had remembered the childlike smile on Ayase's face when she'd gotten closer to her father's mastery of swordplay. He had remembered when she'd said she liked his hands, rough and calloused from swinging bamboo swords. There was absolutely no way those had been fake.

"So I've decided to believe not in the Ayatsuji from last night, but the one from every day before it."

When someone was desperate, they would become blinder than they themselves knew, until they were blind to even themselves. Ikki had known that very well. He'd also known that only the words of someone who cared deeply for them could save a person like that. If Ayase had been as desperate as Ikki

had, and if she had been failing to hear the cries of her heart...

"I want to help her. So please, Ms. Oreki, give me one last chance to figure out who she truly is."

This kid... she'd thought. What sort of knight could refuse a request like that?

"Be forever just. Be sincere, even to your enemies." Every knight out there saw those traits in their ideal self. Ms. Oreki was no different, so she had accepted Ikki's request.

She had noticed Ayase's cheating as soon as it had started, but she'd held her tongue, ready to leave the match—and one girl's heart—in Ikki's hands. She had been cautiously, quietly watching over him, but she never thoughtlessly interfered.

Save your friend, Ikki.



In truth, Ikki had held the whole battle in the palm of his hands from the outset. He'd even known about all the traps that had been set in the arena and seen through Ayase's plan to wrap up the battle quickly. That was exactly why Ikki charged at her at the very start, pretending to try to win in one fell swoop. It was all for the sake of communicating with her through their swords.

I should have done this at the start.

Ikki smiled wryly at his own stupidity. It had taken him an entire month to discover how his girlfriend, the closest person in the world to him, felt. Of course he wouldn't be able to understand Ayase just by talking to her.

The sword was the only way. Crossing swords was the one way for him to see into someone's heart, and finally, he had seen the truth within Ayase.

"Good. You're just the person I thought you were, Ayatsuji."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're not the kind of person who can make mistakes like that so calmly."

"What a ridiculous thing to say. Ahahah. Your body is in tatters, and you're still going to say nonsense like that? How soft can you be?"

Ayase smirked at Ikki contemptuously, ridiculing him just like she had mere hours ago on the rooftop. Ikki, however, would no longer be deceived by her flimsy, false expression, because swords couldn't lie.

"It's not nonsense. Your swordplay, your footwork, your rhythm, your breathing—every part of you is off. You can't perform the moves you've known all your life, let alone replicate what I taught you. Even your forte, your counter, is stilted. That's why it was so easy to block. No matter how much you build yourself up as some kind of villain, you can't fool your soul. If heart, technique, and strength make up swordplay, then a lost heart can't produce real power. You're more noble than you think, Ayatsuji."

"Y-You're wrong!" There was more emotion in Ayase's voice after Ikki had pointed out the truth. "I'm not lost! I learned the truth two years ago! No matter how nobly you fight, it's all worthless if you lose! Being a goody-two-shoes doesn't mean anything if you can't produce results! You can't protect if you can't win, so the only thing you can do is win, no matter what it takes! Win, no matter the cost, and take back what's yours!"

More than a counterargument, it sounded like Ayase was scolding herself. Ikki recognized this: she was becoming desperate and ignoring the cries of her heart, just like he once had.

"Then there's only one thing I can do. I have to make you hear the cries of your heart." That was Ikki's sole duty, so he pointed Intetsu at her and made a declaration: "I'll use my greatest weakness to bring back your honor."



"Oh, what's this?! Kurogane has crouched down, possibly in preparation for another charge! Even after taking those mysterious attacks, I don't see any fear on his face! The Worst One is ready to take the offensive! Could he have figured out the source of those invisible slashes?!"

Ayase reacted instantly, stepping farther away from him until there was about a hundred feet between them. She appeared calm, but internally, she was panicking.

Me, in the wrong?! The "cries of my heart"?! What nonsense. That can't possibly be true. No matter what it takes, I have to get the dojo back and let my

father be at peace! She wasn't lost; she wasn't trying to fool herself. Ikki was just lying in hopes of confusing her. Ayase forced herself to believe that, trying not to think too deeply about it. *If he thinks I'm in the wrong, then I'll show him just how wrong I am while I win this fight!*

The hundred feet between them was a veritable minefield of invisible cuts. She had memorized the speed at which he charged the first time, allowing her to unleash her Marks of the Wind with even more lethal timing.

"Here I come, Ayatsuji," Ikki said, his body righting itself as he leaped forward.

Got you!

Responding to his charge, Ayase opened a Mark of the Wind right in front of him. The air was rent open, creating a guillotine in the resulting vacuum that would tear through anything it touched. The moment it touched Ikki, he would be in a world of hurt.

"Wha—?!"

Ikki Kurogane moved like a bullet, even faster than he had at the start of the match. By the time the vacuum had opened, he was already past it, leaving Ayase's invisible blade behind.

I've seen that speed before... Ittou Shura!

"What incredible speed! Kurogane has finally whipped out his trump card, Ittou Shura!"

H-How?! I thought I took care of that!

"Hm. That's not Ittou Shura, though." Ms. Oreki's voice cut into Ayase's confused mind.

"Oh? Are you sure, Ms. Oreki?"

"He's just speeding up by emitting mana, like anyone else would."

Mana emission?! Ayase finally realized her mistake.

Mana emission was a basic technique that most Blazers—Ayase included—used subconsciously to increase their speed. To use it, all they had to do was release magical power.

“Kurogane has much less magical power than the average Blazer. If he used mana emission like anyone else, he would run out after just one or two uses, so he normally doesn’t use it. That doesn’t mean he *can’t* use it at will, though. He’s unable to use Ittou Shura for some reason, so he’s using this instead.”

Ms. Oreki was right; “doesn’t use it” and “can’t use it” were different. Ikki didn’t usually have the mana to spare, so he chose not to use it. However, since he had yet to recover enough magical power to use Ittou Shura, there was no point in hesitating to use mana emission, and that was exactly what he’d done. By emitting all of the magical power left in his body at once, he was able to move with speed that rivaled even Ittou Shura.

I was too focused on Ittou Shura!

That was a fatal error. Ikki was already nearing attacking range with his super speed, so Ayase wouldn’t be able to use any Marks of the Wind in time. She had been taken completely by surprise.

This isn’t over yet! Ikki stepped into range. Crossing swords was inevitable. But once, just once, Ayase had to do everything she could to endure his attack and escape. If she could, Ikki would run out of mana, leaving him unable to perform that bullet-like charge again. *That’s my only chance to win! I have to overcome this, no matter what!*

Ayase shrieked and swung Hizume at Ikki, but all it cut through was thin air.

“Huh...?”

Ikki had definitely been right in front of her. She’d swung with all of her might, but her blade had only just grazed the tip of her enemy’s nose. Had she miscalculated the distance between them?

That wasn’t it. Ikki had definitely been within striking distance. Like a mirage, however, he disappeared when he approached. Another Ikki had been running behind him.

Ayase’s mind went blank. Nothing made sense anymore—a natural reaction to what had just occurred. It was yet another one of Ikki’s original skills, much like Raikou, his Seventh Secret Sword. By radically adjusting his speed as he moved, Ikki could create afterimages in front of him, fooling his opponent into

thinking he was closer than he really was.

“Fourth Secret Sword: Shinkirou!”

Not a second later, Intetsu tore through both the air and Ayase, who was still recovering from her full-power swing.



“It’s all oveeeeeeeeeer! Kurogane has made a perfectly clean hit!” The announcer wrapped up the events as the crowd erupted into cheers. “Ayatsuji has fallen to her knees, but she’s not bleeding! Did he?”

“Cough, cough. Yes. Ikki changed his sword to Phantom Form before he attacked.”

“Then she’s just exhausted? She’s not dying?”

“Right.”

“But why did he do that? Is he scared of hurting girls?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, he even cut me once. I think he was planning to exhaust her from the very start, because he’s not here just to win.”

Ms. Oreki whispered the last part so nobody would hear, then looked back down at the arena, where Ayase was in the process of trying to get up off her hands and knees. Her body trembled as she looked up and glared at Ikki, who stood stock-still above her.

“What are... you doing?”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t play dumb. Why didn’t you finish me off?!”

“Why would I do that? Either way, you can’t fight anymore.”

He’s toying with me!

Ikki was just trying to embarrass her. Taking that as an insult, Ayase continued putting all of her remaining strength into getting up. Because Ikki’s Device was in Phantom Form, it had only drained her of her energy; she had taken no actual wounds. Ayase was confident in her stamina, however, because she could keep up with Ikki’s daily runs with energy to spare. The fatigue she felt

was nothing to her.

“...Huh?”

Or so she thought, but she couldn't muster up the energy to stand.

“Why?”

If she couldn't stand up—if she couldn't win the fight—it was all over for her. She wouldn't be able to save her father. So why?

Was my heart always this cold? Could this be the cry of my heart?

Her heart didn't even have enough resolve to drag the strength from her body and help her stand up. Finally aware of that, Ayase realized that her heart was rejecting her ignoble fight. The only reason people were able to stand when cornered was that they had pride.

You can still do it. Do it. Don't give up. It would urge the body and soul on. That was how Ayase had always kept pushing forward. No matter how hard it was to train, no matter how much the blisters on her hands popped and stung, she still had pride in herself for using the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style. But she had foregone her pride.

“You were right, Kurogane.” She didn't have the energy to stand. “I've lost.”



“Ayatsuji has just surrendered! The battle is finiiiiished! Once again, Ikki Kurogane, the Worst One, has claimed victory! He's on an eleven-win streak, with names like The Hunter and Runner's High checked off his list! I'd bet money that his spot at the Seven Stars is all but guaranteed now!”

Casting a sidelong glance at the wild crowd, Ayase smiled dryly.

“I'm pathetic. I fought like a coward, and I couldn't even see that all the way through.”

She laughed at herself, pulled so far in either direction that she'd torn and was no longer whole.

“You're not pathetic at all.” Ikki rejected her self-loathing.

“Huh?”

“You were lost, you made mistakes, and you had become blind, but you never threw away your father’s style. That’s where your strength comes from.” Ikki offered his hand to Ayase and asked, “Tell me, Ayatsuji: What did the Sword Eater take from you? What’s eating you up inside like this?”

“What’s the point in asking?”

“I’m going to take it back for you.”

There was no hesitation or trickery in his voice. He was clearly ready to fight for Ayase if she was willing to trust him. She knew as much, and that was why she couldn’t say.

“I can’t tell you. It’s not your problem, Kurogane.”

She couldn’t ask him to fight such a monster. She couldn’t let him get hurt for the sake of such a half-hearted loser like her, so she kept her secret.

Nobody else needs to be hurt. My father was one too many.

“Then I’ll figure it out myself.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll follow you around until I learn everything about it.”

“Wh-What are you even—”

“I’ll learn everything, and then I’ll take it back, whatever ‘it’ is. You stalked me before, so now we can call it even. It’s not like you’re in any position to refuse, right?”

He made no sense. What did he mean, “even”? They were nowhere near being even. If anything, she would just be more indebted to him.

“Why?” Ayase couldn’t stop the flowing of her tears or the trembling of her body. “I betrayed you. I was so... terrible to you... So why are you trying so hard to help me?”

In contrast to her cracked voice, Ikki’s reply was as plain as could be.

“I don’t need a reason to wipe away a friend’s tears.”

“...!”

His reflection in her eyes seemed to mirror the Kaito of long ago, when he stepped into battle for the sake of his injured disciples. Ikki was the same as him. He wouldn't unsheathe his sword for trifles such as being spat on or verbally abused, but when one of his friends was hurt, he never hesitated to take action.

Yes. That's really how he was.

How long ago had Ayase lost sight of that? That was the ideal she'd been chasing for so long, ever since her days in the dojo.

Ayase looked down at her hands. Ugly by conventional standards, they were covered with open blisters. But they were a swordsman's hands, the same as Ikki and her father's.

That's right. I only ever picked up a sword because I wanted to be a cool, accomplished swordsman like him.

Being confronted with Kuraudo's monstrous strength and fretting over the need to take the dojo back had made Ayase lose sight of herself, but as she clasped her hands together, she remembered where her pride had come from. That was when she made her decision.

"Kurogane... Please, help me!"

What she needed was not to turn her back to her father's teachings, betray her pride, and lose herself in self-pity like some tragic heroine, it was to request the aid of the kind boy standing in front of her, and to trust in his coming victory.

Ayase took Ikki's extended hand, to which he smiled happily and firmly squeezed hers.

"That's all I wanted to hear."

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

RENREN TOMARU

■ PROFILE

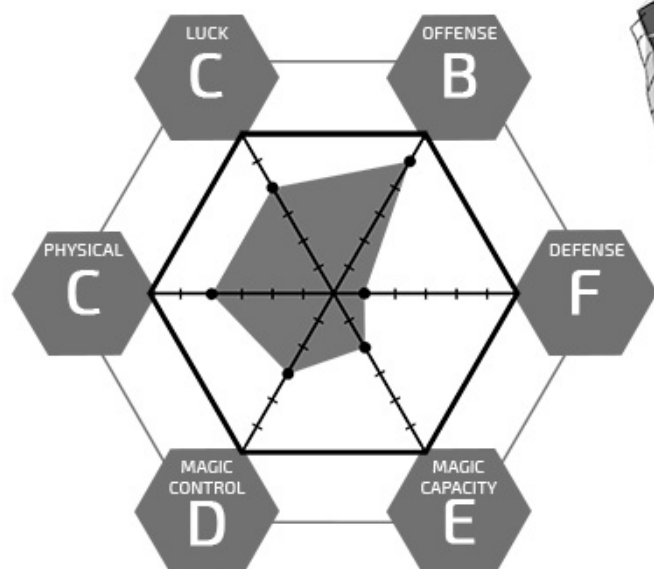
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,
CLASS 2-2

BLAZER RANK: C

NOBLE ART: MACH GREED

NICKNAME: RUNNER'S HIGH

SUMMARY: GENERAL AFFAIRS
MANAGER FOR THE STUDENT
COUNCIL.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

Misogi: "Looks like Runner's High is down for the count."

Toutokubara: "Well, she is the weakest member of the student council."

Toudou: "She's soiled our name by losing to the Worst One, of all people."

Kusakabe: "You guys know this is my section of the paper, right?"



Chapter 4

Worst One vs. Sword Eater

In the middle of the night following Ikki's battle with Ayase, a solitary shadow danced around the forest clearing where he and the group usually trained. Someone was swinging a sword that just barely reflected the moonlight that filtered in through the trees. The night was still; only the sound of that sword slicing through the air could be heard as the lone shadow trained with fluid, graceful movements.

Suddenly, the shadow's movements came to a halt.

"Stella?"

The shadow, Ikki Kurogane, wiped the sweat from his brow and turned toward the entrance to the clearing, for he had felt the presence of an intruder. The silhouette standing at the entrance was, as he'd expected, the fiery-haired girl whose brilliance shone even in the darkness: Stella Vermillion. She frowned at Ikki and spoke candidly.

"You're still at it? If you don't give yourself time to rest, it'll show during your fight tomorrow."

The coming fight she spoke of was Ikki's decisive battle with Kuraudo. After his battle against Ayase, he and Stella learned everything about what had happened two years prior. Everything, from the day Kuraudo had appeared to the present, about how Kaito Ayatsuji, the Last Samurai, had been defeated and broken.

Once he'd learned of it, Ikki reaffirmed his promise to Ayase that he would challenge Kuraudo the very next day for the fate of the dojo. An even harder fight than his battle with Ayase would be waiting for him, so it was best for him to rest his body. Ikki was well aware of that, but he just couldn't calm himself down.

“Were you shocked when you found out?”

“I was, yeah. I’ve more or less looked up to Kaito for a long time.”

For Ikki, who had been abandoned by every possible parental figure in his family, Kaito and other famous swordsmen were like his faraway mentors. He watched their matches, desperately trying to steal, analyze, and practice their style of swordplay. They had laid the foundation for the man Ikki had become, so it certainly came as a surprise when he learned of the depressing fate that had befallen the man who was basically a part of him. Even if he had been in poor health, how could Kaito have been defeated so one-sidedly in a battle not of Mage-Knights, but of pure swordsmanship?

“Kurashiki is no pushover; that much is clear.”

“Are you getting nervous?”

“Considering who he is, yeah.”

Third-year Kuraudo Kurashiki, the Ace of Donrou and a quarterfinalist at the previous year’s Seven Stars. His infamy made it easy to find information about him.

His Device, Orochimaru, could freely change its form by extending or contracting by virtue of his Noble Art, giving him the ability to attack from any range. He could use it to attack faraway enemies with a bullet-like high-speed thrust, and if that were to miss, he could swing it back and forth through the arena to make it nearly impossible to evade. For anyone who tried to fight at close-range, Orochimaru could shrink to the size of a one-handed sword, allowing Kuraudo to overwhelm the enemy with quick strikes from his saw-like blade.

Able to fight with the optimal blade for any range, Kuraudo’s Noble Art, Jakotsujin, left him without a single weak point when it came to crossing swords. It wasn’t all that flashy, but it had so much offensive power that it was sure to be a headache.

Against someone like Ikki, whose forte was crossing swords, an enemy who could constantly change his attack range was sure to be a tough match. That’s why Kuraudo was called the Sword Eater; his ability naturally allowed him to

prey on swordsmen. He probably held secrets even darker than his breaking of Kaito.

“Well, I already figured as much.” Ikki had thought that way ever since he’d felt Kuraudo’s barbaric aura and seen his beastly expression, but that wasn’t why he found it so hard to calm down. “Hey, Stella. What did you think when Ayatsuji told us all that?”

“I could see where she was coming from, since that mad dog had its annoying little eyes on her.”

“Is that all? I—”

“You don’t have to finish that sentence,” Stella muttered, interrupting him. “I think we’re both thinking the same thing; that’s why I said ‘where she was coming from’.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I figured you’d say something like that.”

Ikki was all smiles, overjoyed that the most important person in the world to him thought the same thing he did.

“But no matter what the truth is,” she continued, “it has nothing to do with you. What you have to do doesn’t change either way.”

“You’re right. I agree.”

Ikki nodded and continued swinging his sword through the darkness. His body was in good condition, and he had energy to spare. All that was left was to wait for the next day’s fight, when the truth of the past two years would be revealed to Ayase.



The next evening, Ayase guided Ikki and Stella to the former Ayatsuji Dojo.

“Even the road that leads there is so nostalgic,” Ikki said as they walked along a road full of old-fashioned buildings.

“Really? Well, I think I do remember you coming to challenge the dojo once or twice.”

“Yep. But your dad chased me out, saying he didn’t want any of my funny

business.”

“That was when you were in middle school, right, Ikki?” Stella asked. “You went out looking for dojos all the time.”

“I might not look like it, but I was a mischievous little runt. Whenever I found the time, I’d go around the country challenging dojos.”

“You were certainly full of energy, Kurogane, but isn’t it dangerous for a middle schooler to do something like that? Someone could have beaten you up if you rubbed them the wrong way.”

“Yeah, that happened sometimes. I’d get beaten to a pulp by disciples. It’s not their fault, though; trying to storm dojos like that is really rude. It’s pretty much an ironclad rule that no matter what the dojo does to the challenger, the challenger can’t complain.”

Ikki had known it was a dangerous thing to do. In fact, he had nearly been killed on more occasions than he could count on his hands. Even knowing that, however, all he’d wanted at the time was to be stronger. Since the parental figures in his home wouldn’t help him, he had been desperate to soak up as much battle experience as he possibly could.

That said, I didn’t randomly attack disciples and force the teacher into a duel after being refused.

While they talked about the past, the three of them left the city road and entered a quiet clearing in the woods. Before their eyes was a large house surrounded by tall walls.

“This used to be my home.”

The mansion was so decrepit and poorly maintained that it seemed abandoned. Roof tiles had peeled off, and the wood supporting the gate had rotted and collapsed. Cigarette butts, empty cans, and plastic wrappers littered the area, and the once-white walls had been covered with vulgar graffiti.

“Look at this tasteless ‘art’,” Stella said, full of disdain. “There are people out there with real skill when it comes to this sort of thing, but this is just awful.”

“I don’t think that’s the worst part, but yeah, it’s a real mess.”

Ayase wore a pained expression, as if trying to stifle her frustration. To see a place so full of memories for her trampled so callously must have been too much to bear.

We'd better get this place back in her hands right away.

Ikki steeled his resolve once more and removed a bamboo sword from the long, slender bag he carried.

"How do you plan to get the dojo back, Kurogane?"

"I'm just gonna charge through the front door and storm the dojo, of course."

The first thought Ikki had when he'd learned of what happened was that Kuraudo's actions were surprisingly decent. Assaulting the disciples to force their master to accept his challenge was certainly a crime, but when all was said and done, the final battle had been settled with mutual consent from both parties. For better or for worse, everything had ridden on the outcome of their duel. If a third party had tried to intrude, it would have been an insult to Kaito's honor.

"That's very like you, Ikki."

"Okay. But please, Kurogane, be careful. The Sword Eater is very strong. The other disciples and I were no match for him, and my father may have been rusty, but even he couldn't win..."

"I know. He's the Ace of Donrou, too. I can't be careless against him." Ikki took a deep breath and said, "All right. Here goes."

He prepared himself mentally and headed to the gate of the former Ayatsuji Dojo. In front of the decaying gate, five high school thugs were sitting on the ground, laughing. One of them was the skinhead from the confrontation at the restaurant. He was definitely one of Kuraudo's underlings.

"Sorry to interrupt your conversation, but could I have a sec?"

"The hell you want?"

I wonder why these people always try to lead off with intimidation.

"Oh! Heh! You're that little bitch from the family restaurant!"

The skinhead immediately took notice of Ikki, obviously remembering him.

“Huh? Is that the guy you were talking about?”

“Yeah! Kuraudo beat him and spat on him, and he just sat there shittin’ his pants! He didn’t even say a word!”

“Hahaha! He definitely looks like a weak little beansprout, doesn’t he? He’s wearing a Hagun uniform; does that mean this guy’s a Blazer?”

“Hey, that’s Ayase behind him! Who’s the redhead?! Damn, she’s hot!”

When the thugs saw Stella, they started to approach her with vulgar grins on their faces. Stella, however, looked at them as if they were nothing but walking garbage. Tiny embers crackled in the air.

Hoo, boy.

Ikki grabbed the shoulder of one of the boys that tried to approach her before he could get burned to death. He’d done it out of kindness, but the thugs took it as an attack.

“The hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m trying to save your life. Now, just listen to what I have to say. I’m here to challenge Kurashiki to a fight. Could you show me where he is right now?”

Ikki got straight to the point, hoping to keep them from inciting Stella’s wrath and creating an actual issue. Their eyes opened wide at his statement, and so did their mouths as they laughed.

“Hahahahaha! Haaahahahahah!”

“Hey, seriously?! You wanna fight him?! A chicken like you? Damn, man, you’re hilarious!”

“Do you even know what the word ‘fight’ means?!”

“Heheheh! Ah, my sides hurt!”

“Whew... Hey, buddy. I’m sorry, but Kuraudo doesn’t care about fighting weaklings like you. Here, we’ll give you a good fight. If you beat us, we’ll go ahead and take you to Kuraudo.”

“Woo! Fight, fight! I’m excited!”

One of the boys materialized an army knife-like Device and patted the flat of the blade against Ikki's face.

They're Donrou students, too.

Ikki accepted their challenge. He seized the wrist of the boy with the knife, holding it tightly as a cruel smirk spread across his face.

"I'm glad you're quick to the point."



"That asshole with the dyed brown hair was so stubborn; I pantsed him and kicked him all the way down the road!"

"Gahahah! For real?!"

"No waaay! Hahah!"

In the trashed halls of the former Ayatsuji Dojo, a group of boys sat around and chewed the fat. They talked about the same things they always did: who'd beaten up whom, who'd cheated whom, and who'd had sex with whom. Kuraudo didn't especially care for any of it, so he sat away from them on a sofa, puffing away at his cigarette. They weren't a bad group, and they all loved him, but he just didn't understand it.

How do these guys not get bored talking about the same shit every day? I wish Donrou would start doing something like Hagun's selection battles.

That way, at least he could be excited about some part of his daily life. He sighed, watching the cloud of smoke he exhaled drift toward the hole in the roof that let in the sight of the night sky. Looking back, it had been two years since he'd won the dojo.

Maybe I ought to sell this place, he thought idly, still blowing out cigarette smoke.

"Hey, Kuraudo?" One of his lackeys called over to him, his face pale.

"What? Your stomach hurt or something?"

"You remember the guys you got into it with at that family restaurant? That guy and girl who were with Ayase?"

“Yeah. What about them?”

“I thought I’d seen their faces before. Yesterday, I finally remembered.” He showed Kuraudo his electronic student handbook. On the display was a news aggregator site with a summary video under the article *The Crimson Princess, Rank A, Somehow Loses to The Worst One, Rank F, in Mock Battle!* The video was, of course, a recording of Ikki and Stella’s duel. “One of my buds at Hagun told me that he took down Runner’s High too! People have even started calling him ‘Another One’ or the ‘Uncrowned Sword King’. Hey, man, you think maybe we stepped into some nasty shit?”

Once they realized who they had messed with, Kuraudo’s friends grew pale and sweaty, but Kuraudo simply laughed. Instead of showing fear, he grinned, his canine tooth poking out of his mouth.

“Hahah! I get it. I figured they weren’t normal, but *this* is a surprise.”

Kuraudo noticed his body temperature rising. He so badly wanted to run wild and let all his pent-up energy explode out of him.

Interesting.

Kuraudo had thought he would wait until the Seven Stars, but perhaps it was time for him to pay Hagun a visit. Either that, or he could use Ayase to smoke them out. As a wicked plan began to form within Kuraudo’s head, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching him.

“Oh?”

It was a beautiful sound; the sound of someone with perfect posture. None of his cronies had such posture.

“Hahah! I think things are about to get interesting!”

“Huh? Kuraudo, what are you talking—”

Suddenly, the footsteps stopped at the entrance and the door was flung open. The visitors were just the ones he had expected: Ikki Kurogane, Stella Vermillion, and Ayase Ayatsuji—the trio he’d run into at the restaurant.

“I’m coming in.”

“Whoa! The inside is filthy, too. How can you guys live in a dump like this?”

Ikki and Stella announced their arrival.

“Wh-Who are you?!”

“These are the people from the family restaurant!”

Casting a sidelong glance at his friends, who had been bothered by the sudden intrusion, Kuraudo remained sitting on his sofa. He glared at Ikki, who was still holding the bamboo sword and convenience store bag.

“What a coincidence. I was just thinking of coming to find you losers.”

“Really? I’m glad we didn’t miss each other, then.”

Ikki’s response didn’t sound like something a person treading on enemy soil would say. He was definitely testing his luck.

“So, what are you here for, coward?”

“I don’t think you’re dense enough to not be able to guess. I’m here to help Ayatsuji get her dojo back.”

“Hah! You’re funny, man. I don’t know how she convinced you to do this, but I won this dojo fair and square. As a swordsman, you ought to know what that means.”

“Of course. I’m not just going to ask you to give it back.” He approached the sofa Kuraudo sat on and pointed his bamboo sword at his enemy’s nose.

“Kurashiki, I challenge you to a duel.”

“Came to storm my dojo, huh?”

“I’m doing the same thing you did. You’re not going to back down, are you?”

He’s gonna taunt me and everything, huh?

Ikki might as well have been a different person compared to when they’d last met. Kuraudo didn’t know how much Ikki’s state of mind had changed, but he was interested nonetheless. He grabbed the sword pointed at his face and spoke.

“Hahah. All right, I accept.” He then crushed the sword with his grip strength alone. “But just like when I took this dojo for myself, you’re gonna have to take on my thirty idiots by yourself. We’ll see where things go from there.”

“I don’t mind. My friends are just here to watch. It’s only proper to respect the dojo master’s rules, after all.”

“So you know a challenger’s etiquette. Good. Wait right there while I get my idiots.”

Kuraudo used his electronic handbook to call his friends outside the dojo.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary.”

“Huh?”

“I thought you might do this, so I already fought them all.” Ikki turned his bag upside down in front of Kuraudo, causing nearly two dozen Donrou Academy student handbooks to clack as they fell to the floor. One of them was ringing; of course, the caller’s name shown on the screen was Kuraudo. Ikki grinned fearlessly at Kuraudo as he showed off the spoils of his victories and said, “The only ones left are these seven.”

“D-Don’t mess with us, jackass!”

“I’ll kill yooou!”

Once Kuraudo’s lackeys realized that their friends had been defeated, they materialized their Devices. Their leader stopped them, however.

“Back off, boys.”

“Kuraudo?”

“D-Don’t be a wuss! Let’s kick his ass!”

“I said back off. You’re in my way.”

“Eep!”

They gasped and turned pale, frightened by the threatening fire in Kuraudo’s eyes.

Hmph. Even if they all attacked at once, they wouldn’t be a match for him. It would just be a waste of time.

“I’m changing the rules. This is now a real battle to the death. First to die loses,” Kuraudo declared as he materialized his Device, a nodachi that looked almost like it was made from human bone.

Normally, student knights were forbidden from using their abilities outside of school, but there were certain exceptions. For example, if they were caught up in a major incident; or if they had been given permission by the owner of a private dojo. Ikki was dealing with the latter, and he had no reason to refuse such an offer.

“You have my thanks for accepting my challenge, Sword Eater,” Ikki replied, materializing and readying Intetsu in place of his shattered bamboo sword.

All the hair on Kuraudo’s body instantly stood on end. He was up against the real deal, invoking a sensation that he hadn’t felt since the Last Samurai.

This is why I love swordsmen, he thought. The nervousness I feel is a world different from fighting idiots who are caught up in their so-called “talent”.

Ikki’s dagger-like eyes and dimly-glowing sword both threatened to pierce directly into Kuraudo’s heart. The tension within him rose to a peak, giving him a high he couldn’t find even at the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“Then let’s fight!” Kuraudo screamed, lost in the excitement.

Spurred on by his boiling blood, he attacked.



Making the first move, Kuraudo attempted to close the distance between himself and his foe. He’d put magical power into his legs and kicked off the ground, sending him forward at a rapid speed.

“Hahah!”

His saw-bladed nodachi ripped through the air as he swung it powerfully with his right arm. The swing was too wild, too easily-counteracted—he may as well have been an amateur. He wielded it like a one-handed sword, as if he didn’t understand how to use a nodachi. Rather than slicing, he seemed to be trying to smash with it.

How is his swing so sharp when his style is so sloppy?!

Once, twice, thrice. Intetsu began to creak from the repeated, formless blows, while Ikki’s arms screamed as pain radiated all the way down to his ankles.

Kuraudo’s strength was beyond belief. He was like some sort of monster, the

wildly-swinging nodachi like his fangs. His sword had no theories or ideals behind it, just raw, deadly power.

But those wild movements should put him off-balance, slowing down his recovery!

After taking the first three blows, Ikki shuffled backward to dodge the incoming horizontal swing. The air boomed like a cannon as the pressure from Kuraudo's attack grazed Ikki's nose. Swinging such a large sword with only one hand, however, left Kuraudo's chest open to attack.

This is my chance!

Ikki had perfectly calculated his dodge so that he would be close enough to counterattack. He wasted no time in swinging his own sword for his opponent's torso, but the leering skull on Kuraudo's chest simply laughed at him.

"Ngh?!"

What he felt against his sword was not skin, but steel. Ikki's perfectly-timed counterattack had been blocked by the bone-like blade.

"Hah! Damn shame."

The monster stuck his tongue out and laughed. It *was* a damn shame. No human alive should have had reflexes fast enough to protect themselves from a perfectly-timed counterattack while still recovering from their last attack. Unless, perhaps, they had expected the counter and were moving to guard from the beginning.

Or maybe...

An incredibly dangerous theory took form in Ikki's mind. He had no room to deliberate on it, though, as Kuraudo was already repelling not just Intetsu, but even Ikki himself with just one arm.

"Hah! Hahah!"

They had moved from sword range to lance range—a distance neither of them would be able to fight at. Was he trying to reset their positioning? No, that wasn't it.

"Trail your prey, Jakotsujin!"

Ikki was still in the Sword Eater's striking distance. Kuraudo's blade, Orochimaru, slithered like a snake as it extended toward Ikki.

"Ngah!"

Ikki deflected the extending blade with Intetsu, successfully defending himself.

"Hahah! It's not over yet!"

Kuraudo's assault didn't end with just one strike; he pulled his long weapon back and hacked away at Ikki from a safe range, using Orochimaru's flexible body like a whip. There was enough distance between them that only the Sword Eater's attacks would reach. All Ikki could do was block each and every incoming attack.

"Urk!"

Every whip of the saw-like blade ground away bits of Ikki's sword, sending sparks flying. Ikki's arms were beginning to give, unable to take the long-range assault.

"Woooo! Get 'im, Kuraudo!"

"Tear him apart until he's just a raggedy dust rag!"

Kuraudo's crowd cheered as he gained even more ground. Meanwhile, Ikki's side wasn't looking so good. Ayase's face went pale.

"You can't keep guarding, Kurogane! Get away for now!"

"He can't. Every time he's forced back, Orochimaru grows to fill that distance. In fact, if Ikki moves away, it'll just be worse for him."

"So it's just going to get worse?"

"Yes. But Ikki isn't the kind of man to just let something like this happen to him!"

The Crimson Princess made a bold declaration. She was correct, of course, because she knew the Worst One better than anyone else.

Though he had been forced into a defensive battle, Ikki leaned forward. He threw his body forward using just his legs, but Kuraudo wasn't ready to let him

approach so easily. Given the distance between them, their battle would be completely one-sided in Kuraudo's favor. He swung his sword once again, hoping to maintain his advantage and limit Ikki's options.

The white serpent sliced through the air, heading toward its prey. It bared its fangs, ready to crack open Ikki's skull, but he leaned even farther forward, evading the snake entirely.

He dashed so low that he almost looked to be crawling—a superhuman feat made possible by Ikki's honed body. The Worst One ran low to the ground and passed under the blade, never letting the enemy out of his sight.

"He did it!"

Ayase pumped her fist when she saw the perfect dodge.

"Hahah!"

The Sword Eater wouldn't let a single evasion stop him, though. Like a snake with its own free will, Orochimaru raised its head and continued pursuing Ikki even after he'd dodged it.

"H-His sword doesn't just extend?!" Ayase screamed.

Orochimaru's true strength wasn't just in growing and shrinking; it could also move according to its user's will. The sword altered its course as if it were a living being, chasing Ikki anew. Despite Ikki's belief that he had avoided the looming threat, it aimed straight for his back. The attack was sure to skewer him.

"I saw that coming, Kurashiki."

Unless, of course, he had predicted it.

"What?!"

Ikki made the smallest necessary sidestep to avoid the incoming fangs. He was never just fighting a defensive battle; he simply wasn't that docile of a person. Even his defensive battles always concealed some bold plan.

As he struggled to block Kuraudo's successive attacks, Ikki was stealing his patterns and combinations, exposing the very root of Kuraudo Kurashiki himself.

Perfect Vision. The Worst One had used his all-seeing eye, which had captured even the invisible Hunter, to read the thoughts of a fanged monster until he found an opportunity for his counterattack. His counter was to be a stab—the fastest possible method of attack for a katana—and his closest target was the forehead of the skull tattoo.

Kuraudo was completely open, still recovering from his own surprise attack. He wouldn't even have had the time to pull back his sword, let alone take evasive action. It simply wasn't possible for a human, meaning Ikki's attack was sure to pierce his heart.

Huh?!

At that very moment, the skull disappeared from before Ikki's eyes. What had happened? How could he have lost sight of his target? Had Kuraudo really disappeared into thin air? That couldn't have been the case.

Ikki's heart thumped painfully and furiously, alarm bells sounding in his head. *Danger, danger!* they blared. *Danger, danger!*

Below?!

His sixth sense had informed him of the enemy's position. Just before Intetsu could pierce his heart, Kuraudo had bent his upper body backward until it was almost parallel to the dojo floor, evading the thrust. Then, he looked at Intetsu from directly below, as if mocking it.

"Hahaaah!"

With his upper body still bent back, he attacked Ikki with his nodachi once more.

"Ngh!"

Ikki blocked the attack with his own sword, stopping it just before it could behead him. He'd only narrowly defended himself, so he had been unable to properly disperse the impact, causing his shoulder to dislocate. His expression turned grim, but not because of Kuraudo's incredible strength even while contorted into such an unstable position.

I knew it!

While Ikki was stupefied, Kuraudo let loose three more wild attacks, his body having been righted by his previous one.

Ikki's breathing was ragged as a result of his combined charge and evasive maneuvers; he had to be careful not to push himself too much. Focusing on defense once more, he held Intetsu over his head, ready to block the falling nodachi. However, the moment their blades were to cross, the nodachi faded like a mirage.

This is bad!

As Ikki launched himself backward with all his strength, the spot he had leaped from was torn through by Kuraudo's blade.

"Ngh!"

Because he had leaped back without thinking, Ikki broke posture and nearly fell. He staggered backward until he eventually corrected himself.

Stella and Ayase gasped as they looked on from the sidelines. Ikki's uniform had been torn in the front—proof that if he hadn't jumped back at that exact moment, his entrails would have ended up all over the floor.

"Hah! Not bad, dodging that on your first time seeing it."

"Wh-What was that?!"

"Kurogane..."

"Nooooooooo!"

"He was so close to slicing him in half!"

"Good shit, though, Kuraudo! This guy has nothing on you!"

"Get hiiiiim!"

Shock and confusion, anticipation and excitement. The difference between each side's mood was like night and day. Ikki didn't have room in his mind to worry about any of that.

"Hm. I think I get it." He'd finally confirmed the theory had been in the back of his mind ever since Kuraudo's impossibly-timed evasion of his counter. His worst nightmare had become a reality. "So that's your true power—the power

that allowed you to defeat the Last Samurai.”



“When Ayatsuji first told me about your duel, there was something I just couldn’t wrap my head around. How had Kaito been defeated so easily? Even if he had been rusty from his years of retirement, he was such a great swordsman that people called him the Last Samurai. He couldn’t have been beaten at his own game that easily. There had to be some explanation for it.” It was all the more reason for Ikki to believe Kuraudo was just that strong. “But now, I know what that reason is.”

Blocking and evading with inhuman timing, a sword that would disappear into thin air and attack from entirely different angles—both were possible because of a single ability.

“What is it?! Is it some kind of trick?!”

Ayase cut in from the sidelines, desperate to know more. She must have wondered how Kaito had been beaten so badly. She must have believed there had been some trickery afoot.

“No, it’s not trickery,” Ikki said, shaking his head.

“Haha! Looks like you do get it after all. Go on and tell them so we can compare answers.”

Kuraudo smirked as Ikki revealed the true nature of his ability.

“The power that serves as foundation for Kurashiki’s strength is his reaction time.”

“It does...?”

“Ikki, are you talking about the same reaction time that everyone has?”

“Yes and no. Going by the meaning of the phrase alone, yes, but the speed of our reactions is just too different. I’m talking about the factors that make up reaction time: the individual activities of sensing, comprehending, and responding to stimuli. For a normal human, it all adds up to about a third of a second, and for a world-class sprinter, it’s said to add up to about a sixth of a second. Getting below a tenth of a second should be impossible no matter how

much you train. Judging by the speed of Kuraudo's moves, however, his reaction time must be around half of that."

Stella and Ayase were, naturally, too shocked to speak. Even Ikki and Stella only had reaction speeds slightly better than a sprinter's. Kuraudo had surpassed human speed; if Ikki performed an action, he could perform two or three in the same amount of time.

"Thanks to your superhuman reaction speed, you can avoid unavoidable attacks, change the path of your sword the moment our blades are about to meet, attack from completely new angles, and more. That's why it looked like your sword had disappeared in midair."

"Hahah! Haaahahahah! Correct!"

Kuraudo laughed and gave Ikki a metaphorical gold star. There never was any technique to his swordplay; just brute force. Because all actions were governed on a basic level by reaction speed, that force alone was enough to allow the Sword Eater to pound any obstacle into the dirt.

No matter how strong one was, how polished one's stance was, or how honed one's tactical sense was, it was all meaningless if their opponent was twice as fast as they were. Even if top-tier tactical prowess landed them the perfect surprise attack on Kuraudo, he would win the moment he laid eyes on you. Even if he dove awkwardly into battle, Kuraudo could break through an enemy's guard just by changing his angle of attack.

The Sword Eater's true strength was his ability to, in essence, change his throw from paper to rock after seeing that his opponent had thrown scissors. Skills, experience, strategy, and tactics were nothing before the gift he was born with. Superhuman reaction speed and the action speed to put it to good use combined to create his special ability: Marginal Counter.

"I've never had someone see through my Marginal Counter from the very start! Good shit, Worst One! You're a cut above the rest. But so what?! Even if you know what's going on behind the scenes, what are you gonna do about it?!"

Knowing that Kuraudo was right, Ikki's expression clouded over. Perfect Vision was worthless against an opponent who could redo his move in rock-paper-

scissors. Ittou Shura only increased physical strength; it couldn't speed up the body's impulses. He had no way to break through Marginal Counter.

“Hahah! You can't do shit! My Marginal Counter isn't a skill—it's something I was born with. You can't beat it. And you haven't even seen Marginal Counter's top speed! Hebigami!”

Kuraudo howled, moving to close the distance between them, and unleashed an attack that struck from two places at once. The simultaneous left and right strikes both somehow came from the same slash.

There was no way for Ikki to guard against the twin strikes' impossible, phantom-like speed and vigor. Even if he protected himself on one side, the other strike from the saw-like blade would tear his body apart.

As such, there was only one action he could take: he attempted to evade the blow by leaping backward. Superhuman twin strikes should have been pointless if he was out of range, but the Sword Eater could change his attack range at will.

“That won't work twiiice!”

Orochimaru extended toward Ikki. He could no longer evade by moving back; the saw-like blades approached from left and right, ready to cut his body in two. That was when he acted.

Ikki had repelled the Orochimaru on his right with Intetsu in his right hand. Wasn't that the wrong move, though? With Ikki's reaction speed, he shouldn't have been able to defend himself against the attack on the left. The saw should have dug into his torso, hurling flesh and blood all over the dojo, but that didn't happen.

“What?!”

Sparks flew instead of blood, and the *clang!* of steel against steel rang out. The reason for that lay in Ikki's hands, which defended him from Hebigami.

“Damn you...!”

Kuraudo growled when he realized what had happened. Ikki wasn't actually holding Intetsu's hilt; he was holding the base of the blade, decreasing his

reach.

“Ooh, shortsword techniques?! That’s amazing, Ikki!”

“Kurogane can use shortswords too?!”

“Shizuku uses one, and given that he can teach others her style of swordplay, of course he can!”

Stella was confident in her judgment because she knew Ikki would hate to give flawed lessons, and she was correct. The martial arts he had learned weren’t limited to swordplay; he knew everything, from archery to hand-to-hand combat. If he found anything that could make him stronger, he would pursue it wholeheartedly, using every second he had to the fullest because he knew that he was the weakest Blazer out there.

In times of need, Ikki would use every bit of knowledge he’d gained. Doing so was how he’d found The Hunter’s position based on the force and angle of his arrows. The same was true for him having survived Kuraudo’s attack.

Shortswords had less attack power than katanas due to their shorter reach, but they made up for it in defensive power due to their ease of handling. The increased speed they boasted allowed Ikki to parry Kuraudo’s attacks.

“You’re not the only one who can adjust their range.”

After warding off both bites of Hebigami from his tight stance, Ikki immediately stepped forward to counterattack.

“Hahah!”

Kuraudo couldn’t help but laugh as his foe seemed to communicate that he was ready to challenge even Kuraudo’s incredible speed. That weapon switch wasn’t something that a student knight who relied on his magic all the time would come up with. Kuraudo praised Ikki for that last-second action.

That won’t help you win, though! It’s not enough!

The shortsword switch may have been clever, but it was nothing more than a trick. Kuraudo was ready to give his enemy the final answer that he had learned as a quarterfinalist at Seven Stars, one of the strongest Blazers in Japan.

Strength didn’t lie in flashy tricks or noble ideals like fighting for your friends.

It was so much simpler, so much more basic: absurd brute force.

“Hah-haaaaah!”

“Wha—?!”

Ikki and his spectators were lost for words. The snake Kuraudo had let loose had two additional heads; Ikki had to try to counter four attacks all at once.

He can still move faster?!

Ikki was taken completely by surprise, but he just barely managed to block both the blow that was meant to cut through his neck and the blow that was meant to gouge his left side.

It wasn't enough, though. In the time it took Ikki to do one thing, Kuraudo could do four. The two remaining fangs tore through Ikki's chest in the shape of a cross, sending blood spurting out of him.

“Graaaaah!”

“Ikki!”

“Kurogane!”

“I'm fine! I can still fight!”

The wound was probably deep enough to reach his sternum, but Ikki still put energy in his legs, refusing to fall. He continued to stare fixedly at the monster before him.

“Heh. You let my first two attacks push you backward so you wouldn't get killed the last two, did you? You're one tricky son of a bitch, you know that? But you won't be for long! You can't do anything from that distance! I'll make mincemeat out of you!”

Kuraudo cast his freshly-bloodied Orochimaru like a whip from afar. At a distance from which only he could attack, he rained hell on the wounded Ikki.



When Ikki had first evaded Kuraudo's Orochimaru and charged toward him, Ayase had thought he'd done it. When Ikki had blocked Hebigami shortsword-style, she had thought he'd had a chance. But the Sword Eater had just kept

coming out on top, far exceeding her expectations every step of the way. It was like a nightmare.

Ikki had come to be known as one of the strongest contenders in the hunt to represent Hagun Academy at the Seven Stars Battle Festival, even able to win against the Crimson Princess without taking a single hit. He was Another One, the Uncrowned Sword King.

But he can't do anything, even at close range!

Ikki's Perfect Vision was meaningless before Marginal Counter, and there was no point in him using Ittou Shura because Marginal Counter allowed Kuraudo leave him in the dust either way. In fact, if he were to use Ittou Shura, it could cause Kuraudo to go on his guard and end in Ikki's death after running out.

Ittou Shura was a skill supported by Ikki's determination and resolve. It was a last-ditch effort ability that he would use when he was desperate enough to use up all of his remaining strength. He couldn't stop the skill halfway through, and he couldn't make adjustments to it like making it last longer than a minute. And as long as Kuraudo had the inhuman reaction speed to act two or three times in the span of one of Ikki's actions, one minute wouldn't be enough to break through his defenses.

There's nothing he can do!

Even with his deep wounds, Ikki was desperately trying to block Orochimaru and its wild Hebigami attacks while standing in a pool of his own blood. It was a one-sided battle.

Ayase gulped as she looked at Kuraudo, who continued piling attack after attack on Ikki.

This boy is too strong! He's out of control! His strength was world-class. The Sword Eater, a quarterfinalist at the previous year's Seven Stars, was finally showing his true power. *Is the top of the Seven Stars full of monsters like him?*

Ayase didn't see any chance for survival, let alone victory. The Sword Eater could just laugh and laugh as he trampled over every trick or skill in his way.

In the face of such overwhelming force, Ikki sustained wound after wound. As blood flowed continuously from his chest, his prediction and shortsword-style

guards began to dull more and more. Each time the saw blades grazed Ikki's chest and thighs, they dug in deeper, grinding away bits of flesh.

At this rate...!

Ayase got a bad case of déjà vu. Ikki was just like Kaito as he stood fighting despite being slowly turned into mincemeat. She couldn't take it anymore.

"Miss Vermillion, we have to stop the duel! Kurogane's going to break down any minute now!"

"You won't get your dojo back if you stop them now."

"I don't care! Kurogane's life is more important!"

"Agreed. But we still can't stop him."

Stella crossed her arms as she spoke. Ayase was floored by how unbelievable her statement was.

"Why not?! Aren't you two supposed to be a couple?! Is there something he can do to turn the tables or something?!"

"Nope. I could just take him down with pure firepower, but Ikki doesn't have that. He doesn't have any weapons that could fight from that range, either. To add insult to injury, his one close-range weapon, the swordsmanship he prides himself on, can't do anything here. This is really bad. I'm honestly surprised at how much of a monster that skull guy is."

Stella's voice was perfectly calm, but when Ayase looked carefully, she noticed there were scratches on Stella's arms, leaking blood onto her white sleeves. She was desperately holding back the impulse to run in and help.

"World-class skill doesn't lie," Stella continued. "I have to accept that he's incredibly strong. At this rate, Ikki can't win."

"I don't understand. If you know that, why won't you stop him?!"

"I told you: we can't stop him."

"Why not?!"

"Look how much fun Ikki is having."

"Huh?"

Before she could comment on the absurdity of it, Ayase looked at Ikki's face amidst the bloodshed. She was left dumbfounded.

He's... grinning?!

It wasn't the kind, mild-mannered smile that she had become used to. It was ferocious, like he was baring his fangs.

"Thinking back, he smiled the same way when he was up against my Katharterio Salamandra."

"Why? He could die right now; just look at all that blood. So... why?"

"Because that's what's fun for him, of course." Ayase wasn't strong enough to comprehend it, but Stella understood, and Ayase's father, Kaito, likely did as well. "Hey, Ayatsuji. When you told us about your dad, there was one thing we couldn't come to terms with."

"What's that?"

"Does the Last Samurai really regret what happened?"

"Huh?! Of course he does! What are you talking about?!" Ayase raised her voice, angered and shocked by Stella's baseless accusation. "If... If *he* hadn't shown up, we could've been happy forever! Dad wouldn't be in a coma, we wouldn't have lost the dojo, and the disciples wouldn't have gotten hurt! He took away our days of happiness! How could Dad not regret it?!"

"That's just speaking from your point of view, isn't it?"

"What?!"

"Think about it. The man whose swordplay was so incredible that they named him the Last Samurai, the veritable king of swords that wanted glory so badly he ascended to the very top. Then, he became unable to hold a sword, drifting further from his passion every day. Is that happiness? Is that a feeling of satisfaction that you'd want to experience every day? If you ask me, I wouldn't be able to stand it."

"Ngh."

"Sure, maybe he had a problem with the details of the fight—this skull guy definitely did some really terrible things to make it happen—but for someone

to go so far just to challenge him, a swordsman who could do nothing but decay all alone? I think he might have been really happy about that.”

Is that true? No. That can't be right. Dad was always smiling. He looked at his disciples kindly, his life's new purpose being the teaching of his style—

“This is my fight! Don't interrupt!”

“Ngh!”

Something that had never made sense finally clicked in Ayase's mind; she understood everything.

She understood why her father, with an expression she had never seen and a voice that she had never heard, had shouted so angrily at her during that fight. She understood why he, even when the outcome was clear, continued their duel. She understood why he, despite being hurt so badly, refused to give in.

Ayase had never realized Kaito's feelings. She couldn't have. From her point of view, he had been forced into a duel that he didn't want and forever regretted it.

But she was wrong. Completely wrong. He was likely fighting in part for his wounded disciples and in part to protect the dojo he wanted to leave to his daughter, but that wasn't all. The real emotion that spurred Kaito forward, supporting him in his fight, was something simpler—a reason much more basic than etiquette or morality.

It was the desire to fight the enemy in front of him, to defeat the incredible threat in front of him. It was the pure, unadulterated instinct of a wolf to fight.

For Kaito, who'd had his true life's purpose taken away from him by illness and age, that fight was something he had yearned for. A single moment in which, even if his body and soul were burned away, he'd leave the world with no regrets.

That's it, isn't it? Those words weren't meant for us.

“I'm sorry.”

She finally understood. His apology was likely meant for Kuraudo, rather than his disciples. No matter his reason or his methods, that boy had been worthy of

defeating Kaito, not caring how much he had decayed over the years. The Last Samurai was apologizing to the boy because he wasn't able to fight with everything the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style had to offer.

Some father he was. How could he have offered what could have been his last words to an enemy, of all people? Ayase had thought he was wiser and more mature than that. What of that? Was he just an egotist? He was like a sore loser of a little boy. *Is that what it took for him to be happy?*

At that moment, a loud noise rang through the dojo.



The dojo fell perfectly silent for the first time since their fight began.

“Haah, haah! Haah!”

In the silence, Ikki panted hoarsely. The loss of blood from so many wounds had clearly drained him of all of his stamina. He wasn't the only one short on breath, though.

“Heh... Haah, haah...”

He was uninjured, but Kuraudo was red-faced and breathing heavily. Why was Kuraudo as exhausted as Ikki if the battle had been entirely in his favor? Stella immediately realized the answer.

“I get it! So this is Marginal Counter's weakness!”

“What is, Miss Vermillion?!”

“Look at that skull guy's face. You'll understand.”

Ayase did as directed, looking into Kuraudo's face. Drops of sweat were rolling down his face, dripping from his jawline.

“Is it stamina?!”

“Yes. It's so simple! Marginal Counter gives him the speed to perform countless actions, but it drains his stamina like nothing else. Ikki realized his weakness early on, so he's been waiting for his enemy's stamina to deplete!”

Kuraudo clenched his jaw as if to confirm her statement.

Look at him, acting smart! The battle was supposed to be moving at my pace,

but he somehow dragged me into a game of endurance!

Even on the brink of death, even when his blade couldn't reach the enemy, Ikki had seen through Marginal Counter's weakness and chipped away at Kuraudo's stamina, turning their fight into a battle of attrition.

Just like Stella had said, Ikki wasn't the kind of man to accept a purely defensive battle. He had plenty of ways to take down his foe while protecting himself.

It's like sorcery. He's a scary son of a bitch.

Kuraudo felt a chill when he thought of just how much experience and knowledge had gone into Ikki's simple defending.

"That's Kurogane for you. He can wear down the enemy even when he can't fight! He just might win this!"

Ayase, on the other hand, was struck with admiration. She pumped her fist at the possibility of a comeback, but Stella looked tense.

"I'm not too sure about that."

"Huh? Why not?"

"This battle of endurance was Ikki's last resort; he was overwhelmed even at close range, so he couldn't do anything else. That's really all there is to it. Just look at him, he's just as tired as his opponent. He's been worn down too much. Rather than Ikki winning, the match ending in a draw due to his injuries is more likely."

It was no surprise that someone like Ikki would force their match all the way to a draw in his desperation. Neither side had an advantage any longer. Stella could only say one thing for certain:

"No matter who wins here, the next attack will be the last."

That was the only clear truth.

"You can't be stubborn forever, asshole..."

"Haah, haah... Unfortunately for you, I'm way too competitive to just give up. And... It's been a long time since I've been overwhelmed in swordplay. It's just

too fun... I don't want it to end."

"Hahah... Hah... 'Fun'? Hahahahah. You're fucked up in the head."

"That makes two of us."

"Yeah, but that's about to come to an end...!"

Kuraudo caught his breath and stood up straight. Then, he brandished Orochimaru.

"This one's gonna finish ya," he declared to the bloody samurai.

The next one's going to kill.

Upon that prediction, Ikki's lips curled into a wicked grin.

"Oh, really? I was just thinking the same thing."

Ikki held his blade before his eyes, pointing the tip straight toward Kuraudo's forehead. The two knights swore that they would kill each other and stood face to face. Before their battle ended, however, Ikki had a question that had been weighing on his mind.

"Can I ask you one last thing?"

"What?"

"Did that great swordsman smile like we're smiling now?"

Kuraudo's eyes went wide.

"Hah. Don't be stupid," he spat. "He wouldn't be called the Last Samurai if he couldn't appreciate a good, old-fashioned fight to the death!"

"Is that so?"

That was all Ikki needed to know; he had pleaded for it to be true.

"Thank you," he said, then dashed toward the monster baring its fangs at him.



Blood pouring from his countless wounds, Ikki bent low and leaped forward. His body was dyed red and he had one foot in the grave, but he was just as quick as he'd been at the very start of the battle as he ran.

He's the real deal!

Kuraudo was willing to praise his enemy, so he felt no need to hold back. Preparing to put all of his spirit into his next attack, he shrunk Orochimaru back down to the size of a one-handed sword.

He'd abandoned reach, prioritizing speed. His next blow would have all of his power and his speed behind it. Utilizing Marginal Counter, the Sword Eater would unleash a superhuman feat only he was capable of.

"Yamato-no-Orochi!"

He put all of his might into his attack, releasing eight sword slashes almost simultaneously. The eight snakes, dull white like bone, bared their fangs as they made their way toward the black-haired swordsman.

Ikki was sure to be defenseless against it; he hadn't even been able to fight off four heads. He was sure to be thoroughly butchered.

However, the Worst One didn't stop his charge. He didn't even flinch in the face of the eight sets of fangs headed toward him. He simply held his sword in front of himself, pointed in Kuraudo's direction as he charged forward without the slightest hint of putting up a defense.

Had Ikki surrendered himself to despair? Or had he resolved himself to perform one final suicide attack?

No, Kuraudo thought. That's not it. He's...

The tip of Ikki's forward-pointed sword and the daggers his eyes sent a chill shooting through Kuraudo's body.

He knew that sensation—he had experienced it just once in the past. It was during the very final moments of his fight with Kaito Ayatsuji. At the time, Kaito had attempted to do something in his desperation. Just like Ikki was doing, he had held his sword in front of him and charged forward, abandoning all defense.

Kuraudo never understood quite why he'd felt such a sensation, but he had felt it once more: danger. A half-dead man who could have been pushed over by a slight breeze had sent shivers up his spine. Not only that, but it was

happening again.

Hell yeah! Kuraudo didn't stop swinging his sword. With his Marginal Counter, he still had time to evade, but instead, he pressed on. *This is...!*

Kuraudo had wanted to see the end of the decisive battle that he'd believed was forever lost to history. He had waited for so long, clinging to some small hope that Kaito would recover or that Ayase would become as skilled as her father and come to take her dojo back.

The realization of that hope was the reason he didn't stop. He had no reason to stop.

"This is what I've been waiting these two whole years for!"

Their strikes intersected, sending blood flying through the air.





The high ceilings of the dojo were stained crimson by the blood gushing from Kuraudo. He keeled over in pain after his torso was sliced open diagonally from his right shoulder to the left side of his hip.

Ikki, however, was unhurt. Yamato-no-Orochi's eight strokes moved with such speed that they should have been unavoidable and unblockable. He should have been torn to shreds.

In truth, Ikki had taken every single set of fangs head-on, but he came out uninjured. Only Ayase knew how that was possible.

I-It must be...

She had seen this skill only once in her life, back when Kaito had first showed her the ultimate technique of the Ayatsuji Single-Blade Style. By her father's urging, Ayase had attacked him with Hizume, putting all of her strength behind the attack. It had hit him, but he was unscathed. She'd felt only emptiness, as if she had been trying to slice at petals falling through the air.

Kaito explained that when one parried an enemy's attack, their counterattack was slowed. To push away the enemy's weapon, one had to move their own away from a proper attacking position.

Knowing that, how could one counter as quickly as possible? The answer, Kaito revealed, was to fend off the enemy's attack without abandoning one's optimal offensive stance.

The ultimate technique he'd created was what had come of that. Dispersing one's soul through all of creation while taking in all of creation, resulting in a peerless stance that could ward off any attack with the minimum amount of movement necessary.

"The Ayatsuji style's final, ultimate move: Ten'i Muhou!"

How could Ikki Kurogane have known about that? It was a secret move that Kaito had never used in front of anyone else.

"Ah..."

As that question swirled within her mind, she remembered something she

had heard in the family restaurant:

“It’s all your own doing, Ayatsuji. I mean it. Even if you were studying alone, you would’ve figured it out someday.”

Ikki never said things that he wasn’t certain of. Ayase knew he was reliable because she had received his direct instruction.

“No way! Did he already know...?”

“Blade Steal.”

“Huh?”

“Ikki can watch anyone’s swordplay and learn everything about it, including their ultimate technique. He did it to me, too.”

Back then, Ikki had already seen the final summit that Ayase’s fledgling swordplay would reach as she followed in her father’s footsteps. Stella grinned widely, convinced of that truth. She knew that that was what was truly to be feared about Ikki.

For as much strength and skill as he had, it wasn’t enough for him. He wrung out every last bit of new strength from every encounter and challenge that came his way, then made use of it all to reach even greater heights. Ikki Kurogane’s endless ambition was the very thing that made him Another One, the boy the Crimson Princess loved.

“Sheesh. Those are some big footsteps to follow in, huh?”

Just as Stella finished softly murmuring that statement, Kuraudo let loose a horrific howl.

“Aaaaargh!”

Everyone there was speechless in disbelief at what they saw unfolding before them. Kuraudo’s body, even after sustaining such a clearly fatal wound, refused to fall. The copious amounts of blood streaming from his body pooled at his feet, but he wouldn’t go down even as he toed the line of ultimate defeat.

He’s still standing?

Not even Ikki could hide his shock.

“I get it. So this is what that old geezer was trying to do.”

Though Kuraudo stood, defying death, his eyes no longer harbored the will to fight.

“Hahah... Not bad.” A nostalgic smile crept across his face as he remembered the battle from two years ago. He forced his blood-covered body to stand upright, and looked back at Ikki. “What’s your name, Worst One?”

“Ikki Kurogane.”

“‘Kurogane’... We’ll finish this at the Seven Stars,” he said, turning to walk toward the exit. He no longer seemed interested in fighting inside the dojo.

“Kurashiki,” Ikki called out as he walked away, “about the dojo—”

“Do what you want with it,” came his answer. “There’s no point in me keeping it anymore.”

“W-Wait, Kuraudo!”

“Let’s get going, boys!”

“Y-Yeah!”

Kuraudo’s cronies followed behind him, rushing out of the dojo. After all of them had finally disappeared, Ikki and his friends could hear panicked voices in the distance.

“Whoa! G-Get up, Kuraudooo!”

“Aw, shit! He’s out like a light!”

“Let’s call an ambulance!”

“We can’t wait for that! Let’s get him to the school in my car!”

“Kuraudo! Hang in there!”

Ikki dematerialized Intetsu with a sigh, expressing a mixture of exasperation and admiration.

“He won’t show weakness to his opponents. That’s one stubborn guy.”

“You’re not much different.”

“Whoa!”

Suddenly, his legs were swept out from under him, leading to him falling on his backside.

“Wh-What are you doing, Stella?”

“Don’t talk big when you don’t even have it in you to stand up.”

“Ugh.” Far from being able to walk, Ikki wasn’t in a condition to even stand back up. He turned away sheepishly. “So you noticed.”

“Of course I did. How is it that you let people mess you up like this every day?! If you’ve got a crazy hidden technique like that, break it out sooner!”

“Don’t be silly. Above all else, that’s *the* Last Samurai’s ultimate technique; no matter how you look at it, I can’t just whip it out flawlessly on my first try. If I didn’t tire Kurashiki out first and slow down his swordplay, he would’ve chopped me right up.”

“At least fight so you don’t get hurt as much next time. Jeez...” Stella sighed and handed her bag over to Ayase. “I brought an emergency first-aid kit. Would you mind stopping the bleeding, Ayatsuji? This kind of thing is better left to the lady of the dojo. While you do that, I’ll call a teacher to come meet us. There’s no way Ikki’s getting on a train looking like that.”

“O-Okay! I’ll take care of it!”

Ayase gladly took the bag. Inside, there were general first-aid items such as bandages and antiseptics she could use to perform some amount of treatment.

“Thank you, Kurogane.” Ayase tightly grasped his hand and expressed her heartfelt thanks as she patched him up. “Thanks to you, I finally understand my father’s true feelings. I thought I knew him better than anyone, but I actually didn’t understand him at all.”

“I disagree.”

“Huh?”

“The only reason I won was because you have every last detail of your father’s style memorized. Nobody knows Kaito as well as you do, Ayatsuji. You’re the one who most deserves to carry on his spirit.”

Was that true? Ayase didn’t know, but she certainly wished it to be.

“Then I’d better get stronger. That way, I can take pride in myself as his successor. Once I do, maybe... I’ll be able to defeat that boy myself one day.”

Her eyes were resolute. Ayase would never lose herself again; she had rediscovered her pride once and for all.

Ikki smiled, relieved, as he looked upon her.

“I look forward to that day.”

Ikki smiled, relieved, as he looked upon her. He, too, prayed that the future she spoke of would become reality.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

KURAUDO KURASHIKI

■ PROFILE

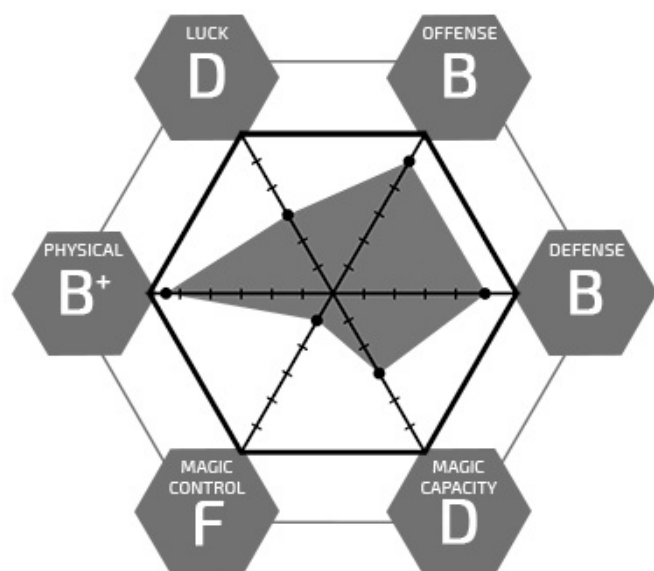
AFFILIATION: DONROU ACADEMY,
YEAR 3

BLAZER RANK: C

NOBLE ART: OROCHIMARU

NICKNAME: SWORD EATER

SUMMARY: A GANG LEADER.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

A mad dog who'll bite anyone, Blazer or non-Blazer, the number of dojos he's taken down is in the double digits! Once he sets his sights on you, he'll stop at nothing to get you to fight him! He loves to fight, though, and plays fair when he does. He's pretty similar to Kurogane and Stella in that regard. According to my friends at Donrou, he's been doing an insane workout routine in order to defeat Kurogane. He might be one heck of an opponent the next time they meet!



Epilogue

An Icy Smile

Worst One Uses Mind Games to Defeat Ace of Donrou, Sword Eater!

The next day, the Hagun Academy Bulletin proudly published the event. Kagami Kusakabe had written the article, complete with pictures taken from a hidden vantage point. She had happened to catch the scent of a scoop when she'd heard Ikki and Ayase talking during their match, so she'd kept her eye on them for the rest of the day, even following them and Stella to the dojo the day after.

"A journalist is indistinguishable from a professional stalker!" she claimed. Ikki was astonished that she'd exposed everything that had happened without him even beginning to sense her presence.

The article made waves throughout Hagun, which was to be expected considering his opponent was a school's ace. Even if his mind games were the only reason he'd won, nobody could call Ikki's victory against a quarterfinalist a fluke. Those who were still prejudiced against him were left without a leg to stand on; nobody in Hagun could question his strength any longer.

"Who's stronger? The student council president, Raikiri, or Worst One?"

No one knew who had first asked that question, but it had piqued the curiosity of all the students at Hagun Academy. Raikiri—Touka Toudou—had been a semifinalist; she must have been stronger. But if anyone would be able to beat her, it was the Worst One.

"No, he wouldn't."

"Yes, he would."

"No."

"Yes."

Kaito had been comatose for two whole years, his body deteriorating all the while; his rehabilitation was sure to be a difficult process. Plus, he still had his heart condition. Ayase most likely wanted to spend time with him while she could.

“Guess we won’t see her in our training sessions anymore,” Ikki sighed.

“It’s kinda sad.”

“That’s just how it is, though.” It was a miracle in itself that Kaito had woken up after the doctors told her he wouldn’t make it past winter. “They may not have much longer together, but I hope they make the most of the time they have.”

“Yeah. Ooh, a phone call.” As Stella looked up at the evening sky, making a wish for Ayase and Kaito’s happiness, Ikki’s handbook suddenly started ringing. The caller happened to be the subject of their conversation, Ayase Ayatsuji.

“Hello?”

“Is this Ikki Kurogane? Ayase told me about you. Get over here, marry my daughter, and inherit my dojo!”

Wham!

“You wake up after two whole years and this is how you act?! Sorry for the pointless phone call, Kurogane! I let him do it because he said he was just going to thank you!”

“Hahaha! There’s no need to hide it, Ayase. You love this boy! A father can tell; trust me. When you talked about him, you sounded just like your mother when she was head-over-heels for me!”

“Aaah! Aaaaah! Shut up, shut up! You’ve got it all wrong!”

“Don’t be embarrassed. Now that I’m awake, I have to make up for two lost years of matchmaking—”

“How about you sleep for two more years?!”

“Urfgh! Gah...”

“K-K-Kurogane! Forget he said anything! Bye!”

Click.

Beep. Beep.

“I get the feeling Kaito won’t be dying anytime soon,” Ikki sighed again.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Stella replied.

“Still, seems like things wrapped up pretty well, didn’t they?”

“Yep!”

The dojo was Ayase’s again, and Kaito was finally awake. It was a shame that Ayase wouldn’t come to train anymore, but that didn’t mean they would never see her again. The whole affair with the Ayatsuji Dojo had been their sole concern since the assault at the family restaurant, so it was nice that things had calmed down.

“Things are a lot quieter with one less person around,” Ikki noted.

“Well,” Stella began, “we’re actually three people short today.”

“True, I guess.”

Not only was Ayase gone, but Shizuku and Alisuin hadn’t shown up to training sessions either.

“It’s not all that rare for Alice to be absent,” Stella noted, “but even Shizuku is missing today.”

“Yeah. Maybe she’s not feeling well.”

“I guess that means we’re alone, huh?”

Stella silently wrapped her hands around Ikki’s. She turned her wet ruby eyes up toward him, gazing into his eyes. After their trip to the public pool, their relationship was... still rather platonic, but both of them had started showing their affection through small gestures, so it was gradually making progress.

Beneath the setting sun, the couple’s shadows slowly came closer and closer.

“Stella...”

“Ikki...”

“Ikki...♥” The pair let out a “Huh?” as they turned their heads toward the third

voice. Alisuin was trying to get in on their kiss from the side. “Mwah... Oh? You’re not going to kiss?”

“AaaaaaaaAAAAaaaAAH!”

Stella and Ikki both fell off the bench in shock.

“A-Alice?! What the hell are you doing?!”

“Whoopsie! I figured maybe you two would be into a three-way kiss.”

“We would nooot!” they cried in unison.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding! You’re both so cute when you’re this red. Ahaha!” The couple’s reaction was so funny to Alice that tears started to form in the corners of her eyes. “But my, oh my, am I surprised. You used to be two prickly little hedgehogs, and now you’re going at it like rabbi—”

“W-W-W-W-We haven’t gone that far!”

“Oh, really? Well, you’re still making big progress, considering you’re used to public displays of affection now.”

“Alice, did you really notice that we were dating?”

“Well, I had a hunch. This just confirmed it!”

“Ngh.”

Stella’s expression soured. She must have thought that Alice, who was very well-connected—she was friends with boys and girls from all over the school—knowing their secret wouldn’t end well. Her eyes seemed to plead, “*Do you think it’s too late to trick her?!*”

Yes, it was clearly way too late. Even so, Ikki believed that if they calmly explained their circumstances, Alice wouldn’t spread the news all over the school. Thus, he forced himself to talk, telling himself that he had to spill the beans right then and there.

“Hey, Alice. Could you keep this—”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry. I can keep my mouth shut.” Alice put her index finger to her lips and winked, promising her silence. She really was a great person; she’d gotten even Shizuku to like her, after all. “I’ll just enjoy the show

from my front-row seat, if you don't mind."

Or maybe she wasn't so great. Maybe the world would have been better off if she were to get kicked square in the face by a horse.

"Ugh..." Stella groaned. "We messed up by letting you see us like this, but the silver lining is that at least Shizuku isn't here."

"Seriously. By the way, Alice, is Shizuku not with you?"

"Right. I got too caught up playing ONE with my fans, so I just got here a little late. Shizuku, however, has been planning to train alone."

"Train alone"?

"Huh. It's unusual for Shizuku to leave Ikki alone. And by choice, even."

"Well, considering her next opponent, she's probably bracing herself for what's to come."

"Oh? Has her next opponent already been revealed?"

"My, my. You two don't know yet?"

Ikki looked over to Stella with a questioning glance, to which she shook her head. He didn't know either, of course.

"Alice, who's her next opponent?" Ikki asked, slightly concerned. "You said 'considering her next opponent', so they must be pretty tough."

In response, Alice frowned, deep in thought.

"'Tough' doesn't begin to describe her. She's the strongest student in this academy, after all."



Meanwhile, at the sixth training field...

From noon to 5:00 p.m., the grounds were used for Seven Stars Battle Festival selection battles. After that, they were used as individual arenas for free-to-fight battle royales. The fights were carried out with Devices in Phantom Form, but there were no other concrete rules, allowing students to fight freely, unlike in class. Students who opted out of the selection battles were the first to join in, of course. That was why the training fields were usually bustling with battle

later in the evenings.

That, however, was not the case. There was no bustle, and the heat of battle was absent. Freezing cold seemed to envelop the sixth training field, but that came as no surprise; all of the student knights in the arena had been turned into ice sculptures.

“Wh-What’s with her?”

“She’s a monster...”

“That one girl really took out fifty people...?”

The students in the audience spoke with quivering voices, discussing the events that had started only ten minutes prior. A single first-year student had entered the arena and spoken to every knight present.

“I want you all to fight me right now,” she’d told them.

They’d accepted her challenge, ready to rake the cocky first-year over the coals, but it resulted in their complete destruction. Not a single one of them was able to even touch the girl occupying the very center of the ring: Shizuku Kurogane, the girl known as Lorelei.



“It’s not enough,” Shizuku sighed as she looked upon her custom-made ice rink. She’d thought there might have been at least some challenge in fighting fifty people at once, but they weren’t even worth talking about. Was Hagun really so lacking? The way things were, Shizuku would never be able to destress. “But at least you won’t disappoint me.”

Shizuku looked down at her student handbook. On the display was an email that showed the name of her next opponent. That name belonged to the frontrunner for the year’s selection battles, a semi-finalist at the previous year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival.

“Shizuku Kurogane, for your fourteenth selection battle, your opponent will be Touka Toudou of class 3-3.”

Finally, her lips wordlessly spoke as a bewitching grin crept across her face.

She had grown tired of holding back against every enemy, taking great pains not to hurt them too badly while also securing victory. It was about time for her to fight someone she could go all-out against. She had waited so long for such an opportunity.

Maybe I got this itch from Big Brother.

Ideally, she would have been up against Stella, but there wasn’t anything especially wrong with Toudou. Shizuku was finally able to fight an enemy so strong that she could unleash all she had, yet still perhaps lose to.

At last.

At last, she could fight with all she had.

At last, she could *destroy* with all she had.

“Heehee. Ahahaha!”

Though her surroundings were below the freezing point, heat boiled up ceaselessly within her. Why should she try to stop an ever-growing flame? Instead, Shizuku surrendered herself to the blaze, laughing joyously as if to greet the coming battle with a song.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume two of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. I'm the author, Riku Misora.

The sultry summer heat is finally starting to cool down; I hope you've all had a safe, healthy summer. As for me, I collapsed on the side of the road thanks to heat stroke.

Cold sweat wouldn't stop flowing, and my body was convulsing so much that it was hard to walk. I just happened to be near a hospital, so I ran over. I passed out, but fortunately, I was already in the waiting room, so it didn't turn into a major problem. I couldn't believe it, though—I never thought I'd be counted in the number of people who got heat stroke that was mentioned on the news.

Everyone, when you're out all day during the summer, make sure you buy something hydrating instead of just tea! What's that, you say? It's already October? Ah, that doesn't matter.

So, back to the book. In volume three, Hagun's selection battles will come to a climax! As the battles reach their final stages, the biggest clashes begin. Hagun Academy's student council will all appear together, and the Kurogane household will perform some shady sabotage, pitting Ikki against old foes and powerful enemies simultaneously. I have a feeling that volume three is going to be a major trial for him!

Driven into a corner, will Ikki be able to win his final battle and secure his ticket to the Seven Stars?! I hope you'll join me again for the third volume of this battle school, sword-action, rising-through-the-ranks series!

Last but not least, I express my gratitude to all of the people who worked with me to make this.

My illustrator, Won, is a god for making good on my ridiculous, perverted request for the cover image: "Tear the clothes around her boobs!" Delectable, thank you.

And of course, to the readers who have stayed with me through the entire book, my heart goes out to you all. Thank you so much!

See you again in volume three!

Riku Misora

Illust Won



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